

LUCE IRIGARAY AND LES FOUS DE BASSAN:  
A READING

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

**TOTAL OF 10 PAGES ONLY  
MAY BE XEROXED**

(Without Author's Permission)

CATHERINE HOPE SQUIRES







Luce Irigaray and **Les fous de Bassan:**

A Reading

by

Catherine Hope Squires

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of French and Spanish  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

August 1995

St. John's

Newfoundland

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Abbreviations	iii
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Chapter 2. Luce Irigaray	7
Chapter 3. Les fous de Bassan	34
Chapter 4. Conclusion	80
Bibliography	84

ABSTRACT

Irigaray and **Les fous de Bassan**: A Reading.

This paper is a reading of Anne Hébert's novel, **Les fous de Bassan**, following Luce Irigaray's analysis of western culture. The novel through its title, deconstructs the unified subject by bringing into play pairs of binary oppositions for which the underlying opposition is, culture as creation:nature as creation. This foregrounds the role of reproduction in the creation of culture which we then examine through demonstrating the lack of a vertical dimension in the mother/daughter relationship. The novel, at the same time, affords the reader symbolization of two notions, the threshold and mucosity, both of which Irigaray suggests as possible new categories of thought that could allow sexual difference to be expressed in language.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help and advice given me in the preparation of this dissertation by my thesis supervisor, Dr. Virginia Harger-Grinling of Memorial University of Newfoundland. Without her encouragement I would not have been able to complete the work.

I would also like to express my gratitude to professors A. R. Chadwick, J. Hare, A. Wilkshire, M. Smith, and again V. Harger-Grinling who, during my term as a part-time student, were very considerate in arranging meetings and discussions to fit my erratic schedule.

Finally, I would like to thank my son and grandson for sharing with me their knowledge of computer technology during the preparation of this manuscript. I would like to acknowledge as well the patience of all my family 'for the duration'.



## ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used to indicate those texts of Luce Irigaray quoted. Where I have quoted the novel studied, **Les fous de Bassan**, I have used only page numbers in brackets.

- E** L'Ethique de la différence sexuelle(1984)
- CS** Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un(1977)
- CAC** Le corps à corps avec la mère(1981)
- JTN** Je, tu, nous(1990)
- JT** J'aime à toi(1992)
- OA** L'oubli de l'air(1983)
- PN** Parler n'est jamais neutre(1985)
- PE** Passions élémentaires(1982)
- SP** Sexes et parentés(1987)
- S** Speculum, de l'autre femme(1974)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

[J]e suis née femme, mais je dois encore devenir cette femme que je suis par nature. Luce Irigaray.

Le Verbe en moi est sans parole prononcée, ou écrite, - Anne Hébert.

The quotations at the beginning of this dissertation are from **J'aime à toi** (1992) by Luce Irigaray and **Les fous de Bassan** (1982) by Anne Hébert. I take the statement by Hébert's character Nora to express essentially the same sentiment as that of Irigaray. This is merely one of many resonances between Irigaray's ideas and Hébert's novel. In this paper I will try to present Irigaray's analysis of patriarchal culture. Then, in light of that analysis, I will examine the culture of Griffin Creek in the novel, **Les fous de Bassan**, by Anne Hébert.

Irigaray's quotation indicates the direction of her work. Woman's identity has yet to be constructed and this cannot be done by denying feminine physiology. It must be constructed by desiring and elaborating a spirituality, a subjectivity and an alterity proper to woman. She states:

Il est question de revendiquer une culture, de vouloir et d'élaborer une spiritualité, une subjectivité et une alterité propres à ce genre: féminin. Soit non pas, comme disait Simone de Beauvoir: on ne naît pas femme, on le devient (par culture) mais plutôt: je suis née femme, mais je dois encore devenir cette femme que je suis par nature(JT,168).

This indicates the difference in direction that her work has taken from Beauvoir's and from that of many feminist theorists of the

last twenty-five years. It also indicates one of the reasons why her work was not well received by many feminist theorists who considered her to be essentialist. Irigaray is a writer who, according to one critic, is frequently footnoted but rarely read. At one point in her most recently published work, *J'aime à toi*, Irigaray refers to the misunderstandings, confusions and useless conflicts connected with feminist questions, and comments on the misreading of the subtitle of *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, her first book. She takes pains to explain that her focus is on woman as other, not the other woman:

Dans le sous-titre de *Speculum*, j'ai voulu indiquer que l'autre n'est, en fait, pas neutre, ni grammaticalement, ni sémantiquement, et qu'il n'est pas ou plus possible d'utiliser indifféremment la même parole pour le masculin et le féminin (JT, 103-104).

Her emphasis is on women becoming subjects in discourse as women, which would require a recognition of sexual difference, rather than claiming the right to speak equally with men as masculine subject. This conflicts sharply with the project of downplaying sexual difference in order to bring to the forefront the social construction of gender and the seeking of equality with men. For, as Morag Shiac points out, "Writing of the body, we fear appropriation at the point where, historically, we have been most vulnerable, and where we have been so ruthlessly placed" (Brennan, 1989, 155). However, Irigaray's view of the universal subject as dual requires the recognition of each subject as a sexed subject.

Irigaray's project consists of interrogating patriarchal assumptions, amassed over centuries, about the nature of society, the criteria for truth and the role of woman in both. She does so through examining the general functioning of discourse in western society. In the introduction to **French feminist criticism: Women, Language, Literature. An Annotated Bibliography** (1985), Virginia Thorndike Hules situates Irigaray in the context of the work of both Structuralists and Post-structuralists in France in the nineteen-sixties. She shows that Derrida's analysis of the works of Freud, in particular his critique of the Freudian model of sexual difference, provided "the intellectual tool" needed by Irigaray to interrogate the signifying systems of western culture. Irigaray, trained as a psychoanalyst under Jacques Lacan, makes use of his theory that gender identity is constructed by the systems of difference encoded in language: by the binary oppositions between phallus and lack.

She uses this account of the constitution of the speaking subject and its relationship to the gendered subject to show how the law-of-the-father is perpetuated in the subconscious. She shows that this reproduction and perpetuation of the masculine can be seen in the symbolic order, which is the place of the conjunction of body, psyche and language. It is this aspect of human culture that she refers to as patriarchal. She questions the necessity of this domination of the masculine in the symbolic, as she considers the possibility of two libidinal economies in the imaginary. It

should be noted, as Whitford has done, that the imaginary for Irigaray is malleable, as it is not for Lacan (Whitford,1991a,199).

Irigaray is both a philosopher and a psychoanalyst. From within psychoanalysis she has attempted, through the deconstruction of patriarchal theory, to produce an analysis of Western culture. Indeed, Whitford (1991a,7) claims that her strategy consists in psychoanalysing philosophy, a discipline which Irigaray describes as, "le discours des discours" (CS,34). Irigaray believes that the theory and practice of human identity is incorrect (JT,40): that the unitary subject, presumed 'neutre', has been shown to have always been masculine. A situation, which through the repression of 'woman' as subject, has resulted in the oppression of women as subjects. Her stated aim is to change discourse (SP,191). She suggests that this can only occur through a shifting from the centre, of the masculine subject. While she avoids producing a theory of woman as such, she actively explores the possibility of creating modes of being other than those which govern life in patriarchal societies.

In some important ways, **Les fous de Bassan** appears to be a novel that performs, in Irigaray's words, a 'work on language'. As was the case with other critics, notably Paterson (1985), I was struck by the possibility of deconstruction of meaning generated through the title, **Les fous de Bassan**. No less evident is the possibility of examining the lives of women as they relate to men

in patriarchal culture, which of necessity entails a discussion of the mother-daughter relationship, to which Irigaray attaches such importance. Through Hébert's evocation of certain categories, the threshold, fluidity/porosity, I find in the novel a certain correspondence to the creative aspect of Irigaray's work.

Since Irigaray's works were studied in French, indeed only **Speculum** and parts of other works were available in English, the quotations will be, for the most part, in French. The quotations from **Les fous de Bassan** will also be in French. I have worked from the French text and parts of my interpretation would not have been possible if I had used the English translation. This is particularly true of the title which in the English translation becomes **In the Shadow of the Wind**. A certain dimension of meaning of 'les algues', an important recurring element of the story, is also lost in the available English translation. They are referred to as 'sea plants' or seaweed which loses the quality of mucosity associated with the "algues visqueuses" described by Nora. Likewise, in the passage which begins, "Tout juste le plaisir (...) leur chaleur à l'horizon" (111), the use of the first person singular where it is not used in the French, "[...] then I'll stretch etc." (81), tends to negate my interpretation of that image, which I think can be sustained in the French version. For the sake of coherence I will use French quotations throughout.

Irigaray's style of writing deliberately does not lend itself

to extracting neat linear theories. Whitford (1991), Grosz (1981) and Chanter (1995) have all commented on this aspect of her work. I am very much indebted to their publications for provision of background information and interpretation of philosophic and psychoanalytic concepts. The following exposition is by no means a comprehensive presentation of Irigaray's work. I have written only about those aspects that were pertinent to the literary interpretation required, without, I hope, misinterpreting or reducing her ideas to banality.

## 2. LUCE IRIGARAY

The struggle to achieve equality of rights and opportunities with men has been a major component of the Womens' Movement since the seventies. This emphasis on equality rights has meant minimalizing sexual differences as much as possible while emphasizing the effect of the social construction of gender. Irigaray, on the other hand, feels that woman should have a culture particular to her sex, in order to have a gender that she can realize without giving up her natural identity. She sees a need for the recognition of sexual difference through the acknowledgement of two sexes. According to Irigaray, a culture particular to the sex of women does not now exist. To create such a culture, to have the existence of two sexes acknowledged, to think sexual difference where it has never before been thought, is Irigaray's project.

This would require a change in the ethical, ontological and social status of women. For present culture can be seen to be dominated by a masculine imaginary (unconscious fantasy) whose constitution depends on the suppression of any possible female imaginary. Irigaray believes that this is evident in all signifying practices. What is needed is the creation of conditions which would allow the female imaginary to find a voice with which to enter into 'fertile' dialogue with the masculine, not with a view to dominating the masculine imaginary but so that there could be 'fertile exchange' between them. However, for such an exchange



to occur there must be two terms, the masculine and feminine, an acknowledgment that there are two sexes, that the universal is dual. This would entail the thinking of sexual difference and its articulation in language.

Irigaray indicates the importance of the question of sexual difference to her work in the following statement:

La différence sexuelle représente une des questions ou la question qui est à penser à notre époque. Chaque époque - selon Heidegger - a une chose à penser. Une seulement. La différence sexuelle est probablement celle de notre temps. La chose de notre temps qui, pensée, nous apporterait le "salut"? (E,13)

She has stated that the exploitation of women is based on sexual difference and cannot, therefore, be resolved except through it (JTN,12). According to her analysis, the exclusion of sexual difference from language, as from all patriarchal discourses, is at the root of the problem of women's oppression and of all other forms of oppression and destruction in the world. A symbolic in which women and men could equally be subject or object could lead to societies capable of attending to other differences, differences between women, between races, between nations. When Irigaray calls for the liberation of women, she sees it as the key to the liberation of humanity: for, "La libération des femmes, et d'ailleurs de l'humanité, passe par la définition d'un générique féminin, soit de ce qu'est la femme et non seulement telle ou telle femme" (JT,111). Irigaray suggests nothing less than radical change in the categories we use to apprehend our world, as well as

a different organization of the death drives, whose present mode of sublimation appears to be inadequate given the multiple forms of destruction in the world (E,13).

Her project is twofold. She attempts to undo or to make founder under their own weight, patriarchal systems of thought. She also envisions a different mode of thought and makes concrete suggestions for moving along that road, in order to open up a passage to what has hitherto been unthought and unsymbolized. In an interview published in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977), she elaborates on several of the strategies that she uses. She attempts, first of all, to analyze patriarchal discourse in order to reveal the conditions that make its systematisation possible. Referring to philosophy as "le discours des discours", she says, "Il fallait donc, y faire retour, pour interroger ce qui fait la puissance de sa systématique, [...] **sa position de maîtrise**" (CS,72). This analysis would also include paying attention to the unconscious of each philosophy.

In *Speculum*, she examines Freud's theory of sexuality, and exposes its inadequacies as a description of human identity. She maintains that it is, indeed, capable of describing only the oedipalized male subject; the female subject being described as a paradigm of the male. Symbolic castration, the figure for the loss of the symbiotic relation with the mother's body and for the process necessary to enter into language, cannot be a useful

process for the girl child. She is, after all, in Freud's description of the female, already castrated: female sexual identity is seen only as 'not male', lacking the phallus or as Irigaray says, 'indifferent'. For, Freud does not realize "l'articulation possible du rapport entre l'économie inconsciente et la différence des sexes" (CS,70). He is, however, merely describing and presenting as natural what the socio-cultural forces of a patriarchal culture have produced. Women in this culture have no adequate means of expressing their relation to the loss of origin. Sublimation is not possible for them (E,70). For the male, viewing the biological female body as lacking, both palliates and confirms castration anxiety, and as we shall see, through sublimation gives rise to his creativity. The Oedipus complex, then, the figure which purports to explain the constitution of the speaking subject, does not indeed suffice to explain the constitution of a female speaking subject: it serves only to explain the phenomenon of woman speaking as man. Irigaray questions what would become of these psychoanalytic notions in a culture that did not repress the feminine. For,

La reconnaissance d'une sexualité féminine 'spécifique' remettant en cause le monopole de la valeur par le sexe masculin, en fin de compte par le père, quel sens pourrait avoir le complexe d'oedipe dans un système symbolique autre que le patriarcat? (CS,71)

Certainly Freud has not analysed the presuppositions of the production of language with respect to sexual difference. He remains, therefore, caught in the 'a priori' of metaphysics. For, "c'est bien le discours philosophique qu'il faut questionner, et

déranger, en tant qu'il fait la loi à tout autre\* [...] (CS, 72).

Therefore, all philosophic concepts must be rethought.

By a 'process of interpretative re-reading' of the classic texts of philosophy, Irigaray is able to discern the operation of the Freudian model of human sexuality in the most important philosophic concepts. She sees the functioning of rationality, in a general sense, as a project which effaces sexual difference. She describes it as: "[U]n projet de détournement, de dévoiement, de réduction, de l'autre dans le Même. Et, dans sa plus grande généralité peut-être, **d'effacement de la différence des sexes** dans les systèmes auto-représentatifs d'un "sujet-masculin" (CS, 72). It is this model of sexuality which operates to produce the unitary subject, said to be neutral, but which is, in reality, masculine. Psychoanalytic theory is one of the tools she uses to open up these concepts, to understand the conditions which make them possible and what their coherence hides about these conditions (CS, 72). In the following passage she explains clearly her intentions to examine the functioning of the unconscious in each philosophy.

Dans cette relecture interprétante, la démarche a toujours été aussi **une démarche psychanalytique**. Donc une attention au fonctionnement de l'inconscient de chaque philosophie, et peut-être de la philosophie en général. Une écoute de ses procédures de refoulement, de la structuration du langage qui étaye sa/ses représentations, départageant le vrai du faux, le sensé de l'insensé, etc (CS, 73).

In *Speculum*, following the psychoanalytic method of paying

close attention to minute details, she interprets the myth of the Cave contained in Plato's **Republic**. This is a myth in which Plato explores the theme of identity, and its relation to origin and death. In her interpretation of it, she purports to show that what underlies Plato's formulation of the question of truth is a unitary model, arrived at through the repression of the maternal-feminine and the exclusion of sexual difference from our systems of thought. She sees, as well, a language which excludes corporeality even while assuming a male morphology. Whitford describes Irigaray's interpretation in this way: "What Irigaray finds in the myth is an imaginary primal scene (i.e. a phantasised copulation between father and mother) which has attempted to remove the mother" (Whitford, 1991a, 106). In this way the carnal act is excluded from representation, and the split between nature and culture-- 'l'intelligible et le sensible'-- that operates in our signifying practices is exposed. On a psychoanalytic level this is accomplished by requiring the mother-woman or corporeality to assume the negative functions. For, since castration and death are related in the psyche, it is the fear of castration, the need to palliate the death drives, which makes this split necessary. The death drives, then, have been organized in such a way as to produce a split between the sexes instead of within each genre. This means that woman carries all the unwanted negative functions rather than having each sex bear the responsibility for sublimating its own drives.

Woman is thus equated at various levels of discourse with nature, with body, with the negative pole of the hierarchised values. So, although sexual difference is unsymbolized in language, the masculine imaginary which produces, and is in turn produced by language, results in discourse which is isomorphic with oedipalised male sexuality. Irigaray interprets the scene in which the prisoners in the cave find themselves unable to return to the area that they have come from - to their origin - as a metaphor for this development. She writes:

Et la seule chose qu'ils puissent encore faire est de regarder en face d'eux ce qui se montre à eux. Etant mobilisés par l'impossibilité de **se retourner**, ou **retourner**, vers l'origine[...]. Visages, regards, sexes, maintenus dans une droite direction, tendus toujours vers l'avant, selon une ligne droite. Direction phallique, ligne phallique, temps phallique, tournant le dos à l'origine(S, 303).

Turning their backs on their origin is another way of saying, in Irigaray's analysis, that the body of the mother is used to form language, and that there is a debt owed the mother. Since woman constitutes the material of man's language, women are unable to occupy the position of subject in this discourse. She speaks it without speaking in it. Rationality, then, functions through exclusion. It is thought and symbolized as masculine, and its subject requires the repression of the feminine. In this system the world is conceived through binary opposites, the categories, mind/matter; 'sensible/intelligible': two categories which correspond to the binary opposites feminine/masculine, the basis of

all signifying systems, in which woman represents nature or corporality or the negative value in an hierarchised system of negative/positive values, and her use as the material of language is ignored, unacknowledged.

Irigaray reconceptualises the three basic structures of the myth, (the Cave, the World and the Idea/Forms) in terms of otherness. She introduces the terms: the 'other'; the 'other of the same'; and the 'other of the other'; which she is able to use as a tool to further demonstrate the functioning of subject/object in the cultural as well as the linguistic domain. She suggests that there is no true 'other' in masculine discourse. The symbolic is part of a masculine economy in which there is no feminine subject, since woman functions in it as a reflection of man. For, in the myth, what has been left behind, the cave, represents the 'other of the other', and it has been excluded from the construction of the true, the real. What remains is the 'same' and the 'other of the Same'. Man is the 'same' and woman is the 'other of the same'. Just as western thought functions through metaphor and is determined by the privileging of sight, everything is a copy, a semblance, a metaphor.

Thus, the psychoanalytic model of sexuality reflects and produces a dominant discourse in which neither men nor women can assume the position of both subject and object. Such a system of thought hampers the becoming of both sexes, but it is particularly

inimical to the becoming of women. For, women have to function in a culture, in signifying practices governed by a male morphology, in which they can never assume the subject position except as men. The whole system must be rethought. Irigaray insists that:

En effet, il n'est pas question de changer telle ou telle chose dans un horizon déjà défini comme culture humaine, il s'agit de changer l'horizon lui-même. Il s'agit de comprendre que notre interprétation de l'identité humaine est incorrecte théoriquement et pratiquement (JT,40).

She indicates the scope of change envisioned when she says: "Quand les femmes veulent sortir de l'exploitation, elles [...] mettent en cause toute théorie, toute pensée, tout langage existant, en tant que monopolisés par les seuls hommes" (CS,160).

Irigaray suggests that changing the relation between mother and daughter, as patriarchal society produces it, is the key to shaking the foundation of the stable symbolic, which ensures our current interpretation of human identity. As she expresses it: "La relation mère/fille, fille/mère constitue un noyau extrêmement explosif dans nos sociétés. La penser, la changer, revient à ébranler l'ordre patriarcal" (CAC,86). This relationship is unsymbolized in patriarchal discourse, and the questioning of that lack of symbolization is extremely dangerous to the symbolic order. For, it reveals the 'machinery' of cultural structures and the function of women in keeping the machinery running. According to Irigaray, the murder /sacrifice on which civilization has been built is not that of the father, as expressed in *Totem and Tabou*, but on a more primordial murder, that of the mother: "Elle est



**totem avant tout totem désigné, identifié, représenté" (SP,97).** Irigaray's intention is to unearth this founding gesture by finding ways of revealing the how and why of the lack of symbolization of the mother/daughter relation, and by doing so, create a space in the symbolic where women could begin to function as daughters, mothers, and women.

The unsymbolized mother/daughter relationship, a condition directly related to the lack of expression of sexual difference in patriarchal culture, stems from the fact that women have no identity as women in that culture. The only image of woman valued in society is that of the woman as mother, never that of the woman as woman. In psychoanalytic theory women are defined with respect to the physical sexual attributes of man, or rather their lack thereof. In the cultural sphere they are permitted certain restricted roles, mother, daughter, wife; once again defined in accordance with their relationship to a man. Except for a few unwholesome cultural images -- the wicked stepmother, virgin mother variety -- women have very few representations through which to see themselves, other than in the accepted roles of wife, mother, prostitute (CS,181).

These are the roles to which they must be restricted if they, as objects of exchange, are to continue to function as social and symbolic support of patriarchal systems. She says:

La société que nous connaissons, la culture qui est la

nôtre, est fondée sur l'échange des femmes. [...] Ce qui assure donc le passage à l'ordre social, à l'ordre symbolique, à l'ordre tout court, c'est que les hommes, ou les groupes d'hommes, font circuler entre eux les femmes: règle connue sous le nom de prohibition de l'inceste(CS,167).

Examining the notion of exchange as it is theorised in different intellectual disciplines-- Marx(economics); Saussure (linguistics); Levi-Strauss(anthropology); and Lacan (psychoanalysis)--she finds that it is woman/women, particularly mothers, who make exchange possible. Just as she found the materiality of the maternal-feminine being used to create language in the formulation of Plato's notion of truth, it is women who serve symbolically and otherwise as the necessary 'object of exchange' in these other theories. A corollary to performing this service is that they themselves will not be able to participate in these exchanges. Women circulate among men as 'things' with a 'value' attached. "Dans notre ordre social, les femmes sont "produites", utilisées, échangées par les hommes. Leur statut est celui des "marchandises" (CS, 81).

As we have seen, the primitive drives common to both men and women are sublimated for men through a mechanism which makes use of women, and at the same time cuts them off from any possibility of adequately sublimating their own drives. Entering the symbolic means abandoning the possibility of attaining a feminine subjectivity, accepting a monosexual language not appropriate to them, and becoming always the object of desire. In other words they

experience drives for which they have no possible representations.

Irigaray says:

**Socialement**, elles sont "objets" pour et entre hommes et ne peuvent, par ailleurs que mimer un "langage" qu'elles n'ont pas produit; **naturellement**, elles restent amorphes, souffrant de pulsions sans représentants ou représentations possibles. La transformation du naturel en social pour elles n'a pas lieu, sinon au titre de parties de la propriété privée ou de marchandises (CS, 183).

Consequently, as 'merchandise' or 'objets d'échange' the roles of mother and daughter are interchangeable. The vertical, the prototypical mother/daughter relationship, restricts the mother to that role only, and provides the daughter with one legitimate goal to accomplish, to supplant the mother as mother. Irigaray explains: "La place de la mère étant unique, devenir mère supposerait d'occuper ce lieu, sans relation avec elle en ce lieu" (E, 101). The daughter, therefore, finds it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine herself in any relationship to her mother except as mother. Or to express it from the point of view of the mother, culture offers her no other role to teach her daughter but that of mother. The mother cannot be a woman for her daughter nor the daughter a woman for the mother. Whitford reads Irigaray as saying that in this culture, there are no other "linguistic, social, semiotic, structural, cultural, iconic, theoretical, mythical, religious or any other representations of that relationship (Whitford, 1991a, 76)". Socio-cultural norms have restricted her/their becoming to an existence, described by Hegel

in his description of the complete functioning of a society, as vegetal (E,105).

The unsatisfactory vertical relationship between mother and daughter is then, perhaps, the cause of the unsatisfactory, even damaging horizontal relationships between women in general. On a psychoanalytic level, it can be said that women are unable to individuate; as 'fusionnels', they suffer from an inability to know their boundaries, they are in an ontological state of "dérélection" (E,66). This seems to lead to a lack of respect for the other woman as an individual, and to an inability to see her as different: "Un des dangers de l'amour entre femmes est la confusion d'identité entre elles, le non-respect ou la non-perception des différences" (E,66). This situation gives rise to a number of well recognised social problems between mothers and daughters and between women. It has been, no doubt, the source for a variety of damaging stereotypes of women: rivalry in all spheres between women, a perceived aspect of women's relations which has been greatly exploited and perhaps reinforced by the advertising industry; cruel behaviours towards each other, giving rise to the commonplace beliefs that women will not support other women, that they are quick to destroy reputations (SP,102); and pathological behaviours -- implosion, flight, explosion (E,111).

Irigaray suggests that these behaviours can only be mediated if the vertical relationship between mother and daughter is taken

care of first (E,106). This would entail a different social organisation in which women would have a religion, a language and an economy of their own (SP,93). These conditions are interdependent, and one could say perhaps that a precondition for their creation is that women might learn to love and want themselves as women: "[...] de nous aimer et nous **vouloir**. Ce qui ne peut être que projet divin" (SP,80). Love of self and love of one's gender could provide a milieu in which the other accomplishments, necessary to the attainment of feminine subjectivity, might come to pass. It would entail as well the rethinking of space-time, a category inextricably bound up with self-love.

Replying to a question concerning the possible means of resolving the problems associated with the constitution of feminine subjectivity, Irigaray indicates the importance she gives to the notion of love. In an interview, she states:

I make many suggestions in the **Ethique**, notably by speaking of love as an intermediary, [...] by analysing, by discovering and inventing love of self, love of same, a love of the Other and of the other in their spiritual, carnal and affective dimensions (Whitford,1991b,196).

Love, then, is a necessary component of any condition which would allow a feminine subjectivity to come into being. It is necessary for women to be able to love themselves and each other as women. It is necessary also that love between the sexes, as two subjects, be possible, which she describes as the motor of becoming which allows each its own growth (PE,32-34).

Feminine subjectivity would require a different mode of ethical being. The 'amorous embrace' is the image Irigaray uses to represent such a mode, for which the paradigm might be 'fertile exchange' between two parents, not necessarily procreative, but fertile in mind and spirit. She envisions a system of thought which would allow fertile exchange between the two sexes: creative intercourse within the cultural imaginary. Whitford expresses it in this way:

There is a view in psychoanalytic theory, based on clinical evidence, that psychic health may be conceived of, unconsciously, as a state in which both parents, i.e. both the male and the female elements, are felt to be in creative intercourse within the psyche. Along these lines, then, Irigaray argues that for rationality to be fertile and creative, rather than infertile and sterile, it must not be conceived of as transcending or **exclusive**, of the female element (Whitford, 1991a, 58).

Whitford's interprets the figure of the 'amorous exchange' as: "a phantasy of exchange in general, the basis of human society" (Whitford, 1991a, 168).

In **Ethique**, Irigaray demonstrates that, in patriarchal culture, the conditions for self-love are different as they pertain to men and women. In psychoanalytic terms it is propelled, for man, by the desire to return to origin, and sublimated through his creations, his buildings (houses), his theories and his paternity, the latter described by Irigaray as the "preuve ultime de sa puissance" (E, 66). He is assisted in this sublimation by the exteriority of his sex and the process of the carnal act, in which the model of masculine 'jouissance', not necessarily corresponding

to that of women, nor expressing all of man's possibilities, substitutes as a creation. Indeed, for man, his self-love as well as his 'love of the same' are guaranteed by a phallic culture, a culture in which he is required to build more and more 'shelters', in his impossible desire for return. Indeed, according to Irigaray, "l'homme va en constituer à l'infini" (E,66). His self-love is guaranteed as well by his God, which is his true other, since woman is only a reflection of man.

However, God, as traditionally conceptualised in western culture, is not a true other for women: "Un Dieu **féminin** est encore à venir" (SP,79). This is directly related to the psychic mechanism which structures identity. Her relation to origin, to the mother, is not symbolized: for, "Toute une histoire la sépare de l'amour d'elle" (E,68). Irigaray sees in Freud's theory of sexuality an affirmation of this separation: for, in order to accept the law-of-the-father, to enter into the symbolic order, it is first necessary to reject the mother:

[E]lle devrait se détourner de sa mère et d'elle-même pour entrer dans le désir de l'homme. Elle devrait ne plus s'aimer pour aimer l'homme, qui, lui, pourrait, voire devrait continuer à s'aimer. Il devrait renoncer à sa mère pour s'aimer, par exemple. Elle devrait renoncer à sa mère **et** à son auto-érotisme pour ne plus s'aimer. N'aimer que l'homme (E,68).

It follows that in rejecting the mother she is rejecting herself. "Elle ne peut réduire sa mère en objet sans s'y réduire elle-même parce qu'elles ont le même sexe" (SP,210). She is required to abandon the 'phallic' mother, the all powerful mother (of fantasy),

in order to identify with the 'castrated' mother, who is powerless, and who has submitted to the symbolic father. Neither provides her with an identity as woman. At best it provides the choice of an identification with the masculine. She cannot, then, experience self-love since she has no identity as woman to love. It follows that being unable to love the self as woman, it is also impossible for her to love her kind, her genre: without love of self no love of the same can be possible (E,102). Love of the other in those circumstances is equally difficult. For, "Pour aimer, il faut être au moins deux" (E,69). And, as we have seen, woman, functioning as the 'other of the same', cannot love what does not exist, woman.

On the other hand, man exists as subject because God is the infinite against which he defines himself (his gender). "L'homme peut exister parce que Dieu l'aide à définir son **genre**, à se situer comme fini par rapport à l'infini" (SP,73). Thus self-love for man is bound up with his understanding of space-time and his notion of God. Consequently, Irigaray finds it necessary to include religion as one of the discourses to be questioned. For, it is a phenomenon which is a constant in all societies and appears in many different forms, even in degraded forms such as sectarianism or religiosity. What must be done is to examine its structures, which, she claims have been masculine for centuries (SP,89). As such, these phallographic forms, blind to sexual difference, do not provide women with the same possibility of defining their gender, of achieving their own becoming as it does for men. She does not



suggest, however, a monosexual god, based on woman, for this would be as inadequate to the two genders as the reverse. Nor does she suggest a return to the worship of pre-historic goddesses. Rather, she envisions a divine through which sexual difference would be incorporated in our social, ethical and religious practices.

It would be useful, perhaps, to consider the notion of the divine in Irigaray's work, as Whitford has done, through two aspects: its function as "non-restrictive horizon for identity", and as the mechanism which binds social violence (Whitford,1991a,140-145). We have already seen that men ensure their self-love, their identity, with reference to a God, but that the God of patriarchal religions does not suffice in this respect for women (E,99). For the second aspect, its relation to violence, Irigaray works from René Girard's description of the phenomenon of religion, which describes the divine of patriarchal societies as based on sacrifice. The aggression innate to humans is mediated by the ritual act of sacrifice: the violence is displaced from its true object by means of a scape-goat. Civilization is founded on such a sacrifice. Irigaray suggests that the sacrifice referred to is the sacrifice of the mother, and that the phenomenon described corresponds to the rhythm of male sexuality, "[...]tension, décharge, retour à l'homéostasie" (SP,211). She states:

La plupart de nos sociétés sont bâties sur un sacrifice. L'espace social n'existe que par une immolation. René Girard[...]donne, à ce propos de nombreux exemples. Sa démonstration correspond à bon nombre de phénomènes sociaux. Mais il parle peu de la question posée à côté

des femmes[...]. Il me semblerait plus adéquate de se demander si, sous la victime sacrifiée, il ne s'en cache pas souvent une autre(SP,89-90).

Irigaray envisions a social order which would be based on fertility rather than sacrifice. She suggests that violence could be mediated in some other manner, in ways which did not sacrifice the mother or nature in its fertility. She wonders why, in our psycho-social development, words did not suffice as mediation: "Pourquoi la parole a t-elle manqué?" (SP,91) And, she suggests that this has come to pass because of lack of harmony between words, gestures and the body: because sexual difference was not articulated in the systems of exchange. Indeed, the incorporation of the maternal genealogy by the paternal genealogy, and the resulting suppression of a feminine identity, has given rise to a lack of respect for nature which works itself out intellectually, affectively and economically as a lack of fertility in the world. She asks: "**Le sacrifice de la fécondité naturelle ne serait-il pas le primordial sacrifice?**" (SP,95). To allow fertility to become the basis of social order, to replace a sacrificial foundation with one which incorporates sexual difference (in order not to obliterate it), and to pay attention to the rhythms of nature, (rhythms which would be closer to the bodily experience of women and perhaps to those of men as well), space-time must be rethought (SP,97). She writes:

Il n'est pas peut-être indispensable que toute société se fonde sur un sacrifice. Mais, pour qu'il n'en soit pas ainsi, il importe d'assurer autrement le fonctionnement

social. Il est nécessaire de modifier le rapport à l'espace-temps, de retrouver la fidélité aux rythmes micro- et macrocosmique(SP,97).

Space-time, then, based on a masculine morphology, becomes, for the thinking of sexual difference, one of the most important categories of philosophy to be redefined. It would be useful here to look at the mechanism described by Freud as essential to the entrance of the child into language; in psychoanalytic terms, the separation of the child from the mother in order to accept the 'law-of-the-father', and the world of the symbolic. It is through the mechanism of 'fort-da' that man symbolises his loss of origin, and creates his notion of space-time. This functions for the girl child only as a means of identification with the boy, not as a means of establishing a feminine identity. It amounts to having no means of sublimating her relation to origin: an impossibility for her under the symbolic castration figuration, because what she might fear to lose, i.e. castration, has no value. Space-time, then, becomes an ontological category that conforms to a masculine topology, and aids in the definition of masculine identity, as it is conceived in patriarchal culture.

Irigaray's interrogation of the philosophers' concept of space-time from one of the earliest, Aristotle, to the more recent Heidegger, reveals that the place of woman was concealed in western thought from its beginnings. In her re-reading of Aristotle's work on 'place', she shows that his discussion of space covers over

sexual difference. In his interpretation of place, woman has the status of container and envelope for man just as she does in procreation and generation. However, this function of woman is not thought through, not symbolized in thought, which, Irigaray says, allows man to confuse himself with the human race (SP,26), thereby relegating woman to the position of the 'other of the same'. She sees Aristotle's work on 'place' as not asking about those bodies, i.e. the mother's body, that contain human bodies (E,43-46). She questions as well his proposal and rejection of place as interval, as passage. She wonders why he has not theorised the elements of mucuous, blood, water and the protective membrane connected with birth, suppressing perhaps the sense of touch, "ce sens qui soutend tous les autres" (SP,71). In her interrogation of Heidegger's work on being and time, she inverts his interpretation of Being as time. Chanter explains that:

Irigaray asks, what if being was first of all spatial? Her question is not so much a refusal of time as it is a way of making clear how Heidegger's questioning of temporality was also an exclusion of the place of woman (Chanter,1995,150).

Woman's being/having no 'place' prevents ethical communication between women, between the sexes, and between men. What is needed is a new economy of existence and being. Such an economy would require two genders as subjects in discourse: intersubjectivity, founded on irreducible sexual difference, which accepts that human nature is dual, that the universal is dual. For as Irigaray says: "Une rencontre entre une femme et un homme peut atteindre à une

dimension d'universalité si elle a lieu dans la fidélité de chacun à son genre" (JT,223).

Irigaray's work in the area of ethics is related to the work of Emmanuel Levinas on alterity. They share the notion that the other cannot be defined in terms of sameness; that the subject must be irreducible to sameness rather than systematically reduced to sameness as it is in metaphysics. However, for Irigaray, Levinas, no less than the other philosophers, falls back on a logic governed by hierarchical values and as a result recognises only men as ethical subjects (Whitford,1991a,114). Nevertheless, in accordance with Levinas' description of ethics, that it exists as the result of a confrontation between two radically different subjects, or as the response to the needs of the subject to an (other) radically different subject, Irigaray suggests that the most evident model of radical difference is that of sexual difference. For, "Ce qu'est l'autre, qui est l'autre, je ne le sais jamais. Mais l'autre qui m'est jamais inconnaissable, c'est l'autre qui diffère sexuellement de moi" (E,20).

However, she reads the feminine in Levinas' eros as being relegated to the status of object: "Aimée. Non amante. Nécessairement objet et non sujet ayant rapport, elle aussi, au temps" (E,180). In short, she sees Levinas relegating woman, "l'aimée", to infancy, animality or maternity, while catapulting "l'amant" to the heights of divinity. The question of woman's

"rapport au cosmique" is left unconsidered in his work (E,181).

Irigaray chooses to emphasize an eros which can take the subject back to a state where it is not a question of being in control; where the metaphysics of presence, the domination of sight, no longer reigns. She calls this, "[...] ce naif ou natif d'un toucher" or, "volupté d'une naissance au monde où le regard lui-même demeure tactile[...]" (E,173). Here, instead of the gesture of Hegelian negation, in which the other is subsumed to the I, she appeals to the eros of Diotima where the lovers bestow on one another - life (E,177), called by Irigaray, "le toucher de la caresse", the amorous embrace. In her words, love could,

[...]advenir à cette innocence qui n'a jamais eu lieu avec l'autre comme autre(my emphasis)(E,173).

[...]

Ce geste toujours et encore préliminaire à et en toutes noces, qui épouse sans consommer, qui accomplit en respectant les bords de l'autre, ce geste peut s'appeler: le toucher de la caresse(E,174).

This is an eros before procreation: an eros which would give rise to fertility of mind and body. As a paradigm for ethical relations, she suggests, then, the sexual relation between the couple: an ethics of the couple as an intermediary place between individuals, peoples, states (SP,17-18). This implies for Irigaray that the condition 'sine qua non' for the praxis of ethics is to recognize and express sexual difference in signifying practices: that 'woman' becomes part of the symbolique as 'woman'. Ethics

cannot exist without an alterity that would be an 'other of the other' instead of an 'other of the same'. Since female identity is predicated, in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, on the masculine model -- as the same, the opposite or the complement of the male -- woman cannot be an other, and this model is not apt to produce ethical relations between the sexes. Indeed it is apt to produce confrontation between a subject and its semblance.

Irigaray suggests some practical tasks that women might perform in order to move towards the possibility of becoming "cette femme que je suis par nature" (JT, 168): to move toward refurbishing the imaginary as it were. With respect to the mother/daughter relationship, new representations of it must be created, and those buried over in history, unearthed. We should no longer hierarchise the maternal and paternal functions. This would require deliberately drawing attention to the loss of the maternal genealogy, to the practice of effecting a break between the mother and daughter, with their loss of name at the time of marriage. She suggests a variety of specific acts that mothers and daughters may do together and for each other: to relearn a respect for life and for food; to create or unearth pictorial and other representations of mothers and daughters together, as in the biblical Anne and Marie for example; to invent together linguistic forms which express their realities; to avoid traditional activities which encourage fusion, such as the sharing of food and the giving of domestic advice, rather they should make objects which can be

exchanged between them; and each should have a space at her disposal, a sort of 'room of one's own' (JTN,58-60).

Her practical suggestions are certainly in line with many of the political activities undertaken by activists in the Women's Movement. Her creative re-reading of some important biblical events, such as the **Assumption** and **The Song of Songs**, shows that even the artifacts most entrenched in culture, can be made to shift in order to be seen from another perspective. Important to her as well is the encouragement of solidarity between women, not with the aim of creating groups to rival those of men, but of providing a space where women may together experiment with other modes of being, other constructions of power. This solidarity would not preclude, however, the demand that women be given space in public life (JTN,57-61).

While recognising the need for equal pay and access to positions of power, she cautions against demanding equality with men in the socio-economic and political spheres as a solution to all of women's problems. She considers this to be a demand which might negate alterity, and as a consequence, block the possibility of woman's subjectivity. Before women ask to be equal, they must consider what they are asking to be equal to. She sees the demand for equality, without attention to sexual difference, as an ethical error in that it contributes to the effacement of the natural and spiritual reality of women (JT,53). For, it supports a universal,



claimed to be neutral, but which is in fact masculine; a universal which, not including the feminine, is partial, and as such authoritarian and unjust (JTN,103). Laws, therefore, must be created to reflect sexual difference. The specificities of women must be taken into account (SP,13). For, the lure of identification and sameness could result in the destruction of the only real alterity possible, that between man and woman (JT,105).

Irigaray fully recognises the difficulties inherent in articulating sexual difference in a discourse, from which it has been excluded, as a condition of the existence of that discourse. So, in addition to questioning the conditions of systematisation and interpreting the psychoanalytic basis of those conditions, she suggests that specific actions be taken. She suggests strategies that might be used both to reveal women's absence from this systematisation of language and to insert themselves into it (CS,72). As a first strategy readily available to women she suggests mimicry: readily available because it is historically woman's position to mime/reflect the masculine. She must do this deliberately in order to overload the system, and, by 'playful repetition', make visible what has been hidden, the role of woman in discourse. Mimicry should also be a means of showing that although women play the masculine speaking subject so well, they are not 'used up' in functioning this way. Something remains of their 'matter' and their 'sexual pleasure': "**Elles restent aussi ailleurs:**" (CS,74). Historically, female sexuality was allowed

expression only in reproduction. Women must be allowed to speak their desire (CS,75). She envisions a feminine 'style' that would be metonymic rather than metaphoric, a style that would collapse the rigour of fetish words, proper terms and well-constructed forms, a writing which is characterised by simultaneity and fluidity (CS,76): a work on language so that woman does not remain outside the symbolic, in madness (CS,74).

### 3. LES FOUS DE BASSAN

The central events in this novel are rape and death, simultaneously the rape and murder of two young women and the death of a village, Griffin Creek. These happenings take place in an atmosphere tinged with madness. The novel is about the domination and appropriation of culture at all levels by the masculine speaking subject, and the madness occasioned by it. The atmosphere of madness is hinted at in the title, *Les fous de Bassan*, and resonates strongly with Irigaray's statement that for women not to remain outside of language, "rejetée comme déchet de la réflexion[...]comme folie" (CS,74), language must change. This novel of Anne Hébert can indeed be seen as a work on language. It both deconstructs dualistic oppositions on which the unified subject is founded, and it opens a passage to the emergence of a feminine speaking subject. Its composition allows the emergence of some symbolic forms, the threshold, fluidity/mucosity, which Irigaray sees as essential to the emergence of a feminine I in discourse. For, as Naomi Schor expresses it, "the forgetting of fluids participates in the matricide that according to Irigaray's myth of origins founds Western culture" (Brennan,1989,49). For those foundations to be shaken and a culture created in which woman can become, in Irigaray's words, "cette femme que je suis par nature" (JT,168), the symbolization of new categories is necessary. Those words correspond to Nora's enigmatic statement: "Le verbe en moi est sans parole prononcée, ou écrite, réduit à un murmure

secret dans mes veines" (118). The novel is also about desire, not only libidinal desire but ontological desire: desire for 'Le Verbe', of which Nora speaks and which has been to this moment in time, "sans parole prononcée": the word that would be reflected in cultural artifacts and cultural practices fertile in a way "encore inadvenue" (E,13).

The form of the novel is, in itself, a challenge to the notion that patriarchal discourse, rationality, produces 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. For it presents itself as a detective story but shies away from giving, in the traditional sense, a clear resolution. Marilyn Randall has commented: "c'est comme si l'accumulation d'indices menant à la résolution du meurtre[...]s'accompagnait, à l'insu du lecteur, d'un ensemble de contre-indices travaillant sournoisement à miner sa certitude"<sup>1</sup> And Jean-Louis Backès says of it: "Un doute plane en effet, sur ce récit trop bien construit".<sup>2</sup> And the account of events as we have received them, supported by Stevens' ambivalence about whether or not he is up to telling the truth, does nothing to assure us that it is possible to know 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'. He writes to Old Mic: "Ce que j'ai à faire, ce que je me suis juré de faire est au-dessus de mes forces. Te dire la

---

<sup>1</sup>Marilyn Randall, "Les énigmes des **Fous de Bassan**: féminisme, narration et clôture", VOIX & IMAGES, 43, (autumn 1989), p.66.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-Louis Backès, "Le Retour des morts dans l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert," L'ESPRIT CREATEUR, 13, no.3 (Fall 1983), p.57.

vérité, old Mic, toute la vérité, rien que la vérité" (LFB,237).

Indeed doubt goes hand in hand with madness as a dominant feature of the novel. Paterson has designated it, "une véritable Ecriture de la folie", and she gives a very complete summary of the features of its form which allow her to designate it "psychotique" or "déliquant". She documents: circularity; collapse of linearity; transition from the real to the imaginary; obsessive repetition; and the problematic representation of the subject (Paterson,1985,170). All of these are features which combine to create a style of writing that challenges the notion of hermetic self-present truths.

According to Irigaray, man's discourses of truth result from his attempt to palliate his impossible desire to return to origin. Paterson shows that this novel, in both sense and form, signals the notion of beginning: "début du texte, début de l'écriture, début de la fiction et début du monde" (Paterson,1985,164). As a novel whose form takes the shape of a series of beginnings, superficially the same story repeated five times, and, by its numerous references to the Bible, it draws attention to the mechanism through which man attempts to symbolise his impossible 'retour'. This repetition reveals the nature of man's theories, discourses and institutions as belonging to the economy of the same, as continuing to create more and more theories and institutions "à l'infini" (E,66), in an impossible attempt to return to origin.

To express, respectively, man's and woman's different relation to the maternal-feminine, Irigaray uses a pair of terms, 'le retour' and 'le retouche' (SP,126-135). "Le retouche" is used to denote contiguity as a mode of being, more suited to the feminine, and it is presented as a counter to the masculine mode of assimilation. While certain aspects of the structure of **Les fous de Bassan** reflect a masculine economy motivated by the 'retour', other aspects reflect a feminine economy, or contiguity as a mode of being. The theme of the sea reflects this economy. The five stories are structured in such a way as to represent the movement of the sea. Each story is a wave. Each wave is similar to the other, but essentially different, and always in contact with the one before and after. In this context it might be interesting to note Irigaray's suggestion that female sexual jouissance has a dimension akin to the movement of the sea rather than orgasmic in the mode generally described as masculine. She comments:

L'élément marin, c'est donc à la fois les eaux amniotiques, [...] et c'est aussi il me semble, quelque chose qui figure assez bien la jouissance féminine [...]. Mon mouvement disons de jouissance féminine, est plus maritime que l'escalade sur la montagne et la descente de la montagne(CAC,49).

These aspects of the novel, not only point to contiguity as a mode of being, but they suggest the reorganisation of space-time based on natural rhythms, those of the sea and of the body.

The title of the novel, **Les fous de Bassan**, draws immediate attention to categories not based on natural rhythms. For it

highlights the process of naming, which speaks to Irigaray's notion that language is arrested in development at the stage of expressing needs, including the need to master nature, objects and others, notably by naming (JT, 78). Kathryn Slott has pointed out that it is the male narrators in Hébert's novel who insist on naming their relatives by giving the surnames of both husband and wife. She interprets this as an indication of the "fragility of the male sense of self in this novel", brought about by the threat of the female family members, and she suggests that this might lead to a compulsion on the part of men to "dominate or eliminate them"<sup>1</sup>. The naming process and the practice of women taking their husbands names symbolically reinforce the reality of the appropriation of the maternal genealogy by the paternal and the social consequences of that for women. The role of naming in women's lives is further symbolized in the story of Olivia de la Haute Mer. Her reverie/communion with the sea interrupted just when she was about to "pénétrer[ai] tout d'un seul coup" (211), she is called back by her brothers shouting her name, appropriately from the top of the cliff. However, her name is separate from her being. She considers whether she should put her name back on as she would a dress. Or, she can inhabit it as one would an empty shell. It covers her and it is the house (of language) of someone else. Furthermore, for her, it is empty.

---

<sup>1</sup>Kathryn slott, "Submersion and Resurgence of the Female Other in Anne Hébert's *Les Fous de Bassan*", QUEBEC STUDIES, 4, 1986, p.160-161.

As a name which indicates belonging to someone or some place, the title speaks directly to the notion of ownership and to the categories of subject/object. However, simultaneously, as the name of a bird, it evokes freedom, the property of no one and of no permanent place. The title thus establishes two hierarchised polarities, culture:nature, and causes an immediate hesitation over the relation of signifier to signified. Indeed, as Paterson has demonstrated, the text makes ample use of the generative power of the title (Paterson,1985,166). It is possible to find in it a series of oppositions, for which the title functions as the source, and through which they are deconstructed. Hébert does this through employing multiple significations of the word 'fou/folle'; through elaborating an affinity between birds and protagonists by means of physical resemblances, and as I will show later, by creating a rapport between the gannets and women that is different from that between men and the birds.

Truth is at stake in this novel. Perceval embodies this effect. The name itself, Perceval, evokes the mythical Perceval searching for the Holy Grail of truth or wisdom. However he is considered, in familiar terms, to be 'fou'. Jones and Stevens both attest to this. We quickly realize nevertheless, that he has a certain insight into human behaviour. He knows about the events that people want kept secret. For instance, he understands completely the feelings of Jones and Stevens towards their young cousins, Nora and Olivia. For in a sort of parody of the



privileging of sight, and the function of reflections in the foundations of thought, we see Perceval observing the observers. He observes the furtive actions of Jones and Stevens while they spy on Felicity and her granddaughters swimming at dawn. Jones, who, all his life, has been spying on his mother while she takes her early morning swim in the sea, thinks that he is doing so in secret. However, we are told:

Le révérend n'a jamais été seul ici, même lorsqu'il croyait regarder en paix les petites filles préférées de Felicity Jones s'ébattant avec leur grand-mère [...]. Perceval est déjà là, caché dans les joncs, tout près du pasteur [...](LFB,38).

It is also Perceval who tells Irene, the pastor's wife, what he saw happen between Nora and the pastor in the boat house on the beach (44). Indeed, Perceval's story leads one to believe that he is the only person who knows what really happened at Griffin Creek that summer night. The reader, trying to decide who really was responsible for the murder of Nora and Olivia, is curiously drawn to the deep feelings, the cries and the enigmatic words of Perceval. He becomes for the reader a sort of wise fool, 'un sage/fou'.

The repetition of the word fou/folle as the adjective of preference to describe both the surrounding natural elements and the women in the novel multiplies the signification of the word and underlines the aspect of liberty associated with both of them. A wide variety of natural elements are described as 'folle'. That they are all feminine is indicated by the adjective: 'herbes

folles" (16) intertwined with the names of Olivia, Nora and Irene in the twins' painting; "plumes folles" (25); "la folle vie vegetale" (59); the sea, "follement vivant" (60); "avoine folle" (76); "bourrasques folles" (178); "l'idée folle" (61,68) and "certains instants de fin d'été" which "atteignent [...] une précision folle" (95). The last two have a particular force in that they are, in themselves, oppositions. The link is made between nature and the girls when their hair is described as "mèches folles" (97) and "cheveux fous" (152); and when Nora describes the laughter of her little sister as "folle" (132).

The behaviour of the women becomes 'folle' only when they step outside what is required of them as women in a male dominant culture. Stevens refers to Nora as "folle" when she dares to use "le vocabulaire grossier des hommes"; when her mouth is "vociférante"; when he feels that he is forced to silence her laughter, "rire hystérique" and her "Désir fruste" (244). He uses the word 'folle' in a different context in suggesting that Olivia is "folle" (78) when she refuses to allow him into the house. Jones insists that Pat and Pam are mad because they have the audacity to specifically include Nora, Olivia and Irene in the gallery of ancestors. He mentions it twice (17,37), and, in a passage which employs six synonyms of the word 'fou', he makes it clear that their madness is different from the madness of Perceval and Stevens. Their actions are "niaiseuses"; their minds full of an "imagerie démente" and they are "hantées". These evoke

qualities quite different from those of Stevens and Perceval, who are 'maléfique' and 'idiote'. It is also significant that, in the same passage, he compares the twins to birds and affirms that they have never been women, women, that is, as defined by the patriarchy. He writes: "Le temps leur glisse dessus comme l'eau sur le dos d'un canard. [...] Pas une once de graisse, ni seins, ni hanches, fins squelettes d'oiseaux" (17).

This is the second time that Jones has compared women to birds in his story. The first time, at the age of twelve when he had not yet perhaps completely accepted the patriarchal notion of woman as 'other of the same', he saw Felicity as "un oiseau captif" (25) and wanted to free her. The 'rapprochement' of women to the birds in the novel is further strengthened by the fact that Olivia has "le pied palmé" (97); she is compared to a bird being hunted by a cat (77). Nora's heart is beating like a captured bird (97); she has "la face pointue" (72), a feature shared with her mother (131), and one which recalls the beak of the fous de Bassan. References are made to the feature 'pointu' and 'le pied palmé' by the other narrators as well. The word 'pointu' proliferates throughout the text --at least fourteen times -- and is an identifying feature for protagonists who come from outside Griffin Creek and in one way or another are a threat to the dominant culture -- the American (43) and the detective (183). A further conceptual link is made between the birds and the outside when this feature is taken up again at the end of the novel by Stevens. Under the influence of the perfect

drawing of the bird, he wants his words to direct themselves, - "que les mots se pointent" - in order to deliver him from his memories and help him "Habiter un espace nu" (233).

The birds have been taken to represent desire by Paterson. However, she interprets the birds' activities during the bathing scene as representing the repressed sexual desire of the pastor. Her statement that "L'expression du désir fou ou de la folie du désir englobe aussi celui de la femme" (Paterson,1985,167), leads me to understand that she sees the birds as a symbol primarily of repressed masculine sexual desire. Speaking of the symbol as including ("englobe") feminine sexual desire, appears to place the emphasis on the masculine sexual desire, in perhaps the same way that the Freudian model of human identity posits 'male' and 'non-male', rather than male and female. I prefer to read the birds as a symbol of libidinal desire to which the male protagonists respond differently than do the female. The male response reflects Irigaray's suggestion that the development of human identity has become arrested at a stage characterized by the need for mastery. It reflects too her statement that desire cannot be accomplished (for either sex) except in an atmosphere that allows for the development of the becoming of both (PN, 294).

It is possible to show that Nora and Olivia have a different rapport with the birds than do Stevens Brown and Nicolas Jones. In the case of the two men, the birds are perceived as adversarial,

unwelcome. The pastor views them as projecting "leur ombre noire sur le presbytère"; refers to them as "une meute céleste"; and to their sounds as "jappements" (24). Stevens refers to them as "une nuée", their calls as "stridents", and he feels the need to chase them away like "mouches" (58). Their cries are "assourdissants" (95,230), and, in his dreams at the end of the book, they are perceived as violent and threatening, reminiscent of the mythological Furies. I suggest that these two men are disturbed more by the birds as an expression of female sexuality than as an expression of their own repressed sexual desire. Apart from the physical attributes they have in common with the birds, Nora and Olivia exhibit an easy coexistence, even a strong affinity for them. Describing a childhood encounter with Stevens, Olivia reveals her pleasure in that encounter in terms of the birds. She sees herself as uttering cries of pleasure "avec les oiseaux dans le ciel" (207). Listening to them at night, Nora sees the shadow of their "ombre parfaite" (124) on her counterpane, and she is able to touch them with her hand. For her their sound is a muffled barking, "aboïement sourd" (124) as opposed to Jones' "jappement", yapping. Furthermore, she would like her mate to come in the form of a bird, as in the fairy tale, "sa figure d'homme délivrée de l'enchantement qui pesait sur lui" (125). This easy rapport, added to the previously mentioned identification of Nora and Olivia with the birds, suggests a strong linking of women with the notion of liberty in this text. This is curious sort of liberty, present alongside a servitude which manifests itself in its most virulent

forms in this patriarchal society of Griffin Creek. It is ironic that this aspect of liberty and freedom should attach itself so strongly to them despite their servitude -- putting the lie to neat binary oppositions.

The people of Griffin Creek, as descendants of United Empire Loyalists, former English colonists of the United States, are like the fous de Bassan who are well known as a colony of migratory birds. Since they are English Canadians living in Quebec, a former French colony, no obvious resolution of the dichotomy colonizer/colonized presents itself. This question of colony and invasion comes to the surface in the first paragraph. Jones refuses the status of invader by referring to the villagers as "le peuple élu de Griffin Creek" (13). And in speaking of the Quebecois in the neighbouring village he scoffs at the notion that they were the founders of this country. He says "[...] ils osent célébrer le bicentenaire du pays, comme si c'étaient eux les fondateurs" (13). But this opposition, colonizer/colonized, is traceable to other aspects of the novel, particularly with respect to women. The trope of woman as colonized is a familiar one in feminist writing. Irigaray writes: "[...] la virginité et la maternité comportent une dimension spirituelle qui m'appartient. Ces dimensions ont été colonisées par la culture masculine" (JTN, 141): women's bodies, invaded in various ways, metaphorically used to construct masculine discourse and physically used for men's profit and pleasure. Certainly the latter is the case in this

novel. Pregnancy, in a society where reproductive choice does not exist except as abstinence, is a physical invasion for most of the female protagonists. This is most obvious in the case of Bea. Unwelcome sexual attention from husbands is the case, we are led to believe, for Felicity and certainly for Irene. The most striking case of bodily invasion in the novel remains the rape of Olivia and the murder of Nora.

This opposition of colonizer/invader:colonized/invaded is, however, reversed very explicitly in two pivotal events in the story. The first occurs in the scene of the painting of the gallery of ancestors by Pastor Jones when he gives Pat and Pam the opportunity to add their women ancestors to his depiction of male ancestors, all of whom are suitably created in his image. The twins invade his neat reproduction of 'the same' with a depiction of women intertwined with natural elements of nature that exceeds all bounds of propriety/property. They even dare to make explicit reference to the three women of Griffin Creek who were not 'proper women', and who died as a result of this. This invasion at the end of his life and his power is echoed by the annoyance he feels at the birds, as feminine desire, that disturb his sleep.

The second occurs to Stevens when he is in the act of writing his last letter to Old Mic, which becomes a sort of written history, since Stevens has no way of knowing if his friend will ever receive it, or even want to read it if he does. He is haunted

by the violent events in his life, the war, the rapes, the screams of women but particularly by the event of the rape and murder at Griffin Creek. The birds, the threat of woman, as woman, bore into his skull, his mind and threaten rationality:

La raison qui persiste alors qu'elle aurait du crever, depuis longtemps, sous le choc répété des images, des odeurs et des sons aux becs acérés. Lâcher d'oiseaux de mer contre mon crane. [...]ils [...]s'aguissent le bec contre mon crane(230).

However, it is the drawing of the gannet, which he calls at that moment, "cet oiseau superbe", that acts as a sort of Proustian touch stone, and allows him to recall everything (238). He even says that "la vérité" must be told under the eye of these birds (237). This suggests that Stevens has some awareness of the need to question the patriarchal notion of 'vérité'. These two men find themselves, at the end of their lives, in the vain effort to leave a record -- true record? -- of their lives, haunted and invaded by the women they have spent their lives doomed to try to control and use. It is perhaps significant that the women who wreck the picture of sameness, the old dream of symmetry, are Pat and Pam, who, as old maids, have remained virgins, in the patriarchal sense at least, but who have developed a sort of female homosexual economy, an 'entre-elles'. It is equally significant that Stevens is haunted by Nora and Olivia, who, with the covert encouragement of Felicity, seek to define themselves as 'woman-subject'.

The oppositions demonstrated above echo one another and lead to the basic opposition, culture:nature. It is possible to detect



culture as creation/writing, and nature as creation/reproduction. Paterson identifies and demonstrates thoroughly the connections between all the elements in the novel which combine to draw attention to the act of writing (Paterson, 1985, 173). She suggests that in this way the text draws attention to the metaphoric nature of speech and of all creation: "[...] ce que le texte murmure dans un sous-texte, à savoir que toute parole et toute création sont nécessairement des activités en abyme" (Paterson, 1985, 174). She singles out certain events as supporting 'mises-en-abyme' for the metaphor of creation (Paterson, 1985, 174): Stevens' making the village and his grandfather appear and disappear (63, 64), and in his last letter, controlling day and night (234). However, by adding two other events to those mentioned, I hope to enlarge on the significance of these actions. I would mention Stevens again, who pretends he is making Olivia go up and down stairs "à volonté" (76), and the striking image of his father John seeming to make the village appear at the end of his whip (114). All of these events are so similar to the action in the mechanism of 'fort-da' that they could be seen as alluding not only to the metaphoric nature of speech and creation, but also to the role of the mother's body in that function. 'Fort-Da' is essentially, as Irigaray puts it "playing with the mother's body". By making his toy appear and disappear at will, Little Hans was able to control his sense of loss of the mother's body, to create his sense of space-time and at the same time to posit a God in his own image. This brings us face to face with reproduction, its use to create men's language, men's

culture, and the unacknowledged debt owed the mother in that process. Just as writing as creation can be seen as a major theme in this novel so, too, can procreation and reproduction.

The latter is made visible by its absence in that first important *mise-en-abyme*, the painting of the gallery of ancestors. When we take into account the painting of Pat and Pam, viewed by Jones as a destruction of his hermetic self-same representation, we realise that he wanted "que les filles accouchent des mères" (16). Nevertheless, in their attempt to add their truth to the gallery of ancestors, Pat and Pam insist that the three women who died in that community in the summer of 1936 be included in the story. They were three women who would be ancestors to no one, for they had not given birth. This is, then, an affirmation of these women as women, not solely as procreators. The artistic addition of Pat and Pam, with all its power to disturb the pastor, the patriarchy, clearly represents the feminine, opening up a space within the symbolic for the feminine subject, as the maternal and as woman/other.

Images of birth and of sexual 'jouissance' are inextricably intertwined with the sea in this novel. This link is first made in the painting of the gallery of ancestors. The sea is used as the vehicle to express both birth and sexual pleasure in the bathing scene. The expression of birth is supported throughout the novel by the imbrication of images related to the gannets bursting back

up out of the water. Perceval makes this image specific as an image of birth when he describes the birds " crevant leur coquille d'eau. Pour naître à nouveau. Emplissant le ciel de clameurs déchirantes" (166). Nora experiences herself as being in "une bulle transparente" (132); Olivia experiences herself as "légère comme une bulle" (204); while Stevens, too, speaks of all three of them having been "dans une bulle fragile [...] à l'abri", before being suddenly precipitated into the furor of the world (244). In the following passages from Olivia's story there is an agglutination of vocabulary that evokes the maternal, culminating in an explicit reference to the sea as "le ventre d'une femme sous la poussée de son fruit", and the sea as mother by the use of homonym 'mère' and 'mer':

Regagnons la haute mer. Légère comme une bulle, écume de mer salée, plus rapide que la pensée, plus agile que le songe, je quitte la grève de mon enfance et les mémoires obscures de ma vie ancienne. Pareille à quelque oiseau de mer, mollement balancée entre deux vagues, je regarde l'étendue de l'eau, à perte de vue, se gonfler, se distendre comme le ventre d'une femme sous la poussée de son fruit(LFB,204).

Mes grands-mères d'équinoxe[...] (218)

Olivia's is the only story which does not make specific reference to the ritual bathing with Felicity. The elements of female sexuality represented in the two passages above, reinforce, however, those found in the bathing scene. We have shown that women in the novel exhibited a different reaction to the birds than did Stevens and Jones. This relation of contiguity between the women and birds throughout the novel is reinforced in the bathing scene.

Indeed I would say that this scene serves as a mise-en-abyme of that relationship. The presence of the birds on the cliffs above is sufficient to establish a physical contiguity but at the point where "leurs cris se mêlent dans le vent" (39), the identification of the women with the birds is complete. The birds in this context translate to feminine desire and can be seen to express both aspects of feminine sexuality, birth and sexual pleasure, and, as I will discuss later, ontological desire.

The passage which begins "Le globe rouge du soleil [...]", is read by Paterson (1985,167), and others, as one which, through its verbs and topos of verticality, mimes the masculine model of jouissance. However, I would like to reclaim the dimension of verticality here, as an image of birth. As Luisa Muraro, talking with Luce Irigaray, expresses it:

La signification phallique de la verticalité nous fait trop souvent oublier que la verticalité est aussi la direction de l'énergie solaire, de la force de gravité, tout comme de celle de la sève et de la vie végétale en général(JTN, 119).

While Paterson reads the sounds made by the birds and the young girls as evidence of violence, I read them as sounds associated with effort or force, such as one might make when working at a difficult physical task. Indeed, the traditional expressions 'a woman in travail' and 'a woman in labour', synonyms for childbirth, are suggestive of an activity of intense effort rather than one of violence. That "rires aigus", "clameur déchirante", "mots ricochent" and "font jaillir" express force or an expression of

intense energy not accompanied by violence is supported by the fact that Stevens reports the girls as emitting "cries de joie" while they swim with their grandmother 'à l'aube'. And these words are more easily understood as force, a productive intense energy, if we contrast them with the words associated with the birds' activities, used by Stevens in the last chapter, -- "s'aguissent le bec contre mon crane"; "becs acérés"; "défoncés à coups de becs durs"; and "claquant dans toute la chambre" -- words which suggest violence and destruction. Certainly the nouns in the passage -- "nid", "mer/mère", "gerbes d'écume" -- are suggestive of birth.

I agree that the sexual desire of the pastor, a figure for the appropriating nature of culture, is expressed in this scene. However, I find it in his crushing the yellow sea bladders or bladder wrack under his feet as, in frustration, he angrily leaves the scene. The bladders on this seaweed, in fact, resemble miniature embryonic sacs in shape and in the viscosity of the fluid contained inside. The image of the seaweed can, I believe, be elevated to the status of symbol because of its frequent occurrence throughout the novel and the emphasis on its quality of mucosity. It is an image that occurs in important scenes: as embellishment in the painting of Pat and Pam; as a description of the women by Nora in the swimming scene; Olivia's reference to it as a garland; Stevens' hair on the night of the storm; Stevens persists in walking on it as a young boy, and as a young man crushed it under his feet just as the pastor did at the scene of the morning ritual

swim. While it is an adornment for the women, it is crushed angrily underfoot by the men. Keeping the image of adornment with the word, 'guirlandes', confirms the closeness of the connection between women and the bladder wrack when she compares them to her memory. "Ma mémoire ressemble à ces longues guirlandes d'algues qui continuent à croître, à la surface de la mer, après qu'on les a tranchées" (200).

The scene can represent both aspects of female sexuality, generation and procreation. Irigaray's positing of the sexual relation as a paradigm for another mode of being, one in which the notion of control is abandoned, recalls the nature of this ritual act of Felicity and her granddaughters, in their rapport with the sea. It also recalls Cixous' description of the birth process in **La venue à l'écriture**:

Accoucher 'bien'. Mener son acte, sa passion, se laissant mener, poussant comme on pense, mi-emporée, mi-commandant la contraction, elle se confond avec l'incontrôlable qu'elle fait sien. Alors, sa belle puissance! Accoucher comme on nage, en jouant de la résistance de la chair, de la mer, travail du souffle en lequel s'annule la notion de 'maîtrise' [...] (Cixous, 1977, 37).

The sea overall can be read as sustenance, life for the women: its fluidity serving to dissolve the rigidity of the masculine 'house of language', as it uproots the trees in the storm (131). It is said to be the source of life for Maureen (65). While spying on Olivia, Stevens remarks her affinity to the sea and refers to it as her "eau natale" (97). Nora speaks specifically as being born of

the sea and of the fact that the others are unaware of the sea that runs in their veins (118,121). Finally there is the condensation of the words 'sea' and 'mother' in "Olivia de la Haute mer" when she refers to "Mes grands-mères d'équinoxe. Mes hautes mères, mes basses mères, mes embellies et mes bonaces, mes mères d'étiage et de sel" (218). Reproduction, then, and women's function in it, is juxtaposed with culture and men's function with respect to it.

The positing of the terms creation:reproduction in opposition and their subsequent blurring in **Les fous de Bassan** draws attention to the debt owed the mother in reproduction, and to the use of that function to assure the patriarchal order on symbolic, social and economic levels. Irigaray has said that the key to shaking the foundations of this house of language is to question the unsymbolized mother/daughter relationship. An examination of the women in Hébert's novel supports Irigaray's claim that this relationship, unsymbolized in culture, restricts their functioning as subjects and perpetuates the dominant masculine at symbolic and social levels. For, while inscribing positive images of feminine sexuality within the text, at the level of the story the novel paints a grim picture of motherhood.

At the level of narration the novel follows the principles of psychoanalytic discourse, in that the story is always told from the point of view of the child. There are five stories in the novel, told by three men and two young women. What we know of the mothers

and grandmother Felicity is told to us by their sons, Nicolas, son of Felicity and a Father/priest; Stevens, son of Bea and John and grandson of Felicity; Perceval, idiot son of Bea and John; or their daughters Nora, granddaughter of Felicity, daughter of Alice; and Olivia, granddaughter of Felicity, daughter of 'Olivia's mother'. As in the case of Jocasta, in the myth of Oedipus, we know little or nothing of the point of view of the mothers. No mother tells her own story. In addition, the stories of Nora and Olivia as well as that of Perceval, the idiot, are flanked by the stories of Nicolas Jones, which serves as prologue, and the last letter of Stevens, which serves as epilogue to the events.<sup>4</sup> Clearly these two men are trying to establish their view, account, of (H)istory just as in the history of western culture, mother's stories remain untold or are interpreted by others. As a necessary corollary to this it is also a history in which the mother, having no voice, is absent as woman, thus depriving her daughter of any symbolic relationship with her as woman; leaving her only the role of rival for her place, as mother, in an economy where they both function as objects of exchange.

The description of the men's life in the village given by Jones which begins, "Le fusil en bandoulière, hirsutes et mauvais, les hommes de ce pays ont toujours l'air de vouloir tuer quelque créature vivante" (40), signals the rape and death of Nora and

---

<sup>4</sup> Magessa O'Reilly, "Le jeu des rythmes dans *Les fous de Bassan* d'Anne Hébert", *CANADIAN LITERATURE*, 133, 1992 (summer) p.112



Olivia. It refers explicitly to the violence in Griffin Creek by suggesting a surfeit of implements of death in the homes and stores of the people of Griffin Creek. It is clear that this is not a case of hunting for food, since Jones confesses that even he, "Moi, Nicolas Jones, Pasteur de Griffin Creek" (40), has let a salmon agonize for two hours at the end of his line. Included in the same paragraph, as one of the events of life that complete this picture is the following: "De retour de chasse ils prennent leur femme dans le noir, sans enlever leurs bottes". This signals the status of woman as chattel in Griffin Creek. The surfeit of violent possession of the animals in the hunt is thus extended to the women of the village. The description ends abruptly with "La mer est rouge de sang". This evokes the blood of mothers/women shed because of the violence but it evokes as well, in Irigaray's words, the unacknowledged debt owed the mother, 'la mer/mère', in reproduction.

Not all the women in the village suffered such overt violence, but their status as possession or 'thing' is all too evident. Olivia, after her mother's death, is guarded by her brothers and father, "trois hommes jaloux" (75). Stevens explains the competition he feels with these men for the ownership of Olivia and how, sensing "Une vague bruit de chaînes à chacun de ses gestes" (80), he is attracted by this. Talking about women in general, he predicts that Nora and Olivia would be in future, "enceintes [...] cachées dans leurs maisons fermées" (88), and he finishes by saying

that only the church and the Pasteur knew how to keep the women in their place. He speaks of Maureen as of a wild animal: "Le dressage de cette vieille Maureen est déjà commencé" (90), making her useful for a summer's comfort. Jones' attitude toward women is no less misogynist. He takes advantage of Nora's anger for his sexual pleasure; hits her when she shows some interest in the American; and muses on how, in another time, he would have been able to get rid of his wife because of her supposed inability to procreate. The women in Griffin Creek are identified as barren women, virgins, mothers, widows or prostitutes: categories based on their status as sexual objects for men, and on their economic value. The barn dance, an episode recounted by all protagonists, in which the women go round the circle being passed from hand to hand, serves as a metaphor for this situation. This is not a culture in which young women can identify with their mothers as women, without objectifying themselves.

The strong bond between Nora and Olivia, developed since birth, is weakened in the face of their attraction to Stevens. It is not surprising to see evidence of jealousy and rivalry between the two on this account. For, they exist in an economy which demands "[...] **ou l'une ou l'autre**, ou elle ou je-moi"; where the unsymbolized mother/daughter relationship has made them "[...] complices et rivales pour advenir à l'unique position possible dans le désir de l'homme"; where "Cette compétition paralyse aussi l'amour entre femmes soeurs. [...] parce qu'elles travaillent à

obtenir le poste de l'unique: mère des mères en quelque sorte" (E,101). Nora asks herself which one of them he is looking at, even while she admits that it took only "un seul regard [...] posé sur nous deux ensemble, **comme sur une seule personne** (my emphasis)" (121), to cause an irrevocable rupture between them. She wonders which one has the more beautiful breasts: which one of them is more valued as sex object.

There is clear lack of solidarity among the women. Nora wanted to go to her mother or grandmother when she was disturbed about Stevens' reactions to her sexual advances, but she knew that was not possible. For, despite the independence of these two, they would not have supported her actions. The older women withhold vital information from their daughters about the male/female relationship: Nora and Olivia both yearn to know what their mothers know but they get only warnings. These are all behaviours that Irigaray identifies as resulting from women being unable to speak their identity in words and images, being unable to discern boundaries, being unable to respect the other woman -- sister, daughter, mother or friend -- as another woman.

According to Irigaray, the social and symbolic organization which restricts women to and values them only in their function as mothers, produces two types of mothers, the cold unfeeling mother, unable to love herself, her children or anyone else, and the mother who suffocates/stuffs her children with what passes for love/food

in such a culture. Most of the women of Griffin Creek suffer from either a psychological or physical inability to mother. A number of critics blame the lack of maternal love in the mothers of Griffin Creek for the ills that befell the village. Marilyn Randall writes:

Selon la psychologie exposée dans les récits de Nicolas et de Stevens, la cause de leur misogynie reposerait sur une enfance hantée par le désir insatisfait de l'amour maternel et par le refus de tendresse de la part des femmes.<sup>5</sup>

Karen Gould states that sexual anxiety for these men cannot be avoided when faced with the desiring productive maternal body "[...] since their experience of motherhood is fundamentally one of vulnerability and rejection"<sup>6</sup> In my view, this explanation of the misogynistic behaviour of the men in Griffin Creek seems to stop at the stage of mother blaming. An examination of the relationship of the women of Griffin Creek to motherhood will serve I think to paint a picture of the extremes that can be reached when women are restricted to the role of procreator, where love of self as woman, libidinal desire and desire to create, are all unavailable to them. In Irigaray's words, "On a enfermé les mères, et en elles la femme, dans le rôle qui satisfait le besoin mais n'a pas accès au désir" (CAC,86). But she also says:

Il faut que la femme puisse se dire en mots, en images et symboles dans cette relation intersubjective avec sa mère, puis les autres femmes, pour entrer dans une

---

<sup>5</sup>Kathryn Slott, *op.cit.*, p.68-69.

<sup>6</sup>Karen Gould, "Absence and Meaning in Anne Hébert's *Les fous de Bassan*", THE FRENCH REVIEW, LIX, 1986, p.927.

Certainly Felicity's experience of motherhood had all to do with satisfying the needs of others. Her pregnancies, we are led to understand from Nicolas, were the issue of unwanted sexual attentions from a brutal and promiscuous husband, rather than that of 'fertile exchange' between the two. She gave birth without a sound. She denies herself the pleasure of birth that is possible where (male) medicine has not made it a pathology. Cixous' lyrical description of birth suggests a pleasure akin to sexual jouissance. There is no jouissance in giving birth for Felicity. Her herculean efforts to have a space and a time of her own, to maintain her selfhood, are interpreted by Nicolas as rejection of him, and, later, when she includes her granddaughters in the early morning ritual, it is interpreted as a preference for girls over boys. Despite the fact that she appears to be a symbol of the foremothers, who attempted, in various ways, to create a space for themselves as women in male culture, we see her falling into the stereotypical role of women at the time of the death of her granddaughters and the accusation of murder against her grandson: she quietly prepared food for everyone. This giving of food by women, has, according to Irigaray's reading, always substituted for the lack of words as mediation.

Bea's cries during childbirth have nothing to do with jouissance either. When given her twins to hold she shakes her

head and says: "Je peux pas. je peux pas. je peux pas" (86). She is physically cold and it is a miracle that she gives birth to living children at all. This physical coldness and rejection of birth is mirrored in her coldness toward her children and her desire to be rid of them. She colludes with her husband in the cruelty he exhibits towards the children and there is no evidence that the relation between this couple can be said to be an encounter in any way 'fertile in mind and body'.

It seems that the lack of fertility, in the procreative sense, so framed Irene's life that she committed suicide. Since she does not get to tell her own story, we know from Nicolas' description of her that she is sexually frigid. It is tempting to see her as one of these women whose expectations of sexual pleasure are defined entirely by a masculine model. She has been unable to learn from her foremothers what they were unable to teach, restricted as they were to a masculine sexual economy. There was no other role open to her in this society. There was certainly no sexual pleasure permitted her. She was devoted to her household duties and for her, too, the preparation of food substituted for words:

Sel, poivre, beurre, porc frais, galette de patates, pudding au riz et thé noir, mots détachés qui résonnent dans la salle à manger, nous tiennent lieu de conversation(45).

Maureen has no children and is defined as the widow Maureen. Stevens' reference to her being menopausal, and his disdain for this very natural condition, demonstrates the assumption, that a

woman in patriarchal culture, being no longer useful reproductively, is no longer a sexual being. Maureen's only recourse in the face of this is, essentially, to continue to play the Sleeping Beauty game, waiting for a man, in this case it would seem any man, to come along. Any toad can look like a prince in shining armour when a woman accepts the value placed on her as sexual object by a misogynist society, and when that value is fast decreasing for her. She is a rival for Stevens' affections. She shares food with the girls, candy, but the fruit in her garden is bitter. There is no vertical relationship here; no pictorial representation of women on her walls, only a calendar of Old Chum and the grandfather clock that is so all-important to her; an indication of her collusion with patriarchy and her protection of Stevens in the matter of the murders. Irigaray describes such women as confusing identity with identification.

Le leurre d'être obscurément ou de pouvoir être des hommes, et réciproquement, exilent les femmes d'elles mêmes et font d'elles des agents de destruction individuelle et sociale(SP,210-211).

"[L]es pommiers noirs et tordus" (199) in Maureen's garden are an image of her growth, not because she is old and childless, but because she has not been able to become 'un sujet/femme'.

Although appearing to be in abject servitude, Pat and Pam have managed to create an 'entre-elles'. Expressing what they know through the painting in the gallery of ancestors is significant, since art has been seen traditionally as a discourse not allied to

truth. The twins establish a homosexual economy and from that economy validate women as women in their painting. They take the step described by Irigaray as essential to undermining patriarchy, refusing the category "vérité/art" (CAC:46).

Olivia's mother is a dutiful servant to her husband and sons at the expense of her own pleasure and her own life. There is little doubt that the demands of these men are the cause of her death. However, she is so cowed by the situation that she trains her daughter to live the same sort of life. Whether through fear or acceptance that this is the lot of women, she is an accomplice of the forces of patriarchy which are the source of her misery. She has no other role to teach her daughter. She is procreator and an economic asset for these men, nothing more.

Nora is a young girl just becoming a woman. Despite the fact that her relationships with the other women in her community afford her no image of herself as woman/subject she does not yet perceive herself as a paradigm of masculine subjectivity: "Faite du limon de la terre, comme Adam, et non sortie d'entre les côtes sèches d'Adam, première comme Adam, je suis moi, Nora Atkins [...]" (116). Her intuition or self-knowledge allows her to see herself as both a sexual being and potentially maternal: "la promesse de dix ou douze enfants" (118). Even though her mothers have failed to teach her anything of her role as a sexual being, for "l'ombre de l'amour qui surgit dans les conversations des mères est secrète et



redoutable" (115), she does not limit herself to the maternal role.

When Nora speaks of sexual experience, she knows that she does not want the traditional or present model of male/female relationship. She considers each of the men she knows and subjects each one with a "Non, non [...]" and "Mon Dieu faites que le premier ne soit pas [...]" (119). She fears that like her mothers, she will be sacrificed: "Figure de proue pour l'éternité [...]" (125). She fantasizes a better life and, using the language available to her, pictures her ideal mate in the language of fairy tales as a king or a bird who is a man/prince in disguise. The depiction of her ideal partner coming to her as a bird, which in this novel represents desire, reflects her understanding that a male/female relationship should be possible which does not involve the negation of the 'other' by the 'I'.

Nora is not the Sleeping Beauty. She does not intend to play the waiting game as women have traditionally done. She seeks sexual pleasure actively, for "le fun de par tout mon corps" (119,131) even though tragically, she knows that she is unlikely to find it in Griffin Creek. Her attitude toward the male-female sexual relationship is clearly expressed after her encounter with Stevens in the forest:

C'est lui le chasseur et moi je tremble et je supplie quoique j'enrage d'être ainsi tremblante et suppliante en silence devant lui alors qu'il serait si facile de s'entendre comme deux personnes, **égales entre elles, dans l'égalité de leur désir**(127).

Irigaray and Cixous both emphasize that there have always been women who, like Nora, understood themselves as other than 'lack', the mirror of man; who have refused to allow themselves to be restricted to the maternal function. They have been buried in history, as Nora was buried in the cemetery overlooking the village. Their loss helps erase the vertical relationship between women, between the mother and daughter. It is a loss which makes the construction of a feminine identity the more difficult.

The process of deconstruction generated through the title indicates the dissolution of the unified subject. For Irigaray the deconstruction of the unified subject merely indicates, however, the indifference of the subject, the lack of articulation of sexual difference in discourse and in culture. It is part of her project to find ways of allowing another sort of discourse to come into being, one which would symbolize the feminine, and allow the creation of other categories through which to comprehend the world. This implies that thought could go beyond its present stage of development, in which the feminine is repressed instead of being integrated, and that it could lead to a fertility of mind and body 'encore inconnue au monde' (E,121). This implies rethinking and recreating the cultural imaginary which informs the categories through which we apprehend the world. **Les fous de Bassan** appears to contribute to this cultural imaginary in some important ways.

Two of the elements which, according to Irigaray, constitute

the material of our existence and which have been excluded from our language/way of being, are the threshold, 'le seuil', a passing to and fro through boundaries but without loss of identity; and the condition of porosity, 'le muqueux'. The inscription of these elements in this novel merits our attention. The sublimation of men's loss of origin results in the building of closed structures, linguistic, theoretical and actual. The reification of women in patriarchal culture and their being shut up in men's houses while being shut out of participation in society as women, is another product of that sublimation. Irigaray says this is an indication of men's need to own the container. Woman does not need to own the container, instead she needs a passage through which she can move to and fro. This is why it is necessary to symbolize the threshold in order to open up the container, to contest its ownership by men and to give women a space where they might move freely.

The rape and murder of Nora and Olivia symbolize in a striking manner the violent crossing of thresholds: crossing the threshold of the body and crossing the threshold between life and death, both of which would otherwise be perceived as part of a healthy process of becoming, of living. The rape corresponds, for the most part, to the negative experience of giving birth for the women in Griffin Creek. At one level then, the thresholds of generation and procreation are seen to be appropriated by men for their pleasure and economy. This serves as a reminder that without specific rights for women in law, attempts to construct laws having to do

with rape and violence between the sexes have proved problematic to say the least.

It seems that there are two distinct modes of threshold symbolized in the novel. They are the threshold through which no passage is possible, a blocked threshold creating an enclosed space, 'des maisons closes', and open thresholds through which passage is not only possible but unlimited. It is in the inscription of the latter that I see the creation of a space for the feminine in masculine discourse, images for the feminine imaginary. The open passage, evoking both conception and birth, is a necessary element in language if we are to recognize what has been obliterated in the creation of masculine discourse, the sexual relation between two subjects (§,431). It evokes equally, of course, what has been most repressed in patriarchal culture, feminine sexuality, feminine desire; reducing women, "à la maternité du fils, au maternage, et au langage qui y correspond" (SP,194). Feminine sexuality has always been defined and described by men according to masculine norms (CAC,49). According to Irigaray, culture has not taken into account that what constitutes female sexuality is:

une énergie et une morphologie différentes, une relation particulière au muqueux et au seuil qui va du dedans au-dehors du corps, de l'extérieur à l'intérieur de la peau (et de l'univers?) sans blessure(SP,194).

If the title, **Les fous de Bassan**, serves as the source of the

deconstruction of the unified subject, the opening sentence introduces the first of many images of the open threshold: "La barre étale de la mer, blanche, à perte de vue, sur le ciel gris, la masse noire des arbres, en ligne parallèle derrière nous" (13). Its effect is twofold. It situates us in time and space but a time and space based on natural rhythms not on Kantian logic. The reader finds herself in that time(less) moment when the tide has finished its outward ebb and has not yet begun to flow back to the shore. This is a fluid, imprecise moment, not knowable in the masculine logical sense. In that manner it is very similar to all other open thresholds inscribed in the novel. The space evoked in this first sentence is not quantifiable either. It is not 10, 15, 200 miles away, it is "à perte de vue". This is a significant expression since the sense of sight, essential to masculine logic, does not serve to measure; it is 'perte'. The remainder of the passage brings us back to what Jones sees and hears of the new French-speaking village "au loin": sounds that "me perce le tympan" and sights that "m'emplit les yeux de leurs fauves stridentes" (13). In the last paragraph of this short opening section, there is a proliferation of synonyms for buildings. The passage includes four different words for closed structures, "maisons", "église", "bâtiments", "présbytère"; naming each type of building essential to the culture of Griffin Creek and evocative of the closed structure of masculine discourse.

The buildings of Griffin Creek, defining space, play an

important visual role in the novel. Their condition as open or closed is made quite evident: Olivia who describes her desire as that of a girl who calls out in a closed room (223); Nora's home whose doors are never locked but swing to and fro with the coming and going of whoever and whatever (132); the church with its doors open, "à deux battants" (117). In the case of closed houses, the repetition of Stevens blocking the doorway is significant. His presence in the church doorway is remarked by Jones, Nora and Olivia. It is not just his act of blocking the doorway that the reader is aware of but the quality of light around him and the fact that these three people are very aware of his gaze. Jones recognises that he is looking for someone (29). Nora was aware that he was looking at her and Olivia; "(son) regard posé sur nous deux ensemble, comme sur une seule personne" (121). Olivia is aware that he is looking at her each time that she sees him "dans l'encadrement de la porte", at Maureen's house (201); and using the same phrase (219), at the barn on the occasion of the barn-dance; then later, "dans la porte", at her house when she was ironing her brothers' shirts (215). She is bothered by his gaze but is unable to escape from it. The house of language depends on sight. Nora and Olivia find themselves fixed by Stevens' gaze just as their lives are fixed by the masculine discourse, the Irigarayan "house of language",<sup>7</sup> that governs them.

---

<sup>7</sup>This is an expression used frequently by Irigaray, which she has borrowed from Martin Heidegger.

This blocking and appropriating image of Stevens in the church door is in sharp contrast to Nora's description, both of the open church doors permitting an intermingling of the hum of insects with the music in the church, and of the swinging door of her home "qui bat au passage des personnes, des chiens, des chats, des fleurs, des légumes, des fruits, et des mouches noires, dans la chaleur de l'été" (132). Of the church she says:

J'aime les dimanches d'été lorsque la porte de l'église est ouverte à deux battants sur la campagne. Le chant des oiseaux, la rumeur des insectes se mêlent au chant des hymnes, au son de l'harmonium. De grandes bouffées d'odeur pénètrent partout, comme des paquets de mer(117-18).

This suggests the natural phenomenon of the interface between sea and air in which there is a continual interchange of oxygen and water, an interchange vital to life, which recalls in turn, Irigaray's paradigm of the 'fertile exchange' as a mode of being. Nora's perception suggests as well a view of nature which accepts an association with nature rather than a domination of it; a view contrasting with both the hunting habits of the men and the efforts of Jones to dominate the sea with his words (12). We have here an appeal to the senses of sound and smell as opposed to that of sight predominant in the vision of Stevens in the doorway "inondé de lumière" and looking for someone. Indeed Stevens' appearance, "dans l'encadrement de la porte", with his gaze, "posé sur nous deux ensemble, comme sur une seule personne" (121), speaks nothing, in the Irigarayan sense, of the 'admiration' of one person for another which might precede a 'fertile exchange' between two subjects. On the contrary it is a gaze that appropriates and reduces them both

to one.

The image/symbol of threshold as passage, so evident as metaphor at the level of the narrative, is reflected and repeated at the level of the code, in the bathing scene of Felicity with Nora and Olivia. We have already established this scene as a symbol of birth. Nora's recounting of the event crystalizes it as an image of both conception and birth. Reclaiming woman as an active rather than passive element in the conception process, she experiences herself as Johnny Appleseed scattering seeds along the way, from which, she says, "naïtront des vergers un peu partout sur mon passage" (112). As women about to be born, they experience themselves as "une grappe d'algues visqueuses, collées au rocher" (113). Nora's description of how she felt during those morning swims leaves no doubt that it is a depiction of the moment of birth. She echoes Cixous' description of birth: "c'était la femme au comble de sa chair, sa jouissance, la force enfin délivrée, manifeste son secret" (Cixous, 1977, 37). Anticipating the experience which has become a ritual for her, Nora describes her feelings in this way: "Tout juste le plaisir de me sentir exister, au plus vif de moi, au centre glacé des choses qui émergent de la nuit, s'étirent et baillent, frissonnent et cherchent leur lumière et leur chaleur à l'horizon (111)". It is significant that the sense of touch, not sight, is foregrounded here. The quality of porosity/mucosity, associated with women in numerous instances in the text (pp.35, 113, 115, 117, 218), is very evident in this



scene. Irigaray states that because of its qualities, "[...] le muqueux correspond peut-être à ce qui est à penser aujourd'hui" (E,107): qualities which would allow what has hitherto been unexpressed to insinuate itself into the interstices of language for the development of new categories of thought.

Felicity's search for another passage takes the form of a search for the interstices between night and day, a place where the sense of touch and hearing serve to know. As Nora tells it, Felicity insists on swimming at the break of dawn, "à l'heure blafarde". If the sun is up before high tide, she obstinately refuses to swim and becomes "farouche et lointain". For, "Il s'agit de l'aimer à l'aube" (113). The scene suggests the emergence of the idea of a feminine divine. Certainly the patriarchal religion practised in Griffin Creek did not suffice for Felicity and Nora. They both understood that pastor Jones, with his polished oratory, was not speaking to God but to himself: a metaphor for Christianity as masculine discourse, as representative of the economy of the 'same', the divine as "fini" rather than "infini". Felicity, for whom this has been a lifelong practice, has created her own ritual. It is a ritual from which men are excluded in order to create 'un entre-elles', where women might begin to love themselves as women, a necessary first step, according to Irigaray, toward the development of a feminine divine. In addition, the topography of the scene, the vertical movement of the birds and the horizontal movement of the swimmers, particularly of Felicity, who

"fait la planche", suggests an iconograph that corresponds to religious practice that pre-dates patriarchal monotheism. Women need a divine which will allow them a horizon; the rebirth of woman through the possibility of an open passage where she may move freely in the air toward her own "horizon à l'infini". Irigaray expresses it in this way:

Après l'enveloppe pleine d'eau de notre séjour prenatal, nous avons à construire, peu à peu, l'enveloppe d'air de notre séjour terrestre, air encore libre à respirer et à chanter, air où se déploient nos apparences, nos mouvements. Nous avons été poissons. Nous aurions à devenir oiseaux. Cela ne peut se faire sans ouverture et mobilité dans l'air (SP, 78).

The image of threshold coalesces as "ouverture et mobilité dans l'air", in the story of Olivia de la Haute mer. Passages are created in time, in space, and in thought. Olivia's description of the two leaving Maureen's house is a metaphor for what follows. "La porte est grande ouverte sur la nuit blanche de lune. Nora et moi passons le seuil de la porte, disparaissions dans la nuit. Basculons dans le vide. A jamais" (212). The critics, to mention only two, O'Reilly<sup>8</sup>, and Bishop<sup>9</sup>, have noted the difficulty of situating this novel in the sphere of the temporal. This is significant in a novel which draws attention very precisely to dates, as is shown by the "Table des matières". While other narrators mention the relevant dates, Olivia mentions them seven

---

<sup>8</sup> Magessa O'Reilly. *op.cit.*, p.114

<sup>9</sup> Neil B. Bishop, "Distance, point de vue, voix et idéologie dans *Les fous de Bassan* d'Anne Hébert", *VOIX&IMAGES*, IX, 2, (hiver84), p.114

times and adds one other significant date "l'autre tempête, celle du 28 octobre" (223). However, her story is characterised by an addition to the inscription, of the words, "pas de date". Time is certainly dislocated in this narration. There are numerous prolepses and analepses, if indeed one can use this terminology, in a story where the narrator refers to herself as being "désormais hors du temps" (223). Her story is, however, marked by another sort of time. It is marked by the rhythms of nature; by night and day and by the tides. She visits Griffin Creek "nuit après nuit". For it is "Impossible de quitter Griffin Creek pour le moment. Calme plat sur le sable, à perte de vue" (210), recalling the setting established in the first phrase of the novel, where the village appears to be waiting immobile for the tides to permit movement, change. So it is the rhythm of the tides which permits the visits to Griffin Creek from the beyond. For, "Ayant franchi le passe de la mort [...] je reste là sur la grève comme quelqu'un qui attend un train" (210). As the village seemed to be waiting for change, so she is waiting for the tides when she wishes to rejoin her great watery mothers, described by Karen Gould as "a collective and pulsating feminine space".<sup>10</sup>

To establish another space-time, one based on natural rhythms, is one of the changes which must occur before women can symbolize their own relation to the loss of the mother, before they can speak

---

<sup>10</sup> Karen Gould, *op. cit.*, p.928.

their desire. The sea certainly seems to offer a mythical space in which to express in language another relation to origin; not in the sense of a return to the pre-oedipal, for this would result in psychosis, but perhaps in some sense of a 'retouch' rather than 'retour'. Certainly, the rapport of Olivia, Nora and Felicity to the sea is expressed explicitly throughout the novel. And in a passage from "Olivia de la Haute Mer", this special relationship is extended to all women. For, Olivia says that the spirits of all the women buried in the cemetery on the hill, "les grandes femmes crayeuses", including Nora, "[...] depuis longtemps ont l'âme légère, partie sur la mer, changée en souffle et buée" (217). This serves too as a figure for the lost feminine genealogy. The sea serves as a source of truth for them. Felicity searches it in swimming 'à l'aube'. Olivia, as a young girl in a trancelike state, at the edge of the sea, searches it for "[L]e mystère de la vie et de la mort de ma mère" (211). She wants the sea to reflect the face of her mother as if in a mirror; a desire to know her mother/herself as woman, rather than a reflection of what man wants her to be for himself. She almost succeeds in knowing but at the moment when she is just about to "tout saisir, tout savoir" (211), her brothers call her and she is forced to return to the realm of the patriarchal. In her words she is forced to "habiter mon nom de nouveau" for, "c'est mon histoire qui m'attend là-haut, avec mon père et mes frères" (212).

Irigaray says that it is possible to see in myths and stories

traces of our relation to the elements, which reveal and hide something of our identity, and that these psychic structures (affects) have yet to be deciphered as a moment in history (SP,70). She interprets the story of **La Petite Sirène** as figuring a passage between inter-uterine life and life in the air (vie aérienne): a life situated in ambiguous relations for couples who are "procréateurs mais difficilement amoureux" (SP,72). The images of pregnancy and birth, reinforced by the quality of mucosity associated with the women in Hébert's novel, evoke the intra-uterine life. But the image of Olivia as an aerial entity is very marked as well, particularly in the well known passage which begins, "Transparente et fluide comme un souffle d'eau,[...] je passe entre les planches mal jointes des murs, les interstices des fenêtres vermoulues" and which continues: "J'ai beau siffler dans le trou des serrures,[...] me faufiler dans les songes de mon oncle Nicolas [...]" (199-200). It is significant that Hébert's choice of citation to begin the story of "Olivia de la Haute mer" is from **La Petite Sirène**: "Ton coeur se brisera et tu deviendras écume sur la mer. **H.C.Andersen**" (197). Olivia, we know, has "le pied palmé" (97), a suggestion of mermaid, and furthermore Perceval refers to her, on occasion, as a mermaid (71). I read this striking similarity of Olivia's story to that of the little mermaid as a suggestion that we can decipher from it something of the present psychic state of men and women.

The paragraph that begins, "Tout l'été à attendre des

apparitions...Je hante Griffin Creek afin que renaisse l'été de 1936" (220) can be seen as a crystalization of the psychic and social state of women. Through Olivia, feminine sexual desire, which is also ontological desire, is openly expressed. As in the case of Nora, who wanted sexual relationships to be "égales [...] dans l'égalité de leur désir" (127), Olivia wants to look at and be looked at by Stevens (220). She understands, however, that his desire is nothing more than the desire to awaken "la plus profonde épouvante en moi [...] épouvante qui n'est plus tout à fait la mienne, mais celle de ma mère enceinte de moi et de ma grandmère qui..." (202). Olivia knows that, as Irigaray says, "L'amour perd sa divinité, sa médiumnité, ses qualités alchimiques entre les couples d'opposés" (SP,33): that love cannot be an intermediary where the violence let loose by phallogocentric logic is bound up with all violence; that death ensues when one law rules (E,105-6). Olivia yearns to "exister encore une fois [...] Vivre!" However, she knows that "Quelque part cependant, est-ce au fond de la terre, l'ordre de mort est donné" (220). Just as they have done at each period of her life, childhood, adolescence and adulthood, her mother and grandmothers warn her of danger. Olivia, however, is aware of their failure. Although they "gémissent [...], jurent qu'elles m'ont bien prévenue, [...]" and "me recommandent d'y habiter désormais avec elles, d'être obéissante [...]" (220), Olivia knows that they are merely babbling and repeating the same thing (220) in fear and acceptance. As 'gouttes de pluie sur la surface des eaux" they represent women/fusionnels rather than

women/subjects. They are women in exile from their own subjectivity. Irigaray explains this condition:

L'Oedipe dit la loi du non-retour de la fille à la mère, sauf dans le **faire comme** de la maternité. Elle la coupe de son commencement, de sa conception de sa genèse, de sa naissance, de son enfance.

[...]

Divisée en deux par l'oedipe (désormais située entre deux hommes, le père et l'amant?), elle serait exilée dans le monde masculin, paternel. Errante, mendiante, par rapport à des valeurs qu'elle ne pourrait pas s'approprier(PN,293-294).

In a novel that foregrounds writing, the story of Olivia is the only story in the "Table des Matières" not referred to as a literary artifact. It is disconnected from that product of culture in which authority is anchored. This is supported by the image of Olivia, at the end of her story, saying with some urgency that she has just enough time to hide herself like a squid in its ink before the events of the summer of 1936 repeat themselves. As Harger-Grinling and Chadwick have pointed out, this is "une image qui évite le dur, l'encre séché,"<sup>11</sup> (Harger-Grinling and Chadwick,1994,12), and it echoes Stevens' reaction to Felicity's tea which is as black as ink and acrid to the taste (75). These women distance themselves from the culture of the patriarchal order. **Les fous de Bassan**, then, is a literary artifact which questions its

---

<sup>11</sup> V.Harger-Grinling and A Chadwick, "Sorcières, sorciers et le personnage féminin dans l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert", *ETUDES CANADIENNES*, 36,1994 p.12

literariness and, in the wider sense, draws attention to the production of truth in patriarchal culture, or as Neil Bishop has said, "[elle] pose un geste d'espoir" (1993,245). One could say, perhaps, that the 'house of language' of patriarchal culture, like the houses at Griffin Creek in 1982, "se délabrent sur pied" (14). Olivia asks pardon of her foremothers but affirms that she must be obedient to "le désir qui me tire et m'amène" (221): libidinal and ontological desire. She must haunt Griffin Creek in order that the summer of 1936 be **reborn** (221) but not **relived** "dans toute sa furie" (225). And the face that she searches is not "dans le présent" but "dans l'éternité de la terre sauvage" (221) - a time, a culture, not yet known.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

What Braidotti refers to as the "genderized universal" (Bock and James, 1992,188) would give rise to a culture of sexual difference, but it does not yet exist. It is, however, being theorised, and the work of feminist theoreticians such as Rosi Braidotti and Jessica Benjamin -- "female desire conceptualised as the in-between space, connecting inside to outside" (Bock and James,1992,188) -- echo the ideas of Irigaray. In *J'aime à toi* she states that a culture of sexual difference would require another level of consciousness, a level which would not search for mastery but attempt to find harmony between passivity and activity (JT,80). Irigaray emphasizes change in language itself which would shift the subject of enunciation through new ways of writing. This would imply the creation of a style of writing in which gender would be expressed; a style which would not lend itself to 'codage', to classification, according to neat binary oppositions. Anne Hébert's novel, *Les fous de Bassan*, shows evidence of such a style.

In form and content, this novel deconstructs the notion of 'truth' and the unified subject as they are constructed in patriarchal discourse. It is largely a story about women being defined according to their relationship to men and children. Mothers and daughters have no vertical relationship in that society. They are passed from hand to hand as in the barn dance.

The only social position open to them is that of mother; as subject/ woman they do not exist. The subject is clearly masculine.

Although I have not attempted to analyse the formal structures of language in the novel, I have attempted to show that Anne Hébert can be seen to, as Irigaray expresses it, 'travailler sur le langage dans sa sexuation' (SP,190). I suggest that the imbrication of the images of birth and 'jouissance' in the text, and, in particular, the multiple images of passage/threshold found there, are a step towards the symbolization in language of women's libidinal and ontological desire; a definition of female subjectivity as female. Of equal importance is the rejection of the patriarchal model of divinity and the emergence of a ritual linked to a new notion of space-time and pointing to the possibility of a vertical relationship between mother/daughter and hence between women.

Irigaray privileges poetry as being one of the spaces in patriarchal discourse where the feminine may speak. She says that "Le poète arrive pour maintenir l'ouvert ouvert. [...] Il garde l'ouvert ouvert en le montrant. Le constituant en demeurant ouvert" (OA,104). The poetic quality of Hébert's prose has been

noted by many critics including Bishop<sup>12</sup> and O'Reilly<sup>13</sup>. So, we see that the enclosed spaces of the traditional detective story, the linear novel, are opened up in **Les fous de Bassan**. It is a novel about rape and murder but in writing the impossibility of Olivia as 'revenante', Hébert refuses the murderousness of patriarchal culture. For Olivia passes easily from one realm to another. Her murder does not obliterate her. The same is true to a lesser extent of the other women in this novel. They are gathered together as the great sea mothers, women's history/genealogy waiting there for women to excavate for themselves and for men too.

Despite his deeds -- Were they his deeds? -- Stephens is not presented simply as the negative term of a pair of reversed oppositions, bad male protagonist:good female protagonist. He senses the inauthenticity of life in patriarchal culture. What the mirror reflects for him is unreadable(82). He wants to change his skin (85). He stands always in the position of being rejected by the village, in which case he would like to live, significantly, like a fish in the sea(62). His attempt at understanding life through the categories of patriarchal discourse forces him to say that he is tired of living by proxy and that "la vraie vie est semblable à la mort"(64).

---

<sup>12</sup>Neil B. Bishop, "Energie textuelle et production de sens: images de l'énergie dans **Les fous de Bassan** d'Anne Hébert", UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO QUARTERLY, vol.54, 2(winter 1984/85), p.178.

<sup>13</sup>Megasse O'Reilly, **op. cit.**, p.109.

The genderized universal, although more imperative for women, is necessary as well to men in order that the two no longer may walk "clopin-clopant, un pas dans la pure nature (la reproduction), l'autre dans une culture abstraite" (JT, 86). That patriarchal discourse can be challenged and a process begun to articulate sexual difference in language is clear. This novel is part of that process. Nora proclaims that we are born women and Olivia points the way to becoming those women that we are by nature.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### BOOKS

- Arcana, Judith. Our Mother's Daughters. Berkeley: Shameless Husky Press, 1979.
- Bachelard, Gaston. L'eau et les rêves. Paris: Corti, 1942.
- Bachofen, J.J. Myth, Religion and Mother Right. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- BenHabib, Selya and Cornell, Drucilla, eds. Feminism as Critique. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987.
- Berg, Temma F., ed. Engendering the Word: Feminist Essays in Psychosexual Poetics. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1989.
- Bishop, Neil B. Anne Hébert, son oeuvre, leurs exils. Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1993.
- Bock, Gisela and James, Susan, eds. Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, feminist politics and female subjectivity. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. p149-193.
- Bouchard, Denis. Une lecture d'Anne Hébert: la recherche d'une mythologie. Quebec: Hurtubise, 1977.
- Brennan, Teresa, ed. Between feminism and Psychoanalysis. London and New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Chanter, Tina. Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's rewriting of the philosophers. Routledge: New York and London, 1994.
- Chodorow, Nancy. The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

- Cixous, Hélène and Clément, Catherine. The Newly Born Woman. Trans. Wing, Betsy. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- La jeune née. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975.
- Cixous, Hélène. La venue à l'écriture. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1977.
- Prénoms de personne. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974. p.5-10.
- Daly, Brenda O., and Reddy, Maureen T. eds. Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991.
- Davidson, C.N. and Broner, E.H. The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980.
- Durand, Gilbert. L'Imagination Symbolique. 3e. ed. France: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976.
- Emond, Maurice. La femme à la fenêtre: l'univers symbolique d'Anne Hébert. Québec: Les presses de l'université Laval, 1984.
- Fadiman, James and Kewman, Donald. Exploring Madness: Experience, Theory and Research. Monterey: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1973.
- Felperin, Howard. Beyond Deconstruction: The Uses and Abuses of Literary Theory. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.
- Gelfand, Elissa D. and Hules, Virginia Thorndike. French Feminist Criticism: Women, Language, Literature. An Annotated Bibliography. New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1985.
- Greene, Gayle and Kahn, Coppelia eds. Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism. London and New York: Methuen,

1985.

- Grosz, Elizabeth. Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1981. Chs 4,5.
- Hébert, Anne. Les fous de Bassan. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982.
- Hirsch, Marianne. The Mother Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Humm, Maggie. Feminist Criticism: Women and Contemporary Critics. New York: St.Martin's Press, 1986.
- Humm, Maggie. An Annotated Critical Bibliography of Feminist Criticism. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987.
- Irigaray, Luce. Speculum de l'autre femme. Paris: Minuit, 1974.
- . Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un. Paris: Minuit, 1977.
- . Amante Marine, de Friedrich Nietzsche. Paris: Minuit, 1980.
- . Passions élémentaires. Paris: Minuit, 1982.
- . L'oubli de l'air. Paris: Minuit, 1983.
- . L'éthique de la différence sexuelle. Paris: Minuit, 1984.
- . Parler n'est jamais neutre. Paris: Minuit, 1985.
- . Sexes et parentés. Paris: Minuit.
- . Le corps à corps avec la mère. Ottawa: Editions de la pleine lune, 1981.
- . Je, tu, nous. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1990.
- . J'aime à toi. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1992.
- Jardine, Alice. Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

- Jung, C.J. Dreams. Trans. R.F.C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.
- Jung, C. J. Aspects of the Feminine. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Kauffman, Linda, ed. Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989.
- Kloepfer, Deborah Kelly. The Unspeakable Mother. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- Koppelman, Susan, ed. Between Mothers and Daughters. Old Westbury, New York: Feminist Press, 1985.
- Kristeva, Julia. Polylogue. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977.
- Kristeva, Julia. Révolution in Poetic Language. Trans. Waller, Margaret. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Lemieux, Pierre-Hervé. Entre songe et parole: Structure du Tombeau des rois" d'Anne Hébert. [.....] 1978
- Lewis, Paula Gilbert ed. Traditionalism, Nationalism and Feminism: Women Writers of Quebec. Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985.
- Marks, Elaine and de Courtivron, Isabelle (eds.). New French Feminisms: An Anthology. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980.
- Meese, Elisabeth A. Crossing the Double Cross. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986.
- Mitchell, Juliet. Women: The Longest Revolution. London: Virago, 1984.
- Moi, Toril. Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory. London & New York: Methuen, 1983.



- Nordquist, Joan. French Feminist Theory: Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. A Bibliography. Santa Cruz: Reference and Research Services, 1990.
- Ong, Walter J. Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality and Consciousness. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Pateman, Carole and Gross, Elisabeth eds. Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory. Boston: Northwest University Press, 1987.
- Paterson, Janet M. Anne Hébert: Architecture Romanesque. Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1985.
- . Moments postmodernes dans le roman québécois. Ottawa: Les presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1990. p.9-25.
- Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk. The Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and the Mother-Daughter Relationship. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.
- Roy, Lucille. Entre la lumière et l'ombre: l'univers poétique d'Anne Hébert. Sherbrooke: Editions Naaman, 1984.
- Schwenger, Peter. Phallic Critiques: Masculinity and 20th Century Literature. London: Routledge & Kegan, Paul Co., 1984.
- Smith, Paul. Discerning the Subject. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Waelti-Walters, Jennifer. Icare ou l'évasion impossible: Etude Psycho-mythique de l'oeuvre de J.M.G. Le Clézio. Sherbrooke: Editions Naaman, 1981.
- Whitford, Margaret. Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine. London: Routledge, 1991(a).
- Whitford, Margaret. ed. The Irigaray Reader. Oxford: Basil

Blackwell, 1991(b).

Wright, Elizabeth, ed. Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary. Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1992.

### Articles

Backès, Jean-Louis. "Le retour des morts dans l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert". L'ESPRIT CREATEUR vol. XXIII, no.3 (automne 1983)

Bishop, Neil B. "Energie textuelle et production de sens - Images de l'énergie dans Les fous de Bassan". UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO QUARTERLY 54 (winter 1984-85) 178-99.

--- "Distance, point de vue, voix et idéologie dans Les fous de Bassan". VOIX ET IMAGES 9.2 (hiver 1984) 113-129.

--- "Les Enfants du Sabbat et la problématique de la libération chez Anne Hébert". ETUDES CANADIENNES (1980) 41-42

--- "Anne Hébert entre Quebec et France: L'exil dans Le Premier Jardin". ETUDES CANADIENNES 28 (1990) 36-57.

Chadwick, A.R., and Harger-Grinling, Virginia. "Anne Hébert: Métamorphoses lutéliennes". CANADIAN LITERATURE 109 (Summer 1986) 165-170.

---. "Sorcières, sorciers et le personnage féminin dans l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert". ETUDES CANADIENNES, 36 (1994) 6-12

Ewing, Ronald. "Griffin Creek, The English World of Anne Hébert". CANADIAN LITERATURE 105 (Summer 1985) 100-10.

Felman, Shoshana. "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallexy". DIACRITICS 5:4 (1975) 2-10.

Féral, Josette. "Clôture du moi; clôture du texte dans l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert". VOIX ET IMAGES 1:2 (décembre 1975) 265-272

Godard, Barbara. "Feminism and/as Myth". ATLANTIS 16:2 (Spring

1991) 16-20.

- Gould, Karen. "Absence and Meaning in Anne Hébert's Les fous de Bassan". FRENCH REVIEW, Vol. LIX, no 6, mai 1986.
- Harger-Grinling, Virginia. "Le personnage en marge chez Anne Hébert et Langevin" ETUDES CANADIENNES 21:1 (1986)
- Jacques, Henri-Paul. "Un probable souvenir-écran chez Anne Hébert." VOIX ET IMAGES 7:3 (1982) 448-470.
- Knapp, Bettina L. "Jungian Criticism and French Literature". L'ESPRIT CREATEUR (Summer 1982) 5-9
- Major, Ruth. "Kamouraska et Les enfants du Sabbat: faire jouer la transparence". VOIX ET IMAGES 7:3 (1982) 459-71.
- O'Reilly, Megasse. "Le jeu des rythmes dans Les fous de Bassan d'Anne Hébert". CANADIAN LITERATURE 133 (1992) 109-126.
- Paterson, Janet, m. "L'envolée de l'écriture: Les fous de Bassan de Anne Hébert". VOIX ET IMAGES 9.3 (1984) 143-51.
- "Bibliographie d'Anne Hébert". VOIX ET IMAGES 7:3 (1982) 505.
- "L'écriture de la jouissance dans l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert". REVUE DE L'UNIVERSITE D'OTTAWA 50:1 (janvier - mars 1980)
- "Anne Hébert and the Discourse of the Unreal". YALE FRENCH STUDIES 65(1983) 172-86.
- Poulin, Gabrielle. "L'écriture enchantée : Les fous de Bassan d'Anne Hébert". LETTRES QUEBECOISES 28 (hiver 1982-83) 17.
- Randall, Marilyn. "Les énigmes des Fous de Bassan: féminisme, narration et cloture". VOIX 7 IMAGES, 43, automne 1989.
- Saigal, Monique. "L'appropriation du corps dans Le Cercan de Jeanne Hyvard". ATLANTIS 16:2 (Spring 1991) 22-29.

- Sirois, Antoine. "Bible, mythes, et Fous de Bassan". CANADIAN LITERATURE 104(Spring 78-82).
- Slott, Kathryn. "Submersion and Resurgence of the Female Other in Anne Hébert's Les fous de Bassan". QUEBEC STUDIES, 4, 1986.
- Smart, Patricia. "La poésie d'Anne Hébert: une perspective féminine." LA REVUE DE L'UNIVERSITE D'OTTAWA 50:1 (janvier-mars 1980) 63
- Spivak, Gayatri. "French Feminisms in an International Frame". YALE FRENCH STUDIES 62 (1981) 154-83.
- Vanasse, André. "L'écriture et l'ambivalence: Une entrevue avec Anne Hébert". VOIX ET IMAGES 7:3 (1982) 41-49.







