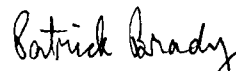


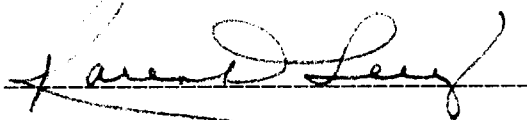
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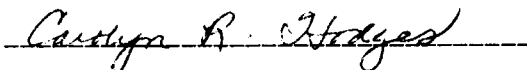
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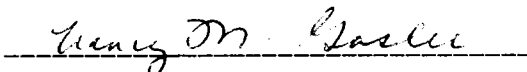


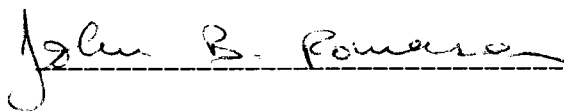
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Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

**The Problematics of Gender Specificity
in Sarraute's *Enfance*,
Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité*
and Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre
ou l'histoire de Jeanne***

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Brenda Young Ferrell

December 1997

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the problematics of gender specificity in three twentieth-century French women writers' works in which there is a strong female protagonist. These works are Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*, Marguerite Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité*, and Lucette Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne*. This study is divided into two parts. Part One is comprised of two chapters, and Part Two of five. The first chapter of Part One deals with the theory of a specific women's writing and is subdivided into three parts: woman as reader, woman as writer, and woman as autobiographer. The second chapter presents Sarraute's, Yourcenar's and Desvignes's claims of gender neutrality in their writings, and also discusses the concepts of universality, misogyny, autobiographical style, and the existence of a "new" writing style in these women's works. The five chapters in Part Two draw on examples from the texts to support my claim that a gender specific writing does, indeed, exist in these three works despite what the writers claim to the contrary. Chapter One deals with innovations in women's autobiography such as a reticence to reveal one's self, the issue of truth versus fiction, and the fragmentation of the text. Chapter Two presents certain characteristics of *écriture féminine* which can be found in each of these texts. Chapter Three examines the family relationships in each of these works focusing especially on the mother-daughter relationship and the "maternal" fathers. Chapter Four analyzes these three works as examples of female *Bildungsroman* drawing on the theories of Esther Kleinbord Labovitz. Finally, Chapter Five discusses

certain areas of interest or concern to women which pervade these works: scissors, clothes, dolls, and the powerful effect of words.

Based on certain theories of *écriture féminine*, women's autobiography, woman as reader and woman as writer, I conclude that a gender specific writing is present in these three works by Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Theoretical Introduction: The French-American Connection	1
--	---

PART 1

Introduction: The Authors	9
-------------------------------------	---

Chapter 1: Is there a Distinctive Feminine Style of Writing?	15
--	----

Woman as Reader: Furman, 17—Showalter, Miller, 19— Culler, 21

Woman as Writer: Gallop, Heilbrun, Jacobus, Abel, 26—
Gardiner, 29—Eisenstein, Cixous, 32—Gauthier, 36—
Showalter, 38—Jehlen, Oates, Brady, 40—DuPlessis, 45

Woman as Autobiographer: Snyder, Hite, 49—Miller, Morgan, 52—
Wilson, 55—Jelinek, 59—Voss, 64

Chapter 2: Authorial Attitudes: Claims of Gender Neutrality	70
---	----

Nathalie Sarraute: Not a Woman Writer, 71—Universality and New
Writing Style, 75—Influence of her Mother and Misogynistic
Portrayal of Women, 79

Marguerite Yourcenar: Not a Woman Writer, 83—Misogynistic
Portrayal of Women or Not? 84—Mimesis and Influence of
Father, 95—Universality and New Autobiographical Style,
98—Paratexts, 108

Lucette Desvignes: Not a Woman Writer, 114—Male and Female
Characters, 115—Writing "Auto"biography, 118—
Universality, 120

Conclusion	123
----------------------	-----

PART 2

Introduction: The Texts	125
Chapter 1: Innovations in Women's Autobiography	127
Reticence to Reveal Self, 128—Truth vs. Fiction, 132— Fragmentation, 138—Summary, 143	
Chapter 2: <i>Ecriture Féminine</i> : Style and Structure	145
New Writing Style: <i>Disease de l'indicible</i> , 146— Characteristics: Suspension Marks, Silences, Divisions of Text, 157—Filmic Style of Writing, 166—Orality of Writing, 169—Multilayering or Polyphony, 175—Narrative Techniques, 183—Gender of Narratorial Voice, 193— Summary, 197	
Chapter 3: Family Relationships	199
Maternal Absence, Indifference and Lack of Commun- ication, 200—"Maternal" Fathers, 218—Love, 223—Death, 230—Fatality, 234—Summary, 237	
Chapter 4: <i>Bildung</i>	239
Female <i>Bildungsroman</i> , 240—Self-actualization, 244— Mentors, 254—Movement from the Provinces to the Urban Center, 257—Self-education through Reading, 260— "Unusual" Women: Women "Before their Time," 269—Secret Part of Self, 275—Willingness to do Unpleasant Tasks, 278—Summary, 280	
Chapter 5: Feminine Interests/Concerns	282
Scissors, 283—Clothes, 286—Dolls, 297—Powerful Effect of Words, 304—Summary, 317	
Conclusion	319
Postface	328
Works Consulted	330
Vita	349

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS OF WORKS CITED

E	<i>Enfance</i>
GC	<i>Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne</i>
QE	<i>Quoi? L'éternité</i>
LNA	<i>Les Noeuds d'argile</i>
OR	<i>Oeuvres Romanesques</i>
SLD	<i>Studies on Lucette Desvignes and the Twentieth Century</i>
YO	<i>Les Yeux Ouverts: Marguerite Yourcenar, Entretiens avec Mathieu Galey</i>

Theoretical Introduction
The French-American Connection

Much has been written in the past twenty years about the importance of gender and the different ways in which men and women use words in both speech and writing. Some critics argue that sex plays a role in the different lived experiences of men and women to such an extent that this difference is reflected in men's and women's writing. Other critics stipulate that one's gender alone influences writing. Still others differentiate between women's social experience and their biological experience as revealed in women's writing. Then there is also the issue of the style and content of women's writing and how that may or may not differ from men's. As one examines women's writing, all of these issues enter into the analysis contributing to the problematics of gender specificity.

In Christiane Makward's essay, "To Be or Not to Be . . . a Feminist Speaker," she establishes 1975 as the time when two concepts about women's relation to language appeared in French literary criticism, that of women's speech (*parole de femme*) and that of feminine writing (*écriture-au-féminin*). The following decade saw the "explosion of feminine writing, that is, a rapid blooming of first-rate literary works qualifying as 'writing-in-the-feminine' in that they attempt[ed] and succeed[ed] in creating new forms to signify or 'inscribe' femininity" (95). She identifies key words associated with female creativity that have emerged from French feminist creative and critical writings: "open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to 'speak the body,' i.e., the

unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from logical, nonambiguous, so-called 'transparent' or functional language" (96). Makward finds inherent problems for feminist scholars in relating the practice of feminine writing to the theory of femininity. In Neo-Freudian theory

language is said to function through male control of women's bodies at the cost of female silence and submission. The corollary of this conception of language is that the feminine is said to be by definition undefinable, unspeakable and silent, in that "when women think, they think like men" or that thought excludes femininity, or again, that the feminine is unthinkable. (96-97)

Makward believes that concepts of feminine creativity have moved beyond either silence or ephemeral political expression. Ideas about non-termination, open structures, nonlinearity, and movement have emerged as being associated with *écriture féminine*. She identifies the difficulty of defining feminine creativity and writing without "opposing them to 'the Other,' to describe them while dissociating them from the writer's sex" (101). Her proposal for moving beyond the impasse of silence is to return to the initial postulate of bisexuality, "to speak as a woman/gynandrous being, and not to allow ourselves to go on demonstrating that discourse is masculine" (103). Following the exhortation of Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa," Makward encourages us to *go beyond* the contradictions that encumber feminine discourse and the theory of the feminine rather than obliterating or reducing them (103).

Josette Féral declares that we, that is, women, have to invent or reinvent society, creating new values, new discourses, new words, refusing to "allow woman to accede to the existing values, those masculine values which have always evaded the problem of difference. We must substitute for them our own ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking" ("The Powers of

Difference" 92). She advocates breaking down the old forms of established discourse in which woman absolutely cannot find her place because it is so permeated with masculine values. Woman may borrow "forms and structures from the established discourse, but only in order to disrupt them in her attempt to go beyond them toward a different horizon" (93).

Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn have identified gender as one of the fundamental organizing categories of experience of feminist literary criticism. Two premises about gender exist within their version of this category. The first is that the inequality of the sexes is a cultural construct rather than a biological given or a divine mandate. The second is that a male perspective has dominated and shaped various fields of knowledge because of the assumption that this perspective is "universal." From these two premises, feminist literary criticism has established at least two areas of concern. One is to revise concepts previously considered as universal but which really originate in specific cultures and have particular purposes. The second is to restore or even establish a "female perspective by extending knowledge about women's experience and contributions to culture" (1-2).

In Nelly Furman's essay, "The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle?", she employs Lévi-Strauss's argument that woman is both object of desire and object of exchange in a world defined by man, she is both "a person and a sign, a human being and a depersonalized, subjectless structure" (61). This understanding influences the discussion of "woman's relationship to language—of woman and/in language—and determines the direction of the discussion depending on whether woman is understood as being a person or a sign" (61). Furman argues that although

each person's experience of life is unique, sex is an essential differentiating factor among individuals, so that men and women will have markedly different experiences. Furman seems to suggest that this difference is not just a biological fact: along with Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, she argues that culture and society have also played a role, giving rise to the recurrence of certain themes, topics, images and metaphors in women's literary works. According to Furman, these feminist critics outline the problem as being one of definition from the male perspective, and argue for examination from a female perspective (62-63).

Another critic who points out the limits of the existing language for expressing the feminine is Mary Lydon. She remarks on "the difficulty if not the impossibility of representing femininity, and by extension, sexual difference, in language which . . . is inadequate to the task. Yet the paradox remains that it is *only* in language, for all its inadequacy, that 'femininity' may (fleetingly) be represented" (37).

Domna C. Stanton's essay, "Language and Revolution: The Franco-American Dis-Connection," explores three French feminist critical theories and how they connect with or differ from American feminist critical thought. She finds that Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray argue that women's *repression* exists not only in economic, political, or social structures but in the very foundations "of the Logos, in the subtle linguistic and logical processes through which meaning itself is produced" (73). Therefore, they propose that we deconstruct this symbolic order as men have created it, and find a new word/writing/logos created by women. According to Stanton, Irigaray's and Cixous's primary concern is with the

inscription of the female in language and thought, whereas Kristeva's vision of a transformed Logos does not differentiate "the female impulse from other polymorphous manifestations of negativity and dissidence" (75). Cixous believes that some men have produced texts marked by *feminité* or femaleness (i.e., Jean Genet), and she warns against confusing the sex (the biological attributes) of the author with her/his sexuality (sexual orientation and practice) (76). In her emphasis on the revolutionary power of *l'écriture féminine*, Cixous admits that speech is greatly influenced by the dominant system of discourse, but that writing (*écriture*) is the space where change can take place. Stanton's summary of these three critics denotes an emphasis on the unconscious in an articulation of woman's difference in their efforts "to revolutionize the dominant discourse to its very core" (77). She cautions against "the 'erection' of a feminist critical imperialism that mouths dogma and prescribes *the* right way to package a feminist product" (79). She advocates preserving openness and diversity as well as dialogue and receptiveness about the differences within feminist criticism in order to continue its revolutionary impulse. However, this does not mean total espousal of *écriture féminine* without seriously examining it first. Both American and French feminist critics should question whether "global subversion of the Logos can be achieved through language . . . and [whether] a locus [exists] outside of the symbolic order from which woman might speak her difference" (80).

Ann Rosalind Jones continues this examination of French feminist criticism in her survey of four French feminist critics and their theories in her essay, "Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine."

She defines Julia Kristeva's theory of the semiotic as "a rhythmic free play related to mother-infant communication" (80). She explains that Irigaray's emphasis on *différence* leads her to imagine a specifically feminine language, a *parler femme*, which reproduces "the doubleness, contiguity and fluidity of women's sexual morphology and the multi-centred libidinal energy that arises from them" (86). Irigaray's theories of feminine subjectivity have evolved into a set of criteria that has become widely recognized in *l'écriture féminine*: "double or multiple voices, broken syntax, repetitive or cumulative rather than linear structure, open endings" (88). Cixous advocates an *écriture féminine* which celebrates women's sexual capacities, asserting the female body as plenitude, and a source of multiple physical capacities (gestation, birth, lactation) and of liberatory texts. She focuses on unconscious erotic female bodily drives which produce a distinctively feminine style of writing (88). Monique Wittig rejects the idea of *différence*, calling for an understanding of women as subjected to oppression. She believes that language is both a means of oppression and the means for countering this oppression (91). In contrast to Irigaray and Cixous, who base their theories of writing on the individual female body, Wittig's theory rests on "a desire for a plural, social body, a lesbian body politic" (92).

Because these four feminist critics' work has greatly influenced the field of feminist literary theory, it is necessary to mention them here. However, I will only employ parts of their theories to apply to this current study of the selected works under consideration by Sarraute, Yourcenar, and Desvignes. Because I have chosen to concentrate on the concept of gender specificity in these works, and since all of these critics do propose

that gender specificity exists in writing, that is the premise which seems to be the most broadening and the one I wish to pursue in my own fashion. Women's writing does reflect the gender of the writer. This gender specificity is revealed in both the style and the content of the writing, as well as in the woman's social and biological experiences.

It is evident that the question of gender specificity and the differences in how men and women use language is still of paramount importance in 1997. Nara Schoenberg's article entitled, "Sex Discrimination Common in Colleges, Speaker Says" appeared in the April 19, 1997 issue of the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*. Anne Murray, a former Western Kentucky University administrator who settled a 1994 sex discrimination lawsuit against the university, claims the problem to be that "men have not educated themselves in the differences in the gender-conversational styles." She said, "For many years women have been told that we are broken and must be fixed, that we must behave in male-like ways in order to function effectively in the workplace and in order to be perceived as competent." This sounds much like what feminist critics have been saying about women's writing—either we must conform to the traditional (male) model or struggle to create our own new language and style.

PART 1

Introduction: The Authors

In the semi-autobiographical works of Sarraute (*Enfance*), Yourcenar (*Quoi? L'éternité*) and Desvignes (*Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne*), one can find many strong women characters who face adversities and death. Although each of these authors insists that she is not a feminist writer, the particular importance she gives to the development of the female heroine turns these works into examples of female/feminist writing. I shall argue that these works belong to the genre of twentieth century *écriture féminine* by finding examples in each text that exemplify female characteristics, attitudes and emotions. The discussion will encompass both biological and social feminine characteristics, with more emphasis on the social. A common theme tying these works together is the self-development of the woman protagonist through the vicissitudes of her life, much of this development being tempered by the mother-daughter relationships.

These accounts of Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes have also been classified as "autofictions" because of the mixture of truth and fiction in each work (a situation which arises because of the difficulty of recreating the past truthfully in one's writing). Each of these women writers penned her "autofiction" in the latter part of her life. Sarraute was eighty-three when she wrote *Enfance*; Yourcenar was eighty-four when she was writing *Quoi? L'éternité* and died before it was finished or published; Desvignes was fifty-six when she first published *Les Noeuds d'argile* and fifty-nine when *Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne* was

published. Both Sarraute and Yourcenar had established successful literary careers with many published works and literary awards before attempting to write their *mémoires*. Desvignes had distinguished herself as a Marivaux scholar and academic before taking early retirement in order to devote herself to her own writing and to try to launch her own career as a writer, with the publication of the first volume of the three-volume saga of her own family's history. She, too has received literary awards for her fictional works.

Each of the three works to be examined here portrays a very strong female protagonist who plays an instrumental, if not the primary, role in that work. All three works belong to the time period of the early twentieth century, with episodes in both France and Russia. All three of these works were written/published in the 1980's (*Enfance* [1983], *Quoi? L'éternité* [1988], *Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne* [1985]). Although the authors themselves are Russian/French, Belgian/French, and Burgundian/French, they all deny the existence of an *écriture féminine* in their own writings. Nevertheless, I propose that an *écriture féminine* does prevail in these three literary works in the portrayal of certain events, feelings and emotions, as well as in the self-development of the female protagonist.

In the area of self-development, the recurrent theme of female *Bildung* as described by Esther Kleinbord Labovitz in her book *The Myth of the Heroine* suggests a link between these works as examples of the female *Bildungsroman*. No one has treated these three works together before, nor has anyone discussed the female *Bildungsroman* heroine in these works, individually or collectively. This is what is treated in Part Two, Chapter

Three of this dissertation. Labovitz argues that the female *Bildungsroman* modified the traditional definition/image of the *Bildungsroman* in many ways, one of which was extending the protagonists' *Bildung* on into middle age rather than stopping at the threshold of marriage. Desvignes's Jeanne Berthouin and Yourcenar's Jeanne de Reval both fit this category. However, Sarraute's Natacha's *Bildung* adventure will be incomplete, as it takes the heroine only to the age of twelve or thirteen. Yet most *Bildungsromane* begin with the protagonist's childhood and education, and since these are two of the primary elements in *Enfance*, I shall argue for the inclusion of Natacha in this discussion, especially since this time period of her *Bildung* adventure is described in much greater detail than that of Jeanne Berthouin or Jeanne de Reval.

Although much has been written on Sarraute's *Enfance*, very little has been written on Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne*, or on Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité*, especially since this last work was published posthumously. The latter merits attention, particularly since we do not have the plethora of comments by Yourcenar herself with prefaces, postfaces, notes and interviews which accompany and surround her other works. Desvignes's work, though not very well-known in France, has a growing number of American and foreign critics. However, this second volume of the *Les Mains nues* trilogy has been out of print for some time, so it is not readily accessible for research and is perhaps the volume which has received the smallest amount of critical attention. Thus, both of these works as well as Sarraute's demand critical appraisal and attention.

Though these works are all to some extent autobiographical, each one modifies any typical definition of "autobiography," such as that offered by Philippe Lejeune as a "récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie, individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité" (*Le Pacte* 14). Sarraute's very fragmented text of childhood memories from the age of three to about twelve or thirteen years of age consists of three voices which interact based on events and feelings triggered by the words of others. The female protagonist is the child Natacha Tcherniak, Sarraute herself. The reader of both Yourcenar's and Desvignes's texts expects to read of the author/narrator's life, but instead becomes immersed in the lives of her family members or family friends. Though both Yourcenar and Desvignes had planned to write their family histories, projects which grew to enormous proportions and required several volumes, the closer the project came to their own lives and present, the more difficult it became for them to continue, and the more they distanced their own selves from the text. Thus Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité* continues to relate the story of her father, Michel de C. (begun in *Souvenirs pieux* and elaborated in *Archives du nord*) with a large portion of the work devoted to Jeanne de Reval (the close girlhood friend of Yourcenar's mother, Fernande), who offered to be a substitute mother for the young Marguerite when Fernande died ten days after giving birth to this daughter. Jeanne also became one of Michel de C.'s mistresses and had a profound influence on the young Marguerite's life. Yourcenar herself appears at the beginning of *Quoi? L'éternité* but with very few appearances in the rest of the text, mainly in the chapter entitled "*Les miettes de l'enfance*." Desvignes's *Le Grain du*

chanvre recounts the fictionalized story of Desvignes's maternal grandmother, Jeanne (née Berthouin). Just as Yourcenar is absent from much of her autobiographical work, Desvignes, too, appears only near the end of *Le Grain du chanvre* as Jeanne's granddaughter named Séverine in the chapter "*Vacances de Pâques: La dernière promenade (Séverine dialogue avec le silence)*."

One more reason for grouping these three works together is that all three of these women writers stress the universality of the experiences related in their works. Peter Christensen indicates that Yourcenar criticized family histories that were undertaken for the sole purpose of discovering someone of power or importance in the past (63). She envisioned her autobiography in terms of universal history, writing it as "an elderly woman looking back over the expanse of her own life and the labyrinth of history. . . All of the centuries must be considered in judging her life . . ." (Christensen, 66). Michael Tilby expresses a similar impression that, though this writing is rooted in a personal quest, what impresses us

is its ability to look beyond the individual self of author or character to a world of universal concerns and values. The reader . . . is left feeling that differences of time, of place and of gender are, ultimately, of relative insignificance. The mass of particular details that make up an individual's experiences and which are so finely recorded by the author are revealed to us as merely the product of random accidents. (35-36)

This comment seems to be appropriate for both Sarraute's and Desvignes's works as well. Part One, Chapter Two, will demonstrate how each of these women writers perceives of her work as being universal.

I wish to pursue both the issues of style and content in these three women's works and how they reflect certain traits of *écriture féminine*;

however, I shall argue this by emphasizing women's social experience rather than discussing it as an essential biological experience. I shall also examine these works as examples of female *Bildungsromane* based on the themes and topics treated in each work from a feminine perspective. The issue of universality will also be analyzed because each of these writers insists that her work is universal. However, it is important to examine how this can be if these works belong to the categories of *écriture féminine* and female *Bildungsroman*.

Chapter 1

Is There a Distinctive Feminine Style of Writing?

Virginia Woolf wrote, "A woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine" (qtd. in Abel 14).

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous wrote:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (qtd. in Marks & de Courtivron 245)

It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, encoded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (qtd. in Marks & de Courtivron 253)

Mary Jacobus has proposed that we need a women's writing that works within "male" discourse but works "ceaselessly to deconstruct it: to write what cannot be written" ("The Difference of View" 12-13).

According to Shoshana Felman, "the challenge facing the woman today is nothing less than to 'reinvent' language, . . . to structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning" (10).

Introduction

This thorny question about the existence of a feminine style of writing has proponents on both sides: those who deny the existence of an *écriture féminine* and those who espouse its existence. It becomes necessary to define, or rather to attempt to define, what *écriture féminine* is in order to develop elements or characteristics that one might find in woman's writing that seem to be peculiar to women writers. Not only does the style of writing reveal a woman author's hand, but also the subject matter. One area of *écriture féminine* that has received much attention is the writing of women's autobiographies, so I shall also look at woman as autobiographer. Associated with this question of woman as writer and woman as autobiographer is the notion of woman as reader and the interaction between the author-text-reader and the various interpretations that a woman reader may bring to a text which could differ from a male reader's interpretation.

Many feminist critics and women writers argue for the acceptance of androgyny as part of feminist criticism. In *Gender Studies: New Directions in Feminist Criticism*, Judith Spector agrees that this was originally a good idea because it included the study of both genders and recognized the fact that both women and men are "equally human, equally entitled to full privileges within the human race, literature and academe" (5). However, she criticizes this view now fearing that it could lead to separatism because "men and women are equally influenced by differences in perspective which result from gender-related differences in culture" (5). Yet this issue must be discussed here, because Sarraute, Yourcenar and

Desvignes all advocate the concept of an androgynous style in their own works. They will advocate such a position because of their insistence on the universal nature of their works.

Woman as Reader

Furman

In Nelly Furman's essay, "Textual Feminism," she states that one of the early concerns of feminist criticism was the study of the images of women, the explanation of women's characterization, and the analysis of the economic restrictions, social taboos, and cultural norms that governed women's behavior. As feminist criticism developed, the feminist critics have argued that a male view of life has influenced literary standards, often discounting women's interests and perception of life, and women's views of experience (46). Textual criticism emphasizes the articulation of language and meaning and aids the feminist critics to "debunk the myth of linguistic neutrality . . . [It] can show how women appropriate gender-marked signs" (48). This is evident not only in speech, but also in writing and, according to Furman ("Textual"), Miller ("Changing"), Oates and others, also in reading. Furman writes, "there is no reason to believe that, as readers, men and women impart identical connotations to words" ("Textual" 48). Adrienne Rich explains that it has been difficult to break free from the "power of the fathers . . . because it permeates everything, even the language in which we try to describe it" (qtd. in Furman, "Textual" 49). Furman espouses the modern stress on the interaction between writer and reader and with the linguistic medium, describing it as a dynamic interchange with the text as the locus and the product of the

relationship. She continues by arguing that, since the reader is the one who perceives elements of a work as significant, the creative process that was once thought to be the author's domain is now seen to be shared by the reader through the reading process. She emphasizes the difference in the way men and women read and states that "it is the reader's acumen, expectations, and unconsciousness which invest the text with meaning" (49). If we focus, then, on women as readers and women as writers, there exists a continuous alternating movement (49). In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf indicates that they are ill-suited to a woman's sensitivity and experience (Furman, "Textual" 50). Furman emphasizes that the importance of textual criticism for the feminist scholar rests "in the implications of the [New-Critical] switch to the power of the reader" (51, my insert). She believes that readers have their own audible voices and distinguishable personae. "Reading is no longer just an attempt to decipher; it is simultaneously a gesture of self-inscription" (51). In her conclusion, Furman says that "textual feminism implies a recognition of the fact that we speak, read, and write from a gender-marked place within our social and cultural context" (52). She admits, too, as many others have before her, that a plurality of readers may also give rise to a plurality of readings/interpretations, since the active reader is also a producer of a new text (52).

Showalter, Miller

Another feminist critic who stresses the importance of the role of woman as reader is Elaine Showalter. In her essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," Showalter discusses the many facets of feminist criticism as it has developed. She identifies two modes of feminist criticism: woman as reader (ideological) and woman as writer (conceptual). The ideological mode is one of interpretation that involves the feminist as reader and which Showalter calls feminist reading or the feminist critique. Among the subjects treated by this mode are the different images and stereotypes of women in literature. To emphasize the liberating intellectual act of feminist reading, Showalter quotes Adrienne Rich from her essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision":

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh. (qtd. in Showalter12)

Showalter also quotes from Annette Kolodny's essay, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism,"

All the feminist is asserting, then, is her own equivalent right to liberate new (and perhaps different) significances from these same texts; and, at the same time, her right to choose which features of a text she takes as relevant because she is, after all, asking new and different questions of it. In the process, she claims neither definitiveness nor structural completeness for her different readings and reading systems, but only their usefulness in recognizing the particular achievements of woman-as-author and their applicability in conscientiously decoding woman-as-sign. (qtd. in Showalter12)

Showalter advocates pluralism in criticism that is woman-centered, independent (of the "white fathers"), and intellectually coherent, asking

what we want to know and how we can find answers to the questions from *our* experience (12-14). We must move beyond the androcentric critical tradition and find one of our own. The second mode of feminist criticism identified by Showalter will be discussed in the next section, dealing with woman as writer.

Nancy K. Miller and many others support the notion of the woman reader as critic of women's writing. In "Writing Fictions: Women's Autobiography in France," Miller believes that the reader can read the difference of gender as genre, but that s/he must enter into a pact of commitment "to decipher what women have said (or, more important, left unsaid) about the pattern of their lives, over and above what any person might say about his, through genre" (55).

Miller believes that there is a "marked" reading of texts (a masculine mode of reading) just as Cixous has identified a "marked" or masculine writing (253). Therefore, Miller maintains that there exists a difference to be read only if one is determined to decipher what women have said or left unsaid. This difference is located in the reader's perception and identity, leading Miller to advocate the notion of a gender-bound reading, "a practice of the text that would recognize the status of the reader as differentiated subject, a reading subject named by gender and committed in a dialectics of identification to deciphering the inscription of a female subject" ("Women's Autobiography" 267).

Miller finds that she is not alone in proposing the importance of the role of the reader in women's autobiography. She found a similar thought

in Philippe Lejeune's work, *Le Pacte autobiographique*,¹ which indicates that autobiography is as much a mode of reading as a mode of writing ("Women's Autobiography" 271). Even though Lejeune is not concerned with women's autobiography, Miller argues that his "notion of a contractual genre dependent upon codes of transmission and reception is an important one for our purposes, because it places the problematics of autobiography in reader response" (271). As shall be seen some of these same issues about woman as reader will apply likewise when discussing the issue of woman as autobiographer.

Culler

It is interesting to find a man who accepts many of these arguments posited by women feminist critics. Jonathan Culler's chapter on "Reading as a Woman" in his book *On Deconstruction* emphasizes that women readers' experiences differ from men's. He quotes from many critics who stress the importance of our own experience and how this influences our perceptions. Maurianne Adams writes that "our [women's] literary insights and perceptions come, in part at least, from our sensitivity to the nuances of our own lives and our observations of other people's lives²" (qtd. in Culler 44). Culler writes that many feminist critics claim that women's experience "will lead them to value works differently from their male counterparts, who may regard the problems women characteristically encounter as of limited interest" (45). Relying on a belief in women's

¹This is a declaration of autobiographical intention, a telling of the truth, and a promise to the *reader* that the textual and referential "I" are one. Miller, "Women's Autobiography in France. For a Dialectics of Identification," p. 260.

²*The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, 140-41.

experience as a source of authority for their responses as readers, some feminist critics have re-evaluated both celebrated and neglected works. This type of feminist criticism based on the concept of a woman reader leads to the assertion of continuity between women's experience of social and familial structures and their experience as readers, and calls for an investigation of attitudes toward women or the "images of women" in the works of an author, a genre, or a period. Culler believes that "criticism based on the presumption of continuity between the reader's experience and a woman's experience and on a concern with images of women is likely to become most forceful as a critique of the phallogentric assumptions that govern literary works" (46).

In "*Millet's Sexual Politics: A Year Later*," Carolyn Heilbrun advocates wrenching the reader from her/his place of ease and forcing her/him to look at life and letters from a new coign (a position of advantage for observation) and to posit new interpretations of the reading that may have rarely been heard before and may [even] seem strange (qtd. in Culler 49). Heilbrun suggests that "reading as a woman is not necessarily what occurs when a woman reads: women can read, and have read, as men" (qtd. in Culler 49).

Shoshana Felman poses the questions, "Is it enough to be a woman in order to speak as a woman? Is 'speaking as a woman' determined by some biological condition or by a strategic, theoretical position, by anatomy or by culture?" (3). Culler poses these same questions for "reading as a woman," and asserts that there is a double or divided request because it "appeals to a sexual identity defined as essential and privileges experiences associated with that identity" (49). Culler maintains that

even the most radical French theorists, who would deny any positive or distinctive identity to woman and see *le féminin* as any force that disrupts the symbolic structures of Western thought, always have moments, in developing a theoretical position, when they speak as women, when they rely on the fact that they *are* women. (49-50)

Culler reproduces a passage from Virginia Woolf which feminist critics often reiterate: that women's "inheritance is the difference of view, the difference of standard"; Culler then asks what the difference is and responds that "difference is produced by differing" (50). Culler then quotes Elaine Showalter's essay, "Towards a Feminist Poetics," in which she argues that the "hypothesis of a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text, awakening us to the significance of its sexual [gender] codes" (50). Culler indicates that feminist criticism has taken up this argument "that women do not always read [and] have not always read as women [because of being] alienated from an experience appropriate to their condition as women" (Culler 50).

Culler identifies at least two levels of feminist criticism's dealing with the female reader: first, "criticism [that] appeals to experience as a given that can ground or justify a reading," and second, "the problem . . . that women have not been reading as women" (51). He quotes from Annette Kolodny's "Reply to Commentaries," in which she argues that "reading is a *learned* activity which, like many other learned interpretive strategies in our society, is inevitably sex-coded and gender-inflected" (51). Culler states that, in the first type of feminist criticism, "women readers identify with the concerns of women characters, [whereas] in the second case, the problem is precisely that women are led to identify with male characters, against their own interests as women" (51). Judith Fetterley, in her book *The Resisting Reader*, supports this argument, stating that the

literature of American fiction "insists on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms" (xii). This criticism can also be leveled at many works of French fiction. Fetterley admonishes the feminist critic "to become a resisting reader rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us" (xxii qtd. in Culler).

Culler believes that the persuasive writing of some kinds of feminist criticism "appeals to a fundamental desire or experience of women—what women want, what women feel—but an experience posited to displace the self-mutilating experiences described by Dinnerstein" (54). He cites Dorothy Dinnerstein's work, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, in which she analyzes the effect of "human nurturing arrangements. . . . The initial experience of dependence on a largely uncontrollable outside source of good is focused on a woman, and so is the earliest experience of vulnerability to disappointment and pain" (28). This is true for both Sarraute's Natacha and Desvignes's Valérie. It is their mothers who inflict pain and disappointment on the daughters. The resulting resentment leads to a tendency to identify with male figures, a characteristic of all three young daughters, Natacha, Valérie, and Marguerite. Culler quotes Dinnerstein who says "that women share men's anti-female feelings—usually in a mitigated form, but deeply nevertheless. . . . What women want is to stop serving as scapegoats (their own scapegoats as well as men's and children's scapegoats) for human resentment of the human condition" (qtd. in Culler 53). Culler then attempts to develop a positive definition of what it might mean to read as a woman, and states that it "is to avoid

reading as a man, to identify the specific defenses and distortions of male readings and provide correctives" (54).

In his conclusion to "Reading as a Woman," Culler delineates three modes of feminist criticism for the woman as reader. First, "woman's experience is treated as a firm ground for interpretation . . .—her own and others'—which can be set in a vital and productive relation to the text." Second is the problem of "how to make it possible to read as a woman." Finally, "the appeal to experience is veiled but still there, as a reference to maternal rather than paternal relations or to woman's situation and experience of marginality, which may give rise to an altered mode of reading" (63). Culler states that this

appeal to the experience of the reader provides leverage for displacing or undoing the system of concepts or procedures of male criticism, [even though] "experience" has [a] divided, duplicitous character: it has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced—an indispensable point of reference, yet never simply there (63).

As a feminist critic, it would be valuable for the woman reader to interpret the text through her own experiences as a woman. She must be a resisting reader, resistant not only to the male tradition, theory, or mind-set, but also to certain tenets, arguments, and theories within feminist criticism with which she may disagree. In accordance with Culler, Miller, and the many other much earlier critics, who argue that multiple readers can give rise to a plurality of readings and interpretations, the woman reader's observations are valid. Her interpretation of a work may well be different from that of a man's, or from that of other women as well. Other critics have disagreed with the woman writer's professed views, intentions, and interpretations of her own work, so each woman reader is also entitled to do the same. In fact, Wimsatt and Beardsley cautioned readers to be wary

of the author's stated purpose with their theory of the "intentional fallacy" as early as 1954, advice that all readers still need to heed. For this reason, I, a woman reader, shall disagree with the stated intentions of Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes that their writing is neuter or androgynous. I maintain that gender specificity is present in their works, and that my lived experience as a woman reader will influence my interpretation of their works as feminine.

Woman as Writer

Gallop, Heilbrun, Jacobus, Abel

In Jane Gallop's "Critical Response" to Abel's book, *Writing and Sexual Difference*, she poses several questions pertinent to any study about women's writing. "Does 'sexual difference' mean the *difference between* the sexes or the *difference within* sex? Are 'sexual difference' and 'writing' two distinct domains which intersect, or is writing interior to sexual difference?" (285). She concludes that we write in sexual difference, and posits that as women writers we have a dual inheritance from both our fathers and our mothers, as well as from feminism and criticism, which forces us to live with both the "enabling and disabling tension of a difference within" (290).

Carolyn Heilbrun's "Critical response" to this same book posited several interesting points. She underlines the importance of education in woman's desire for autonomy, but stresses that "even a measure of autonomy brings choices, and choices bring pain, particularly for women who do not, like men, have wives licensed for comfort on the premises" (294). She also encourages women to be the adventure seekers, and not to

identify all adventure as "male" and something not for women. She takes issue with the emphasis on genitalia, and advocates that we find other metaphors for creativity. In fact, she identifies creation as "allied with, if not identical to, sexuality: they are both energy at its most concentrated" (294). I find this comparison much more acceptable than all the writing theories concerned with genitalia. I also concur with Heilbrun's finding that we do not need to deprive ourselves of male discourse while we attempt to subvert it, recognizing that the discourse of males is not all "male" discourse, rather "much of it is human discourse that society has denied to women. Feminist theory must be able to comprehend that which men and women share as well as that which is, or is accounted, intrinsically feminine" (295). In Heilbrun's discussion, she refuses to accept the term "linear" for the "male quest," or for any quest for that matter. She perceives the quest as a path that could be highly circuitous, with encounters of all types of women, men, and beasts, along the way. It "is to be valued not only because one arrives ultimately at the goal but also because one lives fully in the world along the way" (296).

Mary Jacobus takes up "The Question of Language," and asks what *écriture féminine* is, and why we need to examine and establish such a term or field of study. She answers that this is necessary because "women's writing" has traditionally been elided, marginalized, ignored, or made inferior by the canon formations of literary history. She feels the necessity of the term "women's writing" in order to serve as a reminder of the social conditions which have surrounded and continue to surround women who write. She speaks of the "economic and educational disadvantages, the sexual and material organizations of society, which,

rather than biology, form the crucial determinants of women's writing" (39). One style of women's writing that feminist critics today seem to dislike is that of "mimetism," in which the woman writer mimics traditional style, that of men, a role historically assigned to women, according to Irigaray, Gauthier and others. This statement could definitely be applied to Yourcenar and to an extent to Desvignes's work as well. However, Sarraute forged her own path in the literary world, imitating no one, and no one has imitated her, either. Because Yourcenar was educated in the classical French tradition by her father, and was thus introduced to a masculine perspective of literature, her works seem to reveal a very mimetic quality of other literary creations by men. Desvignes's work falls somewhere between these two extremes. She did imitate male writing up to a point, but she has also attempted to find new ways for expressing the "unsaid," and has developed a new style. This concept will be discussed in greater detail in Part Two.

In the introduction to *Writing and Sexual Difference*, Elizabeth Abel determines that the "the analysis of female talent grappling with a male tradition translates sexual difference into literary differences of genre, structure, voice, and plot" (2). These will be some of the areas in women's writing to be explored in the three primary works under consideration here. Abel's collection of essays deals with women's writing that stresses its divergence from dominant conventions, with an identity theory attuned to the sexual difference that distinguishes between male and female literary strategies, with female relationships which explore interchangeable gender roles, with the faith in women's resiliency, and a

recognition of often unorthodox female creative strategies (5-6). Abel writes:

The fluid character of female identity, emerging from the symbiotic mother-daughter bond, finds literary form in the defiance of generic boundaries, the dissolution of integrated characters, and their distinctive identification among female authors, characters, and readers that Gardiner represents by the metaphor, "The hero is her author's daughter." (5)

Gardiner

Judith Kegan Gardiner argues that critics who espouse a difference in women's writing based on the profound and regular ways in which women's experiences differ from men's determine the existence of recurrent imagery and a distinctive content in women's writing, "for example, imagery of confinement and unsentimental descriptions of child care" (178). These critics also posit "a 'female consciousness' that produces styles and structures innately different from those of the 'masculine mind'" (178). However, Gardiner finds these parameters too narrow and lacking in connectedness and explanations. She therefore proposes her own hypothesis based on two metaphors. The first is that "female identity is a process," and the second is that "the hero is her author's daughter" (179). However, all identity is a process, whether male or female. It may be more accurate to say that female identity is a less understood and more convoluted process than that of males. Gardiner argues that because female identity formation is dependent on the mother-daughter bond,

the maternal metaphor of female authorship clarifies the woman writer's distinctive engagement with her characters and indicates an analogous relationship between woman reader and character. We thus return to women's "personal" closeness to literature from a new perspective. This perspective, in turn, helps us analyze some typical narrative strategies of women writers—the manipulation of

identifications between narrator, author, and reader and the representation of memory. (179)

Gardiner then identifies five terms associated with identity and clarifies the differences by gender within each concept, indicating the necessity of such definitions before being able to establish a female identity theory and apply it to writing by women. She summarizes these terms and their gender associations as follows:

Female identity is a process, and primary identity for women is more flexible and relational than for men. Female gender identity is more stable than male gender identity. Female infantile identifications are less predictable than male ones. Female social roles are more rigid and less varied than men's. And the female counterpart of the male identity crisis may occur more diffusely, at a different stage, or not at all. Cumulatively, we see a complex interplay between women's experiences of identity and men's paradigms for the human experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that the area of self-concept is especially troubled for women and that contemporary writing by women reflects these dissonances. (184)

Gardiner stresses the fluid and flexible aspects of women's primary identities with her theory of female identity, and indicates that one aspect of this fluidity of women's writing is that it "does not conform to the generic prescriptions of the male canon" (185). In fact, several scholars have concluded that women's autobiographies "tend to be less linear, unified, and chronological than men's autobiographies" (185). She finds that "because of the continual crossing of self and other, women's writing may blur the public and private and defy completion" (185).

The mother-daughter bond also plays a significant role in the process of female identity according to Gardiner and other current critics. The daughter's mature female identity is linked to her identification with and separation from the mother, with a conflict often existing between a

"personal identification" with the admirable aspects of the mother and a rejection of "positional identification" with the mother as victim. This conflict is reinforced in terms of roles: the mother as

individually experienced is separated both from the ideally loving mother and from the devalued occupation of motherhood. Current writing by women reflects this emphasis on the mother-daughter relationship. (186)

In a footnote, Gardiner identifies the most disturbing villain in recent women's fiction as the bad mother, who is so frightening because the daughter fears becoming like her. She indicates that authors "may dispose of this fear by rendering the mother so repulsive or ridiculous that the reader must reject her as her fictional daughter does" (186).

Gardiner suggests that both women writers and readers approach texts differently from men, with the female author participating in a

process of testing and defining various aspects of identity chosen from many imaginative possibilities. That is, the woman writer uses her text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her empathic identification with her character . . . The author exercises magical control over her character, creating her from representations of herself and her ideals. (187)

With this creation of varying episodes and settings, Gardiner finds that the female writer often shifts "through first, second, and third persons and into reverse" (187). She then postulates that the woman reader passes through a similar/analogous "process in her empathic identifications, identifying particularly with female characters closely bonded to their authors" (187).

Gardiner believes that a theory of female identity development can also add to the concept of androgyny currently popular in much criticism of twentieth-century women's writing. She argues that female authors often create characters in whom both male and female attributes of personality form a real union, which does not mean that the writer is confused about gender identity. The difficulty for women, according to

Gardiner, is in knowing how to respond to social rules which our society dictates for what it means to be female. Gardiner concludes by saying that

a woman's sense of her gender, her sexuality, and her body may assume a different, perhaps a more prominent, shape in her conception of her self than these factors would for a man. Women are encouraged to judge their inner selves through their external physical appearance and to equate the two. At the same time, they are taught to create socially approved images of themselves by manipulating their dress, speech, and behavior. . . . Women writers interpret this alienation between outer and inner selves in various ways and thus give some distinctive turns to old verities about appearance and reality. (190)

She then summarizes the four elements that work to construct her theory of female identity. First, it is a process in which writing by women seeks definition in the experience of creating art. Second, bonds and relationships between women influence female personality and "establish patterns to which literary identifications are analogous." Third, through the supportive community of women, "a full, valued, and congruent female identity may form in the continuing process of give and take that re-creates both self and other." Finally, "this creation of a valid and communicable female experience through art is a collective enterprise" (191).

Eisenstein, Cixous

A related category of female identity development is the learning of appropriate "sex-role" behavior, appropriate as deemed by society and subject to conditioning and reinforcement in early childhood, according to Hester Eisenstein in the introduction to *The Future of Difference* (xvi). Eisenstein indicates, as other feminist critics do, that feminist analysis has revealed that women's "difference" from men has often "concealed a conviction of women's inferiority and an intention to keep women

relatively powerless," resulting in continued inequality and oppression (xvii). However, in the late 1970s, women's difference from men began to be perceived as a means of asserting their importance, and feminist study gained recognition as a legitimate and crucial focus of study. This change in attitude toward the value of women's difference from men moved from one of oppression to a source of enrichment. Eisenstein mentions Jean Baker Miller's 1976 statement that although women "have been taught to be passive, they have also learned to be nurturing, affiliative and cooperative—in short, to be endowed with more truly human qualities than are men as currently socialized" (xviii). As feminist scholars began to value women's difference and to expand their horizons, they "uncovered a plethora of differences in women's lives, historically and cross-culturally," emphasizing the variety rather than the uniformity of feminine difference (xix).

Eisenstein's analysis of the works of Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray reveals that in various ways they all call for the creation of a specifically women's language and writing. She mentions Audre Lorde's argument that the special force of poetry acts as a source of strength and courage for those seeking to reach "the woman's place of power within each of us" (xxi). In the conclusion, Eisenstein admits that the concept of difference seems connected to "male" and "female," and that these, in turn, are embedded in our language, thought and cultural organization. She questions what the consequences of this may be for the theory and practice of feminism. One of her final thoughts echoes that of other feminist critics. "It is not difference in itself that has been dangerous to women and

other oppressed groups, but the political uses to which the idea of difference has been put" (xxiii).

This chapter began with the following excerpt from "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Hélène Cixous. It is so pertinent to this current study that it is repeated here in order to keep it clearly in mind as we discuss its application to "Woman as Writer":

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (qtd. in Marks & de Courtivron 245)

Cixous explains that when she speaks of "woman," she means "woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man" (245). However, she rejects the notion of the existence of one general, typical woman. She admits that there are commonalities that all women share, but reiterates her belief in the multiplicity of "the infinite richness of their individual constitutions . . . Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible" (246).

Cixous encourages women to come out of the dark, to express themselves publicly, no longer in secret. Writing in secret, woman restrains herself and is fearful and her writing is not as good as it could be if she were to come out in the open, no longer feeling guilty about her efforts. Cixous writes, "I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man" (247). She urges women to break out of the constraints that men have placed on them and to express their childhoods "which men have been trying desperately to make them forget" (247). Cixous maintains that there exists very little writing which inscribes femininity, although the number is increasing slightly. However, she posits that much writing by

women does not differ at all from male writing because it either "obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women" (248). Cixous goes on to explain very clearly what she means by male writing, arguing convincingly for a *marked* writing. She indicates that

writing has run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never *her* turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the *space* that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (249)

Later she continues,

It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, encoded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (253)

Cixous maintains that the *process* of writing is *bisexual*, a constant and incessant process of exchange from one subject to another, with the possibility for multiple and inexhaustible "encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between" (254). Bisexuality, for her, represents the presence of both sexes in one's self, "non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex" (254). Cixous goes on to explain through various sexual acts and metaphors that woman must write through her body. This is an area which will not be pursued in depth here because it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is important to recognize the merit that such a study could provide. Such a study will be left to other feminist critics who desire to specialize in this area of feminist criticism.

Gauthier

Xavière Gauthier's essay "*Existe-t-il une écriture féminine?*" first appeared in *Tel Quel* in 1974. It was translated by Marilyn August and reprinted in *New French Feminisms* in 1980 entitled, "Is there such a thing as women's writing?" Gauthier gives two popular answers to this question: first, in the traditional sense, feminine literature is "flowers, sweetness, children, tenderness, submission, and acceptance, etc." (161); or, the second answer is that only one type of literature exists and it is neuter, allowing "women to participate at the same rate at which they 'progress' both socially and economically" (161). However, she condemns both of these positions because it is men who have rendered these judgments. In the first case, men are reassured that woman continues to fulfill their expectations, and in the second case, they are reassured because the woman is in the process of becoming like a man (162). She poses no threat. Gauthier states that throughout history, women have been mute, "and it is doubtless by virtue of this mutism that men have been able men to speak and write . . . As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process." However, if women begin "to speak and write *as men do*, they will enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt" (162). As women have begun to express themselves, they have had to do so through men's language, thus entering history subdued and alienated. Gauthier declares:

If, however, "replete" words (*mots pleins*) belong to men, how can women speak "otherwise," unless, perhaps, we can *make audible* that which agitates within us, suffers silently in the *holes of discourse*, in the unsaid, or in the non-sense. (164)

Gauthier makes a valid point here. Most women writers have entered the literary world through the existing language, established by men, who have been writers for much longer than women. However, there have been women along the way who have sought to create a new language or new means of expression for those thoughts, feelings, emotions, and experiences within themselves which differ radically from those of men.

Gauthier believes that Nathalie Sarraute's work has moved in this direction, creating an *écriture féminine*, a woman's language with her use of tropisms, "formless, trembling, imperceptible, moving, which literary language tries to crush and bring back into the fold, and restore to order" (163). I concur with Gauthier and would also cite Sarraute as an innovator in creating an *écriture féminine*. Gauthier concludes this essay by saying

And then, blank pages, gaps, borders, spaces and silence, holes in discourse: these women emphasize the aspect of feminine writing which is the most difficult to verbalize because it becomes compromised, rationalized, masculinized as it explains itself. . . . If the reader feels a bit disoriented in this new space, one which is obscure and silent, it proves perhaps, that it is women's space. (164)

Gauthier also discusses the appropriation by some women of a pseudonym, a name that is not that of their father's, or even a name that is masculine. The reason she cites for this is that "knowing, more or less consciously, that in order to make a name for themselves in literature, women have to be men, they often used masculine pseudonyms" (164). Sarraute's mother wrote under a masculine pseudonym for this very reason. One might question why Marguerite Yourcenar chose to write under a pseudonym, this woman who loved her father, and never knew her mother. Why did she discard her father's name? For a time, she even used the name "Marg Yourcenar" which both looks and sounds masculine.

Showalter

Let us return to Elaine Showalter's essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in which she identifies two modes of feminist criticism, the first being that of woman as reader, which was discussed above, and the second being that "of women as *writers*, [examining and investigating literature by women, and dealing with] the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; . . . female creativity; . . . individual or collective female career[s]; and the evolution . . . of a female literary tradition" (Abel 14-15). Showalter coined the term "gynocritics" to describe this specialized discourse "which offers many theoretical opportunities" (Abel 15). The question she raised is "What is *the difference* of women's writing?" (Abel 15). Is it inferior to the masculine counterpart, or a successful escape from the categories of womanhood, or the shaping of "women's creative expression?" During the 1970s these and other questions were asked in numerous "essays and papers [in which] women's writing asserted itself as the central project of feminist literary study" (Abel 15). French feminist criticism proposed "the concept of *écriture féminine*, the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text." However, Showalter finds this rather "Utopian" instead of "literary," although this concept does provide "a way of talking about women's writing which reasserts the *value* of the feminine and . . . difference" (Abel 16). Showalter feels that all types of feminist criticism have value because they are "struggling to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority" (Abel 16).

Showalter admits the difficulty of defining the unique difference of women's writing, questioning whether it is a matter of "style," "genre,"

"experience," or even "the reading process" (Abel 16). She then outlines the four theoretical models of difference in women's writing: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural (Abel 16). As was stated earlier, the biological theory of women's writing is beyond the scope of this present study, so that shall not be pursued here. Instead I concur with Miller that "the historical truth of a woman writer's life lies in the reader's grasp of her intratext: the body of her writing and not the writing of her body" ("Women's Autobiography" 271). Therefore, I shall deal with these women writers' texts, not their bodies.

Showalter identifies "the essence of women's language [as] its secrecy" ("Feminist Criticism," Abel 21). Although many specific differences in male and female speech, intonation, and language use have been identified, she believes that they cannot be explained in terms of "two separate sex-specific languages" but "need to be considered instead in terms of styles, strategies, and contexts of linguistic performance" (Abel 23). Showalter argues that we need to examine a model of women's writing and feminist critical practice from a basis in cultural anthropology. Abel summarizes Showalter's argument by saying that she believes that the "specificity of female writing will emerge . . . from the study of the woman writer's interaction with both her male and female literary heritages" (3). Showalter indicates that "in the reality to which we must address ourselves as critics, women's writing is a 'double-voiced discourse' that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant" (Abel 31). She identifies this double-voiced discourse as what Gilbert and Gubar have described as a "palimpsest," in which there is

both a "dominant" and a "muted" story, "two alternative [and] oscillating texts simultaneously" (Abel 34).

The images in Showalter's conclusion are rather interesting. She refers to an earlier time in feminist criticism in which critics envisioned themselves on a pilgrimage to the promised land where gender would be powerless and "all texts would be sexless and equal." However, the more feminist criticism came to "understand the specificity of women's writing," the more the critics realized that they had "misperceived their destination," and that they "may never reach the promised land at all; for when feminist critics see our task as the study of women's writing, we realize that the land promised to us is not the serenely undifferentiated universality of texts but the tumultuous and intriguing wilderness of difference itself" (Abel 35). This calls into question Sarraute's, Yourcenar's and Desvignes's claims that their writing is universal, especially if we are able to prove that gender specificity exists in their works, thus, making them different.

Jehlen, Oates, Brady

In 1987, a collection of papers presented at a conference in 1982 on twentieth-century women writers was published with the title, *Faith of a (Woman) Writer*, edited by Alice Kessler-Harris and William McBrien. These essays dealt with "acknowledged writers of stature" and their critics and how these "critics appraised the work of the writer as woman", exploring "how women generated their art, developed and presented it," as well as asking "what was unique to gender" (1). One overarching theme of these papers was that of women's self-realization (1). Another perception that critics treated was "how women writers have dealt with the complexity

of changing female life styles in the twentieth century" (2). In the "Introduction" to this work, Kessler-Harris and McBrien summarize Myra Jehlen's essay in which she describes the confusion that exists about which direction the critics should take, posing two questions:

Should a critic of women's writing deal with the work as the product of a woman's hand, dwelling on the sensibilities of the female consciousness, and representations of female reality? Or should the critic assume that the proper point of departure remains the artistic and aesthetic norms that have emerged from generations of male-defined practice? (3)

There is a desire to create a canon that will reflect both the marginality and the inclusion of women's writing within the male tradition [I say this, because the *traditional canon* is one that has been devised by *men*, and includes works primarily by *men*, therefore, it is the *male* tradition]. One must "come to terms with the androgynous possibilities of author, character and plot," as well as the co-existence of "the aggressive and the gentle," "the adventurous and the nurturing . . . in the dual/multiple selves" (3-4). Kessler-Harris and McBrien mention an article on the subject by Carolyn Heilbrun in which she states that "the study of literature cannot survive if it cannot . . . illuminate human experience; and human experience cannot today be illuminated without attention to the place of women in literature, in the textuality of our lives, both in history and in the present" (4).

In the same book, Joyce Carol Oates writes about "The (Woman) Writer." In this essay she discusses woman's role as both reader and as writer declaring that a sympathy exists between the reader and the writer of an enlargement of vision. "If the ideal reader experiences the classic 'enlargement of sympathies' by way of serious fiction, it is to be assumed, perhaps to be taken on faith, that the writer immersed in these sympathies

experiences a similar enlargement of vision" (6). Oates declares that the reader's immediate "genuine response" to a book "is incalculable—unpredictable—unwilled," much as one's response to music or art is (7). Just as many artists try to make themselves invisible in their work, so too do many writers. Oates says that they "really do attempt to refine themselves out of existence by way of an immersion, a systematic and disciplined immersion, in language" (8). Each of these three women writers, Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes has indicated that this is precisely what she does as she writes, trying to erase her female self from the text and to imagine how her protagonist (whether male or female) would behave and react. Perhaps these women want to underscore this fact in order to give more credence to the belief that, though women, they can enter into the mentality of any human being, whether man or woman (universality). This argument stresses the struggle for each of these three women to overcome the difference that being a woman makes in her writing.

Oates examines this problem and indicates that the woman writer "experiences herself, from within, as a *writer* primarily" (5, my italics). However, she admits that

there are writers, born women, who do not think of themselves—at least by their testimony—as women, when they write: and there are other writers, born women, who believe their writing to be conditioned at all times by their gender. (7)

Later she expands upon this position by saying that

A woman who writes is a writer by her own definition; but she is a woman writer by others' definitions. . . . Since I am a woman who writes, I see that, in the eyes of most observers, I must be a "woman writer," though there are, so far as I can determine, no "men writers." Sometimes the extraordinary praise is thrown at me, like a bouquet of roses that lands in one's face instead of in one's arms, that *I write like a man*. (One wants to inquire—Which man?) (9)

Oates maintains that a woman writer is mistaken, deluded, or simply hopeful if she thinks that she has been "'assimilated' into the mainstream of literature," in other words, the literature of men. She argues that pretending not to be what one is, "in the flesh, in the historical flesh, is naive; to brush lightly aside the evidence of being despised is symptomatic of that interesting variation of hysteria called denial" (10). The three writers under investigation here all seem to enjoy this praise, "you write like a man," wishing to be assimilated as Oates has described into the literature of men, or perhaps they only want to be regarded as "writers." Yet, I maintain that there are definite characteristics and episodes, issues of both style and content, in their writings that clearly mark them as feminine and reveal certain phenomena associated with elements of *écriture féminine* and related issues.

Patrick Brady finds that the most basic issue dividing feminists is "whether women have a different perspective from men and thus a different contribution to make" ("Editorial" 15). He believes that one could argue that this intuitive, holistic, nonlinear character often attributed to female thinking could actually "be superior to the purely rational, analytical, linear thinking classified as male" (15). His essay is an overview of feminist criticism spanning the past decade, with an emphasis on articles gleaned from newspapers and recent books. He mentions Ellen Baer's criticism of feminism, which "glorifies women who emulate masculine behavior [and] abandons feminine caring roles" (16). Many feminists argue that empathy is a positive feminist trait. Brady quotes Susan Suleiman, who denies this difference is a mark of superiority, and remarks that "the so-called empathic style of feminine communication may

simply be an expression of the need to please those in power . . . women speak far more aggressively and less deferentially to one another than to men" (17). Brady summarizes Elaine Showalter's discussion of the difference between men's and women's writings in *Sister's Choice*. Linearity, simplicity, coherence, and closure characterize the dominant style of writing (male), while nonlinearity, complexity, incoherence, open-endedness, and disruption by desire characterize female writing (19). Other characteristics observed in female writing are that it is more empathetic and personal. However, Brady stresses the fact that all human beings, men and women, possess a dual character with both male and female components, and that some of these characteristics can be found in both men's and women's writings, so it is unjust to assume that all males follow order and linearity or that all females do the opposite.

Just as Brady seems to advocate the complementarity of male and female, Kristeva also argues for an understanding of both in her essay "Woman Can Never be Defined." She believes that the difference between the sexes is not as great as one might imagine, stating that "men and women are not two races at war with one another: 'man' is in 'woman,' and 'woman' is in 'man'" (qtd. in Marks & Courtivron 140). She urges feminism to participate in discussion with other oppressed groups in an effort

to move from a patriarchal society, of class and of religion . . . toward—Who knows? In any event, this process involves going through what is repressed in discourse, in reproductive and productive relationships. Call it "woman" or "the oppressed social class": it's the same struggle, and you never have one without the other. It seems to me that the movement's most urgent task is to make the ideological and political machines understand this complicity. But this implies that we change our style, that we get out a bit from "among women," from among ourselves, that each one of us in our respective fields fights against social and cultural archaisms. (Kristeva qtd. in Marks & de Courtivron 141)

DuPlessis

"Writing beyond the ending" is Rachel Blau DuPlessis's phrase which describes the concept of inventing "strategies that sever the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction and consciousness about women" (x). She applies this concept to several women writers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who began to question the existing narrative form, and attempted to experiment with new forms which would better express the fate of female characters, as well as express attitudes toward family, sexuality, and gender by calling into question political and legal forms related to women and gender, characteristic of women's emancipation at this time. She examines both quest and romance plots in order to reveal the choices that structure their resolutions. This examination reveals numerous "narrative strategies invented or deployed by female writers of the twentieth century explicitly to delegitimize romance plots and related narratives. These strategies involve reparenting in invented families, fraternal-sororal ties temporarily reducing romance, and emotional attachment to women in bisexual love plots, female bonding, and lesbianism" (xi). This list could be expanded to include many other strategies that women writers employ in order to write beyond the ending.

DuPlessis restates a common thought, that at one time, the end of women in novels was either social or judgmental, ending in either marriage or death, resolutions associated with romance (1). She mentions the presence of the concept of quest or *Bildung* in these earlier works, but this was usually repressed or set aside by the woman's marriage or death. She proposes that the twentieth-century women writers' project is to

resolve this conflict between love and quest, and to offer a different set of choices for endings, something other than marriage or death. She urges women to "write beyond" the romantic ending, to use narrative to make critical statements about the psychosexual and sociocultural construction of women (4).

Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. These strategies . . . take issue with the mainstays of the social and ideological organization of gender, as these appear in fiction. Writing beyond the ending, "not repeating your words and following your methods but . . . finding new words and creating new methods,"³ produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised. (5)

DuPlessis finds that in nineteenth-century narrative, quest and love plots were interconnected, but at the end of the work, "the energies of *Bildung* were incompatible with the closure in successful courtship of marriage. Quest for women was thus finite" (6). DuPlessis declares that death occurs at the end of nineteenth-century texts "as a 'cosmic' or essentialist ending when a woman tests the social and historical rules governing the tolerable limits of her aspirations." Death occurs when the woman destabilizes the limited equilibrium of respectable and accepted female behavior. However, "in the twentieth-century critiques, community and social connectedness are the end of the female quest, not death" (16).

I shall attempt to show that Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes have accomplished this "writing beyond the ending" as advocated by DuPlessis. These women writers attempted to offer a different set of choices for endings for their women protagonists, with plots about female *Bildung* that

³Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1929. 87, 89.

extended beyond courtship and marriage, and with female quests that were not finite. Their woman protagonists pushed the long-held, more traditional limits of respectable and accepted female behavior, but did not die as a result of this. They pursued active roles in their communities, and raised social consciousness in their own lives, all as part of their female *Bildung's* quest. I shall return to this discussion in Part Two.

Two other aspects of "writing beyond the ending," according to DuPlessis, is that of breaking the sentence and that of breaking the sequence.⁴ "Breaking the sentence is a way of rupturing language and tradition sufficiently to invite a female slant, emphasis, or approach" (32). This includes not only a change in grammar, but also in

rhythm, pace, flow, expression: the structuring of the female voice by the male voice, female tone and manner by male expectations, female writing by male emphasis, female writing by existing conventions of gender—in short, any way in which dominant structures shape muted ones. (32)

Breaking the sequence involves a rupture in habits of narrative order, "that expected story told when 'love was the only possible interpreter of women's textual lives.'"⁵ DuPlessis proposes that

breaking the sequence can mean delegitimizing the specific narrative and cultural orders of nineteenth-century fiction—the emphasis on successful or failed romance, the subordination of quest to love, the death of the questing female, the insertion into family life. . . reparenting, female bonding, including lesbian ties, mother-child dyads, brother-sister pairs, familial transpositions, the multiple individual, and the transpersonal protagonist [are all possible narrative strategies]. (34-35)

DuPlessis argues that by examining these strategies and other elements of female identity, one can analytically argue that a women's writing does

⁴DuPlessis builds her argument upon concepts provided by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* and *Granite and Rainbow*.

⁵Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 95.

exist, one which incorporates a certain stance toward narrative. One can argue that these writers are "feminist" because of their construction of a "variety of oppositional strategies to the depiction of gender institutions in narrative" (34). DuPlessis finds that twentieth-century women writers attempt to reassess the processes of gendering with the invention of narrative strategies, "especially involving sequence, character, and relationship, that neutralize, minimize, or transcend any oversimplified oedipal drama" (37). There is a strong effort to depict both the masculine and feminine sides in one character, whether one terms it androgyny or bisexuality. This will be very evident in the works of the three women writers under investigation in this present study. DuPlessis along with other feminist critics (e.g., Jacobus, Showalter) declares that the

woman writer is neither wholly 'subcultural' nor, certainly, wholly main-cultural, but negotiates difference and sameness, marginality and inclusion in a constant dialogue, which takes shape variously in the various authors, but with one end—a rewriting of gender in dominant fiction. (43)

In other words, the woman writer must use the discourse of the dominant culture (masculine) in order to express herself. I will examine exactly how Sarraute, Yourcenar, and Desvignes do this and the differing degrees or ways in which they go beyond and/or subvert the language of the dominant (male) tradition. The new strategies they construct to at once fit into and break out of the dominant molds will be observed. This necessity of using the discourse of the dominant masculine culture adds to the problematic, double-sidedness of my thesis relating to the gender specificity in the three works under examination in this study, an aspect that will be pursued further in Part Two.

Woman as Autobiographer

Snyder, Hite

Because two of the three works in this dissertation have been classified as autobiographical, it is necessary to discuss/examine what a feminist autobiography entails. One finds in these works a fictional extension of autobiography, works which are not presented as "true" autobiographies. Sarraute's *Enfance* and Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité* differ radically from what one normally associates with autobiography. Though Desvignes's work is fiction, it is fiction based on fact (many elements from her mother's and grandmother's lives as well as a few from her own life), and I feel that even this fictional work can fit into the category of autobiography. Both Sarraute's and Yourcenar's works may be classified as autobiographical fictions or "autofictions"—a term proposed by S. Doubrovsky, underlining the fact that, because autobiography is based on recreated memories, there is a question as to its truthfulness. Because the child protagonist in these two works bears the same name as the authors, the stress must be on autobiography rather than on fiction. On the other hand, Desvignes's work may be classified as a fictional-biography-autobiography with the stress on fiction which has elements of biography and autobiography. The child, Séverine, only appears in the final one-third of the book and is identified as the author. In a private interview, Lucette Desvignes indicated that she would have chosen the name "Séverine" for herself, never having liked her own name of "Lucette"⁶. This explanation of the three texts is necessary in light of what Nancy K. Miller and others propose for reading a woman's autobiography.

⁶Personal interview, May 1994, Dijon, France.

Carol Snyder's preface to *Gender and Genre in Literature:*

Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction: An Essay Collection, states that the works of Carol Gilligan, Nancy Chodorow, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva have provided a base for "reconsidering female subjectivity by tracing a different developmental model for women than men, an identity formation leading to a sense of self at once fluid and attached and a language of the self described by the semiotic challenge to the symbolic" (x). These critics advocate that gender specificity exists in women's autobiography. The essays in this text indicate that as the autobiographical form has gained value as a genre, many women have produced works that cross the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, thus, raising a host of new questions about women's writing of the self, and the concepts of fluidity and attachment.

In Molly Hite's foreword to this same book of essays, she declares that readers of women's writing tend to identify the protagonist with the author, and argues that this is inevitable when the author is a woman and by implication then less likely when the author is a man. This tendency has permeated critical approaches and regards "women's writing primarily as a *manifestation*, whether of the author's nature, culture, social situation, political situation, or personal situation. The tacit premise of such approaches is that the author is somehow present in her work, not in any secondary sense . . . but in a wholly accessible and unmediated manner" (xiii). Hite mentions the negative connotations associated with fiction, "connotations of duplicity, dissimulation, veiling, and perhaps outright lying" (xiv). She then states that these connotations, in a wide range of cultural contexts, are also attached to women. Women write not only

fiction, but also "autobiographical fiction," a category that presents problems because "it takes deception to another level, blurring the distinction between confession and fabrication, between laying bare and cunningly draping" (xiv). However, she declares that self-writing is a unique type of creativity, especially for women autobiographers because they "are often motivated to write by their *awareness* of the ways their identities have been constructed, [aware, too, in how their identities are narrower and more constricting] than the identities acknowledged as belonging to privileged men" (xv). For this woman writer, who is a marginal subject in the dominant (male) culture, self-writing "tends to be participation in the multiple discourses that establish and reestablish this 'self'" (xv). Writing autobiographical fiction could assume mimesis, constructing a self more consonant with the values of the dominant culture, or it could forge a new path. No matter which form it takes, writing fictional autobiography, according to Hite, "involves more, rather than less, artistry and artifice than the writing of other kinds of fiction" (xv). The woman autobiographer hesitates to reveal too much about herself so veils her story in fiction, but fiction based on fact. In Part Two, I shall examine how Sarraute, Yourcenar, and Desvignes do this. Another consideration to bear in mind is that "differences in class, race, and sexual preference among women . . . entail different degrees of marginality, and commensurately different relations to the project of fictional self-writing" (xvi). These differences affect the events and details of the woman writer's life that she will reveal—either truthfully or fictionalized—depending on how much of herself she is willing to reveal.

Miller, Morgan

In "Women's Autobiography in France" Nancy K. Miller not only discusses woman as reader, but also the role of woman as autobiographer and how the woman writer blends fact with fiction. She reminds us that Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her autobiography that there were many things she firmly intended to leave in obscurity. This is a claim that Sarraute and Yourcenar also have made about their autobiographical works. Miller states that, because these autobiographers are already known as figures of public fiction (that is, they have already established themselves as fictional writers), they expect their words to have an impact within a clearly defined reader's circle, and they also know that, as female autobiographers, they are being read as *women* (262). Miller mentions what Simone de Beauvoir has called "féminitude"⁷: a culturally determined status of difference and oppression (263). Miller discusses Daniel Stern's autobiography, in which she shows that

while a woman may fly in the face of tradition, that is, of traditional expectations for women, particularly in regard to the institution of marriage, she is no less a *human being* of merit; that while on the face of it she is an outlaw, the real fault lies with society and its laws. To justify an unorthodox life by writing about it, however, is to *reinscribe* the original violation, to revioliate masculine turf. . . (263)

Miller continues by stating that these autobiographies

are a defense and illustration, at once a treatise on overcoming received notions of femininity and a poetics calling for another, freer text. These autobiographies, then, belong to that type of women's writing Elaine Showalter has described as "feminist": "*protest*" against the "standards of art and its views of social roles," and "*advocacy* of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy."⁸ (263)

⁷"Simone de Beauvoir interroge Jean-Paul Sartre," *L'Arc*, (1975): 12.

⁸*A Literature of Their Own* 1977, 13.

Miller identifies a structure of kinship through which readers as women perceive bonds relating them to writers as women, and questions whether this is a "natural" feature of the autobiographical text. She decides that it is not because, in the shaping of the past, the autobiography leaves out the parts that do not add up, just as a narrative does, thereby creating a *reconstructed* personality (268). Miller cites Roy Pascal's belief that the autobiographer recognizes that there exists "something unknowable in him" (268). In the autobiographers' effort to make sense of their lives, there is also an effort towards universal reception, and if one looks carefully at the text, one can find the "unsaid things" of the autobiographer. This is where Miller advocates a *double* reading of the autobiography with the fiction in order to have a more sensitive means for deciphering a female self (270). Miller clarifies this by indicating that she is not advocating Larnac's view that one discovers the author in the center of every feminine novel "incapable of abstracting a fragment of themselves to constitute a whole, they have to put all of themselves into their work" (253-54). To the contrary, Miller proposes a practice of reading which privileges neither the autobiography nor the fiction but takes the two writings together in their status as text. Miller claims,

Because of the historical protocol and mythical taboos that have governed women's writing until very recently, and beyond that their very notion of a self, not to perform an expanded reading, not, in this instance, to read the fiction *with* the autobiography is to remain prisoner of a canon that bars women from their own texts. (279)

Miller and others have indicated that the writing of the self is both an approximation and a projection, "a matter of details, shadows, adjustment, and proportion—an arrangement of truths" (271).

Janice Morgan gives a resume of the various shifts in emphasis on autobiography and writing of the self, and concludes that the current emphasis is on "graphe," on writing, on textuality. She argues that readers no longer expect to receive "a full, factual account of the author's public self, nor . . . a linear, chronological exposition of events, nor . . . for the autobiographical enterprise to be contained, necessarily within a single work" (5). She cites several critics, among them Nancy K. Miller, Domna Stanton, Mary Mason and Sidonie Smith as having "pointed out that the by-now canonical features of contemporary self-representational writing—fragmentation, discontinuity, duality, and above all, a pervasive textual self-consciousness—have, in fact, frequently been present in women's autobiographical writing all along" (7). She indicates that these features of women's autobiography are not really "new" because women have often used these techniques in the past. She claims that the "search for more genuine concepts of female identity—other than those projected through male fantasy—certainly constitutes one of the major motives behind feminist criticism today" (7).

Morgan cites Sidonie Smith, who has postulated that "female selfhood is far more concerned with various levels and intensities of connection *to* (rather than separation *from*) significant others . . . women's sense of self as portrayed in autobiographic texts has been much more locally-bound, tied to the exigencies of a particular place and time, tied especially to the key individuals who marked their development" (7-8). This statement will be true of the three autobiographical fictions under examination here. Another aspect of this connection to significant others is these writers' sense of the self as plural, an awareness of "their roles/identities as

multiple—and, given societal constraints on women's aspirations, frequently in conflict with one another" (8). This conflict arises "between the private role specifically reserved for her by society and the more public, authoritative or adventurous role she aspired to exercise" (8). Morgan declares that women writers embark on an ambiguous process of self-discovery, asserting the plurality of the "fictionality" of the self, and maintaining an awareness of writing as a continuous process of self-integration that can never be fully completed (10-11). Morgan concludes by saying that many women authors who choose to "write other-wise" do so because "this writing constitutes a deliberate challenge to the prevailing social and literary constructions of gendered selfhood" (13). She also acknowledges that "autobiographical writing—however private or intimist its concerns may be—is also a gesture toward others; however self-oriented, it is addressed to a community of readers" (15).

Wilson

In "Auto-bio-graphie: vers une théorie de l'écriture féminine," Suzanne Wilson states that if an *écriture féminine* exists, that is, literature written by women for women, then two aspects that one must consider are "(1) ce que c'est d'être femme et de (2) ce que c'est d'écrire" (617). She finds the literary genre of autobiography particularly striking for a theory of literature in which "les femmes parlent d'elle-mêmes et de leur écriture" (617). By dividing the word "autobiography" into its three components: auto=self, bio=life, and graph=writing, Wilson discusses how these can be considered the primary elements of a theory of genre and of *écriture féminine*.

She posits that the concept of "auto" suggests a return to the self, a contemplative reflection, as if regarding or contemplating oneself in the mirror. She identifies this as a kind of refusal, a refusal to be regarded as object by others (meaning men) and a beginning of regarding/contemplating herself, thereby becoming subject. This return to self also implies a deeper understanding of her body (617-18). Wilson points out that in *Le Deuxième Sexe* Simone de Beauvoir indicates that woman defines herself in relation to man, being both object and other. The question then becomes one of whether the woman ceases to be object and begins to be subject by her writing (618). As we shall see, the three women writers treated here become subject of and by their writing.

In describing the second part of the word "autobiography," Wilson reminds us that "bio" signifies "life," "la somme des expériences qu'une personne a vécu par rapport à son corps" (619). In agreement with certain statements by Cixous, Irigaray and others, she states that knowledge for the woman is a knowledge of the body: "la femme se connaît par rapport à son corps" (619). She continues by saying that the body is not only a source of knowledge but also a source of memory. While man remembers his past through words, such as newspapers, letters, stories told him by others, she believes that woman remembers her past "à travers son corps" (620). This is interesting in regard to Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes. Sarraute's memories are not so much remembered "à travers son corps" but "à travers" the memories evoked by the spoken words of others. Yourcenar's autobiography evolved as a result of careful research of family documents, letters, genealogies, and memories of things her father told her. She admits the rebirth of the idea to write her family's history coincided with

the surprise arrival at her home in Maine of an old trunk filled with family documents. Yet in Desvignes's case, it seems that Jeanne's memories are very closely associated with her body and the feminine pride that she takes in her youthful appearance all throughout her life, even on the day of her sixtieth birthday. This relationship to her body is even more strongly emphasized by the descriptions of her by various females close to her following her accident that rendered her speechless and virtually helpless (the nurse-gardian, her daughter Valérie, and her grand-daughter Sévérine, even her son-in-law Juste [but he was described by the female author]). On her sixtieth birthday, while regarding herself in the mirror as she gets ready for her birthday celebration, her body provides the point of departure down memory lane. She sees "une 'lecture' de son passé en examinant [son corps]" (Wilson 620). Her gaze differs from that of men, who observe her just as a beautiful woman. She looks at her body in the mirror and remembers/relives certain episodes of her past, reading her body as a kind of book. Wilson believes that because of "l'importance que la femme accorde à son corps comme source de vie et de mémoire, la femme présente au lecteur un regard neuf, une perspective et une contemplation qui sont personnelles; l'écriture de la femme vient de son 'bios'" (620).

Wilson argues that this personal aspect of women's writing is reinforced by the fact that she seems to write by means of the *parole* rather than *langue*. She says that a *langue* belongs to a group of people but a *parole* belongs to *une personne*. This seems to indicate that *langue* is the dominant or male discourse, and that *parole* is what each individual, man or woman, does with the *langue*. Another aspect of this personal writing is that it speaks to others. As an example of this Wilson cites Sarraute's work

Enfance, in which "la mémoire devient un double à qui Sarraute parle" (620). Wilson goes on to say that one cannot overestimate the importance of *la parole* for woman because this act of taking *la parole* is an act of power. In Sarraute's text, this will be especially true for Natacha, because it is in her love of words, and her delight in writing, that she is saved from the madness in which her mother's casual, uncaring, thoughtless actions and words plunge her. Desvignes's Jeanne also recognizes the power of the written word to protect her and her children's inheritance from the men she would later marry. However, this recognition only comes after her having been victimized by men's written and spoken words following the deaths of her first two husbands. She also recognizes the power of the spoken word to hurt and defame one's reputation, so she changes her place of residence after the suicide of her third husband, Florent.

Wilson cites Leclerc, who states that, while men can speak in the name of humanity, women can only speak in the name of women (620). However, woman has begun to appropriate *la parole* more and more for herself, rendering her silences all the more significant because she can now both speak and remain silent in her writing. Thus the empty spaces in her writing can suggest the idea of lack, the idea of silence, or even the idea of the marginality of woman (621). But because of the importance of her body in her return to herself, these empty spaces can also suggest an idea of *ouverture* and of sexual rupture, or even an idea of *nourriture et d'allaitement*. Finally, according to Wilson, these empty spaces can also serve as points of departure for new readings and literary births (622).

Because women's writing is itself a *création* which invites others to read it and thus to create, it gives birth to the possibility of multiple

readings. Wilson believes that, along with this notion of multiple readings, strictly linear and chronological time is destroyed, thus integrating the real present in which the woman writes with that of the story, giving it a sense of continual movement and of becoming (622).

Jelinek

In Estelle C. Jelinek's preface to her book of collected essays, *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, she expresses how gratified she felt to discover that there were many critics who agreed with her that there is a literary tradition in which women write autobiography differently from men (xi-xii). Some of the characteristics that were identified were "the tendency of women to write in discontinuous forms and to emphasize the personal over the professional" (xii). In the chapter, "Introduction: Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition," and with an interesting speculation, Jelinek proposes that, if certain women's experiences were described as men's experiences, they would be described in heroic or exceptional terms such as alienation, initiation, manhood, apotheosis, transformation, guilt, identity crises, and symbolic journeys. However, as they are women's experiences, more conventional terms are applied: heartbreak, anger, loneliness, motherhood, humility, confusion, and self-abnegation (5). Jelinek finds that, in the matters of form and content, women's biographies differ from those of the critical canon (male), and that we may therefore need to find different criteria for evaluating these women's autobiographies because they are different from the male tradition (6). She identifies certain patterns that have emerged in women's autobiographies which, though they may not hold true for every

woman's autobiography, nonetheless cannot be wholly ignored (7). The first pattern is that women's autobiographies tend to emphasize women's personal histories rather than to mirror the history of their times. They concentrate more on their personal lives—"domestic details, family difficulties, close friends, and especially people who influenced them," with less emphasis on "the public aspects of their lives, the affairs of the world, or even their careers" (7-8). Jelinek says:

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)

A second pattern identified by Jelinek regards both women's and men's autobiographies, that of the autobiographical fallacy which stipulates "that the autobiographical mode is an introspective and intimate one and that autobiographers write about their inner or emotional life" (10). Jelinek disagrees, stating that "neither women nor men are likely to explore or to reveal painful and intimate memories in their autobiographies" (10). This holds true for the three writers in this study, each of whom, as we pointed out earlier, distanced herself from her own life's story, preferring instead only to recount events from her childhood or from her ancestors' past: the closer her story came to her present, the more difficult and reticent she became, ultimately stopping the writing of her own life's story. Jelinek finds that autobiographers of both sexes avoid self-revelation about similar subjects; however, they employ different means of detachment for treating the material which they do include. They often omit references to siblings, children, mates, and romantic attachments, although women more often refer to their children in their

writings than do men, but more rarely refer to their mates (11-12). She states that autobiographers are not so reticent when writing about their parents as they are about other family members, finding that most touch on at least "one or both parents, with the pattern being to emphasize one parent, often to the exclusion of the other one. . . Women are less likely to focus on their mothers than men are" (12). This is an interesting observation in light of our three works, two of which deal extensively with the author/daughter's mother (Sarraute and Desvignes). Jelinek observes that, though most autobiographers include parents, "they are rarely described with emotionality" (13). Other subjects which are excluded are "the admission of intense feelings of hate, love, and fear, the disclosure of explicit sexual encounters, or the detailing of painful psychological experiences" (13). However, they "cannot entirely avoid writing about subjects that provoke uncomfortable memories. In order to deal with their feelings, they use various means of detachment to protect and distance themselves from the imagined or real judgments of their unknown audiences" (13). Yet men and women use different stylistic means to distance themselves from this material (13).

Jelinek suggests that both male and female autobiographers describe their childhoods as unhappy times, thus making this the area to distinguish the differences of style most easily, although it pervades the accounts of their adult lives as well. She declares that "men tend to idealize their lives or to cast them into heroic molds to project their universal import," exaggerating, mythologizing, or monumentalizing their boyhood and their entire lives. Not wanting to appear sentimental, they "desist from revealing" childhood crises, tending rather to reveal adult crises,

especially events in their professional lives (13-14). Jelinek reveals that the male literary tradition views "their childhoods as idylls of innocence and redemption and their lives as heroic" (15). This embellishment of their autobiographies projects a "self-image of confidence, no matter what difficulties they may have encountered" (15). Women, on the other hand, project a different self-image, one of self-consciousness and a need to "sift through their lives for explanation and understanding," often with the intention "to convince readers of their self-worth, to clarify, to affirm, and to authenticate their self-image" (15). Jelinek declares that women employ a variety of forms of understatement as one of the means of distancing themselves from the intimacy of their life stories.

In place of glowing narratives, women tend to write in a straightforward and objective manner about both their girlhood and adult experiences. They also write obliquely, elliptically, or humorously in order to camouflage their feelings, the same techniques used to play down their professional lives. Even when they risk themselves by relating crises, usually in girlhood, it lacks that nostalgia men seem to experience . . . (15)

A third pattern of autobiographers identified by Jelinek is the conscious shaping by autobiographers of "the events of their life into a coherent whole" (17). Men tend to present a harmonious and orderly chronological, linear narrative, unifying "their work by concentrating on one period of their life, one theme, or one characteristic of their personality" (17). In contrast, women's self-portraits are characterized by irregularity. Their narratives

are often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters. The multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write their autobiographies as well. (17)

Jelinek cites examples of women autobiographers who seem to interrupt their narratives constantly, to describe their adventures and trials episodically and fragmentedly, to organize the narrative around the various towns and cities they inhabited as children and adults (18-19). One often finds mixed chronology, flashbacks within flashbacks, stream-of-consciousness and associative narrative, all of which reflect the fragmentation the writer experiences in her multiple roles (19). Jelinek associates the number of women's autobiographies in the form of diaries, journals, and notebooks, rather than the form of autobiography proper to men, with the "fragmented, interrupted, and formless nature of their lives" (19). She argues that these forms "attest to a continuous female tradition of discontinuity in women's autobiographical writing to the present day" (19). She finds that, even when they are basically linear, they still possess the same anecdotal and disruptive characteristic found in other women's autobiographies (19). Therefore, this final pattern of orderliness, wholeness, or harmonious shaping that critics often use to characterize autobiography is not always applicable to women's autobiographies (19). Jelinek also notes that autobiography "is no longer the sole province of older people looking backward reflectively and consciously on their past," because young people are now writing about their lives as they live them. With the gradual collapse of traditional values, women's values are becoming more acceptable to the present male culture, and "what may appear new is, in fact, for women the culmination of a long tradition" (20). Jelinek's discussion of women's and men's autobiographies, underscores once again the problem of identifying a specific gender slant in the three works to be examined in greater detail in Part Two of this present study.

Voss

Norine Voss's essay, "'Saying the Unsayable': An Introduction to Women's Autobiography," also presents arguments for the existence of a difference in women's writing. While most men's autobiographies present linear accounts of their lives, which have been centered around a career or the pursuit of a specific goal, most women's autobiographies seem disorderly. Voss states that this is due to the fact that most women have been taught that their lives revolve around the needs of others, thus not having the single-minded pursuit of long-term goals that men have. This makes their lives appear disjointed and non-linear (220). Voss cites Estelle Jelinek and Suzanne Juhasz, who have indicated that women's lives are usually cyclical, repetitive, disjointed and other-directed rather than linear. While women may have goals, their progress toward that goal may be erratic at best because of circumstances beyond their control, such as family crisis. Jelinek⁹ argues that women's autobiographies are "discontinuous": "The narratives of their lives are usually not chronological and progressive [like men's] but disconnected or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters" (cited in Voss 221).

When considering women's autobiographies Voss cautions against bringing to the text preconceived ideas or notions as to what constitutes the form or genre of autobiography. Voss cites Francis Hart's argument that traditional forms of autobiography may be too rigid, so the critic must be sensitive to the writer's often multiple and shifting intentions, thus

⁹Estelle Jelinek, "Discontinuity and Order: A Comparison of Women's and Men's Autobiographies," MLA Convention, Dec. 1976. 10-11.

allowing the work to define its own form (Voss 223). Voss also presents Elizabeth W. Bruss's admonitions against narrow, prescriptive definitions of autobiography, and her espousal of the view that autobiography is an understanding between the author and the contemporary readers based on their shared cultural context (Voss 224).

Citing the arguments of Karl Weintraub and John M. Morris, Voss then emphasizes the formative influence of the historical context on autobiographies. However, she stresses the fact that women's autobiographies must be examined in connection with women's status and experiences within particular cultures and historical periods, keeping in mind that women's history does not necessarily follow the same contours as men's (224). Voss admits that it may prove impossible for practical reasons to answer the question of whether women's autobiography differs substantially from men's and that this may not even be a useful question to ask on theoretical grounds. She cautions readers against perceiving women's autobiographies as different or deviations from the norm, meaning male autobiographies. She also admits that autobiographers are individuals in spite of certain features which they might share, so that not all women's autobiographies could be classified as discontinuous, some even follow the traditional model, while others have experimented with various forms (225).

Voss deems it helpful to study women's autobiographies in relation to one another because such a study can reveal insights that would not be apparent when studied in isolation (225). Areas of study would include not only the author's sex but also patterns and themes that emerge, the response to women's changing position and status, or the treatment of

problems common to all autobiography by women in whatever time period. Voss then lists three problems inherent in the genre of autobiography for both men and women. The first is the combination of the revelation of the inner with an account of the outer person. The second is the uncomfortable feeling of seeming conceited. The third is the attempt to overcome the obstacles preventing one from telling the truth about one's self. Even though these problems are common to both men and women, Voss argues that women's socialization has made their experience with these problems different from men's. She stipulates that this is a difference of degree rather than of kind (226).

Because autobiography has traditionally been defined as a public act of personal recollection, Voss states that it has not been a form congenial to women who have normally been relegated to the private realm of home, personal relationships and emotion. She indicates that it has been difficult for women to bridge the gap between the public mode of autobiography and the private world. Exposing oneself in the public mode of autobiography is not the only problem for women; they must also deal with the fact that this is a rather egotistical genre, "implying both a strong interest in oneself and a life which seems important enough to record" (226). Even though our society censures an excessive concern with one's own self-importance for both men and women, this social prohibition seems stricter for women, appearing incompatible with the conventional definition of femininity, which includes the qualities of "passivity, humility, unselfishness bordering on self-annihilation, and self-display only to please a husband or a lover" (227). Voss indicates that this conflicting attitude between egoism and unselfishness, self-love and self-

effacement poses a problem for women autobiographers which can affect the narrative mode and the form of the autobiography. Because women are taught to define themselves in relation to others rather than as autonomous selves, any attempt to pursue one's own priorities is severely censured (227).

Voss cites examples of women autobiographers who found the autobiography to be their own personal manifesto for the right to live as an autonomous being. Some women autobiographers have written an "autobiography-family biography" in which the woman presents herself within the context of a web of familial relationships. The assertion of ego, the displacement of the autobiographical voice, the emphasis on personal connectedness, and the definition of women through relationships with others are all characteristics of various autobiographies by women. There is also a problem with the autobiographical truth and the veil of fiction which seem to be uneasily wedded in most autobiographies. Voss finds that, although complete truthfulness is a problem for both male and female autobiographers, because of women's vulnerable position in patriarchal society, there exists an additional dimension to the question of autobiographical truth for female autobiographers:

Deception means survival for the powerless: to be successfully feminine means to learn concealment, deceit, the graceful falsehood . . . suppressing unfeminine emotions of anger or rebellion, depreciating or concealing intellectual and athletic ability, playing roles that have little connection with the real person—all these are part of almost any woman's repertoire. (229)

Voss mentions several taboo emotions and subjects that women autobiographers are beginning to discuss more openly. These include anger and the often troubled and ambivalent relationship between mothers and daughters. Women have traditionally been taught to repress their

anger or to redirect it against themselves or other women, but many writers are discovering the creative potential of anger. Some autobiographers in the act of re-examining their own lives (often at the same age as their mothers were when the autobiographers were young girls) are impelled to reconsider their relationship to their mothers. One frequent result of repressing one's anger or fears is voicelessness, a phenomenon recounted by many women autobiographers with literal and metaphorical instances of being silenced, unable to speak, and/or invisible (230-31). Voss concludes by stating that "for many women, autobiography thus becomes a way of emerging from silence, a way of saying the unsayable" (231).

Conclusion

The elements and characteristics peculiar to an *écriture féminine*, as discussed by the various critics above, lead to the conclusion that the answer to the question presented as the title of this chapter, Is there a distinctive feminine style of writing?, is affirmative. However, this question is shrouded in the problematics of gender specificity, and what it means to write like a woman. Though all of these characteristics may not be found in every woman writers' works, enough of them may be found in each of the three women writers under discussion here to argue that gender specificity pervades their writings even though they all maintain the contrary. Elements that demand attention include: the writing style; the presence of blanks, gaps, spaces; nonlinearity, fragmentation, complexity, open-endedness, and incoherence of the text; elements of content include recounting empathetic and personal episodes; a desire to

please; characteristics associated with women's autobiographies or autobiographical fictions; the desire for universality of experience; the presentation of women's self-development and survival; the importance of the mother-daughter relationship; the examination of the silences of the text and the things not said; the function of woman's body as source of memory as well as the power of words for source of memory; the emphasis on relationships and connectedness and on the personal over the professional. These elements will be examined in Part Two with specific examples taken from each of the texts. Chapter Two will present the authors' perceptions of their own writings.

Chapter 2

Authorial Attitudes: Claims of Gender Neutrality

Quand j'écris, je ne suis ni homme ni femme . . .

This statement by Nathalie Sarraute reflects the attitude of all three of these women writers about their writings. They all insist that they are androgynous writers rather than feminine writers, often strongly rejecting any feminist aspect to their works at all. Yet they are all women, women who do write about women (as well as men), and women who depict certain attitudes and events common to women in their works in a particularly feminine manner. Just as Inas Messiha has decried having her work/dissertation labeled "feminist" because she is a woman analysing other women, these three writers have also tried to reject this label. However, no matter how much Messiha protested having her work referred to as an *étude féministe*, she finally abandoned her resistance to this term because those around her refused to let it drop. In finally coming to terms with this idea, she wrote, "il m'a alors paru clair qu'être femme est et sera toujours quelque chose de spécial, quelque chose de différent. Cette discrimination n'est pas nécessairement du genre malhonnête et destructif, elle pourrait même être du genre qui encourage le bien et l'avancement de la femme" (10-11). This very positive feminist attitude is what will be examined in the specific works under consideration by Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes, based on the argument that, in spite of the expressed opinions of these three women writers, their works reveal a specifically feminine manner of writing.

Nathalie Sarraute

Not a Woman Writer

Nathalie Sarraute has refused to be identified as a "woman writer." In an interview that Sarraute had with John Ardagh she stressed that "any good writer is androgynous, he or she has to be, so as to be able to write equally about men and women . . . " (Minogue, *Nathalie Sarraute and The War* 216). In a 1990 interview, when asked, "What about your own feminism?" Sarraute responded:

I militated for the women's vote in 1935. I have always been a feminist in so far as I want equal rights for women. But the idea of "women's writing" shocks me. I think that in art we are androgynous. Our brains are not different¹⁰, but until now women were less educated, so they produced fewer works of art. People always compare women to each other. (Sarraute, "The Art of Fiction" 160).

Sarraute insists that her strong "political" feminism has no direct relationship to her creative work, that she does not think as a woman, and that "one must not consider men and women as separate because this leads to a 'destructive segregation'" (King 85). In a 1984 interview with Sonia Rykiel, Sarraute stated:

Quand j'écris, je ne suis ni homme ni femme ni chien ni chat, je ne suis pas moi, je ne suis plus rien mais plongée à l'intérieur d'une chose où je ne me pose aucune question d'âge, d'être . . . je me mélange, je refuse de parler d'écriture féminine, de participer à des mouvements qui séparent les hommes, les femmes, c'est contraire à mes opinions . . . Il n'y a pas d'écriture féminine, je n'en connais pas. (40)

In a 1987 interview with Simone Benmussa, Sarraute said, "A l'intérieur, où je suis, le sexe n'existe pas . . . Quand je travaille je ne pense pas en tant que femme. Cela ne m'a jamais effleurée. C'est une chose qui est absolument hors de mes considérations" (140).

¹⁰The corpus collarum is thinner in women apparently.

After reading the interview in Benmussa's book, one might be confused by what appears there and what Minogue reports that Sarraute said to John Ardagh about being an androgynous writer. In Benmussa's interviews, Sarraute said,

C'est l'être humain pour moi, le neutre. . . Je ne pense pas du tout "androgénéité". Je travaille à partir uniquement de ce que je ressens moi-même. Je ne me place pas à l'extérieur, je ne cherche pas à analyser du dehors. A l'intérieur, où je suis, le sexe n'existe pas. Je ne me dis jamais: ça c'est ressenti par moi, ou par une femme, ou par un homme. Je place souvent ce "ressenti" dans des consciences féminines ou masculines pour des raisons, quelquefois, simplement de variations du dialogue, sauf dans de rares cas où la femme *joue* un rôle de femme. . . Je ne pense pas que c'est une femme qui écrit. Cette chose-là, ce que je travaille, est en train de se passer quelque part où le sexe féminin ou masculin n'intervient pas. (140-141)

Here Sarraute does not accept the concept of androgyny but in the Ardaugh interview, she did. Perhaps the dates of these interviews should be examined to get a clearer picture and to see if her thinking changed over time.

Gaëtan Brulotte writes that Sarraute defends "la folie et la passion qu'on cherche à mettre sous clé, sous bonne garde, en lieu sûr" (40). Sarraute said that, "Je pratique l'abandon à mon propre courant" in an interview with Finas in *Etudes littéraires*. Brulotte finds this in keeping with Sarraute's aversion to being labeled as part of a particular group or movement and underlines "les malaises qu'elle éprouve à se laisser intégrer à un groupe (celui du Nouveau Roman par exemple) et les efforts qu'elle déploie dans son discours théorique et dans ses interviews pour se démarquer des collectivismes uniformisants" (40).

Sarah Barbour reminds us that the New Criticism demands that the "intentions" of the author be read separately from the "production" of a text (*Nathalie Sarraute* 35). Barbour claims that Sarraute "has always

dissociated herself from the feminist movement in France as it has been defined, and the feminists writing in France in the 1970s left Sarraute's works alone" (19). Barbour's advice seems to have been followed by feminist critics in recent years, as Sheila M. Bell's summary of Sarraute criticism since 1980 indicates.

Bell has noted that, until relatively recently, critics have tended to accept Sarraute's account of herself. However, several feminist critics in the late 80s and early 90s have questioned Sarraute's self-professed position of not being a "woman writer" and have argued for her being a feminist or even a feminine writer ("The Conjuror's" 89). Many comparative studies of Sarraute's works have been made and are being made, even though Sarraute herself is rather impatient with such comparisons, saying that they distort: "Et toutes les comparaisons me paraissent donc insupportables. Surtout cette manie qu'on a de comparer les femmes entre elles" (Boncenne 92). However, many feminist critics have argued that Nathalie Sarraute, along with other twentieth-century women writers, has contributed to create "un autre style d'écriture féminine, [et] presque une autre langue" (qtd. in Bell, "The Conjuror's" 90). Bell presents views of various feminist critics who argue that Sarraute does indeed possess an *écriture féminine* although Sarraute denies it. Bell concludes by stating that the case is not closed, indicating that this view needs and demands further research, with accurate readings of Sarraute's texts (91).

Raylene L. Ramsey writes that, as to the issue of gender differences, or of similarities between "masculine" and "feminine" writers, Nathalie Sarraute has insisted vehemently that her text has no sex (*The French New Autobiographies* 5), resisting being classified "as a 'woman' writer, in any

way different from the great (male) writers of the past" (137). However, Ramsey advocates that a reading of Sarraute's "rewriting of history, story, and gendered self involves hidden movements between the specific and individuated gendered bodies (the desires, fantasies, and disavowals) . . . in text and the gendered reader's (my) own body and text" (9). She seems to be advocating the reader's own interpretation of the text, which could find it to be feminine.

In *Enfance*, Sarraute writes that, as a child, she rejected her own emotions, rejoicing when her mind seemed "clean, flexible, healthy" (E 119, 130). Adèle King suggests that this control, and need to dominate the irrational "may explain to some degree Sarraute's insistence that she is writing about what all individuals share, and writing from an ungendered position, asserting a 'healthy' neutrality" (106).¹¹ Another explanation for her refusal to consider her writing as feminine can also be found in *Enfance* during the intellectual discussions between her father's émigré friends in Paris, where she is conscious that "no one made the slightest distinction between men and women" (E 177, 189). King argues that Sarraute's childhood world depicts the sexes "united in intellectual pursuits, while widely differentiated in their expressions of emotion" (106, my italics). However, King earlier indicated that she found in Sarraute's works a vision of the world that reflects her position as a woman, and a use of writing that shows a conscious or perhaps unconscious assumption of gender (85). These two seemingly contradictory statements by King underscore once again the problematics of this topic of gender specificity. I disagree with Sarraute's claims of neutrality in her writing. Despite her

¹¹Cf. Mme de Merteuil in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

pretensions that the masculine is neutral, her texts reveal what we call *écriture féminine* and I shall use her tropisms as my argument even though she claims the opposite. These are the issues to be explored more in depth in Part Two in an effort to reveal how Sarraute's *Enfance* does indeed reveal a gender specific writing.

Universality and New Writing Style

Sarraute claims to seek what is common to all human beings and is aware that women can not represent this communality (*elle* is not neuter, but *il* is [because it can mean both "he" and indefinite "it"]). In fact, she insists that women cannot perform the roles in her play, *Pour un oui ou pour un non*,

parce qu'il leur est impossible d'être "neutres". Elles sont toujours représentées, se représentent socialement, se veulent elles-mêmes—et cela joue un rôle énorme—différentes de l'homme. Elles ont certaines habitudes, certaines manières d'être, une certaine voix, certaines intonations dont les trois-quarts, à mon avis, sont fabriquées, sont le fait de l'éducation. Il serait insupportable de faire jouer cette pièce par des femmes parce qu'on ne verrait plus l'être humain, on n'y verrait que des femmes qui se disputent. Il existe une certaine image de la femme, jusqu'à présent indéracinable, qui sera plaquée, projetée immédiatement sur ces deux êtres humains: la femme jalouse de celle qui a une famille, puisque c'est l'essentiel pour elle d'avoir un mari et des enfants etc. (Benmussa, *Nathalie Sarraute* 142)

When Benmussa asked whether she thought a stereotype for men existed as well, Sarraute admitted that this was rather curious because she did not see a specifically masculine conduct when she constructed her characters.

C'est que, probablement, j'établis comme un contre-poids qui agit en sorte que cette conduite ne me paraît jamais typiquement virile puisqu'elle est aussi ma propre conduite. Elle devient neutre par le fait que j'y participe moi-même et, d'un coup, je la neutralise. (142)

She avoids using women as principal characters because "elles sont vues uniquement en tant qu'être féminin, alors qu'un homme peut représenter

l'univers entier. Tout l'extérieur chez la femme joue un rôle immense, davantage que chez l'homme" (144). Therefore, she opts for "neuter" because this represents more generally the universal experience of *human* kind. Although this position may seem ridiculous, it is what Sarraute believed and professed. This is one of the problems that Sarraute's writing poses. She is indeed exploring new ground by exposing the tropisms in language, but then refuses to admit that gender difference can exist in language. In her effort to stress the universality of her writing by insisting on this neutralising of her characters, it seems that she denigrates or attempts to denigrate the femaleness of her work.

Sarraute claims that, because this neuter zone exists, one is able to recognize oneself in both male and female characters of well-written works. She cites *Le Rouge et le Noir* as an example in which women readers *se reconnaissent* in Mme de Rênal as well as in Julien. For her, this is the absolute proof that "nous sommes tous semblables à un certain niveau de la conscience," otherwise masculine characters would be totally closed to us, and there are many more of them than there are female characters. She continues this argument and expresses her violent opposition to the discrimination that women make:

Si nous n'avons que notre univers à nous, la plupart des oeuvres nous sont alors fermées! . . . Tout ce qui a été écrit par les hommes nous est fermé. Cette discrimination est suicidaire . . . Mais je crois que les féministes, maintenant, ont abandonné ce point de vue.
(Benmussa, *Nathalie Sarraute* 145)

Typical female themes of maternal relations, sexual love, and the female body are seldom treated in her works. She stresses the lack of communication between individuals and the impossibility of fully

comprehending another individual (King 86), themes which are much more universal.

Sarraute's desire to pursue her writing of tropisms¹² is not only because she wanted to examine this unexplored domain, but also because she believes it to be an area common to all. She said to herself, "tout le monde les a, ces mouvements, tout le monde les éprouve" (Benmussa, *Nathalie Sarraute* 60). She insists that she does not qualify these tropisms. "Ils se produisent, ils sont là, je les vois comme je vois cette porte ou un objet quelconque mais jamais je ne me place au-dehors pour les qualifier moralement" (Benmussa, *Nathalie Sarraute* 70). She proudly "admits" that she imitates no model, that she is alone in this exploration of tropisms, and that she employs her own instruments to discover them. "J'ai l'impression que je marche avec une certaine liberté sur des terres où il n'y a personne. Je suis seule, je suis maître d'abord . . . " (Benmussa, *Nathalie Sarraute* 106). She insists that she never sought to study something because of its importance, rather,

j'ai pris des choses que je ressens fortement, qui me sont proches et qui me paraissent intéressantes parce qu'elles aboutissent à ce qui, en apparence, est anodin, relève de la vie courante, quotidienne, qui se passe à chaque instant. (Benmussa, *Nathalie Sarraute* 107)

Sarraute maintains that she writes from not only a personal experience, but also a common/universal experience, "puisque tout le monde [lui] ressemble" (Benmussa, *Nathalie Sarraute* 115). She is certain that "sur un plan précis, à un niveau également précis, nous nous ressemblons tous, que nous avons tous ces mouvements intérieurs" (Benmussa, *Nathalie Sarraute* 115). Although there are few well-defined characters in her work,

¹²This term will be defined and discussed in more detail in the next section "New Writing Style."

Sarraute stresses that it is not the character that is important "mais ce qui se passe d'anonyme et d'identique chez n'importe qui" (Benmussa, *Nathalie Sarraute* 119).

Sarraute not only insists on the universality of her writing, but also that she has developed a new writing style. Lucille Frackman Becker quotes from Gauthier's essay "Existe-t-il une écriture féminine?" and indicates that many contemporary female authors hail Sarraute as a precursor because she has challenged the rational, linear construction of the traditional novel, and has rejected its allegedly "conventional masculine" language in an effort to "*make audible* that which agitates within us, suffers silently in the *holes of discourse*, in the unsaid, or in the non-sense" ("Toward a New" 111). Sarraute's constant goal has been to express what cannot be expressed in traditional forms, to find words and images that give the reader the impression of simultaneously experiencing the same feelings as the characters. She attempts to do this with what she has termed "tropisms," a concept that demonstrates the new territories she charted for writing, particularly women's writing. Becker concludes that Sarraute's fascination with language and that which antecedes language, led her "to chart a new path for the novel—redefining it and extending it as an instrument of exploration—one that preceded and influenced the feminist novel in its search for a new means of expression for women's literature" (119). In the 1987 interviews with Benmussa, Sarraute expresses her fascination with writing.

J'aime travailler l'écriture. J'ai toujours aimé ça. Dès que le fond, que j'essaye de montrer, est un fond déjà reconnu, l'écriture devient plate et conventionnelle. Pour que cette écriture respire et vive, il faut qu'il y ait quelque chose de spontané, d'inconnu, de vibrant qui essaye de se trouver des mots. (*Nathalie Sarraute* 115)

She insists that this is a long and difficult job "pour dégager quelque chose d'encore intact, d'encore tremblant qui donne une certaine vibration à la forme" (117). This insistence on finding a new form is summed up in her credo, "il est impossible de se servir de formes qui ont déjà été utilisées" (117).

In a 1989 interview with Françoise Dupuey-Sullivan, Sarraute reiterates this fascination with writing:

. . . J'écris parce que c'est un besoin, une nécessité pour moi, parce que des choses me passionnent, parce que j'ai envie de travailler sur l'écriture. J'ai toujours aimé écrire . . . J'aime rendre avec des mots des sensations qui me paraissent nécessiter une forme qui n'est pas une forme académique prise chez quelqu'un d'autre. (190)

She also claims that she writes for herself, not for her readers because she does not know them, and desires neither to transform them nor to educate them:

J'essaie de prendre une parcelle, si infime soit-elle, du monde et de m'y attacher parce qu'il y a quelque chose là qui n'a pas encore été exploré et qui nécessite une forme neuve, c'est-à-dire une forme vivante . . . C'est pour ça que j'écris. (190)

On numerous occasions Sarraute has expressed the fact that her writing style is new and different, something that she has found and discovered within herself, something that she must express. It took many years for her to accrue a reading public who appreciated her work and attempted to understand it simply because it was so "novel."

Influence of her Mother and Misogynistic Portrayal of Women

In a 1984 interview with Marc Saporta, Sarraute spoke of her mother's writings and of the fact that she, the mother, was proud that no one—critic or reader—realised that her work was written by a woman (8).

In her interview with Benmussa, Sarraute said that her mother "n'a jamais

voulu qu'on sache qu'elle était une femme. C'est son mari qui apportait les manuscrits chez l'éditeur et on n'a jamais découvert qui elle était" (*Nathalie Sarraute* 159). Like her mother, Sarraute refuses to be identified by gender. Sarraute told Benmussa that she had never spoken about literature with her mother, even though this was an area common to them both. In fact, she did not believe that her mother had ever even read any of her (Sarraute's) works. "Je lui avais donné *Portrait d'un inconnu* et, après sa mort, quand j'ai retrouvé le livre, les pages n'étaient pas découpées, seulement celles de la préface, elle n'était pas allée plus loin" (159). The subject of their writing differed greatly. Sarraute said that her mother not only wrote children's stories, but that she also "aimait les romans de cape et d'épée, les grands romans d'amour avec des assassinats. C'est fou ce qui se passait dans ses romans!" (158). Sarraute believed that her mother's works were *assez connues* and said that her mother "était persuadée qu'elle était un grand génie" (159).

In a 1982 colloquium held at New York University, Sarraute spoke of her discovery and efforts of finding/creating a new form that could reveal an unknown "content," her discovery of writing tropisms. She said that her first writing emerged without preparation, assuming its own shape and rhythm, flowing so smoothly that there were almost no erasures, so she left it as it was (Oppenheim 120).

In spite of Sarraute's denials, many feminist critics have examined the influence of Sarraute's mother on her writing, and have discerned that the mother—whether present or absent—was able to wield incredible power and influence on her daughter. A close examination of Sarraute's autobiographical *récit* begins to reveal some of this power: Natacha's

fascination with words, her love of writing and desire to imitate the mother, the destruction of this desire by the cutting criticism of her mother's publisher after he examined one of Natacha's early writing efforts, Natacha's rediscovery of a love of writing and her desire to please while attending school in Paris. However, it was not until her mid-thirties that Sarraute really began writing in earnest with a desire to have her work published. The reason for this late blooming of her writing has been linked to the trauma she must have felt as a child when her mother's publisher rejected her writing. That piece of writing was something that imitated her mother's style and subject. Sarraute's later literary efforts had nothing in common with her mother's writing at all. This is one more indication of the mother's influence on her writing, Sarraute's effort to establish her own form and not to imitate her mother's. Another indication of the mother's influence can also be linked to the refusal by both mother and daughter to be classified as "women" writers.

In Sarraute's response to criticism about her misogynistic portrayal of women, she claims that "she showed women not as they should be but as they are, playing roles imposed upon them by society, roles they have both accepted and adopted" (Becker, "Toward a New" 110). She insists, however, that her real interest is "how they are in the depths of their being, where all people are alike and respond in a similar fashion" (110). This criticism stems from the fact that Sarraute seems to employ more masculine characters and masculine pronouns than feminine ones. Her response to this is that she desired to present her characters as "neuter" and the masculine pronoun may also be neuter while the feminine pronoun is only ever feminine.

In *Enfance* there are several women characters to be examined.

Sarraute portrays her Aunt Aniouta and her "adopted" grandmother, Véra's mother, in a very positive light. However, the pictures of both her mother and her step-mother Véra vacillate between good and bad. Natacha attempts to be honest, yet she also seeks explanations for why the maternal figure may have reacted in such a negative way, sometimes finding a plausible excuse, so that the reader does not come away with such a negative image of these women who "mothered" her. Her portrayals of nannies and governesses, on the other hand, seem to be mostly negative, an understandable attitude in light of the fact that this child so ardently desired the mother's approval and love, but was so often left in the care of others.

One may not agree with the interpretation of Sarraute's work as misogynistic. I support Sarraute's claim that she presents women as they are in the circumstances in which they find themselves, and with her desire to present "neuter" characters so that the episodes related have a more universal appeal. However, this is once again an instance of the difficulty of defining gender specificity in Sarraute's work. Although Sarraute vehemently denies the existence of a feminist writing in her work, as evidenced by the many statements quoted above, a close examination of her text, *Enfance*, will reveal otherwise.

Marguerite Yourcenar

Not a Woman Writer

In "Marguerite Yourcenar's Encounter with a Feminist Critic," Kay Gorman states that "every student of Marguerite Yourcenar's work is aware that she is not a feminist in the current meaning(s) of that word" (59). Marguerite Yourcenar, like Nathalie Sarraute, categorically refused to be classified as a "woman" writer. In *Twentieth-Century French Women Novelists*, Becker states that Yourcenar's *oeuvre*, while typical of the great French classical tradition, differs from that of the majority of contemporary French women authors in both themes and language.

Unlike her contemporaries, who insist that language is sexually biased because it is structured according to oppositions—male/female, mind/body, intellect/emotion—which are ordered by a patriarchal society and which work to the detriment of women, she has always maintained that language and logic are universally valid and are generally the same for both sexes. ("The Law" 33)

Becker concludes this chapter on Yourcenar by stating that she has always spoken against and refused to be included in the category of "women writers" (43).

Renée-Berthe Drapeau suggests (recites) certain events from Yourcenar's life as possible reasons for her uncomfortableness with femininity.

Une femme peut nier l'identité sexuelle de sa production, lui donner une idéalité toute intellectuelle (et s'en donner une à elle-même à la fois), il n'en reste pas moins que sa fiction la nomme, et se refuser est aussi une manière d'exister. La retenue pourtant chargée de sensualité, le feu tantôt allumé, tantôt éteint accompagne chez l'écrivaine belge l'hésitation entre le conservatisme et la révolte. Il s'agit de s'assumer différente du séduisant modèle proposé par un père infiniment cultivé. Fille de noble isolée des luttes pour le pain, orpheline de mère et jamais confrontée à la grossesse et au lot des femmes regroupées, la jeune Yourcenar vit pour les livres et s'isole de la foule. . . .

[Elle est . . .] mal à l'aise avec la sensualité prenante des femmes. L'ambivalence à peine masquée se grave à l'écriture désirante froide

. . . l'esprit habitué à une fémininité plus fulgurante éprouve une certaine gêne à voir les belles revendications libertaires, qui sont les siennes aussi, passer par la bouche de protagonistes masculins plutôt misogynes. Et pourquoi de si pâles personnages féminins avant les années 1950? Les féministes se fatiguent et repoussent l'écrivaine sans mère, la Jeanne d'Arc asexuée sous sa cuirasse. (19-20)

It seems true indeed that many feminist critics have left Yourcenar alone because of their perception of misogyny throughout her works, and because they did not find enough positive representations of women in her texts. However, her texts should be of great interest to feminist critics, with much material yet to be examined.

When Georgia Hooks Shurr wrote to Marguerite Yourcenar telling her of her (Shurr's) intended project to include her in a guide she was writing dealing with works by French *women* writers (my italics), Yourcenar "was negatively disposed to [Shurr's] thinking of her as a woman writer" (qtd. in Shurr vii) and responded, " . . . I do not believe in such a bipartition of women and men writers" (qtd. in Shurr viii). While Yourcenar may insist that she not be regarded as a woman writer, there are many indications throughout her works that reflect that she is a woman writing. More feminist critics need to examine her works in a more positive light as possessing aspects of *écriture féminine*.

Misogynistic Portrayal of Women or Not?

Yourcenar, like Sarraute, has been criticized strongly for her misogynistic portrayal of women. In her defense against this criticism in the notes at the end of her novel, *Anna, soror*, Yourcenar enumerates several of her admirable women characters stating that "on m'a parfois reproché de négliger la femme," and claiming that, on the contrary, "j'ai mis en elles une bonne part de mon idéal humain" (143). However, Becker,

among others, interprets Yourcenar's portrayal of women in her works as very negative, even misogynistic:

Her central theme of male homosexuality, with its frequently sadistic treatment of women, has placed her squarely in the misogynistic tradition of "l'esprit gaulois." Accusations against her of misogyny and contempt for women have been countered by critics who cite various female characters with supporting roles in her work. Mention has also been made of women who are "essential to the action of the story and the psychology of the protagonists"¹³, including Marcella (*A Coin in Nine Hands*) and Sophie (*Coup de Grâce*)—both of whom, however, were motivated in their actions by unheroic, homosexual rejection. Arguments such as these are rejected by feminist critics. Marguerite Yourcenar is indeed a "woman" novelist, that is to say she is a woman who writes novels within the great French classical tradition. But her portrayal of women also reflects the negative vision of women conceived and fostered within that tradition. ("The Law" 43)

Becker continues this critique of Yourcenar's portrayal of women linking it to the fact that she is a lesbian, although she does not speak about it nor give it a positive value as many other contemporary French women authors who are lesbians do because it rejects "a male-dominated society and provides a basis for the construction of a new, or even utopian society" (33). Becker stresses that, "Yourcenar retains the traditional male/subject-female/object dichotomy and always sacrifices the female and heterosexual love to male homosexuality" (33-34). Becker cites numerous examples, drawn from Yourcenar's texts, to support her opinion of Yourcenar's misogyny. However, I find her criticism to be too harsh, and feel that she has ignored many other examples of how Yourcenar portrays women in a more positive light, as will be addressed later.

Shurr is one of the Yourcenar critics, along with Becker, who argue that her women characters are presented in a very negative light, saying that, when they are present, they are "generally repressed or forced to be

¹³Pierre Horn, *Marguerite Yourcenar* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), 96.

silent, or they are quite mad. Finally, they are vague creatures, abandoned by the stronger, more interesting masculine figures. They are self-effacing, voiceless beings" (Shurr 103). After reading Shurr's chapter, "Conclusion: Women in Yourcenar's Fiction," I agree with Gorman about Shurr's lack of understanding and misinterpretation of the role of women in Yourcenar's work.¹⁴ Shurr gives a very lop-sided and biased view of women in the works of Yourcenar and ignores the findings of many other critics, and the comments of Yourcenar herself. In fact, Shurr's analysis of Yourcenar's acceptance speech to the Académie Française, totally ignores Yourcenar's comments about earlier French women writers who would also have merited a place among the immortals. Shurr deems Yourcenar's writing style to be more androgynous than either masculine or feminine, and finds that it lacks certain characteristics generally associated with female sensibility or the literary style of a woman writer. She even claims that "the reader is rarely tempted to compare her to any other woman author" (89). I find this surprising, since there are numerous critics who have indeed included/compared Yourcenar in studies involving other women authors. I, for one, chose to deal with Yourcenar in a comparative study with Sarraute and Desvignes, because, from the beginning, I wanted to explore the depiction of women in her work. Although this is an issue that demands the critics' attention with a careful analysis of all of Yourcenar's *oeuvre*, this present study must be limited to the portrayal of women in *Quoi? L'éternité*.

¹⁴This disagreement with Shurr is based on the many women characters in Yourcenar's fiction who play interesting roles, supportive of and necessary to Yourcenar's male characters. For example, Shurr ignored many of the women characters in *L'Oeuvre au noir*, including the Lady of Frôso and Marthe, and grossly misjudged Hilzonde.

Many critics have attempted to link facets of Yourcenar's personal life to the portrayal of women in her work. However, evidence exists to indicate that Yourcenar disapproved of the secondary lot or role attributed to women in literature. One example, which will be discussed in more detail later is the essay by Gay Smith, "Ode to the Heroine: Marguerite Yourcenar's Dramatic Voice." In an endnote to this essay, Smith points out that Yourcenar published an essay in 1932 criticizing Pindar "for marginalizing woman and conceiving of the ideal woman as 'a good hearth dog' (*Essais* 1478)" (19). I would posit that the critics who have attempted to explain why Yourcenar displays a misogynistic attitude toward women have not read Yourcenar's own works very carefully. Drapeau finds that most critics have insisted on attaching Yourcenar and her works

aux piliers de la tradition bourgeoise et patriarcale comme si, malgré son malaise à l'endroit de la solidarité des femmes, elle n'avait pas défendu le droit à l'avortement, à la justice; comme si son discours n'était pas souvent, à son insu sans doute, anti-patriarcal. (21)

These feminist concerns from her personal life may not have played a predominant role in her literary creations, but must have influenced to some degree her depictions of the plight of women in her works. Drapeau writes that, although "l'espace accordé aux femmes dans sa production écrite suggère la place qu'elle alloue à son identité sexuelle dans le monde de ses émotions," one must write/compose with the body that one has been given (22). "Le flambeau de la dame solitaire nous est bien connue, c'est celui de l'homosexualité, pas du lesbianisme: l'amour du même corps est attribué à l'autre sexe (22)." This is an interesting and important observation. However, Yourcenar does seem to allude to lesbianism in her autobiographical trilogy with two or three references to a possible sexual relationship between her mother Fernande and her school friend Jeanne

Vietinghoff (de Reval). She even alludes to this in the relationship between her father's first wife, Berthe and her sister Gabrielle.¹⁵ Based on these two examples among others, the correctness of Drapeau's statement might be questioned. Although it has been argued that Yourcenar mentions these possible lesbian relationships, Drapeau correctly asserts that homosexuality is dealt with in much more length and detail than the issue of lesbianism throughout Yourcenar's works. In the *Entretiens Radiophoniques* with Patrick de Rosbo, Yourcenar admits to being perplexed by the themes which readers have chosen to emphasize in her works, especially that of homosexuality. She prefers the word "bisexual" for the characters in her work rather than "homosexual." These characters "ne sont pas, au sens du mot tel qu'on l'entend aujourd'hui dans la littérature populaire et dans la psychologie de drugstore, des "homosexuels": ils sont bisexuels" (79). I agree with Yourcenar here because this could also be said of the examples just cited of women who showed a preference for both other women and men. They are not lesbian, so much as they are bisexual.

The initial intention of this study was to examine the female characters in several of Yourcenar's earlier works, beginning with *L'Oeuvre au noir*.¹⁶ However, after the reading of *Quoi? L'éternité*, the

¹⁵In *L'Oeuvre au noir* one might question the relationship between Marthe and her cousin Bénédicte.

¹⁶In this work alone, there are more than forty-five women characters. The concept of female *Bildung* for both Hilzonde, and her daughter, Marthe was to be a significant part of that study. My initial reaction to Marthe was much more tolerant and positive than Yourcenar's condemnation of this woman character because of her emotional and moral cowardice as well as her avarice.

initial scope of this project changed direction in order to deal with the exemplary and wonderful female protagonist, Jeanne de Reval.

Although some Yourcenar critics chastise her for her lack of strong women characters or for their (the critics') perceived misogynistic portrayal of women, Gay Smith's article which I mentioned earlier entitled "Ode to the Heroine: Marguerite Yourcenar's Dramatic Voice" examines the roles of female protagonists in Yourcenar's drama. Although Smith limits her analysis to the heroines in Yourcenar's dramatic works, many of her observations apply just as well to the heroines in the rest of Yourcenar's work. Smith claims that "from a feminist perspective, Yourcenar the dramatist deconstructs traditional heroes and heroines in the advance guard of twentieth-century feminist theatre practitioners" (13). One technique employed by Yourcenar is the use of silence and stasis, another aspect often associated with feminist writing. Smith perceives Yourcenar's dramatic heroines as women who act and suffer, who strive and make an imprint, but who are not victims. Smith says that one can interpret Yourcenar's dramas as "updated passion plays, communicating the persistent passion and suffering of the heroine" (18). She identifies these heroines as intelligent and courageous, women with a maternal nursing of an obsessive goal or abstract ideal, women who battle like wolves, guilt-ridden, sex-driven heroines suffering the misery of their tasks, and the onerous demands of the crime they must commit. However, Yourcenar does not "bring judgment upon the heads of her heroine criminals, but rather admiration for their strength and empathy for their alienation" (18). This admiration of female strength and struggle of alienation will be evident in the character of Jeanne de Reval in *Quoi? L'éternité*.

Two other critics who reject the claim of misogyny toward women by Yourcenar in her works are C. Frederick Farrell, Jr. and Edith R. Farrell. Their essay "From Siren to Saint: Women in the works of Marguerite Yourcenar" in their book *Marguerite Yourcenar in Counterpoint* was published in 1983, five years before the appearance of *Quoi? L'éternité*, so it does not deal with the character of Jeanne de Reval. However, the Farrells argue convincingly that Yourcenar has not ignored women in her works, nor has she always portrayed them negatively. They accuse her critics of ignoring "the rich and varied women characters who people her books and [for conveying] the false impression that [she] has neglected women to write exclusively about men" (93). The Farrells argue that Yourcenar's women characters represent women of all levels of society, of various time periods and countries. Although not all of her women characters are protagonists, their role in her works is of great importance, and should not be measured by the "direct ratio to the space they occupy, but rather by their influence and by their example" (94).

The Farrells have identified several feminine themes which recur in Yourcenar's works and were of significant importance to her. She placed a high value on marriage and despised characters who overly emphasized their vanity or concern with their dress. This indicated a weakness of character, a passivity and lack of fervor, whether for another person, a cause, or an ideal (96). In *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, Farrell and Farrell claim, Hadrien identifies women as having two facets: "the matron (cold, proud, economical, concerned with her children and her household); and the other, what he calls 'tender idols' of men who love women" (96). These "tender idols" are women who display the traditional characteristics of

"femininity," being "more concerned with display—paint, perfume, clothes—than with qualities of the mind or spirit" (96).

According to the Farrells, the weakness in Yourcenar's women characters may be due to their nature or to their upbringing. However, not all weaknesses are due to character or environment, but some are a result of powerlessness "dictated by social and economic forces" (97). Yet Yourcenar also identified the good qualities even in some of her weak female characters. The Farrells argue that the large majority of Yourcenar's women characters learn to cope with the condition allotted to them, and that Yourcenar herself sees "the nurturing and protecting acts as 'infinitely sacred,' i.e., as contributing to the cause of humanity" (97). They believe that this group of practical women forms a very significant part of the women in Yourcenar's work: solid, competent mistresses of the house, as well as hardworking and pious servants and peasants. One can even discover humble women who play a very small role in both the novel and in life, yet who are able to reach out to others in acts of kindness and generosity.

The capacity for love is the quality with which Yourcenar endows her women characters, whether maternal, romantic, abstract, or mystical love.

Whether the woman is a servant, friend, wife, lover, full partner, idealist, or saint; love transfigures a woman and allows her to transcend her position, time and space. Even though they may be rejected by the person they love and serve . . . their devotion raises such women to the rank of heroine. (99)

The Farrells delineate several characteristics which are typically feminist and which Yourcenar presents in a very positive light, with women being more empathetic and sensitive than men:

Yourcenar believes that women, who are closer to birth and death than men, and who have traditionally been responsible for the preparation of food, the care of children and the home, may also be closer to the fundamental realities of nature, may place a higher value on an individual life and on the quality of that life, may be capable of greater sensitivity and greater compassion. If, however, they become avid for material gain, more concerned with appearances than reality, and more self-centered than giving, then they will have given up their advantage. (101)

Having discerned many women in Yourcenar's work who are close to nature, concerned with the environment, very nurturing and concerned with relationships, I agree with the Farrells's position. One also discovers, however, that some of Yourcenar's male characters seem to possess these feminine traits as well, especially Zénon in *L'Oeuvre au noir* and Egon in *Quoi? L'éternité*.

According to the Farrells, within Yourcenar's work, all women are judged on the same basic criteria, in fact much the same criteria as men:

Each individual is honored for fulfilling her own potential and for being a force for good in her own sphere of influence, however great or small that may be. Those women with the necessary intelligence, status, or power, must work to correct political, social, or religious oppression in the world. The others may set a smaller, but no less worthy example. (101)

The Farrells write that "in terms of elemental images, which play a large role in Madame Yourcenar's work, women are primarily earth and water, the nourishing and sustaining elements; while men are primarily fire and air"¹⁷ (101).

In the Farrells's discussion of women in Yourcenar's writings, one can find a progression or a "movement from those who are most self-centered or self-seeking and either hostile or indifferent to the needs of

¹⁷Gaston Bachelard, the father of French archetypal criticism, delineated these classifications in his five volumes dealing with the four elements over fifty years ago.

others, to those capable of great love, devotion, and sacrifice" (101). A further distinction is made in this second group "for those who devote themselves to a person or cause expecting no reward" (101). It is this last type, the ones who can "give their sacrifice," that Marguerite Yourcenar most admires and who become exemplary characters for her (101). In light of the Farrell's discussion of Yourcenar's exceptional women, Jeanne de Reval, the heroine of *Quoi? L'éternité* belongs to this group of exemplary women because she devotes herself to her husband and sons. However, she still had room in her heart and compassion for Michel de C. and his daughter Marguerite.

The Farrells conclude that, "far from ignoring women, Marguerite Yourcenar has portrayed them with varied characteristics, in all times and in every stratum of society. She has tried to see their strengths and weaknesses, both as individuals and as a group" (100). In their defense of her portrayal of women, they write:

Marguerite Yourcenar's women have not been falsely romanticized, their importance has not been exaggerated out of proportion, but neither they nor their causes have been either slighted or disparaged. They exhibit the same traits as women we all know. They cope with life's difficulties, succumb to its lures, and, on occasion, rise nobly above it. On the whole, they struggle with temptations, resolve to do better, sometimes stoop to being sirens, but aspire to be saints. (101-02)

This attitude reflects what Sarraute said about women in her work as well: she depicts them as they are in life and in society.

Gorman discerns "a tendency in Yourcenar's fiction for women, when they are presented positively, to appear as mother-figures, rather than as sexual partners . . . However, Yourcenar's mothers are not good *per se* and motherhood in itself confers no special status in her fictional world" ("Marguerite Yourcenar's Encounter" 64). Yourcenar herself sees some of

her female characters as *parèdres* (consorts of a god).¹⁸ Yourcenar felt that "la vie des femmes est trop limitée, ou trop secrète" (OR 526) for her to have chosen a woman as the central protagonist of the novels she wanted to write ("Marguerite Yourcenar's Encounter" 66). Gorman states that Yourcenar provides no role models for men or women, insisting that her writing is about the quest for wisdom, the passion for living and the ambiguity of life and life's choices, which are rarely clear-cut in Yourcenar's literary world. Gorman describes Yourcenar as a unique writer because of her combination of precision, subtlety, passion, intellect and total indifference to literary and intellectual fashion (67). In fact, the qualities that Yourcenar seeks in woman are not those which might readily appeal to modern feminists: "la douceur, la bonté, la finesse, la délicatesse" (YO 286), as well as self-abnegation (YO 96). As stated above, Yourcenar defended herself against criticisms that she may have neglected woman in her works.

Even though women may not be the predominant protagonists in Yourcenar's *oeuvre*, they do play a significant and important role in her work. I agree with the Farrells's interpretation of the positive way in which Yourcenar does manage to deal with women in her work depicting them as they are with both strengths and weaknesses. Yourcenar has not ignored women in her work by any means, nor has she presented only a misogynistic view of women. As shall be seen in Part Two, Yourcenar has even managed to portray an "ideal" woman, the one she took for her own

¹⁸The Farrells define *parèdre* as a statue, representing the consort, which shares the niche or the altar with a god. With this term, Yourcenar indicates the high value she attributes to this relationship and the ideal of equal sharing between a man and a woman in relation to some male figures (*Marguerite Yourcenar in Counterpoint* 100).

role model during her childhood and adolescence—Jeanne de Reval, the heroine of *Quoi? L'éternité*.

Mimesis and the Influence of her Father

One criticism of women writers by feminist critics is that they mimic, imitate, and/or copy the style of the traditional form—that of men. This criticism has been leveled at Yourcenar. In fact, Sarnecki proposes that Yourcenar's desire to establish herself as a serious writer of "literature" may have influenced her to "impersonate male writers or espouse a male identity in writing in order to accomplish this goal" (98). However, Yourcenar herself disliked and rejected the adjective "virile" which was sometimes used to describe her writing. Savigneau's biography of Yourcenar elucidates this rejection:

Emile Henriot, . . . ne se mêle pas au concert—qui deviendra rengaine—sur "la virilité de la pensée" et le "style mâle" de Marguerite Yourcenar, notamment orchestré cette fois-ci par Denise Bourdet, dans la *Revue de Paris* . . .

Marguerite Yourcenar sera poursuivie toute sa vie par cette sottise. Et plus violemment que jamais au moment de son élection à l'Académie française. (231)

This effort to imitate a masculine style of writing may be linked to Yourcenar's fear of death in childbirth, a recurring theme in her *oeuvre*, as pointed out by both the Farrells and Sarnecki. In fact, Sarnecki proposes that Yourcenar's writing may have been a way for her to try "to create a male 'destiny' or 'fate' for herself, one which will spare her the fate of her mother and grandmother: death in childbirth. Her almost exclusively male 'heroes' permit her to 'live' the male adventure, or at least to write it as alternative identities" (112). Sarnecki explains Yourcenar's identification with her father and grandfather (in the three autobiographical volumes of

Le Labyrinthe du monde) as her means of escaping a condition which represented not only motherhood, but untimely death as well, and further states that Yourcenar "does not seem to see herself as partaking in a 'feminine' (or, for that matter, even female) destiny" (211).

Another critic who also emphasizes the masculine influence on Yourcenar's works is Michael Tilby, who argues that Yourcenar's works reveal a pursuit of her self as indivisible from her father, who had been her early (idiosyncratic) teacher and guide (34). He continues by stating that she

clearly experienced fiction as a privileged entry into a male domain, the pursuit of activities she associated with the world she had once shared with Michel de Crayencour . . . Her tepid response to contemporary feminism is wholly consistent with her representation of the lives of her fictional and biographical heroes. The translator of Virginia Woolf offers us not a quintessentially feminine view of the world but a resolutely masculine view imagined, not to say desired, by a woman. (35)

However, as Tilby continues his comments about Yourcenar's writing and rewriting as an effort to search for identity which spanned more than forty years, he mentions a characteristic that has been identified by feminists as part of *l'écriture féminine*, "the imagination [of] a proliferation of potential selves and the interplay of a multiplicity of positive and negative versions of a given stance or theme" (35). These two concepts of the fragmented self or narrator and multilayering or polyphony are both characteristics of *écriture féminine*. So even though Yourcenar may have been strongly influenced by her father and did imitate a masculine style of writing, she brought to it some aspects of her own femaleness, whether conscious or not.

Just as Sheila Bell advocates more research on Nathalie Sarraute as a "woman" writer, Kay Gorman encourages more research on Marguerite Yourcenar as a "woman" writer. Gorman questions

how the more sophisticated approaches of Julia Kristeva (with her problematic of the construction of subjectivity) or Hélène Cixous (with her problematic of the feminine) would deal with Yourcenar's work, given that she, as a writer, so adamantly refuses both a feminist, and indeed, a feminine role, authority or voice. (70)

Gorman concludes by saying that "the 'Yourcenar case' invites reflection on the significance of gender in a writer's production and a reader's reception of a text" ("Marguerite Yourcenar's Encounter" 70-71). A similar thought was expressed by Sarah Barbour in her own evolution as a feminist reader in parallel with Nathalie Sarraute's evolution as a writer/novelist (*Nathalie Sarraute* 22).

Despite discussion of Yourcenar's work as virile and her identification with her father, it is also very important to study in greater depth the aspects of her work that are linked to *écriture féminine*. And as others have emphasized, there needs to be more work on her and this point of view. Sarnecki points out that Yourcenar did break new ground for a woman with her "usurpation of what had always been a male prerogative in France—the writing of literature" (113). As stated earlier, Yourcenar did indeed imitate a male model of writing; however, in a careful examination of her work in Part Two, there are revealed certain feminine traits within this traditional model. This mixture of masculine and feminine influences and characteristics within one work emphasizes once again the problematics of gender specificity in women's writing.

Universality and New Autobiographical Style

Yourcenar, like Sarraute, claims to write of universal themes. She attempted to form a picture of a universe, not just a world, according to the Farrells in their article about Yourcenar in *French Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book* (538). One can discover in her characters and milieux references to humanity in general, as well as to the arts, and to the broad sweep of history. Considering herself a citizen of the world and holding a view of life as sacred, she had an appreciation for every individual, and decried and abhorred distinctions based, for instance, on class, education, talent, and sex. Her open-mindedness allowed her to see the value in all peoples and beliefs. She saw herself as a champion of the oppressed and of victims of prejudice, a theme which recurs in many of her works (539). Though her view of the world and of society was originally optimistic, it gradually moved toward a more pessimistic outlook, and led to her involvement in matters of ecology. She refused to cut down trees to use for firewood, preferring to gather what had fallen naturally. She fought for the protection of seals and reforestation, among other causes (YO 311-14). With respect to her writing, Yourcenar saw it as a means of influencing others, her way of helping to change the world for the better, a very nurturing and feminine characteristic. In *Les Yeux ouverts* Yourcenar says that every writer is either "utile" or "nuisible":

Il est utile s'il ajoute à la lucidité du lecteur, le débarrasse de timidités ou de préjugés, lui fait voir et sentir ce que ce lecteur n'aurait ni vu ni senti sans lui. Si mes livres sont lus et s'ils atteignent une personne, une seule, et lui apportent une aide quelconque, ne fût-ce que pour un moment, je me considère utile. (248-49)

Yourcenar desires to leave behind a world that is a little cleaner, a little more beautiful, even if "ce monde n'est qu'une arrière-cour ou une

cuisine" (249). She believes that whatever we say or do will have far-reaching consequences, so she wants to influence her world in a positive way.

"Le thématique de l'expérience partagée universellement" is what links Yourcenar's three volumes of autobiography (*Souvenirs pieux*, *Archives du nord*, *Quoi? L'éternité*) according to Yvette Went-Daoust in her article "*Quoi? L'éternité* de Marguerite Yourcenar: le particulier et l'universel." She identifies the meaning of these works in their "potentiel d'universalité . . . à travers les manifestations de l'amour, de la solitude, du malheur" because these are experiences and feelings that we all know ("car nous les connaissons tous") (173). Edith and Frederick Farrell echo this finding, "le présent et le passé mythique, la biographie et l'autobiographie, sont unis par ce fonds d'expérience commune qui est l'aventure humaine" ("L'Encadrement" 41). Gorman also underlines the theme of universality in Yourcenar's work, her belief "that all mankind is related. . . [and that] life in all its forms is a vast interconnecting network" ("Fact and Fiction" 61). Although the subject of this autobiographical trilogy may be Yourcenar's family, Gorman also finds here the predominant themes present in all of her writing: "a strong condemnation of the modern world for its overpopulation, ugliness, famine, and cruelty of human beings to others and to animals" (61).

Throughout her works Yourcenar did, indeed, describe much that is common to us all. In her interview with Mathieu Galey she indicated that when she embarked on the adventure of writing her autobiography, she attempted to isolate certain common denominators between herself and her ancestors, "mais il y en a aussi avec vous, avec n'importe qui. J'appartiens

à la plate humaine plutôt qu'à une ou plusieurs familles . . . (YO 215). She continually stressed the universal appeal and flavor of her work and what she attempted to do.

Although Sarraute claims to be writing in the neuter for all humanity and Yourcenar insists on the universality of her texts, we can discern aspects of strategies of *écriture féminine* within the works of both of these women writers. This aspect of universality within Yourcenar's work relates to *écriture féminine* as she depicts the multiplicity of selves within each of her characters and describes events and experiences shared by all. Just as DePlessis advocated writing beyond the ending or writing new endings for female protagonists, both of these women writers have attempted to do that. With their emphasis on both the masculine and feminine sides in one character—what Sarraute calls "neuter" or androgyny and what Yourcenar terms "universal" or bisexual—each of these women writers has attempted to write a different ending for their women protagonists, freeing them from the social strictures of their day while expressing changing attitudes toward family, sexuality, and gender.

One can find certain overtones of *écriture féminine* not only in the concept of universality in Yourcenar's work, but also in the autobiographical style which she adopted. According to Peter Christensen, Yourcenar offers an alternative to the dominant practice of writing autobiography, since she broke with the tradition of beginning with the autobiographer's earliest memories and experiences (60). He suggests that her use of a nonlinear narrative functioned to decenter the author from her own life (61), an observation made by many critics of Yourcenar. However, in her three autobiographical volumes, both linear and

nonlinear narratives exist. She uses Marguerite's birth to frame the family histories which she has created through research.

Went-Daoust reveals several traits in Yourcenar's autobiography that resemble those of Sarraute: her effort at neutrality in the depiction of the events that she recounts, a certain "fear" "comme si l'auteur redoutait de remuer les cendres du passé," and "le réseau communicationnel que l'auteur établit avec les autres" (*"Quoi?"* 176). Just as Sarraute uses her "double" within the text to question the veracity of the memories evoked and described in *Enfance*, Yourcenar appeals to the reader concerning the credibility of her autobiography by citing her sources within the text: oral accounts given by Michel and Jeanne, visual sources of photographs taken at different times, documents such as letters or poems, etc. Another similarity between the two authors is their account of their childhood.

Went-Daoust writes

la narratrice regarde de loin évoluer une enfant qu'elle semble à peine connaître. Les points de vue personnels nous sont chichement mesurés. Tout se passe comme si Marguerite Yourcenar reculait devant le projet autobiographique. La manoeuvre de la dérobaie consiste précisément à choisir de raconter son enfance—période de la vie qui l'engage peu . . . (*"Quoi?"* 180)

Gorman, along with other Yourcenar critics who awaited impatiently the appearance of Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité*, concludes her article on "Fact and Fiction" by writing that "one waits with curiosity to see which aspects of herself will be revealed by this author who is one of the most discreet, and the most passionate, of all contemporary writers" (70).

Although Yourcenar had promised to write about her own life in this third volume of her family autobiography, only one chapter of the eleven which compose *Quoi? L'éternité* actually deals with her. This is the seventh chapter, the middle of the book, entitled "Les miettes de l'enfance." Went-

Daoust points out how Yourcenar distanced herself from her own story, and although she employed a first person narration, "il s'agit d'un 'je' lointain, d'une simple convention qui ne peut engager la personne de l'écrivaine" ("*Quoi?*" 181). Edith and Frederick Farrell have made a similar observation, noting, "même en tant qu'autobiographe, Yourcenar tâche de garder ses distances" ("L'Encadrement" 40). Drapeau agrees that, "dans son oeuvre autobiographique [elle] ne parle [pas] de sa vie intime. Yourcenar fait l'histoire de sa famille comme elle le ferait de purs étrangers, avec une conscience qui rappelle l'Université" (20). Ness discerns that, in her efforts to make her autobiography universal, Yourcenar "fond son identité au genre humain. . . [avec son] 'je' qui ne tient pas à se dévoiler. . . [ainsi] cette fausse autobiographie cède la place à une biographie" (796).

Yourcenar's intention was to write about her life from her early childhood until 1914 or even 1939¹⁹; however, just as she had disappeared from the early pages of the two preceding autobiographical volumes, she does so again in this third volume. Ness writes that she "rejette à l'infini l'autobiographi[e]. . . C'est donc l'inexistence du moi qui est significative tout au long de cette trilogie" (797). Ness continues by stating that this autobiographical deconstruction, this break down of the autobiography into a biography which mixes reality with fiction, allows the author to exist better, because she has postponed indefinitely the revelation of herself, hence this is not an autobiography by recapturing the past lives of those who contributed in whatever manner to the creation of "son moi." She concludes her essay, saying,

¹⁹YO 213, and *Quoi? L'éternité* "Note" by Yvon Bernier. 340.

le narrateur du récit autobiographique yourcenarien, bien que soumis au contrat d'authenticité du pacte autobiographique, et désireux de livrer son oeuvre comme crédible, multiplie néanmoins les ruses pour s'écarter de sa vérité afin de raconter celle des autres. D'où un système doublement ambigu puisque l'auteur, soucieux de plus de l'interprétation de l'information, se doit d'expliquer ses oeuvres par un étalage de paratexte convaincant. (800)

Went-Daoust believes that the seventh chapter of *Quoi? L'éternité* provides the answer as to why Yourcenar insisted "à ce point sur l'impersonnalisation du moi. . . Il permet de se rendre compte que le 'je', derrière le masque de la neutralité, cache un sujet, et un sujet plus vulnérable que l'auteur voudrait bien le faire croire" ("*Quoi?*" 181). This resembles Sarraute's efforts also to distance herself from her autobiographical account. Even though the reader anticipates this revealing chapter of Yourcenar's childhood, she immediately hides herself behind others. Went-Daoust describes this as "la fausse entrée en scène de l'auteur qui s'esquive aussitôt derrière une description d'individus, d'animaux et d'objets" (181): "Je revois surtout des plantes et des bêtes, plus secondairement des jouets" (QE 203).

Almost every article on *Quoi? L'éternité* mentions the fact that Yourcenar mixed fact (truth/reality) with fiction in these autobiographies. Béatrice Ness admits that Yourcenar is not the first "à soulever le problème entre vérité et fiction dans l'acte autobiographique" (794). However, she finds in Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy, especially in *Quoi? L'éternité*, written "au seuil de la mort, . . . un monumental 'paratexte', une explication finale et définitive de l'auteur, remettant en perspective les oeuvres de fiction les plus déterminantes de sa carrière d'écrivain" (794). Gorman cites 1921 as the time when Yourcenar originally envisioned a long novel "contenant l'histoire de plusieurs familles ou groupes reliés

entre eux et s'étalant sur quatre siècles"²⁰ ("Fact and Fiction" 60).

Although this work was abandoned, Yourcenar spent much of her life working out its various themes in separate texts, thus mixing fact and fiction in her writing. She admits that *Le Labyrinthe du monde* is made up of "chroniques familiales et partiellement autobiographiques."²¹ Went-Daoust points to the numerous dialogues in this work, moments when the writer herself was not present. Not only does Yourcenar permit the narrator easily to cede the point of view to other characters, she also permits the reader to hear and see the characters think, a technique which Desvignes similarly employs to advantage. The reader "suit aux premières places le déroulement de leurs monologues intérieurs, qui se présentent comme des commentaires sur les événements et des réflexions plus ou moins philosophiques" ("*Quoi?*" 178). Desvignes likes to use the term *ruminer* to describe this trait of her characters.

Went-Daoust describes Yourcenar's relationship with her characters as symbiotic: "on sait qu'elle recrée ses personnages historiques en s'associant à eux dans une espèce de symbiose, par 'magie sympathique'" (178). In fact, Yourcenar told Mathieu Galey that she becomes a sort of medium through which her characters speak. "Mon effort est d'incliner ma propre personnalité et de l'effacer pour entendre, pour m'abandonner au personnage, ce qui a, je l'admets, quelque chose de médiumnique" (YO 107).

Many similarities between Yourcenar's autobiographical works and her historical novels exist, and she has taken great care to inform her

²⁰Marguerite Yourcenar, *Oeuvres romanesques*. Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 1982; chronologie. xv.

²¹OR. avant-propos de l'auteur. ix.

readers of the accuracy of her creations. However, some fissures appear in her creations that permit the reader "d'accéder au vécu intime, souvent douloureux, de l'auteur. Les liens personnels qui rattachent Marguerite Yourcenar à ses origines—toujours renversées cependant au compte de l'universel—sont étrangement forts" ("*Quoi?*" 184). In fact, according to Went-Daoust, Ness and other Yourcenar critics, the keys to her earlier fictional works may often be found in these three autobiographical volumes. Several have remarked that her autoportrait was sketched in *Hadrien*. Went-Daoust discusses how in *Quoi? L'éternité* the couple of Jeanne-Egon provides intimate enlightenment for *Alexis*, just as Jeanne and Michel do for *La Nouvelle Eurydice*. "Or ces personnages peuplaient la réalité affective de l'écrivaine, avant d'appartenir à l'humanité" ("*Quoi?*" 184). Edith and Frederick Farrell also support this argument indicating that, when looking at the corpus of a writer's works, neither biography nor autobiography predominates. However, they stipulate that Yourcenar, as most writers do, "mêle des éléments autobiographiques dans toutes ses oeuvres de n'importe quel genre: et, d'autre part, toute oeuvre qui trace la vie d'un protagoniste est en quelque sorte une biographie" ("L'Encadrement" 37).

If one of the goals of *écriture féminine* is to develop a new language and a new style, then Yourcenar seems to have done the latter in *Quoi? L'éternité* with her blending of fact and fiction and blurring of the story of herself in this "autofiction." Ness describes this autobiographical work as hesitating between three forms: "l'autobiographie (=le récit de la vie de Marguerite) la biographie (=le récit de la vie de son père) et l'autographie (=le [sic] reproduction d'une fiction de Yourcenar)" (797). (This latter

refers to the explanation and sources for her earlier works which can be found in this third volume). In fact, in her conclusion, Ness determines that Yourcenar has come full circle in her writing. "Elle avait bouclé le cercle du texte final en reprenant dans son dernier ouvrage *Quoi? L'éternité* son tout premier récit d'*Alexis*" (800).

Just as Yourcenar's portrayal of women in her works is a topic of debate among feminist critics, so is the autobiographical format which she employs. Beatrice Ness takes issue with Nancy Miller's definition of the elements of fact and fiction within a feminine autobiography as it pertains to Yourcenar, stating in a footnote that "l'attitude de Yourcenar dans son autobiographie, étrangère à la protestation, ne peut donc aucunement être décrite comme 'féministe'" (802). As was mentioned earlier in Chapter One, Miller stresses that autobiographers who are already figures of public fiction feel a responsibility about speaking out because they are already known to a specific group of readers. Furthermore, women autobiographers know that they are being read as women, and as such, "the concern with notoriety, then, functions as an additional grid or constraint placed upon the truth" (*Women's Autobiography* 262). Ness responds, "Si la dissimulation est présente dans l'autobiographie de Yourcenar, la démarche de l'auteur est néanmoins en contradiction avec le second élément de l'autobiographie féminine noté par Miller—la 'féminitude', déterminant la différence et l'oppression (Ness, 802). Ness is responding to the following statement by Miller: "To justify an unorthodox life by writing about it, however, is to reinscribe the original violation . . ." (*Women's Autobiography* 263).

Just as DuPlessis advocated that women writers find new words and create new methods in order to liberate their women protagonists both socially and culturally, we can see how both Sarraute and Yourcenar have accomplished this in their autofictions. Sarraute has experimented with a new style of writing, and Yourcenar has developed a new form for autobiography. Sarraute develops and uses tropisms to relate the non-linear account of her childhood. Yourcenar breaks with the traditional form of relating the story of one's life with the narrator being identified with both the main protagonist and the author. She provides the reader with only glimpses of her life, preferring instead to relate the lives of her parents, their ancestors, and ultimately in *Quoi? L'éternité* the lives of Jeanne and Egon de Reval. She usually employs a third-person omniscient narrator, and sometimes resorts to a first-person "je" who is sometimes the child Marguerite and sometimes the author. Even the concepts of neutrality and universality take on new meaning in these women's works because of being influenced by certain aspects of *écriture féminine*. As Morgan indicated, autobiographical writing is a gesture toward others and for women it is intricately linked to their relationships to others, especially the key individuals who marked their development. The episodes related in these autofictions by Sarraute and Yourcenar indicate this very clearly, as well as another very important characteristic of *écriture féminine*, the multiple roles assumed by women and the sense of the self as plural. Together, the concepts of universality/neutrality and new autobiographical style in Sarraute and Yourcenar have been distinctly marked by *écriture féminine*.

Paratexts

Because Yourcenar creates prefaces, postfaces, notes, etc. to provide autobiographical information for readers, she demonstrates what Jelinek, King, and others have identified as characteristic of women's autobiographies: that of only revealing that part of oneself necessary for a proper (according to the author) interpretation of the text while at the same time protecting oneself from revealing too much. Colette Gaudin, in her article "Marguerite Yourcenar's Prefaces: Genesis as Self-effacement," borrows the term "paratexts" from Gérard Genette to identify these extra texts with which Yourcenar populates her work (33). Gaudin argues that a feminine element pervades these paratexts of Yourcenar. She reiterates what other feminist critics have said, namely, "prefaces are obviously a gesture of self-protection. Yourcenar herself admits that authors write them 'to avoid saying more than they have to'" (33). This seems to be rather paradoxical with Yourcenar both wanting to reveal certain information to her readers to aid with the interpretation of her texts that she advocates and at the same time trying to hide and protect from the reader's view certain aspects of her private life that she has no wish to share.

Yourcenar used her paratexts to anticipate the reader's questions and desire to know more about the development and sources of her texts. However, Gaudin questions Yourcenar's claim that she wished to make her creation transparent for her readers with the aid of a preface. According to Gaudin, the content of Yourcenar's paratexts combines "the form of the traditional preface, the erudition of the scholarly note, and autobiographical information" (32). Gaudin states that Yourcenar's

prefaces do not fit the normal model, rather she takes her models from the past in order to address her future readers, seeming to bypass the present, ignoring the current heated debates on the redefinition of genres and on the legitimization of women's writing (32). By breaking with tradition to provide her own prefaces and notes, Yourcenar provides information to her future readers about the characters and incidents of her works, indicating that she herself often desired this clarification for works that she found pleasing or disconcerting (32).²²

Gaudin argues that even the author's name acts as a preface to the written work, because it is loaded with extra-textual significations. The desire by the reading public for autobiographical information concerning the author reflects how closely tied are the two entities "author" and "work" and how difficult it often is to consider the second if the first is not comfortably identified and situated. Gaudin claims that Yourcenar's sudden celebrity in 1980 when she was elected to the Académie Française

provided such a context for her work—a highly problematic context—since questions concerning the relationships between her texts, their author and the world were explicitly formulated with the added complication (or stimulus) that she, the author, was a woman. (34)

This "mystery" about Yourcenar's life and the fact of being a woman was emphasized by Jean d'Ormesson as he greeted her on January 22, 1981, when she was inducted into the Académie Française. Gaudin quotes from

²² I can identify with this desire of the reader to know more. When reading Desvignes's works and knowing that the events depicted were fiction based on fact, I was filled with many questions that I wanted to ask the author. I had the unique opportunity to do so on five different occasions when I was able to interview Lucette Desvignes at her home in Dijon, France, in May 1994 and October 1996. I asked many questions about the characters in the novel, were they real, were they based on a real person, did this really happen, where did this idea come from, etc. It was quite satisfying to be able to voice these questions, to obtain answers, and to put some closure to my reading experience of that particular work.

an article published shortly before the induction ceremony, in which d'Ormesson wrote:

The principal virtue of Marguerite Yourcenar is to have destroyed the myth of feminine literature . . . It is not even a question of saying that Marguerite Yourcenar writes as a man does. With her, we enter into unisexual literature. After her, no one will ever attempt to distinguish feminine from masculine literature. And isn't that a good thing!²³ (qtd. in Gaudin 35)

Because of these efforts to embrace Yourcenar in the classical French tradition and to praise her for expressing the universal condition of "man" (humanity), d'Ormesson and others seem to have overlooked the feminine elements within her work. Yet, according to Gaudin, her name and the fact of her being a woman influenced him (and others) even before reading her work.

Another aspect of *écriture féminine* of Yourcenar's paratexts is how they fragment and separate the text, and at the same time seem to indicate that the text is unfinished and, therefore, needs more explanation. Gaudin positions Yourcenar's prefaces and postfaces as a *cadre* or frame around the fiction, a concept which Yourcenar herself described. However, Gaudin claims that

the preface splits the book in two parts, remaining outside the formal structure of the text, yet inside its semantic structure by announcing its meaning. It makes the text appear, in advance, as finished-unfinished, since something about its conception has to be said in order to complete a meaning that is already contained elsewhere. (37-38)

In Gaudin's quest to understand Yourcenar's use of prefaces, she finds that they constantly display their double mark of necessity and superfluosity, of functionality and dysfunction. On the one hand,

²³"Yourcenar ou la rigueur dans l'art," *Magazine Littéraire*, 153 (Oct. 1979). 20.

they express an intention of revealing, for the good of the reader, the underside of creation. On the other hand, they are imbued with a desire for self-effacement. (38)

Yourcenar recognized that her books are read but not always "well read," and she seemed to feel a need to impose her intentions on the reader with these paratexts. In fact, she felt so strongly about this that she insisted that these prefaces and other paratexts be included in the final bibliography of the Pléiade edition. Ness underscores the fact that Yourcenar demanded that she and she alone would be the one to "rédig[er] l'Avant-Propos, les préfaces, postfaces et notes qui encadreraient ce premier tome [de ses *Oeuvres romanesques*]" (798). Ness and Gaudin both find in this plethora of paratexts Yourcenar's intention to tell and/or indicate to the reader how her texts should be interpreted. Ness questions whether this is "vérité ou détournement de lecture?" (799).

In addition to revealing the pleasure she took in writing the details in these paratexts and in her fiction, Yourcenar offered many autobiographical digressions, especially in the later postfaces written at about the same time as her autobiographies—*Souvenirs pieux* and *Archives du nord*. Gaudin believes that Yourcenar seems to be less defensive about writing these "residues," giving freer rein to personal memories, and probing further into the mystery of writing (39). However, Yourcenar became impatient with those readers who seemed incapable of separating the characters in her fiction from her own life, "readers who transfer[ed] their questions from the universe of the novel to the author's life" (40). Gaudin suggests that this is because of an attempt on the part of the reader to look in the life of the author for the reason to explain extreme passions or situations that verge on the "scandalous" in the author's works. Gaudin

states that Yourcenar carefully "describes her literary creation as an evolutive complex of craft, personal memories, and historical knowledge" (40). Yourcenar's preoccupation with rewriting led her to add these prefaces and postfaces to her earlier works. However, these were not added at the same time, and, according to Gaudin, "cannot be added to each other in a linear manner, but they exchange their significance in a circular pattern of communication" (50). Although Gaudin notes an absence of metaphors of flow and continuity in Yourcenar's "Prefaces," she discovers that more recent supplementary texts return "to her initial intuition of 'the ocean of time' and concurrently uses images of 'seeds,' 'torrent,' and 'spring' to describe literary creation" (51), terms associated with feminist imagery.

Not only do these paratexts reflect feminist characteristics of fragmentation, self-effacement, and lack of closure, but they also reflect a pervasive feminine element according to Gaudin. Although Yourcenar does not renounce the historical marginality of women and reposition it at the center of her fiction, she does seem more capable, as Cixous argues in *La Jeune Née* (158), than man of accepting otherness within the self, because she is closer to her own bisexuality, and thus her writing is that of a woman. Yourcenar employs the male voice speaking in the first person as a means of distancing herself from her text. Gaudin asks if this is not a means of equating the woman's voice with her own, or whether something of the woman's voice exists in the man's voice, being "traversed by otherness" (51)? She further identifies Yourcenar's male heroes' conquests as *fragile*, and states that their sexuality is *not* based on the domination of women, and that their lucidity reflects Yourcenar's own

vision of the self as *divided and dispersed* (my italics). Even though Yourcenar does not revise the "image" of women in history, Gaudin argues that she does transform "the image of men in a way that cannot leave 'humanism' untouched." She suggests that Yourcenar's "work might be a preface to a chapter of feminism which is possibly being written elsewhere" (52).

Gaudin has identified several writing techniques within Yourcenar's prefaces that often characterize feminine writing: a desire for self-effacement, unfinished text/endings, and layering or doubling of texts. These and others shall be examined in Part Two.

In researching Marguerite Yourcenar and her work, the reader will find two pieces of information very striking because of their very feminist nature, for this woman who did not want to be classified as a "woman writer." The first is the fact that she herself enjoyed baking bread. Alfred Cismaru's "The Final Interview" mentions this as do many other critics, friends, biographers, and photos. In the Cismaru interview, Yourcenar likens baking bread to writing because "the hand has to feel when the dough is ready and when one has to stop kneading it. The same happens with a page, or a sentence" (101). The second reference referring to writing and pottery is quite striking as well because of the similarity to one of Desvignes's novels and what critics have said about creating something beautiful out of clay and likening it to giving birth, or to the creation of a literary work. In an interview with Patrick de Rosbo, Yourcenar said,

chaque fois que l'écrivain s'assied à sa table, devant son cahier de pages blanches, pour commencer une oeuvre nouvelle, il aura à voir naître sous ses doigts, comme un potier qui commence à faire

tourner son tour, une forme toute neuve et qu'il ne pourra employer qu'une fois. (18)

Both baking bread and giving birth to a new form through clay are very feminine metaphors. The fact that Yourcenar compared writing to these two activities seems to indicate influence from her feminine side in her literary work.

Lucette Desvignes

Not a Woman Writer

In a lecture given at Rice University in 1988, Lucette Desvignes expressed her desire not to be classified as a "woman writer," preferring to be called a *romancier* rather than a *romancière*. As Carole Brooks Platt has observed, "Desvignes specifically rejects a privileged feminine . . . she welcomes critical acclaim for her 'masculine' writing style" ("Androgyny" 69). Brady also points out that Lucette Desvignes is extremely proud of the fact that others have likened her writing to that of a man.²⁴ His article "Literary Cross-dressing: Point of View in *Les Noeuds d'argile* and *Clair de nuit*" discusses the implications of the author's gender on his or her writing. He mentions in passing Lucette Desvignes's position of not being "one of those feminists who promote the idea of a distinctive feminine voice in literature" (58). Her belief is that "men and women have the same gifts and she herself wants to be considered and judged not as a *romancière* but as a *romancier*" (61). Brady points out that although Desvignes received "acclaim" as having written like a man after the publication of her two novels *Les Noeuds d'argile* and *Clair de nuit*, her critics realized

²⁴Brady offered this point in a private conversation about Lucette Desvignes on April 8, 1997.

that she was simply writing as required by the character or his/her situation after the publication of her next two novels, *Le Grain du chanvre* and *Le Livre de Juste* (61). In an interview with *L'Idée libre*, Desvignes states "j'ai adopté pour écrire . . . ma caractéristique essentielle, une espèce de technique qui me pousse à disparaître totalement" (Irubetagoyena 24). Because of this, people remarked "Vous écrivez comme un homme" about her first two published books. She responded, "j'avais seulement cherché à entrer dans la mentalité de mes personnages masculins. Donc c'était un pari gagné que d'avoir écrit comme un homme puisque justement je voulais rendre l'enregistrement de la vision de ces hommes . . . " (24). She continued by saying that "je tâche de m'effacer pour réussir mon 'exploration' de ces mentalités que je reconstitue; je tâche d'oublier que je suis femme, universitaire, formée à l'expression académique et à la culture, vivant dans un siècle d'effervescence, de publicité, de consommation . . . " (25). However, this is of course what every good writer attempts to do, to erase her/himself from the text, to become one's characters, entering into their mentalities, thoughts, and experiences. In fact, this is exactly what Sarraute and Yourcenar have also claimed to do.

Male and Female Characters

Desvignes seems able to portray equally well both male and female characters throughout her work. To my knowledge no accusations of misogyny have been aimed toward her work. Of the three writers under examination here, Desvignes seems to have accomplished most successfully what Sarraute claimed she was doing, portraying women as they are, playing roles imposed upon them by society, roles they have both accepted

and adopted. However, Desvignes carries this further into the camp of women's liberation with accounts of women protagonists who dared to defy tradition, to seek new roles, to be different. Among these characters are Jeanne Berthouin, Louise, and Jaquette in the *Les Mains nues* trilogy.

Platt determines that in both Desvignes's craft and in her character development, she attempts

to level the differences between men and women. Her female characters often exhibit strength, endurance, business savvy, and fixity of purpose, while her men demonstrate the qualities of tenderness, nurturance, and communicativeness. . . . While valorizing female strength, Desvignes clearly demonstrates that a woman must also preserve her tender, nurturing side for marriage to be successful. ("Androgyny" 69)

In Desvignes's first novel, *Les Noeuds d'argile*, she portrayed two male protagonists, one with a very developed masculine side, Francis, and his son, Marrain, with a very strong feminine side. In the second volume, *Le Grain du chanvre*, it is the women characters who will be portrayed in greatest detail; only two men who exhibit the tender feminine nurturing qualities will be carefully depicted—Etienne Barandelle and Jeanne's father Pépé. Jeanne's son-in-law Juste appears at the end of this second volume and seems to possess both male and female traits. However, the feminine side of his personality seems most evident in his relations with Jeanne, his mother-in-law, and with Séverine, his daughter. His masculine side is most evident in his relationship with his wife, Valérie. When reviewing these three volumes of the *Les Mains nues* saga, it is evident that women figure most predominantly throughout these works. Throughout the work of Desvignes, like Yourcenar's, there is a wide representation of women. Women of all classes, levels of education, and time periods (nineteenth and twentieth centuries) are present throughout Desvignes's work.

Desvignes has presented many different types of women in various situations in her literary creations. Two commonalities shared by many of these women characters are those of strength and independence. Mary Anne O'Neil's analysis of the women characters in *Les Noeuds d'argile* states that

none of the female characters succumbs to her man's fate, in large measure because each *refuses to do what is expected of her* . . . Through these women, who surprisingly come forward in the final pages of *Les Noeuds d'argile*, Desvignes leaves us with the impression that the way of the future will be that of *independence* rather than obedience and that it is possible to *break through the walls of tradition* instead of turning to these walls to die. ("Fathers" 81, my italics)

The character of Jeanne (née Berthouin) will exemplify these character traits of strength and independence. She will defy tradition and forge a new path for herself and the women who would come after her. She was a woman "of the future," a fighter in the face of the many adversities that assailed her, a rebel, and an innovator. Her story is told in the second volume of the *Les Mains nues* trilogy. In fact, Jeanne will be the precursor and model for many of the women characters that appear in Desvignes's later works (i.e., Louise and Jaquette in *Le Livre de Juste*).

Just as Sarraute and Yourcenar did before her, Desvignes has also fulfilled DuPlessis's admonitions to write a new ending for her female protagonist. She has adhered to some of the new strategies proposed by DuPlessis for women writers. Her female protagonist broke the social and cultural norms of her day in the type of family life she adopted with her children, the mother-child dyads that she established or failed to establish, the writing of her own story in which love was not the only option, even the way in which she died. Desvignes seems to have followed DuPlessis's suggestion that women writers of the twentieth century offer a different

set of choices for endings, something other than marriage or death for their female protagonist. At first, one might believe that Desvignes's work followed the older model because *Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne* ends with her death. However, it is not a judgmental death brought about because of her actions or choices. It is a natural death at the end of a long life, well-lived, and lived to the fullest by a woman who defied conventions, broke the norms, had a satisfying and fulfilling vocation, pursued her dreams, married five times and had three children. In one sense, a woman "who managed to have it all." However, there were sacrifices and difficult choices she had to make along the way. Although she had begun her business venture during her first two marriages, being left widowed and in financial straits for the second time at the age of twenty, with three young children, she launched herself into her vocation by a series of desperate, propulsive choices where standing still would have meant annihilation. However, vocation as Jeanne pursued it, was viewed with great suspicion, and as second best, by those around her. Just as Sarraute and Yourcenar depicted both the masculine and feminine sides in one character, Desvignes has done likewise, once again following the suggestions of DuPlessis whether one calls it androgyny or bisexuality.

Writing "Auto"biography

When discussing her writing, Desvignes indicates that one day she sat down and began to write, realizing only after she had written twenty or thirty pages that she had begun to write her family's history. As she continued contemplating her writing, she knew that it was going to be a very long work and would require several volumes. Initially, she

envisioned her work like a musical score with five parts. However, she was not able to carry through with her initial plan, and modified it to be in three parts. Just as Ness has shared that, from the beginning Yourcenar never hid "l'apport fictionnel de cette étude généalogique" (795), Desvignes made a similar comment about her own work, stating from the beginning that it was fiction based on fact, based on the lives of her ancestors. In *Souvenirs pieux* Yourcenar does not subscribe to the autobiographical pact that insists that the narrator and the principal character be identical. Rather, there is a continual sliding from ancestor to ancestor, minimizing the role "du moi" (Ness 795). However, in *Quoi? L'éternité* this is more often the case, but not throughout the entire work. Desvignes employs a similar technique in her work, especially in volumes two and three, *Le Grain du chanvre* and *Le Livre de Juste*, relating the story through the narrator/protagonist, the narrator/author, and other characters. In fact, most of the story is related through Jeanne's daughter Valérie and her reactions to overheard snippets of conversation. Jeanne herself only speaks/reminisces once, on the occasion of her sixtieth birthday celebration. Jeanne's grand-daughter Séverine will also recount part of Jeanne's story near the end of the volume. Most of these accounts are very "stream of consciousness" with events and thoughts and associations flowing into each other. Another difference from the autobiographical pact is that Desvignes does not give the same name to herself as a character in her work. Desvignes is the young Séverine in these two volumes, differing from Sarraute and Yourcenar by not giving this character the same name as the author.

In Part Two other differences that Desvignes has brought to women's autobiography will be examined in greater detail.

Universality

Just as Sarraute and Yourcenar emphasize the neutral or universal nature of their work, Desvignes, too, claims to depict universal experiences common to all throughout her works. Although the *Les Mains nues* trilogy is situated in Burgundy and Nivernais, Desvignes's critics have consistently argued that her work has universal appeal, and reaches beyond what one might normally consider regionalist literature. Like Yourcenar, Desvignes is filled with pessimism when confronted with "man's" inhumanity to "man" (toward other beings) which surrounds us and with the careless attitude exhibited toward nature. Brady writes, "Lucette Desvignes combines a pessimistic view of the human condition with an extraordinary zest for literary production and human contact" ("Innovation" 70). He perceives her literary creations as one way "in which her sheer humanity transcends the gloom of the philosophy that inspires her when she looks around her and perceives the injustice of man to man" (70). Jean-Marie Auzias declares that Desvignes's characters "nous appren[nent] à nous à vivre, et comment" ("Lucette Desvignes et sa grande Saga" 23). Desvignes herself in an interview with *L'Idée libre* enunciates her desire to be useful in her literary creations and believes that she has succeeded based on the letters she has received from numerous sources. She elaborates on this theme of the usefulness of one's writing in the following excerpt from this interview.

Dans un premier temps, mes livres sont utiles dans la mesure où ils entraînent le lecteur dans un univers romanesque (donc évasion) où

il retrouve quand même des sentiments forts ou subtils (qu'il connaît, qu'il approfondit), des émotions qu'il fait siennes (donc qui le font vivre plus intensément), des atmosphères auxquelles il s'intègre (par le souvenir, par la curiosité . . .), des problèmes éternels sur lesquels il lui faut réfléchir, souvent avec une disposition, une ouverture nouvelles. Donc le lecteur connaît à travers la vie de mes personnages une vie qui prolonge, corse, varie, intensifie la sienne: c'est déjà je pense une utilité, et elle est confirmée par les centaines de lettres qui me remercient de les avoir fait vibrer, aimer, pleurer, réfléchir ou se souvenir. Et puis je pense être utile aussi en amenant à voir les choses (événements, étiquettes des catégories, réputations . . .) avec des yeux neufs, plus attentifs, plus compréhensifs—mieux informés ou disposés peut-être. (Irubetagoyena 26)

This attitude seems to be one of "nurturing," a very feminine characteristic and one which she shares with Yourcenar as we discussed earlier. Her desire is to be useful, to help change one's world for the better by one's writing, to influence the reader to reflect on his/her life in comparison to the life of the character portrayed in her literary work.

The quality of "nurturing" seems to be applied most often to women. One finds this nurturing quality in both Yourcenar's and Desvignes's stated purposes for their writings to be useful, to positively influence humankind/their readers. However, this is not only the author's attitude, but is also often expressed by the characters whom they describe.

Desvignes prefers to be called a writer, not a "woman" writer, and has indicated that she felt quite proud when told that she writes like a man. However, as Brady pointed out, she writes in such a way to reflect the character whom she is describing, like a man if it is a man, and like a woman if it is a woman. She depicts both male and female characters well and accurately, in all types of situations, from various levels of society, and with varying degrees of education. Her writing does reflect her gender because of its nurturing aspect and her desire to be helpful. Her

"auto"biography demonstrates a "new" form of mixing truth with fiction, of narrative techniques with varying points of view, and of changed grammar and syntax. Despite her claims to universality, some of the issues which she treats are, as we will see, likewise associated with the ambiguous but legitimate realm of *écriture féminine*.

Conclusion

After presenting these authors' attitudes about their own writing and briefly discussing certain traits of *écriture féminine* from a general view, I will now examine this more specifically in relation to the three texts: *Enfance, Quoi? L'éternité*, and *Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne*. Although all three of these women writers have denied the existence of any gender specificity in their writing and have refused to be categorized as "women writers," I shall argue in Part Two how a close reading of their texts reveals certain traits common to *écriture féminine*. All three writers have incorporated innovations of writing women's autobiography in the texts to be analyzed here, as well as certain features of *écriture féminine*. In addition, their portrayal of family relationships also reflects a certain woman's point of view. Furthermore, I shall examine how each of these three texts falls into the category of the female *Bildungsroman*. Finally, the authors' portrayal of certain events and discussion of feminine interests or concerns reveals that these texts are written by women. Even though these women claim that their writing is non-sexed, because of the afore-mentioned points to be examined in each text, I shall argue that these texts can be considered part of the scope of *écriture féminine*.

PART 2

Introduction: The Texts

The three texts provide examples that are typical of female experience and are presented from a woman's point of view, stressing the sensitive, feeling, emotive aspects of a woman's personality. Both the choice of subject and the treatment of the subject-matter by these writers are carried out in a very feminine manner. The examples examined may not appear in all three texts but will be found in at least two of them. The categories under examination include both style and content. Women's autobiography and *écriture féminine* will be treated in the category of style. Family relationships, female *Bildung*, and feminine interests/concerns will be addressed in the category of content. Each of these categories will be examined in light of the feminist way in which the author has portrayed it.

In the past two decades the areas of women's autobiography and *écriture féminine* have received much attention. Only in the past decade, however, has much attention been focused on the female *Bildungsroman*, so this is an area wide open for more study, especially in these three works. Because of the emphasis given to family relationships by psychology, this area has also figured prominently in research and in feminist studies and plays a significant role in each of these works. The last area examined here deals with subjects and objects that are of particular interest to women. Although I have found no critical theory that deals with this area, the discussion in Part Two of these feminine interests and concerns that appear in all three works will support the argument that there is a

feminine slant to these works by Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes, despite what the authors themselves say to the contrary.

Chapter 1

Innovations in Women's Autobiography

In their autobiographies, or rather autobiographical fictions²⁵/autofictions, these women writers have drastically changed the format of what we usually consider autobiography. They resist the usual format of recounting the story of one's whole life, preferring only to relate episodes from their childhood through their teen years, and even leaping further back into their family's history to recount the lives of their ancestors. Critics have consistently remarked on the innovations in women's autobiography which may be found in these three works. One common to all three involves the narrative technique of recounting the family history through the eyes of a child. Another aspect of all three is the mixture of fact and fiction, or truth and reality in these autofictions. Finally, there is the fragmentary nature of these works, as in the fragmented narrator or split self and the fragmented organization of these texts.

My discussion of these works will generally follow the pattern of presenting Sarraute first, then Yourcenar, and finally Desvignes.

²⁵Cf. Janice Morgan, "Subject to Subject/Voice to Voice: Twentieth-century Autobiographical Fiction by Women Writers," in *Gender and Genre in Literature*, p. 5 for a thorough explanation of the history and development of this term as applied to women's autobiographies.

Reticence to Reveal Self

None of these three women writers attempts to tell her own complete life's story. On the contrary, the author's story will be related only until she reaches the age of ten or twelve. Bella Brodzki has classified this refusal to tell the whole life story or this resistance against self-disclosure as characteristic of women's autobiographies in particular ("Mothers" 247). Yolanda Astarita Patterson observes that Sarraute "gives tantalizing glimpses of her feelings and her experiences, but leaves a good deal unsaid or unexplained" (152). She likens Sarraute's recounting of certain childhood moments of both joy and pain to an impressionistic presentation with "dabs of the literary brush" (152). Patterson believes that Natacha's lack of a sibling near her own age, someone who could have been an ally against the incomprehensible adult world during her childhood, has "undoubtedly influenced Sarraute's style of writing" (155). In fact, she associates this with Sarraute's "unwillingness to expose herself, a vulnerability which forces her to maintain a clear separation between her own life and what she reveals on paper" not only in *Enfance* but also in all her works published before *Enfance* (155). Michael Sheringham discusses what appears to be Sarraute's invitation to the reader to involve herself in her efforts to write her autobiography, a process that initially seems quite liberating. However, he finds that it is really designed "to forestall the reader's response, to *shut us out* of the action, to *protect the writer from us*" (30, my italics). Writing her autofiction often allows a woman writer to resolve many of the traumas of her childhood. For Sarraute, this involves the resolution of her mother's abandonment and indifference. Her use of the dual narrator allows her to understate her experiences and to attempt to

present her mother in a more positive light, even though she usually comes off in a more negative light. The reader is left to wonder exactly what Natacha's feelings were for both her mother and her step-mother Véra, because the narrators vacillate between depicting scenes that portray these women as unfeeling monsters and unnatural mothers and episodes that point up their vulnerability, as well as scenes in which the child narrator tries to find an acceptable explanation for the woman's behavior toward the child.

King finds similarities between Sarraute and Yourcenar in their denial of the relevance of personal experience to an interpretation of their works. In the case of the autobiographical accounts of each of these women writers, they have allowed some of the personal emotions and experiences from their childhoods to surface, but one must not confuse their "I" with their fictional characters. King suggests that this attitude of keeping the self rigidly in the background is "feminine" in its origins (105).

Yourcenar, like Sarraute, has been rather reticent about revealing information about herself, either in her interviews or in her own writing. In fact, Yourcenar carefully went through her papers and correspondence, and discarded what she did not want left behind after her death. She bundled up what remained, and stipulated that it be given to Harvard but left unopened for fifty years after her death. This reticence to reveal herself has caused much disappointment for her readers, who awaited revelations of her unusual life in her autobiographical trilogy *Le Labyrinthe du monde*. After the publication of the first two volumes, in which Yourcenar barely mentioned herself, relating instead the histories

of her mother's and father's families, readers waited impatiently for the third volume, in which Yourcenar promised to write about her own life. However, this work too would fail to satisfy her readers about her own life, because she returned to an account of her father's life in conjunction with the story of Jeanne and Egon de Reval's lives, devoting barely fifty pages to her own childhood. Judith Sarnecki links Yourcenar's hesitation to represent herself in her autobiography to the confusion that may have been caused by her mother's death and the function of the father as the mother in her childhood (108). Went-Daoust describes this reticence about herself in her autobiography as follows: "tout se passe comme si l'auteur redoutait de remuer les cendres du passé" (*"Quoi?"* 176). Later in this same article, Went-Daoust finds that Yourcenar's choice to recount her childhood stems from the fact that she deems this a "période de la vie qui l'engage peu . . . puisque l'individu y est encore à l'état d'ébauche" (180). This same comment could be applied to Sarraute and Desvignes, since they also only relate their autobiographies up to their early teen years.

Auzias defines Desvignes's work as a "genre infra-autobiographique qui sévit. L'histoire d'une famille devient avec Lucette Desvignes une histoire d'amour, à répétitions différencielles. Le passé y est sourcement, origine originante" ("Lucette Desvignes" 17). Desvignes had originally anticipated writing her family's history in a five-volume saga, including her own autobiography (recounting her own adult life as a woman, wife, mother, academic) in the later volumes. However, she realized that she could not do this as the story drew nearer to her own present because it became increasingly difficult for her to distance herself from her work and to reveal aspects of her own life and personality that were too painful

or emotional. So, she revised her plan and stopped with only three volumes.

Both Yourcenar and Desvignes choose in their autobiographies to relate the story of a remarkable woman who influenced them as young girls rather than relating the story of their own lives (by a curious coincidence, these two women bear the same name: "Jeanne"). Yourcenar's choice of title for her trilogy *Le Labyrinthe du monde* is a sort of homage to her father, who had translated the satirical allegory with a similar title written in Czech in the 1630s by Comenius (Jan Comenski), the famous educational reformer. In Peter Christensen's attempt to understand the link between Comenius's and Yourcenar's titles/works, he "conclude[s] that life is a labyrinthine journey full of temptations that may seem gruesome under the aspect of eternity. Nonetheless, this life may still lead to personal happiness" (64). I believe that this comment about Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy applies equally well to Desvignes's autobiographical trilogy and to Sarraute's *Enfance*. The accounts of all of these women writers lead the reader through a labyrinth of experiences and episodes in the lives of their characters, both female and male. However, each of these works ends on a positive, hopeful, optimistic suggestion that somehow these women protagonists do manage to find a kind of personal happiness in their lives, and do rise above the bad experiences and negative circumstances that often beset them. Perhaps by not writing about their adult lives, they leave open the possibility of a positive life.

In their autobiographical *récits*, Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes gave tantalizing glimpses of their pasts, but left a great deal unsaid and

unexplained. They maintained a clear separation between their own lives and what they actually revealed on paper. The further in the past the events or story they related, the easier it was to recount, but the closer to the present the story came, the more difficult it became and the more reticent the writer. Is this not also an indication of what society imposes on a woman as being acceptable or unacceptable behavior? One critic has pointed out that it is acceptable for male autobiographers to discuss their accomplishments and to express their selves, but women traditionally have been told not to "put themselves forward," not to seek the limelight, not to "brag" (although some men may have been told this as well). This unwillingness to expose themselves, this reticence and fear of the vulnerability of such an exposure are all characteristics of women's autobiographies according to certain critics mentioned earlier.

Truth vs. Fiction

Although we have designated these three works as "autofictions," there is still a concern in these texts for relating truth, not fiction. Paul John Eakin observes that autobiography is not only a referential act but also and always a kind of fiction. In fact, he argues, the invention of fiction in autobiography may actually be undertaken in the pursuit of biographical truth (31). These observations provide insights into the autobiographical fictions written by Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes.

Sarraute's work depicts this problem very succinctly in the opening pages, where one finds the narrator in argument with herself about the audacity of attempting such a feat as writing an autobiography and the

constant questioning about the truthfulness of the memories and their interpretations. Her dedication to presenting a truthful past

offers a relentless exposé of the whole repertoire of linguistic deceptions—the shameless faking, the indulgence in the facile and the banal, the plastering over of gaps—that often make a mockery of an autobiography's claims to referential truth. (Eakin 33)

Sarraute apparently attempts to keep her account truthful, with the alter-ego narrator forcing her to examine each memory for its truthfulness.

Eakin argues that the autobiographical style of Sarraute's *Enfance* is anticonventional because it is neither character nor plot (the staple of so many autobiographies) which constitute "the reality of remembered experience" but rather "tropisms"²⁶ (32). Sarraute is convinced of the universal value of her work, because she believes that "au niveau où se trouvent les tropismes, tout le monde sent de la même façon" (Besser, "Colloque" 157). Many of the episodes/scenes recalled in *Enfance* derive from tropisms which reflect Sarraute's "extraordinarily sensitive response to the qualities of words and phrases" (Eakin 33). However, although she is aware of the fragility of these tropisms as she brings them to light for inspection, she is also fearful that such inspection could destroy the very referents it seeks to preserve. Her words indicate her misgivings "that language might prove to be a hostile medium, not merely inaccurately representing but actually fatally altering the referents themselves" (36). In Sarraute's creative and original autobiography, she determines "to reproduce in language the precious tropisms of memory despite her deep-seated fear of the power of language to alter and betray" (Eakin 52).

²⁶These are "the myriad subconscious and rapidly-shifting reactions to external stimuli which Sarraute has dubbed 'tropisms' by analogy with the instinctive movements of primitive organisms in response to heat or light" (Besser 155)

Havercroft finds that Sarraute's battle against "les clichés et les contraintes se poursuit également par rapport au texte autobiographique, car au lieu de se contenter d'un simple réemprunt des formes traditionnelles du genre, Sarraute adopte une stratégie d'innovation" (144). Examples of how Sarraute transformed the traditional autobiographical genre, according to Havercroft, include many instances of interference or interruption of the text: "les trous de la mémoire, la fiction, le rêve, l'invention, les discours d'autrui" (132). Incorporating such techniques into her *récit autobiographique*, Sarraute creates a text that is not "une simple reproduction mimétique du hors-texte," nor is it ever "une copie exacte d'une sensation ou d'un événement antérieurs" (132). Rather, it is the locus of the "développement du moi comme une négociation sans fin entre l'événement et l'illusion, le réel et l'imaginaire."²⁷ Voss proposes that, with this protective fiction in her autobiography, the woman writer can be very honest and open and frank when dealing with certain subjects or emotions, especially those dealing with female sexuality. She adds that, just as one lies to avoid punishment, one also tells the audience what one thinks they want to hear. In Sarraute's case, this protective cover of fiction and the dual narrator technique allow her to broach the painful subject of her mother's abandonment and indifference. However, she hesitates to paint too negative a picture of her mother, trying to explain why she may have reacted as she did, trying to find an excuse, and allowing the reader to discover that neither the mother nor the daughter is all bad.

²⁷Janice Morgan, "Femmes et genres littéraires: le cas du roman autobiographique", *Protée* 20.3 (1992). 28.

Went-Daoust finds that Sarraute does not purposefully try to incorporate fiction into her autobiography, "elle garde le respect de la réalité et de la copie conforme (*"Enfance"* 338). However, one may question this interpretation of Sarraute's work. Sarraute may indeed have tried to keep her account truthful, but memory is a faulty thing at best, and she wrote this autobiographical *récit* seventy years after the events recounted here. The reader wonders whether the pictures she paints of her mother and her step-mother are really accurate. She vacillates back and forth between depicting these women as wicked, unnatural mothers/monsters and portraying them in a more positive light. Which picture is the real one? Can the writer ever really know, or the reader either? Probably not, simply because recollections become cloudy and fuzzy over time, and as an adult woman writer one does not really want to portray one's family members, especially one's parents, as bad. After all, women tend to be "fixers," wanting to make everything alright, leaving no unfinished business or unpleasant feelings, and I believe that this aspect of women's writing is revealed in Sarraute's *Enfance*, clouding the truthful account with some aspects of fiction.

Yourcenar constantly interrupts her text to assure the reader of the veracity of her statements by citing her sources, whether written documents, photographs, or interviews for the episodes she recounts. However, she admits that her autobiography, although based on fact, conversations, real documents and photographs, also has many elements of fiction. Sarnecki's discussion of the mother metaphor in Yourcenar's autobiographical/fictional trilogy points to the confusion that arises in Yourcenar's texts between "real" people and fictional personae and further

emphasizes "that any representation in writing of persons who actually lived is, of course, fictional" (94). Her argument may be worded too strongly because although it is true that all representation distorts, some do so more than others. Sarnecki deems Yourcenar's depiction of Jeanne de Reval to be that of the "idealized" fictional mother indicating that this character was based on the real Jeanne de Vietinghoff, and claiming that the name change to "Reval" with the word "rêve" embedded in it seems to indicate that Jeanne was the mother Yourcenar "dreamed" of having (94). However, one might question Sarnecki's interpretation because there is no accent in "Reval," which is consequently more suggestive of the word "revaloriser" than of "rêve."

In Yourcenar's work, the fictive mask proposed by Voss, allows Yourcenar to allude to the possibility of a sexual interest between her mother Fernande and Jeanne de Reval when they were schoolmates together, a reference made first in *Souvenirs pieux* and repeated in *Quoi? L'éternité*.

As for Desvignes, one will not find instances within the text where the author vouches for the validity or truthfulness of an episode or memory, but in interviews, newspaper reports, and articles she herself has written she admits the presence and *mélange* of fact and fiction in her own family trilogy. Desvignes emphasizes the fictional aspect of her biographical/autobiographical trilogy, stressing that from the moment that she was immersed in this "atmosphère, romanesque et sentimentale, authentique aussi puisqu'[elle] avai[t] tout de même de bonnes bases de connaissances qui [lui] permettaient d'imaginer la vie de tous ces gens. [Elle a] écrit le roman comme une suite de grandes vagues" (Limoges 41).

Desvignes has discussed the liberties that the fictional mask has allowed her to take with her family's history. In a private interview, she told how she came to invent the love affair between Francis Pacôme and Antoinette. Because Desvignes never knew Francis, but had only ever seen pictures of a very austere, hard, unhappy-looking man, she wanted to explain why he might appear this way in the photograph, so she invented this affair of *amour manqué et retrouvé*, and an unsatisfying marriage in order to explain this man's bitterness and unjust reactions toward his son's happy marriage. This concern with the mixture of truth and fiction leads Eakin to declare that "the critic's concern with reference, with the author's intention, is built into the very structure of autobiography that we experience as we read such texts" (35). Perhaps, in the writing of her family's history, Desvignes was also able to come to grips with her own mother's apparent coldness and lack of feeling, and the emotions that she (Desvignes) harbored unconsciously toward her.

It is evident that this mixture of fact and fiction in women's autobiographies assumes a significant and important role in each of the three works under examination in this study. For Sarraute and Yourcenar there is the concern to be truthful and factual with the episodes recounted. However, both Yourcenar and Desvignes have admitted that there is a significant amount of fiction in their autobiographical accounts. As Voss says, these women writers employ the mask of the protective fiction in their autobiographies in order to deal more frankly, honestly, and openly with not only female sexuality but also other painful episodes from their pasts.

Fragmentation

Another trait often found in women's autobiographies is that of the fragmented narrator, or split self. Instead of using the "I" narrative exclusively, the authors of these three works will present much of the history through the eyes of a child—who is sometimes "I" and sometimes in third person indirect discourse—something unique to these particular women's autobiographies. Sarraute's text has three voices interacting to recreate certain events of the narrator's past: the narrator, the questioning/critical other part of herself, and the child, Natacha. Yourcenar's narrator vacillates between third-person adult narrator, first-person narrator as a child, first-person narrator as an adult and omniscient narrator who recounts episodes of both the child and the adult Yourcenar as well as of the other characters. Sarnecki remarks on the fairy-tale aspect of Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité* and the "wonder of childhood," which is evoked by comparing two of the main characters, Jeanne and Egon, to characters in fairy tales (230). This would seem to be in keeping with narration from a child's point of view, especially that of a young girl who enjoyed fairy tales (see below, Chapter Four). Desvignes's text has many narrators who recount the life of Jeanne; however, much of her story is related through the eyes of her daughter, Valérie, at the ages of five and then of nineteen, and later through the eyes of her granddaughter, Séverine, who is Lucette Desvignes herself at the ages of five and nine. All three of these works are marked by foreshadowing and flashbacks, jumping forward into the adult life to make a remark, and backward again to the point of the child's story, or even further into the past. For each of these writers, the adults of her past act as catalysts that

stimulate the action of feelings, emotions, and responses by the child to what the adults have said or done.

This characteristic of the fragmented narrator/self is very evident in Sarraute's *Enfance*, which has been analyzed by many critics. Havercroft observes that the technique of this dialogue "entre deux voix énonciatives . . . [met] en question l'unicité du sujet autobiographique, son autorité vis-à-vis de son discours, de même que l'acte de reproduire le souvenir" (136). Brulotte identifies the dual narrators in Sarraute's works as possessing duality itself, "ce double est lui-même duel: il y a le *bon* et il y a le *mauvais*" (52, my italics). In *Enfance*, the second narrator is the good one who acts like a sentinel, warning the author against giving in to the traps of writing and the dangers present in clichés. This double accompanies the author in her writing of the *récit autobiographique*.

Not only does fragmentation occur with the narrator but also with the arrangement of the text, the syntactic elements of the text and the episodes recounted. LeGault states that "Sarraute does not hide the fact that she is uncomfortable with the genre of autobiography" and as a "result of her privileging of tropisms, with its inherent ellipsis, internal dialogue, and silences, . . . her autobiography reads as possibly more fragmented than another's" (27). Sarraute's decision as to which tropisms to include and which to leave out further underscores the fragmentation of *Enfance*. According to LeGault, "anything that insinuated 'happy childhood' or was too cliché-ridden does not appear in *Enfance* (28)." Sarraute also stresses the fact that the tropisms which are included are "unattached to each other" (Boncenne 90).

Cristina Bacchilega discovers in Sarraute's *Enfance* an attempt by the child Natacha to express herself, to break free from the bonds that restrict her, and to do this through writing, in spite of the inherent conflict in language. According to Bacchilega, the question implicitly asked in Sarraute's work is that posed by Cixous in *La Jeune Née* (*The Newly Born Woman*): "What is my place if I am a woman?" The writer seeks the answer(s) in and from her childhood (102), a "lost, but unforgotten, unburied childhood of struggle" (103). The initial dialogue of *Enfance* "articulates the difficulty, the uncertainty, the risk involved in writing from—and not simply about—that *sol, soleil*, ground and sun of childhood" (103).

The form of *Enfance* is indeed fragmentary, and although Sarraute argues that the tropisms which she recounts in each episode are not attached to each other, there is a connection or a bond, and that is the account of one little girl's childhood, an account which has elements common to many other children's childhoods. In fact, the fragmentary nature of this work is in keeping with the way a young child thinks, plays, and lives her/his life—in fragments or chunks. Desvignes has presented the account of Jeanne Berthouin's life in fragments as well, fragments that are recounted through the eyes of two young girls, first, Jeanne's daughter Valérie and later, Jeanne's grand-daughter Séverine. Yourcenar has also employed this same method in her autobiographical account.

Both Yourcenar's and Desvignes's works are even divided into fragments, as indicated by the chapter titles. Yourcenar's chapter divisions delineate a chronology, but she often makes references to the future within each chapter as well as to the past. Chapter One, "Le

traintrain des jours," relates her birth, her mother's death ten days later, and her father's boredom with his daily life, chained to his family home because of this baby which he must now care for himself. Chapter Two, "Necromantia," recounts episodes from her father's past, his relationship with his family and especially with his younger sister, and her unusual and untimely death. Chapter Three, "Un grain d'encens," returns to Michel's raising of his young daughter and the advent of Jeanne de Reval in their lives. However, the majority of this chapter deals with Jeanne de Reval's youth, two engagements and marriage to Egon. Chapter Four, "Le Trépied d'or," discusses the evolution of Michel's and Jeanne's relationship. Chapter Five, "La Déchirure," as the title indicates describes the rupture of this relationship, recounting many episodes of Jeanne's and Egon's marriage. In Chapter Six, "La Fidélité," we read of Jeanne's faithfulness to her husband, her marriage vows, her family, and her relationship with Michel's daughter Marguerite. We also learn of Egon's faithfulness to his male lover, Franz, as well as his bond with Jeanne. This is the place in the text where the actual rupture of Michel's and Jeanne's relationship is recounted. Finally, in Chapter Seven, "Les Miettes de l'enfance," Yourcenar speaks about herself, devoting much of this chapter to her beloved nanny Barbe. Chapter Eight, "Les Miettes de l'amour," returns to the account of Michel's amorous escapades with various ladies over the years, and Marguerite's meeting with Jeanne at a relative's birthday celebration. The next two chapters, entitled "La Terre qui tremble (1914-1915)" and "La Terre qui tremble (1916-1918)," recount the events in Michel's and Marguerite's lives prior to and during World War I. The final chapter, "Les Sentiers enchevêtrés," returns to an account of Jeanne's and Egon's lives during

this same period. Because Yourcenar died before having finished this text, the reader is left with a sense of hanging in mid-air or mid-story, with the text incomplete. As just indicated, Yourcenar's chapter divisions have a very fragmentary nature in the chronology of the events recounted, the characters' lives revealed, and the nature of the narrator. Although the chapters do seem to move forward chronologically, there are references to far distant future events as well as references which return to the distant past. These references "break up" the story and begin to "fragment" the story line.

Desvignes divides *Le Grain du chanvre* into two main parts which are almost the same length. However, the second part of this work is broken up into chapters by chronological references: 1900 (Un jeudi . . .), 1911 (. . . adolescence), 1919 (Un crépuscule . . .), 1935, 1937. Each of these dates has a subtitle as well; but only the temporal reference within the subtitle has been given. The last chapter, 1937, has three further subdivisions, each with a temporal reference: "2 janvier au soir . . .," "Vacances de Pâques . . .," "Premier mercredi de juin . . ."

The fact that Sarraute does not give titles to the episodes she recounts increases the sense of fragmentation. In addition, the typography of the text is very fragmentary in structure. As just pointed out, both Yourcenar's and Desvignes's texts are subdivided into chapters that recount fragments of their past or that of certain of their ancestors. In summary, it can definitely be argued that these three examples of women's autobiographies do indeed possess a fragmentary quality, in both the structure of the text and in the characteristic of the fragmented narrator, both of these

fragmentations being specifically characteristic of women's autobiographies in general, as certain critics have indicated.

Summary

These three works must be termed "autofictions" because of their blending of truth and reality, something that inevitably occurs when one tries to remember and record the events of one's past. However, these women writers have been quite cognizant of this blending of fact and fiction in their works and have either tried to indicate where this blending may have occurred or tried to indicate where their memory was faulty, leaving it up to the reader to interpret the text appropriately. All three women have expressed reticence about revealing too much of their own personal lives, preferring to end the account of their "autofiction" of the true events of their lives up to the time of their own early teen years as presented through the eyes of a child. This perspective necessitates a fragmented narrator who makes jumps into the future to make comments and then jumps back into the past to resume the story again. This fragmentary characteristic is also accomplished in the structure of the works and the divisions into episodes/chapters. All of these characteristics have been associated with writing women's autobiography. One other intriguing trait shared by these three women writers and their texts is that of role reversal between mother and daughter. Each of these writers is much older when she recounts the events of her childhood and the role her mother played. The writers are now more than twice the age of the mother—the roles are reversed, the mother has become the daughter, and

the daughter/narrator the mother. It is now the task of the narrator to make the mother come alive as a character in her family history.

An overlap exists between this chapter on women's autobiography and Chapter Two on *écriture féminine*, because several aspects discussed in this chapter will be mentioned again and discussed in greater detail or differently in the next chapter. After all, there are common links between women's autobiography and *écriture féminine*—they both involve writing.

Chapter 2

Écriture Feminine: Style and Structure

One of the most obvious reasons for designating Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes as feminist writers is the way in which they modify their writing style in a manner that is in keeping with what Cixous and Irigaray characterize as *écriture féminine* or what has come to be characterized as *écriture féminine*. This is the changed syntax, punctuation, and presence of silences and pauses.²⁸ Each of these women writers has developed a "new" writing style that is unique to her alone. Another aspect that has come to be associated with much twentieth-century women's writing is that of a filmic style of writing, something which Marguerite Duras has mastered and perfected. Because these women belong to the twentieth century, there is also a concern about how they may have been influenced by the *Nouveau Roman* movement. This influence may affect the narrative techniques of each writer, the repetition of the same event from several different perspectives, the existence of multilayering and polyphony within the text, the linearity or non-linearity of the text, the inner monologue or stream of consciousness technique, and the conversational style of their writing. However, if these women have been influenced by the *Nouveau Roman* movement, they have each brought their own feminine perspective to their use and development of these techniques. Two other areas of interest in this section on *écriture féminine* involve the

²⁸There are many other aspects of *écriture féminine* that could also be examined. I shall not attempt to apply all these aspects to these three works.

gender of Sarraute's narratorial voice and Desvignes's *chromatisme des mots*.

New Writing Style: *Disease de l'indicible*

What is it that these women have contributed to developing a new writing style or to the argument that theirs is a type of *écriture féminine*? Of these three women, Sarraute and Desvignes seem to have experimented more with new techniques and style than Yourcenar, so the discussion in this section will follow the order of Sarraute, Desvignes, and finally Yourcenar.

Sarraute's fragments begin half-way down the page, leaving much emptiness before and after each episode. The use of ellipses abounds in this text. However, it is Sarraute's development of tropisms in literature that has made the greatest impact on *écriture féminine* and her emphasis on the inner monologue or dialogue with oneself as in *Enfance* and the *sous-conversations*. Although she insists on the neuter within her texts, a strong feminine voice is apparent in *Enfance*. Her insistence on the universality of tropisms, something we all experience, may be valid, but again in *Enfance* this universal experience is more appropriate to women.

In Sarraute's effort to express the tropisms within herself, which she believes everyone experiences, she has created a new writing style. Marc Saporta writes that it is necessary to understand what Sarraute means by "tropism," since this is what has become the subject of her research.

Il convient de dire que, de son propre aveu, cela la conduit à faire subir au roman une évolution semblable à celle que les peintres abstraits ont introduite dans la peinture. Elle écrira donc des romans aussi abstraits que possible, d'où seront éliminés autant que faire se peut les personnages. ("Introduction" 2)

Sarraute, herself, describes "tropisms" as "des mouvements sous-jacents de la conscience" ("Introduction" 6). She desires "faire exister ces mouvements, ces tropismes, ces drames difficilement perceptibles à l'intérieur de chaque conscience" ("Introduction" 7). Saporta finds that one must admit that, "si la romancière met en scène, dans ses récits, de menues souffrances, causées par des exclusions et des exclusives (donc d'atroces mais pointillistes accès d'insupportable solitude)," Sarraute's plays afford her a privileged place for demonstrating the "action" of the conscience as it pursues/follows the death of the other ("Introduction" 3). Saporta cites Sarraute herself from an interview in which she said that she "'travaille sur la dignité du langage', à contre-courant d'un certain laisser-aller. Et pour elle, la dignité du langage 'c'est de porter un sens'" ("Introduction" 3). In her finding a new/"better" way to express herself, Saporta writes, "Nathalie Sarraute se veut diseuse de l'indicible" ("Introduction" 2). Sarraute desires to express what is not able to be said, what is beyond expression.

When questioned on the role of objects in her works, Sarraute responded, "ce qui m'intéresse ce n'est pas l'objet mais les mouvements intérieurs qu'il déclenche. Les objets ne sont que des catalyseurs. . . . Chez moi l'objet est un déclencheur de tropismes . . . Ce n'est pas l'objet qui importe mais les tropismes qu'il déclenche" ("Portrait" 23). When Natacha passes the scissors to her maid Adèle and is reprimanded for doing so incorrectly, the words which unleash a torrent of thoughts are "chez ta mère" (E 160).

. . . alors que je n'ai jamais entendu personne faire devant Adèle la plus légère allusion à ma mère. Jamais rien qui puisse me faire penser qu'Adèle connaît son existence. Et il apparaît maintenant que non seulement elle connaît l'existence de ma mère, mais qu'elle ne

perd jamais ma mère de vue... elle la voit à travers moi... Elle voit toujours sur moi sa marque. Des signes que je porte sans le savoir... des signes mauvais... (E 160)

Becker finds that Sarraute's fascination with language "led her to chart a new path for the novel—redefining it and extending it as an instrument of exploration—one that preceded and influenced the feminist novel in its search for a new means of expression for women's literature" ("Toward a New" 119). In Sarraute's development of a new style of writing, Benmussa writes that it is not plot that plays the important role, but rather "les rapports entre les personnages, les liens secrets qui les enchaînent ou les déchaînent . . . ce jeu de rapports et de réactions" ("Paroles" 79). Gaëtan Brulotte also emphasizes Sarraute's unique writing style in her article, "Tropismes et Sous-Conversation:" "Sarraute s'est créé, sur cinquante ans d'écriture, un langage propre, original, d'une parfaite unité" (39). Later in this same article, Brulotte stresses Sarraute's attempt to break new ground with her style of writing.

Sarraute s'élève contre l'idolâtrie formelle, contre la phrase fermée et léchée parce qu'un tel souci esthétisant représente, pour elle, la fixité. La phrase, elle la laissera donc inachevée, ouverte, pour ne pas la figer dans une rigueur grammaticale, pour donner "cette sorte de tremblement à la forme qui est essentiel", dit-elle dans une interview (*Les Ecrivains sur la sellette*, Ezine). (51)

Benmussa comments on Sarraute's dialogue with herself in the opening pages of *Enfance*:

Ces moments, ces mouvements qui émergent de la brume et disparaissent à nouveau, ces éclaircies sont triées, choisies non pour leur intérêt biographique mais pour ce qui peut se prêter le mieux au travail de l'écrivain sur son texte. Certains moments seront violents, d'autres pas, délicats au contraire, ou intenses. Le travail consistera à cerner au plus près une sensation, une émotion, quelque chose d'impalpable, l'approcher, l'effleurer avec des mots. ("Paroles" 78)

The opening pages of *Enfance* demonstrate these open-ended phrases, these unfinished thoughts and sentences, this trembling fear of words and writing. The typography of the text leaves much open space between each utterance, and for new episodes, this space becomes almost half a page:

— Alors, tu vas vraiment faire ça? "Evoquer tes souvenirs d'enfance"... comme ces mots te gênent, tu ne les aimes pas. Mais reconnais que ce sont les seuls mots qui conviennent. Tu veux "évoquer tes souvenirs"... il n'y a pas à tortiller, c'est bien ça.

— Oui, je n'y peux rien, ça me tente, je ne sais pas pourquoi...

— C'est peut-être... est-ce que ce ne serait pas... on ne s'en rend parfois pas compte... c'est peut-être que tes forces déclinent...

— Non, je ne crois pas... du moins je ne le sens pas...

[. . .]

— Oui, ça te rend grandiloquent. Je dirai même outrecoquant. Je me demande si ce n'est pas toujours cette même crainte... Souviens-toi comme elle revient chaque fois que quelque chose d'encore informe se propose... Ce qui nous est resté des anciennes tentatives nous paraît toujours avoir l'avantage sur ce qui tremblote quelque part dans les limbes...

— Mais justement, ce que je crains, cette fois, c'est que ça ne tremble pas... pas assez... que ce soit fixé une fois pour toutes, du "tout cuit", donné d'avance... (E 7-9)

Sarraute's initial literary efforts were an attempt to express what was within herself. However, over the years she has often stopped to reflect on her work and the elements of a theory about the novel have evolved. One must not forget that the theory emerged from the practice of her writing and not the other way around (Brulotte 40).

Although *Enfance* has more detailed characters than any of Sarraute's other works, they are not described completely. They are revealed "par fragments" as Benmussa has observed, "de chapitre en chapitre, pour leur donner contour . . . Les personnages sont ainsi tous vus comme à contre-jour, comme travaillés au 'repoussé'. Le courant venant d'eux, retournant vers eux, les cerne d'une auréole qui se précise petit à petit" ("Paroles" 80). One of the best examples of this fragmentary revelation of a character is that of Véra. She is first revealed at Natacha's father's apartment in Paris.

[. . .] une jeune femme entre... je l'ai déjà vue, ce n'est pas celle de Moscou qui décorait l'arbre de Noël avec moi, mais une autre aux cheveux châtons, que ne j'ai vue qu'ici avec papa... Elle fait son entrée déguisée en jeune homme... elle porte un costume de papa et elle a sur la tête son chapeau melon sous lequel elle a dissimulé son chignon [. . .] elle est drôle, vêtue ainsi, comme ça lui va... elle s'approche de moi, elle s'incline devant moi comme on fait dans les bals devant les dames, elle me prend par la main, je me lève, *elle me tient par la taille et elle tourne avec moi en chantonnant des airs charmants joyeux entraînants elle va de plus en plus vite elle me soulève mes pieds ne touchent plus terre la tête me tourne je ris de ravissement...* [. . .] elle s'évente avec son mouchoir en haletant encore un peu, en souriant... Je voudrais bien qu'elle recommence. (E 64-65, my italics)

This first view of Véra will not be the dominant image that the reader will carry of this character. There will be other glimpses of this happy, carefree, young Véra, but the image of Véra as the sickly, worried, unhappy, depressed wife of an older man, and the "mean" step-mother of Natacha is the one that leaves the strongest impression. However, these views of Véra are only revealed by fragments in the various episodes recounted by the child Natacha. Not only does this passage provide the reader with the first fragmentary view of Véra, but it also demonstrates how Sarraute changed or deleted the punctuation in keeping with the

emotion and movement of the moment of dancing as indicated by the italicized lines of the text.

In *La Quinzaine littéraire*, Sarraute herself states that, "mes véritables personnages, mes seuls personnages, ce sont les mots. Mais investis, mais pleins" ("Où en est" 11). According to Brulotte the real character,

le personnage linguistique par excellence qui revient toujours sous différentes formes, c'est le cliché. Il occupe une place cible dans l'univers de Sarraute. Les proverbes, la sagesse des nations, les lieux communs, les citations irresponsabilisantes . . . dictent les comportements et permettent de ne pas penser. Ils sont le véhicule des vieilles croyances et du statu quo. Sans cesse Sarraute convoque le cliché pour le démolir ou pour l'exploiter en tant que source d'images. (48)

Benmussa poetically describes the way in which Sarraute artfully reveals the various images throughout her work:

Les images, avec délicatesse ou force, par touches successives, par approches attentives, prudentes, se détachent juste le temps de trouver les mots les plus justes qui les nomment, et s'éloignent de nouveau. Nathalie Sarraute s'en saisit, et, avant qu'elles ne s'enfoncent, les examine, les décompose, les travaille, sans jamais rien de théorique, sans aucune démonstration, mais pour les faire revivre, maintenant, au plus près de l'émotion, du vrai, alors que le temps les a rendues plus fragiles encore. ("Paroles" 82)

In her attempt to isolate the tropisms and bring them to the surface of one's consciousness, using the only tools at hand, words, which could also so easily destroy these fleeting sensations, Sarraute has creatively found her own *écriture féminine*. No one else has even tried to imitate her.

Desvignes will also develop her own *écriture féminine* with ellipses, ruminations, interior monologue, total absence of punctuation in moments of extreme emotion, and repetitive phrases that act as incantations or emphasis, as well as the presentation of certain events from several characters' perspectives. One example of the lack of punctuation occurs at

the end of the chapter entitled "1900 *Un jeudi dans la vie de Valérie*."

Valérie is drifting off to sleep after an emotional day with the arrival of her young baby brother that Pépé has brought home to live with them now, and these are the thoughts that flit through her mind as she is falling asleep.

Le Génie caracolera sur son cheval blanc il n'aurait pas un vilain nez comme le bon roi Henri il aurait juste deux petits points brodés à plat sous ses deux yeux étincelants il n'arrêterait pas de vous regarder et Mlle Tamburlinet relèverait la tête du milieu des fleurs elle vous regarderait avec des yeux noirs étincelants avec le bout de sa règle elle montrerait le bout des grappes de lilas avec le blanc qui était encore un peu vert avant de s'ouvrir elle vous regarderait avec des yeux noirs étincelants elle dirait Boutons Boutons avec un s au bout parce que c'est au pluriel comme des ciels de lit si on savait seulement ce que c'était des ciels de lit (GC 393) (no punctuation to end)

Just as Sarraute indicated that she wished to express what is not able to be said, Desvignes, in a similar but not identical manner, has shown herself to be the "speaker of the unsaid," the "non-dit," with her use of the interior monologue and the ruminations of her characters. One instance of this occurs when the eight-year old Valérie is singing the song *Marie assise sur un' pierre* with her friends. However, her grandmother and other grandmothers forbid the girls to sing this song. Valérie does not understand why.

Comme d'habitude, quand les grandes personnes trouvent des choses drôles ou pas convenables, jamais elles ne vous expliquent. Les autres savaient peut-être, elles, il y avait eu des messes basses entre elles, on la regardait de loin comme si elle avait une maladie, on était gentil avec elle mais on ne voulait rien lui dire, et chaque fois qu'au moment de faire une ronde il y avait une étourdie pour dire Et si on chantait *Marie assise sur un' pierre*, les messes basses recommençaient, les autres rapprochaient leurs têtes et se prenaient aux épaules comme pour garder le secret pour elles, rien ne transpirait, elle ne saurait jamais pourquoi il ne fallait pas chanter cette ronde-là qui était si jolie.

Mais rien ne l'empêchait de la chanter pour elle toute seule. . . elle pouvait chantonner tout doucement, personne n'entendait, elle était seule à écouter sa voix, elle pouvait traîner sur les notes les plus

hautes pour avoir tout le loisir de s'entendre, elle pouvait répéter un morceau de chanson quand elle le trouvait spécialement joli, trois fois cinq fois dix fois, jusqu'à en avoir assez. (GC 358)

Valérie's reflections on why she has been forbidden to sing this song and why she likes it, lead her to compare her pleasure of singing certain refrains over and over to the pleasure of eating cherries.

Comme quand on arrive au fond d'un panier de cerises, qu'il en reste encore, avec des feuilles qui sentent si bon, c'est bien tentant mais quand on est plein on est plein, tout ce qu'on peut faire c'est se frotter doucement les feuilles sur la joue en les appuyant un peu sous le nez l'odeur monte c'est presque de l'odeur de cerises c'est même encore meilleur, c'est tout ce qu'on peut faire oui, le fond du panier c'est bien tentant mais quand on est plein on est plein, il n'y a plus ni place ni envie pour une seule cerise, même bien noire même bien brillante même piquetée par un bec de merle, ce qui veut dire que c'est la meilleure la plus confite la plus sucrée. Tout pareil pour la chanson, quand on a répété le passage qu'on aime cinq ou dix fois l'envie a disparu, ça vous énerverait plutôt. (GC 358)

Just as Sarraute developed her own writing style, in like manner, Desvignes's style is also quite unique. Auzias describes her work as having "une puissance, une compacité qui font de Lucette Desvignes l'auteur peut-être le plus important, celui qui ne ressemble à rien, le plus humain de la littérature, ici, et sans doute, beaucoup plus au-delà" ("Lucette Desvignes" 18). Desvignes says that, in an effort to find a means to share/relate with her reader the intense emotions and feelings that she felt and associated with her ancestors' past, she came up with "un nouveau type d'écriture, un médium qu'on a appelé 'le langage pensé'" (Limoges 43). She likens this to the juxtaposition of several films not presented according to the author's will imposed from the outside, but rather from the character's perspective as he/she felt and lived these experiences (43). Continuing this claim of a new writing style, Pascal Dibie underlines the way in which Desvignes develops her own writing according to her own "rules."

La grammaire; elle fait littéralement, littérairement, chavirer les règles de l'écriture et du roman. Sa langue est forte, enrichie de centaines de termes régionaux qui régionalisent l'oeuvre et l'enracinent tout en la portant, grâce à la précision et à la justesse de ce vocabulaire oublié, à une expression universelle. (25)

One of these regional terms used frequently is "la colle." This refers to "une panade," a soup made from bread boiled in water or milk, a poor man's meal. After Jeanne's marriage to Etienne Barandelle, her life was that of an upper-class bourgeoisie woman. However, after the fire which destroyed Etienne's warehouse full of grain, Jeanne had to return to work, and frugally watch over every cent that was earned and spent. Her maid, Fanchette

comprenait la situation et à l'image de Jeanne s'était héroïquement lancée dans une austérité résignée de ragoûts, de fèves, de lentilles et de châtaignes. . . . La *colle* fit sa réapparition inattendue, avec du beurre seulement dans l'assiette de Valérie, et elle s'imposa les jours de semaine tout aussi bien que le dimanche où il était de tradition de liquider les vieux croûtons. (GC 321, my italics)

Sarnecki has identified a difference in Yourcenar's syntax and style between her first two autobiographical volumes of *Le Labyrinthe du monde* and the third volume *Quoi? L'éternité*. Some of the sentences seem to be more fluid, flowing "with less control or stops imposed by the author. Sentences in volume three are often longer with less punctuation" (219). Sarnecki also remarks on Yourcenar's frequent use of the semi-colon in much of her work and interprets it "as an indication of internal contradiction or tension" (138). Just as Sarraute reveals her characters with fragmentary revelations throughout the text, the same is true of Yourcenar. There is not a complete picture of the child Marguerite, only bits and pieces. Even Jeanne's strengths and weaknesses are presented in fragments.

Both Sarraute and Desvignes have spoken about their initial literary efforts, how they first began writing, and how their particular style developed. Sarraute believes that her awareness of "tropisms" was a slow process that developed over a period of time, really manifesting itself when she began to write.

Je me suis mise un beau jour à écrire quelque chose que je ressentais fortement et qui n'avait pas été exprimé de cette façon. J'étais là dans un domaine qui m'appartenait et qui me faisait trouver une forme qui ne me paraissait pas avoir été employée, qui était donc une forme vivante. ("Portrait" 12)

Just as Sarraute's development of "tropismes" was initially a literary effort for herself rather than for others, so, too was Desvignes's literary beginning. When one interviewer accused her of "tordre le cou à la rhétorique," Desvignes vehemently denied this, saying that

un beau jour, j'ai eu vraiment envie d'écrire et je m'y suis prise tard parce que je pense que j'avais accumulé de l'expérience et des désirs rentrés d'écrire. Et du jour où j'ai commencé à écrire, j'ai écrit pour moi, j'ai d'abord commencé par écrire pour moi, et c'est ensuite, quand j'ai vu que ça commençait à prendre forme, que j'ai pensé que peut-être un jour, avec beaucoup de chance, ce livre pourrait être publié (Maertens 37)

Although they had similar beginnings with their literary creations, the innovations which they brought to twentieth-century women's writing differ greatly.

Developing a new writing style, a new means of expressing the female self, is the foundation of *écriture féminine*. Both Sarraute and Desvignes characterize their writing style as possessing something new and different, as being innovative and even unique. However, not only have the writers themselves made this remark, but also many critics. Sarraute's innovations include her development of tropisms, the "sous-conversations," plot based on words and language rather than action,

sketchily defined characters who are most often nameless, changed syntax and punctuation, as well as silences and empty spaces on the page.

Desvignes's innovations resemble some of Sarraute's but with their own flavor. These include the inner monologue, the ruminations, changed syntax and punctuation, use of regional French, filmic style of writing, and the retelling of the same event from several different perspectives. One also finds non-linearity in the relating of events, fragmented narrators, multilayering or polyphony, unusual chapter/episode/fragment divisions of the text, the rhythmic flow of the text, innovative narrative techniques, and a reticence to reveal oneself. Even Yourcenar's work possesses many of these characteristics that have come to be associated with *écriture féminine*, a point that lends weight to the argument that these three works, *Enfance*, *Quoi? L'éternité*, and *Le Grain du chanvre*, are indeed examples of *écriture féminine* and thus that a gender-specific writing style does exist within these particular texts.

Both Sarraute and Desvignes, then, claim that they have brought literary innovations to their own particular writing style. The remainder of this chapter will discuss these innovations in greater detail with specific examples from their texts. Certain innovative characteristics are perceptible in Yourcenar's text as well. The innovations that these three women have brought to French women's literature present strong arguments for the existence of an *écriture féminine* within their texts.

Characteristics: Suspension Marks, Silences, Divisions of Text

In Went-Daoust's discussion of Sarraute's writing style, she identifies several sarrautien characteristics which are also typical of much *écriture féminine*. She speaks of the numerous occasions of the use of suspension marks, the silences of the text, the pauses between words and phrases, the division of the work into episodes or fragments, and the author's reticence to reveal herself. According to Went-Daoust, the suspension marks between "ces lambeaux de phrases séparés par des points de suspension caractérisent l'auteur implicite de deux façons" ("*Enfance*" 348). First, they permit the author to remove phrases from their "frame," to distill the words and phrases down to their "pure" meaning. Second, they act as points/moments of reflection, allowing the author time to find "le mot juste" with the proper meaning for that situation. In addition to the use of suspension marks, Sarraute's "silences" are many. Both these suspension marks and the silences also allow the reader time to reflect and react to the text and its relation to her/him personally. This is also characteristic of Desvignes's text, which provides both the author and the writer time to reflect.

Went-Daoust uses the oxymoron "silences bavards" to describe the second sarrautien characteristic of *écriture féminine*. These are "silences bavards" because they do "speak." "L'auteur implicite s'est proposé de ne pas se laisser aller à raconter au-delà du vécu, le blanc vient toujours lui couper la parole à point nommé. Ces silences sont des actes conscients de non-parole ou d'une parole in absentia" ("*Enfance*" 348). She further identifies these silences as the narrator's means "pour éclairer la parole-objet et la prolonger" (349). In addition, Sarraute's childhood has

influenced her distinctive writing style and the presence of these "eloquent silences." Patterson suggests that Sarraute's different approach to literature "can assuredly be found in [her . . .] childhood experiences," which differed vastly from those of other writers (157). She cites the fact that Sarraute "grew up with no place she could really call home and listened enviously as the British girls brought in to teach her stepsister English told her about their early years, 'de 'vraies' enfances vécues dans l'insouciance, dans la sécurité, sous la ferme et bienveillante direction de parents unis, justes et calmes' (E 244)" (157). Because Sarraute was "a child supersensitive to the nuances of every word said to her and to the general instability of her day-to-day existence," Patterson does not find it surprising that she "would focus on the undercurrents beneath the surface in describing human relationships, the 'tropismes' which pervade all of her work and would remain throughout her life reluctant to reveal very much of herself in her writing" (157). One example of these undercurrents in human relationships occurs in the fragment recounting Véra's difficulties in getting Lili to eat. Véra says to Lili, "Mange, mon petit lapin [. . .] Mon petit lapin blanc... tu dois le manger, c'est bon pour toi..." (E 143). She is trying to feed her "brains" because Lili needs food that is fortifying and delicate, but only Lili has the right to eat such fine foods. However, Natacha remembers that

c'est la gentille grosse bonne qui un jour à la cuisine m'en a fait goûter un petit morceau... Elle essaie parfois ainsi de réparer comme elle peut des injustices qui l'indignent... "Ici, il n'y en a que pour la petite... C'est comme pour les bananes, vous me croirez si vous voulez, elles sont cachées en haut du placard à linge, derrière la pile de draps, pour que la grande n'en prenne pas... Si c'est pas malheureux de voir ça..." Je ne sais plus à qui elle parlait, mais je me souviens que c'est ainsi que m'a été révélé quelque chose de stupéfiant et que je ne soupçonnais pas: l'existence de cette cachette. (E 143-144)

This passage reveals how Véra spoils Lili and slights Natacha, and how the maid takes up for Natacha, the hidden currents of the human relationships in Natacha's life. Silences in the text are like the gaps in the text—holes in discourse—but these silences speak, have meaning and begin to fill in those gaps and holes.

Silences also speak in Yourcenar's text. They are especially associated with Jeanne and her relationships with others. Jeanne and Egon seem to communicate just as well silently as verbally. In fact, many of the episodes of their courtship take place out in nature, surrounded by animals and silence. Sarnecki remarks that Jeanne "appears to operate wordlessly at a level of feelings and sensations" (225). She observes that this is especially evident in Jeanne's relationship with Egon, "in which the two of them seem to understand each other in a way that renders language superfluous" (225). Although Michel wonders at the relationship that develops between himself and Jeanne, he refrains from questioning her about her feelings for him, and about this extraordinary situation, allowing the "clear" and "beautiful" *silence* to close around them. "Il ne se demande pas si Jeanne l'aime. Cet homme supposé bien à tort du type conquérant est trop humble envers la femme pour se poser la question . . . Le beau silence se referme . . . Là aussi, le clair silence se reforme" (QE 126-127). Even with Marguerite, the communication more often takes place via silence, especially when the young Marguerite meets Jeanne again after several years when they both attend Marguerite's aunt's birthday celebration in Brussels. Although they only spend a few minutes together and then are separated by the other guests, emotions, feelings, love, and acceptance flow between them in silent accord.

Elle me tendit les bras. Je m'y jetai avec joie. Son baiser, venu à la fois de l'âme, du coeur et du corps, me rendit aussitôt l'intimité facile d'autrefois, bien que ces récentes quatre années d'absence représentassent à mon âge presque la moitié de ma vie. J'eusse par exception souhaité babiller sur . . . son mari . . . Mais il suffisait qu'elle fût là. La sonnette de la rue tintait; d'autres dames arrivèrent; on m'éloigna. Je n'étais pas même triste. Il suffisait de savoir qu'elle était belle et toute bonne. (QE 250-251)

Sarnecki wonders about Yourcenar's sources for the information regarding Jeanne's relationships with her husband Egon and with Michel, because the text indicates that both Michel and Jeanne maintained silence: "Michel d'un côté et Jeanne de l'autre ont toujours gardé un silence de bonne compagnie sur la nature de leurs rapports" (QE 122) (240). Perhaps one can say that the silences in Yourcenar's text raise more questions that are left unanswered, even though Jeanne's silences do "speak" to those whom she loves.

Yourcenar characteristically gives the sources for her literary works within the texts and *Quoi? L'éternité* is no exception. However, she also admits that there are gaps in her family chronicles which she has tried to fill in, assuring the reader that this is the exception rather than the rule (QE 80). She uses two images/metaphors often associated with women's writing to describe her own process of recording her family's history; that of the weaving of a tapestry, and that of reuniting the fragments of a broken mirror. She insists that one must fill in the gaps if one is to weave a completed tapestry or if one is to rejoin the broken pieces of glass back together.

Mais les propos plus ou moins incomplets ou désultatoires de tiers, les récits faits distraitemment au cours d'une promenade . . . nous laissent toujours à court: il faut boucher les trous de la tapisserie, ou rejointoyer les fragments de verre brisé. (QE 80-81)

Later while walking on the beach with Jeanne, this fragmented mirror image is once again evoked.

Jeanne règle son pas sur celui des enfants, s'arrête pour les laisser çà et là ramasser un coquillage. De grands flaques parsèment le sol à marée basse, comme les fragments d'un immense miroir brisé. (QE 128)

Sarnecki questions whether imagination can "compensate for what has been irretrievably lost" and indicates that the broken mirror image "signals not only loss, but also the possibility of reflecting a desire both hidden and revealed" (249). Sarnecki's interpretation of this work is that it reveals Yourcenar's desire for the lost/absent mother, so she creates an idealized/fictionalized mother in Jeanne to make up for this loss/absence. Sarnecki also proposes that this fragmented mirror image could be Yourcenar's attempt to fragment her identity beyond recognition, in keeping with her desire to both reveal and conceal her own identity (as discussed earlier) and to create a mirror that is "purposefully different from the smooth surface reflected in more traditional autobiographies of well-known male authors" (242). I agree with Sarnecki's interpretation that Yourcenar tried to fragment her own identity beyond recognition, but I question her interpretation of Jeanne as the idealized, fictionalized mother Yourcenar created in order to replace that which was lost to her in her own mother. Some fictionalizing may have taken place because of the length of time that has passed and the tricks that memory can play, but the feelings are strong and often remain faithful and true to what one felt at the time.

As for the third characteristic, the division of the work, Went-Daoust declares that Sarraute has divided her *récit* into chapters with each one recounting a slice of life "comme s'il s'agissait d'une vie romancée"

("Enfance" 349). This contributes to the rather rapid rhythm of the narration and "le nivellement des événements qu'elle comporte" (349). However, other critics do not define this division as "chapters" but rather as "fragments," or "episodes." There are no titles given to these divisions, just blank spaces before and after each one. Perhaps the designations of "fragments," "episodes," or "reflections" are more appropriate than "chapters." In order to facilitate analysis of this work, many critics have numbered these fragments so they can refer to them more easily.

In like manner, critics have found Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité* to possess a fragmentary structure. Sarnecki's comparison of the three volumes of Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy finds that *Quoi? L'éternité* has more divisions than either of the two earlier works. There are eleven separate sections, which do not always fit together as coherently as the sections of her earlier volumes (219-220). One easily observes the fragmentary aspect of this work, given the multiple accounts of the stories of Michel, Jeanne, and Egon but very little about Marguerite.

Voss argues that the discontinuous form and often disjointed narrative of many women's autobiographies represent the woman writer's effort to embody the texture of female lives: since her life is cyclical and prone to interruption, her segmented, disorderly form perfectly embodies the reality of her life. She continues by stating that this discontinuous form implies that meaning inheres, especially for women, in the individual events and diurnal details of a life. This seems to be true for each of these autofictions: although minute details of individual life are not given for all episodes, the episodes related do reflect what the daily life of the heroine would generally be like. One other statement made by Voss is that a

woman's autobiography embodies the role-playing central to feminine experience. If this is so, then Sarraute accomplished this role-playing with her dual narrator, constantly questioning herself about the veracity of her memories, and the replaying of the same scene several different times in order to find the "right" or "true" evocation. Yourcenar accomplished this with her depiction of the ideal woman, the perfect mother, in Jeanne de Reval. Finally, Desvignes was able to do this through her re-creations of her grandmother's and mother's pasts. Valérie especially played roles as a child with her dolls, acting out the dream she had of having her mother living with her in a close-knit, loving, sharing, intimate family relationship.

Another aspect of *écriture féminine* found by Went-Daoust within Sarraute's work is that of the author's efforts to "hide herself," not to reveal herself within her text. As we mentioned earlier, this reticence to reveal oneself also characterizes many women's autobiographies.

C'est dans un esprit d'impartialité que N. Sarraute souhaite que son livre soit abordé. Or, dans cette perspective, le double pronom peut être interprété comme une tentative d'objectivation du moi, plutôt que comme une éviction du lecteur.

C'est sa propre mise à distance que l'auteur s'efforce, sur tous les fronts, d'opérer pour mieux se rapprocher de ce dernier, confondre son univers avec le sien. . . C'est ainsi qu'en se dédoublant en "je" et en "tu", Nathalie Sarraute introduit le monologue intérieur dans le discours autobiographique généralement extraverti, et ce faisant, se rapproche d'elle-même. ("*Enfance*" 340)

However, she finds that although this was the author's initial intention, she ends up by revealing herself, "l'impression que l'auteur implicite s'était d'abord proposé de cacher est finalement tout de même montrée" (349). Of the three texts under examination in this study, Sarraute's *Enfance* seems to be the most revealing about the woman writer's life. While she actually devoted her entire autobiographical *récit* to her own

childhood memories, Yourcenar and Desvignes chose instead to relate the life stories of their parents and other relatives, with very few episodes of themselves as young girls. They conveniently hid behind the stories of others and were thus able to refrain from exposing too much of themselves and becoming vulnerable.

Elizabeth Winston's essay "The Autobiographer and her Readers: From Apology to Affirmation" states that using a third-person perspective allows the woman autobiographer to omit giving a full account of painful events from her past because this third-person narrator would not be expected to know those details. It also allows the autobiographer to avoid revealing her inner life, a means of distancing herself from her audience and protecting her privacy (qtd. in Spector 109). Perhaps this partially explains why Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes all refused to reveal very much of their inner selves in their autofictions, since each one did employ a third-person narrator for part of their autobiographical *récit*.

The following passage from *Enfance* demonstrates all of the five sarrautien characteristics of *écriture féminine* mentioned earlier. The revelation of the author's/narrator's feelings comes in the five paragraphs that relate the episode when Natacha's mother reproaches her for having compared the mother to a store-window doll and found the mother lacking in the comparison. Not only the suspension marks but also the typography of the text contribute to the shock felt by Natacha at hearing her mother's words,

"Un enfant qui aime sa mère trouve que personne n'est plus beau qu'elle."

Je ne me rappelle pas comment nous sommes revenues à la maison... peut-être même avons-nous continué à parler comme si de rien n'était. J'emportais en moi ce qu'elle y avait déposé... un paquet

bien enveloppé... Ce n'est qu'une fois rentrée, quand je serai seule, que je l'ouvrirai pour voir ce qu'il contient... [. . .]

— C'est sûr. Mais dans ce cas aucune repartie, même si j'en avais eu le don, n'aurait été possible...

— Il est probable qu'elle s'était mal exprimée. Ce qu'elle avait sans doute voulu dire était: Un enfant qui aime sa mère ne la compare jamais à personne.

— C'est ça: un enfant qui aime sa mère ne l'observe pas, il ne songe pas à la juger... (E 95-96)

Went-Daoust points out the glaring marked silence (the long, white, blank space in the text) which follows the "fatal phrase" of the mother. This silent space allows the "auteur implicite" to communicate the "choc ressenti" and the following three paragraphs deepen this feeling. The suspension marks provide a delay during which the author allows these things to mature/fester/grow within the implicit reader's spirit ("*Enfance*" 349). The image that struck me most forcibly was that of the wrapped-up package—these sealed, closed off words demanding conformity—but not a package like a present, rather a package containing a bomb, something explosive and fearful—something to be explored carefully and with trepidation. The five feminist writing techniques identified by Went-Daoust in Sarraute's work include the use of suspension marks, the "eloquent" silences of the text, the division of the text, the distancing of the author/narrator from the text, and polyphony (which will be discussed in detail later). The techniques occurring in Yourcenar's work include the communicating silences, the division of the text, and the reticence of the author/narrator to reveal too much of herself. The passage from *Le Grain du chanvre* (GC 393) cited earlier demonstrates how Desvignes incorporates the techniques of suspension marks, and changed punctuation and syntax

within her text. Other techniques that she employs are the division of the text, and the reticent author/narrator.

Filmic Style of Writing

A characteristic that Sarraute and Desvignes share is that of a "filmic style of writing," writing in such a way that one pictures it as if on a movie screen. Benmussa describes Sarraute's *Enfance* as "une écriture scénique visuelle" ("Paroles" 80). She also finds instances of contrasting of light and dark within Sarraute's work.

Nathalie Sarraute utilise les mots également dans un jeu d'ombres et de lumières pour tenter de détourner, de rendre le tracé et les effets de creux et de pleins d'un moment, d'un souvenir, qui était resté dans l'ombre, qui, maintenant, émerge et s'évanouit de nouveau, ne "s'efface" pas, précise-t-elle, mais "s'enfonce" plutôt. (80)

In like manner, several Desvignes critics have likened her writing to that of Duras, having the feel of "un texte écrit en style cinématographique" as Sylvia Pandelescu has described it, writing as "on écrit un film à travers une série d'images et de plans cinématographiques qui s'enchaînent pour former un tout" ("Effets" 88). Pandelescu presents an example of "un récit bref et un style elliptique, syncopé, cinématographique, sollicitant en quelque sorte aussi la vue du lecteur et pas seulement sa sensibilité, que Lucette Desvignes dépeint un 'plan d'ensemble'" (92-93). This relates to Desvignes's description of a market day in Macon. She also mentions other scenes brought to life by Desvignes's "type d'écriture de support visuel" (94). Pandelescu suggests that "l'art cinématographique a fourni des renouvellements de développements et d'émotion parmi les écrivains et le grand public, et que la littérature est en contact, sciemment ou inconsciemment, avec tous les mouvements novateurs et toutes les

demandes de l'esprit" (96). Pandelescu indicates that Lucette Desvignes has incorporated some of these experiences in her own works, but "elle se garde bien d'insérer dans ses romans des fragments qui se 'voient' plus qu'ils ne se lisent" (96). She has stressed the visualisation, "le tableau d'ensemble offert avec tous les mouvements intérieurs qu'il comporte, et même avec les odeurs spécifiques . . . donnant au lecteur la possibilité de découvrir les choses progressivement, comme au cinéma" (96).

When first reading Pandelescu's article with this mention of the cinematographic feature of Desvignes's writing style, the reader familiar with Duras's work immediately thinks of her. There are many references to this trait in Desvignes's style which could eventually lead to a comparative study between Desvignes and Duras. Lucette Desvignes herself seems to concur with this observation of a filmic style to her writing, often mentioning the juxtaposed films of several characters within a particular text. In a 1983 radio interview with Michel Limoges, Desvignes refers to a remark made by an interviewer for FR3 the previous year in which he said, "En somme, vous avez installé une caméra dans le cerveau de chacun de vos personnages" (44). Over the years, this remark has been affirmed as a distinguishing characteristic of Desvignes's work by many other reviewers and critics as well. Most critics have discussed this filmic technique in relation to Desvignes's first novel, *Les Noeuds d'argile* mentioning the two juxtaposed films of Francis Pacôme's (the father) thoughts and those of Marrain (his son). However, this filmic technique also plays a significant role in Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre*, with the juxtaposition of at least three "films," those of Valérie, Mémé, and Jeanne herself.

Henri Lecoultré's review of Desvignes's work not only mentions this camera technique of her writing but continues the comparison of her with Duras by mentioning the "voix 'off' [qui] livre, en 'incrustation', non seulement les dits mais les non-dits, le présent et le passé, les hésitations, les réticences, les justifications des personnages" (68). The discussion of the veracity of the memories expressed by Sarraute's narrator between the two voices also resembles this "voix 'off'"—although the "dual narrator dialogue" is more in the foreground and the memory/action is in the background. Françoise Ducout also remarks on "la voix 'off' du récit cinématographique, qui ne se contente pas de commenter, scander l'action, mais crée une nouvelle dimension, une nouvelle 'fiction'" (72) in Sarraute's *Enfance*. However, she states that the *essentiel* for Sarraute is the pursuit of the "petit fait vrai" by which she "pourra dénuder 'le foisonnement infini de la vie psychologique et les vastes régions encore à peine défrichées de l'inconscient'" (72).

In one sense, it seems that Yourcenar has combined both of these techniques in her text *Quoi? L'éternité*. She employs a dual narrator—herself, at different places throughout the text, sometimes narrating as a child, other times as an adult, sometimes her character is she as the author, at other times she is outside the character as the omniscient narrator. This mixes Sarraute's technique of the dual narrator and the idea of the "voix off." There is a filmic quality in Yourcenar's writing, with the reader easily being able to visualize the people, scenes, and events that she recounts. This filmic style of writing in Desvignes's and Yourcenar's texts may be rooted in these writers' assertions that, when they write, they, in essence, *become* their characters, living and reacting as if they were the

characters themselves. This is what many writers attempt to do, and if successful, then perhaps "any" reader would be able to visualize and "live" the text, experiencing it as "larger than life" similar to what one sees on a movie screen. In any case, this quality of a filmic style of writing has come to be associated with women's writing because of the influence of the works of Marguerite Duras, and this characteristic may be identified with Sarraute's, Yourcenar's and Desvignes's autobiographical fictions.

Orality of Writing

Another similarity between Sarraute's and Desvignes's works is that of the rhythmic flow of the phrases. The "vers claudélien" comes to mind, with the phrase resembling one's respiration. Carmen Licari remarked on the oral quality of Sarraute's writing, to which Sarraute responded, "C'est une écriture que j'entends en écrivant . . . Quand j'écris, je ne peux pas me fier au lecteur pour le rythme, il faut que le texte respire comme quand je l'entends" (9). Brulotte stresses the oral, conversational aspect of Sarraute's writing, and writes: "Pour rendre le flux conversationnel dans ses romans, elle développe des marques que tout lecteur familier de Sarraute connaît bien: jeux d'interligne, points de suspension, incorporation de l'interlocution au corps de la narration" (47). Brulotte further observes that the dialogue in her works takes place on two levels which are in constant interaction: the real conversation, and the interior conversation which reacts in secret within one's consciousness (47). These conversations, however, do not resemble those that readers would hear in every day life because writing them down has slowed them greatly, while the "temps du discours, chez Sarraute avance toujours beaucoup plus vite

que le temps de l'histoire" (47-48). How interesting that her subject matter—tropisms or *sous-conversations*—deals with the language that is not spoken, but is thought, just below the surface of the real conversation, and is manifested in her work/writing in a very oral, conversational, expressed-aloud style.

Je parle le moins possible de maman... Chez mon père tout ce qui peut l'évoquer risque de faire monter et se montrer au-dehors... pas dans ses paroles, mais dans le froncement de ses sourcils, dans le plissement de ses lèvres qui s'avancent, dans les fentes étroites de ses paupières qui se rapprochent... quelque chose que je ne veux pas voir...

— De la rancune, de la réprobation... osons le dire... du mépris.

— Mais je n'appelle pas cela ainsi. Je ne donne à cela aucun nom, je sens confusément que c'est là, en lui, enfoui, comprimé... je ne veux surtout pas que cela se mette à bouger, que cela vienne affleurer... [. . .]

Et voilà qu'un jour, sous le regard de mon père que je sens posé sur mon visage, un regard qui s'attarde, ne le quitte plus, je relève un de mes sourcils comme le fait maman, j'ouvre mes yeux tout grands, je les fixe devant moi très loin, mes yeux comme ceux de maman s'emplissent d'étonnement, de désarroi, de candeur, d'innocence...

Mon père regarde toujours ce que je tiens étalé, immobile devant lui...

Mais ce n'est pas moi, c'est lui, c'est son regard à lui qui a fait venir cela sur mon visage, c'est lui qui le maintient...

— On aurait pu croire que ce que son regard ferait apparaître, ce serait plutôt l'air fermé et dur que ta mère avait parfois, celui qu'elle avait dû le plus souvent lui montrer et qu'il devait le mieux connaître.

[. . .] et ce qui est arrivé ensuite prouve que j'avais senti juste. Il s'est tourné vers l'ami qui était là, c'était l'ami commun de mes parents qui m'avait amenée de Berlin... nous étions seuls tous les trois... et mon père, détachant enfin ses yeux de moi, s'est tourné vers lui et lui a dit: "C'est étonnant comme par moments Natacha peut ressembler à sa mère..." et dans ces mots quelque chose d'infiniment fragile, que j'ai à peine osé percevoir, je craignais de le faire disparaître... quelque chose a glissé, m'a effleurée, m'a caressée, s'est effacé. (E 127-129)

Desvignes employs a similar technique in her works. One example that comes to mind is that of Valérie crouched below the window of her grandmother's house eavesdropping on the conversation between Mémé and Mme Ledoyen. The five- or six-year old Valérie relates the conversation to us, the readers, but at the same time stops to reflect on the meanings of certain words or expressions that she overhears. She also makes observations and associations in her mind with what she overhears. Desvignes thus relates the exterior conversation between the two old women, and the interior monologue, the language that is not spoken but is thought just below the surface of the exterior conversation.

C'était bien plus agréable de s'installer dans la cour. La Mémé avait dit Va jouer avec tes petites amies, sors sur le devant, mais restez bien en bordure de la galerie, surtout que je ne voie personne galoper sur le Champ de Foire. C'était gentil, la Mémé disait ça comme une permission, pour faire plaisir, mais il ne fallait pas que ça devienne un ordre. Dès que ça devenait un ordre on ne voyait plus que c'était une gentillesse, on n'avait plus qu'une envie c'était de faire tout le contraire. Si on lui disait Sors, même gentiment, elle avait envie de rester. La Mémé avait dit Sors sur le devant, elle avait tout de suite eu envie, elle, de s'installer derrière. (GC 353)

Sixteen pages of reflections and associations later, the reader learns that Mémé and Mme Ledoyen are conversing in the kitchen while working together to mend/recrochet a bedcover.

. . . les deux ah malheur malgré les précautions qu'on peut prendre, et à l'entendre se moucher comme ça on devinait qu'elle avait dû déjà commencer la conversation à la cuisine et déjà bien pleurer. . . Maintenant la Mémé pleurait dans son mouchoir, on entendait tout par la fenêtre ouverte, et Mme Ledoyen pleurait aussi — C'est comme ça que les dames faisaient quand elles disaient des choses tristes elles ne pleuraient jamais les unes sans les autres, des fois il y en avait qui n'avaient pas bien envie mais ça ne fait rien, elles faisaient une boule avec leur mouchoir et elles se tamponnaient les yeux, elles frottaient plus fort voilà tout, le bord des yeux devenait tout rouge, on croyait que c'était à cause des larmes. C'était triste que la Mémé pleure et que Mme Ledoyen s'y mette de son côté, ça vous donnait envie à vous aussi et pourtant pour une fois que les grandes personnes allaient dire des choses qu'on pourrait comprendre ça

n'était pas le moment de pleurer, même sans bruit pour ne pas attirer l'attention. (GC 371-72)

Valérie patiently sits under the window and learns many details about the sad events of her mother's life. Mémé indicates that Jeanne has been in Moulins now for three years trying to rebuild her life.

Mais tout de même elle n'a pas encore vingt-cinq ans — elle les aura aux cerises, quand la petite aura eu ses huit ans — ça ne pourra durer tout le temps cette vie loin de nous, loin de ses enfants. Et puis ni le père ni moi, ni la grand-mère de Bourg ne sommes éternels. Il faudra bien qu'on parte un jour ou l'autre — et alors qu'est-ce qui se passera pour ces trois petits?

Mais moi je ne veux pas qu'elle parte, la Mémé. Ni mon Pépé non plus. Ni l'un ni l'autre, je ne veux pas, moi. Ça remonte dans le cou, ça vous étouffe. Et puis avec les larmes on ne voit même plus assez pour trouver le loquet, il est si dur ce loquet de la porte du couloir. Mémé Mémé je ne veux pas que tu me laisses je ne veux pas que tu partes ni le Pépé non plus. Le tablier de la Mémé sent la satinette neuve, . . . c'est doux contre la joue, on voudrait y enfouir sa tête, on voudrait s'y creuser un trou. Allons bon, voilà autre chose. Mais bien sûr que non je ne vais pas te laisser, où as-tu pris une idée pareille? Vous voyez, Madame Ledoyen, ça n'est plus de mon âge d'élever des enfants. Surtout cette petite-là peut-être, elle a l'air comme ça tranquille, sérieuse, ah ouiche c'est nerveux et compagnie, toujours en alarme, toujours en angoisse. (GC 381)

This passage demonstrates clearly Desvignes's changed syntax and punctuation, and multilayered dialogues—the interior one of Valérie, and the exterior one between Mémé and Mme Ledoyen. Although we would be hard-pressed to locate many tropisms within Desvignes's texts, she does employ a similar technique to that of Sarraute, with the exterior and interior conversations going on simultaneously.

Several critics have remarked that Desvignes's writings exhibit an oral character. One description of Desvignes's writing style that recurs constantly is that of "une écriture parlée." Perhaps Jacques Lacarrière was the first to characterise her style with this description, but many have since concurred with his finding. One finds this description in the "Préface" for *Les Noeuds d'argile*, where he writes that this is

une écriture comme rarement j'en ai entendu depuis des années, une mélodie de voix, de chemins, de pensées, d'émotions qui s'accordent ou se désaccordent, qui entrent en résonances ou dissonances mais toujours dans le fil de la même portée sonore, dans la même orchestration magistrale des solitudes et des rencontres. Une écriture parlée comme il existe une pensée parlée, un livre-conte, un livre oral. (36)

In his preface to *Le Grain du chanvre*, Lacarrière again emphasized Desvignes's "style inimitable, cette écriture parlée . . . une écriture lisible, familière et en même temps exigeante, rigoureuse, hauturière," and concludes that she has brought "un air vraiment nouveau dans le roman français" (63). Monique Damon-Bonnefond finds this second volume "plus quotidien, plus proche d'une réalité saisie dans ses infimes nuances, [qui] nous emporte au fil d'un langage quotidien, savoureusement enrichi de termes régionaux" ("Review dans" 64). Henri Nicolas terms Desvignes's style a "style pensé," something out of the ordinary, "ce n'est même pas le style parlé . . . Et c'est ce style direct, franc, cette vision par l'intérieur qui, presque autant que l'histoire elle-même, émeut le lecteur" (41-42). The passage just cited with Valérie eavesdropping on her grandmother's conversation with Mme Ledoyen is an example of this "style pensé." Desvignes writes in a way which reflects the inner thoughts/thinking of the character. In another review Nicolas writes that Lucette Desvignes "a su apporter quelque chose de nouveau dans la littérature française, elle s'est hissée aux premières places" ("Review in" 66).

Françoise Dumas stresses the importance of Desvignes's use of the "français régional" throughout her work (31), employing "une langue oralisée et dialectalisée, surtout pour les récits plongeant dans le siècle précédent" (27). The "unique" characteristic of this "français régional" within Desvignes's text is that she gives no typographical indications that

the word or expression is from a regional dialect. The reader is usually able to grasp the general meaning of the word from the context; however, Desvignes does provide a glossary of this vocabulary at the end of her text (31). These "regionalisms" do not occur as frequently in volumes two and three, because the stories draw closer to the present, and the social level of many of the characters is more educated and bourgeois. Dumas mentions a few of these "rares régionalismes" that do appear in *Le Grain du chanvre* but concludes that "la langue régionale apparaît nettement comme un clivage de générations" (37). The example expounded upon by Dumas is the term "niau," the small plaster egg that the farmer puts in the nest in order to "trick" the hen into sitting on the nest.²⁹ The use of this term is accompanied by quotation marks, something that Desvignes rarely does when incorporating these regional terms in her text. Dumas argues that the rareness of regional terms in *Le Grain du chanvre* is in keeping with the "vraisemblance narrative, mais elle est compensée par des réflexions sporadiques intériorisées sur le pouvoir de certains mots" (39).

This oral style of writing, characteristic of both Sarraute and Desvignes with its dual layers of the real conversation and the interior conversation, possesses a distinctive feminine aspect because women tend to try to verbalize, discuss, "*ruminer*" their inner thoughts in an effort to understand better what they are hearing, experiencing, and feeling.

²⁹Madame Desvignes explained this to me during one of our interviews in France. Then recently, during a conversation with my neighbors who grew up on Indiana farms, I heard about it again.

Multilayering/Polyphony

One theme that consistently recurs in feminist criticism and feminist writings is that of "multilayering" or "polyphony." Examples of this occur in the writings of all three women under examination in this study. Presenting the same event from several perspectives or points of view, or reinterpreting it several times, seems to occur frequently in writings by women.³⁰ Brulotte discusses this feature in Sarraute's works as her means of imparting movement and mobility to the text. In order to express this mobility, "Sarraute emploie la technique, devenue un tour classique du Nouveau Roman, qui consiste à présenter plusieurs versions du même fait. Une scène donnée se répète avec certaines variantes" (50). This presentation of the same scene/event from various points of view occurs frequently in both Sarraute's and Desvignes's works. The episode recounted in Fragment 17 in *Enfance* awakens a very painful memory for Natacha of the time when she was rejected by her mother and Kolia during their playful love "fight." The two narrators will examine this event from three different perspectives, with each possibility becoming more agonising. According to Havercroft, the interpretations go "d'un simple sentiment d'écart (comparé au 'tintement d'un verre doucement cogné', E 75) à un dérangement ('je dérangeais leur jeu', E 75), pour aboutir à une représentation de soi en tant que 'corps étranger . . . qui gênait' (E 75)" (139).

On another occasion, the two narrators offer several interpretations for the mother's statement "Un enfant qui aime sa mère trouve que

³⁰This is also quite characteristic of some writers of the "Nouveau Roman" movement, both male, and female and earlier experimentalists like Faulkner or Woolf in English.

personne n'est plus beau qu'elle" (E 95). Even though the two voices discuss the possible interpretations of this statement, "la douleur ressentie par la fille" (Havercroft 138) remains. After an initial condemnation of herself, the narrator examines the situation again and dissociates herself from the stereotypical image of real children. Havercroft finds that this "réexamen déclenche chez elle les débuts d'un processus de réaffirmation de soi, la croyance qu'elle a droit à ses propres opinions, qu'elle n'est peut-être pas si méchante" (138). Further on, Natacha reflects on her future, and decides that she has a right to her own ideas and expresses another insult to the mother, "Tu sais, maman, j'ai mes idées. . . Je pense que tu as la peau d'un singe" (E 135). Havercroft says that this allows the "narratrice de se réaffirmer pleinement, cette fois pour de bon. Insistant sur son droit à s'exprimer, sans crainte ni honte, la narratrice réenonce, avec plus de confiance, son indépendance" (139). This is the beginning of her *Bildung* process, which will be discussed later in Chapter Four in greater detail.

Went-Daoust uses the term "polyphonie" to designate this multilayering of text in Sarraute's *Enfance*:

N. Sarraute reconstitue donc le discours d'autrui et sa propre réponse à ce discours, tandis qu'elle instaure une dialectique entre cette réponse à la parole d'autrui, d'une part, et la parole "double" de l'adulte qu'elle est devenue, d'autre part. Ainsi s'enchaînent et se télescopent les discours d'*Enfance*. ("*Enfance*" 343)

She asserts the importance and necessity of examining "la multiplicité des paroles qui ont influé et influent encore sur le devenir de la narratrice" (344). As one reads Natacha's experiences with words and the feelings they evoked, a chord may resonate within the reader about some of her/his own

past experiences that resemble those of Natacha³¹. Thus, the polyphony within Sarraute's text is not only interior, but also exterior—resonating within the reader's own life, both past and present.

Not only does Sarraute replay the same scene within the text of *Enfance*, but she also replays scenes from other texts. Havercroft has observed this repetition of events from one work to another in Sarraute's *Enfance*. She

signal[e] certaines reprises formelles et intertextuelles dans *Enfance*, ces nombreuses ressemblances aux textes déjà publiées par Sarraute. Que l'on commence par les caractéristiques générales (la séquence des scènes centrées surtout sur un énoncé, le dévoilement de la sous-conversation, la structure souvent hésitante des phrases, l'emploi des modalisateurs et les points de suspension, les métaphores liquides), ou que l'on s'attarde aux réemplois intertextuels spécifiques, on remarque que ce texte de Sarraute est une vaste construction textuelle de reprises, renouvelé par le versant autobiographique. (143)

Havercroft then gives several examples of episodes from *Entre la vie et la mort* which reappear in *Enfance*; however, in *Enfance* "ces passages réutilisés ne sont pas que de simples ressouvenirs; ils deviennent . . . de vraies reprises, où l'ancien trouve son vrai épanouissement, un élargissement et un éclaircissement de son sens, au sein de son nouveau contexte" (144). One example is that of the young boy's train trip with his mother in *Entre la vie et la mort*. During the boring trip through the bleak countryside, the child turned inward, playing with words and verbal associations that came into his consciousness. Natacha does the same thing in *Enfance* during the train trip from Russia to Berlin with her mother,

³¹For me, there has been a chord that reverberates as I utter words, threats, admonitions, warnings, and angry tirades now at my young son. As I am saying these words, my mind thinks—"Will this be one of those sarrautien memories that stand out for him?" Or on another occasion my mind thinks—"Oh! This is like what Natacha expressed and experienced in such and such an episode in *Enfance*."

playing with the Russian and French word for "sun," "solntze" and "soleil." These words served as toys or playthings for the children's imaginations, opening up a whole new fantasy world, affording the unhappy and misunderstood child an escape into a land of warmth and comfort while also challenging and encouraging his/her creative *élan*. There are many other examples of episodes which are repeated from one text to another throughout Sarraute's works. Brulotte's observation about these multiple presentations of the same event, although applied to Sarraute's work, are applicable to the other two writers' works as well.

C'est le principe des réalités variables qui joue ici et qui montre que la réalité des personnages est plurielle, qu'elle n'est pas réductible à une unité simple et que la réalité objective est en fait subjective et susceptible d'interprétations variées. Plus rien n'est sûr, arrêté, définitif. On dérange des perspectives, une intervention en corrige une autre, on échafaude des hypothèses, le rêve contamine le réel.
(51)

This replaying of the same scene occurs in Yourcenar's works as well, but not within one single work; rather it is repeated from one text to another. One example occurs in her autobiographical trilogy, in which each volume begins with the birth of Marguerite. Another example is that the sources of many of her earlier works can be found in the people and events recounted in her trilogy *Le Labyrinthe du monde*. For example, in *Quoi? L'éternité*, the couple Jeanne-Egon provides the source for the events in *Alexis* as well as for some of the episodes in *Le Coup de grâce*, and the couple Jeanne-Michel gives new insight on *La Nouvelle Eurydice*.³² Sarnecki writes that "Yourcenar's family history collides with her fictional universe," leading the reader of *Le Labyrinthe du monde* "to feel lost in the

³²Cf. Yvette Went-Daoust, "*Quoi? L'éternité* de Marguerite Yourcenar: le particulier et l'universel." 184.

labyrinth of this neverending text which weaves in bits and pieces of Yourcenar's other, earlier works" (244).

This aspect of writing which turns back on itself resembles a running water image, and water/fluid/liquid imagery is all associated with *écriture féminine*. Within Yourcenar's and Desvignes's texts one can find many words, phrases, and metaphors which refer to this water imagery. Sarnecki says that "Yourcenar's writing flows in such a way as to prevent any one image from becoming fixed or stagnant. This way of writing, with its constant re-turning and its continuous flow, also suggests or re-produces the mother's body" (246). In fact, Sarnecki discusses other maternal metaphors which recur throughout Yourcenar's *oeuvre*—*le vide*, *l'abîme*, *la mer*, *le labyrinthe*—and notes that Yourcenar both struggles against her (female) destiny and affirms it through her writing (112). In Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre* I have counted more than fifty page references to water. One example occurs when Jeanne and Etienne Barandelle get caught in the snow storm during their trip to Cluny at Christmastime. There are at least ten references or allusions to water in this one passage.

La *neige* les avait pris vers Donzy-le-Pertuis, et en moins d'une heure ils se faisaient l'effet d'être en train de *se noyer*. Les *flocons* s'accrochaient en paquets si épais, si lourds, si proches les uns des autres, qu'on se sentait comme *roulé dans l'eau* . . . D'ailleurs on attrapait le tournis à essayer de voir au-delà de ces grandes zébrures, aussi bien quand elles vous cinglaient de plein fouet que quand, plus calmes, elles avaient seulement l'air de dégouliner comme une *pluie de lait* rencontrant une vitre. *Noyé*, oui, on se sentait *noyé*, le corps *trempe, absorbant l'eau* comme une *éponge*. (GC 127, my italics)

This water imagery is one more characteristic of *écriture féminine* as identified by certain feminist critics, and it lends weight to the argument

that these women's writings do indeed reflect the fact that they are written by women.

According to the Farrells, the multilayered perspective on the world presented in Yourcenar's texts affords the reader much richness as one interprets the events of a certain time period, along with the dreams, ideals, values, morals, and religion of the characters portrayed, in relation to one's own life, and also provides a new source of inspiration and enjoyment that allows one to move beyond the limitations of one's own historical period ("Marguerite Yourcenar" 542). This observation also holds true for both Sarraute's and Desvignes's works. In fact, Desvignes expressed a similar thought pertaining to her own work and how she hoped her readers would receive it.

The "polyphonic" aspect of *écriture féminine* is also present in Desvignes's texts. Françoise Dumas stresses the fact that Desvignes has broken new ground with her "forme narrative non- conventionnelle, reconstituant passionnément l'histoire d'une famille—la sienne—à partir d'une polyphonie de voix qu'elle ressuscite, écoute, interpelle jusqu'à ce qu'elles lui livrent enfin, au terme de sublimes 'ruminations', leur part de vérité" (27). There are many voices which speak on various levels throughout her texts. Just as Sarraute portrayed Natacha's pleasure, freedom, joy and excitement in playing with words, Desvignes does likewise with Valérie. The scene that immediately comes to mind is where Valérie hears the term "porte-guigne" used to describe her mother and she tries to figure out what this unusual and never-before-heard term might mean. (This particular episode will be analyzed in greater detail in Chapter Five). Dumas remarks that it is poets and children who know best how to play

with words, and observes that Lucette Desvignes plays the role of both at the same time (40).

There is also the typical French pleasure of "le jeu de mots." Dumas, comments on Lucette Desvignes's pleasure and freedom in exploring language; "Elle a gardé de l'enfant la tendance naturelle au jeu de sonorités et de sons" (41). One example, which Dumas cites, are the words uttered by Antoinette upon her deathbed in *Les Noeuds d'argile*. Antoinette calls out "Cissou"—the endearment she used for Francis in moments of tenderness, but understood by those near her as "Six sous." According to Dumas, it is "grâce à l'homophonie, [qu'] une complicité s'établit entre Francis et ceux qui savent ce que les mots veulent dire au-delà de leur codage purement social" (41). There is a similar occurrence of this homophony in *Le Grain du chanvre* as Jeanne expires on her deathbed. She cries out "Marrain" but the nurse-guardian understands this to be "marin" because of the simple children's book about a sailor that she had been reading to Jeanne just before she died.

Desvignes repeats certain words and phrases often without punctuation in order to make a point. At the funeral service of Père Pacôme, Jeanne reflects on the monotony, unease, and sense of not belonging while standing in the receiving line as the funeral mourners pass by the family to express their regrets, calling it a

cauchemar des Merci qu'il fallait murmurer d'un air dolent—sans même chercher à dire Merci Dieudonné ou Merci Marie ou Merci monsieur Vavasseur, c'était si fatigant . . . qu'est-ce que ça voulait dire Bourg pour elle, Merci Merci Merci du bout des lèvres sur une poignée de main ou sur une embrassade c'était bien assez, il y avait presque de quoi s'endormir piquée debout comme ça malgré le froid, à ronronner Merci Merci Merci sans rien voir (GC 31)

The word "Merci" is repeated ten times in this short excerpt underscoring the monotony of this custom for Jeanne. It is rather ironic that this word, which is usually associated with a positive experience, here is used so negatively. This repetition of words is often expressed with someone's name. Jeanne is awakened from this nightmare of incessantly repeating "Merci" to the funeral mourners upon seeing the beautiful Caroline, Marrain's old girlfriend, and perceiving the pity combined with a superior attitude that Caroline exhibits toward her. Jeanne feels Caroline's hypocrisy as she says "Pauvre Jeanne." Jeanne replays in her mind what she imagines to be passing through Caroline's mind as she sees Jeanne in her present state. "Pauvre Jeanne. Pauvre Jeanne. Le fantôme de Jeanne. L'ombre de Jeanne, enfouie dans le noir sans pouvoir plus s'en désespérer, Jeanne la morte Jeanne la vieille Jeanne la laide" (GC 33). Once again, in both of these examples, Desvignes has deleted the punctuation as the emotion of the character has risen. This technique of repeating certain words, phrases, or a proper name reverberates throughout Desvignes's text, once again, a specifically feminine characteristic.

Jerry Curtis discusses the significance of the title of Desvignes's first work *Les Noeuds d'argile* and finds that it functions as a sort of "paratext" or adjunct text. The title suggests characters bound together by a seemingly fragile substance, clay. The word "knots" implies a type of imprisonment, referring to the inflexible and unchangeable bonds which link the characters together ("Prison" 103). Not only does the title of *Les Noeuds d'argile* function as a paratext for that work, but a similar observation applies to the title of this second volume of the trilogy, *Le*

Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne. Jeanne's story is one of constant struggles against unfortunate events: each time she seems to have found happiness and security, something seems to knock her back down, but she keeps getting back up and going on. She seems to grow accustomed to this chain of events, just as one must develop a sense of comfort when sleeping on *sheets of hemp with the coarse grain/seed* woven into the fabric. In fact, this portion of the title, "le grain du chanvre," recurs throughout the text as a leit-motif.

Narrative Techniques

With regard to the narrative techniques, the style, and the role of the narrator within the work, Brulotte says that the reader of Sarraute must be one who does not like "visites guidées, car l'auteur ne le renseigne pas en cours de narration, ne tient pas son esprit en laisse, ne commente pas les mobiles profonds d'un personnage, n'intervient pas pour expliquer sinon, tout au plus, pour souligner un geste ou une attitude" (54). The same could be said of both Yourcenar's and Desvignes's texts as well.

Sarnecki applies the term of "style indirect libre" to Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité* because the narrator slips into the identities of the various characters. The story begins with Michel, then the narrator slips into Jeanne's identity, and then into that of Egon, and sometimes into that of Marguerite. After the rupture between Jeanne and Michel, the final third of the text deals with Jeanne's and Egon's lives and ends with Egon's return to his homeland. What ever happened to Michel and Marguerite? Granted, we must remember that Yourcenar died before the text was completed, but this story has meandered through the lives of four different characters,

two of whom were not even members of her family. Sarnecki also points out that the tone of this third volume differs from that of Yourcenar's earlier "autobiographical" works. "Yourcenar the historian is less present, Yourcenar the storyteller more so. Fiction predominates, and the prose becomes increasingly poetic. There are fewer 'facts' and more metaphors and similes" (224). One example of this slipping into the identities of the various characters follows. This passage is the beginning of *Quoi?*

L'éternité.

Michel est seul. A vrai dire il l'a toujours été. Sauf peut-être dans sa petite enfance, mais sa soeur aînée, Gabrielle, qu'on voit près de lui dans de vieilles photographies, est morte toute jeune, et quand il a définitivement rompu avec la vie de famille, sa cadette, la remplaçante, n'était qu'une enfant. Seul . . . avec son père . . . Seul naguère avec ses deux femmes . . . Seul avec son fils du premier lit . . . Seul avec cette enfant de deux mois à peine, qu'il va scrupuleusement voir matin et soir, assistant à son bain, s'informant de ses biberons et de ses évacuations, mais qui n'est encore qu'un petit animal que le cours des événements a mis entre ses mains, et qu'il n'y a pas déjà de raisons d'aimer. (QE 11)

It is not until fifty pages later, that the "je" of the narrator/author appears unexpectedly. Having just related the unfortunate and untimely death of Michel's younger sister, Marie, and the occasion of her funeral, Yourcenar enters the text abruptly with references to the latter twentieth century and even the Viet-Nam War.

Mais la réversibilité des mérites, qu'elle [Marie] espérait obtenir pour "ceux qui lui étaient chers", n'est pas nécessairement évidente dans le monde où *nous sommes*. Les prêtres catholiques, qui donnaient très volontairement leur vie, et que *nous mentionnions* tout à l'heure, sont effectivement morts, mais *la guerre au Vietnam s'est longtemps traînée et en un sens se traîne encore, mal changée en une paix aux cicatrices infectées*. Je décrirai plus tard ce qui en advint des personnes chères à Marie. (QE 64, my italics)

This "je" abounds in the following paragraph which begins, "Durant les longues années de ma vie, à cette époque pas encore commencée, j'ai eu l'occasion de suivre, de façon intermittente et d'un peu loin il est vrai, ces

êtres chers . . ." (QE 64). Yourcenar closes this section with an anecdote about her distant aunt's (the second Madame de S.) condemnation of the books which Michel allowed his young daughter to read, and her horror upon learning that Michel was not going to have his daughter confirmed in the Catholic church. The concluding pages of this chapter recount several war-time experiences of Marguerite and Michel with the return of the "je" narrator/author. "Avant de fermer ce registre, il me faut rapporter un incident qui me concerne. Je venais d'avoir quatorze ans" (QE 68). In the streets of Paris, Marguerite is stopped by a couple who ask if she is Marie de Sacy's daughter. She responds that she is her niece. After this chance encounter, Marguerite looks at photographs and tries to find the resemblance between herself and her aunt. These are just two examples of Yourcenar's means of slipping into her character's identities, and these examples occur at the beginning of this text, not having mentioned Jeanne or Egon yet.

Desvignes's narrative techniques are varied, but she never employs the "je" of the narrator/author. Dumas has pointed out that Desvignes the author remains outside of the text, never saying "'je', qu'elle s'exprime en tant que narrateur-auteur dominant l'ensemble du cycle ou en tant que narrateur-personnage interprétant les événements de l'intérieur. Dans cette focalisation interne le narrateur ne dit que ce que savent les personnages" (28). This is a very important point, because this type of narration often leaves the reader with more questions about the events related but these questions will not be answered because Desvignes does not assume the role of omniscient narrator. Dumas also points out that Desvignes's descriptions of the small joys of everyday life are related in an

intuitive and sometimes secretly amused manner (33). In the Limoges interview, Desvignes stresses her "unique" narrative technique, telling the story from the inside accompanied by all the sensory impressions: the events are not "*décrits*," rather they are "*revécus*" by the people who are remembering, being a conglomeration of "notations qui se retrouvent à l'intérieur du cerveau" (43). She admits that her writing style may be "un peu déroutante" for people accustomed to a novel that follows a dramatic thread and is related from the outside. "Mon roman à moi est tout à fait différent; et je crois que j'ai mis au point cette écriture parce que je me sentais plongée dans ce milieu" (Limoges 42). In Jacques Madaule's assessment of Desvignes's writing style in *Les Noeuds d'argile*, he finds that "elle écrit en phrases très simples avec des mots de tous les jours, quelquefois empruntés au parler du pays, car elle se contente de nous montrer les choses comme les voient ses personnages" (49).

Pandelescu uses the terms "style indirect libre" with "monologue intérieur" to describe Desvignes's writing-style ("Effets" 81). In fact, she stresses the series "de techniques romanesques spécifiques du discours narratif de Lucette Desvignes" (82). Among these techniques, she declares that "les dialogues, les intrusions d'auteur, le monologue intérieur, le style indirect libre s'interpénètrent, sans que la démarcation entre ces zones soit toujours distincte" (82). She also mentions "le discours 'actoriel'—les diverses formes du discours du personnage, avec leurs conventions, leurs signes démarcateurs, introductifs ou conclusifs, le fonctionnement intérieur et le rôle joué à un moment donné dans la narration" (82). Desvignes seems to have perfected the interior monologue to such a point that, according to Pandelescu, the reader has the feeling "d'une souffrance

fraternelle" within his/her heart (92). She varies her style and narrative techniques depending on the situation and event presented. Mary Anne O'Neil describes Desvignes's style with its "jumble of observations, emotions and conversations" as giving "us the impression of living events along with the characters instead of merely reading an account of their lives falsely ordered after the fact" ("Fathers" 72). The episodes cited earlier of Valérie singing the forbidden song (GC 358), welcoming her neglected baby brother into her grandparents' home (GC 393), and her eavesdropping outside the window (GC 381) all demonstrate these narrative techniques. Curtis describes Desvignes's novels as "an unabashed *mélange* of realism, symbolism, lyricism, and myth" ("Prison" 102).

A narrative technique unique to Desvignes's texts, especially of *Le Grain du chanvre*, is what Damon-Bonnefond terms the *chromatisme des mots*. Other characteristics that she enumerates include "le goût du portrait, . . . l'élaboration des formes littéraires, [. . . et une] dimension . . . de la musique" ("Mon amie" 15). To these may be added a profound love, respect, and admiration for both nature and animals. The proliferation of animals mentioned throughout the text in a very affectionate, respectful, and caring way runs the gamut from tiny insects to large animals. The most obvious and striking example of her respect and love of nature can be seen in her choice of artwork for the covers of her *Les Mains nues* trilogy. Two other types of word, or word description, in Desvignes's work include the abundance of vocabulary dealing with food and with sewing/dressmaking. Dumas analyzes some of the food vocabulary used in *Les Mains nues* trilogy (35). Another critic, Bernadette Palasse, and a reviewer, Jacqueline Marchand, have pointed out the sensitive and loving

way in which Jeanne's dresses are described and the care and thought which Jeanne puts into the process of making these creations (77, 74). I believe that Desvignes's portrayal of episodes involving vocabulary dealing with food, sewing/clothes, and certain animals is very "feminine" in her depiction. A man would not so carefully describe the color and details in the way that this woman writer has done. In addition, to state the obvious, cooking and sewing are the typical domains of women, so it follows that Desvignes, being a woman, would lovingly, sensitively portray such episodes.

The term "non-linearity" (another narrative technique) has frequently been applied to women's texts, especially their autobiographies, because of their often fragmented and episodic nature. However, upon closer examination one may find that these texts do indeed follow a chronology with a "serpentine linearity." The plot does move forward, but often snakes back around on itself before moving forward again. Rather than these three texts being viewed as examples of "non-linearity," they may be said to possess a "serpentine linearity."

Many critics have classified Sarraute's *Enfance* as having a non-linear plot. However, Philippe Lejeune convincingly argues that there is a linear chronology that evolves with both foreshadowing and flashbacks. I would elaborate on this argument with this concept of the existence of a "serpentine linearity" in this text. First, the text opens with the writer in conversation with herself as an eighty-year-old woman who feels tempted to write her autobiography. Then it jumps into the past with the memory of the scissor-slashing episode of the couch in a Swiss hotel, then it jumps back into the present with the dialogue between the two narrative voices.

This will be the recurring structure of the entire work, with occasional jumps into the future in the past (*futur antérieur*) (specifically the memories associated with Véra and her father in Paris before Natacha came to live permanently with her father and step-mother).

Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité* begins with Marguerite's birth, then leaps back into the past with her parents' courtship and marriage, forward to her mother's death, back into the past with mention of her father's first marriage and the son he had, and so on back and forth between present and past with occasional leaps into the future and an observation about the adult Marguerite. Sarnecki finds that none of Yourcenar's three autobiographical volumes of *Le Labyrinthe du monde* uses a linear approach to time (217).

In addition to the aspect of "serpentine linearity" (or "non-linearity"), another characteristic of much women's writing is that of open-endedness. This can be found in both Sarraute's and Yourcenar's texts, but not in Desvignes's because each of the volumes of her *Les Mains nues* trilogy ends with the death of the protagonist, bringing to closure that part of her/history. Sarraute seems to leave the reader dangling, filled with questions about Natacha's new adventure and life at the "lycée Fénélon," questions about her future relationship with her mother, etc. The reader is left with Véra as Natacha boards the bus that will carry her to her new school and new life. It almost seems as if the writer just stopped in mid-story, leaving so much unsaid. This is also the case for Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité*. However, one must bear in mind that Yourcenar died before this work was finished, indicating to Yvon Bernier that she anticipated writing another fifty pages in order to recount Jeanne's and

Michel's deaths, as well as some of her own travels and adventures, bringing the story up to the outbreak of the second World War. Sarnecki remarks that "it was only the death of the author that marked the close of an otherwise 'unfinished' text" (218). Sarnecki speculates that, because of the digressions which the three volumes of Yourcenar's "autobiographies" have taken, volume three would never have been finished even if Yourcenar had not died. She believes that Yourcenar continually returned to relate the father's story, remaining incapable of relating her own story, thus leaving the text *open*. "One reason that Yourcenar was unable to close this text may actually be her success in *opening a space* where the imaginary is given full reign, where the author is finally able to 'play' with the mother's body" (224). I agree with Sarnecki's speculation that Yourcenar would probably not have ever "finished" her "autobiography." However, I disagree with her statement that she "play[ed] with [her] mother's body" via the text. If anything, it seems that she tried to recreate her father's past, as well as that of Jeanne de Reval and Egon.

Desvignes's novel *Le Grain du chanvre* also possesses this trait of much feminist writing, that of "non-linearity" or of "serpentine linearity." As Dumas has observed, "la continuité du récit est ainsi assurée non pas de manière linéaire, platement chronologique, mais selon le procédé de focalisation interne cher à l'écrivain" (43). This is quite evident in the chapter "Dis adieu, Valérie, à ton adolescence." The reader may be a little confused when first reading this chapter, because of the way in which the story folds back on itself within Valérie's memories and her present action of packing her trunks as she prepares to leave Cluny to move to Bresse to assume her first teaching post.

Because of its importance and the unique way that these women writers have used it in their works, I have mentioned the narrative technique of the interior monologue several times already in this study. Desvignes declares that she did not want to tell a story from the "outside" as an omniscient narrator who pulls all the strings. In *Les Noeuds d'argile*, she told the story from the two perspectives of the father and the son, and likened this technique to "deux films, juxtaposés d'abord puis qui parfois se mélangent, et qui relèvent chacun d'une optique particulière" (Caratini 30). In another interview she again makes reference to these two juxtaposed films and stresses how they differ:

La plupart du temps, sans présenter exactement les mêmes événements, ils présentent les mêmes personnages qui se remémore[nt] tout cet enregistrement de sensations et l'idées [sic], ce personnage est différent; il a donc une manière à lui de voir les choses, de voir les gens, de voir les paysages, et donc, de juger les événements. (Maertens 38)

Her intention was to plunge the reader into an atmosphere "où il s'immerge complètement" (Caratini 30). This has been my own experience as I read *Les Noeuds d'argile*, and *Le Grain du chanvre*. Desvignes emphasizes the importance of the events related as they are re-viewed and re-lived by the various characters in her works "avec toutes les impressions qui y sont attachées: non seulement les impressions sensorielles (formes, couleurs, contacts, odeurs) mais aussi l'impression de chaleur, de froid, d'humidité, de lumière, et naturellement les impressions sentimentales" (31). This will be characteristic of all of her works.

When one interviewer described her as a "partner observer," Desvignes elaborated with a poetic metaphor describing the novel as something like "un grand lit de campagne. Il faut un moment pour s'habituer à la fraîcheur des draps, il faut creuser son trou, et quand on est

bien au chaud on n'a qu'une envie c'est d'y rester" (Caratini 31). The metaphor that Desvignes employs here of the large country bed has a very feminist aspect to it, belying her assertion that there is no gender specificity in her writing. Her description brings to mind the title of her second volume *Le Grain du chanvre*. This phrase recurs throughout the text as a leit-motif, referring to the hemp sheets on which Jeanne slept. The rough grain of the hemp seed remained in the woven sheet, and was a texture that one had to get used to.³³ Jeanne had such an attachment to these hemp sheets that her son-in-law Juste as well as her nurse-warden both remarked on it. Even the grand-daughter Sévérine was aware of the "pleasure" that awaited her when she visited her grandmother and had the special privilege of sleeping on these sheets. Desvignes finds the roughness of these sheets reminiscent of the ups and downs of one's life; eventually one gets used to it.

The narrative techniques of these three women writers vary. While Yourcenar employs an omniscient narrator, Desvignes does not, preferring only to relate what the characters feel and experience individually. Sarraute's narration seems to fall between these two extremes. She is omniscient in the narration of what happens to Natacha and what she feels, but not for the other characters in *Enfance*. Sarraute replays several scenes with these other characters in an effort to decipher what motivated them to act as they did, but she never gives a definitive reason as an omniscient narrator would have done. Both Sarraute and Desvignes employ

³³When I asked Madame Desvignes the significance of this title and the constant reference to the hemp sheets in this text, she provided me with this explanation and even showed me a set of these sheets that had belonged to her grandmother.

the interior monologue consistently throughout their works, but this occurs only rarely in Yourcenar's text. In all three works, the authors intrude into the narration, giving one a sense of the text not being linear. One striking instance of the author's intrusion in Yourcenar's text was her reference to the Vietnam War, an event of the 1960s—an event that many readers today would remember clearly from their own adolescence, but *Quoi? L'éternité* really only dealt with the first eighteen years of the twentieth century. However, instead of these texts being non-linear, they possess a serpentine linearity. All three of these women writers have depicted the small joys and sadnesses of everyday life in their works in such a way that the reader experiences the same feelings and emotions as the characters, crying, laughing, hoping, and despairing. Some of these daily events include the death of a beloved pet, the absence of a beloved mother, the pleasure of excelling in school, the escape afforded by reading, the pain of being lied to, the joy of a reunion with a loved one, and the strangeness of the world of *les grandes personnes*. The various narrative techniques employed by each of these women writers aid the reader in identifying with the women protagonists in each of these texts and experiencing the text for themselves.

Gender of Narratorial Voice

This section on the gender of the narratorial voice will discuss only Sarraute's work *Enfance*, because this is the only one of the three works under discussion here that possesses this particular trait. Although this applies only to Sarraute's text, it is necessary to address this issue in a study dealing with gender specificity. At least three controversial

interpretations of the gender of the second narrative voice have been put forth. The three positions taken are that the voice is feminine, or that the voice is masculine, or that the voice is neuter.

Some Sarraute critics, especially the early ones (Vercier³⁴), just assumed it to be a feminine voice, a division/fragment of the female narrator herself. Eileen M. Angelini's 1994 article, "And the Voice of the Child Natacha Makes Three: A Study of the Dialoguing Voices in Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*" mentions Lejeune's description of the two voices as *deux soeurs*, stressing their closeness. Michael Sheringham also uses this description, stating that the "main narrative voice will assert something, then its *sister voice* will quibble, query or demur" (30, my italics). In Eakin's discussion of the role of the dual narrative voices in Sarraute's *Enfance*, he refers to the alter-ego voice as "an older, wiser, and warier *sister*" who warns against being "seduced by the siren spell of tropisms recollected from the past" (33, my italics).

Other critics insist that the voices are gender-marked as female and male.³⁵ They insist that this second voice is masculine because of two adjectives used to describe the voice near the beginning of the narrative. In the French, these adjectives are used in the masculine form. Havercroft is among these critics basing her argument on the two adjectives in the masculine form used to describe the voice, two small words in a text of more than three hundred pages, *grandiloquent* and *outrécuidant*. "—Oui, ça te rend grandiloquent, Je dirai même outrécuidant" (E 8-9). Leah Hewitt

³⁴Vercier writes, "Que ce mot [écrivain] n'ait pas de féminin explique peut-être l'emploi curieux du masculin, au début d'*Enfance*, pour qualifier l'une des deux voix" (E 8-9).

³⁵Brodzki 248, O'Callaghan, "Sexe du texte" 55, Brulotte, Van Roey-Roux 281.

underscores the intriguing and problematizing complication of gendered identity with the dialogue between the feminine and masculine voices.

"Sarraute posits an internal male interlocutor who is integral to the female autobiographical 'I' (195). Another argument for the voice to be perceived as masculine is that its role is the rational, logical, critical, authoritative voice—roles one often allots to the masculine.

Angelini points out that Sarraute intended this voice to be regarded as neuter. She prefers to accept Sarraute's own view of the voices because of Sarraute's well-known opposition to the idea of gender difference in writing and because "*only one example* of 'gender-marking' occurs in the entire text" (8). Marie-France Savéan's "Notes" that accompany Sarraute's *Enfance* interpret these two adjectives to be *neuter*. She argues that for Sarraute "l'important est d'atteindre le niveau commun à tous les hommes, elle gomme la marque grammaticale du féminin, car, en profondeur, l'être humain est asexué" (E 279). Sarraute herself has emphasized numerous times her desire to remain "neuter" in her literary efforts.

In Michelle LeGault's study of Sarraute's *Enfance*, she discusses the role of gender in Sarraute's works, and remarks on her attempt to obscure or blend what has traditionally been considered "masculine" and "feminine" (19). Because of this, some feminist critics have found the portrayal of gender in Sarraute's work to be gender-inclusive and positive. Sarraute presents both men and women as aggressors, victims, and poor communicators, and both capable of sensitivity to tropisms or "feelings" (King 90, Hewitt 67). Drawing on this observation, Hewitt suggests that Sarraute's male voices are "feminized." In like manner, one could say that certain female voices are "masculinized." The voice of Natacha's mother in

Enfance immediately comes to mind: it is the voice of authority, power, aggressiveness, and intrepidity. These are all characteristics associated more readily with the male than with the female.

Benmussa questions Sarraute on her belief that we are all the same, men and women,

Quelles que soient les cultures, et tu parles très souvent du neutre pour exprimer ce fond commun, qu'est-ce que le neutre pour toi? D'ailleurs, dans *Enfance*, ton double emploie l'adjectif "outrecuidant", tu l'entends comme un neutre alors que dans la langue française on peut l'entendre au masculin puisqu'il s'applique à une personne.
(139)

Sarraute responds that in the Russian translation this was a problem because there is no neuter when referring to people. "Il a fallu tout mettre au féminin" (139). Savean's "Notes" also address this, indicating that, in the Russian translation, because it is a "*langue où le neutre serait incorrect, ces adjectifs ont été mis au féminin*" (E 279, my italics). Because there is no neuter in French, if Sarraute wanted to stress the neuter of this narrator, then she had to use the masculine "il." Bacchilega's reading of *Enfance* finds the "I" voice to be feminine, the one that refuses to forget, while the "you" voice "is not gendered throughout the text" (109).

Brulotte identifies these two voices as the "narrant" and the "surnarrant" and states that this dualism is characteristic of Sarraute's work. In *Enfance* she identifies "cette conscience surmoïque" as "la voix du double de Sarraute, de ce double dont elle parle beaucoup dans ses interviews . . . et qu'elle met très clairement en scène dans *Enfance*" (42). Since this voice is Sarraute's double, one can infer that the second voice is also feminine. In her interview with Boncenne, Sarraute said that this double had been quite useful for her, "c'est mon côté plus raisonnable"

(89). If this is her reasonable side, I believe that it is feminine, unless she accepts the view of reason as being a male characteristic.

Although Sarraute insists on the neuter, my position is that the second voice is feminine, the reasonable feminine side of herself. In Sarraute's interview with Carmen Licari, she states that this work begins as a dialogue between herself and her double "qui intervient comme critique, comme [elle] intervien[t] [elle]-même quand [elle] écri[t]" (8). Isn't one's double the same gender as oneself? Thus for Sarraute, both voices would be feminine. Furthermore, the fact that this double was translated as feminine in the Russian lends credence to the position of identifying both voices as feminine. This question calls for more examination and study; however at this time, I maintain that the two voices are both feminine, concurring with Lejeune's description of them being "sister" voices.

Summary

Although these writers profess not to have a particular "feminist" style in their writing, there are numerous instances in their works that suggest that the contrary is true. Sarraute and Desvignes both claim to have developed a new writing style, one that is unique to them, one that allows them to express the "unsayable" within themselves. Although they have had to use the language of the dominant (male) culture, they have done so in a distinctively feminine way that expresses feelings, emotions, and experiences from the emotive, sensitive, caring, nurturing aspect of the female personality. These two texts by Sarraute and Desvignes not only possess many characteristics of *écriture féminine* but also certain traits of the *Nouveau Roman* tradition as well: changed punctuation, varied syntax,

"eloquent" silences, special typography of text on the page and use of blank spaces, chapter/fragment divisions of the work, filmic style of writing, repetition of the same event from several perspectives, multilayering or polyphony, inner monologues or ruminations, non-linearity of story line, orality of their writing, innovations in their narrative techniques, and a reluctance to reveal themselves. Although Yourcenar's work does not incorporate all of these characteristics, a sufficient number of them does exist within her work for one to argue that her work, too, belongs to *écriture féminine*. When one examines these texts and discovers numerous instances of the above-named techniques, one must conclude that the three works under discussion here by Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes are indeed examples of *écriture féminine*.

Chapter 3

Family Relationships

All three of these works deal with relationships, especially those of women. It is a generally held view that men are more interested in *ideas* or *information* and women in *relationships*, a view that influences women's approach to life as different from that of men. Brady writes that "the stereotypes of women as more 'relationship-oriented' and men more 'information-oriented' may be based on reality" ("Editorial" 37). If this is true, then we have one more argument in favor of these three works being classified as *écriture féminine*, because of their emphasis on the importance of communication and relationships; therefore, this category of relationships is quite pertinent to this study of gender specificity within these three texts.

Much feminist criticism examines the mother-daughter relationship. Some critics have focused their study on the mother while others have concentrated on the daughter. Both need to be addressed, and especially how maternal absence, indifference and lack of communication influence the daughters in each of these works.

The absent mothers are complemented by "maternal" fathers in these texts. If one parent is absent, in this case the mother, then the other parent may assume characteristics of the absent parent, in this case the father assuming/taking on many of the mother's tasks, duties, and traits.

Another aspect of family relationships involves love, an emotion that plays a significant role in each of these texts, not only for the

daughters, but also for the mothers and fathers. There is a concern as to how to obtain the mother's love, what to do to earn/merit it, how one feels when it is withheld and yet so ardently desired. How does one express love, or elicit expressions of love from the loved one? There is also the depiction of the heights and depths of passionate love. Finally, at the other extreme of life and love lie fatality and death. Each of these women writers has dealt differently with the role of fate or destiny in the lives of the characters of her autobiographical fiction, and with how she allots blame and responsibility or allows her characters to evade them. Death is linked to fate in the life stories of these women's families, and the way it is portrayed by each author within her text also offers a glimpse at various feminist depictions of death.

Maternal Absence, Indifference, and Lack of Communication

The mother's absence plays a key role in the daughter's development in each of these three works. Because of the similarity of circumstances for Natacha and Valérie, the texts in this section will be discussed in a different order, grouping Sarraute and Desvignes together, and discussing Yourcenar last.

Nancy Chodorow asserts that the role or function of the mother is reproduced in our society through the internalization of early relationships. However, this involves distortions, defenses, and transformations which build on one another and cause internal conflicts (50). Chodorow also maintains that the primary object-relation for the child is usually the mother. If the mother is absent, then who assumes this role, and what aspects of this relationship are internalized or repressed?

The child uses its father to ascertain its differentiation of self, and also to establish a firmer differentiation of objects (71). Chodorow emphasizes the importance of the mother's role because "it is the relation to the mother, if she is the primary caretaker, which provides the continuity and core of self, and it is primarily the relation to her which must be worked out and transformed during the child's earliest years" (71). This proves to be problematic for all three of the young protagonists because of the mother's absence, which is due either to distance or to death.

Natacha's mother exhibits indifference and lack of both understanding and communication with her daughter, and chooses to remain absent from most of her childhood and teen years. Valérie's mother also chooses to absent herself from her daughter's young life; although she is not indifferent to her daughter, she too lacks real understanding and communication with her daughter. Marguerite's mother dies ten days after her birth. This maternal absence, indifference and lack of communication and understanding play a significant role in these young girls' development and interpersonal relationships. For all three of these young girls, their real mother is absent, and they must deal with the issue of who will play the part of the mother or fulfill the maternal function in their young lives.

Raffy ascribes to the mother's absence, in the different forms of "indifférence, froideur, silence, départ, trahison, absence," Natacha's "étranges idées qui allaient hanter ses premières années" as she tries desperately to "éveiller l'attention d'une mère distraite et lointaine" (240). Rather than getting her mother to notice her, and draw closer to her, Natacha's behavior pushes the mother farther away, rendering her more

impatient with the child. This maternal indifference pushed Natacha farther over the edge, as she "multipliait ses 'idées', et glissait lentement dans le monde effrayant d'un langage qui devenait fou" (240).

Je ne crois pas que j'aie jamais été plus seule avant cela — ni même après. Aucune aide à attendre de personne... Livrée sans défense aux "idées". Un terrain propice sur lequel elles pouvaient faire tout ce qu'elles voulaient, elles s'ébattaient, s'appelaient entre elles et il en venait toujours d'autres. (E 100)

Only when removed from the mother's sphere of influence or indifference, residing with her father in Paris, does Natacha regain her mastery of language. Raffy remarks that it is "le départ définitif de la mère qui a sauvé sa fille de la folie" (242). However, this experience marked her in her own mind, underlining for her the essential difference between "elle et les autres, elle et le monde, elle et sa propre image" (240). She becomes "un enfant qui porte sur lui quelque chose qui le sépare, qui le met au ban des autres enfants... des enfants légers, insoucians" (E 98). Both Marguerite in *Quoi? L'éternité* and Valérie in *Le Grain du chanvre* experience this same feeling of being "marked," being different from other children, a feeling which Natacha and Valérie ascribe to their mother's absence, abandonment, and/or indifference.

Bacchilega's examination of *Enfance* reveals a rediscovery and a re-evaluation of the mother/daughter relationship, "on both thematic and discursive levels" and the primary role it plays in the writer's identity formation (104). She declares the story of Natacha to be a journey of conflict, "from the world of an all-powerful, unpredictable, delightful yet violently unforgiving mother to the world of the father, where the child is encouraged to become a model pupil who enjoys dictation and recitation and looks forward to paternal approval" (105). When the journey ends,

Natacha will have accepted the loss of her mother, and have "found refuge in writing, especially writing under direction" (105). Bacchilega refers to the psychoanalytical view that rejection of the mother brings about loss to the "country" of the Symbolic. "In this country . . . language, writing, education are identified as belonging to the father" (107). However, Sarraute's writing "questions the ensuing bond of the child with the father and reaffirms the bond with the mother, the desire to write not from that lost motherland, but deliberately from the frontier between the two countries and *écritures*" (107). Bacchilega finds that the child Natacha/adult narrator endeavors to reach for the mother's love through writing, and she (Bacchilega) specifies it as "feminine" writing. Yet the author/narrator refuses to conform to recounting only "happy childhood memories" or to imitating the unhappy childhoods in the books she has read. She resists, so that her writing is not safe because it is not under the dominant mode of dictation.

Benmussa's description of the rapport between the daughter and mother in *Enfance* indicates that although there is no psychological or moral description of the mother, no overt judgment or criticism, the mother imposes her power on the child by "ce qui vient d'elle, ce qu'elle impose, comment elle est perçue, indirectement, par la petite fille, par le rapport qui s'établit entre elles" ("Paroles" 80). Many times, it is not so much the actual words that she utters as the tone of voice with which she spoke that has remained with the child. ". . . Jamais aucune parole, si puissamment lancée qu'elle fût, n'a eu en tombant en moi la force de percussion de certaines des siennes" (E 27). Benmussa observes that "si ces mots ont été entendus comme imprégnés de violence, c'est parce qu'ils

avaient été prononcés par la mère" ("Paroles" 80). As was seen earlier, when cautioned/threatened not to touch the electric pole because she would die, the child wants to know what it is like to be "mort," so she touches the pole and then believes that she is dead. "Maman sait tout, donc même si maman n'a pas exactement prononcé le mot 'mort', c'est celui-là qui pousse par derrière, qui se cache dans le ton de maman" (E 80).

Another example is the intimate moment of the "love fight" between Maman and Kolia. When Natacha tries to join in, she is gently pushed away, a gesture she interprets as rejection and an indication that she has no place in this relationship (Patterson 154). The effect of the words uttered at this time, however, is by no means gentle, as we saw earlier in the section on *Ecriture Féminine* and the representation of the same scene from several perspectives: Havercroft indicates that the child's interpretation moved from a feeling of gentle rejection to a feeling of intrusion, then to the ultimate feeling of being a stranger who bothered them.

In an evaluation of Natacha's family relationships, her mother is portrayed as somewhat childish, capricious, and selfish. However, Kolia, her step-father, appears benevolent if often absent and ineffectual. Natacha's half-sister, Lili, is finicky and mercurial, tempermental, and spoiled, in contrast to Natacha's quietness and facility to please.

Patterson describes Natacha's mother as "an elusive figure, a capricious personality seemingly more absorbed in herself than in her child" (153). Yet she observes that the young Natacha tries desperately to cling to the "illusory bond between herself and her mother, following to amusing extremes the admonition" (153) to chew her food until it is "aussi

liquide qu'une soupe" (E 15). According to Patterson, "*Enfance* shows Natacha struggling with the gnawing suspicion of her mother's indifference" (153), and describes "the growing rift between Sarraute and her mother [as] perhaps the central drama" of this work (155).

This theme of maternal indifference, absence, and failure or lack of communication between mother and daughter plays a primary role in Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre* in the relationship between Jeanne and her daughter, Valérie. Just as Natacha vainly tried to hold on to the elusive image she had of her mother, while a growing rift developed between them, a similar development takes place in Valérie's and Jeanne's relationship culminating on the occasion of Valérie's first communion. Valérie awaited her mother's visit for this big event with impatience and hope that her mother would stay permanently. Valérie determined to be on her best behavior, fearing that perhaps she was at fault for Jeanne's continued absence. The joy at wearing the beautiful dress made for her by Jeanne faded into insignificance as Valérie jealously observed her mother as an attractive sexual woman who appealed to Florent, flirted with him, and seemed unaware of the raging violent emotions in her young daughter's breast, and her desire for the mother's permanent presence. I believe that this event is the turning point in Valérie's feelings for her mother, because from this time on she no longer seems to desire the mother's permanent presence as ardently as she had earlier. In fact, when Jeanne does return to Cluny within the next year or two, Valérie will not go to live permanently with Jeanne, using the excuse that she needed peace and quiet to prepare for her exams in school and that she had her own space and study area already established at her grandparents' home, the

only real home she had ever known, devoid of Jeanne's permanent presence. So, even though Jeanne does finally end up in Cluny, the rift between her and her daughter was already established. However, Valérie seemed to have more forgiveness for this elusive mother than did Jeanne's other daughter, Angéline. Angéline had never known or experienced her mother's undivided attention and love: Jeanne had always remained a stranger to her. Angéline was also influenced by the comments made concerning Jeanne by her paternal grandmother and Aunt Mariette, both bitter women.

This rift between mother and daughter will continue to widen and will lead Valérie to blame her mother for the shortcomings in her own character. She blames Jeanne for being off in Russia for four years by indicating that her presence might have prevented Valérie from marrying Elie, an Algerian Jewish soldier, whom perhaps she did not know as well as she should have. She blames Jeanne's absence from her life as she reflects back on this pitifully short marriage and the lack of true communication between herself and her husband Elie. (Valérie's marriage to Elie only lasted twenty-four weeks before he was killed on the front in 1914).³⁶ She will even extend this blame to the loss of her daughter Rachel's inheritance, because Jeanne was not there and Valérie was too timid and passive to fight for it herself.

There is also a period of "closeness" between this mother and daughter due in large part to their closeness in age. Lecoultré describes Valérie as "autant soeur que fille et mystérieusement complice" (69). Jeanne and Valérie were only sixteen or seventeen years apart in age and

³⁶Cf. Dumas, (*SLD* 3, 37).

Jeanne enjoyed being compared to Valérie as her sister. However, I believe that this is one more indication of Jeanne's rejection of her maternal role. She was very proud of her youthful appearance and later in life she even looked younger than Valérie, a fact which she seemed secretly to enjoy. Why did she look younger? I think it was because she did not show age signs of having been a mother who had to raise her children in a difficult situation. She put that burden on the grandmothers, while she lived the life of a "single," independent young woman. Yes, she did save her money frugally and sent monthly child-support (funds) to the grandparents, but not being there she did not have to deal with the many tedious and difficult daily cares of children.

Françoise Dumas has pointed out that "les relations avec la mère sont souvent difficiles pour les personnages de Lucette Desvignes" (51). Not only is the mother-daughter relationship between Jeanne and Valérie difficult, but so is the relationship between Valérie and Séverine. In fact, Lucette Desvignes evinced surprise when someone remarked that she must have been closer to her father than to her mother, because she presented her father in a much more positive and loving light than she did her mother.³⁷ I believe that a close reading of the latter part of *Le Grain du chanvre* and of *Le Livre de Juste* supports this finding.

Carole Brooks Platt enunciates the generalization that a mother's true creativity normally begins after giving birth in "nurturing, educating, and forming the behavior and attitudes and potential for self-realization in her child" ("(Re)Tying" 72). However, in Desvignes's text

³⁷Personal interview with Lucette Desvignes, October 1996, in Dijon, France.

this does not seem to be the case for Jeanne, nor her desire. Even though she has given birth three times, she turns her creativity toward developing her own sense of self and her own career, leaving the "creativity" of raising a child to her family members.

According to Dumas, the episode mentioned earlier concerning the words "porte-guigne" as applied to Jeanne and "le détournement de sens que Valérie impose à l'expression" reveal Valérie's need for love, because of a lack of communication with this constantly absent mother whom she idealizes and with adults who do not have the same "appréhension" of words and of the world as she does (40). (This episode will be quoted in full and discussed in Chapter Five, "Powerful Effect of Words").

Three themes common to both Sarraute's and Desvignes's texts are the disappointing visits of these mothers to their daughters, the freedom and independence that school affords these abandoned daughters, and the difficulty these young girls experienced in developing intimate relationships.

Visits from both the mothers to their daughters do not always produce the desired and hoped-for intimacy and pleasure that the daughters anticipated. Natacha's mother cuts her two visits short, one because of angry capriciousness and the other because of fear at the outbreak of war. Natacha even remarks on the fact that the language her mother used to address her was the language she would use to someone she did not know well. After this long separation, the mother is quite uncomfortable and does not know what to say or discuss with her daughter, speaking to her first as if she were an adult. Then when Natacha shares with her her accomplishments at school, the mother belittles Natacha,

showing a total lack of comprehension and understanding. Later, when she tells her mother that she has planned to accompany Véra and a friend to Versailles during the mother's stay, the mother is naturally very hurt and exhibits what the author portrays as a childish petulant outburst, before she capriciously decides to return to Russia after only a few days in Paris, once again abandoning the daughter. However, the daughter is not guiltless. Her actions influenced the mother, yet she puts all the blame on the mother, refusing to take any of the blame herself. The author/daughter is in the wrong but neglects to admit it. Véra, the step-mother, is not totally innocent in this either because she had encouraged Natacha to accompany her to Versailles, indicating that a "real, loving" mother would understand and condone/bless such an outing. Véra was being disingenuous! She surely knew of this mother's capriciousness and lack of understanding regarding Natacha. Natacha even complains/remarks that the letters exchanged with her mother seem to be addressed to someone else—the child she was several years previously. All of these are strong indications of the growing rift between the mother and daughter, as the daughter attempts to break free of the magnetic pull of the mother on her and tries to establish her own identity, sense of self-worth, and independence.

When Valérie's mother, Jeanne, visits, she brings her new clothes and beautiful handsewn dolls that her friends envy. Yet the young girl repeats over and over again the words "Maman chérie oh Maman que j'aime" (GC 379), a sort of incantation, hoping the magic will produce the desired result of a permanent stay of her mother. When Jeanne arrives for Valérie's confirmation, instead of the anticipated joyful, loving, intimate

reunion that Valérie envisaged, she is filled with jealousy and resentment at the attention Jeanne allots to Florent. In fact, later, Valérie feels guilty that she may have been the cause of bringing Jeanne and Florent together, leading to their eventual marriage, and of further separation between her and her mother, since they met at her confirmation celebration. Perhaps, as an adult, she may have felt more guilt believing that, because she had been the "catalyst" that brought these two ill-matched people together, and because of the ensuing physical abuse Jeanne had suffered at Florent's hands (resulting in a serious concussion), she was to blame for the seizure which caused Jeanne's loss of speech and rapid physical decline leading to her "premature" death at age sixty-two.

In an effort to break free of the influence of their absent mothers, and to establish a separate identity for themselves, both Natacha and Valérie will excel in school, finding a sense of pride in this accomplishment so different from their mothers', and in their own discovery of the power of the mastery of words. In a footnote, Raffy writes, "Il est évident que l'école, la maîtrise de la langue, l'écriture ont été pour l'enfant un soutien tout particulier et extrêmement efficace contre l'incertain de sa vie" (247). Although this comment is applied to Sarraute's *Enfance*, it applies equally well to Valérie in *Le Grain du chanvre*. However, this ability to do well in school also has the negative effect of contributing to the girls' feeling of being marked or different from other young children. Because of Jeanne's prolonged absence and infrequent visits, Valérie feels herself to be different from her school friends, and really prefers to play by herself with her beautiful doll rather than with the others. This feeling of being marked or different will follow her

throughout her education, where she seeks to excel in school by immersing herself in literature, preferring the solitude of words to the presence of others.

Just as Natacha found consolation in the hidden meaning of language while embarked on the painful quest for her mother's love, so, too, will Valérie. The difference between the two is that Natacha wrote, while Valérie read, especially the Romantics, feeling in tune with their sense of abandonment, solitude and isolation, and love of nature. School for both of these young girls will be a refuge. Patterson reminds us of the devastation felt by the young Natacha when told by Véra that her father's home is not her home. She "found her only real sense of belonging at school, which represented for her 'un monde aux confins tracés avec une grande précision, un monde solide, partout visible [. . .] juste à ma mesure' (E 225)" (156). Yet school and the girls' relationship to their classmates will be quite different for Natacha and Valérie. While Natacha describes the simple pleasures of a classmate's company: "Nous ne nous parlons pas beaucoup, et je ne sais pas ce qui fait que je ne m'ennuie jamais avec elle, ni elle, il me semble, avec moi" (E 169), Valérie remarks on how she doesn't "fit in," doesn't share in girlish pleasures and confidences, doesn't have a close friend. However, Natacha also experiences certain feelings of being different, not only from her French classmates because of her nationality (Russian), native language (Russian), and religion (Jew), but also from other children in general. This feeling develops because of her mother's reactions and remarks, making Natacha feel as if she is not a "typical, normal" child, but rather "un monstre."

Another problem between these mothers and daughters is their inability to develop intimacy. Because of the failure and lack of communication with the mother, the child learns of the impossibility of communication and of the solitude in words. Raffy indicates that all the sarrautien themes which appear in *Enfance* are marked by the "sceau maternel. Tous les glissements vers l'autre, les rejets, les distances calculées, les répulsions intimes, la fascination pour le sens caché du langage, tout semble naître ici du rapport à la mère, de la quête douloureuse de l'amour maternel" (241). Once again, this observation applies equally well to both Marguerite and Valérie, who seem unable to have intimate relationships, who hold themselves aloof, who experience rejections, and who seem to find a measure of salvation and security in their experiences with language—both writing and reading. Natacha remembers best the scene when she sat at her mother's feet being read to but not having the words addressed to her. Even the mother's correspondence will seem to be addressed to a different person: she seems not to realize that her daughter is growing up and away. Yet the mother, rather than trying to breach this chasm, throws in the towel and abandons the daughter totally to the father's and Véra's care. Valérie and Jeanne seem to be more at ease in the quiet times spent together rather than in exchanging words or girlish confidences. This distance in intimacy will be a characteristic of Valérie's life, as she has difficulty establishing and/or maintaining intimate contact with her second husband, Juste, or even her young daughter, Séverine. In fact, as daughter, wife, and mother Valérie cannot understand the Other.

The case of maternal absence for Yourcenar differs from that of Sarraute and Desvignes. Marguerite's mother died ten days after she was

born of puerperal fever and peritonitis (Savigneau 17), so Marguerite was raised by nursemaids, nannies, and her father, and influenced by the various mistresses he had, especially her mother's girlhood school friend, Jeanne de Reval, who volunteered to be a substitute mother. Because her mother died shortly after her birth, Yourcenar did not have the benefit of experiencing for herself the real mother-daughter relationship. Although many critics have attempted to explain Yourcenar's constant choice of strong male protagonists, recurring theme of homosexuality, and "misogynistic" portrayal of women in terms of this maternal absence, Yourcenar herself has consistently denied that this had any effect on her writing. Yet critics such as the Farrells, who are very sympathetic towards Yourcenar's own point of view, note that, "women are usually not treated as any more oppressed than their male counterparts, although in *Labyrinthe du monde* Yourcenar does stress the dangers of unrestrained child-bearing" ("Marguerite Yourcenar" 539). Yourcenar feared, disliked, and disapproved of the practice of women continually bearing children until the woman's health so deteriorated or until she died while giving birth to yet another child. The importance of this is that socially, the woman had no choice. The Farrells will reiterate this observation about Yourcenar's position on child-bearing in several other articles they have written. In relation to the theme of maternal absence is the theme of marriage in Yourcenar's work. The Farrells identify this as a subordinate theme which is almost always presented negatively (540). They find that Yourcenar had "an extremely exalted view of marriage and motherhood," although she perceived that most marriages "do not measure up to these standards"

because they involve inequality and servitude for the wife, as well as the dangers of childbirth (540).

Judith Sarnecki's unpublished dissertation deals with the maternal metaphors in Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy and provides many new insights into this concern with maternal absence, indifference and lack of communication. She perceives Jeanne as the replacement for the mother that was lost, and one who is even a better mother than Fernande would have been. "She thus becomes the *idealized mother*, the model of an ideal and desirable woman with whom her adopted 'daughter' can readily identify" (256).

Went-Daoust's analysis of *Quoi? L'éternité* stipulates that, although orphaned of her biological mother at birth, during her childhood Marguerite will have two substitute mothers who will also be taken from her. For me, this constitutes the example of maternal separation and absence in this work. The first six chapters of *Quoi? L'éternité* recount Michel's widowhood, his meeting and developing relationship with Jeanne de Reval, and the break-up of this relationship, the three elements of "introduction, noeud et dénouement" as identified by Went-Daoust. Jeanne embodies "la vraie femme pour Michel et la vraie mère pour Marguerite," a role which Marguerite voluntarily assigns to Jeanne (QE 127, 157, 253) ("*Quoi?* " 182). With the break-up between Michel and Jeanne, Marguerite will be deprived of the mother she had "adopted." In chapter seven, the middle of the text, Yourcenar will recount the second loss of the mother for Marguerite with the crucial and painful event of sending away her nanny, Barbe. Went-Daoust terms this "la disparition de la mère une deuxième fois" (183). Barbe was Marguerite's nurse and nanny, who had been with her

ever since the death of her mother Fernande, even before Jeanne appeared on the scene. Went-Daoust emphasizes the significance of the order in which these accounts of the mother-figure in Marguerite's life are related. "Dans la reconstitution rétrospective, cet événement ne peut préfigurer que la disparition de la mère d'adoption, celle qu'elle considère comme l'authentique: Jeanne" (183). Although Barbe had been with Marguerite since birth, Marguerite accorded Jeanne, a later acquaintance in her life, the role of adoptive mother, then later gave this role to Barbe once Jeanne was no longer a part of her and Michel's lives. The following passage from *Quoi? L'éternité* supports this interpretation.

C'est peut-être parce que je veux que cette promenade [avec Jeanne] ait été une sorte d'enlèvement loin du petit monde domestique connu, une espèce d'adoption, que j'ai préféré imaginer ce beau visage penché sur moi, cette voix plus douce que celle de Barbe, cette étreinte de doigts intelligents et légers. (QE 127-128)

Sarnecki believes that this confusion on the part of the child as to whether the hand she remembers holding or the face smiling down at her belonged to Jeanne or Barbe reflects the child's yearning for a real mother in her life (248). I agree with this interpretation and believe that it demonstrates the young child's desire for a loving maternal figure, as well as the love, acceptance, and security that these two women supplied at various times in the young Marguerite's life. The importance of the role Jeanne played in Marguerite's life cannot be overstated. Marguerite's father, Michel, placed Jeanne in front of Marguerite as the model of the perfect woman, the woman Marguerite should try to emulate. Went-Daoust stresses the importance of the text that deals with Jeanne:

l'économie et le respect avec lesquels le nom de Jeanne est prononcé, dans la narration des moindres événements qui l'impliquent, dans le rôle de modèle que Michel lui fait jouer auprès de sa fille et dans la façon dont celle-ci s'y soumet: "*Je serais sans doute très différente de*

ce que je suis si Jeanne, à distance, ne m'avait formée." (QE 253) (183, my italics)

In another instance, when the young Marguerite has been caught out in a lie, her father reminds her of the model woman that Jeanne is.

— Voilà un mensonge que Jeanne de Reval n'aurait jamais fait. (Tu te rappelles Jeanne de Reval?) Tu savais que c'était un bouquet de fleurs fraîches. Pourquoi avoir prétendu qu'elles étaient en or?

— Pour faire plus beau, dis-je en baissant un peu la tête.

— Jeanne savait que la vérité seule est belle, dit-il. Tâche de t'en souvenir. (QE 248)

In contrast to Natacha's and Valérie's disappointing visits from their mothers, Marguerite's visits with her "adoptive" mother Jeanne de Reval will be all, and more than, she had hoped for—times of joy, happiness, security, love and contentment. When the two meet after a four-year separation at Marguerite's aunt's sixty-third birthday celebration in Brussels, neither Jeanne's appearance nor her manner toward Marguerite have changed.

Elle [Jeanne] me tendit les bras. Je m'y jetai avec joie. Son baiser, venu à la fois de l'âme, du coeur et du corps, me rendit aussitôt l'intimité facile d'autrefois, bien que ces récentes quatre années d'absence représentassent à mon âge presque la moitié de ma vie. (QE 250-251)

However, this situation of Marguerite's relationship with Jeanne de Reval as her adopted mother is quite different from the absences and situations of Natacha and Valérie with their mothers. In addition, Marguerite's father constantly held Jeanne de Reval up as a model for Marguerite to emulate, a model which she seemed more than ready to accept. In fact, Marguerite/Yourcenar does not ascribe any blame or guilt to Jeanne for the rupture with Michel. All the blame is put on Michel. In his effort to offer to help Jeanne flee and overcome the scandal in Rome, he ends up by insulting her. "Elle se sent idolâtrée plutôt qu'aimée" (QE 192).

Ce qui *aliène* Jeanne n'est pas qu'il croit, ou veut croire à une connivence sensuelle entre elle et ce Franz . . . c'est *le ton péremptoire de l'homme pour lequel tout élan des sens dégrade une femme*, à moins, bien entendu, qu'il n'en soit le bénéficiaire, et pour qui toute singularité sexuelle déshonore un homme. (QE 194, my italics)

Both Natacha and Valérie have idealized their mothers and placed them on a pedestal. When they must confront the truth about their mothers, they find them lacking. This moment of truth is often traumatic and fraught with pain for these young girls. This lack of the mother's presence in their young lives marked them as "different" from their classmates and friends, rendered them reticent about revealing their emotions, made it difficult for them to relate well with others, and profoundly affected their development and self-image in many other ways. Both of these young girls desired a close relationship with their mothers; however, this desire was not satisfied, the mother remaining absent, elusive, lacking understanding and communication with the daughters. Yet even though the mother was physically absent, she was also eternally "present" because of the desire of the daughter for the mother and because of the mother's dominating influence that transcended distance. In the case of Marguerite, she desired and seemed to have established a close relationship with her idealized "adoptive" mother. However, Jeanne would be absent from most of her life because of the break in the relationship between her father, Michel, and Jeanne. Yet, Yourcenar seemed to look up to Jeanne and accepted her as a model for the perfect woman. Jeanne understood and cared for Marguerite even from a distance. Marguerite knew that Jeanne was different from other women having lived through the numerous and varied relationships her father had with women all across Europe.

In her book *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch discusses the question of what motherhood has to do with writing and concludes that mothers are the primary negative models for their daughters (10). Sarnecki remarks that this is especially true for daughters who aspired to be writers, such as Yourcenar (116). One could also add Sarraute to this group and even Desvignes.

"Maternal" Fathers

In each of these works, one finds male figures assuming the maternal roles in the lives of the young girls. This is due in part to the mother's absence, as discussed earlier. However, even when a maternal figure is present, the fathers or grandfather exhibit maternal characteristics.

Natacha's father assumed the mother's role and picked up the pieces for Natacha when the mother abandoned her to his care. He is the one with the nurturing, patient, understanding, and loving attitude toward his daughter, all maternal characteristics which the mother lacked, or did not demonstrate towards her daughter. One striking example of this difference between the two parents is provided by the two accounts that Natacha remembers of the way she was treated by them when she was ill. She overheard her mother complain about having to sit by her daughter's bedside with no one to relieve her, and of her impatience and boredom. In contrast, she recalls her father sitting patiently by her bedside, and wiping her forehead with a cool cloth. Later, when her half-sister Lili is born, she recalls that she had had an older sister named H  l  ne in Russia who had died of scarlet fever. She also remembers that it was her father who

became quite ill following the daughter's death, because he was the one who had nursed her during this fatal illness. The unsaid thought is that the mother did not assume much of the nursing care of her child, leaving it to the father to do. The analyses of *Enfance* by Vercier,³⁸ Lejeune³⁹ and Ramsay⁴⁰ reveal parallel episodes which describe the difference between the two parents in their treatment of Natacha, with the father always being presented in the more positive light, possessing maternal characteristics, and the mother being cast as the uncaring, selfish villain. This role of Natacha's father is also carried out in the family relationship with her step-mother, Véra. Patterson observes that Natacha "grows increasingly closer to her father, sensing in him the same despair at being abandoned by her mother as she herself has felt" (155). He refuses ever to say his ex-wife's name, just referring to her as "Natacha's mother" (as Yourcenar's father does about her deceased mother) or by her last name. Natacha observes how painfully old and stiff he looked, watching but not joining in the fun as Véra and Natacha joyfully reacted when the child learned how to ride a bicycle. Natacha feels her father's love, although he does not use that term and rarely if ever verbalizes his feelings for her. However,

³⁸Vercier 166.

³⁹"[L]es grandes scènes ponctuent la double évolution des rapports avec la mère (détachement progressif) et avec le père (attachement progressif), et, dans la seconde moitié du livre, les fluctuations des rapports avec Véra et la grande découverte du salut par l'école. [. . .] Cette organisation d'ensemble nous donne l'impression de suivre une histoire, une évolution compréhensible, d'autant plus que certaines scènes qui se répètent permettent d'évaluer les changements: deux scènes de maladies (chapitres 8 et 58), deux visites à l'usine paternelle (chapitres 20 et 55), deux peurs nocturnes (chapitres 21 et 63)." Philippe Lejeune, "Paroles d'enfance," *Revue des sciences humaines* 93.217 (Jan.-Mar. 1990). 30.

⁴⁰Raylene L. Ramsay, *The French New Autobiographies: Sarraute, Duras, and Robbe-Grillet*. Gainesville: UP of Florida (1996) 138.—"Almost as many scenes are marked by the relationship to the father as are devoted to the mother."

there exists a complicitous understanding between the two of them that makes it easier for her to "put up with" Véra.

Michel, Yourcenar's father in *Quoi? L'éternité*, also performs both paternal and maternal roles in the life of the young Marguerite. In fact, several critics have remarked on the symbiotic relationship between the father and daughter. Went-Daoust stresses the importance of the role the father played in Marguerite's life, the trips they took together, Michel's guidance and tutoring in Marguerite's education, the books that they read together, and the books they recommended to each other. She mentions Yourcenar's research methods as they pertained to Hadrien in that she visited the places he had frequented in order to try to recreate his life, and finds that Michel also was reconstructed in a similar fashion.

On ne saurait compter pour rien le fait que les voyages s'effectuent en sa "tangibile" compagnie et que les affinités électives qui les unissent s'alimentent de lectures communes et d'expériences partagées. La façon dont la fille devient le père est sans aucun doute infiniment plus troublante. ("*Quoi*" 178-179)

Went-Daoust alludes to the culmination of this symbiosis "de l'auteur-adolescente avec le père" in the episode when the two are descending the steps of the Russian church "de la rue Daru" after their chance meeting there with Jeanne's husband, Egon (QE 236) (183). In fact, she finds that the final chapters of Yourcenar's *mémoires* deal with the voyages undertaken "par le père et la fille, à la recherche de Jeanne" (183). Another critic underscores this symbiotic relationship in the literary efforts that Marguerite and her father undertook together. Mention is also made of the effort by both Yourcenar and her father to create a *nom de plume* for her. I agree with the critics who have remarked on Marguerite's observations about her father's inner thoughts as they pertained to Jeanne

and Egon, finding it unlikely that a father would have shared such intimate details with his daughter. Sarnecki mentions the blurring of the paternal and maternal roles for the young Marguerite and the confusion that resulted for her. In recounting the episode where she remembered being told Andersen and Grimm fairy tales before going to bed, she cannot remember whether the voice reading to her was that "d'une ferme voix d'homme, ou d'une voix grave et douce de jeune femme" (QE 226) (230). Not being able to remember whether it was a man or a woman reading to her is similar to the scene where Marguerite can not remember which woman was holding her hand on the beach and smiling down at her—Jeanne or her nanny, Barbe. Both of these scenes underscore the blurring in the child's mind of who played the maternal role in her young life. Sarnecki also questions who was actually the mother in the author's relationship to her father. "At times Michel was the 'mother' to Yourcenar, but did she not try to 'mother' him as well? Did she not give him 'birth' (or rebirth) in writing *his* story in *her* autobiography" (123).

A similar depiction of Sarraute's parents' treatment of children can be found in Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre*, but in this case it is the grandparents' treatment of their granddaughter that is evoked. Valérie feels closer to her Pépé than to her Mémé, even having a complicitous relationship and understanding with him, much like Natacha's with her father. Pépé is the one who gently cares for Valérie through a childhood illness, sitting up with her throughout the night. She attributes to him the understanding of the secret name she has given to her doll, even exchanging glances with him, when Mémé continues to use the "public" name. Lecoultré describes him as "une splendide figure de patriarche

indulgent et sensible" (69). Pépé also has many maternal characteristics, and seems gentler, more loving and understanding than Mémé. He is the one who goes to check on Jeanne's third child, Edmond-Pierre, whom he finds terribly neglected, unkempt, malnourished, and unloved at the wet-nurse's. He makes the decision to bring the baby home, although he knows Mémé will react with resentment to this added burden. He is the one who tells Mémé that he will help her bathe the filthy child, gently admonishing the Mémé that it is their beloved Jeanne's son and that they must do what they can to help him and her. It seems that even Juste, Séverine's father, is more "maternal" in her eyes than her mother. Juste and Séverine also have a complicitous relationship, a secret understanding of Valérie's shortcomings and a special love, respect and understanding for Jeanne.

Platt notes that, while the fathers in Desvignes's work often appear "maternal," the mothers perform their duties perfunctorily ("(Re)Tying" 69). This remark is true of Jeanne, and of Mémé as she mothers Jeanne's daughter Valérie. Even with Valérie, it seems as though she had a closer, more loving relationship with her first daughter, Rachel, than with her later children. The fathers—Pépé and Juste—seem more approachable and maternal than the women. This conforms to the general observation that daughters are closer to their fathers than to their mothers.

In this category of family relationships involving the father is that of the parent's nocturnal blessing for the child. An episode in each of these three works deals with the daughter's evening bedtime ritual, and the strong attachment and need she evinced for her father or grandfather before she could drift off to sleep. All three of these women writers have stressed the importance of reading Proust in their literary development,

and in each of their works one finds a sleep episode which is similar to the Proustian episode of Marcel staying awake, waiting for his mother to come and tuck him in. These episodes underscore the anxiety of separation felt by the child. When I read the episode in *Enfance* and *Quoi? L'éternité* of Natacha and Marguerite wanting their father's comfort during the night or trying to stay awake to await his goodnight blessing, at first, I thought this was a typical episode of young *girls*, but when other critics pointed out a similar episode in Proust and Sarraute, and in Proust and Yourcenar, I realized that perhaps it is an event typical of young *children*. However, the difference here is that Marcel awaits his *mother's* goodnight blessing, while Natacha and Marguerite await that from their *father*, and Valérie awaits that from her *grandfather*. In each case, what is evoked is a cross-gender relationship.

Fathers in these three works exhibit many maternal characteristics: nurturing, understanding, complicity, sensitivity and love—although in typical masculine manner, it is rarely voiced aloud. These fathers reveal these usually feminine traits because these works were written by women.

Love

Various types of love are discussed in these three works: the sexual love of a man for a woman and vice versa; maternal love for a child; paternal love for a child; a child's love for its mother; and a child's love for its father. However, the absence or lack of love, the disappointments and disillusion of love, and the efforts to find/obtain/receive love are also portrayed. The latter seems to predominate in these works rather than the former.

The theme of love in Sarraute's *Enfance* centers around Natacha's persistent efforts to obtain her mother's love. However, her mother is a narcissistic, selfish, egotistical being who seems to prefer that children be seen and not heard. She resents being expected to fulfill her maternal role toward her daughter. She resents the daughter's intrusion in her life with her second husband, and the interference in her career that a child can cause. Because Natacha's efforts to obtain the mother's love and approval are continually rebuffed, she begins to seek love elsewhere. She desires an unconditional love, a secure and stable love, one that is not capricious, and one that does not make her feel guilty for her childish thoughts, statements, and efforts to gain parental approval. She feels the love of her father and his pride in her, and gradually she shifts her need and desire for maternal approval and love to one for paternal approval and love. She even cajoles her father into using the "love" word to express his feelings for her, knowing that he is uncomfortable with such terms and displays of affection. Even Natacha's depiction of her step-mother Véra fluctuates between that of a loving and understanding maternal figure and that of the wicked step-mother from "Cinderella." Natacha does feel that Véra loves and pities her, and even finds herself pitying Véra and trying to comfort her when she is unhappy. Véra's unhappiness stems from her marriage to an older man who is undemonstrative in his affections and who seems to continue to bear bitterness and resentment toward his first wife and their failed marriage. Thus, even though it is the child's desperate attempts to gain parental love that plays the primary role in *Enfance*, sexual love between a man and a woman also plays a role in this work and contributes to the child's desire for love and acceptance.

This love between a man and a woman and the child's need for maternal love are also depicted in Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité*.

Marguerite's father, Michel, is portrayed as a seducer of beautiful women, of both noble and humble birth. His love for Jeanne and admiration of her lead him to propose her as a role model to his daughter Marguerite.

Marguerite takes this to heart so much that she idealizes Jeanne and seeks from her the maternal love that is lacking in her own life. When this woman is snatched from her life, and soon thereafter the other maternal figure whom she loves, her nanny Barbe, she seems to close down that part of her being, revelling in her father's attention and "love." Marguerite's father, like Natacha's father, will not be a very demonstrative man, and will not speak of love. However, she knows that she is loved and that her father detests her much older half-brother. She seems to take a perverse sort of delight in this (throughout her life and in her writings, Yourcenar will portray this brother and his side of the family in a rather negative light, denigrating his literary accounts of their family's history as it relates to their father and Yourcenar's maternal ancestors).

The greater part of *Quoi? L'éternité* deals not with Marguerite's life but with the lives of her father Michel, Jeanne and Egon. First, the tragic love affair of Jeanne and Johann-Karl is recounted, an account that prefigures the even more complicated love story of Jeanne and Egon de Reval. However, Jeanne's love for her husband Egon is not of the conventional "feminine" variety. "Elle aime: c'est la première fois . . . Pour elle, le coeur, les sens et l'âme sont entrés en jeu ensemble . . . Séduire, ce divertissement féminin par excellence, lui répugne" (QE 102). Sarnecki indicates that this love has a fairy-tale, mythological flavor to it, an

innocence that compares them to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Several times throughout the text Egon is compared to a god, even to a fallen god, yet Jeanne continues to love him despite his problems and the pain he causes her in their relationship. She indicates that he is not only a lover to her but also a "brother" and a "son." "Mais Egon est à la fois pour elle un amant, un fils, en dépit de l'égalité des âges, un frère, et un dieu" (QE 170). Jeanne's unconventional relationship with Egon bothered Michel, yet the narrator hesitates to judge or condemn either the relationship or Jeanne, refusing to "subscribe to conventional morality" (Sarnecki 234). Although Michel maintained rather conventional ideas about marriage and adultery and had previously looked down on adulterous women, his attitude toward Jeanne was quite different. He was surprised at her gift of herself, and amazed that Egon condoned this behavior. These two attitudes nearly erased the adulterous aspect of the relationship altogether. According to Sarnecki, "Jeanne's privileged relationship with a higher Being marks her spiritual nature and protects her from any moral stain or blemish. Her conduct is also beyond reproach because of her loving nature" (235). "Elle aime Dieu dans Egon, ce qui met le jeune Balte hors d'atteinte; pour autant qu'elle aime Michel, elle l'aime en Dieu qui lui a donné cet ami" (QE 132). Sarnecki concludes that Jeanne's *self-less* love for the two men puts all three of them outside the reach of any malicious gossip or rumors that may be circulating about them (235). They have pure consciences about their relationships and conduct.

In Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre*, the second great love of Jeanne's life results from her meeting Etienne Barandelle, whom she eventually marries. However, after this brief marriage ends with his

brutal murder, Jeanne fears to love passionately ever again. She believes that fate has punished her for wanting and loving so deeply, for giving so much of herself to another, so she decides never to open herself to such hurt again by refusing to love so completely and passionately ever again in her life. This fear of passionate love and refusal to open up to the love of a man carried over into her relationship with her children. She seemed to fear even to love them too much. Unfortunately, her eldest daughter Valérie will spend much of her childhood trying to gain her mother's love, to overcome a feeling of rejection brought on by her mother's continual absence and pitifully few and brief visits. The second daughter, Angéline, will not even seek the mother's love, interpreting her absence and abandonment as a lack of maternal love, preferring to blame the mother for not assuming her maternal role and raising her children herself. She will be a rebellious teenager, constantly "butting heads" with Jeanne, making decisions for her own life that she knows will displease her mother. Thus this lack of consistent and ever-present maternal love will have adverse effects on Jeanne's two daughters and on their ability to love and to relate to others.

For both Yourcenar's and Desvignes's "Jeannes," they experience love as a *loss of self*, becoming one with the loved one, a union that seems to lead to the formation of a single androgynous being. With Jeanne de Reval, this occurred with her relationship to her husband Egon. For Jeanne Berthouin, this takes place with her first husband Marrain (*Les Noeuds d'argile*). Both women indicate that they fuse with their husband, that theirs is a special, mystical relationship. Jeanne de Reval: "Elle était lui. Elle était ses mains sur ce cahier ou sur ce livre" (QE 114). However, at the

same time as this merging, each woman also desires that her husband be free to pursue his dreams and she hers. Their relationship is both spiritual and corporal.

Soudain, une joie infinie l'envahit, différente de celle de l'orgasme, parce qu'elle n'ébranlait pas un tréfonds de son corps, mais comme celle du lit, abandon et béatitude, plénitude d'être et de n'être plus.
(QE 114)

Jeanne remarks on this unusual and mystical experience in which she and Egon become one: "qu'elle définissait tantôt comme un miracle, tantôt comme le passage d'un seuil, tantôt comme une fusion en tout androgyne" (QE 114). The word "soudre" is used many times to describe the relationship between Jeanne de Berthouin and Marrain. Marrain reflects on this relationship with Jeanne and admits to his future father-in-law, "Jeanne et moi c'est comme un miracle" (LNA 225), "Jeanne c'est mon air et mon eau" (LNA 226). Later he muses that "il sentait qu'il pourrait faire quelque chose de neuf . . . qui les souderait tous les deux dans le respect de l'autre" (LNA 227). Jeanne reiterates these same thoughts and feelings. As Jeanne relives her wedding night with Marrain, she tells him, "Il y a des moments où je crois encore que tu es installé dans cette place de moi qui est pour toi. Comme si tu voulais me chasser de moi— ou peut-être devenir moi ou que je devienne toi. Et je ne sais plus où je m'arrête, où tu commences" (LNA 275). This creation of a being that is whole, one that fuses together both male and female attributes, this "androgyne" appears in both Yourcenar's and Desvignes's works in the relationships of Jeanne-Egon and Jeanne-Marrain. However, this strong, unified love engendered fear in those who observed it, as indicated throughout Desvignes's text and in Jacques Madaule's "Review." "Ils ne font qu'un, Marrain et Jeanne, Jeanne et Marrain, un et deux aussi différents et aussi unis que possible. Tous ou

presque peuvent se détourner d'eux parce que leur amour fait peur tout ensemble et d'envie [sic]" (49). Unfortunately, Marrain did not heed his father's advice.

Ç'a été la chance, c'est tout . . . Vous l'avez, vous deux, vous l'avez pour vous. Ah gardez-la bien. Vous vous êtes trouvés tous les deux, découverts ou reconnus ; ne vous lâchez plus. Cramponnez-vous, n'ouvrez pas les bras ni les mains. Ne vous laissez pas conseiller ni tenter sur la voie de l'argent. Si vous devez être ambitieux, soyez ambitieux ensemble. Une chance comme ça, ça se garde. (LNA 234)

As Marrain struggles to discover the secret formula of the blue glaze for his pottery, he spends too many hours in the damp potting shed, ignores the needs of his health, gets pneumonia and dies, leaving his young wife, Jeanne, with their daughter Valérie and another baby on the way.

Sarnecki describes *Quoi? L'éternité* as a text that pays homage to Jeanne de Reval, a "woman who is portrayed as exceptional in every way" (256). One could make the same compliment to Jeanne Berthouin, the protagonist of Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre*. However, Sarnecki defines Jeanne's name in Yourcenar's text as meaning "love" because she is both loving and lovable, and because she represents the love object for all the major protagonists in this work (Fernande, Michel, Egon, and the narrator) (256). The narrator describes the various types of love one associates with Jeanne in the chapter "La déchirure."

[Michel] se dit que ce doux feu qui semble continuellement couvrir en elle n'est autre que la perpétuelle présence de l'amour. Amour pour Egon . . . Amour pour ses deux fils . . . Amour pour Marguerite . . . Amour des pauvres, en particulier des vieillards qu'à Paris, secondée par Egon, elle passe chaque semaine quelques heures à soigner . . . Mais cet amour de charité, c'est encore l'amour de Dieu, celui dont les gens qui le pratiquent le moins savent encore le nom . . . Et l'amour pour lui, Michel? Il est maintenant sûr, à ce niveau, d'avoir sa part. (QE 153)

In a comparison with Desvignes's Jeanne, this same definition would apply if we only looked at the first two-thirds of the first volume *Les*

Noeuds d'argile in which Jeanne's total love for Marrain is portrayed. In this text, Jeanne Berthouin is portrayed as both loving and lovable and appeals to both her husband and his father (initially). However, in the second volume, *Le Grain du chanvre*, Jeanne's name no longer evokes the image of a perfect and happy love. On the contrary, it could be defined as the "absence of love" or "search/desire for love" by her daughter Valérie. Jeanne feels like she is dead herself after Marrain's premature death. She has no desire to go on living, especially without this unique, complete and total love which they had shared. She changes, closes herself off from all those around her, refuses to feel, and withholds her love. She may be the desired love-object for the men in her life and for her daughter, and her name continues to be associated with love, but in a context vastly different from that of Yourcenar's Jeanne.

Thus, the parents' experience of sexual love between a man and a woman greatly influences their daughters' perception of love and their desire for parental love. As the daughters find themselves unable to acquire the maternal love which they so ardently desire, the girls turn elsewhere—to the fathers—for this love.

Death

Death occurs in both Desvignes's and Yourcenar's works. Although it is not specifically mentioned, it is alluded to in Sarraute's work. The presentations of death by Desvignes and Yourcenar reflect a particularly feminist perspective, dealing with death realistically, poetically, sensitively, and emotionally. This is to say not that men do not or can not also write about death in this way, but that these women writers bring a

certain woman's touch to their descriptions. If their depiction of death is feminine, it may be a construct from society.

Sarraute admits that she has never written frankly about death because "l'idée de la mort me fait une telle impression que je ne peux jamais l'aborder de front." It does appear in her writings, but she

arrive toujours à la rendre par des choses en apparence anodines par rapport à ce qu'elle est. . . [Elle a] toujours l'impression que ce sont là des ersatz de l'idée de la mort qui est insoutenable. Comme elle est insoutenable, nous cherchons alors par tous les moyens à l'éviter en transportant l'angoisse dans quelque chose d'anodin. (Benmussa, *Nathalie Sarraute* 134)

In the interview with Carmen Licari, Sarraute admits that "en face de cette angoisse atroce que donne à chaque être humain la mort, on biaise . . . La mort, c'est la rupture, le scandale, la destruction, la perte totale" (6). Men may also dread death, but it seems that women either express their dread differently or write about death more emotionally. Once again, this may be due to society's conditioning.

Although Yourcenar does not deal specifically with death in *Quoi? L'éternité*, it is present here as in all of her works. She consistently stresses "the desire to die with dignity or for a purpose" as the Farrells have pointed out ("Marguerite Yourcenar" 540). In an interview with Mathieu Galey, she states that she shares Hadrien's view of death as the beginning of another adventure, and that one should try to enter it "with open eyes" (540). If she had completed *Quoi? L'éternité* before her death, her stated intention was to continue the story up to the time just after Jeanne's and Michel's deaths. She deals with death realistically yet sensitively in *L'Oeuvre au noir*, *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, *Denier du rêve*, and *Coup de grâce*, as well as in many other works. Her attitude toward death is much more open than that of Sarraute.

Death also plays a prominent role in Desvignes's works. Each volume of her *Les Mains nues* trilogy ends with the death of the protagonist. However, although she may deny it, with her characters she presents two different ways of facing death: either with dignity and courage or with cowardice and a lack of moral responsibility. The deaths of her chief male protagonists—Marrain and Francis—in *Les Noeuds d'argile* are occasions in which one dies without dignity or courage, but rather with a whiny cowardice that evades personal responsibility. Marrain's moral defect comes from the defect of the author's philosophy of pessimism which blames fate for the bad things in life that happen to good people. Marrain is a totally idealized character, who out of sheer selfish ambition drives himself to his death, a condition that the author never condemns or acknowledges. His workaholic attitude is typically "male," a rather interesting observation since the author is female and ignores this fault in her character. It is his fault that he dies so young and abandons his wife and child to an uncertain fate/future. He pushes himself to find the formula for the blue pottery glaze, staying in the cold, damp pottery shed, going without sleep, until he catches pneumonia and collapses. He refuses to accept that his early death is his fault. If he had loved Jeanne as he claimed he did, he would not have gotten so involved in his work so that he neglected his health, his wife and his child. Once his body was too weak to fight off the infection, he accepts his death as a cruel act of fate, ignoring his own lack of responsibility which caused his demise. In a similar manner, Francis blames fate for the misfortunes that have befallen him and his family, refusing to accept any responsibility for his actions and their consequences. When his youngest son, Marrain, dies, he blames fate

for their strained relationship and not his own bitterness and unjust actions. He places all his hopes for the future in Jeanne's unborn child which he anticipates will be a son. When he learns that the child is a girl, his disgust knows no bounds, and he blames fate again. Then he chooses to give up and die. Marrain's and Francis's eyes may be "open" in the sense that they know that they are going to die, but they choose to die, turning their backs on the world, turning to face the wall to await their moment of death, refusing any moral responsibility for their actions and earlier choices that may have precipitated their deaths.

With the deaths of Desvignes's female protagonists and some of her male protagonists, on the other hand, like Yourcenar, she portrays characters facing death with dignity and courage. Even though she does not use the same terms as Yourcenar, they apply equally well here. Her characters—Jeanne in *Le Grain du chanvre*, Louise and Juste in *Le Livre de Juste*—face their deaths with "open eyes," knowing they have lived a full and satisfying life. However, many of her characters exhibit a victim-conscious behavior that is often whiny, blaming an unkind fate for their demise and for the misfortunes that have befallen them during their lives. This attitude lacks courage and maturity. One could also characterize this as a martyr-like attitude, one that is often associated with women. This would be appropriate because this text was written by a woman.

Although Desvignes's characters face their deaths with an attitude of victimization, her portrayal or description of these deaths is so sensitive and emotional that the reader feels that s/he is experiencing the death along with the character. The reader may cry as Marrain dies, a reaction common to many readers according to Desvignes. One may rejoice with

Jeanne when she dies—free from the frail, sickly, mute prison that her body had become—or feel her frustration and disgust with her nurse-guardian. One may struggle valiantly with Louise as she tries to find some way to spare the lives of her afflicted children in the throes of death. Finally, the reader may rejoice and struggle with Juste as he fights valiantly to control his weakened heart to stay alive so that he can fulfill his obligations on his last day of life.

Sarraute's refusal to overtly confront death seems to be that of a feminine attitude of running from an unpleasant confrontation—when one feels that s/he has that choice. Yourcenar's depiction of facing death with "open eyes," with dignity, and reflection on one's life and one's usefulness or contributions to those around them also seems to have a feminine aspect. Desvignes sometimes does the same, but on other occasions, presents a whiny, victim-conscious, blaming attitude toward an unjust death. Perhaps the most striking similarity of these deaths is that the reader experiences the death together with the character, his/her thoughts, feelings and emotions. Death is not presented as dreadful, but is revealed in a sensitive, emotional way which seems to be particularly characteristic of a feminine writing style.

Fatality

Because "fate" plays such a prominent role in Desvignes's *oeuvre*, I shall discuss her work first in this section and then compare it with Yourcenar's. In Edith and Frederick Farrell's article about Yourcenar, "L'Encadrement de la Biographie par l'Autobiographie: Les Effets de la structure de *Feux*," they write that "l'autobiographe doit bien se garder de

se dire noble, héroïque ou pris au piège de la fatalité. C'est manquer de pudeur que de dire de soi-même, 'Les dieux ou la *fatalité* ont voulu ma perte'. On a tendance à ne pas le croire" (40, my italics). This is a criticism that one could level at Lucette Desvignes's works in which the characters put the blame on fate for the misfortunes which befall them. It is not fate so much as it is often the result of one's choices or actions. This whiny, blaming attitude may be a "feminine" weakness in the male characters in her work, since these are characteristics associated with women who have a "martyr" complex.

Desvignes assigns a large role to fate in her works. In fact, Brady finds her works pervaded with a realistic pessimism, not a pessimism "proposed as grounds for despair . . . For artists like Courbet and Desvignes, realism and honesty lead necessarily to pessimism, for it is the unscrupulous, ruthless manipulators who succeed in life, while those who are possessed of principles and ideals are ground down, exploited, and finally destroyed" ("Autonomy" 67). Brady describes Desvignes's celebration of life and human nature by means of "scenes of idealism and lyricism, moving evocations of the struggle for dignity and self-respect through autonomy, and a pervasive compassion for the defeated . . . in the long run her view of the human condition is very negative" (67). He points to a statement from Desvignes's *Les Noeuds d'argile* which sums up her view of life and her consequent philosophy of pessimism, at least as it is portrayed in this novel. Marrain is reflecting on Héraklès and the tragedy and injustice of his fate.

Rien de tout ce courage, de sa justice, de sa fidélité, de sa piété, rien de tout cela ne le préserve du malheur, au contraire. . . Il a cru qu'il suffisait de vouloir aller tout droit, tout net, tout franc, en pensant qu'il y avait au bout les retrouvailles pour toujours avec ceux qu'il

aimait. . . [Marrain] avait l'esprit tout plein de cette tristesse, non pas tellement pour Héraklès lui-même, il y avait bien d'autres choses tristes dans les journaux si on voulait s'attendrir, mais plutôt pour ce que ça représentait, pour la manière dont ça vous faisait réfléchir sur la vie, sur le peu de rapport qu'il y avait entre ce que les gens valaient, finalement, et leur réussite dans la vie. (LNA 379)

Madaule points out the "noblesse de l'homme" when he dares to contemplate his tragic destiny "en face, sans forfanterie ni faiblesse" as it is portrayed in *Les Noeuds d'argile* and concludes that perhaps man is not destined for happiness ("Il se peut que l'homme ne soit pas destiné au bonheur") (50). His use of the word "l'homme" in this statement means "humankind," including both men *and women*, because Desvignes emphasizes this aspect of all of her protagonists, men as well as women (Jeanne, Valérie, Jaquette, Louise, etc.). Desvignes has her characters blame fate for many of their misfortunes and their tragic destinies. Perhaps this is due to her background and love for Greek mythology, yet each of her protagonists makes choices that affect their destinies—it is not fate alone, but also each individual's choices and decisions that play a role in their destinies. They display cowardice in refusing to take responsibility for their actions—a moral weakness Desvignes seems unable to perceive and even appears to attempt to justify.

Yourcenar does not have her characters blame fate for their destinies. To the contrary, they accept the consequences of their actions and choices in their destinies. Jeanne de Reval knows that Egon is different but chooses to follow that path, abide by her marriage vows and remain "faithful" to him while at the same time following her own inclinations. Egon was really the model for Alexis, the character in one of Yourcenar's earlier works by the same name, so we can argue that he too accepted his homosexuality and did not blame fate for it at all.

Whether or not one is "destined" for happiness does not reside in the "hands of fate" alone. One chooses how s/he will accept the ups and downs of life, realizing that one's own decisions and choices along the way will play a significant role in the outcome. Jeanne Berthouin does not have a "tragic destiny." She rises above the challenges life presents her, and makes her own form of happiness, tranquillity, and contentment. The path she chooses is not the typical one for women of her day, yet she does well, lives a full, satisfying, and challenging life, accepting the "price she has to pay" in order to follow her dreams. The same can be said for Jeanne de Reval. Yourcenar makes no excuses, nor blames anything on "tragic destiny." She presents a woman who also forges her own way, breaking out of the traditional accepted role for women and realizing and accepting that the choices and decisions she makes throughout her life will determine her destiny. While Desvignes's background in Greek mythology may have influenced her decision to place so much blame on "tragic destiny," Yourcenar also was a woman educated in Greek mythology and greatly influenced by it as well, yet her characters do not blame their "fate" on "tragic destiny." To the contrary, they make their choices and decisions with "open eyes" and accept the responsibility themselves.

Summary

Each of these three women writers has brought certain feminine traits to the three works under examination in this study. In each work, it is clear how the mother's role has greatly affected the daughter. Even when the mother was physically absent, her influence was present in the daughter's life. The mother's indifference and lack of communication and

understanding toward her daughter have a profound effect on these young girls, giving them a type of "inferiority" complex because of a knowledge that they are different from their peers. Because the daughter's search for maternal love and desire to please the mother does not produce the hoped-for result, the daughter finds it difficult to establish and maintain intimate relationships with others. She turns to her father instead, a father who possesses the tender, maternal, loving, nurturing, and caring traits that the mother fails to demonstrate toward her child. It is the father who tucks the daughter in at night and reads her a bedtime story, who nurses her through illnesses, and picks up the pieces when the mother's absence and/or indifference inflict pain on the child. Love also plays an important role in each of these works because it is the mother's love that the daughter so desperately desires, but which the mother dispenses stingily or selfishly withholds. Of the three works, Sarraute's reticence about death is perhaps the most feminine reaction to death of the three writers, because the women and men characters in Yourcenar's and Desvignes's texts seem to be able to face death courageously with open eyes, something that seems more masculine. However, Desvignes's characters exhibit an attitude of victimization toward death, an attitude often associated with women who feel like they are martyrs. Finally, the role of fate and how these women writers deal with it differs as well. Desvignes seems to have her characters blame fate for their misfortunes, while Yourcenar's characters accept the role that their own actions have played in the events of their lives. The way in which these family relationships and feelings associated with the family are portrayed in these three works has a distinctive feminine quality in these women's writings.

Chapter 4

Bildung

This study began as a study of three examples of the female *Bildungsroman*. In the 1980s, several feminist critics began to take a closer look at the German *Bildungsroman* tradition, realizing that women had been virtually excluded from this genre when it was at its height in the nineteenth century. However, with the changing status of women in society and education during the twentieth century, this genre gave birth to the late arrival on the scene of the female novel of development, with striking variations from the traditional *Bildungsroman* with its male protagonist. Esther Kleinbord Labovitz has discussed this evolution of the female *Bildungsroman* in her book *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century: Dorothy Richardson, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Christa Wolf*.⁴¹ She argues that the female novel of development differs from that of the male in several striking ways yet still appropriately fits into this category. Labovitz proposes that

this new genre was made possible only when *Bildung* became a reality for women in general, and for the fictional heroine in particular. When cultural and social structures appeared to support women's struggle for independence, to go out into the world, engage in careers, in self-discovery and fulfillment, the heroine in fiction began to reflect these changes. (6-7)

In her examination of the works of the four twentieth-century writers mentioned above, Labovitz identifies several themes that appear in each of

⁴¹I am indebted to Dr. Bonnie Braendlin of Florida State University for her correspondence and suggested reading list concerning the female *Bildungsroman* because this work, which I found to be extremely helpful, was one of the ones on that list.

these works which are related to the heroine's personal quest, whether social or spiritual. These themes include:

self-realization (including identity questions, self-discovery, and self-knowledge); sex roles (including male/female roles and role models); education, dramatizing how the heroine reads; inner and outer directedness (psychological, sexual, ideological, societal); religious crisis, where applicable; career; attitude toward marriage; philosophical questions (thoughts on life and death); and autobiographical elements. (8)

Labovitz maintains that, even though the female heroine goes through a different developmental process from that of the male hero, the *Bildungsroman* provides the means for a fuller and more complete exploration of women's goals and expectations and allows for the possibility of redefining this genre.

Female *Bildungsroman*

In the works of Sarraute, Yourcenar, and Desvignes, one can find many strong women characters who face adversities and death. These women's stories of self-development or *Bildung* are influenced by mother-daughter relationships as well as the different roles that women play and by women's place in society. These works belong to the genre of the female *Bildungsroman* as modified and expanded by Labovitz, Bonnie Braendlin and other feminist critics of the twentieth century. Certain works by Yourcenar and Desvignes have in fact been examined as examples of the *Bildungsroman*, but it has been the *Bildung* of the male protagonist that has been discussed.⁴² The discussion and classification of these works as female *Bildungsromane* is new. In Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité*, it is the

⁴²Juste in *Le Livre de Juste* and Zénon in *L'Oeuvre au noir* in SLD 4, "L'Oeuvre de Juste," Reine-Marie Marcel (23-44).

Bildung of Jeanne de Reval that will be studied here, with some discussion of the young Marguerite's *Bildung* process as well. In Desvignes's the *Les Mains nues* saga, all three volumes: *Les Noeuds d'argile*, *Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne*, and *Le Livre de Juste* could be discussed, since the two *Bildungsroman* heroines, Jeanne and Valérie, both appear in all three volumes at different periods in their lives. However, the present discussion will be limited to the second volume, *Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne*. Sarraute's autobiographical fictional work, *Enfance*, will stretch the parameters of the female *Bildungsroman* in the opposite direction from that described by Labovitz et. al., in that it portrays the *Bildung* of the young Natacha only from early childhood through part of her adolescence, not all the way into adulthood or even middle-age as the other works do. The common theme tying all these works together is the self-development of the woman through the vicissitudes of her life, much of this development being tempered by the mother-daughter relationships. Each of these women writers raises different questions/problems facing women, problems which are timeless, pertinent to women in the later twentieth century as well as to the women at the various time periods in each of these works: what is woman's role in the family, in society, in loving relationships, what do these women say about men, what is their possibility of action, and how does one become and remain a strong woman in the face of life's adversities? These writers celebrate strong women, women who have overcome, who have arrived at an understanding of themselves in their many and varied roles, and who have established themselves as forces with which to be reckoned. Of the categories outlined by Labovitz, those examined here are the self-actualization of the female

protagonists in each of these works, the role of mentors in their lives, the importance of moving from the provinces to an urban center, and the woman's self-education through reading. The following categories will be added to this study of the female *Bildungsroman* because these are areas common to the three works under examination: how these women broke the stereotypical representation of woman at that time, how they maintained a part of themselves secret and distant from others, and how they were willing to do unpleasant tasks. This discussion of these three works as examples of female *Bildungsroman* will reinforce the argument that gender specificity does indeed exist in these works by Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes.

There are several articles which briefly mention Sarraute's *Enfance* as an example of *Bildungsroman* or employ terms that are applicable to the theory of *Bildungsroman*. However, the authors of these articles do not expand upon that idea, nor explain how this work might be regarded as an example of female *Bildungsroman*. Becker claims that Sarraute has written "her *Bildungsroman* at the age of eighty-three, reversing the typical order of literary creativity" ("Toward a New" 118). According to Becker, most writers begin their literary career with a novel of development which resumes their early life and gives the genesis of his or her literary creativity. As these writers mature, they then "move away from themselves in the direction of greater objectivity and abstraction" (118). She admits that *Enfance* differs from the typical *Bildungsroman* because of its blending of autobiography with tropistic response. Cristina Bacchilega writes that Sarraute's *Enfance* takes its readers on a journey that ends abruptly when Natacha goes on to *lycée*. "Sarraute does not find it

necessary to narrate the culmination of her initiation process nor to affirm her identity as a writer. Her poetics of tropisms clearly rejects the linearity of a *bildungsroman* [sic] or *kunstlerroman* [sic]" (113). Three other articles infer that this may be a *Bildungsroman*, although no specific mention is made of this term. Leah Hewitt mentions the formal education which afforded Natacha a sense of independence and self-worth (82), both characteristics of the *Bildung* quest. Sheila M. Bell's article, "Endings in Autobiography: The Example of *Enfance*," describes this as a "story of survival" and the child's bid for "independence," and a recovery of self, all terms and concepts associated with *Bildung*. Bruno Vercier discerns that the mother's absence and the father's support "aide l'enfant à conquérir peu à peu son indépendance" (166) and Went-Daoust indicates that Natacha's experience with writing "ponctue l'apprentissage de la vie" ("*Enfance*" 344). Later she affirms Natacha's conquest in this bid for independence as she seems able to reconcile the two sides of her personality, the Russian and the French. The terms "initiation process," "independence," "self-worth," "story of survival," "apprenticeship," among others, are all terms associated with the concept of *Bildung*.

Becker's observation about Sarraute having reversed the typical order of literary creativity with the writing of her *Bildungsroman* late in life, is also appropriate for both Yourcenar and Desvignes since they, too, wrote their *Bildungsromane* after years of other scholarly and creative works. Their *Bildungsromane* also blend autobiography and fiction as the reader journeys through the lives of the female protagonists. Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité* is the story of survival of Jeanne (née de Vietinghoff) de Reval as she overcomes the unhappy/unfortunate circumstances of her

fiancé, Johann Karl's madness, and later her husband, Egon's, succumbing to homosexuality. I shall also observe how she undergoes a type of initiation process as she asserts her independence and self-worth. As for Marguerite, I shall examine that part of her *Bildung's* process concerned with her self-education through reading. In Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre*, I shall analyze the stages of Jeanne Berthouin's self-development as she struggled for survival and independence. She undergoes an apprenticeship/initiation process with her first two husbands, Marrain Pacôme and Etienne Barandelle. I also examine Valérie's *Bildung* process through her reading, her struggle for survival and her bid for freedom.

Self-Actualization

One aspect of *Bildung* is the process of self-actualization undergone by the female protagonist. This process involves the heroine going through several steps on her journey to self-discovery, self-development, normalization, and identity. This is clearly seen in the lives of Natacha, Jeanne de Reval, and Jeanne Berthouin, and to some extent in the lives of Marguerite and Valérie.

As mentioned above, there is a definite *Bildung* journey of self-actualization in *Enfance* for the young Natacha. Because of her parents' divorce when she was barely two years old and the constant shuffling back and forth between the two parents in Russia and France, Natacha felt very displaced and fragmented between her Russian and French heritages and languages, her Russian Jewish background, and her French Catholic schooling. She was very attached to her mother and strove constantly to please her and merit her love and attention. However, the mother was a

selfish, capricious woman who often callously and abruptly brushed off her daughter's concerns, emotions, and observations. When sent to her father in Paris for her summer vacation, Natacha did not realize that her mother was going to "abandon" her there, not returning for her until several years later. Although Natacha's father was a more constant presence in her life, stable and secure, he was undemonstrative and had remarried. Natacha's experiences with her step-mother Véra added to the trauma and uncertainty of her early growing up years. However, Natacha's discovery of the power of words, the effect they can have, and the fact that one's own thoughts have merit and value helped her begin her *Bildung* journey of self-actualization and normalization. This process began when she dared to criticize her mother, finding her not to be as perfect as she had always thought her to be, admitting that a doll in the store window was more beautiful than Mama (E 93-95), and observing that Mama's skin resembled that of a monkey (E 99). This process continued as she allowed herself to admit that her mother did not treat her nanny Gacha very nicely, giving her the smallest and most inferior pieces of meat at dinner (E 101-103). As Natacha discovers these ideas and thoughts that come into her head, and finds the courage and audacity to express them aloud, she begins to free herself from her mother's power and influence. This culminates when her mother breaks their secret pact and upbraids the father for Natacha's not being "very" happy with him in Paris. From then on, Natacha seeks her own way, her own means of expressing herself through words—written, spoken, and read. She will beg her father to allow her to attend school and receive a formal education, something her mother belittled and disparaged. Natacha's excellent performance at school will

please her father, but have little or no importance for her mother. As Natacha tries to find a way to deal with Véra and her feelings of rejection and displacement from this step-mother, she will bury herself in her schoolwork and her books, reveling in the sense of security, solitude, and peace that words afford her. Natacha discovers in academics a means of asserting her independence, of establishing herself as a survivor, of recovering her self, and of finding her way in life. By the age of twelve or fourteen, she has come through her *Bildung* process and established herself as a strong, independent young woman, with a strong sense of self-identity.

Aline Baehler presents a unique perspective on *Enfance*, arguing that Véra, the step-mother, plays a very important role in Natacha's life and provides the means for Natacha to embark upon the path of normalization.⁴³ Baehler argues that Véra slowly takes the place of the mother in Natacha's life and affections, with Natacha feeling Véra's affection:

je sens chez Véra ce que je n'ai jamais ressenti avant ... oui, un attachement, de l'affection... sûrement cela devait être là depuis longtemps, mais enfoui, ratatiné, durci, et maintenant cela se montre au-dehors, cela s'épanouit ... et aussitôt ma confiance, mon affection... il faut peu de chose pour les faire sourdre ... s'épanchent en moi, recouvrent tout, débordent... (E 247-248)

Véra slowly comes to be presented in the more positive light of the "real" mother, while Natacha's real mother is presented in the more negative light of the "wicked step-mother," reminiscent of *Cendrillon*. When Natacha chooses to go to Versailles with Véra shortly after her mother's

⁴³I am indebted to Dr. Aline Baehler of Vanderbilt University for graciously sending me her unpublished paper, "Véra ou la voie de la normalisation" (1988) and allowing me to use it in this study.

arrival in Paris for a visit, Baehler observes that "Natacha accorde à sa belle-mère la voie royale; la mère est bien détronée" ("Véra" 14). Because the separation has lasted five years, neither the mother nor the daughter really "knows" the other, nor how to act with the other. Natacha observes that her mother has changed and is critical of the changes in her mother's appearance, finding the mother's hairstyle unattractive, even though it is the same style that Véra wears.

Elle a un peu grossi, mais c'est surtout sa nouvelle coiffure, ces deux rouleaux lisses et foncés de chaque côté du front, comme ceux que porte Véra... ils ne lui vont pas, ils donnent à son visage qui ne ressemblait à aucun autre, quelque chose de banal, d'un peu dur... (E 251)

Baehler remarks that "le mythe de la mère, au-delà de toute comparaison, s'écroule. Elle ne séduit plus l'enfant; tout au contraire le regard critique de Natacha la condamne" ("Véra" 15). In fact, upon entering the hotel room Natacha finds the mother's reclining position on the divan and her state of undress and exposure of skin rather shocking (E 252). Baehler states that "la mère est bien déplacée, au sens propre et au sens figuré. La situation se répète, mais en se renversant car la mère, jadis terrifiante, devient ici grotesque" ("Véra" 15): "Je vous félicite, écrit-elle au père plus tard, vous avez réussi à faire de Natacha un monstre d'égoïsme. Je vous la laisse..." (E 258). However, Natacha no longer feels any guilt because, as Baehler indicates, the mother "n'est plus crédible" ("Véra" 15). Natacha has come a long way in her *Bildung* process to be able to be critical of her mother and to feel no guilt for the honesty of her feelings and opinions. But the *Bildung* process does not end here. When the mother reappears three years later, it is not to Véra that Natacha compares the mother (the similarity of their hairstyles), but to herself. According to Baehler, "elle

s'y mesure cette fois-ci elle-même, et sur un mode positif" ("Véra" 15):

"Jamais je n'avais vu quelqu'un d'aussi épanoui, d'aussi gai qu'elle [. . .] toujours prête à s'amuser de n'importe quoi, prompte comme moi aux fous rires ... (E 259). Baehler indicates that the process is complete with Natacha rejoining the mother, identifying with the mother. Véra's role is complete and she can now disappear. Baehler's observations about the mother's departure and Natacha's return to her father's house where she found her father "plus froid avec [elle] que d'ordinaire et Véra plus sifflante encore, plus vipérine qu'elle ne l'était assez souvent dans ce temps-là" (E 260), clarified this situation for this reader who could not understand why Natacha's father and step-mother were so upset by her behavior after the mother's departure. Baehler says that this is because Natacha "triomphe, a triomphé. La question qui se pose maintenant est celle du bonheur de Natacha, indépendamment de la cellule familiale. Et sur ce terrain le père et Véra ne peuvent plus rivaliser" ("Véra" 16). Baehler concludes that "la structuration qui s'effectue est celle de la féminité; elle marque le passage à la normalisation" ("Véra" 16). This statement of Natacha's passage to femininity and normalization supports my argument that *Enfance* is the *récit* of Natacha's *Bildung* process as she comes to a strong sense of self and identity and of her place, the place she wants to occupy, as a young woman in society.

Yourcenar's Jeanne de Reval also underwent her own *Bildung* adventure in her process of self-development. We are told of her year in the convent school with Fernande, but even at that time, she was already establishing herself as an independent, free-thinking young woman. She underwent several steps on her *Bildung* journey during her long

engagement to Johann-Karl: travel to new places, sexual awakening with a man, mentoring from her fiancé, education through reading, music, art, etc.. When her engagement fell through because of Johann-Karl's mental illness and incarceration in a mental asylum, Jeanne did not abandon him. She proved herself to be a strong, independent young woman with a mind of her own and a desire to do what she felt was right and best both for herself and for her fiancé despite what society might think and say. It was only when Johann-Karl's doctors told her that she could no longer come to visit him that she ceased her nurturing, caring efforts on his behalf. At that time, her mother deemed it best for Jeanne to have a change of scene and society and took her on the feminine version of the Grand Tour of Europe, another step in her *Bildung* journey. During this period, Jeanne continued her self-education through reading and exposure to new sites, theater, music, etc. She also developed a strong desire for social action and participated as a volunteer in numerous causes. She met Egon de Reval through her church and developed a strong friendship with him that led to their marriage. However, her *Bildung* journey was not yet complete. In her relationship with Egon, she was not only his wife but also often assumed the role of mother, friend, confidante, and lover. Throughout the rest of their married life, she would experience much joy and pain because of Egon, but she determined to stand by him and by her marriage vows no matter what. Their marriage developed into a most unusual arrangement, yet one that they both agreed upon and accepted. Egon pursued his homosexual relationships as he desired, but always had Jeanne there when he needed and/or wanted her. Jeanne was free to pursue relationships with other men if she so desired. Her relationship with Michel de C. was

spiritual, emotional, and physical. Although she had a profound effect upon him and his daughter, he broke off their relationship because she would not leave her husband for Michel after Egon's misadventure in Rome with Franz. However, Michel was never able to forget her and constantly held her up as the ideal role-model for his young daughter Marguerite. From schoolgirl to teenage fiancée of an older man, to Renaissance young woman on the Grand Tour of Europe, to fiancée of a struggling young concert pianist, to wife and mother, to mistress of Michel de C., to strong, independent, free-thinking, indomitable, non-traditional woman, Jeanne de Reval's *Bildung* journey was complete. She knew who she was, she was free to be who she wanted to be, she established the life she wanted for herself, her husband and her children.

We cannot ignore the *Bildung* process for the young Marguerite, even though we only have sketchy details at best in this autobiographical fiction. However, her infancy was marked by the presence of numerous nannies and her father. Frequent sojourns at her father's home of Mont-Noir are distinguished by the various family members there who played a role in the young Marguerite's life, especially the hateful, resentful, controlling grandmother, Noémi. The role of Marguerite's father as her mentor, the materials that they read and studied together, the numerous travels that they undertook together, and the influence of Jeanne de Reval were all steps in Marguerite's *Bildung* journey. She seemed to be a very bright, precocious child with a rather mature understanding of the adult world, a strongly developed sense of self, of who she was, and of what she wanted out of life.

Jeanne Berthouin's journey of self-actualization seems to have begun when she married Marrain. In a sense, he was her liberator, allowing her the freedom and independence to declare to her parents that she was no longer going to attend church on Sundays—this on the morning following her wedding. He also encouraged and supported her in her desire to have her own seamstress business. However, at the same time he curtailed her freedom by getting her pregnant, a situation that she saw as hampering and hindering their unique relationship, but a situation that he saw as fulfilling their married/family life. Although this situation did curtail Jeanne to an extent, Marrain encouraged her to hire Fanny to help her with their baby daughter and with Jeanne's sewing. Marrain enjoyed reading and shared his thoughts with Jeanne about what he read. His untimely, premature death was one of the big steps in Jeanne's *Bildung* process, as she had to learn to cope with financial difficulties, with raising two young children, with continuing her business in the face of her extreme grief, and with her changed position in society. Her meeting Etienne Barandelle and eventual marriage to him were further steps in her *Bildung* journey as she came out of her mourning and learned to live and hope again. However, Etienne's brutal murder and the dishonest business practices of Dr. Trudasnier, and the way in which he took advantage of Jeanne during this time of grief and illness, forced her to re-evaluate her life and her goals. She determined never to let a man have the upper hand with her again, never to be dependent on anyone else again, never to be left financially destitute again. She vowed to seal off her heart, to achieve financial independence, to pursue her own dream and goal of owning her own business. She was learning to be independent and this experience

taught her what she wanted out of life, several more steps along the path of her own *Bildung* journey. Jeanne paid a high price for the lessons she learned as she discovered who she was, and developed into the strong, indomitable woman she would become and remain throughout the rest of her life.

Valérie's *Bildung* process is not as dramatic as that of her mother. Just as Natacha's journey began at a very early age, so did Valérie's. She lived with her mother and father for the first two years of her life, then was sent to her grandparents to be raised for a year while her mother tried to deal with her grief and begin to establish a livelihood for herself and eventually for her daughters. Then she was able to resume a "normal" family life again with her mother and step-father, Etienne Barandelle, for almost a year. However, following Etienne's murder, Valérie was sent back to her maternal grandparents to live until her mother should be able to have her own home with all her children around her. This situation only occurred during the year when Valérie was studying for the *baccalauréat*, a time in her life when she needed peace and quiet in order to prepare for this difficult exam, so she remained at her grandparents even though her mother now had her own home in Cluny. Valérie's childhood and adolescence were marked by her mother's absence, her strong desire for her mother's constant presence, a sense of being different from the other children, an uncertain sense of identity, and the lack of a "nuclear" family. Excelling at school was her salvation, the area of her life that she could control better than any other, and an area for which she received much praise. Her mentors were the mother superior and Mlle Tamburlinet at the convent school she attended in Cluny. Travel did not play a big role in her

early *Bildung* process, but did later in her life. She feared the new and unknown and had many qualms about leaving her home to go to Bresse to assume her first teaching assignment. Her introduction to Elie initiated her awakening sexuality, although she refused to consummate their relationship until after their marriage. The joys and passion of this first love and all too brief marriage dimmed quickly in her memory following her husband's premature death in the first big battle of World War I. However, because of their daughter, Valérie overcame her fears of travel and voyaged by ship to Algeria to visit Elie's family, a disastrous and unpleasant adventure for all concerned. After this, Valérie established her own comfortable haven in the midst of war, pursued her teaching career, and shunned any close contact with others through the protective covering of her widow's weeds. Instead of allowing herself to develop, Valérie, unlike the other heroines in this study, seemed to recede into her shell and stagnate or rather not continue to develop and grow. Even when Juste came along and managed to break through her defenses and marry her, she continued to bear a grudge toward the world and wear a chip on her shoulder. There was a bitterness within her that she never seemed able to overcome. She seemed to blame someone or something for what she had "missed" in life. Unfortunately, once she married Juste, she seemed to dump all this blame, bitterness, anger, and resentment on him. In Valérie's *Bildung* process, she came to a point at which she excelled as a teacher, knew what she wanted to teach and followed a plan to do so. One reason that Juste was able to assail her defenses and establish a common ground with her was that he had the same vision as Valérie of what he wanted to teach—pacifism and tolerance. However, it is quite ironic that she did not

practice this in her married relationship with Juste. Valérie never came through the entire *Bildung* process to the point of normalization and of a real realization of who she was with a strong sense of identity and self-worth.

We can see that each of these heroines underwent her own *Bildung* journey toward self-actualization and normalization, arriving at a point where she had a strong sense of self-identity and self-worth. Along the path of this self-development, she had mentors who helped with her education, training, and self-awareness.

Mentors

The presence of a mentor in the life of the protagonist is another aspect of *Bildung*. According to Labovitz, this is something that the female heroine rarely acquires, whereas every male hero of the *Bildungsroman* is guided by a mentor. Labovitz presumably means here that the female heroine *may* have a mentor along the way but not one who will be with her throughout the *entire process* of her *Bildung*. In that sense, Natacha, Marguerite, Jeanne de Reval, and Jeanne Berthouin, all do have mentors, at least temporarily. For Natacha and Marguerite, their mentors were their fathers, men who, although not affectionate or demonstrative, nevertheless encouraged their daughters to study and excel, and supported their efforts. Both were well-educated, older men who found themselves "saddled" with a young daughter.

Natacha's father seemed to be a silent pillar of support for her through the turmoil of experiencing her mother's rejection and abandonment. He offered comfort, support and encouragement. However,

he was never able to leave his "old man" shell to laugh and play with her spontaneously. They shared a complicity based on mutual trust and affection. Perhaps the most influential aspect of his mentoring role was his encouragement of her to do well and to excel in school. However, Natacha's mentor was not with her throughout the rest of her life. In fact, it seems that, while she was in school, some of her teachers began to assume this mentoring role she had previously allotted to her father.

Michel engaged nannies to care for Marguerite, and when she was older he taught her at home with the aid of tutors. He introduced her to reading, to the classics, to literature, to languages, to travel. He played an important role in her development, so much so that some critics have cited her masculine introduction to literature as an influence on Yourcenar's persistent choice of male protagonists in her works.

During Jeanne de Reval's two-year engagement to Johann-Karl, he was her mentor, introducing her to music and various writers, and traveling with her to different places. He shared with her his love of literature, music, and art, and selected the books he wanted her to read, so that they could discuss them together later. He introduced her to new thoughts and ideas. She was allowed to spend much unchaperoned time with him. He was training her to be the wife and companion he wanted. "Le privilège des longues fiançailles et la relative liberté des filles non-mariées, . . . font de Jeanne et de Johann-Karl de constants compagnons. Elle lui doit beaucoup . . . Il la prépare sans le savoir pour un autre, qui ne sera capable de s'exprimer que par des accords" (QE 86-87). This last statement clearly indicates that Johann-Karl was Jeanne's mentor. Together they discussed the merits of specific literary works or musical

compositions, etc. They were companions and shared many thoughts and feelings with each other. Jeanne at eighteen was greatly influenced by her thirty-eight-year-old fiancé, "le parfait homme du monde" (QE 86). However, after falling in love with Egon, she realizes that Johann-Karl was never her close friend.

[II] a été un instructeur, un maître à vivre; il l'a déniaisée de ce fond de crédule innocence, si vite amassé dans le cerveau d'une fille de mère pieuse au sein d'une société compassée. L'expérience du monde qu'elle tient de lui colle à sa peau comme un vernis protecteur, un peu comme les a protégés, en son temps, leur titre de fiancés. Il a été son compagnon, son amant parfois, jamais son confident. (QE 102)

One must not assume that he was "molding and making" Jeanne into the ideal woman: she still had her own ideas and thoughts, which often differed from his. She had a very sensual nature, and discussed frankly with him some of her fantasies. This conversation led to their lovemaking on the beach later that evening, a situation suggested and desired by Jeanne, cementing their physical-sexual union before marriage. However, with Johann-Karl's ensuing mental instability and institutionalization, Jeanne no longer had him for her mentor. It seemed that she was now a strong enough young woman in her own right and able to make decisions for herself. She was influenced by the protestant pastor Niedermayer and his call to social action, but this was already an aspect that she believed in. Her husband Egon was never her mentor; in fact, it seems that, more often than not, Jeanne assumed a maternal role with him.

Jeanne Berthouin had two mentors during her first two marriages. Her first mentor and guide was her first husband, Marrain Pacôme, who gently and lovingly initiated her into the joys of marriage and the sexual relationship. Together they learned how to love and please each other in a very "equal" giving/sharing relationship. They were also supportive of

each other in their business endeavors and the pursuit of their dreams and goals. Her second husband, Etienne Barandelle, also served as her mentor and guide, again supporting and encouraging her desire to have her own business. He helped her to appreciate the beauty of life again, and to enjoy the bourgeois lifestyle. Unfortunately, neither husband educated Jeanne in the intricacies of business dealings and financial matters. Once they were both dead, she (like Jeanne de Reval) no longer had a mentor to guide her, she had to rely on herself. She profited/learned from the "hard knocks" that life had given her, and determined to learn to be self-sufficient and financially secure, dependent on no-one but herself.

So, just as the mentors for Natacha, Jeanne de Reval, and Marguerite, did not remain with them throughout their whole lives, neither did Jeanne Berthouin's mentor. This fits the mentoring role as defined by Labovitz in the female *Bildungsroman*.

Movement from the Provinces to the Urban Center

Labovitz points out another important area common to both the female heroine and the male hero of the *Bildungsroman*. This is the protagonist's movement from the provinces to the urban center. She suggests that these wanderings, where the heroine will encounter the political, social and ideological ferment of her time, can be seen as parodying the *Wanderjahre* of the traditional *Bildungsroman* male hero (23).

The child Natacha will move from the city to the country in Russia and finally end up in Paris, where she discovers a new life and a new self—away from the mother's sheltering, capriciousness and lack of formal

schooling. When allowed to choose where and with whom she will live, she chooses the stability of the known and secure albeit "boring" father rather than the flighty, uncertain, often indifferent, and "unbalanced" mother.

After the dissolution of Jeanne de Reval's engagement to Johann-Karl and all the talk surrounding it, her mother, Madame Van T., decided that Jeanne needed a change of scene and thought, so took Jeanne on "ce qui était vers la fin du XIXe siècle l'équivalent féminin du Grand Tour des jeunes hommes de l'Ancien Régime" (QE 96). This tour lasted for two years, spent mostly "dans les pays de l'Europe centrale et de l'Europe du Nord protestantes, et au sein de la bonne société conservatrice où perçaient çà et là des idées libérales" (QE 96). Jeanne's exposure to Johann-Karl had opened her eyes and mind to new ideas and thoughts. During her Grand Tour, she researched the places she visited and even participated in volunteer work in each place. She was open to new ideas on religion and saw it as a duty to serve society.

Even though Marguerite's *Bildung* journey is only briefly depicted in *Quoi? L'éternité*, one aspect that stands out in her life is that of travel. Because her father loved to gamble, he traveled extensively even with the charge of his young daughter. She spent much time at her father's family home of Mont-Noir in Belgium, several summers at the beach with Jeanne de Reval's family at Scheveningue, also time in Paris, Brussels, and at the Villa des Palmes in the south of France, and later time in London during World War I, moving back and forth between the country and the city, being exposed to different cultures and people, learning about the history of the various places where she resided. All of this travel played a

significant role in her development, in her identity, and in her growing up.

Jeanne Berthouin also changes domicile several times during the course of her *Bildung* process, usually moving from a smaller country setting to a larger village or city. She moves in order to establish a new life for herself, to leave behind her sad and tragic past and the love she had known, to pursue her dream of owning her own business, to earn and save enough money to become financially independent and stable, to start anew. No longer is she under the protection of her father or of a husband. Her widowed state may serve as a small shield against the world, but she must now rely totally on herself. In this bid for freedom, Jeanne paid a high price, sacrificing her role of mother by depositing her children in the care of relatives. This bears a distinct mark of selfishness, especially in light of the fact that, when her adult daughter Valérie was faced with a similar plight, she never entertained the notion of giving her child to others to raise, but found the means to work and provide for herself and her daughter while staying together.

In this move from the country to the city, Labovitz asserts that the heroine gives up her former, sheltered existence in order to discover for herself a new life and self (24). However, this *Wanderjahre* experience entails the penalty of guilt and elements of selfishness (25). Natacha felt guilt at her decision not to return to her mother but to remain in Paris with her father; however, she also felt the necessity of the stability and the security that formal schooling provided her in that environment. So she did the "selfish" thing, the thing that she felt would be best for her.

Jeanne de Reval's move from Holland to the capitals of Europe on the Grand

Tour was for the selfish reason of giving herself some space at the end of her engagement to Johann-Karl and distance from the nasty rumours that were being circulated about her behavior. She felt no guilt for what she had done, nor for her desire for a change of scene and a thirst to know more about her world. Jeanne Berthouin's moves did entail a large measure of both guilt and selfishness, but she seems to have been able to come to terms with these feelings, putting her own needs and desires before those of her children and others who could hinder her in her pursuit of peace, tranquillity, and "happiness." Indeed, this movement from the provinces to the urban centers did play an important role in the *Bildung* process of each of these heroines.

Self-Education Through Reading

Labovitz argues that no single theme illuminates the female *Bildungsroman* more than the heroine's mode of self-education through reading (32). The books that each heroine read in these works will be strong indicators of the *Bildung* process that each female protagonist underwent. Many of the works mentioned were suggested to the heroine by her mentors, but they still reveal important steps in her *Bildung* journey.

Natacha loved to read and mentions numerous texts throughout her *récit* that she read as a child. Both Natacha and Marguerite enjoyed the fairy tales that were read to them as children. In fact, Natacha recalls *la maison de glace* that she imagined or "saw" in her mind one time, "elle surgissait pour mon interminable enchantement d'un petit livre..." (E 77). She was so enchanted with this image that she later refused to look at "la

macabre *Maison de glace* qu[']elle] aurai[t] pu voir des années plus tard dans une édition pour adultes" because she wanted "conserver la [s]ienne" (E 77). In the Luxembourg garden with her father and his young woman friend, Natacha remembers having the *Contes* by Andersen read to her and of the indescribable feeling of "joy"/"happiness" that overwhelmed her (E 66). She will constantly refer to the fairy tale of *Cendrillon* as she recounts episodes of her relationship with her step-mother, Véra, sometimes referring to herself as the poor Cinderella and Véra as the wicked step-mother (E 130).

At one time her favorite book was *Max et Moritz*, and she memorized the verses by heart and loved to look at the pictures and was never afraid of the escapades the two got into. However, just before describing this book, she recounts having received another book, that she loved *feuilleter*, "j'aime écouter quand on me lit ce qui est écrit en face des images" but there was one picture in this book that so frightened her that she was offered the choice of either cutting it out of the book "Ce serait dommage, c'est un si beau livre" (E 47) or of hiding the offensive picture by glueing the pages together, which is what she chose to do. However, she still knew the frightening picture was there when she came to this extra-thick page in the book.

Her favorite book at a particular moment of her childhood was *Le Prince et le pauvre*. She so immersed herself in her reading that she "lived" the experiences of the fictional characters. "Je crois qu'il n'y en a aucun dans mon enfance, où j'aie vécu comme j'ai vécu dans celui-là" (E 79). She also read and enjoyed *David Copperfield* and *Sans Famille*, but the two images of *Le Prince et le pauvre* that she retained were of the two boys

playing the role of the other and of the uncomfortableness they each felt in the unfamiliar surroundings. King remarks that this book was important to Sarraute

because of its theme of uncertain identity. While the book is obviously relevant to her own situation as a child without a clear sense of a 'home', it may also be seen as a prototype for the kind of fiction she creates in her maturity, in which characters have fluctuating, unstable qualities, and are haunted by fears of rejection. (106)

She refers again to *David Copperfield* and *Sans Famille*, when the governess speaks to her after the birth of her half-sister, "Quel malheur quand même de ne pas avoir de mère" (E 121). The word *malheur* elicits all sorts of thoughts in the young Natacha's mind: "le malheur qui s'abat sur les enfants dans les livres dans *Sans Famille*, dans *David Copperfield*. Ce même malheur a fondu sur moi, il m'enserme, il me tient" (E 122). These three books struck a chord with the young Natacha, who continually experienced rejection, displacement, lack of belonging, and the pain that such experiences embody. She identified with the characters in these books.

While living with her father and Véra in Paris, Natacha mentioned that she often read alone in her bedroom after dinner.

Je me souviens d'un livre de Mayne Reid, que mon père m'avait donné. Il l'avait aimé quand il était petit... moi il ne m'amusait pas beaucoup... peut-être étais-je trop jeune... huit ans et demi... je m'évadais des longues descriptions de prairies vers les tirets libérateurs, ouvrant sur les dialogues. (E 115)

Natacha recalls with delight the books she read with Véra's mother, the woman Natacha called *grand-mère*, "nous rions beaucoup toutes les deux, surtout quand elle me lit des comédies... *Le Malade imaginaire*... ou *Le Revizor*...elle lit très bien, elle rit parfois tellement qu'elle est forcée de s'arrêter, et moi je me tords littéralement, couchée à ses pieds sur le tapis" (E 227). Marguerite also recalls reading Molière with her maid Camille

during World War I and of her father's admonitions "de rire moins haut. Nous riions en effet beaucoup . . . Monsieur Jourdain et Monsieur de Pourceaugnac nous aidaient à supporter le mauvais souper (Michel avait repoussé son assiette sans rien dire), le froid, et la guerre" (QE 286). It is interesting that, when faced with a difficult situation, both of these young girls found comedic relief in the works of Molière.

Finally, the last book Natacha mentions is *Rocambole* by Ponson de Terrail, a book left in an old chest and which she read delightedly—a book and an author that her father disparaged. She immerses herself in this reading. "Voici enfin le moment attendu où je peux étaler le volume sur mon lit, l'ouvrir à l'endroit où j'ai été forcée d'abandonner... je m'y jette, je tombe... impossible de me laisser arrêter, retenir par les mots, par leur sens, leur aspect [. . .]" (E 266). The description of her reading of *Rocambole* continues for two pages with her so caught up in the adventures of the story that she does not hear the summons to dinner, "...et c'est à ce moment-là qu'il faut répondre à des voix d'un autre monde...'Mais on t'appelle, c'est servi, tu n'entends pas?'" (E 267). In fact, she has such a difficult time separating from this fictional world that one of her father's dinner guests asks, "Qu'est-ce qu'il arrive à Natacha?" when she observes her "air absent, hagard, peut-être dédaigneux." The father whispers that "elle est plongée dans *Rocambole*!" and the guest nods that she understands (E 267).

Even Natacha's mother experiences her own kind of *Bildung* through reading. She herself had not been a good student, and disliked the strict structure of formal education. She tended to daydream too much in school and was expelled for having carried a political tract onto the school grounds. Although she claimed that she did not know that it was a

dangerous thing to do and that a school friend had given it to her, she was not allowed to continue attending school. Natacha remarks, "depuis son renvoi du lycée, tout ce qu'elle savait, elle *l'avait appris en lisant*. . ." (E 252, my italics). Although we are not told what she read, this self-education through reading is a distinctive characteristic of the female *Bildung* process according to Labovitz, and thus a strong indicator that not only the daughter Natacha but also the mother went through a *Bildung* process.

These books that Natacha read during her childhood and which the adult Sarraute remembered well enough to record in her autobiographical *récit* are indicative of the development of the young Natacha and the feelings and emotions she experienced during the early years of her childhood and youth. From identifying with the "underdog," the mistreated, the misunderstood, the displaced, the rejected and unwanted child of *Le Prince et le pauvre*, *David Copperfield*, *Sans Famille*, and *Cendrillon*, Natacha moves to the world of escape in the incredible exotic adventures of *Rocambole*, finding in her reading the possibility of imagining another existence, another life, a peaceful and tranquil escape from the instability, trauma, and rejection that she often experienced in her own life. Reading and writing affords her the means to begin to find her own identity, establish her own process of self-development and self-actualization, steps in her own *Bildung* adventure.

Jeanne de Reval seemed to be an avid reader, having read Comenius with her school friend, Fernande, even before embarking on her literary discoveries under the tutelage of Johann-Karl. As her mentor preparing her for marriage to him, Johann-Karl "lui prête des livres qu'il choisit délibérément pour elle" (QE 86). These works included *Pauvre Lelian's*

Romances sans paroles and *Sagesse*, Loti, Maeterlinck's *Le Trésor des humbles* and *La Sagesse et la Destinée*, Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, Swinburne, Rilke, Emerson, Novalis, plays by Ibsen and Bernard Shaw. Later, while on her Grand Tour, Jeanne would read works on the history and art of the places she was visiting (QE 98). Jeanne de Reval's early reading material during her youth reflect her concern with religion, with societal concerns, and with romance. Some of the works that Johann-Karl gave her to read and discussed with her may have seemed rather *risqué* for a young woman of her age at that time; however, Jeanne was already a rather unusual young woman and seemed to take everything "in her stride." She also selected reading materials that would better educate her about art, music, literature, and history. She was interested in the world in which she lived and sought in her reading material information that would help her to be better informed about her world and to be a better world citizen. Her reading played an important role in her *Bildung* process of self-development.

Marguerite was also an avid reader. Marguerite's father told her the fairy tales of Grimm and Andersen each evening just before she went to bed while they resided at *la Villa des Palmes*: "A peu près chaque soir, Michel venait s'établir au coin du feu pour me raconter une histoire: presque tout Andersen et tout Grimm y passa" (QE 153). When she was older and learned how to read, she confided how she knew by heart these fairy tales which had enchanted her:

Blanche-Neige, La Belle au Bois Dormant, La Petite Marchande d'allumettes m'enchantaient, mais je les savais par coeur avant d'avoir appris à lire. Je ne les séparais pas d'une ferme voix d'homme ou d'une voix grave et douce de jeune femme. (QE 222)

However, Marguerite's reading material includes much more than just fairy tales. She describes how the discovery of reading, "la découverte de la lecture," was "un miracle banal, progressif, dont on ne se rend compte qu'après qu'il a eu lieu" (QE 222). She indicates that she "n'eu[t] jamais de livres d'enfants. Les tomes roses et dorés de Madame de Ségur [la] semblaient pleins de sottise et même de bassesse : des histoires racontées par un adulte qui calomniait et abêtissait les enfants" (QE 222). Jules Verne bores her. She learns other languages by reading and translating works with her father. She receives a "male," traditional, classical education from her father and the tutors he employed to teach her at home.

Je connus bientôt grâce à mon père de nombreux "classiques"; j'allais effleurer toute la littérature française et une partie au moins de la littérature anglaise entre sept et dix-huit ans. J'allais apprendre aussi assez de latin et de grec pour remonter plus haut. Les sceptiques diront que les lectures précoces sont inutiles, puisque l'enfant lit sans comprendre, au moins durant ses premières années; j'atteste au contraire qu'il comprend certaines choses, sait vaguement qu'il en comprendra d'autres plus tard, et que les instructions reçues de la sorte sont indélébiles. (QE 222)

She so enjoys reading that she even picks up the book from her father's nightstand to read while they were packing to leave Mont-Noir one October. Although much of what she reads does not make sense to her, one phrase really strikes her, concerning a boat traveling up the Nile, a phrase that would remain with her for more than forty years, until the day that she herself would see a grey-haired man crying on that same bridge across the river. Her memories of the author's name and the book's title are a little vague, but the image of what she read was quite strong.

. . . un roman idéaliste et chrétien d'une Madame Reynes-Montlaur . . . Cette romancière racontait l'histoire de disciples de Jésus réfugiés en Egypte vers le milieu du Ier siècle. L'ouvrage, à ce qu'il me semble (il s'appelait *Après la neuvième heure*), est aujourd'hui oublié . . . Je pris le volume et l'ouvris au hasard : la plupart des propos et des descriptions étaient trop difficiles pour moi, mais je

tombai sur quelques lignes où des personnages, assis au bord du Nil, . . . regardaient une barque à voile pourpre . . . passée par le vent, vue au coucher du soleil sur le fond vert des palmeraies et le fond roux du désert. Je sentais . . . Un sentiment d'émerveillement m'envahit, si fort que je refermai le livre. La barque a continué à remonter le fleuve, consciemment ou inconsciemment, dans ma mémoire pendant quarante ans; le soleil rouge à descendre à travers la palmeraie ou sur la falaise, le Nil à couler vers le nord. J'allais un jour voir sur ce pont pleurer un homme à cheveux gris. (QE 223)

Marguerite recalls with delight her reading times with her father, something the two of them shared in a special way. She mentions a governess who tried to teach her calculus, but who did such a terrible job that her father had to reteach it to her later. However, he himself taught her grammar,

qu'il tenait à ce que je n'apprisse que par l'usage, l'anglais qui alternait avec le français, et l'enrichissement sans fin des lectures. Nous lisions chaque soir, quand il ne sortait pas. Racine, Saint-Simon, Chateaubriand, Flaubert . . . L'Anatole France de *Les Dieux ont soif* et le Loti du *Pèlerin d'Angkor* . . . Shakespeare. (QE 229)

Her education was complemented by visits to museums, historic sites, the theater, etc. This early introduction to a variety of reading materials and authors by her father would develop within her a love for reading, a thirst for knowledge, and a desire for authenticity through research in her own future literary efforts. All of these varied readings have a strong impact on the self-development and self-image that Marguerite would carry with her throughout her life.

Just as Natacha's favorite childhood books are those which often reflected her own position in life and her own feelings of being rejected and an outcast, the reading material of Valérie in *Le Grain du chanvre* also reflects her feelings. Valérie escapes through reading just as Natacha does. For Valérie, her favorite reading material includes the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century because of their depiction of the feelings of

melancholy, solitude and loss of love, and of the way nature so often reflected these same emotions for them. Just as Natacha finds solace in her academic studies, so too does Valérie. Excelling in school, finding acceptance and praise for exceptional school work helps both of these young girls to place a high value on their academic performance, allotting a high value to their formal education in their process of self-development along the way of their *Bildung* journey.

The reading material for each of these women characters greatly influences their self-development as they embarked on their own particular kind of *Bildung* journey. Reading provides a means of escape and of empathy for the young Natacha as she tries to make sense of her uncertain world. She lives through the characters of the works she reads, and is able to tolerate better the uncertainties and trauma of her own life. For Jeanne de Reval, her reading material helps her to expand her horizons, to learn more about the world she lives in, to be able to relate better to her older fiancée, to assume a useful role in her society through her volunteer efforts, and to come to a better understanding of the role of religion in her own life. For the young Marguerite, reading opens up a whole new world of adventure for her, a thirst for knowledge, a love of travel to the new and unknown, and in later life it affords her the means to carry on extensive research for her literary projects so that she might portray the most "true" account possible within her historical works. Valérie also experiences the same feelings as Natacha of escape and empathy in her reading of the Romantics. Reading and excelling in academic work for Natacha, Marguerite and Valérie was also a means for them to gain the approval of their fathers (for Natacha and Marguerite)

and the mother (for Valérie). For Natacha and Valérie school plays a significant role in their self-development and their *Bildung* process.

"Unusual" Women: Women "Before Their Time"

These three works depict strong, independent women, women who were "different" from the image of women at that time, women who broke "new ground." Certain women in these works were exceptional women in that they broke with tradition, they were women who were, in a sense, early models of "women's liberators."

Natacha in *Enfance* broke with the traditional role of what was expected of a young girl. The fact that, at the age of six or seven, she had written a "novel," which her mother showed to her publisher/uncle/friend, was not a typical act for a young girl of her age (E 83+). Though Natacha's mother is not presented in a very positive light in this work, she, too, broke with what was considered typical, acceptable behavior for a woman at that time. She earned her own living through writing both children's stories and romance novels; she did so by using a male pseudonym, and was quite successful.

Sarnecki's discussion of Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy finds that the character of Jeanne de Reval in *Quoi? L'éternité* is portrayed "as larger-than-life, [and is] one of Yourcenar's few women characters who are given primary importance" (243). She deems Jeanne de Reval to be Yourcenar's most positive female character in all of her *oeuvre* (254), a claim that I support as well. Jeanne de Reval had a mind of her own, and seemed to follow the "beat of a different drum" from that of other young women of her time. Her long engagement to Johann-Karl allowed her

many freedoms not normally granted to young women of her day. Another incidence of Jeanne's difference was her insistence that she visit Johann-Karl daily in the insane asylum, even taking up residence in his home in order to be closer to where he was staying. She carried out the duties of devoted fiancée and semi-nurse, uncaring of the opinions of society or what others deemed to be appropriate behavior for a young woman of her age and in her position. When planning to have a small ceremony for her daughter's marriage to Egon, Madame Van T. recalls the remarks and rumors that had circulated about Jeanne and her relationship with Johann-Karl.

Madame Van T. avait été d'une sage indifférence à l'égard des propos malveillants ou simplement sots tenus en Hollande lors de l'effondrement mental de Johann-Karl; le dévouement presque provocant de Jeanne avait, elle le savait, été censuré ou moqué des gens comme il faut. (QE 108)

Sarnecki points to Jeanne's behavior toward Johann-Karl as that of no ordinary woman, finding her to be a character who defies traditional sex-role stereotyping and who undermines the reader's expectations in her relationships with her husband Egon and her friend Michel (226-27). She was forging her own path. Later, while on the feminine version of the "Grand Tour" of the continent, Jeanne continued following her own drummer. When introduced to Egon, she felt so attracted to him and so attuned to him that she was the one to "force his hand/decision" to marry her. After several years of marriage, and two lovely sons, Jeanne seemed to lead her own life independent of Egon's to a certain extent. She had lovers, if she wanted, he knew about it, and condoned it, something that Michel never seemed to be able to comprehend or accept. She had her own code of ethics and morals, and wouldn't be swayed by others' opposing views.

Sarnecki writes that "she demonstrates that her moral code is superior to the more conforming code of her peers—she is loyal to those she loves, despite what people might think or say about her" (259). Jeanne was a free spirit and a self-determined woman. The passage that clearly indicates this is that of Jeanne's attendance at Marguerite's aunt's sixty-third birthday celebration in Brussels. Jeanne's dress, demeanor, and mannerisms were unusual, not those of the traditional young women of her day.

Elle n'avait pas changé. Son visage était resté le même sous son grand chapeau que n'encombraient ni plumes d'autruche ni oiseau mort. Contrairement à ce qui était alors les seules bienséances possibles pour une femme qui sait vivre, c'est à dire les genoux parallèles et presque serrés, et les mains seulement à demi dégantées, elle avait posé ses gants sur la table et croisé un genou, ce qui semblait lui conférer une surprenante et tranquille liberté d'attitude. Sa jupe de soie gris argent, coupée en biais, se tendait de la hanche au jarret, découvrant ainsi quelques centimètres de bas minces et des souliers bas, au lieu des bottines à boutons que portaient encore la plupart des dames. (QE 250)

Yet for all her independence and assertiveness, Jeanne de Reval was a very feminine, beautiful, sensual, loving, caring, maternal woman. She maintained her femininity while "breaking new ground" for a woman of her time. Sarnecki points to the following text which reveals Jeanne's natural sensuality, something rare for her generation (258).

Elle lui [à Johann-Karl] raconte que depuis l'enfance elle a pris l'habitude de sortir dans l'obscurité totale sur son balcon, ou, quand l'occasion s'en présente, par la porte de sa chambre de plain-pied avec le jardin, toute nue, pour mieux goûter ce noir sans forme, ces senteurs nocturnes imprégnant la peau, et sur tout son être la douceur ou la force du vent. (QE 88)

Jeanne Berthouin in *Le Grain du chanvre*, too, was a very sensual woman, one who delighted in the sensual and sexual nature of her marriage to Marrain, again something rare for her generation. She had been indulged and spoiled by loving parents, and had developed a very strong will and mind of her own. Her first husband Marrain encouraged

and admired her for this. Following the murder of her second husband, Etienne Barandelle, finding herself saddled with three young children, and widowed for the second time in her young life, Jeanne, at the age of twenty, decided to make drastic changes in her life, no matter what the cost to her or to her children. Leaving her children in the care of their grandparents, she assumed a job far away in order to try to fulfill her dream. She was determined to have her own dress-making business and struggled valiantly against incredible odds in a very male-oriented world to make it on her own. In my opinion, she was acting much as a single woman would, yet she had responsibilities which she had left behind. Throughout her life, Jeanne often displayed masculine character-traits yet never lost sight of her femininity. She learned to make financial decisions and investments, she gained an understanding of legal contracts and used this knowledge in her last three marriages to ensure that her inheritance would be passed on to her children and not to the man she married. She had creative ideas and the vision and audacity to carry them out, for example, the plans for the Home mobile, the taxi service to the South of France, the movie theater, etc. Jeanne refused to assume the "typical" female role of her time, that of staying at home, keeping house, raising children, being at the "beck and call" of her husband. She did establish a home for herself and her children (when they were almost grown), but insisted on having her own business, separate from that of her husband. She did try to fulfill her wifely duties, but refused those to her husband when he began to abuse her physically. However, she did not immediately try to escape the bad marriage she had made. She attempted to "tough it out." Yet even in this situation, Jeanne seemed to have the upper hand.

When family members and local townspeople noticed the silent, martyr-like way in which Jeanne put up with her unfortunate decision to marry Florent, they sympathized and empathized with her. They were on her side. However, once she left Florent, and he committed suicide, town opinion changed in his favor. Jeanne was criticized for having left her husband, for having refused to work alongside him in his café, for not having remained silent in the abusive circumstances of her marriage. Because she broke with the traditional, accepted behavior of women at her time, she was criticized, and ostracized to the point that she deemed it best to relocate after Florent's suicide. She felt no shame, nor regret for what she had done, but desired what was best for her family, herself, and her business. She developed into a "hard-nosed" business woman who turned every business venture into a success story. She was a "woman before her time" with her characteristics of assertiveness, financial and business acumen, creativity and ingenuity with inventions and ideas, and a strong desire and need for financial independence and security and the means to bring it about.

Lecoultre's review of *Le Grain du chanvre* also points to Jeanne as an independent woman, "un peu dominatrice, à la fois moderne" and admits that it is inevitable that she would have

[des] censeurs: ne symbolise-t-elle pas l'ascension sociale de toute une classe de travailleurs, n'annonce-t-elle pas—sans que la chose soit dite—la femme d'aujourd'hui, presque la femme 'd'après 68' qui veut pouvoir jouir, au sein de la famille et de la société, d'une place à part entière? Les plus sévères de ces censeurs reconnaîtront, au moins, qu'elle a eu quelque mérite à ne pas baisser les bras. (69)

Jeanne's uniqueness posed a problem for her family, as mentioned on the occasion of her niece's wedding. Traditionally the bride tried to make sure that every one of the wedding guests had an escort. However,

finding a suitable escort for Jeanne proved to be a rather difficult and delicate situation. Jeanne told Lucie, "Tu ne peux pas me donner n'importe qui, ma nièce, tâche de faire le tour de tes connaissances pour que ta noce ne signifie pas pour moi l'humiliation dans le cortège ou les bâillements à table" (GC 442). Together Lucie and Valérie try to come up with a suitable escort for Jeanne. Lucie bemoans the onerous task because of Jeanne's difference/uniqueness.

On ne peut pas lui commander quelqu'un sur mesure, à ta mère, tous les hommes qui lui conviendraient sont mariés, il faudrait chercher parmi les veufs ou les vieux garçons, ça nous laisse peu de monde, et encore personne ne sera jamais à son goût. (GC 443)

Unfortunately for Jeanne, the man they pair her with was an "assez bel homme . . . mais pauvre causeur, danseur encore pire et légèrement dur d'oreille" (GC 444). Lucie did her best, "mais c'est qu'au rayon des oiseaux rares Jeanne était vraiment un exemplaire unique" (GC 444). Not only men but also Jeanne's family recognized that she was an unusual woman, one who did not fit the mold of the traditional women of her time.

One other way in which Desvignes portrays Jeanne as a unique woman is the way in which she used her sexual favors as feminine power. Brady cites Carol Cassell (*Swept Away*), who writes, "Women have always derived power from withholding sex" (Feminism 22). Jeanne wields this power so strongly that she drives her husband Florent to suicide. Brady also cites Jack Kammer, who writes that "many women can and often do derive power, satisfaction, and control from dealing with men's yearnings and emotions in ways that are less than straightforward and honest" ("Editorial" 22). Jeanne withholds sex not only from her third husband, Florent, but also from her fifth husband, Blaise. Yet when they each seek sexual pleasures elsewhere (with the servants), Jeanne arranges the

situation so that she is the one who discovers them "in the wrong," thus putting her "in the right" and giving her more power. It was most unusual at this time for a wife to withhold her sexual favors from her husband, yet Jeanne Berthouin did this with at least two and possibly three of her five husbands. Yourcenar's Jeanne de Reval did not withhold her sexual favors from her husband, but did arrive at a mutual agreement that if he sought his sexual pleasures elsewhere with other men, she would discreetly share her sexual favors with other men of her own choice. Both of these women used this as power, and for both, this was highly unusual for that time period.

Because these three works present the positive characteristics and paint such a positive picture of these very unusual women, these works constitute examples of *écriture féminine*. These women protagonists broke the stereotypical representations of women at their time. They forged new paths for themselves, and found new ways of being assertive in a male-dominated world while retaining their femininity.

Secret Part of Self

Shutting off a secret part of oneself in order to be protected from others' view and access seems to be very characteristic of women in general, although men may also do this. This phenomenon of women shutting off a part of themselves can be found in each of the three texts under analysis here. Nathalie Sarraute the narrator, in dialogue with her other voice, admits fear at the prospect of opening this secret, closed-off part of herself in order to attempt to write her autobiography. The other voice speaks of the fear and hurt buried there and the pain it could cause.

As the child Natacha relives these experiences caused by spoken words, she opens the wound caused by her mother's abandonment. As Natacha develops, she learns the power of words and experiments with this power for herself, saying unkind things about others, but only to herself, and saying "des idées comme chacun en a me viennent comme à tout le monde. Je peux sans crainte penser n'importe quoi [. . .] Je l'ai pensé et cela n'appartient qu'à moi. Je n'ai à en rendre compte à personne" (E 136). The narrator seems to be afraid to confront some of these painful memories because they will reveal the negative image of her mother and the hurt she inflicted on her daughter. As a daughter, she seems in many ways to want to hold on to the idealized image of her mother, and not put the blame on the mother for her own emotional instability and problem with words.

Jeanne de Reval will also keep a secret part of herself separate from others. Although Egon had a strong feeling that she had had a lover before him, she never shared with him her experiences, feelings, and emotions associated with her former fiancé, Johann-Karl. Later, she would also be reticent about her marital situation with her husband, Egon's, homosexuality, refusing to speak of it with Michel and becoming offended by his proposal that she leave her husband to live with him.

Following her first husband's death, Jeanne Berthouin closes off that part of herself associated with her emotions, love, and marriage to Marrain Pacôme. Lacarrière writes that "l'on sent bien que son courage, son énergie à vivre, son dynamisme *cachent un vide*, une sorte de momification intérieure depuis la mort de son premier mari" (62—my italics). This emptiness is underscored by her solitude. Even though Etienne Barandelle manages to break through the protective wall with which Jeanne has

surrounded herself, and although he encourages her to begin to "live again," she maintains a part of her inner being locked away from him, although she thinks that perhaps one day she might be able to share with him that part of her former life. However, she admits to her parents and her Cousin Fischer that the Jeanne that has continued to live is a different Jeanne, the other is buried. She buries this secret part of herself even deeper in her inner being following the death of her second husband, Etienne, vowing never to love or feel such intense emotions again because the risk and the hurt are unbearable. Although she marries three more times in her life, she never again brings this buried secret part of herself to the surface, refusing even to speak with her daughter Valérie about her father Marrain, freezing her with a cold look that informs Valérie that this is forbidden ground. Even with herself, forty years after these tragic events, Jeanne will not unlock that box, although the pain has diminished, preferring to keep those secrets away from the calm tranquillity of her present. One critic writes that, although Jeanne marries five times, only the first time was for love, the others were for other reasons. However, her marriage to Etienne was for love; not the same kind of love which she had had with Marrain, but love nevertheless. Marrain was her first, real, great passion. With Etienne, she experienced love, but love tinged with sadness. It is true, however, that the other three marriages were not for love.

In Desvignes's work, it is not only Jeanne who shuts off a secret part of herself, but also her daughter, Valérie. As a child, Valérie has secret/private conversations with herself; some of these she shares with her grandfather, especially the episode concerning the name of her doll, but others are just with herself. She was a rather quiet, timid child, and

this tendency to guard secret places within herself from others would carry over into her adult life, manifesting itself as a difficulty in communication with others, whether with her husband, her children, or even her mother. In fact, this contributed to her becoming a very unhappy and bitter woman in her middle age and later years.

One may question whether this tendency to seal off a secret part of oneself is characteristic of women only or whether men also do this. Perhaps it depends more on each individual's character. Michel in *Quoi? L'éternité* does not reveal very much about his first wife, Berthe, and her sister Gabrielle and the curious circumstances surrounding their deaths, nor does he reveal very much about Marguerite's mother, Fernande, to her. Both of these instances fall into this category of shutting off a secret part of oneself. Yet, other episodes that Michel shares with his daughter Marguerite are not things that one would normally expect a man to reveal to his *daughter*. In any case, the instances of this shutting off a secret part of oneself in these three works is much more common among the women characters than among the men.

Willingness to do the Unpleasant Tasks

One aspect of women's personalities is their willingness to do the unpleasant tasks that must be done in life, perhaps because society has so conditioned them. In Yourcenar's play *Rendre à César* and also in her novella, *Denier du rêve*, the female protagonist, Marcella, says, "When I was a nurse in Bologna I was always the one who did the dirty work no one else would do. Somebody has to do what others don't have the courage to" (RC 47).

Natacha's mother in *Enfance* refuses to continue doing the unpleasant tasks associated with rearing her young daughter. She assumes that Natacha's father will do these unpleasant tasks, and, to an extent, he does. However, much of the responsibility and burden associated with raising Natacha when she arrives in Paris to live with her father and step-mother falls on the shoulders of Véra, the woman. Unfortunately, certain experiences interchanged between Véra and Natacha are hurtful to either one or the other; the father seems unaware of these episodes.

Although Jeanne de Reval does not utter the same words as Marcella, her actions indicate a similar feeling in *Quoi? L'éternité*. When her fiancé Johann-Karl loses his sanity, she oversees his care in the asylum, fulfilling duties that a paid nurse or family member should carry out. Later, while on her Grand Tour in Europe, influenced by the teachings of her protestant pastor Niedermayer ("les tâches charitables auxquelles les [Jeanne et Egon] a dressés leur bonne formation protestante" [QE 102]), Jeanne volunteers her time in orphanages and women's prisons, something her mother found rather unusual. In another instance, she, along with her husband, Egon, also actively participates in social causes, volunteering to serve in health institutions, orphanages, and so on—jobs that were not glamorous, in fact, were often downright filthy. Egon was influenced in this by Jeanne and followed her lead. In fact, Michel felt the same thing, and even wondered if Egon's social work in orphanages for young boys might have an ulterior motive. "Michel se demande malgré lui si les motivations d'Egon sont là aussi désintéressées" (QE 153). Michel would not have done these types of volunteer work.

In Desvignes's work, many of the unpleasant tasks also fall on women. Jeanne's mother Mémé takes on the burden of raising Jeanne's daughter Valérie, and for a while Jeanne's son Edmond-Pierre. Mémé was a tired, old woman, succumbing to Alzheimer's disease. Although Jeanne did not mean to shirk her duty as a mother, she put off really assuming that role for more than eight years, while she worked to earn money for the future. When the task of caring for Jeanne's little boy became too much for her parents, Jeanne's cousin Fischer stepped in to assume the responsibility. When Jeanne's second daughter Angéline was "orphaned" (for the "second" time in her life) upon the death of her paternal grandmother, it was Jeanne's sister-in-law who took Angéline in to raise and mother. When the ravages of World War I began to assail the family, Valérie was the one to take each family member (Jeanne, Angéline, and Edmond-Pierre) into her home—a haven of peace and tranquility that she had created. There are many other examples of the woman's willingness to do unpleasant tasks in this text.

It seems that society has conditioned women to take on this responsibility of assuming the unpleasant tasks that need to be done with the rare man indeed who lifts a finger to help.

Summary

In summary, these three works belong to the category of the female *Bildungsroman* because the female protagonist undergoes the process of self-discovery and self-realization. This process entails certain characteristics that are common or similar in all three works, with the female protagonist ending up as a strong, assertive, independent woman,

one who is secure in her knowledge of who she is and what she wants out of life. These women's *Bildungsroman* stories do not end with marriage, as is so often the case with male *Bildungsromane*. Marriage may be a part of the female protagonist's life, but it is not the ultimate goal for which she prepares herself. Of the five women discussed here (Jeanne de Reval, Jeanne Berthouin, Natacha, Marguerite, and Valérie), only Jeanne de Reval marries and takes on the role of "housewife." The other women may marry, but will also pursue careers outside their marriages, finding fulfillment in several areas in their lives, not just in marriage. The two most striking characteristics of these women are: the way they profited from the role of a mentor in their lives, and the way they then went on to become self-reliant and strong on their own. It is also interesting to note what they read in their process of self-actualization. The present discussion of these three works as examples of the female *Bildungsroman* is by no means complete. This area definitely calls for more research and discussion.

Chapter 5

Feminine Interests/Concerns

No critical theory proposes a category such as this as an area peculiar to women writers. Perhaps that is because it is so "obvious." However, theories and discussions on the "images of women" deal with some of these issues. In the three texts under examination in this study, this category merits attention because of the specifically feminist portrayal/slant with which these subjects are treated. These topics are "maternal" or have to do with the "nesting instinct." They are traits that are congenital. Several episodes involving scissors occur in both Sarraute's and Desvignes's works, yet the meaning and interpretations of each of these episodes varies. Scissors are a tool usually associated with women, yet here represent an object of destruction, revolt, and difference. A second concern common to these three works is that of clothes. Are women more concerned with dress than men? Do they describe clothes differently from men? Do their descriptions of clothes reflect other concerns for modesty, nature, the environment, and a woman's vanity? The examination of the role of clothes in these works should begin to provide answers to these questions. In addition to episodes involving scissors and women's clothes in these three works, the role of dolls figures significantly in the lives of each of the young girls, Natacha, Marguerite and Valérie. Although we can find dolls in each work, the description of each episode and its impact on the young girl's life will vary greatly from work to work. A fourth concern for each of these young girls is the effect

of words—on them and on those to whom they utter certain words. There is a particular feminine concern with the influence of words in each of these texts. Many of these topics reflect a "maternal" or "nesting instinct," being more a matter of genes rather than environment.

Scissors

As just indicated, episodes involving scissors appear in both Sarraute's and Desvignes's works. The three scissors episodes in *Enfance* include the scene of Natacha's scissors-slashing of the couch in the Swiss hotel as a defiant act against her German governess; the frightening image in one of her books of the pointed-nose man carrying scissors dripping with blood (this image so frightens her that she glues the pages together so she will not have to see it); and the episode when she passes the scissors to the governess Adèle, who remarks, "On ne t'a donc pas appris chez ta mère que ce n'est pas comme ça qu'on doit passer des ciseaux?" (E 160)—a remark that Natacha interprets as indicating that her mother did not teach her well, and that she must therefore bear some bad signs on her being because of her mother. Patterson views this first scissors episode as Natacha's way of testing authority. Her reaction to the governess's strong admonition in German, "Nein, das tust du nicht" (E 10) is a defiant gesture which Patterson interprets as Natacha's refusal "to abandon control of the direction her life would take, even when this entailed defying adult authority" (153). Ramsay refers to Minogue's interpretation of this scene as the basic structuring principle of *Enfance*, involving "the paradigm of the soft floral silk of the sofa (of the mother's skin) and the sharp steel points of the scissors (the dissecting of the myth of the mother by the writer's pen)" (*The French*

New Autobiographies 126). The third episode involving scissors was discussed earlier in Chapter Four, in the section on reading. There is also the scene of the young Natacha quietly sitting down and carefully cutting apart the pages of a new book. This would make at least four "scissors" or "cutting" scenes, although this last episode is accomplished with a "coupe-papier."

Sabine Raffy in *Sarraute romancière: espaces intimes* describes the three scissors episodes in *Enfance* as "quelque chose entre le malaise, le dégoût, la terreur et le désespoir . . . l'outil de découverte des drames souterrains [et] aussi le redoutable objet qui provoque l'angoisse . . ." (239-240). Valérie Pacôme, Jeanne's daughter, expresses similar feelings in the scissors episode in Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre*. For her mother, Jeanne, scissors should be large, so she can attack an uncut piece of cloth, a means of exploring the unknown, and when the task is completed, one can shout "Victoire!" This metaphor of a plunge into the unknown by cutting into a new piece of cloth will characterize much of Jeanne's life. Her departure from Macôn to Moulins to assume a job was a plunge into the unknown, as was her venture to Russia to become a governess, and likewise for many of her business ventures. She seemed to thrive on this sense of an unknown adventure awaiting her. Valérie, on the other hand, prefers her small embroidery scissors, which Jeanne makes fun of, tiny scissors which make tiny, careful, controlled, timid snips. Valérie is afraid of the large scissors making aggressive slashes in the cloth, preferring her small scissors that she knows and can control easily. Valérie does not like change, and fears the unknown. She prefers order, sameness, and routine, having things within her control and knowing the outcome in advance (if

that is possible). She is comfortable with her small scissors, her embroidery routine, the repetitive movements that are within her control. She differs greatly from her mother, Jeanne, not only in respect to her scissors, but also in her approach to life.

Raffy likens "les grands ciseaux tranchants, à la fois objet de découverte d'un inconnu convoité et danger de mort" in *Enfance*, as depicting "les deux composantes du rapport de Natacha à sa mère, et dessin[a]nt l'image du traumatisme enfantin: la déchirure qu'est l'indifférence maternelle" (240). This observation could also be applied to Jeanne and Valérie: Jeanne's desire for adventure and new discoveries, Valérie's fear of the unknown and the new; also Valérie's childhood trauma of her mother's desertion. One cannot classify Jeanne as exhibiting indifference toward Valérie, as one can Natacha's mother. But she did abandon/desert/leave Valérie and her other two children while they were quite young, and the children carried scars from the mother's absence throughout the rest of their lives. The scissors image and the differing views with which Jeanne and Valérie endow it reveal this rupture and tear in the fabric of their relationship because of the mother's absence.

The scissors episode in *Le Grain du chanvre* also underscores the difference and distance between mother and daughter, and lack of understanding between the two. However, Jeanne seems to be proud that Valérie does possess a love for sewing as she herself does, even if it is expressed differently. Valérie, too, seeks common ground with her mother yet desires to be different, perhaps as her own silent protest against this mother who abandoned her to the care of grandparents for so many years.

Thus in both of these works the scissors image serves to emphasize the break in the mother-daughter relationship and the differences between mother and daughter based upon the trauma experienced by the child when abandoned by the mother to the care of others.

Clothes

When questioned about the importance of her physical appearance as a teenager by Benmussa, Sarraute responded that it mattered greatly. "J'étais très mal habillée, ma belle-mère ne m'habillait absolument pas, j'étais très moche." Benmussa responded, "Tu me fais rire . . . Tu ne choisissais pas toi-même tes vêtements?" Sarraute answered, "Non!... Si ça comptait? Bien sûr!" (101). These remarks by Sarraute in an interview reflect a certain concern on the part of women not only for their appearance, but specifically for the clothes they wear. The following examples taken from Sarraute's, Yourcenar's and Desvignes's texts suggest that a woman writer's depiction of the clothes worn by her female characters has a certain flavor to it that reflects a feminine point of view.

When Natacha returns to her mother's home in Russia, Sarraute describes the beautiful winter coat and stiff leather gloves that Natacha's father has bought her in Paris. "Il [le manteau] est très joli, en effet, bleu foncé, avec un col et des parements de velours bleu" (E 68). She describes how her father had a hard time putting the gloves on her hands,

je porte mes gants de peau . . . papa accroupi devant moi sur le trottoir, à la sortie d'un magasin, à Paris, avait eu beaucoup de mal à les enfiler sur mes doigts que je tenais raides et écartés, mais les gants se sont détendus comme l'avait promis la vendeuse, et maintenant la pression se ferme facilement sans pincer, sans plisser la peau du poignet. (E 68-69)

She also lovingly described the beautiful clothes of the doll which her father had bought her and with which she never felt comfortable. "Elle est très belle... elle a une robe de tulle blanc, une ceinture de satin bleu, des souliers et des chaussettes bleus et un grand noeud bleu dans les cheveux" (E 49). She also describes the shoes that she and her nanny Gacha wore and compares them with those in the store windows that they enjoyed looking at when on their daily walk.

Nous aimons, Gacha et moi, rester à contempler dans la vitrine d'un magasin de chaussures, elle, des souliers noirs vernis à hauts talons, ils sont très beaux, elle a raison, et moi des souliers noirs vernis d'enfant qui ont des talons un peu plus hauts que ceux de miens, presque comme ceux des grandes personnes... (E 69-70)

Even the descriptions of her mother reflect a certain feminine tone, associating words such as "rose," "doré," "étincelante" with her mother, whose skin was "soyeuse et douce." She even describes the mother's hairstyles, and how the latest one really did not suit her.

C'est surtout sa nouvelle coiffure, ces deux rouleaux lisses et foncés de chaque côté du front, comme ceux que porte Véra... ils ne lui vont pas, ils donnent à son visage, qui ne ressemblait à aucun autre, quelque chose de banal, d'un peu dur... (E 251)

When she describes Véra dressed in her Papa's suit, there is still a feminine tone to the description, "elle a sur la tête son chapeau melon sous lequel elle a dissimulé son chignon, mais des bouclettes tombent sur ses joues, sur sa nuque [. . .] ses yeux d'un bleu très clair sont comme transparents [. . .]" (E 64). Other descriptions, although brief, still contain indications that it is a woman who has written them, i.e., the nursemaid "coiffée d'un haut bonnet brodé de perles..." holding Natacha's elder sister who died of scarlet fever (E 118).

Yourcenar is known for her love and protection of animals and concern for the environment. This filters through in her depiction of

Jeanne de Reval's character, interests and descriptions of her clothes. Both Jeanne and Egon seem to be most attuned to each other when together out in nature, silently communicating with each other and the animals that surround them. The scenes depicted during this time of their courtship are reminiscent of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Julie's oneness and attunement with nature. Two episodes which describe Jeanne's clothes attest to Yourcenar's defense of animals and abhorrence of killing animals for their furs. While preparing her wedding trousseau before her marriage to Egon, the narrator remarks on the difficulty caused by Jeanne's preferences. "Comme Jeanne refusait *les plumes et les fourrures*, ses manteaux d'hiver et les parures du soir présentaient des problèmes" (QE 108, my italics). As indicated earlier⁴⁴ when Marguerite sees Jeanne again in Brussels after a four-year absence, she remarks on her clothes: "Elle n'avait pas changé. Son visage était resté le même sous son grand chapeau que n'encombraient *ni plumes d'autruche ni oiseau mort*" (QE 250, my italics). Is this concern for animals and the protection of animals a more feminine trait than a male one? These descriptions of a woman who refused to adorn her clothes with animal feathers or furs seems to illustrate a feminist attitude. Even Yourcenar's descriptions of the fabric, color, and cut of Jeanne's clothes seems to be more the perspective of a woman than that of a man. In the same passage cited above at Jeanne's and Marguerite's reunion in Brussels, her dress is described: "Sa jupe de soie gris argent, coupée en biais, se tendait de la hanche au jarret, découvrant ainsi quelques centimètres de bas minces et des souliers bas, au lieu des bottines à

⁴⁴This passage was quoted in full in Chapter Four in the section concerning "Unusual" Women. Only the excerpts that pertain to her clothes are restated here in this section.

boutons . . ." (QE 250). Few men would even know what "cut on the bias" means. Men writers have also carefully described the clothes of their female characters, but Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes bring a certain woman's perspective to their descriptions of the feminine adornment of their women characters.

Jeanne's clothes are carefully and lovingly described throughout Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre*. In fact, the description of her clothes plays a significant role in her metamorphosis from grieving widow to strong, independent, reborn woman. In Jacqueline Marchand's review of this work for *Cahiers rationalistes* she writes: "On dit que les livres des femmes s'attachent plus que ceux des hommes à décrire les toilettes. C'est bien possible, mais ici *chaque robe a une intention*" (74, my italics). As Jeanne travels to Père Pacôme's funeral by train accompanied by her dead husband's business partner, Bouvillon, he contemplates her dressed in her black widow's weeds as she rests in her seat. His observations reveal how unattractive the black mourning looks on her.

Le noir lui tirait la vie des pommettes, lui mangeait la couleur de la peau . . . tout ce crêpe sinistre . . . son voile . . . ne l'empaquetait pas . . . il n'encadrait ses joues qu'au fond . . . et c'était déjà bien suffisant pour déteindre sur la peau et la charger de grisaille. Comment est-ce qu'une pauvre femme pouvait bien réagir, enveloppée pour des années dans ce suaire de morte vive, à ne voir qu'à travers ce rideau de crêpe, à se cogner sans cesse à cette vue du noir pire que les ténèbres? Si jeune, si vive, si colorée—Jeanne devait souffrir plus que n'importe qui de cet emprisonnement dans la nuit. (GC 17)

The terms used to describe her mourning dress are all those associated with imprisonment, enslavement, darkness, death.⁴⁵ Bouvillon broaches the subject of Jeanne's mourning dress and his dislike of it and tries to

⁴⁵Cf. Palasse, Bernadette. "Le deuil de Jeanne dans *Le Grain du chanvre*," *SLD* 2 (77-85).

encourage her to "lighten up." However, he does so out of an ulterior motive, and Jeanne does not succumb to his flattery, or his persuasions.

What Bouvillon is unable to accomplish, another woman, Caroline, does. Jeanne feels the shock of Caroline's presence at the funeral and how she herself comes off badly in a comparison with Caroline. As discussed earlier, Jeanne hates the feeling of Caroline's pity and superiority because of the unattractiveness of the widow's weeds. Her feminine vanity was piqued in the face of this former adversary, Marrain's old girlfriend. Jeanne is amazed at the details she remembers of Caroline's dress.

Ce manteau superbe en drap bordeaux avec son col droit en fourrure noire, avec son mouvement de pèlerine sur les épaules jusqu'à mi-hauteur des bras et une bordure de fourrure noire pour souligner la jolie tombée toute en souplesse—un travail de maître qu'elle aurait aimé faire . . . Le petit chapeau très en avant qui dégagait un énorme chignon doré, une voilette noire qui faisait doux sur le visage, mystérieux, secret. Le manchon en fourrure noire dont elle avait sorti ses mains pour mieux faire comprendre sa compassion et sa supériorité . . . elle avait devant les yeux la cambrure épanouie de Caroline, ce drap bordeaux qui l'enveloppait comme une princesse . . . (GC 33)

Jeanne cannot get the image of Caroline's beautiful clothes out of her mind, or of Caroline's superior attitude. This shock which Caroline brings to Jeanne marks the beginning of Jeanne's "reawakening" to life.

Later that afternoon, with the unexpected arrival of M. Barandelle, Francisque's influential "political" acquaintance, Jeanne seems more open to his scrutiny and gentle remarks. His attitude toward her is neither condescending nor judgmental, rather one of gentleness and understanding. However, even M. Barandelle evinces "une sorte de consternation" when she drapes her veil and black crêpe around herself as she prepares to depart for the funeral, "comme s'il se disait Mais ça n'est pas Dieu possible qu'on arrange une femme de cette façon" (GC 45).

Bouvillon crudely takes it upon himself to express what all the men present feel but do not say, while Jeanne and M. Barandelle hold themselves aloof and apart from his inappropriate remarks. After the funeral, Jeanne returns to Francisque's inn to spend the night. Francisque and Marion try to arrange to eat dinner with Jeanne and their "friend" M. Barandelle. However, because of their duties as proprietors of the inn on this busy evening prior to Market Day, they are constantly called away to perform their duties. Jeanne and M. Barandelle are left alone for most of the evening meal. When the nervous and clumsy servant, accidentally spills red wine on Jeanne's black dress, her sister-in-law Marion whisks her upstairs to try to repair the damage and to find another dress for her to wear. The only thing suitable is a mauve dress which is still a little bit too big. The description of this dress and Jeanne's reactions to her changed image reflect once again a very feminine attitude.

La robe était d'un mauve tendre qui tirait sur le rose. Jeanne la passa comme dans un rêve. Un joli travail, de l'idée et du goût pour la façon, en plus de la qualité de l'étoffe, une soie superbe, souple et douce au toucher. . . c'était une façon raffinée, le corsage en pointe souligné de dentelle ivoire depuis le milieu de la taille jusqu'aux épaules, une encolure carrée, basse, avec une modestie qui remontait sur le cou pour finir avec un ruban étroit de velours noir sous un bord tuyauté. Une belle tombée pour la jupe, avec trois rangs de dentelle superposés. Encore de la dentelle au bord des manches. Raffiné, doux à l'oeil, doux sous la main et sur la peau . . . Jeanne en face de la glace contempla un instant cette femme inconnue qui émergeait du noir comme Cendrillon sortait de ses oripeaux sous la baguette magique de sa marraine. Le reflet de la soie colorait ses joues, sa peau, éclaircissait ses yeux, adoucissait son expression. (GC 70)

Jeanne smiles at this reflection and then her thoughts turn to Caroline and how she would have reacted if she had seen Jeanne dressed in this rather than in her heavy black mourning. "Caroline perdrait sa certitude d'avoir rencontré une épave" (GC 70). This thought gives birth to a sudden "envie

féroce, animale, de détruire cette belle certitude insultante pour elle. Une envie de se battre" (GC 70-71). Marion's understanding and gentle remark about Jeanne's metamorphosis reflect her feminine sensitivity for Jeanne "d'avoir quitté le deuil ce soir sans le vouloir" (GC 70). As Jeanne descends the stairs to return to the dining room of the inn, she loses the courage of this desire to fight; however, M. Barandelle's gentle remark on her appearance, "C'est comme un autre printemps" (GC 72) sets her at ease as they resume their earlier "tête à tête." Desvignes devotes several more pages to this dress and the impact it has on Jeanne, on her parents, and Bouvillon, how Jeanne fears the Mère's reaction if she were to know Jeanne that is wearing this dress of "demi-deuil" and her effort to hide the dress by pinning one of Marion's black skirts over the front of the dress until after saying good-bye to the Mère and returning the skirt to Marion, how Jeanne seductively reveals part of the dress and its reflection of her own beauty to Bouvillon on their return train trip to Tournus and then covers it up again—her silent way of letting Bouvillon know that she is aware of his improper thoughts about her and her response. However, the role of the mauve dress does not end here. Jeanne will wear this dress again during her courtship by M. Barandelle, on a special occasion that reminds them both of their first meeting, the beginning of Jeanne's rebirth, and "le printemps sous la neige"—the promise of a new spring waiting to arrive, and the hope of a better future for the two of them.

Just before Jeanne leaves Bourg to return home to Tournus, M. Barandelle offers to give her a ride home to Cluny at Christmastime to visit her parents, since he has business to see to in that area. She accepts his offer and upon her arrival home begins to think about the new clothes she

will design for herself for Christmas and this second meeting with M. Barandelle. As Bouvillon leaves her at her door, she raises her veil and shows him "coloré par le froid, le visage vivant et rose d'une *femme nouvelle*" (GC 92, my italics). This defiant gesture in Bouvillon's face reflects the change in Jeanne. As she sews Christmas and New Year's dresses for her clients, she ponders the phrase, "La plume refait l'oiseau" (GC 92) and how she too was "un oiseau triste qui s'affublait de tenues claires" (GC 92). Jeanne began to design her new dresses, she "essayait sur la plume nouvelle ses forces de combat revenues" (GC 93). The detailed descriptions of the dresses and the cloak which she fashioned in colors appropriate to half-mourning once again reveal a woman writer's hand.

Elle choisit un pékiné gris très foncé éclairé d'une fine rayure blanche, du velours—noir, bien sûr, mais si lumineux, ce n'était même plus du deuil, . . . Elle tricha avec des cols et des revers blancs, avec des dentelles, avec des jabots volumineux qui faisaient oublier les couleurs sombres. (GC 94)

Desvignes's description of the delight, joy and anticipation with which Jeanne designed her new outfits indicate another feminine aspect of this writing.

Dans cette *fièvre à se confectionner* des toilettes qui repousseraient au loin la pâleur délabrée du fantôme de ces derniers mois, Jeanne découvrit que le fantôme avait déjà cédé la place à une femme dont les yeux reprenaient de jour en jour leur brillant, dont le teint se colorait lentement, dont les cernes disparaissaient, qui *respirait avec plaisir, presque avidité*. (GC 94, my italics)

This pleasure in sewing her new clothes reflects Jeanne's slow, gradual rebirth to live again. Just for fun and "par défi," she designs a completely black dress with no tricks of color or accessories to prove to herself that she is coming back to life, to give herself assurance, and to prove that she is beautiful and has color again in her cheeks. She is filled with "l'orgueil

et le plaisir d'avoir gagné son pari avec elle-même" (GC 95). She wears this dress to the weekly Sunday dinner at the Bouvillons. This dress

en soie noire, avec ses reflets moirés, ses dentelles noires au bas des manches évasées et tout au long du décolleté bien creux—du noir seulement, oui, pas la moindre tricherie, et pourtant dans tout ce noir elle se battait avec ses armes, et on était bien obligé de voir qu'elle gagnait la bataille. (GC 98)

The effect of this dress on Bouvillon reassured Jeanne that her gamble was successful and also served as a kind of revenge on him for his immoral thoughts and desires regarding her. "C'est vrai, elle avait fait cette robe pour se mettre en valeur malgré le noir et que cela la gonflait d'aise d'en voir l'effet sur Bouvillon" (GC 98).

The next article of clothing so lovingly described is the "fanchon" or hood that Jeanne made to wear on the ride from Tournus to Cluny for her Christmas visit with her parents: "un fanchon de laine . . . autour du visage un encadrement de boucles . . . les plis du tricot sur les épaules, pour pouvoir refermer son col sans être engoncée ni boussue . . . c'était noir . . . mais ce n'était pas du crêpe ni du voile ni du deuil étouffant" (GC 100).

Numerous other examples of Desvignes's ability to evoke a woman's pleasure and joy in her clothes so carefully proliferate throughout this text, examples which attest to a woman writer's extra perception in describing feminine attire. Palasse refers to these descriptions of Jeanne's different outfits during this stage of her widowhood as "les symboles de son salut, d'un bonheur à nouveau possible . . . Jeanne, la couturière, va ourler ses robes de couleurs du temps, des nuances de l'émotion retrouvée" (81).

Two more dresses that must be mentioned in this section are the dress Jeanne wore to her sister-in-law Mariette's wedding (when Etienne was her escort), and the wedding dress she designed for her own marriage

to Etienne. The dress she created for Mariette's wedding recalls the first encounter Jeanne had with Etienne:

cette robe en peau d'ange, d'un gris de perle aux reflets chatoyants, qu'elle s'était faite cette dernière semaine pour tâcher de faire renaître dans ses [M. Barandelle] yeux à lui la grâce magique du ton de colchique de leur première soirée. (GC 185)

Jeanne's feminine vanity is appeased this time as she outshines not only her old rival, Caroline, but also her sister-in-law, Mariette—the bride. This time it is Caroline who comes out second-best in her dress "d'un bleu dur, en faille sans douceur, presque comme du métal. Une robe qui se voulait éclatante, la plus élégante de toutes, et qui n'avait que de l'éclat, brutalement" (GC 185). Caroline is so upset at being upstaged by Jeanne's dress with "cette souplesse tendre du tissu et de la façon qui semblait gagner Jeanne de lumière" (GC 185) that she leaves the wedding party early, having barely exchanged ten words with Jeanne. The other dress so lovingly described is the one Jeanne made to wear for her marriage to M. Barandelle:

un ivoire soutenu, "champagne clair" disait la demoiselle de magasin qui lui avait vendu cette soie délicate, avec tout le haut du corsage en guipure, arrondi en corolle et enserrant le cou avec une espèce de sévérité. Cette rigueur, Jeanne la trouvait plus élégante que n'importe quoi, elle avait conçu son modèle à partir de cette dignité de la guipure—la souplesse, les fronces, le beau tomber, cela venait après, et plus bas, comme un correctif de douceur . . . (GC 254)

Palasse remarks "ainsi sont *amoureusement* décrites par l'auteur les étapes d'une métamorphose, toujours dans le *souci du détail vrai*, la couleur de l'instant, ses nuances et son authenticité" (82, my italics).

At the marriage of Jeanne's niece, Lucie, the dresses of Jeanne's two daughters are briefly described: "elles avaient toutes les deux une robe superbe, toute blanche, en broderie anglaise, chacune avec son style" (GC 442), but Jeanne's dress is explained in detail, emphasizing once again how

her clothes make her look younger than she is and more beautiful than the others on this special occasion.

Ce n'est pas pour autant que leur mère n'était pas la plus belle, en rose et gris—et ce gris de la guipure, au fond, qui avait l'air de la sagesse et de la modestie, c'était une subtilité de plus, presque une provocation, car il faisait ressortir le rose pêche de la soie au point d'amener cette femme de trente ans bien sonnés à passer aux yeux de tous pour la plus jeune de la noce. (GC 442)

Jeanne's beautiful creations often make her outshine the other women at the gatherings she attends, even when another woman is supposed to be the center of attention.

Not only is Jeanne a dressmaker, but she wears her clothes as both a mode of self-expression and as a business person. The description of Jeanne's clothes is significant throughout this work, as is that of Valérie's as well. In fact, Desvignes uses her description of Valérie's widow's weeds to once again underscore the difference between Jeanne the mother and Valérie the daughter. While those who observed Jeanne in her widow's weeds described her as belonging to the "living dead," thin, imprisoned and enslaved in this packaging of black crêpe, Valérie was known as "La Belle Veuve." In addition, Jeanne wore her widow's weeds for barely a year, undergoing the metamorphosis and rebirth brought on by her awakening love for Etienne Barandelle. As she experienced this rebirth, the colors, fabrics, and style of her clothes reflected the changes within her. Valérie, on the other hand, wore her widow's weeds like a protective armor, sealing herself off from close contact with other people, making/proclaiming herself unavailable to men who might otherwise be interested.

This detailed analysis of the loving description of women's clothes in Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre* indicates an aspect of *écriture féminine* within her work. Yourcenar's careful descriptions of Jeanne de Reval's

clothes in *Quoi? L'éternité* with her emphasis on Jeanne's refusal to wear anything that was part of an animal (i.e., furs or feathers) also projects a certain women's attitude toward clothes and environmental issues. Finally, Sarraute's descriptions of clothes, facial and physical features also bear the distinctive mark of a woman writer's hand.

Dolls

Dolls are usually associated with the female, even though today's parenting guides often recommend that little boys be allowed to play with dolls because this helps to develop the sensitive, caring, nurturing side of one's character. Dolls appear in all three of these works, but the role of the doll in each work differs greatly. In *Enfance*, both dolls and a stuffed bear play significant roles for Natacha. Natacha recounts an episode of a doll that her father had bought for her, hoping to please her. However, even though she had gazed at the doll in the store window, when given it as a present, she felt uncomfortable with this unfamiliar, hard doll. It was special because it could talk, saying "Papa" and "Mama." The young Natacha wonders why she cannot say more. When left alone with the doll to get to know her better, Natacha still "[ne se] sen[t] pas très à l'aise avec elle. Et avec le temps ça ne s'arrange pas." She has no desire to play with her,

elle est toute dure, trop lisse, elle fait toujours les mêmes mouvements, on ne peut la faire bouger qu'en soulevant et en abaissant de la même façon ses jambes et ses bras légèrement repliés, articulés à son corps raide. Je lui préfère encore les vieilles poupées de son que j'ai depuis longtemps, ce n'est pas que je les aime tellement, mais on peut traiter comme on veut leurs corps un peu flasques, désarticulés, les serrer, les tripoter, les lancer... (E 49)

This type of doll preferred by Natacha reveals the world that Sarraute as a writer is trying to make manifest—the world of the *flasque*. This world is both *flasque* and *mou* as indicated in the earlier scissors scene when the young Natacha slashed the silken couch and allowed "quelque chose de *mou*, de grisâtre s'échapper par la fente..." (E 13). Sarraute wants to reveal what is under the upholstery when you rip it open with the scissors. This doll that she prefers indicates that she does not want to reveal the armored world of well-dressed or well-decorated women, but what slips under that—the *flasque*. She wants to be able to squeeze her doll, to play with it and to throw it, watching the disjointed limbs and limp body as it flops around, trying to reveal/discover what makes it work, what is underneath/inside. These two images of the scissors slashing episode and the *flasque* doll correspond to what Sarraute the writer tries to do with words and language—reveal the hidden meanings, reveal the unsaid, what is just below the surface. She also wants the freedom to play with, fiddle with, toy with the doll/language in order to embark on this discovery.

The most memorable reference to a doll in Sarraute's *Enfance* is when the young Natacha sees a beautiful doll in a store window and compares it to her mother. As we saw earlier, she tells her mother that "la poupée est plus belle que maman" (E 91). This comment immediately evokes an angry response from the mother, who admonishes the child for being a monster and not keeping the mother up on a pedestal.

Three episodes in this work involve Natacha's stuffed "teddy" bear (E 49, 104, 185), something that Marie-France Savéan refers to in her "Notes" at the end of *Enfance* as "un lieu commun de l'enfance" (E 318). This bear is

like a doll to Natacha, her confidente, her comforter, her "security blanket."

Il n'y a que lui qui me soit vraiment proche, Michka, mon ours en peluche, soyeux, tiède, doux, mou, tout imprégné de familiarité tendre. Il dort toujours avec moi, sa tête au pelage doré, aux oreilles droites, est posée à côté de moi sur l'oreiller, son bon nez rond avec sa truffe noire comme ses petits yeux brillants dépasse du drap... je ne pourrais pas m'endormir si je ne le sentais pas là près de moi, je ne pars jamais sans lui, il m'accompagne toujours dans mes voyages. (E 49-50)

Je tiens debout sur mes genoux mon *compagnon*, mon *confident*, mon ours au pelage doré, tout mou et doux, et je lui raconte ce que maman vient de me dire... (E 104, my italics)

Many young children, both boys and girls, often have a favorite stuffed animal, doll, or even a blanket that they may go to sleep with. However, as boys get older, they tend to "give up" this need for a cuddly, comforting doll or stuffed animal (perhaps they are forced to by social pressures). On the other hand, girls tend to hold on to this need for a doll or stuffed animal for much longer, even on into their teen years. Thus, when Natacha returned home from school one afternoon to find that Lili had destroyed her teddy bear Michka, the pain was so intense that she could not even express it. Instead, she just ran to her room, threw herself down on her bed and "[s]e vide de larmes ... " (E 186). The nanny Adèle coldly told her that Lili had torn it up so she had thrown it away. Natacha wanted it so she could repair it, but Adèle said it was no more than a rag anyway, and that "des ours comme ça, on en trouve tant qu'on veut, et des tout neufs, des bien plus beaux ... " (E 185). Adèle seems totally oblivious to Natacha's strong attachment to this stuffed animal and to the pain and fear that she is experiencing at its loss. No other doll or stuffed animal can replace this one, because no other one has been there with Natacha through all the separations, trauma, disappointments, and rejections of her childhood. The

love and affection that Natacha felt for this teddy bear is evident in the opening of this fragment:

[. . .] mon ours Michka que j'ai laissé couché sur mon lit ... il est plus mou et doux qu'il n'a jamais été, quand il fait froid je le couvre jusqu'au cou avec un carré de laine tricotée et on n'aperçoit que sa petite tête jaune et soyeuse, ses oreilles amollies, les fils noirs usés de sa truffe, ses yeux brillants toujours aussi vifs ... il n'est plus là ... (E 185)⁴⁶

This attachment to a doll or stuffed animal is very definitely a feminine trait that often lingers even beyond childhood as evidenced by Sarraute, who wrote this episode as an eighty-year-old woman. Everyone may hold onto a cherished object from their childhood, but for girls, this object will usually be a doll or stuffed animal.

Dolls do not play an important role for Marguerite in *Quoi?* *L'éternité*, except as objects of dislike and derision. She speaks of several of her childhood toys and mentions dolls that had been given to her as presents. She refers to the fact that the people who gave these to her did not know her well if they sent such dolls to her. She did not like these dolls and left them in their boxes hidden in her closet. She also mentions the doll that Jeanne de Reval sent to her from Italy. Just as Natacha referred to the luxurious, elegant, expensive doll that her father gave to her and with which she never felt comfortable, Marguerite also had a similar experience.

Les "belles poupées" qui roulaient les yeux, fermaient les paupières, faisaient quelques pas à l'aide d'une clef tournée à même leurs côtes,

⁴⁶This fragment recounting Natacha's pain at the loss and destruction of her teddy bear Michka, reminds me of two similar episodes from my own childhood and the pain, anger, and frustration that I felt at the loss of this trusted friend and confidante. I can recall the details of this stuffed animal and favorite doll just as clearly today (as a forty-year-old woman) as I could as a child. The feelings may not be as intense now as they were then, but the memories are just as strong.

et disaient "Papa, Maman", me paraissaient bêtes. C'étaient le plus souvent des cadeaux de gens de passage. Heureusement, elles couchaient dans leurs cartons au haut des armoires, d'où les bonnes ne les descendaient pas souvent. (QE 202)

Marguerite continues this recollection of dolls that she had as a child, remembering one that she named André, "tout un hiver, une poupée de dix sous, un bébé articulé en celluloïd m'apprit la maternité" (QE 202). Another memory is triggered by a photograph showing her laughing,

traînant le long d'un escalier une poupée du XVIIIe siècle, relique d'une grand-mère, un peu troublante parce que son visage, ses bras, son buste au corselet lacé de pâte tendre se trouvaient dédoublés, quand on lui rejetait sur la tête sa grande jupe mordorée, par un autre visage, d'autres bras, un autre buste au corselet tout pareils. (QE 202)

Finally, she recalls a doll brought to her from Japan by one of her half-brother's friends, a doll that was

presque plus idole que poupée, une dame de l'époque Meiji, aux vrais cils et aux cheveux véritables . . . Elle était trop grande pour qu'on pût faire autre chose qu'embrasser délicatement ses joues couleur d'abricot, et s'agenouiller pour la contempler, placée toute droite contre le dossier d'un fauteuil. Elle m'ouvrit un monde. (QE 202-03)

Although Marguerite does not have the same attachment to dolls or stuffed animals as do Natacha and Valérie, her descriptions of the dolls that did have an impact on her young life resemble in some aspects those of Natacha and Valérie.

In Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre*, Valérie's mother makes for her several beautiful, carefully sewn dolls. The grandmother constantly repeats the refrain, "Ah, il faut qu'elle t'aime, ta mère, pour te coudre tous ces petits boutons, elle qui s'arrangeait toujours pour les faire coudre par Fanchette . . ." (GC 361). One could even interpret this remark by the Mémé as her effort to convince herself that Jeanne truly loves her daughter, since Jeanne's move to Moulins lasted so much longer than any of them had

ever imagined. Valérie cherishes these dolls as they arrive over the years from her absent mother, carefully keeping the old ones in a drawer. Her friends envy her these elegant dolls, but Valérie envies her friends the constant presence of their mothers. She would gladly trade her doll for the permanent presence of her mother, Jeanne, (with her) in Cluny. She even names her doll "Jeanne," a strong indication of her desire for her mother's presence; she is thus able to pretend that she is with her by replacing the real person with the doll made by that person. However, this is the "private" name of the doll, only used when talking by herself, although her Pépé also knows that she calls the doll by this name. Sometimes she calls the doll "Valérie." The "public" name of the doll is "Françoise" the name Mémé and Valérie's friends use for the doll. When Valérie and her friends play with their dolls together, the others are jealous of Valérie's beautiful *poupée*, even though they are allowed to touch and examine it carefully. However, Valérie prefers playing with her doll by herself, not having to worry that her friends might soil or harm the doll, and also because it affords her the "private" time to speak with "Jeanne," the absent mother whom the doll represents for the daughter. When Pépé brings home Valérie's malnourished, filthy, and neglected half-brother, Edmond-Pierre, the little boy follows Valérie and her doll around the room with his over-large eyes. The Mémé suggests that Valérie get one of her old dolls to give to the infant.

—oh une vieille, une qu'elle a remisee dans son tiroir, pas la belle bien sûr, pas sa Françoise . . . La Mémé est bien gentille mais des fois elle dit des choses comme une grande personne, même quand elle veut s'occuper d'être gentille elle ne dit pas juste ce qu'il faudrait. C'est sa belle poupée qu'elle tend au petit frère, celle qui s'appelle des fois Jeanne et des fois Valérie, selon qu'on veut câliner ou se faire câliner, et la Mémé croit tout bonnement qu'elle s'appelle Françoise, est-ce que ça n'est pas ridicule de penser que vous voudriez toujours

mettre l'image de la tante Françoise entre votre poupée et vous, jamais le Pépé n'aurait supposé ça, lui, il avait toujours sa petite lueur dans l'oeil quand il la regardait tenir sa poupée, il savait bien, lui, qu'elle ne s'appelait pas Françoise. Il savait sûrement aussi qu'elle allait tendre cette poupée-là au petit frère et pas une vieille.
(GC 390-91)

Instead of following Mémé's suggestion, Valérie carefully extends her beautiful doll to the baby. He holds it gently and then reverently returns it to her, seeming to understand by some special unspoken language the significant gesture she has just offered him. Then she goes to the drawer to find one of her old dolls to share with Edmond-Pierre. Does the little boy sense his absent mother's presence in these lovely handmade dolls that his half-sister willingly shares with him? It seems so as he settles down to sleep, comforted by the presence of this doll and the gentleness shown him by his half-sister.

Dolls play an important role in these three works, although they are depicted quite differently from one work to the next. The episodes in each of the three works that describe dolls or stuffed animals reflect a very feminine attitude and perspective in the careful and detailed descriptions of the clothes, facial features, and other special characteristics of each of these dolls. Although Marguerite will not have a strong attachment to dolls, in both *Enfance* and *Le Grain du chanvre* the doll functions as a confidante, a comforter, almost a substitute for the absent mother. This is quite typical of a female's feelings toward a doll, demonstrating the woman's maternal nesting instinct, and for this reason this is one more example of how these texts exhibit a feminist point of view and/or style of writing.

Powerful Effect of Words

The experimentation with memory, remembered episodes from their childhoods and an attempt to recreate their own past (Sarraute, Yourcenar, and Desvignes), as well as that of their ancestors, (Yourcenar and Desvignes) lead these women writers to evaluate the powerful effect of words. Numerous instances occur in each of these three texts which emphasize the power of words. There seems to be a large preponderance of episodes dealing with the hurtful, painful, fearful effect of words. However, instances also occur in which words have the power to soothe and comfort. Each of the young female protagonists in these works possesses a hypersensitivity to the effect of words, and in all three works it is often the words uttered by the adults that serve as the catalyst that unleashes the action.

The effect of words to hurt in these texts belies the childhood taunt of "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me." Words in Sarraute's and Desvignes's texts cause much pain, fear, even terror, and in Desvignes's and Yourcenar's texts words force the female protagonist to flee and change her domicile. Went-Daoust finds that Sarraute "weighs" (*soupeser*) words in order to find an adequate place in their interpretation. She needs to examine and re-examine the "mots gênants" which come to life under her pen, and to "cerner" the significance in the spatial-temporal perspective in which they have been pronounced, attempting to distill the parasitic meanings which over time have attached themselves to these words in order to determine their real weight/force/significance/importance ("*Enfance*" 345). Sarraute dislikes

words that label or inflict pain, words "comme une manifestation d'intolérance, de fascisme, de terrorisme intellectuel" ("Portrait" 22).

Brulotte observes that the first thing to strike the reader of Sarraute's universe is that all of her work "met en scène la lutte du conformisme et de la lucidité, de l'ordre répressif et de la liberté de l'esprit, du langage installé, convenu et des images simples qui véhiculent nos émotions franches" (40). Sarraute tries to show this struggle in her work through tropisms, "ces mouvements innombrables, innommables, subtils et complexes."⁴⁷ Brulotte finds that this "lutte qui est le grand thème de son univers se reflète aussi dans la construction de ses oeuvres" (41). She quotes Sarraute: "L'intrigue se fait sur deux plans: il y a le mouvement des tropismes qui seul m'intéresse et puis il y a l'apparence."⁴⁸ In other words, "le ressenti profond et le masque" (41).

Much has been written on the power and influence of the mother's word(s) and how sensitive Natacha is to these utterances. Natacha takes these words at face value, believing them to be "gospel-truth." One example of this occurs when her mother warns her not to touch an electric pole because she would die. The child takes this as a dare, and touches the pole, then cries out to her mother that she is now dead. The mother thinks her a fool, having already forgotten the careless words she had uttered in the hopes of keeping Natacha from doing just what she did. On another occasion Natacha tries to get her mother to eat a spoonful of dirt. The mother becomes quite irritated with Natacha, but Natacha wants a younger baby sibling and the mother had told her that babies come from dirt, so

⁴⁷"Ce que je cherche à faire." *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui* 2, Paris: UGE (10/18, 1972): 41-58.

⁴⁸"Ce que je cherche à faire."

Natacha thought she could obtain her desire by following through on what the mother had said.

Tiens, maman, s'il te plaît, avale ça... [. . .] Tu m'as dit que c'est comme ça que j'ai poussé dans ton ventre... parce que tu avais avalé de la poussière... avale encore celle-ci, je t'en prie, fais-le pour moi, je voudrais tant avoir une soeur ou un frère... [. . .] Tu m'as dit ça. Et tu as dit aussi, je t'ai entendue... tu as dit que tu serais contente d'avoir encore un enfant... Alors fais-le, maman, tiens, avale... (E 29-30)

The mother's words often exclude and/or isolate her daughter. At the end of the preceding episode, the mother's response to Natacha's insistent effort to have her swallow the dirt, indicates this. "Oh, écoute, arrête de me *tourmenter* avec tes questions... Tu ferais mieux de jouer, comme tous les enfants, au lieu de *traîner derrière moi* sans rien faire, tu ne sais plus quoi inventer, tu vois bien que *je suis occupée*... (E 30, my italics). When the mother chastises Natacha for wanting to enter the playful "fight" she and her husband Kolia are having, she tells Natacha, "Femme et mari sont un même parti" (74), indicating that her child has no place in this relationship. On two different occasions she refuses to allow Natacha to call Véra "maman,, stating that "Tu n'as au monde qu'une seule maman" (104)—this just before Natacha's departure from Russia to Paris to visit/reside with her father and "new" step-mother. Later, when a common bond of friendship, understanding and "love" is established between Natacha and Véra, they write to Natacha's mother requesting permission to call Véra "maman-Véra" (already a conciliatory gesture), the mother writes back with a condemning refusal.

Il y avait dans cette lettre... le chagrin, l'indignation de maman... Il faut manquer de coeur, être insensible, ingrat, oublier les liens les plus sacrés, ce qu'on doit avoir de plus cher au monde, sa mère, un nom qu'aucune autre femme ne peut porter, pas question de dire même... c'était l'alternative que je lui avais proposée... "maman-

Véra". Ce nom, maman, ne peut s'accoler à aucun autre. Je n'avais sur terre qu'une seule mère... et elle n'était pas encore morte... (E 217)

Natacha is reduced to bitter tears. "Mes larmes, celles d'autrefois, taries depuis près de deux ans... mais comme à cet âge-là les années étaient longues... ces larmes reviennent plus âcres encore, plus rongeantes" (E 217). Although the mother's argument that she only has one mother is true, it is a mother who has abandoned the child to the father and his second wife, a woman who seems willing to accept the role of mother if Natacha desires it. The "aussi liquide qu'une soupe" episode is often cited as an example of how Natacha internalizes her mother's law (Hewitt 79; Minogue, *Nathalie Sarraute and The War* 334). There is also the instance when the mother describes Natacha as "un monstre" because she wants to go on a picnic with Véra. The mother often refers to Natacha as "un monstre" and continually emphasizes how she is not like other, "normal" children. The power of the thoughtless, carelessly uttered words, *dictons*, judgments, and insults that the mother speaks in Natacha's presence is evident in the fact that the adult narrator of eighty-three has remembered them so vividly for more than seventy years, and has been able to inscribe them so graphically in this autobiographical *récit*. While the mother's words and actions have this incredible power to inflict pain on the young child, the father's actions (not *words*) generally reflect much more empathy, caring, concern, and even "love," although Sarraute herself employs this term sparingly. No critics have written on the power of the father's words, because there are no episodes which are triggered by his speech like the numerous scenes evoked because of the mother's words, this mother who uses language as a weapon.

Another aspect of the power of words to harm resides in the lies that the young children were told, lies which led to their mistrust and sense of betrayal. This power of words to hurt, especially lies, has been carefully recorded in Sarraute's play *Le Mensonge*. Claude-Marie Senninger describes her class's presentation of this play with the input and help of Sarraute herself in the article "Un Mensonge (Le Nôtre . . .)." In their production of this play, the cast/class learned

que la communication, quelle que soit l'époque, était "une condition *sine qua non* de la vie humaine et de l'ordre social", que cette communication était bouleversée par le scandale du mensonge, que l'être humain qui "se trouve dès sa naissance engagé dans le processus complexe de l'acquisition des règles de la communication" se cabre contre cette anomalie que constitue le mensonge . . . Le mensonge met mal à l'aise. (88)

Senninger describes Sarraute's work as having exploited "les cataclysmes et les bouleversements de notre moi intérieur" and having proved that these are infinitely important in our daily life (88).

In *Enfance*, Natacha's mother inflicts great pain on her daughter with her numerous lies, leading the child to believe that she was to have a visit from a beloved grandmother when in reality she was to have surgery for a tonsillectomy, cajoling her to eat something by saying it was strawberry jam when in fact it was calomel, a bitter-tasting medicine. The most piercing episode of betrayal took place when her mother broke their secret written code of communication to chastise the father because Natacha was not happy. Patterson describes Natacha's unkind observations and comments about her mother as "a masochistic streak in her which makes her incapable of keeping certain thoughts to herself" (153). Telling her mother that her skin is like a monkey's, and admitting that she finds the doll in the store window more beautiful than her mother angers the

mother. While Natacha's words may seem cruel and thoughtless, she is experimenting with her language and the power it could afford her, and at the same time gaining the attention of her mother, albeit negative attention. Patterson observes that, "already ambivalent about the responsibilities of raising this daughter, her mother reacts with annoyance, telling Natacha that a child who loves her mother will consider no one else as beautiful" (153). Always hypersensitive to words, especially those uttered by her mother, Natacha "interprets this as an indication that she is not like other children, that she is some kind of monster" (153). Although Patterson describes *Enfance* as "the drama of an abandoned child who seeks and needs her mother's love but finds it always just out of reach, she also views the mother's return to Paris and the child's stay with her just before World War I as a careful indication by Sarraute "not to leave her reader with a totally negative picture of this mother-daughter relationship" (154).

Went-Daoust's analysis of the words of the mother and those of the father determines that the mother's words (to use the categories outlined by Mikhaïl Bakhtin) are received by the child as "une parole autoritaire" rather than as "une parole persuasive." Normally the "parole autoritaire" is attributed to the father, but in this work it was the father who fulfilled the maternal role, so he is associated with "la parole persuasive et dynamique." "Sa parole est liée étroitement à celle de l'enfant et détermine beaucoup plus son 'devenir idéologique' que celle de la mère" ("*Enfance*" 345). Yet, in her bid for independence from the mother's authority and the initial break with the Russian side of her being, Natacha comes to a point at which she paradoxically harmonizes the words "qui scelle la distanciation

par rapport à la mère" (347). She rejoins the two aspects of her being, the Russian and the French, and, as Went-Daoust observes, masters the conquest of independence. "C'est étrange, il y a des mots qui sont aussi beaux dans les deux langues... écoute comme il est beau en russe, le mot 'gniev', et comme en français 'courroux' est beau... " (E 258).

Véra, the step-mother, also has the power to inflict hurt with her words to Natacha. One episode that indicates this occurs when Véra tells Natacha that her father's house is not her house. "'Ce n'est pas *ta* maison'... On a peine à le croire, et pourtant c'est ce qu'un jour Véra m'a dit. Quand je lui ai demandé si nous allions bientôt rentrer à la maison, elle m'a dit: 'Ce n'est pas *ta* maison'" (E 130, my italics). These words and Véra's tone of voice so affected Natacha that she never again uttered "à la maison." "Jamais plus d'"à la maison," tant que j'ai vécu là, même quand il fut certain que hors de cette maison il ne pouvait y en avoir pour moi aucune autre" (E 132). On another occasion while walking together in the park of Montsouris Véra says to Natacha in Russian, "on t'a abandonnée" (E 182). This remark in Russian was much more forceful and cruel than in French with the Russian word more the equivalent of the verb "'jeter', mais qui a de plus un préfixe irremplaçable, qui veut dire 'sous', 'par en dessous' et cet ensemble, ce verbe et son préfixe, évoque un fardeau dont subrepticement on s'est débarrassé sur quelqu'un d'autre" (E 183). Natacha admits that these words hurt her, but at the same time "leur brutalité même [l]'apportait un apaisement" (E 184) because she realized that it was not her fault that she was rejected and unwanted by the others (her mother) but that the decision had been made elsewhere. She just had to stay where she was, she had no choice or say in the matter. So even though Véra's words

caused her pain, these words also allowed her to begin to see that it was the mother who rejected and abandoned her, and not really for any good reason or fault of Natacha's. Another episode involving Véra's words occurs near the end of the *récit*, when Natacha asks if Véra hates her, "Dis-moi, est-ce que tu me détestes?" (E 272). As she awaits Véra's response, she tries to imagine what Véra might say, what words she would find, and how she would answer. Véra's response hurts Natacha and instead of answering her question, fills her with even more questions, "Comment peut-on détester un enfant?" (E 273, my italics). It is the "on," the anonymous, indefinite pronoun, a word that indicates "les gens normaux, les gens moraux, ceux qui sont comme on doit être, ceux dont elle fait partie" (E 274), that hurts Natacha and leaves her wondering what it is about herself as a child that makes her detestable to others.

No other episode so clearly underscores the power of words as the fragment relating Natacha's failed effort at writing a novel. When Maman had Natacha show her work to her publisher/uncle/friend, his harsh, disdainful criticism was that she first needed to learn how to spell. This episode has been interpreted several different ways. Some (Vercier) find that Natacha experiences relief with this criticism, "as if she had just come through a painful but necessary operation" (Patterson 156). Others find this criticism harsh, biting, condemning, and very hurtful. Havercroft interprets this as an agonising scene for the young Natacha, but a scene which "reprend tous les éléments scripturaux auxquels Sarraute l'écrivaine s'est toujours opposée" (142): words which were not hers, borrowed words, stereotypical words and fairy tale characters. Such an examination and rethinking of this scene transforms the failure into a sort of deliverance,

"puisque la voix narratrice (et la lectrice) est capable de reconnaître le contraste entre son écriture toute faite et stérile d'autrefois et, implicitement, celle, vivante, des textes de Sarraute écrivaine" (Havercroft 142). One critic has even theorized that this early condemnation of her original writing attempt may be the reason why she did not take up her own literary creations until her mid-thirties.

However, it is not only the power of words to hurt, anger and instill terror which appears in these works, but also the power of words to soothe and comfort. Vercier notes the importance of the break with Natacha's maternal Russian side and the positive adherence to the paternal "French" side (French because France is where the father resides for the rest of his life) and observes that it is marked by "le désapprentissage tout à fait caractéristique de l'écriture déjà acquise et l'apprentissage d'une nouvelle écriture" (E 133)" (166). He makes this observation in light of the episode dealing with the severe judgment of the mother's friend in regards to Natacha's early literary attempt. Went-Daoust remarks on the joy with which Natacha succumbs to this re-education, "les mots dispensent à l'enfant ses joies les plus authentiques, deviennent ses consolateurs et ses guides" ("*Enfance*" 344-345). Natacha finds comfort in the solitude of her room, where she is left alone to do her homework or, as Went-Daoust so poetically puts it, "dans le secret de sa chambre" (345). Natacha describes her various writing assignments: "Les mots de la dictée, choisis pour leur beauté, leur pureté parfaite" (E 167); "style ampoulé"(E 244), "un sentiment d'exaltation" (E 244), "un sujet en or" (E 207). According to Went-Daoust, words for Sarraute end up by occupying "toute la scène; sortes d'amulettes

avant d'être les protagonistes à part entière de ses livres" (345). The powerful effect of words is the predominant theme of Sarraute's *Enfance*.

This effect and power of words is also evident in Yourcenar's text. Two flights are necessary in *Quoi? L'éternité* for Jeanne de Reval because of words. The difference between these two flights underscores the precarious position of the woman's reputation and the need to protect it. Following her fiancé's mental breakdown and incarceration in a mental institution, Jeanne maintained the role of faithful fiancée, regularly visiting Johann-Karl, and even moving into his home in order to be closer to him and be able to make daily visits. However, as mentioned earlier, this unusual and unorthodox behavior in a young woman at that time gave rise to many rumors and speculation about Jeanne's reputation and conduct. Once the doctors deemed it best for Johann-Karl to have no more visitors, and Jeanne returned to her mother's residence, her mother felt it necessary to leave their hometown to escape these rumors and also to provide Jeanne with a change of scene. The second flight was the departure from Rome by Jeanne and Egon following the arrest of Franz for selling drugs and having stolen family heirlooms from an Italian nobleman. This time the scandal involved Egon, but, being a man, he did not have to run and hide from what others were saying. Upon their return to Paris, they learned that details of the scandal had even been reported in the newspapers there, yet they carried on with their lives. However, this event and the account published in the newspaper were elements that played a part in the termination of Jeanne's relationship with Michel. His words to her were so insulting and hurtful that, once said, they could not be unsaid: the damage was irrevocable. Michel had underestimated Jeanne's

morals and ideals, her strength as a woman, her commitment to her husband and children. His thoughtless and hurtful words destroyed this relationship with the only woman he had ever really loved.

Telling lies to a child also occurs in Yourcenar's text. The young Marguerite felt a similar betrayal and mistrust, as did Sarraute's Natacha, when lied to about the forced departure of her favorite nanny, Barbe, because she had taken the young child with her to "la maison des femmes." The whole family left for the day on a "grande excursion," Marguerite evincing surprise that Barbe was not accompanying them, but being told that she would join them soon. Upon her return home, she goes to her room, but no longer sees any traces of Barbe's presence. Crying loudly, she seeks out her father, who admits that Barbe had to return home, perhaps for several months. Marguerite writes, "un poids énorme pesait sur moi: on m'avait menti. Je ne fis désormais plus entièrement confiance à personne, pas même à Michel" (E 220). Both of these young girls, Natacha and Marguerite, were so strongly affected by these lies told to them as children that when they recorded them as adult writers they emphasized the pain they caused, and the mistrust they engendered.

Conversations by adults overheard by children also have the power to inflict pain and instill terror. Natacha overhears her mother's surprised response to her uncle's observation about Véra. Natacha did not hear the whole conversation and later insists that her mother tell her who they were talking about and what the end of the phrase was.

"Tu as dit: 'Elle est...' Qui c'était, elle?" Maman hésite et puis elle dit: "Elle — c'était Véra, la femme de ton père. — Elle est quoi? — Rien... — Si, il faut que tu me le dises: Qu'est-ce qu'elle est?" Maman a l'air de penser à quelque chose qui l'amuse... "Eh bien, si tu veux le savoir, il m'a dit qu'elle est bête." (E 110)

Natacha holds onto this remark as a talisman against the "evil step-mother," because the words were uttered by her adored mother.

A similar episode happens to Valérie when she overhears her Mémé speaking to her friend, Mme Ledoyen, about all the troubles that have beset Jeanne. Valérie's image of men is that they are all evil, because that is the only kind of man portrayed in Mémé's stories involving her mother, Jeanne, stories that differ greatly from the ones told by her teacher at school, stories with charming princes and happy endings. Both of these young girls take certain adult explanations at their "face value," interpreting them literally. Natacha is especially sensitive to words, something that goes totally unnoticed by her mother as indicated by the two examples of the "poteau électrique" and "la poussière," which were discussed earlier. A similar episode involving words occurs in *Le Grain du chanvre*, when Valérie overhears Mémé talking about Jeanne's close brush with death, but the word that the little girl focuses on is "disappear." She goes running into the house in tears, crying that she doesn't want Mémé to go away. Mémé, unaware that Valérie had been eavesdropping, has no idea of why she is so upset, telling her friend "Vous voyez, Madame Ledoyen, ça n'est plus de mon âge d'élever des enfants. Surtout cette petite-là, elle a l'air comme ça tranquille, sérieuse, ah ouiche c'est nerveux et compagnie, toujours en alarme, toujours en angoisse," and soothing her with caresses and a special liqueur to calm her.

Literal interpretations of expressions overheard by children and the children's attempt to make sense of these unfamiliar words are characteristic of both Sarraute's and Desvignes's works. An episode with Valérie mentioned earlier but not quoted involves the expression that

"Jeanne est traitée de *porte-guigne* et accusée d'avoir le 'mauvais oeil' pour avoir réussi à faire mourir deux hommes coup sur coup" (GC 364). Dumas indicates that Lucette Desvignes is able to develop "une interprétation à la lettre, naïve et poétique, de l'expression *porte-guigne* . . . par le truchement des réflexions de l'enfant" (39).

Ma chère Maman Porte-guigne, c'était un mot si joli, tout tendre aussi, une guigne c'est une cerise. Je m'en souci comme d'une guigne, disait des fois le Pépé pour rire, at avec son ongle il faisait un bruit comme s'il écrasait une puce et c'était comme pour envoyer bien loin une cerise pourrie. Une porte-guigne c'était une dame qui avait des pendants d'oreilles en cerises, pourquoi est-ce qu'on ne pourrait pas dire ça tendrement à sa mère, elle la voyait avec ses yeux noirs tout brillants avec un sourire heureux avec de la gaieté tout partout, avec des grosses cerises rouges, deux de chaque côté qui dandolaient joyeusement. (GC 367)

Dumas points out that only a child who has not yet mastered the polysemic mechanism could express such astonishment at the incongruity of a literal interpretation of these "métaphores complètement lexicalisées." She also claims that adults no longer know how to play with words (40).

Are young girls more sensitive to the powerful effect of words than boys? In light of the feminist examination of these three texts, this question does have merit; however, it will need to be examined in another study. Yet it is evident from the above discussion that words have a powerful force and play a significant role in the lives of the three young protagonists—Natacha, Marguerite, and Valérie. Words not only affect the development and self-image of these young girls, but also affect the perceptions of the adult women who surround them—Natacha's mother, Jeanne de Reval, and Jeanne Berthouin. Instances of the power of words to both hurt and comfort abound in all three texts, and this may be because women seem to be more attuned to the nuances and inflections of words and the tone of voice in which they are uttered than are men. These young

girls also exhibited a delightful sense of "playing" with words, trying to make sense in creative and imaginative ways of words or phrases which they did not understand.

Summary

In Chapters One and Two of Part Two I have demonstrated how these three texts exhibit characteristics of women's autobiographies and of the style and structure of *écriture féminine*.

In Chapter Three I examined family relationships stressing the effect of the mother's absence and indifference on the daughter's development, how the fathers are "maternal," how love is sought and portrayed in these different works, how death is treated, and how fate or destiny is perceived.

Chapter Four discussed why and how these three works may be classified as examples of female *Bildungsroman*, stressing the self-actualization process of the female protagonist, the role of mentors in her life, how moving from the country to the cities aided in her development, how her reading influenced her and how the woman protagonist in each of these works was a unique, "unusual" woman, one who "broke new ground," who broke the stereotypical image of women during her lifetime. In addition, I examined how women tend to hide a secret part of oneself, and are more likely to be willing to do unpleasant tasks than men.

Finally, in Chapter Five I analyzed certain feminine issues, often related to the maternal "nesting" instinct, which appear in all of these works and reflect a particularly feminine perspective. These include the image of scissors, the role and presentation of clothes in these works, how

the role of dolls or stuffed animals differs in each work, and the power of words to both hurt and comfort.

The way each of these women writers deals with these topics varies, but a common feminist slant pervades all of them in each work.

Conclusion

Men can perhaps write like women and women like men. There are definitely at least two sides to this issue. Brady writes that "we all have both male and female elements in our nature, in varying degrees" ("Editorial" 36). In some people the feminine side is more pronounced and in others it is the masculine side that is dominant. The case is usually for women to have a more dominant feminine side and for men to have a more dominant masculine side. However, this may vary. The argument in this study is that, although Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes claim that there is *not* a feminine aspect to their writing, there are in fact numerous examples that indicate the opposite, that they are indeed "*women* writers," whose writing possesses distinctive characteristics peculiar to *écriture féminine*, women's autobiographies, and other aspects of femaleness, femininity, and womanhood. They are *romancières*.

In Part One of this study I asked the question, "Is there a distinctive feminine style of writing?" My answer is affirmative; however, we must admit that there are variations of feminine writing within a category of writing by women. Chapter Two of Part One presented the authorial attitudes of Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes, who reject such a claim, denying the existence of an *écriture féminine* especially when applied to their own particular works. These women refuse to accept the label of being a "*woman* writer," insisting instead that they be called "writers." This attitude arises because a bias inherently exists in the term "woman"

writer, knowing that one is to be read as a woman, but no such distinction or bias exists in the term "writer." Leah Hewitt remarks on how

a female name attached to an autobiography particularizes the text in ways that a male name does not. Whatever position a contemporary woman autobiographer takes vis-à-vis the autobiographical tradition, she is aware that gender affects the reading of her position, *whether she likes it or not*. (2, my italics)

Hewitt argues "that issues of gender play a role in the persistence of the autobiographical subject" and that gender-marked writing does exist simply *because one is a woman* (4, my italics).

Germaine Brée delineates several differences between men's and women's autobiographies, stating that the male autobiography tends to be linear and teleological, employing the rhetoric of assertion, while the female autobiography tends to be circular and fragmented with the rhetoric of seduction (224). She then quotes from Domna Stanton's article "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" in which Stanton admits that she has a "'feeling' that the gender of the 'subject' does make a difference and the gender of the author did make a difference at the discursive 'point in time'," thus posing the dilemma of definition versus feeling (224).

Adèle King espouses a similar position in her book *French Women Novelists*.

Texts written by a woman may show particular characteristics of language influenced by her gender, *whether or not she is conscious of these characteristics*. It is of interest, however, to see what the authors . . . have said on this subject. . . Nathalie Sarraute said: 'at the level where tropisms are found, everyone feels in the same way' (Besser, 1976, 284). Marguerite Yourcenar seemed to believe that certain qualities—kindness, gentleness, delicacy—are feminine; and also that in great male authors there is a tendency towards total impersonality, which is much rarer in women (Yourcenar, 1980, 267-72). Nevertheless, she was against theories of sexual specificity in literature. She accepted a rather conventional distinction between masculine and feminine, but then denied its validity, *at least for her own work*. (40, my italics)

For many years feminist critics accepted both Sarraute's and Yourcenar's claims that a feminine style of writing does not exist, and that their own style was neutral or androgynous. However, within the last decade feminist critics have taken a closer look at Sarraute's and Yourcenar's works, disagreeing with these claims and discovering that these two writers do indeed belong to the category of "women" writers whose writing style possesses many characteristics of *écriture féminine*. In a 1981 interview Sarraute rather proudly stressed the fact that her works were unique and that they had escaped criticism by feminist critics. She said,

J'ai encore échappé de justesse à la vogue de la littérature féminine. Mes textes n'ont jamais été portés par un courant accepté par tout le monde. C'est toujours quelque part en marge et à l'encontre de ce qui est 'bien'. Ce n'est pas du néo-classique, qu'on apprécie toujours, ce n'est pas du roman: c'est une sorte de monstre, une curiosité, quelque chose de bizarre, un peu en dehors du cours normal de la littérature. (Licari 5)

Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes have attempted to overcome this narrow, limiting view of being labeled "women" writers. However, as just indicated, feminist critics have discerned within their works characteristics that indicate that these three women have followed in the steps of earlier women writers and what certain feminist critics of the 70s and 80s have discerned/defined/discovered as *écriture féminine*, whether these three women writers like it or not. Each of these women has created something new within her literary style, having created a "new" language that allows her to express what is within herself while using the dominant, traditional (male) language.

King refers to Béatrice Didier's *L'Ecriture Femme* and remarks that although Didier rejects any theory that would classify all women's writing

as a single entity, she does identify some tendencies within women's writing. Four of these characteristics appear in the works of Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes examined in this study. The first is "a lyricism resulting from social prohibitions on women *talking* about themselves, which makes them *write* about themselves instead" (qtd. in King 52, my italics). The second is the "frequent use of *images of childhood* and the *relations between mother and daughter*" (qtd. in King 52, my italics). The third is the recounting of *fewer events, with more breaks in the narrative*. Finally, "the body [is] presented as *women feel it*, not as men thought they did" (qtd. in King 52, my italics). In addition to these characteristics offered by Didier, one must examine these texts in light of the theories of *écriture féminine* proposed by Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva, and others. Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes do offer something new and unique in their writing style, employing "eloquent" silences, blank spaces, suspension marks, fragmentation, multilayering, and an oral and cinematographic feature to their writing. In these autobiographical *récits*/fictions that they have written, they have employed certain traits associated with *écriture féminine* and have also followed certain characteristics of women's autobiographies, especially a reticence to reveal oneself, and the blending of truth and fiction as a protective shield.

Claims by these women of universality in their writings surface successfully in the way in which they make the personal struggles of the female protagonist into the dramas of all subjects in language (Hewitt 91). The daughter's desire for the mother's love relates to every human being's need for love and acceptance. The anguish one feels when rejected by others; the isolation and solitude one experiences because of feeling that

one is "marked" or "different" from others; the joy, freedom, and acceptance that one may find in reading and/or writing are all experiences common to everyone whether male or female. Gisèle Kapuscinski underscores the universality of Sarraute's work, stating that she "ne se limite donc pas à une vision féminine; au contraire, elle incorpore le féminin dans l'universel. Si elle ne se veut pas féministe, ce faisant elle apporte néanmoins une contribution importante à la cause des femmes" (51). This comment applies equally well to both Yourcenar's and Desvignes's texts studied here. However, this concern with universality seems to be paradoxical within these texts. Certainly, there are instances, as just mentioned, where the experiences related in the text do indeed seem to be applicable to all human beings. Yet, as we discussed earlier, there are also episodes within these texts which seem to be peculiar to women, thus, refuting this position of universality. This is an area which is indeed problematic for these women writers.

In all three of these works there is a concern for how the female protagonist(s) relates to others and a strong desire for connectedness. There is a need for fusion and contact with others. Nancy Chodorow's theories on the dissymmetries between girls' and boys' early development and Judith Kegan Gardiner's use of those theories in speaking about women's writing

stress that masculine identity is based on successful separation and individuation from the mother: to be a male is not to be female like the mother; the boy's sense of self is rooted in the need for autonomy and independence. Women's identity, on the other hand, is traced more along relational lines. A girl's early attachment to the same sex (her mother) is never fully broken and her ego boundaries tend to be more permeable, emphasizing contact and fusion with the other rather than differences. . . . Girls' development is said to be more complex [than boys'] because the highly seductive (and unchallenged) union with the mother also entails absolute

dependence and a loss of self. Repeating these scenarios in adulthood, women vacillate between a desire for fusion and contact with the other and a need to separate themselves in relation to others. (Hewitt 68-69)

This desire for harmony and a possible merging with others appears in all three works in this study, which thus illustrates Chodorow's and Gardiner's descriptions of female identity formation and feminine writing (Hewitt 69). Hewitt observes that the authors' denial of feminine writing and of femininity surfaces in these women's works as a rapport with the feminine in general and with the mother in particular (89). However, she remarks that close, communal moments between mother and daughter are overshadowed by the remembrances of anguished experiences of estrangement which heighten the desire for union (79). Natacha desperately seeks her mother's love and approval, Marguerite desires contact with her "idealized mother" Jeanne de Reval, and Valérie ardently wishes for constant contact and communication with her mother Jeanne Berthouin. However, because of the mother's absence, lack of communication, indifference, and selfish pursuit of her own desires/career, the daughter's desires fail to come to fruition. Both Natacha and Valérie at first perceive this failure as a fault on their part, but as they undergo their *Bildung* journey of self-actualization they come to realize that much of the fault lies with the mother. Van Rouy-Roux's proposition that Sarraute "a choisi de centrer son récit sur une . . . dimension qui semble avoir joué un rôle capital dans sa vie; *ses relations avec ses proches, l'abandon progressif* dont elle fut l'objet, tout le monde du non-dit qui l'a entourée, ont *développé chez elle une hypersensibilité quant aux rapports humains et à leurs manifestations les plus subtiles*" (282, my italics), also holds true for Valérie, and in part for Marguerite.

In accordance with Chodorow's theories, the female protagonist's development in *Enfance, Quoi? L'éternité*, and *Le Grain du chanvre* adheres to what Hewitt defines as the dual needs of fusion with the other on the one hand and *self-individuation* on the other (81, my italics). This is in keeping with the argument that these three works are examples of the female *Bildungsroman* as defined by Labovitz, whose definition has been expanded to include three more categories that are common to these three texts. The presence of mentors in the lives of these female protagonists further emphasizes the feminine need for fusion and contact with others and their desire to please. Access to formal education is a delight and a challenge to Natacha and Valérie. It affords a sense of independence and self-worth through its rigor, and facilitates a break with the family milieu. Although Marguerite did not attend school, she followed a rather rigorous curriculum at home under her father's tutelage and enjoyed the break it afforded her from her paternal relatives. All of the female protagonists examined in this study were unusual women who broke the stereotypical images of women at that time. The thoughts, lives, accomplishments, demeanor and mannerisms of these women marked them as unique and unusual, forerunners of the modern woman of the twentieth century. They belong to the category of the "New Woman," a new type of woman who emerged in the late nineteenth century and preceded "Feminism." This woman did not just accept the role given to her of being subservient to the male, raising his children, caring for him and his house. She saw herself as an equal to man, with the right to her own career. She had a clear vision of her own self-respect, self-confidence, and self-worth. The

women protagonists examined in this study clearly belong to this category of the "New Woman."

In each of these works there is an intense childhood need to fuse with others—especially with the mother—the fear of rupture, the agony the child undergoes at feeling shunned by her mother, the act of betrayal, the emotional intensity felt by the young girl, which are all presented in such a way as to reveal a particular feminine point of view. Certain characteristics of standard gender coding prevail in these texts, that of affective identification with the feminine; and reason, accuracy, and critical distance with the masculine. However, there are places in the texts where these feminine and masculine aspects begin to become blurred together. Françoise van Rouy-Roux writes that in *Enfance* Sarraute "met l'accent sur l'émotion déclenchée par l'événement ou encore sur le fait que c'est le souvenir de l'émotion qui suscite le souvenir de l'événement" (276). Emotions or emotional reactions to events also characterize the texts of Yourcenar and Desvignes. However, Yourcenar's Jeanne de Reval and Desvignes's Jeanne Berthouin are women who not only express a strong emotional side to their character, but who also exhibit a strong masculine side with reason and critical distance. Finally, certain subject matter in each of these texts is that of a woman writer, presented in a particularly feminine way. This includes but is by no means limited to the feminine interests of scissors, clothes, dolls and the powerful effect of words.

The problematics of gender specificity within these three texts by Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes encompasses both issues of style and content. I have examined the presence of certain traits of *écriture féminine* (style) within these texts, as well as certain themes and topics

(content) generally associated with women and often treated by women writers. I have also discussed certain characteristics of women's autobiography (style and content) which are present in these texts. As a woman reader, and based on my own life experiences, and on the research and evidence cited above, I perceive evidence of gender specificity within these three works: Sarraute's *Enfance*, Yourcenar's *Quoi? L'éternité*, and Desvignes's *Le Grain du chanvre ou l'histoire de Jeanne*.

Postface

I feel that I have barely scratched the surface of all that could be discovered from more study and comparison of these three texts. Fairy tales figure prominently in all three works. Sarraute identifies Natacha with Cinderella and sometimes casts her step-mother, Véra, in the role of the "marâtre" or wicked step-mother of this story. Desvignes's Jeanne also refers repeatedly to the Cinderella fairy tale. Yourcenar mentions the fairy tales she listened to, read, and enjoyed as a child. How has each of these women writers used these fairy tales in their works and what is their significance in each text? Both Yourcenar and Desvignes possess an acute interest in mythology, with numerous references throughout their *oeuvre* to various myths and mythological characters. This subject calls for more study and research as well. A third area to be pursued is the concept of these texts as examples of "family romance." I also think the aspect of these works as female *Bildungsromane* has not been fully explored. Because of the constant change of domiciles in all three of these texts, a study involving the images of the different "houses" presented in each text might bring to light some interesting aspects of the works. I briefly touched on Yourcenar's and Desvignes's interest and concern with nature and the environment. This area also calls for more research. At one time, as I was reading Desvignes's text, I remarked on the unbelievably large number of references to all types of animals, insects, and plants that appears in her texts. This reflects her personal interest in and love for both animals and nature and also merits further study. After reading

Judith Sarnecki's dissertation on the maternal metaphors in Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy, I believe that this theme merits more attention as applied to all three of the texts under examination here and the various maternal texts present in each work. One aspect to these works that I wanted to pursue, but did not, came about after reading Jerry L. Curtis' article, "*Prison heureuse ou malheureuse?* Human Bondage in *Les Noeuds d'argile*." This involves the various prison images or examples of incarceration to be found in these works. There is also the theme of awakening sexuality in each of these texts that needs to be evaluated.

I believe that the examination of these three works by Sarraute, Yourcenar and Desvignes has by no means been exhausted, as evidenced by the areas suggested for further research. I hope this study has raised questions in your own mind that can be pursued by all of us.

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