

Conclusion

One of the major features of this book is its focus on various aspects of the subject and identity as they are conceived and represented in contemporary women's writing in France. The contributors to this volume have overwhelmingly read the works of our chosen writers as tales of, quests for, explorations of, and crises in the self. It should be noted that this self is actually plural and that the selves in question are not necessarily those of the writers (either within or outside the text). Rather, as fictions, they exemplify the kaleidoscopic proliferation of selves that we are as individuals. When we are traumatised and damaged by unspeakable loss, our psychological selves work to protect us; this work consists, as with Louise Lambrichs's *Hannah*, in a shoring up of our psychological defences until we are sufficiently strong to begin the reparative and creative process of mourning. Art and literature are themselves part of that reparative, healing process. Indeed, we would go further and argue that loss is an intrinsic part of artistic creation. It can take the form of sublimation, or, as in the case of Chantal Chawaf, contamination. Alternatively, loss can take the form of a more conscious attempt to convey its effects and be traceable in the aesthetics of a text, surfacing in motifs, in metaphors, or in form, as for example, in the works of Paule Constant or Sibylle Lacan.

Our internal selves are also manifest in other ways. Fears and fantasies are given material reality in Marie Darrieussecq's novels of women in crisis, in the literalisation of metaphors pertaining to women's bodies, in the undercurrents of presence and absence, in the void at the heart of emotional relationships. The place of the body in literature and thought is a complex one, since the body can only ever be signified or suggested in literature; it cannot be produced by it. On the other hand, the literary body

plays an important part in articulating and shaping the physical body as it is understood and experienced by individuals and by groups. Indeed, as Judith Butler and Elisabeth Bronfen have argued, one might even question whether the body exists outside language and whether our knowledge of it is not always necessarily determined by our precise socio-cultural and historical contexts.¹ The body is one of the most important objects of representation for writers, as is witnessed by Régine Detambel's experiments with textual dissection or by Clotilde Escalle's insistent detailing of the movement of hands or the droolings of an ageing mouth.

The body is also an object of negotiation (between society and the individual, between men and women, between parents and children) – and a central locus of that negotiation. This is particularly true of women's bodies, which are more publicly shared and made visible than men's. While the project of many contemporary women writers is to retrieve their bodies from public gaze, definition and consumption and to speak more directly and personally about their bodies and how they inhabit them, by writing, they also re-enter the public realm. The transposition of our private and personal selves into the public sphere is, as has been shown in this volume, a risky endeavour. Part of the reason why Christine Angot's work is so controversial is because she puts into writing the intimate feelings, secret and unacceptable thoughts, and images that flash through her/her narrator's mind: images such as a baby daughter grown in a flash to an actively sexual woman in *Léonore, toujours*, fantasies, daydreams, the day's conversations turned over, worked over, returning in fragments and out of context. Similarly, Escalle's private worlds of sex and violence, whose transgressions are, actually, part of real lives, shock precisely because they are brought into the public sphere, expressed in and through writing.

If our inner selves are multifaceted, our external, social and embodied selves are even more plural – and fragmented. Our relations with others are themselves multiple, as we are constantly oscillating between our working lives and personas and our private lives and personas, and as we interact with colleagues, teachers, students, with casual acquaintances, with friends, lovers, partners, children and so on. Moreover, the social self is not only multiple but constantly challenged as we navigate relations with others and exist in the tension between the way we see or present ourselves and the way others perceive and judge and react to us. In this context, Agnès Desarthe's protagonists are of particular interest, caught as they are in a web of misunderstanding and exemplifying the gap between self and others even as they reach out and strive to breach that gap. The hybrid

bi-cultural selves of the *beur* narrators and protagonists in the novels by Farida Belghoul, Ferrudja Kessas and Soraya Nini testify to the complexities of racial and sexual politics in the lives of the children of Algerian immigrants, while Leïla Sebbar's Shérazade struggles against and flees from the images that others produce of her. Perhaps the most 'civilised' thing we can do at the start of the new post-feminist, post-colonial, post-modern millennium is to recognise that we are implicated on both sides of the identity equation. If the way in which others see us sometimes seems far removed from the ways in which we see ourselves, we must not forget that our perspectives on and judgements of others do not fit any more readily with their own frameworks of self-perception. We are all 'selves in process' in the modern world.

The modern trend for self-referentiality in literature means that the writing self is also clearly manifest and, indeed, foregrounded in the work of a significant number of the contemporary French women writers discussed in this volume. The authorial self as narrator or protagonist is subject to the same tensions and negotiations as other aspects of the self – above all, in relation to her readers. Sophie Calle's experiments with her/self both challenge and implicate the reader in an ethical relation to the text, in which respect for the other and the self is precisely at stake. In Detambel's *L'Écrivain*, the writing self is embodied, only to be carefully and lovingly dissected. In a different way, Sylvie Germain's novels engage the reader in a politics of reading in which the author's self invades the text in the form of her religious belief to the extent of closing off freedom of interpretation.

As the last chapter identifies, a recurrent theme in Escalle's novels is the difficult relationships her female protagonists have with their mothers, and it is striking how frequently variations on the mother–daughter theme have appeared throughout this volume. However one considers it, the mother–daughter relationship is important, influential – and also charged with emotion, with ambivalence, with the sorrow of loss, or, more rarely in literature, with pleasure. Angot as an example of the latter may surprise, but she is one of the few writers here (along with Louise Lambrichs) who treat the theme from the perspective of the mother.² The prevalence of problematic mother–daughter relations does not simply point to – or reinforce – the blaming of mothers for the state in which the daughters find themselves. Rather, it acknowledges that for both mothers and daughters, the relationship is formative – a key player in women's sense of self, even if, as Christiane Baroche seems to suggest, alternative maternal relationships

(with ‘surrogate’ mothers) may supplement it. For their part, Marie Redonnet’s motherless characters attempt, with varying degrees of success, to create memory texts in their quest for the grounding and self-representation they lack. Sebbar’s Shérazade reconnects with her mother through identification with a book of photographs of Algerian women, and as such is able to begin to assume an identity of her own.

The work of Leïla Sebbar is now well known and fairly widely commented, but the majority of the chapters in this volume are a starting point on the authors and the works they discuss. They are among the first sustained analyses to be published on these writers and texts, and they attest to the richness of the writing that has been produced by women in France since the beginning of the 1990s. They also attest to the breadth of approaches that scholars are taking to contemporary women’s writing. All the contributors engage closely with the individual works, carrying out close readings of the aesthetics, the form and the workings of the text. A remarkable feature is that these very close readings lead the various critics to draw on a range of different theoretical and interpretative frameworks from within literary criticism and, importantly, beyond – from psychoanalysis to linguistics, through trauma and post-colonial studies and performance art. The critical discourse generated by these interdisciplinary forays produces fruitful and thought-provoking analyses of contemporary writing and confirms its relevance to contemporary issues. However, this new literature does not simply offer a reflection of current issues at stake for women – or womanness. Indeed, it is not one ‘new literature’, and even less a coherent body of work. Rather, in all their diversity, the texts discussed in this volume offer spaces for working through, for exploring and for speculating on the freedoms and limitations, the pleasures and pains of being – and constantly renewing what it is to be – a woman, as we, both women and men, advance – and read ourselves – into the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); Elisabeth Bronfen, ‘The body and its discontents’, in Avril Horner and Angela Keane (eds) *Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality, Corporeality* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 109–23.
- 2 The rarity of the mother’s perspective in a wider breadth of literature is confirmed in Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother–Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).