Evermore or nevermore? Memory and identity in Marie Redonnet’s fiction of the 1990s

The body of writing produced by Marie Redonnet between 1985 and 2000 is an unusually coherent one. Settings and characters drawn up in one text are echoed in later works; certain stories and motifs figure again and again; the style of writing rarely changes from one text to the next. This is not to suggest, however, that the work does not evolve over the period. Indeed, while there is a large degree of overlap between the works published in the 1980s and more recent texts, there are also significant differences, of which the most obvious is increased realism in characterisation and setting. Thus, whereas the characters in the early texts lack physical attributes and psychological depth, are endowed with nonsensical, nursery-rhyme-like names, and exist in the most indeterminate of landscapes, characters in the texts produced in the 1990s are more fully realised, have more realistic names, and figure in places such as Paris and Brooklyn. This shift towards the construction in the later texts of a more realistic if not also more contemporary fictional world is reinforced by a number of sporadic references to the attributes of modern life. Thus, in Candy story, the central character Mia drives a Golf GTI, while the Internet plays a role in promoting the islanders’ struggle against a despotic dictator in Villa Rosa. Moreover, the essentially age-old and fairy-tale quality of the stories evoked in texts like Doublures and Rose Mélies Rose is superseded in the later texts by sinister tales of Mafiaesque corruption, murder, greed and prostitution. And what can be described as the increasingly Americanised flavour of Redonnet’s later fiction is compounded by the incorporation into the texts of elements of the classic detective novel.

But if certain elements of the œuvre have changed, others have proved to be more abiding. Still very much to the fore in the later texts is what one
critic has termed the ‘disarming simplicity’ of the writing. Equally enduring has been the thematic interest in the notion of identity. Indeed, identity, and more specifically the quest for identity, remains at the very core of Redonnet’s work. It is even possible to argue that the texts of the 1990s are merely updated or modernised versions of the story played out in the earlier texts, with the following proviso: if the quest for identity taking place in the texts of the 1980s is a predominantly female one, that quest has been broadened out in the more recent texts to include a number of central male characters whose sense of identity is as fragile as that of their female predecessors.

Identity is a particularly elusive commodity in Redonnet’s textual universe. From the eponymous doyblures (doubles) of the 1986 text who strive, however erroneously, to compensate for their radically depleted sense of self via the assimilation, even plagiarism, of the attributes and characteristics of others, right through to the 1996 text Villa Rosa whose protagonist – an artist called Henri Matisse – must divest himself of his name and forge a new identity if he is to be able to produce paintings which are more than mere copies of the works of his illustrious namesake, the struggle to elaborate a more coherent and enduring sense of self than that which originally exists is the main issue at stake in Redonnet’s work. There are, of course, a number of factors which can be used to account for the enfeebled – and ultimately enfeebling – nature of the identity with which characters are afflicted. The majority of Redonnet’s characters exist in a largely hostile landscape, one which threatens not only some abstract notion of identity but their very material existence. A recurrent feature of the œuvre is the threat and/or eventual experience of death through engloutissement (being swallowed up) by the landscape. Much more significant, however, than the threat to identity posed by the landscape are the implications for identity of the complete absence of characters’ immediate forebears. The absence or erasure of the protagonists’ biological parents is virtually de rigueur in Redonnet’s œuvre, with the result that they never know or have only the scantiest of information about their origins. One consequence of this deletion of the protagonists’ antecedents is that they are effectively denied access to the past: there are no forebears to act as repository of the past, to foster and/or pass on memory and identity. Hence, when Mélie in Rose Mélie Rose remarks, ‘Quand Rose m’a trouvée dans la grotte, j’étais sans rien’ (p. 10) (‘When Rose found me in the grotto, I had nothing’ (p. 3)), one may read her words not merely as a statement of physical destitution. One may also infer from them a much more profound and debilitating kind of impoverishment; that is, the absence or loss of the
psychological inheritance which memory, knowledge and understanding of the past constitute.

For many of Redonnet’s characters, then, the past is a blank and their memories are either full of holes or completely non-existent. In Splendid Hôtel, Adel is described as having gaps in her memory (p. 20), while Ada suffers from amnesia. In Rose Mélie Rose, Mélie starts out upon her quest for identity with just one memory or souvenir, while in Nevermore, Cassy Mac Key can empathise with Willy Bost because both of them lack memory (p. 158). Although it is never made explicit, the consequences of this deficient memory – or consummate lack of memory – for characters thus afflicted are that their quest for identity will be a frustrated and empty one, if it is not premised first upon a quest for memory. To put it quite simply, the ramifications of lacking memory include the inability to forge a lasting identity. The fundamental role played by memory in the formation of identity is pointed up by Milan Kundera in the novel Identity:

Remembering our past, carrying it with us always, may be the necessary requirement for maintaining, as they say, the wholeness of the self. To ensure that the self doesn’t shrink, to see that it holds on to its volume, memories have to be watered like potted flowers, and the watering calls for regular contact with the witnesses of the past.

Similarly, for Luce Irigaray, memory is ‘the place where identity is formed, the place where each person builds his or her ground or territory’. If memory is the place where identity is formed, if “wholeness of the self” is indeed contingent upon one’s ability to remember the past, then little wonder that so many of Redonnet’s characters, devoid of a past or with a severely truncated knowledge of it, are destined to remain identity-less. For those who do go on to develop a more fully-fledged sense of self, at least part of their success is, as we are about to see, due to their capacity to make memory for and of themselves, to create a past.

The artistic endeavour is a recurrent feature of Redonnet’s texts. From Doublures, with its cast of costume-makers, toy-makers, acrobats and performers, right through to Villa Rosa, whose eponymous villa is a haven for painters, dancers and musicians, the desire to invent and create is one which impels a vast array of characters. In many cases a veritable compulsion, the creative act is seen by Redonnet’s characters as a means of generating identity, or, at the very least, of elaborating a fuller, more cohesive and enduring sense of self than that which originally exists. This, as will be seen, is because of its ability to preserve, and even to produce memory.
The range and diversity of creative acts carried out by the characters is, at times, bewildering, but certain forms crop up again and again. In *Candy story* and *Villa Rosa*, (self-)portraiture is a common pursuit, whilst photography, and its correlative of film-making, feature in the texts *Rose Mélie Rose*, *Candy story*, *Le Cirque Pandor* and *Fort Gambo*. The importance of the photograph is illustrated in many of Redonnet’s texts. In *Candy story*, Ma’s photograph album is a cherished possession, the only thing retained by the narrator, Mia, when Ma dies, while in *Seaside*, the grandmother’s tenacious grip on her album is relinquished only as a result of her death. In each of these cases, the photograph and/or photograph album is perceived and treated as a kind of lifeblood, a potent symbol of the past and a means of retaining some kind of grip on, or control over it.

At its most basic level, a photograph is evidence, a visual sign or signifier of the existence now or in the past of an individual or thing. As Susan Sontag puts it in *On Photography*: ‘Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it . . . A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened’. The evidential capacities of the photograph are what render it so important in Redonnet’s œuvre. In the quest for, and construction of, identity taking place in her works, photographs play a vital role because they offer visual – and thus seemingly irrefutable – proof of the subject’s existence. But what Sontag neglects to make explicit here is that the photograph is also a means of gaining purchase upon the past. The real significance of the photograph as far as Redonnet’s work is concerned resides in the fact that it not only offers an entrée into the past, but can also actually create a past for those characters whose history is a blank, as well as acting as an incitement to, or trigger of, memory. Annette Kuhn contends that the photograph is ‘a prop, a prompt, a pre-text: it sets the scene for recollection’. This contention is clearly borne out in the following excerpt from *Candy story*:

> J’ai seulement emmené une photo . . . C’est la plus belle photo de Ma que je connaisse. On ne voit qu’elle sur la photo. Elle sourit d’un sourire que je ne lui connais pas. C’est de ce sourire-là que j’ai envie de me souvenir. (p. 65)

(All I took away was a photo . . . It’s the most beautiful photo of Ma I know. All you can see is her. She is smiling a smile I don’t recognise. It’s this smile I want to remember.)

What is most interesting about the above is the way in which the narrator Mia construes the photograph not merely as a prompt to memory, but,
more significantly, as a means of filling in the gaps in her own memory, as a means, therefore, of manufacturing memory: as she makes clear, Mia has never actually seen Ma smile as she does in the photograph. This capacity of the photograph to witness the past and thereby to create or make memory is particularly important in Redonnet’s textual universe, made up as it is of characters starved of memory, and explains also the avidity with which they take and hold onto photographs.12 In Redonnet’s œuvre, there seems to be a consensus among the characters that, as Sontag puts it, ‘photographs are not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement’ (p. 165).

In Family Secrets, Kuhn includes the photograph in the genre of what she terms the ‘memory text’ (p. 4). This is a category into which many of the artefacts resulting from the creative exploits of Redonnet’s characters fall. In addition to photographs, there is a variety of other types of ‘memory text’ in the process of being constructed, some of them solely visual in nature, some made up of writing, some a mixture of both. Villa Rosa, for example, closes with an evocation of the abandoned Villa Rosa, upon whose walls the traces of the paintings of monsieur Jean still remain:

Entre les plantes et les fleurs . . . un visiteur curieux aurait pu découvrir . . . des morceaux de fresques et de tableaux, aux couleurs toujours vives . . . Il aurait pu alors rêver à la Villa Rosa telle qu’elle avait dû être avant de tomber en ruines, et en réinventer l’histoire pour en sauver la mémoire. (p. 81)

(Among the plants and flowers . . . the curious visitor could have found . . . remnants of frescoes and paintings, their colours still bright . . . He could then have dreamed of the Villa Rosa as it must have been before it fell into ruin, and have reinvented its history in order to preserve its memory.)

When all else has faded and fallen into ruin, a veritable treasure trove of images, their bright colours undimmed, has resisted the passage of time. The capacity of the painting to act – in much the same way as the photograph – as a witness to the past is made clear, and its capacity for endurance pointed up. More importantly, the role imputed here to the visitor of the future is that of the (re)creation or (re)invention of the past and thus the memory of Villa Rosa. That this invention may well be pure fabrication based on the visitor’s imagination or dreams is of little significance; what is important is the need to preserve memory, fictional or
otherwise, and the paintings will constitute the raw materials of, or catalyst to, the process of memory production. In *Villa Rosa*, it is also worth noting that what becomes the artist’s haven of Villa Rosa was used formerly as a refuge for members of the island’s resistance movement. An analogy between the act of (political) resistance and the artistic act is thereby implied, and the artistic endeavour does indeed become a form of resistance in Redonnet’s œuvre; that is, resistance against amnesia. Thus, for Willy Bost in *Nevermore*, the production of a written text is a means both of resisting a dearth of memory as well as restoring lost memory, irrespective of whether the memory thus created is a fictional or imagined one:

Willy Bost a beau chercher dans sa mémoire, il ne se rappelle rien de ses parents . . . Ce qui rend son livre si difficile à écrire, c’est d’être un livre de mémoire qui s’écrit d’une absence de mémoire. Cette mémoire s’invente au fur et à mesure qu’il écrit. (pp. 142–3)

(Willy Bost searches his memory in vain, for he remembers nothing of his parents . . . What makes his book so difficult to write is that it’s a book of memories founded on an absence of memory. As he writes, memory is being invented.)

Incidentally, the memory that Willy Bost is inventing here takes on a particularly sinister configuration, for, as the text progresses, it becomes clear that his parents died in a death camp which has now been erased. His text, and by extension, Redonnet’s œuvre, may thus be read as an allegory of the necessity for the creative act, and especially writing, as a means of resisting memory loss or collective amnesia. And *Nevermore* in particular – seeking to resist the deletion of the memory of the horrors of the past – might even be read as a contemporary commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust.

Willy Bost is far from being alone among Redonnet’s characters in ascribing to writing the role of making and saving memory. Indeed, writing is one of the most common forms of artistic endeavour in her work, and books or written documents tend to be perceived by many characters as preferable to those ‘memory texts’ constituted purely of visual images. Evident in Redonnet’s *L’Accord de paix*, for example, is a subtle vilification of the contemporary cult of the visual image, symbolised by the flashy and futuristic Palais de l’Image (Palace of the Image), and an underlying sense of regret at the way in which books are being increasingly sidelined by the creation of more sophisticated – but perhaps also more
ephemeral – technologies. Similarly, in *Rose Mélie Rose*, a sneaking distrust of the effectiveness on its own of the photographic ‘memory text’ is implied by Mélie’s assiduous formulation of a written inscription to accompany each image: ‘Au dos de la photo, j’ai écrit: Mélie à douze ans, photographiée par le photographe de Oât au 1 rue des Cigognes’ (p. 47) (‘On the back of the photo, I wrote: Mellie aged twelve, photographed by the photographer of Oât at 1 Storks Street’ (p. 33)). Whereas Roland Barthes argues that writing, because it is made out of language, can never be as trustworthy as the photographic image (for him the ultimate means of authentication), Redonnet’s Mélie has limited faith in the capacity of the photograph alone to capture the past. She sees the need for words as well as for images, and her inscriptions are intended to flesh out, but also to anchor the image, to fix its meaning. That there is much need for this kind of anchorage is implied by Sontag when she writes: ‘A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passing of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading’ (p. 71). Given the particularly wayward quality, even at the moment of their conception, of the photographs in Redonnet’s œuvre (in *Rose Mélie Rose* alone, they are imprecise and blurred, even empty of their intended subjects), the supplementation of a written inscription is utterly essential if they are to act as meaningful and lasting ‘memory texts’.

Of all of Redonnet’s texts, it is, however, in *Candy story* that the role of the writer as a witness to the past and that of the written text as a repository of memory and potential identity are most fully explored, since a bewildering number of characters (Witz, Curtz, Rotz, Dilo, Stev, Will, Lou, Erma, Bobby Wick, to cite but a few) engage in the act of writing. Thus, the narrator Mia is a writer, whose first book is significantly entitled ‘Sise Memories’, Sise being the name of a place in the text. It is my contention that the English homonym contained in the title of Mia’s text acts as Redonnet’s imperative to her characters to grasp onto or seize memory, in much the same way that the book itself is a means of seizing, containing and preserving the memories of the place named Sise. Further examples of the text’s multifaceted capacity to seize and preserve memory are demonstrated when Mia recounts the story of loss and obliteration underpinning Sise’s past, and also when she claims to have signed ‘Sise Memories’ not with her own name but with that of Ma. This desire to safeguard *via the text* both memory and identity is contrasted starkly with the story of the ship’s captain who, in spite of an illustrious past, dies unknown and largely forgotten:
Ma m’a toujours dit que les habitants de Sise ne ressemblaient à personne . . . C’étaient les rescapés d’un grand naufrage. Dans leur barque de sauvetage, ils étaient arrivés à Sise . . . Ma me racontait que le commandant, qui avait disparu avec son bateau, était le premier à avoir découvert l’Amérique. Mais il avait emporté sa découverte dans la mort et son nom était resté inconnu. Son fils, qui commandait la barque de sauvetage, était l’ancêtre de son grand-père, le gardien du phare de Sise, qui portait son nom. C’est pour continuer de porter ce nom que Ma ne s’est jamais mariée, et c’est pour que ce nom ne se perde pas que j’ai signé Sise Memories du nom de Ma. (pp. 49–50)

(Ma always told me that the inhabitants of Sise were like no one else . . . They were the survivors of a great shipwreck. They arrived in Sise in a lifeboat . . . Ma told me that the captain, who went down with his ship, was the first person to discover America. But he took his discovery with him to his death and his name remained unknown. His son, who took charge of the lifeboat, was the ancestor of [Ma’s] grandfather, who was lighthouse-keeper in Sise and who had the same surname. It was in order to preserve this name that Ma never married, and it was to prevent this name from dying out that I signed Sise Memories with Ma’s name.)

This perception of the written text as a means of preservation is illustrated again and again in Candy story. Thus, another more contemporary captain attempts to capture his own memories by writing his memoirs. When his text is discovered after his death, it turns out to be nothing more than a notebook containing lists of numbers and calculations, its cover stained in blood (p. 76). And yet, one might well argue that this captain does indeed succeed in leaving behind a text replete with memory and identity, for what more effective and tangible means of (self-)inscription can there be than a notebook imprinted with one’s own blood? Other characters who attempt to produce what are quite literally ‘memory texts’ include Witz, the celebrated spy-novelist, who is engaged in writing his memoir (p. 24), and Lou who throughout her life has kept a diary or journal (p. 55). That ‘Candy story’, the text Mia purportedly sets out to write at the end of the text, is also a kind of memoir, even an autobiography, seems plausible, given that the book is, as its title suggests, the story of Candy, Mia’s alias.

This effort on the part of the characters above to render memory into text, to render themselves in text is contrasted with those characters in Redonnet’s œuvre who are not inscribed in or via text. Thus, in Silsie, the memory of the engineer will eventually be occulted, for, without some form of inscription, that memory will not endure: ‘Personne à Dolms ne se
souvent de l’ingénieur, sauf Souie et moi. Pour Souie, c’est un souvenir
sans paroles’ (No one in Dolms remembers the engineer apart from Souie
and me. For Souie, the memory is one without words).18 An identical fate
awaits the mine in which the engineer spent so much of his time. Not men-
tioned in the town’s archives, it is destined to fall into oblivion: ‘La mine
appartient au passé de Dolms . . . et c’est un passé sans archives’ (p. 125)
(The mine belongs to Dolms’s past . . . and there is no archive of this past).
It is the wordless memory or the archiveless past which the memory-
makers in Redonnet’s œuvre are so desperate to avoid, for their own place
in that past will be fixed and confirmed, perhaps even immortalised, if only
they can succeed in rendering that past into text.

Of course, not all Redonnet’s memory-makers do succeed, and
immortality is far from being guaranteed. In Candy story alone, Witz will
drown, taking with him his memoir (p. 70), and the captain’s bloodstained
notebook will be burnt by Mia (p. 78), who also gives away Ma’s self-
portrait to a random security guard, himself engaged in the deletion of
memory (p. 78). Thus, while many of Redonnet’s characters are the guar-
dians of memory, others (and sometimes even those characters who simulta-
naneously attempt to preserve it) engage in its wilful destruction. In an
article on memory in Redonnet’s work, Marie Darrieussecq claims that
there is no real consensus in Redonnet’s œuvre about the benefits of
remembering versus the dangers of forgetting, and that it is, in fact, quite
difficult to decide which is the more threatening – forgetting or remem-
bering.19 While I agree with Marie Darrieussecq’s contention that a kind of
ethics of memory is established in Redonnet’s work, I would argue that, as
far as identity is concerned, and in keeping with Kundera’s and Irigaray’s
contentions about the role of memory in the construction of identity, a lack
or loss of memory is far more dangerous than the act of remembrance.
Moreover, it is more often than not the ‘good’ characters – Rose and Mélie
in Rose Mélie Rose, Mia and Ma in Candy story – who succeed in making
and preserving memory and inscribing identity. And it is the memorial
made out of writing which is perceived as the surest way of preserving
oneself as well as others, for, in the uncertain and treacherous spaces of
Redonnet’s texts, it is the written sign or text which lasts longer than any-
thing else. Thus, in Candy story and in other of Redonnet’s texts, the ‘never-
more’ (the constant threat of death and obliteration) is resisted or, at the
very least, tempered by the ‘evermore’ of the characters’ inscriptions. The
past (and its inhabitants) may indeed be gone forever, but as Redonnet’s
work intimates:
that does not mean it is lost to us. The past is like the scene of a crime: if the deed itself is irrecoverable, its traces may still remain. From these traces, markers that point towards a past presence, to something that has happened in this place, a (re)construction, if not a simulacrum . . . can be pieced together. (Kuhn, p. 4)

In an article on the contemporary novel in France, Christian Michel claims that, in the work of novelists such as Marie Darrieussecq and Marie NDiaye, it is possible to identify an interrogation of the function of literature and, more specifically, of writing as a means of safeguarding the past and transmitting memory. In the same article, Michel characterises writing (interestingly, in contrast to the photograph) as ‘[le] dernier, voire unique, média à avoir la mémoire longue’ (p. 66) ([the] last, indeed the only, medium with a long memory). Although he makes no mention of Redonnet’s fiction, the pertinence of his remarks for her work is striking. For, in Redonnet’s work, the act of writing is perceived as a palliative – to lapsed, lost or obliterated memory as well as to the fragile or fragmented identity which is a consequence of it. More than that, writing offers some kind of protection against the ephemeral nature of life, the vagaries of memory and the omnipresence of death. Protected, even immunised against obliteration by their (self-)inscriptions, characters like Mélie can expire in peace. And that this urgent compulsion to write impels Redonnet herself is revealed in ‘Réponses pour une question brouillée’, in which the writer notes the text’s power to save: ‘Je n’écris pas pour la postérité, mais pour sauver ma vie en faisant une œuvre’ (italics mine) (I am writing, not for posterity, but in order to save my life by making of it an œuvre). For Redonnet, therefore, as well as for the characters who people her texts, the creative endeavour – and the act of writing in particular – is no mere pastime or trivial pursuit, but lifeblood and lifeline, a thread which may save.

Notes


2 See Raymond Bellour’s review of L’Accord de paix, Magazine Littéraire, 390 (2000), 86.

Note that the French for memory is *souvenir*, so when Mélie takes down the sign over the door of the Hermitage claiming that this is her only *souvenir* (*Rose Mélie Rose*, p. 15), her words can be read on two levels – the sign will act as a souvenir of her life in the Hermitage and as her only memory.


Mélie in *Rose Mélie Rose* is the best illustration of this as she takes twelve photographs throughout the course of the text.


See, for example, the photograph taken of Yem and Mélie by Coh, p. 112, in which Yem and Mélie do not appear.

It should be pointed out, however, that my reading of the title ‘Sise Memories’ is in direct opposition to that suggested by Fieke Schoots in *Passer en douce à la douane: l’écriture minimaliste de Minuit: Deville, Echenoz, Redonnet et Tousaint* (Amsterdam and Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1997). Schoots reads ‘Sise Memories’ as ‘cease memories’, claiming that the title calls for an end to memory (p. 95).

In other of Redonnet’s texts such as *Rose Mélie Rose* and *Seaside*, bloodstains constitute ‘memory texts’.


