WIND IN AUGUST: *LES FOUS DE BASSAN*'S REPLY TO FAULKNER

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Anne Hébert's use of Macbeth's lament that "life is a tale told by an idiot . . ." as the epigram to the fourth book of *Les Fous de Bassan*, the story as told by the demented Perceval, is an explicit echo of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. *Les Fous de Bassan*, like Faulkner's *Light in August*, is a story of rape and the murder—also in the month of August—of female victims. The essential subtext of Hébert's novel is revealed in the fact that while it mirrors much of Faulkner's style, his themes, his symbology and even his characters and narrators, it, in the process, underscores the masculine bias of the Faulkner canon. The consideration of *Les Fous de Bassan* against *The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August* not only underlines the male worldview implicit in the Faulkner novels but it brings to the foreground the surfacing feminist vision which informs *Les Fous de Bassan*.

Despite the obvious dichotomy of female as object versus female as subject which exists between them, in Faulkner, Hébert seems to have found a soulmate and a stepping stone to expand her own imaginative universe. Hébert, like Faulkner, has suffered from the malaise of insecurity, both economic and personal, which so typically plagues writers. In a Montreal television documentary, she confessed: "Souvent . . . je cessais d'écrire parce que je croyais ne plus être capable de le faire. Le temps qui passait entre chaque livre que je publiais c'est parce que j'attends à me renouveler."[1] Both writers began their careers as poets, and their prose is marked by the intensity, fluidity and craftsmanship normally associated with poetry. While both writers have acquainted themselves with urban cultural centres, their best works, constructed around mythological versions of their native regions,

seem intensely "regional." Hébert wrote of Kamouraska and "Griffin Creek" while living in Paris. Faulkner travelled to New Orleans, New York and Paris only to repeatedly write about Yoknapatawpha. Hébert and Faulkner both had unsatisfying careers writing for film. Faulkner frequently referred to his work under contract to Warner Brothers in Hollywood as "writing trash." For several years Anne Hébert worked for the National Film Board of Canada before moving to Paris. Faulkner's letters indicate that he frequently fell short of "making ends meet" while attempting to survive as a writer. Anne Hébert's comment upon receiving the *prix Femina* for *Les Fous de Bassan* was that "On se sent enfin reconnu par un grand nombre de personnes; c'est très réconfortant. Et au point de vue financier, c'est extraordinaire: ça enlève beaucoup d'angoisse."[2]

Hébert is a product of a turn-of-the-century bourgeois élite. Her grandfather was the architect of the Quebec Parliament buildings; her father a critic, essayist and writer in his own right; her cousin and friend, St-Denys-Garneau, was a renowned poet before his death at the age of thirty-one. Hébert never attended the public school system but was educated at home by her mother, and for her high school studies was sent to a convent. During the Duplessis era, Anne Hébert doubtlessly felt herself to be the progeny of an alienated and dwindling class.

Faulkner also managed to avoid much of the normal school system by refusing to attend his high school classes. Like Hébert he was the offspring of a fallen gentility. His lineage parallels the decline of "Southern Society": his great-grandfather was a Southern gentleman, writer and duellist; his grandfather was a builder of railroads. Faulkner's father proved to be the last beneficiary of any of the Faulkner fortunes.

Not surprisingly then, both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Les Fous de Bassan* adopt a dying community as milieu. *Les Fous de Bassan* records the last breath of a Loyalist community which had first been driven to Northern Vermont and then to Quebec. The tiny English community is fated to internal decay as its traditions, religion, and values are eroded by isolation within the growing nationalist movement of Quebec (the key dates of the narrative are 1936, the beginning of the Duplessis era, and 1982, six years after the first election of the *Parti québécois*), by "Papist" intervention, and by the destructive lure of the American Dream.

The families of *Les Fous de Bassan* share a parallel Loyalist lineage with the Compsons of *The Sound and the Fury*. "Les Jones, les Brown, les Atkins, les Macdonald" remained "fidèles à un roi fou, refusant l'indépendance américaine" (14). Of the Compson ancestors, Quentin Maclachan "having fought once against an English king and lost, he would not make the same mistake twice and so fled one night in 1779" from Carolina to Kentucky, and his son, Charles Stuart, who fought with the British against the American revolutionaries in Georgia, was eventually forced—after a failed "plot to secede the whole Mississippi Valley from the United States"—to flee Kentucky (404-5). The fortunes of both the Compsons and the Joneses/Browns stabilized somewhat after the War of Independence: the Joneses/Browns were part of the well-to-do Loyalist communities in the North; the Compsons became part of the South's landed gentry. The families were displaced a second time by historical events. Though the Joneses and Browns arrived in the Gaspé region in 1782, the perseverance and evolution of Quebec as a political reality meant the increased isolation and diminution of their community. The Compsons of Mississippi suffered first as the South lost the Civil War—Jason Lycurgus "failed at Shiloh in '62" and again "at Resaca in '64" (408)—and subsequently from the long economic decline of the South which ensued. Faulkner sets *The Sound and the Fury* in 1910 and 1928, the degenerative period of a once proud Southern society. Nicolas Jones and Jason Compson are each explicitly identified as failing, childless bachelors and the final male heirs of their respective family lines.

What Hébert would find in the novels of Faulkner is another displaced soul, *une âme déracinée*, attempting to organize a new, universal mythology from the disconnected and decaying roots of lost heritage. Fittingly, both Hébert and Faulkner choose to tell of the sordid lives of characters in search of themselves in the fragmented mirror of a dying community; a search which, in *Les Fous de Bassan, The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August*, leads to greater destruction and tragedy. Both writers relate a series of incidents which reveal an almost inevitable thematic interweaving of loss of history and tradition and a decline of spiritual values and morality leading to a host of aberrations: sterility, impotence, physical and psychological imprisonment, sexual deviance, insanity, suicide and murder.

Les Fous de Bassan, The Sound and the Fury and *Light in August* revolve around conflicts between women and men which are, in fact, externalizations of internal conflicts in men which lead to the violent victimization of women. In *Les Fous de Bassan,* Hébert traces out the pattern of this internal and external conflict as it has been presented in the earlier novels, but she allows a female perspective to emerge which debases and, eventually, satirizes the masculine bias of Faulkner's version and vision of these conflicts.

The Sound and the Fury is largely the story of Candace Compson as told by four different narrators. The story of *The Sound and the Fury* is first told by the three Compson sons—Benjamin, Quentin and Jason (often described in Freudian terms as id, ego and superego figures, respectively). The fourth book focuses on Dilsey, the black maid, but is written in the voice of an omniscient narrator. The final section of the novel is an historical epilogue. Anne Hébert adopts much the same narrative structure and similar characters: the story as told by Nicolas Jones, Stevens Brown and Perceval (also superego, ego and id figures respectively); the story as told by an omniscient spirit, Olivia de la Haute Mer, and a 1982 epilogue to the events of 1936 provided by the "Dernière Lettre de Stevens Brown."

The most striking divergence of *Les Fous de Bassan* from the structure of *The Sound and the Fury* is the story as told by Nora Atkins. Nora parallels Candace Compson in many respects. Both women conspicuously portray female sexuality and desire, and are central to the novels as objects of sexual desire. Both girls have loving, understanding, vaguely sensual relations with the id figures, the "idiots," of the respective stories, Perceval and Bejamin. Though Caddy (Candace) and her fate are the center of *The Sound and the Fury,* Faulkner never allows her to be her own narrator. Hébert, on the other hand, gives Nora a voice through her diaries. We begin to see the shifting emphasis from the Faulkner vision to that of Anne Hébert.

In *Les Fous de Bassan,* Hébert, in Faulkneresque style, adopts a kind of *symbolisme,* with frequent shifts of time and place and point of view, and constant flowing access to the inner lives of the characters. Hébert employs poetic fluidity and elliptic syntax throughout the novel, and her writing style is marked by the drive, density, sensuousness and underlining passion charac-

teristic of Faulkner's prose. This prose style has much to do with the themes which the novels evoke, as can be seen in key, climactic scenes of both novels.

For example, in *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin is driven by a moralistic sense of disapproval of Caddy's sensuality and by a countervailing incestuous desire for her. Paradoxically, his moral vision of the family honour (which Caddy's promiscuity has besmirched) and his lust are both potential answers to what is for Quentin a crucial question: how to be a man? In his unfolding of the scene in which Quentin and Caddy broach incest, Faulkner brings us to the realization that the answer to Quentin's dilemma might well lie in the very real but symbolically charged act of stabbing his sister.

After putting Benjy to bed, Quentin finds Caddy in the moonlight, languishing on the edge of the branch, "water flowing about her hips," so that "her skirt half saturated flopped along her flanks" (186). The elements at first attach themselves to Quentin's flesh.

> I could smell the honeysuckle on the water the air seemed to drizzle honeysuckle and with the rasping of crickets a substance you could feel on the flesh. (186)

Quentin eventually comes to interiorize these elements—particularly the smell of honeysuckle—turning them into his private mindscape. It is this confusion of inner and outer worlds which is the particular mark of Quentin's madness. Ironically, it is the schizophrenic Quentin who says to Caddy, "get out of that water are you crazy" (186). The episode which ensues between Caddy and Quentin confirms the ambient conditions—the air and water—as both a symbolic complement to what is taking place between the characters and an interiorization of these elements on the part of the narrator.

> she moved my hand up against her throat her heart was hammering there
>
> poor Quentin
>
> her face looked at the sky it was so low that all smells and sounds of night seemed to have been crowded down like under a slack tent especially the honeysuckle it had got into my breathing it was on her face and throat like paint her

blood pounded against my hand I was leaning on my other arm it began to jerk and jump and I had to pant to get any air at all out of that thick grey honeysuckle

yes I hate him I would die for him I've already died for him I die for him over and over again everytime this goes

when I lifted my hand I could still feel the crisscrossed twigs and grass burning into my palm

poor Quentin

she leaned back on her arms her hands locked about her knees

youve never done that have you

what done what

that what I have what I did

yes yes lots of times with lots of girls

then I was crying her hand touched me

then I was crying her hand touched me again and I was crying against her damp blouse then she lying on her back looking past my head into the sky I could see a rim of white under her irises I opened my knife

do you remember the day damuddy died when you sat down in the water in your drawers

yes

I held the point of the knife at her throat. (188)

In Stevens Brown's revelation of his murder of his cousin Nora and rape-murder of his cousin Olivia, we find the narrator once again interiorizing the elements and attempting to suggest that they were somehow responsible for his actions.

J'ai senti la menace de la tempête à l'intérieur même de ma tête, cognant contre mes tempes, bien avant que rien ne soit visible dans le paysage, baigné de lune. Nora répète que je ne suis pas un homme et qu'elle me déteste. Elle pleure et rit à la fois, son béret blanc toujours incliné sur l'oeil.

Le vent retrousse leurs jupes et découvre leurs genoux. Inutile de me contredire là-dessus et prétendre que l'air est immobile et doux. Olivia tente d'apaiser sa cousine. Le vent me soufflette au visage. Son odeur d'iode me colle à la peau. La bouche vociférante de Nora à portée de ma bouche. Répète que je ne suis pas un homme. Dit à Olivia de se méfier de moi. Renverse la tête. Son rire de gorge en cascade. Désir fruste. Mes deux mains sur son cou pour une caresse apaisante. Son rire hystérique sous mes doigts. Cette fille est

> folle. La boule dure du rire, dans sa gorge, sous mes doigts. Simple pression des doigts. (244)

Whereas Faulkner extends somewhat the metaphysical conceit of sex leading to death, Hébert explodes it with an actual murder. The murder scene in *Les Fous de Bassan* recaptures the sensuality of Quentin's tryst with Caddy. Once again skirts reveal legs; the elements are interiorized by the narrator and contribute to the Dionysian frenzy of the moment, and the madman/narrator calls his victim mad. Nora's saucily inclined beret replaces Caddy's muddy drawers as a symbol of female sexuality. However, Hébert judiciously underlines that Brown's claims about the wind are of his own creation.

> "Dans le silence qui suit je comprends tout de suite que le calme de la nuit, que la beauté de la nuit n'ont pas cessé d'exister pendant tout ce temps. Seul le grondement de ma rage a pu me faire croire le contraire." (248-9)

The difference between these passages of the respective novels is not simply that Hébert alerts us to the self-justifying nature of the narrator's recounting of events but that Nora dies a shocking and revulsive death and that Olivia, though she struggles to survive, is raped and strangled by Stevens Brown. Caddy not only survives but when the knife is placed at her throat she craves its penetration with a lustful eagerness.

> yes
> it wont take a second Ill try not to hurt you
> all right
> will you close your eyes
> no like this youll have to push harder
> touch your hand to it
> . . . . . .
> push it are you going to
> do you want me to
> yes push it. (189)

Significantly, both passages lay hold of the notion that the individual gains an identity, a sense of self-definition, through the act of sexual intercourse. Quentin can "become a man" either by making love to his sister or by killing her and thereby saving the family honour or, as the passage suggests, there is a perverse third possibility in which he accomplishes both; that is to say, he

kills her in a manner that overtly suggests copulation. In *Light in August*, when Joe Christmas has raped Joanna Burden he concludes, "At least I have made a woman of her at last" (223). Stevens Brown killed his cousins because Nora charged he was "not a man" (244). Stevens's smug contention that Olivia "est devenu femme comme les autres" (239) before she died brings to the foreground his adherence to this notion that we become "men" and "women" through the rite of coitus.

All three novels relate the struggles of alienated individuals lost in the search for some sense of personal identity. The failure of these men to find themselves is, at least in part, a result of the insufficiency of their social environments. If Quentin's or Stevens Brown's or Joe Christmas's attempts to find themselves, to prove themselves men, seem futile or anachronistic or misguided or even tragic, we must keep in mind that the avenues taken seem to have been the only ones that their worldviews provided.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, it is Benjy, the idiot, who sets the stage for Quentin's view of the world, while the frenzied Perceval is the source and gravitational center of the universe of *Les Fous de Bassan*. In *Light in August* and *Les Fous de Bassan*, the Reverend Gail Hightower and the Reverend Nicolas Jones stand as symbols of the fallen state of their respective communities. Both Hightower and Jones are keepers of heritage and guardians of tradition, and both are felled by scandal. Jones's wife commits suicide by hanging herself in the barn after she discovers her husband's lust for his niece. Hightower's wife is an adultress and kills herself jumping from a motel room window. In both cases it is suggested that the men were inadequate: Jones is a pedophile, and it is intimated that Hightower is a homosexual. Both men fail to have offspring. Symbolically and practically, they represent the end of the line, the fall of the communities of which they are the spiritual leaders. As Nicolas Jones expresses it: ". . . dans la galerie des ancêtres il manque un maillon à la chaîne des hommes. Après moi le gouffre abrupt. Le vide. Rien. Le fils que je n'ai pas eu . . ." (19-20).

In the absence of a social structure or an ideology or a grid of values, the inculcation of a sense of self or of personal identity becomes particularly problematic. Quentin Compson, while travelling to school in the East, ponders how to react to Northern Negroes: "That was when I realised that a nigger is not a person

so much as a form of behaviour; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among" (106). What Quentin fails to realize (and this theme is pervasive in *The Sound and the Fury)* is that the reverse must also be true; that the white man (who views the black man as an "other") defines himself in terms of the black man. In the absence of a broader structure of values there is a compelling tendency to define one's self, even if "obversely," in terms of a conspicuous and contiguous "other." Just as many of Faulkner's Americans find themselves defined in terms of the American "Negro," Hébert's males identify themselves in terms of "woman." Nicolas Jones defines himself by his sadistic overbearance toward the twins, his life is ruled by his desire to please his mother, his barren wife makes him incomplete as a man, and his lust for Nora makes him a fallen man. Similarly, Stevens's male ego demands the rejection of Maureen, the murder of Nora and the conquest of Olivia. It is personal alienation together with this dependence on women for self-realization which precipitates the frustration, misogyny and violence of the novel.

Joe Christmas (*Light in August*) was the offspring of a white girl and an unidentified man who was probably black. Christmas feels himself without identity, unable to fit a role, neither white nor black. Stevens Brown connects himself with the black American. Unkempt, travelling the American South, Stevens Brown found himself being treated almost like a black man: "C'est fou ce qu'une barbé de deux à trois jours fait mauvais effet sur les gars bien rasés des Carolines ou de Georgie. Il n'y a que les nègres qui font aussi mauvais effet . . . " (57). Later, Stevens recalls ". . . j'ai parfois travaillé au coton, avec les nègres" (58). In light of the fact that Joe Christmas's companion and alter ego in *Light in August* is Joe Brown, it seems reasonable to conclude that we are being encouraged to read Stevens Brown's character as an extension and variation of Joe Christmas's dilemma.

Stevens, like Joe Christmas, cannot find himself. He is neither "American moyen" like his friend, Michael Hotchkiss, nor "American Negro." Home, Griffin Creek, seems to offer no hope of a sense of belonging, of a sense of identity befitting his ego. "Mon pied est énorme et le village tout petit dessous. Le village est si petit que je ne pourrai plus jamais y rentrer, avec mes grosses bottes et ma taille d'homme. On doit étouffer là-dedans" (62-23).

Stevens's response to patrimony and tradition is revealed in his daydreams about his grandfather. "Sous ma botte je m'imagine sa petite vie de vieux, il a bien soixante-dix ans. Je pourrais l'écraser comme une coquerelle" (63). Stevens is equally alienated from his immediate parents. The only real human contact that Stevens has is a kind of hopeless affection for the twins and Perceval, which Stevens is too worldly-wise to nurture. Stevens's ensuing crisis of identity is only natural in such extreme isolation. "Être quelqu'un d'autre. Ne plus être Stevens Brown, fils de John Brown et Bea Jones. Il n'est peut-être pas trop tard pour changer de peau définitivement, de haut en bas et de long en large" (79). On July 28, Stevens writes: "Être quelqu'un d'autre, quelle idée est-ce là qui me poursuit toujours? Organiser les souvenirs, disposer les images, me dédoubler franchement . . ." (85).

When Stevens Brown enters Griffin Creek he goes first to his cousin Maureen's, a middle-aged widow, and has sex with her. Maureen feeds Stevens in exchange for his work on her farm. He sleeps in her barn. Joe Christmas arrives mysteriously in Jefferson, Mississippi. Christmas meets Joanna Burden, an older woman. He becomes her hired man; she supplies him with food and shelter in a shack on her farm. Christmas becomes her clandestine lover.

Both Joe Christmas and Stevens Brown adopt a bitter misogyny. When Christmas takes Joanna Burden the first time it is with rage.

> He went into the house. He did not go in eagerness, but in a quiet rage. "I'll show her," he said aloud. He did not try to be quiet. He entered the house boldly and mounted the stairs; she heard him at once. "Who is it?" she said. But there was no alarm in her tone. He didn't answer. He mounted the stairs and entered the room. She was still dressed, turning, watching the door as he entered. But she did not speak to him. She just watched him as he went to the table and blew out the lamp. Thinking, 'now she'll run.' And so he sprang forward, toward the door to intercept her. But she did not flee. He found her in the dark exactly where the light had lost her, in the same attitude. He began to tear at her clothes. He was talking to her, in a tense, hard voice: "I'll show you! I'll show the bitch!" She did not resist at all. . . . [T]hough his

> hands were hard and urgent it was with rage alone. (222-3)

Joe Christmas requires a reaction from Joanna Burden in order to know something of his own identity. Even her hate or fear would provide him with some sense of self-definition. She offers no reaction. His isolation and dark emptiness grow. His rage is his only vestige of selfhood and he rages because of this lacuna. Vaguely, he realizes that Joanna Burden, being a woman and white, can offer him a sense of identity, yet he feels trapped and separated from himself by this woman. Christmas concludes: "This is not my life. I don't belong here" (244).

Stevens's affair with Maureen gives him an immediate identity of sorts: "Je suis devenu l'homme engagé de ma cousine Maureen" (69). Stevens connects planting himself in Maureen with planting himself in the community.

> Je me suis tout de suite établi au pays, non sans peine d'ailleurs, ma cousine Maureen étroite comme un trou de souris, mais j'ai pris racine dans le ventre d'une femme et tout alentour la campagne de mon enfance bruissait comme la mer. (69)

Stevens then rejects Maureen and the possibility of finding himself through her, choosing instead a renewed solitude.

> Ma volonté est de dormir tout seul, la nuit, et de me satisfaire tout seul, si l'envie m'en prend. Que ma cousine Maureen découvre à loisir, couchée dans son grand lit conjugal, sa nouvelle solitude, plus grande que la première. (69)

Maureen's solitude is Stevens's vengeance against woman-kind. His alienation grows, his bitterness heightens.

> Une telle excitation dans tout mon corps, une rage inexplicable. Il y a trop de femmes dans ce village, trop de femmes en chaleur et d'enfants perverses qui s'attachent à mes pas. Je visite la parenté et je vais de l'une à l'autre. Des femmes. Toujours des femmes. (80)

Operating in such an atmosphere of anomie, misogyny, racial tension and rampant alienation, Faulkner's and Hébert's stories become basic, primordial, elemental. The conflicts transcend individual characters, penetrate even the archetypes

and become tensions in the elemental symbology of life—a struggle of earth, air, fire and water.

Hébert first archetypifies the conflict into a battle of the sexes. Stevens sees "woman" as one entity. Stevens, Nicolas Jones and Perceval become part of one organism, "man." Nicolas Jones describes himself as an accomplice to the murder. Stevens describes Perceval as being part of himself. In the process of the novel, man and woman revert to their traditional symbols, fire (smoke, storms, burning objects) and water respectively.

In *Les Fous de Bassan* Hébert methodically establishes the link between the men of her story and fire symbolism. Nicolas Jones's house is flooded with smoke:

> Le parloir est plein de fumée bleutre. L'odeur du tabac monte au plafond, en flaques molles. Respirer là-dedans. En absorber par tous les pores de sa peau, . . . yeux et gorge brûlés. (32)

Strange men in the community:

> L'homme, à l'arrière du magasin, fume, sans retirer la cigarette de sa bouche, comme pour cacher son visage dans la fumée. (41)

Stevens's grandfather:

> Mon grand-père s'embrouille, fait le compte des feux du village, on dirait qu'il recense une myriade de prunelles bleues, sorties d'une source vive au milieu de son ventre d'homme. (64)

Stevens himself:

> Moi, je la regarde, la chaise renversée en arrière, les yeux miclos, dans la fumée de ma cigarette. (67)

Stevens and his friend, Hotchkiss:

> . . . Gulf View Boulevard, assis tous les deux dans le porche, toutes lumières éteintes, le feu de nos cigarettes, rouge dans l'obscurité . . . . (70)

The women of Hébert's novel are frequently and repeatedly associated with water and the sea. Felicity Jones, Nora and Olivia are all pictured swimming, while none of the men seem to swim. Nora claims that her grandmother is a dolphin. Faulkner works

with the same basic symbology. In *The Sound and the Fury* water symbolism is prevalent. Caddy, in particular, is connected with water symbols. The entire story of *Light in August* moves centrifugally around the blazing house set afire by Joe Christmas.

Stripped of a viable culture, without history, tradition or community, void of morality or spirituality, in Freudian terms, in the absence of superego and in the collapse of the ego, the characters play out their dramatic conflict as a battle of the elements. What brings fire and water (male and female) together is the air. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin, just before his death, thinks of Caddy and his consciousness is dominated by the smell of honeysuckle. Benjy associates her with the smell of leaves. In *Les Fous de Bassan* the women are associated with the smell of the sea. Maureen is also connected with the smell of cooking. Wind and air are the means of communication, smells and carried sounds the mode. The wind becomes the mixing of the sexes, the carrier of desire and eventually desire itself.

Stevens, Nora and Perceval are archetypically "les fous de bassan"; "fous de bassan" are literally gannets, common in the Gaspé. The characters are <u>fous</u> in that their behaviour is often mad: Nora's wild laughter, Stevens's howling in the storm, Perceval's idiocy. All three are connected with the lunacy symbolized by the moon. Like gannets they are more at home on the wind than on solid ground. Like the birds they ride upon the wind, desire, and penetrate the sea, "womanness." Stevens wants to penetrate "woman" in a coital sense, and in a mysterious sense to be reborn. Perceval wants to lick the salt from Nora's body; he is most at-one-with the mystery of the sea. Nora must struggle with the desires of a woman.

The dependency of man on the female is reiterated on the symbolic level. Nicolas Jones and Stevens Brown repeatedly express their need for the sea. The Oedipally-fixated Jones revels in childhood memories of his mother's midnight swims and his desire to join her. Stevens Brown cannot live out of sight of the sea. When he travels he maintains a coastal route, always under the influence of sea-breezes. Their dependence operates on conscious and unconscious levels.

The essential myth of *Les Fous de Bassan* is that man is born of woman, symbolically of water, and depends upon woman for his growth, his progeny, his stability. Woman must be a mirror

(like Quentin's "niggers," an "obverse mirror") of man and masculinity, and one way or another, of every individual man. Alienated man necessarily rages against woman because he lacks identity, and reasons that woman must somehow be responsible for his failure of identity. Such a man may reject "woman" but he is tied to her by desire, and by the mysteries of birth, growth and self-realization. He depends upon her, yet fears his dependence, his own desires and her unfathomable mystery. Hébert recognizes this syndrome but, rather than sympathize, she uses the occasion to expose the pathetic fallacy with which Faulkner typically mitigates the actions of his male protagonists.

Stevens Brown blames the wind for the events of August 31, 1936. ". . . je roule avec ma cousine Olivia sur le sable de Griffin Creek, enfermés tous deux dans un typhon qui se déchaîne" (246). Even while ravaging Olivia he is conscious and afraid of the sea: "La mer à deux pas de nous, ses vagues sauvages heurtant la paroi rocheuse, à deux pas de nous. Des vagues de dix pieds de haut . . . " (247). In his fatuous imaginings of the wind and the water Stevens Brown becomes a parody of the Faulkneresque character.

However much a man has gone awry, one can nonetheless find a comprehension of his mindset, a basis for his thinking and the possibility of sympathy for him in the Faulkner novels. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin leaves home, but is so dominated by his desire for his sister that he is incapable of a mature sexual relationship. He is arrested for suspicion of child molesting and shortly after commits suicide by drowning himself. Water's fatal domination renders Quentin a pathetic, if not tragic, victim. It is, of course, this fear of drowning, of being betrayed and suffocated by the women he finds himself among which underscores Stevens Brown's misogyny.

Joe Christmas kills the older woman who is actively trying to take control of his life. Joanna Burden is a victim, but she is not innocent or unaware. She wants to marry Joe Christmas and she presses him to enroll in the black University program and thus, in his terms, to identify himself as her man and "a nigger." Having murdered her, Christmas sets her house afire, but Faulkner allows us much sympathy for this domination by fire. Joe Christmas was a man searching for himself, another kind of victim, a black man,

a tragic, perhaps even Christlike man who is eventually shot, castrated and hung.

In contrast to the tragedies of his male characters, Faulkner includes a note of optimism about the destiny of "woman" in the dénouement of his novels. Though Caddy was "doomed and knew it" (412), her daughter, Quentin, escapes Jason's clutches. While Joanna Burden's blazing house is one kind of "light in August," Lena Grove finds a father for Joe Brown's child, and Lena, the mother-to-be, is another kind of "light in August."[3] Hébert, however, rejects both Faulkner's guarded optimism and his clouding of the male protagonist's culpability.

Hébert leads us down the path of sympathy for Stevens Brown. He was also a man facing a crisis of identity. In his final letter to Michael Hotchkiss he reveals that he is haunted by Nora and Olivia in a pre-classical sense—as if they were Furies rather than projections of his guilt. Stevens Brown has spent the last thirty-seven years in a hospital and now survives day by day on a cache of stolen drugs. Yet, the scales of justice still seem askew.

In the rape and murder of Olivia, Stevens Brown killed innocence itself. As the symbolism of the novel underlines, in the face of alienated man the desire of woman and simply being a woman are tragic. The novel proffers the fatalistic vision that innocent girls died simply because they were becoming women; their suffering and deaths were inescapable because women must face not only their own desire but the rage of men to whom their desire might submit them. While giving Stevens Brown the last word, Hébert makes it clear that the real tragedy of *Les Fous de Bassan* remains the deaths of Olivia and Nora. Stevens Brown confesses:

> Je te mentirais, old brother, si je n'insistais pas sur le fait que longtemps après Griffin Creek je me suis plu en cet agenouillement de Nora Atkins, ma cousine, devant moi, sur le sable. Blitzkrieg à Londres, fermes normandes sous la mitraille, relent de pharmacie à Queen Mary, cette fille n'en finit pas de m'apparaître et tombe à genoux devant moi, bascule sur le sable, avec son envie de femme, son mépris de femme, matée et domptée. (245)

Though he toys with suicide forty-five years after the murders of August 31, 1937, Stevens Brown still survives, as he reminds

Michael Hotchkiss, "intact" and without "la moindre petite cicatrice" (231). Hébert brooks no sympathy for Stevens Brown; she permits him to live on as a festering symbol of life's injustice.

NOTES

[1] Anne Hébert, from "Anne Hébert," *Profession Ecrivain*, Les Productions Prism, CIVN, TV 17, Montrèal, 11 Feb. 1984.

[2] Françoise Faucher, "Interview: Anne Hébert," *L'Actualité* 8.2 (Feb.1983): 11.

3 I would like to thank Annick Chapdelaine of l'Université McGill for bringing to my attention that 'she will be a light in August' is a Mississippi expression meaning she will give birth in August.

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