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"Little Women"? History and her stories in Marie Cardinal's *Comme si de rien n'était*¹

Claire Marrone

In *Comme si de rien n'était* (1990)², Cardinal explores the writing of individual and collective histories. Her text is in fact a tribute to the particular lives connected to the larger Histoire. Numerous female characters are given voice in this polyphonic narrative.³ The lives of these individual characters are set against the backdrop of the larger Histoire of the year 1989. In the year in which Nelson Mandela was freed, Ceaucescu was murdered, and Gorbachev helped pursue the collapse of the Berlin wall, Cardinal writes: "Winnie, Helena, Raïssa, tu crois qu'on saura un jour l'histoire de toutes ces épouses?" (116). It is the lives of women, frequently left without a trace, which Cardinal recognizes and celebrates in this text: "A propos, tiens, elle s'appelle comment la femme de Walesa?" (116). Similar questions are echoed in the "avant-propos" to Cardinal's translation of *La Médée d'Euripide*, in which she writes: "L'histoire nous a exclues, elle ne nous donne pas la parole, elle parle à notre place, c'est elle qui raconte nos vies, pas nous."⁴ *Comme si* thematizes Cardinal's longstanding concern regarding the subjective interpretation of History and the traditional erasure of women's lives from historical record. She implicitly asks: what is the relationship between the Petite histoire and the Grande histoire? is, and/or how is, a particular moment in history representative? how are the seemingly insignificant happenings of individual lives recorded in history? what is in a name, in naming, in writing, and in remembering? I interpret Cardinal's text as a statement on the events and happenings of women's lives in particular, which frequently go unnoticed in the still male-dominated spheres of politics and History. I shall explore the manner in which she manipulates structure, character portraits and narration in order to subvert the writing of History.

The form of *Comme si* reflects both an innovative attempt to break new narrative ground, and also a repetition of techniques found in Cardinal's previous works. The text is organized through a series of seemingly disconnected fragments - short passages, meditations,

conversations, etc. These various episodes are thematically connected, however, in that they reveal a complex web of interrelations between the "characters" we meet. Some of the personages are related through blood, friendship or acquaintance. Simone and Mimi, for example, the main players in the text, are cousins who maintain a very close relationship despite their differences. The association between various other figures is revealed gradually to the reader and in this sense, *Comme si* can be loosely associated with the detective novel. A fragment on page fifty describing the life of "elle", for example, may in fact reveal additional information about a character introduced and named on page nine.

Within the first five pages of *Comme si* we encounter not only the two cousins, Simone and Mimi, and also: "elle", Solange (and "sa chienne"), Madame Lamantin, Nicole, Monique, Mademoiselle Aymard (and "sa mère"), Gisèle, Germaine, Mimi A. (and "sa mère"), amongst others in what appears to be an amalgam of female portraits. We understand that the author, who has previously written of her own traumatic experiences with "sa mère" in her celebrated autobiographical novel *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975)⁵, feels connected to these women, to women, and is writing for them. Hence her text takes on political and feminist significance. Cardinal's tableau becomes a commentary on the oftentimes fragmented nature of female existences and on women's interconnectedness to one another, to others.⁶

At the end of the text, the author includes a "glossary" of certain important characters and several secondary figures who have been mentioned throughout the work. Each entry includes biographical data and page numbers to refer us back the first appearance of, or first reference to, the character in the text. Sometimes these page references are intentionally erroneous, a reflection perhaps of historical "mistakes". In the glossary, Julius Caesar, Hegel and Medea, stand beside Michel Platini, the dog Mitra and "les amants de Mimi". Through this marriage of historical and mythical giants with popular cultural stars, bestial companions and ordinary people, Cardinal achieves attempts to subvert historical hierarchies, and to record History from a different perspective. Simone and Mimi are not mentioned in the glossary, but others connected to them - Mimi's various lovers, her parents, Simone's husband, her son, etc. - do merit

a place in the final biographies found in the glossary. In such a fashion, Cardinal continues to revise and rewrite History, for the "main" characters are not necessarily those who have a place in Cardinal's "History book" - the glossary at the end of the text. We read in the glossary, for example, about Jean-Louis Le Plantec: "Né en 1925. Magistrat à la retraite. Epoux de Sylvie Legrand, professeur de latin et de grec, sœur de Georges, belle-sœur de Simone." (200-201). When we refer back to page eighty-four as indicated at the end of the entry on Jean-Louis Le Plantec, however, we realize that the passage in the text focuses not on Jean-Louis, but on his wife Sylvie. In the excerpt, Sylvie laments her brother George's choice of Simone for a wife - "sa belle-sœur a ses cinq enfants par lesquels elle s'était laissée envahir au point de n'être plus rien qu'une pondeuse" (83-84). There is really no mention of Jean-Louis in this passage; he is only "present" on page 84 by omission. We deduce from details in the glossary entry under Jean-Louis, that he and his wife, who "ne s'entendront jamais et n'auront pas d'enfants" (201), are estranged and this is perhaps what sparks Sylvie's criticism of her brother's marriage. Jean-Louis's presence through absence echoes much of feminist critic's discourse on the female presence through absence in writing and in History, and on the crucial role of silence as a communicative force in women's writing.

Cardinal's effort to inscribe women's "little stories" in our collective memories also involves a personal pursuit. Through depicting many women's lives in *Comme si*, Cardinal once again gives herself the opportunity to analyze her own story. Further, these lives are set against the backdrop of struggle and liberation, namely that of the former Eastern block. In her previous, largely autobiographical texts, the emancipation achieved through self-discovery is also expressed through the individual's relation to History (May 68, for example), *Geography and Culture* (Algeria, France). As in her preceding texts, self-learning is also tied to communication and to writing. The lives of Mimi and Simone bear much resemblance to different aspects of Cardinal's biography; this is nothing new for the author who claimed to be "la femme de chacun de (ses) livres (*Autrement dit*, 1975)."⁷ Mimi, like the author, originates from Algeria, and was forced to leave the country with her family in 1962. She is a professor and highly engaged in the political events of 1989. She also writes, an

activity central to the text as mystery novel. Simone, a former teacher, presently devotes her life to her family and household. Domestic activity also characterized Cardinal's life for several years, and the plight of the woman without a public role is frequently discussed in her works. Consider, for example, the following exchange:

Simone: Qu'est-ce que tu fais?
 Mimi: Comme d'habitude, tu sais, je travaille, je lis, j'écris. Rien de spécial... toi, comment vas-tu?
 Simone: Moi, ça va. Tu sais, la maison, les enfants, les copains des enfants, le jardin. Je suis débordée comme d'habitude. (54)

It becomes clear that Mimi and Simone represent in many ways the alter-ego of the other.⁸ Cairns notes: "Mimi, one feels, is the realization of the woman Simone/Marie might have become had she, for instance, pursued her academic studies instead of devoting herself chiefly to her family."⁹ The Mimi/Simone dichotomy reflects different potential selves, potential lives, women possessing opposing characteristics which the author can develop more fully in separate protagonists, but which in some way relate back to the author. Colette T. Hall explains that "Cardinal, who uses her own life experiences as a starting point for her creations, establishes her own identity when she projects on her female protagonists her possible selves."¹⁰

Cardinal has elaborated on what she sees as the veiled autobiographical thrust in many works written in the third person (an important narrative voice amongst others in *Comme si*).¹¹ She has stated on several occasions that her characters presented by a third-person narrator are often more autobiographical than those who are given expression through a first-person.¹² In *Autrement dit*, for example, we read: "Quand j'écris, je pars toujours de quelque chose que je connais, que j'ai vécu, et puis ça se transforme, ça s'ouvre, ça divague, le 'je' pourrait devenir 'elle', mais 'elle' c'est moi bien plus que 'je'. 'Je' est un masque."¹³

The play between autobiography and fiction in Cardinal's writing, and her projection of various aspects of her own personality onto her female characters, constitutes a constant rewriting and reconsideration of the self and is indeed characteristic of the author's entire corpus. The fact that Cardinal has written several "versions" of herself over the years, and yet all of her heroines relate in some way

back to the author, emphasizes the fact that an individual life can be written and interpreted differently depending on context - setting, time period, narration, language, imagery, and so on.

Using her common story-within-a story technique again in *Comme si*, Cardinal illustrates her theories on the contextual nature of subjectivity. Throughout the work certain fragments are set off by three dots above and below. Pieces of all of these sections which are set off by three dots will be repeated, rewritten, toward the end of the work, and separated from the rest of the story by indentation and single spacing. Carolyn Durham discusses Cardinal's common technique of repetition and rewriting of material from previous texts.¹⁴ Dealing with works published before *Comme si*, Durham examines "autocitation" in terms of repetitions from one text to another. Cardinal's move in to citing previous passages within the same work in *Comme si* is an even more radical experiment in subjectivity. Though it appears that *Comme si* is made up of bits and pieces of a puzzle, some of those pieces can in effect be read as a continuous narrative, and once again they are grouped together toward the end. After reading these repetitions of previous material, the reader has the impression that this grouping describes a moment in Simone's life story when she contemplated suicide. This is never quite certain, however, since a very small portion of this grouping has appeared at yet another moment in the text, earlier on - as pages from Mimi's "novel" about "Madame de la Porte", the fictive name Mimi has given to the character who closely resembles her ex-husband's second wife, who, by the way, committed suicide."¹⁵ While Cardinal embroiders a tapestry of seemingly disconnected scenes in the text, she also pulls together a potential, though never completely consistent, individual biography toward the end. The story-within-a-story technique seems relevant in terms of Cardinal's autobiographical portraits - Simone/ Madame de la Porte, like the various personae in Cardinal's corpus who share characteristics with the author (including Simone/Mimi), are variations on a central theme. Cairns comments on the rewriting of the story-within-a-story as an effort to erode "compartmentalized subjecthood. (There is) a willing merging and blurring of identities. The same script is shown to be relevant to more than one subject."¹⁶

Cardinal's exploration of selfhood in *Comme si* hinges not only on her link to Mimi and Simone, but the entire female collective. Writing the self through women characters, and writing on women have indeed always been central themes in her works. Here, Cardinal aspires to give voice to the traditionally silenced female minority. Her endeavor to read and to write the aspects of women's lives which have been snuffed out by History is not new. Critics point out, for example, that Cardinal is particularly concerned with female literacy in *Autrement dit*.¹⁷ In this work, Cardinal explains that her writing is for women whose lives have been monopolized by family, by childbirth, by household responsibilities and by abiding by certain conventions - for women who "ne savent pas exprimer ce qu'elles ont compris, elles n'ont pas de vocabulaire... ça les rend impuissantes."¹⁸ A favorite saying of Cardinal's maternal grandmother - "Si mes tricots pouvaient parler" - which we read in *Autrement dit* and again in *Une vie pour deux* (1979)¹⁹ is repeated in *Comme si* (118). Citing such a phrase in literature valorizes this woman's reflection and also brings the lives of women who have found expression in craftsmanship and domestic activities, into the public view not to mention into publication. Durham explains that such women, who have traditionally been denied a voice, are the author's ideal readers. Further, Cardinal interprets women's writing as inherently collaborative... "These women collaborate in the production of work designed to speak their silence."²⁰

We can associate the oppression and muting of women to the political oppression of the countries of the former Eastern block. We can also parallel the political revolutions of 1989 to Cardinal's feminist revolution and endeavor to give voice to the female minority, and in particular to women who remain outside of the public domain. Yet another parallel exists, and it revolves around the work's title. One character, Solange Dumont, a "cruciverbiste" enthralled with words and crossword puzzles, explains: "On peut s'amuser avec les mots, on fait des jeux de mots. Tenez, en ce moment, à l'Est, ils suppriment le mot 'communisme'. Ils en mettent un autre à la place et, pfiuit! Il n'y a plus de communistes".(106) Although the communist governments deteriorated into oppressive regimes in many of the Eastern block countries, can the communist struggle and ideology, which retains a certain value for Cardinal and others, be erased "comme si de rien

n'était"? In a conversation between Mimi and Simone we hear: "Mimi, le mot 'communisme' symbolisait toujours, pour moi (et je suis certaine de ne pas être la seule), la recherche de ce qui est bon pour la communauté humaine: un rêve, un idéal" (92). Simone: "Ils ne veulent même plus entendre le mot communisme". (92). Cardinal also suggests that new corrupt political powers will come to replace the old, as if 1989 had not even taken place. The political/feminist parallel exists of course in Cardinal's focus on the women's lives which have been erased by History and passed unnoticed, "comme si de rien n'était."

To conclude, I shall return to the glossary at the end of the work. After reading through the various biographies found in it, we realize that the glossary includes approximately three times more male figures than female. Through this statistical opposition found in Cardinal's "History book", she reminds us of how often the names of "great men" are written and remembered in historical records. We recall again the "avant-propos" to Cardinal's translation of *La Médée d'Euripide* in which she states: "J'ai commencé une enquête, et je me suis rendu compte qu'il manquait beaucoup de femmes dans la liste officielle de la renommée. C'est que, justement, la majorité d'entre elles n'ont pas de noms, ce sont des anonymes."²¹ Throughout the main text of *Comme si*, however, we have focused primarily on women's names, and on the women about whom Cardinal has written, and paid much less heed to her male portraits. Her textual depictions of women are usually more elaborate and more engaging. Further, they are penned by a woman who has thematized the female experience in her writing time and time again. Cardinal's narrative reversal does not stop there. Many of the men portrayed in the main text have in fact gone unnamed; they are "les trois frères (de Mimi)" or "l'Américain" or "un badaud" or "un monsieur vêtu de noir" - the behind the scenes players often left in the shadows of History, a role much more typically associated with women. Cardinal does include women in her glossary, and the list of female biographies replicates the subversion of History she attempts in all of her character portraits. The glossary entries textualize Sainte Clothilde, Queen of the Franks from 475 to 545, alongside the "unknown" Madame Aymard, and Marcelle Paul - the saintly alongside the simple. But more

importantly, whereas women are intentionally "underrepresented" in the 23 page glossary, they are the focus of Cardinal's *story*, of the 183 pages which precede, surpass the glossary in the reader's imagination. We realize that just as people have traditionally remembered and recorded men's names and focused on men's lives and how they have played a role in shaping History and politics, Cardinal asks us to remember and re-write women's lives and their influence throughout the ages in the public and the private spheres. While *Comme si* describes in part the political and historical happenings of 1989 (authored mainly by men), this author implicitly asks women to speak and to write their stories, both small and large. It is Cardinal's poetics - the manner in which she writes and the structural reversals which she orchestrates - which shape and direct our reading. Likewise, it is the manner in which History is written which forms our ideas and our memories of the past.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of the talk I presented under the same title, on the Fiction of Marie Cardinal and Annie Ernaux, *Three Centuries of French Feminist Writers Symposium*, Hofstra University, Hofstra, NY, 21 April 1994.
2. Marie Cardinal, *Comme si de rien n'était* (Paris, Grasset, 1990). All quotations shall be taken from this edition and cited in the text by page number.
3. See Lucille Cairns' discussion of the polyphonic narration in *Comme si* in: *Marie Cardinal: Motherhood and Creativity* (U of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1992) 253. Much of the work is written in the third person. There is, however, fluctuation between a third and a first person narration, even within particular episodes. Further, there are frequent fragments of conversations or passages of direct discourse interspersed throughout the text. Another technique which complicates the narration of the text is Cardinal's use of quotation.
4. Marie Cardinal, "avant-propos", *La Médée d'Euripide* (Paris: vlb éditeur, 1986) 37.
5. Marie Cardinal, *Les Mots pour le dire* (Paris: Grasset, 1975).
6. This interconnectedness which is often a defining element in female development is outlined in Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979).
7. Marie Cardinal, *Autrement dit* (Paris: Grasset, 1977) 85. The names Simone and Mimi reflect not only the author and those closely associated with her (Simone is the author's real first name; she was baptised Simone Odette Marie. Mimi was the affectionate name Cardinal's children used to refer to

their maternal grandmother), but also echo former protagonists from Cardinal's corpus (the main character Simone in *Une Vie pour deux* (Paris: Grasset, 1979, for example). Cardinal feels that the character of Simone contains a strong autobiographical component. Mimi, however, at least on a conscious level is for the author a combination of her own mother and her sister-in-law (Marie Cardinal, personal interview, 30 April 1994).

8. see Cairns 252.

9. Cairns 252.

10. Colette T. Hall, "She" is more than 'I': Writing and the Search for Identity in the Works of Marie Cardinal", in *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction: An Essay Collection*, eds. Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall (New York: Garland) 63.

11. In *Autrement dit*, for example, she writes: "Comme si tous les romans n'étaient pas autobiographiques! Comme si le fait de se cacher derrière la troisième personne pour écrire, ou de changer de sexe, ou de s'évader dans le rêve... n'est pas aussi révélateur, aussi près de la confession, de l'intimité, aussi autobiographique finalement que d'écrire une histoire à la première personne" (85). This is coyly echoed in a letter Cardinal wrote to me in which she declares: "Je n'ai jamais raconté ma vie et pourtant je ne fais que ça!... Mais est-ce que tous les écrivains n'en font pas autant?" (Marie Cardinal, letter to the author, 20 Dec. 1993).

12. Marie Cardinal, personal interview, 30 April 1994.

13. Cardinal, *Autrement dit* 28.

14. see Carolyn Durham, *The Contexture of Feminism: Marie Cardinal and Multicultural Literacy* (Urbana:U of Illinois P, 1992) 32-41 on the techniques of repetition and rewriting.

15. Cairns comments "Mimi is depicted as writing the life-story of a (north American) woman who committed suicide, as was Simone in *Une Vie pour deux* 252. Cairns does not see the connection, however, between the repeated/rewritten passages at the end of *Comme si* and Simone's life. Several of these passages are repetitions of events in Simone's youth, for example, the loss of her first love: "Jamais plus elle n'avait aimé comme ça. Même Georges" (Georges is Simone's husband) 176; this is a rewriting of portions of a passage in the main text on page 100-103 and also a reference to the episode first presented on pages 14-16 where the young Simone is named.

16. Cairns 254.

17. see Durham 40.

18. Cardinal, *Autrement dit* 66.

19. Durham 44.

20. Durham 40.

21. Cardinal, "avant-propos", *La Médée* 35.