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FÉLIX-FRÉDÉRIC HÉBERT

Félix-Frédéric Hébert was born in Cherbourg on January 14, 1832. Nothing is known of his childhood apart from his scholastic career: a steady progress through local schools which culminated, at the age of twenty-one, with his entering the prestigious École normale supérieure in Paris. After three years' study there he graduated as a teacher in the "Natural and Physical Sciences," and returned to Brittany to take up the post of assistant physics teacher at the *lycée* in Rennes. After only a few months, however, he left the school due to some sort of incident involving "a woman of bad reputation," and the following year he was teaching in Angoulême, in 1859 in Le Puy, then in Évreux (1862), Rouen (1864), and Limoges (1868).¹

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F.-F. Hébert, teacher of physics.



His principals' reports from these various establishments were unanimously discouraging. Angoulême: "Well enough liked but little respected by his pupils. His teaching lacks discipline, liveliness, and interest, owing to his inability to prepare his lessons properly." Rouen: "Unable to impose authority on his pupils whom he has frequently to reprimand or punish so as to avoid disorder in the classroom." Limoges: "An extremely slow teacher, who wastes an enormous amount of time and is unable to complete the syllabus. ... His results are extremely feeble ... his lessons are ill-prepared, particularly the practical experiments, which are marred by repeated accidents."

The few surviving photographs of Hébert show him with a distinctly apprehensive air, which is perhaps not surprising given these dismal assessments of his abilities. Hébert sought the approval and respect of his superiors above everything else, and seemingly imagined that an unassuming and submissive manner might offset his professional failings. His cowed demeanor, carried into the classroom, simply made him an easy target for the mob of schoolboys, whose favorite sport was uncovering the weaknesses of their teachers. And after all these years of teaching, his only defense was utterly ineffective: a pose of bluff pomposity. Here he is concluding a typically maladroit eulogy to the physical sciences at a school prize-giving:

Therefore, you should love Science, which has made us so great, which has brought to our country an illustration even more imperishable than that of military glory and its bloody trophies; which has furnished the craftsman with a lightening of the heavy burdens of his labor, and provides a vast improvement to all of our lives, and yet can still elevate our souls and direct our thoughts toward Heaven, by every day revealing to us the admirable order established by the divine Creator of the Universe.

The combination of ostentation and bluster was easily sufficient to arouse the contempt of his pupils, but Hébert had the extra misfortune of looking absurd. His corpulence and his too-short legs slowed his movements to a laborious shuffle or a swaying waddle and—even better—he had a slight speech impediment. "He always spoke as if he had a mouthful of porridge." Eventually he realized he was forever to be the butt of his pupils' derision, and in 1877 he appealed to the authorities for a post as an inspector of schools.

His application was rejected. The board of inspectors noted that while his obsequious manner was useful for ingratiating himself with his superiors, it hardly suited him to a position of judgment over them, and that he lacked strength of character and "*sang-froid*." Nevertheless, he was briefly favored by a change in the political situation when a right-wing administration was installed in Limoges. Hébert, having devoted years of oratory to the praise of Family, Church, and Motherland, had his wish granted by the new council. Three months later, however, he was dismissed, when local elections returned a republican. His grievances filled long letters to the educational authorities, but he had no alternative except to return to teaching.²

So, in 1881, after an interval of twenty-three years, he returned to Rennes, to the very school in which his teaching career had begun, and his classes then descended into complete disorder. In June 1882 the inspector noted: "M. Hébert's speech is ponderous and muffled. His lessons lack

both clarity and organization. His influence on his pupils is almost nil. He does not know how to impose his authority, nor how to get the slightest attention from his pupils.” Soon the class was taken over by the vice-principal and Hébert was assigned to teach elementary mathematics, to a class of only fourteen. It made no difference; the uproar from his classroom became impossible to ignore. The inspectors refrained from enforcing his retirement only because of his advancing age and the financial responsibilities incurred by his large family (five children). Finally, in 1892 and after eleven years at Rennes, he was persuaded to retire, on reaching the age of sixty.

A few years later the events of the Dreyfus Affair obliged his return to public service. Alfred Dreyfus had been the highest-ranking Jewish officer ever to serve in the French Army until, in 1894, a court martial found him guilty of passing military secrets to the Germans. After a ceremony of public denigration he was imprisoned on Devil’s Island under particularly arduous conditions. It soon became obvious that he was the victim of an anti-Semitic plot, and the “Affair” became the greatest political controversy of its day. Dreyfus’s second court martial, in 1899, happened to take place in Rennes; the courtroom was within the *lycée* building itself. He was again found guilty, and sentenced to an additional ten years in prison, even though the evidence brought against him at his first trial had been shown in the interim to have been forged. The verdict was so obviously unjust that the French President pardoned him anyway. Hébert was so outraged by this attempt, in his words, “to rehabilitate a justly condemned traitor” that he entered local politics and was elected a town councilor in 1900. Later the same year a local paper carried this report of a council meeting:

M. Hébert, by virtue of the seniority granted by his age, was called upon to preside over the meeting for just a few minutes; he took advantage of this to read to the new council the sort of address in which everything is a matter of “city-slickers, gangs of Jewish Freemasons, bribed government officials, the Flag, France, etc.” The council did not appear to be particularly gripped by this stale old claptrap, which was clumsily delivered by King Ubu.

It is the reference to King Ubu that explains why anything at all is known of the career of F.-F. Hébert. The young Alfred Jarry had entered his class in 1888, and would soon transform Hébert into the aberrant antihero of *Ubu Roi*. Another future author, Henri Hertz, was a fellow pupil, a couple of years younger than Jarry, and he described their relations:

Hébert was celebrated for the violent barracking he suffered and for the portentous manner with which he strove to placate his tormentors. He was not one to allow himself to be overcome straightaway, to be too quickly reduced to trembling abasement, not before attempting to defend himself with great blusterings of rage. Hardly ever, anyway. What we loved in him, what made him unique, and inspired a plethora of ingenious inventions aimed at stirring him up, was that we could look forward to beautiful tears, noble sobs, and ceremonious supplications.

Hébert's torture passed through three phases, accompanied on his part by three physiognomies:

Entrance: wary, Hébert paused at the threshold of the classroom. His legs were so short and his stomach so large that he looked as if he was sitting on his backside. His appearance in the doorway provoked gales of laughter. He tried to exorcize this demon by directing angelic looks from tiny eyes, lost in a mass of pallid flab, at the mob which he knew full well would be in uproar in a matter of minutes.

The second phase began when Hébert, his back to the class, took on the appearance of a giant insect heaving itself up the blackboard and depositing trails of chalk behind it. Those of us with ammunition bombarded the shabby elytra of his old jacket. Hébert turned round. Not straight away, because he was deaf, although we were never sure if this deafness was due to a deficiency of hearing or of courage. The fact was that he left it till the last possible moment before taking on the miscreants, and when he decided to act, it was plain to see that he did so reluctantly.

He turned round suddenly. The third phase was then initiated, in which he exhibited his truly royal character, itself contradicted by his uncertain gaze and the despairing grin beneath his great moustache, once red, now stained with tobacco.

First of all, he drew a small silver case from his jacket pocket, took an enormous pinch of snuff and then commenced his harangue: beautifully phrased, carefully formulated, full of solemnity, but completely inappropriate. This was his great talent. His words conformed neither to his features, nor to the circumstances of his predicament. He threatened the innocent, avoided the guilty. His pupils were so insulted by the obvious injustice as to become lovers of justice themselves.

It was during these feats of oratory enunciated through glittering tears that Jarry came forward. He joined the fray at the end, like a matador entering the arena for the *coup de grâce*. Complete silence reigned. Coldly, cuttingly, he put insidious and bizarre questions to Père Heb, who faltered in mid-sentence, his self-righteous manner shattered. Jarry encircled him, stunning him with aphorisms. He demolished him, Père Heb became disconcerted, batted his eyelids, stammered, pretended not to hear, lost his footing. Finally he gave way, collapsing on the table amidst the retorts and apparatus, scrambling for his spectacles, and with a trembling hand he would scribble a note to the headmaster. The class regarded Jarry the victor with a sense of wonder.

And also with trepidation and disquiet, because we felt that Jarry's sarcasm went far beyond the general unruliness, that something within him, some powerful impulse, lay behind the ferocity of his attack. Already it seemed as if Père Ubu was coming into being, modeled on Jarry's victim.³

Jarry's ferocity may be attributed simply to fear and loathing. Hébert, the tragic incompetent, with his earnest appeals for order, respect, and tradition, personified something extremely ominous. Subservient, unquestioning, his eagerness to please his superiors had cost him both his dignity and self-respect. As a teacher he was inadvertently effective nevertheless; he offered his pupils a ghastly example, and it was a lesson that some of them learned very well. Hébert was the anti-Narcissus of impending adulthood—what one most dreaded one day recognizing in the mirror. Yet Jarry came to see in him something more than a simple warning against petit bourgeois conformities. Here was an archetype that he could at once embrace and ward off, by forming it into a symbolic representation of “everything in the world that is grotesque”: Père Ubu.⁴