The Ambiguities of the M(O)ther-Daughter Bond in Marie Redonnet's *Candy Story* (1992)

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Abstract: For many women writers, the loss of the primary bond with the mother has been the stimulus for an examination of this most fundamental and ambivalent of human ties. In Marie Redonnet's novel Candy Story the mother-daughter relationship forms the backbone around which numerous other narratives circulate. Exploring this relationship exposes the ambiguities and ambivalence that lie at its core and that fundamentally are at the heart of all of Redonnet's oeuvre.

Keywords: Marie Redonnet – mother-daughter bond – loss – mourning – childhood – women's autobiography

This article takes as its focus *Candy Story* (1992) the fourth novel in Marie Redonnet's considerable body of work.[1] In her discussion of the French author's early novels, Gill Rye notes that although there is a "wealth of feminine symbols and [...] common themes of women's identity" as well as a plethora of surrogate mother figures and grand-mothers, there is a consistent break in the immediate biological line (367). The mother has abandoned the daughter and remains only as an image in a photograph in *Splendid Hôtel* (1986)*;* she is absent altogether in *Forever Valley* (1987)*, Rose Mélie Rose* (1987)*, Silsie* (1990), *Nevermore* (1994) and *L'Accord de paix* (2000) and deceased in *Diego* (2005). In the same vein, Aine Smith writes "the absence or erasure of the protagonists' biological parents is virtually *de rigueur* in Redonnet's oeuvre" (43). In the novel scrutinized here, the presence of a biological mother as a significant character in the narrative stands out as one of its more distinctive features.

[1] Marie Redonnet began publishing in 1985 and is the author of eight novels (*Splendid Hôtel, Forever Valley, Rose Mélie Rose, Candy Story, Nevermore, L'Accord de paix, Diego* and *La Femme au Colt 45*), three collections of stories or "contes" (*Silsie, Villa Rosa, Matisse* and *Doublures*), five plays (*Mobie-Diq, Seaside, Le Cirque Pandor*, *Fort Gambo*, *Tir et Lir*), a collection of poetry (*Le Mort & Cie*) and a book-length essay on Jean Genet (*Jean Genet, le poète travesti*). As of the time of writing this paper, Redonnet's most recent novel, *La Femme au Colt 45* had not been published.

For many women writers, the loss or impending loss of the primary bond has been the stimulus for an examination of this most fundamental and often ambivalent of human relationships, as Annie Jouan-Westlund notes in her comparative study of Simone de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce* (1964) and Annie Ernaux's *Une femme* (1988). More recently, in her ambitious study *Imaginaires de la filiation* Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand expands on this rich vein of genealogical inquiry to examine trends in women's writing spanning the turn of the century. Redonnet's novel *Candy Story* is situated in a context that has seen writers as diverse as Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, Andrée Chedid, Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, Marie Darrieussecq, Lydie Salvayre and others explore the mother-daughter bond in texts that borrow formal elements from a variety of literary traditions (see for example Duffy; Gingrass-Conley; Went-Daoust.). *Candy Story* is clearly a work of fiction, however in an overview of her work Redonnet points to the link between her own personal circumstances and the genesis of the novel. As she explains: "Je traversais un moment difficile: ma mère venait de mourir, j'avais divorcé de mon mari. Je me trouvais aussi face à une crise de création. Quoi écrire après le double triptyque et après *Silsie* qui en était comme un point d'orgue?" ("Parcours d'une oeuvre" 494). This is not to suggest, of course, that *Candy Story* is an autobiographical text in any traditional sense of the term or a literal account of a particularly difficult moment in the author's life. However, as Elizabeth Fallaize points out with reference to the trilogy, the issues facing the female narrator "have much to do with Redonnet's own battles" (320). Jean-Louis Hippolyte also identifies an "autobiographical bent" in her fiction (113). Likewise, Jean Duffy's assessment of Redonnet's early trilogy "as an allegorical account of her creative efforts" is equally pertinent to her later work and has particular relevance to *Candy Story* (921).

A second distinctive feature of the novel is that the narrator, Mia, has a history. For readers of Redonnet, this represents another significant departure from the author's previous work because, as Aine Smith points out, "[f]or many of Redonnet's characters the past is a blank and their memories are either full of holes or completely non-existent" (44). *Candy Story* presents a female narrator who has lost her professional bearings and struggles to (re)define herself on affective and psychosocial levels. Narrated in the first person, the novel adopts an autobiographical tone and recounts four months of an eventful summer. Author of a first novel aptly titled *Sise Memories*, Mia is seeking the subject of her second novel. Complicating the search for a plot is the impending death of the mother and the radical reorganization of the daughter's sense of identity that this entails. The narrator's history is revealed through memories that arise as she navigates the landscape of the past, a landscape whose urban and rural features are at once recognizable (Paris) and fictitious (Sise, Mills-le-Pont, etc.). The return to her family origins in the seaside town of Sise and to the working class district Mills-le-Pont where she was born and lived with her mother evokes childhood memories many of which center on this primary relationship. This navigation through the spaces of childhood is accompanied by an increasingly complex description of the mother-

daughter bond, of their life together and of the mother's past. Memories that emphasize the closeness of mother and daughter, for example Ma's reading the classics to her daughter or singing to her to chase away nightmares, are juxtaposed with much more troubling recollections that raise questions both for the narrator and the reader about Ma's motivations and apparent lapses of judgment.

Set against the backdrop of the mother's deteriorating health, the mother-daughter plot forms one of the main narrative threads of *Candy Story*. At key moments in the text—the beginning, the middle and the penultimate chapters—visits to the mother act as a stabilizing core around which other plots and subplots multiply. Yet these moments together with the narrator's limited point of view introduce ambiguity into the text and do little to resolve any of the questions put forward about this most vital of human relationships. It is the ambiguity at the core of the mother-daughter bond that is the focus of the analysis that follows.

"Elle n'y voit plus très clair"

Redonnet's novels are tightly structured and *Candy Story* is no exception, anchored as it is temporally by dates of personal, social and cultural significance. The first chapter begins on an auspicious day, Ma and Mia's birthday, the 21st of June, which is also the summer solstice. The shared birthday they celebrate underscores the mother and daughter's symbiotic relationship, as do their names separated only by the single letter "i". Consistent with the symbolism of renewal and growth associated with the season, the first chapter develops themes of regeneration: Ma's remodelling of an old outfit to reproduce the iconic Chanel suit and in so doing reproducing the image of an admired figure from her childhood, Madame Alma; her return to an old hobby of watercolor painting; and her new neighbour, the Commander, rewriting his memoirs. What singles this birthday out as unique however comes with the hint of a budding romance between Ma and the Commander as well as in the exchange of expensive gifts, notably a diamond Ma offers to Mia.

What seems an overall hopeful opening is quickly overshadowed by the first indication of Ma's mental deterioration. The window of Ma's room provides a view of a bucolic landscape whose topographical features are reminiscent of her place of origin, Sise:

> Depuis son balcon, elle ne voit que les arbres et au loin le lac. Comme elle n'y voit plus très clair et qu'elle mélange les temps et les lieux, elle fait comme si elle était revenue à Sise. Ce qu'elle se rappelle de Sise, c'est ce qu'elle voyait quand elle était petite. (9)

Given the context, the expression "elle n'y voit plus très clair" lends itself to both a literal and a figurative interpretation since the clarity of both vision and mind are

affected. Failing eyesight and diminished mental faculties blur time and space permitting an imaginary return to the landscape of her childhood. The early symptoms of cognitive deterioration are confirmed a little later on when the narrator reveals that "Ma est en train de perdre la tête" and can't find her way back when she wanders away from the home (38).

Blurred vision as a metaphor also obtains however in suspect situations, as is first revealed in an unusual episode. Ma's curiosity about her neighbor, the Commander with whom she flirts, is piqued by his habit of gazing towards the woods through a pair of binoculars, a relic of his time as the chief officer of Fort Rore. Copying the Commander's gesture using a pair of opera glasses instead, Ma sees young African women in leopard print shorts engaged in the sex trade at the nearby traffic circle. However, she quickly discounts this as the object of the Commander's attentions:

> Ce que le commandant regarde dans ses jumelles, ça ne peut pas être le Rond-Point, puisque ce qu'il y a à voir il peut le voir en gros plan tous les soirs sur Canal après minuit. Ma se dit qu'il doit avoir un secret et qu'il regarde une scène visible de lui seul au-delà du Rond-Point. (12)

Rejecting what seems the obvious conclusion, she rationalizes instead that the availability of pornographic material on TV precludes a penchant for voyeurism in the Commander. The more unsettling sexual, racial and political implications implicit in the Commander's evening activities remain equally unexplored in the text. Delivered with "la neutralité du constat," this episode does not give rise to any commentary, evaluative or otherwise, from the narrator (Van der Donk 5). As Jordan Stump writes so succinctly: "Redonnet's narrators do not theorize" (107). Following the Commander's death, the narrator learns that the field glasses are broken thus providing no clear vision of anything: "Quand on essaie de voir avec, on voit tout trouble" (77). So what was the Commander doing and why? The episode leaves unresolved questions of purpose and motivation, questions that are symptomatic of many of the significant relationships described in the novel particularly the relationship between mother and daughter. They continue to surface as the narrator returns to the spaces of memory: Sise and Mills-le-Pont.

Sise Memories

The first locus of childhood memory is the seaside town of Sise and it is particularly rich in information about both the narrator's and Ma's past. Fully one third of the twenty-one chapters of the novel are devoted to Sise when the narrator returns to attend the funeral of family friends Dilo and Lou. The train trip brings back feelings of excitement shared by mother and daughter during the journey and provides the

opportunity for renewed contact with family history or, to be more precise, with the founding family myth as defined by Maïté Snauwaert:

> toute généalogie est aussi et d'abord une mythologie: un ensemble de récits plus ou moins vrais, plus ou moins vérifiés, mais valant par la force de l'imaginaire qu'ils ont réussi à imposer, et tirant leur autorité de qui les a transmis; ou encore, d'avoir été transmis. (131)

Ma is quite proud of her paternal ancestors; she maintains the family name by remaining unmarried—a legacy Mia preserves in turn by writing her first book *Sise Memories* under the same patronymic—and fosters a strong attachment to the region through the stories she relates to her daughter. Consistent with the generic features of myth and legend, the family tale focuses on the uniqueness of the founding people. According to Ma, the inhabitants of Sise are unlike anyone else "parce que leurs ancêtres venaient d'ailleurs" (49). The embedded tale, a recurring narrative device in Redonnet's novels, stresses the resilience of the original settlers, a quality necessary for them to withstand the natural dangers in the region: the inhospitable, swampy terrain that is the source of disease and the treacherous off-shore reefs that claim the lives of the best sailors. Sise and its unique story are significant components of Mia's sense of identification with the region even though she was not born there. As she explains "c'est comme si mon pays c'était Sise, parce que Ma m'en a toujours raconté l'histoire comme la seule histoire, la mienne et celle des habitants de Sise" (50). In the family genealogy, two patriarchal figures are of particular note: the captain who originally discovered America but whose name is forever lost to history, and his son who leads the shipwrecked founders of Sise to safety onshore. These heroic, if difficult, beginnings contrast rather starkly with the more sordid reality of the military camp which is a third source of danger for the inhabitants; it serves as a cover for offshore trafficking and for the sexual exploitation of the young women of Sise by the officers of the camp. "Il y avait toujours des histoires entre les filles de Sise et les officiers du camp qui se croyaient tout permis," the narrator states (50). The juxtaposition in the same paragraph of the history of Sise, the legend of Sise and the romantic and sexual entanglements between the officers and the women of the area provides occasion for semantic slippage as *histoire* articulates history, story and, lastly, affair. For Ma the responsibility for the tragic lives of the young women of Sise is uncritically deflected from the officers to the broader context of the colonial wars "qui sont la plaie cachée et la honte du camp de Sise" (51).

The family stories transmitted by the mother are meant to instill pride in her daughter: "Elle [Ma] était très fière de la lignée de son grand-père de Sise. Elle me disait qu'il ne fallait jamais que j'oublie que son ancêtre avait découvert le premier l'Amérique et que son fils avait fondé Sise" (50). For the narrator too the stories equip the people of Sise to face the challenges of a difficult environment: "Sans cette histoire, comment auraient-ils pu survivre entre le marais qui leur apportait toutes les maladies, le camp qui

leur apportait tous les malheurs, et la mer pleine de récifs où perissaient leurs meilleurs marins?" (50). As well, the stories are intended to make her daughter forget (clearly unsuccessfully) other stories of death and disaster that plague her own ancestors in particular, and the people of Sise in general, in addition to suppressing Ma's own past of frustrated ambitions.

Although providing protection to future generations, the story of Sise's past is a double-edged sword. A much darker side to Mia's and Ma's genealogy comes to light in the double suicide by drowning of Ma's grandfather and Madame Alma, a story Ma does not transmit to her daughter. The death of the couple is the key event that precipitates Ma's own misfortunes by putting an end to what is constructed as an idyllic period in her life. The trauma associated with the loss of parental figures alone suffices to explain Ma's selective memory but nevertheless this does not prevent her daughter from learning the story or suicide by drowning being imitated by other characters. Symbolic of Ma's inability to permanently hide the tragedies of the past, or to even hide them effectively, is a trunk hidden away in the grandfather's attic. Her refusal to force open the trunk she claims is locked and the keys lost betrays a fear of what its contents may reveal as well as their possible impact. The contents of the trunk are easily brought to light without breaking the lock however. Inside are the remnants of memoirs, the narrative remains of the collective memory of Sise. Among the torn books and pages discovered within is a death scene that strikes a powerful and resonant chord with Ma's friend Lou who then reproduces it, drowning herself together with her husband Dilo because "c'était leur mort [...] comme si quelqu'un déjà l'avait écrite" (58). Consistent with the repetitive narrative structure that drives Redonnet's fictional world, the past repeats itself with relentless and often deadly predictability.

As well as hiding the dark side of the family history, Ma's attempts to protect her daughter from the fatality of Sise involve self sacrifice and restrictions on both her own and the child's movements in Sise and in Mills-le-Pont. In Sise, for example, Ma allows herself only one night out over the summer holiday and the occasion is preserved in a photograph. As well as the child Mia's admiration for her mother evident in the description of the photograph, there is also a strong element of pathos as Ma lives out her own youthful dreams on the French national holiday:

> De tout l'été, Ma ne sortait qu'un seul soir pour le bal du 14 Juillet […]. C'était avec elle ce soir-là et pas avec Lou que le commandant du camp ouvrait le bal. Ils formaient un beau couple. Ma était la plus élégante dans sa robe de mousseline blanche avec ses escarpins dorés et une rose rouge dans les cheveux. Ses yeux brillaient tandis qu'elle dansait avec le commandant comme si la danse n'allait jamais finir, et qu'elle était enfin et pour toujours danseuse comme dans son rêve. Pendant tout le temps que durait la danse, je m'asseyais à côté de Dilo et je la regardais danser.

> Ma quittait le bal après le feu d'artifice parce qu'elle ne voulait pas que je veille tard. (51)

The white muslin dress, the gold pumps, the red rose: these few visual elements depict the highly romanticized, feminine and virginal image that recalls the fairytale Cinderella. The ability to hide her feelings or situation from others behind a protective shield of clothing and transform herself, such as is evident here, is a skill she has taught her daughter, and which Mia readily acknowledges in composing her own image, "pimpante et gaie," to counteract her grief over the deaths of Dilo and Lou and Ma's deteriorating condition (38). Chosen above all others by the Commander, Ma recovers her storybook past and fulfills a childhood ambition for the space of an evening; all of this comes to an end when she returns to her maternal role after the fireworks. The enigmatic smile on her mother's face captured in the photograph is one that is unfamiliar to her daughter yet it is precisely this that Mia wishes to retain and remember: "On ne voit qu'elle sur la photo. Elle sourit d'un sourire que je ne lui connais pas. C'est de ce sourire-là que j'ai envie de me souvenir" (65). The photograph is the one object Mia chooses to take from her grandfather's home prior to closing this chapter of her life forever by putting the house up for sale.

With more damaging effect, the mother's fear of disaster is transmitted to her daughter who as an adult remains haunted by it to the extent that suicide remains a very real option:

> Depuis que je suis toute petite, Ma me répète que la seule chose qui compte pour elle, c'est que j'échappe à la fatalité de Sise. Certains jours, j'ai peur que la fatalité de Sise soit plus forte que moi, et alors ces jours-là je me dis que je préfèrerais encore me noyer dans la Seine plutôt que de gâcher ma vie comme madame Irma et Ma. (38)

The precise nature of what constitutes "gâcher [s]a vie" is manifold and gendered. It may be a bad marriage, depression, alcoholism and attempted suicide, as in Madame Irma's case, or a bad choice of career path as illustrated by the young women of Sise who become dancers at the local hotel, and eventually go to Paris to work in the sex trade ending their days at the Salpêtrière Hospital, historically famous for its treatment of marginal and marginalized women, the poor, vagrants, prostitutes and the insane. Or in Ma's case, misfortune comes from an external source when her artistic ambition is frustrated by Madame Irma, for which Ma never forgives her. The expression refers euphemistically to the threat of pregnancy as well. Indeed, the circumstances of Mia's own conception and birth are never elucidated nor is the question even formulated by the narrator. Except for the rather chaste flirtation between Ma and the Commander, the whole issue of the mother's sexuality remains a blank.

Like Ma's attempts to hide the darker side of family history, her attempts to control her daughter's movements are equally ineffectual. Her habit of leaving her in the care of Dilo and Lou, for example, is paradoxical given the couple's unusual arrangement with the Commander of Sise. Every evening Dilo, accompanied by the child Mia, takes his wife to the Commander's home. While waiting for Lou, Dilo recites to the child the love poems he has written to his wife as if, as Mia says, "c'était pour moi qu'il les avait écrits" (64). On Lou's return, Mia ceases to be a substitute for Lou and, in short, ceases to exist for Dilo. These episodes provoke emotional turmoil in the child who is at once embarrassed by the overtly sexual content of the poems and yet feels abandoned by Dilo once his wife returns. But her involvement in the couple's sexual affairs does not end there. Mia's role as audience and temporary stand-in for Lou shifts to that of spectator. In a scene reminiscent of Marguerite Duras's *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, from her hiding place in their garden the child observes the two making love in a brightly lit room before an open window. Reflecting on this memory and her role as integral to their exhibitionism, the adult Mia develops a cinematic analogy to ponder the motivations of the couple:

> pourquoi allumaient-ils les lumières qui attiraient tous les moustiques, comme s'il leur avait fallu que je sois là invisible derrière le tamarinier à les regarder, comme au cinéma pendant le tournage d'un film, quand il y a sur le plateau tous les projecteurs et le camera-man en train de filmer la scène d'amour? (64)

Inevitably this question leads to another about Ma's motivations in leaving her alone with them: "Je me demande aussi pourquoi Ma, qui ne me laissait jamais de toute la journée de peur que je fasse une bêtise qui gâcherait ma vie, me laissait aller tous les soirs à l'Île aux Oiseaux avec Dilo et Lou, sans jamais nous accompagner?" (64). The expression "gâcher sa vie" reappears and in this context clearly refers to the threat of pregnancy. For the adult Mia, there can be little doubt that her mother was aware of the couple's arrangement with the Commander and that her daughter remained unchaperoned with Dilo for a period of time every evening. There follows a somewhat unconvincing explanation for her mother's actions:

> Elle devait pourtant savoir que Lou allait rejoindre le commandant, et que je restais seule avec Dilo puisqu'elles se disaient tout. Avec ses jumelles, elle pouvait surement voir tout ce qui se passait à l'intérieur du pavillon illuminé avec tous ses lampions. Peut-être qu'elle avait seulement besoin de rester seule un moment dans le noir, pour se reposer un peu et penser à la vie? (64-5)

The modal adverb "peut-être" opening the interrogative sentence highlights the very tentative nature of the explanation offered and the expression "rester dans le noir" can be read both literally and figuratively. Ma is, indeed, seated in the dark and remains willingly, it would seem, in the dark about both Lou and her daughter's evening activities. The narrator does not probe this memory further nor does she seek to resolve the other questions that surface about Ma or Dilo and Lou.

The Second Visit to Ma

Strategically placed at the center of the novel, the second visit Mia pays to her mother marks Ma's rapid decline and prepares her death in the penultimate chapter. Unable to reach her mother by telephone, Mia informs her caretaker of her impending visit "pour qu'elle [Ma] ait le temps de se faire belle avant que j'arrive" but this latter expectation will not be met (72). In a passage evocative of Simone de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce* (1964) and of Annie Ernaux's *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* (1997), Mia is shocked on her arrival by the dramatic physical deterioration of her mother and particularly by the sight of her ravaged body:

> Quand je suis entrée dans sa chambre après avoir cogné à la porte, Ma n'a même pas tourné la tête pour voir qui entrait. Elle est assise devant son poste. L'écran est allumé, mais tout noir. Ma a dû mettre une chaîne qui n'existe pas. Je n'ai jamais vu Ma ainsi. Sa chambre est dans l'obscurité. Ma n'est pas coiffée, et elle est encore en chemise de nuit alors qu'on est au début de l'après-midi. J'ai ouvert les persiennes pour que la lumière entre dans la chambre. Soudain, j'ai vu Ma comme je ne l'ai encore jamais vue. À travers sa chemise de nuit mal boutonnée et presque transparente, je vois son corps maigre et blanc avec toutes ses veines bleues. Elle n'a plus de seins et sa peau est flétrie. J'ai eu envie de fermer les yeux pour ne pas voir Ma comme elle me montre qu'elle est devenue, comme si maintenant son apparence lui était devenue indifférente. Sans maquillage, avec ses cheveux décoiffés, son visage apparaît tout ridé et si pâle. (73)

The description in this passage contrasts starkly with the carefully composed image offered in the opening pages of *Candy Story* and, of course, with the image of a much younger Ma preserved in the photograph of the July 14th ball. It is especially against the former that the extent of the decline in her health is measured. Seated in front of a blank television screen in a darkened room, Ma does not acknowledge or even appear to be aware of her daughter's presence; as death approaches, the external world, at least as it is presented via televised images, is symbolically no longer accessible to her nor is she accessible to it. Ma's worsened state is only partly visible in the darkness yet the change

in personal habits and care is immediately noticeable. The social conventions once so important to Ma are now utterly abandoned. Entering the room, the narrator becomes progressively aware of the change in her mother, the measure of her shock registered in the recurrence of the verb "voir." Upon opening the blinds, Mia sees her mother and her mother's body in a new light, stripped of the artifice and composition of the social self made possible by clothing, make-up and accessories. Unadorned, disheveled, and clad in a thin nightgown Ma's body reveals the physical effects of ageing. The white, wrinkled skin with its network of blue veins, the shrunken breasts present a new image her daughter does not wish but is suddenly forced to confront. Upon learning that Ma's decline was precipitated by the Commander's demise, in a role reversal it is Mia who mothers, providing physical comfort where words are not only inadequate, but quite simply pointless: "Je l'ai prise dans mes bras sans rien lui dire parce qu'il n'y a rien à dire" (76).

Although initially unresponsive to Mia's presence, Ma leaves her daughter a watercolor self-portrait that distills in a striking visual image the effects of her debilitating condition. The painting is poorly executed according to the narrator, but its impact is "saisissant." In the image the effect of ageing on the body is accompanied by a very effective artistic rendering of its psychological impact. The face is divided in two, half representing Ma as a child and the other Ma in her current condition:

> Ma a peint son portrait. La moitié du visage, c'est celui qu'elle me montre aujourd'hui, et qu'elle a dû peindre en se regardant dans un de ses miroirs. L'autre moitié, c'est celui de Ma petite, photographiée avec madame Alma dans l'album de photos sur sa table de chevet, qu'elle me montrait à chaque fois que je venais la voir. Le tableau est signé Ma en grosses lettres peintes en noir pour qu'on les voie bien. On dirait la signature d'une petite fille qui vient de peindre son premier tableau alors qu'elle ne sait pas encore écrire que son nom. (74)

With much more tragic effect, the same imbrication of time and space that characterized the opening paragraphs of *Candy Story* is reproduced in the self-portrait. Childhood and old age are juxtaposed in the two sides of Ma's face. Dementia has erased anything in between these two periods of her life, robbing Ma of her adulthood and cognitive abilities. There is additional pathos in the signature on the painting not only because of the evident deterioration of her writing skills, but also because after a lifetime of sewing beautiful clothing for others it is the only creation of Ma's that bears her name.

The interaction and exchanges between the adult Mia and her elderly mother now rely exclusively on the daughter's ability to implicitly understand Ma's intentions or wishes rather than on any explicit communication between the two. The narrator reproaches herself for not having understood immediately the reason for her mother's

emotional and physical collapse. Mia's interpretive skills are called into play again with respect to the painting and she expressly hides her feelings about it from Ma. Rather than refuse her mother's gift Mia accepts it because she intimates that "elle n'aurait pas compris pourquoi je n'aime pas son tableau. Elle aurait seulement pensé qu'il était mal peint, et elle en aurait eu encore plus de peine" (76). Complicated by Ma's declining health, communication between mother and daughter continues to be an occasion fraught with the potential for misunderstanding.

Mills-le-Pont

Not wanting to confront the image represented in Ma's painting or to think of Ma's decline, the narrator undertakes a visit to Mills-le-Pont, the second locus of childhood memory. The narrator's feelings about the area where she was born and grew up are quite different from, indeed antithetical to the positive feelings associated with Sise. No similar sense of excitement or anticipation invades Mia as she makes her way on foot to Mills-le-Pont. On the contrary, the narrator's feelings are quite unequivocal: "[J]'ai toujours détesté Mills-le-Pont" (104). This journey into the past is not accompanied by family myth; there are no stories equivalent to the legend of Sise to encourage identification with a people and a region or to form a barrier against the surrounding dangers, and there are no material remains of a shared life to take away. Rather unexpectedly though, the visit allows the daughter to divest herself of the unwanted painting which serves as a bribe giving access to a shortcut otherwise prohibited to the public. Thus Mia rids herself of a disturbing image while sparing her mother's feelings, and postpones confronting the spectacle of her mother's dementia and impending death. With this gesture, the narrator both rejects and refuses to see Ma's state of decline in its most visual expression.

The high rise building where she lived with Ma for twenty-one years is abandoned and slated for demolition in a vast urban renewal project. To rid the area of the criminal element that gives it such a bad reputation La Poterne will disappear under an artificial lake, a recurring motif in Redonnet's work where spaces are regularly submerged or otherwise obliterated leaving no physical trace behind. The building's dilapidated interior contrasts with the bucolic description of the grandfather's house with its timeless unchanged quality right down to the collection of tiny porcelain animals "toujours bien alignés sur le grand buffet" (62). Nothing is recognizable to Mia in the barren apartment. All trace of her life together with Ma has disappeared leaving only empty rooms with stained walls. Rather than reflecting on the past as she did in the house in Sise, Mia responds by leaving the now unfamiliar space "en courant presque" (83). As if to confirm she is out of place, an angry voice swearing at her in a foreign language echoes down the stairs. In effect, the narrator is verbally ejected from a now hostile environment.

Although there are no tangible remains in the form of photographs or other memorabilia to recover from the apartment, further memories of Mia's girlhood surface, fleshing out the relationship between mother and daughter. Among them, a curious, shared fascination with the building's concierge, Madame Anna, a permutation of Madame Alma and the object of both mother and daughter's admiration. To supplement her income, Ma sews for Madame Anna who, in turn, makes extra money by supplying sexual favours for "le contremaître de la briqueterie, le comptable du garage, et le gérant de l'immeuble, sans compter le secrétaire de mairie qui n'avait pas d'heure" (82). Her sexual activities are common knowledge—even the young Mia seems to be aware of them to the point of providing a precise list of her clientele—and yet, as in the episode with Dilo and Lou, "Ma faisait semblant de n'être au courant de rien" (82). Mother and daughter agree Madame Anna does not fit her working-class status as superintendent of the building and does not conform to expectations. The adult narrator intimates that Ma's own frustrated ambition is the source of her identification with Madame Anna: "Ma, qui aurait tant voulu être danseuse au lieu d'être couturière, se sentait sûrement proche de madame Anna à qui pourtant elle ressemblait si peu" (82). In pointing out the lack of similarity between the two women, she offers an assessment of Ma's emotional attachment to Madame Anna as entirely misplaced. In addition, Madame Anna and her daughter Luira are both sexually autonomous figures seeking physical fulfillment and financial remuneration from their relationships with men, "à la difference de Ma qui ne vivait que pour moi" according to the narrator (103). As opposed to the young women of Sise whose dreams leave them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and to Ma whose sole sense of purpose stems from her maternal role, this mother-daughter pair provides an example of sexual agency and eventually each forms a successful heterosexual relationship.

As much as there are aspects of Ma that remain unknown to the daughter, significant parts of Mia's life in La Poterne are hidden from her mother. Mia is again in the company of a questionable couple, Madame Irma and her husband And, whose dysfunctional relationship and violent disputes are regularly played out in front of her. Instead of being a spectator to the couple's lovemaking, this time the narrator reveals her sexual victimization at the hands of And: "Tous les jeudis, And me donnait des leçons de calcul pour que je sois toujours la première. Je n'osais pas bouger quand il se serrait tout contre moi sous prétexte de me donner des leçons de calcul" (84). Irma, on the other hand, uses the child as a confidante and reveals her own past failure to launch a career as a singer in Paris. Irma's confessions present a somewhat more complicated portrait of the woman who is the object of Ma's antipathy. Since the child derives both monetary and instructional benefit from the relationship with the couple, she keeps And's inappropriate behavior secret from her mother. As well, Ma's animosity towards Irma forestalls any intimacy between the two women hence no questions arise about the extent of Ma's knowledge of the incidents with And or her motivations.

Economic insecurity compounds the very diffuse fears stemming from Ma's genealogical background and motivates her decision to reside in the La Poterne quarter where rents are cheap but where trafficking and other forms of crime are rampant. The narrator describes the negative effects of her mother's fears in strong language evoking first the shame of living in a bad neighborhood and hiding it from her friends, and then the oppressive, almost pathological nature of Ma's obsession with impending disaster: "Le malheur, c'était son idée fixe. À cause de son idée fixe, je vivais dans la hantise du malheur" (80). The chiastic structure of these two sentences reinforces both the source and the impact on her child of the mother's fixation. As might be expected given her mother's fears, areas such as the "terrain vague" are off limits to Mia. The term in French conveys particularly well the indeterminate and ill-defined nature of the empty space. However, the child disobeys her mother to follow her much more precocious friend Luira into forbidden territory (both literally and figuratively). Madame Anna's daughter is the source of much of the information about the clandestine activities in La Poterne. The "terrain vague" is where Luira earns money by exposing herself to the tightrope walker, Luiji, and in the nearby garage she and the mechanic's son Mike engage in passionate lovemaking in stolen vehicles. Where Ma fails to provide any information about sex to her daughter, Luira fills the gap with explicit stories of her very active erotic life, educates her on methods of birth control and means of protection from sexually transmitted diseases. "Elle faisait mon éducation à la place de Ma qui ne me disait rien," the narrator declares (81).

Notwithstanding these sources of friction between the two, Mia's close relationship and difficulty separating from the mother are highlighted in the shared birthday and the additional letter in the center of the name. Her name thus serves as a graphic illustration of the mother-daughter relationship and of what Laurie Corbin finds is a common structure of women's autobiographical writing, that is "tensions of similarity and difference, intimacy and independence […] such […] that the writer often seems divided within herself" (120). Alex Hughes points out as well that the mother-daughter bond is "never conducive to individuated subjecthood" (156). While maintaining affiliation through repetition of the syllable, the separation of "Mia" from the generic "ma" is affirmed by the additional letter "i." Obviously in English the letter "i" is also the personal pronoun that calls into existence and individuates. However the "i" is placed between two other letters linguistically and graphically reflecting the daughter's existential position vis-à-vis her mother, at once both the same and different, and always at risk of being or remaining engulfed by the maternal. Rather succinctly Redonnet's protagonist affirms the difference between herself and her mother and the psychological division this creates: "Je ne ressemble pas à Ma, mais comme elle aurait voulu que je lui ressemble, j'ai toujours été partagée entre Ma et moi" (103). At the same time, the narrator shares with Irma the letter "i" and her mother claims Mia shares other characteristics with Irma as well:

> Ma m'a toujours dit que je lui [Irma] ressemblais. C'était sa grande déception que je ressemble à madame Irma, et pas à madame Alma. Quand elle était en colère parce que j'avais désobéi, elle me disait toujours que je finirais comme madame Irma. Je m'en voulais de faire tant de peine à Ma qui sacrifiait sa vie pour moi, et je promettais de ne plus désobéir comme j'aimais tant le faire parce qu'en tout j'étais l'opposé d'elle. Quand je repense à madame Irma, je ne vois pas en quoi je lui ressemblais. Je n'ai jamais voulu être chanteuse et j'ai toujours détesté Mills-le-Pont. Je ne veux pas finir comme madame Irma à qui je ne ressemble pas. (104-5)

Disappointment with and anger at her daughter's disobedience are evident in this passage where Madame Irma is held up as the prime example of failure, the female model not to emulate, the negative to Madame Alma's positive. Although the child Mia feels guilt over disappointing her mother and causing her grief, she nevertheless reveals the pleasure she took in disobeying. For the narrator the explanation for her persistent misbehavior lies in the profound difference between herself and her mother. They are opposites sharing no common ground. With the succession of negatives closing the passage, the adult Mia rejects in no uncertain terms the similarity drawn between herself and Irma, and also rejects any question of sharing the same fate. Simultaneous with this vehement rejection of Irma is a symbolic and more violent rejection of Ma's aspirations for her daughter in the destruction of the wedding dress she labored over for years. Described as unique and too sumptuous to wear, the dress is torn and soiled with vomit following a bout of binge drinking. Mia's intoxicated state conveniently wipes out any memory of the incident leaving only the remains of the garment as evidence and the nagging fear that she may, in fact, come to a bad end like Madame Irma.

Ma's Death

The mother's death in the penultimate chapter of *Candy Story* brings narrative closure to the mother-daughter plot. Mia responds to the loss of her mother with a characteristic sense of disbelief and the deployment of dream imagery conveys the dissociation from reality she initially experiences. Taking control of the final preparations, Mia ritualistically recomposes the image of Ma in the opening chapter, dressing the body in the same imitation Chanel suit and accessorizing it with all the gifts Ma received: the gold shell earrings from the Commander, the hair band threaded with silver from her nurse, and the watch (but with its battery removed) from Mia. Time has indeed stopped for Ma and Mia returns her mother's body to its earlier state erasing the visible effects of the debilitating disease. Watching over the body, the narrator draws a parallel with a childhood memory where Ma calmed her fears of death by staying by her

bedside at night. Here, the roles are reversed again with the daughter filling the maternal function.

In a final tribute to and affirmation of the bond that unites mother and daughter, Mia has Ma's headstone inscribed in gold with the words "Mia pour Ma Forever" (133). This gesture fulfils a wish of her mother's expressed in the opening chapter and brings closure to the mother-daughter plot. Among the gifts Ma offers Mia is a precious stone, a diamond that Mia is to have mounted in a gold ring engraved with the words "Ma pour Mia." In a play on words, the stone diamond becomes instead a tombstone carrying a modified inscription reflecting the change in the genealogical order Ma's demise brings into effect. "[A]utrefois n'existe plus maintenant que Ma est morte," the narrator states signaling the ultimate finality of death, the definitive end to her childhood and the end of her remaining tangible link with the past (132). The grandfather's house in Sise, the apartment building in La Poterne, Ma's self-portrait, the wedding dress: these are all ties with the past that are systematically severed by the narrator. Of the remains transmitted to the her, Mia keeps only the maternal legacy represented by a book of photographs that spans the lifetimes of both mother and daughter constituting, in Ma's words, the sum of the world's literature: "Je n'ai gardé que son album de photos qu'elle feuilletait chaque soir avant de s'endormir. Elle disait que c'était son livre de chevet et qu'il contenait tous les livres. Ce sont des photos d'elle et de madame Alma à Sise, et de moi et d'elle à Mills-le-Pont." (134)

The ambiguities and questions that arise in *Candy Story* about Ma and her decisions, obsessions and contradictions never find a resolution. Like Mia, the reader, faced with the same lack of answers, is a similar situation and this is narrativised in an elegant mise-en-abyme when Ma's painting becomes the focus of Mia's renewed attention. After giving the painting away, the narrator rediscovers it hanging in a gallery where it is displayed as the "oeuvre d'un peintre inconnu de grand talent" (127). In its new context, the emotionally charged image has become aestheticized and turned into an object of study; the watercolor's invented provenance and new situation create a safe distance allowing the daughter to contemplate the image in an attempt to understand her mother through it: "Je suis restée longtemps assise sur le petit banc à regarder le tableau de Ma, comme si j'essayais de comprendre ce que je n'ai jamais compris d'elle," she states but again no further insight is offered (127).

Alessia Ricciardi observes that loss "confronts us with the ultimate enigma of the Other and thereby perpetuates questions that must be forever left unsettled." Further, she explains that the process of bereavement should be understood "in terms of an ongoing, interpretive challenge without a prescribed end, without knowingness" (4). In Redonnet's novel, the mother is a source of ambivalence and mystery, the unknowable Other and no satisfactory answers to the multiple questions about the mother that arise in the text find any resolution or solution. Like the photograph taken on July 14th, like the self-portrait hanging in the gallery, the m(O)ther remains unknowable.

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