From the First "Eve" to the New "Eve": Anne Hébert's Rehabilitation of the Malevolent Female Archetype

Kathleen Kells

Consistent with Patricia Smart's theory that Anne Hébert's poetry "evolves towards a transformed mythology centered on woman as redemptress. . . well summed up in the figure of Eve,"[1] I propose to examine the poet's rehabilitation of Eve as a malevolent female archetype in two poems sharing the identical title of "Eve" but separated chronologically by a period of eighteen years. Whereas the first of these poems makes no specific allusion to Eve as the first sinner, but simply presents her awakening sexual desire, the second, by ironically and angrily evoking the original sin traditionally imputed to Eve and associated with that desire, constitutes an explicit and impassioned cry of revolt; here the feminine lyrical voice, in full consciousness of woman's wrongful persecution throughout history, invokes Eve as a female saviour, thereby subverting her usual status as a malevolent female archetype.

The first "Eve" poem (originally published in 1942 in a volume now out of print entitled *Les Songes en équilibre*)[2] of course takes its title from the name given by Adam in Genesis 3:20 to the first woman, but thereafter it departs significantly from the scriptural account of that woman's role in the creation story in that it makes no reference to either of the two principal male Biblical protagonists, God and Adam, or the story of "man's" fall from God's grace. Accordingly, Eve is not presented in this poem in her traditional role as the original temptress and sinner but rather as a sensual woman whose "voice rises up clearly and well-defined"[3] above the "artless jazz-like. . . confusion of sounds and rhythms" that accompany the birth of the world's first springtime. It is, therefore, with the

---

[1] Patricia Smart, "La Poésie d'Anne Hébert: une perspective féminine," *La Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 50.1 (1980): 62-68, 63 (my translation). The original French text reads: "Douloureuse, elle [la poésie d'Anne Hébert] évolue vers une mythologie transformée centrée sur la femme rédemptrice et bien résumée par la figure d'Eve."

[2] Anne Hébert, *Les Songes en équilibre* (Montréal: Les Editions de l'Arbre, 1942).

[3] All quotations given in English of this poem are my translations of the text based on the original edition, Anne Hébert, *Les Songes en équilibre* 75-77.

primal desire of this first woman, whose three plaintive notes—"Yearning, Invitation, Seduction"—suffice to "stir the primitive heart" that the poet identifies. Consequently, although Eve, as well as the female poet, does have the premonition of some "indescribable misfortune" associated with her desire, no explicit connection is made in the poem between this desire and sin. Woman's sensuality is understood simply in the context of a cosmic primal setting evoking the initial springtime awakening of nature.

In contrast to such an innocent and exuberant representation of Eve's budding sexual desire, the second "Eve" poem (which first appeared in a 1960 collection of the author's poems entitled *Mystère de la parole)*[4] angrily attacks the discourse, myths, and icons of the male-generated symbolic code[5] which have consistently attempted to repress this life-giving desire. The second "Eve" poem is, therefore, a subversively iconoclastic text or, to use a concept put forth by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text,* a "text of 'jouissance'. . . that discomforts . . . [and] unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories and brings to a crisis his relation with language."[6] The second "Eve" poem, accordingly, attacks the essentially antifeminist doctrine of an original female sin which, as the title of the poem suggests, has consistently singled out Eve as the primal sinner, attributing sexual overtones to her sin and scapegoating her, not only for condemning the entire human race to death by enticing Adam to transgress God's will and eat the forbidden fruit, but also for thereby necessitating the sacri-

---

[4] Anne Hébert, "Eve," *Mystère de la parole* dans *Poèmes,* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1960) 100-02. All quotations given in English are based on Alan Brown's translation in *Poems by Anne Hébert,* (Don Mills, Ontario: Musson, 1975) 72-75.

[5] My use of the term "symbolic code" derives from Julia Kristeva's notion of "le symbolique" as distinct from what she designates as "le sémiotique" in the first chapter, "Sémiotique et symbolique," of *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974) 17-100. Leon S. Roudiez, the editor of a collection of Julia Kristeva's writings translated into English, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980) 6-7, explains "the symbolic process" as follows: "[it] refers to the establishment of sign and syntax, paternal function, grammatical and social constraints, symbolic law." The "sémiotique" then can be understood, theoretically at least, as preceding the "symbolique" in human development and can be associated with instinctual drives that come to the child through the mother before being channelled and structured by the symbolic process; since this process begins for the child at the "mirror" stage with the realization that he/she is distinct from the mother, it necessarily involves the adoption by the child of what is, in fact, a "male-generated" or paternal code of symbols and behaviour, which will permit the child to function in the world as a being independent of his/her mother.

[6] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill, 1975) 14. Miller's translation of "jouissance" by "bliss" misses the sexual overtones implicit in the French noun which derives from the verb "jouir," meaning not only "to enjoy" but also "to have an orgasm." Richard Howard in his "A Note on the Text" refers to this translation difficulty on pages v and vi. The original French reads as follows from Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973) 25-26: "Texte de jouissance: celui qui met en état de perte, celui qui déconforte. . . fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses valeurs et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son rapport au langage." Janet Paterson in an excellent article on Anne Hébert's novels, "L'Ecriture de la jouissance dans l'œuvre romanesque d'Anne Hébert," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 50.1 (1980): 69-73 has pointed out that *Kamouraska* as well is a "texte de jouissance" in the Barthien sense of the word.

fice of a male saviour, conceived and born immaculately from a pure and submissive woman chosen specifically to redress the enormity of Eve's first crime and minimize its contagion among other women. Tertullian's[7] scathing remarks addressed to Eve and all her daughters are representative of exactly the kind of misogyny against which Anne Hébert is reacting in the second "Eve" poem:

> You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that forbidden tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die.[8]

In the offensive she launches in the second "Eve" poem against the symbolic code responsible for the propagation of such antifeminism, Anne Hébert skillfully makes use of a number of subversive techniques intended to undermine and discredit the mythology and doctrines surrounding and supporting the creation of Eve as a malevolent archetype. One of these techniques is the adoption of a first person plural female poetic voice, a woman's chorus, the "we" of the seventh stanza (later to be identified in the poem specifically with Eve's daughters) to invoke Eve on behalf of all women. Accordingly, the female poet, in a symbolic feat worthy of Prometheus, usurps the fire-like gift of the "word" or naming function, originally bequeathed to Adam by God in Genesis and passed on from one generation of men to the next, taking it from God's appointed male custodians and bestowing it upon women. No longer will the woman writer be obliged to assume the traditional male voice in order to share in what Anne Hébert calls, in "The Mystery of the Word" (the title of the opening poem and also of the volume containing both that poem and the second "Eve" poem), "the function of the word."[9] Finally, the "word" is reclaimed and made accessible to woman. The first step in subverting the male-generated symbolic code in the second "Eve" poem, therefore, involves producing that poem using a dinstinctly female voice and writing from a woman's perspective.

---

[7] Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus is one of the most important early Christian Latin authors; he wrote a defence of Christianity against pagans entitled *The Apology* and lived from 160-230 A.D.

[8] Tertullian, "On the Apparel of Women," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1956) 4:14.

[9] My translation of the "fonction de la parole" from Anne Hébert, "Mystère de la parole," *Poèmes* 78.

The main focus of Hébert's attack then shifts to profaning Eve's archetypal opposite, Mary, so prominently displayed in churches and shrines throughout Christendom as a symbol of perfect virtue and of salvation, to whom all good Catholic women have been specifically encouraged to pray for their moral edification and guidance in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of their evil mother, Eve. Mary, whose virgin motherhood has made her an impossible, confusing, and frustrating model for women to emulate is, therefore, replaced as an object of worship and an intercessor by an extremely imitable Eve, whose maternity has not been divorced from her sexuality and who is, to quote Nabiha Ettayebi, an "angry [and] revolted [woman] . . . refusing henceforth to bow her head."[10]

Such an interpretation of the poem is confirmed by its prayer-like format; it begins and ends with invocations addressed not to the Virgin Mary, the usual officially sanctioned female intercessor, but to Eve, her wicked counterpart, who is clearly not among the saints to whom Catholics are normally encouraged to pray. To promote even further Eve's status as mediator and to devalue Mary's, Anne Hébert then attacks the ludicrously contradictory notion of Mary's virgin motherhood by revising Mary's usual appellations, "Mother of Christ" and "Queen of Heaven," in the opening invocation, "Queen and certain mistress," which is addressed to Eve. The replacement of "mother" in the original "Mother of Christ" with the polysemantic term "mistress," used to designate both an extramarital sexual partner and the female counterpart of the feudal-like God, the "Lord" or "Seigneur," implies that Eve was, in fact, the paramour of God the Father, and therefore the unofficial but rightful Queen of Heaven and the true mother of Christ. Adam accurately calls her the "mother of all living"[11] in Genesis 3:20. Thus, Mary's usurped titles of "Queen of Heaven" and "Mother of Christ" are restored to Eve.

Eve's right to honour instead of ignominy is further emphasized in stanzas two through six by Hébert's boldly and impiously proposing her as an appropriate replacement for the beneficent male saviour sacrificed to redeem her alleged original sin. Eve's "crucifi[xion] on the gates of the farthest city" is evoked in the first stanza, and in the second stanza, the traditional white dove used to represent the Holy (and male) Spirit in

---

[10] "Le Mythe d'Eve dans l'œuvre d'Anne Hébert," *Recherches et Travaux*, Université de Grenoble 20 (1980): 90 (my translation). The original French is as follows: ". . . se dresse une Eve nouvelle, en colère, révoltée, qui n'accepte plus de baisser la tête."

[11] "And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living," Genesis 3:20, The Bible, King James Version.

Christian iconography is replaced by an unholy icon, a female homologue: a "red" or "Russet screech-owl," whose "wings" have been "nailed back," with "every joint disjointed" and every "[wing] span forever fixed." That women's persecution throughout the centuries has come about because of her supposedly obscure evil habits naturally allies her with such a nocturnal bird (whose latin name "strix" is the same word for "witch"),[12] while the reddish colour attributed to the owl in place of the white purity of the dove links woman's "wickedness" to her insatiable sexual passion. The third stanza then describes Eve's once sensuous and appetizing "flesh" transformed into the "acid flesh of green apples, [the] beautiful juicy orchard" which originally enticed Adam to sin, and draws an implicit parallel between Eve's subsequently immolated body and that of Christ: whereas the male saviour's body was honoured and preserved in a sepulchre for three days following his crucifixion, his female counterpart's is left to rot where it hangs, "wasted [and] flapping in the wind like a torn flag," as a symbol and warning to all of woman's supposedly unbridled lust and corruption. Stanzas four and five then revalorize Eve's desecrated body by suggesting a sacrilegious analogy between its enduring owl-like parts—the beak, the feathers, and the bones—and their holy counterparts or relics derived supposedly from the clothing or body of Christ (or one of the many saints martyred for his sake). As these sacred fragments have been cherished as objects of worship by Roman Catholics, so, too, will the female saviour's remnants be preserved by her women disciples and worn in sabbatic rituals to protect them against the various types of persecution and torture to which they have been subjected throughout history. So it is that the cumulative suffering of women brought about in the name of Christ, the very same male saviour sent to atone for some supposed original female sin, has rendered Christ's passion and crucifixion derisively superfluous. Woman has no need of such a redeemer. The martyred flesh of Eve's many daughters has more than ransomed any of their mother's alleged transgressions and entitles woman to be her own saviour.

Such a revalorization of woman's maligned body and slandered reputation is then continued in the sixth, seventh, and eighth stanzas, which discredit the essentially misogynist creation and fall myths found in chapters two and three of Genesis. The first of these myths recounts that Eve was created from one of Adam's ribs, thereby insinuating, as John Phillips points out in *Eve: The History of an Idea,* that, because she was "created after man, out of his substance and especially for him, her purposes

---

[12] Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983) 754.

are subordinate to his."[13] The second of these myths, which is, in fact, a corollary of the first, then seeks to blame Eve's reputedly innate propensity to sin upon her inherent moral frailty which came about as a result of her secondary and hence inferior creation from Adam.

The discrediting of the first of these myths is accomplished in four ways. First of all, in the opening line of the seventh stanza, woman's beauty is conjured up in the words "fine face like dawn"; such beauty could not possibly have survived the difficult and painful birth evoked in the remainder of the stanza if that face had "pass[ed] between the ribs of man the hard barrier to light." Secondly, this allusion in the seventh stanza to woman's creation from man is preceded with the much older and more plausible story of the creation of man and all living things from woman, referred to in the sixth stanza. The order of presentation of these two conflicting versions of the creation myth, therefore, reproduces their chronological appearance in history and suggests that the later account was fabricated to replace the former and to justify man's superiority over woman.

Thirdly, there is, in the sixth stanza, an impressive symbolic representation of the female life-giving principle: an immense, supine, and highly fertile woman, whose constantly swollen and pregnant womb is metaphorically compared to an enormous anthill. This original "mother earth" of the cliché—whose extremely arable soil is being constantly penetrated, ploughed, and impregnated by her lovers as numerous as ants, becomes identified, in the opening apostrophe of the seventh stanza, with Eve, who is addressed as the "primal womb." Consequently, Eve's usual derogatory status as original sinner, propagated by "the rib theory" of her creation, in combination with the Genesis version of her collaboration with Satan in bringing about the fall of man, is replaced by the honourable title of "primal womb" or "mother earth."

Finally, the second myth of Eve as primal sinner is then further eroded in the eighth stanza by the ironic tone of vehement accusation (reminiscent of the Inquisition) adopted by the female chorus who exhorts the heretic, Eve, to look upon the destruction she alone has brought upon the male species because of the "strong curse" imposed on them because of her, whereby "[her] sons and husbands rot pell-mell between / [her] thighs." So, Anne Hébert's allusions to the Genesis myths of the creation and fall expose how these myths have perversely con-

---

[13] (San Francisco: Harper, 1984) 27.

spired to devalue Eve's true status as "mother of all living" by making her solely responsible for human mortality. It is precisely this insidious association made in Judeo-Christian thought between Eve as "primal womb" and primal sinner that Anne Hébert then seeks to undermine in the following six stanzas.

Of primary importance in such a task is the iconoclastic destruction of the Virgin Mary as the ideal symbol of motherhood. Accordingly, the ninth stanza sarcastically calls upon the Virgin Mary in her supposedly loving capacity as the "Mother of Christ" to remember also her many daughters who have perished far more frequently, anonymously, and ingloriously than her Son, due to the neglect of this reputedly perfect mother, who theoretically redeems and replaces Eve. Mary, this "blind," unfeeling idol, is then addressed in the tenth stanza as the "Source of all tears," an ironic variant of the usual "Our Lady of Sorrow," and asked to explain why she unwittingly left her daughters the onerous legacy of trying to live up to her confusing, irreconcilable, and matchless attributes—all of which, of course, relate to her contradictory status as virgin and mother, which has constituted the real and endless source of tears and suffering for all women necessarily incapable of emulating her.

In contrast to this paragon of inimitability, Eve is then nominated in stanzas twelve through fourteen as a realistic and possible model for women precisely because she is not devoid of sexual desire. She is, therefore, first invited to recount her version of the primal temptation scene in the garden with God, "bright and naked, and sin fiercely desired as shadow at hot noon"; she is then asked to tell all women about that first "unblemished" love and the first man to fall prey to her charms; and finally she is exhorted to "recall the initial heart in its morning consecration" in order that the true memory of what happened may legitimize women's sexual and life-giving desire and "renew our faces like a destiny at peace." So Eve, whose story has so long lain buried under the rubble of misogynist mythology, is now at last restored as "mother of all living."

The final supplication to Eve in the last two stanzas of the poem is preceded by a graphic depiction of the unending series of wars and mutilations visited without distinction upon the guilty and the innocent in stanzas fifteen and sixteen. In contrast to such scenes, the horror of which has no doubt caused Eve to turn a "blind eye" on the human condition, the female chorus then seeks to arouse Eve's compassion by evoking, in stanzas seventeen and eighteen, the peaceful spectacle of Eve's daughters as they keep watch in the evening with their hands spinning out life's mystery "like rough wool," while remaining constantly at-

tentive to "the baby coo[ing] at [their] breast" and the odour of man's "burnt bread" while "the noon of day closes over [them] like seamless water." The last two stanzas then open with a double plea addressed to Eve from "the depth of [that same] sudden peace" at last come to the women who have been praying to her and who now feel as if they can finally stand "with ease against the buttress of [their] justified hearts." From this newly acquired sense of strength and validity, the chorus then exhorts Eve, even at the risk of her reawakening the original "crime" committed against her that now lies "sleeping" in the depths of the human unconscious, to let her "memory" explode against the sun so that it may once again find "the shadow of grace on her countenance like a black ray."

The final image of the poem leaves us with the possibility of a new Eve crowned, not with the glittering halo regularly surrounding the Virgin Mary's head as a symbol of her apotheosis, but with a wonderfully malicious inversion of such saintliness: the appearance of the dark shadow of grace on Eve's face like a black ray of light. As this newly created icon shows, Eve, unlike Mary, is clearly not proposed for canonization by the church. On the contrary, her status as original sinner is cherished, her alliance with the dark and mysterious feminine forces of the universe is celebrated, and the type of grace she may experience becomes associated with her defiance of nonsensical taboos and injurious myths propagated by patriarchal religions which demean women and contribute to what Mary Daly has called, in *Beyond God the Father,* "the essential lovelessness of the sexually hierarchical society."[14]

In this second "Eve" poem, therefore, Anne Hébert reclaims and revalidates the vitalizing sexual energy of the Eve of the first "Eve" poem, who has become perversely connected in our civilization with the forces of evil and death, and, as Patricia Smart states, "invert[s] the interpretation of the myth that makes Eve out to be the first sinner . . . view[ing] her more as a model of desire and of transgression."[15] Moreover, by insisting on Eve's right to supersede her beneficently meek and pristine counterpart, Anne Hébert succeeds in exposing, demythicizing, and subverting centuries of misogyny, the insidious nature of which was diffused by the church through its adoption of the Virgin Mary as an object of worship almost equal to Christ him-

---

[14] *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon P, 1973) 51. The entire sentence reads: "To oppose the essential lovelessness of the sexually hierarchical society is the radically loving act."

[15] Smart 68 (my translation). The original French reads as follows: "Inversant l'interprétation du mythe qui fait d'Eve la première pécheresse, Hébert y voit plutôt un modèle du désir et de la transgression."

self and as an officially sanctioned pseudowomanly intercessor to whom women in particular might pray to obtain absolution for their special sin: that of being women.

Marina Warner, in *Alone of All Her Sex,* describes with first-hand knowledge the dilemma which Anne Hébert must have confronted also because of the "unattainable . . . ideal" of virgin motherhood represented by Mary and advanced to her as a young woman by the Québec branch of the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, "the effect the myth has on the mind of a Catholic girl cannot but be disturbing, and if it does not provoke revolt (as it often does) it deepens the need for religion's consolation, for the screen of rushes against the frost of being carnal and female."[16] Clearly, Anne Hébert in the second "Eve" poem has revolted against this myth, rejected Mary, and reinstated Eve. To quote Kim Chernin from her recent book entitled *Reinventing Eve:*

> The transformation of woman is a work of archetypal dimension and significance. To change fundamentally the nature of woman, it would be necessary to transform the archetype itself. To imagine Eve, the sinful first woman, as rebel in Paradise, is itself a bite into the forbidden fruit.[17]

Anne Hébert's rehabilitation of Eve in the second "Eve" poem is certainly an appetizing bite into that fruit.[18]

University of Western Ontario

---

[16] *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Pan Books, 1985) 337.

[17] *Reinventing Eve: Modern Woman in Search of Herself* (New York: Times Books, 1987) 148-49.

[18] From what I can discern, Anne Hébert is unique in subverting the Eve myth, in both French and French-Canadian literature. The date of the publication of the second Eve poem, 1960, precedes even Marie-Claire Blais' *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (Montréal: Les Editions du Jour, 1965) in which Catholicism—but not specificially the Eve myth—is severely criticized. Hébert's challenge in 1960 when the Quiet Revolution was just beginning is, therefore, really daring. This contrasts sharply with women's literature in English: Anglophone writers from Amelia Lanier in Renaissance England through to Dorothy Livesay in contemporary Canada have "reinvented" Eve.