Narrative Strategies/Feminist Perspectives

and

Marie-Claire Blais

by

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Abstract

Ce mémoire examine les romans de Marie-Claire Blais à l'aide d'une grille féministe qui nomme et définit les diverses stratégies de narration spécifiques aux auteures du vingtième siècle. Il va se servir de la théorie féministe nord-américaine (DuPlessis, Hirsch, Showalter) afin d'élaborer des paradigmes critiques et démontrer comment la spécificité de l'écriture de Blais, en tant qu'auteure québécoise, peut et/ou ne peut pas s'expliquer à travers ces paradigmes. En proposant avant tout une critique féministe nord-américaine, cette thèse mettre en question le postulat selon lequel un auteur francophone doit être étudié uniquement à la lumière de textes critiques francophone.

This thesis examines the novels of québécois writer Marie-Claire Blais from a North American feminist literary critical perspective. It challenges the assumption that francophone women writers should only be studied from a French Feminist perspective by attempting to situate Blais' writing within a North-American "female literary tradition". Issues of Blais' cultural specifity as a québécois writer are also addressed.

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Chapter I Feminist Criticism and Marie-Claire Blais

In her 1982 text entitled Second Words: Selected Critical Prose Margaret Atwood states : "Marie-Claire Blais is undoubtedly the Quebec writer best-known outside of Quebec. In fact, it is perhaps through her work, especially the much praised A Season in the Life of Emmanuel and The Manuscripts of Pauline Archange, that Quebec itself is best-known outside of Quebec, at least as a country of the imagination."[1] Indeed, Marie-Claire Blais' work has been translated into twelve languages. She has received many prestigious literary prizes: i.e. France's most coveted award, the Prix Medicis, the Governor General's Award and the Order of Canada, to name but a few. Her long and fruitful career began quite early. She made her literary debut in 1959 with the publication of La Belle Bête. Renown American critic Edmund Wilson is credited with having "discovered" Blais when he singled her out for special praise in his book O Canada.

Critics at home and abroad praised Blais' first novel and many hailed her as a young genius. Others, more reservedly, viewed her as a child prodigy who would burn out early.[2] It took Blais several years and as many novels to win over the skeptics and prove herself a serious writer. For the past 32 years Marie-Claire has produced an astounding array of literary works: 17 novels, 15 plays for stage and radio, 2 collections of poetry and various articles for newspapers and journals. Her literary awards are numerous and diverse. She is

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[1]Margaret Atwood, Second Words: Selected Critical Prose (Toronto: Anansi, 1982) 259.

[2] Born in 1939, Blais first stared writing poetry at the age of 14. She wrote La Belle Bête at the age of 17, though it wasn't published until she was 20.

considered by many to be one of the finest writers to have appeared from the Quebec cultural renaissance of the 1960's. And her novels have served as a particularly poignant voice for the "quiet revolution" in Quebec of the same period.

The importance of Marie-Claire Blais as a literary figure of Quebec cannot be contested. Her writing spans over three decades and is a vivid testimony to the radical changes that have, and continue to, take place in Quebec society. This period in history, 1960-1990, also marks the rise of the second wave of the feminist movement in North America. Blais, who spent many years in New England during the sixties, was deeply influenced by the cultural and political happenings of the U.S. at that time. In fact, Blais' novels usually deal with issues that pertain to all of North America, anglophone and francophone: poverty, discrimination, juvenile delinquency, crime. Her concerns also echo many of those voiced by her female American counterparts: motherhood, coming to consciousness, artistic expression, questioning of the status quo. Unfortunately, however, Blais' work often fails to be incorporated in the studies of North American feminist literary critics of North American women writers because she is a francophone writer. North America is for the most part an English speaking continent; Quebec's linguistic minority is often forgotten or ignored by an American population that is little educated in the French language. Except for the small circle of French Studies programs at American universities, or in the odd chance that a translation of a québécois work is studied, little attention is paid by anglophone (largely U.S.) critics to Quebec's literary and cultural production. This critical

oversight of Blais' contribution to contemporary feminist women's writing is an issue I feel that needs to be addressed.

As the drive to uncover a "female literary tradition"[3] continues to strengthen and grow in the field of feminist literary studies today, one cannot overlook the rich and vibrant contribution that an author such as Marie-Claire Blais has made to the realm of women's writing. This thesis represents an attempt to fill in this existing gap of criticism and to thus familiarize the feminist reader with the writing of Marie-Claire Blais.

Up to this point in time, the body of critical work that exists on Blais has largely been confined to small articles (mostly book reviews), short academic pieces, Master's Theses and one book. Much of the academic work on Blais appeared in the 1960s when her most famous work to date, Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel (1965), was published Her triptych of Pauline Archange, which appeared in the later sixties, also produced a flurry of academic study. I have noticed, however, that since the early 1970's there has been a steady decline in the number of studies published on Blais. For example, out of a list of 117 articles written on Blais since 1960, 100 were written before 1975 Also, 12 of the 13 theses on Blais were written before 1976.[4] Of the recent material being published, some

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[3] As proposed by Elaine Showalter in A Literature of Their Own. British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing (New York. Virago Ltd. 1978.) Also see Ellen Moers, Literary Women (London. W.H Allen & Co. 1963) and Patricia Meyer Spacks, The Female Imagination (New York Knopf 1975).

[4] For a good overview of critical material that exists on Blais, please refer to the excellent bibliography published in a special issue on Blais in Voix et Images-- Boivin, Aurélien , Lucie Robert and Ruth Major-Lapierre. "Bibliographie de Marie-Claire Blais." Voix et Images no.2 (1982) 251-295.

of the most noted work has been from American feminist scholars: Karen Gould, "The Censored Word and the Body Politic: Reconsidering the Fiction of Marie-Claire Blais," Journal of Popular Culture XV no. 3 :14-27 and Mary-Jean Green, "Redefining the Maternal: Women's Relationships in the Fiction of Marie-Claire Blais" in Traditionalism, Nationalism,and Feminism: Women Writers of Quebec, ed. Paula Gilbert Lewis, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985. 125-137. I would like to continue in this recent trend and also look at Blais from an academic feminist perspective.

When considering a feminist critique of Blais' writing, it is important to note that Marie-Claire Blais does not consider herself a "feminist writer." While she may assert that she possesses a "feminist consciousness" and that she is concerned with women's issues, she does not feel that her gender takes precedence over her artistic vision. Blais states:

> Pourtant, je suis féministe, j'ai une conscience féministe depuis longtemps. . Mais ca veut dire quoi au juste spécificité féminine, féministe ? Il faut tendre être bon écrivain. C'est la qualité du travail, de la pensée, de la structure de l'oeuvre qui doit primer, plus que toute appartenance à un groupe.[5]

Blais' philosophy of writing is defined by her humanistic vision of the world where people are united "by the same universal forms of suffering".[6] She believes that every writer, through the act of writing, attempts to describe their own personal view of the world:

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[5]Monique Roy, "Chaque livre est un engagement," Le Devoir 4 mars 1978: 33.
[6]Donald Smith, Voices of Deliverance. Interviews with Quebec and Acadian Writers (Toronto: Anansi, 1983) 132.

"une petite humanité" [7] The artist's vision, presented in narrative form, embodies, in Blais' opinion, "toutes sortes de réalités, d'approches du regard, de façon de percevoir la société, la vie, les autres, le monde" [8] No matter how small or specific the "world" being described, this vision/perception is a vital part of the larger realm of universal experience

The writer's artistic vision must attempt to cross all barriers linguistic, geographic, ethnic, ideological Blais states: "La voie de l'avenir serait d'arriver à se débarrasser de ces frontières".[9] Blais views the world globally and she sees the act of writing (of describing one's individual humanity) as holding the key to the survival of the human spirit· "Il me semble aussi que l'écriture, grâce à son pouvoir de dénonciation et de revendication contient nos espoirs de survie".[10]

In light of Blais' philosophy of an individual authorial vision, free of ideological barriers, engaged in the humanistic effort to fight oppression and secure a brighter future for the world, we can understand her rejection of the confining political, ideological category of "feminist writer". Blais is not alone in her feelings on this matter. American writer Joyce Carol Oates echo's Blais' call for an individual style of writing, free of definitions, particularly those of "male" and "female". In the article "Is There a Female Voice ? Joyce Carol Oates Replies", she states her belief that, for the

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[7]Geneviève Picard, "La vision universelle," Voir 22 nov 1989 24 This publication is an interview with Marie-Claire Blais.
[8]Picard 24.
[9]Picard 24
[10]Lucie Côté, "L'extrême discrétion de Marie-Claire Blais," La Presse 27 jan. 1990. K5.

practicing artist, "'sociology', 'politics,' and even 'biology' are subordinate to matters of personal vision, and even to matters of craftsmanship". The category "women", Oates contests, refers to a sociological, political, and biological phenomenon (or class, or function, or stereotype); whereas, in her view, "'literature' refers to something that always transcends these categories even while being fueled by them"(writer's emphasis). Oates confers with Blais' philosophy of writing when she states that women's problems/ insights/experiences are all material for writing but that ultimately "what matters in serious art is. . .the skill of execution and the uniqueness of vision" [11]

Joyce Carol Oates and Marie-Claire Blais avoid ideological and political platforms because they see the inherent danger of confusing art with propaganda. In her article entitled "On Being a Woman Writer," Canadian writer Margaret Atwood also speaks of the danger of political ideology and writing. Atwood discusses the relationship between feminist politics and writing via an exploration of the concept of being a "woman" and a "writer". She believes the main reason for the infrequent participation of women writers in the feminist movement is that "no good writer wants to be merely a transmitter of someone else's ideology, no matter how fine that ideology may be".[12] She shares Blais' belief that writers are witnesses, or as Atwood says "eye/I-witnesses". She believes that a writer's personal vision and political ideology do not always

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[11] Joyce Carol Oates, "Is There a Female Voice? Joyce Carol Oates Replies," in Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 208.
[12] Atwood 203

mix well because traditionally, politicians have had little or no respect for writing as an activity valuable in itself; writing is just a vehicle for conveying propaganda. In her view, the woman writer today exists in a society that has little respect for writing as a profession, and not much respect for women either. Hence, she believes that:

> The proper path is to become better as a writer. Insofar as writers are lenses, condensers of their society, her work may include the Movement, since it is so palpably among the things that exist. The picture that she gives of it is altogether another thing, and will depend, at least partly, on the course of the Movement itself.[13]

What we see here is a common sentiment amongst some contemporary women writers (and there are many more) to refuse the label or category of "feminist writer." They reject the closure placed on their artistic vision by a prescribed ideology or politic. Joyce Carol Oates, angered by the "lumping" of her work under the category of "Women Writers" in the Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Literature, states that: "[A]ttempting to rise out of categories (and there are many besides that of 'woman'), the writer is thrown back, by critics frequently as well-intentioned as not".[14]

What does this mean to feminist literary critics attempting to delineate a feminist model of writing ? Can we call them feminist if they are not so self-defined ? Yes. I believe that Blais can be considered a feminist writer because her writing embodies the

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[13]Atwood 204.
[14]Eagleton 208.

following important concepts: 1) a collective subject, 2) "breaking the sequence"--a narrative rewriting of culture scripts which is characterized by the writers "oscillation" between insider\outsider in relation to dominant culture, 3) "breaking the sentence"--stylistically rejecting traditional plots and narrative conventions, 4) a positioned humanism that is defined by marginalized identities. These ideas are expressed by feminist critics, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Mary Jacobus. I will explain these concepts in more detail as I examine the novel L'ange de la solitude (1989) by Blais.

I am not going to to give an overview of the field of feminist criticism in this thesis. Feminist criticism has been rapidly expanding since the first articles began to appear over twenty years ago. The body of feminist theoretical work can be divided into four different areas: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. Each of these models participates in the effort to define and differentiate the qualities of the woman writer and the woman's text.[15] The array of theories and standpoints presented by these various models is much too complex to be dealt with properly in this text. Instead, I am selecting various theories on the basis of my knowledge of Blais' literary works and what I feel best pertains to her particular writing style.

One might assume, however, that francophone literature such as Blais' would call for the implementation of French language criticism, and French feminist criticism in this case in particular.

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[15]For further elucidation of models of feminist theory refer to Elaine Showalter's article "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," Critical Inquiry vol. 8 no. 2 (winter 1981).179-205.

The problem of "French vs. American" feminist theory presented itself quite early in the process of my research. As a graduate student in the Department of French Language and Literature, who was studying a francophone woman writer from a feminist critical perspective, I was inevitably guided down the road of French feminist theory. My program quite naturally emphasized the importance of French content in my research. The literature I was studying was French, and so, by extension, should be the methodology. My initial study of feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Madeleine Gagnon, Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig introduced me to the concepts of "writing the body" and *écriture féminine*. I was also educated in the study of linguistic and textual theories of as well as Lacanian and neo-Freudian approaches to women's writing. The theories were very enlightening but they did not seem to fit into the culturally-based analysis that I was focusing on for Marie-Claire Blais.

My uneasiness with a French feminist approach is a sentiment not uncommon to many North American feminist critics. Indeed, the perception of French feminism, as constructed by North American feminist critics, has its origins in a debate at the 1979 conference organized by Alice Jardine entitled "The Scholar and the Feminist IV" (Barnard College). Here, according to feminist critic Nancy Miller, "is the moment when French theory as a powerful intervention begins to have its day in feminist and nonfeminist contexts".[16] The subject of these early debates can also be found in essays by Domna Stanton in

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[16]Nancy K. Miller, Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 21.

The Future of Difference, Mary Jacobus in the preface to Reading Woman, and Margaret Homans in Bearing the Word, Miller states:

> Debate is probably not the right word to describe the profound differences in assumptions about language, identity, sexual difference, and politics that underlie unevenly and freight asymmetrically the discussions of this period. On the whole this has been coded as a polarization between Anglo-American and French approaches to literature. It more accurately has had to do with one's relationship to "theory"--construed as deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and neo-Marxism--and to a profound ambivalence within a certain feminist analysis to those bodies of theory as 'male.'[17]

This debate is continued in the 1981 Introduction to Yale Feminist Studies entitled "Feminist Readings: French Text/American Contexts".[18] This special edition was edited by a collaborative group of seven faculty women from Darmouth College assembled to discuss the scholarship being done by American feminists trained in the field of French studies. In their introduction, the collective decided to explore the subject of "dis-connection" in French/American feminist theory by asking other American feminist scholars to give their opinion on the situation. The responses provide an excellent overview of the major areas of discord.

The dialogue turns on three debates: the lack of available translations of French Feminists/the desire to read them; the

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[17]Miller 14.

[18]Gaudin, Colette, et al., eds., Introduction, Yale French Studies 62 (1981): 2-18.

temptation to reject psychoanalysis/the recognition that both the French and American psychoanalytic traditions might provide useful bases for feminist inquiry; the resistance to theory in the name of practical application/the realization that theory can be used as a practical tool.[19]

As for the first issue, Susan Gubar related her pervasive sense of dependency on key translators (i.e Spivak-Derrida, Gallop-Irigaray); Sandra Gilbert spoke of feeling "troubled and excluded" and that even though her language skills may be satisfactory, "it's still so much an 'other' culture.[20] Carolyn Allen is frustrated by the preoccupation with word play and the loss of meaning in translation. Hence, there seems to be a genuine interest as well as frustration amongst American critics. They feel dependant on translators and excluded by intimidating cultural differences.

The question concerning psychoanalysis was dominated by the American critics' wariness of Freud (Gilbert, Allen). Also, there were the basic differences of approach between French Lacanians and Object Relations analysis of America and England. Susan Gubar is suspicious of the male theorists behind French feminist theory. She also finds that the abstract theoretical discourse in French theory creates a sense of "division between practice and theory, between history and theory".[21] Sandra Gilbert and Elizabeth Abel (like Carolyn Allen) criticize the use of word play since it fails to address their concerns about female experience and identity. Collette Gaudin and

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[19]Gaudin 6.
[20]Gaudin 6-7.
[21]Gaudin 10.

her fellow editors state: "Americans bring to criticism a practice grounded in the authority of women's experiences". [22] In essence, American critics often find that French feminist theory does not meet the political needs of feminist activism.

I understand these basic problems of fellow American feminists in light of French feminism. I often feel excluded, frustrated, lost in theory for theory's sake. Even though I consider my language skills adequate in French, I also depend on translators to help clarify the difficult word-play of writers such as Irigaray and Cixous. The complaint I sympathize with the most, however, is Gilbert. Abel, and Gaudin's concern that French feminism fails to address female experience and identity. This aspect is particularly important as it pertains to Blais' positioned humanism in her writing. To ignore issues of identity, marginalization and personal experience would be missing the central concepts that make Blais' writing feminist.

It is the final opinion of the collective, however, that the disconnection between the two feminist approaches should not be overemphasized. Strength is to be found in the alliance of the two cultural and theoretical contexts. Mary Jacobus' statement is an example of the inter-connectedness of French and American feminists:

> To come back to the problem of integrating French feminist theoretical criticism with the American tradition which cut a lot of close reading: actually, as you think about it, deconstruction is exactly close reading; it does come out of France; it is one of the tools that is being used. It seems to

[22] Gaudin 11.

> me that this is the kind of work that's clearly productive for feminist theory. The education of ourselves in the very powerful and dominating way of reading and of writing enables us to identify where women have been silenced yet again in various ways. . . .[23]

I tend to agree with Mary Jacobus' statement. Nancy K. Miller also echoes this need to conciliate the two positions in order to try and incorporate both within a workable approach. Nancy K. Miller and I, as American feminist critics working within the field of French literature, see the very real need to incorporate French feminist theory into American feminist discourse. To continue the relentless redrawing of boundaries only leads to a narrowing of vision, of possibilities. The continuation of the game of binary oppositions--theory and empiricism, indifference and identity--is a self-defeating practice. Instead, Miller hopes to see the birth of a "more international geo-graphics in feminist writing."[24]

While my thesis draws mainly on North American feminist criticism, I am not unaware of this theoretical concern. My choices have been made according to the specific needs of my writer. However, I see my attempts at combining French literary texts within a North American context as participating in the "birth of a more international geo-graphics in feminist writing".

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[23]Gaudin 11.
[24]Miller 17.

Chapter II. L'ange de la solitude

As I stated in Chapter I, Marie-Claire Blais does not consider herself feminist. Yet, due to the presence of certain concepts or narrative conventions, one can assert that her writing is feminist. These concepts, which will be analyzed in Blais' novel L'ange de la solitude, have been posited by certain feminist critics as being characteristic of women writer's oppositional strategies to the depiction of gender institutions, cultural scripts and certain ideological formations in narrative.[25] The concepts I will be addressing in Blais are: 1) the collective protagonist; 2)"breaking the sentence" or the stylistic rupture of conventional narrative; 3) "breaking the sequence" or women's dual position as inside and outside dominant culture and discourse, the "oscillation" that occurs between these two positions, and its relation to the writer's narrative critique; 4) Blais' positioned humanism as defined by her own marginal identity as a lesbian.

Blais' latest novel, L'ange de la solitude (1989), is about a group of young lesbians living together in a house somewhere east of Montréal. The characters are: Johnie, Doudouline, Polydor, Gérard, L'Abeille, Thérèse, and Sophie. They are all in the early to mid twenties, except for Sophie, who is the mother of Doudouline. The only characteristic these women have in common, besides being lesbian, is that they are all in a state of torpor, ambivalence as to

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[25]Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies in Twentieth Century Women Writers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 34

their life's plans or ambitions. They all express feelings of alienation, angst and malaise about the state of the world today.

L'Abeille, Johnie and Gérard are college drop-outs who have started various projects or degrees only to forget them before completion. Doudouline is an aspiring actress who is also incapable of seeing a project through to the end. Her mother, Sophie, an accomplished actress, is frustrated with the girls' lack of ambition "Quand finirez-vous de rêver, les filles ?" (39). Only Polydor and Thérèse are actively pursuing a goal. Polydor is a theology student who does not believe in God, but desires to be a priestess so that she may battle the oppressive phallocracy of the Church. Thérèse, L'Abeille's ex-lover, is a social worker who left the group, sickened by their constant state of idleness.

Blais' presentation of a group of characters instead of a single protagonist exemplifies a double tactic that characterizes twentieth-century women writers -- the use of a "multiple individual" and a "collective protagonist". The first concept is derived primarily from a rather radical strategy of Dorothy Richardson's that concerns breaking down the "him and her" of heterosexual romance by making the girl the symbolic center of all conflict. This is possible, according to Richardson, because "women have a special capacity for pluralism, heterogeneity, and a tolerant, multiple caritas."[26] Richardson's concept of woman as multiple, fluid, and possessing stronger desire for plural identifications is a complex and unique expression of the author's own artistic

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[26]Dorothy Richardson, "The Reality of Feminism," The Ploughshare no 2 (Sept. 1917):24 as qtd. in DuPlessis 153.

philosophy. However, her basic premise, that women are the privileged site of a desire to move "'beyond the hard visible horizon' of the bounded self and to express a 'communal consciousness'" does have its particular application in the narrative of Blais, especially when we consider it in light of the concept of "collective protagonist".

The "multiple individual" can appear in different narratives, and is shaped differently by each author. Alice Walker, for example, creates a pluralist spiritual and political vision for her single, questing protagonist in Meridian in order to dramatize the inherent social and spiritual contradictions of her character. While this is not the case in L'ange de la solitude, Walker's narrative is also such that "[a]ll the characters are equally the narrative subject; the 'progress' of each and all is intertwined. Further, within this multiplicity no character goes unchanged, unexamined,".[27] This is certainly the case for Blais' group of women as well.

The concept of the "communal protagonist" is defined by Rachel Blau DuPlessis as follows: "a way of organizing the work so that neither the development of an individual against a backdrop of supporting characters nor the formation of a heterosexual couple is central to the novel".[28] This type of novel is based on a collective Bildung and communal affect which can suggest the structures of social change in the structures of the narrative. DuPlessis states: "The communal protagonist operates, then, as a critique both of the

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[27]DuPlessis 159.
[28]DuPlessis 163.

hierarchies and authoritarian practice of gender and of the narrative practice that selects and honors only major figures."[29]

The lesbian characters of L'ange embody both concepts of "multiple individual" and "collective protagonist". The character Johnie, who represents the voice of gay and lesbian oppression in the novel, speaks for all of the women in the group with her monologues on the marginality of gay/lesbian existence. Johnie reflects:

> la société ressemblait à une forêt uniforme où poussait rarement la fleur sauvage, et comme si on eût été dans un état de guerre et qu'il y eût des soldats tapis dans l'herbe, ceux-ci déguisés en ce vert, uniforme feuillage afin de mieux se perdre dans la forêt, on ne pouvait plus distinguer les soldats de l'ennemi sournois qui se dérobait derrière les arbres qui avaient pris eux-mêmes la teinte de la forêt, partout dans cette forêt en apparence si uniforme. Celui qui portait une couleur différente pouvait déclencher l'attaque de l'ennemi. (21)

Johnie's political consciousness is a communal one that pertains to all sexual minorities. Her personal struggles against oppression mirror the larger group struggle being waged by gay rights groups, and AIDS activists:

> bien qu'on eût dit qu'elle était lesbienne ou gaie, sa dignité n'était-elle pas de savoir qu'elle n'avait pas encore un nom qui fût nommé ou nommable, mais qu'échouée parmi ses contemporains de l'Étoile Rose, sa conquête d'une libération

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[29]DuPlessis 163.

> à vie comme sa frêle conquête de la vie, n'avaient jamais était aussi menacées (111).

However, by representing the other lesbian characters in various personal struggles of their own (i.e. drug addiction, generational conflicts, heartache), Blais moves beyond the boundaries of gay/lesbian oppression to represent a fuller vision of lesbian identity. Blais' lesbians participate in a larger communal consciousness of women's existence and thus break free from culturally scripted plots of "otherness".

This group of women come together in a "commune" at L'Abeille's house, each suffering from her own feelings of alienation or oppression, looking for a refuge from the outside world as well as a "family". The beginning of the novel finds most of the group together in L'Abeille's living room, in various states of languor. As the novel progresses, the characters split off and follow their own story line. There is Johnie's affair with Lynda, who disappears one day and leaves Johnie lonely and dejected; followed by Johnie's trip to the Bahamas where she seduces rich married women, only to be rejected when vacation time is over. There is Doudouline's and Polydor's loving relationship, their conflict with Sophie, and Doudouline's latest musical project. There is L'Abeille's affair with an older women, their generational conflicts and her artistic awakening. And there is Gérard who takes pills, deals cocaine, lives in the dark world of gay nightclubs and dies in a tenement fire. Her death serves to bring these women together at the end of the novel.

Here, after following their individual lives for two-thirds of the book, Blais presents a group "coming to consciousness" of sorts.

Blais presents the individual thoughts of the characters in a flow of consciousness narrative that weaves the fears, thoughts and resolutions of everyone into a single flowing piece. Induced by the shocking realization of Gérard's death, and hence the fragility of life, these women finally voice their frustrations and face the paralyzing fears that have kept them secluded (excluded) from the world.

L'Abeille concludes: "le temps n'était-il pas venu d'exprimer ce qu'elle ressentait de plus violent, son exclusion de cette planète," (95). Doudouline, having completed and performed her first play, wins the affection and admiration of her mother, Sophie: "la voix exceptionelle de Doudouline, d'elle seule, de ses fibres, de son sang, on était actrice, chanteuse, de mère en fille," (117) Polydor confronts her feelings on her plans for a religious life.

> Aucune place, parmi eux, pour Polydor qui savait que Dieu ne lui ferait jamais signe, car pas plus que l'homme est les désagréments de sa théologie, de sa philosophie, Polydor n'eût toléré l'idée de Dieu, ce Dieu de la décrépitude érudite qui occupait tous les postes de l'université, lequel anéantissait le discordant esprit des jeunes. Elle voguait donc seule, des bras chauds de Doudouline à la nuit obscure de saint Jean de la Croix. (112-113)

Here we see a type of collective Bildung where the individual efforts of agency of each woman reflect the way women and minority groups give political voice to their oppression in society as a whole.

Blais' communal protagonist implies that problems or issues that we see as individually based are, in fact, "social in cause and in

cure".[30] Richardson states: "[t]his [plural] protagonist is an avatar of new values in a dramatic and narrative form, suggesting that individual conflict and resolution are completed and absorbed by communal growth, and that collective survival is an essential goal".[31]

I feel that Marie-Claire Blais' "humanistic" view of life and writing underscores the importance of community and collective survival. She has often stated that the her great preoccupation with writing is the future of the world: "Ma préoccupation pour l'avenir, c'est la survie des gens, de leurs esprits. Je vois la vie globalement, une entité universelle, plein d'images".[32] In her opinion, the writer, as witness, as recorder of actualities/experiences, plays an essential role in the survival of humanity. The act of writing, she states: "grâce à son pouvoir de dénonciation et de revendication contient nos espoirs de survie".[33]

So, what can be said of the plot of L'ange de la solitude ? Not much. Blais uses the traditional plot convention of closure via death in order to present and frame the collective consciousness of her characters. Where is the traditional build up to the death sequence ? Where is the transgressive act, (i.e rejection of cultural script of marriage) that precipitates and legitimizes Gérard's untimely death ? Yes, she was a bad girl who took drugs and hung out with "the wrong crowd". (What would the "wrong crowd" be to a lesbian,

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[30]DuPlessis 179.
[31]Richardson, cited DuPlessis, 179.
[32]Picard 24.
[33]Lucie Côté, "L'extrême discretion de Marie-Claire Blais" La Presse 27 Jan. 1990: K5.

heterosexuals ?) In any case, Blais does not voice judgmental opinions on these women's lifestyles, freeing the closure of death from any moralistic meaning. Her thoughts may best be encapsulated by Johnie's statement concerning street people: "n'étaient-ils pas. pensait Johnie, les victimes d'une déchéance engendrée par une fin de siècle qui enterrait déjà ses vivants ?" (76).

Why would Blais reject a traditional plot line, or even a simple story line, in her novel ? Perhaps we should consider Dorothy Richardson's view that "story", for women, typically meant plots of seduction, courtship, the energies of quest deflected into sexual downfall, the choice of a marriage partner, the melodramas of beginning, middle and end, the trajectories of sexual arousal and release. Virginia Woolf was very interested in Richardson's rupture of conventional narrative. Woolf links the formal and the ideological aspects of critique--the link between conventional narrative on the one hand and normative expectations for female life on the other.

> So 'him and her' are cut out, and with them goes the old deliberate business: the chapters that lead up and the chapters that lead down; the characters who are always characteristic; the scenes that are passionate and the scenes that are humorous; the elaborate construction of reality; the conception that shapes and surrounds the whole. All these things are cast away...[34]

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[34] Virginia Woolf, "The Tunnel" and "Romance and the Heart," in Contemporary Writers: Essays on Twentieth Century Books and Authors (New York. Harcourt Brace Hanovich, 1965): 120.

The drive by women writers to reject traditional narrative plots of closure via marriage or death goes along with the feminist stylistic and ideological concept of "breaking the sentence". This concept was first presented by Virginia Woolf in her discussion of the "poetics of rupture and critique" in A Room of One's Own.[35]

To break the sentence rejects not grammar especially, but rhythm, pace, flow, expression: the structuring of the female voice by the male voice, female tone and manner by male expectations, female writing by male emphasis, female writing by existing conventions of gender-in short, any way in which dominant structures shape muted ones. Woolf spoke of creating a "woman's sentence" whose function it was to reflect a dissension among women concerning their lack of "accurate" representation in literature. Breaking the sentence is, then, a way of rupturing language and tradition sufficiently to invite a female slant, emphasis and approach.[36]

Blais' positing of a communal lesbian protagonist, in a narrative that rejects conventional plot structure, is an excellent example of Woolf's "breaking the sentence". Blais ruptures the traditional convention of quest formation for women as being tied to heterosexual romance plots, writing men entirely out of the narrative. She also ruptures the traditional meaning of death for women as closure, since Gérard's death is the moment of opening, of awakening in the novel. For with Gérard's death the women arise from their own states of dormancy and seclusion and actively

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[35]Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929)
[36]DuPlessis 32.

assess the world around them. They awaken to the injustice of their marginalization. Blais "casts away" what Woolf calls the "elaborate constructions of reality", or the ideological formations of the dominant society as transmitted through narrative, in order that her otherwise muted characters may speak.

Indeed, Woolf sees the "new sentence", and the narrative displacement that it embodies, as coming from the "other-side of everything, articulating something not. . .noticed before, or if noticed. . guiltily suppressed".[37] By displacing the traditional tale of heterosexual romance, of single protagonist, of quest and closure Blais offers the possibility of speech to her marginalized characters. This narrative displacement is a committed identification with Otherness-- or as DuPlessis states "a participant observer's investigation of the claims of those parts of culture that are taboo, despised, marginalized".[38]

By putting the female eye, ego, voice at the center of the tale, narrative displacement asks the kind of question that certain feminist historians have, in parallel ways, put forth: How do events, selves and grids for understanding look when viewed by a female subject evaluated in ways that she chooses ? This brings up the next feminist concept in Blais' writing: "breaking the sequence-the expected order".

Having broken the sentence, ruptured with the voices of dominance in narrative, women writers now delegitimate cultural scripts by realigning literary scripts to privilege women, the muted,

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[37]Woolf "Romance and Heart" 125.
[38]DuPlessis 108.

and minorities. As Dorothy Richardson expressed earlier, why would a woman writer want to write a conventional woman's "story" when that traditionally positions them as an object of a man's quest? Carolyn Heilbrun, in her book Writing a Woman's Life, also discusses women's need to rewrite previously posited "culture scripts", assigned to them by patriarchy, that lead to closure via death or marriage.[39]

In her book, Heilbrun posits four ways to "write a woman' life":

> the woman can tell it herself, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is call biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously, and without recognizing or naming the process.[40]

Heilbrun asserts that the distance between life and fiction is not readily discernable. She explores how women's lives have been contrived in the literary representation of cultural conventions and, how, above all, "what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life".[41] She then defines a "new style feminist biography", that appears after 1973, which is concerned with venting women's anger and openly admitting their desire for power over their own life. These new biographies rewrite the old cultural

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[39]Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing a Woman's Life (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988)
[40]Heilbrun 11.
[41]Heilbrun 13.

scripts and dare to reinvent the lives their subjects lead and reject the pressure to accept the "plot" assigned to them by patriarchy.

Blais' novel, while not concerned with the life of one woman in particular, does testify to an authentic realm of women's experiences. In her description of the text, Blais admits that her characters are based on some of her friends, and that this novel represents an attempt to "les décrire avec un maximun de sympathie".[42] Blais' lesbian characters reject patriarchy's assigned "plots". Indeed, much of the alienation they suffer is from realizing their position outside of society. The ending of the novel is the moment when their collective anger is vented. Their ability to achieve a change of consciousness (or perhaps a state of consciousness) corresponds to the active rupture with a narrative order. For if you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' version of it, then you are producing a new story.[43]

The consciousness of the "commune" is inextricably linked to their marginality, or their "sites of opposition". The same can be said of Marie-Claire Blais, a lesbian French-Canadian woman. DuPlessis sees women's "oppositional" stance to the social and cultural construction of gender as defined by their marginal status in relation to the dominant ideology. She lists the following categories as sites of opposition from which the writer moves into the center of culture and back again: black, colonial, Canadian, of

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42"Marie-Claire Blais rend hommage à Jean Genet" La Presse (2 May 1989): K1.
43DuPlessis 112.
44DuPlessis 33.

working class origin, lesbian or bisexual orientation, or displaced social status. These sites of opposition are shared by many women writers whose writing conveys "a movement between complicity and critique".[44] This conflictual motion is characteristic of the hegemonic process. Women's dual position in society combined with their state of ambiguity in relation to authority provides them with a privileged position from which to question ideological mainstays and cultural conventions.

Similar theories are presented by other feminist writers. Carolyn Heilbrun and Adrienne Rich state their position of "double marginalization" when they point out their muted position as women in addition to their personal sites of opposition. Carolyn Heilbrun points toward the role of double determining when she suggests that"to be a feminist one had to have an experience of being an outsider more extreme than merely being a woman".[45] Adrienne Rich describes that tension leading to a doubled vision: 'Born a white woman, Jewish or of curious mind/ --twice an outsider, still believing in inclusion--".[46] Marie-Claire Blais is a white, well-educated lesbian born of working class parents. She is "inside" the realm of dominant culture because she is white and well-educated yet she is outside or marginal to society because of her sites of opposition: lesbian and of the working class.

45Carolyn Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979) 20-24

46Adrienne Rich, A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981) 39

47Mary Jacobus, "The Difference of View," in Women Writing and Writing about Women, ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979) 19-20.

As a woman writer defined by her sites of opposition, who believes in the essential role of writing, of witnessing human experience and voicing marginalized discourse, Blais is forced to work within the dominant discourse while maintaining her position outside it. She thus "oscillates" between being inside accepted culture and outside. Mary Jacobus makes central to her analysis of women's writing this split between alien critic and inheritor. Jacobus states, given this situation, "at once within culture and outside it, a woman writer must simultaneously challenge the terms and work within them"[47]. DuPlessis sees this as precisely paralleling her argument that women are neither wholly "subcultural" nor wholly "maincultural" but that they must "negotiate difference and sameness, marginality and inclusion in a constant dialogue, which takes shape variously in the various authors, but with one end--a rewriting of gender in dominant fiction"[48].

Once again, Blais is "breaking the sequence--the expected order" by being neither inside nor outside society. Her dual position goes against dominant structure that demands inclusion or exclusion. Her sanctioned position as "writer", as one with access to the dominant discourse, combined with her marginalized identity, facilitates her narrative rupture of culturally mandated, hegemonically poised patterns or scripts.

How does Blais' dual position and oscillation manifest itself in her writing, her philosophy of writing ? As I discussed in the beginning of Chapter I, Blais defines herself as a "humanist". She

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[48]DuPlessis 43.

believes in the primordial importance of artistic vision unlimited by ideological boundaries. Hence, her rejection of "feminist writing". If we are to understand the term "humanist" in light of its Renaissance interpretation, as assuming the dignity and central position of man in the universe and his capacity for self-realization through reason, we would expect an enlightened, positive view of humanity from Blais. Or we might expect a universal, non-hierarchical portrait of human experience, unbiased in its depiction. Yet this is not what we see portrayed in Blais' fiction.

In fact, L'ange de la solitude is not the only Blais narrative to posit marginal characters at the center of the novel. The majority of her novels are populated by suffering tortured souls, social deviants and minority groups. Karen Gould, in her article "The Censored Word and the Body Politic: Reconsidering the Fiction of Marie-Claire Blais", points this out:

> From the outset, her novels have been literally filled with the sickly oftentimes disfigured bodies of neglected and impoverished children, as well as the tortured souls of a seemingly lost generation of adolescents, all of whom feel the full negative weight of society's gaze, a masculine-patriarchal gaze which judges them unfit and unacceptable. As a result, virtually all of Blais' protagonists are engaged in various stages of subconscious or conscious revolt against the repressive structures and moral hypocrisy of conventional authority. They align themselves with troublemakers and criminals, with the insane, the afflicted, or the dispossessed; in short, with the 'marginals' of

> society who lie or steal, not out of wickedness, but out of necessity, in order to survive, in order to affirm themselves in the face of prohibition.[49]

Blais' artistic "universal" vision is one defined by opposition. Her "humanity" is a positioned one, defined by her own sites of marginalization. It is this "positioned humanity" that allows Blais to assert her inclusion within dominant culture while maintaining her stance outside it. It is a position that possesses incredible potential for subversion. Who better to critique the system than someone who views it both from the "inside" and the "outside", as "inheritor" and "critic" ? Also, her position as "writer", as recorder of society and manipulator of the dominant discourse, allows for the dissemination of thoughts and feelings normally silenced by dominant discourse. Giving voice to the voiceless and making visible the invisible are two prime maneuvers in feminist poetics.

When asked why there are so many marginal characters in her writing, Blais states:

> For me, that's the world as it is. It's not only literature; the world is like that. It's the human condition and I don't think people should be afraid of talking and writing about it. Life and death are always with us in all sorts of forms. You can't say we're here on earth to be completely happy. There's nothing to prove that to us, except ourselves, our own personal attempts in which we're very much alone.[50]

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[49]Karen Gould, "The Censored Word and the Body Politic: Reconsidering the Fiction of Marie-Claire Blais," Journal of Popular Culture, xv, no.3 (winter '81). 15.

[50] Donald Smith, Voices of Deliverance: Interviews with Quebec and Acadian Writers (Toronto: Anansi, 1983): 136.

For Blais, suffering is a "universal reality". In asserting this, she underwrites the "universal" from a decidedly marginalized perspective. Her self-defined "global" vision, --"[O]n ne peut plus s'arrêter, vivre en contemplant le monde de sa chambre. Ni de son pays. On est emporté dans le grand courant du monde"[51]--is really a series of marginal microcosms. Her world, her experiences as a marginal being, are the lens through which her artistic vision is filtered.

Her "petite humanité" is an example of the feminist concept of "identity politics". This very important concept was introduced by the Combahee River Collective in their manifesto entitled "A Black Feminist Statement", and is an example of personal identity defining political agency. They state that "the most radical politics come out of our own identity." [52] They believe their work with their own consciousness raising groups represents a "political contribution" to the feminist principle that "the personal is political."[53] Their status as black lesbian feminists is an example of multiple oppression, a position that makes "their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique."[54] The Collective's political work is characterized by the need to fight oppression on many fronts: race, class, sexual preference.

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[51]Geneviève Picard, "La vision universelle," Voir (22, nov. 1989): 24.

[52]Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," This Bridge Called My Back, eds. Cherrie Morage and Gloria Anzaldua, Foreword Toni Cade Bambaca (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press) 210-218.

[53]Combahee River Collective 213.

[54]Combahee River Collective 211.

Blais' writing also confronts oppression on many fronts, as demonstrated in her array of reoccurring themes. The "personal is political" agenda of feminist politics can be reflected in the "writer as witness" agency prescribed in Blais' "personal" artistic vision. Could we not consider Blais' narrative representations of minority groups as a "consciousness raising" effort ? By depicting alternative life scripts, she proposes new models for female experience. By rejecting traditional literary plots of romance and quest, hero and heroine and by restructuring narrative order by focusing on muted identities, she allows for previously muted, silenced voices to rise to the surface, and speak from a position of otherness.

The Angel of Solitude, the title of Blais' novel and symbol of muted discourse, speaks to Johnie, reminding her of her exclusion from dominant society:

> elle avait retrouvé avec toujours ce rejet de Marianne son Ange de la Solitude qui l'avait toujours attendue dans l'ombre, comme pour lui dire: "Quand donc défendras-tu tes droits ? Toi qui es un soldat sans armes, quand donc cesseras-tu de te camoufler dans le feuillage qui t'abrite chez les filles de la bande, quand donc seras-tu toi-même, face au monde, dans une clarté resplendissante ? (109)

Blais dedicated the novel to Jean Genet, from whom the Angel of Solitude originates. His words preface the novel:

> L'ange de la solitude, c'est-à-dire un être de plus en plus inhumain, cristallin, autour de qui se développent les bandes d'une musique basée sur le contraire de l'harmonie,

> ou plutôt une musique qui est ce qui demeure quand l'harmonie est usée. (Genet, Querelle de Brest)

Can we not consider Marie-Claire Blais as our own ange de la solitude ? Her novels are based on the disharmony of marginalized beings. Her narrative plot is an "anti-plot", based on the rupture of traditional narrative conventions. Her message speaks against the dominant discourse. She reminds us of the failures of the social system and she makes us notice those whom we would sooner prefer to ignore.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, Blais' writing can be considered feminist due to her use of several feminist narrative strategies. So perhaps she should be considered a feminist Angel of Solitude ? In any case, I shall continue my study of Blais' feminist narrative strategies in my next chapter concerning the image of mother and mother/daughter relations in Blais. L'ange de la solitude is the product of over thirty years of writing, of "breaking the sentence" in order to "break the sequence". I will now examine the evolution of Blais' feminist narrative by focusing on her struggle to delegitimate and re-write the cultural institution of the French-Canadian mother/myth.

Chapter III The Institution of Mother and Mother/Daughter Relations in Blais

The gendered institution of the French-Canadian mother is characterized by a hegemonic discourse, created and sustained by the Catholic Church, that first arose around the turn of the twentieth century and has changed little over the decades. The ideological formation of a French-Canadian matriarchal myth[55] can be traced through the religious discourse that pervaded all aspects of French-Canadian society since the founding of the first colonies at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Marie-Claire Blais' narrative struggle to delegitimate the culturally mandated institution of motherhood in Québéc society spans over thirty years. Her earliest novels, in particular La belle bête (1959) and Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel (1965), are noted for their especially bleak depiction of the family, positioned, explicitly against the ideology of perfect harmony/identity/ compensation of women's role over generations. She writes of the generational conflicts/hatred between women, the absent father, the alienated mother, the resentful daughter, male-identified women and male-directed reproduction of the hegemonic order.

Having "un-written" the cultural script of motherhood during the first half of her literary career, Blais attempts, in her later novels (i.e. Les nuits de l'Underground [1978], Un sourd dans la ville [1980]

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[55] I am using the term matriarchy in reference to a false ideal of empowerment in hegemonic discourse as exemplified by La Bonne Parole, then as the object of attack by feminists in the 1970's. I am not using the term in reference to matriarchy as a feminist utopian location, as do Science Fiction writers of the same decade.

and Vision's d'Anna [1982]) to "write beyond the ending" or re-write the script of motherhood via the examination of maternal modes of caring. By positing women-to-women and mother-daughter relations as the center of her narrative, she also participates in DuPlessis' "project" of delegitimation of the cultural hegemony of the heterosexual love plot. I will examine Blais' three novels La belle bête (1959), Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel (1965), and Vision's d'Anna (1982) as they demonstrate the feminist writer's efforts to express dissent from the voices of dominant culture.

In order to understand Blais' feminist narrative critique in La belle bête, it is first necessary to present the hegemonic discourse that is the target of her attack. One finds much of the discourse on the role of the mother in French-Canadian society in the "revue féminine" entitled La Bonne Parole which served as an unofficial voice for the Catholic Church from 1913 to 1958. A quick summary of the main themes presented in this revue will serve to delineate the cultural script of motherhood proposed by the Catholic Church in Québéc.

A. La Bonne Parole: Mapping out a matriarcy

La Bonne Parole is a "revue féminine" that first appeared in March of 1913. Its primary function was to serve as a newsletter for "L'Association Saint-Jean Baptiste"--a volunteer women's association founded in 1907 by Marie Gérin-Lajoie and Caroline Béique. This association was part of a growing movement of the period know as "le féminisme chrétien" which was born out of a need

to reconcile issues of nationalism, women's rights and religion. The Association Saint-Jean Baptiste created a coalition of some twenty-two women's groups and centered their interests around the areas of charity, education and social welfare. The pamphlet La Bonne Parole acted as the newsletter as well as the ideological voice for this Association and political movement, whose principle objectives were to instill a nationalist fervor amongst women while maintaining a strong moral and spiritual order in society.

Throughout its history, three themes predominate in La Bonne Parole: "à savoir le patriotisme, la religion chrétienne et la nature".[56] The issues of nationalism and patriotism revolve around the simple fact that women, by producing children, are preserving the French-Canadian "race": "[C]e sont les mères qui sont les berceaux vivants d'une race !"[57] Women are appreciated according to the number of children they have and if they have successfully "inculcated" them: "La femme en devenant gardienne des grands principes qui réfissent la société et en assurent la stabilité enfantera à la patrie des dévouements insoupçonnés jusqu'ici."[58]

Not only are the women conservators of the "race" and of the nation, but they are also conservators of the language and the faith. Patriotism and religion go hand in hand as the mother came to embody all that is sacred to French-Canadian society and culture:

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[56]Dumais 1.

[57]J.-A.-M. Brosseau, "Conférence sur le dévouement," La Bonne Parole (juin 1916, 8) qtd. in Dumais 2.

[58]Marie Gérin-Lajoie, "Entre-nous" La Bonne Parole (février 1924, 3) qtd. in Dumais 5.

> C'est à la femme canadienne-française que nous devons ce que nous avons de meilleur et ce que le voisin nous envie le plus: la famille nombreuse, robuste, attachée au sol, fidèle à sa langue, à sa foi et conservant fièrement le culte des aïeux, l'amour de la vieille mère patrie.[59]

The Catholic religion and the Church wielded immense power in Québec culture and history; its influence penetrated deep into the psyche of the people and would not be questioned until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. La Bonne Parole is an excellent example of the intense cultural indebtedness to Catholicism in Québec. The "feminist" journal claimed itself to be in the service of the Church, and indeed, the entire "feminist movement" of the period was defined in relation to religion.

> Attentives aux besoins de leur époque, les femmes d'aujourd'hui se coalisent pour se vouer à l'Apostolat social et pour offrir à leur mère la Sainte Église leur énergie comme complément de celles de leurs soeurs religieuses dans le but commun de "tout restaurer dans le Christ.[60]

Indeed, women's emancipation was viewed from the perspective that, not only would it not interfere with her domestic duties or charity work, but it would instead allow the mother to devote even more time to the Church. Mothers, whose purpose was "d'atteindre l'état de sainteté et de donner à l'Église des saints", were expected to live with the constant knowledge that Catholic doctrine was their

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[59]Hon. A. Taschereau "De l'influence de la femme sur nos destinées nationales," La Bonne Parole (mai 1921,7) qtd. in Dumais 3.

[60]Anonymous, La Bonne Parole (avril 1917,15) qtd. in Dumais 6.

moral and spiritual guide to life and that the Pope played spiritual "father", and hence role model, to all good Catholics .

The role of the mother was carefully created and defined by God who blessed the woman with a "natural" instinct:

> Par sa nature même, nous dit Léon XIII, elle est destinée aux ouvrages domestiques, ouvrages d'ailleurs qui sauvegardent admirablement l'honneur de son sexe, et répondent mieux de leur nature à ce que demandent la bonne éducation des enfants et la prospérité de la famille.[61]

This "natural" gift from God placed woman in her "natural" sphere of the home where she reigned supreme. Here, she became known as the "reine du foyer" : "La maison, c'est son royaume à elle. Dans ces frontières qui dressent les cadres de la famille, elle tient le sceptre d'une royauté incontestable".[62] From this predefined division of labor came a "natural hierarchy" of the family unit. The mother was to be docile, respectful, submissive; the father was authoritative, responsible and "chef de la communauté". The domestic unit, the division of labor and the role of the mother were thus considered to be "natural", pre-ordained by God and irrefutable in its veracity.

The clergy, as well as men of power, were terribly worried by women's continuing efforts to participate in communal, political life --a sphere that was dominated by them alone. They argued that purity, the dignity of the woman/mother, would be dirtied by the

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[61]Marie-J. Gérin, "Entre-nous," La Bonne Parole (sept. 1914) 2, qtd. in Dumais 10.
[62]Anonymous, "Causerie donnée aux membres des associations professionelles," La Bonne Parole (déc. 1921) 4, qtd. in Dumais 11.

events of the political arena. This line of thinking was particularly evident in the debate over women's right to vote.

> La femme est la joie des foyers, le lien des familles, la force des traditions, l'espoir des générations. Là où les lois s'élaborent, elle ne peut être que médiocre.
>
> (Mgr. Louis-Adolphe Paquet, 1917)
>
> Les femmes 'savent à merveille que le jour où elles seront électrices et éligibles, elles auront perdu le vrai secret de leur puissance sociale'. (Henri Bourassa, 1918)[63]

Via this debate, as well as those to follow, women realized that their so-called power was nothing more than an elaborate web of socially constructed myths that they themselves helped create.

The "natural", "pre-ordained" institution of motherhood, firmly situated in the authoritative discourse of the Church, was carefully reproduced generation after generation. Québécois women's dissent from the cultural convention of motherhood wasn't truly realized in social discourse until the early to mid 1970's. However, in the pages of Blais' 1959 novel La belle bête, we can see an eery premonition of Québec feminist responses to the institution of motherhood that would appear some fifteen years later.

What is the central issue presented in La Bonne Parole's hegemonic discourse on motherhood ? The issue, which Blais' narrative attacks, is one of sameness: that women are all the same, they are all mothers and daughters. Their roles are all the same, to bare offspring (hopefully male), preserve the language and preserve

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[63]Paquet and Bourassa cited in Dumais 12.

the faith. Women's identity is predefined by the patriarchy, passed on from mother to daughter with no hope of escape. Blais' novel, as I will show, proposes a radical break from the cultural script of motherhood. She also shows the radical consequences of what happens when a cultural script is broken, when daughters refuse to be, or cannot be, identical to their mothers according to their "natural" instinct. La belle bête, as I will show, addresses the need to break with the oppressive sameness and repressive "happiness" as instituted by society via motherhood.

B. La belle bête

In 1959, at the young age of twenty, Marie-Claire Blais arrived on the Québec literary scene with her shocking tale of a young girl's madness and matricide in the novel La belle bête. The story depicts a radical disruption of the mother-daughter relationship and, indeed, of all family interaction in general.[64] Even though the characters are reduced to the most symbolic or mythic of meanings, and the backdrop they inhabit is a vague timeless fairyland realm, the drama they play out is not far removed from psychological reality.

The story concerns a family of three: a widowed mother, Louise; her beautiful but idiot son Patrice; and her ugly daughter, Isabelle-Marie. Louise is a shallow, vain woman who lives through the empty, self-reflecting relationship with her son whose beauty is a living

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[64]Mary-Jean Green, "Redefining the Material: Women's Relationships in the fiction of Marie-Claire Blais," in Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism: Women Writers of Quebec, ed. Paula Gilbert Lewis. (Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 125-137.

testament to her own. Isabelle-Marie is intelligent but ugly and therefore is rejected by her mother and condemned to a life of menial labor like Cinderella. Patrice, like Narcissus, is defined by his mindless contemplation of his beauty in the reflections of the lake and of his mother's gaze. The jealousy and the hatred produced by Isabelle-Marie's exclusion is the central theme to this tale.

Isabelle-Marie's ugliness is the reason for her hatred and jealousy. Rejected by her mother for not reflecting her own beauty, she is treated as an outcast and stripped of her identity. Several critics who have studied the novel have posited the relationships in La belle bête as being largely characterized by their "mirroring" effect and the role it plays in the characters' psychological development.[65] Critic Jennifer Waelti-Walters sees the issue of mirroring in the text as revolving around the fact that "everyone else (except Isabelle-Marie) has a partner in whom he [sic] sees himself reflected, and the reflection strengthens or even creates his sense of his own reality and selfhood".[66] However, the demand for mirroring is much stronger between the mother and child than the other relationships. This demand is understandable with reference to the cultural myth of motherhood outlined above, that sees women as playing one social role.

Isabelle-Marie, in order to become the same as her mother, is forced to seek acceptance in the cultural script of marriage. Her

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[65]See for example Béatrice Slama, Jennifer Waelti-Walters. "Beauty and Madness in Marie-Claire Blais' La Belle Bête," Journal of Canadian Fiction 25-26 (1979); Margot Northey, The Haunted Wilderness (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976) .75 ; and Douglas A. Parker, "The Shattered Glass: Mirror and Illusion in Mad Shadows," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 2, No. 4 (1973): 68-70.

[66]Waelti-Walters 189.

"ugliness", which is her break from the mother, also forces her into a marriage which provides her the identity of sameness she has been seeking. She tries to rebel against her mother's judgement, yet having internalized it, she perpetuates it in her effort to conform. By seeking out a husband who is blind, she attempts to create her identity and/or acceptance by telling her husband that she is beautiful. And, for a while, she succeeds in conforming to societal codes and is happy in the security of her marriage. One day, however, her husband regains his eyesight and, seeing Isabelle-Marie as she truly is, he immediately rejects her in disgust. Isabelle-Marie is left alone with her daughter who, unfortunately, looks like her mother. Unable to accept her own difference (ugliness), she is unable to accepts her daughter's, whom she sees as monstrous.

Having lost her only source of social acceptance--the security of sameness in marriage bestowed upon her by patriarchy--she returns to her home and to her Cinderella existence, seething with resentment at the injustice of her fate. The reality of her exclusion turns her murderous. First, she plunges her brother's head into a pot of boiling water, thereby sentencing him to the same ugliness and rejection that she has suffered. Then, banished from the house, she sets fire to the property, killing her mother.

Having broken the bond between daughter and mother, destroying her role as daughter, Isabelle-Marie then rejects the cultural script of motherhood by throwing herself in front of a train, leaving her daughter alone to face an uncertain future. Mary Jean Green comments on this situation: "Since a relationship of reflection and repetition is the only one she sees as possible between mothers and

daughters, Isabelle-Marie can only attempt, by the murder of her mother and her own suicide, to smash the maternal images".[67] In her attempt to "smash the maternal images", Isabelle-Marie is trying to rupture the oppressive script of sameness imposed on women by the hegemony of motherhood.

The horrible and extreme ending of this narrative is reflective of the fact that, with an act as radical as breaking from cultural concepts of patriarchy and matriarchy, there is bound to be radical results. I would consider Blais' narrative an act of rebellion, a rebellion that would be voiced by "radical" feminist groups in the 1970s. Yet, Blais' narrative precedes this social change by at least a decade and we can see that she is still at odds as to what may follow such a radical break.

Perhaps we can look to the third generation, the daughter of Isabelle-Marie, who was left alone on the platform, as a witness and a survivor to her mother's act of rebellion. What social space does she occupy now that her family has been destroyed ? Will she grow up to perpetuate her mother's legacy of "otherness" ? Or maybe she will begin a new script that will not be based on sameness, that will fufill Carolyn Heilbrun's agenda for new feminist biographies: the right to express one's anger and ultimately take control over one's own life. We can only speculate as to her outcome. However, not much later, her contemporaries in Québec society began their own campaign to dismantle the "myth of matriarchy". We can witness

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[67]Green 126.

their efforts in the pages of the "radical" feminist journal Les Têtes de Pioches.

C. Les Têtes de Pioches; Dismanteling a Matriarchy

Les Têtes de Pioches (1976-1979) was the product of a "radical feminist" collective that met for the first time in October of 1975. Their primary reason for assembling was to assure the continuation of a feminist journal after the demise of Québécoise deboutte in 1974. The collective's objectives were to fight against "le système séculaire de domination nommé patriarcat".[68] The collective aspect of the journal was paramount to the ideology of the publication. It affirmed the solidarity that existed between women as well as the noncompetitive character of a feminist enterprise. The tone of the publication was often aggressive; their main purpose being the denunciation of the myth of "matriarchy", understood as the ideas and expectations surrounding the French-Canadian mother, and the continued domination of women in Québec society.

The first number of Les Têtes de Pioche (March 1976) was dedicated to exposing and dismantling this concept of matriarchy in Québec society. As "inheritors" of the dominant social discourse on motherhood for generations, Québec women finally exposed its patriarchal cultural script as the marginalizing, repressive role it really was. The principle article was entitled "Le matriarcat québécois analysé par les reines du foyer". The article deserves to be

[68]Armande Saint-Jean, "Préface," Les Têtes de Pioche Collection complète. (Montréal: Les Éditions de remue-ménage, 1980): 5, qtd. in Dumais iv.

reproduced in its entirety, although I am limited here to outlining its major themes. First, the article demanded "What does this matriarchal power endow us with ?" The answer, it limits us to the household and all its duties; it obliges us to produce as many children as possible, to arduously accomplish a thousand and one menial tasks and to forget about the worries of life outside the domestic sphere.[69] Essentially, the illusion of power excluded women from participating in the affairs of the external world. The matriarchy was clearly characterized by its division of labor into female household, and male public spheres.

The feminist journal asserted that the matriarchal myth did nothing but hide the fact that a women was no more than a "domestique déguisée". The collective also charged that, in French-Canada, the myth of matriarchy was supported by a social context in which Québec occupied an inferior place in the realm of anglophone Canada. French-Canadian men, suffering from a position of inferiority in English Canada, were consoled by having the dominant power over women in their culture. Their sense of inferiority was eased at the expense of French-Canadian women, and all of this took place under the guise of a matriarchal society. Hence, women's site of opposition was "doubly defined" through gender and a French-Canadian identity.

Lastly, the matriarchy was seen to possess all of the religious and antiquated characteristics of traditional Québec society. Traditional Québec society lived under the myth of the matriarchy,

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[69]Dumais 14-15.

that is, the patriarchy that perpetuated the exploitation of women via the ideology of the mother as preserver of "faith, language and race". In the popular sectors, the matriarchal reign of the household (with the mother as preserver of language and religion) served as a source for the implantation of patriarchal values reinforced with religious tenants. The values and morals of society passed from mother to daughter who is herself a mother "d'une jupe sous une autre jupe". This vision of matriarchy is, needless to say, quickly rejected by the feminist collective:

> Le matriarcat était une représentation phantasmatique. Car la loi était comme ailleurs patriarcale. La loi du père comme le nom du père se transmettait de génération en génération. Nous n'avons pas vécu un véritable matriarcat mais une représentation surajoutée, surimposée du matriarcat à la société patriarcale. Le matriarcat avait pour fonction de renforcer celui-ci. Enfermer la représentation de notre passé dans le matriarcat pour rendre plus difficile la question du féminisme actuel au Québec.[70]

The collective warns us at the end of their article that the myth of the matriarchy has not been completely overturned in Québec society with the advent of the "Révolution tranquille" of the 1960s and 1970s. The widely-publicised drop in the birth rate perhaps symbolizes a conscious effort on the part of women to reject the old myth of motherhood. However, the collective insists that the extreme difficulty feminists have in posing their problems before

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[70]Dumais 18.

society is indicative of the persistent need to uphold the sacred tenants of patriarchal law.

Blais' narrative attack on the mother is prefigured in the works of other women writers of Québec. One could cite in particular Anne Hébert's story "Le Torrent" and Françoise Loranger's Mathieu.[71] The post-World War II women writers' rupture of the mother-figure represents much more than a more symbolic act. Indeed, it must reflect their own inability to identify with their mothers, "not just their own biological mothers, of course, but an entire generation of québécois women whose lives had been committed to the preservation of traditional values".[72] In other words, Québec women writers, via the narrative depiction of the disintegration of the family, esp. mother-daughter links, un-write the cultural script of mother. They reject the hegemonic discourse that equated/identified generations of women from one another. The attack of the daughter on the mother is a reaction to the patriarchy who posited the mother-daughter relation as site for the reproduction of values and morals passed "d'une jupe sous une autre jupe". The dual potential of opposition to and reproduction of the hegemony in the institution of motherhood, the "oscillation" between women's position inside and outside the dominant discourse, provides women writers the privileged position from which to critique and dismantle what DuPlessis calls the cultural script.[73]

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[71]For a more detailed discussion of the representation of the mother in French-Canadian fiction refer to Soeur Sainte-Marie-Éleuthère, La mère dans le roman canadien-français (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1964).

[72]Green 127.

[73]Blais presents an additional reading and re-writing of the cultural scripts in La belle bête. Scripts of women's cross-generational conflicts, male-identified women,

The socio-cultural specificities of Blais' undermining of the maternal script can easily be seen in her 1965 novel Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel. Written in the age of the "Révolution tranquille", this novel represents a particularly poignant attack on the mythical figure of the French-Canadian mother, as well as on the repressiveness of mother-daughter relationships based on identity and repetition which destroys daughters. In her novel Blais environed: "the role assigned to women by traditional Québec society as reduc[ing] her to the status of a nameless, faceless animal, whose only function is to bear, feed, and often bury an unending series of babies".[74]

D. Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel

In Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel, perhaps her most famous novel to date, Marie-Claire Blais returns to the veritable mythical and cultural origins of the French-Canadian people. We find a household run by Grand-Mère Antoinette, the embodiment of the maternal myth, occupied by a quasi-anonymous mother and father

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rejection/destruction of the maternal image, and beauty constructed by gender via the use of the traditional conventions of myth and fairytale. Her narrative consists of a strange combination of re-worked figures of Cinderella and Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, Narcissus, Oedipus, Electre and the "absent father", Faust and the "blind husband". Equally important is Blais' re-writing of cultural and literary scripts via the inversion of the title/story Beauty and the Beast. The traditional "Beauty" (Isabelle-Marie) of this story is ugly. Beauty, who is now also the Beast, deprives the "beautiful beast" Patrice of his beauty. There is an inversion of the sex roles, character roles and of the message of the traditional tale. Also, the tale is now told from the point of the woman. For further detail on myth and fairytale in Blais' La belle bête please see Béatrice Slama, "La Belle Bête ou la double scene," Voix et Images no. 2 (winter 1983): 211-227.

[74]Green 128.

and a herd of children many of whom don't have proper names. The story revolves around Jean-Le-Maigre, a young, suffering poet/genius who lives under the protective wing of his mighty Grandmother. Indeed, it is his life and his writing that is really the central issue of the novel. As Françoise Laurent states: ". . .la peinture réaliste de la misère n'est pas le sujet du livre. Plus qu'aucun autre roman du même auteur, il s'appuie sur l'idée-force de la toute-puissance de la flamme créatrice qui est rédemptrice,"[75] However, it is Blais' treatment of the image of the mother, mother and daughter relations and the myth of motherhood that will serve as my area of focus.

The novel begins with the figure of Grand-Mère-Antoinette standing over the latest arrival to the family, Emmanuel--number sixteen. Remarkably, the figure of the child-bearing mother is absent. Jaqueline Viswanathan, in her structuralist analysis of the novel, concludes that the brevity and/or the erasure of the scene where the mother nurses Emmanuel, an act that according to our cultural code symbolizes the greatest intimacy between individuals, is symptomatic of the system of values prescribed by the novel: "[L]es rapports humains valorisés par la culture traditionnelle sont inopérants et se voient suppléés par des relations parfois illicites ou même perverses suivant le code dominant".[76] The illicit and perverse acts she mentions are brief references to homosexuality,

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[75]Laurent 68-69.

[76]Jaqueline Viswanathan, "Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel de Marie-Claire Blais: introduction à l'analyse du personnage romanesque," French Review, vol. LII, 5 (April 1979): 757.

onanism, and prostitution that occur sporadically throughout the novel.

The mother, traditional "queen" of the hearth, is instead an anonymous figure, burnt out from years of childbirth and domestic labor. Here is the first description we have of her :

> Voici sa mère. Il la reconnaît. Elle ne vient pas vers lui encore. Il pourrait croire qu'elle l'a abandonné. Il reconnaît son visage triste, ses épaules courbées. Elle ne semble pas se souvenir de lui avoir donné naissance, ce matin. Elle a froid. Il voit ses mains qui se crispent autour du seau de lait. "Il est là, dit Grand-Mère-Antoinette, il a faim, il a pleuré tout le jour." Sa mère est silencieuse. Elle sera toujours silencieuse. (12-13)

The mother, as she is referred to, will always remain silent. She is a shell of a human being, always at the point of exhaustion and seemingly in a state of stupor. Aware of the strain of his birth, his existence, the narrator comments parenthetically as Emmanual nurses: "Il épuise sa mère, il prend tout en elle ! (15)". We are soon aware that his mother has little left to offer him in the way of comfort: "Sa mère, elle, ne dit rien, ne répond plus, calme, profonde, désertée, peut-être. Il est là, mais elle l'oublie. Il ne fait en elle aucun écho de joie ni de désir. Il glisse en elle, il repose sans espoir" (15).

Standing in the shadows, always surveying the scene, is Grand-Mère Antoinette. She takes responsibility for the household. She names the babies, she baptizes them, and all to often, she buries them. Grand-Mère-Antoinette is a literary embodiment of the matriarchal myth. Henri Mittérand, in his structuralist analysis of

the novel, places the grandmother at the head of the family hierarchy. She is the central character who occupies the place of the "donateur ou de l'attributeur": "C'est elle qui dispense la vie, à l'origine de cette famille: c'est elle qui dispense la nourriture, le nom de baptême, la chaleur, la sécurité--et les sanctions."[77] She embodies all that is posited as innate to the French-Canadian mother: strong, nurturer, conservator of language, faith and values.

The character of Grand-Mère Antoinette betrays some hint of a "positive vision of female caring".[78] On the positive side, Grand-Mère-Antoinette is a strong nurturing force who fights to preserve the life and the work of the tubercular poet-grandson, Jean-Le-Maigre. She upholds the children's needs for education against the objections of the ignorant father and is a source of emotional sustenance for the infant, Emmanuel. She also tries to aid one of the rebellious daughters Héloïse, but in this relationship the negative and repressive side of Grand-Mère Antoinette's nature comes to force: "Having denied her own sexuality by shielding her body with mounds of clothing and having committed herself to the life-denying teachings of the Church, Grand-Mère Antoinette cannot show her granddaughter the way to the new life she is seeking", that is, she nurtures male children as individuals, but enforces identity among daughters.[79]

Grand-Mère Antoinette's negative or repressive behavior is possibly exemplary of generations of Québec women who received

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[77]Henri Mittérand, "Coup de pistolet dans un concert: Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel," Voix et Images, vol. II, 3 (April 1977): 408.
[78]Green 128.
[79]Green 129.

their entire education (what little there was) from Catholic convents.[80] Grand-Mère Antoinette's "denial" of her sexuality was a product of the silence imposed by the Church who relegated non-procreative sex to the realm of sin. Her inability to confront Héloïse's crisis is symptomatic of the generational gap between women being expressed by women writers of the 1960's and 1970's. In order to find happiness and to express her sexuality, Héloïse is forced to radically break with the world of her mother and grandmother. Blais, in an ironic twist, and by rewriting the cultural script of closure via marriage or death, gives Héloïse the fulfillment she desires working in a brothel. Her life of prostitution is depicted as far less exploitive and debasing than that of the traditional role of wife and mother.

Héloïse's liberating life of a prostitute is definitely not supposed to represent a role model for a new generation of Québec women any more than the abandoned child at the end of La belle bête. Blais simply shows the desperate need of women to break the repetitive cycle of feminine identity that entraps them to a life of childbirth and anonymity. Blais' fictive scripts reflect the closure of cultural scripts on women. With the exception of the cruelly satirized mother and daughters of Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel, Blais' women characters have typically been cut off from relationships with one another. And those, like Héloïse and Isabelle-Marie, who have chosen to remove themselves from the traditional pattern of female identity (and continuity) have not succeeded in laying a foundation

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[80]Dumont, Micheline, Michèle Jean, Marie Lavigne, and Jennifer Stoddart. L'Histoire des Femmes au Québec: Depuis Quatre Siècles (Montréal: les Quinze éditeur, 1982).

for a new female identity or a new mode of connection to others.[81] Women's relationships in Blais' novels are still marked by the alienation and resentment women feel for each other as they see their position as "inheritor" of dominant culture perpetuated in the hegemony of maternal discourse.

It was not until the late 1970s that Blais began to explore female relationships from a positive, empowering perspective. While the subject of generational gaps and conflicts still exists, Blais' character's are now trying to reach across the differences and touch in a constructive, unifying way. This effort to re-examine and redefine mother-daughter relations in Blais can be seen in her poigant 1982 novel, Visions d'Anna.

E. Visions d'Anna

With the appearance of Blais' 1978 novel on lesbian love and relationships, Les nuits de l'Underground, there emerges the development of a model of maternal and sisterly caring in Blais' fiction. The model was first seen in Les nuits in terms of a network of women's relations giving priority to the "female" trait of care and concern for others. Embodied in the artistic model of Rodin's sculptural representation of a mother embracing her dying daughter, Blais' protagonist in Les nuits de l'Underground articulates the author's new vision: "ne figurait-elle pas. . . les diverses expressions d'une maternité morale qu'elle avait souvent eu l'occasion d'observer

[81]Green 129.

entre les femmes ? "(Les nuits, 45-46). This vision would continue to be explored and defined in her following novel Le Sourd dans la ville (1980). Here, there is a new dimension added to this theme: "Blais seems to be condemning not men themselves, but a masculine stereotype, shaping the lives of individuals and society as a whole, which cuts men off from the maternal caring qualities displayed by women".[82]

This vision continues to develop in her 1982 novel Visions d'Anna with maternal caring representing a force capable of opposing the destructive tendencies of the modern world. Also, perhaps most importantly, it is here, for the first time in Blais' work that "the strength of motherly, daughterly, sisterly, and lesbian relationships seems able to regenerate even the entity which had been the target of Blais' early satire--the family".[83] By placing alternative couple formation at the center of her narrative Blais also undermines the traditional romance plot and gives priority to the female perspective.

Blais' Visions d'Anna also portrays certain characteristics posited by Marianne Hirsch in her text The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, concerning women's writing of the 1970's:

> the feminist family romance of the 1970's de-emphasize the role of men; the retreat to the pre-oedipal as basis for adult personality; the concentration on mother-daughter bonding and struggle; and the celebration of female

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[82]Green 134.
[83]Green 134.

> relationships of mutual nurturance leave only a secondary role to men.[84]

Hirsch's analysis of feminist fictions and theories emerging in the 1970s and their representations of female suject-formation in relation to mother-daughter relations provides another view on cultural and literary scripts. Her neo-Freudian idea of the "feminist family romance" highlights "mother-daughter bonding as a basis for a vision of gender difference and female specificity".[85] I will therefore examine "feminist family romance" as developed by women writers in the 1970s, and its function in Blais' narrative quest to "write beyond the ending" of the cultural script of motherhood.

Anna is the daughter of divorced parents. She takes drugs, hangs out with "drifters" and wanders alone from Canada, to Mexico to the Caribbean. She is described, by Le Devoir reviewer Noel Audet, as "un être translucide d'une sensibilité exacerbée, errant en marge de ce monde qu'elle rejette, famille, parents, ces risibles ancrages, drifter du monde, c'est-à-dire partie à la dérive, glissant à la surface sans même troubler l'eau alors qu'elle rêve de tout changer".[86] Her visions are of a society in decomposition, a society that is in chaos, on the edge of collective suicide orchestrated by "la terreur mâle"--nuclear war, violence, destruction.

The world is seen by two different groups of characters: the teenagers--Anna, Michelle and Lilianne; and the adults--Raymonde,

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[84]Hirsch 133.
[85]Hirsch 15.
[86]Noel Audet, "Une écriture vertigineuse," Le Devoir (8 mai, 1982): 19.

Peter, (Anna's parents), Guislaine and Paul, (Michelle's parents). The novel is centered around these two interconnected family groups. Both of these families are in the process of disintegration. Anna's father rejected her and her mother and remarried. For him, Anna represents bad memories of his irresponsible youth (as a young, destitute American Viet Nam draft dodger). He wants no longer to associate with her. Raymonde and Anna love each other very much but generational differences plague the relationship. Raymonde, who works as counsellor in a drug rehabilitation clinic, plays part in the system of authority against which Anna revolts. As for Guislaine, who seems devoid of any maternal sentiments, she is jealous of the freedom enjoyed by her teenage daughters--a freedom she had before giving birth to them. She is also afraid, and a bit jealous, of Liliane's lesbianism which she cannot bring herself to accept. The girls' father cannot understand his daughters. He is an intellectual who doesn't smoke, doesn't drink and is <u>always</u> right. He represents authority and, as a figure of patriarchal authority, there is a characteristic breakdown of communication between him and his daughters.

Anna's world is defined by the fear of patriarchal violence, her vision is a constant testament to its very real presence. She is haunted by thoughts of mass catastrophe; of annihilation at the hands of a genocidal, patriarchal world: "Une terreur mâle. . .ces machines de terreur qu'étaient la prison, la nation, l'État, et. . .une invention de l'homme, l'armée. . .chacun de ces mots menaçait ces vies jeunes," (150). Interestingly enough, the male figures of the novel are peripheal beings who do not seem to want, or know how, to

relate to women. The men seem unwilling to involve themselves in lasting relationships, as with Anna's father and the young sensitive boyfriend of Raymond's who leaves them in search of his freedom. In leaving he states: "Les hommes, disait-il, ont toujours éprouvé ce besoin d'être libres de leurs liens, quand les femmes, elles, au contraire, sont sensibles à ce qui les rattache à la terre, (15)". This desertion represents one of the differential attitudes toward human relationships which psychologists have observed in women and men: "women in our society seem dependant on and embedded in relationships with others, while men develop a sense of independance and automomy".[87]

In an attempt to situate Blais' recent narrative development of maternal models of human interaction within a socio-historic context, we can see Blais' violent and bleak vision of humanity, voiced by Anna, as the product of:

> masculine autonomy, expressed in indifference and even in violence, with the major problems of contemporary society: individual cases of cruelty toward children, as well as global menace of nuclear destruction and impending ecological disaster"[88]

Blais' positioning of the mother-dominated family unit at the center of her narrative reflects the dramatic increase in theories arguing gender difference as a social response in the 1970s. The increasing threats of war and nuclear destruction are believed to have influenced some feminists' need to "imagine an alternative to what

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[87]Green 135.
[88]Green 135.

was perceived as masculine destructiveness".[89] The alternative pre-oedipal space of mother-daughter mirroring became a promising replacement to the rupture between self and world implied in the destructiveness of war: "American feminism, then, creates a fantasy of cultural survival through the dissemination of traditionally feminine values into the public world".[90]

The family romance of the 1970s is based not on separation from parents or the past, but from patriarchy and from men in favor of female alliances. Yet it is important to note that the "romance" is centered almost entirely on the experience of the daughters, "with mothers no more than objects supporting or underlying their daughter's process of individuation".[91] "Matrophobia", which can be found in many feminist writers of the 1970s including Adrienne Rich, played a predominant role in the lives of feminist women and may be seen as the underside of the feminist family romance.

> Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted. Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her. But where a mother is hated to the point of matropobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will

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[89]Hirsch 135.
[90]Hirsch 135.
[91]Hirsch 136.

identify with her completely.[92]

Certainly there is a discernable aspect of matriphobia that informs Anna's relationship to her mother. Anna tells her mother that it is no longer possible to believe in the peaceful vision of nineteenth century bourgeois existence (as depicted in the painting by Bouville which Raymonde had hung in Anna's room). This painting is a *leitmotiv* of the novel that recalls both "the lost ideal of the traditional family and the countervailing reality of Raymonde's care for Anna".[93] Despite the profound alienation Anna suffers, she still dreams of the close ties to her mother that she had when she was a child. Anna continues to tenuously reach out to her mother throughout the novel. It is only at the end of the novel, when Raymonde quits her job at the clinic and refuses to continue her participation in a system of social control which Anna sees as repressive, that the two individuals bridge the gap that exists between them.

Through the same gesture of mutual understanding, Guislane and Michelle are brought together at the end of the novel. Unlike Anna and Michelle's bond of mutual caring and respect, Michelle's emotional ties to her mother come from her understanding of Guislaine's personal suffering on her own account. Instead of completely rejecting her mother via "matrophobia", Michelle is drawn closer to her mother as she starts to perceive her as another woman. She is able, through this experience, to herself assume the nurturing role

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[92] Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: Bantam, 1977) qtd. in Hirsch 136.
[93] Green 134.

as she hugs her mother and whispers in her ear, "tu sais, cette ride, à ton front, je sais que j'en suis la cause. . ." (158). Here we see the outline of the model of women's relations that Adrienne Rich speaks of in Of Woman Born: "We are, none of us, 'either' mothers or daughters; to our amazement, confusion, and greater complexity we are both".[94]

This is ultimately the model of maternal caring that Blais wants to posit in her texts. A model, as proposed by Rich, where: "Women, mothers or not, who feel committed to other women, are increasingly giving each other a quality of caring filled with the diffuse kinds of identification that exist between actual mothers and daughters".[95] In following Blais' humanistic vision of writing, she sees the work of reconstructing relationships between individuals as essential to the "reestablishment of a new form of social order, an order in which human concerns would once again provide a check to pervasive violence and destruction".[96] Her recent fiction, then, serves to posit women's relationships as a model for all human interaction. This concern is echoed in much of the feminist fiction of the 1970's and continues today[97]. And while Blais would assert that this narrative concern reflects her preoccupation with the future and the survival of humanity, it is also considered to represent a "more general movement in contemporary feminist thought".[98]

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[94]Rich, Of Woman Born 257.
[95]Rich, Of Woman Born 257.
[96]Green 137.
[97]Hirsch 135.
[98]Green 137.

Once again I have shown that Blais' fiction fits firmly within the contemporary feminist literary tradition of North America as defined earlier in this thesis. This chapter examined Blais' participation in the "feminist" narrative project of "writing beyond the ending" of "rupturing with the internalization of authorities and the voices of dominance".[99] I also pointed out the cultural specificities that inform the larger feminist concern of the maternal image in Blais' fiction. Her literary evolution of the maternal figure has its base in the rejection of a very specifically defined cultural myth. There is the irony of Blais' recent positing of a maternal model of caring--the very maternity/mother that she had rejected and even killed in her early novels. However, once liberated from the repressive role assigned to her by French-Canadian (and other) patriarchal society, Blais now sees the mother as being free to exercise her essential capacity for caring:

> As the life-giving mother had been the symbol of survival for her people in the world of nineteenth-century Québec, it is the model of maternal nurturance and compassion which now, in Blais' twentieth-century vision, holds out the hope of survival for us all.[100]

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[99]DuPlessis 34.
[100]Green 137.

IV. Conclusion

Marie-Claire Blais is worried about the future. She is worried about an increasingly violent world. She is worried about children, adolescents and other groups that are silenced by society and its institutions; and those who are victims of a cold, uncaring world that ignores their existence. She is fascinated with those "outside" the dominant culture, with the "underbelly" of society, as well as with minority groups and those forgotten by the "system". Critic Donald Smith lists the themes that are central to Blais' writing:

> broken families; children who are smothered by the capitalistic world of adults; ugliness, a source of suffering imposed by a restrictive society; social inequalities; homosexuals and lesbians caught up in the problems of existence; sickness, seen as a symbol of the universal struggle against death; criminals, with the revelation of both their appealing and reprehensible sides; and the function of the writer.[101]

Her artistic vision is undoubtedly informed by her own marginality as a woman, as a lesbian and a French-Canadian. These "sites of oppression", and many more, embody "la petite humanité" that is Blais' fiction. Here, in her world on the edge of society, marginalized characters attack the status quo, revealing and creating cracks in the hegemonic discourse.

Through their discourse of social dissent, Blais disrupts, breaks down and rejects the traditional language of narrative in order to

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[101]Smith 130.

present her own opinions, views, approaches. For her: "Un roman englobe toutes sortes de réalités, d'approches du regard, de façons de percevoir la société, la vie, les autres, le monde".[102] And she states that one's artistic vision, no matter how marginal or unique, reaches many people and therefore carries much social importance. In her opinion, the writer occupies a very important place in society. Without his/her vision of the world, "quelque chose en nous se meurt et s'éteint".[103] Blais' own unique observations of the world--a world of suffering, sickness, and oppression--is a vitally important critique of a society; a society and its institutions that suppress and ignore those who do not conform. By representing society's "unrepresented" and by refusing to perpetuate the dominant discourse (of exclusion), Blais participates in the larger feminist practice of women writers' oppositional stance to the depiction of gender institutions in narrative. While her narratives attack other institutions besides gender--her humanistic, non-hierarchical view of oppression mandates such--it is this aspect of her writing that best situates her within a practice of feminist writing.

The examination of her narratives via Duplessis' concept of "writing beyond the ending" reveals Blais' delegitimization of the conventions of the romance plot by positing lesbian and mother/daughter relations as central to the text. Her 1989 novel L'ange de la solitude "writes beyond" the traditional romance plot by valorizing homosexual instead of heterosexual ties, by depicting a "communal protagonist" instead of a couple or single protagonist, and by

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[102]Picard 24.
[103]Côté K5.

prioritizing the female character and personal quest over cultural scripts of marriage or death. Her novels La belle bête, Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel and Visions d'Anna also participate in the subversion of the romance plot via their use of maternal or familial relations over couple formation.

These novels also reflect Blais' effort to transgress the culturally mandated institution of French-Canadian motherhood through narrative structure. This effort to write, delegitimate, and re-write the gendered and hegemonic institution of motherhood is a particularly good example of "writing beyond the ending" because Blais arrives, in her later novels, at placing a redefined, empowering model of maternal caring at the center of her narrative--a model she once attacked for its script of repression and closure. Via her writing process, she is able to "break the sentence" of patriarchy's model of mother in narrative, "break the sequence-the expected order" by delegitimizing the cultural script of the French-Canadian mother, and "write beyond the ending" of the institution of motherhood as meaning oppression and closure.

The cultural specificity of the French-Canadian mother (its ties to Catholic doctrine, to nationalist ideology and aspirations, even to the suppression of a French-Canadian minority) serves to differentiate Blais' narrative vision from her anglophone counterparts. However, her concern for the status of woman and her situating of narrative as a site for women to question ideological assumptions, serves to unite her with other women writers under the banner of "feminist writing".

Blais, along with many other contemporary women writers,

rejects the efforts to define her work as "feminist", prefering to emphasize the importance of art over ideology. The issue is no doubt a complex one, as feminist literary critics strive to define a history of women's writing, a "female literary tradition", a specifically "female" way of writing, women writers feel their artistic vision confined --in danger of being appropriated by certain political agendas.

Whether or not Marie-Claire Blais, the writer, defines herself or her work as feminist, one can still interpret her writing as reflecting feminist concerns. Throughout her thirty years of writing, Blais' novels have shown a recurrent interest in the undermining of hegemonic discourse. From her very first novel, La belle bête, Blais has employed various narrative strategies, now seen as common to feminist writing, that have as effect the questioning and, in some cases the rejection, of cultural scripts and dominant ideology. As her writing progressed, so did her structural break from traditional narrative. Until the late 1970's, the majority of Blais' novels consisted of conventional grammatical structure, dialogue and plot development. But as of 1980, with the appearance of Un sourd dans la ville, Blais' narrative took a radical turn. Her narratives became progressively a-grammatical; dialogue between characters shifted back and forth without any clear distinctions; plot lines all but vanished as she produced long, breathless passages reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's "flow of consciousness" narratives. Blais' rejection of societal institutions, cultural scripts, and hegemony came to reflect itself in her unconventional narrative structure.

Unfortunately, Marie-Claire Blais' contribution to a "female literary tradition" is often overlooked due to her status as francophone writer in a field that is largely defined by anglophone writers and critics. Yet, Marie-Claire Blais is a North American writer. The concerns she voices in her narrative, "humanistic" in intention, are largely reflective of her North American identity. Themes dealing with broken families, juvenile delinquency, single mothers, AIDS, nuclear war etc. are common in the works of her American and English Canadian counterparts. She deserves to be heard by her contemporaries. As a North American feminist literary critic, working in a French literary field, I am trying to cross linguistic and theoretical boundaries and give Marie-Claire Blais' writing the attention it deserves. As a writer, Blais, too, calls for the necessary transgressing of boundaries: geographic, linguistic, cultural and ideological. As critics and readers, we need to do the same. We need to participate in Marie-Claire Blais' special humanist vision.

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