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Marie Cardinal: New Perspectives (Book Review)

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Emma Webb, Ed., *Marie Cardinal: New Perspectives*. Bern, Switzerland and New York: Peter Lang, 2006. 258 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-03910-544-2.

Review by Claire Marrone, Sacred Heart University.

The engaging collection, *Marie Cardinal: New Perspectives*, offers a stimulating array of the latest interpretations of the author's corpus. The compilation presents a variety of critical writings and viewpoints aimed at a diverse audience, including scholars of literature, history, and cultural studies. Psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies inspire several essays. While many pieces treat Marie Cardinal's celebrated autobiographical novel *Les mots pour le dire* (1975), there are also numerous essays on other significant texts, such as *Le passé empiété* (1983) and *Comme si de rien n'était* (1990). In addition, comparative studies situate Cardinal alongside women writers like Héléne Cixous and Assia Djebar who similarly have complex relationships to their mothers and their motherland Algeria. Other studies place Cardinal within the women's autobiographical tradition, evoking such authors as George Sand, Colette, and Simone de Beauvoir. Many of the critics published in the book are veteran Cardinal scholars whose mastery of her corpus brings a wealth of insight into the author's writings. New scholars appear as well. They continue to develop our readings and sometimes challenge accepted critical notions about Cardinal's texts. In general, the critics present striking insights, strong arguments, and solid methodology. Only occasionally does an essay fail to convince readers of its central thesis or fall short in its argumentation. Importantly, the collection is challenging but very readable, and is a necessary addition to the libraries of Cardinal scholars and, more broadly, researchers in twentieth-century French studies.

Cardinal's prolific corpus, beginning with *Écoutez la mer* (1962), displays the author's bold treatment of such issues as expression and subjectivity, the body, the mother-daughter relationship, and multicultural identity.[1] She entered the literary scene at an exciting time for women writers, many of them experimenting with language and daring to voice women's repressed desires and complicated realities. The publication of *Les mots pour le dire* secured her literary legacy, sparking extensive critical analysis as well as attaining astounding popular success.[2] The text highlights the protagonist's battle with mental illness and her traumatic relationship with her mother. *Les mots pour le dire* illustrates the interpretative work of psychoanalysis and the cathartic benefits of expression. Healing is brought on by writing, but also by the community that artistic production anticipates, from family, to colleagues, to the society of readers.[3] Cardinal eschewed literary trends and reached out, in particular, to "real" women, like those she met during her years struggling to raise a family. These women, she wrote, "ne savent pas traduire en mots ce que leur corps sait: la lenteur des gestations, la viscosité féconde, l'épaisseur nourrissante...L'archaïsme de nos vies de femmes." [4] Her political purpose is clear in her desire to give these women "des mots qui seront des armes." [5] Political issues also permeate Cardinal's writing because of her personal history. Born in Algeria to a French colonial family, she was forced to leave her homeland because of the French-Algerian War. In *Les Pieds-Noirs* (1988), we read of the influence of both France and Algeria on her sense of identity: "Deux pays, deux coeurs, deux têtes..." [6]. In Cardinal's last work, *Amour...amours...* (1998), an aging, would-be writer expresses her nostalgia for her birthplace and her struggles to write experiences so informed by the oral culture of Algeria. [7]

In her comprehensive "Introduction," Emma Webb, the editor of *Marie Cardinal: New Perspectives*, stresses the fact that Cardinal's writing, "which addresses deep philosophical issues while nonetheless maintaining its popular appeal, has undoubtedly confounded critics" (pp. 13-14). Webb furthermore points out that Anglo-American academic departments have shown greater interest in Cardinal's work than their French counterparts, the latter having embraced more readily such avant-garde theorists as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. In addition, only a limited number of full-scale studies of Cardinal's writing have appeared. Since Cardinal's writing has proven to have significant literary and cultural value, particularly within the context of the social and political events of the 1960s and the 1970s, and also because of the outpouring of women's writing since the 1970s, *Marie Cardinal: New Perspectives* is both timely and useful. The volume grew out of a 2003 conference, at the University of Sheffield, inspired by questions surrounding Cardinal's legacy, her impact on women's writing today, the limited critical response to her work, and the varied approaches that francophone and Anglo-American scholars bring to her corpus.

Among the many engaging pieces in the collection, some particularly powerful ones include Phil Powrie's excellent psychoanalytic study of the hallucination scene inscribed in *Cet été-là* (1967), Cardinal's journal about her cinematic experiences with filmmakers Robert Bresson and Jean-Luc Godard. Powrie reads this scene as a precursor to several issues worked out more fully in *Les mots pour le dire*. The journal critiques Bresson as a dehumanizing authority figure. The words of revolt and desire which free Cardinal from his power parallel the words that release the protagonist of *Les mots pour le dire* from illness, words that express the body and female community. Cardinal's experience with Godard, who symbolizes the future for her, involves questioning the condition of women. Their project becomes associated with female expression and sisterhood, issues so dear to *Les mots pour le dire*.

Webb presents a stimulating exploration of Cardinal's stylistic development, in particular the focus on dialogue as an ideal medium for self-understanding in *Comme si de rien n'était*. She draws on the linguistic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin to prove that dialogue allows the author to analyze the relationship between subject and society, and between author and reader. She argues that this turn to the dialogic utterance does not really constitute a concession to the French Academy, which has tended to favor such postmodern writing. Rather, Webb convincingly situates Cardinal's formal experimentation in this text, which continues in *Les jeudis de Charles et de Lula* (1993), within the context of her ongoing concerns with language and exchange.

Maria José Palma Borrego presents an excellent theoretical study on how the "récit de cure féminin" situates itself within women's autobiographical writing. She notes that this subgenre has its own distinctive features. For example, it recounts a limited temporal experience rather than capturing a life. Particular psychoanalytic elements emerge in these texts as well, such as awareness of one's illness, details about therapy sessions, and the process of healing. There are also singular problems, such as the impossibility of communicating an analysis. Yet the "récit de cure féminin" still falls within the female autobiographical framework because it inscribes a story and a desire to construct a female subjectivity struggling to find voice within a patriarchal system.

Sarah Hartshorn provides a provocative study on Cardinal's portrayal of the heterosexual couple. She focuses on the father-daughter relationship as it evolves from *Les mots pour le dire* through *Amour...amours...* Hartshorn argues that Cardinal's ultimate reconciliation with the father helps her find a lasting, albeit untraditional model for male-female relationships. Hartshorn claims that Cardinal's attention to the father-daughter relationship

and the heterosexual couple sets the author apart from her female contemporaries such as Marguerite Duras.

The collection concludes with Colette Trout's impressive study of Cardinal's legacy. Trout's thorough and informed piece analyzes how the fact that Cardinal is a woman has influenced critics' views and how her work has received a differing critical reception from French intellectuals and English-speaking academics. She argues that Cardinal's refusal to espouse avant-garde theory and her concern with the everyday realities of women distanced her from the French writing elite of her time. She notes that because some critics disapproved of Cardinal's unadorned descriptions of female bodily functions and her use of graphic language, and because they often misunderstood the literary merits of her autofictional works, they often underestimated the author's talent.[8] Trout goes on to cite the most prominent areas of recent Cardinal studies, including postcolonial studies and trauma studies, and further explores the author's impact on today's women writers. We find Cardinal's influence notably in the areas of motherhood and creativity, the body, and the blurring of generic boundaries. Trout finds one of Cardinal's most striking characteristics her awareness of the power of words. This emphasis on language which closes the collection echoes Webb's eloquent introduction that cites as Cardinal's "most lasting legacy...her analysis of language and the manner in which it shapes identity both empowering or containing us according to how we use it" (p. 22).

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Emma Webb, "Introduction"
- Phil Powrie, "The Father with the Movie Camera: *Cet été-là*, *Mouchette* and the 'force utérine de l'oeil'"
- Owen Heathcote, "The Personal and the Political: Algeria, Violence, Gender and Writing in Marie Cardinal, Hélène Cixous and Assia Djebar"
- Emma Webb, "Writing Fragments: Dialogic Utterances in *Comme si de rien n'était*"
- Patricia de Méo, "Dégager les fils de son histoire: les fonctions narratives et thématiques de la broderie dans *Le Passé épiété*"
- Kathryn Robson, "The Hysterical Body in *La Souricière* and *Les Mots pour le dire*"
- Maria José Palma Borrego, "Le 'récit de cure féminin' comme 'débordement' du canon autobiographique"
- Alison Rice, "La Terre Maternelle: Algeria and the Mother in the work of three women writers from Algeria, Marie Cardinal, Hélène Cixous, Assia Djebar"
- Annik Houel, "Mère morte pour une fille vivante"
- Nancy Lane, "Mother/Land: Cardinal, Beauvoir and the Body"
- Walter Wagner, "*Les Mots pour le dire* ou la dialectique de l'aveu"
- Sarah Hartshorn, "The Importance of the Heterosexual Couple and the Father-Daughter Relationship in the Work of Marie Cardinal"
- Elaine Martin, "From Marie Cardinal and Verena Stefan to Banana Yoshimoto: Feminism and the Best-Seller"
- Colette Trout, "Marie Cardinal's Legacy: Quels mots pour la dire?"

NOTES

[1] Seminal full-scale studies of Cardinal's works include Lucille Cairns, *Marie Cardinal: Motherhood and Creativity* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1992); Carolyn Durham, *The Contexture of Feminism: Marie Cardinal and*

Multicultural Literacy (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); and Colette Hall, *Marie Cardinal* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

[2] The work has sold over 2,500,000 copies and has been translated into numerous languages. For additional information on sales figures and the best-seller status of this significant literary work, see Martin's and Trout's essays in this volume.

[3] These ideas are developed in the chapter entitled "Creativity and Community in Marie Cardinal's *Les mots pour le dire*," in my book, *Female Journeys: Autobiographical Expressions by French and Italian Women* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 2000), pp. 121-41).

[4] Cardinal, *Autrement dit* (Paris: Grasset Livre de poche, 1977), p. 81.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

[6] Cardinal, *Les Pieds-Noirs* (Tours: Belfond, 1988), p. 54.

[7] See my elaboration of these ideas in "The Limits of Writing in Marie Cardinal's *Amour...amours...*," *Dalhousie French Studies* 59 (2002): 119-29.

[8] Trout notes, for example, Cardinal's skillful use of "auto-citation," the practice of quoting passages directly or of rewriting significant scenes from different angles from one text to the next (pp. 236-37). See Durham's extended analysis of Cardinal's use of this technique in *The Contexture of Feminism*.

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