

Private Life and Collective Experience in Quebec: The Autobiographical Project of France Théoret

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Like other areas of women's experience, women's autobiographies have long been marginalized within the autobiographical canon. The explosion of theoretical work in this domain that has occurred over the last decade has not only made this clear but has begun to suggest some of the reasons why this has been the case. Foremost among the reasons for the lack of recognition of women's autobiographies—a lack of recognition that, in fact, has functioned to discourage their production and publication—has been the division of experience into individual and collective realities, private and public domains.

In a world divided into public and private spheres, women's experience has often been associated with the private. In her collection of essays on women's autobiography, Estelle Jelinek suggested that female autobiographers tended to focus on the private sphere, even when they were women who led active "public" lives, like the playwright Lillian Hellman, the anthropologist Margaret Mead or the political activist Emma Goldman. At the time she published her pioneering work in 1980, Jelinek was led to observe: "This emphasis by women on the personal, especially on other people, rather than on their work life, their professional success, or their connectedness to current political or intellectual history clearly contradicts the established criterion about the content of autobiography" (10).

In addition, women have not been seen—nor have they seen themselves—as appropriate representatives of a larger community. In their introduction to *Life/Lines*, a collection of essays subtitled *Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck point out that "[t]he (masculine) tradition of autobiography beginning with Augustine had taken as its first premise the mirroring capacity of the autobiographer: *his* universality, *his* representativeness, *his* role as spokesman for the community" (1). They go on to examine the case of Henry Adams, once characterized as a "representative of the time, a mirror of his era" (2), who "[p]erhaps . . . more than any other autobiographer, felt himself to be the fulcrum of historical and cultural forces, an elect representative of his unique place in his family and the nation's history" (3). According to Brodzki and

Schenck, the female autobiographer, "[n]o mirror of *her* era" (1), has never possessed this non-problematic assumption of the integrated and exemplary nature of the self.

Recent critical studies of women's autobiography have shown the necessity of complicating generalizations about the public and private aspects of women's life/writing. My own studies have led me to observe that, in many cases, the work of women autobiographers has brought about a redefinition of boundaries between public and private experience. In *La Douleur* (1985), her autobiographical writing about World War II, Marguerite Duras has argued forcefully for the inclusion of personal suffering and loss in the Gaullist public narrative of the French Resistance. Simone de Beauvoir's wartime memoirs, at first criticized for their preoccupation with trivial details of cooking and housekeeping, have helped to change public awareness of the role played by this obsession with the means of daily survival in the experience of the Occupation. Somewhat ironically, de Beauvoir's memoirs are now perceived as more "representative" than the more assertively exemplary Resistance memoirs of De Gaulle.¹

Similarly, in Quebec, the autobiographical writings of Claire Martin and Marie-Claire Blais, at first criticized as fragmentary and disordered, can now be seen to provide an account of the processes of social change and personal liberation that took place during the era of the "Quiet Revolution" in the 1960s.²

As women have felt authorized to write the story of their lives, they have begun to develop new literary forms. Carolyn Heilbrun contends, along with Nancy Miller, that it has not been their alienation from language that has most hindered women's authorship; rather, it has been the lack of narrative structures adequate to the telling of women's experience. In *Writing a Woman's Life* she argues that the dominant masculine plots of romance and marriage left little room for aspects of women's lives that refused to be contained within "the acceptable narrative of a female life" (45). Since 1970, however, Heilbrun feels the nature of women's experience and women's narratives has changed as women consciously recognize the importance of moving toward a collective understanding of self. Domna Stanton has stressed the importance of relationships with others in the structuring of women's autobiographical writing, a process she calls, echoing Mary Mason, "the delineation of identity by way of alterity" (14). For Stanton, the creation of the subject of women's autobiography is related to the process of female development outlined by feminist thinkers such as Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan: "The female 'I' was thus not simply a texture woven of various selves; its threads, its

life-lines, came from and extended to others'' (15). Because of the importance of these connections with others, Heilbrun feels that new narrative forms, for both living and writing, can only emerge from women's gradual creation of a collective vision of self through dialogue with other women:

I suspect that female narratives will be found where women exchange stories, where they read and talk collectively of ambitions, and possibilities, and accomplishments.

I do not believe that new stories will find their way into texts if they do not begin in oral exchanges among women in groups hearing and talking to one another. As long as women are isolated one from the other, not allowed to offer other women the most personal accounts of their lives, they will not be a part of any narrative of their own. (47)

These exchanges, the interplay of women's voices have already begun to play an important role in women's writing and specifically in women's autobiographical writing in French. This new form of what I would like to call "collective autobiography" seems intimately connected to the consciousness engendered by the postwar feminist movement. Its first incarnation may well have been Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking work, *The Second Sex*, in which she found it necessary to broaden her own understanding of the feminine condition by listening to the voices of the many women who appear in her text—the words of women of the past, as expressed in diaries and novels, as well as the voices of French women friends and acquaintances and the hundreds of American college students she spoke with on her postwar lecture tour of the United States. After she had used this testimony to gain an understanding of the shape of a woman's life in *The Second Sex*, it was a logical and necessary step to the reconstruction of her own personal experience in the multi-volume autobiographical project she began in its aftermath.

Another more contemporary example of this collective form is provided by the autobiographical novel of the Algerian Francophone writer Assia Djebar, *L'Amour, la fantasia*. Djebar embeds a first-person reflection on her own childhood in a context of other voices, recording the conversations of women in her own family as well as those of an older generation of Algerian women who have participated in the struggle for their country's independence. These voices are inscribed in a further historical context as they are juxtaposed to

the orientaling perspective of the French conquerors, who have subjected Algerian women to a double colonization.³ As is made clear by the structure of Djébar's novel, the story of the writer's childhood can only be understood within this context, as it is intertwined with other lives. In this work, Djébar is consciously constituting a female self through the inclusion of a multiplicity of women's voices, in the process blurring the lines between personal and collective identity, implicitly affirming the truth of Heilbrun's speculations about the creation of new women's narratives.

In Quebec, the oral exchanges Heilbrun sees as essential to the formation of women's narratives have found their way into many recent Quebec feminist texts, particularly those that have been labelled postmodern. Yolande Villemaire's *La Vie en prose* weaves together individual women's voices, while Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska in *La Maison Trestler* reconstructs Quebec history through a dialogue between present and past. Of these multi-voiced feminist texts, the most evidently autobiographical are those of France Théoret, whose major works—particularly *Une Voix pour Odile*, *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* and the most recent *L'homme qui peignait Staline*—may be considered, in a sense, to constitute a sustained autobiographical project. In considering these texts as autobiography, I am, of course, expanding the notion beyond the limits of Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact," in which the announcement of autobiographical intention plays a determinative role. As I have argued elsewhere, women's life/writing has not always located itself comfortably within the traditional generic boundaries.⁴

Such an autobiographical project breaks new ground in the Quebec literary tradition, where the limits of the narratable have been clearly drawn, particularly in the case of women writers. The French Canadian literary establishment, which, until the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s was largely dominated by the Catholic Church, saw literature as playing a role, good or evil, in the public domain and, ideally, as participating in the collective welfare of French Canadians, to which the personal experience of women was perceived to bear little relationship. Thus, Quebec women were encouraged to confine their writing to the dominant subgenres of the historical novel or the so-called *roman de la terre*, the novel of rural life, neither of which accorded much importance to the emotional life of women. Even in the less repressive intellectual climate of post-World War II Quebec, women's autobiographies were rare. An important woman writer like Gabrielle Roy wove much of her personal experience into her fiction, but she wrote her autobiography, *La Détresse et l'enchantement*, only

at the very end of her life. Marie-Claire Blais, another major woman writer of Quebec in the 1960s, also inscribed much of her own experience in her fiction, particularly in *Manuscrits de Pauline Archange*, her three-volume account of a young girl's discovery of her vocation as a writer, but she persists in denying the autobiographical elements in her work. Throughout the history of Quebec literature, few women's texts have dared to affirm themselves as autobiography and even the effort to give fictional form to women's personal experience has been surrounded by taboos. Théoret's feminist autobiographical project thus opens new possibilities for narrative in Quebec by making room for the expression of a woman's intimate reality and embedding that experience in the collective reality of Quebec.

The outlines of this project may be seen in Théoret's 1978 prose text, *Une Voix pour Odile*, translated in *The Tangible Word*, begun, as the author tells it, as the result of an alienating confrontation with a male professor in France.⁵ In her attempt to affirm her own countervailing identity as female and Québécoise, Théoret found it necessary to incorporate into her text the life, and, in fact, the imagined voice, of a maternal aunt, who had died at menopause: "Elle disparue il y a la voix à inventer l'écho de la voix le rappel de la voix qui se noie" (24) 'She disappeared there is the voice to invent the echo of a voice the reminder of the voice that is drowning' (47). In *Une Voix pour Odile*, Théoret implicitly recognized the impossibility of affirming her own individuality without recognizing its grounding in the experience of preceding generations of women.

In her longer novel, *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* (1982), this original autobiographical impulse is developed in greater complexity. The voice of Odile is replaced by those of a multitude of Quebec women, whose stories are told to the narrator by an older woman acquaintance. Through the interplay of different voices, the interlocking and mirroring of disparate narratives, Théoret constructs a female autobiographical subject that encompasses the reality of several generations of Quebec women. *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* is thus, along with Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*, an example of a new narrative form that has emerged from women's collective efforts to construct a new female self, a sort of feminist collective autobiography.

The dual impulse toward personal and collective autobiography is present from the first pages of Théoret's text. The novel opens with a baffling series of seemingly incoherent affirmations: "Lorsque passe la mort, je dis présente. A ma montre, il est toujours l'heure. Le plein et le dénoué. When death passes, I answer here. On my watch, it is

always time. The full and the untied' (9).⁶ In light of the multiple musical allusions in the text, this opening passage can be seen as a sort of "overture" in which themes are introduced before being presented in their proper context. In the midst of this fragmented and seemingly incoherent series of statements emerges the figure of a young girl: "une toute jeune fille recommence d'apprendre à vivre" 'a very young girl begins anew to learn how to live' (9). This figure, although described in the third person, is an early representation of the speaking subject, the voice who has already begun the narration by saying "I." The young girl is described in terms that will later be attached to the first-person speaker: "[E]lle bégaië, hésite quand elle parle" 'She stutters, hesitates when she speaks' (9). Here, as later in the text, the process of learning to "live" is attached to the question of language.

It is only in the fourth fragment, on the third page of the text, that the story is introduced of the girl who refuses to work in her father's grocery store. There is as yet no link between this unnamed character, described only as "she," and the speaking subject, although her stuttering provides a powerful link to the young girl of the first page.

As many critics have noted, the subject of autobiography is inevitably split. If, according to Philippe Lejeune, autobiography is always "the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes about his or her own existence" (14), the subject of autobiography is at the same time the author/narrator who looks back and the protagonist who actually experiences the events being told. This split between present and past selves also exists in Théoret's text, set primarily in two different time periods. She has described the structure of the novel as a sort of chiasmus: fragments concerning the period 1955-60 constitute approximately two-thirds of the first long section of the novel, while the narrative present of 1975-80 dominates in the conclusion.⁷ But Théoret's splitting of the autobiographical subject goes beyond the simple division between past and present.

The first-person voice that speaks in the first pages of the text immediately foregrounds a more complex fragmentation, as it affirms, "Dans la ville je circule brisée" 'In the city I circulate shattered' (10). The narrative voice makes no pretensions to a false unity, and the reasons for this refusal are made explicit in the section entitled "Lamento d'Arianna," where the effort of a young schoolteacher to attain the coherent identity prescribed by society threatens to end in total silence. Coherent identity, on a personal or collective level, creates an undesirable and paralyzing rigidity, "une identité dure comme fer," 'an iron-hard identity' (168).

Théoret uses this fragmentation of the female subject as her point of departure and the grounding of her textual practice. It determines the very form of a text that is broken into short segments not only by typographical divisions but, more evidently, by the different voices that speak in each textual fragment. Commentators have tended to identify the first-person voices with the autobiographical experience of Théoret, and this reading, based on extratextual knowledge of Théoret's life experience, suggests an identity of author and narrator, an intermingling of reality and fiction. Yet, on the basis of textual evidence alone, there is little to suggest that the first-person voice that begins anew at the beginning of each fragment of the text does indeed belong to the same speaking subject. It is only our tendency as readers to perceive a continuity between feminine subjects that leads us to believe that the little girl who falls from the streetcar is to be identified with the barmaid and the young schoolteacher and the writer who speaks with her friend who loves Colette. In the same way, this recognition of continuity within difference leads us to perceive the various "she(s)" of the text as possible variants of the "I."

The splitting apart of the narrative voice at the same time opens it to a multiplicity of feminine experience, both in the context of history ("j'ai dans mes veines les générations antérieures" 'the blood of preceding generations runs in my veins' [10]) and of the surrounding society ("Je me confonds attirée et portée par des regards brisés. Les vieilles femmes qui parlent toutes seules, les robineux et les débiles. Un même espace mental ouvert . . ." 'I lose myself, drawn in and borne by shattered looks. Old women who talk to themselves, drunk and senile. The same mental space opened up . . .' [10]).

The process extends to include in a collective feminine subjectivity even the various women, identified only by a third-person feminine pronoun, whose experience is clearly separate from that of the speaking voice. This multiple subjectivity is given a historical dimension by the tragic stories of women's lives in pre-1960 Quebec, stories told by the 74-year-old woman in the sections beginning, "Elle a soixante-quatorze ans, elle me raconte" 'She is seventy-four years old, she tells me' (15, 40, 102, 115, 123, 136). The older woman talks of the lives of women of her own generation, burdened with large families, abandoned or ignored by their men. A woman is driven to madness by the unending series of babies: after the birth of her sixth child, she is sent off to an asylum. As an obstetrical nurse, the older woman has seen children condemned to institutionalization because of lack of care in their overburdened families, mothers who lament the birth of each new life. These tales of women and children suffocated by the social

structure work to undermine the old Quebec myth of the moral superiority of the large rural family, with its ties to the land. The voices in Théoret's text tell a different story of destruction wrought on women's lives by the demands of this myth itself. These voices from the past also show strong links with the experience of the speaking subject. Théoret encourages her readers to break down the boundaries between "she" and "I" as she shifts pronouns within a single textual fragment or reiterates in the third person an experience already narrated in the first.

Although there is a blurring of identities, a commonality of experience, the process of dialogue between different voices is crucial to the construction of a collective subject, and it is foregrounded in the text. The passages that tell the stories of the 74-year-old woman are always introduced by the words "she tells me." Oral exchanges between women proliferate within the text. The adolescent girl talks with her mother, a friend telephones to tell of childhood sexual abuse, the present narrator meets and converses with her anglophone friend, "the friend who loves Colette." In their dialogues the friends traverse linguistic boundaries—the linguistic boundaries of Canada itself—as the Francophone narrator replies to her friend's references to Colette with her own love for Virginia Woolf. Beginning with quotations from Woolf herself, written as well as spoken words of other women enter Théoret's text, as well as references to literary figures. As is the case with the voices of Quebec women of the preceding generation, these literary voices often point to a history of oppression and deprivation. Angeline de Montbrun, the character created by Quebec's first woman novelist, Laure Conan, is disfigured because of an obscure personal failing, abandoned by her beloved fiancé and left to live out her life in lonely isolation. The woman known as "La Corriveau" was unjustly convicted of murdering her husband, and her corpse was placed in an iron cage. The figures of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, both finally driven to suicide, become sisters to these Quebec women, whose condition they share, and evocation of the wrathful Electra and the suffocated Antigone extends the network of intertextual sisterhood to ancient Greece.

This dialogue of feminine intertextuality is described by the young girl's summer correspondence with her friend: "Le rythme d'une correspondance. L'échange. Un réseau de paroles" 'The rhythm of correspondence. Exchange. A network of words' (78). The form of Théoret's text is aptly described by one of the narrator's descriptions of a musical composition by Schönberg: "Tour à tour voix d'homme, voix de femme, entrée instrumentale au moment où les voix

s'estompent, une finale comme un commencement. Continuum. C'est toujours déjà commencé depuis. Alternance, la voix humaine devient instrument et l'instrument interpelle à son tour. Morte la rivalité. Entier tissu musical. Eclat soudain d'un chœur. Et le chœur reprend" 'In turn, the voice of a man, the voice of a woman, instruments come in as the voices die out, a finale like a beginning. A continuum. It's always already begun. Alternation, the human voice becomes an instrument and the instrument answers in its turn. Death of rivalry. Total musical fabric. Sudden bursting out of a chorus. And the chorus takes it up' (20).

It is interesting that this music involves the voices of both women and men. Although the voices who speak in Théoret's text are those of women, their experience may be shared with men. The narrator is particularly conscious of her relationship with the contemporary Quebec writers Hubert Aquin and Claude Gauvreau, who, like Virginia Woolf, were led to commit suicide. In reflecting on Gauvreau, she evokes his desire to invent a new language, perhaps implying, as does the book's title, that a renovation of language might also provide a way out of an oppressive reality.

Théoret makes it clear from the first pages of the text that her multiple voices are firmly situated within the reality of Quebec. Despite its incoherence, the first short section of the text gestures clearly toward its Montreal setting: "La rue des briques, escaliers en fer" 'The street of brick buildings, iron stairways' (9). In the second section, however, the speaking subject expands to take on the dimensions of the territory of Quebec: "Entre l'Abitibi et les Cantons de l'Est, dans les quartiers Maisonneuve et Saint-Henri et aux quatre coins de Saint-Colomban où les chiens jappent après la lune. La communauté . . . me rejoint partout où que je sois" 'Between Abitibi and the Eastern Townships, in the Maisonneuve and Saint-Henri districts and the four corners of Saint-Colomban where dogs bark at the moon. The community . . . seeks me out wherever I am' (10). The narrator's movement, extending from Abitibi in the north southeast to the Eastern Townships, sweeps through the densely populated Francophone Montreal working-class areas of Maisonneuve and Saint-Henri, thus taking in much of the Quebec population before moving on to the typical Quebec village of Saint-Colomban, described as "un village réduit aux plus simples dimensions" 'a village reduced to its simplest dimensions' (10). The community with which the speaker identifies herself exists in spatial and also in temporal terms: on the same page, the speaker continues, "j'ai dans mes veines les

générations antérieures . . . "the blood of preceding generations flows in my veins" (10).

Although the experience of the autobiographical subject is in many ways the personal and private experience of a girl becoming a woman, that of a woman oppressed by a patriarchal society, it becomes, almost insensibly, the collective experience of all Québécois, an experience profoundly shaped by the "private" sphere of life within the family. The family of the autobiographical protagonist becomes, by the end of the novel, equated with the whole of Quebec society: "Un petit lieu où ce qui s'appelle rigueur et exactitude n'est autrement nommé que rigidité. Encore c'est le lieu où des familles entières sont écrasées d'enfants, chargées de survivre en nombre avant tout et où chacun masque son désarroi" 'A small place where what is called rigor and exactness is nothing other than rigidity. It is the place where whole families are crushed under the weight of children, told to survive in great number above all, where each person's trouble is hidden behind a mask' (119). In Théoret's text, individual experience becomes collective, the lines between public and private are blurred. As these words imply, the particularly oppressive situation of Quebec families, whose children exceed their resources, is related to an outdated policy of survival through population growth that had been enunciated by a nineteenth-century intellectual elite and enforced by the authority of Church and State. The father's particular interdiction of the narrator's study of Latin evokes a whole history of domination by an elite initiated into this ritual language of the Church.

The oppression resulting from an outmoded Quebec family policy is linked as well to the political oppression by the Anglophone-dominated Canadian federal government, which, in October 1970, responded to the actions of a small Quebec terrorist group by imposing martial law and arresting hundreds of innocent people. Set during the month of October, the last section of the book evokes thoughts of this "October Crisis," bringing its reality into the present: "En octobre, des gens au regard éveillé ont été incarcérés. Chaque emportement est menacé. Tout emportement est une menace" "In October, people with an enlightened look were locked up. Every expression of anger is threatened. All outbursts are a threat" (172). Individual thought or action, on the part of the woman narrator or the Quebec people as a whole, is subject to the same repression.

Both Karen Gould and Patricia Smart have already analyzed the way in which the multiple voices within the text unite to constitute the plural pronoun of Théoret's title, *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* (*We will Speak the Way People Write*). This plural pronoun is reminiscent

of the collective Québécois subject that Quebec writers of the 1960s aspired to create, although the unity of this subject in Théoret's postmodern work is neither seamless nor even assumed. By its verbs, Théoret's title, in fact, reverses an important direction of the Quebec literary project of the 1960s, an era when many writers sought to reproduce in writing the reality of Québécois oral speech, as a way of subverting standard "international" French. This project might well have been characterized, paraphrasing Théoret's title, as, "We will write the way people speak." Théoret, on the other hand, seems to be suggesting a different relationship between writing and lived experience, in which the practice of writing might transform the lives and the words spoken by real women. Her autobiographical project would thus seem to embody the dream articulated so forcefully by Carolyn Heilbrun of women's collective creation of new narratives which would, in turn, be capable of restructuring their lives.

Notes

1. See my article, "Writing War in the Feminine."
2. See my article, "Structures of Liberation: Female Experience and Autobiographical Form in Quebec."
3. See my article, "Dismantling the Colonizing Text."
4. See "Structures of Liberation."
5. Théoret commented on her writing in a discussion held at Dartmouth College on February 27, 1990.
6. Since *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* is one of the few novels by Théoret that has not been translated, the approximate English translations appearing in this article are my own.
7. Discussion at Dartmouth College, February 27, 1990.

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