Autobiographical Intentions and Interpretations: Marie Cardinal, Annie Leclerc

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In memory of my mother

Abstract

This thesis seeks to provide new readings of the autobiographical fictions of Marie Cardinal and Annie Leclerc. The study has three central aims. Firstly, to present a comparative overview of Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* and Leclerc's *Exercices de mémoire*; secondly, to explore the significance of the texts in relationship to developments within feminist theory and practice; thirdly, to develop a mode of reading which acknowledges the importance of autobiographical intention, social context and critical reception. My study will make a claim for the importance of considering the situated experience of the author and the reader.

My methodological approach is informed by autobigraphical and literary theory, feminist theory and reception studies. The thesis explores a number of themes in the writing of Cardinal and Leclerc including the construction of autobiographical identity in relationship to the reader, the social function of the autobiographical sub-genres of confessional and testimonial writing, the impact of theories of the 'death of the author' on experiential writing and its significance for a feminist agenda. The manner in which gender influences the shape and tone of the autobiographical pact and the relationship between gender and critical reception are further themes under consideration.

A further concern will be to explore the feminist claim that traditional theories of the genre, authored by male critics, fail to account for the 'difference' of women's writing. It will also be argued that early forays into the genre by Anglo/American feminist critics have tended either to essentialise female identity or to erase the self from the text altogether. Acknowledging the shift of interest in autobiographical criticism from the 'autos' (self) to the 'graphe' (text), I align myself with those theorists who have argued for the need to reinstate the 'bios' (life) back into autobiographical criticism.

While acknowledging the impact of deconstructionist perspectives, this thesis proposes the value of experiential writing as a means of challenging exclusionary identity politics and raising consciousness among readers. I examine Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* as an exemplary text of the 1970s which illustrates the feminist interest in the communal 'I,' and Leclerc's *Exercices de mémoire* as a more cautious

text of the 1990s which nonetheless demonstrates a continuing interest in communal identity, mediated by an awareness of difference. I engage with criticisms of confessional writers for holding naive assumptions about 'agency,' 'communal identity,' and the transparency of language. I argue that Cardinal's confessional and Leclerc's testimonial writing demonstrate an awareness of both the constructed nature of identity and the importance of situated experience. Furthermore, both writers avoid 'speaking for other women' by presenting authorial identity in relationship to the Other. I argue that the gaze of the Other plays an essential role in the construction of autobiographical identity whether it be the imagined critical gaze of the literary critic or the sympathetic identification which the author solicits from her readers.

I conclude that while there are no essential qualities to women's self-writing there is a need for reading with gender awareness. The identities constructed in *Les Mots pour dire* and *Exercices de mémoire* are shaped by the social conditions of the time and the constraints of the genre. I argue for situated reading of each women's writing, concluding my discussion with my own personal reading of *Les Mots pour le dire*.

Contents

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Introduction

1.1. Theorising the Genre

The central concern of this thesis is to develop new perspectives for reading the autobiographical fictions of Marie Cardinal and Annie Leclerc. My methodological approach will seek to address the following aims. Firstly, to juxtapose the writing of the two authors with a specific focus on Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* and Leclerc's *Exercices de mémoire*. Secondly, to read these texts with reference to a range of theories of autobiography and indeed, literature in general. Thirdly, to locate the texts within the context of developments in feminism. Fourthly, to formulate a critical approach for reading the self-writing of Cardinal and Leclerc based on the tripartite structure of autobiographical intention, critical reception and socio/historic context. Due to constraints of space my discussion of socio/historic context is necessarily succinct; while I provide a brief overview of the events of May '68 and the condition of women's writing in France at that time, my study offers a more detailed exploration of the changing face of feminist theory. My enquiry raises a number of questions: in what respect do the conditions governing the production and reception of women's writing play a role in shaping autobiographical identity? To what extent does sexual difference come to bear on the autobiographical signature? Can male theories of the genre be seen to throw light on the textual practice of Cardinal and Leclerc? In what respects do these authors employ the genre to raise consciousness about political issues? What is the relationship between autobiography and fiction in their writing and in what ways can we account for this relationship in terms of gender? My attempt to formulate a new critical practice for reading autobiography necessitates an exploration of the shortcomings of earlier theoretical approaches.

During the 1970s Philippe Lejeune argued that the existence of a pact testifying to the author's intentions to produce a true account of his or her life should be held as a defining feature of the genre (Lejeune, 1975). While Lejeune's theory of the 'pact' might at first sight appear to allow for diverse approaches to the genre[1], feminist critics have argued that he failed to account for the difference of women's self-writing (see for example: Hewitt, 1990; Miller, 1980; Stanley, 1992). As with other acclaimed theorists

of the genre like Georges Gusdorf, Georg Misch and William Spengemann, the notion of self-hood espoused in Lejeune's theory was indubitably white, male and middle-class (see chapters 1 and 3). Recognising this critical lacunae, feminist theorists quickly sought to repair the imbalance by producing their own gendered autobiographical theory.

Early forays into the genre by female critics tended to essentialise this difference by producing ahistorical definitions of female identity while ignoring the conditions governing the production of women's self-writing. Jelinek seemed to endorse gender stereotypes when she argued that men's writing is confident, linear and inscribes an autonomous selfhood while women's writing is fragmentary, episodic and characterised by authorial self-effacement (Jelinek, 1980). Later on critics engaged in more sophisticated analyses drawing upon socio/economic studies and psychoanalytic theory in order to explain divergences in men's and women's self-writing (Benstock, 1988; Friedman, 1988). Furthermore changing conceptions among feminists of what constitutes 'difference' have also come to bear on autobiographical theory with the growing awareness of class issues, postcolonial debates and queer politics all impacting upon the autobiographical arena (see chapter 5).

Despite the increased awareness of the 'differences' marking women's writing, critics tend to agree that the fictionalisation of identity is a common trait of female authors. The subtle prohibitions issued by the publishing industry do not encourage women to be outspoken about their lives in literature. Hence, the use of understatement, the fictionalisation of autobiographical data, the masking of the autobiographical voice are frequent traits in women's self-writing (see for example Spacks, 1980). Furthermore, as critics have pointed out, when women do choose to tell their life stories their texts are frequently seeped in authorial anxiety about the terms of reception (Morgan, 1991: 8-9).

It might be argued that to focus on the 'difference' in the ways that we read men's and women's writing is to demonstrate a negligent ignorance of all that the poststructuralist and postmodern critics have taught us. Indeed, Barthes' essay on the death of the author seemed to point the way towards a free interpretative licence over the text, disclaiming the importance of the author's life and with it their gender (Barthes, 1968, (see chapter 4)). More recently, the characteristics hitherto associated with women's writing have become common currency when discussing literature in general (Morgan, 1991: 7). Hence, authorial anxiety, fragmentation of authorial

identity, and disjointed textual structure are popular terms of reference for the contemporary literary critic. At the same time, the pervasive critical focus on the text as a system of intertextual references, as opposed to a reflection of lived experience, has turned critical interest away from the social conditions governing textual production and from the political impact of texts. In this thesis I align myself with those feminist critics who have argued that there is still an urgent necessity for reading with gender consciousness, taking the different social positioning of men and women and indeed of male and female writers *vis-à-vis* the academy into account (see chapter 4); French women's writing has only begun to have an impact on the canon over the last three decades, while the concessions gained by Francophone writers are undoubtedly less significant than those of their Anglo/American counterparts (see chapter 1). I therefore argue for the continuing imperative of raising such questions as who is the author? Where and why are they writing? Who is the reader? Where and why are they reading? A central imperative of this thesis is to focus on the experience which the author and reader bring to the text and to assess its place in the construction of autobiographical identity.

In a recent study of the testimonial writing of Simone de Beauvoir, Ursula Tidd has presented a case for the importance of autobiographical agency and communicative strategy in de Beauvoir's writing (Tidd, 1999: 9). Tidd traces de Beauvoir's unique position as a female intellectual writing in a predominantly male tradition. She argues that de Beauvoir managed to give voice to experience by subverting this tradition through the "representation of alternative selves" in the testimonial voice (Tidd, 1999: 85). Tidd draws on the work of Francis Jeanson (1966) to argue that de Beauvoir extricates herself from charges of narcissism through the construction of a communal sense of autobiographical identity which is experienced in relation to the Other (Tidd, 1999: 4-5). My own argument shares many common concerns with those of Tidd including my exploration of the manner in which the writing of Cardinal and Leclerc is constructed in relation to social discourses and constraints of the genre (Tidd, 1999).

In this context, I will consider the social function of women's self- writing. My focus will be on the manner in which the genre has been employed to critique exclusionary identity politics and to endorse the experience of oppressed groups. Referring to Cardinal's confessional writing and Leclerc's testimonial account, I explore the manner in which the authors utilise the first person voice to raise consciousness among their readers. In relation to contemporary debates about 'difference' within the feminist movement, I draw attention to some of the problems

inherent in 'speaking for' other minorities. While acknowledging the shortcomings of generalising personal experience, I argue that the writing of Cardinal and Leclerc, shaped by an awareness of the experience of the Other, demonstrates the political potentialities of the non-authoritarian autobiographical voice. Cardinal and Leclerc disrupt the hierarchical relationship between reading and writing as the reader is called upon as a necessary witness to the autobiographical account. During the textual encounter the self-hoods of both author and reader are held up for scrutiny; the act of reading and writing necessitates the reassessment of identity.

A final and related concern in this thesis is to explore the critical reception of the self-writing of Cardinal and Leclerc. My discussion is intended to complement my exploration of the authorial 'pact.' It provides a test case for my claim that that the authors' tendency to mask their identity is, in part, a response to anticipated critical responses. Following on from the work of Fallaize (1998); Moi (1994); and Thomas (1999), I trace recurrent patterns of reception exploring their relationship to gender. I argue that the female signature particularises the autobiographical text in a way that the male name does not. This leads me to align myself with a tradition of feminist critics who have argued for the necessity of formulating a gender specific framework for reading women's autobiography.

Before moving on to consider some different theoretical approaches to the study of autobiography, a word needs to be said about the choice of terminology employed to describe women's self-writing. A number of feminist scholars have found the term 'autobiographical' to be insufficient on this front. Domna Stanton's recognition of the homocentric bias of the canon led her to coin the term 'autogynography' (see chapter one) as a provisional step in the formation of a gender preferential critical approach.

In 1994 Laura Marcus offered a different interpretation of the genre which, although lacking gender specificity, does present an informative view on self-writing. For Marcus the gender division is in itself a false imposition when considering a genre which characteristically "unsettles distinctions, including the division between self and other" (Marcus, 1994: 15). Marcus contests that the destabilising and hybrid forms of the genre "are inextricably linked to the problematics of selfhood and identity with the boundaries between 'inner' and 'outer,' 'private' and 'public' becoming the sites of greatest concern" (Marcus, 1994: 15). The resistance of autobiographical writing to strictly delimited generic boundaries is addressed in Marcus's key claim for the inseparability of autobiographical writing from its biographical counterpart. For as she

points out, "Recounting one's life almost inevitably entails writing the life of another or others" (Marcus, 1994: 273). For Marcus, this recognition is observed through the insertion of a slash between the auto and biographical of autobiographical[ii]. Of course, Marcus's work lends itself to the study of women's autobiography where it has been argued that identity is seen as inter-relational as opposed to isolate.

More recently, postmodernist approaches to autobiography have been offered in Leigh Gilmore's 'autobiographics' and Jeanne Perreault's 'autography' where the pervasiveness of textuality in the formulation of identity is highlighted (Smith and Watson, 1998: 183-189; Smith and Watson, 1998: 190-196).

This thesis recognises that the term 'autobiographical' is more commonly used to refer to the traditional notion of the autobiographical subject as the autonomous centered individual of Enlightenment thought, (in this sense it connotes the prevalence of autobiographical representations of the white, middle-class male). However, I will also employ the term in a rebellious manner to signify the challenge posed to the canon by women's writing. The terms self-writing and self-narration will also be employed when speaking of women's autobiography. To my mind these terms, connoting the interconnectedness of the self and its inscription, are particularly apt. The aim of this study, however, as the title suggests, is to concentrate on the particular tensions arising in women's autobiographical practice which, despite its innovatory qualities, is in one way or another constrained by the limits of the genre. This thesis seeks to explore the various tensions which exist between the experiential and the textual. Inasmuch, a fourth term 'autobiographical fiction' will be introduced during the course of the discussion. I am aware that some critics have coined the term 'autofiction', evoking the tension between relating past experience and creating the autobiographical self. However, this term seems to suggest that the only two components of autobiographical writing worthy of study are the *autos* (self) and the *graphe* (inscription of the self). In contrast, my use of the term autobiographical fiction implies my concern to write the *bios* (life lived by the author) back into the text (see chapter 1).

1.2. Choice of Authors

In this section I provide a rational for my decision to focus on the texts of Cardinal and Leclerc. In what ways does my thesis provide a new reading of their works? An initial point worthy of note is the originality of a comparative study of *Les Mots pour le dire*

and *Exercices de mémoire*. While a scant number of essays have been written on *Parole de femme* there are no full-scale works or theses written on Leclerc. Discounting one essay which appeared in 1997 on *Exercices de mémoire* (Hutton, 1997), this thesis is the first critical interpretation of the text. There are several theses and a handful of published works which dedicate chapters to Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* (see chapter 8 for a full discussion of this subject). Lucille Cairns has provided an excellent study of Cardinal's corpus focusing on the representation of motherhood and its relationship to writing in Cardinal's texts (Cairns, 1992). Caroline Durham's unique critical appraisal considers the manner in which Cardinal's textual practice undermines the rules of the literary establishment. The originality of her study is to be found in her presentation of Cardinal's oeuvre not as the object of theoretical and critical discourse but rather as the site of its production. For Durham, Cardinal's writing crosses cultural, critical and generic boundaries, functioning as "the locus of the complex intersection - at once intergenderal, intertextual, interdisciplinary, and *intercultural* – of modern thought (Durham, 1992: 7). The other major full-scale work on Cardinal offers a concise and comprehensive study of the main themes of Cardinal's oeuvre (Hall, 1994).

In general, doctoral theses on Cardinal's writing fall into three main areas (see chapter 8). The first of these treat the narrative as a tale of salvation. The second focus on the transgressive nature of her writing. The third consider the text as an example of postcolonial writing. Françoise Lionnet has provided an interesting analysis of the hybrid cultural and textual references (*métissage*), in *Les Mots pour le dire,* taking Cardinal's multicultural origins as a *piednoir* as a starting point of her discussion (Lionnet, 1989). The originality of my own study is to consider the texts through the theoretical framework of the relationship between reading and writing with particular reference both to the authors' autobiographical intentions and to critical interpretations of the texts.

The texts of Cardinal and Leclerc provide interesting source material for a comparative study for several reasons. Cardinal and Leclerc are stable-mates at Grasset et Fasquelle. The publication of *Parole de femme* (Leclerc,1974) and *Les Mots pour le dire* a year later (Cardinal, 1975) propelled them to celebrity status as best sellers both at home and, in the case of Cardinal, abroad. The events of May 68 and the ensuing second wave of feminism can be seen to provide the backdrop to the production of both texts (see chapter 2). The impact of these semi-autobiographical texts was immense, causing women to question their relationships and social roles while the authors became role models for many of their readers (see chapter 8).

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A further connection can be found in their shared imperative to find a 'parole de femme' and explore the 'difference' of female identity. Both authors recognise the political significance of personal experience which they draw upon in their writing. However, they are reluctant to limit their textual output to the purely autobiographical. In the writing of both Cardinal and Leclerc the fictional and autobiographical are intertwined.

The authors' educational background in philosophy is in evidence both in their approach to women's issues and in their textual practice more generally. The discussion of metaphysical issues including, life and death, desire and power, dreams and happiness, love and hate, good and evil, is clearly informed by their intellectual formation.

In 1977 the two authors engaged in a collaborative project entering into a discussion of the central themes of Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire.* These conversations including subjects like women's sexuality, *écriture féminine*, the female body, and Algeria were published two years later as *Autrement dit* (1977). For the purposes of this thesis the conversations provide a link in my analysis of the writing of both women, constituting an intertextual source which demonstrates the interactive and transformative nature of feminist reading and writing practice.

While I dedicate some space to an examination of the developments within each woman's writing (see chapter 2), I have chosen to focus my enquiry on the two texts named above. My choice was influenced by a number of factors. Firstly, both texts highlight the relationship between language, memory and the self. Both deal with a major crisis in identity. In *Exercices de mémoire,* Leclerc re-evaluates the place of the aesthetic and the representation of the self after the Holocaust. In *Les Mots pour le dire* Cardinal explores the ways in which the discourses of her bourgeois catholic childhood drove her to the brink of suicide. In both texts, the themes of death and rebirth are central to the examination of selfhood.

Leclerc's *Parole de femme* is arguably her most popular and accessible text. Acknowledging its impact, I draw upon the text at regular intervals in my discussion of her work. In many respects *Parole de femme* would have lent itself more easily to a comparative study with *Les Mots pour le dire.* A common link between these two texts is the author's preoccupation with finding the words to give voice to female experience. Equally important is the desire to write the female body and to discuss subjects previously deemed to be taboo. However, while I was interested in engaging in a

comparative study, I also wanted to conduct research on a text which would enable me to discuss some of the more recent developments within feminism. It was with this in mind that I chose to focus on *Exercices de mémoire*. This text provides interesting source material because Leclerc uses it as a forum to evaluate critically her literary output up to that point.

I examine Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* as an exemplary text of the 1970s which illustrates the feminist interest in the communal 'I' and Leclerc's *Exercices de mémoire* as a more cautious text of the 1990s which nonetheless demonstrates an interest in communal identity. While both texts share the central theme of coming to terms with an identity crisis the manner in which the authors choose to confront this crisis is very different. In *Les Mots pour le dire* Cardinal employs the *bildungsroman* format tracing her narrator's progress from a catastrophic crisis through to recovery. Cardinal presents writing as a means of rethinking identity and of self-empowerment. In this thesis I will be arguing that Cardinal's search for a stable selfhood and communal identity is typical of the 1970s confessional. It exemplifies the current of optimism prevalent in the feminist movement at that time. I will be contrasting this with Leclerc's *anti-Bildungsroman*, her refusal to provide narratives of hope, and her more self-conscious approach to speaking for Others. While it is certainly not my intention to classify *Exercices de mémoire* as a postmodern text, I will be arguing that Leclerc's autobiography typifies many of the concerns of feminisms in the 1990s. The fact that she chooses to focus on the subject of the Holocaust suggests that the investigation of women's issues has become less explicit. However, her preoccupation with the manner in which Western identity was constructed by 'othering' the Jewish self might be seen to exemplify the feminist preoccupation with the question of 'difference,' while her examination of the relationship between language, history and the self demonstrates many of the concerns of contemporary feminism. I argue that Cardinal's confessional and Leclerc's testimonial writing demonstrate an awareness of both the constructed nature of identity and the importance of situated experience.

1.3. A Feminist Methodology?

In many respects the production of this thesis can be seen as a way of testing out a number of theoretical approaches and their suitability for reading the two texts under study. While I discuss the development of autobiographical theory in chapter one, I will

also be introducing different methodological approaches throughout the course of the thesis. My research recognises the unique ability of women's life-writing to expose the often radical failure of theory to provide an adequate framework for reading about women's experience (Broughton and Anderson, 1977). For this reason I am conscious of the danger of manipulating the texts under study to fit a static theoretical framework.

While at times I will suggest the viability of certain theoretical approaches, I am equally interested in demonstrating how and why other methodologies fail to provide an adequate structure for theorising women's life writing. This has enabled me to arrive at a more fluid approach to the study of the texts. In this manner I hope to raise as many questions as answers. For, as Broughton and Anderson have argued, a subject which crosses the borders between reading and writing, theory and practice, provides a space for the exploration of "the conditions and limits of knowledge itself" (Broughton and Anderson, 1977: xii).

A second key concern of this thesis is to avoid privileging theory over practice. In an essay on the subject Stacey has remarked how the demands on the student of literature have intensified during the last twenty years not only requiring an in depth knowledge of the texts under study but also necessitating a well integrated understanding of the ever growing body of theoretical writings. Stacey goes on to note the resonance of theoretical discourse in feminist scholarship (Stacey,1997:54). Drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti (1991) Stacey adumbrates that the work of Lacan, Foucault and Derrida provide a locus for this interest. In this case Braidotti's apt neologism 'Foucaultlacanderrida' neatly surmises the obsessive focus on these three theorists with knowledge of their work becoming a necessary credential which all feminist scholars are supposed to flaunt (Braidotti, 1991). Stacey has noted the difference between this approach and that taken in the 1980s where diverse and often conflicting theories were drawn upon in the exploration of women's oppression. For feminist scholars of this period feminist was the 'central category' and theory was an instrumentalist resource for 'political purposes' (Stacey, 1997: 54). Recalling the central concern of feminism as the transformation of patriarchal relations Stacey views the 1990s' preoccupation with theory with caution. In her opinion, the feminist social agenda risks being neglected, as "the capital 'T' of Feminist Theory has come to take precedence over the capital 'F' (Stacey, 1997: 54). This thesis seeks to accord a capital 'F' to the social agenda of feminism by acknowledging the importance of the experiential aspect of women's writing and notably the influence of social conditions on textual production; it equally recognises the political implications of writing and reading

autobiographically for women. With this in mind, I am equally conscious of my own position as a social being whose patterns of influence come to bear on the research process.

Over the past two decades feminist researchers have become increasingly aware of the need to consider the ways in which the production of knowledge is shaped by the researcher's personal perspective. Both Adrienne Rich's notion of 'the politics of location' (1986) and Donna Haraway's (1988) theory of 'situated knowledges' address the question in different ways, suggesting that no knowledge is ever truly objective but is always shaped by the positioning (social, intellectual, political and so forth) of the researcher. To what extent has my own experience influenced my choice of subject matter and shaped the development of this thesis? A tentative and undoubtedly incomplete response to this question, can be found in the conclusion to the thesis where I situate my reading within a personal context.

In chapter one I explore developments in autobiographical theories. Beginning my discussion with an examination of the early homocentric bias of the canon, I go on to look at the birth of a tradition of women's writing as represented by Anglo/American theorists. Other issues under consideration in this chapter will be the manner in which the critical emphasis has changed from the *autos* to the *bios*, to the contemporary preoccupation with the *graphe* of the autobiographical text. I then go on to briefly explore the conditions facing women writers in France around the 1970s and the impact of the events of May 68 on the women's movement in France.

In chapter two, I provide the reader with some background information on both of the authors under study. Challenging critical practice which focuses solely on the *graphe*, I trace its connection to the *bios* of each author. The central aim of this chapter is to consider the predominant textual themes and preoccupations in connection to the situated experience of the authors. This chapter will also raise some questions about developments in the authorial corpus in relation to progressions within the feminist movement.

In chapter three, with reference to the theoretical work of Philippe Lejeune, James Olney and Georges May, I consider the extent to which *Les Mots pour le dire* can be classified as a traditional autobiography. A key issue in this chapter is the manner in which the female authorial pact is compromised by the constraints of the genre. The positioning of the female subject outside the traditional requirements of the genre

necessitates the fictionalisation of the self. For this reason the referential focus is often diminished while the masking of the authorial 'I' in a hybrid, diffuse and multi generic text is a significant feature of Cardinal's writing.

In the second part of this chapter, I refer to the work of Michael Sheringham (1993), in order to discuss the author-reader relationship. For the author who sets out to challenge current ideologies, the relationship with the reader, who may choose either to resist or incorporate these discourses, is intensified. In this section, I examine the authorial projection of reader as both the law and object of desire with reference to Cardinal's comments on reception.

In chapter four, I trace the tension in Cardinal's writing between the desire to fictionalise the self and the concomitant need to make a claim for the truthfulness of the text. Drawing upon the theoretical work of Rita Felski I explore the text as a feminist confessional. Arguing that confessional writing is not predicated on a naïve belief in referentiality, I examine the manner in which Cardinal manipulates the text as a series of textual codes in order to solicit the reader's engagement and complicity.

I then turn to explore the impact of theories of 'the death of the author' on women's life writing. With particular reference to the consciousness-raising texts of the 1970s, and in the light of my discussion of the homocentric bias of the canon, I argue that, even for contemporary women writers, the deconstruction of authorial identity is premature. Following on from this claim, I suggest that *Les Mots pour le dire* provides a classic example of the feminist *bildungsroman* where identity is constructed as opposed to deconstructed through the act of writing. The text marks a coming to authorship and as such offers a counter discourse to Barthes' meditations on the death of the author, suggesting the need for heroic modes of female identity in the 1970s.

In chapter five, I focus on more recent developments in autobiographical theory. I trace the 'crisis of truth' within feminism and growing sense of scepticism towards grand narratives, collective identities and referential discourse. I consider how this has impacted on autobiographical theory leading to a preoccupation with the 'difference' of minority voices. I argue that the distrust of referential discourse has led to growing emphasis being placed on the textual self. In this context, I examine the interweaving of the textual and the experiential in Leclerc's Holocaust narrative. I suggest that Leclerc's exploration of the shortcomings of memory problematises definitions of autobiography as a referential genre.

In chapter six, I focus on Leclerc's exploration of the self and its relationship to language and writing. Tracing the connections with and differences from the other leading proponents of *écriture féminine*, I examine the development of Leclerc's writing. Engaging in a close analysis of recurring stylistic features in Leclerc's writing, I examine the ways in which she seeks to deconstruct the binary opposition between self and other, emotion and reason, science and nature.

In chapter seven, I refer to the work of Shoshana Felman (1992) in order to consider how the text functions as a testimony. I examine the discourses of trauma and mourning engaging in a reading of the text as a *mea culpa* and a rejection of the author's previous fascination with the romantic aesthetic. I go on to suggest that Leclerc's confrontation with death and refusal to offer the reader a cathartic resolution represents a renunciation of the narcissistic subject of modernity. In the second section of this chapter, I explore the role of the reader who is called to witness the Holocaust narrative. I examine the various self-reflexive strategies which Leclerc employs in order to pre-empt rejection by the resistant reader.

In chapter eight, I turn to look at the reception of the text. This chapter aims to complement chapters three and five where I considered the pact with the reader. The analysis of critical reception enables me to examine the dialectical relationship between the modes of reception and the approach taken by each author to narrating the self. Referring to the work of Toril Moi, I will be arguing that four main critical *topi* are at play in the reception of the work of both authors (Moi, 1994). A first critical *topos* is to attach the autobiographical label to the text and hence to avoid entering into discussion about its literary merits. A second critical *topos*, again related to the genre, is to focus on the autobiographical detail with the intention of ignoring the political content. A third strategy is to foreground the sexual content at the expense of all other intellectual or philosophical discussion. A final strategy, involves ignoring the text, focusing instead on the author's appearance and/or private life.

In conclusion, I will be arguing that the autobiographical fictions of Cardinal and Leclerc are predicated on an awareness of both the constructed nature of identity and the central position of experience in narrating the self. The challenge of their autobiographical fiction, is to be found in the personal voice which often exceeds the confines of the genre and theory. Cardinal and Leclerc present a poetics of writing which requires the reader to reformulate his/her analytical frameworks where the

categories of author/reader, self/Other, experience/text, life/writing are renegotiated in the purchase of expanding the thresh-holds of reading and writing the self.

Notes

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[i] Sheringham has argued this point in his introduction to *French Autobiography Devices and Desires* (Sheringham, 1993).

[ii] This study clearly recognises the biographical aspect of women's self-writing. However, I omit the auto/biographical slash because of my own concern to lend equal weight to the 'autos,' 'bios,' and 'graphe' of the autobiographical equation.

Part 1

Theory and Practice

1

Towards a Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiography

The central aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical and socio/political context for reading the autobiographical fictions of Cardinal and Leclerc. In the first part of my discussion I offer the reader an overview of theoretical approaches to women's autobiography. I will, firstly, consider male authored theories of the genre and will then go on to discuss Anglo/American feminist forays into the realm of autobiographical criticism. I will not discuss more recent developments in the field, as the impact of postcolonial, poststructural and postmodern discourses on the genre is explored in chapter five. My discussion will raise a number of questions. Is there a gender specific form of life writing? Is it possible to produce a definitive generic definition? To what extent does the inscription of female identity necessitate a blurring of the line between autobiography and fiction? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Anglo/American approaches? I will argue that while Anglo/American theorists effectively drew attention to the paucity of published works by women writers, they failed to consider the social conditions of textual production. Recognising the importance of situating autobiographical criticism within a socio/economic context, the second part of the chapter will explore the events of May 68 in relation to the second wave of feminism and the life-writing of Cardinal and Leclerc. I will begin with a discussion of the term autobiography and the evolution of critical approaches to the genre.

1.1. Autos • Bios •Graphein

Olney remarks the genesis of the term 'autobiography' at the end of the eighteenth century. The appearance of the genre can, according to Olney, be attributed to the growing preoccupation with the self. The noun, which on the authority of the Oxford English Dictionary was first coined by Southey, is, as Olney remarks, a composite of three Greek words:

> "auto-" (combining form of "autos," self) + "bio-" (combining form of "bios," life) + "graphe" (substantive derived from the verb "graphein," to write) (Olney, 1978: 114).

As Olney points out, the debate has raged not only about what constitutes autobiography but also about whether to place the emphasis of the study on the 'autos'(the self), the 'bios'(the life lived) or the 'graphein' (the textual inscription of the self). Olney goes on to outline some of the troubling aspects of each approach.

Olney is only too aware of the shortcomings of attempts to theorise the 'autos'. He remarks the impossibility of defining the 'je' which the autobiographer makes it his/her goal to seize. Olney contrasts the different conceptions of selfhood envisaged by the ancient Greek philosopher Homer and the French philosopher Georges Gusdorf. As he rightly notes, the selfhood captured in modern French philosophy is fleeting and always in process of creation, divided from itself through its very self-preoccupation:

> Philosophically and psychologically speaking, Homer's "self" and Gusdorf's "self" are poles apart because in the interim between ancient Greece and modern France, the self was discovered or discovered itself: it became conscious of its own existence and in so doing sundered itself as subject from the world and other as object (Olney, 1978: 114).

In the same way, says Olney, the autobiographer pursues the self like a carrot on a stick, seeking to capture its essence yet forever thwarted by language which keeps him/her at one remove from identity. He borrows a striking metaphor from Yeats's Michael Robartes of the universe as a giant egg which turns inside out without breaking its shell, to describe the autobiographical act:

> the autobiographer, having become conscious and self-conscious, proceeds to take subject for object and object for subject, turning them around together into a circle of conscious self-consciousness, and in the act of writing he attempts to become conscious of himself becoming conscious of himself becoming...-and so

> on, "perpetually," but always, of course, without breaking the shell (Olney, 1978: 115).

Olney goes on to examine critical approaches which take the 'bios' as their source of study. He rightly observes the difficulties inherent in an approach which raises all sorts of questions about how we define 'life'. Outlining a number of issues which have been foremost in the minds of female theorists, Olney mulls over the meaning of the word life. Should life be taken as a generic term which encompasses the interwoven experience of a whole community? Or should it refer to the isolate individual who has led a remarkable existence? Does our definition of what constitutes a life differ across national boundaries and cultural landscapes? When should the narrative of a life begin and end? Olney illustrates the problem with an anecdote of a group of African students who when asked to produce a piece of life writing all proffered much the same story. These evocations of a "ritual, archetypal life" may not, so says Olney, have been autobiographies in the proper sense of the term. However, this communal narrative was "generally a richer and more deeply moving one from the different-from-one-another but rather thin stories" penned by his American students (Olney, 1978: 115).

Exploring the question further, Olney notes that 'bios' in Greek signifies "three score years and ten". For Olney, this reference to a "life time" does indeed "seem to invest the autobiographical performance with an historical and narrative bias" (Olney, 1978: 115). Nonetheless, as with some female theorists, he gives scant credence to the idea that autobiography provides a faithful mirror image of the totality of the author's life. For Olney, the interior monologue, expressed in metaphysical writing and lyric poetry, provides a fitting example of the diverse nature of self-writing (Olney, 1978: 116).

Moving onto the third element of the tripartite equation, Olney considers how recent theoretical interest has shifted towards the 'graphein', or the manner in which the author's life is created through the act of writing. Olney refers to a paper given by Germaine Brée which highlighted the performative function of autobiography as "becoming alive to oneself through writing" (Brée in Olney, 1978: 116). Brée illustrates her point with reference to the French grammatical construction of "I was born" which in French reads as "Je suis né" (I am born). Writing then, according to Brée and Olney, constitutes a kind of birth where the author comes into existence

through the autobiographical act: "We see the event of birth and the act of writing mirroring, duplicating, and extending one another: a continuous birth into a perpetually renewed and recreated life" (Olney, 1978: 116-7).

Olney draws upon Elizabeth Bruss's *Autobiographical Acts* (1976) as a noteworthy illustration of the movement in autobiographical criticism away from the "autos" and toward the "graphe". Bruss's comparative study of an autobiographical and non-autobiographical work of four authors from four different centuries illustrates the contemporary interest in the constructed nature of identity: "the sturdy Puritanism" of the seventeenth century is represented in John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* and *Pilgrim's Progress* (Olney, 1978: 122;. Boswell's *London Journal* and his *Life of Johnson* bring in the eighteenth century; autobiographical output in the nineteenth century, says Bruss, finds a fitting illustration in the form of De Quincey's *Autobiographical Sketches* and *Suspiria de Profundis*; For Bruss, the contemporary interest in "multilayered artificiality" finds a voice in "the hyperworldly" Vladimir Nabokov (Olney, 1978: 122). Olney is right to observe the increased creative input which the sophisticated autobiographical texts demand of the reader today. Yet, as he goes on to argue, Bruss flounders when she attempts to provide a generic definition of the common features which reside in all of these texts. He is equally correct to observe the limitations of producing an overriding theory of the genre. For, as he rightly observes, the critic enters into the game of self-creation and in so doing places his/her own transformative stamp on the text:

> While dutifully attending to these words and being largely persuaded by them, one yet seems to hear a small voice echoing and altering them and in so doing calling into question the possibility or validity of placing any generic limitations at all on autobiography (Olney, 1978: 23).

Olney is convincing in his argument for continued interest in the "bios" of autobiography, albeit, informed by an awareness of evolving conceptions of what constitutes a life and how that life might be given autobiographical form. Yet, as he rightly observes, theories will necessarily be as conflicting and converging as the lives that we lead:

> Given the fact, known to everyone, that "bios" *is* at once one and many, different and the same, we should scarcely be surprised that the writing of the "bios" by the individual who has lived it should be both single and various (Olney, 1978: 123).

I have already remarked how female critics of the genre have been equally preoccupied with issues of where to locate the critical act, with the difference that they have sought to contextualise the debate within a gender specific framework. I shall now go on to discuss how early theorists like Jelinek have criticised their male counterparts for defining the autobiographical self through a homocentric and Western magnifying glass. They have in turn been castigated for focusing exclusively on the autos while subscribing to a naive belief in the transparency of language and human agency. Others like Stanton have been berated for evacuating the author's experience from the text in their sole pursuit of the "graphein" of the autobiographical act. Liz Stanley has made a claim for the urgent need to reinstate the 'bios' or the 'writing of a life' in autobiographical criticism (Stanley, 1992: 100). In this thesis I align myself with Stanley arguing that a critical approach which focuses exclusively on textuality "removes from analysis that which is most interesting about autobiographies from the viewpoint of the common reader and [...] the feminist theorist" (Stanley, 1992: 101).

1.2. Anglo/American theorisations of the genre

Interest in women's autobiography has burgeoned over the last twenty years. Texts like Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* (1984) and Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975) are widely read while the area of autobiographical criticism has become big currency in departments of literature and women's studies. Seen in this light who would have guessed that it was only twenty years ago that women's life stories started to become a respectable area of academic study? Up until then, the only texts deemed worthy of merit were those penned by 'great men'. Although this kind of categorisation seems highly tenuous today, the value accorded to the text was roughly speaking commensurate to the social role of the writer. Hence, those individuals who had been influential public figures, politicians, intellectuals, humanitarians and the like were given the right to publicise their lives and to lay them open to general scrutiny. Broughton and Anderson have drawn attention to two autobiographical sub-genres

predominant during the nineteenth century which lend weight to this view. The first entitled *Life and Times* "signalled the belief that an entire social landscape could happily come within the purview of an individual life" (Broughton and Anderson, 1997: xi). The second *Life and Opinions* "made explicit the wide interpretative frame which went with this view of autobiography" (Broughton and Anderson, 1997: xi). Of course, this kind of generic coding tacitly privileged the upper echelons of society (and most notably the white middle class male) who had both the financial security and the social status to make their mark in the public sphere. Not only, then, were the lower classes denied an autobiographical voice, so too were the majority of women.

During the twentieth century the construction of the autobiographical canon by theorists like Georg Misch, Georges Gusdorf, and William Spengemann has upheld this privilege with only those possessing the correct membership card gaining entrance. To put it simply, the perspective of these theorists was coloured by their own social positioning and gender bias. With its exclusive focus on the lives of 'great men' like Rousseau, Franklin, Goethe, Carlyle and Henry Adams "whose accomplished lives and literary tomes assured their value as cultural capital"(Smith and Watson, 1998: 5), the canon which they constructed was indubitably white, western and male. This was no more apparent than in Georges Gusdorf's early theorisation of the genre entitled 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography' (1956). In this seminal essay which appeared later in Olney's collection (1980), Gusdorf raised the autobiographical profile by playing up its informative function, but in so doing he also contributed to the banishment of the female voice from the autobiographical scene. Gusdorf made a number of assumptions about the genre which have since been challenged by feminist theorists as indicative of male bias. Firstly, he assumed that the work would recall a life in its totality. Secondly, he suggested that the autobiographical 'I' was a unique self-contained individual. Thirdly, he proposed that the influential life was the only valid autobiographical subject matter. Fourthly, he assumed that the genre was largely referential. For Gusdorf " the artist and the model coincide, the historian tackles himself as object...he considers himself a great person" (Gusdorf, 1980: 31). Another influential contribution to the autobiographical landscape came in the form of Philippe Lejeune's *Le Pacte autobiographique* (1975). However, Lejeune made similar assumptions to those of Gusdorf about the nature of the autobiographical inscription of identity. A notable exception to the exclusive focus on male practitioners by male theorists is James Olney's collection of essays entitled *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980). In this selection Mary G. Mason's discussion of

women's autobiography was a crucial voice in a wilderness. Similarly, Louis Renza's exploration of a female authored text (*The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila*) was another exception which proved the rule.

An early tentative to create a paradigm for women's life writing came in the form of Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination* (1972). While acknowledging the influence of the evolving social environment on women's literary output, Spacks' goal was to uncover the themes which haunt the female imagination. Proposing an analytic as opposed to purely descriptive approach, Spacks addressed the central question: Do any characteristics of self-perception shape the creative perception of women? (Spacks, 1972: 3). Although Spacks' approach is more psychological than political, she does envisage women's writing as both an expression of their subordinate status and a means to "combat their characteristic difficulties" (Spacks, 1972: 3). The study presents the history of women's writing as a positive trajectory from self-effacing 'fingerposts' pointing the reader's attention to others, to 'free women' writing their own lives. Spacks provided the reader with a bold initiative surveying a series of texts spanning some 400 years. However, as with many early forays into the genre her project was hampered by the author's white middle-class bias which influenced the choice of texts under study.

The theme of women's ambivalent relationship to the genre would be picked up by Mary G Mason in her influential essay "the Other voice: Autobiographies by Women Writers" (Mason in Olney, 1980). Mason offered another take on the genre which, like Spack's, acknowledged the female author's tendency toward self-effacement. Basing her analysis on four texts ranging from the spiritual to the secular: Julian's *Revelations*; *The Book of Margery Kempe*; Anne Bradstreet's spiritual account 'To My Dear Children;' and Margaret Cavendish's *True Relation*, she concluded that "the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness..."(Mason in Olney, 1980: 210). For Mason the female autograph's desire to "record and dramatise self-realisation and self-transcendence through the recognition of another" offered a refreshing alternative to the Western obsession with the self (Mason in Olney, 1980: 210). Mason also set a trend which was to be followed by other practitioners of the genre when she suggested that Rousseau's *Confessions*, as an archetypal male autobiography, was a million miles away from the life-writing which women produced. In a manner which would be echoed in Jelinek's publication of the same year she argued that women's life-writing failed to conform to

the pattern of conversion, where spirit was seen to defeat flesh. Equally, the unfolding narrative of discovery had scant place in female authored narratives.

Another noteworthy contribution to the debate would come in the same year with the publication of Estelle Jelinek's anthology of women's writing entitled *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism (1980)*. Jelinek offered a reading of the genre based on women's experience of the personal domain and their containment within the private sphere. In her opinion, men adopt a public voice tending to "idealize their lives or cast them into heroic molds to project their universal import (Jelinek, 1980: 14-15). On the other hand, women proffer intimate and private details of their lives. They employ the genre, not to project their image onto others, but rather to feel a greater sense of connection to them. According to Jelinek, women expose a sense of "self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding" (Jelinek, 1980: 15). Jelinek suggests that these differences are translated into the structure of the text; men tend to shape their experience into a linear, coherent whole while women's narratives are fragmented and disjointed in a manner which, in Jelinek's opinion, reflects "the fragmentary, interrupted, and formless nature of their lives (Jelinek, 1980: 19). Jelinek suggested that women's autobiography had been neglected because of the 'difference' of the female practitioner's approach to the genre which, in her opinion, quite simply failed to conform to the requirements which had been staked out by male critics. Of course, there are a number of problems with Jelinek's thesis, not least the tendency to universalise all women's experience and with it their writing practice. A further weakness can be found in her assumption that experience can be unproblematically translated into textual practice. As with Spacks, Jelinek tends to envisage the experience of white middle-class women as a generic model. Despite these problems Jelinek had made a noteworthy incursion into a hitherto male dominated world.

Following on from Jelinek's work, a number of other American critics sought to repair what they saw as the inherent essentialism of her theory. An important contribution to the debate came from Domna C. Stanton who, drawing on the work of Germaine Brée, envisaged women's life writing in terms of the multiple differences of the subject. In her collection entitled *The Female Autograph* (1984) she sought to cross cultural and temporal boundaries bringing together a number of essays on women's autobiographies from different centuries and cultural locations. As with Jelinek, her collection addressed the central question of the erasure of women's lives and voices in literary history. While avoiding all attempts to produce a mainstream theory, Stanton

presented the nomenclature of 'autogynography' to conceptualise the marginal voices of women's self-writing. Stanton's proposal of an autobiographical theory based on the recognition of difference was deeply influenced by deconstructionist approaches to subjectivity. In attempting to sidestep the problematic of referentiality, she suggested that the challenge of women's life narratives lay in the manner in which identity was constructed in their texts. She suggested a reading of their works as sites of intertextual reference. These female centered texts could be seen to counter the dominant intertextual threads of a tradition which had been passed down from literary father to son.

> Autogynography...had a global and essential therapeutic purpose: to constitute the female subject. In a phallocentric system...the *graphing* of the *auto* was an act of self-assertion that denied and reversed women's status (Stanton, 1984: 14).

With her offering of the late 1980s, Sidonie Smith became another influential voice in the debate. As with Stanton, Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (1987) recognised the exclusion of women's voices from the public arena. Again, following Stanton's lead, her theory was predicated on a desire to resist all temptations to mimic the totalising theories of the androcentric tradition. Smith's response to the silencing of the autobiographical self was to place women's texts in dialogue with one another. She was particularly interested to explore the manner in which women were 'fictionalised' in male authored texts and to uncover the various challenges to gender ideologies which women's self-writing posed. What conflicts, Smith asked, do women encounter when they speak from the margins? How do they validate the autobiographical voice? In what ways do these tensions come to play in the representation of sexuality? For Smith, the female autobiographical voice was divided between the desire to speak the self with authority and the fear of unmasking identity.

In 1988 the course of autobiographical theorising would veer off in another direction, incorporating psychoanalytical accounts of subject formation. Shari Benstock's *The Private Self*, contained two essays which would have a resounding impact on the study of women's life-writing. The first of these, 'Authorising the Autobiographical,' authored by Benstock, drew upon Lacanian theories of women's marginalized position to the symbolic order in order to explain the disruptions and

discontinuities in texts penned by writers like Woolf. Describing these textual effusions as 'fissures of female discontinuity,' she continued the trend mapped so far of celebrating the divergences in women's writing as a disruptive locus.

A different psychoanalytic approach was offered by Susan Stanford Freidman in her 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice'. Referring to Nancy Chodorow's account of identity formation, she argued that patterns of child rearing were influential in shaping the 'fluid boundaries' of women's self-narratives. For Friedman the female autobiographical self "does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms every where in the community" (Friedman in Smith and Watson, 1998: 79).

While recognising the contribution of American theorists to the construction of a female centred canon, Stanley has noted a number of problems with their approach [i]. Firstly, most are sustained in opposition, or with reference to male critics like Pascal, Lejeune, Gusdorf and Olney, hence demonstrating a certain dependency on their writing (Stanley, 1992: 89). Secondly, in Stanley's view, the emphasis placed on difference and diversity by the editors of these autobiographical anthologies, suggests their inability to arrive at shared notions of the self and the nature of autobiography (Stanley, 1992: 98). Thirdly, the problem of referentiality, so Stanley argues, is always foremost in their attempts to construct an oppositional canon. Yet this problem is rarely addressed in a satisfactory manner. As Stanley notes "the editorial stance in these collections varies from completely rejecting any notion of referentiality, to being embarrassed by it, to making watertight referential claims" (Stanley, 1992: 90). As Stanley goes on to argue, most of these authors concern themselves with the *autos* (self) and the *graphe* (textual inscription) while failing to acknowledge the central position of the *bios* (lived experience) in women's life-narratives. Stanley rightly argues that women's self-writing demonstrates an awareness of the "ontological shakiness of the self" as sharp as that of any deconstructionist theorist (Stanley, 1992: 90). With this in mind she proposes a more balanced theory of women's autobiography, acknowledging the inseparability of the life lived and its textual inscription.

> The only way fully to explore such ontological puzzles and their epistemological consequences is to confront in an appreciative way not only the textual making of selves – their 'graphing' of the 'auto' – but also what these texts say about the

> living, growing I and its life – that is their inscription of the 'bio' of each author (Stanley, 1992: 90).

The importance of these different approaches is to be found not in the often essentialised and ahistorical perspectives which they offer on women's self-writing but rather in drawing attention to the unspoken prejudices which mark reception. What they successfully achieve is the construction of a lucid critique of gendered patterns of reception. This is an area which constitutes a significant strand of my research (see especially chapter 8). I hope to have drawn attention to the shortcomings of critical approaches which focus exclusively on the 'graphein' of the autobiographical act. I have equally highlighted the critical tendency to ahistoricise the 'autos' of women's writing. In the next chapter I seek to bring the 'autos', 'bios' and the 'graphein' of the autobiographical act into play in my introduction to the respective corpi of Cardinal and Leclerc.

Before moving on to present an overview of the works of Cardinal and Leclerc, a brief discussion of the status of women writers in France around the time when *Parole de femme* and *Les Mots pour le dire* were published will help to provide a socio/historical context for our discussion. Anglo/American theorists had pointed to the paucity of publicly available female authored texts. This statement was equally applicable to the condition of women's writing in France where, as we shall see, female authors had failed to make a significant impact on the literary scene. Due to constraints of space my discussion of the reception of women's writing in France will be necessarily succinct. I will then go on to explore the events of May 68 and the beginnings of the second wave of French Feminism.

1.3. The French Context

Diana Holmes has drawn attention to the necessity of considering literary figures and literature within "the context of the social, political and cultural development without which their position cannot be properly understood" (Holmes, 1996: v11). In a thesis which makes a claim for the importance of reading women's autobiography with an awareness of the socio/political context of its production, it is necessary to discuss the impact of the events of May 68 on women's writing. Although this subject has been amply documented by Duchen (1986), Holmes (1996) and Laubier (1990) it is crucial to

retrace some of this ground in order to consider the manner in which the writing of Cardinal and Leclerc reflects the preoccupations of feminist writers who emerged during this historic moment[ii].

1.4. Early Forays into Women's Writing: "Un féminisme de bonne compagnie"

Up until the late 1960s women writers were for the most part deemed unworthy of attention by the French Academy. In fact, the only woman writer who had made her way onto reading lists in universities and *lycées* was the seventeenth century writer Madame de Lafayette (Fallaize, 1993: 3). Although the impact of de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* (1949) had been widespread in England and America, the tendency among Francophone readers to view it as a licentious and scandalous work had led to the dismissal of its status as an academic work (Laubier, 1990: 17-18). In fact, despite having been awarded the *Prix Goncourt* for *Les Mandarins* in 1954, de Beauvoir's position as an influential scholar and public voice was largely unrecognised. The French Academy was similarly unresponsive to Marguerite Duras. Indeed, it was not until 1984 that she received the *Prix Goncourt* and even then she viewed her position as an author as 'still shakey' (Fallaize,1993: 3). Paradoxically, in this case, it was Duras's reputation as a 'difficult writer' which precluded a sought after place in the Academy. The post 1980s saw the long awaited recognition of a handful of women writers including Colette, Nathalie Sarraute and Marguerite Yourcenar. Colette gained the seal of approval in 1984 when her work appeared in the prestigious *Pléiade* edition [iii]. Nathalie Sarraute and Marguerite Yourcenar joined her soon after. These concessions on the part of the Academy can in themselves be taken as evidence of the progress made by the women's movement of the 1970s when all three women had been religiously excluded from the canon.[iv]

The paucity of female authored texts in France during this period can in part be explained by the fact that a majority of men sat on the board of the Academy, controlled the publishing houses and as such decided who was elected to the canon. Given the dismissive critical reception of her own work it is understandable why de Beauvoir became actively involved in promoting undiscovered female authors including Violette Leduc, Nathalie Sarraute and Annie Leclerc. The 1960s saw the inauguration of the 'librairies' of Simone de Beauvoir and Françoise Sagan. While these book shops

created a demand for women's texts, the works which they published were for the most part "un féminisme de bonne compagnie, modéré et conformiste" (Vercier et al. eds., 1982: 234). From the events of 68 a new female voice emerged. No longer prepared to maintain the status quo, this voice was bold, unrelenting and above all acutely gender conscious:

> Je me ramasse dans moi, femme, homogène, lucide. Je descends dans mes profondeurs. Je retrouve mes racines dont si longtemps j'ai été coupée ! C'est la fête. Les retrouvailles. Le cri. Le chant. Le creuset bouillonne, multiple, intact. Superbes et neufs surgissent le langage, l'image, le monde (Halimi, 1973: 22).

In what manner did the student revolts impact on the nascent women's movement?

1.5. May '68: Le Torchon Brûle

Bouclée au foyer, surexploitée au travail, éloignée de la décision politique, niée dans ma sexualité, conditionnée par la culture et les mass media, Je me présente. Je suis la Femme Enfermée (Halimi, 1973: 9)

In 1949 de Beauvoir had raised the question of why women failed to revolt against their subordinate status. She argued that the lack of a collective female consciousness was central to women's readiness to acquiesce to their condition. Women did not share a collective history, a common religion, mutual interests and patterns of employment, a unified class structure or a clearly defined geographic location (de Beauvoir, 1949: 19). De Beauvoir argued that while other minority groups could identify a common oppressor, this was more difficult for women because of the biological necessity of interaction between the sexes in the shared pursuit of the survival of the species (de Beauvoir, 1949: 19-20). Woman, de Beauvoir neatly surmised, was confined to the unenviable role of 'l'autre' to male subjectivity.

The influential feminist lawyer, Gisèle Halimi followed a similar line of analysis in *La Cause des Femmes* presenting women's containment in the private sphere as the locus of their oppression (Halimi, 1993: 9). Expected to perform repetitive, unpaid domestic duties, excluded from the world of economics and politics, Halimi's definition

of woman as 'la femme enfermée' seemed highly fitting (Halimi, 1973: 9). Countering the myth that maternity and female creativity are fundamentally opposed, she made a claim for the subversive potential of motherhood: "la procréation librement décidée peut[...] catalyser chez certaines d'entre nous une forme d'insertion, ou de contre-insertion de notre marginalité de femme" (Halimi, 1973: 22).

Halimi argued that the exclusion of women from the public arena was a contributory factor to the paucity of women artists. In her opinion female creativity was repressed both through the French education system[v] and in the broader social sphere (Halimi, 1973: 21). Halimi recognised that there was a wealth of women's art, the problem was finding the means to disseminate their works (Halimi, 1973: 21). In what ways then did May 68 provide a platform for women to find a communal voice?

The protests, which nearly led to the collapse of the Gaullist government, marked a major turning point in French feminism. There had been isolated bouts of feminist action since the French Revolution; Celebrated feminists including the revolutionary martyr Olympe de Gouges, the socialist campaigner Flora Tristan and the suffragette Hubertine Auclert, had played an important role in drawing attention to the women's cause. However, hitherto these women's voices had been easy to ignore or ridicule because of their disparate nature. 1968 provided the perfect climate for women to question their role in French society. During the last decade many of the French colonies including Indochina (1946-54), Tunisia (1954-5), and Morocco (1955-6), had successfully battled for home rule. While the scent of revolt was in the air, it was the Algerian struggle for independence which turned public opinion against the French government. Both the supporters of and dissenters against colonial rule were to be frustrated. The former because they would see de Gaulle cede France's treasured North African department. The latter because they deplored the unnecessary blood which had been shed to uphold political reputations. Women, in particular found a common cause with the oppressed nations who were battling for autonomy against a repressive regime which absolved itself from blame in the name of charitable paternalism.

During this period, it was not only foreign policy which was floundering. While de Gaulle's policy had produced a buoyant economy, it had equally entailed a growth in unemployment. Coupled with this, cuts in social services and wages at the lower end of the scale meant that the working classes were badly hit. As the gap between the proletariat and the bourgeois classes widened the general feeling was one of distrust of

politicians and trade-unions alike. The mood was anti-authoritarian and belief in the hierarchical social structures underlying the paternalistic ideology began to erode.

The revolts started as a student protest against the regimented and dehumanising university system. The large numbers of students admitted to higher education ensured that the learning process was alienating and impersonal. This wave of discontent spread among women, the working classes and left-wing intellectuals alike. At this point in time, a stronghold of Marxist campaigners dominated the group. For these protestors, economic reform was viewed as the general answer to a diverse range of social problems. However, for women who had become involved in the protests a rude awakening to the inadequacies of this policy was imminent.

While those versed in Marxist theory were convinced that men and women should rally together against a shared middle-class oppressor, the events of May 68 revealed an altogether different trend. Women soon discovered that the distribution of power among the left-wing protesters was subject to a gender preferential hierarchical structure. The division between men as the proponents of the political sphere and women as the advocates of the domestic realm was taken as read. Women were expected to act as secretaries or domestics while the men got on with the serious business of writing or delivering agendas (Duchen, 1986: 7).

The failure of the male protesters to accord women any political concessions alerted them to the need for a separatist and collective women's group. Women began to gather together at the *Sorbonne* and *Vincennes* with the express aim of formulating their role in the social unrest. In the next two years the *Mouvement de la Libération de la Femme* became autonomous. A symbolic gesture was enacted at the tomb of the unknown soldier at the *Arche de Triomphe* where women layed a wreath for his forgotten wife. The accompanying message which read 'Il y a plus inconnu que le soldat – sa femme,' was a public announcement that women were no longer prepared to play a secondary role in French society.

As with most French feminism the MLF drew heavily upon philosophical ideas. Providing a gendered reading of Marxist-Leninst thought, they argued that social equality could be achieved through instituting changes in the law in the areas of contraception, abortion, childcare, equal work and wages, and violence against women. However, while most women were agreed about the urgency of campaigning for these causes, the group was not exempt from its own internal squabbles and would soon diversify into a number of break-away factions. These splinter groups included the

renowned *Politique et Psychanalyse* (*Psych et Po*) which claimed members including Hélène Cixous and Annie Leclerc, the class-struggle group, and the Radical non-aligned feminists.

As Claire Laubier has pointed out, the main point of divergence between these factions was the manner in which they identified women's oppression (Laubier, 1990: 71). Whereas the class-struggle group perceived women's oppression to be closely intertwined with issues of class, the women of *Psych et Po* defined patriarchy in terms of pervasive power structures imposed by men over women. Heavily influenced by the psychoanalytical writings of Jacques Lacan, they subscribed to the theory that the social order is constructed around the acceptance of the power of the 'phallus' (a symbolic marker of patriarchal supremacy which is unconsciously absorbed during the acquisition of language and social practices). With this in mind the members of *Psych et Po* concluded that if women were to achieve their liberation they would have to consciously negate the patriarchal social order by isolating themselves from men. In the texts of Cixous, and the early writings of Leclerc, the challenge to liberate the feminine through the celebration of female *différence* is envisaged to be a political gesture. Less radical feminists criticised *Psych et Po* for what they held to be an elitist and overly intellectual approach to politics. They contested that the best way to improve women's lives was through calling for concrete changes in the political and legislative systems. As their name suggests, the non-aligned feminists fell outside of both groups while accepting some of their premises. While they believed in the necessity of effecting direct change in society they were nonetheless reluctant to wholly align themselves to the Marxist cause. They were equally unconvinced by the emphasis which *Psych et Po* placed on *différence* and the group's eschewal of direct action.

Despite these differences, up to the early 1970s French feminists were united in their general concern that women should secure admission to the public sphere. While women gained greater access to higher education in the 1960s their impact on the work place was limited[vi]. In general working-class women performed low paid production line jobs while their middle-class counterparts contributed to the voluntary sector. With her account of the gruelling conditions affecting women working in factories in *Elise ou la vraie vie* (Etcherelli,1967), Claire Etcherelli was the first of a number of women to voice their political protest through the literary medium.[vii] For many, marriage was seen as an escape route which provided some form of financial security, although it also left them highly dependent upon their husbands. In texts like *Les Petits Enfants du Siècle*, Christiane Rochefort produced gritty tales of working-class heroines

who marry to escape their social position (Rochefort, 1961). De Beauvoir provided a different perspective on married life in *La Femme rompue*, a harrowing tale of a middle-class woman whose husband deserts her (de Beauvoir, 1968).

As a predominantly Catholic country the notion of women's liberation rubbed against the grain of deep-seated values where "the family, marriage and maternity were inextricably linked" (Laubier, 1990: 18). The loss of life incurred during the Second World War had equally inspired a political campaign to increase the nation's population through financial incentives. De Beauvoir inspired a remarkable amount of hostility from the Catholic faith in 1949 when she published her views on motherhood as a form of imprisonment (de Beauvoir, 1949). In 1973 Halimi captured the condition of women in France in the following manner:

> Notre sexualité est unidimensionnelle : la reproduction de l'espèce. Nos désirs ? Notre plaisir ? Dans sa hiérarchie et ses textes fondamentaux, l'Eglise "ne connaît pas" – ou chez les tentatrices, les envoyées du Malin, peut-être – et la condemnation est alors sans appel (Halimi, 1973: 15-16).

The 1920s had seen the implementation of a draconian law which made abortion illegal and denied women the right to contraception. It was not until 1967 that *loi Neuwirth* gave women the right to contraception. However, even then it was not readily available. For the lower classes who could not afford to terminate unwanted pregnancies in the private clinics in Switzerland and England, the shoddy back street abortion was still a reality. A dramatic if necessary gesture was taken in 1971 when a group of French intellectual women, including Simone de Beauvoir, Marie Cardinal and Gisèle Halimi, signed a manifesto declaring that they had undergone an illegal abortion. The document famously entitled 'le manifeste des 343' was published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* on the 5th of April in the same year. At the same time the celebrated group *Choisir*, headed by Halimi, was formed with the express aim of campaigning for women's right to abortion. The issue was again thrown into the spotlight a year later with the *Bobigny Trial*. Four women were brought to trail for procuring an illegal abortion for a girl who had been raped. The vindication of the women marked a turning point in French history and the 'loi Veil' was introduced in November 1974 legalising abortion[viii].

While political campaigning was seen as an essential aspect of the feminist agenda it was not limited to public protest. Many women turned to literature as a means of voicing their experience and in order to create a spirit of female community. There was a flourish of autobiographical offerings and first person narratives and women sought to bring their private lives into the public arena. At the same time the slogan "the personal is political" was born. Halimi provided a neat summary of the importance of the first person narrative in 'La Femme Enfermée', the introduction to her acclaimed autobiographical manifesto *La Cause des Femmes* (Halimi, 1973). Drawing upon her own success story of overcoming a difficult childhood to assume a prominent social role she describes her motivations for writing in the following manner:

> si j'ai raconté quelques traits de mon enfance et de mon apprentissage de femme, c'est que je voulais dire aux autres femmes – surtout aux plus vulnérables d'entre elles – que pour durs et inextricables qu'ils aient pu apparaître, mes chemins m'ont menée vers elles et la lutte commune (Halimi, 1973: 9).

The issues which I have addressed so far, the perception of women as colonised subjects, the challenge to speak of women's sexuality and desire, the imperative to write about women's bodies and the private sphere of women's lives was central to these texts. The necessity of speaking about women's issues which had hitherto remained unspoken was captured in the emergence of the term 'parole' which was used to capture the essence of women's writing. As Claire Laubier has pointed out, this term became synonymous with "the desire to find a separate space for women to express themselves" (Laubier, 1990, 95). A neat illustration of the usage of the term can be found in Annie Leclerc's *Parole de femme* (Leclerc,1974) where women's writing is intrinsically linked to the female body.

During the 1970s some progress was made in ensuring the transmission of these narratives. Two women's publishing houses were set up with the express intention of disseminating female authored texts. The first, *Éditions des femmes*, was inaugurated by the feminist collective *Psych et Po* in 1974 and advertised itself as a publishing house for women. This group was responsible for the publication of a number of influential women's journals including *Les Sourcières*. The titles of these offerings which included 'La Nourriture', 'Les Odeurs', 'Le Sang', 'Les Poupées and 'La

Jasette,' are indicative of the preoccupations of women writers during the period. The arrival of a second women's publishing house *Tierce* followed closely afterwards in 1977. While these two organisations cannot be credited for the publication of all of the women's texts which made their appearance in the public domain during the next decade, they gain a weighty symbolic resonance with their message that women's writing could no longer be ignored. Recognising the massive public demand for such texts the institution of women's collections became commonplace in most of the *maisons d'édition classiques*.

Having provided the reader with a brief overview to the historical backdrop to the second wave of French feminism I will conclude my discussion by pointing the reader toward the way in which these political concerns are addressed in *Les Mots pour le dire and Parole de femme*.

Cardinal and Leclerc in the Context of May 68

The writing of Cardinal and Leclerc cannot be fully appreciated without an understanding of the events of May 68 which provided a back drop to both women's early works[ix]. Cardinal and Leclerc were both caught up in the spirit of the times. Leclerc, as a proponent of *écriture féminine* and a member of *Psych et Po* (see chapter 5), Cardinal as an active campaigner for women's rights. The last lines of *Les Mots pour le dire* "QUELQUES jours plus tard c'était Mai 68" point to the significance of this period for the women's movement.

In both texts the author's subscription to the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' is in evidence. Leclerc and Cardinal draw on deeply personal experiences of pregnancy and mental malaise respectively to communicate a wider feminist message. The appearance of the first person voice is essential to both texts where the reader is invited to identify with the author's experience. The *bildungsroman* format employed by Cardinal typifies the preoccupation among feminists of this generation with presenting heroic female role models (see chapter 4) while the personal oral tone of Leclerc's text suggests a renunciation of the hierarchical relationship of omniscient author to submissive reader. For both authors personal experience is seen to have a collective significance while writing is a political gesture.

The imperative to publicise women's lives is localised in the discourses of female sexuality, the female body, the mother/daughter relationship and female centred

experience. In both texts the authors discuss women's issues like abortion, rape and pregnancy which had hitherto been represented from a male perspective in medical discourse, men's novels and patriarchal legal systems. For example, in *Parole de femme* pregnancy is eulogised while in *Les Mots pour le dire* it is presented as a curse so long as women are denied the right to 'choose'. In both texts the authors inscribe memorable descriptions of the, then, taboo subject of menstruation while the mental malaise of Cardinal's narrator stands as a testimony for women's right to abortion (see chapter 4).

Cardinal and Leclerc provide a window to the private sphere of women's daily existence. In *Parole de femme* this women's space is validated as Leclerc seeks to accord a sense of value to the domestic tasks which women perform. For the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire*, it is presented as a threat to the narrator's autonomy as she finds herself contained in the house and locked in a claustrophobic relationship with her mother. While both authors seek to politicise the everyday details of women's lives they pay less attention to the wider political picture. For instance, although the Algerian crisis provides a backdrop for Cardinal's exploration of women's oppression the theme is implicit as opposed to explicit.

Finally, central to both texts is the challenge to find a 'parole de femme', a language through which to express female experience. Cardinal and Leclerc differ marginally in their perspective on what constitutes a 'women's language' with Leclerc aligning herself more closely with the proponents of *écriture féminine* (see chapter 5) while Cardinal is sceptical that there is an innately different 'women's language' and grounds her theory in terms of reception[x]. Despite these minor divergences, for both authors the challenge to inscribe female difference is central to their self-writing.

Conclusion

In this chapter I hope to have provided a theoretical and political framework for our reading of the works of Marie Cardinal and Annie Leclerc. I started out by discussing the movement of autobiographical criticism from the 'autos' to the 'graphe' of the autobiographical equation. I demonstrated how this pattern can be traced in the development of Anglo/American theories of the genre. With reference to the work of Stanley, I proposed a method of reading Cardinal and Leclerc which would reinstate the author's life or the 'bios' back into autobiographical criticism. In the light of this claim,

I then set out to explore how the texts of Cardinal and Leclerc can be contextualised in relation to the condition of women writers in France around the 1970s and the impact of the events of May 68 on the second wave of feminism. I have suggested that the upsurge of interest in first person narratives was a response to the exclusion of women from the public domain and the paucity of published material discussing women's issues from a female perspective. In the next chapter I seek to provide a literary context for my reading of *Les Mots pour le dire* and *Exercices de mémoire*, exploring the development of the respective oeuvres of Cardinal and Leclerc and tracing their imperative to find 'the words to say it'.

Notes

[i] Stanley's discussion focuses on the collections edited by Estelle Jelinek (1980), Domna Stanton (1984), Shari Benstock (1988), and Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (1988).

[ii] For a further discussion of this subject see Powrie's introduction to the 1993 edition of *Les Mots pour le dire.*

[iii] The collection, introduced by Gallimard in 1931, claimed to offer readers 'the masterpieces of literature'.

[iv] Having said this, Elizabeth Fallaize has drawn attention to the fact that Francophone women writers have gained fewer concessions than their Anglophone counterparts. In a survey carried out in *Le Monde* in the *rentrée* of 1988 it was discovered that despite the increasing number of best-sellers authored by women, 75 percent of books published during this peak –period were penned by men (Fallaize, 1993: 20).

[v] In 1798 women protestors of the third estate had presented a petition to the king demanding "Une meilleure instruction pour ne pas être totalement dépendantes des hommes". Since then women were taught to read although there was always a notable gap between standards of literacy in men and women. Between 1960 and 1970 the number of illiterate men and women in the world stood at 8 million for the former and 40 million for the latter. (Speech of Mr M'Bow, the head of UNESCO, 17 November, 1975 in Halimi, 1973: 21).

[vi] Although the number of girls almost equalled that of boys in higher education, the former tended to follow non-vocational subjects.

[vii] See for example Victoria Thérame's *Hosto-blues* (Thérame, 1974) and Hortense Dufour's *La Marie Marraine* (Dufour, 1978).

[viii] The law was not watertight as the decision of whether or not to carry out an abortion was left primarily in the hands of the doctor while minors were dependant upon gaining their parents' consent.

[ix] Margaret Atack has provided a detailed analysis of the thematic and structural relationship of May 68 to *Les Mots pour le dire* (Atack, 1999: 85-101).

[x] Je ne crois pas qu'il y ait une écriture féminine ou une écriture masculine. Mais je crois qu'il y a une lecture différente selon que les mots ont été écrits par un homme ou par une femme. Le sachant, ou le sentant, les femmes consciemment ou inconsciemment, si elles veulent être comprises [...] ont tendance à masquer, maquiller, apprêter leur écriture (Cardinal, 1977: 82).

2

In Search of Origins

2.1. Marie Cardinal: The Quest for the Motherland

> ***Me voilà, une fois de plus, embarquée, dans mon enfance, dans ma jeunesse! Je les rabâcherai jusqu'à ce qu'elles soient usées. Pour trouver, au bout de cette usure, la communication. Pour enlever mon uniforme [...] Pour penser selon moi et non pas comme on m'a appris à penser*** **(Cardinal, 1972: 229-230).**

The central aim of this chapter is to present the reader with an overview of the respective oeuvres of Marie Cardinal and Annie Leclerc. Clearly, some of these texts cannot properly speaking be described as self-writing. Nonetheless, Cardinal's declaration that her works written in the third person are often more self-revelatory than those narrated in the first person (see chapter 3) and Leclerc's pronouncement that all of her writing has an autobiographical subtext (see chapter 5) would seem to justify this methodological approach. Furthermore, a consideration of the full range of each authors' writing will situate the works under study in this thesis in a broader context, while enabling us to consider the manner in which authorial experience comes to bear on the shape and tone of the writing. My aim will be to trace the recurrent themes and intertextual markers which punctuate the respective authors' work. However, by focusing on intertextuality it is not my intention to erase the author's lived experience from the text. My project in this chapter is to illustrate the link between 'autos' (self), the 'bios' (life of the author) and the 'graphe' (textual inscription of that life).

2.2. Narratives of Loss

The loss of origins is a significant theme in Cardinal's writing. There are a number of reasons for this which can be traced back to the impact of social, familial and historical events on Cardinal's life. As a *piednoir* living in Algeria Cardinal experienced the privileged existence of the French colonial. Cardinal's family were proud of their ancestors. In *Autrement dit* she has recalled how her forebear, a wealthy aristocrat,

founded the first vineyards which would provide the family with a source of income until they left for France in 1962. Cardinal's father, an engineer, was something of a dandy who had a weakness for philandering. Her parents met when he was sent to fight in the Algerian war in 1918. However, the discovery of his tuberculosis, coupled with his roving eye for other women, led to a bitter marriage which was finally terminated in 1929 at the time of Cardinal's birth. The divorce did not ease the family tensions. On the contrary, Cardinal's childhood was fraught with anxiety as she bore the brunt of her mother's guilt as a catholic divorcee. In *Les Mots pour le dire* Cardinal evokes the portrait of her mother as an overbearing figure incapable of demonstrating any affection for her adoring daughter. The absence of her father ensured that there was no respite from the claustrophobic relationship. This experience played a decisive role in shaping Cardinal's later views on the family and motherhood.

Education, however, offered Cardinal a means of asserting her independence. In 1947 she took up a place at university and obtained a degree in philosophy. Six years later she was married to Jean-Pierre Ronfard, a theatre director whom she had initially met while he was working as a stage-director at a festival in Lourmarin at the age of 20. Over the next seven years she would take a number of teaching posts in French *lycées*. Sadly, marriage did not provide the escape which Cardinal was still seeking. Cardinal's experience as a bourgeois housewife and mother would be cited in *Les Mots pour le dire* as a contributory factor to her neurosis.

A further significant rupture was to occur in Cardinal's life with the struggle for Algerian independence which exiled the family from their homeland in 1962. The loss of a country associated with freedom, warmth and sensuality was to become a repetitive preoccupation in Cardinal's writing. In 1960 things came to a head with Cardinal deciding to undergo a psychoanalysis which would last seven years and which she would recount in detail in *Les Mots pour le dire*. The author's unhappy childhood is accorded a broader significance in *Les Mots pour le dire* where she explores the manner in which the discourses of patriarchy, and bourgeois catholicism come to bear on the formation of female identity.

During this period Jean-Pierre, unable to deal with his wife's increasing mental instability, left the family to take a post in Canada. The absence of Jean-Pierre was to become another major concern which would be worked through in texts like *Une Vie pour deux* and *Les Mots pour le dire*. By now Cardinal was a single parent with three children, a boy Benoît and two girls Alice and Bénédicte. Abandoned by the significant

male figure in her life, Cardinal was filled with all sorts of doubts about her ability as a mother. These doubts would be explored in texts like *La Clé sur la porte* (1971), *Le Passé empiété* and *Les Grands désordres* (1987).

Although she had published her first novel *Ecoutez la mer* in 1962, which was awarded the *prix du premier roman*, Cardinal was still living on the bread-line and had to undertake a number of different jobs including proof-reading and writing articles in order to survive. In 1976, having suffered at first hand from the regulations prohibiting French writers from claiming social security, she co-founded the *Syndicat des écrivains de langue francaise*. Her efforts were rewarded in 1977 when the government recognised its duty to offer financial assistance to the 600 or so members of the *Syndicat*. With the publication of *La Clé sur la porte* in 1971 Cardinal became a public celebrity. Her interests throughout this period would be directed not only to writing but also to aligning herself with the women's cause. To what extent do Cardinal's texts replay her life experience?

2.3. Intertext and Life

As we have seen, the author's experience of family life is influential in her discussion of themes including the search for the words to express female difference, the loss of the cherished Algerian motherland, the trials of motherhood and the necessity of revising definitions of the maternal role and the couple, the tension between maternity and creativity, the single woman, and the representation of writing as a form of analysis leading to the stabilisation of the self and a greater sense of self awareness.

Cardinal's exploration of the relationship between language and identity can be seen as the driving force behind her corpus. In every one of her texts, the central protagonists struggle to overcome the barriers of non-communication, seeking to express their life-narratives with clarity. In many ways they can be seen as a projection of Cardinal's own voyage of self-discovery through language.

The intertextual nature of Cardinal's writing has been widely remarked upon by Cairns, Durham and Powrie (Cairns, 1992; Durham, 1992; Powrie, 1993). However, it is necessary to reiterate some of their observations for the purposes of this discussion. On picking up Cardinal's texts the reader is imbued with the feeling of returning to a lost homeland as the author continually retells the same story in a familiar yet subtly

evolving language. Cairns has located a number of paradigmatic narrative sequences which are found in each of her texts up until *Les Grands Désordres* (Cardinal,1987):

> A young woman, keenly alive to the sensuous beauty of her Mediterranean environment, marries early and endures exile; has children in close sucession; suffers a sense of physical degeneration; falls into mental malaise and anguish; is estranged from her husband (who always departs to work in North America); takes a lover; and gradually establishes an inner balance (Cairns,1992: 19).

Powrie has elaborated on this theme noting the reinscription of specific events including the harvest on the Algerian farm (*Ecoutez la mer, La Clé sur la porte, Les Mots pour le dire, Autrement dit*); the mother's revelation to her daughter that she tried to abort her (*La Clé sur la porte, Les Mots pour le dire*); the annual pilgrimage to the dead sister's grave (*La Clé sur la porte, Les Mots pour le dire*) (Powrie: 1993: xxvi). For Powrie, the repetition of key narrative sequences lends authenticity to the "autobiographical reality" of the texts (Powrie, 1993: xxiv). Yet, as he goes on to suggest, it might equally be argued that the rewriting of key intertextual moments in Cardinal's oeuvre is predicated on the author's sophisticated awareness of the constructed nature of autobiographical narratives.

Cardinal's first three works are all written in the third person. The central focus of these early texts is on a female character who is in one way or another exiled from her homeland and struggling to come to terms with her identity. *Ecoutez la mer* (Cardinal, 1962) narrates the story of a young woman who, born in Algeria, finds herself displaced in France. Abandoned by her husband who has moved to Canada, Maria succumbs to a nervous breakdown. As in *Les Mots pour le dire*, the narrator's mental anguish is sharply contrasted with her nostalgic memories of Algeria. This is most notable at the end of the text where her recollection of dancing at the harvest celebrations provides a release from the suffering which she experiences at separating from her lover Karl.

This refrain appears in a different guise in *La Mule de corbillard* (Cardinal, 1964) where the elderly narrator, who runs a farm single handed, seeks revenge on a colonial figure who has robbed her of her land. She recalls her affair with a young surveyor, Pierre Landrieux, who came to visit the small-holding, which she was then operating, in the South of France. Familiar paradigmatic features occur in the form of

the narrator's interaction with a young lover, her passionate relationship to the land and her discovery of strength through independence. Furthermore, as with the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire*, it is through the process of remembering that the protagonist is able to construct a new identity. As in *Les Mots pour le dire*, the protagonist's love of her native country and her self-contained solitary existence are central themes of the text.

La Sourcière (Cardinal, 1965) can be interpreted as an earlier version of *Les Mots pour le dire* with the plot revolving around the neurosis and self hatred of Camille who is struggling to raise her children alone. However, in this rendition, the reader is denied the cathartic release provided by the *bildungsroman* format of *Les Mots pour le dire*. As with the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire,* the female protagonist Camille is of Mediterranean origin. She is married to a university lecturer and has three children: one boy and two girls. She succumbs to a neurosis and is inhabited by thoughts of death and decay. The husband leaves home and Camille takes a lover. The twin combination of hearing the news that her husband's American partner is pregnant and being rejected by her lover pushes Camille to suicide.

A digression from the familiar paradigm appeared in 1967 with Cardinal's frank account of her interactions with the Parisian cinematographers. *Cet été-là* (Cardinal, 1967) is one of Cardinal's more overtly autobiographical works in which she describes the experience of participating in the making of Jean-Luc Godard's film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle.*

The publication of *La Clé sur la porte* (1972) marked a break with Cardinal's old publishing house *Julliard* as she joined camp with *Grasset and Fasquelle*. This text opened her work up to a wider audience. As with *Les Mots pour le dire*, the popular appeal of the text was highlighted when it was directed by Yves Boisset as a film (Cardinal, 1978). The subversive title rejected the notion of the bourgeois family home as a closed idyll with its implied criticism of the repressive style of childrearing typical to the bourgeois household. The first person narrator, a mother whose husband Jean-Pierre is away, tells the story of her attempts to raise her three children single-handedly. Despite the use of pseudonyms these children, two girls and one boy, closely resemble Cardinal's own. In seeking to develop a relationship based on understanding as opposed to oppression she allows her children and their friends to set up a quasi hippy commune in her home. The pitfalls of this approach are demonstrated, as the commune descends into an interminable party frequented by drug addicts and religious fanatics

and things come to a head with the theft of the narrator's money and a photograph of her son. For Cardinal, this text exemplified her desire to move beyond her own traumatic and distant relationship with her mother.

Although the fictional aspect of the text cannot be denied, Cardinal did make a pact attesting to its referential quality. On the back cover of the book she defiantly reveals that "Je ne regrette pas d'avoir été cette femme et d'avoir vécu ce que j'ai vécu avec ces jeunes, je leur dois tout". Cardinal's declaration that she wrote the text outside of her capacity as a writer and from within the family seems to suggest an interest in publicising the private sphere. The simple style which takes the form of a journal undoubtedly contributed to its popular appeal. The theme of writing as catharsis, common to *Les Mots pour le dire* and *Une Vie pour deux* (Cardinal,1978) is resonant, with the narrator maintaining her sanity by inscribing her experience as a diary. The text anticipates *Les Mots pour le dire* as the narrative shuttles to and fro between the author's attempts to rethink the maternal role and her memories of her traumatic relationship with her own mother. The link between the two works is made explicit at the end of the text; one of the residents, a young girl called Moussia, recounts a poem on the subject of her mother's attempt to abort her. This passage will be rewritten as the mother's declaration of her failed abortion in *Les Mots pour le dire*. Despite the fact that Cardinal does not draw a direct connection between the narrators of *La Clé sur la porte* and *Les Mots pour le dire*, for those readers choosing to read the later work as a sequel, the text opens another window to the author's life. However, the focus this time is on the narrator's formative experiences with her children and not her mother.

Cardinal's next text *Les Mots pour le dire* (Cardinal,1975) was to be her most celebrated, and would secure her reputation as an internationally acclaimed writer. In this text many of Cardinal's views on womens' rights, motherhood and the couple would be crystallised. Loosely based on Cardinal's seven year psychoanalysis, the narrative is told by an anonymous protagonist who recounts her traumatic relationship with her mother in explicit detail. As in the earlier works, exile from the maternal homeland of Algeria is seen to be a causative factor in the narrator's oncoming neurosis. However, the exploration of these themes is contextualised within a more explicit feminist perspective as the colonisation of Algeria is equated with women's oppression. Cardinal's own political involvement in the women's movement which was to grow out of the student revolts of 68 is hinted at in the last lines of the text "Quelques jours plus tard c'était mai soixante-huit". With the onset of the narrator's illness the husband, again named Jean-Pierre, leaves the family to work in Canada. However, as in other

works, writing becomes a means of rebuilding the relationship as the husband discovers an aspect of the narrator's personality which had hitherto remained hidden. This text provides a fulcrum for Cardinal's discussion of her vision of the couple based on mutual respect and the independence of the respective partners.

Autrement dit (Cardinal, 1977) can be seen as the companion volume to *Les Mots pour le dire*. It was published as a personal response to readers' desire to get to know the author behind the novel. The text is a multigeneric offering combining conversation, monologue, fictional narrative, autobiography, literary criticism and philosophical meditation. The sense of affiliation between Leclerc and Cardinal is apparent as the two converse on the content of *Les Mots pour le dire* covering a diverse range of subjects from colonial Algeria, psychoanalysis, the mother/daughter relationship, female sexuality and women's writing. Somewhat questionably, Cardinal offers the reader an illustration of her viewpoint on the couple presenting her 23 year marriage to Jean-Pierre as an example of the subversive couple. On this point Cardinal expounds that "un veritable couple ne peut exister que dans la liberté. Chaque union doit être un choix, sinon ce n'est pas une union" (Cardinal, 1977: 156-7). However, one has to question the extent to which raising one's children as a single parent is a liberation or an imposition on one's liberty. A further point worthy of note is the slight divergence between Leclerc and Cardinal in their conversations on women's writing, with the former indicating her leanings toward the experimental textual practices of *écriture féminine*. As in many of her texts Cardinal seeks to explore the oppression of women through an analysis of her own displaced origins. *Autrement dit* provides a further example of the cathartic properties of writing as the author envisages the completion of the text as stamping the seal on her analysis.

Une Vie pour deux (Cardinal, 1979), written in the third person, is the story of a couple, Simone and Jean-François, who have been living together for twenty years without ever really knowing each other. While they are on holiday in Ireland, Jean-François finds the body of Mary Maclaughlin, a young woman who has met her death by drowning. The reconstruction of the dead girl's life provides the couple with a pretext for conversation. As in *Les Mots pour le dire*, we encounter the familiar themes of marriage as slavery, and the tension between women's domestic situation and their intellectual pursuits. While the text diverges from Cardinal's previous works, being set in Ireland and New York, the narrative is interspersed with nostalgic yearnings for the Algerian homeland. Although Cardinal's approach to women's writing can primarily be defined in terms of her ability to speak of women's issues in a manner which would

be completely alien to a man, the creation of a text, quite literally conceived on the body of a woman, points to the textual practice of *écriture féminine*. For Simone writing leads to the creation of a new identity. Unable to agree upon the ending of the text, François decides to write a secret version which can be seen to serve as a metaphor for the inscription of female difference. As in *Les Mots pour le dire*, when she shows her husband this text he sees a completely different woman from the one he thought he knew. This text demonstrates the connection between biography and autobiography as Simone carves out a new identity with the textual birth of her heroine: "elle avait écrit sa propre vie mêlée à celle de Mary (Cardinal, 1979: 299). A new couple is formed based on the recognition of female independence. At the end of the text the narrator meditates upon the relationship between writing and her new identity: "Seule avec mon cahier. Quel goût aura cette solitude? Quelle femme naître d'elle? Je veux la rencontrer car je l'aime" (Cardinal, 1979: 299).

In *Au Pays de Mes Racines* (Cardinal, 1980) Cardinal, now fifty years old, recounts her voyage to post-colonial Algeria in the month of May. The familiar themes of her sense of uprootedness and nostalgia for her homeland are treated in an overtly autobiographical manner. Writing about the rupture which she experienced functions as a salve to loss. Although the discussion of separation from the motherland takes precedence over the exploration of maternal loss, the two are inherently intertwined. The horror of the mother's revelation of the failed abortion is once more resurrected if only to be exorcised. The intertextual nature of Cardinal's writing is made explicit by the author, who reveals that each one of her texts carries references to previous manuscripts "pour indiquer que je n'écrirai jamais qu'un seul livre qui sera fait de tous mes livres" (Cardinal, 1980: 194). The narrative takes the form of fragmentary entries in a journal where the author notes her sensations, joyful moments, tears and her search for origins. The sensual dreamy style of the narrative demonstrates the author's desire to inscribe female emotion and the palpable sensations of the body in the text. The names of Cardinal's Arab friends who appeared in *Les Mots pour le dire* such as Kader, Youssef and Aoued are now given full autobiographical authenticity. Cardinal's fear that her mature age may affect her perceptiveness leads her to collaborate on the project with her daughter Bénédicte who will add her own follow up chapter, *Au Pays de Moussia*, to the journal. The similarity in style is indicative of the sense of connectedness and complicity between mother and daughter. Indeed, their relationship stands in sharp contrast to that of the narrator and her mother in *Les Mots pour le dire*.

The Search for Origins

In *Le Passé Empiété* (Cardinal, 1983) Cardinal tackles her favourite *topos* of her family history, retelling the story of her parents' lives. In what can be viewed as a sequel to *Les Mots pour le dire*, Cardinal attempts to come to terms with the absence of her father in her childhood by recreating his past in the first person. The narrative is intertwined with the story of the female narrator's own maternal guilt: she feels responsible for having caused the motorbike accident which has seriously injured her two children. In this text the first person narrator (who might be seen to resemble Cardinal) clearly demonstrates some of the characteristics of the 'bad' mother whom we encountered in *Les Mots pour le dire*. However, in this text, Cardinal demonstrates a greater acceptance of maternal fallibility.

Les Grands désordres (Cardinal,1987) is broadly based on Cardinal's experience of her daughter Bénédicte's drug addiction. However, the narrative is related in the third person with both the mother and daughter being given the respective pseudonyms of Elsa Labbé and Laure. One striking divergence from the previous texts is that the maternal figure is more comfortable with her status as a single parent. Elsa asserts her independence by taking a number of lovers and through her work as a professional psychologist. Despite this fact Cardinal returns to the subject of maternal responsibility, focusing on the complex emotions which mothers may experience toward their children: Elsa's fear that she has failed to carry out her maternal duties successfully is a central theme in the text. Again, as in *Les Mots pour le dire* Cardinal offers various possibilities for re-envisaging the couple outside the institution of marriage.

Cardinal's recent works represent a change in formal structure with the *bildungsroman* format of earlier texts like *Les Mots pour le dire* and *Les Grands Désordres* being replaced by texts structured around a series of fragments. This development may well be indicative of Cardinal's awareness of changes within the feminist movement and most notably the influence of the deconstructionist debate. The narrative of *Comme si de rien n'était* (Cardinal, 1990) is structured in a manner which is more redolent of a film or theatre script. Different female characters discuss their every day lives against a backdrop of momentous historical events: the death of Sakharov, the fall of the Berlin wall, the demise of communism in Eastern Europe. Despite the stylistic divergences, the theme of maternal guilt again haunts one of the main protagonists, Simone. While in *Les Mots pour le dire* the revolution of May 68 marked the beginning of the narrator's independent existence in *Comme si de rien n'était* another leading character, Mimi, is profoundly nostalgic for the heady years of political optimism.

Les Jeudis de Charles et de Lula (Cardinal, 1993) is similar in narrative structure to *Comme si de rien n'était.* The text is divided into seven sections which revolve around the conversations between two lovers on subjects such as love, faithfulness, sex and history. Following the paradigm of Cardinal's last two books, the narrator Lula is an independent woman, who has raised her daughter as a single parent and worked as a successful journalist. As with the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* she is subject to maternal guilt and asks herself whether she has behaved as a mother should have done. Like Jean-Pierre in *Les Mots pour le dire* Charles, her lover and the father of her daughter, is an absent parent. As in *Les Mots pour le dire*, the narrator demonstrates a strong affiliation with nature and the Mediterranean climate. She enjoys flower arranging and seeks mental relaxation through tending her garden and growing vegetables. There are numerous passages in the text where she reminisces on her upbringing in Algeria.

In Cardinal's latest work *Amour...amours* (Cardinal, 1988), the familiar paradigm of an independent female protagonist who yearns for her lost Algerian homeland is once more in evidence. Although the text is written in the third person, it replays key moments of loss which Cardinal has disclosed as central to her own life. The death of her father is re-written and re-explored; the protagonist's sense of being unable to ever recuperate the loss of paternal affection echoes the narrator's sentiments in *Les Mots pour le dire*. The back cover blurb now seems to acknowledge that autobiography and fiction are inseparable in Cardinal's oeuvre: "Une fois encore, Marie Cardinal, admirable conteuse, mêle fiction et autobiographie pour le plus grand bonheur de ses lecteurs".

As I hope to have demonstrated, Cardinal's oeuvre revolves obsessively around the theme of loss: the loss of the Algerian homeland, of family ties and identity itself. While the female characters in the later works are accorded an increasing sense of independence, the fragility of the female self is nonetheless a central concern of the author. The intertextual focus of Cardinal's corpus implies both a lived experience which needs to be continually retold and worked through as well as a self-generating textual practice which sustains its own momentum. In what ways might the oeuvre of Leclerc be seen to explore similar themes and generic concerns?

2.4. Annie Leclerc: In Search of the 'Jardin d'enfance'

Maman, Maman, tu ne m'aimes plus. Tu m'as abandonnée. Morte. Te voilà morte. Les yeux clos, les mains figées, glacées, pour toujours. Morte (Leclerc, 1967: 208).

J'ai cru savoir la mort de Maman. Je n'ai su que mon corps avide d'elle. Maman est morte. Il n'y a que moi que j'ai senti mourir. J'ai perdu de moi tout ce qui me faisait dire Maman (Leclerc, 1967: 220).

Annie Leclerc was born on the 21 July 1940 at Saint Sulpice Laurière (Haute Vienne). She has evoked her regret as to the unexceptional nature of her childhood (Righini, 1976). Born into a middle class family, Leclerc was to have the comfortable upbringing divided between the family home in Saint-Sulpice and the summer house in the Auvergne. The key position accorded both to education and freedom of thought in Leclerc's family was to have a lasting impact on her writing. Her grandparents were Socialist Republicans who earned a living in the teaching profession. Her father worked as a civil servant; her mother studied law at university although she gave up any career aspirations in order to raise her three children. Leclerc was brought up in a literary household with both parents sharing a passion for reading (see for example Leclerc, 1992: 213 and 214; Leclerc, 1988: 38). This has led the author to remark that: "J'ai vécu toute mon enfance entourée de livres (Leclerc, 1988: 25). It was at the Lycée Marie Curie, a boarding school for girls located in Sceaux, that Leclerc started to develop her interest in philosophy. Two thinkers, Pascal and Plato, were to leave a lasting impression on her writing convincing her that "de la verité ne peut naître que du bon" (de Lagarde, 1985: 62). A further key influence would be acknowledged in *Origines* where the author discusses her life-long passion for the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Leclerc, 1988). Leclerc continued to develop her interest in philosophy at the Sorbonne, gaining her degree in 1963. In that year she took up a post as a philosophy teacher and married the Greek writer Nicolas Poulantzas with whom she had a daughter, Ariane. In 1975 she interrupted her teaching carrier to dedicate her time to the sole pursuit of writing. From 1979 she has taught 'les techniques d'expression' at the I.U.T. in Sceaux.

Leclerc's writing is not easy to classify. As with the work of Marie Cardinal her texts are essentially multigeneric, consisting of a hybrid mixture of philosophical

thought, autobiography, poetry, fiction and political tract. The impossibility of applying neat generic classifications to her texts seems to be confirmed by the fact that only her two earliest works, *Le Pont du Nord* (Leclerc, 1967), and *Étoile-Nation* (Leclerc, 1967), classified as *roman* and *nouvelle* respectively, have been accorded a generic label. Nonetheless, self-referentiality is a defining feature of Leclerc's writing where her meditations on social issues are usually filtered through her individual experience. On this point, she has remarked that "the greatest role toward which literature can strive in the twentieth century is to try to formulate as precisely, as accurately as possible what is elaborated through a life, through an experience" (Fallaize, 1993: 135).

Leclerc's texts cover a wide range of themes including the search for a woman's language (*Parole de femme*), the desire to give up smoking (*Au Feu du jour*), an exploration of the fairy tale Blue Beard (*Clé*), an appraisal of the writings of Rousseau (*Origines*), and a discussion of the Holocaust (*Exercices de mémoire*). However, certain preoccupations prevail throughout her corpus including the exploration of language, the quest to express aspects of human experience previously unsymbolised, the critique of power relations, the lament for the loss of innocence and the search for a new ethic for living.

While the discussion of women's issues, such as maternity, menstruation, childbirth, female sexuality and *jouissance* is an important feature of her corpus, Leclerc also covers conflicting and contrary metaphysical issues such as the meaning of life, the forces of good and evil, cruelty and kindness, innocence and corruption, life and death. Unflinching in her critique of social injustice, this in no way marks her out as a pessimistic author. Indeed, her writing is underpinned by her staunch belief in the values of truth, justice and freedom, and is predicated on a conviction that the human race can learn from its mistakes in the shared pursuit of a more harmonious social interactions. Leclerc's sense of optimism is best encapsulated in the overriding authorial imperative to write about 'L'Histoire d'Amour' with the power of love being evoked as a transformative and life saving emotion. This theme "en chaque histoire reprise" (Leclerc, 1985: 148), takes central stage in *Parole de femme*, *Epousailles* and *Hommes et femmes*, which have been described by the author as a trilogy dedicated to the quest for absolute love (Fallaize, 1993: 136).

As with Cardinal, coming to terms with loss is a central preoccupation in Leclerc's writing. However, in Leclerc's case, it is the loss of innocence which marks the authorial signature. Leclerc frequently evokes her childhood as 'Le jardin

d'enfance'(see for example Leclerc, 1988: 63; Leclerc, 1992: 51). The reader is imbued with the impression of Leclerc's early years as a quasi-paradisiacal existence where innocence reigned, where the child lived in harmony with her body and nature and where there was no evil. Key symbols such as the train (see Leclerc, 1976: 175-196), which connotes mankind's progress, and characters like Marie and Alexandre (see Leclerc, 1976: 75-101), are intertextual markers signifying her faith in humanity. For Leclerc, growing up entailed a shattering of her belief system and an uneasy awakening to the harsh reality that the people she believed in were capable of cruelty. As the gap between good and evil started to blur, the young girl was thrown into a state of a confusion:

> Ce qui me fait tant souffrir ce ne fut pas d'apprendre qu'il y avait des méchants puisque c'était un fait connu depuis toujours, c'était que les bons puissent être méchants ...C'est tout l'édifice de la représentation qui vacille...(Leclerc, 1992: 78).

At secondary school Leclerc became increasingly conscious of the underlying prejudices which marked the bourgeois family. This awakening is particularly apparent in her uneasy awareness of the unspoken hostility toward the Jewish girls in her class (Leclerc, 1988: 53; Leclerc, 1992: 81). This sense of unease intensifies as she recognises that her own privileged existence is dependent on an unjust class-system which leads to the hierarchical ordering and segregation of her peers (Leclerc, 1988: 52).

While the author was undoubtedly shaken by the reprehensible snobbism of the adults around her, a further and more inexplicable injustice was to be borne by the 12 year old Leclerc when her mother died of cancer. Leclerc has referred to this traumatic event in a number of her texts including *Le Pont du nord*, *Epousailles*, *Hommes et femmes*, *Clé*, *Origines*, and *Exercices de mémoire*. Would it be fair to suggest that for Leclerc, writing is a way of mourning and coming to terms with this inexplicable loss? To what extent can the death of her mother be seen to heighten her awareness of social injustice? Does her desire to return to the unblemished realm of the 'jardin d'enfance' indicate an authorial imperative to revisit a time before this painful loss, with Leclerc seeking to recreate an idyllic childhood in a paradisiacal garden of Eden albeit in the

symbolic realm of writing? In what manner does Leclerc set about exploring these issues in her corpus?

In 1967 Leclerc's short story entitled *Étoile-Nation* was accepted by Sartre and de Beauvoir for publication in *Les Temps Modernes*. On first sight this early text does not appear to be a typical illustration of Leclerc's writing. The narrative is divided into two parts. We follow the unnamed heroine, a philosophy teacher, through a day in her life as she meditates on whether she is pregnant and the possibility of undergoing an abortion. The influence of Sartre and de Beauvoir can undoubtedly be felt in the coolly controlled style and existential angst of the heroine. However, Leclerc's presentation of every day events, in this case the hustle and bustle of city life, as a spring board for exploring the human condition is inspired by Rousseau.

Several themes which will come to predominate in the later works are at play here. Firstly, the title, which refers to a metro station in Paris, introduces Leclerc's preoccupation with the train, which up to *Exercices de mémoire* signifies the integration of the individual in the community. For the heroine of *Étoile-Nation* the journey on the metro represents a mode of interaction with the every day and others around her which enables her to escape her feelings of solitude. A further related theme of import here is the significance of the train as a symbol of continuity. Following an unremitting course from one station to another, the train might be seen to evoke the cycles of nature and the female body. For the heroine, it represents an escape route which will enable her to"glisser continuellement d'un paysage à un autre [...]mais sans rupture jamais" (Leclerc,1967: 62). As in many of Leclerc's texts nature is presented in sibylline terms. For the leading protagonist it represents an escape route and ideal setting for a fairy tale encounter with a prince charming:

> Elle aurait voulu des marbres gris, des matins sans personne, des soirs de fêtes, et puis des ornières, des futaies, des lisières de la forêt, des orées du bois, des chemins creux...Elle aurait voulu un homme aux yeux noirs d'épée ancienne....(Leclerc, 1967: 62).

In the same year, Leclerc produced her first full scale work. *Although Le Pont du nord* is written in the third person singular, the subject matter, which deals with the death of the leading protagonist's mother, clearly carries an autobiographical resonance. This early work is the only one of Leclerc's texts to be classified as a novel and the

narrative action is much more developed in this text than in the later meditations. There is nothing particularly original about the simple plot. Nonetheless, the text captivates the reader through the author's use of narrative tension and emotion which builds throughout the text.

Themes typical to Leclerc's oeuvre are in evidence, including, sense and sensibility, nostalgia, violence, and most notably the connection between death and desire. Hélène, a twenty year old student, returns to the country home to pass the summer holidays with her family. As her mother's illness worsens, an erotic attachment starts to develop between Hélène and her aunt's husband Philippe.

This text provides the first glimpse of the idyllic childhood which Leclerc seeks to evoke, and of the rupture and chaos which the death of her mother would provoke. Hélène's childhood is presented as one where the *joie de vivre* reigns, where no harsh words are spoken, and where death is held in abeyance. One passage, in particular, evokes a prelapsarian existence where wo/men and nature coexist harmoniously, where grace and purity abound, where language is never used to control and where every day marks a new beginning full of hope. The qualities associated with this 'jardin d'enfance' bear many similarities to Leclerc's project of *écriture féminine*:

> Etres de grâce perpétuelle, dont les mots, les tâches, ne sont jamais que recommencements. Recommencements jamais ternis. [...] Etres acharnés de la terre, mourant sur place, comme se flanent les fleurs..Les bêtes viendront boire, les femmes butineront, et l'eau jaillira, indifférente et pure. La vie n'est ici que la mort indéfiniment réparée (Leclerc, 1967: 22).

Textual inscription provides the means to seize these perfect moments, to immortalise them in writing for a time when they no longer exist in reality (Leclerc, 1967: 191).

Many of the themes under development in these early works were to come to fruition in Leclerc's bestseller *Parole de femme;* The fear of pregnancy under discussion in *Étoile-Nation* would be reframed in a poetic celebration of women's life-giving forces as bearers of children while Leclerc's quest for a language of *jouissance* would become the central theme of the text (for a further discussion of this text see chapter 7). In terms of style, it might be argued that the simple unadorned tone of *Parole de femme* which gives the text its oral quality is uncharacteristic of Leclerc's writing. More typical is the first person voice which enhances the personal nature of the narrative.

Autobiographical Intentions and Interpretations

Although most critics have seen this text as a feminist manifesto, it can be situated within the wider context of Leclerc's humanitarian project.

1976 saw Leclerc moving even further away from what she considered to be the more radical approach to feminism adopted by the *Mouvement de la libération de la femme*. In Leclerc's view, the campaign for equal rights and improved social conditions for women had been an important step in the feminist cause. However, in her opinion, these aims had been achieved and it was now time to open up the discourse on how men and women could develop positive as opposed to oppositional relationships with one another.

In comparison to *Parole de femme*, the style of writing adopted in *Epousailles* is more typical of Leclerc's oeuvre. The sentences are embroidered and meandering. The feel of the text is almost poetic with the frequent appearance of parallelisms. Philosophical themes are explored through the author's autobiographical reminiscences on subjects including her love of the park at Versailles and reading of Descartes. Does this text mark a further authorial endeavour to recreate the lost 'jardin d'enfance'?

Epousailles is the second in the trilogy of texts dedicated to the quest for absolute love. The title of the text, which translates as marriage nuptials, points to the text as a celebration of life with Leclerc arguing that it is only our love of humanity and nature which give meaning to existence. As with *Parole de femme*, this text finds the author seeking the words to express female *jouissance*; a counterpoint to power relations played out in the family, at school, in the workplace and through the state:

> La jouissance n'est pas transgression de la loi, ou complice du pouvoir, elle est affirmation insolente du vivre, certitude impertinente de sa vanité, de l'inanité de sa prétention (Leclerc, 1976: 11).

This text introduces a primary scene where the author receives her mandate to write. This moment of awakening to *jouissance* will be reinscribed in different forms throughout Leclerc's corpus (see for example, Leclerc, 1967: 128; Leclerc, 1979: 181-2). Sitting on the steps leading out to her garden, the young Leclerc drinks a bowl of milk and suddenly experiences a sublime awakening to the joy of life. She makes a promise that one day she will write about this experience. For the author this is a promise which she still makes when seized by "la crampe du bonheur" (Leclerc,1976: 41).

> Et chaque fois que le bonheur m'a empoignée dans l'enfance, mais aussi après, et maintenant encore, j'ai été saisie de la même pensée, emportée de la même promesse : je ne veux rien penser que ce qui se pense d'ici, et ouvrir dans la parole tout ce qui s'y dit déjà confusément, obstinément (Leclerc, 1976: 41).

We also make the acquaintance of Alexandre and Marie, family friends who will figure later on in Leclerc's writing. The author remembers a key moment of insight when she watched Marie knitting. This seemingly simple encounter symbolises the transmission of women's knowledge and the celebration of life which, for Leclerc, is encapsulated in female *jouissance*. While Marie is a silent bearer of the archaic wisdom of women, Leclerc vows to speak of it through her writing: "Là où Marie brode savante et muette : écrire" (Leclerc,1976: 89). The presence of Alexandre is also of key importance in the text. A veteran of the war of 1914 and a hero of the resistance, Alexandre represents the author's love of simple pleasures and her passion for nature. Her confession that "A l'intime spectacle de la mémoire, Alexandre est encore mon personage favori" will however be called into question later on in *Exercices de mémoire* (Leclerc, 1976: 81).

Alexander, who works for a railway line, is closely associated with the author's passion for the train. A final chapter is dedicated to the discussion of the author's preference for this mode of transport. As she explains, the train provides a refreshing option from the cult of the individual represented by the car and the desire to transcend the human encapsulated in the aeroplane. The train breaks down the boundaries between self and Other, time and space with its "réseau de convergences-divergences-convergences spatiales, temporelles, sociales..." (Leclerc, 1976: 180-1). This positive evocation of the train will be retrospectively called into question by the author in *Exercices de mémoire* where it is associated with the Holocaust and comes to represent a utilisation of reason which has quite literally gone off the rails.

Another cherished figure in the author's past, the mother, is evoked in this text. The spectre of her death haunts Leclerc's writing and is examined in a chapter entitled 'De la mort, soudain'. Meditating upon the impact of this traumatic event on her life, the author recognises that it has provided the impetus to write. A central theme of the discussion, which Leclerc will return to in *Exercices de mémoire*, is the author's sense of guilt at surviving the death of another (Leclerc, 1976: 104). However, Leclerc's

response to the horror of the event is not to focus on the darker side of human existence but rather to concentrate on the miracle of life. Although the author could have been overwhelmed by sadness, she preferred to draw upon her experience in order to speak of the *jouissance* of the living (Leclerc, 1976: 106). For Leclerc, the confrontation with death, has not made her cynical but on the contrary has imbued her with a love of life and of humanity:

> Parler, je ne le peux que de la jouissance. Non pour remplir l'espace vide, infini, de nos morts. Il demeure. En lui nos bouches s'ouvrent à la folie flamboyante de la jouissance, pari somptueux de la naissance, émergence de l'amour (Leclerc, 1976: 118).

With the publication of *La Venue à l'écriture* (1977), co-edited with Hélène Cixous and Madeleine Gagnon, Leclerc's ties with the proponents of *écriture féminine* were made explicit. In an essay entitled *Lettre à Vermeer*, Leclerc expressed the need to inscribe the palpability of the female body and experience in writing through an analysis of a painting by Vermeer. The painting depicts a serving lady silently waiting on her mistress as the latter writes a letter. For Leclerc, the painting signifies the predicament facing the woman who seeks to express herself in writing. On the one hand, like the lady who is holding the letter at arms length from herself, she speaks at one remove from her sexual identity. On the other hand, like the maid, she may remain in touch with her body and yet she will be reduced to silence. For Leclerc, women must strive to find a means of expression which allows them to speak their female difference. This observation is to be a hallmark of her approach to women's writing. Gallop famously interpreted the text as a declaration of lesbian love with the author poeticising her desire for the maid figure who appears in the text (Gallop, 1988). However, Fallaize correctly argues that the letter is addressed to the author's mother "a figure who then merges both with the serving-woman and with a more generalised notion of woman" (Fallaize, 1993: 136).

The style of this piece is dense and packed with significance. The winding sentences, obscure rhetorical questions, repetitions and poetic incantations are typical to the writers of *écriture féminine* while Leclerc's desire to evoke a 'terre amour' illustrates her imperative to bridge the divide between nature and culture. The narrative shifts between the meditations of the first person narrator and her third person

description of the figures in the painting. The text provides another version of the 'lettre d'amour' (Leclerc, 1977: 119) while the purpose of writing is once more to conjure up the 'promise de l'enfance' (Leclerc, 1977: 119).

Published in 1979, *Au feu du jour*, which refers to a poem by Guillaume Apollinaire, describes the author's experience of giving up smoking. At first sight, the text appears to diverge from the main paradigm of Leclerc's writing. However, familiar authorial preoccupations including the discussion of absence, desire, plenitude and loss are in evidence. As in previous texts, Leclerc is able to develop her personal experience into a more general philosophical enquiry. The every day, banal practice of smoking leads her to raise such questions including, why do I smoke and why does giving up cause so much suffering?

As with *Exercices de mémoire,* the use of the first person voice and the present tense lend the text a sense of immediacy. In both cases, the fragments of thought which the author renders up suggest the impromptu nature of her project:

> Et je me mis pour m'occuper, pour griffonner mon malaise, à écrire ce qui suit; qui n'était pas un texte, qui n'était le début de rien, qui était pour passer le temps (Leclerc, 1979: 9).

Leclerc explores her cravings and desires concluding that smoking plays a similar role to writing in her life. Both allow her to conjure with the feelings of plenitude, absence, desire and loss, providing her with some sense of control over these overpowering drives. Each puff opens up a new possibility "une sorte de naissance" and acts as an elixir against death (Leclerc, 1979: 31).

With *Hommes et femmes* (1985), Leclerc completed her trilogy on the theme of love. This text opens with the author meditating upon her approach to the women's issue as voiced in *Parole de femme*. While some critics, including Bernard Henri-Lévy, have interpreted this text as signalling Leclerc's renunciation of her feminist roots, it seems more accurate to view the work as a logical progression in the authorial project (see chapter 8). The mature author now perceives her earlier interpretation of male female relationships to have produced an unbalanced view of the equation. Leclerc holds herself to account for celebrating the feminine as a liberatory force while giving scant attention to the desire for the Other as a unifying bond between men and women. Her project in this text is to evaluate the relationship between the two sexes in terms of

connection as exemplified in the communal search for absolute love: "J'avais négligé Éros parce qu'il fondait notre communauté, assurait notre indéfectible ligature. Je nous voulais obstinément séparés et distincts" (Leclerc, 1985: 21).

Leclerc does not aim to present a faithful social study of relationships between men and women. She is fully aware of the disasters, the divorces, the betrayals and heartaches which are a common feature of contemporary relationships. Her concern is, rather, to explore the ideal of love which, in her opinion, is still foremost in the minds of many of us when we dream of finding the perfect partner. Leclerc questions the value of the sexual act when it is divorced from emotion. In her opinion, sex without love constitutes a deception of everything that it means to be human. In this text, written after the death of her husband, Leclerc's desire to confront the spectre of human mortality with the celebratory forces of female *jouissance* is once more the driving force behind her writing. Leclerc's quest for the fairytale ending, the perfect love match, is as strong as ever.

For Leclerc, love and the act of writing bear certain similarities, as both constitute a form of amorous exchange. Leclerc often describes writing as a 'pari' or wager where the self is given in a declaration of unconditional love. This is particularly apparent in *Origines* and *Exercices de mémoire*.

> J'écris parce que j'appelle.
>
> Mais n'est-ce pas ainsi que "je t'aime" se dit? (Leclerc, 1985: 7).

At times, the second person familiar, addressed to an ideal reader (see for example *Lettre à Vermeer, Origines*, *Exercices de mémoire*), may evince the romantic encounter between author and reader.

In this text, and indeed all of Leclerc's writing up to *Exercices de mémoire,* the influence of the romantic aesthetic is apparent. On page 7 of the text the author draws a connection between the daybreak, the process of falling in love and the revelation of truth: "Il me semble n'avoir jamais réellement distingué la naissance du jour, l'entrée dans l'amour et le dévoilement de la vérité" (Leclerc, 1985: 7). The quest for enlightenment and the exploration of memory are closely interconnected and the interrogation of the past is envisaged as a form of remembrance leading to greater self awareness. Leclerc's promise not to forget, "On jurait qu'on n'oublierait jamais qu'on

avait juré..." (Leclerc, 1985: 39), anticipates a similar declaration in *Exercices de mémoire*.

1986 saw the publication of a volume of four intriguing short stories grouped together under the ambiguous title *Le Mal de mère*. Leclerc's continuing interest in the theme of motherhood hardly needs be stressed. However this time her playful title seemed to hint at a darker side of motherhood untouched in her previous texts. To be or not to be a mother? To have or not to have a mother? Each of Leclerc's narratives demonstrate that motherhood is no easy task while the theme is used as a pivotal force to discuss other metaphysical issues close to Leclerc's heart including the forces of life and death, good and evil, love and religion. The first three stories revolve around female protagonists who fail to conform to the stereotypical image of the nurturing 'good' mother. The first story 'Sarah' focuses on the triangular relationship between two siblings François and Clara and their half brother Luc who are trapped in an eternal childhood. The siblings are haunted by the memory of their father's Jewish lover 'Sarah' who is the mother of Luc while their own mother Jeanne becomes an invasive and overpowering presence. The sparse and seemingly simple style of the piece hides a deeper psychological sub-plot and recalls the writings of Duras. The veiled references to the evacuation of 'Sarah' anticipate the discussion of the psychological mechanisms behind antisemitism in *Exercises de mémoire*.

The second story entitled 'Deli-Delo' treats the subject of the conflicting maternal forces of desire and repulsion for a child. The delusional first person monologue is addressed to a baby whom the protagonist has snatched while out walking in a cemetery. The narrator's desire to possess the new life force which the baby represents can be seen to compensate for the death of her parents and her solitary existence. However, the narrator is rudely brought back to reality as the baby's inconsolable cries disrupt her newly found tranquillity and lead her to question whether purity and goodness exist, even in a newly born baby. The narrator laments: "Tu me fais mourir vivante à crier comme ça, tu me tortures avec ton affreux mal, tu m'extrapoles, tu m'horrifies..." (Leclerc, 1986: 82). Unable to accept this obstacle to her quest for meaning in life, the narrator becomes the anathema of motherhood as she suffocates the baby.

The third story, 'La Guerre Civile' is set in Greece against a backdrop of a Communist uprising. This time the subjects under discussion are maternal jealousy and the fear of separation. In the first scene, Magda watches anxiously over her son

Anguelos as he bathes in a river, fearing that he might drown. Later on in the story Anguelos falls ill with peritonitis. Magda becomes increasingly jealous of her son's growing friendship with Takis, a Communist protestor, who occupies the hospital bed next to him. This relationship might be seen to represent the beginnings of the son's separation from his mother through his association with the world of male action. However, while the mother is suspicious of this friendship, her nurturing instincts override her jealousy as she concedes that she would rather he became a Communist than to loose her son to a life at sea .

As in *Exercices de mémoire,* Leclerc is profoundly anxious about the reader's reaction to her 'difficult' subject matter and fears losing her audience. In the last story, then, she vows to present an image of motherhood which will counterbalance the bleak picture which she has hitherto offered the reader. In 'Ci-gÎt mémé Pastille' Leclerc recounts the fairytale story of an old lady who lives on a hill side and who provides a luxurious feast for her grand daughter Julie and her group of friends. As the author points out, the good nature of mémé Pastille offers the reader a clue to her own authorial intentions: "C'est à ce coeur qu'allait mon coeur, à ce coeur que couraient toutes mes intentions d'écriture" (Leclerc, 1986: 124). Reiterating reasons for writing evoked in earlier works she explains her motivations in the following manner:

> C'est cette irrépressible pulsion à soigner, réparer, consoler, ce penchant viscéral à faire taire la dure vérité dès qu'elle cherche à se dire, à la couvrir d'amour, à l'étouffer de baisers (Leclerc, 1986: 152-3).

Leclerc's desire for reparation is however thwarted as she finds her narrative interrupted by invasive images of the fairytale grandmother who metamorphoses into a voracious wolf. Her author's block leads to a surreal passage where she describes herself vomiting a still born baby. This anecdote can perhaps be seen as the inverse of the dream of giving birth recounted in *Exercices de mémoire* (Leclerc, 1992: 115-6). In both instances writing is closely associated with birthing, however, in this case the dead baby signifies the stultifying images of motherhood which the author holds herself to account for producing. The author's reaction of shedding incontrollable tears is another intertextual marker of the two texts where the description is almost identical in both cases (see Leclerc, 1992: 13-140):

> C'était de simples larmes qui n'étaient à personne, ni à moi, ni à mémé Pastille, qui venaient de je ne sais où, me traversaient sans réellement s'intéresser à moi" (Leclerc, 1986: 144).

Foreshadowing a recognition which will be more fully explored in *Exercices de mémoire,* the author realises that her desire to see the 'good' in everything may have led her to produce a one dimensional picture of her subject matter. Leclerc comes to realise that the production of static images of 'good' and 'bad' mothers serve to turn women into frozen statues as opposed to living beings. In conclusion she concedes that women are capable of being both the loving grandmother and the wicked stepmother. Nonetheless, the author is unable to renounce her belief in the paradisiacal 'jardin d'enfance':

> Ah ! Je le verrai, je le verrai bien, c'est promis ; et je ferai un poème pour vous à la beauté de mon jardin qui ne veut pas mourir et qui m'appelle d'une petite voix enfantine, adorable, irrésistible ... (Leclerc, 1986: 162).

The search for the 'Jardin d'enfance' could not have been closer to Leclerc's heart than in 1988 when she returned to a major influence on her writing: her love for the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The text is more sober in style then her other works although it still contains the lyrical and poetic qualities common to her corpus. *Origines* is one of Leclerc's most autobiographical texts. In it she discusses the death of her mother, her school years, her marriage to the author Nicolas Poulantzas, her meeting with Sartre and de Beauvoir, the events of May 68 and of course her passion for the works of Rousseau which she traces back to a dictation test which she sat when she was 10 years old.

The text is written as a love letter to Rousseau. As in many of Leclerc's works, the use of the second person singular suggests the intimate nature of the address. However, whereas in *Parole de femme* the 'tu', addressed to a male reader was often voiced in an accusatory in tone, in *Origines* the addressee (Rousseau) is presented in a much more favourable light. Again we are aware of Leclerc's desire to speak where others have remained silent. In this particular case the author seeks to question the refusal of French scholars to take Rousseau's writing seriously. She argues that

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Rousseau's profound insights may partly explain why others have sought to deride him[1]. Leclerc's project is a defiant gesture to break the 'oubli' surrounding his writing.

It is worthy of note that Leclerc's inspiration for writing often comes from reading or viewing other art works: *Origines* is engendered from Leclerc's readings of texts by Rousseau including *La Nouvelle Héloïse;* Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* is the spring board for *Exercices de mémoire*; *Clé* is a re-reading of Perrault's *Blue Beard*; Vermeer's painting provides the inspiration for Leclerc's letter of love to her mother. As Leclerc points out in *Origines*, the processes of reading and writing are inseparable for her. In an imaginary address to Rousseau she describes her text as an expression of "cette soif d'écrire l'amour que j'ai pour tes livres, ce désir que je ne parviens jamais à satisfaire et auquel je donne le change en substituant ton écriture à la mienne" (Leclerc, 1988: 10).

As in other texts like *Clé* and *Exercices de mémoire*, the interactive nature of reading and writing is made explicit in the text through the inclusion of quotations from Rousseau's writings. Like Rousseau, Leclerc's central project is to make sense of injustice, to explore the loss of innocence and to address these questions using reason and enlightened thought. However, Leclerc's reference to the texts of Rousseau as the source and inspiration for her own works might be seen to complicate definitions of *écriture féminine.*

The origins of Leclerc's references to 'le jardin d'enfance' are traced back to a fresco which was painted on the wall of the infirmary at her old *lycée*. This fresco, offering images of maternal figures and children in harmony with nature, points to the key themes in her writing: the search for innocence and harmonious interactions with nature, the critique of patriarchal power and an impoverished society. The author declares that :

> Je peux suivre à la trace à travers mes textes la persistance naïve et probablement inexpugnable de cette figuration archaïque et ordonnée du monde : d'un côté la nature, soit la terre, le ciel, les eaux, les plantes, les animaux et les enfants sous la protection souveraine et aimante des femmes, et de l'autre côté, ailleurs, sans représentation possible, tout le reste confus et redouté, les hommes, les travaux, la société et ses contraintes" (Leclerc, 1988: 19-20).

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For Leclerc, the 'jardin d'enfance' is the origin of all writing. In her opinion, writing is simply a re-inscription of moments of truth which were gleaned through the innocence of a child's eyes. Writing does not tell us anything new it simply enables us to retrace past experience:

> Remontons à la source et nous verrons dans la lumière enfantine un monde tout disposé à recevoir plus tard les circonvolutions de nos écritures, les édifices laborieux de nos méditations (Leclerc, 1988: 20).

A formative moment in the author's career is mentioned in this text. Leclerc recounts the impression which a passage from the *Nouvelle Héloïse* entitled 'promenade sur le lac' made on her. The romantic encounter between the two young lovers was to have a huge impact on the young Leclerc:

> Il me semble qu'ils sont arrivés. Au plus haut, au plus heureux, en ce point où leur séparation découvre son revers enchanté : celui d'une éternelle alliance où la parole entre eux atteint sa perfection de silence plein de certitude : On peut se taire puisqu'il est maintenant pour toujours entendu que l'on n'a jamais cessé de s'entendre" (Leclerc, 1988: 98-9).

The absolute nature of the protagonists' love is to be rewritten in a different form in a number of texts. This encounter appears albeit in a different guise in *Hommes et femmes,* where Leclerc describes an ephemeral and unspoken exchange with a bus driver, and in *Exercices de mémoire,* where she recalls a boat trip taken with an angelic and taciturn German boy (Leclerc,1988: 207-213; Leclerc, 1992: 103-104). The term 'jamais-toujours' is employed in a contradictory fashion by Leclerc. At times evoking the absolute nature of an unfulfilled love, at others, signifying the jealous and possessive love sometimes associated with the traditional couple.

The title of a short work published in 1989 entitled *Clé* can be seen to provide a key to Leclerc's writing. In this highly readable text Leclerc provides an insightful reading of Perrault's fairy tale *Blue Beard.* Leclerc focuses her attention on the role which the word *clé* plays in the text. This leads her to a more general discussion of the function of language: "Comme si Clé en savait plus que les autres mots, comme si Clé

détenait le secret de leur secrets, comme si le mot de passe de tous les mots était Clé" (Leclerc, 1989: 14).

As in other texts like *Origines* and *Parole de femme* Leclerc demonstrates the huge impact which words have on our perception of selfhood and identity. Although she is clearly concerned to reveal certain 'truths' about experience, she is equally conscious of the manner in which the language which we have at our disposal comes to bear on us. In these same texts this realisation is broadened out to suggest the intertextual nature of all writing. Indeed, Leclerc's predilection for citing other works as the inspiration for her projects implies both the interconnectedness of reading and writing and the impossibility of total originality. As the author points out "La littérature nous écrit d'avance, bien avant que nous ne la poursuivions..." (Leclerc, 1989: 36).

The expression of authorial anxiety about the value of her writing is again in evidence. In *Origines* the author envisages her project as the manifestation of her 'folie'. In *Clé*, as in *Exercices de mémoire* the fear of rejection by the reader is anticipated in numerous authorial interventions (see chapter 7). Leclerc often justifies her forays into the autobiographical realm, masking the authorial 'je' with the disclaimer that she is simply the vessel through which discourses pass: "Clé m'est arrivé sans que je l'aie demandé avec sa question. Je suis liée, ligotée. Impossible de revenir là-dessus" (Leclerc, 1989: 12-13).

The word *clé* has a particular significance for a writer of *écriture féminine*. Indeed, as Leclerc points out, the two variations of the spelling: *clé* and *clef*, may respectively be seen to represent the feminine and the masculine. In a rather convoluted discussion, Leclerc argues that while she recognises the validity of contrary readings, for her the open endedness of the word *clé* exemplifies the qualities of the feminine and women's words while the closed nature of the alternative *clef* is typical of masculine and male authored language.

An analysis of Perrault's fairytale enables the author to return to a number of her favourite themes. Her interest in fairytales as demonstrated in texts like *Etoile-Nation*, and *Hommes et femmes* is made explicit in this text. For Leclerc, the fairytale represents both the deliverance from evil, and the reclamation of the lost maternal paradise, the return "dans le sein de sa mère, concilié, achevé, éternel..." (Leclerc, 1989: 38). Her desire to see the world through the innocent and unclouded eyes of a child is satiated through the re-reading of a narrative first encountered in childhood. The author declares that "C'est l'enfance qui parle en moi ainsi qu'elle a parlé (Leclerc, 1989: 30). As in

Origines, the author's desire to adopt the name of Rousseau's protagonist 'Claire' indicates her quest for clarity (Leclerc, 1989: 30).

The feminist interest of a text which narrates the story of an overbearing patriarch who murders his wives because of their curiosity is all too apparent. However, the murderous Blue Beard also connotes the mother's death which threatens to annihilate the author and her younger sister. In the most overtly autobiographical passages of the text, the author once again appears to be writing in order to assuage her guilt at surviving her mother's death[ii]. In this case, the lust for life which she felt as a result of her bereavement is contrasted with the manner in which the same experience drained the life forces of her younger sister:

> Moi, c'est bizarre, on dirait presque que ça me fait vivre davantage, la mort. Tandis qu'elle, la petite, c'est terrible, c'est comme s'il lui fallait rester à jamais attachée à son ombre (Leclerc, 1989: 31).

For Leclerc, writing provides a means not only to protect herself from the threatening presence of death but also to save her sister from the murderous hands of Blue Beard (Leclerc, 1989: 32). Writing is employed like an incantation protecting the author from human mortality. Like the fairy-tale, Leclerc's text confronts the spectre of death in order to hold it in abeyance.

The discussion of death in this text is a fitting precursor to the less optimistic meditation on the same subject in *Exercices de mémoire* (Leclerc, 1992). Leclerc, compares herself to the wives of Blue beard who are condemned for their inquisitiveness, for daring to confront death. Leclerc, uses the analogy of being cast out of paradise to describe the experience of witnessing the death of another (Leclerc, 1989: 49) and indeed, by the time she comes to undertake the subject of the Holocaust, Leclerc has lost all hope that literature can provide salvation.

Leclerc's most recent text, *Exercices de mémoire* (1992), breaks with the familiar authorial paradigm. The author's optimistic vision of humanity is called into question after she sees Claude Lanzmann's Holocaust documentary. This experience leads her to question her previous motivations for writing.

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> J'écrivais pour donner lieu, donner chance, donner vie, espace et fécondité à ce qui avait fait joie. Et le reste, longtemps, je n'ai pas voulue entendre – m'en entendre parler (Leclerc, 1992: 82).

In what amounts to a rewriting of previous texts, key incidents in the author's past and most notably the author's desire to return to 'le jardin d'enfance' are sharply called into question. Leclerc now suggests that nostalgia for childhood innocence may in fact be a defence mechanism to prevent facing up to the harsh realities of life. The mature narrator reluctantly acknowledges that there is no 'jardin d'enfance' but that it is a product of the imagination, a form of nostalgia, created retrospectively as a way of coping with loss and life's imperfections.

Leclerc's erstwhile quest to make sense of death through the celebration of life is retrospectively rejected as a form of blindness, a refusal to see the truth. The fight against evil is perceived as a reductive binary opposition. Alexandre who was once held up as an example of everything most admirable about human beings is now seen to be a simple minded bigot who is as war hungry as the next man. The much loved trains which traversed Leclerc's childhood are now perceived as the harbingers of death which transport millions of innocent victims to the gas chambers. If in *Clé* Leclerc envisaged her brothers as dashing princes who offered protection and salvation, in *Exercices de mémoire* the brothers (figured as Cain and Abel) are locked in a murderous relationship.

This is not however to suggest that Leclerc has succumbed to an extreme form of nihilism. For Leclerc, the challenge to create a better society is a strong as ever but now it is no longer to be found in the expression of female *jouissance*, nor the search for a 'jardin d'enfance'. Her message in this text is more pragmatic, good and evil are components in each and everyone of us, life and death are inevitabilities of the human condition. In order to prevent further destruction we must stare death full in the face and accept the tragedy of the human condition with humility.

Conclusion

In seeking to provide the reader with an overview of the respective autobiographical *corpi* of Cardinal and Leclerc I hope to have traced the recurrent intertextual markers in their writing. In my reading of Cardinal I have noted a familiar autobiographical

paradigm of the narrator's loss of the maternal homeland, physical disintegration and estrangement from her family. In the case of Leclerc, the quest for absolute love, the desire to return to the 'jardin d'enfance' and the imperative to mourn maternal loss are of key significance to her autobiographical project. While these repetitive sequences might be seen to take on a fictive countenance through their very recurrence, it is nonetheless correct to suggest that they find their origins in the authors' life experience. Both authors' sense of rupture, loss and absence provides the imperative to embark upon the autobiographical journey. As such writing functions as a salve to loss imbuing each author with a sense of power and control over disruptive and disempowering occurrences like the death of a mother (Leclerc) or the loss of one's homeland (Cardinal). In conclusion, it seems plausible to flag up the necessity of a critical approach to reading these authors which takes account of the 'autos' (self) 'bios' (life) and the 'graphe' (inscription of that life). For, as I hope to have demonstrated, each of these elements is in play in the autobiographical fictions of Cardinal and Leclerc. The emphasis which I have placed on each author's situated experience in my reading of these texts points to the necessity of providing a gender sensitive framework for reviewing women's autobiography. In order to explore this question further, I dedicate the next two chapters to a close analysis of *Les Mots pour le dire*. This analysis will enable me to raise a number of questions: To what extent do traditional autobiographical theories, like those of Lejeune, provide a fitting structure for reading women's self-writing? In what ways are gender and genre interconnected? How, if at all, does the political agenda of the feminist writer problematise the autobiographical act?

Notes

[i] Leclerc repeats this line of argument in *Exercices de mémoire* to explain the persecution of the Jews (Leclerc, 1992).

[ii] Tidd has noted a similar characteristic in the writing of de Beauvoir where "Auto/biography and the memoirs act as a site of recovery or as an opportunity to rework lost relationships with the Other" (Tidd, 1999: 69).

Part 2

Marie Cardinal:
Les Mots pour le dire

3

Fictions of the Self

3.1. The Autobiographical Pact: a Case of Mistaken Identity

Philippe Lejeune made a notable impression on the landscape of autobiographical criticism with his theory of the autobiographical pact (the author's declaration of autobiographical intention) as a defining feature of the genre. Since then, he has been criticised by a number of feminist theorists for producing a homocentric definition of the genre (see for instance, Stanley,1992; Miller, 1980). In this chapter, I draw upon *Les Mots pour le dire* as a test case for Lejeune's theories. Referring also to the work of Georges Gusdorf, Georges May and more recent developments in autobiographical theory I raise a number of questions about the relationship between gender and genre. How does gender come to bear on the autobiographical pact? To what extent might the fear of critical reprisal lead to the fictionalisation of the autobiographical voice? In such a case, does a reading of women's autobiography require attention not only to autobiographical intention but also to critical reception? This chapter can be seen to complement chapter 8 where I engage in a close analysis of the reception of the texts under study. The analysis undertaken in this chapter will point the way toward the central claim of this thesis, that autobiographical intention and critical reception cannot be treated as separate entities. It flags up the necessity for a critical approach residing in an awareness of the interconnectedness of gender and genre, intention and interpretation. In the second part of the chapter I engage in a gender specific reading of *Les Mots pour le dire* with reference to feminist autobiographical criticism.

One of the problems inherent in writing a thesis on women's autobiography is the fact that many female authored texts fail to conform to 'traditional' generic requirements. This is, perhaps, because much early autobiographical theory failed to account for the 'difference' of women's writing. Although *Les Mots pour le dire* cannot, properly speaking, be described as an autobiography, my reason for including it in this study is that I believe that it challenges the reader to re-evaluate conventional approaches to autobiographical criticism. At the time of the publication of *Les Mots pour le dire*, autobiography was mainly defined in terms of its opposition to fictional

and creative writing. Critics placed the emphasis on 'truthfulness' and historical accuracy when discerning whether or not a text should be included in the autobiographical canon. However, this kind of classification system was especially problematic for women writers who, struggling to gain recognition within the literary milieu, were often utilising the genre in order to explore their social roles and to construct different selfhoods. For these reasons the line between fiction and reality has often been less clearly defined in women's self writing.

This phenomenon is especially apparent in *Les Mots pour le dire*, where Cardinal is as much engaged in a process of reformulating her selfhood as she is of reflecting her identity. Cardinal's approach to self-writing is both highly ambiguous and original. On the one hand, her desire to be taken seriously as an author of quality literature, prompts her to foreground the fictional aspects of *Les Mots pour le dire*. On the other, her recognition that confessional writing is an effective tool for raising consciousness among women, leads her to speak of the text as if it were a truthful account of her life (see chapter 4). In general, readers and critics alike have tended not to make a distinction between the anonymous narrator who features in *Les Mots pour le dire* and Cardinal herself. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, she has nonetheless failed to gain recognition in the autobiographical canon.

Although Lejeune has latterly come under fire for what Paul John Eakin regards as "intemporal formalist idealism" (Lejeune,1989: vii), his seminal study of the genre in *L'Autobiographie en France* (Lejeune,1971) provided a noteworthy contribution to autobiographical criticism. In an attempt to draw a boundary between autobiography and other forms of self-writing (diary, memoir, autobiographical novel and poem) Lejeune defined autobiography as a "récit rétrospectif en prose que quelqu'un fait de sa propre existence, quand il met l'accent principal sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité" (Lejeune,1971: 14). Of course, as Lejeune was aware, the definition was inherently flawed because it failed to offer any qualifying distinction between fictional and factual writing. This was a problem which he tried to overcome later on in the same work by introducing the idea of 'le pacte autobiographique'. Lejeune argued that the autobiographical nature of a work could be attested to only if the author made a pact with the reader affirming that it was a true account of his life story. Again conceding the problematic nature of intentionality (could the reader trust the author? Were there not many fictional texts which were presented as life stories?) Lejeune added that the pact must be verifiable through external data (Lejeune, 1971: 26). If the critic's job looked set to become akin to that of the private detective then

Lejeune once more came to the rescue, refining his definition in *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Lejeune,1975). In this later work Lejeune clarified his notion of the pact calling for a coincidence of name between the author, narrator and protagonist.

More recently Lejeune's theory has been criticised for several reasons, not least because the strict boundary line which he erected between autobiography and fiction is now seen to represent an outmoded humanist perspective[i]. Indeed, it might be argued that the concept of a 'pact' relies upon the assumption that categories such as truth, fiction, reality and identity can be fixed without reference to historical and social setting.

Another main weakness of Lejeune's approach is his lack of gender consciousness. The feminist critic, Nancy Miller, has drawn attention to the fact that Lejeune fails to consider the manner in which gender may influence the nature of the 'pact'. She argues that women writers frequently eschew the proper name in order to avoid traditional patterns of reading (Miller, 1980). Felski has similarly argued that the line between fiction and autobiography is not clearly defined in women's writing. She cites the example of women's confessional writing which, in her opinion, is a mixture of "ambiguous or contradictory signals" which "problematise rather than confirm the distinction between autobiography and fiction". (Felski, 1989: 92)

In contrast to Lejeune, other critics including Georges May, James Olney and Georges Gusdorf can be seen to offer less rigid interpretations of the relationship between autobiography and fiction. For example, Georges May has suggested that the question of autobiographical truth is itself "a faux problem" given the impossibility of verifying all of the autobiographical data which an author might proffer to the reader (May, 1979: 21). May recognised that the act of remembering was always, to some extent, a reconstruction of events from a position of hindsight. For this reason he argued that the point of interest was not the truthfulness of the account but the meaningfulness of the memories to the autobiographer. Despite his attempt to blur the generic distinctions between fiction and autobiography May outlined seven categories in a spectrum starting with total fiction and progressing through to the purely autobiographical (May,1979: 188-194). Similarly Georges Gusdorf and James Olney have suggested that the boundary line between autobiography and fiction is always in flux (Gusdorf, 1980, Olney, 1980). One reason for their resistance to definitions of autobiography as the referential genre par excellence was their concern to counter its negative image as the dark continent of literature. However, instead of denying the

referential aspects of autobiography they argued that all literature, including literary criticism, is to some extent autobiographical for, in their opinion, it is impossible for the writer not to be influenced by his experiential reality (Olney, 1980).

Despite the flaws in Lejeune's autobiographical theory, it is of particular interest to my project because by placing the emphasis on the pact which was shared between author and reader he was, in the words of Paul John Eakin, "well on his way to establishing a reader-based poetics of autobiography" (Lejeune,1989: ix). As Lejeune pointed out in *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, his definition of the genre implied an "analysis, on the global level of *publication*, of the implicit or explicit contract proposed by the *author* to the *reader*, a contract which determines the mode of reading of the text and engenders the effects which, attributed to the text, seem to us to define it as autobiography" (Lejeune, 1989: 29). Seen in this light, "the history of autobiography would be therefore, above all, a history of its mode of reading" (Lejeune,1989: 30).

3.2. Fictions of the Self

Drawing upon Lejeune's definition of the genre, only three of Marie Cardinal's texts: *Cet été-là* (Cardinal,1967), *Autrement dit* (Cardinal,1977), and *Au pays de mes racines* (Cardinal, 1980) can, properly speaking, be described as autobiographical. However, even these texts do not focus on the totality of her life history in the manner which has been required by Lejeune: in *Cet été-là* the narrative action is contained with in a period of a few months when Cardinal recounts her involvement in the making of Jean-Luc Godard's film: *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*. Similarly, while Cardinal discusses various aspects of her life with Annie Leclerc in *Autrement dit*, the narrative is fragmentary and focuses on specific thematic concerns such as her relationship with her mother, her approach to writing and her viewpoint on rape and marriage. Again, in *Au Pays de mes racines* the action centres around the author's journey to post-colonial Algeria earlier that year. Furthermore, the final chapter is written by her daughter Bénédicte.

To what extent, then, can *Les Mots pour le dire* be seen to conform to Lejeune's definition of autobiography as a "récit rétrospectif" (Lejeune,1971:14)? The text does broadly retrace elements of Cardinal's past history. As with her protagonist, she was born in Algeria and raised by a family of *piednoirs*; both remain nostalgic for the Algerian country: its sensuous beauty, its oral tradition and Mediterranean landscapes;

both are deeply affected by childhood traumas, having experienced an ambiguous relationship with their mother and a father who left home at their birth; both have a younger sister who died of tuberculosis and an older brother from whom they feel estranged, both are married to a university lecturer who separates from the family to take a post in Canada; both have suffered a nervous breakdown; both go through a seven year psychoanalysis which will awaken them to women's oppression; both become writers[ii].

Nonetheless, if we are to accept Lejeune's contention that, when seeking to define autobiography it is "a question of all or nothing" (Lejeune, 1989:5) then *Les Mots pour le dire* cannot be seen to possess the correct entry requirements. Perhaps the most obvious reason for arguing against a reading of the text as a true account is that Cardinal fails to make a 'pact' with the reader attesting to the veracity of her story. Paradoxically, while Cardinal may seek to obtain the reader's trust and complicity through adopting an intimate first person voice, she makes no disclosure within the text itself which links her directly to her anonymous narrator. One of the main reasons for this, which I will discuss more fully later on, might be Cardinal's overriding desire to generalise her experience to the body of her readers and, hence, to avoid presenting her selfhood as in any way unique.[iii]

Despite the apparently frank and open style which Cardinal adopts, the reader is constantly forced to question the hyperbolic and mythical proportions which the text assumes. For instance, was the mother really such an unrepenting maternal rogue? Or have her negative characteristics been magnified in order to solicit the reader's total identification with the narrator? Could the protagonist really have suffered from incessant menstrual haemorrhaging without having ultimately bled to death? It seems fair to suggest that Cardinal's evocative descriptions of the narrator's menstrual problems are intended less to provide a realistic documentation of her neurosis and more to arrest the reader's attention:

> le sang était sorti de moi comme une cordelette rouge qui ne cessait de se dévider : un robinet ouvert. Je me souviens de ma stupeur en constatant cela, puis de ma terreur: "A ce train-là je serai vidée de mon sang en dix minutes" (Cardinal,1975: 41).

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On this point, Cairns opinion that "the whole text may be viewed as a poetic, specifically modern process of myth-making" seems valid (Cairns,1992: 86). In as much as Cardinal's text can be read as a modern day myth, it is also possible to suggest that it demonstrates many of the paradigmatic features of the fairy tale. Unfortunately constraints of space prevent me from developing this point in greater detail here [iv]. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the language which Cardinal uses to describe the narrator's recovery can be seen to endorse such a reading:

> Cela tenait du miracle, du conte de fées, de la sorcellerie. Ma vie était entièrement transformée. Non seulement j'avais découvert le moyen de m'exprimer mais j'avais trouvé toute seule le chemin qui m'éloignait de ma famille, de mon milieu, me permettant ainsi de construire un univers qui m'était propre (Cardinal,1975: 271).

Bearing this in mind, we might wonder just how far Cardinal has restructured her lived experience in order to create a sense of wish fulfilment in the reader. This is a question to which I will return when I consider the critical response to the text. Indeed, a number of critics have located its popular appeal in the fact that Cardinal provides a seemingly fantastical resolution to the narrator's problems. For instance, Fernande Schulmann has commented that the overriding strength of the text is "d'être tonique, comme un conte de fées où le rôle de la bonne fée serait dévolu à la vie" (Schulmann,1975: 943).

The 'truthfulness' of the narrative is most notably called into question in the section where the narrator recalls her mother's attempt to abort her. Cardinal opens chapter seven by painstakingly constructing the setting of the encounter between mother and daughter. She offers the reader a host of realist details including the date: 1943 and the location of the encounter: the salon. The posture, expression and clothes of the narrator's mother are all recalled in precise detail:

> Son corps trop gras et appétissant ne ressemblait pas à son visage. Il était gainé dans un impeccable "pyjama" de shantung blanc très large du bas si bien que le tissu tombait en godets le long de ses jambes qu'elle venait de croiser (Cardinal,1975: 131).

However, several pages on the narrator calls the accuracy of her memory into question by confessing that:

> A la vérité, cela ne s'est pas passé comme ça. Nous n'étions pas à la ferme, dans le salon, en face d'un feu de bois. Tout son monologue, toutes les précisions, les révélations et les instructions qu'elle me donnait [..] c'est dans la rue qu'elle me les débitait (Cardinal,1975: 160).

Furthermore, Cardinal has explained how, in real life, the exploration of the thrashing which her mother gave her played a much more important role in her analysis than the confession of her mother's attempt to abort her. This was because she had already worked through the abortion revelation. On the other hand the effects of "the spectacle of [her] mother's violence" had remained profoundly repressed (Cardinal,1977: 28). However, in the actual text Cardinal played up the importance of the abortion confession, realising that its symbolic resonances were much more powerful when presented in the literary medium. In a similar fashion, Cardinal has adumbrated how she omitted to accord any place to the cancer which she developed at the time of her mother's death in the text (Cardinal, 1977: 197-9). She interpreted the appearance of cancer as a somatic response to the guilty feelings which she harboured about having missed her mother's funeral. Nonetheless, she chose not to accord it any importance in the text because "il était énorme et qu'il aurait peut-être engagé le livre sur une voie que je ne voulais pas lui faire suivre" (Cardinal,1977:194).

The ambiguity surrounding the generic status of the text was further heightened through the conflicting information which was given on the cover. When *Les Mots pour le dire* was first published in 1975 the original edition was classified as a 'roman'. However, the description given on the back cover presented the work as 'un cas vécu' and 'un document vérité'. By the time that the text appeared in the popular paperback *Livre de poche* series it was still described as 'un cas vécu' while its presentation as a novel was dropped. In *Autrement dit* Cardinal has drawn attention to the fact that *Les Mots pour le dire* was initially classified as a 'roman' in the best-seller list of *L'Express*. However, when it really became a best-seller it was featured under the category of 'essais et documents':

> Quand le livre à commencé à se vendre il a été classé dans la liste des best-sellers de *L'Express* à la section 'romans'. Puis quand il est réellement devenu un best-seller il est passé, dans le même journal, à la section 'essais et documents' [...] On a dit alors: ce n'est pas un roman, c'est une autobiographie (Cardinal,1977: 85).

The changing generic status of *Les Mots pour le dire* highlights one of the fundamental tensions which marks Cardinal's autobiographical project. For, if on the one hand, she set out to provide a documentary account of her life which would be a source of inspiration to her readers, on the other, she also wanted to be considered as an author of quality literature. Although the relationship between these projects may not initially appear to be oxymoronic, autobiographical writing has historically been accorded a lower status than literature. Furthermore, for women who produce self-writing the situation is doubly problematic. In what ways does Cardinal's autobiographical fiction demonstrate the interrelatedness of gender and genre? To what extent does gender come to bear on the nature of the authorial pact and the classification of the text?

3.3. Autobiography and Narcissism: The Autobiographical Mask

Quand j'écris, je pars toujours de quelque chose que je connais, que j'ai vécu, et puis ça se transforme, ça s'ouvre, ça se divague, le 'je' pourrait devenir un 'elle', mais 'elle' c'est moi bien plus que 'je'. Je est un masque (Cardinal, 1977: 28)

In *Autrement dit* Marie Cardinal has evoked her childhood dream of running away with a cabaret troop (Cardinal, 1977: 56). This fantasy suggests a desire to assume another identity, to put on a mask and to become another person. The successful actor is blessed with the double gift of being able to draw upon past experiences and of being able to fictionalise those experiences in order to assume the identity of another. While Cardinal expresses her regret that she never fulfilled this aim, the analogy between cabaret and Cardinal's writing is apt. For the woman writer who attempts to inscribe a uniquely female experience the constraints of the genre may necessitate both the

fictionalisation of the self and the assumption of a chameleon identity. In the autobiographical realm, so closely associated with freedom of expression, why is the female author compelled to wear a mask?

In her study of francophone self-writing, Leah D. Hewitt has employed the apt metaphor of the tightrope walk to connote the precarious act of autobiographical writing. Hewitt argues that, for a woman writer, the act of autobiographical self-expression may not be self-evident, for as she points out "A female name attached to an autobiography particularizes the text in ways that a male name does not" (Hewitt, 1990: 4). A main line of defence adopted by male critics is to accuse the female writer of vanity. Of course, narcissism has often been associated with femininity. In famous paintings like Tintoretto's *Susannah and the Elders* and Memling's *Vanity* [v]the mirror is used as a symbol of women's self obsession. A similar discourse manifests itself in a different form in the psychoanalytical discourses of Freud on femininity and in particular in his essay on female narcissism (1953). When these accusations are levelled at the female writer seeking a mode of autobiographical expression, because of the self-referential nature of the genre, they become doubly extreme[vi]. One particular example of these strategies in action can be found in the critical responses to the autobiographical writing of Simone de Beauvoir whose texts excited an inexplicable reaction of hostility in a number of critics (Moi, 1994).

A further negative facing the woman writer is the fact that critics have demonstrated a tendency to judge all women's writing as 'autobiographical' again suggesting that the female author is incapable of imaginative creativity. As Molly Hite has argued "for women, to 'write oneself' is a procedure analogous to rubber stamping, in which a pre-existing self is simply inked and then imprinted on the page. From the standpoint of this model, self inscription is something women do because they cannot help it" (Morgan and Hall, 1991: xiii). In this way all aspirations to recognition from the Academy are forestalled. Women who call upon their personal experience are caught in a catch twenty-two situation. On the one hand, if they engage in self-writing, they are accused of making a spectacle of themselves. On the other, the ubiquitous autobiographical label seems to follow them wherever they go in the generic spectrum. The reduction of the female author's writing to the purely autobiographical serves a double function. Firstly, it enables the critic to continue to berate the author for her self-centredness. Secondly, by focusing on the author's life it forecloses all possible debate about the political subject matter of her texts. Women writers, so it seems can only speak about themselves and not the world at large. Clearly, underlying this critical

approach is the tacit belief that in contrast to their female counterparts men's autobiographical writing is somehow more 'authentic' and as such representative of the human condition.

Les Mots pour le dire is a case in point. The very fact that Cardinal had managed to draw upon her life history while at the same time dealing with serious metaphysical questions and political issues upset some of the deep seated beliefs about women's writing. For here was a writer who was not simply producing *romans d'évasion*, to use de Beauvoir's term, but who was demonstrating that female authors were able to describe an authentic experience which was of general significance. Unable to accept that a woman could produce literary writing and at the same time cover universal issues like life, death, dreams, happiness and politics, they preferred to classify the text as 'un document sur la psychanalyse' or 'un témoignage' (Cardinal,1977: 84)[vii].

However, as Cardinal rightly points out, the temporal gap which opened up between her own psychoanalysis and her rendering of the experience meant that it was in no way presented from the perspective of a witness. During this time lapse Cardinal had learned the craft of writing which enabled her to present her material from the perspective of a writer as opposed to that of the analysand (Cardinal,1977: 27). She rightly draws attention to the fact that "l'analyse cela ne peut pas s'écrire" because it would lack narrative substance (Cardinal,1977: 156). Cardinal has outlined the many edits, cuts and elaborations which she made to the raw material of her life story in order to turn it into compelling literature. The manner in which she restructured the mnemonic fragments of her past into a coherent narrative seems to confirm Georges May's opinion that the importance of autobiography is to be found, not in its historical accuracy, but rather in the symbolic richness of the memories which the autobiographer seeks to relay to the reader (May, 1979).

The female autograph has developed a number of strategies to pre-empt negative reading practices. A common feature of women's writing is the multi-generic nature of their texts which pose problems to conventional classificatory systems. It is commonplace for women to intersperse their texts with autobiographical elements, fictional creations, poetic interludes and philosophical meditations. Another tactic, employed less frequently these days, is the assumption of a pseudonym. For instance, when Colette first started writing it was necessary for her to adopt her husband's name in order to assure the publication of texts which might have been deemed overly salacious for a woman writer. What this suggests, is that for the female writer the

borderlines between autobiography and fiction, self and text, experience and writing are constantly in flux.

It is perhaps with the intention of evading reductive descriptions of her work that Cardinal has endeavoured to deny that her texts can be fitted into any stringent categories:

> je n'aime pas que les livres aient un genre défini, j'aime qu'ils soient à la fois roman, poésie, essai, recherche, histoire, philosophie. Ce que je veux c'est qu'on reconnaisse que j'écris même si je n'écris pas des livres classiques de femmes, "des romans de femmes". Je ne veux pas qu'on dise que je témoigne. On n'a pas besoin d'être écrivain pour témoigner. Or je suis un écrivain (Cardinal,1977: 87).

Another tactic which she employs is the generalisation of her experience through the suggestion that all of her texts are to some extent autobiographical. Like Georges Gusdorf and James Olney, Cardinal contests the assumption that autobiography is the referential genre par excellence. In her opinion, all novels whether written in the first or third person are to some extent autobiographical:

> Comme si tous les romans n'étaient pas autobiographiques. Comme si le fait de se cacher derrière la troisième personne pour écrire, ou de changer de sexe, ou de s'évader dans le rêve et le fantasme, n'est pas aussi révélateur, aussi près de la confession, de l'intimité, aussi autobiographique finalement que d'écrire une histoire à la première personne (Cardinal,1977: 85).

The precarious position of the female autograph *vis-à-vis* the French Academy is played out not only on the generic level but also on the plane of authorial self -perception. I will now go on to illustrate how the term 'writer' is charged with conflicting significations for Cardinal.

3.4. The Anxiety of Authorship

Although Cardinal clearly wants to be considered as an author of quality literature, the term 'écrivain' is one which she finds highly problematic. In her opinion, the term is a masculine construct which suggests an elitist approach to literature, diametrically opposed to her own direct and accessible style of writing. Cardinal is also fully conscious that for a woman to be given the grand title of 'écrivain' in France it often means that she will have to avoid speaking about women's issues or at least disguise her message in elliptical language. While Cardinal refuses to renounce the title she also admits the paradoxical nature of her position:

> Dire que je suis un écrivain, c'est quelque chose ! C'est à la fois prétentieux parce que l'écrivain est vu par le public comme un personnage mythique (et Dieu sait que je ne suis pas mythique, que je suis faite de chair et d'os !) et c'est une trahison parce que, un écrivain, c'est masculin (et Dieu sait que j'ai des fesses et des nichons et un sexe de femme !) (Cardinal, 1977: 87).

While Cardinal might question the connotations of the noun 'écrivain' she also demonstrates a great deal of insecurity as to whether she is equal to the title. Janice Morgon has argued that because of their historical exclusion from the literary domain, women writers have "felt a particularly urgent need to justify their entry into the realm of public (thus, male) discourse" (Morgan, 1991: 8). She goes on to explain that anxiety and ambivalence may mark the texts of the female author who "is posturing uncomfortably before the audience of male readers she knows to be watching and judging her"(Morgan,1991: 8-9). Cardinal is no exception to this rule. She describes the writing process as a constant battle between "la jouissance et la lutte" (Cardinal,1977: 54) where she struggles with her desire to express herself and her conflicting feeling of being unworthy of the title of 'écrivain'. In the average three year period which it takes her to write a book only six months are actually productive while the rest of the time is spent striving to overcome her insecurities:

> Disons qu'il me faut à peu près trois ans pour écrire un livre et que dans ces trois ans il y a six mois de bon. Six mois pendant lesquels ça coule, c'est mûr, rien ne peut m'arrêter, même pas mes réflexions, les plus destructrices sur ce que je suis en train d'écrire, sur le fait d'écrire, sur ma prétention à être un écrivain (Cardinal,1977: 55).

It is interesting to note that, in keeping with Morgan's assertion, Cardinal is highly conscious of the manner in which her literary endeavours might be viewed by an imagined critical observer. It appears that the key obstacle to the expression of her creativity is her preconception of how she might be judged by the literary establishment. Before she is able to write she struggles to overcome her insecurities in a process she describes as "La lutte de moi contre moi". The charge of vanity seems to haunt her: "Quelque fois je me ravage, je ne peux plus écrire pendant des semaines. J'ai honte de ma vanité. Qu'est-ce qui me prend ? Pour qui je me prends?" (Cardinal,1977: 55).

In a manner which is somewhat alarming and yet not unfamiliar to women writers, Cardinal draws a direct link between her authorial intentions and insanity. She admits that her attempts to write are accompanied by the feelings of worthlessness and self-deprecation which she suffered from during her years of neurosis. It is as if she is divided between a female self who is struggling to express herself and a masculine observer who looks down upon her and belittles her actions.

This schism between the observed and observing subject is vividly represented in *Les Mots pour le dire*. One of the main symptoms of the author's neurosis is a hallucination of a critical eye which observes her every action from the end of a pipe. Phil Powrie has drawn attention to the fact that the narrator's mental illness is directly linked to her perception of herself as an object of the male gaze. In order to illustrate the universality of this phenomenon he cites John Berger's perceptive study on the subject:

> *Men act women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision, a sight (Powrie, 1993: xxxiv).

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Cardinal seeks to avoid the critical gaze through self-effacement. She has suggested that her third person writing is actually a more accurate self portrayal than those texts which she has narrated in the first person. Like Jean-Paul Sartre who admitted that his third person account *La Nausée* was as self revelatory as *Les Mots*, his autobiographical work, Cardinal has confessed that for her writing in the first person is akin to wearing a mask:

> Quand j'écris, je pars toujours de quelquechose que je connais, que j'ai vécu, et puis ça se transforme, ça s'ouvre, ça divague, le "je" pourrait devenir un "elle", mais "elle" c'est moi bien plus que "je". "Je" est un masque (Cardinal,1977: 28).

Cardinal's self-deprecatory attitude is typical of many women writers. It appears, at times, as if she is at pains to efface her identity all together: "Je ne m'aime pas assez pour inviter qui que ce soit à venir me rencontrer moi, Marie Cardinal" (Cardinal,1977: 61). She justifies her self-writing by suggesting its relevance to a community of readers. In comparison to the unique, autonomous male autobiographical self, Cardinal's authorial 'je' is defined by fluid boundaries between self and other:

> Le problème consiste à m'enfoncer suffisamment profond en moi pour trouver un noyau simple que j'ai envie d'écrire, qui est à moi mais qui, en même temps, est commun à tout le monde (Cardinal,1977: 61).

The autobiographical identity which Cardinal creates conveys the generosity of her writing where the self is constructed in relation to the Other; where the authorial 'je' cannot be separated from the community of readers.

By destabilising the boundaries between the novel and the autobiographical account, Cardinal is engaged in a rejection, not only of strict generic classifications, but also of traditional conceptions of identity itself. Through creating an as yet undefined textual space she envisages the possibility of formulating a different female selfhood. All the same, for Cardinal the inscription of an autobiographical identity is a delicate tightrope act (to draw upon Leah Hewitt's apt metaphor) of both conforming to literary rules and at the same time transcending their boundaries.

Conclusion

I started off by suggesting that *Les Mots pour le dire* fails to conform to traditional [read male] classificatory systems. It should now be clear that Cardinal's refusal to accept the autobiographical label is predicated on an awareness of the limitations which the genre imposes on the exploration of female experience. The decision to present her experience in a fictionalised form is at once indicative both of the author's desire to evade the autobiographical stamp and to find a fitting form for the narration of the female self. The challenge of Cardinal's autobiographical impulse is to be found in the gap which it exposes between gendered experience and the conventions of the genre. Cardinal's effacement of the autobiographical 'je' calls for new gendered patterns of reading where the line between fiction and reality is never taken as given.

In this chapter I hope to have illustrated the manner in which authorial anxiety about the reception of a text may come to influence the shape of the autobiographical pact. I have equally sought to demonstrate the gender specific nature of this anxiety which is inspired by an awareness of the terms of reception governing women's writing. Perhaps seeking to atone for their own lack of confidence and motivated by the need to raise political awareness a number of woman writers employed their creative skills to inscribe strong female protagonists who would serve as role models to their readers. In the next chapter, I present *Les Mots pour le dire* as a case in point, exploring the manner in which Cardinal employs the confessional genre to create a feminist icon and to solicit collective identification with the authorial voice.

Notes

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[i] Lejeune has revisited and reassessed this approach in *Moi aussi* (Lejeune, 1986).

[ii] Cardinal endorsed the autobiographical nature of the text in her conversations with Annie Leclerc, published under the title *Autrement dit* (Cardinal,1977) two years after *Les Mots pour le dire* came out. In this later work, she expanded upon many of the themes which were addressed in her earlier text including, rape, motherhood, female sexuality, menstruation and the colonisation of Algeria.

[iii] Interestingly enough, just as Cardinal is not self-identical to her narrator, so too, the protagonist of *Les Mots pour le dire* assumes a fictive divergence between herself and the future narrator of her imagined novel:

> je me promettais d'écrire un jour l'histoire de mon analyse, d'en faire un roman où je raconterais la guérison d'une femme qui me ressemblerait comme une soeur, sa naissance, sa lente mise au monde (Cardinal,1975: 293).

[iv] As with the fairy tale, the narrative charts the difficulties of growing up and of finding an autonomous identity separate from that of one's parents. Although the voyage which the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* undergoes takes place, mainly, within her own psyche, we note the familiar tropes of: the loss of maternal affection; an absent or weak father who is viewed as an ally to the victimised child; the destabilisation of family security in the form of the parents' separation; the narrator's entry to the realm of the inhuman, as she undergoes a breakdown; the encounter with phantasmagoric creatures: *la folle* and *la chose*. There is, however, one main divergence between the narrative of *Les Mots pour le dire* and the traditional fairy tale: the resolution does not take the form of the narrator's marriage to a handsome prince. In Cardinal's feminist reappraisal, the narrator's salvation is achieved as the process of psychoanalysis enables her to recognise the role which patriarchy has played in structuring her negative self-image. It terminates with her conversion to the feminist cause.

[iv] For a discussion of the 'male gaze' and these pictures in particular see John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, (Berger, 1972: 50-51).

[v] In order to recognise how deeply entrenched these attitudes are it is worth

considering how De Beauvoir reiterated them in her discussion on women writers in *Le deuxième sexe*:

> Le narcissisme de la femme au lieu de l'enrichir l'appauvrit ; à force de ne faire rien d'autre que se contempler, elle s'anéantit ; l'amour même qu'elle se porte se stéréotype : elle ne découvre pas dans ses écrits son authentique expérience, mais une idole imaginaire bâtie avec des clichés (de Beauvoir,1949: 632).

[vii] See chapter 8 for a fuller discussion of this point.

4

Autobiographical Deaths and Rebirths

Parler, naître. Ecrire, faire naître (Leclerc in Cardinal, 1977: 214)

4.1. The Feminist Confessional

In this section I draw on the work of Rita Felski to explore the confessional function of *Les Mots pour le dire*. In the light of contemporary criticisms of the concepts of 'agency,' 'communal identity', and the 'transparency of language', the value of confessional writing has been called into question. In this context, I argue that Cardinal demonstrates an awareness both of the constructed nature of identity and of the importance of situated experience for consciousness-raising. I contrast the significance accorded to experiential writing by French feminists in the 1970s with the concomitant rise of poststructuralism and discourses on the 'death of the author'. In conclusion, I suggest that despite the current trend toward deconstruction, experiential writing may still have an important political function for contemporary feminists.

I argued in Chapter 3 that Cardinal's autobiographical novel disrupts the boundaries between fact and fiction, however it is equally important to recognise that the text had a wide impact on readers precisely because they interpreted it as a true account of Cardinal's life. While acknowledging this fact, I do not aim to suggest that *Les Mots pour le dire* is a faithful reflection of the author's experience; my interest lies in exploring the confessional as a set of generic codes. Before moving on to a textual analysis, I will begin my discussion by proposing a definition of the feminist confessional. I will go on to consider some of the reasons why confessional writing seems to have had less impact than *écriture féminine* in the Anglophone world. I will conclude by arguing for the importance of this genre of writing for the exploration of female identity. Having said this I am deeply aware that the notion of a white-middle class woman drawing upon her experience in the name of consciousness raising is deeply problematic at the beginning of the twenty first century. Posing the question of who has the right to speak, I outline the paradoxical position of the confessional writer who draws upon a unique experience in order to speak for all.

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In her study of women's autobiography, Rita Felski has coined the term 'feminist confessional' to describe the sub-genre of autobiographical writing which presents "the most personal and intimate details of the author's life" (Felski,1989: 88). This kind of writing is characterised by the author's concern to share the truth of their subjective experience with a sympathetic reader who will identify with their life story. Closely associated with Anglo-American feminisms, confessional writers are more interested in "the referential and denotative dimension of textual communication rather than its formal specificity" (Felski, 1989: 88). Confessional literature differs from other forms of life-writing in that it foregrounds the relationship between a female author and an imagined female reader.

The genre seems particularly appropriate for the exploration of women's issues for a number of reasons. Firstly, its outsider status as a largely unrecognised branch of literature offers women an experimental space within which to operate. Secondly, the less formalised structure of the confessional provides an appropriate textual location for the multiplicity and fluidity of women's voices. The political importance of this genre for consciousness-raising through the publication of female centred narratives should not be overlooked. Particularly prevalent during the 1970s, the confessional genre provided a textual space for minority groups to express their marginalised identities within the public domain. For those who chose to 'tell it like it is' writing the personal could create an oppositional culture as isolated and disempowered readers recognised that they were not alone in their dispossession. Self-expression in the confessional mode enabled women to constitute a critique of patriarchy and to explore the nature of female sexuality and identity. In many cases, the authors were inspired to write in order to analyse and repair fractured identities. Narrating the self, whether it involved amassing fragmentary thoughts on paper, or structuring them into an ordered narrative held the promise of self-empowerment. Marie Cardinal, along with other writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Annie Ernaux, found that the exploration of female identity in autobiographical writing could be a self-affirming act both for the author and her collective audience.[i] The production of female literary role models provided a source of inspiration to female readers. This process is particularly apparent in *Les Mots pour le dire*, where Cardinal employs the *Bildungsroman* format and an intimate first person voice to recount the story of a woman's struggle to overcome debilitating psychological problems. The sense of sisterhood and shared gendered experience was foregrounded through the narrator's construction of an autonomous identity and her conversion to the feminist cause.

The impact of this genre upon the public testifies to its popular appeal (see chapter 8). However, the growing emphasis on difference as opposed to solidarity within the feminist movement, and the post-colonial and postmodern distrust of totalising discourses has meant that writers working in this genre have come under fire for what is seen as a naive perception of the nature of identity and the function of language.[ii] Perhaps for these reasons, in terms of French women's writing, *écriture féminine*, with its emphasis on literary formalism, is often envisaged as a more sophisticated approach to narrating the self. On this point, it is interesting to consider the extent to which Toril Moi's influential analysis of the differences between French and Anglo/American women's writing has had the, perhaps, unforeseen consequence of constructing "communicative writing" [iii] as the Other of feminist literature (Moi,1985). Indeed, while Moi provides a balanced critique of the respective schools of thought, we might wonder whether the divide between Anglo/American criticism and French theory is itself a false one. Furthermore, those reading the text as an introduction to French feminist thought might be tempted to exoticise the 'écriture' in French women's writing and to oversimplify its Anglo/American counterpart as crude social realism. In Felski's terms, Moi could be accused of falling into the trap of overestimating the political potential of the disruptive textual strategies of *écriture féminine*. Felski reminds us that "there exists no obvious relation between the subversion of language structures and the process of social struggle and change" (Felski,1989: 6). Making a similar point, Patricia Waugh warns against the conflation of the aesthetic and the political sphere while arguing that feminism "must believe in the possibility of a community of address situated in an oppositional space which can allow for the connection of the 'small personal voice' (Doris Lessing's term) of one feminist to another and to other liberationist movements" (Waugh,1992: 195). The positive response of women readers to *Les Mots pour le dire* (see chapter 8) seems exemplary both of Felski's bond between reader and writer, and Waugh's 'community of address', suggesting that this widely read, and accessible text is far from being politically defunct.

The association of communicative literature of the type produced by Cardinal with naive social documentary fails, furthermore, to take account of the transformative nature of the process of reading and writing itself. A number of critics have drawn attention to the fact that the sense of 'difference' which marks many female writers' explorations of identity already ensures an awareness of the problematic relationship between discourse and reality, and the constructed nature of identity. For the female autograph, who in the words of Estelle Jelinek, has always felt herself to be "different

from, other than, or outside the male world", the boundary line between narrative construction and memory, representation and reality, fact and fiction has perhaps never been clearly delineated (Jelinek,1986: 187). Molly Hite's definition of the genre as "a revisionary activity [which] reinscribes a prescribed subjectivity in another register [in order to] bring a somewhat different self into being" (Hite,1991: xv) can thus be applied to those texts which, at first hand, appear to adopt more traditional approaches to narrating the self. Thus, while many readers have found it liberating to read *Les Mots pour le dire* as a true story of a woman's recovery from a nervous breakdown, it is equally plausible to interpret the text as a metacommentary on the act of writing itself. The title, which implies the primary relationship between language and identity, highlights the poetic function or literary nature of the work. In the same way, the narrator's voyage of discovery can ultimately be read as a coming to authorship. Enlarging upon the complex relationship between truth and fiction in women's confessional writing, Rita Felski has argued that to take the claim of truthfulness at face value is to ignore the "ambiguous and contradictory signals which problematize rather than confirm the distinction between autobiography and fiction" (Felski,1989: 92). Most notably, the authenticity of the self, inscribed in this kind of writing, is always compromised to the authorial intention of generalising experience to appeal to a wide community of readers. This conflict of interests is particularly apparent in *Les Mots pour le dire* where authenticity is systematically denied through the presentation of an anonymous narrator, and, at the same time endorsed, through the dedication at the beginning of the text "To the doctor who helped me to be born". As Felski goes on to argue, the classification of a text as a confessional has less to do with the truthfulness of the author's account and more to do with its reception and the manner in which it is publicised (Felski,1989: 91). Having said this, confessional writing does pose some problems for the contemporary feminist critic. As Patricia Waugh has pointed out, the feminist slogan 'let us wage war against totality' has superseded the former feminist belief that 'the personal is political.' "But if the latter can be seen as a rallying cry, the former implies a hostile attitude toward its implicit ideals of collectivism and community" (Waugh, 1992: 189). To what extent might the position which Cardinal adopts *vis-à-vis* her readers be seen as problematic?

4.2. The Writer as Social Voice: Some Problems Facing the Confessional Author

As I pointed out in the introduction to this discussion, one of the defining features of the feminist confessional is the bond which is constructed between female author and female reader. For the confessional writer, the narration of gender specific experience is seen as a source of empowerment for both parties. However, the position of the confessional author is highly ambiguous, for on the one hand, she attempts to draw upon the universal significance of her life-history, yet on the other, in telling her tale she implies the unique and original nature of her experience. The complexities of this position are no more apparent than when Marie Cardinal tries to define her relationship with her readers. At times, Cardinal proclaims that her texts have found a wide audience because of the typicality of her life (Cardinal, 1977:61). However, at other moments, she declares that her middle-class education has placed her in a particularly strong position to raise consciousness among the working classes (Cardinal,1977: 66). In many ways Cardinal's life was anything but typical as she became exiled from her home country, family and class. Yet, it is perhaps for this very reason that she is able to speak convincingly about the human condition. Like Annie Ernaux, Cardinal has become a perceptive social commentator precisely because of her feeling of being up rooted or cast adrift from her family and class. Cardinal has explained how her mental breakdown led her to re-evaluate her identity. During the seven year period of her analysis when she struggled to scrape a living to pay for her therapy, she rubbed shoulders with working-class women on a daily basis. She raised her children in the French equivalent of a council house and took a number of part-time jobs in order to make ends meet (Cardinal, 1977: 63-4). Like her narrator, Cardinal's own recovery from a crisis gave her the motivation to help those who were undergoing a similar turmoil.

Cardinal's encounter with poverty was necessarily mediated through her positioning as a middle-class woman; nonetheless, she has professed to being deeply marked by this encounter and has described how one of her key autobiographical intentions is to write for working class women. [iv] "Ces femmes-là me touchent, j'aimerais qu'elles puissent lire mes livres et j'avoue que je pense à elles quand j'écris" (Cardinal,1977: 65). Despite her altruistic intentions, it might be argued that Cardinal

falls into the trap, typical to middle-class writers, of exoticising working-class women's lives:

> A chaque fois j'ai l'impression de rencontrer de vraies personnes. Je sais, pour avoir vécu longtemps avec elles, le contact qu'elles ont avec la matière, avec le corps de leur enfants, avec les saisons, avec la durée, c'est un contact vrai (Cardinal, 1977: 66).

It is as if Cardinal strives to give a voice to this 'archaic' wisdom which she perceives working-class women as possessing and yet being unable to express. This sentiment is perhaps best encapsulated in a lyrical autobiographical passage which appears in *Autrement dit*:

> Je pleurais sur les femmes. Oui, sur la vie des femmes. Jamais je n'avais vu aussi clairement l'absurdité de leur existence annulée par les usages. [...] Elles ne savent pas traduire en mots ce que leur corps sait : la lenteur des gestations, la viscosité féconde, l'épaisseur nourrissante, le danger des fermentations, la nécessité des mutations, le poids du temps, l'espace incontrôlable, la précarité des limites...L'archaïsme de nos vies de femmes.
>
> C'est pour elles que j'ai envie d'écrire, j'ai envie de leur passer des mots qui seront des armes (Cardinal,1977: 80-1).

Cardinal's concern to act as a spokeswoman for working-class women might be seen as typical of the feminist confessional writer working in the 1970s. It exemplifies the interest in providing strong literary role models as a source of inspiration for the reader. Today, feminist critics might view this approach as somewhat patronising. However, it is a problem which Cardinal side-steps by generalising her experience and suggesting that it is of relevance to all women:

> Dans mes livres je pense que les lecteurs rencontrent une femme qui vit en France, aujourd'hui, et qui ressemble, dans le fond, à toutes les femmes. C'est ce que je suis (Cardinal, 1977: 61).

Of course this is a highly contentious statement, given that Cardinal's bourgeois upbringing in a highly cultured household, along with her university education in philosophy, placed her in a highly privileged position. Furthermore, by the time that she wrote *Les Mots pour le dire*, even if she was not placed among the top echelon of French academics, she was an established writer having published five relatively well received works while notching up the prize for best literary newcomer along the way.[v] As an established woman writer she was speaking from a relatively strong position in comparison to many of her women readers. While Cardinal might be seen to fall into the trap of 'speaking for' as opposed to 'speaking as' woman, her approach to the process of reading and writing might be seen to counter the imbalance between author and reader. Cardinal seeks to erase all traces of authorial power by envisaging the process of reading and writing as an exchange. Through this interaction she aims to empower and inspire women, to give them the power of her words so that they might in their turn go away and produce their own life narratives (Cardinal,1977: 66).

While class issues were one obstacle facing the confessional author, a further challenge could be found in the increasing influence of poststructuralist discourses which threatened to deflect critical attention away from the author's life toward the text.

4.3. The Death of The Author

The deflection of critical interest away from the author's life can be traced back to the early part of the twentieth century when the Russian Formalists began to focus on the internal mechanics of the text. The *Nouveaux Romanciers* developed this critical approach, centring their textual analysis on the stylistic features of parody and intertextuality. But perhaps the most dramatic questioning of the author's role came in 1968 when Roland Barthes wrote his seminal essay 'The Death of the Author'(Barthes, 1968, trans. 1977). Barthes challenged the idea that the author has ultimate control over the representation of his identity, arguing that the author's lived experience is substantially remodelled through the act of textual production [vi]. Barthes proposed that authorial intention is subject to misinterpretation, firstly, because self-portrayal is always constrained by laws governing language and the literary medium, secondly, because the reader might choose to effect interpretative licence over the text. Cast adrift from the signification of his/her writing, the author's identity was perceived as inherently unstable and fragmented[vii]. No longer a creative genius, nor the originary

source of his/her text, the author was now viewed as an expendable by-product. One of the problems with this approach is that it could be seen to present the text as a self-sustaining object. From this position it is only a small step to claiming that all reference to the author's life or historical setting are irrelevant.[viii]

In a manner which seems to deny the function of autobiography as a form of social commentary Barthes famously declared that "the author is never more than the instance writing" (Barthes,1977: 146). Questioning the relevance of authorial experience, he proposed that the modern author's hand "traces a field without origin - or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself" (Barthes, 1977: 146).

Some feminist critics, including Toril Moi, have noted the positive political implications of the destabilisation of authorial identity for a feminist agenda. In Moi's opinion, the concept of the author as a solitary genius is a reflection of the society where the bourgeois male reigns supreme:

> The humanist creator is potent, phallic and male - God in relation to his world, the author in relation to his text. History or the text become nothing but the "expression" of this unique individual (Moi,1985: 8).

Reiterating Barthes' earlier call to arms, she declares "We must take a further step and proclaim...the death of the author" (Moi,1985: 63). Barthes' thesis is certainly not an anathema to the feminist cause. In principle, his critique was a bomb thrown at a literary tradition which was seeped in elitism. Barthes' sacrilegious assault on the author had further implications, for, by laying the text open to a free rein of interpretation he tacitly questioned the very fabric of the social order. For Barthes, this textual practice was "truly revolutionary" for, "to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law" (Barthes,1977: 147). Of course, for many women, who felt their oppression to be immutably inscribed within these discourses, this signalled a positive step forward.

Other feminist critics viewed the implications of the 'death of the author' in a less positive light (Miller, 1988; Morgan, 1991; Stanley, 1992; Waugh, 1992). Published at a time when the majority of women writers were still fighting tooth and nail to gain admission to the literary canon, it did seem a little premature to start beheading them. [ix] Furthermore, it seems generally true to suggest that Barthes' essay marked a turning point whereby the political function of literature, as exemplified in

Sartre's 'littérature engagée,' became increasingly underplayed. Barthes set about deconstructing the author at exactly the same time as many minority groups were starting to employ the confessional genre as a means of bringing their private experience into the public domain. While these writers might now be open to accusations of naivety, we should not underestimate the value of their accounts, especially during the 1970s, for raising consciousness among women and other marginalised groups. In focusing the critic's attention on the text alone, it might be argued that Barthes detracted critical attention away from some of the key questions raised in this thesis including, who is writing, who is reading and, indeed, when, where and why.

It is interesting to note the manner in which Barthes' conception of authorial identity generalised many of the qualities which had hitherto been associated with women's textual production. Indeed, by destabilising the author's position he made anxiety and uncertainty about the right to author one's life the lot of all writers. Yet, as Janice Morgan has pointed out, the features which now mark men's 'canonic' autobiographical writing such as fragmentation, discontinuity, dual perspectives and textual self-consciousness have been present in women's writing all along (Morgan,1991: 7). The narrowing of the gap between men's and women's writing might be viewed as a sign that textual equality has been achieved. However, it could also be argued that for women writers, who have still to make a significant impact on the French canon, the deconstruction of authorial identity may be overhasty. As Nancy K. Miller has pertinently observed, it is "in the face of the current trend toward the massive deconstruction of subjectivity" (Miller,1988: 103) that feminist critics are struggling to instate the difference of female identity. Indeed, it might be argued that the female author, writing in the 1970s, could hardly have been 'killed off' for she was yet to be born. Women's historic status as the 'other' of public discourse has "necessitated alternate and, to some extent, oppositional strategies of self representation" (Morgan,1991: 7). In this section, I will be considering the manner in which Cardinal employs these 'oppositional' strategies in *Les Mots pour le dire*. The focus of my enquiry will be the manner in which the text can be read as a coming to authorship. For the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* writing follows a reverse trajectory to that proposed by Barthes: leading not to death, but rather to her rebirth.

4.4. Autobiographical Deaths

The over-riding theme of *Les Mots pour le dire* is the narrator's quest to find an autonomous identity [x]. For this reason it might be argued that the text is a typical feminist *Bildungsroman*. This sub-genre of women's autobiography, particularly prevalent during the 1970s, is characterised by the female protagonist's voyage of self-discovery and emancipation. As Rita Felski has noted, the narrator's progress is frequently "depicted as a process of moving outward into the public realm of social engagement and activity" (Felski, 1989: 26-7). The search for an autonomous selfhood often sees the narrator standing alone as an independent woman by the end of the text.

The narrative action of *Les Mots pour le dire* can be roughly divided into a tripartite structure of death-conversion-rebirth. At the beginning of the text, the narrator is on the verge of suicide and no longer has any will to live. By undergoing a lengthy period of self-analysis she realises that one of the main causes of her mental breakdown was the patriarchal discourses which shaped her into a 'dutiful daughter'. With this awakening she converts to the feminist cause. Finally, the narrator assumes a new identity when she becomes a recognised writer. The voyage of self-discovery comes to an end when she quite literally becomes the author of her own destiny.

In the opening sections of the text, the narrator is portrayed - to draw upon Gilbert and Gubar's evocative terminology - as the quintessential mad woman in the attic (Gilbert and Gubar,1979). At this point, she is quite literally enclosed in a room at the top of her uncle's psychiatric hospital. The narrative is suffused with anxiety in a manner which recalls Jean-Paul Sartre's striking evocation of existential angst in *La Nausée* (Sartre,1938). As with Sartre's Roquentin, the narrator's perception of life as profoundly absurd is indicative of the breakdown of her identity [xi]. The destabilisation of the protagonist's selfhood becomes particularly apparent as the normal barriers between self and Other, life and death, inside and out, break down. All that she is left with is an overwhelming sensation of fear:

> J'avais peur de la mort mais j'avais aussi peur de la vie qui contient la mort. J'avais peur de dehors mais j'avais peur de dedans qui est l'envers de dehors.

> J'avais peur des autres mais j'avais peur de moi qui étais une autre. J'avais PEUR, PEUR. C'était tout (Cardinal,1975: 21).

As we can see from the extract above, the narrator's perception of life as essentially purposeless leads her to become obsessed with the question of death. In a distinctly Beckettian fashion, the narrator exposes her belief in the ultimate futility of existence. For this reason, the unceasing cycles of decomposition and regeneration strike her as inherently senseless. Seen through the protagonist's desolate mindscape, everything around her seems to lead to decay and putrefaction. Death is the only outcome of which she can be sure. Following her first visit to the analyst, the narrator describes the thoughts which overwhelm her as she lies in bed, unable to sleep:

> Pourquoi cette vie qui se nourrit d'elle-même ? Pourquoi ces gestations repues d'agonies ? Pourquoi mon corps vieillit-il ? Pourquoi fabrique-t-il des liquides et des matières puantes ? Pourquoi ma sueur, ma crotte, ma pisse ? [...] Qu'y a-t-il de stable à part la mort ? (Cardinal,1975: 39-40).

The inner turmoil which racks the narrator's mind leads to a breakdown in her channels of communication with the outside world. All recourse to the stabilising concepts of logic and reason becomes futile as her anxiety takes hold:

> La chose qui, à l'intérieur, était faite d'un monstrueux grouillement d'images, de sons, d'odeurs projetés en tous sens par une pulsion dévastatrice rendant toute explication absurde, toute tentative de mise en ordre inutile, se révélait à l'extérieur, par des secousses intenses et une sueur nauséabonde (Cardinal,1975: 17).

Again, like Sartre's Roquentin, Cardinal's protagonist believes herself to be engulfed by nauseous fetid and slimy liquids. On this point, it should be noted that Cardinal repeatedly draws upon the opposition of 'good' and 'bad' liquids in order to symbolise the condition of the narrator's mind. Hence, on the one hand, she might associate calm, clear waters with reason, sanity and stable identity (Cardinal,1975: 10, 261-2, 268-9). On the other, treacherous currents, dangerous rapids and putrid, stagnant

waters connote the narrator's mental instability (Cardinal. 1975: 9,10,19,120). An effective illustration of this opposition can be found in the section where the narrator first finds herself in front of the analyst. Wondering how she will ever be able to communicate her story to him she ruminates:

> Comment jeter le pont qui joindrait l'intense au calme, le clair à l'obscur, qui enjamberait l'égout, le fleuve gros de matières en décomposition, le courant méchant de la peur, qui nous séparait le docteur et moi, les autres et moi ? (Cardinal,1975: 9).

The terror which the thought of confronting the past inspires in the narrator leads her to quite literally block off her senses. Her body starts to produce viscous liquids: blood, sweat, mucus, saliva and vomit, the better to hide from the outside world. These nauseous discharges provide a defensive barrier against the encounter with the self and Other:

> Pour mieux me cacher j'avais bouché toutes les issues : mes yeux, mon nez, mes oreilles, ma bouche, mon vagin, mon anus, les pores de ma peau, ma vessie (Cardinal,1975: 10).

It is highly significant that, as the narrator's illness progresses, she is quite literally denied the power of the gaze. As her senses become dulled to the outside world, her eyesight becomes progressively weaker until she lives in darkness (Cardinal,1975: 19). Eventually, the route which she travels becomes more curtailed, until she hunches in a foetal position, in the bathroom of the sanatorium, more dead than living. The protagonist is mute, aphasic, quite literally unable to author her own narrative. Struggling to repress a noxious past she has been reduced to a condition of near stasis:

> Entre le bidet et la baignoire, c'était là qu'elle était le mieux quand elle n'arrivait plus à maîtriser la chose intérieure [...] Recroquevillée, les talons contre les fesses, les ongles si enfoncés dans les paumes de ses mains qu'ils avaient fini par

> y creuser des plaies, la tête ballottant d'avant en arrière ou sur les côtés, trop lourde, le sang et la transpiration qui coulaient (Cardinal,1975: 16-17).

4.5. The Making of a Dutiful Daughter

As the narrator explores the reasons for her neurosis it becomes apparent that one of the causative factors is that she has been forced to adopt a selfless attitude toward others. Raised to be the perfect bourgeois lady, the protagonist has received a rigorous training in the art of good manners, refined comportment and distinguished taste. As she later comes to realise, these doctrines were in complete conflict with her own beliefs about the ways in which women should behave:

> Il y avait en moi une indépendance, un orgueil, une curiosité, un sens de la justice et de la jouissance qui ne cadraient pas avec le rôle qui m'avait été dévolu dans la société de ma famille. Pour étouffer tout cela ou n'en laisser apparaître que la mesure convenable, il fallait frapper fort et longtemps. Le travail avait été bien fait. La seule partie qui était restée intacte c'était mon sens de la chose (Cardinal, 1975: 236).

The dissolution of the narrator's personality appears to have been particularly pronounced, firstly, because of her mother's religious fanaticism and, secondly, because of her status as an unwanted child. It is almost as though the protagonist's mother denies her every need as a punishment for having been born. A particularly striking evocation of the systematic obliteration of the narrator's selfhood appears in the section where she recalls how her mother forced her to eat her vomited vegetable soup (Cardinal, 1975: 214-7). Ignoring the narrator's visceral loathing of leeks, her mother threatens that she will be taken away by the old rag and bone man. Imagining that her daughter is deliberately playing, up the mother pretends to be the old man in order to scare her daughter into eating her soup. Yet the plan backfires when the young girl, utterly distressed, vomits the contents of her stomach back onto her plate. The total subjection of her desires and needs to her mother's will is represented as her mother refuses to let her leave the table until she has finished. The narrator describes her utter humilation:

> Alors j'ai mangé toute seule mon vomi de soupe et je l'ai fait non pas pour lui plaire mais parce que je sentais en elle quelque chose de dangereux, de malade, quelque chose de plus fort qu'elle et plus fort que moi, quelque chose de plus épouvantable que le marchand d'habits (Cardinal, 1975: 216).

The impossibility of totally subordinating her emotional and physical needs leads to a split in the narrator's personality. This psychic schism manifests itself in a number of ways. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the narrator's fragmented identity is to be found in her hallucination of an eye which watches her. This symptom of her neurosis is of particular significance because it demonstrates the narrator's self image as an 'object' of, an Other to, perception. For the narrator, this appears to be the genuine evidence of her insanity (Cardinal, 1975: 18). Yet, while the protagonist sees this fantastical image in front of her right eye, she sees with complete clarity from the left. She describes how the vision usually takes hold when she is, in reality, under the gaze of the Other:

> De l'oeil gauche je vois la personne en face de moi, le décor avec ses moindres détails et de l'oeil droit je vois, avec autant de précision, un tuyau qui vient s'adapter à mon orbite, doucement. Quand il est en place, je vois, à l'autre bout du tuyau, un oeil qui me regarde (Cardinal, 1975: 177).

The division between the dutiful daughter the narrator strives to be, and the rebellious, energetic child she really is, can be seen as a main cause of her illness. The game of keeping up appearances is one, however, which she continues to play up to the point of her marriage. Indeed, this is when her madness truly sets in. On the outside she presents herself as a perfect bourgeois housewife. On the inside, however, she is seething with aggression, self-loathing and hatred. The divide between inside and out is particularly in evidence on pages 15 to 16 of the 1975 edition when the narrator describes the enormous efforts which she had to make in order to appear normal:

> Je la vois dans une rue, pressée (here the narrator is referring to herself in the third person singular). Je sais son effort pour paraître normale, pour stopper la

> peur derrière son regard [...]. Imaginer qu'elle ne saurait plus juguler la folie, dont le flot grossissant romprait un jour les digues et déborderait, la faisait grelotter (Cardinal,1975: 16).

Although the narrator attempts to hide the breakdown of her personality, it becomes apparent through her inability to express herself. During a major break-through in her analysis the narrator comes to recognise how profound her sense of alienation from language really is. She tells us that, "Je comprenais que les mots pouvaient être mes alliés ou mes ennemis mais que, de toute manière, ils m'étaient étrangers" (Cardinal, 1975: 283). As we can see, the narrator perceives language, not as a useful tool for bridging the gap between self and Other, but rather as a threatening entity. During the course of her analysis the narrator is terrified by certain words which assume a larger than life existence. When confronted by these alarming symbols, the narrator is thrown into a state of panic. Throughout the text, key words such as PEUR, FIBROMATEUX, TUBERCULOSE are given in upper case in order to signal their heightened significance for the narrator. This idiosyncratic use of grammar also highlights the ability of certain words to disrupt the narrator's normal communication through their almost living presence. It is as if words and the things that they refer to (the signifier and signified) have become divorced from each other. For the narrator, words have become living entities in their own right. They have taken on the properties of animate objects. As the narrator explains:

> Pour les malades mentaux, les mots, de même que les objets, vivent autant que les gens ou les animaux. Ils palpitent, ils s'évanouissent ou s'amplifient. Passer à travers les mots, c'est comme marcher dans la foule. Restent des visages, des silhouettes qui s'effacent vite du souvenir ou s'y enfoncent parfois, on ne sait pas pourquoi (Cardinal, 1975: 14-15).

On this point, it is interesting to note how Cardinal's approach to language might be seen to differ from that of some post-structuralist thinkers. Theorists like Lacan and Derrida have suggested that the subject's relationship to language can only ever be evoked in terms of deferral and difference. They have argued that words gain their significance in a continually shifting and chaotic configuration to the signifiers which surround them. However, as Cardinal rightly recognises, the literal manifestation

of the subject's inability to conceptualise language as stable is symptomatic of mental illness.

The rest of the text will therefore be devoted to exploring the delicate balance between language, experience and identity. The reader is able to follow the narrator as she reinstates meaning in her life and constructs a new selfhood through gaining control over language. Yet, before she can reach this stage, with the help of her analyst, the narrator must return once more to her childhood. She must excavate the passionate and aggressive child who was lost in order that she might be reborn.

4.6. Autobiographical Rebirths

As the title of the book suggests, the narrator's voyage of self-discovery revolves around finding the words to say it. While the protagonist's inability to make sense of her life led to the break down in her personality, her rebirth is achieved by finding the means to express her desires, needs and beliefs with clarity. This might explain why the English edition begins with the epigraph from Boileau's *L'Art Poétique*: "What one truly understands clearly articulates itself, and the words to say it come easily". Unlike the writers of *écriture féminine*, the narrator does not feel the need to create a 'feminine language' or to find new words to narrate her past. Her own struggle to express herself involves using words boldly in order to verbalise those aspects of her selfhood and experience which she has hitherto denied; language is employed as a means to self-integration, in order to create a stable personality.

There are two specific ways in which Cardinal demonstrates the importance of self-articulation to the construction and acceptance of the self. Firstly, by means of psychoanalysis which is represented as a positive way of working through the past in order to take control of one's destiny. The link between analysis and language need hardly be stated, given that it involves exorcising harmful repressed memories by speaking about them. The second way, is through writing. The narrator has been keeping a series of notebooks during her analysis: their publication marks the narrator's recognition as an author and her entrance into the public sphere. [xii] The importance of finding the words to say it, as a means to rebirth, is made explicit throughout the text as images of parthenogenesis abound. The narrator frequently describes herself as an embryo. A good example of this can be found in the opening passages when the narrator describes her first visit to the doctor:

> à cette époque, je ne savais pas que je commençais à peine à naître et que je vivais les premiers instants d'une lente gestation de sept ans. Embryon gros de moi-même (Cardinal, 1975: 20).

In a similar fashion, the analyst is portrayed as a kind of midwife who will aid the birthing process. Hence the dedication "to the doctor who helped me be born". Another fitting illustration of this imagery can be found on page 20, again where the narrator describes her initial encounter with the doctor:

> je vois [...] le bureau éclairé doucement où parlent un homme et une femme, et cette femme, dans cet ensemble, sur un divan, recroquevillée, comme un foetus dans une matrice (Cardinal,1975: 20).

It should, however, be noted that although the analyst is praised for his part in aiding the narrator's recovery, generally speaking the narrator takes responsibility for her own destiny. For it is ultimately she who decides what memories she will relay and also what their significance is to her. More often than not, she takes the role of both progenitor and progeny, describing how she gave birth to herself (see quotation above).

The narrator's analysis can be reduced to a number of key turning points which enable her to achieve a greater level of self awareness. These revelations are accorded a double significance. Indeed, they are not simply analysed as a product of the narrator's childhood traumas but are broadened out in order to illustrate the extent to which the discourses of patriarchy have come to play in the narrator's breakdown. Every awakening marks a further step towards the narrator's autonomy and the refusal of her upbringing as a dutiful daughter. This process involves a gradual movement from chaos to clarity, from disintegration to integration. It is most notable that, as the text progresses, both the narrator's memory and perception become clearer. We follow her from being a mute object transfixed by the gaze of the Other, to a speaking subject who has the power of perceptive insight. [xiii]

The first moment of insight comes when the narrator overcomes her guilt about having masturbated as a child. The subversive nature of the narrator's guilty secret should not be overlooked. Firstly, it went against all of the bourgeois catholic doctrines

on how a young lady should behave. Secondly, the way in which the incident is recalled in the text constitutes a slight to those who hold literature to be a sanctified and hermetically sealed domain. For, indeed, the fact that the narrator expressly recalls the row of solemn texts (dictionaries, *Larousse* and *Littré*) which lined the shelves of the toilet where she gained sexual arousal is indicative of the disrespectful nature of the act (Cardinal, 1975: 124). It might also be seen to highlight the enormous schism between reason and the body, education and sensual pleasure which overshadowed the narrator's childhood. As the narrator comes to realise, there was nothing abnormal about her childhood sexuality. On the contrary, it indicated her healthy, active desires. It is only once the narrator has accepted this part of her former self that she can start on the road to recovery:

> La petite fille qui se masturbait au milieu des dictionnaires, dans le soleil qui lui caressait les fesses, n'existait pas. Elle venait de naître sur le divan du docteur, au fond de l'impasse (Cardinal,1975: 128).

It is interesting to note how, having made this discovery, the narrator starts to recognise her own rights, to see more clearly, to speak as a sane being and not as a patient. She criticises the doctor for keeping a gargoyle in his office because she finds it highly disturbing:

> En me levant j'ai dit au docteur :
>
> "Vous ne devriez pas laisser cette gargouille dans votre bureau, elle est affreuse. Il y a déjà assez d'horreur et de peur dans la tête des gens qui viennent ici, pas la peine d'en rajouter".
>
> C'était la première fois que je m'adressais à lui autrement que comme une malade (Cardinal,1975: 129).

The second turning point is reached when the narrator comes to realise the effects of her mother's revelation that she had unsuccessfully tried to abort her. As she explores the consequences of being an unwanted child she concludes that her feelings of self-disgust and guilt are a means of channelling the hurt caused by being abandoned by her mother. She confesses that every failure, which occurred in her life, gained an

added significance because of this earlier abandonment. Hence, every departure, separation and misunderstanding evoked a profound sense of loss. While Cardinal's adverse portrayal of abortion might be seen to hold an anti-feminist message her approach is actually much more subtle. For indeed, as the narrator points out, it was not the fact that her mother had attempted to have an abortion which was the problem, on the contrary, the narrator's anger is levelled at the catholic discourses and the laws at that time had forced her to embark upon 'backstreet methods' which had failed. In fact, Cardinal might be seen to offer a convincing case for abortion by demonstrating how the frustrated mother continued to project her death wish onto her living child :

> Ce que j'ai appelé la saloperie de ma mère ce n'était pas d'avoir voulu avorter (il y a des moments où une femme n'est pas capable d'avoir un enfant, pas capable de l'aimer assez), sa saloperie c'était au contraire de n'avoir pas été au bout de son désir profond, de n'avoir pas avorté quand il le fallait ; puis d'avoir continué à projeter sa haine sur moi alors que je bougeais en elle...(Cardinal,1975: 170).

The narrator's pain is greatly assuaged when she comes to understand her mother's predicament. She realises that her actions were directly linked to the breakdown of her marriage and were intensified by her feelings of being trapped and unfulfilled in her role as house-wife and mother:

> Aujourd'hui je ne considère plus la "saloperie de ma mère" comme une saloperie. C'est une importante péripétie de ma vie. Je sais pourquoi cette femme a fait ça. Je la comprends (Cardinal,1975: 171).

Another significant breakthrough is achieved in chapter 8 when the narrator unmasks the hallucination of the eye which watches her. In order to excavate the hidden significance of this illusion, the narrator follows a process of lateral thinking as the analyst asks her what the word "tuyau" makes her think of. Her consciousness initially offers a strong resistance to unravelling the painful memories behind the hallucination. However, she eventually recognises that it is directly linked to her feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing. These self-derogatory impulses are exacerbated when she is in the company of others. As the narrator trawls through her

memories, she returns to her early childhood. She remembers being filmed by her father while she was going to the toilet. When she tries to protect herself from his gaze by striking him, she is unjustly punished. The episode can be seen to symbolise the manner in which women are subordinated to the male gaze: in recognising the import of the incident, the narrator is able to regain control over 'the gaze'. Hence, as she turns to leave the doctor after the session, she is able to meet him directly in the eye and to recognise that she has finally been reborn:

> Mon regard à rencontré le sien et je suis certaine d'y avoir vu la joie. Quel bon travail nous avons fait ensemble ! Pas vrai ?
>
> Il venait de m'aider à accoucher de moi-même. Je venais de naître. J'étais neuve! (Cardinal,1975:185).

While the narrator might now proclaim that "L'IMPASSE était devenue le chemin de mon paradis" (Cardinal,1975: 187) she also recognises that, having unmasked her phantasms, she has literally been stripped bare, broken down, left without personality. At this point in the text, it is as if the narrator has quite literally aborted herself, carried out the work which her mother had so unsuccessfully started:

> En décodant l'hallucination j'avais cru me mettre au monde, j'avais cru naître. Maintenant il me semblait qu'en crevant l'oeil au bout du tuyau je m'étais fait avorter de moi-même (Cardinal,1975: 196).

For the narrator, at times when the sense of trauma is simply too great, tears are salutary. As with other warm fluids, they serve to appease the sense of suffering and provide some form of anchorage to unbridled desire. As we shall see later on the motif of tears is one which recurs throughout Annie Leclerc's *Éxercices de mémoire*. It is interesting to note that the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire*, perhaps representing Cardinal's own position, does not necessarily view her weepy outbursts in a positive light. She recognises that at these moments she is continuing to enact the role of martyr and victim which she learned in childhood. On the other hand, for Leclerc, tears represent a more positive recognition of human fallibility and a sense of compassion both for the self and the Other (see chapter 7). Fully recognisant, however, of the

release which tears provide, the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* compares the experience of crying with the pleasure of feeling the amniotic waters burst before childbirth:

> Je me souvenais du plaisir que j'éprouvais à chaque fois qu'au cours de mes accouchements on m'avait percé la poche des eaux, mes fesses, mes cuisses, mon bassin : un répit, une douceur, une sieste, avant les grands spasmes de la délivrance (Cardinal,1975: 234).

The exploration of her propensity to tears marks another break- through for the author. She realises that they represent her repressed anger and violence. In order to become an integrated human being she must accept this aspect of her personality. As she flashes back to her childhood, the narrator remembers an incident where, at the age of two or three years old, her brother destroyed her favourite toy monkey. When she quite rightly retaliated by stamping on his toy doll her mother put her under the shower to force her to calm down. As with the incident of the vomited soup, the narrator realises that her mother's will is too strong for her and represses her anger. However, as she recognises, it is all of this hidden aggression and violence which has become transformed into anxiety. She comes to conclude that the discovery of her violence might be one of the most significant moments of her analysis:

> Cette révélation soudaine de ma violence est, je pense, le moment le plus important de ma psychanalyse. Sous ce nouvel éclairage tout devenait plus cohérent. J'ai eu la certitude que cette force rentrée, muselée, enchaînée, qui grondait constamment en moi comme un orage, était la meilleure nourriture de la chose (Cardinal, 1975: 249-50).

Having integrated the different aspects of her personality the narrator must now work towards finding the words to express her new level of self- knowledge. After relating a dream where she discovers a number of silver boxes containing excrement she engages in an analysis of the function of language. The protagonist realises that her bourgeois upbringing has trained her to employ words, like 'silver boxes', in order to deny the concrete realities of human existence. She is deeply troubled by words which

disrupt the precepts of bourgeois taste. Hence, she employs elliptical and obfuscatory language in order to describe the body and its functions. Similarly, street language, which often expresses desire, sexuality and corporality in more concrete terms, was to be avoided at all costs. On page 282, in one of the few extracts where we actually hear the narrator explicitly speaking from the perspective of an established author, she describes the sense of discomfort which she still experiences when employing 'vulgar' terminology in her texts:

> aujourd'hui, pour introduire "crotte" dans un récit que je voulais hereux et beau, et qui était heureux et beau, il m'avait fallu mobiliser mes forces et vaincre un trouble profond, une résistance abyssale (Cardinal, 1975: 282).

Through her analysis, the narrator becomes aware of the many different functions of language. She recognises that the way we use words is fundamental to the creation of our identities. At best, language can be employed in order to achieve a greater level of self-awareness, to express who one is with honestly and clarity. At worst, words can function as a form of self-censorship and denial:

> Les mots pouvaient être des particules vibratiles animant constamment l'existence [...] Les mots pouvaient enfin être des monstres, les S.S. de l'inconscient, refoulant la pensée des vivants dans les prisons de l'oubli (Cardinal,1975: 283).

In terms of the creation of her own authorial identity, the narrator's most dramatic discovery is that she has previously used language as if it were dead. She chastises herself for having adhered to the correct grammatical rules and aesthetic principles without considering the living matter, the life behind the words. She had never really thought of language as a tool which would enable her to express the truth about herself:

> Avais-je jamais soupesé le poids des mots, soupçonné leur importance ? J'avais écrit des livres avec des mots qui étaient des objets, je les rangeais selon un

> ordre que je trouvais cohérent, convenable et esthétique. Je n'avais pas vu qu'ils contenaient de la matière vivante (Cardinal,1975: 285).

Before undergoing analysis she confesses that she would never have considered writing a creative work "Le fait même d'écrire me semblait être un acte important dont je n'étais pas digne. Jamais ne m'était venue à l'esprit la prétension d'écrire" (Cardinal,1975: 255). The furthest her literary endeavours went was when she attempted to learn the *Grévisse* (the French guide to good grammatical usage) by heart. While she recognised the scope for playing with, and broadening, the rules of grammar, she believed this to be the preserve of great writers. She confesses to being overawed by the literary 'masters'. Among those writers she feels she could never emulate are Gustave Flaubert, Plato, Julian Gracq and Jean-Paul Sartre, all of whom might be considered as canonic male writers (Cardinal,1975: 255).

Paradoxically, the severity of the narrator's illness forces her to do things which she would never previously have contemplated. During her analysis she has been keeping a series of notebooks. As with Marie Cardinal's approach to narrating the self, the protagonist's creative output consists of a hybrid combination of semi-autobiographical and semi-fanciful textual strategies:

> Les divagations de mes carnets étaient faites d'éléments de ma vie que j'arrangeais comme cela me plaisait, j'allais où je voulais, je vivais des instants que je n'avais pas vécus mais que j'imaginais ...(Cardinal,1975: 254).

Perhaps because of the instability of her mind, she is able to transcend her authorial inhibitions. Writing comes 'simply' and 'easily' as she allows her mind to wander:

> Cela se faisait simplement, facilement. Je ne pensais même pas que j'écrivais. Je prenais mon crayon, mon carnet, et je me laissais aller à divaguer (Cardinal, 1975: 254).

The manner in which the narrator sets about the act of self-inscription might be seen to typify some of the characteristics of women's autobiography which I mentioned earlier (see chapter 1). Firstly, the non-authoritarian nature of her approach is signalled by the

fact that she writes tentatively using only a pencil. Secondly, as I have just pointed out, the style combines fictional and autobiographical elements which appear to be episodic and fragmentary. Thirdly, the writing is carried out in secret, or disguise, as it were. The narrator hides her notebooks under a mattress during the day and sets about writing early in the morning and late at night when no one is around. The narrator's comments on her writing technique also serve to distinguish it from the process of analysis. For while both might involve an exploration of the self through language, by writing her life the narrator is able to take complete control of her destiny, without guidance from a second party. Furthermore, as she points out, she was free to invent in a manner which she could never do in analysis. She affirms that "je n'étais pas tenue par le carcan de la vérité comme avec le docteur. Je me sentais libre comme je ne l'avais jamais été" (Cardinal,1975: 254).

The narrator begins to gain confidence in her writing abilities when she is asked to produce a publicity hand out for a dairy cooperative (Cardinal,1975: 263-5). She asks the editor to comment on the piece which she has written. He replies in a somewhat playful tone of voice "Alors, madame fait du Jean Cau maintenant ?" (Cardinal,1975: 265). It is only later that the narrator realises the import of this comparison when she discovers that Cau received the *Prix Goncourt*. Further confirmation of her talent comes from her estranged husband Jean-Pierre. When the narrator finally plucks up the courage to show him her notebooks he is moved to tears by the beauty and sensitivity of the work. It might be argued that Jean-Pierre is the narrator's ideal reader. Firstly, because she is profoundly in love with him and secondly, because he is highly qualified in the field. He holds a doctorate in literature and is gifted with what the narrator describes as "une connaissance si profonde, presque amoureuse" of the French language (Cardinal, 1975: 267). It is almost as though the narrator is writing in order to regain her husband's love. On this point, the fact that he reads the pages in bed beside the narrator signals the very sensual nature of the encounter. Furthermore, his appreciation will convince the protagonist that she is no longer insane:

> C'est grave que Jean-Pierre lise ces pages...Je me rends compte qu'elles sont importantes, qu'elles portent un élan fondamental de mon esprit...Elles sont même ce que j'ai fait de plus important dans toute ma vie...(Cardinal,1975: 266).

Jean-Pierre is particularly moved by a sensual and emotive passage from the narrator's book. This extract, cited, in *Les Mots pour le dire* portrays a scene which is an intertextual marker in Cardinal's corpus. It describes a young woman initiating her lover into the pleasures of swimming in the waves:

> Viens, regardons-nous, ne me lache pas des yeux. Nous allons entrer dans les vagues. Je connais un passage de sable blanc où tu ne te blesseras pas, où tu n'auras qu'à te laisser aller. Rappelle-toi, mon doux, mon beau, que la mer est bonne si tu ne la crains pas. Elle ne veut que te lécher, te caresser, te porter, te bercer, permets-lui de le faire et elle te plaira encore. Sinon elle te fera peur (Cardinal,1975: 268-9).

Of course, these passages stand in sharp contrast to the earlier evocations of nauseous liquids which signify the narrator's mental collapse. Indeed, not only the act of writing but also its content testifies to the fact that the narrator is regaining her health and vitality. It also serves as a counterpoint to the earlier passage where the narrator imagines Jean-Pierre swimming in the ocean with his young lover. This is all the more pertinent because the narrator had become estranged from her husband partly because her mental illness had prevented her from sharing the natural pleasures into which she had initially initiated him.

The gap between the mad woman who the narrator was, and the liberated, creative individual who she has become, is so immense that Jean-Pierre no longer recognises her. He is so transfixed by the mystery woman behind the text that he falls in love with the narrator for a second time. He expresses his emotion in the following manner: "Ecoute, je ne sais pas ce qui me prend, je suis amoureux de la femme qui a écrit ces pages" (Cardinal,1975: 268).

And again, one paragraph on, he exclaims:

> Il y a des phrases que tu as écrites qui me bouleversent, parce qu'elles sont belles et aussi parce que je ne connais pas celle qui les a écrites. Pourtant c'est toi (Cardinal,1975: 169).

Autobiographical Intentions and Interpretations

The narrator's choice of Jean-Pierre as her ideal reader is not just a textual mechanism. In *Autrement dit* she has explained how her first book *Ecoutez la mer* was written with the express intention of regaining his affection. It is true that her authorial intentions might be seen to designate her dependency upon her husband. For this reason, it might be argued that they fall into conflict with the central theme of the feminist *Bildungsroman*: the narrator's struggle to find an autonomous identity. However, although the narrative closure is, in part, dependant upon the protagonist salvaging her relationship with Jean-Pierre, their new relationship is founded on a recognition of their separate identities and an acknowledgement of difference:

> A partir de ce jour-là Jean-Pierre et moi nous avons commencé à former un bloc. Nous nous sommes nourris de nos différences. Nous avons confronté nos vies sans jamais les critiquer, partageant les meilleurs morceaux (Cardinal,1975: 270).

Moreover, by producing positive images of the ways in which women writers want to be read, Cardinal goes some way toward questioning the homocentric bias of the autobiographical canon.

The narrator's analysis draws to a close with the publication of her first novel. Again the gap between the former mad woman and the independent writer who she has become is foregrounded by the serious and respectful manner which her publisher accords her. The narrator's insecurities are still apparent in the fact that she is afraid that she will be unmasked as the 'mad woman' at any moment: "Je n'osais pas le regarder. Et s'il avait su qu'il s'adressait à la folle !" (Cardinal,1975: 271).

However, the independent nature of her voyage of self-discovery is reinforced as she recognises that she and she alone is responsible for her salvation. As she addresses her mad persona, now as a long lost friend she remarks: "Je t'ai tirée de là, ma vielle, je t'ai tirée de là !" (Cardinal,1975: 271). The narrator's arrival in the public domain is now undeniable. Her book sells well and thanks to its success, she is asked to write articles for papers and to do investigative reporting for magazines (Cardinal,1975: 274).

It should now be clear that the narrator's mad persona serves as a metaphor for her repressed authorial status. If this point needs further reinforcement, it is worth remembering that Cardinal has equated her own authorial intentions with insanity (see chapter 3). Through writing, the narrator has been able to accept the 'insane' aspect of

her persona and to employ the creative energy which it represents to the full. It is thus, at the beginning of the text, that the writer who has finally discovered herself is able to conclude that:

> La folle et moi nous avons commencé une vie toute neuve, pleine d'espoirs, une vie qui ne peut plus être mauvaise. Moi la protégeant, elle me prodiguant *l'invention*, la liberté [my italics] (Cardinal,1975: 15).

As the self-affirming author of her life, we would not be wrong to assume that the narrator has found a room of her own.

I started off by aligning myself with those critics who argue that it might be prudent to take a gender specific approach to the question of authorial deconstruction. For women writers who are only recently starting to gain recognition in the canon proclamations of the death of the author may be overly premature. Sean Burke has pertinently observed that in order to empty the text of the author one must presuppose there is "a king worthy of the killing" (Burke, 1992: 26). For an author like Cardinal, who has received little serious recognition from the literary establishment, regicide is an anachronism (see chapter 8). The decentering of the author was a positive step forward in the struggle to overturn the hegemony of the white bourgeois male author. Barthes' intention in declaring the death of the author was to open up the French literary canon. Paradoxically, time has shown that in many respects, by detracting attention from the conditions of the production and reception of literary texts he paved the way for critics to bypass the important issues of race, class and gender. As we have seen, feminist critics like Moi have heralded the fragmentation of the unified, phallic (read male) author. Yet, where does that leave an author like Cardinal whose conception of her authorial status can in no way be described as transcendent? For Cardinal, writing presupposes neither the authority nor the annihilation of the author. Rather, it opens up a space for an interactive exchange between reader and writer which leads to the production of new and different voices.

In this section I have demonstrated how Cardinal's confessional writing prompts us to ask questions about the identity and social positioning of both the author and the reader. In contrast to those theorists who suggest that texts can somehow be divorced from the socio/historic conditions of their production it is my intention to make a claim for the importance of the experience of both the author and the reader in textual

analysis. I have explored the manner in which *Les Mots pour le dire* addresses specific issues resonant of a particular historic moment and seeking to raise awareness about the condition of women in France in the 1970s. The experience of the author and reader is clearly paramount in lending authenticity to the political message. Furthermore, I have also noted how the reader's approval is central to the reconstruction of the narrator's identity. In the next section I will engage in a fuller discussion of the role of the reader of the confessional text.

4.7. The Trade Between Reader and Writer

> ***Aucun écrivain ne peut, honnêtement, nier l'importance du lecteur. Quand on apporte un manuscrit chez l'éditeur on sait ce que ça veut dire, ça veut dire : "Livrez-le au public". Sinon on le garderait chez soi, dans un tiroir*** (Cardinal, 1977: 60).

I argued in my introduction that the feminist confessional is characterised by the intimate mode of address whereby the author invokes the imaginary reader as a sister. While the author might embark upon her project in the hope of gaining the reader's sympathy this is not, however, to suggest that she is confident of success. As with many 'sisterly' relationships, intimacy may be overshadowed by conflict. The author, uncertain of converting the reader to her cause, risks exposing herself to rejection and betrayal. In this section, I draw upon Michael Sheringham's analysis of autobiography as 'an anxious genre' and explore the insecurities which beset the author *vis-à-vis* his/her readership. Although confessional writing is predicated on a belief that the personal is political, I will argue that, as in Cardinal's case, there may be a disparity between the author's public and private motivations for writing. The author, who publicly sets out to liberate his/her readers, may privately be equally dependent upon them for his/her personal salvation. In such a case, can the psychoanalytic drama played out within the text also be located within the relationship between reader and writer? Does the reader's consumption of the text, like the host, point the way toward authorial salvation?

In his analysis of French autobiography (1993), Michael Sheringham has argued that the reasons why individuals turn to self-expression in the autobiographical genre are multifarious. Some may be driven by the desire to promote a cult of their

personality. Others may feel a compelling urge to confess their sins. One may wish to embellish the past. Another may seek to produce a more truthful version of it. Some may turn to the genre at the pinnacle of a literary career. For instance, in Sartre's case, writing the self enabled him both to denounce and paradoxically (because he pre-empted all possible criticisms) to endorse his previous literary output.[xiv] Recently, the growing validation of autobiography has meant that the more adventurous may even deem it plausible to start their careers with an autobiographical offering. In Cardinal's case, it might be suggested that autobiography proffers the possibility of cathartic healing and rebirth and the preservation of one's identity for posterity. Yet, as Sheringham goes on to argue, there is one major obstacle to authorial intention. Indeed, the author's seeming self-centredness is always compromised by the encounter with alterity, the need to engage with what is Other (Sheringham, 1993: vii). This is no more apparent than in the autobiographer's relationship with the reader. The more the author seeks to authenticate his/her own image, to endorse it through the act of inscription, the more s/he finds herself at the mercy of the imagined recipient of her text. For this reason, as Sheringham notes, "far from being unequivocally triumphal, the apotheosis of the sovereign ego, autobiography is an anxious genre" (1993,ix) [xv].

The interaction with the reader is a double-edged sword; for on the one hand, the author may aim to seduce his/her audience, and to convert them to his/her cause. On the other hand, s/he is constantly assailed by the fear that the reader might reject the self-image which she renders up. Sheringham has proposed that, in this case, the reader might be envisaged as a kind of superego or, indeed, as a projection of the author's own nagging internal voice, "the Other who inhabits all acts of self scrutiny" (Sheringham,1993:139). The reader may, then, be seen as an object of desire but also as one of persecution. At worst, as Sheringham neatly surmises, the reader becomes the voice of the law. This paradox is at its most apparent where the author sets out to challenge conventional assumptions and codes of normality. In this case, her desire to win the reader over to her cause is proportional to her fear of reprisals and rejection.

The over-riding need to be accepted by one's audience may lead to a disparity between the public and private faces of authorial intention (Sheringham,1993:137). Autobiographical writing has always been a public activity; the possibility of textual dissemination, no matter how fleeting, usually looms in the back of an author's mind. Cardinal's public autobiographical face is that of a social reformer. We have already noted that one of her professed aims for writing is her desire to raise consciousness among working-class women through the production of a lucid critique of patriarchy

and bourgeois catholicism. This face of autobiographical intention undoubtedly situates the author in a position of non-dependency *vis-à-vis* the reader.

However, as Sheringham has observed, "it is when we pursue the autobiographer into the darker recesses of his or her undertaking, its seemingly more private motivating forces, that we truly encounter the inescapably public face of this activity" (Sheringham: 1993: 137). As we go on to explore Cardinal's less overt autobiographical intentions, the author's vulnerability *vis-à-vis* her readers begins to show. Cardinal describes the relationship between author and reader as a kind of trade which she finds "unbearable"(Cardinal: 1977: 61). One of the main reasons for this is Cardinal's fear of losing her audience. She has remarked her sense of dependency upon her readers who provide her with a point of communication with the outside world (Cardinal, 1977: 61). Despite the fact that Cardinal has voiced her intention of writing for working-class women, she nonetheless, denies that she has a specific reader in mind when she sets about writing a text. In fact, she is aware that her authorial status is highly precarious, precisely because she has not carved out a niche in the market. Cardinal has pin pointed two kinds of authors, guaranteed to attract a faithful readership: the specialist writer, who has a loyal and elitist following who hungrily await his books, and the writer of formula novels who has a wide audience and can be sure of reaching high sales figures. She considers herself to be outside of both of these categories. For these reasons she appears to be deeply anxious about the threat of losing her reading public.

Cardinal recognises that when her texts hit the mark, as with *Les Mots pour le dire*, the encounter is 'passionate'. However, she is troubled by the prospect of producing a text which fades away into obscurity. Cardinal is also deeply perturbed by the threat of 'selling out', of becoming a 'writer tradesman' simply to keep up sales:

> L'angoisse ne vient pas seulement de la perte possible du public, c'est à dire de faire ce qu'il faut pour garder mes lecteurs et ainsi de devenir un écrivain-commerçant. Si ça arrivait je n'aurais plus aucun respect pour moi (Cardinal,1977: 61).

Is it plausible to argue that Cardinal's sense of anxiety is compounded by the fact that the reader's approval suggests, not only, a recognition of her status as an author, but also, a vindication of her self worth? If we turn to consider the personal aspect of

Cardinal's autobiographical enterprise, we can argue that her feminist critique is as much motivated by her need to come to terms with her past history and her traumatic relationship with her parents. I would like to suggest that, in this case, Cardinal finds herself in a position of dependency upon the reader who is envisaged as an object of desire. Like an analyst, the reader becomes a silent and compliant witness who will enable the author to work through her emotional traumas.

One of the most striking features of *Les Mots pour le dire* is the author's sense of being bereft of love. Deserted by her father at the time of her birth, the narrator laments being deprived of "mon seul allié" (Cardinal, 1975: 75). Brought up on the "planète mère" (Cardinal, 1975: 76), she is haunted by feelings of abandonment and loss. The narrator frequently cites examples of how she was prevented from expressing her real self and how, on the contrary, the only way that she could gain her mother's affection was through pretending to be the perfect dutiful daughter (see section 4.5). Never quite matching up to the idealised memory of her dead sibling, emotionally starved and unjustly punished by her mother, the narrator is deeply marked by feelings of self-hatred and worthlessness which drive her to the brink of suicide. I am aware that I might be falling into the trap of conflating the narrator with Cardinal. However, Cardinal has spoken about her childhood in a number of interviews and gives a similar account of the causes of her neurosis. In an interview with Geneviève Doucet, Cardinal cites her mother as the central cause of her illness:

> C'était elle en premier. Et la manière dont elle avait vécu, elle, son divorce : avec ses principes, sa rigueur, ses refoulements....Ce qui provoque le saccage c'est le manque d'amour, les haines reportées sur l'enfant, les mesquineries, la méchanceté (Doucet, 1975: 63).

For the purpose of our analysis, Sheringham's observation that, the satisfaction of the autobiographer's private desires may necessitate an "imaginary negotiation...with an imaginary Other, an interpolated subjectivity which receives and responds to their utterances" (Sheringham, 1993: 137), is pertinent.

I would like to propose that, for Cardinal, the imaginary reader functions as a kind of 'good' mother. This 'ideal' reader, who attentively follows the narrator's pursuits, offers the author the sense of complicity and understanding which she was never able to achieve with her own mother. As I have already noted in chapter 3, the

portrayal of the mother as a kind of rogue figure is undoubtedly intended to gain the reader's sympathy for the author. It is noteworthy that the narrator is constantly at pains to communicate with her mother, to be heard. Hence, it might be suggested that, while the narrator's mother never listened to her, the reader is envisaged as an ally who will correct this injustice by following the narrator's most intimate thoughts [xvi].

Taking this analogy a little further, it might be argued that, for Cardinal, writing is tantamount to a symbolic gift given to this imaginary 'good' reader. As I have just noted, much of the narrator's frustration as a child comes from her inability to please her mother. This is most apparent when she attempts to win her mother's affection by offering her gifts. The ritualistic offerings of pebbles, and flowers from the garden, which are envisaged as precious jewels in the young narrator's mind, are constantly rejected. In the following exchange the narrator describes the excitement which fills her heart as she is about to present a gift to her mother. The mother's brusque and unfeeling response is remembered so vividly that the exact words are quoted in inverted commas:

> Devant le petit tas de cailloux que je sortais de ma poche, le souffle court, l'esprit en folie, le coeur jubilant à l'idée de la merveille contenue sûrement là-dedans et qui allait illuminer se vie elle disait :
>
> Ne laisse pas traîner ces saletés dans la maison (Cardinal,1975: 89).

Hence, the protagonist's attempts to individuate herself from her mother by entering into the realm of economic exchange are constantly thwarted.

Commenting on the behavioural patterns of the Maori tribe, Lévi-Strauss argued that gift-giving is an essential form of communication (Lévi-Strauss, 1950). Michel Lerris offered a similar analysis of this ritual among North-West American Indians (Lerris, 1948). Drawing a comparison between the shield which the tribesmen exchanged and the literary text, Leiris argued that the greater the dissemination of a text, the more it becomes a source of enrichment to the author (Levi, 1992: 12). On this point, it is interesting to note how the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* goes on to suggest that the process of analysis (like writing, an attempt to re-establish

communication with the Other) provided a therapeutic resolution to her earlier thwarted attempts at gift giving[xvii]:

> Ma mère repoussait mes trésors imaginaires tandis que le docteur, lui, écoutait mes récits sans broncher mais avec une grande attention, m'aidant ainsi à me rendre compte par moi-même de la valeur exacte de mes rapports (Cardinal,1975: 189-190)

If then, as I have argued Cardinal is writing as a gift for an ideal imaginary reader what kind of qualities might this individual possess?

4.8. Annie Leclerc: an Ideal Reader

In an early foray into reader response criticism Gerald Prince has drawn a useful distinction between the different types of readers to whom a text might be addressed (Prince, 1973): "The real reader (the person who holds the book in hand), the virtual reader (the kind of reader the author thinks he is writing for, whom he endows with certain qualities, capacities, and tastes), and the ideal reader (one who understands the text perfectly and approves its every nuance)" (Tompkins, 1980, xii). Cardinal's ideal reader is not, perhaps, so unassumingly compliant as that evoked by Prince. However, I adopt the term in this discussion to describe the mode of reception which is accorded the seal of authorial approval.

Cardinal's ideal reader writer interaction finds a direct expression in her series of conversations with Annie Leclerc in *Autrement dit*. In the preface, Leclerc is praised as a rigorous critic who is fired, not by a desire for self promotion but rather, by her quest for the truth: "I like her strictness, her severity, her desire for the truth" (Cardinal,1995: 3). At the same time, however, she is also portrayed as an active reader who - like the author - is broad minded and forever open to new ideas: "I also like the fact that she wanders, that she searches like me" (Cardinal, 1995:3). Interestingly enough, while Cardinal might seek to disguise her identity from imagined hostile critics, she actively welcomes Annie Leclerc's engagement with her life. Leclerc's interest in reaching the woman behind the book, in drawing out the real person as opposed to the writer, is seen as an important form of communication: one moreover, which Cardinal

believes herself to have achieved with readers who wrote to her in response to *Les Mots pour le dire*. There is clearly a major difference between this kind of interaction and the one she eschews with literary critics. One reason for this could be the fact that, while the latter relationship is somewhat voyeuristic, the former is a form of engagement whereby readers share their own life histories and vulnerabilities with Cardinal, gaining empowerment through the exchange:

> elle me pose des questions d'une part pour me forcer à me dire moi-même plus clairement, à montrer la femme que je suis plutôt que l'écrivain, d'autre part, parcequ'elle croit que mes réponses pourront peut-être l'aider, elle, à progresser. Elle révèle ainsi sa propre personne, la direction de sa curiosité et de son intérêt (Cardinal,1995: 7).

For the narrator, and perhaps for Cardinal herself, the 'ideal' reader is one who will listen to her words without casting judgement. Like the silent analyst who aids the narrator's recovery, the reader becomes a recipient who aids the process of psychical healing. In *Autrement dit*, Cardinal describes the role of the analyst in much the same way as she has spoken about Leclerc: "Jamais il ne juge, jamais il ne fait de commentaires, jamais il ne cherche à diriger mais on le sent attentif, très attentif"(Cardinal, 1977: 62).

It seems to me that, at the time of writing *Les Mots pour le dire*, Cardinal was still searching for an identity and that the act of confessing her past enabled her to exorcise the influence of her middle-class family upon her life. By confessing to her mental illness, Cardinal was able to bring her analysis to an end and to start rebuilding her life (Cardinal, 1977: 213). This subtext of authorial intention in no way undermines the feminist interest of the text. In fact, it provides a fitting illustration of the manner in which feminist confessional writing plays out the narrator's symbolic rebirth. The fact that the text was such a huge success may have served to endorse Cardinal's narrative of her past history and may have aided in her own process of recovery.

If, as I have argued, the reader is placed in the position of an analyst, does he/she have an active role to play in the creation of textual meaning? On the one hand, Cardinal's tightly structured narrative seems to suggest an authorial desire to rigorously control the interpretative strategy. Much of the pleasure derived from reading *Les Mots*

pour le dire is in the act of assuming a passive role, of being effortlessly carried along with the narrative tension and suspense. On the other hand, in comparison to a writer like Annie Ernaux (see Thomas, 1999), Cardinal makes few direct interventions in the text offering the reader directions for interpretation. The self-reflexive comments typical of autobiographical writing are conspicuous by their absence. While Cardinal recognises the impossibility of fixing textual meaning: "Je crois que chaque lecteur crée un livre différent de celui que l'écrivain a écrit" (Cardinal, 1977: 121), *Les Mots pour le dire* is less open to multiple interpretations than a text which Barthes' might describe as 'scriptible.'[xviii] Yet, it is plausible that the reader can assume an active role in the reading process by engaging positively with the analytical encounter. As John Phillips has argued, in his work on Nathalie Sarraute, "As well as the analyst, the reader is also of course [..] an analysand in search of self" (Phillips, 1994: 255). Sheringham has provided the interesting analogy of the reader approaching the text like a voyeur at a peep show (Sheringham, 1993). It is certainly the case that with a text like *Les Mots pour le dire*, there is a temptation to adopt a voyeuristic stance. Cardinal is, perhaps, aware of this fact; the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* compares herself to a circus performer being made to jump through hoops for the audience's pleasure (Cardinal,1975: 177). However, the interactive nature of the text seems to be confirmed by the thousands of letters which Cardinal has received from readers who have reappraised their lives after reading the text (see chapter 8). This seems to suggest a reading strategy which, like psychoanalytical "transference," is "performative" as opposed to "cognitive" [xix]. This is not to suggest that all of these textual encounters are positive. Indeed, when I have discussed Cardinal's autobiographical fiction with friends and colleagues, I have been surprised by the number of people who said they had to put the text aside, or come back to it at a later date, because of the distressing nature of the subject matter.

For those who are prepared to become fellow travellers with the author, to participate in the narrator's struggle, the compensation is found at the end of the text where the reader is invited to share in the communion of rebirth and renewal. While *Les Mots pour le dire* may not be to the taste of every reader, the best selling status of the text seems to suggest that despite Cardinal's anxieties, the reader is rarely Other to the author's experience. As I started off by suggesting, the key aim of the confessional writer is communication with a reader with whom she can share her most secret thoughts like a sister. The following sentence, taken from Cardinal's preface to the

1995 English edition of *Autrement dit,* seems to effectively encapsulate her approach to writing:

> Voici donc ce que sont ces pages : un cheminement dans la connaissance de deux personnes, un désir de se rencontrer, une volonté commune d'être intègres. que se soit dans le rire, l'indécence, ou la gravité de mots que nous mettons en avant sans savoir exactement ce qu'ils contiennent (Cardinal,1997: 7).

Notes

[i] It is interesting to consider how all three authors are inspired to write as a means of coming to terms with loss. Cardinal's background as a middle-class French woman, born and brought up in Algeria, led to a fragmented sense of self and to a need to write as an affirmation of her identity (see chapter 2). Ernaux was fired by the need to explore the trauma of changing class (see Thomas, 1999). While de Beauvoir may initially appear to have a more stable sense of identity, Toril Moi's careful reading of her texts has revealed an unresolved relationship with her mother and bouts of depression to be the driving force behind her writing (Moi,1994).

[ii] Michel Foucault's analysis of the ways in which power functions in modern society has been particularly influential in recent feminist re-evaluations of the confessional genre. In his seminal work *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976), Foucault argued that order is maintained in modern society, not through preventing citizens from airing their opinions, but rather, by encouraging them to publicise their private existences. However, for Foucault, this was not to be taken as a sign that society had adopted a more liberal attitude to free speech because, in his opinion, it constituted a method of monitoring social behaviour. For indeed, while confession was encouraged, those who expressed experiences which were outside the norm would be stigmatised and marginalised. Thus, in Foucault's terms, the act of confession represented a form of normalisation as the confessor sought to overcome anti-social behaviour. See for example, Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics* (1994) where the multiplicity and marginality of women's discourses is seen as a point of resistance to the 'technologies of the self' outlined by Foucault. Or Joan W. Scott's 'Experience' where the author questions the validity of assumptions that women's autobiography presents an 'authentic' women's experience. (In Butler and Scott eds. 1993: 22-40).

[iii] In her discussion of Cardinal, Carolyn A. Durham coins the term 'communicative' literature to describe writing which attempts to speak more directly to an audience than the avant-garde text, and is more concerned with the depiction of social reality (Durham,1992).

[iv] It should, however, be noted that Cardinal does not envisage *Les Mots pour le dire* as a text aimed exclusively at the female reader. See for example Cardinal's admission to having a strong identification with, and desire to write for, people who are touched by neurosis. "Ces gens là, sont mes frères et mes soeurs, plus que ça même, mes semblables. La névrose c'est une maladie épouvantable, insupportable à vivre, ce n'est pas par hasard si elle est à l'origine de 95 pour 100 des suicides" (Cardinal, 1977: 29-30).

[v] As noted in chapter two, Cardinal was awarded the *Prix international du premier roman* for *Écoutez la mer* (Cardinal, 1962).

[vi] Since then, there has been an increasing tendency to see the text as a self-constituting object, a web of shifting signifiers, where meaning is continuously deferred. For instance, Foucault has famously described the text as "a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules...where the writing subject endlessly disappears" (Foucault, 1977:116). For a further discussion of this point see chapter 5.

[vii] Semi-autobiographical texts like Borges', *Borges and I* (Borges, 1960, trans. 1962) and Barthes', Roland *Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Barthes, 1975) exemplify this feeling of anxiety and fragmentation. In both cases, narration of the self in the third person conveys the gap between the living author and the linguistic narrator. The failure of language to convey the embodied self has never been more apparent as

the authors' textual selves take on a life of their own which appears to be more present and substantial than that of their progenitors.

[viii] At this juncture, I had better point out that it is not my intention to deny the import of post-structural theories; Rather, the purpose of my discussion is to examine the particular tensions which arise between autobiographical formalism and feminism.

[ix] See chapter 1 for a brief discussion of the status of women writers in France at this time. A further discussion of the subject can be found in Alice Jardine and Anne. M. Menke (Jardine and Menke, 1988).

[x] On this point see Colette T. Hall's essay entitled " 'She' is me more than 'I' ": Writing and the Search for Identity in the Works of Marie Cardinal" (Hall, 1991).

[xi] It should, however, be noted that unlike Sartre, Cardinal offers a gender specific explanation for her female protagonist's neurosis. Her breakdown is a result of her marginal social identity and her exclusion from the public domain.

[xii] It is interesting to note how the narrator's recourse to writing as a means to self-empowerment reflects Cardinal's own authorial intentions.

[xiii] The importance of the gaze in *Les Mots pour le dire* is echoed in *Exercices de mémoire* where the refusal to see is presented as a form of denial and the reinstatement of the gaze is an essential vehicle to overcoming repression (see chapter 7).

[xiv] See Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mots* (Sartre, 1964).

[xv] Sheringham coins the term 'devices' to describe the different strategies which the author may adopt in order to overcome this sense of anxiety. He suggests that one of the key causes of anxiety, the fear of banality, may be allayed through the utilisation of innovatory formal devices. These displays to the reader help to direct the terms of reception (Sheringham, 1993). Although I do not have the space to develop this point in detail, it might be argued that Cardinal places a unique stamp on her autobiography through her idiosyncratic use of capital letters, temporal shifts, enumeration, and fragmentary narrative voice. However, perhaps because of her desire to avoid hermeticism, Cardinal does not seem to display an overriding impulse to assert her individuality through textual experimentation.

[xvi] In an interview with Cardinal, Madeleine Chapsal has raised the question of whether "écrire c'est sortir de sa solitude ?" (Chapsal,1990: 96).

[xvii] In a similar manner, Thomas has noted how gift-giving is a pivotal force of the writing of Annie Ernaux. Thomas remarks the recurrence of the words 'don' and 'donner' which is reiterated in the reader response to the texts conveying "the desire to give something back to the author" (Thomas, 1999: 135). On this point, it would be interesting to examine the extent to which the writings of Cardinal and Leclerc might be seen to encapsulate Hélène Cixous' conception of *écriture féminine* as a feminine economy of exchange which accepts the reality of loss and undoes the desire for economic recompense (Cixous and Clément, 1986: 87).

[xviii] See Barthes' *SZ* (Barthes, 1970: 11).

[xix] Phillips argues that where the reader assumes the role of analyst "interpretation of the text becomes a process not unlike the transference which Freud identifies as occurring between analyst and patient, and which is therefore essentially a process of movement" (Phillips, 1994: 255).

Part 3

Annie Leclerc:
Exercices de mémoire

5

The Crisis of Truth

5.1. Introduction: The Crisis of Truth

A recurring theme in this thesis has been the manner in which autobiographical writing is used by the author as a form of symbolic renewal. Writing provides a linguistic space for casting off the old, exorcising unpalatable memories, coming to terms with the past. As with the traditional festival where the underside of humanity, the inner demons which haunt the collective unconscious, are made manifest so that they be evacuated from the social order, writing offers the potential for self-renewal. This process finds a particularly fitting illustration in the case of testimonial writing. Why the urgent need to bear witness in our era?

As we begin a new millennium, we have arrived at a moment in time where the past must be revisioned and reassessed, where the future offers the potential for change and new beginnings. We are experiencing a unique temporal shift where we gain a heightened awareness of the movement between past and future. As the values of modernity (our belief in depth of character, the autonomous subject, bourgeois morality and taste) have given way to those of postmodernity (the celebration of surface appearance, fragmentation, multiplicity, globalisation, the narcissistic subject, and the inhuman interaction between man and the microchip), there is an urgent need to take stock, to testify. What does it mean to be a human at the beginning of the 21st century? Looking back on a century which was labelled the bloodiest of all time, one which has seen two world wars and the Holocaust, do we any longer have the right to describe ourselves as humane and indeed human?

Of the many movements to which the 20th century has witnessed (CND, the revolts of 68, anti-colonialism, the gay rights movement), feminism has been at the forefront of those recognising the need to redefine subjectivity and to find a new way of interpreting human interactions. In the context of this thesis, which makes a case for the continuing importance of experiential writing for offering women a point of collective identification, is it plausible to suggest that feminism has undergone its own crisis of truth? If texts like Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* signalled the belief, predominant in

the 1970s, that the woman's movement could be defined in terms of unity, shared goals and collective action, then the fear of essentialising and universalising women's experience has led to a radical questioning of the principles underlying this approach. From the late seventies onwards, with the appearance of women's voices of other races, classes and sexualities, a *heteroglossia*[i] of multiple and divergent voices has emerged. Recognising the growing awareness of political, racial, sexual and class differences in the feminist movement, is it too extreme to suggest that the latter is itself undergoing the fragmentation of identity common to the traumatised subject?

5.2. Postmodern Feminisms

In this section I examine some of the difficulties facing the contemporary feminist movement with particular reference to the postmodern debate. Drawing on the work of Patricia Waugh, I argue that it is possible for women to hold onto some of the grand narratives which came out of the Enlightenment while also recognising the need to avoid the totalitarianism inherent in fixed notions of total identity. Referring to the work of Wendy Wheeler, I suggest that the approach to identity, the aesthetic and the natural world posited by Annie Leclerc in *Exercices de mémoire,* might come some way toward responding to the cartesian split in identity particular to Enlightenment conceptions of the subject.

In her essay 'From Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory', Patricia Waugh draws attention to the aporia in which contemporary feminists find themselves. Postmodern feminism has grown out of a critical awareness of the nature of female identity, produced in the discourses of Modernity. That is to say that feminism could not have arisen without reference to the Enlightenment ideals of truth, justice and equality which grew out of the project of modernity. However, while recognising the usefulness of these values for feminism, it is nonetheless the case that the movement is caught in an impasse, legitimating a mode of discourse which is equally responsible for the repression of women. While the modern subject is perceived in terms of unity, individuality and the uniqueness of his identity, all of these features, incorporated in the bourgeois individual, are predicated on the creation of a split between the public and the private domain, the self and the Other (Waugh, 1992: 189-204). Women, presented as the Other to the cultural order, rightly felt the need to form a unified front in order to protest against their exclusion from the

public domain. Hence, in the seventies women were inspired to form a unified body against a common enemy which was encompassed in the term 'patriarchy'. At this time, women were rightly concerned to gain access to equal employment opportunities, the right to control their bodies, the same possibilities as men to define culture and to participate in the world of politics. Hence, the importance which was accorded to 'coming to voice' and airing women's subjectivity through making the personal political. However, while these aims are still to be fully realised, feminism has been hampered by the contradictory nature of its own position. As a narrative which rises out of the discourses of modernity, does this not then mean that if women retain the values and identities of modernity then they are perpetuating their own oppression? This point was reinforced when minority voices of women of other classes, races and political leanings began to emerge in the late 1970s. While the women's movement of the early to middle 1970s was essentially dominated by the voices of white middle-class women who had access to the culture, and funds to protest on behalf of other women, it now became apparent that these women might be adopting the same unifying and exclusionary perspectives evident in the laws of patriarchy which they had set out to over throw. This 'awakening' has far reaching implications for autobiographical writing, for as Patricia Waugh argues "There can be no simple legitimation for women in throwing off 'false consciousness' and revealing a true but 'deeply' buried female self. Indeed, to embrace the essentialism of this notion of 'difference' is to come dangerously close to reproducing the very patriarchal construction of gender which feminists have set out to contest as *their* basic project of modernity" (Waugh,1992: 189). In the 1970s the search for collective identity and empowerment through unified identity (no matter how imaginary that might be) was exemplified in confessional writing (see chapter 4). I have noted how in France the *MLF* campaigned for equal rights while a number of symbolic acts such as the signing of the *manifeste des 373* and the laying of a wreath for the wife of the unknown soldier on the memorial tomb at the *Arc de Triomphe*, all pointed towards a growing demand for women's voices to be heard (see Chapter 1).

By the late 1970s women no longer wanted to be equal to men, they wanted their 'difference' to be recognised. Along with the emergence of post-structuralist theories of a subject who is created in language we start to notice a growing resistance to concepts of unification and collectivism within feminism. Just as the unified subject is seen to be a fallacy, there is a gradual leaning towards an examination of the subject as s/he is constructed in language. This process reaches its logical conclusion in some

theories of the postmodern where the subject is perceived as a site where different texts meet and collide, where identity and indeed gender are seen to be constructible and destructible like textual meaning. Derrida's deconstruction of identity as self-present, his theory of writing as a process of endless deferral and Lacan's concept of the split subject were to have a dramatic impact on feminist writers and theorists who now envisaged the search for a unified identity as naïve. Furthermore fragmentation, silence and multiplicity were all seen as fitting strategies for disrupting 'masculine' language. In response to Lacan's proposal that the Symbolic Order is governed by the 'law of the father' women sought to resist dominant discourse by constructing their own languages. The proponents of *écriture féminine* (as exemplified in the work of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva) sought to signify their difference by usurping grammatical rules and speaking in the gaps of male language. Although Foucault's theories do not rely solely on an analysis of the relationship between language and the subject, his presentation of bodies as sites for the reproduction of discourse and power has been influential for a number of feminist writers. For instance, in Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics* (1994) the author proposes multiple, contradictory identities as a site of resistance to dominant productive discourses.

By the late 1980s the celebration of multiple voices, regional identities and dissolution of the subject is particularly apparent in the writings of women of different races where plurality and diffuseness are seen as ways of challenging the autonomous identity of the colonial. As a direct critique of the unified self, created through capitalist imperialism, the voices of colonised subjects are seen to offer a fragmented divergent self-hood as a point of resistance. For example, in *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989) Françoise Lionnet coined the term *métissage* to describe the diversity and plurality of voices of women of colour whose texts can be read as braided narratives spoken from the margins. The *diasporic* nature of women's writing was recognised in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *De/Colonising the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography (1992)* which mapped emerging subjectivities in Asian, African, Australian and American continents. Coining the term *subaltern*, Gayatri Spivak questioned the implications of colonisation upon the colonised and hence marginalized subject's ability to adopt a narrative voice, to say 'I' (Spivak, 1988). Is the autobiographical voice, the 'I' always constrained by the emergence of the unified, coherent read male bourgeois subject of the Enlightenment project? In such circumstances does speech already always assume the valorisation of the discourses of one's own oppression?

The Crisis of Truth

While all of these theories appeared to reside in a belief that women's liberation would come through a recognition of their difference from men, in the 1980s the eruption of queer politics upon the feminist scene dramatically challenged the nature of female identity as a given and further destabilised the boundaries of gender and subjectivity itself. Arguing that there is no fixed 'I' which precedes its entry to the social and linguistic order, Judith Butler has proposed that the body is "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (Butler,1998: 373). To what extent can we continue to view the body as a material entity when it is now perceived as "a site of social construction and conflict" (Smith and Watson, 1998: 35)? Other writers like Donna Haraway, influenced by advances in information technology, have offered further challenges to fixed notions of gendered identity, by presenting a picture of the constructedness of a female subject who is part human, part machine (Haraway, in Nicholson, 1990).

What all of these different approaches seem to indicate is feminism's persistent concern with the question of identity and difference. At present the characteristics of difference and alterity are seen to be politically preferable to those of unity and stability. If the changing feminisms noted above all demonstrate an increased tendency toward the rejection of the unified self it is perhaps because that self is associated with domination, and exclusion of the Other. However, this celebration of alterity and difference has been problematised by Waugh who suggests that, in the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein, the desire to fragment is perceived as the residual response from childhood to "destroy that which we cannot possess" (Waugh, 1992). Is, Waugh asks, the celebration of radical fragmentation which appears in some postmodern texts a defensive response against the unobtainable Enlightenment goal of unified identity? Yet, as Waugh goes on to argue, for most women, feelings of nostalgia for a universal and autonomous subject identity simply do not exist quite simply because, either for reasons of gender, class, sexuality or politics, they have been refused access to that kind of subjectivity. Marie Cardinal's narrative construction of self as a means of coping with feelings of fragmentation and dissolution is a case in point for this kind of argument. As Waugh goes on to argue, feminism needs coherent subjects which, however, "avoid the fetishisation of pure reason" (Waugh, 1992: 194).

Does the postmodern interest in language games, fragmented identity and history as a fictional construct mean that there is no longer any place for the grand narratives of progress and emancipation? I would argue that women's different situatedness with regard to history and identity means that they might approach these

issues from a different position to men. As a discourse, feminism, which has sought to challenge patriarchal approaches to language, history and identity has always been aware of these areas as sites of conflict and change. Furthermore, it is questionable whether women have ever felt their identity to be transcendental and unified. As both theories of autobiography and women's self-writings seem to suggest, women have frequently experienced their identity in postmodern terms as lacking autonomy, decentred and defined by Others. As I have already argued, the idea that aesthetic disruption can be conflated with political action is highly problematic for a feminist agenda, not least because both in literary terms (see my discussion of the death of the author in chapter 4), and in psychoanalytic terms (in the work of Freud and Lacan), women are seen to be the necessary Other who makes the symbolic (read masculine) 'I' (no matter how fragmented it might be) possible. As my earlier analysis of Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* demonstrated, there is a space for creating narratives which make a communal address, which posit the possibilities of collective and unified identity while recognising the constructedness of these notions. As Waugh argues, as an emancipatory discourse there is a need for feminism to hold on to "the goals of agency, personal autonomy, self-expression and self-determination" (Waugh, 1992: 194).

Is there then a possibility of holding on to what Waugh describes as the totalities of Enlightenment modernity (belief that history will move forward and not simply repeat its mistakes, belief in the usefulness of emancipatory narratives) without falling into the trap of producing a totalising discourse? Is there a possibility of evacuating the worst aspects of modernity (the Cartesian split between mind/body, reason/passion, science/nature, self/Other, woman and man) while holding onto to the notion that progress is possible? Waugh draws upon psychoanalytic theories in order to provide a response to this question. Freud is held to account for offering an approach to subject formation which she envisages as being bound up with notions of separateness and transcendence with women taking the position of Other to male subjectivity.

> According to most psychoanalytic theories [..] Maturity is seen to be reached when the dependent infant comes to regard its primary caretaker (nearly always a woman) as simply an object through which it defines its own identity and position in the world (Waugh, 1992: 201).

Offering a different approach, Waugh posits that the work of objects relations theorists like Nancy Chodorow might offer some explanation of the problem. So long as women continue to act as the primary caretaker they will be associated with the fear of pre-oedipal mergence and loss of identity. Men, on the other hand, are equated with individuation and the world of work which is held to be superior. From this point the feminine and all things associated with it are seen to be potentially threatening.

> Women (or the 'feminine') come to be identified in Cartesian or poststructuralist philosophy with all that cannot be rationally controlled and thus threatening dissolution or non-identity: mortality, the body, desire, emotionality, nature (Waugh, 1992: 203).

Waugh suggests that a way forward can be forged by formulating theories of subjectivity where connection and intersubjectivity are privileged over autonomy as the goals of maturity.

A further reflection on the problem comes in the form of Wendy Wheeler's *A New Modernity: Change in Science, literature and Politics* (1999). In this recent reflection on 'post-Enlightenment' ways of thinking, Wheeler offers a new approach to rethinking the Enlightenment project (Wheeler, 1999). Noting that human beings have benefited from the material gains and developments in human knowledge, Wheeler is also aware that life has been impoverished by the Cartesian dualism between mind and body, reason and passion. Wheeler concludes that the dualism of Enlightenment thought is in a process of change directed by an 'ecological sensibility' which she perceives as being a more "holistic way of thinking". I would argue that writers of *écriture féminine* like Luce Irigaray[ii] and Annie Leclerc might both be seen to be developing ways of approaching identity, the aesthetic and the world around us which embody this attempt to understand "the creative complexity of the world, and of the creatures amongst whom we move and in whom we have our being-as do they in us" (Wheeler, 1999: 5).

In this context, *Exercices de mémoire* is of particular interest because it deals with many of the issues mentioned above which are troubling feminists today. As I have already mentioned, Leclerc demonstrates a disillusionment with notions of 'total' identity, the aesthetic and modern communications which she presents as in part responsible for the Holocaust; one of the most appalling onslaughts on human dignity.

Autobiographical Intentions and Interpretations

As I will go on to argue, Leclerc's text revolves around the crisis of truth in modernity. If the feminist interest of the text is not immediately obvious then this is, perhaps, indicative of the manner in which feminists have broadened the field of analysis to a consideration of the construction of the Other which is not exclusively focused on gender. Nonetheless, as I will argue, the feminist content of the text is particularly apparent in the stylistics; Leclerc's quest to find a 'woman's language' through which to formulate non-exclusionary interactions with the Other is a major theme in the text. The authorial imperative to confront the Holocaust and death itself suggests a desire to reformulate thought in a manner which admits of Otherness. The fragmentation of the narrative voice and structure, along with the emphasis on the poetic function of language may also demonstrate that Leclerc is conscious of some of the problems inherent in the production of rousing, identificatory narratives. For Leclerc, an awareness of the manner in which the Nazis manipulated emotion by means of the aesthetic prompts her to create a reflective distance between herself and the reader. The many self-reflexive passages suggest the author's awareness of the interactive process of reading and writing as she requests the reader to take up a position of responsibility with regard to the subject matter. If Leclerc is fully aware of the problematic of 'speaking for' she does nonetheless envisage herself as a vessel for the transmission of testimonial accounts. Leclerc's attempt to think beyond the Enlightenment opposition of transcendental subject (mind, self, science, man) who dominates over inert matter (nature, the body, world, woman) is particularly apparent in her critique of the valorisation of science and technology over nature, and in her call for a form of thought and remembrance which is directly linked to the body and emotion. While Leclerc may employ some of the textual strategies associated with the postmodern, avoidance of linear narratives, textual closure and a personalised approach to historical events, this is not to suggest that she is denying agency, responsibility, or the value of experience. Indeed, the importance of the personal voice is apparent in the fact that she turns at this point to the genre of testimony as a means of exploring a historical crisis. In seeking to produce a form of testimonial writing adequate to her subject Leclerc is concerned to avoid dislocating mind from body, thought from emotion, and indeed author from text. And while the testimonial issues from the author's body which is fractured and humbled, it is not defeated or evacuated from the text. For Leclerc, the subject's lived experience, and the 'real' body of the writer outside of the body of the text, is as important as ever. The exploration of Leclerc's *écriture féminine* and her unique interpretation of the testimonial genre will be discussed more fully in chapters 6 and 7.

The 'autobiographical pact' forms the subject matter of my next discussion. To what extent does Leclerc's narrative conform to Lejeune's definition of autobiographical writing? In what ways, if any, does the production of a Holocaust narrative necessitate an innovative approach to the representation of the autobiographical 'je', time, place and memory?

5.3. Exercices de Mémoire: The Promise not to Forget

Je n'ai donc pas seulement promis de ne pas oublier, J'ai promis d'interroger l'oubli...

Essayer de penser à l'impensable (Leclerc,1992: 24).

Earlier on in this thesis I outlined some characteristics which have been taken as defining features of the genre by the autobiographical theorist Philippe Lejeune. As I dealt with this in detail in chapters one and three I will not reiterate the discussion again here. It will suffice at this point to recall my observation that the reduction of autobiography to a retrospective overview of a life in its totality might today be deemed to be overly narrow by some critics. I further suggested that Lejeune's early theory placed undue emphasis on the truthfulness of autobiography while failing to adequately account for the nuances between autobiography and fiction. I argued that the evolving nature of concepts like truth, the self, identity, and memory is not fully addressed in his writing and hence his definition excludes a number of innovative texts which might otherwise be accorded the autobiographical label. *Exercices de Mémoire* provides a fitting example of the manner in which self-writing may straddle a number of generic borders while re-interpreting the conventions of the genre. Leclerc's exploration of the Holocaust precipitates the author onto a journey leading to a radical re-evaluation of the function of memory, the structure of identity and the dividing line between fact and fiction. To what extent then can *Exercices de Mémoire* be defined as an autobiography?

The untypical nature of Leclerc's enquiry necessitates a non-conventional approach to the formal structures of autobiography. Demonstrating both the disarray of the author's mind and the difficulty of the subject matter, the text is fragmented and shifts between different narrative voices. There is hardly any narrative development or

story line. In what constitutes a polyphonic symphony of voices the reader is offered extracts from historical documents and letters, snippets from philosophical tracts, obscure yet beautiful poetic symphonies, reconstructions of the Holocaust, interspersed with flashbacks to the author's past. Memory is constantly called into doubt while certain historical representations of the past are shown to be unreliable. The text is not readily accessible to the reader, firstly, because much of it reads like a philosophical exposé and, secondly, because of Leclerc's innovative and poetic use of language which demonstrates many of the experimental features typical of *écriture féminine* (see chapter 6).

Given the hybrid nature of the text, can we accurately make a claim that this is an autobiography? Referring back to Lejeune, what evidence is there of a 'pact' attesting to the author's autobiographical intentions? If we take Lejeune's definition in its most literal sense as "a contract of identity [between autobiographer and reader] that is sealed by the proper name" then no 'pact' can be seen to be in evidence (Lejeune, 1989: 19). Indeed, as the narrator remains anonymous the authenticity of Leclerc's account is not attested to through the appearance of the proper name.

The title of the work makes no direct reference to Leclerc and seems to question the commonly held assumption that the author's life is the primary subject matter of autobiographical writing. If memory now becomes the key focus of the text the emphasis on remembering as an exercise implies the subjective and uncertain nature of mnemonic recollection. Nonetheless, the importance which is accorded to memory certainly suggests that we are within the realm of autobiography.

There is no autobiographical label on the back cover. However, the information given suggests that the work might fall somewhere between 'idées' and 'autobiography'. We are informed that this is a meditation on the causes of the Holocaust and of evil itself. Yet this is not just an academic essay for, as the abstract informs us, Leclerc will explore the theme through a subjective re-evaluation of her own journey from childhood to adulthood.

> C'est en se posant cette question à elle-même qu'Annie Leclerc, remontant le cours de sa vie d'enfant, d'adolescente puis d'adulte, nous inquiète et nous éveille au scandale le plus poignant de l'humanité : celui du Mal.

However, the reader would not be wrong to take issue with this claim. for Leclerc's enquiry focuses primarily on her early childhood and adolescence with little mention being made of her life as an adult. Indeed, in terms of the volume of autobiographical data, Leclerc's earlier semi-autobiographical work entitled *Origines*, offers a more panoramic retrospective of the author's life, covering a wide range of events including the author's early school years, her recollections of May '68, her encounter with Sartre and de Beauvoir and her marriage to Nicolas Poulantzas (see chapter 2).

Leclerc's 'pact' with the reader reflects the complex nature of her discussion. In setting out her reasons for writing she clearly states that she is engaged in a project of self-exploration. However, for Leclerc, increased self-awareness is bound-up with a re-evaluation of the function of memory. Clearly, in a text where the author bemoans our readiness to forget the Holocaust both on a personal and collective level the transparency of memory is presented as a fallacy of the first order. Thus if we can make any claim to uncovering a 'pact' in the text it is a long way from the conventional attestation of autobiographical intention. In Leclerc's case the 'pact' is re-invented as a promise to explore the inconsistencies of mnemonic recollection:

> Je promets d'entrer dans la question de l'oubli.
>
> Et non pas à la place des autres, mais de ma place à moi (Leclerc, 1992: 16).

Paradoxically, Leclerc's autobiographical intentions can never be fully realised for as she recognises, writing may itself constitute a form of repression, of exorcising our demons in order to put them behind us. In a turn of phrase reminiscent of Sartre's *Les Mots* (1964) she concludes that writing may not provide all the answers but it is all she can do:

> A quoi me suis-je donc engagée ?
>
> A écrire, bien sûr...Que ferais-je d'autre ?
>
> Mais n'est-ce pas ainsi que toujours on cherche à préserver de l'oubli ? (Leclerc, 1992: 14)[iii].

We have noted how Lejeune placed emphasis on the retrospective function as a defining feature of autobiographical writing (see chapter 3). Lejeune's formula implies

that there is a clearly defined gap between the present of writing and the past of memory. Of course, this perspective is somewhat problematic because it fails to account for the way in which the past is constructed through its formulation in writing. Leclerc's awareness of her ability to repress and rewrite traumatic events draws the reader's attention to the fact that memory is often less than truthful. This understanding necessitates an entirely different approach to the act of remembering. Leclerc's approach to memory bears many similarities to that of Gusdorf. Like him she subscribes to the belief that the autobiographer will be continually thwarted in his or her attempts to produce an accurate rendition of the past because the reconstruction of memory is essentially a creative process:

> Confession of the past realises itself as a work in the present: it effects a true creation of the self by the self. Under the guise of presenting myself as I was, I exercise a sort of right to recover possession of my existence now and later (Gusdorf in Olney, 1980: 44).

Leclerc's idiosyncratic use of tenses highlights the interconnectedness of the past and its reconstruction in the present. While the author shifts between future, perfect, past historic and imperfect, meditations in the present tense dominate. Furthermore, the traditional autobiographical tense of past historic is underused. This is probably because Leclerc wants to avoid the impression given by the past historic that the past is fixed as an immutable entity. The imperfect is more popular with the author perhaps because it brings the past nearer to the present of writing. Leclerc is equally unconventional in the manner in which she introduces the text.

The opening passage of *Exercices de mémoire* breaks with all of the normal autobiographical conventions. Dates are conspicuously absent. While the formulaic evocation of family origins and early childhood memories is fastidiously avoided. Naive definitions of autobiography as the referential genre par excellence are neatly exploded. Self-writing in this case does not simply imply a retrospective account of one's personal history but rather a propulsion toward an unknown future. Memory is seen to be interconnected to narrative construction: "Dès le premier mot, la première ligne, c'est irréversible ; on est parti" (Leclerc: 1992: 7).

The Crisis of Truth

As with the process of psychoanalysis the excavation of a hidden past is a hazardous process where identity is broken down and reinvented. The tentative and risky nature of the project is clearly apparent to the author:

> C'est alors qu'on sent trembler de la gravité des enjeux et, malgré tant d'atermoiements, de l'irresponsabilité flagrante du premier pas. Comment a-t-on osé se lancer sans savoir...(Leclerc,1992: 7).

While recognising the seemingly non-referential and indefinite nature of the title, the reader would be wrong to classify *Exercices de mémoire* as a postmodern autobiography. If Leclerc is interested in textual experimentation, it is only so far as she is seeking a more effective system for transcribing her lived experience. Unlike some postmodernists, the author does not imply that impossibility of providing an accurate picture of experiential reality, untainted by its modes of linguistic translation, should lead us to confine ourselves to playing meaningless language games. It is rather through exposing the schism between real events and their linguistic conceptualisation that Leclerc challenges us to rethink our discursive formulations of identity. In keeping with her interest in *écriture féminine* this might include a re-evaluation of the formal properties of language itself. In this way, we might argue that Leclerc's project combines both an awareness of the contemporary debates around linguistic representation and a continued commitment to the interpretation of autobiography as the expression of lived experience. In seeking a language which coincides more closely with embodied experience, Leclerc's imperative is to produce a form of literature which is both committed and at the same time not reducible to its social message: this is an arena where the reflexive, referential and creative converge.

The complex relationship between the textual and the experiential in Leclerc's writing is no more apparent than in her reworking of intertextual themes (see chapter 2). On the one hand, through the continual sifting and rewriting of past events the author might be seen to arrive at a more truthful version of the past. Indeed, this is the picture painted by Leclerc in *Exercices de mémoire* where she promises to reveal those aspects of her life which she previously concealed:

> J'ai déjà beaucoup écrit, et souvent évoqué mon enfance.[....]

> Voici que je me souviens peu à peu de tout ce que j'ai tu. Tant de faits si tristes, amers, incompréhensibles...(Leclerc, 1992: 82)

On the other, the intertextual nature of Leclerc's writing suggests that the author's life is an unceasing fiction to be continually reinvented and retold. On this point Leclerc has expressed her view that each one of her texts is "une autobiographie du féminin, toujours reprise et bien sûr interminable." [iv]

Despite her seemingly unorthodox approach to the genre, Leclerc's project is firmly rooted within the autobiographical tradition. Her awareness that memory and language rarely provide the autobiographer with a transparent window on the past does not prevent her from seeking to discover the true nature of the human self through introspection. Mirroring Rousseau's search for 'un homme dans toute la vérité de sa nature' Leclerc embarks on a quest to "envisager de nouveau" ... "ce que c'est qu'un homme" (Leclerc, 1992: 42).

Raylene Ramsay has pertinently argued that the frame of research and the particular questions which the autobiographer poses will necessarily affect the nature of the 'true' self which is discovered (Ramsay, 1996: 15). Hence, while the Christian may discern God at the end of his search for the essence of mankind, the Protestant may unearth man's propensity for self-deception and obfuscation. In Leclerc's case the imperative to re-conceptualise identity while avoiding binary oppositions of 'good' and 'evil' 'self' and 'Other' becomes the key to self-understanding (see chapter 6).

The fact that the autobiographical voyage of self-discovery will necessarily mirror certain preoccupations of the age has been widely observed by autobiographical critics[v]. Leclerc's text provides a case in point of the manner in which autobiographical writing evokes certain concerns central to the historical moment of its production. In an age where the discourses of psychoanalysis have called the transparency of consciousness and the autonomy of the subject into question, it is little wonder that Leclerc's exploration of the darker recesses of the human mind holds a contemporary appeal. Moreover, as I noted in the introduction to this discussion, her critique of the worst excesses of modernity including the destruction of the environment, the break down in a sense of community and man's concomitant sense of alienation from Others around him comes at a time when these issues are under discussion in both the public and private domain. The subject of the Holocaust itself has engendered wide debate

about the role of art and the status of the artist in societies where such atrocities are possible (see chapter 7).

Leclerc's intention in writing *Exercices de mémoire* is to confront aspects of her life which she had previously relegated to the unconscious. From her lack of awareness about the anti-Semitic slights upon her Jewish school friends, to her complaisance with regard to the events of the Second World War, to her attempts to lose herself in romantic art, the author holds herself to account for what she sees as a supreme form of naivety about the human condition. She realises that up until that moment she had lived the extermination of the Jews as if it happened in another world.

Employing a formula to be replayed throughout the text, the adult narrator regards her previous 'un-awakened' self in an acutely ironic tone which recalls Jean-Paul Sartre's self-portrait in *Les Mots* (1964). A fitting illustration of this process can be found in the section entitled 'Savoir sans Savoir' which introduces us to the young Leclerc - aged four - through the typical autobiographical medium of family photograph. In traditional autobiographical accounts reference to photographs might be seen to endorse the truth factor of the account. However, in *Exercices de mémoire* this author's photographic image is summoned with the sole intention of demonstrating the narrator's naivety and moral innocence. Leclerc offers the reader an image of a child who has had a comfortable start in a bourgeois household and who, indoctrinated with bourgeois morality, sees the world as inherently good. Even though the Second World War is underway the child remains obliviously unaware [vi]:

> tout de l'enfant de quatre ans est là dehors, éclaboussant d'évidence, les boucles légères, la santé, le rire, les jambes bien plantées au sol, la confiance, c'est-à-dire l'ignorance, c'est-à-dire la stupidité...(Leclerc, 1992: 33).

The young child's complacency is disrupted when she witnesses the family pig being slaughtered. The expression of primal pleasure which radiates from the faces of the butchers awakens her to the fact that violence and murder are the underside of human culture. The narrator's naive humanism is dramatically called into question. While she is no longer able to rigidly enforce the boundary line between those who are 'good' and those who are 'evil' the conceptual categories which she has at her disposal are inadequate to the task of formulating a more nuanced approach of identity. The schism between the awakened narrator of the present and the illusion-ridden child of the

past is represented through a split in the narratorial voice. However, the narrator's nostalgic longing for moral innocence is indicated by her frequent references to her erstwhile self in the affectionate second person familiar[vii]. In a passage where the narrator recalls her early mandate to become a writer the self-assurance of the aspiring author is concomitantly derided and yearned for:

> On aurait dit que c'était un message cousu d'or, une lettre, un chiffre [....]
>
> Soudain tu as cru. Tu as cru que tu finirais par déchiffrer quelque chose d'inscrit là dans l'azur depuis la nuit des temps, quelque chose de très simple, d'infiniment précieux...(Leclerc, 1992: 127).

Leclerc's presentation of selfhood is a far cry from the confident self-images which theorists like Gusdorf and Lejeune have outlined as the hall-mark of the autobiographical writing. Furthermore, at times, the author's authority is eroded as she opens up her experience to that of her readers. This process is achieved through Leclerc's careful use of subject. The indefinite third person singular 'on' is frequently called upon to generalise the author's experience to that of her readers. In many cases, perhaps for the same reason, Leclerc avoids the use of the first person singular altogether or shifts abruptly from the first person voice into the third person as on page 21:

> Je croyais que je savais, mais je ne savais pas.
>
> On peut avoir entendu cent fois parler d'une même chose sans y avoir jamais arrêté sa pensée (Leclerc,1992: 21).

As we noted in the section on Marie Cardinal, the splitting of identity and representation of the self as an object of perception is a feature common to women's autobiography and indeed many poststructuralist and postmodern writings. However, in Leclerc's case it seems fair to suggest that that gender can not be directly attributed as the cause for the splitting of the narrative voice where the difficulty of reconciling different conceptions of morality is the key imperative for this stylistic device.

The lack of attention to psychological realism in the representation of influential figures in the author's childhood constitutes a further divergence from the traditional

autobiographical paradigm. Characters like Alexandre (a family friend) and Frieda (her German teacher) are presented as quasi-mythical figures whose impact on the author's childhood is inferred through the use of evocative metaphors. In his first appearance in the text Alexandre is presented to the reader in the following manner:

> Mon Alexandre n'aurait pas eu à s'écarter devant Diogène. Il brillait plus que le soleil, et son humilité valait davantage que celle du vieux sage dans son tonneau, car c'était aussi un homme comme un autre (Leclerc, 1992: 51).

Frieda, who comes to replace Alexandre in the author's affections, is described using similar metaphors, connoting her presence as a guiding light in the author's confused adolescence:

> Et voilà que de l'obscurité, et qu'on aurait dit venue du coeur des forêts germaniques, elle se leva pour moi la lumière (Leclerc, 1992: 88).

While the hyperbolic language employed signals the author's idealisation of Alexandre and Freida, in retrospect, these impressions are held up to ridicule as the author realises that they were mere projections of her romantic personality.

Referring again to Lejeune's schema, to what extent can the text be described as a *récit retrospectif*? The formal structure of the text is reflective of Leclerc's sceptical approach toward history as a teleological, linear narrative which demarcates man's progress. Leclerc does not chart the kind of unbroken, and necessary evolution which we find in say Simone de Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*.[viii] Instead, the representation of time in terms of a series of fragmented tableaux denotes both a critique of the project of modernity and the author's refusal to create a unified and coherent myth of her past (see chapter 7).

The fragmentation of the narrative structure means that the chronological aspect of the text is not clearly discernible at first sight. The linear development is disrupted by the narrator's present musings, future anticipations, and, in one instance, a reconstruction of events which predated her birth (Leclerc, 1992: 45). Nonetheless, the narrative can broadly speaking, be seen to chart Leclerc's progression from childhood to adulthood. The first three sections are situated in the near past of viewing *Shoah* and

provide the reader with an introduction to the author's project. Chapter four takes us back to 1944, the earliest concrete evocation of the author's childhood. From this point tableaux are layered in a labyrinthine structure of progressive falls into false-consciousness. Leclerc's lionisation and subsequent rejection of Alexandre is recounted in 'La mort du cochon'. Her cult of the personality of her schoolmistress Frieda is revealed in the chapter of that name. The autobiographical anecdote of 'Le voyage en Allemagne' is a school trip to Germany which the author embarked upon at the age of fifteen. In this section, the recollection of her romantic encounter with an angelic German adolescent stands in sharp contrast to her ability to turn away from the destruction of the city of Hambourg. The death of Alexandre "quelques années plus tard" (Leclerc, 1992: 109) and the author's inability to fully accept or mourn it is recalled in 'Désespoir'. In 'Le herseur aveugle' we are brought forward to the 60s when the author loses herself in the metaphysical philosophy of Heidegger choosing not to question the meaning of his silent complicity with the Holocaust. This tableau marks a dropping off in the already scanty autobiographical detail which from this point on is confined mainly to the author's reactions to different cultural artefacts such as Rossif's film *Le Temps du ghetto* (Leclerc, 1992: 201-205), Homer's *Odessy* (Leclerc, 1992: 207-9), Roland Dorgelès *Croix de Bois* (Leclerc, 1992: 213), extracts from Hitler's Mein Kampf (Leclerc, 1992: 216-8) and Lanzmann's *Shoah* (Leclerc, 1992: 233-9). The final tableau entitled 'A la fin' returns us to the year of writing when the adult narrator returns to her home town in 1992.

The slippery nature of memory is highlighted through the author's inability to anchor her past with exact temporal markers. The school trip to Germany, in the summer of 1955, is one of the few events which is located with exactitude. The author's recollection of her crush on Frieda, her German teacher, is more typical of the treatment of time in the text and is vaguely located between the years 1953 and 1955 "On était en 1953, 54, 54...Dix ans à peine" (Leclerc, 1992: 92). In this case, the author's mnemonic lapse is demonstrative not only of the foibles of memory but also of her ignorance of the events shaping world history.

Leclerc is equally aware that historical data is subject to reinterpretation and indeed, misinterpretation. She refers to a number of sources to prove her point. The narrative is peppered with extracts from documents which might normally be cited to prove the historical accuracy of the text. Thus we might read an extract from a letter from the 'chef de l'état-major personnel de Himmler' (Leclerc, 1992: 27), a snippet from a children's history book (Leclerc, 1992: 30), a quotation from Primo Levi's

Naufragés et Rescapés (Leclerc, 1992: 39), extracts from Kierkegaard's *Traité du désespoir* (Leclerc, 1992: 113 and 168), the opening lines of a conference entitled *Terre et ciel de Hölderlin* given in 1959 (Leclerc, 1992: 162). Were we to assume that Leclerc's reference to philosophical works and other primary sources is to endow them with a narratorial authority which she denies herself we would be wrong. In reality, her motivation for drawing upon each of these texts is to demonstrate how history can be re-written. For instance, in the account of the Second World War given in the children's history book the most glaring factual absence is the omission of the fate of the Jews from the summary of events. Commenting on the passage which focuses on the privation of the French nation and its subsequent honourable resistance Leclerc comments: "Pas question de collaboration, pas question de Pétain. Quant au seul petit mot de *juif* il n'apparaît pas une seule fois" (Leclerc, 1992: 31). In this case, through highlighting the subjective bias of historical reconstructions, Leclerc awakens us to the impossibility of producing a truly neutral account of the past. Even Primo Levi, the respected Jewish philosopher, is called to account for suggesting that the Holocaust belies representation:

> C'est ainsi que certains qui veulent maintenir vivace le souvenir de la Shoah tout en le gardant impénétrable ont recours à cette étrange ruse de langage par laquelle ils interdisent de réprésenter, taisent ce qu'ils nomment, et relèguent l'horreur dont ils veulent témoigner au panthéon inaccessible de l'*Incompréhensible*. Ou de l'*inhumain* (Leclerc, 1992: 39).

Recognising that even historical reconstructions are not innocent, Leclerc's answer is to produce a document which declares its subjective interest. Leclerc's meditation on the connection of the Holocaust to her personal life demonstrates that the feminist slogan 'the person is political' still holds some weight (see chapter 5). The intertwining of the subjective and the historical, the private and the public would undoubtedly be deemed subversive and hence threatening by some (see chapter 8). However, it offers a vital and refreshing approach to the problem of historical representation.

Somewhat paradoxically, the reworking of historical disasters in a personal voice may render them more vivid and real to the reader. Indeed, for many, over-exposure to bloody world events in the mass media has rendered us immune to their

impact. As Marguerite Duras realised when writing the scenario for *Hiroshima mon Amour*, by approaching the atomic catastrophe through the story of two strangers who meet and fall in love at Hiroshima, she was able to avoid the anonymous sterility of historical documentary. Leclerc follows in this tradition by reconstructing events of the Holocaust in a fictive mode. The representation of the past in the present tense prevents the reader from assuming a safe distance from the events. The immediacy of these images is further enhanced through the use of cumulative lists of adjectives. Take for example this reconstruction of the Jewish evacuation:

> Une fois parcouru jusqu'à son terme l'enchaînement furieux des opérations, depuis la descente des wagons, *schnell, schnell,* la folie des lumières dans la nuit, les hurlements des chiens, les bousculades, la frénésie, le fureur, les cris, les imprécations, jusqu'au déblaiement final de la cour de ses monceaux de vêtements, chaussures, valises...(Leclerc, 1992: 195).

Leclerc's presentation of memory as a work in process, forever subject to reinterpretation, is reflected in the manner in which she chooses to exit from the autobiographical arena. The title of the final tableau 'A la fin' is somewhat deceptive for Leclerc's point is precisely to avoid all attempts at narrative closure and resolution. Indeed, the failure to provide a cathartic release through such techniques marks the author's refusal of the possibility of salvation through writing. The town to which the narrator returns, is a region in decline where the only commercial venture still flourishing is a funeral parlour. This image connotes the elegiac function of the text. The title of the section harks back to the authorial focus on the tragedy of human mortality. Referring to the biblical tale of Cain and Abel, the author concludes that Cain's act of fratricide was a defensive response to the realisation of his own mortality. The somewhat humbled and wearied author attests to the inevitability of violence in a system based on oppositional relationships and fear of the Other. Whether we become 'victims' or 'victors' is an arbitrary outcome of an inadequate belief system. For as she concludes, "Le frère tue le frère" (Leclerc, 1992: 251).

In this section, I hope to have provided the reader with a comprehensive overview of the manner in which Leclerc manipulates the traditional features of the autobiographical genre providing a fitting stylistic approach to narrating the Holocaust. While Leclerc is undoubtedly employing the genre in its most traditional sense as a

means of making sense of her past, the desire to present a unified and self-assured identity or to assume a position of authority over the subject matter in hand is fastidiously eschewed. As Leclerc questions our patterns of thought and belief systems, so too, she rethinks the forms and structures of her text. Stylistic features including multigenericism, narrative fragmentation, and refusal of closure are all indicative of the author's desire to create, not only a non-authoritarian form of writing, but also, an egalitarian society. As I will go on to discuss, the exploration of the self can not be divorced from the authorial quest to reach a greater awareness of the Other. I will now go on to argue that while the feminist content of the text is not immediately apparent, Leclerc's commitment to the project of *écriture féminine*, the feminisation of the text as a means to re-envisaging identity is as strong as ever.

Notes

[i] The term is drawn from the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin whose theories of *Dialogism* and *Heteroglossia* have been found to be particularly useful by feminists. Bakhtin's notion of a dialogue of different meanings existing inside every word has been adapted by feminists like Mea Gwendolyn Henderson in order to posit "the multivoicedness of women's autobiographical texts as a crucial way to reframe issues of agency and ideological interpellation" (Smith and Watson, 1998: 31).

[ii] See in particular Irigaray's *Le Temps de la différence* (Irigaray, 1989).

[iii] Compare Leclerc's admission of the futility of her project to that of Sartre at the end of *Les Mots*: "J'ai désinvesti mais je n'ai pas défroqué : j'écris toujours. Que faire d'autre?" (Sartre, 1982: 211).

[iv] Personal communication with the author 25 June 1997.

[v] Although Misch's autobiographical criticism is clearly lacking gender consciousness, he has nonetheless provided an interesting analysis of the relationship between the autobiographical exploration of the self and its representation of its age:

> Though essentially representations of individual personalities, autobiographies are bound to be representative of their period [....]In the exemplary form of autobiography, is seen and felt not only as the subject of the narrative but as a formative power. Thus the characteristic self-revelations provide us with an objective, indeed, a demonstrable image of the structure of individuality, varying from epoch to epoch (Misch, 1950: 12-13).

Of course, feminist theorists have taken issue with such definitions which, as we have seen, exclude the often less confident and less exemplary manifestations of selfhood which have been produced by women writers in the private domain. The fact that Leclerc may choose to tackle a theme of momentous social and historical magnitude may in itself be taken as an illustration of women's growing belief that their experience is, if not exemplary, certainly representative. However, it would be wrong to suggest that Leclerc approaches her subject matter from a position of power or with complacency about her eminent suitability to the task in hand (see chapter 7).

[vi] Leclerc's self-criticism seems a little harsh as she would only have been four years old at the time.

[vi] As in Leclerc's other texts, the second person singular may also be employed in order to cause the reader to identify with events (see chapter 2). In the section entitled 'Le désenchantement' the author discussed various possible responses to the shattering of childhood innocence. The reader is directly implicated in this passage:

> Ou tu fuis sans te retourner. Comme si tu n'avais rien vu; et tu essayes indéfiniment de vivre au jardin, seulement au jardin.
>
> Ou tu te venges. Tu arraches les ailes des mouches, tu chasses les oiseaux au lance-pierre" (Leclerc, 1992: 61).

[vi] For an analysis of the narrative structure of this text, see Michel Sheringham's *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires: Rousseau to Perec*, 1993: 221-2).

6

Writing Difference

I will say this: today writing is for women. This isn't meant to incite, it simply means that: women can admit of the other...writing is within me, the passage – entry, exit, duration – that I am and am not, that I don't know how to be but that I feel passing... (Cixous, 1975: 158).

Quand la jouissance m'abandonne, la terre est inondée de félicité. Je pleure dans l'immensité d'une joie que je ne peux contenir. Ni mortelle ni immortelle ; je ne suis plus. La vie est (Leclerc, 1974: 132).

In the previous section of this thesis I discussed Leclerc's innovative approach to autobiographical writing. In this section I examine the form and content of the text exploring the ways in which the female signature sets the tone of the writing. To what extent might the production of a Holocaust testimony be seen to have a feminist interest? Can the text be considered to provide a fitting illustration of *écriture féminine*? And if so, what are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach for a feminist politics? To what extent can the text be seen as a continuation of the feminist agenda proffered in *Parole de femme*?

Introduction

In chapter 1 I remarked the impact of the events of May 68 on the women's movement. The recognition that women had failed to make a significant foray into the public domain led to a growing awareness of the need to find a 'parole de femme'. During the 1970s the cultural climate was right for an investigation into the function of language and its connection to gender issues. As Diana Holmes has pointed out, the significance of these events needs to be contextualised within a series of cultural and philosophical developments which would all impact upon the feminist movement in France. Holmes has argued that the theoretical underpinnings of *écriture féminine* can be traced back to Hegel's philosophical thought outlined by de Beauvoir in *le Deuxième sexe*, the Nouveaux Romancier's interest in the political implications of formal experimentation,

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Barthes' interpretation of reading experimental writing in terms of sexually charged *jouissance*, and the French tradition of emphasising sexual difference (Holmes.1996: 217-8).

The influence of structuralist and post-structuralist thought in France including the writings of Foucault, Lacan, Barthes and Lévi-Strauss had revealed that language is not simply an innocent naming system, but rather that it reflects the ideologies and power structures of a given society. With this in mind feminist theorists in the 1970s concentrated their attention on demonstrating how language endorses the values of the white bourgeois male. Patriarchal language was a monolithic structure which would have to be deconstructed and reconstructed if women were to achieve their liberation. One of the most lucid analyses of the structures of patriarchal language came in the form of Hélène Cixous' *La Jeune Née* (1986). In this poetic meditation Cixous argues that language functions as a system of binary oppositions with those words connoting the masculine assuming a positive status while those equated with the feminine are accorded a negative significance:

> Where is she?
>
> Activity/passivity
>
> Sun/Moon
>
> Culture/Nature
>
> Day/Night (Cixous, 1986: 63).

The search for a form of writing to express female difference was to become a central concern among women writers over the next ten years. The term *écriture féminine* was born [i].

At this point it becomes necessary to produce a definition of *écriture féminine*. Elizabeth Fallaize has drawn attention to the difficulty of translating this term into English. She offers two explanations for this: Firstly, because the word 'féminine' in French refers both to the biological female and the cultural notion of the feminine. Secondly, because *écriture* cannot simply be translated as writing because the term refers to Barthes' usage as "a particularly creative and liberatory way of using language" (Fallaize,1993: 10).

Moreover, critics are divided on how to identify women's writing. Does its specificity lie in its content or its form? For instance, some critics argue that the

quintessential women's text can be identified through the female centred nature of the subject matter. On the other hand, some argue that the unique qualities of *écriture féminine* can be traced to the innovative forms and structures of the text. For these theorists Lacan's notion of language as being located in the symbolic order where the law of the father reigns supreme is of particular significance. Indeed, Lacan's proposal that a prerequisite of saying 'I' is to renounce the pre-oedipal bond with the mother is viewed by many to be both sexist and reductive. Paradoxically, the presupposition that women are thus condemned to be 'other' to the symbolic order was viewed with optimism by some, for by rethinking the structures of language they could challenge the structures of women's oppression.

While the thought of Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous and Leclerc diverges on a number of points and has evolved over time, their names were linked during the 1970s as theorists of *écriture féminine*. For these theorists, the political significance of women's writing was to be found in its power to subvert the symbolic order and to speak of the repressed bond with the mother. With her theory of the *Semiotic* Julia Kristeva proposed a style of writing associated with the *pre-symbolic* which would disturb the text's unity and with it fixed meaning[ii]. Hélène Cixous sought to find a direct relationship between language and female desire. In 'Castration or Decapitation' she proclaimed that "Writing in the feminine is passing on what is cut out by the Symbolic, the voice of the mother, passing on the most archaic" (Cixous, 1981: 53-4). Similarly, turning Lacan's phallocentric interpretation of language back on itself, Luce Irigaray has argued that the characteristics of multiplicity and fluidity equated with women's writing can be explained by the duality and circularity of the female sex organs (Irigaray, 1977).

For the proponents of *écriture féminine*, language and the body are seen to be closely connected. This has at times led to an oversimplification of the relationship between gender and textual production. Where men's writing is seen to be conformist, coherent, linear and unified, women's writing is presented as rebellious and subversive. Seen as a direct expression of female desire, sensation, emotion and sexuality, it is characterised by lyricism, circularity, the refusal of textual closure, the disruption of syntax, unorthodox use of grammar, repetitions and metaphoricity. Annette Kuhn has argued that *écriture féminine* finds its specificity in the author's aim to "Challenge and subvert...by posing plurality over against unity, multitudes of meaning as against single, fixed meanings, diffuseness as against instrumentality" (Kuhn, 1982: 11). Claire Laubier places emphasis on the poetic nature of the writing which is "heavily

metaphoric, evoking a concrete sense of the physical and sensual" (Laubier, 1990: 95). However, she also flags up the importance of content in defining a style of women's writing, drawing attention to common themes including sexuality, menstruation, childbirth and maternity (Laubier, 1990: 95).

This is not however, to suggest that men are debarred from producing such writing. Indeed, the qualities of *écriture féminine* are often indiscernible from those of avant-garde texts. Kristeva and Cixous offer an explanation for this inconsistency by suggesting that male writers may produce writing which reflects the pre-symbolic stage although women find it easier to relinquish notions of autonomy and authority[iii]. This they explain in Freudian terms proposing that women have more fluid ego-boundaries because of their inability to fully separate from the maternal bond and their propensity to mother.

Rita Felski is among those critics who deride the claim that there is any inherent difference between the form of women's texts and those of their male counterparts: "It is impossible to make a convincing case for the claim that there is anything inherently feminine or feminist in experimental writing as such; if one examines the texts of l'*écriture féminine*, for example, the only gender specific elements exist on the level of content, as in metaphors of the female body" (Felski, 1989: 5).

Although a simplistic comparison of the writing of Leclerc and Cixous is to be avoided, the two do share similar preoccupations. Both were affiliated with the group *Psych et Po* which leaned heavily on the theories of Jacques Lacan. Leclerc's *Parole de femme* prefigured many of the themes which were to appear in La *Jeune Née* a year later in a less popularised form. For Leclerc as with Cixous women's writing is seen to express female *jouissance or* sexual pleasure which is perceived as a subversive challenge to patriarchal power. For both laughter and mockery of patriarchal systems are seen as a way of subverting them without entering into the same oppositional thought patterns:

> Alors je dis (rien ne saurait m'en empêcher) : la valeur de l'homme ne vaut rien. Ma meilleure preuve : ce rire qui me gagne quand je l'observe là où il veut être reconnu. Et c'est aussi ma meilleure arme (Leclerc, 1974: 14).

Both demonstrate the ways in which motherhood is repressed in dominant culture and argue for the recognition of matriarchal authority. The link between Leclerc and Cixous

was strengthened in 1977 when the two were joined by Madeleine Gagnon in a collaborative project offering the reader a series of essays entitled *La Venue à l'écriture* (1977). Leclerc's name was figured alongside those of Hélène Cixous, Chantal Chawaf, Emma Santos and Jeanne Hyvrard in a special issue of *Magazine Littéraire* devoted to the question of women's writing and its difference (Clédat, 1982).

To what extent then does Leclerc's approach to writing the body conform to the theories of those critics who suggest that there are structural differences between men's and women's writing? Françoise Clédat has argued that there is no discernible difference in the form of these women's writing from that of their male counterparts. In her opinion, the huge sales figures of *Parole de femme* can be explained by the double combination of ease of reading and novelty of subject matter: "les structures de la langue n'en sont aucunement bouleversées, demeurent traditionnelles, marquées tout au plus par un évident parti-pris de simplicité, de familiarité" (Clédat, 82: 20). Making a similar point Adele King has asserted that Leclerc writes the body in terms of themes as opposed to style (King, 1989: 30).

The title *Parole de femme* suggests a theme common to writers in the 1970s of finding the words to express female sexuality. Claire Laubier has pointed out that the term 'parole' denotes both the psychological and political struggles for a female identity. "It represents the desire to find a separate space for women to express themselves, to find a separate language to suit their different needs and emotions (Laubier, 1990: 95).

Following on from de Beauvoir, Leclerc argues that women's oppression is different from that of other oppressed groups including slaves, and blacks because women are expected both to serve and idolise men as their masters and lords. Leclerc proposes that women's lack of self worth is engendered by the denigration of the feminine in patriarchal society. However, she refuses to interpret gender relations in terms of war. This, she argues, is a masculine response. If men have oppressed women for so long it is precisely because they have been brutalised through patterns of childrearing and social pressures to conform to the masculine stereotype. Leclerc proposes the valorisation of that part of the feminine which has not been sullied by the male quest for power. Hence, she celebrates women as guardians of the domestic sphere and as the givers of life.

Parole de femme was written while Leclerc was pregnant. The text was envisaged by Leclerc as an affirmation of the life giving-forces in women. Covering

territory which had been hitherto uncharted or written from a male perspective Leclerc spoke of the female body and its functions, pregnancy, childbirth, menstruation, in a celebratory manner [iv]. While many authors have recognised the connection between writing and giving birth, in *Parole de femme* the experience is reclaimed from a subjective and female-centred perspective. Commenting on the creative process Leclerc notes:

> C'est bien dans mon ventre que cela débuta, par de petits signes légers, à peine audibles, lorsque je fus enceinte. Et je me mis à l'écoute de cette voix timide qui poussait, heureuse, émerveillée, en moi. Et j'entendis une parole extraordinaire, où les mots me manquaient...(Leclerc, 1974: 11)

Pregnancy appears to heighten Leclerc's characteristic sensitivity to the environment and others around her. The authorial 'je' does not have a rigidly defined sense of self; it is in tune with the cycles of nature and other ways of envisaging identity. In that sense, it might be seen to illustrate Chodorow's theory that women have more permeable ego boundaries because of their experience of mothering (Chodorow, 1978). Leclerc describes her sense of self during this period in the following manner:

> J'ai perdu les mots mêmes qui me choquaient la tête. Je suis devenue immense, tentaculaire [...]
>
> Ouverte, encore, écartelée jusqu'aux confins...(Leclerc, 1974: 79).

However, some critics have found Leclerc's appraisal of women's nurturing qualities to be counterproductive to a feminist agenda. For instance, Adele King and Christine Delphy have held Leclerc to account for valorising patriarchal images of femininity while failing to provide an adequate analysis of the social causes of women's oppression:

> Leclerc sees the liberation of women from this submission and domination as part of a more general economic liberation, but does not seriously consider any restructuring of society. She would like to have the traditional roles of women

> as nurturers given more value by society, but does not see the division of labour as economic exploitation (King, 1989: 21).

Furthermore, King argues that Leclerc falls into the trap of biological essentialism by suggesting that woman's most intense experience is maternity. "Woman must express her body, a body that is largely defined in terms of organs and physiological processes" (King, 1989: 20). It is undoubtedly the case, that at this stage in her career Leclerc does appear to unproblematically draw a link between writing and the body. However, in later texts like *Hommes et femmes* Lecerc redefines her position claiming that *écriture féminine* is not the sole property of women but is seen to emanate from the socially constructed female body:

> J'appelle parole féminine, j'appelle à la parole, ce qui naît et s'affirme du corps aliéné (corps vendu à l'autre corps et réduit au silence). Or elle n'est féminine que parce qu'on nous fabriqua femme d'un corps aliéné (Leclerc, 1985: 35).

To what extent then does the text exhibit the formal structures associated with *écriture féminine*? I would agree with King that the feminist interest of the text is located in the female centred content and unique oral tone. King is also right to suggest that Leclerc points us toward a different way of reading women's texts by exploring the denigration of women's writing in a male based culture (King, 1989: 21). "Toute la littérature féminine a été soufflée à la femme par la parole de l'homme" (Leclerc, 1974: 9). However, what King fails to note is that Leclerc's poststructuralist roots ensure that she posits a firm link between gender and the formal structures of language.

Leclerc begins her analysis of women's oppression by suggesting that it is directly linked to language. Woman is oppressed primarily because man has taken control of language and has defined woman in his terms: "Le monde est la parole de l'homme. L'homme est la parole du monde" (Leclerc, 1974: 6). Leclerc posits that women's liberation is directly linked to the reclamation of language and redefinition of female identity: "Toute femme qui veut tenir un discours qui lui soit propre ne peut se dérober à cette urgence extraordinaire : inventer la femme" (Leclerc, 1974: 6).

Furthermore, Leclerc implies a causal connection between gender, the body and the different ways in which men and women perceive time. This presumption can

ultimately be equated with her perspective on gender and language structure. In her opinion, the rise and fall of the male ejaculation leads men to interpret life as a linear progression opened by birth and closed with death. Leclerc implies that men have lost touch with the natural world supplanting nature's rhythms with historical time:

> Les hommes [...] ont une appréhension linéaire du temps. De leur naissance à leur mort, un segment de droite leur est imparti. Rien dans leur chair ne témoigne de la courbure du temps. Leurs yeux, leur pouls négligent les saisons. Ils ne voient que l'Histoire, ils ne se battent que pour elle. Leur sexe se bande, se tend, éjacule et retombe (Leclerc, 1974: 58-9).

On the other hand, Leclerc suggests that the menstrual cycle plays a role in influencing women's perception of time as open-ended, circular, archaic and seasonal:

> Mon corps revient à lui-même par un cycle de métamorphoses. Son appréhension du temps est circulaire, encore que jamais close ou répétitive (Leclerc, 1974: 58).

In terms of the content of her text Leclerc's thought converges with that of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva in their shared belief that the expression of female *jouissance* has political implications. As with Irigaray, Leclerc's writing is sibylline and utopic. For both of these authors the language of patriarchy is associated with male desire, the quest for power, the appropriation of the Other and ultimately, the death drive:

> Les hommes ont inventé le monde, renversé les montagnes et tracé les sillons, ils ont dressé leur sexe et bandé leurs muscles, ils ont fabriqué le monde de leur sang, leur sueur, leur sperme, ils ont coulé dans les moules de l'ordre, de la tyrannie et de l'oppression (Leclerc, 1974: 40).

Leclerc proffers the names of Malraux and St. Exupéry as two authors who exemplify the male obsession with the themes of domination and death. As with many of the proponents of *écriture féminine*, Leclerc was perhaps overly optimistic in

believing that her unique approach to writing the body could bring about social change. On the other hand, both authors suggest that *écriture féminine* paves the way for an understanding of difference and harmonious interactions with the Other. In the closing lines of *Parole de femme* Leclerc's imperative to redefine the boundaries between self and Other is in evidence:

> Un jour peut-être, ce sera la Fête.
>
> Nous serons ensemble et confondus [...]
>
> Un jour peut-être nous inventerons ce que nous avons mis tant d'acharnement à empêcher [...] l'harmonie de nos rires (Leclerc, 1974: 160)

While recognising the political significance and historical importance of these theories, I do not personally believe that there is anything inherently different about men's or women's writing. As such, I will be using the term *écriture féminine* to define a style of writing which represents a conscious questioning of patriarchal values and the rules which govern the symbolic order. I will be supposing that this is more apparent in the content as opposed to the form of the writing. However, this does not debar me from considering the stylistic deviations in the text. For while I am of the opinion that the textual disruption associated with *écriture féminine* is typical to most *avant-garde* writing, I will be assuming that the difference of women's writing is to be found on the level of authorial intention and reader reception. If writing is accorded a female specificity it is because it is presented by the author and hence, interpreted by the reader as such.

6.1. Parole de femme

On a first reading *Exercices de mémoire* might appear to be a far cry from the earlier celebration of life lyrically espoused in *Parole de femme*. In an unlikely *volte-face* Leclerc accuses herself of refusing to tackle the themes of death and destruction in her previous works. In complete contrast to the spirit of optimism which prevailed in the writing of *Parole de femme* Leclerc now seems to be overwhelmed by a foreboding of the omnipresence of death. This is not, however, to suggest that this shattering realisation leads her to add to the absurdity of life by producing texts which celebrate

war and man's power to dominate the Other. Leclerc argues that the desire to annihilate the Other is a defence mechanism against our fear of death. Her autobiographical quest involves coming to terms with man's weakness and his inevitable mortality. Is it perhaps by confronting the spectre of death that Leclerc hopes to lay it to rest?

While she is no longer celebrating the power of the female body to bring about life, Leclerc's roots as a practitioner of women's writing might explain her readiness to produce a lucid critique of a system of values which enabled the Holocaust to take place. In *Parole de femme* writing was envisaged as a form of *jouissance*, the manifestation of spontaneous female desire. By the time *Exercices de mémoire* was produced the link between writing and female sexual pleasure was less apparent. It is perhaps befitting of a text written in the 1990s that the feminist subject matter is implicit as opposed to explicit. Leclerc briefly mentions some themes which have hitherto been of interest in the creation of a counter discourse to men's writing: sexual abuse, pregnancy, shopping. Yet this content is of secondary import to the discussion of the Holocaust.

Leclerc's decision to focus on the theme of the Holocaust could rightly be seen to have a more universal appeal than the feminist texts of the 1970s. Nonetheless, it might be argued that her choice of subject matter does have a gender specific interest. In fact, her condemnation of war and critique of those who seek to exert power over others continues a theme which was central to *Parole de femme*:

> Je crois, je veux croire qu'on peut penser hors du système de la guerre. Je crois même que la désignation de l'ennemi marque le gel de la pensée (Lelcerc, 1992: 42).

In *Parole de femme* Leclerc propounds the belief that war is an essentially male pursuit which is entailed through our inability to think difference and to recognise the feminine. Men seek to destroy difference because they are unable to accept any form of alterity which challenges their identity. Her brand of feminism is inspired by a recognition that society functions around "une économie du même,'to use Irigaray's expression (Irigaray, 1977). In a social environment which values the masculine above the feminine, expenditure, consumption, invasion and destruction become dominant values. Hence, the need to place a higher recognition on feminine attributes like nurturing, giving birth and compassion. While Leclerc's argument might sound essentialist, in

reality she believes that the masculine and feminine are not biological givens. She is adamant that they can exist in different proportions in both men and women (see chapter 1). Furthermore, her critique is not aimed at the masculine *per se* which she recognises as a valid and necessary gender position when balanced by the feminine.

In seeking to understand the events of the Holocaust Leclerc returns to an issue which is of key interest to feminism, the relationship between self and Other. On route she raises a concern which has become predominant among feminists in the 1990's, offering the reader a forceful critique of those who seek to assume a unified and autonomous identity. She argues that the Jewish identity represents the difference against which Western self has been constructed[v]. Nazism was the final solution to the problem of man's search for a stable, unified and unproblematic identity. According to Leclerc, the Jew came to incorporate everything which man fears: death, evil, illness, old age, and weakness. The Jew had to be annihilated because his existence stood to challenge the Aryan myth of the supremacy and perfection of German identity:

> Corps vivant, corps martyr de l'objection au délire de puissance, corps habité de la sagesse du message, et grâce à lui, résistant, opiniâtre, les Juifs n'en finissent pas de blesser notre orgueil insensé, de moquer la démesure, la vanité de nos prétensions, de maintenir ouverte, incisive, la conscience de nos limites (Leclerc, 1992: 172).

Leclerc recognises that the reduction of identity into those who are 'good' and those who are 'bad' is a simplistic response which maintains the opposition between self and Other. Leclerc is aware that this is typical behaviour of the dominant subject who is able to preserve his positive self-image by presenting the Other as evil.

In *Exercices de mémoire* the reader is reminded that this mentality is not limited to the Nazis for the same binary is in opposition when Alexandre makes his reactionary comments about the Germans and collaborators alike: "Pour moi, des gars comme ça, douze balles dans la peau et puis *à jour*..." (Leclerc, 1992: 79). Perhaps, Leclerc aims to remind us that we are engaging in the same thought processes when we label the Nazis evil monsters in order to maintain a safe distance between them and ourselves. Rather than asking why a whole nation was mesmerised by Nazi ideology we prefer to paint them as evil creatures divorced from humanity. Is this not, Leclerc suggests, because we are loath to admit that, in extreme circumstances, we all have the potential

to commit evil? Leclerc's project in *Exercices de mémoire* is to re-conceptualise identity in a manner which avoids binary oppositions between good and bad, strong and weak, masculine and feminine.

In seeking an explanation for oppression Leclerc might be seen to fall into the trap of setting up her own binary opposition between science and nature. The perception of science as an essentially male pursuit, founded on an unhealthy desire to conquer the environment and to acquire total knowledge, is common to the writers of *écriture feminine*. As with Luce Irigaray, Leclerc envisages the break down in human relationships as being directly tied up with developments in science and technology (Irigaray, 1977). She suggests that mankind is out of harmony with nature. In her opinion, advanced communications have not improved social interactions; they have only led to a further sense of alienation and isolation in individuals. Leclerc envisages the notion of progress as a closed and repetitive cycle. She argues that an ever increasing amount of energy will need to be expended in order to maintain the myth that humanity is progressing. Commenting on the effect which the pursuit of this unobtainable goal has on those who choose to pursue it, she notes:

> Ils s'efforcent de ne pas voir ; mais un doute affreux – depuis bientôt deux siècles – les poursuit qui les fait courir toujours plus vite: il n'est pas certain que finalement, et à tout prendre, les choses tournent mieux pour l'humanité qu'elles ne tournaient avant...(Leclerc,1992: 166).

Leclerc develops this idea by suggesting that the outcome of man's desire to master his environment can only ever be discontent as there will always be elements of the social and natural world which will evade him. The inability of science to provide an answer to all of man's questions will remind him of his powerlessness in the face of the forces of nature. In the section entitled 'Occident' Leclerc describes this process in action. In the following quotation it is interesting to note how the evils of science and technology are directly associated with the masculine:

> Vient un moment où *les hommes* s'effraient de leur puissance. De l'impuissance de leur puissance. Leurs machines les débordent. Leurs sciences les égarent. Leurs progrès les encombrent (Leclerc,1992: 166. My italics).

Leclerc is only too aware that one possible response to disillusionment with progress is to succumb to nostalgia for a lost utopic home-land:

> Ils craignent une perte irréperable, une faute inexpiable...
>
> Il faut faire quelque chose...
>
> Retrouver ce qu'on a perdu, rejoindre ce dont on s'est éloigné...
>
> C'est *sehnsucht* qui parle(Leclerc,1992: 166).

While Leclerc seems to demonstrate an awareness that nostalgia is no solution to social discontent, it is nonetheless incontestable that her own stance against science and technology is somewhat regressive. Without wanting to address this problem in detail, it seems to me to be reductive to simply consider the negative aspects of modern society without giving equal weight to social improvements. Furthermore, Leclerc's social critique implies that life was somehow more harmonious and untroubled in the past. Of course, this is simply not the case.

The gap between modern and pre-modern life is evinced in a further way in *Exercices de mémoire*. As with writers like Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray, Leclerc is interested in what myths can tell us about ancient attitudes toward life and living. In the section entitled 'Le Refoulement des Larmes' Leclerc offers us an original reading of the myth of *Ulysses* in order to argue that the ability to feel compassion and pity is not a feminine weakness. Just as Leclerc perceives that willingness to admit to one's weakness is a strength, so too she believes that the readiness to shed tears, to admit to one's powerlessness, is an attribute:

> Pourquoi faut-il que les hommes, bien plus que les femmes, ravalent leurs larmes ? Pourquoi se détournent-ils pour pleurer ? Qu'y a-t-il de si humiliant dans cet aveu d'impuissance à ne pouvoir contenir ses larmes ? (Leclerc,1992: 207).

Drawing out extracts from Homer's *Odyssey*, Leclerc demonstrates how Ulysses the warrior hero cried on numerous occasions and for diverse reasons. He sheds tears of nostalgia when a prisoner of Calypso, pity when encountering Elpenor his young

companion, and joy when he is reunited with his wife Penelope and his father, Laertes. Quoting from the passage where Ulysses's tales of war are narrated to the Phoenicians, Leclerc demonstrate how his tears illustrate the fact that glory can never exist without its underside, suffering and defeat:

> Et comment à l'évocation de sa propre gloire aurait-il pu, lui , oublier ce qu'elle dérobait aux yeux de tous : la détresse de l'exil, l'angoisse de l'errance, l'abandon du ciel et de la terre...? (Leclerc,1992: 209).

As we can see, in *Exercices de mémoire,* Leclerc provides the reader with an emotional yet lucid critique of power relations which is totally befitting of a writer of *écriture féminine*. Leclerc's plea for a society based on compassion and acceptance of all forms of difference is expressed not only in the content but also within the form of her writing. It is to an examination of the formal structures of the text which I will now turn.

6.2. Exercices de Style

The form of Leclerc's writing mirrors the central concerns of her argument. Her critique of the values which enabled the Holocaust to take place is implied through the idiosyncratic syntactical and grammatical structures of the text. For Leclerc, the refusal to adhere to stringent grammatical rules provides a space for thought which is not oppositional. Leclerc's approach to narrating the Holocaust is extremely personal. Her eschewal of abstract, scientific language is typical of the female writer's search for a subjective form of expression. The author's determination to question fixed boundaries is apparent through her presentation of a unique mélange of genres and the circular, open-ended structure of the text.

A notable stylistic anomaly in *Exercices de mémoire* is the use of the uppercase in unorthodox places. Obviously, the use of capital letters serves the function of magnifying the significance of a word. At other times it signals that the author is assuming an ironic distance from the behavioural patterns which she is observing. Hence, on page 66 Leclerc outlines the defensive responses which she could have succumbed to after witnessing the slaughtering of the pig: "Peut-être qu'il est

nécessaire de faire comme si de rien n'était. ET OUBLIER" (Leclerc,1992: 66). Another fitting illustration of this process can be found on page 159 where the author holds herself to account for forgetting the horrors of the Second World War: "Avec passion je me remis à oublier ce qu'il avait en tête sur cette question : RIEN. Un blanc. Oubli total" (Leclerc,1992: 159).

The author's state of mind is often conveyed through the presentation of grammatically incomplete sentences. In the example cited above, the punctuation of single nouns and noun phrases with full-stops lends a staccato feel to the piece which effectively conveys the repressive function at work in the author's psyche.

The italicisation of certain key words in the text serves a similar function to the use of the upper-case. It demonstrates the manner in which language can be used as a form of deception. This stylistic device might equally be seen to highlight the failure of language to reach our true emotions and feelings. On page 131 the italicisation of the word *voir* is contrasted with a non-italicised version of the same word. The use of italics suggests a way of seeing which is blinkered and repressed: "Quand on ne peut pas voir, seulement *voir*" (Leclerc,1992: 131).

While Leclerc is clearly aware that we can use words both in order to seek the truth and to hide from it, she recognises that their significance is often culturally embedded. This explains why she often states ideas in their original language. When dealing with the words and concepts particular to Nazi thought, she regularly writes them in the original German. This is probably because these words evolved in and hence evoke a specific historical context. The feelings and emotions which these words conjured up cannot be transcribed into French. Hence, Leclerc might speak of "*Une restlose vernichtung* " (Leclerc, 1992: 20) to describe the systematic destruction of the Jews. Another thought provoking illustration of the resistance of certain words to translation appears on page 25. Here the author expains her choice of the word *traité* to describe the extermination of the Jews:

> Les ordures accumulées demandent à être *traitées* (ce fut leur mot [the Nazis] pour l'exécution des Juifs, traitement spécial, de faveur autrement dit, *Sonderbehandlung*) (Leclerc, 1992: 25).

Other terms and expressions such as *schnell, schnell, Endlösung* and *Untermenschen* (Leclerc, 1992: 30, 178, 186), appear throughout the text. Leclerc's decision to present

these terms in German denotes the connection between language and national identity. On this point it is interesting to note that Leclerc refers to the Holocaust using the Hebrew word *Shoah* perhaps demonstrating her identification with the Jewish plight.

For the reader of *Exercices de mémoire*, the connection between language and identity cannot be ignored. The implicit message of Leclerc's text is that language which celebrates the self while excluding the Other is to be avoided at all costs. Leclerc's own relationship to language is a far cry from that of the Nazis who manipulated words in order to incite German crowds into a frenzy of national pride and loathing for the Jewish nation. Although Leclerc, an experienced writer, demonstrates an exceptional command of language, in *Exercices de mémoire* her self-expression is self-effacing, tentative and lacking in certainty. Like Marguerite Duras she is of the opinion that the feminine might speak through the gaps in language. By punctuating her text with silences Leclerc finds a space to speak on the margins of the Symbolic Order. Like Duras, she may be searching for the 'mot trou' the silent space in language which means everything through saying nothing. Indeed, in an interview with Mariella Righini she has confessed that her writing is predicated on a quest for a missing word (Righini, 1976). Leclerc demonstrates that silence sometimes speaks louder than words. Leclerc frequently employs trailing ellipses and incomplete sentences in order to undermine the authority of her pronouncements. In so doing she avoids all temptations to produce a rousing message which will incite communal identification. By denying her own authority Leclerc holds the reader at a distance from the text, requiring them to take responsibility for their own beliefs and encouraging them to engage in thoughtful reflection. A fitting illustration of this process can be found on page 21 where Leclerc admits to being deluded in her belief that she had confronted the horror of the Holocaust: "Je croyais que je savais mais je ne savais pas" (Leclerc,1992: 21). At other moments the use of clusters of question marks denotes authorial anxiety. On page 199 the author engages in a series of questions about her right to tackle the subject of the Holocaust. The frequent appearance of rhetorical questions connotes the author's uneasy state of mind. Yet paradoxically, through using punctuation suggestive of uncertainty, through according the reader the right to decide for him or herself, Leclerc teases the reader into agreeing with her sense of urgency regarding the need to speak of the Holocaust:

> Comment ? Il serait déjà venu le temps de tourner la page ? Pour nous en particulier qui ne sommes pas Juifs ? Mais nous n'avons encore rien dit, ou presque...(Leclerc, 1992: 199).

Claire Laubier has pointed out that the writers of *écriture féminine* have a tendency to punctuate their texts with repetitive structures. In her opinion, the reiteration of certain stylistic features may serve to "symbolise different rhythms, bodily sensations, emotions and sufferings" (Laubier, 1990: 95). The poetic quality of Leclerc's writing is achieved in part through her use of parallelisms. This adds a lyrical quality to the text which through its repetitive and circular structure makes manifest the cyclic nature of 'women's time' and avoids closure. A fitting illustration of this stylistic feature can be found in the following extract. The quotation is taken from a passage where Leclerc discusses Western civilisation's preoccupation with the image of fire as a symbol of self-purification and renewal:

> Le feu : l'image même de la beauté qui est de tenir le vivant dans son halo de mort.
>
> Le feu : la beauté même. La mort vivante, la vie mourante. La Beauté active, brûlante, extasiée (Leclerc, 1992: 139).

The personification of 'beauty' is indicated through the use of a capital letter at the beginning of the noun. This simple stylistic feature demonstrates not only the negative consequences of the pursuit of the ideal of beauty, but also Leclerc's scepticism toward all forms of romanticism. Here, the search for beauty and perfection, which may lead to the annihilation of all forms of otherness, is presented as an inherently flawed quest.

The rhythmic flow of the text is further achieved through the use of three tiered repetitions. On page 211 Leclerc describes Western man's pursuit of total knowledge:

> Plus ils ont acquis de puissance et moins ils ont voulu connaître leur impuissance.
>
> Plus ils ont prétendu avoir raison de tout et maîtrise d'eux mêmes et moins ils ont admis leur ignorance et leur faiblesse.
>
> Plus ils sont devenus savants et moins ils ont voulu savoir... (Leclerc, 1992: 211).

In both of the illustrations above it is interesting to note Leclerc's tendency to employ anaphora. The repetition of the same word at the beginning of the sentence lends an incantatory, musical quality to Leclerc's prose. As in many epic poems this stylistic device increases the solemn feel of the piece. It lends the impression of a choral interplay of voices.

At other moments in the text, it is difficult to tell precisely where the author's voice is. Leclerc places herself in a number of subject positions constructing a dialogue between imaginary voices. Where one voice acknowledges the horrors of the century another implies the need to cover over these atrocities:

> On ne peut tout de même pas dire que le Mal n'existe pas, que le Diable n'est pas de ce monde...
> Puisque cela *se voit*.
> Patience...le pire n'est peut-être pas encore advenu...
> Si rien ne se voyait plus...(Leclerc, 1992: 176).

Like the river Styx evoked in the text, Leclerc's writing is characterised by its languorous and flowing structure. The typically long and winding sentences are, at times, contrasted with short staccato bursts of words. The creation of sentences linked by numerous sub-clauses gives Leclerc's prose a quality of free-flowing lyricism. These sentences exemplify the characteristics of fluidity and circularity which have been seen as essential features of *écriture féminine*. Their structure is non-teleological and not directly goal orientated. They express thoughts which meander, which privilege reflection and questioning over reaching conclusions. On page 118 Leclerc describes a moment when she was overwhelmed by middle-class guilt. Pushing her shopping trolley around the supermarket in Rue Bobillot, Leclerc falls into a panic about the overly sheltered nature of her existence [vi]. Leclerc conveys her sense of anxiety using a stream of consciousness narrative technique. The passage is remarkable because of the relative absence of full stops; there are only six in an interior monologue which lasts for over two pages. Here we join the narrator at the beginning of her meditation:

> D'un coup tu repenses à tout ça, à quoi on ne pense pas, à tout ce temps que tu as passé, que tu passes à n'y pas penser, à cette impossibilité de se tenir dans

> cette pensée, les trains, les fils barbelés électrifiés à la limite du camp, le Vel' d'Hiv ce n'était pas dans un autre monde pourtant..." (Leclerc, 1992: 118).

The eschewal of full stops in preference for long flowing sentences punctuated by commas effectively conveys the author's troubled state of mind. We have the impression that thoughts are literally invading her consciousness, conflicting with or conjoining one another, compounding her sense of anxiety.

As I hope to have demonstrated, Leclerc's original approach to textual expression is motivated by her avid concern to avoid totalising discourses. Through opening up language Leclerc hopes to pave the way for a better society which values feminine difference and celebrates the alterity of the Other. While I am acutely aware of the important role which *écriture féminine* has played in carving out a niche for women's writing, I am also sceptical that linguistic experimentation can bring about cultural change. One is forced to ask whether the celebration of 'difference' does not simply serve to keep women confined on the cultural margins. Clare Duchen has aptly observed that "It is impossible to say that feminine difference can be divorced from the historical use made of that notion and feminine difference has always been used to oppress women, just as other kinds of difference (racial, linguistic, class, etc.) have been used to justify oppression" (Duchen, 1986: 101). A further problem might be perceived in the difficulty of reception which avant-garde texts pose to some readers. As I have already argued, the huge sales figures and international best-seller status of *Les Mots pour le dire* might in part be attributed to its accessibility to a wide popular audience. On the other hand, as I will go on to suggest in chapter 8 the more eclectic style of *Exercices de mémoire* may have restricted its reception . A final point worth noting is that the proponents of *écriture féminine* have often come under fire for their lack of pragmatism. It has been argued that their social vision of a harmonious society smacks of utopianism. In Leclerc's case it is undeniable that while she provides a valid critique of power relations in contemporary society, she does not offer an adequate ethic or vision of how society should function should we renege on our present value systems. Duchen has lucidly argued that the idea of an anti-oppression society where anything goes sounds attractive. However, she goes on to caution, "the reality of a world that is provisional in meanings, where logic is denigrated as a mode of thought, where all interpretations are valid and values are upset but not replaced, would be impossible"(Duchen, 1986: 101-2). It might be argued that to suggest that Leclerc's vision is purely utopian is to miss the point of her text. As, I pointed out at the

beginning, Leclerc's growing pragmatism is a driving force in her decision to structure her autobiographical fiction around a series of encounters with death (see chapter 7). Nonetheless, if at this point in her life, Leclerc conjures up the spirit of death is it not with the very intention of laying the ghosts which haunt her to rest.

The function of writing as a defence against death is made explicit on pages 115-6. In a self-reflexive passage, the author admits to the extreme difficulties which she has experienced while writing the passage entitled 'Désespoir'. Remembering the death of Alexandre, the author holds herself to account for surviving his loss. Reliving the train journey back from his funeral, she recalls how she was unable to concentrate on reading Kierkegaard's *Traité du désespoir*. This is perhaps because it makes her all too aware of her ability to remain unmoved by the death of another: "C'est une forme de désespoir que de n'être pas désespéré, que d'être inconscient de l'être..." (Leclerc, 1992: 113).

If the author comes to conclude that "Notre condition, c'est le désespoir" (Leclerc, 1992: 113), she is equally conscious of the psychological defences which she employs in order to protect herself from this recognition. She confesses that during the 12 days that she has been dealing with these unpalatable thoughts she has repeatedly dreamed of a baby. Of course, the metaphor of giving birth has been repeatedly evoked to describe the creative process. In *Exercices de mémoire* the link is made explicit. While Leclerc may seek to confront *Thanatos*, the death drive, it is evident that her writing is the expression of a quest for life which is as strong as ever. Describing her own creative process Leclerc observes:

> J'écris comme si j'allais trouver un bébé au bout du chemin. Comme s'il allait sourdre de mon encre un bébé d'humanité nouvelle, une aurore insoupçonnée...
> Tout effacer, tout brûler, tout oublier...
> Et commencer á vivre (Leclerc, 1992: 116).

Conclusion

During the 1970s Leclerc was among those authors who sought to present a challenge to the patriarchal order by writing outside of binary oppositions. Twenty years later, Leclerc's commitment to the aims of *écriture feminine* finds a particular urgency in

Exercices de mémoire along with her growing awareness of implications of the Holocaust. As Leclerc argues, the Holocaust provides a most extreme and horrific example of social exclusion at work. It suggests that the need to accept difference is a social imperative. Leclerc's tentative to 'penser autrement' in order to envisage a new self which is not defined in opposition to the Other gains a deeper political resonance in the light of the Holocaust. For Leclerc, writing the feminine is seen as a fitting strategy to critique social injustice and the horror of war.

Notes

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[i] This term was coined by Hélène Cixous in the Laugh of the Mudusa (1975) "to designate a writing that emerges from and celebrates the specific nature of women's sexuality, thought and imagination" (Holmes, 1996: 216).

[ii] In Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Kristeva, 1984).

[iii] For instance, Cixous names James Joyce and Jean Genet as examples of male writers who create outside the phallocentric tradition.

[iv] The original nature of Leclerc's subject matter might account for the record sales which the text achieved. On this point see Toril Moi ed. *French Feminist Thought* (Moi,1987: 5).

[v] In an interview with Mariella Righini, Leclerc has expressed her fascination with alterity. Bemoaning the normality of her own family life she perhaps falls into the trap of exoticising that of the exile. Her admission that she would have liked to come from the Balcans, to be Jewish, to have divorced parents or to live a life on the road seems a little naïve while it might be seen to trivialise the cultures which she idealises (Righini, 1976).

[vi] The supermarket has become a common site for the expression of existential angst in contemporary French women's literature see for example Annie Ernaux' *Journal du dehors,* Editions Gallimard, 1993 and Darrieussecq's *Naissance des fantômes* P.O.L.éditeur, *1998.*

7

Bearing Witness

7.1. Reading the Holocaust

In order to contextualise Leclerc's approach to narrating the Holocaust, I will begin by referring to an article by Saul Friedlander which offers an insightful overview of the history of Holocaust reception. In this study Friedlander draws attention to the pervasive current of resistance which surrounds the subject (Friedlander, 1992). Freidlander is well aware of the Jewish tradition of countering trauma with narratives of redemption. As he points out, the foundation of the Jewish nation on a catastrophe has been reiterated in Jewish mythology which charts a sequence of "Catastrophe and Redemption" making martyrdom coterminous with heroism (Friedlander, 1992: 42).[i] However, Friedlander concludes that no such narrative has proved sufficient as a redemptive discourse to the insurmountable horrors of the Holocaust.

Referring to Lawrence Langer's (1991) discussion of hundreds of video taped Holocaust testimonies, Friedlander highlights the conflict between a pervasive deep memory "totally centered on the years of the *Shoah*" and a more common memory offering a detached picture of the events from a contemporary perspective. In such a case the redemptive function of memory is always compromised to "a subtext of loss that punctures the story with fragments of chagrin..." (Langer quoted in Friedlander, 1992: 40). As Friedlander points out, communal messages of hope are not enough to temper the malign meanderings of the unconscious. All such attempts at reconstituting a shattered identity are destined to founder as repressed subject matter emerges: "Any attempt at building a coherent self flounders on the intractable return of the repressed and recurring deep memory" (Friedlander, 1992: 41). For Friedlander, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* is one such example of a narrative which recognises the limits of its redemptive function. Neither linear nor circular Lanzmann's documentary is, according to Friedlander "a spiral recoiling upon itself" and inasmuch it becomes "just another episode in the story of total extermination" (Friedlander, 1992: 43).

Friedlander argues that the failure of Jewish narratives of redemption to contain the Holocaust problematises Cathy Caruth's thesis about the relationship between

trauma and history (Friedlander, 1992: 43). Caruth draws upon Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* in order to demonstrate how the very specific and personal effects of trauma need time to settle before they can be generalised and integrated into social discourse as history. For Caruth, Freud's foundation myth provides a fitting illustration of the relationship between trauma and history; Freud's original reading of the story of Moses and the origins of the Jewish religion was prompted by his 'departure' from his homeland and the partial loss of his maternal language. However, as Friedlander rightly argues the "aftermath of the *Shoah* seems to indicate that the thesis of a history-originating trauma cannot be transposed as it is to *these* specific events and to their delayed effects" (Friedlander, 1992: 44).

7.2. Defences

Friedlander employs a psychoanalytical framework to explore the divergent responses to the event. He borrows the term 'projection' to evoke the unstable and subjective nature of historians' "unconscious shapings and reshapings" of an "unmastered past" (Friedlander, 1992: 44). In Friedlander's opinion, the extreme character of the occurrence may lead to a refusal to confront the reality of historical events and with it a desire for transference on the part of the witness (Friedlander, 1992: 44). Referring to the work of Dominick LaCapra (1992) Friedlander recognises that the psychological responses of witnesses may vary according to their subject position (age, nationality and proximity to the event). In the case of the victims, the gamut of responses including shame, guilt and self-hatred may be tempered by individual experience. Similarly, Friedlander notes, the variety of responses may be as wide ranging in the German nation. Seeking to arrive at some sort of tentative overview of responses to the Holocaust, Friedlander argues that one obvious trait can be uncovered in the difference between Jewish and German reactions to the event: "For the Jews of whatever age, the fundamental traumatic situation was and is the *Shoah* and its sequels; for Germans, it was national defeat..." (Friedlander, 1992: 45). As the full extent of the genocide was revealed the Jews were left to deal with their trauma while the Germans had to confront a widening burden of guilt.

In seeking to throw light on the seeming inability of historians, writers, artists and the general public alike to close the event, Friedlander outlines two forms of repressive 'defence' which he perceives as typical in patterns of reception of the

Holocaust in both Germans and Jews alike. The first of these, 'denial', was, according to Friedlander, prevalent in the historical output of the two decades after the war. In German historical writing the silence mirrored a desire to prevent the events from surfacing into German society. The lacunae in Jewish accounts cannot, according to Friedlander, be explained in terms of repression alone. Contrary to the German response, in this case, silence was often imposed by "the shame of telling a story that must appear unbelievable and was, in any case entirely out of tune with surrounding society" (Friedlander, 1992: 48).

Friedlander draws attention to the extensive body of work which now exists on the subject of repression among the German nation (see for example Mitscherlich, 1975 and Santner, 1990). He outlines a progression from the "massive denial" of the 1940s and 1950s to "signs of transformation" in the 1960s. For Friedlander, the student revolts marked a rejection not only of their parents' generation but also of the Nazi era which they had come to represent. Inasmuch, Friedlander argues, by engaging in this symbolic act of regeneration, the German youth avoided confronting the *specificity* of the Nazi past (Friedlander, 1992: 46). Although Friedlander acknowledges a growing concern to confront the past he is equally aware of the patterns of repression which continue to prevail to this day.

In contrast to this silence, Friedlander notes that a second and more predominant tendency of 'splitting off' is present in the multifarious and often conflicting responses on how to document the event. 'Splitting off', says Friedlander, is a psychological defence against the problem of how to integrate the victims' personal and 'quasi-mythic' memory into more factual accounts of the Holocaust. Moreover, it is a dilemma which has not been resolved in a satisfactory manner. Friedlander outlines the tendency among theorists of this category to envisage the memory of Auschwitz as the property of the victims. However, this in turn led to an alarming practice among historians to focus on the minutiae of everyday life while avoiding naming the atrocities committed (Friedlander, 1992: 47).

The implacability of the event for the German population is mirrored in the sense of fragmentation which marks Jewish historical accounts. Friedlander cites a number of Jewish intellectuals who produced important historical works during the 1940s and 1950s which are nonetheless remarkable in their steadfast avoidance of the subject of the Holocaust. Featured in this list are Hans Rosenberg who was working on a study of the Prussian bureaucracy (Rosenberg, 1958); Lewis Namier 'the doyen of

British historians' who was not tempted to break his silence on the subject even when he embarked on a study of the Nazi epoch (Namier, 1952) and Felix Gilbert whose research into the relationship between "political power and academic responsibility" pointed only indirectly to the effects of the war on his writing [ii](Friedlander, 1992: 48-9). In this light the reference to the Holocaust made by the likes of Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt and Salo Baron marked a brave foray into an arena which many feared to enter (Friedlander, 1992: 50).

Friedlander concludes that the Holocaust has "not yet found its historian" (Friedlander, 1992: 50). For both Germans and Jews alike the task of producing a historical overview of the event beyond a description of the technology of war or a series of fragmented monographs continues to elude them. This pattern, suggests Friedlander, is a response to the many "unbridged ruptures" which those historians who lived through the war years experienced and one which has been mimicked by future generations of theorists (Friedlander, 1992: 50). The debate is still held up in the "hasty ideological closure" of the theorists of catastrophe and redemption and the lacunae of "global interpretation" (Friedlander, 1992: 51). Is there then, in Friedlander's opinion, any way out of this theoretical dead-end?

7.3. Working Through

In seeking to provide an answer to the problem of how to represent the Holocaust, Friedlander points the reader towards two possible responses to trauma as outlined in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1953-74). In this essay, Freud presents trauma in terms of excessive stimuli which are strong enough to break through the organism's protective shield. Freud presents his findings thus:

> It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism's energy and to set in motion every possible defence measure (Freud, 1953-74, 18: 29).

Intentions and Interpretations

For Friedlander, the difficulty facing the historian of the Holocaust is to find a balance between "the emotion recurrently breaking through the 'protective shield' and numbness that protects this very shield" (Friedlander, 1992: 51). In his opinion, both the distanced intellectualising of the event and the voicing of immediate and unmediated emotion are necessary and unavoidable. 'Working through' involves precisely such a balancing act between the two responses.

A further and important consideration for Friedlander is the avoidance of closure. While Friedlander is fully aware of the necessity of historical accuracy he is sceptical of narratives which try to resolve the event through closure (Friedlander, 1992: 52). He pertinently observes that "Closure in this case would represent an obvious avoidance of what remains indeterminate, elusive and opaque" (Friedlander, 1992: 52). Those who might interpret Friedlander's approach as borrowing from deconstructionist practices are quickly silenced. Indeed, he steers away from this theory which through placing emphasis on the rhetorical dimension questions the possibility of historical representation. While Friedlander recognises the impossibility of reaching a totalising interpretation he is aware of the need for making reference to 'concrete reality' and the quest for 'significant historical linkage' (Friedlander, 1992: 52). Friedlander's approach is then necessarily contradictory in its "search for ever-closer historical linkages and the avoidance of a naive historical positivism" (Friedlander, 1992: 53).

7.4. The Self-Referential Voice

For Friedlander, one possible solution to the problem of producing facile historical renditions of the event is the utilisation of metacommentary. This feature, contradicting the linear progression of events, would, in Friedlander's opinion, enable both the production of a 'rational historiography' while at the same time making possible the representation of 'deep memory'. Narrative commentary paves the way for the production of different vantage points, alternative interpretations, splintered refractions, while resisting all temptations to closure. The presence of a narrative voice personalises what might otherwise become an objective and coldly calculated account of events which demand the expression of emotion. "Working through ultimately means testing the limits of necessary and ever-defeated imagination" (Friedlander, 1992: 54).

Friedlander is not optimistic that all narrators will be able to 'work through' the event with success. He envisages the temptation to produce narratives of closure as

overriding the resolution of the event. Yet Friedlander does offer a way forward. The first would draw upon Caruth's presentation of traumatic history not as a finished event but rather as "a point of departure" (Caruth, 1991: 191). In that sense, the 'excess' which the Holocaust represents is always in the process of being 'phrased' as opposed to 'determined'. Friedlander is particularly aware of the 'growing sensitivity' to problems of representation of the Holocaust in literature and art. Annie Leclerc is just one of those authors for whom "the trauma, the insuperable moral outrage, the riddle whose decoding never seems to surrender a fully comprehensible text [presents] an ongoing emotional and intellectual challenge" (Friedlander, 1992: 55). Leclerc's text offers a fitting illustration of the problems outlined by Friedlander: with her interplay between the personal and political and her use of metacommentary, multiple perspectives and narrative voices she seeks to address the problem of representing 'deep memory' and 'historical data' which in my opinion can be taken as an example of Friedlander's 'working through'.

7.5. Testimony: Writing Inside Otherness

> ***Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language.***
>
> ***This, the language, was not lost but remained, yes, in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death bringing speech. It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening-but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again, 'enriched' by all that*** (Celan, 1958).

> ***On ne peut vivre que si on sait pourquoi. Si on croit savoir pourquoi.***
>
> ***On ne peut vivre que si on croit...***
>
> ***Que ça a du sens de vivre par exemple.***
>
> ***Qu'on en saura plus à la fin qu'au commencement*** (Leclerc, 1992: 114).

In this section I draw on the work of Shoshana Felman[iii] in order to examine *Exercices de mémoire* as an example of testimonial writing. I argue that Leclerc's experience as a witness to the Holocaust testimonies in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* leads to a sense of fragmentation and isolation whereby the need to write becomes paramount. Referring to Felman's interpretation of testimonial writing as a kind of trial which results from a crisis of truth, I examine various aspects of Leclerc's narrative asking

such questions as how is the witness appointed? What languages might he or she use in order to testify? If testimony involves a trial then what place does the eye-witness account, the gaze play in such narratives? Finally, I argue that testimony involves a journey into radical otherness, a confrontation with the dead where symbolisation breaks down. I suggest that through this confrontation with death the author seeks to achieve a non-narcissistic approach to identity which nonetheless constitutes a form of autobiographical rebirth.

In a study of testimonial writing, Shoshana Felman has drawn attention to the growing popularity of this discursive mode in contemporary society (Felman, 1992: 5).[iv] In seeking to explain the preponderance of testimonial artifacts in our recent cultural offerings Felman argues that the need to bear witness is inspired by a crisis of truth (Felman,1992: 6). As in the courtroom, when a crime has been committed, there is a need to scrutinise the past, to weigh up the evidence, in order to reach a verdict. Where truth as we know it has been called into question, a witness is asked to take the stand, to testify.

While individuals have taken to testimonial writing for diverse reasons [v], the 'crisis of truth' ensuing from the Holocaust has prompted a number of writers to engage in a radical re-evaluation of the past. Writers like Primo Levi, Christa Wolf, and Shulamit Hareven, have all found an urgent need to bear witness to the sense of otherness which this event imposes on our preconceived ways of seeing[vi]. If Leclerc's addition to the growing body of Holocaust literature in 1992 might be seen as somewhat belated, the fact that the narrative is the first of its kind by a French woman from a non-survivor perspective offers interesting material for an analysis. (Slama, 1992).

Before going on to discuss the text in more detail, it will be helpful if we attempt to define testimonial writing. How for instance does the testimony differ from other forms of self-writing such as the confessional or the autobiography? In seeking to answer this point, it is interesting to note that in the majority of literary dictionaries, this autobiographical sub-genre fails to make an entry[vii]. Is this perhaps because the characteristics of urgency and immediacy, typical to this writing do not suggest the thought and control demanded in the production of 'real' literature? Shoshana Felman has argued that testimonial writing is a discursive response to a sickness whereby the testifier seeks healing through the act of writing (Felman, 1992). While the trauma of witnessing atrocities may lead to a feeling of being divorced from one's-self and humanity at large, then writing - symbolically encoding a shattering experience -

becomes a means of reconstituting subjectivity and re-opening the portals of communication. Is it because the testimonial writer seeks to inscribe experiences which shatter belief systems that in this kind of writing meaning is never transparent but is always in process? As with Marie Cardinal, the testimonial writer is quite literally searching for 'the words to say it'. To testify is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than simply to formulate a statement (Felman, 1992: 5. Felman's italics). What then is the accident which drives a middle class French woman writer to bear witness?

7.6. The Fall

Leclerc's text is unusual because, unlike writers like Primo Levi and Georges Perec, she is not writing from the perspective of a Holocaust survivor. Her urgent desire to write is a response to the shock which she felt on witnessing *Shoah,* Claude Lanzmann's documentary of Holocaust testimonies. This experience, so the author tells us, led her to question the foundation of her beliefs, prompting her to re-evaluate her liberal humanist perception of mankind as essentially good.

> J'ai vu Shoah, j'ai entendu les témoignages des hommes qui avaient survécu et c'est comme si je découvrais que j'avais toujours évité de penser à cela que je savais pourtant.
>
> Ce fut cette fois, pour de bon, comme un déraillement de la croyance (Leclerc, 1992: 11).

Following Felman's schema, Leclerc's text can be seen to chart a crisis of truth, a trial where the facts must be weighed up and the guilty held to account. However, while Leclerc is willing to take the witness stand she is equally prepared to place herself in the position of the accused. The text is suffused with the author's guilt about her erstwhile lack of political awareness (see chapter 5). Leclerc is acutely aware of her reluctance to consider the implications of the Holocaust. The disorientated state of the author's mind prompts an immediate desire to write. Kept in a folder entitled *Trains* the fragmented and incomplete nature of these "notes" and "bribes de pensées" suggests the state of confusion which haunts her.

While writing might provide some respite from the author's *crise de conscience*, Leclerc is equally aware of the dangers of this undertaking. For the writer who dares to confront subjects dealing with situations of extreme otherness might become cut off from his/her fellow wo/men, cast adrift in madness or even death. Drawing on the analogy familiar to testimonial writers of the traveller with no preconceived destination Leclerc employs the metaphor of the writer boarding a train. Her fear of losing her voice and the power to communicate is apparent. Commenting on the writing process, she laments:

> Il se peut qu'on titube, qu'on bafouille, qu'on s'étrangle.
>
> Il se peut qu'on s'abîme dans des pensées sans visage. Il se peut que le train déraille et sombre au pays des morts (Leclerc, 1992: 7).

While recognising Leclerc's personal need to bear witness in order to come to terms with her past, what right does she, a non-survivor, have to tackle such a sensitive subject?

7.7. The Right to Bear Witness

Felman has spoken of the unique position of the witness. His/her singularity comes from being one who has seen, witnessed events which remain closed to others. Witnessing is a lonely occupation where the desire to tell all may be necessary as opposed to chosen. The witness may be inspired by the recognition that the events have a political significance beyond his or her personal experience. Through giving testimony the witness may relieve him/herself of his/her solitary burden. Paradoxically, Leclerc seems to be riddled with anxiety about her suitability for writing about the Holocaust. Indeed, many Jewish readers might feel that she lacks the necessary insight and heritage for such a task. This form of authorial anxiety makes itself apparent through a number of authorial interventions which appear throughout the text. Early on in the text, the author expresses misgivings: "Peut-être n'aurais -je pas dû commencer...après tout nul ne m'a demandé d'écrire ni surtout de me risquer en ce voyage incertain..."(Leclerc, 1992: 8). Further down on the same page she employs the Sartrian metaphor of being a traveller without a ticket to describe her seeming lack of

necessity: "Si quelque lecteur-contrôleur venait me demander sur l'heure – ce serait bien légitime – mes intentions d'écriture, que pourrais-je lui dire, ici, honnêtement?" (Leclerc, 1992: 8)[viii].

Despite her misgivings, Leclerc's justification for treating the subject, is that the Holocaust is the legacy of us all, from perpetrators to victims, from politicians to the general public, from those who witnessed the event at first hand to those whose knowledge of it is acquired from history books. Leclerc recognises that we all share a responsibility to bear witness, to keep these events alive if we are to prevent them from happening again. She is aware of the objections which could be raised against her project: the event is unnameable, to speak of it is sacrilege for it will normalise the occurrence. However, she concludes that it is too soon to turn the page: "Il m'a semblé qu'à force de ne pas considerer l'événement, je risquais de l'abandonner tout à fait" (Leclerc, 1992: 9).

As a second-degree witness to the testimonies of survivors Leclerc takes on the role of a medium who allows the testimonies of others to pass through her. Seeing the victims reduced to tears, unable to formulate their past in language Leclerc feels obliged to share the burden of a memory which "seul, on ne peut pas endurer..." (Leclerc, 1992: 14). She seeks to transcribe some of this raw emotion in words, to respond to the seemingly unimaginable with "quelque petit signe d'intelligence, d'humanité, quelques mots pour tenter de répondre à la supplique infinie de larmes..."(Leclerc, 1992: 14).

7.8. The Refusal to See

In the court-room the form of testimony which holds the most weight is the eye-witness account. The reconstruction of events is closely linked to being able to see clearly. Truth is called into question precisely when our ability to see is blurred. As with the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire*, Leclerc recognises that one of the effects of trauma is the loss of clear vision. Writing enables revisioning, an opening of one's eyes to the truth, no matter how painful it might be. In order to explore this process of repression at work, Leclerc draws upon her childhood experience of witnessing the slaughter of a pig. The image of a group of bloodthirsty butchers who take pleasure in watching a pig bleeding to death may not inspire every reader as a metaphor for the Holocaust[ix]. However, Leclerc's personal experience does provide a fitting illustration of our refusal to confront traumatic events. In a section entitled 'La Mort du cochon' Leclerc

surmises that her response to this rude awakening to death and human cruelty was to shut her eyes and refuse to see: "C'est sur le champ même de l'évenement que se met en place le refus de voir" (Leclerc, 1992: 68).

Leclerc's anecdote points to a primal desire to repress trauma, to deny a past which belies conscious representation. After exposing her own refusal to see she goes on to consider the manner in which the National Socialist Party sought to prevent others from bearing witness to the Holocaust by destroying the evidence. Commenting on the annihilation of the Jewish population Leclerc adumbrates:

> Cela se désirait comme un grand ménage, une purification de l'Occident corrompu.
>
> Or il ne suffit pas de repousser la saleté, il faut decider de ce qu'on va en faire. Les ordures, accumulées demandent d'être *traitées*...La disparition des ordures ne s'achève réellement qu'avec la disparition des instruments de la disparition (Leclerc, 1992: 25).

Speaking of the situation in contemporary society, Leclerc recognises the same desire to avert the gaze from events which threaten to disturb the social order: "Déjà c'est Presque comme si personne n'avait rien vu, rien vécu de cela" (Leclerc, 1992: 22). In one particularly alarming illustration she cites an account of the Holocaust, figured in a history book, where the word Jew is not even mentioned (Leclerc, 1992: 30-31). In presenting her personal experience of the slaying of a pig as a primal scene of evil Leclerc is not seeking to generalise the behaviour of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. She is however concerned to explore the psychological mechanisms which motivate us to commit acts of violence.

As a witness, Leclerc seeks to confront experience which is normally banished from conscious thought. Felman has argued that the journey which the witness embarks upon may entail "a passage through radical obscurity" (Felman, 1992: 23). This journey might be equated with a passage to the underworld where the testifier explores the murky depths of the unconscious, the realm of dreams where the irrational reigns. According to Felman, the process of psychoanalysis and testimony bear some similarities. Both seek to get at a truth which is unavailable to rational symbolisation. Both entail the break down and fragmentation of subjectivity before healing can be achieved. On this point, Felman acknowledges the impact of psychoanalysis on our

approach to truth. Freud's observation that knowledge teased out from the unconscious does not necessarily lead to enlightenment has proved an insurmountable obstacle to man's pursuit of 'total knowledge'.

> Hitherto...all the paths along which we have travelled have led us toward the light – toward elucidation and fuller understanding. But as soon as we endeavour to penetrate more deeply into the mental process involved in dreaming, every path will end in darkness (Freud, 1953 : 509-511).

Leclerc's response to the 'mort du cochon' seems to confirm Freud's premise that certain revelations lead toward obscurity: after witnessing the event she laments:

> Il y a des revelations si poignantes et si brutales que, loin d'eclairer celui qui vivait dans l'illusion, elles le précipitent dans la nuit (Leclerc, 1992: 64).

Further on she describes the experience as the "Eclipse fatale d'une lumière qui semblait couler de source" (Leclerc, 1992: 68).

The act of seeing, reinstating the gaze, requires one to perceive what has previously been repressed. For Leclerc this means confronting death. The author is aware of the extent to which she has shied away from the terror and ultimate solitude of death. From the loss of her childhood hero Alexandre to the death of her mother, Leclerc painfully ruminates over this metaphysical question.

The analogy between the experience of the Holocaust and a Dantian descent to hell has been employed by a number of writers[x]. In *Exercices de mémoire* the text is divided into four views from the window of a train. Each offers a different view of an Orphean underworld and presents an alternative perspective on the author's encounter with the radical otherness of death. A poetic meditation on the problematic of mortality introduces each stage of the journey. Looking through the first window the author recognises that we must live in common with our fellow men, struggling valiantly yet hopelessly against death:

> A ceux qui prétendent mener leur barque seuls

> Est refusée la tendre vision dont les yeux auront, à l'instant de la mort, la plus grand soif (Leclerc, 1992: 57).

The second window offers a gloomy picture of a world where the occupants live in limbo. For unable to face death they are equally unable to take pleasure in life:

> Ils se sont retrouvés dans la rue [...]descendant ensemble en ce lieu qui n'est pas l'enfer, encore moins le paradis, mais seulement le monde souterrain d'avant la vie, d'après la vie, où se croisent les ombres que n'éclaire nul soleil (Leclerc, 1992: 107)

Outside window three the author recognises the tranquillity offered to those who can accept the tragedy of human mortality with humility and solidarity:

> c'est bien ainsi qu'on passe, de la vie à la mort, fondu et silencieux, tout mêlé à tout autre, coupable ou innocent, sans l'arrogance à la fin d'en juger (Leclerc, 1992: 181).

Finally from window four, the author reaches the heart of darkness. Recalling Ulysess's voyage to the underworld, phantoms pass before her eyes and the river *Styx* continues its unremitting course. In this final confrontation with death, the author rhetorically implies that she is no more certain of the meaning of life than when she started her testimonial voyage:

> C'est la mort qui coule ; regarde. C'est l'eau du Styx derrière les vitres secouées où errent les doux fantômes [...]
>
> Que nous veulent les dieux? (Leclerc, 1992: 241).

Each stage of the author's journey represents her attempt to see beyond her own narcissistic reflection in the train window. Through reaching beyond the total image of herself toward the fragmented and tortured figures who wander aimlessly in the no man's land on the other side of the train Leclerc achieves an acceptance of the otherness

of the human condition. Better, she argues, to face a cruel fate together, than to live the solitary existence of the one whose actions are seeped in denial. What then do these symbolic encounters with death have to do with writing the Holocaust?

As Mordechaï Podchlebnik, featured in *Shoah* and quoted in *Exercices de mémoire*, points out, the witness who has survived the death camps may have to kill off that part of himself, the one who saw, the voice which can testify, in order to go on living. Who then remains to bear witness? By placing herself in the position of the Other, by journeying to the inside of death Leclerc attempts to make a connection between inside and out, silence and speech. Yet paradoxically, her testimony signals the impossibility of her project. For those who were there, the words to say it belie them. Those who were not there can only ever attempt a fictional reconstruction of events. Yet, by quoting extracts from the testimonies of survivors and through creating imaginary sequences of events as they may have happened in the camps Leclerc allows the dead, whose words have been erased, to speak. When words fail us what language can we use to speak of horror?

7.9. Languages of the Holocaust

As Paul Celan, Holocaust survivor and poet recognises, for those who have experienced a severe trauma, language often loses its power to signify, it falls mute. Yet, at the same time, for the survivor, there is an urgent need to explore language, to make sense of the trauma and to bring it into signification. In his Breman speech, commenting on the relationship between loss and language, he effectively conveyed how language is both answerless and the answer to trauma:

> Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language.
>
> This, the language, was not lost but remained, yes, in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death bringing speech. It passed through and yeilded no words for what was happening – but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again, "enriched" by all that (Celan, 1958).

What languages might be used in order to explore the horrors of the Holocaust? Is there a style or register that adequately symbolises the experience? In *Exercices de mémoire* the breakdown in meaning, experienced by the author, is symbolised by the accent which is placed on the poetic function. The violence done to language (to use Jacobson's term) signifies the violence committed against humanity. As I have already explored many of the figurative devices which Leclerc employs in chapter 6 of this thesis, at this point I will only briefly mention some of the features which suggest a language in crisis which is undergoing its own trial of meaning. The *mélange* of poetry and prose might be seen, not only to undo traditional generic divisions, but also to question social hierarchies which thrive on the exclusion of the Other. The rhythmic unpredictability of the piece suggests the urgency of the author's need to testify. It points to a subject who is not simply reflecting on the past but who is creating meaning through the act of writing. The fragmented nature of the prose connotes the author's sense of rupture and dislocation. The explosion of the medium through Leclerc's refusal to adhere to grammatical rules harks back to Felman's definition of testimonial writing as a response to authorial sickness. The break down of language demonstrates the failure of art to provide an adequate medium for the testimony. Hence, the process of testifying becomes a critical process where art is held to account.

In his evaluation of the place of the aesthetic in a post-Holocaust world the influential Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno has suggested that the notion of art as a vehicle to emotion is repulsive in the light of the atrocities of the death camps. In his celebrated apothegm he cautions that "After Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems" (Adorno, 1973: 362). This is not to suggest that Adorno intended to abolish all art but rather to highlight his call for art to take a critical stance against itself. In a later formulation Adorno goes on to suggest that art offers a space for critical activity: "It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it" (Adorno, 1982: 313).

It is in the light of her awakening to the full implications of the Holocaust that Leclerc (perhaps mirroring Adorno's perspective) takes a critical stance to her former approach to the aesthetic. The author's bedazzlement by German Romantic Art (personified in her German teacher Frieda), her desire for rebirth, purity and unity is now equated with the program of National socialism. Retrospectively, Leclerc sees her romantic self-absorption as a form of escapism which enabled her to postpone her

confrontation with otherness. If German art is equated with the desire to ignore the Second World War then her literature of fragmentation might be seen to encompass Adorno's idea of art which thinks against itself. The adult narrator confesses that:

> Goethe renversait Hitler{...}*Hyperien,* soleil de Hölderlin et de la poésie tout entière, se levait sur ma vie. La guerre était finie, finie à jamais (Leclerc, 1992: 91[Leclerc's italics]).

Adorno's call for art which thinks against itself finds a neat illustration in Leclerc's text which demonstrates the impossibility, the limit point of testimony.

7.10. The Limit Point of Testimony

Exercices de mémoire is not only a response to the trauma of the Holocaust, it is also a meditation on the difficulties inherent in testifying. As testimony is always meaning in process, it never provides a transparent, fixed rendition of the past. In a sense, the truth which the testimonial writer seeks is always one step away as the language available is never quite equal to the subject matter. Given this factor, is the event, as many have claimed, quite simply unthinkable? Leclerc is adamant that even if we are still seeking an appropriate language within which to formulate the event, we cannot afford to remain silent on the subject. Countering Primo-Levi's proposal in *The Drowned and the Saved* that to understand the event is almost to justify it, Leclerc argues that to suggest the Holocaust is unnameable is to renounce all hope of understanding history and mankind. The Holocaust was carried out by ordinary people, in a particular historic circumstance. To deny this is to repress a part of humanity and hence, to give up the right to be human. It is to commit oneself to the solitude and burden of silence:

> Inhumain ? Indicible ? Si j'admets cela, plus rien de l'humain ne peut être pensé, énoncé. Toute parole s'étrangle dans ma gorge (Lelcerc, 1992: 40).

Our pronouncements may only take the form of "fragments de sens". However, it is our duty to speak, if only to acknowledge the limits of testimony: "On bafouille certes, mais c'est parce-qu'on veut parler, se parler. Parce qu'il le faut" (Leclerc, 1992: 39).

7.11. Voices of the Dead

Au moins cela. Les larmes.

Car elles disent: Oui c'est vrai; cela a été. Cela est (Leclerc, 1992: 191).

Mordechaï Podchlebnik, recognising the impossibility of conveying his experience of the death camp, cries. Along with the death camp trains, tears are the second *leitmotif* of the text. It is in keeping with Leclerc's interest in *écriture féminine* that the author proposes tears as a solution to the problem of memory. Where words may prove inadequate, tears alert us to the painful memories which are inscribed on the body. Leclerc argues that tears, sign of compassion and humility, are a more appropriate response to trauma than revenge. Tears, recalling the amniotic waters and the first bond with the mother connote the subject's desire for merging with and understanding of the Other. Moreover, tears are contagious. The tears which the author sheds in response to the Holocaust testimonies which she witnesses are perceived as a means of transferring memory, outside language, where trauma is both written on and cleansed from the body. Tears suggest the possibility of collective mourning where the dead speak through the living. In the words of the author: "les larmes coulent des yeux des morts à ceux des vivants...la mémoire se poursuit" (Leclerc, 1992: 225).

Conclusion

In one of her first introductions to philosophical thought, Leclerc recalls being asked to comment upon Goethe's death bed request for 'mehr Licht'. Does our encounter with death lead toward enlightenment or does it throw us into radical obscurity? Leclerc's voyage through otherness seems to suggest that we need to confront death in order to fully appreciate life. Yes, we must all die one day, but perhaps by facing up to this prospect, like Albert Camus, we will choose to confront the absurdity of existence by seeking solidarity with and justice for our fellow men. In confronting the dead and

resurrecting the buried voices of the Holocaust Leclerc recognised that she ran the risk of undergoing a "déraillement de la croyance" (Leclerc, 1992: 11). She was terrified of quite literally going off the rails. Writing provided the possibility of reinstating meaning, rejoining humanity. Returning to Goethe, Leclerc's project might be seen not as a quest for the total knowledge of enlightenment but rather to throw light upon, to illuminate the Holocaust, to respond to the question with "quelque petit signe d'intelligence". While Leclerc recognises that we can never explain the Holocaust she cannot resist the temptation to attempt to translate chaos into narrative. For it is through shared discourses that we escape solitude and find community. Paradoxically, while Leclerc has produced a narrative of fragmentation, which refuses closure, her professed aim of writing is to: "Relier le sens au sens. Changer d'aiguillage. Reprendre le train; le train commun, le train d'humanité" (Leclerc, 1992: 11).

7.12. The Role of the Reader

Thus the overarching principle is: identity recreates itself...all of us as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves (Norman Holland, 1980: 124).

In *Exercices de mémoire* the issue of reception is at the forefront of the author's mind. Leclerc's testimony is inspired by the author's reception of another text, Claude Lanzmann's Shoah, while a substantial part of the narrative is dedicated to exploring the author's earlier failure to 'read' the narratives of the Holocaust correctly. The author's self-reflexive meditations on the difficulty of confronting the subject in writing seem both to anticipate a resistance from the reader but at the same time to lead the way forward by example. In many ways it is understandable that the reader might be reluctant to engage with Leclerc's narrative. A process of narratorial transference is underway as trauma is shifted from Holocaust witness to author and then from author to reader. As readers we are expected to undergo the same fragmentation of identity and crisis of belief as the author. While it might be argued that the physical registering of pain on the body of the receiver indicates that the testimony has been successful in fulfilling its educational function, the reader could not be criticised for shying away from such an experience (see Felman, 1992).

Intentions and Interpretations

In this section I draw on the reception theory of Gabriele Schwab in order to discuss the reader's relationship to the otherness of the text (Schwab, 1986). I move on to consider the function of Leclerc's self-reflexive address to the reader, arguing that it functions like a palliative, anticipating and hence undermining the reader's resistance. I then turn to consider some of the reasons why the reader might want to resist the trauma narrative. Finally, referring to Schwab's analysis of Winnicott's theory of 'transitional objects' in relation to reception theory, I go on to argue that Exercices de mémoire constitutes a transitional space where ego boundaries merge and are reformed. Both reader and writer engage in the construction of meaning and the formation of identities which are not shaped in opposition to the Other.

In an essay on reception theory Gabriele Schwab has raised the question of the relationship between reader response and identity. Schwab argues that the act of reading is one where boundaries are constantly at stake (Schwab, 1986: 111). Boundaries of self, Other and culture collide, merge and are redrawn each time the reader encounters a text (Schwab, 1986: 111). The text, says Schwab, is always other to the reader's experience. Hence, the reader's modes of reception, whether s/he sees the text as an object of desire or a threat to identity, is in part a reflection of his/her way of relating to the Other in every day life (Schwab, 1986:111). By looking at the history of reading, Schwab contests, we can also acquire some understanding of changing attitudes toward the self and the Other. What then happens when a reader picks up *Exercices de mémoire*, encountering the radical otherness of a text dealing with the deathly subject of the Holocaust?

Drawing on the philosophical writings of Hegel, Schwab has argued that the act of reading is linked to orality where we take in and introject that which we believe to be palatable and reject or spit out what is perceived as distasteful (Schwab, 1986: 114). Hegel likened the written word to the Holy Sacrament where the body of the Other is symbolically destroyed and absorbed leading to the spiritual rebirth of the subject. Schwab borrows the analogy for his study of reader response arguing that assimilation and rejection are the two main reader responses to the otherness of the literary text (Schwab, 1986: 115-7). According to Schwab, there are two different forms of assimilation. In the first kind, the text is assimilated to the reader's subjectivity. He gives the example of Sartre's description of his psychological development in *Les Mots* (1964) where the child becomes a product of the cultural artefacts which he consumes. In the second, the reader is assimilated to the text's subjectivity. Schwab coins the term *fusion* to describe this process

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The phenomenon of fusion is characterised by the reader's identification with the 'text world' or the "subjectivity materialised in the text" (Schwab, 1986: 116). In such a case reading becomes a pleasurable primordial experience where the boundaries between the real and imaginary world, self and Other, break down as the reader quite literally gets inside the skin of a character living out his/her trials and tribulations (Schwab, 1986:116). Illustrating his point, Schwab cites the example of a Passion Play where a member of the audience rushed onto the stage to save Jesus from crucifixion (Schwab, 1986: 116). However, as Schwab goes on to argue, after our experience of the Second World War, the promotion of this kind of identification with characters has largely been taken up by the media, especially the film industry, with writers becoming more sceptical of approaches to the aesthetic which aim to manipulate the reader through the use of emotion (Schwab, 1986: 117).

This mode of reception is very different from that promoted by Leclerc in *Exercices de mémoire*. Earlier on in this chapter we have noted how the experimental nature of Leclerc's writing along with the fragmentation of narrative structure and the refusal of closure all serve to distance the reader from the subject matter. The formal structure of the text denies the reader the pleasure which is to be found in the narcissistic identification with the central protagonist. Instead, it functions somewhat like a cracked mirror, reflecting a fragmented and humbled image back to the reader.

According to Schwab, a more complex and less pleasurable reader response is that of rejection (Schwab, 1986: 117). This kind of reception, says Schwab, is ambiguous because the latent fascination a reader feels for a character whom they simultaneously reject might symbolise an imaginary identification with an oppressor. It might be argued that Leclerc's recollections of the malaise which she felt in front of Jewish people is an example of a refusal to read identity correctly (Leclerc, 1992: 35). Although Leclerc's ambivalent reaction did not indicate a latent identification with an oppressor it certainly suggests a lack of willingness to identify with the victims of the Holocaust narrative. Schwab's schema is particularly pertinent for an analysis of *Exercices de mémoire* for as he goes on to argue, the Nazis' cultural policies of destruction of 'degenerate art' were an extreme form of the rejection and annihilation of the otherness of a text (Schwab, 1986:117).

The problem of the reader's resistance to the Holocaust narrative is one of which Leclerc is undoubtedly aware. Indeed, the central focus of the text is the different ways

in which the author has sought to deny its reality. After witnessing *Shoah* the author laments:

> Penser à ça, je ne l'avais encore jamais fait.
>
> Je savais ce qui s'était passé, mais je ne le considérais pas. Je disais même que c'était monstruosité, tragédie...l'indicible même. A vrai dire je regardais ailleurs. Pour pouvoir me raconter l'histoire comme avant, selon ma croyance d'avant (Leclerc, 1992: 9).

It is certainly not my intention to suggest that any reader who demonstrates resistance to *Exercices de mémoire* is subject to a latent identification with the persecutory practices of the Nazis. At this point, however, I would like to consider the manner in which Leclerc anticipates and, hence, seeks to overcome potentially negative reactions to her choice of subject matter, through the many self-reflexive comments which she addresses to the resistant reader.

On page twelve of the text, the author adopts a supplicatory approach asking the reader to forgive her for her choice of subject matter: "Que me pardonnent tous ceux qu'une parole vaine et intempestive, s'agissant de choses si terribles, pourrait ici offenser" (Leclerc, 1992: 12). Further down on page twenty three the words of the imaginary resistant reader "une voix assurée prétendant que 'c'est assez' ", are conjured up if only to be dismissed by the author (Leclerc, 1992: 22). This anonymous interminable and intransigent 'voix,' which according to the author could belong to anyone of us, is the voice of the Enlightenment subject who can only see the world in terms of a teleological forward propulsion toward progress and emancipation:

> C'est une voix que chacun de nous, un jour ou l'autre, peut entendre, et entendre de nouveau. Une voix moderne et dynamique qui veut qu'on tourne la page, qu'on oublie l'histoire ancienne" (Leclerc, 1992: 23).

Offering a more personal view of actual responses from readers whom one presumes to be the author's friends Leclerc remarks on their astonishment at her choice of subject matter. Although the author does not develop this point one can only ponder whether this sense of astonishment was prompted by the author's seeming abandonment

of the feminist cause. Why was an author celebrated for writing feminist texts now turning to narrate the Holocaust, a subject with seemingly little direct relation to the lives of women? Or was their response indicative of their desire to resist, to turn away from a disquieting historical occurrence?

> Certains à qui j'ai confié ce qui est venu – avec la vision de *Shoah* – frapper à ma porte d'écriture se sont étonnés, comme si c'était étonnant.
>
> Moi ce qui m'étonne maintenant c'est l'incroyable délicatesse de ces cinq millions [..]d'humains mis à mort…(Leclerc, 1992: 29).

Of course, it is understandable that the reader might wish to resist an encounter with Leclerc's text. As Shoshana Felman's study of the reception of testimonial literature by a class of American undergraduates demonstrates, at its most powerful, the trauma experienced in witnessing testimonial literature can lead to a shattering of the subjectivity of the witness (Felman, 1992: 47-52)[xi]. There is one particular instance in *Exercices de mémoire* where Leclerc seems to actively draw the reader into the text, suggesting that the horrors of the Holocaust victims may one day be our own. Is this an illustration of the process of transference at work? Commenting upon her experience of the 'mort du cochon' Leclerc recounts her feelings of utter abandonment and solitude in the face of death. Then in a direct address to the reader she cautions:

> Peut-être…cela arrive tous les jours de par le monde…
>
> Peut-être…cela m'arrivera, t'arrivera, à toi, mon plus tendre amour, ou à toi, à toi encore…
>
> Peut-être est-ce cela qui se découvre à l'instant de toute mort, cette solitude, cet abandon de tous, ce désert, cette glace…(Leclerc, 1992: 69).

By adopting an intimate first person voice Leclerc seeks to convince the reader of the personal nature of her own struggle with this difficult subject matter. The awakened narrator of *Exercices de mémoire* can be seen to draw upon her personal experience in order to provide the reader with an illustration of the correct mode of Holocaust reception. Indeed, the many self-reflexive comments which the author

makes, attesting to the terrifying nature of her narrative journey, lend an indubitable authenticity to the authorial voice. One of the most memorable of these authorial interventions is to be found on pages 132-3 where the author seems reluctant to continue her voyage of self-discovery:

> Maintenant je le sens, je me suis approchée au plus près de la pensée la plus difficile...Puisque je dois arriver à considérer cela même qui fait le plus peur, les trains par exemple, les centaines de trains bourrés de cris, d'enfants terrorises, de ventres creux, de gorges assoiffées, de corps pressés, claustrés, révulsés...(Leclerc, 1992: 132-3).

In seeking to overcome her denial of the Holocaust, Leclerc calls upon the reader for the support of a fellow traveller. Just as Leclerc witnessed the Holocaust victims' testimonies in *Shoah*, the reader is asked to witness the author's testimony in *Exercices de mémoire*.

The approach to reception promoted by Leclerc might exemplify Schwab's, third way of reading beyond the narcissistic responses of assimilation and rejection (Schwab, 1986: 117-8). This more 'archaic' form of reading employs the text somewhat like a transitional object in order to establish an indeterminate boundary between self and Other. In *Playing and Reality* (1971), Winnicott argues that transitional objects (the teddy bear, blanket and so on) which enable the child to begin to symbolise experience are neither quite separate from nor the same as the developing selfhood. For Winnicott the text is a place which in later life allows the subject to occupy the indeterminate space which was once experienced through the transitional object. This 'third order' is located somewhere between the stages of narcissism and autonomous subjectivity. In this area, the reality and pleasure principle are interconnected as are the 'I' and the 'not I'. In this context, the act of reading can be seen to play a role in the continual reshaping of ego boundaries which allows for a non-defensive interaction with the Other. For as Schwab argues whenever one picks up a book:

> One does not only confront the Otherness of the outside world, in whatever form it may present itself (a book, a different culture), one also faces the otherness of

the unconscious, part of which constitutes what Winnicott calls 'the personal core of the self'[xii](Schwab,1986: 121).

Returning to Schwab's proposal that changes in our reading patterns are coterminous with historical developments and perceptions of identity then it is hardly surprising if for Leclerc, the Holocaust necessitates a new way not only of reading but also of interacting with the Other. The otherness of Leclerc's text is to be found not only in the deathly nature of its subject matter but also in the structure of the text which requires a 'scriptible' approach from the reader[xiii]. Denied all narrative certainties, the reader is required to play a role in the construction of meaning. In so doing he/she is also asked to reassess his/her relationship to the Other. This form of reception assumes the merging of boundaries between reading and writing, author and reader, self and Other in the production of different narratives and new identity scripts. Although the reader, the recipient of the testimony, is required to undergo the fragmentation of identity common to the traumatised subject, by engaging with the author in the creation of meaning and new historical narratives he/she reinstates meaning. While the text may always be Other to the reader, paradoxically in the case of *Exercices de mémoire* it is precisely this otherness which enables the author to instil a deeper understanding not only of self but also of the Other in the reader.

This section is envisaged to complement my analysis of the role of the reader in *Les Mots pour le dire* (see chapter 4). We can trace several common themes in the two texts. Firstly, there is a tension between the traumatic nature of the accounts and the authors' desire for the reader to identify with their experience. Both authors have expressed anxiety about their right to produce self-narratives and their subsequent fear of being rejected by the reader. Secondly, the nature of the subject matter may come to bear on the different modes of reception which the reader is encouraged to adopt. For Cardinal the confessional genre is employed to erase the distance between author and reader. For Leclerc, the testimonial account provides a means to encourage the reader to adopt a reflective distance from the author's experience. Thirdly, in each case, the authors' awareness of difference is central to the relationship which they construct with the reader. For both Cardinal and Leclerc, the reader is envisaged as a necessary Other through which identity can be reframed and reformulated. The reader's approval is essential for the vindication of the self-doubting authorial voice while the act of reading and writing is envisaged as a transformative process engendering new perspectives on

identity. In what ways have these narratives impacted on real readers' lives? Is there a difference between the popular and critical reception of the texts? To what extent does the reception of the texts complement or conflict with the authors' autobiographical intentions? The final chapter of this thesis I turn to consider the critical and popular reception of the texts under study in order to investigate these issues.

Notes

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[i] Among these narratives of redemption, Friedlander includes Aharon Appelfeld's, *The Awakening*. In this short autobiography, Appelfeld recounts how the Jewish children who escaped the Holocaust to settle in Israel sought to forget the past, repressing all traces of unpalatable memory. However, years later, salvation and rebirth on both a personal and collective level were to come through the recollection of these events. Retrospectively, Appelfeld would acknowledge the overly optimistic nature of an approach which suggested that remembering was tantamount to salvation (Friedlander, 1992: 40).

[ii] Quotation taken from Barry M. Katz (1989: 88, 95). See also Gilbert (1988).

[iii] Tidd has drawn on Felman's theory to explore de Beauvoir's testimonial writing on subjects including: "the Holocaust, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Algerian War, May '68, the women's movement, and AIDS" (Tidd, 1999: 151).

[iv] On this point Elie Wiesel has proposed his view that "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of the testimony" (Wiesel, 1977: 9).

[v] For example, it has been argued that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* can be interpreted as an example of testimonial writing which addresses issues of race (Vickroy, 1998) while Tidd has drawn attention to de Beauvoir's situated role as a public witness in her memoirs and biographical works (Tidd, 1999).

[vi] See for example Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (Levi,1988), Shulamit Hareven's *Twilight*(Hareven, 1985) and Christa Wolf's *A Model Childhood* (Wolf, 1980).

[vii] See for instance *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Terms* (1990), *Literary Terms and Criticism* (1993), *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (1987).

[viii] Compare for instance Leclerc's comments with the following extract from *Les Mots*:

> Voyager clandestin, je m'étais endormi sur la banquette et le contrôleur me secouait. 'Votre billet !' Il me fallait reconnaître que je n'en avais pas (Sartre, 1981: 90).

[ix] Lisette Morin makes this point in her review of the text (Morin, 1992).

[x] See for example Shulamit Hareven's 'Twilight' in (Hareven in Ramras-Rauch and Michman-Melkman, 1985: 165).

[xi] Felman describes how the class was thrown into silence after witnessing a videoed testimony of a woman survivor. She notes how this silence "fermented into endless and relentless talking in the days and weeks to come" (Felman, 1992: 47). The students were experiencing the same breakdown in meaning and language as witnessed by Celan. In order to bring the class "back into significance" Felman encouraged the students to write their own testimony about the course.

[xii] Here Schwab refers to Winnicott's *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Winnicott, 1965)

[xiii] See Barthes, *SZ*, (Barthes, 1970: 11).

Part 4

Reader-Response

8

"Reducing the Book to the Woman:"[i]

the Critical Reception of Cardinal and Leclerc

This chapter will attempt to provide a response to the call of Elizabeth Fallaize for "the development of a gendered reception theory" (Fallaize, 1998: 7). In answering this call I undertake an analysis of the critical response to four texts with the central issue of how the gender of the author affects the critical reception of a text providing the fulcrum of my discussion. In the previous chapters in this thesis I have indicated that a series of connections and tensions exist between gender and genre, *écriture* and feminist politics, theory and practice, experience and representation. I have argued that these tensions, whether consciously or unconsciously, come to bear on the shape and tone of the self-writing of Cardinal and Leclerc. My analysis of the 'autobiographical pact' of each author provided a neat illustration of the many devices and tactics employed by female authors in order to escape the stranglehold of a genre which has hitherto refused to recognise the specificity of women's writing. In my discussion of the 'pact' I demonstrated that writers are always to a lesser or greater extent constrained by an awareness of the reception of the text. As we have seen, the feature of authorial self-consciousness may be particularly pronounced in the case of women writers (see chapter 1). The study of the critical reception of the texts undertaken in this section is thus envisaged to complement the series of questions which have been raised in the previous chapters. To what extent does the 'autobiographical pact' affect the reception of the text? And what role does the reception of a text come to play in the ensuing classification of the self-writing of Cardinal and Leclerc? This theoretical approach can also be used to provide an indication, albeit a tentative one, of the differing modes of reception of avant-garde and less experimental forms of writing. It enables us to pose some questions about the effectiveness and shortcomings of different writing strategies for a feminist agenda (see chapter 4). Does the implementation of a communal address preclude an awareness of difference? Is the political message obscured in more avant-garde forms of writing? The contention that a pervasive feature of women's self-writing is the renegotiation of normative literary codes and conventions is central to the writing of this thesis. While questioning the boundary lines between categories like

self/Other, reading/writing, author/text, experience/text is now common currency in literary studies the influence of women's self-writing in calling the hitherto mutually exclusive status of these categories into question should not be overlooked. It is thus in keeping with the aims of this thesis to consider the role which reception comes to play in the construction and deconstruction of authorial identity.

Introduction

Over the past thirty years there has been a growing acceptance of the place of reception theory in literary studies. Nonetheless, in some quarters, it is still deemed to be a less valid form of criticism than textual analysis. There are, of course, some disadvantages to be considered when applying reception theory in the context of academic research. Firstly, the sources which the researcher draws upon may not be readily open to verification in the way that a literary text is. Hence there is less opportunity to ascertain the extent to which interpretative liberties have been taken. Secondly, while deconstructionist theories have been rapidly assimilated into literary criticism there is some reluctance to accept the part which reception might play in the creation of textual meaning when this involves an examination of the ways in which class, gender and race might affect the reception of a text. In this thesis, I argue that an analysis of critical reception is pertinent when dealing with women's autobiography. Not only does it allow us to investigate the manner in which gender affects the reception of a text, it also sheds light on some of the constraints governing the presentation of authorial identity. As Elizabeth Fallaize has rightly observed, the author and the critic never occupy mutually exclusive speaking positions (Fallaize, 1998: 7). In an article on women's self-writing Janice Morgan has noted that the study of autobiography requires close attention to both authorial intention and critical reception where the risk of losing those 'alternative voices' writing outside a tradition which privileges the white middle-class male is not to be overlooked. On this point Morgan calls for an awareness of the different experiences, and cultural baggage, which individual readers bring to the text. She argues that textual analysis should pose the tripartite question of "who is speaking", "who is listening" and "who will respond"? (Morgan, 1991: 4). Along with Morgan, I acknowledge the need to approach literary criticism as an interactive experience of reading and writing, where the voices of reader and author blend and converge "subject

to subject, voice to voice" (Morgan, 1991). Before looking at this question in more detail, I would like to consider some developments in Reception Theory.

Brian Richardson has noted that by the early 1980s "the most exciting development in literary theory and criticism reached something of an impasse" (Richardson, 1997: 31). At this point, those involved in the debate about the role of the reader seemed to fall into two oppositional camps which Culler has named 'monist' and 'relativist'[ii]. On the one hand, the 'monist' theorists attempted to curtail the boundaries of textual interpretation by suggesting that there was a 'correct' reading of the text. The notion of an 'ideal' reader who was able to faithfully decode the author's message gave weight to the power of authorial intention. Although this ideal reader was an authorial projection, the closer the real reader came to the author in terms of education, class and politics then the more likely s/he would be to reach the correct interpretation of the text. Rimmon-Kenan has noted that "the 'Superreader' (Riffaterre), the 'Informed Reader' (Fish), the 'Ideal Reader' (Culler), the 'Model Reader' (Eco), the 'Implied Reader' (Booth, Iser, Chatman, Perry), [and] the 'Encoded Reader' (Brooke-Rose) are all different variations of this interpretative category.[iii] Several problems pose themselves with this approach. Firstly, it is prescriptive and fails to describe the practices of actual readers. Secondly, 'monist' practitioners offer no consideration of resistant reading strategies. The failure to account for gendered patterns of reading is a glaring omission.

More recently, reception theorists have striven to free interpretation from the stranglehold of the author. Opposing the notion of a single 'ideal' reading they argue for a free play of interpretative strategies where no reading is accorded greater value or authenticity than another. Thus theorists including Norman Holland, David Bleich, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, and others, portray the text as a site of multiple signification where different meanings blend and clash. In opposition to the "monists," these theorists reject the idea that any one interpretation is superior to another. Hence, Stanley Fish's declaration that "Interpretations do not decode poems; they make them" (Fish, 1980: 327). In a similar vein Holland and Sherman assert that "texts do not determine responses - it would be closer to the truth to say that experiences determine texts" (Holland and Sherman "Gothic Possibilities" in Flynn and Schweickart, 1984: 232). For Holland, the dismantling of the author's hold on the text makes critical interpretation a pleasurable experience. Hence he argues for an ever increasing and limitless free-reign of signification:

> Instead of subtracting readings so as to narrow them down or cancel some...let us use human differences to add response to response, to multiply possibilities and to enrich the whole experience (Holland in Suleiman and Ingecrosman, 1980: 370).

The importance of these theories is to be found in their recognition of the role which the reader plays in the construction of textual meaning. While I would not go so far as Culler in proposing that "one thing we do not need any more is more interpretations of literary works" (Culler, 1981: 6) I would argue that the relativist nature of their approach is deeply problematic for a feminist agenda. Firstly, as I already argued in my discussion of Barthes' essay on the death of the author, the deconstruction of authorial identity could be seen to undermine the use of experiential writing for the purposes of consciousness raising (see chapter 4). Secondly, it is possible that the gender of the author, critic and reader will get lost in the melting pot of multiple signification. As I hope it is now clear, this study argues for the recognition of the feminist practice of reading and writing as an interactive and transformative process where identities, texts and cultural boundaries are constantly in process and under negotiation. As with Richardson (1997), my study also acknowledges the presence of the resistant reader as one who intentionally misinterprets meaning in order to hold the otherness of the text in abeyance. It recognises that this practice may be particularly apparent when critics seeking to uphold the traditions and values of the canon are confronted by women's alternative approaches to writing the self. This is of particular relevance to my discussion of the critical reception of Cardinal and Leclerc because some critics, perhaps threatened by the subversive subject matter of their texts, have attempted to deny the literary quality of their writing.

Methodology

At this juncture, a word needs to be said regarding my methodological approach. Why, for instance, did I not choose to analyse readers' letters or to observe students' reactions when I was teaching *Les Mots pour le dire*? While both of these approaches would have cast an enlightening perspective on the reading process[iv], several problems arose in terms of undertaking the research. Firstly, for Annie Leclerc, the privacy of her readers was foremost in her mind when she refused my request to see readers' letters.

Furthermore, she was equally reluctant to be interviewed. She suggested that a detailed study of her texts would be considerably more illuminating than a discussion with the author:

> Mes écrits n'en finissent pas d'interroger mon travail d'écriture. Et ils en disent forcément beaucoup plus et beaucoup mieux que ce que je pourrais vous dire au cours d'un entretien privé de l'élaboration patiente, grave et nuancée d'écriture.[v]

In response to a similar request Marie Cardinal sent me an informal note saying that she was happy to be interviewed: "Vous voulez me rencontrer ? Pourquoi pas...", she did not however mention the subject of readers' letters.[vi] Cardinal's amicable response: "Je suis très touchée par le fait que vous vous intéressez à ce que j'écris", seems to typify her desire to communicate with her readers.[vii] However, as neither author seemed willing to divulge the letters I was unable to pursue that line of study.

Teaching French feminism at the *University of North London* offered the possibility of observing class discussions of *Les Mots pour le dire*. However, as *Exercices de mémoire* was not on the syllabus this would have created a methodological imbalance. When compared to textual analysis, it might be argued that the element of spontaneity in the discussion group is a deciding factor in favour of this methodological approach. Nonetheless, it is also the case that the class-room is a controlled setting where the boundaries of the discussion are demarcated by the discourses of academia (nature of the institution, presence of the lecturer, literary knowledge of readership). In the end, taking account of constraints of time and space, I decided to focus my study on the critical response to the texts. I was also able to draw upon sales figures, translations, and a selection of published letters in order to arrive at some conclusions about the popular appeal of the texts under study. The analysis of journalistic texts offers rich material for a discussion of the ways in which women's self-writing challenges the literary establishment and dominant modes of reading. The gaps and resistances in the critical discourse have much to tell the feminist researcher about the unspoken prejudices which mark the critical act. In many cases critics may have a personal stake in tightly policing the boundaries of the Academy. For as the "gatekeepers of legitimate culture" their "professional status is constantly being reclaimed by the critical act" (Thomas, 1999: 140). The often rebellious and subversive face of the writing of Cardinal and Leclerc poses a threat to these traditions in a number of distinct ways.

three of which I mention here. Firstly, their frank discussion of female sexuality often pushes against the boundaries of what is considered to be the valid subject matter of literature. As we will see, both Cardinal and Leclerc disturb critics by speaking the body in a manner which is not always deemed to be acceptable in a woman writer. Secondly, because of the inchoate nature of their writing, these women's texts refuse curtailment within traditional classificatory frameworks. The gap between theory (which is often male authored) and the textual practice of Cardinal and Leclerc is a glaring reminder that experience does not always conform to our conceptual categories. The classification of the autobiographical fictions of both Cardinal and Leclerc poses problems to critics. Thirdly, in the case of Cardinal, the boundaries between high and low art, the popular and the hermetic are continually blurring and merging. Moreover, the popularity and accessibility of *Les Mots pour le dire* seems to have worked to the detriment of its status as a literary work. On the other hand, with the exception of *Parole de femme*, the less accessible texts of Leclerc have received critical praise but have reached a narrower readership. In this light, a study of the critical response to Leclerc's texts provides an interesting test case of Cardinal's argument that the texts of *écriture féminine* meet with little critical resistance because the political content is indiscernible within the complexity of vocabulary and syntactical structures (Cardinal, 1997: 82-3).

In her study of de Beauvoir, Moi has outlined a number of critical strategies which the Academy has developed for dealing with the challenge which women writers pose to the canon (Moi,1994). A first strategy, is to focus on the personal nature of the writing, and hence to evade a discussion of the political content (Moi 1994: 81). A second response, also connected to the generic status of the text, is to accord the autobiographical label to the text and hence to exclude it from the literary canon (Moi, 1994: 78). A third strategy, is to focus on the sexual content at the expense of all other philosophical or intellectual discussion. A final strategy, involves ignoring the text altogether, focusing instead on the author's appearance and/or private life (Moi, 1994: 78). Some, if not all, of these strategies are at play in the reception of Cardinal and Leclerc. Having said this it would be to paint a completely false picture were I not to acknowledge that both authors are successful and respected figures in France. It is also the case that the majority of reviews of their texts have been favourable. It is nonetheless interesting to note those critical responses which demonstrate ambivalence or hostility towards their subject matter, for it is precisely in the gaps and fissures, the

sub-text of the critical responses that the ideological preconceptions which underlie such readings begin to emerge (Thomas, 1999: 144).

8.1. Reader Response to *Les Mots pour le dire*

In chapter 3 of this thesis I discussed the ambivalent nature of Cardinal's 'pact' with the reader. I have suggested that on the one hand, Cardinal has set out to inspire and create a sense of community among female readers by employing the generic conventions of authorial self-revelation and intimacy typical of the confessional genre. I have also drawn attention to the fact that on the other hand the problematic struggle to be taken seriously as a woman writer has led Cardinal to deny the autobiographical status of her text. In this section I continue this theme by considering the reader response to *Les Mots pour le dire*. I will be arguing that the conflicting tensions in Cardinal's autobiographical enterprise are reflected in the critical and popular reception of the text. I will be suggesting that both critical and popular audiences have tended to focus on the truth factor of the text. Yet, this seemingly universal response foreshadows very different interpretive strategies. For Cardinal's popular audience the interpretation of the narrator's struggle as a lived experience served as a source of inspiration and empowerment; she is viewed as something akin to a religious figure or guru who proffers guidance and strength to her 'followers'. In contrast, literary critics have attached the autobiographical label to the text as a means of foreclosing all discussion of its literary value and political message.

Another point of tension is to be found in the different value accorded to the text by popular and critical audiences. While the huge sales figures of the text undoubtedly attest to its popular appeal, despite receiving generally favourable reviews, Cardinal has complained that *Les Mots pour le dire* has never been treated as a work of serious literature (see chapter 3). Of course, it is possible that critics have remained silent about the literary merit of *Les Mots pour le dire* quite simply because the book does not warrant classification as quality literature. However, this thesis will claim that the repetitive focus on Cardinal's life and personality is a strategy for eluding the political message which she advocates. As I will go on to argue, by "reducing the book to the woman" (to use Toril Moi's term (Moi, 1994: 77)) critics are able to tacitly silence the female voice.

My discussion will proceed, firstly, with a consideration of the impact of Cardinal's writing outside France. I will then go on to engage in a detailed examination of the critical and popular reception of her writing inside Metropolitan France. The source material for my analysis of the critical reception is drawn from a selection of over 60 articles and reviews drawn from newspapers, literary journals, and magazines. My comments on the popular reception of the text are based on sales figures, translations, Cardinal's own comments on the subject and a number of readers' letters published in magazines like *Lire*.

A first issue here is the sheer quantity of critical reviews which points to the huge impact which the text had in France and abroad. The topical issues raised in *Les Mots pour le dire* became the subject of media debate. The confessional nature of the text provided the kind of scandalous revelations which sell magazines. It also provoked the discussion of more serious issues such as effective parenting methods and the benefits of psychoanalysis.

To what extent, then, has *Les Mots pour le dire* made its mark outside France?

8.2. Reception Outside France

The impact of culture on reception should be noted at this point. While I will be going on to argue that the French critical reception of *Les Mots pour le dire* has been luke warm, this is less the case in England and America. This might in part be explained by the greater influence of feminism in anglophone countries than in France. With the growth of the women's movement a number of women's studies departments have opened up in England and America. Although it would be inaccurate to suggest that Cardinal is widely studied in either of these countries, her name is starting to appear on bibliographies for courses in women's studies and French literature. A search on the database of dissertation abstracts for the UK revealed three research projects on her writing. Two doctoral dissertations centred on the themes of motherhood and autobiography respectively while the MA thesis situates Cardinal's writing within the tradition of French feminist thought. A similar search for the USA and Canada revealed that *Les Mots pour le dire* has figured in 3 MA dissertations and 10 doctoral theses written in the 1980s and 1990s with the majority of the research being carried out in the last decade. Although both of the MAs and two of the PhDs were written in the French language the research was carried out either in the USA or Canadian universities with

Sweden providing a home for one doctoral dissertation. The focus of these dissertations can be divided into three main areas. Firstly, the representation of the mother/daughter relationship (Hall; Mai). Secondly, the salvatory function of the narrative (Dauer; Matthews; Hjartarson; Marrone). Thirdly, the text as an example of postcolonial writing (Lionnet; Hellerstein). The fourth stand of research has centered on the transgressive nature of Cardinal's writing (Proulx; Meda; Yang). It is interesting to note that comparative studies have placed the text both alongside other French 'realist' writers (Ernaux; de Beauvoir; George Sand; Colette), the proponents of *écriture féminine* (Wittig, Chawaf, Kristeva), and those who lie somewhere in between (Duras; Sarraute); two authors chose to read the text through the theoretical work of Kristeva and Irigaray. To what extent are these trends reiterated in the other scholarly writing on Cardinal?

The MLA database produced a list of nineteen articles and three books on *Les Mots pour le dire*; the articles/chapters were mainly published in the UK and US (seven and six respectively), two of the books were published in the US and UK respectively, the other, in French, was published in Amsterdam. Most of these articles and all of the books are geared toward students of literature or women's studies. As with the dissertations, a number of these articles focus on the representation of the mother/daughter relationship. This can be seen to demonstrate the growing interest in this area of study among feminist scholars. Among these offerings are Marguerite Le-Clezio's 'Mother and Motherland: The Daughter's Quest for Origins' (Le-Clezio,1981: 381-389) and Phil Powrie's 'Reading for Pleasure: Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* and the Text as (Re)play of Oedipal Configurations' (Powrie,1990: 163-76). Moreover, the interest in this subject matter is not purely sociological. For some of these academics, Cardinal's writing is perceived as making an important contribution to the creation of a maternal genealogy. This is particularly apparent in Samantha Haigh's comparison of the mother/daughter relationship in the works of Cardinal and Irigaray and Colette Hall's offering in 1988 which draws the writing of Cardinal and Leduc together in seeking to explore this theme (Haigh,1994: 61-70; Hall,1988: 231-238). Another key area of interest is the link between psychological disorder and patriarchal oppression. For some critics the protagonist's hysteria is envisaged as a point of resistance to patriarchal discourse (Proulx, 1992; Webb, 1997), while Elaine Martin highlighted the link between ambivalent mothering and madness comparing *Les Mots pour le dire* and Plath's *The Bell Jar* (Martin,1981: 24-47).

Reducing the Book to the Woman

Despite these developments, as already noted, Cardinal has had less impact on the anglophone academic scene than the proponents of *écriture féminine* (see chapter 4 and Thomas and Webb, 1999). One explanation for this might be that Cardinal's literature is perceived to be less exotic than more experimental forms of writing. For a number of critics however, her textual practice is interpreted as an intersticial space between realist conventions and those of *écriture féminine*. Carolyn Durham sees Cardinal's writing as a site of intersection between francophone and Anglo/American feminisms (Durham,1992). Similarly, Colette Hall and Francoise Lionnet recognise that Cardinal's search for identity is inseparable from her innovative textual practice(Hall,1991: 305; Lionnet,1991).

During the 1980s a number of anthologies appeared with the express aim of introducing French feminist writing to the anglophone reader: Cardinal is significantly absent from the three most influential studies (Marks and de Courtivron,1981; Moi 1987; King 1989). In the 1990s Cardinal has been included in general works such as Atack and Powrie's Contemporary French Fiction by Women whose aim was to correct the "imbalance in the attention devoted to French feminist literary theory at the expense of fiction" (Atack and Powrie,1990:1). The detailed study of individual authors in this collection seems most likely to appeal to specialist readers in University French departments. More recently, an analysis of *Les Mots pour le dire* was included in Elizabeth Fallaize's introduction to French women's writing; a collection which was intended for the English-speaking reader (Fallaize, 1993). It may be that these texts represent the beginning in a turning point of reception of Cardinal's work, albeit led by academics working in French studies. It is somewhat paradoxical that more critical attention should have been accorded to Cardinal abroad than on her own doorstep. In seeking to explore this issue, and to offer some tentative reasons for this phenomenon, I will now consider the reception of the text in the French media.

8.3. The Critical Reception of Cardinal in France

In an interview with Bernard-Henri Lévy Marie Cardinal recalls how the renowned critic Angelo Rinaldi confided to her that he had offered *Les Mots pour le dire* as a present to his friends on numerous occasions. Surprised by this disclosure Cardinal asked him why it had never crossed his mind to write a few lines about her works. The

eminent critic laughed and the blanket of silence came down: "Il a ri en retour et nous sommes restés sur ce mystère" (Cardinal,1994: 152).

In this section I argue that the absence of serious critical attention to *Les Mots pour le dire* in France reflects a site of critical resistance to the challenging nature of the style and content of Cardinal's writing. I consider the ways in which critics have discussed the text as an autobiography or document about psychoanalysis in order to avoid engaging with the text as a serious literary work. I go on to examine the media presentation of Cardinal arguing that in many cases critics assimilate the author's appearance to her textual practice.

The critical response to Marie Cardinal in France is incommensurate to her popular appeal as a writer. In fact Collette Hall's analysis of Cardinal's works (published in Holland by Rodopi in 1994) is the only full-scale criticism written in the French language. It is true that Cardinal has received two prestigious literary prizes: her debut novel *Ecoutez la mer* (1962) won the *Prix international du premier roman* and *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975) was awarded the *Prix Littré* for the best medical novel; however in France her work has found an audience primarily as a source of sociological study rather than as the material for literary analysis. Carolyn Durham's experience while conducting research on Cardinal seems to give weight to this proposal. She has recounted how almost everyone who she met in France had read at least one of Cardinal's texts. However, nine times out of ten, these readers manifested their disapproval of Durham's choice of Cardinal as a subject for a literary study often proposing Marguerite Duras as a more suitable author (1992: 2). Unlike many of the Anglo/American universities, French institutions have stalwartly stuck to the 'classics' as their area of study. French literature is an important part of the French heritage and cultural identity. It is a tradition which is fiercely guarded. Hence, it comes as little surprise if *Les Mots pour le dire*, which challenges that tradition, has not yet gained full recognition.

Lucille Cairns has offered a more specific explanation for this phenomenon arguing that "neither [Cardinal's] theory nor her praxis are assimilable to avant-garde trends of the last three decades" (1992: 1). Although in the past Cardinal was active in the Parisian literary scene, more recently she has adopted a more peripheral position, both textually and geographically (she moved from the French capital to Montreal, Canada in 1994 and now divides her time between Canada and the South of France). Thus a recent work, *Les Jeudis de Charles et de Lula*, has received little attention from

Parisian critics (Lévy, 1993: 12). Indeed, Cardinal has recounted how the press officer at her publishers *Grasset et Fasquelle* forewarned her that the novel would not excite a great deal of critical interest in Paris because of her currently peripheral relationship to the Parisian *mouvement* - a term which for Cardinal herself remains couched in mystery (Lévy, 1993: 12). How can we account for the lack of critical interest in Cardinal's writing? Can her gender in any way be seen to affect the reception of her texts? Do her outspoken views on female sexuality and desire in any way disturb her critics?

Drawing on Moi's schema (see the introduction to this section) the first critical *topos* at play in the reception of *Les Mots pour le dire* is the reduction of the text to the purely autobiographical. In my discussion of Cardinal's 'autobiographical pact' I revealed the manner in which many critics ignored the text's early classification as a *roman* preferring to focus on the autobiographical nature of the text. In some cases, critics refute the author's creative ability. For instance, writing for *Esprit* Fernande Schulmann contests the generic label of the text declaring: "Voilà la toile de fond d'un ouvrage malhonnêtement intitulé roman - ces tromperies sont - elles nécessaires au négoce ?" (Schulmann,1995: 942). In *Autrement dit* (1977) Cardinal has pointed out that a substantial number of critics classified the text as a document about psychoanalysis. The titles of the following four articles taken from a range of French newspapers of different political persuasions, and popular women's magazines like *Elle*, suggest the preponderance of this kind of reading. Norbert Bensaid's 'Un si bon divan'(Bensaid,1975: 51); Madeleine Chapsal's 'Deux femmes sur un divan' (Chapsal,1975:44); Jérôme Garcin's 'Les ravages de la psy' (Garcin,1993); [viii] Florence de Monza's 'La Parole retrouvée: La Psychanalyse leur a permis de s'exprimer' (de Monza,1990: 96) all present the text as *récit de psychanalyse*.

Paradoxically while many of these reviews assume that *Les Mots pour le dire* is a true account of Cardinal's life, the authors berate her for fictionalising the psychoanalytic process. Hence, while Bensaid surmises that "Marie Cardinal défend avec éloquence, avec passion, et légitimement, la psychanalyse," he goes on to criticise the narrative structure: "En choisissant la forme romanesque, elle ne pouvait pas échapper au danger de la fausse clarté d'une analyse racontée par l'analysé mais avec la volonté d'y mettre, sans être analyste, l'ordre du savoir analytique" (Bensaid,1975: 51). Making a similar point, Madeleine Chapsal, who has produced her own récit de psychanalyse which shares intertextual references with *Les Mots pour* le dire, complains "Marie Cardinal, elle se rappelle, reconstitue tout. Est-ce ce qui donne à son roman,

d'autre part une passionnante exploration de soi, son caractère volontariste et hyperrationnel ?" (Chapsal,1975: 44-5).

Although Cardinal is clear to stress that *Les Mots pour le dire* is not simply a book about psychoanalysis, it is undeniable that by using the psychoanalytic relationship as a fulcrum for the discussion of themes such as mortality, love, liberty and religion she has done much to popularise the subject. Cardinal has remarked that the correspondence which she has received from the psychoanalytical profession has been positive (Leyvraz and da Silva,1975). This is hardly surprising given that the text provides an extremely convincing testimony to the healing powers of the 'talking cure.' [ix] The value of the text as a sociological study seems to be endorsed by the fact that the text was reviewed in a number of medical journals (see for example, Nogrette,1976: 4648; Houareau,1975: 66-7). Paradoxically, critics from the medical profession seem to be much more willing to recognise the literary merit of the text than those from the literary milieu. Marie-José Hourareau, while classifying the text as a document, concludes that Cardinal demonstrates an "indéniable talent d'écrivain" (Hourareau,1975: 67). In some cases Cardinal's discussion of psychoanalysis is seen to offer a positive corrective to the often obscure and hermetic discourses which emanate from practitioners themselves. For instance, in an article appearing in *L'Eventail*, M. Georis contrasted the 'frank', 'honest' and 'authentic' tone of Cardinal's writing with Lacan's elliptical and jargon riddled texts:

> Cette analyse d'une analyse, cette psychanalyse vue par une ex-patiente fera plus pour la cause psychanalytique que tous les écrits logomachiques de cet imposteur jargonnant de Lacan (Georis,1975: 30).

While Cardinal's illustration of psychoanalysis has gained credence with practitioners, there are other areas of her subject matter which cause critical consternation. For many, Cardinal's descriptions of the female body are quite simply too direct, too real: "Une fois le sang avait coulé par caillots si gros qu'on aurait dit des tranches de foie que je débitais l'une après l'autre" (Cardinal, 1975: 41). Interestingly, critics often express their shock in the hyperbolic terms which they find offensive in Cardinal's novel. Marlon Renard, a critic writing in a specialised literary journal, highlights this aspect of the text remarking that "La violence est là dès les premières pages, lorsqu'apparaît cette jeune femme, mère de trois bébés, dont le ventre saigne

interminablement" (Renard,1975: 10). For Madeleine Chapsal of *L'Express*: "le roman démarre dans une rebutante odeur de sang utérin" (Chapsal,1975: 44). While even a women's magazine, Marie-France, saw fit to warn readers that it would be hard to avoid being disgusted by Cardinal's descriptions of her menstrual flow (Hamel,1975). Cardinal's refusal to disguise her embodied experience in technical or elliptical language belies many of the conventions of 'taste' and 'intellectualism' which are rigorously enforced within the French literary milieu.

The word 'impudique' was used to describe Cardinal's literary style in a number of reviews, though the connotations were often positive; given the desire to classify Cardinal's text as medical evidence, her lack of 'pudeur' (modesty) can become an attribute, as in this review, published, significantly, in *Psychologie*: "Ce n'est pas la première fois qu'un auteur cherche à nous faire vivre une psychanalyse ; mais Marie Cardinal, avec un récit d'une sincérité impudique et sans concession, approche le plus près du but" (Houareau,1975: 66). Another reviewer registers the sense of shock which Cardinal's uneuphemistic use of language instils in the reader describing *Les Mots pour le dire* as "dur, violent, impudique" (Loisel, 1975).

In an interview for *Parispoche* which appeared with the release of Cardinal's later work *Le Passé empiété*, the male interviewer Gilles Chenaille, uses the interesting analogy of Cardinal's autobiographical enterprise and self-revelation. He goes on to question whether "il reste encore un bout de Cardinal à montrer?" (Chenaille, 1993: xv). Whether Chenaille's reference is to the mind or the body is not apparent. However, it is worth pointing out that this time it is Cardinal who employs the term 'impudique' to differentiate between being 'shameless' and 'indecent'. Her response deems to imply that she is defending her right to write the body: "Mais si je suis impudique, je ne suis pas indécente : je montre peut-être mon derrière, mais pas son mode d'emploi !" (Chenaille,1993: xv).

While 'immodesty' might be an attribute in psychoanalytic journals, it is seen in a less positive light by the literary world. Cardinal's direct approach to writing the body appears to have played a role in the exclusion of *Les Mots pour le dire* from the short list of the prestigious *Prix Goncourt*. Cardinal has argued that her description of the taboo subject of menstruation counted against her. As she points out "Le même livre, avec un problème de prostate à la place des hémorragies, aurait marché" (Spirlet,1975).

In her study of Simone de Beauvoir, Toril Moi has remarked that the combination of "her sex and her politics - are fatal to her reputation as a writer"

(Moi,1994: 73-4) The refusal to engage with Cardinal on a literary level is attributable not only to the language which she uses but also to the social critique which she develops in her texts. Cardinal is fully aware of the challenge which her outspoken views on women's rights poses to contemporary western ideologies. Speaking about the absence of interest in her latest work *Les Jeudis de Charles et de Lula*, Cardinal explains:

> Pour me consoler je me dis que cela tient au fait que je suis [...] une féministe qui se défend d'être féministe tout en plaidant sans cesse la cause des femmes, prétendant que cette cause est peut-être la plus importante qui soit en cette fin de siècle et de millénaire, mettant en cause l'économie et donc la politique de l'Occident (Cardinal,1994:152).

Like Beauvoir, Cardinal is particularly critical of the effects of marriage, motherhood and the family on women's lives. This aspect of her writing is unsettling in a Catholic country where woman's role is very much defined in relation to the family. Although generally positive, a review which appeared in *Vie Catholique* remarked the disturbing nature of Cardinal's narrative, warning that:

> Ce livre peut choquer, il choquera, car pour se trouver elle - même, l'héroïne a dû rejeter toute la vérité de sa famille, l'univers bien pensant où elle était emprisonnée, démythifier sa mère, se libérer de cette éducation qui l'avait 'tordue' pour la faire entrer dans un moule conforme aux
>
> normes de son milieu" (author unknown, 1975).

Furthermore, although the text remained on the best-seller list for several months, many readers found Cardinal's critique of the family and marriage 'disturbing' and 'subversive' (Linda Gaboriau,1979: 8). Even in the 1990s 'family values' are still a determining factor in French women's lives, and the challenging nature of Cardinal's writing should not be overlooked. Indeed, the disarray induced in critics by her subversion of language, genre and patriarchal ideology is a testimony to the strength, and political significance of her writing.

Reducing the Book to the Woman

A final and related issue is the manner in which critics fixate on the author's appearance and persona often giving these factors precedence over the text. This is a practice of which Cardinal is well aware. Indeed, in a conversation with Henri-Lévy she has related how critics have preferred to focus on her life and personality as opposed to her books (Cardinal, 1994: 152). Furthermore, as Cardinal has remarked in her discussions with Leclerc, pressures to conform to a stereotypical image of femininity are particularly intense in France where it is impossible for a woman who does not present a kempt and seductive image to make her voice heard:

> Tu connais une femme vraiment moche qui à réussi à faire entendre sa voix en France. Moi, je n'en connais pas. Toutes celles qui ont pu s'exprimer ont quelque chose de séduisant. Elles sont au moins maquilleés, coifées. On n'imagine pas qu'une femme comme ces Américaines géniales, qui ont l'air de sortir tout droit d'une poubelle, puisse être écoutée *a priori* (Cardinal,1977: 144).

Interviewers frequently equate Cardinal with the sensuality of her Algerian homeland, so poetically evoked in *Les Mots pour le dire*. For instance, Linda Gaboriau writes:

> Marie Cardinal is a tall, dark-eyed, strikingly attractive woman. Her throaty voice and her emphatic Mediterranean gestures...exude confidence and sensuality (Gaboriau,1979: 7).

Many of the descriptions of Cardinal centre around her health and vigour with reviewers finding it difficult to believe that she was once "crippled by anxiety and self-loathing" like the heroine of her novel (Gaboriau,1979: 1979) [x] Making a similar point in *France Soir*, Françoise de Comberousse remarks her astonishment in discovering that the woman "éclatante de santé" before her is also the "folle" of the novel (Comberousse,1975).

Despite critics' attempts to exoticise Cardinal, it seems fair to suggest that she does not conform to the stereotypical image of the feminine, delicate, suit clad, stiletto heeled French woman writer. She is often portrayed as robust, unrestrained and plain

speaking. Cardinal refuses to put on a front even when her literary reputation is at stake. Critics often remark on her casual attire. Her relaxed attitude is conveyed through the jeans and pullovers which she normally wears for interviews. Jean Bothorel's sympathetic review in *Le Matin* draws a direct link between Cardinal's appearance and her uncompromising approach to language: "Le personnage Cardinal a l'authenticité de ses livres ; il déroute, il est mal élevé, au sens noble du terme" (Bothorel,1975: 2). Bothorel also goes on to note how this might have hindered her from gaining recognition among the French literary elite: "il y a plus de politesse que de génie à l'Académie française" (Bothorel,1975: 2).

Many interviewers seem to have been struck by Cardinal's dominating presence. Transgressing the cliché of the softly spoken self-effacing woman, Cardinal is both commanding and captivating when she speaks. Bothorel notes, with a vague feeling of awe that "Marie Cardinal s'impose, la voix brûlante de ses indignations" (Brothorel,1978: 2). Catherine Lord speaks of being surprised by Cardinal's 'rough' and 'throaty' voice, her way of sometimes hammering out words: "Et la voix? Surprenante: enjouée mais grave, râpeuse, parfois rauque, souvent trainante avec une façon comique de détacher les syllabes de certain mots, en les martelant" (Lord,1975: 36). As with de Beauvoir, the combination of intellectualism coupled with a forceful personality may not be to the taste of every critic.

Conclusion

Cardinal has repeatedly denied that *Les Mots pour le dire* is an honest, unfiltered account of her life. It is a testament to her literary skill that critics have taken it to be such. Cardinal's ability to excite critical discourse cannot be denied. Yet, as a site of ideological tension, for some, the text is viewed as deeply subversive. It is perhaps for this reason that it has evoked such diverse reactions. On the one hand, the text has received wide acclaim when read as a sociological study. As we have seen, this tale of healing has excited eulogies from the psychoanalytic profession. On the other, discussion of its status as a literary work has been foreclosed. I started out by suggesting that Cardinal's frank discussions of gender issues may have proved problematic for critics. Her ability to frame the most complex thoughts and situations in clear and precise language had not enabled her to enter into dialogue with the Academy. This is not to suggest that critics like Rinaldi have not enjoyed her texts. It is, however,

to argue that within the Academy there may still be a wish to discredit the personal voice especially when that voice is marked by the female signature. In the case of Cardinal it could further be suggested that popularity might actually function like a black mark against the authorial name. However, as Cardinal correctly argues, popularity and critical recognition should not necessarily be disparate entities. In response to Bernard Henri-Lévi's question of whether she would prefer to receive popular or critical acclaim she responds:

> Bien sûr, je préférerais être Georges Pérec ou Julien Gracq que Marie Cardinal, mais pas à cause des ventes modestes ou de l'estime de mes pairs, tout simplement parce qu'ils sont de grands écrivains (Cardinal,1994:158).

If we now turn to consider the popular reception of the text we will note that readers, like critics, have focused on and widely enjoyed the confessional aspect of Cardinal's writing. While this may not lend literary credibility to the text is does endorse its political value.

8.4. Popular Reception: the Feminist Guru

Cardinal is a public celebrity in France. Several of her texts have achieved best seller status while *Les Mots pour le dire* has now sold over 2,500,000 copies world wide and has been translated into 18 different languages. As Carolyn A. Durham has pointed out, the immense popularity and enormous sales of *Les Mots pour le dire* place it along side Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième Sexe* (1949) "as one of the most influential texts of contemporary feminism" (Durham, 1997: viii). Despite having produced a number of impressive works since 1975, it is *Les Mots pour le dire* which still commands the greatest popular response. Cardinal has explained how she initially received around 200 letters a day, and that she still receives dozens of letters referring to this earlier text (Delay, 1975-6; Boncenne et al., 1982). At the time of its publication, the specifically feminist content of the text was highlighted by the fact that it attracted an 80 percent response from women readers. However, its universal appeal is demonstrated by the growing number of responses which the author has received from young male readers (Bosselet, 1997).[xi] In an interview with Catherine

Lord, Cardinal attributed the overwhelming response to the sense of identification which many readers feel with her:

> Ce sont des gens qui tous, soit eux-mêmes, soit par quelqu'un de proche, ont abordé, à un moment ou à un autre dans la vie, le désarroi, sans que ça soit toujours la névrose ou la maladie mentale (Lord,1977: 36).

These readers relate to Cardinal as if she were some kind of religious figure whose words, like a blessing, can cure their troubles: "Ils me prennent un peu pour Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus, ou je ne sais pas quoi" (Lord,1977: 36). In these kinds of responses readers appear to be seeking embodied contact with the author, an encounter with the woman behind the book: "ils veulent me parler, ils veulent me toucher, ils veulent rester en contact avec moi, ils veulent que je leur donne des conseils, etc" (Lord,1977: 36).

Many readers feel a close affinity with Cardinal and hence use the affectionate second person singular: 'tu' or address her as Marie. Cardinal is praised for her courage and honesty as well as for her perceptiveness and capacity to convey a 'truth' which strikes a chord with many readers. One reader confides: "Marie, je ne sais pas si cette lettre te parviendra. Tes livres m'ont bouleversée : c'est fort, c'est bon, c'est vrai..." (Boncenne et al.,1982: 24). Another expresses the view that: "il fallait du courage et du talent pour raconter cette longue histoire de la chose, de cette folie envahissante" (Boncenne et al.,1982: 24). Some see Cardinal as a kind of agony aunt in whom they place complete trust, divulging their intimate testimonies and pouring out their personal problems: "Marie, j'ai un petit problème sexuel..." (Boncenne et al., 1982: 24).

The interaction between analyst and analysand, so positively evoked in *Les Mots pour le dire*, is played out between the author and reader. The content of the letters is repetitive, focusing on the narrator's problems and subsequent salvation. The *bildungsroman* format of Cardinal's narrative is thus transferred to personal life-histories, resulting in a sense of inspiration and empowerment. Perhaps most importantly, Cardinal seems to have encouraged women readers to bring about change in their own lives. For one reader, Cardinal's eschewal of technical jargon dispelled her fears that analysis is an occult practice: "Ce récit d'une psychanalyse réussie m'a aidée à comprendre et à me départir d'une méfiance quasi totale pour ce mode de thérapautique..."(Boncenne et al.,1982: 24).

Reducing the Book to the Woman

Many of the letters which Cardinal receives are requests for the name of a good analyst. However, Cardinal is reluctant to act as a help line. "Je ne suis pas Ménie Grégoire" (Boncenne et al., 1982: 24). Cardinal takes every one of these letters seriously, remarking on the "gravity" of each "case". However, despite her obvious compassion for these women's troubled lives, Cardinal is reluctant to assume the role of omniscient "guru" quite simply because she feels inadequate to a task which is 'a terrible responsibility'. For this reason, her replies are often formulaic: "Je vous remercie de m'avoir écrit. J'en suis très touchée. Veuillez croire, madame.." (1982: 24). While it is unusual for readers to adopt a critical perspective toward her writing, not all of the correspondence which comes through her letter box excites her sympathy. Commenting on one overly keen admirer - who has sent her what amounts to a diary complete with illustrations and declarations of love - Cardinal comments "Je ne les lis même plus, elle m'em..." (1982: 24).

This is not, however to suggest that the positive response to Cardinal's texts is universal. Just as a number of literary critics found Cardinal's representation of the family and motherhood problematic, so too do some readers. Cardinal has described how the most negative responses focus on her "attacks upon motherhood" (Gaboriau,1979: 8). However, Cardinal asserts that, as a mother of three, her critique is not aimed at motherhood but the distorted role which mother plays in our society. She is referring to the 'mythical mother-figure' and not individual cases (Gaboriau, 1979: 8). This kind of reaction is in evidence in the letters written in response to an extract of *La Clé sur la porte*, published in *Elle* (Cardinal, 1972). In this earlier work, Cardinal describes the non-hierarchical relationship which she tried to establish with her children. The author recounts how she kept an open house to her children's friends, refraining from making authoritarian judgements about their actions even if this included turning a blind eye to their drug taking. One university lecturer voices her disapproval of what she perceives as Cardinal's studied observation of her children inflicting harm upon themselves:

> Le document 'J'ai laissé la clef sur la porte' de Mme Cardinal (*Elle* no 1399) m'a profondément choquée. [...] Que l'éducation des enfants soit une expérience soit, mais que cette expérience soit menée de façon presque scientifique, en regardant sans broncher ces adolescents se droguer, tout casser et vivre dans le désordre et

> la saleté avant de passer à l'action, me semble inhumain (Mme M. F. Lyon, 1973: 110).

On the same point, another female reader, while voicing her reluctance to stand in judgement over others, comments: Je dois dire qu'il me serait pénible de voir casser les chaises et les quelques couverts en argent disparaître, au risque de paraître bourgeoise (Mme J. T. Oyonnax, 1973: 110).

These debates highlight Cardinal's celebrity status as a popular figure in the French media. Some of Cardinal's most controversial works including, *Les Mots pour le dire, La Clé sur la porte* (Cardinal, 1972) *and Les Grands désordres* (Cardinal, 1987), have been the subject of interviews on radio and television and in women's magazines like *Elle.* The catalogue at INA,[xii] lists around 67 programmes in which Cardinal featured between the dates of 1963 and 1993. The nature of these appearances varies from participation in serious literary debates like *Apostrophes*, to more popular shows; in real life Cardinal remains refreshingly true to her theoretical approach to literature. Her avoidance of pretension and an ability to laugh at herself are reflected in her appearance on light hearted French game shows such as *Questions pour un champion.* However, it is questionable how far these appearances have added to the literary credibility of Cardinal. Reflecting the readers' letters, television spectators seem to be less interested in discussions about her work as 'Literature' and more concerned with its documentary aspects (Leyvraz and da Silva, 1975). A videocassette featuring Cardinal's appearance on Jacques Chancel's *Radioscopie*, sold widely. However, as Cardinal has pointed out, it wasn't the discussion of *Les Mots pour le dire* that interested viewers but "ce que je peux apporter aux autres à travers mon expérience" (Leyvraz and da Silva,1975).

Conclusion

Writing about *Les Mots pour le dire* in *L'Eventail* on August 1975, Philippe Cruysman's commented "Il serait impardonnable qu'un prix littéraire ne vienne pas le couronner en automne" (Cruysmans,1975: 30). While Cardinal was credited for having produced a moving testimony of her psychoanalysis, recognition in the form of the *Goncourt* was not forthcoming. What explanation might we give for this? I hope to have demonstrated that *Les Mots pour le dire* poses a number of challenges to the critic:

generic, linguistic, and political. It is something of a borderline text which defies categorisation. While the originality of the text excited readers it ultimately confounded critics. For both critics and popular audience alike, interest in Cardinal's life has paradoxically served to eclipse her writing. Perhaps one might suggest that while it is 'impardonable' that Cardinal did not receive literary recognition, this can be explained in part by the fact that "Jamais une femme avait été aussi loin dans l'introspection, dans la sincérité" (Cruysmans,1975: 30).

8.5. Annie Leclerc: the Acceptable Face of Feminism?

Parole de femme

Premier livre sans doute, à briser le fil d'une tradition qu'un siècle de militantisme, patiemment, avait nouée (Bernard-Henri Levy, 1994).

In this section I turn to consider both the academic work which has been carried out on Leclerc as well as the literary reviews of three of her texts *Parole de femme* (1974), *Hommes et femmes* and *Exercices de mémoire* (1992). I have analysed the reception of three texts by Leclerc, as opposed to one by Cardinal, because there is a disparity in the proportion of reviews on *Les Mots pour le dire* and *Exercices de mémoire* with the former commanding much wider critical attention. This factor is of some significance and merits further consideration. While Leclerc's *Parole de femme* did achieve best-seller status, the less accessible style of many of her other works might in part account for the lower sales figures. As with Cardinal, the difficulty of classifying Leclerc's texts has unsettled some critics and, at times, excited negative comments. Yet, paradoxically, Leclerc's writing may have failed to capture the critics' imagination because it falls somewhere in between the brutally direct approach of 'communicative' writers like de Beauvoir, Cardinal, and Rochefort and the esoteric avant-garde offerings of writers like Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray. Moreover, Leclerc does not exploit the media to the same extent as Cardinal. For Leclerc, as we have already noted, the text speaks for itself.

In this discussion, I seek to draw out four main strands in the reception of Leclerc. Firstly, I explore the manner in which critics have responded to the

autobiographical aspect of Leclerc's writing. Secondly, I explore the impact of Leclerc's language on her readers. Thirdly, I examine the reception of her feminist politics which some have deemed anti-feminist and others have applauded as being more viable than more militant approaches. Fourthly, I argue that, the media construction of the authorial persona can be viewed as an intertext of Leclerc's writing.

Moreover, as I will go on to argue, responses to *Parole de femme* appear to be polarised, with some envisaging it as a feminist manifesto while others like Delphy (1976) and Lévy (1974) have seen the text as signalling the demise of feminism. I suggest that these mis-readings can be divided into three distinct critical *topoi*. The first critical topos presents her call for difference as a renunciation of her feminist roots. The second critical strategy envisages her as a male centred woman who is dismissive towards her female readership. The third critical approach is to quite simply ignore the feminist content of her texts.

One explanation for the presentation of Leclerc as an anti-feminist is that she has repeatedly distanced herself from the MLF. Leclerc is ready to acknowledge the important role which the MLF played in fighting for equal rights for women (most notably, the right to abortion). However, by the time of writing *Hommes et femmes* she is adamant that women's liberation is to be achieved through the recognition of difference and not through seeking to emulate masculine behaviour. In an interview with Christiane Vettu, Leclerc has drawn attention to the current spate of women's magazines catering for the 'professional woman'. In her opinion this trend indicates "le triomphe de l'idolâtrie du masculin" (Vettu, 1885). It is indicative of a brand of feminism which she describes as 'machiste à l'envers' whereby women judge themselves according to male values and seek to affirm themselves by adopting scales of achievement defined by men (Parneix, 1985). To what extent, then, has Leclerc made an impact in the French academic world and the media?

Academic and Media Reception inside France

In comparison to Marie Cardinal, Leclerc does not appear to have obtained the same renown as a public figure. This might, in part, be explained by her reluctance to give interviews. [xiii] While Leclerc considers all of her works to be semi-autobiographical she is nonetheless guarded when it comes to revealing details about her life to journalists. My research at INA in France has revealed that, in comparison to the seventy or so

television broadcasts featuring Cardinal, Leclerc has made only nine television appearances. These include an interview on Bernard Pivot's celebrated literary review *Apostrophes* and other documentaries having a broader feminist interest such as an overview of the women's movement in France entitled *Le Deuxième Sexe*. The silence surrounding Leclerc's personal life seems to be mirrored by the absence of critical attention accorded to her writing. As with Cardinal, the academic interest accorded to Leclerc in France is relatively scant. While there are no full-scale studies dedicated to Leclerc's writing, a handful of articles in periodicals and literary reviews have deemed her approach to writing the body worthy of attention.[xiv]

Academic Reception Outside of France

While *Parole de femme* has gained recognition as a seminal text of the feminist movement of the 1970s and is now a 'set text' on many university syllabuses, the French critical lacuna is mirrored in the Anglophone world. A search on two databases of research being carried out in the United Kingdom and the United States respectively reveal that no theses have been written on her work. This seeming lack of interest in the author is mirrored in her absence from both academic journals and scholarly publications. There are no books dedicated to the works of Leclerc alone. The MLA bibliography reveals only five articles on the subject of her writing. Two are published in an Italian journal, two in English journals and one is from an American source. Significantly, all bar one of these articles focus on the subject of Leclerc's *écriture féminine* with reference to *Parole de femme,* with Hutton's article on the representation of the Holocaust in *Exercices de memoire* proving to be the exception to the rule. [xv] It is not, perhaps, surprising that most critical attention should have focused on *Parole de femme*. This was, after all, Leclerc's bestseller and the only one of her texts to be translated into English. Leclerc's contribution to French feminism is however noted by her inclusion in several anthologies which aim to bring French feminism to the English reader.[xvi] Following the trend noted above, the majority of these works include extracts from *Parole de femme* in sections which deal with *écriture féminine*.[xvii] In Laubier's chapter on contemporary French women writers, Leclerc figures along side other writers like Duras, Ernaux, Cardinal and Sarraute. This is perhaps because Laubier prioritises shared themes (such as a preoccupation with the link between identity and writing) above similarities in stylistic approach. In Moi (1987) Leclerc appears in a chapter

entitled 'The Politics of Difference' along with writers like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. While in Marks and Courtivron, she is figured in a section entitled 'Demystifications' which presents a selection of "critical analyses of certain official male models and categories such as phallocentricism, logocentricism, misogyny, pornography and heroism" (Marks and Courtivron eds., 1981: 57). Despite her inclusion in these anthologies, one possible explanation for the critical void surrounding Leclerc is that writers like Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva have dominated the field of *écriture féminine* and have solicited more critical interest. [xviii]Leclerc, so it seems, has slipped through the net, for she cannot be included among the realists while her *écriture féminine* is not considered experimental enough [xix].

Literary Reviews

This study draws upon a small sample of eight reviews and articles on the text in question. In each case I have picked out what I believe to be the salient features of the critical response, acknowledging both positive and negative responses, gender of the critic and political persuasion of the paper. An initial observation worthy of note is that in the majority of reviews *Parole de femme* was met with unanimous approval. The quality of Leclerc's poetic prose was widely praised. In many cases critics employed adjectives which connoted the sensual and lyrical facets of the text as well as the author's uninhibited expression of emotion. Their comments demonstrate an understanding of the tension in Leclerc's writing where the author's interest in the function of language is mediated by an awareness of the importance of writing experience. Hence, the palpable and lyrical qualities of her writing emerge. Writing for the women's magazine *Elle,* Denise Dubois-Jallais describes the work as "un poème à la vie, un poème à la femme. Un livre qui crie, hurle, philosophe, éclate de rire, saigne, naît et jouit de tout cela" (Dubois-Jallais, 1974: 14). The author's words are evoked as" "ivres et sereins" (Fresco, 1974), and "lyrique et ample" (Chavardes, 1974: 26). Another critic describes the text as a "Geyser jailli des entrailles" to describe her impression that the work was literally wrenched from the author's guts (Desanti, 1974: 9).

The question of what constitutes decent subject matter for a woman writer was again centre stage of the critical debate. For some, the author's quest to speak of the intimate secrets of female sexuality and desire was seen as a daring exercise in self-revelation. As with the reviews of Cardinal, whether to positive or negative effect,

questions of decency and indecency arise when discussing the authorial project. Writing for the right wing *Le Figaro*, Claudine Jardin praises the author for forcing herself to "vaincre sa pudeur". In a review appearing in the left wing *Le Monde*, Desanti recognises both the originality and the applicability of her expression of female sexuality. Declaring her solidarity with the author she applauds "Neuve, cette Parole de femme...d'Annie Leclerc dénombre, dévoile, déviole, décrit, dégèle, développe et nous dédie les dons qui sont à nous, en nous, et que l'homme dévalorisa." However, she is less complementary about the author's discussion of menstruation which she considers to be both negative and unoriginal. Desanti refers to Leclerc's declaration of her malaise about discussing the taboo subject of menstruation in order to ridicule it:

> Toute adolescente ne ressent peut-être pas son premier sang comme le signe de sa féminine infériorité ("mais savez-vous bien ce qu'il me faut braver pour parler de ce sang ?", avoue notre courageuse) (Desanti, 1974: 9).

While critics like Desanti might praise Leclerc for her lack of 'pudeur' this is not always the case. In *Epousailles* she pre-empts those who might accuse her of indiscretion with the defiant observation that: "Il y a toujours quelque part quelqu'un qui ne veut pas que j'aime toutes jambes écartées, tous bras ouverts [...] toute gorge déployée" (Leclerc, 1976:171). The author's metaphorical refusal to keep her legs crossed is in evidence in an article entitled 'Le Sang d'une femme poète'. The title indicates Leclerc's refusal to respect the taboo of silence around menstruation. It recalls not only the visceral qualities of Leclerc's writing but also the references to menstruation in *Les Mots pour le dire* which were a cause of consternation for some critics. Speaking about a theatrical adaptation of the text which caused a furore, Leclerc remarks that it is acceptable for an actor to lose himself in sublime monologues about blood on stage and even to smear himself in huge globules of haemoglobin so long as it isn't menstrual blood (Righini, 1976).

For one female critic, writing for the centre-left *Nouvel Observateur*, the originality of the first person voice as a tool to politicising the personal was not overlooked (Fresco, 1974). Making a similar point, Dominique Desanti, writing in the centre-left *Le Monde*, draws attention not only to Leclerc's uniquely personal approach to narrating female sexuality but also to the shock value that this might register in both

male and female readers: "Neuve, cette 'Parole', et subjective –c'est là une irrefutable qualité, - au point qu'elle choquera sans doute aussi des femmes" (Desanti, 1974: 9).

Yet, as with Cardinal, a number of critics were puzzled by the generic complexity of the work The difficulty of placing a text which was both philosophical, creative, polemic and poetic led to the rather reductive label of 'essai' being accorded to the text. Even Leclerc's publishers, who undoubtedly had stakes in promoting the text, were unwilling to classify it as literature. In *Autrement dit* Leclerc has voiced a similar complaint to Cardinal about the reception of her text: "On en a souvent débattu comme s'il s'agissait d'un ouvrage théorique, on l'a pris dans sa seule dimension théorique. Je veux bien , mais c'est quand même autre chose qui est en jeu dans ce livre : j'ai voulu écrire" (Leclerc in Cardinal, 1977: 87).

Another critical strategy, of which two male critics in particular are guilty, is to erase the feminist politics from the text all together. Leclerc's attempt to capture the rhythms and sensations of the female body was widely remarked upon by critics. Yet, my examination of these reviews suggests a gender divide between the readings of male critics like Maurice Chavardes who prefer to focus on its lyrical qualities and female readers who register the overt nature of the feminist content. In the right wing *Témoignage Chrétien,* Chavardes praises the author for writing the female body; ironically he goes on to compare her literary style to that of the celebrated homosexual writer Gide. Not knowing quite how to describe this new form of writing he remarks "On dirait presque qu'elle parle avec son corps. Langage tour à tour gidien et caustique..." (Chavardes, 1974: 26). Perhaps most perplexing is a review by Bernard-Henri Lévy which appeared in *Quotidien de Paris* (Lévy, 1974). While the celebrated philosopher gives the text a laudatory review, his proposal that it signalled the demise of feminism was undoubtedly problematic for many feminist readers. This brings us to a point of particular interest. For indeed, one feminist critic has argued that the willingness of male critics to embrace *Parole de femme* was in itself indicative of the ineffectual nature of Leclerc's feminism.

Christine Delphy's materialist analysis of the text is critical of what she describes as Leclerc's 'protofeminism'[xx]. The main thrust of Delphy's argument is that by celebrating women's nurturing instincts and domestic duties Leclerc accepts the division of labour as given. Holding Leclerc to account for a naïve brand of idealism, Delphy argues that she simply reverses male ideologies and hence maintains the basic structures of female oppression. Delphy is undoubtedly right to suggest that the

devaluation of women's work is not a cause but an effect of the exploitation of women. However, it is also worth noting the value of Leclerc's text as an exercise in political propaganda and a celebration of the 'feminine' as an abstract and necessary category unrelated to sex.

It might also be argued that Delphy's critique of Leclerc is overly personal. In a manner recalling the criticisms levelled at de Beauvoir (see Moi, 1994) Leclerc is presented as a woman whose writing is motivated by self-interest. She is held to account for her failure to acknowledge the debt she owes to the women's movement and for remaining silent on the question of collective action. However, it seems to me that Leclerc's authorial 'je' is more inclusive than exclusive. For while her celebration of female sexuality takes the form of the first person narrative, as with many writers of this époque she employs this voice with the intention of soliciting the reader's identification with her positive experiences. Leclerc's reluctance to suggest that her experience is typical of all women might be commended in the light of developments in feminism where the desire to 'speak for all' has been condemned.

For Delphy, Leclerc's address to the reader is a further cause of critical concern. She argues that Leclerc shows less attention to her female readers than their male counterparts, and that when she does address them, it is in a condescending manner: "Annie Leclerc challenges men directly: 'You must realise that...' She never addresses women except to rebuke them, to lecture them, or to hold them responsible for their own oppression" (Delphy in Moi, 1987: 80). While it is true that Leclerc often addresses the male reader directly, this is not in itself a crime. Indeed, Leclerc's intent was to avoid separatist discourses and to present women's experience to the male reader. Having said this, Delphy's essay did represent a significant critique of *Parole de femme* and it is therefore of interest to explore further the media responses to the text in the light of her objections. Did female readers feel that they were being lectured to? Were they alienated from the authorial voice? Or, on the contrary, were they able to recognise their life stories in Leclerc's *Parole*?

The laudatory responses of some female critics who attest to their identification with the author would seem to fly in the face of Delphy's criticisms. Jardin not only recognises the female specificity of the text which she describes as a 'connais-toi toi-même' but also, in contrast to Delphy, laments the fact that male readers, intimidated by the subject matter, will pass by this text (Jardin, 1975). Dubois-Jallais enthusiastically signals both her recognition of Leclerc's feminist agenda and her identification with

Leclerc's message. She expounds: "Le titre exprime bien ma parole. ce que cela veut dire d'engagement sérieux" (Dubois-Jallais, 1974: 14). And if she goes on to add that "C'est un livre pour les hommes" this only serves to endorse Leclerc's awareness of the need to open up the feminist debate to the male reader. At this juncture it is worth considering the article written by Dubois–Jallais in more detail because, in my opinion, it signals on the one hand why some women, who might not normally consider themselves to be feminists, have identified with Leclerc's message, and on the other hand, why materialist feminists like Delphy have found it to be unpalatable.

At the beginning of the article Dubois-Jallais comes across as being somewhat reluctant to identify with the feminist cause. Before meeting Leclerc, her attitude mirrors many of the clichés bandied about by anti-feminists. Her belittling evaluation of women who seek to express their personal experience is curious and discouraging in a female critic and recalls de Beauvoir's equally dismissive evaluation of women writers in *Le deuxième sexe* (de Beauvoir, 1949): "J'ai horreur des livres de bonnes femmes ; les suffragettes me tuent, les femmes-femmes m'assomment, les exhibitionnistes m'anesthésient" (Dubois-Jallais, 1974: 14). Her comments on first reading *Parole de femme* indicate that she is evidently unsure about how to place Leclerc's text: "Le livre de Leclerc m'a fait une curieuse impression : l'envie de le jeter par la fenêtre et celui de crier oui" (Dubois-Jallais, 1994: 14). The journalist's sense of surprise on meeting Leclerc suggests that she has absorbed the clichéd discourses which present the women writer as a non-maternal blue-stocking.[xxi] Registering her relief that Leclerc's house "n'a rien d'un repaire du M.L.F." Dubois-Jallais goes on to inform her readers that Leclerc has achieved the unimaginable, she is intelligent, a feminist and still attractive to the opposite sex! *Elle* readers learn that Leclerc is married to the Greek author Nicolas Poulantzas and that she has a three year old daughter Ariane. Dubois-Jallais's article merits further attention because the manner in which she represents the authorial persona is revelatory.

8.6. Leclerc: a Maternal Imago

In my discussion of the media presentation of Marie Cardinal I described the manner in which journalists often presented the author as the personification of her *écriture*. The representation of Leclerc is another case in point. In this section I explore the discourses adopted by critics in their media representation of the author. My interest here is to

expose the manner in which critical discourses mirror the author's texts functioning as a kind of intertextual response. In the *Elle* article Leclerc becomes the embodiment of the maternal and life giving forces of women which she celebrates in her texts. Hence, we are told that the apartment is littered with toys while a reproduction of the virgin and child hangs on a wall. The photograph of Leclerc breast-feeding Ariane mirrors this religious iconography. Of course, the presentation of Leclerc as the very image of motherhood stands in sharp contrast to Cardinal's attempts to separate female identity from the maternal role.

Reinterpreting the image of the male intellectual holding a cigarette or pen, Leclerc is featured along with her knitting basket.[xxii] Some feminists might see this as a regressive image which leads to the association of women with domestic tasks. However, for Lecerc, knitting is closely associated with women's writing. In *Epousailles* Leclerc describes her experience of learning how to knit as an initiation into the unspoken women's language of *jouissance*. Knitting, as a creative act, is equated with the transmission of female knowledge and giving birth:

> Mon premier tricot de bandes roses et blanches me dit : tricoter, fabriquer, produire c'est jouir, quand par la besogne appliquée, ajustée, de mon corps, advient un autre de mon corps. Fabriquer, c'est jouir, parce que c'est accoucher, faire naître en quelque sorte (Leclerc, 1976: 95).

Another notable media discourse of the author appears in an article entitled 'Annie Leclerc : Philosophe en Cuisine' (Parneix,1985). The article draws a link between Leclerc's writing and cooking; the title refers to her declaration that her favourite creative location is the kitchen. Of course, this kind of image is completely in keeping with Leclerc's interest in reclaiming the domestic sphere and 'women's tasks' as attributes of the feminine. However, it is also undoubtedly the case that feminists like Delphy might consider these images to endorse the view that a woman's true position is in the home and, indeed, the kitchen.

In her study of de Beauvoir, Toril Moi remarked the manner in which critics sought to de-feminise the author, preferring to represent her as a frigid blue-stocking. In this light, Leclerc seems to get a less acerbic reaction from critics who tend to fixate upon her good-looks and femininity. It might indeed be argued that Leclerc is envisaged as the physical embodiment of her *écriture féminine*. In Dubois-Jallais's portrait the author

is described as "Belle" with "L'oeil et la bouche immenses" (Dubois-Jallais, 1974: 14). Writing two years later in the centre-left *Nouvel Observateur,* Mariella Righina, somewhat unoriginally, equates Leclerc's sensuality with the feline: "La voix de cette féline à la bouche gourmande, aux narines bien ouvertes, au regard largement fendu d'un éclat de rire est chaude [...] Annie Leclerc a la chair heureuse" (Righini, 1976). It is interesting to note the resonances between the language which Righini employs and that which Leclerc uses in *Epousailles*, published the same year. Describing her feeling while knitting her first ever scarf; a symbol as we have seen for female *jouissance,* Leclerc comments:

> Et déjà, mais toujours maintenant encore, la pensée de cette écharpe blanche et rose que je vais m'appliquer à terminer, puis que je nouerai douce, *chaude*, autour du cou de ma petite soeur, me met en *bouche* une salive *gourmande*, et mouille la paume de mes mains d'une fine suée de désir...(Leclerc, 1976: 91-2) [my italics].

The quotation from Righini offers further evidence for the coincidence between critical and authorial discourse. In this case we can note the critic's use of adjectives which describe the tone of the author's voice in a way which seems to conjure up the character of her writing. Text and experience are intertwined as the author's voice becomes the literal mouthpiece for the writing. We have already noted how critics translated Cardinal's desire to use 'words as arms' in the adjectives which they employed to describe her voice. For Righini, Leclerc's voice conveys the warmth and *joie de vivre* which she pursues in her texts.

Recalling Leclerc's enduring textual pursuit of enlightenment and purity, the critical discourse presents the author as a source of light. Dubois-Jallais conjures up an angelic vision of an author who emanates "La lumière partout, front, dents, âme" (Dubois-Jallais, 1994: 14). The good will and joie de vivre which Leclerc evinces seem to centre around her laugh which becomes a focal point of critical discourse. In the picture accompanying the Dubois-Jallais article she appears to have just burst into an unstoppable grin. Without wanting to make too much of this point, these images of the author certainly contrast with the stern and impenetrable expressions which male academics and writers often assume in portraits. Leclerc certainly appears to radiate the orgasmic *jouissance* and *joie de vivre* which she evokes in her texts. It is interesting to

note that in each of the seven pictures accompanying the articles under study in this section, the author is smiling. Of course the 'rire' has an added significance for Leclerc: as the author advises in *Parole de femme,* laughter constitutes a critic of male discourse which avoids challenging patriarchy in its own terms (see chapter 6).

I started off by exploring a number of responses to the feminist politics propounded by Leclerc in *Parole de femme*. Following Delphy's lead I raised the question of whether Leclerc was simply pandering to her male audience or whether she does indeed, offer a valid feminist message for male and female readers alike. Does male approval signal anti-feminism or on the contrary does it suggest that Leclerc has found a fitting form for the dissemination of a feminist message? In my opinion, the argument that acceptance by male readers is tantamount to complicity with patriarchal discourse is self-defeating for it suggests that any argument which is acknowledged by men is somehow defunct. In which case how can women ever hope to produce an effective challenge to patriarchal discourse? Furthermore, it might be argued that the presentation of Leclerc in a popular magazine like *Elle*, as the acceptable face of feminism, is further evidence of the insignificance of her textual politics. However, it is my belief that if Leclerc can convince reluctant feminists like Dubois-Jallais and her readership to engage with her message, then her feminist politics undoubtedly has a significant place to play in changing attitudes towards women. If further evidence is needed then surely the best-selling status of *Parole de femme* is a testimony to Leclerc's ability to move her audience.

8.7. *Hommes et femmes*: un texte illisible?

Prenons Hélène Cixous. Je crois qu'elle écrit vraiment de sa chair même, sans essayer de répondre à une certaine demande, sans entrer dans le langage tel qu'il est : codé, imposé...Mais elle court le risque d'être perdue. D'ailleurs, elle est presque toujours perdue, elle est presque toujours non entendue (Annie Leclerc in Cardinal, 1977: 90).

Ayant adoré "Paroles [sic] de femme" je me réjouissais de la lecture de ce livre. Ma déception est grande. Annie Leclerc semble avoir oublié la simplicité (Monique Dubard).

In her conversations with Marie Cardinal Leclerc has described how the hermetic nature of the texts of Hélène Cixous might lead to her work being misunderstood or forgotten. Paradoxically, this is a comment which might easily be turned back on Leclerc herself. For while Leclerc's texts are arguably more accessible than those of Cixous they are nonetheless fairly demanding of the reader. The purpose of this section is to raise some tentative questions about the usefulness of *écriture féminine* for a feminist agenda. Among the questions under discussion will be the accessibility of these texts to a wider audience. I would also like to consider Cardinal's proposal that *écriture féminine* poses no threat to the established order because the political content of the texts is obscured by the hermetic language (Cardinal, 1977: 96). Are readers able to decipher the language and the author's feminist agenda? It should be noted at this juncture that it is certainly not my intention to create a binary opposition of popularity/accessibility against obscurity/elitism. Indeed, I recognise the interchangeability of these terms. I am equally conscious that popularity is no guarantor of quality while there is no direct link between the wide dissemination of a text and the effectiveness of its textual politics. Nonetheless, it does seem true to suggest that if feminist writing is to bring about social change then wide dissemination is desirable. Although an analysis of readers' letters would have provided a rich source of material for responding to this question, I have already noted that I was unable to access the documents. However, my research at *Grasset et Fasquelle* might shed some light on the issue.

The archives of *Grasset et Fasquelle* housed the comments of a panel appointed to judge the best 'document' for *Elle* magazine. The members of the panel were chosen for their ability to represent the popular tastes of *Elle* readers as opposed to literary expertise. The comments of the jury provide stimulating source material for analysis because they offer a more popular critical response to Leclerc's writing. Furthermore, given that these responses were not intended to be seen by the public, the authors were not constrained by the knowledge that their responses would appear in print. Hence, the fear of appearing ignorant or causing offence to a literary audience was not a primary consideration of the panel when they made their comments. In conclusion, it might be proposed that these critical responses present a relatively truthful and spontaneous picture of the readers' reactions to the text.

One of the qualities which critics applauded in *Parole de femme* was the brevity and succinct style of writing. For instance Desanti describes the text as "brève" and

"acerée"(Desanti, 1974: 9). As with Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* the compelling nature and 'readability,' of the text might have been a factor which contributed to *Parole de femme* achieving a best-seller status. The decorate and ornate style of *Hommes et femmes* stands in sharp contrast to *Parole de femme* and is more typical of Leclerc's works. In this later text, the pared down sentences of *Parole de femme* are replaced by winding sentence constructions which are peppered with a plenitude of adjectives. As with all of Leclerc's texts, the lack of anecdote, the emphasis on poetic philosophical meditation place an intellectual demand on the reader. What then did the professional critics make of the text?

Writing for the literary review *Le Matin des Livres*, Françoise Xenakis voices her appreciation for a style which she describes as "éminemment élaborée, dentellée, ajourée, hypertravaillée" (Xenakis, 1985: 23). It is of little surprise that Leclerc's language posed few interpretive problems for a trained literary critic who is already conversant with the "dialectique en cours chez les féministes professionnelles" (Xenakis, 1985: 23). However, writing in *L'Echo du Centre*, one critic warned that the text was not to be opened lightly (J.M., 1985). Would the untrained panel of literary critics appointed by *Elle* magazine be moved or immune to the language of *Hommes et femmes*?

Each member of the panel was required to award the text a mark from 0 to 20. The marking system spanned out in the following manner: 0-3: très mauvais; 4-7: mauvais; 8-10: passable; 11-14: assez bien; 15-17: bien; 18-20: très bien. The text was awarded the following marks by the judges: 3, 3, 5, 5, 5, 8, 8, 9, 10, 10, 10, 10, 11, 11, 11, 14, 14, 14, 15, 16, 16, 16, 16, 16,17. A cursory glance at these marks indicates that in general the text commanded a respectable score. A striking feature, is the wide range of the scores. This would seem to suggest that the text inspired a mixed response with a significant number of the panel awarding it marks at opposite ends of the spectrum. Furthermore, when we consider the judges' commentaries there are several discourses which emerge repetitively.

One of the most striking responses, is the sense of dismay and difficulty which some of the readers experienced on picking up the book. At times, they express the view that reading *Hommes et femmes* was a veritable combat. For instance one woman, who is not afraid to mince her words, expounds: "Je n'ai pas du tout aimé ce livre et j'ai vraiment dû me forcer pour le lire jusqu'au bout : dès la page 20, je me suis demandé combien il en restait encore à lire (Janine Gousesnard [mark awarded: 5]). For

one member of the panel, the daring nature of Leclerc's project was undeniable. However, this same reader was left with the over-riding impression of being unable to get to grips with the text: "Je reprocherai à ce livre courageux, la terrible impression d'incommunicabilité que l'on ressent à sa lecture" (Flauwise Stephan [mark awarded 11]). One female reader expresses a marked sense of alienation from the author's words. In this case, and in sharp contrast to responses to *Les Mots pour le dire*, the critic describes being unable to find a point of communication with Leclerc. Adopting the adjective 'hermetic' to describe her response to the text she comments with *sang-froid*: "Je suis hermétique au lyricisme et au style d'Annie Leclerc. Je lis ses volutes, ses phrases, souvent amples avec détachement" (Hélène Dejenne [mark awarded 10]).

Perhaps, the disparity in responses is related to the willingness of readers to work at decoding a meaning from the text. For instance, Georgette Surget remarks that "C'est un livre assez déroutant au début, mais après quelques pages, nous suivons bien la pensée de l'auteur (Georgette Surget [mark awarded: 16]). At the other end of the spectrum are those readers who attest not only to their appreciation of the text but also to their identification with Leclerc's message. One reader demonstrates a 'sisterly' affiliation with the author typical of feminism in the 1970s. For her, the complexity of the text merits re-reading and preservation as opposed to rejection. She enthuses: "Cette femme est une soeur; de nombreux passages me l'ont fait sentir [...] à garder et à relire (Anne Charbonneau [mark awarded 16]).

Having noted the polarised responses to the text, with readers seemingly loving or hating it, to what extent does Leclerc's discussion of women's issues come to bear on these responses? Those who awarded the text higher marks seem to have appreciated Leclerc's approach to gender politics. Most of the women emulate the sceptical attitudes towards feminism voiced by Dubois-Jallais in her interview with Leclerc for *Elle*. If the judges have been chosen to represent *Elle* readers then this is hardly surprising given the relatively safe attitude toward gender politics of this women's fashion magazine. For some, Leclerc's reappraisal of gender relationships in terms of an acceptance of difference, as opposed to an attack on or imitation of masculine behaviour, is a laudable feature of the text. Diane Pezeron differentiates between the feminist tract and women's writing classifying *Hommes et femmes* as an illustration of the latter: "Ce n'est pas un écrit féministe, c'est une écriture de femme, dans ce qu'elle a de sensible et de percutant (Diane Pezeron [mark awarded: 16]). Another makes a similar point while having a side-swipe at the MLF: "A retenir surtout que ce n'est plus

les femmes contre les hommes (=MLF, etc) mais et→avec les hommes et presque leurs semblables"[sic] (M. José Lafen [mark awarded 10]).

Conclusion

Recognising the limitations of this qualitative analysis, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions from the research undertaken in this section. I started off by considering Leclerc's fears that the innovative works of Hélène Cixous would be 'forgotten'. Raising a similar concern I turned to consider the responses of a panel of judges to *Hommes et femmes*. As we have seen a number of these readers expressed difficulties with both the style and the content of the text. For these individuals the message was obscured through an initial resistance to the language of the text. On the other hand for more 'informed' readers an appreciation of the quality and the content of the text went hand in hand. *Hommes et femmes* undoubtedly exemplifies the interest of the proponents of *écriture féminine* in inventing new forms of expression and languages of the self. It also demonstrates some of the problems which the experimental forms of these texts pose for the reader. If, as I have argued, the simplicity of *Parole de femme* is a factor in its wide dissemination then it is hardly surprising that *Hommes et femmes* has not achieved the international acclaim of this earlier text. This is not to take away either from the literary quality or the political importance of the text. It is, however, to suggest that consciousness-raising and formal experimentation are not always comfortable bed fellows.

8.8. Exercices de mémoire: Un Livre qui fait peur?

There is only a relatively small sample of source material for an analysis of the critical response to *Exercices de mémoire*. My research at *Grasset et Fasquelle* revealed only 10 reviews of the text. The majority of these appeared between 1992 and 1993 in a selection of newspapers, literary reviews and supplements while the *French Review* offered a belated response to the text in 1995. Out of these reviews seven were positive while three expressed ambivalence towards the text. In this case, neither the gender of the critic nor the political persuasion of the paper appeared to influence the reviews. The main point of critical contention *vis-à-vis* this text, was not the author's feminist

politics (although the critical discourse did typically return to this issue). This time, it was Leclerc's representation of the Holocaust which came under fire. To what extent had she found a fitting medium through which to approach the subject? Did this account, written by a non-Jew, do justice to the issues at stake? As we have seen, Leclerc's background as a writer of *écriture féminine*, her quest for a more holistic interaction with the Other and the environment around us, was influential in her approach to narrating the Holocaust (see chapter 6). Yet, critics are divided in their interpretations of her project. Before going on to look at these critiques, I will attempt a necessarily superficial summary of the main strands of thought on Holocaust literature.

The debate on how to narrate the Holocaust has been raging among academics, historians, writers and intellectuals for a number of years. For some, including the influential Holocaust theorist George Steiner, the most appropriate manner to address the Holocaust may be in silence for the "world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason" (Steiner, 1966: 123). Those who believed in the necessity of producing Holocaust narratives were equally divided in their approaches. Early discussions on the subject saw historians and literary theorists taking opposing stances with the former believing in the necessity of recording the 'hard facts' and 'raw data' of the event. Thus, the influential Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer questioned the import of seeking a 'metaphysical comprehension' of the event in literature, arguing instead for the necessity of raising essential questions like "What were the bases of Jew-hatred? Who were the murderers? When was the mass murder planned and how? Was there a way of rescue? What were the effects of the Holocaust on the Jewish people, in Israel, and in the Diaspora? (Bauer, 1978: 46). On the other hand, literary theorists have countered that the incredible nature of the occurrence prevents us from creating the objective distance to integrate it into our collective history and necessitates its exploration in a fictional form. More recently, developments in approaches to reading history have led to an uneasy alliance between historians and literary theorists with the growing recognition that history and literary narratives are irrevocably intertwined for "both events and their representations are ultimately beholden to the forms, language, and critical methodology through which they are grasped" (Young, 1988: 1). Interest in the representational aspect of the Holocaust has been taken to its furthest extreme in postmodern readings of the subject. However, as Young points out, these have to be approached with caution for "To concentrate on the poetics of a witness's testimony, for example, over the substance of a testimony seems to risk displacing the events under discussion altogether" (Young, 1988: 3).

Reducing the Book to the Woman

While the failure of historical renditions to adequately capture the true atrocity of the events has been widely acknowledged, some Holocaust theorists are still sceptical of personal approaches which might produce a distorted view of the occurrence. This fear might be particularly pronounced in the case of a writer who has not even experienced the events at first hand. [xxiii] Is this a reason why some critics have expressed displeasure at Leclerc's exploration of the subject through her personal encounters with death and human cruelty? In the only essay to have been published on the text, Hutton points out what she believes to be the pitfalls in exploring the political through the personal; "To suggest that all evil finds its source in a primary childhood scene, and that civilian bystanders sought (and still seek) to deny the reality which faced them because of a reluctance to explode a personal belief in human goodness, is to ignore all social, political and economic factors" (Hutton,1997: 439). Hutton is certainly right to suggest that Leclerc does not provide a convincing analysis of the socio/economic events prior to and during the Holocaust. However, to be fair to Leclerc, her authorial intentions were foremostly to explore her own position with regard to the event. Her unique contribution to the body of Holocaust literature is, as Hutton rightly notes, in its status as a confessional narrative which offers a personal perspective on the Shoah (Hutton, 1997: 439).

A point of contention for others, is Leclerc's presentation of the Holocaust as a collective responsibility. We have seen how Leclerc broadens her investigation to include a discussion of the origins of human cruelty. In her text, the image of the 'mort du cochon' functions as a metaphor for the Holocaust and reminds us that the desire to annihilate the Other is present in all of us. For Slama, however, this approach is deeply problematic because through generalising the crime it appears to absolve the perpetrators: "faut-il que ce qui fut le crime d'une bande de monstres non pas, assurément uniques (voir Pol Pot), mais exceptionnels, ne soit pas dilué dans une espèce de culpabilité collective , qui rend aussi difficiles le pardon que le châtiment" (Slama, 1992: 31). Slama makes a valid point in suggesting that Leclerc conflates different levels of wrongdoing. At times, the slayers of the pig, the children who dismember frogs, and the Nazi crimes are all confounded. However, as I hope to have demonstrated, by presenting the Holocaust as a collective responsibility Leclerc is doing much more than drawing a naïve equation between the man in the street and Hitler. Leclerc's point is to prompt us to assume responsibility for past atrocities in order to prevent them from recurring in the future .

Autobiographical Intentions and Interpretations

While Leclerc's narrative perspective may have incited dissent in some critics, it is the style of her *écriture féminine* which upsets Nicole Lapierre. Recalling the criticisms of *Hommes et femmes*, she expresses difficulty in reading the text. In an article in the centre-left *Le Monde* she remarks that "*L'effusion des sentiments, circulant d'un souvenir à l'autre* nourrit une réflexion sur les rapports de l'homme au mal qui *cede parfois à la confusion.*" (Lapiere, 1993: 28 [my italics]). Lapierre makes a valid point in suggesting that the testimonial function of Holocaust literature may necessitate a more communicative use of language. Nonetheless, Leclerc's approach is completely in keeping with those theorists who believe that the Holocaust cannot be submitted to closure or a fixed narrative perspective at this moment in time.

It was not only the form but also the content of Leclerc's *écriture féminine* which displeased. It is easy to understand why some critics found Leclerc's presentation of tears of lamentation as a response to the Holocaust to be both overly sentimental and trivialising. One critic, writing in the right wing daily *Le Figaro*, envisages Leclerc's evocation of the salutary benefits of tears as somewhat curious given Hitler's particular talent for exploiting emotions in order to impose his fascistic ideology. He remarks somewhat ironically that "Néron pleurait. Hitler aussi, aux opéras de Wagner" (Slama, 1992: 31). Slama is right to draw attention to the fact that emotion and sensibility can co-exist with atrocity. However, it should be noted that Leclerc differentiates between emotional responses to the romantic aesthetic and those prompted by the trauma of witnessing. The former denies the pain of the Other through the pleasure of the artistic experience. The later acknowledges the Other through pain which is registered emotively on the body (see my discussion on the role of the reader in chapter 7).

Despite these criticisms, Leclerc's ability to affect the reader is attested to in the responses of certain critics. Some are led to reflect upon contemporary political events such as the ethnic cleansing being carried out in Bosnia (Brochier, 1993, Morin, 1992). Others express a strong emotional response. Brochier, mimicking the sense of fragmentation described by the author, describes it as a "livre déchirant" (Brochier, 1993: 6) while the adjectives 'bouleversant' and 'éblouissant' are employed by others. The latter term is, of course, one which Leclerc employs frequently to describe intense artistic experiences. While Morin, a trained literary critic, finds the text highly readable, she comes closer to the true nature of the text warning us that those who approach this 'strange' and 'unfriendly' book will be scared and attracted in equal doses (Morin, 1992)[xxiv].

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At the end of this overview of the critical response to three of Leclerc's texts it should now be clear that there is a great deal of misunderstanding about the nature of both her writing and her approach to feminism. In general, the complexity of Leclerc's *écriture féminine* has been overlooked. Either too feminist or not feminist enough, at times Leclerc seems to occupy a middle-ground which displeases both radical feminists and anti-feminists alike. In her most recent writing critics have overlooked her continuing project to write the body. As with Cardinal, Leclerc's writing causes critical upset because it defies obvious patterns of classification. In that sense, her desire to re-envisage the self in writing is as pertinent as ever.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter I started off by making some general comments about the applicability of reception theory to a study of women's self-writing. It should now be clear that this methodological approach has much to tell us both about the manner in which Cardinal and Leclerc conform to and challenge the codes of the genre. The reception of Leclerc and Cardinal does not appear to be as venomous as that of de Beauvoir (Moi, 1994) or Ernaux (in the case of *Passion simple* (Thomas, 1999)). In fact the over-riding critical impulse appears to be to trivialise the writing of these author's by representing them as 'autobiographers' and not as 'real' writers. This has clearly been an influential factor in both authors' refusal of the autobiographical label in favour of a multi-generic approach. Critics appear to have applauded and rejected the feminism of both writers in equal measure. However, it seems plausible to suggest that clarity of expression combined with explicit sexual discussion seem to fuel the critical fire more brightly than the texts of the avant-garde. Does this endorse Cardinal's opinion that avant-garde writing is less threatening to critics both because the message is less easily discernible and secondly because it tends to be restricted to a select audience? If so what can women writers who are interested in exploiting the political potentialities of writing learn from this? Finally, the over-riding discourse which we have uncovered from this study is that women's experience far outstrips the theoretical discourses on autobiography and that critics frequently mis-read the texts of Cardinal and Leclerc precisely because they are ill-equipped to deal with the gap between theory and practice, experience and *écriture*, which these texts expose. Their responses suggest a desire to hold on to a traditional way of reading and writing which women's

self-writing, and other minority discourses, founded in a different experience are in a process of re-shaping.

Notes

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[i] My title is taken from Moi's analysis of the reception of Simone de Beauvoir's writing (Moi, 1994: 77).

[ii] See Jonathan Culler in *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Culler,1982: 64-83).

[iii] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, 1984: 32

[iv] For an illuminating study of readers' letters written in response to the works of Annie Ernaux see Thomas (1999). Thomas justifies her decision to adopt a methodological approach which might be deemed to be 'below literature' with the proposal that "contemporary literary texts are inevitably read intertextually through the network of critical and journalistic writing and media representations which they generate" (Thomas, 1999: 109).

[v] These comments are drawn from a personal communication with the author 25 June 1997.

[vi] These comments are drawn from a personal communication with the author 8 September 1997.

[vii] Unfortunately, despite sending several follow up letters I was unable to make further contact with the author.

[viii] This review actually focuses on Madeleine Chapsal's *Le Retour du bonheur* and Cardinal's *Les Jeudis de Charles et de Lula*. However, the reason that I mention it here is because the reviewer also comments on *Les Mots pour le dire.*

[ix] On this point it is interesting to note that the one award which Cardinal did receive for *Les Mots pour le dire* came from the medical profession. Although the *Prix Littré* is a sought after award the interpretation of *Les Mots pour le dire* as a 'medical novel' may be seen to endorse Cardinal's grievance about the generic misclassification of the work as document about psychoanalysis.

[x] In *Autrement dit*, Cardinal has explained that doctors refused to take her illness seriously because of her seemingly healthy external appearance (Cardinal,1977).

[xi] In this article Cardinal explains how the publication of the text in the Livre de poche edition attracted a new readership which included young male students and 'less cultivated' readers ("des gens [...] moins cultivés") who didn't have the money to by the by the original edition (Bosselet,1977).

[xii] *Inathèque de France* is the name for the French media library which houses copies of programmes broadcast on French television.

[xiii] For Leclerc's comments on the subject of interviews see the introduction to this section.

[xiv] See Alzon (1978), Anderson (1979), Cesbron (1980), Granjon (1976), Vilaine (1982), Hervé (1977) and Clédat (1982).

[xv] See Brewer (1984), Powrie (1989), Muscia (1991 and 1993) and (Hutton, 1997).

[xvi] See Moi (1987), Marks (1981), Laubier (1990) and Gelfand and Thorndike Hules (1985).

[xvii] Fallaize (1993) also includes extracts from *Hommes et femmes* and *Origines* while Jane Gallop produced a critical response to Leclerc's 'La letter d'amour' in *La Venue à l'écriture.*

[xviii] See the section on the reception of Cardinal for comments on the many articles which have been written on these authors.

[xix] For instance, Hutton has described *Parole de femme* as a 'popularisation' of the ideas of Hélène Cixous (Hutton, 1997: 342).

[xx] Delphy's response to *Parole de femme* is reprinted in Toril Moi (Moi, 1987). However, as Fallaize has argued the anthology gives an unbalanced view of the debate by offering the reader limited extracts of *Parole de femme* while reprinting Delphy's essay, which is almost twice as long, in its totality. (Fallaize, 1993: 136).

[xxi] See Moi's analysis of the critical reception of Simone de Beauvoir (Moi, 1994).

[xxii] In another article we discover that Leclerc knitted a layette for her daughter Ariane during the feminist meetings during the 1970s (Lagarde, 1985: 62).

[xxiii] On this point it is interesting to note that Steiner has argued that non-survivors may actually be better equipped to narrate the Holocaust then those who were implicated in the events: "Perhaps it is only those who had no part in the events who can focus on them rationally and imaginatively; to those who experienced the thing, it has lost the hard edges of possibility, it has stepped outside the real" (Steiner, 1966: 301). While I would agree that non-survivors may have a useful contribution to make to the body of Holocaust literature, Steiner was clearly misguided in dismissing the perspective of survivor witnesses as the works of Elie Wiesel, Jakov Lind, Ilse Aichinger, Primo Levi and Paul Celan among others serve to demonstrate.

[xxiv] Here Morin is borrowing Leclerc's description of Kierkegaard's *Traité du désespoir* in *Exercices de mémoire* (Leclerc, 1992).

Between Experience and Text

In the previous chapters of this thesis I have raised a number of questions about the relationship between gender and genre, life and writing, theory and practice, experience and its inscription in the life-writing of Cardinal and Leclerc. In what ways does the gender of the authors influence their autobiographical intentions and the critical reception of their texts? How do they employ language in order to find new ways to inscribe female experience? To what extent do existing theories of the autobiographical genre provide a fitting framework for the analysis of each woman's texts? In what ways might the life writing of these authors be seen to blur the boundaries between theory and practice? Can their texts in any way be seen to provide an alternative approach to theorising the self? In raising these questions I hope to have presented the life-writing of Cardinal and Leclerc as an interstitial space where the borderlines between self and Other, life and writing, individual and communal, textual and social are in constant negotiation. The discussion engaged in so far has presented the reader with a collection of challenges and a series of loose threads. The central aim of this chapter is to bind up some of these threads while resisting the temptation to closure. By way of conclusion I discuss two central issues at the heart of the contemporary feminist debate. Firstly, I explore the impact of the increasing preoccupation with difference on feminism's key concern of negotiating a space for the recognition of female experience. Secondly, I raise the question of whether there is a female autobiographical language.

I have argued elsewhere in this thesis that the rise of poststructuralist thought has had a significant impact on the feminist movement. Poststructuralist discourse has driven a stake through claims for the authenticity and autonomy of the subject with its proposition that identity is constructed and embedded in language. In poststructural terms, the subject has been presented as an unstable site of diverging and conflicting discourses. For instance, in Lacan's psychoanalytical account of identity formation the subject is always a fictive 'I' in search of an imaginary authentic selfhood. These theoretical approaches reject the notion that identity categories can retain constant features across historical periods and geographical locations, proposing instead the study of the ways in which cultural codes of practice come to bear on identity. The poststructural challenge to notions of identity as unique and coherent has reverberated

on claims to authenticity, truth and collectivity which were popular features of women's writing in the 1970s.

These developments have made themselves felt in feminism initially in the call for a recognition of the difference of women's experience which would be grounded in women's writing or *écriture féminine*. Since then the women who theorised about the potentialities of a separate women's language have themselves been accused of essentialism, and this has led to an awareness of differences of class, and race within the women's movement. Queer theory provides a striking illustration of the contemporary renunciation of the authority and authenticity of a collective women's experience. Implicit in the term is the idea that the practitioners of queer theory are writing from a marginalised position. The notion of 'queer' constitutes a celebration of difference where the oppositional and marginal are at their most extreme. Formulated in the writings of feminist theorists like Butler (1993) and Braidotti and Butler (1994), queer theorists rail against fixed notions of sexual identity. For these writers, gender, like clothes may be put on and taken off to suit the individual's needs and predilections. Queer theory shares many of the preoccupations already hinted at in poststructural discourse: the distrust of unifying impulses and collective identities providing a substantial critique to the claim of a whole, unified identity. According to Stacey, queer theory is thus positioned as a more enlightened mode of feminist theory than that of 1970s feminisms (Stacey, 1993: 63) Yet, as Stacey goes on to argue, this kind of perspective is in itself reliant on notions of progress as a teleological development where the feminist movement is portrayed as a progress narrative from naivety to enlightenment. As such, it represents an approach to history which is embedded in the project of modernity (Stacey, 1993: 63).

In the light of these developments writers like Cardinal, who employed the *bildungsroman* format during the 1970s as a means of consciousness raising, might be accused of upholding an unproblematised vision of women as a unified category. Cardinal's aim to write in order to give women arms could be seen to demonstrate a politically incorrect impulse to speak for women of colour and different class. Similarly, as a proponent of *écriture féminine*, Leclerc might be perceived as maintaining essentialist presumptions about a universal female identity and its connection to writing practice. These comments seem to be borne out by the fact that some academics who I have spoken to have suggested that the writing of Leclerc and Cardinal is now somewhat outmoded[i]. While I am fully conscious of the need to keep abreast of developments in women's writing [ii], the suggestion that authors like Cardinal

and Leclerc are no longer worthy of study demonstrates a failure to recognise that their writing has a value beyond its significance within the context of second wave feminism. Secondly, it neglects to consider both the developments within and the innovatory qualities of each women's writing practice which render it as worthy of discussion as any postmodern offering.

As Liz Stanley and other theorists have argued, women's self writing is "predicated upon a constructionist and indeed deconstructionist view of gender that a priori rejects essentialism, and was doing so long before postmodernism was even a twinkle in any male theoretician's eye (Stanley, 1992: 243). This awareness is no less apparent in the writing of Cardinal and Leclerc. Indeed, there are a number of ways in which the graphing of the autobiographical 'I' demonstrates the preoccupation with difference and textuality which are foremost in the minds of feminists today. Firstly, in the writing of both Cardinal and Leclerc the difference of the personal voice, which is nonetheless seen to hold a general appeal to the reader, is fully acknowledged. Hence, the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* might cite the unusual circumstances of her menstrual haemorrhaging and nervous breakdown while drawing upon that experience in order to explore the manner in which social discourses come to bear on women. In the same way, by relating her singular past seeped in denial of the Holocaust Leclerc broadens out her experience to inculpate the general reader.

Secondly, the urgency with which these authors seek to express a female centred experience is not indicative of a naive belief in the transparency of experience. Indeed, writers like Cardinal and Leclerc, as practitioners in a predominantly male tradition, are acutely aware of the manner in which language comes to bear on the formulation of identity. For both Cardinal and Leclerc a significant autobiographical impulse is the desire to find new languages to speak about areas of female experience, hitherto silenced and made taboo. Yet, both are constrained in their project by their awareness of the problematics of reception and they demonstrate a desire to find new ways to negotiate the boundaries of the genre.

Thirdly, the deconstruction of oppressive social discourses is a central issue in both women's writing. For Cardinal and Leclerc the autobiographical mode is a fitting genre to explore discourses of oppression. Inasmuch, their work provides a lucid exposition of the ideologies through which the self has been disciplined and moulded. In *Les Mots pour le dire*, the narrator explores the discourses of bourgeois catholicism providing a vigorous critique of the manner in which they had shaped her into a dutiful

daughter. In *Exercices de mémoire,* Annie Leclerc retraces her fascination with the romantic aesthetic if only to deny its validity in the light of the Holocaust.

Fourthly, the autobiographical fictions of both authors demonstrate a heightened awareness of the contingency and constructedness of identity. While ascribing value to collective experience, they nonetheless recognise how identity is influenced by social positioning. Thus in *Exercices de mémoire,* Leclerc demonstrates how social circumstances and national identity may influence our historical perspective. In *Les Mots pour le dire*, Cardinal deconstructs and reconstructs her narrator's selfhood using a psychoanalytical framework.

A fifth characteristic of the life-writing of Cardinal and Leclerc is a pervasive self-consciousness which leads to a continual questioning of authorial authority and indeed, a recognition of the contingency of author's voice. We have noted how Cardinal is haunted by insecurities about her right to assume the title of 'écrivain'. We have also discussed the tension in her writing between her recourse to the conventions of the confessional genre and her willingness to alert the reader to the fictionality of her account. This characteristic is even more accentuated in *Exercices de mémoire* where the author's many authorial interventions and self-referential comments require the reader to engage in an analysis of the modes of textual production. The self-consciousness of both authors draws attention to the gap between the textual and the experiential while foregrounding the contingency of the narrative perspective. For the recipients of these texts an active reading strategy is required.

I hope thus to have demonstrated that the life writing of Cardinal and Leclerc illustrates a shared concern with features such as the fragmentation of identity, the pervasive nature of textuality and the contingency of experience which have recently been associated with the postmodern debate. There is, however, one major difference between the two approaches. While theorists of the postmodern have tended to focus on the 'graphe' (text) at the expense of the 'bios'(life), the writing of Cardinal and Leclerc can be seen to provide an intersection between situated experience and its textual inscription. On this point, it is worth noting that the growing interest, both theoretical and personal, in women's life-writing cannot simply be explained by theories of autobiography where the sole focus is on the 'graphe' of the autobiographical equation (see chapter 8). Autobiography has become an increasingly popular genre because it has something to tell us not only about the lives of those around us but also about ourselves. The reading and writing of autobiography serves a number of functions,

pedagogical, ideological, historical and so forth. For the female reader, in particular, the life histories of other women may shed light on their personal experiences, offering them a way of locating their social positioning and relationship to others around them. During the 1970s women's autobiographical accounts provided heroic models of identity challenging others to rail against their oppression. The autobiographical genre has provided a personalised framework within which female readers and writers can explore the boundaries of the female self. Furthermore, the multi-generic and interdisciplinary nature of women's life writing has become the locus for forging links and connections between a number of hitherto exclusive disciplines and of challenging fixed boundaries of the limits of knowledge.

Nancy K. Miller has argued that one way of plugging the gap between the so called sophisticated theoretical feminisms of the 1990s and what are assumed to be naively referential feminisms of the 1970s is to be found in the writing of personal criticism. For Miller this personal approach to the theoretical is marked by "an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism" where the guarantor of authenticity is "a kind of internal signature" (Miller, 1991:1). While this theoretical practice necessitates the personal voice it does not necessarily entail radical disclosure (Miller, 1991: 1). Of course, this form of criticism may incite negative reactions from those who envisage the personal as a negative term which has been used to curtail female identity. Equally, it raises the spectre of narcissism and self-indulgence. Yet it constitutes a fitting theoretical form for reading women writers who draw upon the autobiographical genre as a means of inscribing the female body and emotion in the text. Indeed, as we have seen, male authored theories not only fail to recognise these textual possibilities but they may, at times, even serve to eradicate the possibility of theorising the female personal voice. In her reading of Jane Tompkins's "Me and My Shadow" (1989) Miller dares to agree that there may be a difference in the manner in which men and women read. Avoiding the blunt assertion that what interests women is the personal, Miller instead recasts the question as "If what seems important ('interesting') to women is personal, what seems important and interesting to men? (Miller, 1991: 13). The implicit suggestion here is that the impersonal theory which has dominated critical discourse over the past thirty years, and which has been adopted, adapted and challenged by feminist critics in equal measure, is essentially a male domain. While the adoption of this impersonal theory by some feminists may have led to the dismissal of both the personal and the collective of the women's movement for Miller, who is well aware of the stigma of essentialism, it is important to remember both

the historicity of the move from 'I' to 'we' along with the political implications of the personal voice. She cautions the need to remember "the sense of intellectual experiment and innovative practice of the late seventies [...] and the feeling of excitement that the idea of community negotiates" (Miller, 1991: 16). How then, Miller asks, can women reclaim the personal voice while avoiding accusations of self-indulgence? While reclaiming the value of the personal Miller proposes its location in a positional mode. Firstly, an awareness of the positional will enable women to recognise the need to take account of their different positioning to men in relation to the autobiographical canon and the Academy. Secondly, positional self-writing recognises the situatedness of the author while at the same time functioning as an autobiographical 'pact' inviting the reader to "participate in the interweaving and the construction of the ongoing conversation" (Miller, 1991: 24). Positional writing draws attention both to its own contingency and the modes of its construction and "by turning the authorial voice into spectacle, personal writing theorises the stakes of its own performance" (Miller, 1991, 24). With this in mind I want to turn to consider my own personal experience as a reader of *Les Mots pour le dire*. In adopting a personalised approach to criticism I hope to point up what to my mind are four influential factors in the reception of women's autobiography.

I first came upon *Les Mots pour le dire* as an undergraduate enrolled in a course on French women's writing. The text left a resounding impression on me which can in part account for my choosing to write about it in this thesis. I found reading the text to be a generally pleasurable experience despite the shocking nature of the subject matter. Most of all I enjoyed the feeling of empowerment and inspiration which Cardinal's failure to success story inspired in me. What then were the predominant responses which marked my reception of the text?

A first point worthy of note was that my interest in the text was not of a purely academic nature but was demonstrative of my personal interest in an account of another woman's life. My initial reaction was both shock at the self-revelatory nature of the subject matter and interest in the intimate details which were being proffered to me by the author. I had the same feeling which I had experienced on reading other semi-autobiographical works like Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, of witnessing a confession of things which quite simply should not be said, especially when the author of the discussion is a woman. I remember being particularly struck by the descriptions of the author's unstoppable menstruation and the sexual content of the text which at the time led me to question whether I had correctly understood the French. My interest in the

text, then, was not primarily, its stylistic features but rather the detail of a woman's struggle to overcome insurmountable difficulties both social and familial. Although the subject matter was not easy to read, the *bildungsroman* format contained the initial sense of shock which I had experienced, leaving me with the sense of satisfaction which comes with cathartic narrative resolution.

A second explanation for the attraction which this text held for me was the mirror which it held up to my own life. While the sense of shared identity or 'sisterhood' are common features experienced by the reader of the feminist confessional, in my case the bond which I felt with Cardinal was particularly intense. As with Cardinal's mother, mine was an ex-colonial who often spoke of her homeland in nostalgic terms. Although my mother had relinquished her Catholic faith before she divorced she was undoubtedly subject to the collision of discourses and opposing ideologies which this rupture opened up. While my mother's strong sense of justice and refusal to accept second best perhaps mark her out as my first feminist role-model, at times, she appeared to be ill at ease in a world which no longer endorsed the paternalistic values which she had perceived to be immutable.

The absence of a father figure in my household meant that, like Cardinal, I was raised on the 'planète mère'. While I may have played out the role of 'dutiful daughter' more diligently than Cardinal, I too felt that my identity had been fashioned by my family and class in a manner which I would later on come to question. My parents' divorce, vaguely scandalous at the time, and the disruption of the family home perhaps paved the way for my autobiographical journey. Reading Cardinal's analysis of the mother/daughter relationship was informative in my reaching a deeper understanding of my mother as a real person who was subject to the discourses of colonialism and bourgeois catholicism and to situate her unique and exceptional personal history and indeed, my own, within a wider socio/historic framework.

The impact of the personal voice in *Les Mots pour le dire* influenced me in a further manner. This text provided one of my first encounters with French feminism and indeed feminist thought in general. As such, it can be seen to provide a fitting illustration of the manner in which women's autobiography blurs the boundaries between the personal and the theoretical. Cardinal found the words to express the thoughts which I had been formulating for a number of years without finding the correct mode of expression. To the 'wise' feminists of the 1990s Cardinal's discussions of marriage, menstruation, motherhood, and female hysteria may appear as second hand

news. However, to someone who had little knowledge of feminist discourse these discussions were revelatory and provided a social and economic analysis of prejudices which I had hitherto failed to actively question.

A final and related issue, is the manner in which my reading of *Les Mots pour le dire* can be seen to play out the feminist concern, raised throughout this thesis, of reading and writing as an interactive and transformative process. It seems fitting that having been captivated by Cardinal's text I was moved to write my own response to that textual encounter. Although the 'I' is heavily disguised behind the mask of academic writing, my choice of themes and treatment of the subject matter can undoubtedly be seen to be demonstrative of the autobiographical turn. Is it possible then to argue that authors like Cardinal and indeed Leclerc are still worthy of academic discussion in the 1990s?

Jackie Stacey has noted a trend in her classroom whereby students of women's studies identify 1970s feminism with the naive belief in collective identities and an essential female self. On the other hand feminists in the 1990s are seen to demonstrate a sophisticated awareness of difference and other postmodern concerns (Stacey, 1993: 68). The trap of carving up the feminist movement into distinct movements and periods is, indeed, a seductive one. In contrast to Stacey's students, I have to declare my own rather nostalgic leanings for 1970s feminism with its heady optimism and call for collective action. My own conceptualisation of my feminist predecessors of the 1970s as something akin to the 'good' mother shows nothing of the desire to rebel against one's maternal ancestry which Stacey has noted in the classroom. (Stacey, 1993: 60). It was perhaps as a result of my being unable to break out of this conceptual framework that I sought to position Cardinal's text of the 1970s and Leclerc's offering of the 1990s at opposite ends of the spectrum. However, while my research has demonstrated that the respective texts do indeed reflect the socio/historic circumstances of their production, including developments in feminist thought, it is nonetheless true that there are more similarities than differences between these texts and that that both the metaphorical and experiential are indeed alive and well in each case. Leclerc's *Exercices de mémoire* provides a fitting illustration of Stacey's observation that "'Experience' has not disappeared from feminist theorising in the 1990s, but its presentation to readers is accompanied by a warning: be wary of the truths we hold to be self evident" (Stacey, 1993: 67). For Miller the personal has played a different but nonetheless significant role from the 1970s through to the 1990s. From the 1970s slogan 'the personal is political' to the 1980s interest in the personal as theoretical and as an

area for theorisation where "what may distinguish contemporary feminism from other postmodern thought is the expansion of the definition of cultural material" (Miller, 1991: 21).

This brings me to my final point. I have explored a number of theories of women's writing and have discovered that in the majority of cases the practice of experiential writing quite simply bypasses the boundaries of the theory which seeks to confine it. With this in mind is it plausible to suggest that there is a woman's autobiography? Indeed, can it be realistically argued that there is any difference between men's and women's self-writing beyond the choice of content? For Liz Stanley the specificity of women's self-writing is grounded in the social circumstances of their oppression. As she rightly argues, autobiographies penned by men and women are destined to be different, not because of some essential biological difference but because of their different social positioning (Stanley, 1992: 253). Women's life-writing, whether written as a direct response to, or in ignorance of their social circumstances, is nonetheless mediated by the circumstances of women's oppression. Stanley outlines three main characteristics of women's life-writing which to my mind are all in play in the autobiographical fictions of Cardinal and Leclerc. Firstly, women's life- writing rejects a narrow version of the self. In both *Les Mots pour le dire* and *Exercices de mémoire* we have noted how the autobiographical 'I' is opened up to address a community of readers. Secondly, the autobiographical 'I' is presented as a social construction within a network of others. In both texts the author's both deconstruct and reconstruct identity while attempting to reformulate notions of the self in a manner which admits of otherness. A final characteristic is the crossing and recrossing of generic boundaries. As the title of my thesis suggests, the hybrid and multigeneric nature of women's writing demonstrates both the difficulty of defining the self within existing theoretical frameworks as well as a desire to push against the constraints of the genre and to renegotiate its boundaries.

The attention dedicated in this thesis to exploring the relationship between autobiographical intention and critical interpretation seeks to define women's writing not only within a socio/historical framework but also to locate the poetics of women's writing within the concrete and embodied practice of reading and writing. Texts are not created in a vacuum. In the case of women's writing where the exploration of women's ontological identity is a main pursuit, the necessity of locating writing practice in terms of its production and reception is paramount. While this thesis has traced a number of characteristics common to the writing of both Cardinal and Leclerc, I would like at this

point to reject at first hand any temptations to essentialise these features as somehow given. As this study has shown, many of the features of the life-writing of Cardinal and Leclerc including authorial anxiety, self-consciousness and the masking of the authorial I, are not only formal devices but are also a direct reaction to anticipated critical responses. The fictionality of the female autobiographical 'I' is determined, in part, by the fear of being exposed to the microscopic critical gaze to which women's writing often falls victim. In suggesting, then, that there are no essential characteristics of women's writing I would, nonetheless, like to offer another definition of the genre as a performance where identity is put on and pulled off in the aim of producing a different vision of the female self. This is not to deny that women's writing is grounded in experiential reality, nor is it to dismiss the potentialities of political writing. It is rather to suggest that women's writing involves a quest to explore identity and its construction in language and that this, rather like a performance, involves putting on a mask in order to try out new identities. Even for women writing in the liberated 21st century, the history of our oppression cannot simply be denied by erasing the body and with it our experience from the text. The challenge of women's life-writing whether in the 1970s or the 21st century is to be found in the gap which it exposes between experience and text, life and writing, self and Other, theory and practice. In exposing this uneasy fit, women's autobiographical fictions, like those of Cardinal and Leclerc, have created a space for imagining different identities and for renegotiating interactions between self and Other.

Notes

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[i] This kind of approach is in itself influenced by progress narratives where writers have a ten to twenty year life span and, like clothes, are seen to go in and out of fashion.

[ii] A conference held at the Institute of Romance Studies in 2000 entitled "Women's Writing in France in the 1990s: New women New Literatures" included discussions on Sylvie Germain, Marie Darrieussecq, Agota Kristof, Christine Angot, Leïla Sebbar, Chantal Chawaf and Marie Redonnet.

Annex

Translations

Works by Marie Cardinal

***Amour...Amours*:**
Italian: Bompiani
Greek: Kedros
Turkish: Can Yayinlari
Danish: Cicero

Les Jeudis de Charles et de Lula
Danish: Lindhardt and Ringhof
Italian: Bompiani
Swedish: Trevi
Greek: Kedros
Korean: Yolimon Publishing

Comme si de rien n'était
English: Middlesex University Press
Danish: Lindhardt and Ringhof
Swedish: Trevi
German: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag
Italian: Bompiani

Les Grands désordres
Slovakian: Motyl
Greek: Kedros
Turkish: Afa Yayincilik
English: The Women's Press
Danish: Lindhardt and Ringhof
Swedish: Trevi
Italian: Bompiani
German: Zsolnay, D.T.V. (pocket edition)

Le Passé empiété
Italian: Bompiani
Greek: Kedros
Norwegian: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag
Swedish: Trevi
Danish: Lindhardt and Ringhof
Finish: Tammi Publishers

German: Rowohlt

Catalan: Argos Vergara

Au Pays de mes Racines

Danish: Lindhardt and Ringhof

Italian: Bompiani

Swedish: Trevi

Greek: Kedros

German: Otto Maier Verlag, Rowohlt (pocket edition)

Une Vie pour deux

Norwegian: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag

Latvian: Daugava

Italian: Bompiani

Catalan: Argos Vergara

Swedish: Trevi

Danish: Lindhardt and Ringhof

Greek: Kedros

German: Rogner und Bernhard, Rowohlt (pocket edition)

Autrement dit

Italian: Bompiani

Danish: Lindhardt and Ringhof

Greek: Oceanida

Swedish: Trevi

English: Indiana University Press

Les Mots pour le dire

English: The Women's Press (United Kingdom)

English: Van Vactor and Goodheart (United States)

Rumanian: Editura Trei

Polish: Jacek Santorski

Latvian: Daugava

Slovenian: Pomurska Zalozba

Serbo-Croat: Globus

Bulgarian: Narodma Kultura

Portuguese/Brasil only: Trajetoria

Swedish: Trevi

Norwegian: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag

Finnish: Tammi Publishers

Danish: Lindhardt and Ringhof

Icelandic: Idunn
Hebrew: Adam Publishers
Japanese: Libro Port
Italian: Bompiani
Catalan: Noguer, Argos (pocket edition)
German: Rogner and Bernhard, Maarten Muntinga (pocket edition)
Greek: Kedros
Dutch: Rogner und Bernhard, Maarten Muntinga (pocket edition)
Portuguese: Imago

La Clé sur la porte
Italian: Bompiani
German: Rowohlt
Greek: Kedros
Danish: Lindhardt and Ringhof
Catalan: Losada, Argos (pocket edition)

Works by Annie Leclerc

Au Feu du jour
Greek: Kastaniotis

Parole de femme
Indonesian: Kanisius
Portuguese/Brasil: Brasiliense
Greek: Kastaniotis
Catalan: Editorial La Aurora

Sales Figures of texts by Cardinal and Leclerc, published by Grasset et Fasquelle

Marie Cardinal:

La Clé sur la porte	27,000
Les Mots pour le dire	140,000
Autrement dit	45,000
Une Vie pour deux	135,000
Au Pays de mes racines	21,000
Le Passé empiété	46,000
La Médée d'Euripide	1,700
Les Grands désordres	66,000
Comme si de rien n'était	35,000
Les Jeudis de Charles et de Lula	23,000
Amour...amours	15,000

Annie Leclerc:

Parole de femme	70,000
Epousailles	30,000
Au Feu du jour	12,000
Hommes et femmes	15,000
Le Mal de mère	4,000
Origines	2,000
Clé	1,000
Exercices de mémoire	1,100

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- (1978) *Une Vie pour deux*, Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle
- (1980) *Au Pays de mes racines*, Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle
- (1983) *Le Passé empiété*, Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle
- (1986) *La Médée d'Euripide*, Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle
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