

**Ce qui n'est pas moi: Writing the Self, Desiring the Other in
La Nouvelle Pornographie.**

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Gabriel Tourmon voulait du bien raide, du clairement handé, je rêvais du tout flasque [. . .] Et j'y prenais plaisir. (*La Nouvelle Pornographie* 50)

In Marie Nimier's novel *La Nouvelle Pornographie*, the protagonist-narrator Marie remembers a trip to a literary conference in the United States. Finding herself one among three female authors chosen to speak, she remarks to her colleagues, two British novelists, that she is surprised to see so many women invited and that evidently, "Les temps changeaient" (51). Looking at her "comme si je venais d'une autre planète," (51) the British women, Loretta and Edwige, reply that:

Of course, nous étions des femmes, d'ailleurs nous avons été choisies uniquement pour cette raison, afin de respecter le quota imposé par l'américaine faculté. Je me demandais comment elle pouvait dévaloriser à ce point son travail. L'autre participante, une certaine Edwige [. . .] vint compléter l'assertion de sa compatriote: nous étions les porte-paroles de toute une génération de femmes, c'était pour elles que nous étions ici, pour elles que nous écrivions. Je lui fis remarquer que trois hommes invités par la même institution l'auraient été en tant qu'écrivains tout court, sans avoir à représenter le genre masculin.

- À moins qu'ils ne soient homosexuels, corrigea Loretta.
- Oui, s'ils sont pédés, ils parleront pour les pédés, confirma Edwige. (52-3)

Within the French context, mention of women's writing inevitably evokes the spectre of Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*, and of the 1975 essay "Le Rire de la méduse" which has come to be seen as a manifesto for women's writing, with its defiant proclamation that "il faut que la femme s'écrive" (39). Yet just who or what is designated

by this amorphous term, *écriture féminine*, has remained a topic for fierce debate and dispute, and Marie's attitude of suspicion towards her categorisation as a "woman writer," "la porte-parole de toute une génération de femmes," (53) is one shared by many contemporary female authors in France, who express a certain ambivalence towards, if not an outright rejection of, the term. The questions raised by the designation of *écriture féminine* or women's writing are numerous: who is this feminine subject of whom we speak? Are we concerned with defining a female author, and if so, must she write "consciously" as a woman writer? And, perhaps most importantly of all, if we are to talk of women's writing, why not of men's?

It is this final point, the fear of colluding with the binary hierarchical division which separates "French women's writing" out from the more prestigious, and implicitly masculine field of "French literature," of producing an effect of ghettoisation by means of which the stability both of gender roles and of the male-dominated literary canon is maintained, which leads to the sense of unease and discomfort felt by many authors and critics with regard to the term "women's writing." In the face of her colleagues' unquestioning acceptance of their role as "women writers," Marie tries to point out the potential risks of this position:

Je tentai une ultime réflexion sur le danger des cloisonnements, ces nouveaux ghettos dans lesquels nous ne devions pas nous laisser enfermer. Je prônais une écriture large du monde, n'osant pas utiliser le terme "universelle" qui me paraissait un peu prétentieux, et comme les deux romancières m'écoutaient sans réagir, je m'entendis prononcer cette phrase que je regretterai aussitôt: Si j'écris, n'est-ce pas pour comprendre ce qui n'est pas moi? (53)

Whilst Cixous declares that woman must write her self, Nimier's narrator declares her intention to write in order to understand that which is not her self, that which is her other. Yet in this novel, she uses precisely "ce qui est moi," endowing her protagonist with her own name, engaging her self in an autofictional writing practice. This use

of the author's name is a strategy found in numerous female-authored autofictional texts in French since the 1970s, exploited by, among others, Marie Cardinal, Christine Angot, Jeanne Hyvrard, and Amélie Nothomb. In this use of the devices of autofiction, then, and also in its frank discussion of female sexuality and desire, Nimier's novel may be identified as both partaking in, and exploring the limits of, key trends within French female-authored fiction. Moreover, we are dealing here with a story narrated by a character who has been commissioned by a male editor to produce a form of women's writing, namely "La Nouvelle Pornographie": erotic short stories written specifically from a female perspective. The relationship between gender and literature, with all the questions of power, authority, and cultural hierarchies which that entails, is thus explicitly foregrounded in the text.

My discussion of the novel will focus, therefore, firstly upon the relationship between author, narrator and protagonist (for the sake of clarity, I shall refer throughout to the "real-life" author as Nimier, and to the fictional character as Marie), before turning to an exploration of the way gender roles are enacted and subverted in the text, as Marie undergoes an encounter with otherness which, ultimately, leads to a breaking down of conventional gender binaries. I argue that Nimier's writing posits an otherness which is radically unsettling, hard to pin down, impossible to define, as rather than merely reversing the hierarchy of binary oppositions, she shifts the foundations upon which binary difference stands, celebrating the pleasures of the ambiguous and the indecidable.

The protagonist of the novel, identified as Marie Nimier from the opening pages of the book, has been commissioned to write a collection of erotic *nouvelles*, to be published under the title "La Nouvelle Pornographie." In this sometimes confusing, and frequently highly comic novel, the narration shifts constantly between the outlandish fantasies which Marie hopes will form the basis of her short stories, to her memories of her own past, her sexual experiences, and her childhood, and to the story of her relationships with her seductive, demanding editor, Gabriel Tourmon, and with her sexually voracious flatmate Aline. The

identification of author and narrator is reinforced by references throughout the text to Marie's work as a writer and to her/Nimier's previous novels, such as *Sirène* (178), *Celui qui court derrière l'oiseau* (37), and *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous* (which ends with the narrator, Cora, taking the manuscript of her novel to an editor named Gabriel Tournon). Moreover, the identity of Nimier's father, the novelist Roger Nimier, is alluded to through mention of his book collections, his literary tastes, and his death during her early childhood.

The extent to which an author may be, or should be, identified with her text is a question which troubles Marie throughout the novel. When Gabriel suggests that title, "La Nouvelle Pornographie," she is deeply disturbed by the thought of her name appearing alongside such a salacious title: "La couverture, je la voyais, mais ce que j'avais du mal à imaginer, c'étaient mon nom de famille et mon prénom [. . .]. Et la tête de ma mère" (34). She is also nervous about the risks involved in writing about characters too close to herself—Loretta Flink (one of the British novelists referred to earlier) is the author of an autobiographical account of childhood abuse, and Marie appears unconvinced of the literary merits of a text which bears such a direct relationship to the author's life. Nevertheless, she is deeply wounded when her flatmate, Aline, accuses her of not having genuinely committed herself in her previous work: "Comment osait-elle insinuer que j'écrivais en touriste?" (38) Marie demands, shocked by the accusation that she is "un écrivain frileux [. . .] La preuve: je ne racontais pas ma vie" (40). Aline encourages Marie to use her own experiences as a starting point for her work "tu n'as qu'à piocher dans tes expériences personnelles, pour te mettre sur la piste," she advises, "après tu improvises" (37). It would appear that this advice is followed not only by the fictional Marie, but also by Nimier herself, who has discussed in interview the reasons behind her decision to inscribe her own name both in and on *La Nouvelle Pornographie*. "Il me semble que c'était la seule façon pour moi de m'engager solidement [. . .] dans ce sujet risqué," she has stated, "De lui donner un corps, de lui restituer son poids" ("Marie Nimier répond aux lycéens"). Marie similarly overcomes her anxieties about

publishing under her own name, reaching the conclusion that:

C'était la seule manière d'aborder honnêtement la proposition de l'éditeur. [...] il m'aurait été impossible de faire vivre à une autre, fût-elle imaginaire, les débordements que je m'infligeais en tant que narratrice. Je me mouillais, comme disait Aline, je prenais sur moi, et par conséquent, symboliquement, j'avais tous les droits. Voilà ce que je gagnais en payant de ma personne, de ma première personne: la liberté de me travestir, de m'inventer, de me remodeler à loisir sans culpabilité majeure et même avec une certaine jubilation, et sans autre prétention que de servir le texte qui m'était commandé. (107)

The motivation for this autofictional writing, it appears, is about the attraction of otherness, othering one's self through the creation of a fictional alter ego, the attempt to "comprendre ce qui n'est pas moi" through a process of imaginative transformation, a fictional othering of the self. As Marie, echoing Lacan, affirms, "Le moi est une construction imaginaire" (125). The liberty to "me travestir, m'inventer, me remodeler à loisir" functions at several levels within the novel: at that of the autofictional relationship between Nimier and her narrator, Marie; in a form of *mise-en-abyme* as Marie reinvents herself in her own erotic writing; and finally in the roles which Marie's research for her writing allows her to play out. If the act of fiction writing involves an imaginative othering of the self, the placing of one's self within the mind of the fictional narrator, Marie goes one step further, as, aided and abetted by Aline, she embarks upon an exhaustive program of research which allows herself to step beyond the bounds of her normal, and rather straight-laced day to day existence. Marie thus takes on the role of "the pornographer," chatting up men in bars, ordering the services of gigoloes and so forth. Moreover, her relationship with Aline is crucial here. Of no fixed abode, no clear nationality, with a French mother, Italian father and raised in Santa Fe, trilingual but at home in no one language, Aline represents a certain fluidity and instability, an ability to move "d'un univers à l'autre sans problème apparente" (36). Most

significantly, she embodies a form of sexual freedom which Marie both fears and envies. "J'aurais bien aimé être comme ça, certains jours," she admits, "une fille un peu vulgaire qui se laisse draguer" (43). The writing of pornography allows her, both literally in the name of research, and imaginatively, on the page, to play out this role, to become other, to become, in a sense, Aline, and their collaboration on the project serves to further Marie's imaginative identification with her friend.

Fiction, and most specifically autofiction, blurs the boundaries between truth and invention, reality and fantasy, self and other, and this uncertainty is experienced by Marie as producing both pleasure and a distinct sense of uneasiness. It is the impossibility of drawing a clear line between herself and her fictional characters who "n'étaient pas le contraire de nous," the coexistence of the same and the different, the *unheimlich*, perhaps, which disturbs: as Marie states of her relationship to her characters, "Il y avait trop de différences, ou trop de similitudes, pour ne pas se sentir mal à l'aise" (72).¹ Yet it is this very sense of ambiguity and indecidibility in her writing that, Gabriel claims, makes Marie the ideal author to produce the *nouvelle pornographie*: within her work, as he explains, "il faut toujours que vous affûtiez un détail qui déplace les certitudes" (98).

Despite his apparent admiration for the subtleties of Marie's/Nimier's writing, for the elliptical nature of her texts and the suggestive powers of the *non-dit*, it would seem that when it comes to sexuality, Gabriel is deluding himself as to the degree of ambiguity he is willing to accept in her work. Having employed her as a representative woman, asking her to take her inspiration from women's daily lives in order to produce an erotic literature which will appeal to women as well as men, he still hopes that Marie can offer a single, stable answer to the question of what women want: "Il me regardait comme si, appartenant à la caste femelle, j'allais apporter une réponse générique et définitive" (158). Whereas Gabriel wants clear-cut stories, straight forward narratives of sexual activity, the texts Marie produces for him, prompted by the *dérive* of her imagination, fail to conform to such rigid structures. Presented by Marie with the text which forms the opening of Nimier's novel,

Gabriel rejects it as too confusing, too disturbing, "l'ensemble manquait de stabilité, [. . .] on s'y perdait" (30), and wants instead to pursue the possibilities of what is to Marie's mind the most banal, clichéd section of the text, a short fantasy of rescue by a fireman (16, 34).

Although he may claim to want to overturn the conventions of what he terms "classic" pornography, Gabriel is not willing to move beyond the standard binary structures in which the woman is the passive, helpless object, and the man the active, virile subject, of sexual desire. Marie's fantasies, however, centre upon the reversal of such hierarchies. The opening sequence, for example, takes its inspiration from the advertisement for the supposedly "revolutionary" ironing board, the "revolution" being that it is the board itself which steams the clothes, the active element now being the board rather than the iron. This is described, in the mail-shot, as "un concept nouveau, inversant les perspectives traditionnelles," a reversal of the norms in which, as Marie explains, "on délaissait l'outil, la chose qui agit dedans la main de l'homme, pour érotiser le support" (12). The terms in which she describes this reversal, and the use of the ironing board in a highly comic, albeit graphic, sex scene, suggest an equivalence between this supposed reversal of the domestic order, and the reversal of the sexual order which Gabriel claims is at the heart of his publishing project. Nevertheless, Marie's sceptical, ironic commentary upon this advertising campaign reveals the idiocy of proposing such a simplistic approach to the disruption of deeply ingrained domestic and cultural norms. "La libération de la femme avait porté ses fruits," we are told, "et si la femme se tapait toujours le repassage, il ne s'agissait plus d'une corvée mais d'une activité épanouissante" (13). Despite the apparent reversal of norms, it would appear that women remain caught up in gendered hierarchies which accord power and activity to the man, and passive receptivity to the women.

Nevertheless, there is one key scene in which these hierarchies are subverted, and in which Gabriel's notion of what women's fantasies might be (rescue by a virile fireman) are subject to a comic reversal: the erotic encounter between Marie and Aline, and a compliant young

pompier by the name of Tom (86-92). In this scene, power relations are for once genuinely shifted rather than merely reversed, since as the scene progresses, the source of sexual tension becomes not so much the assertion of female sexual power over the fireman as stereotypical symbol of virility, but rather the increasingly eroticised relationship between the two women. Tom, who moonlights as a male escort, is at the girls' flat supposedly for their research purposes, but is revealed as a somewhat flawed porn hero when he admits to having a problem with premature ejaculation. Marie and Aline attempt to cure Tom of his problem, tying him to the bed and taking charge of the situation: "Aux premières lueurs du jour, nous te laisserons partir," he is told, "En attendant, tu continues à respecter la règle du jeu" (89). Marie describes Tom at one point as "un jouet": he is effectively feminised, held in a position of passive subjection, and ultimately functions as a justification and a point of mediation for Marie and Aline, Marie holding him from behind as he penetrates Aline, and the two women then embracing over his genitals, which Aline caresses "comme s'il agissait d'un énorme clitoris" (92).

Despite the hints throughout the book that Marie may regard Aline as more than a friend, this is a truth which she hesitates to admit to herself, although as she eventually recognises, "les textes que nous pondions toutes les deux étaient saturés de femmes entre elles, il faut le reconnaître, gorgés de scènes où les plaisirs se partageaient en miroir" (168). Aline appears in the ironing board fantasy, and when Marie returns to reality, Aline is seen dressed in only an old T-shirt, in which, "lorsqu'elle se dressa sur la pointe des pieds pour prendre les tasses, je vis sa touffe noire se dessiner en transparence" (24). She later offers to help Marie with her writing, and her insistence that she must commit herself fully to her work plays upon an implicit *double entendre*, as sitting at a restaurant table Aline takes her friend's face in her hands and murmurs, in what could easily be read as a seduction, "ça te fera du bien [. . .] un peu, de te mouiller" (38). Upset, apparently, at what she sees as a criticism of her writing rather than a sexual come-on, Marie runs out of the restaurant, and Aline follows, apologising and taking

Marie in her arms as she offers to help with the new project. As the two women hold hands, Marie takes comfort from the idea of working with Aline, and fantasises that "Tout le monde nous prendrait pour des gouines." (42) imagining them playing up to the role, "habillées de façon très stricte [. . .] col montant pour les interviews" (42).

However, although happy to indulge in such imaginary role-play of "acting out" the part of lesbian, Marie is, it seems, unwilling to actually confront the possibility of a genuine, physical, homosexual desire, and the possible social consequences of being "taken for a dyke." After her disastrous first day at a new job, Aline tried to kiss her in the middle of the street, and Marie's one fear is that Gabriel will see them, "peur [. . .] qu'il nous prenne pour des gouines," and she uses him as a rationale for pulling away from her friend's advances, "je t'aime beaucoup, tu le sais bien, je t'adore, mais Gabriel nous attend" (115). As Marie's feelings for Aline and Gabriel become progressively more confused, it could be argued that Gabriel is, in fact, merely the object of Marie's transposition of her (socially taboo) desire for Aline into a conventional, heterosexual, frame. Aline and Gabriel become intrinsically linked in her mind, and whilst Marie may tell herself that her desire is purely for Gabriel, her words betray her, and his role as a form of mediation in her relationship with Aline is emphasised by her reference to Truffaut's homo-crotie love-triangle "Il y avait un côté Jules et Jim avec l'éditeur, dans le rôle interprété par Jeanne Morcau" (175).

At the climax of the novel, as Marie discovers Gabriel and Aline's relationship, the possibility that it is her flatmate rather than her editor whom she really desires, becomes increasingly evident. The ultimate ambiguity of the closing pages in particular appears to support this hypothesis. Having come to the conclusion that her desires lie not so much in the realm of, in her own words, firemen with or without their helmets, but in the more conventionally feminine terms of romance, Marie decides to declare her love to Gabriel. On reaching his apartment, she is devastated to discover that he is with Aline, with whom he has embarked upon an affair. Running from the apartment, Marie plunges into drunken despair, burning her arm, and as she is rescued

by a fireman who asks her her name, the realisation comes to her that “je m’étais trompée de personnage,” (182) and the name that she utters is that of Aline.

The ambiguity of Marie’s response is, I would argue, crucial to the interpretation of the novel, and representative of the wider tendency within Nimier’s work to subtly undermine the decidability of the text, rendering it unstable, unknowable, other. I have suggested elsewhere that it is possible to interpret this scene as indicating the dissolution of Marie’s identity, the culmination of her desire, perhaps, to *be* Aline, the “fille qui se laisse draguer” (43)—the mistake is thus about her own “personnage,” the role she herself plays (Wardle 2004). However, in the light of the homo-erotic undertones present throughout the text, it could equally be read as a recognition of Marie’s desire *for* Aline. She is thus “trompée de personnage” (182) in believing, or at least in maintaining the illusion, that it is Gabriel whom she loves. Marie has tried, throughout the novel, to convince both her reader and herself that “mon fantasme le plus tenace n’était pas de violer un sapceur-pompier, avec ou sans casque, mais, comme toutes les fillettes nourries aux conte de fées, de me marier, d’être heureuse, et, par conséquent, d’avoir beaucoup d’enfants” (45). Trapped between two clichéd visions of male-female relations, caught up in cultural fantasies of heterosexual desire, she has missed out on the opportunity for a sexual relationship which would truly disturb both the hierarchised binary oppositions of “classic” porn, and the socially approved norms of romance. In her final words, then, it could be argued that Marie is finally facing up to her transgressive desire, recognising the attraction of an otherness which does not rely upon gender as the primary marker of difference.

The attempt then to “comprendre ce qui n’est pas moi,” to step out of one’s own skin into the imaginative projection of a fictional character, to “travestir,” through the transgressive role of pornographer the role she conventionally plays, has thus led Marie ultimately back to her self, to a self transformed through the encounter with otherness and open to the possibilities of an identity which displaces and disturbs the binary structure of male and female, man and wife. To Gabriel’s

demand to know what women want, Marie Nimier will not offer an easy answer. Thus, rejecting both a vision of a “new,” feminised pornography which ultimately relies upon the same clichés as the old, and the critics’ vision of a “women’s writing” which, easily definable and stable, can be conveniently separated off from the more serious business of “literature,” *La Nouvelle Pornographie* induces a profound sense of uncertainty and instability, and it is this which gives her novel its disturbing and seductive appeal.

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NOTE

¹ Freud conceives of the *unheimlich* as that which disturbs through its ambiguity, its duality: for example the clock-work automaton Olympia in Hoffman’s story of the Sand-Man, whose status as animate or inanimate appears indeterminate. This example, which Freud derives from Jentsch, is perhaps particularly pertinent here, since what Jentsch describes as “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate” parallel the ambiguity within both Nimier’s and Marie’s narratives as to whether the protagonists are to be read as real and autobiographical, or as fictional creations (Freud 226).

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