

Postcolonial Betrayal? Mysticism and the Past

in Nicole Brossard's *Hier* and Diane Schoemperlen's *Our Lady of the Lost and Found*

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Literature is not a matter of leisure; it is a matter of living in the place of the heart and of the gaze into a mystery which still persists. [...] Literature is a collective memory lodged in the heart of our intimacy and of the silence which generally accompanies reading.

—Nicole Brossard.

Now I see that the opposite of fact may not be fiction at all, but something else again, something hidden under layers of color [sic] or conscience or meaning. If I were a visual artist, I might call it pentimento. If I were a historian, I might call it a palimpsest. But I am a writer and I call it the place where literature comes from. [...] Now I see that the opposite of knowledge may not be ignorance but mystery; that the opposite of truth may not be lies but something else again: a revelation so deeply imbedded in the thin places of reality that we cannot see it for looking: a reverence so clear and quiet and perfect that we have not yet begun to fathom it.

—Diane Schoemperlen.¹

Nicole Brossard's *Hier* and Diane Schoemperlen's *Our Lady of the Lost and Found* were published in 2001. Both novels explore contemporary “turns” in the humanities—turns that can be seen as a betrayal of the secular worldview and the focus on the New World that dominated *la nouvelle écriture/l'écriture engagée* and the concerns of Canadian and Québécois postcolonial writers of the late twentieth century. Brossard is *the* foremost practitioner of *l'écriture au féminin*; her literary texts have been characterized as “volontiers intellectuels, abstraits, schématiques, brillants [et] d'un formalisme étudié” (Mailhot 84). The tone of *Hier*, however, is

¹ Brossard, “Fragments” 21; Schoemperlen, *Our Lady of the Lost and Found* 270-71.

different. Alice Parker notes that it is “perhaps the most millennial of Brossard’s texts” (71).² My interest in this novel was provoked by what I saw as the “trahison” [betrayal] of Brossard’s *Hier*: its dismissal of the focus on the New World which has become *monnaie courante* in contemporary postcolonial and/or *engagés* texts, and in its foregrounding of accumulated Old World knowledge, religious art, and spiritual figures.³ In a secular twenty-first century Québec that is proud of its disassociation with the previously all-powerful Catholic Church, Brossard nonetheless foregrounds two of its primary religious figures: Marie Guyart (Mère Marie de l’Incarnation), the seventeenth-century founder of the Ursuline order in Québec, and the Virgin Mary of Catholicism. In this novel, Brossard looks to those women associated with the mystical world, knowledge of whom is buried in our collective memories, in order to turn to mysticism as a way of accessing that “high” provided by a metaphysical, *summa plus ultra* experience.

Diane Schoemperlen’s 2001 novel, *Our Lady of the Lost and Found* [*Our Lady*], reveals a number of similar preoccupations to those found in Brossard’s *Hier*. In *Our Lady*, a narrator/writer is “visited” by the Virgin Mary near the beginning of the novel, and the text then alternates between credible domestic scenes and stories of other Marian apparitions, most of which, as Schoemperlen assures us, are “based on actual documented accounts” (“Author’s

² Parker continues: “At the edge of a new millennium and century, it is time to interrogate where we have been, where we are going, what the present holds for us, to inquire into the lasting lessons of modernity” (71).

³ Recent Québécois texts that illustrate a turning-away from Europe as a cultural centre and a turning-to “les Amériques,” and that choose to work on what Arun Murkerjee calls “home ground” issues (6), (instead of a writing-back-to-the-centre practice from earlier postcolonial works) are the novels in Francine Noël’s tetralogy (*Maryse*; *Myriam première*; *La Conjuración des bâtards*; and *J’ai l’angoisse légère*; 1983-2008). Catherine Khordoc notes that it is “by looking beyond the elephant that is the United States that Francine Noël finds another culture [the Mexican] with which Québec shares history, a religious tradition, a postcolonial past, marginalization within North America—at the levels of language, culture, and economics—and possible future complicity. Furthermore [...], this American perspective that Noël adopts reflects Quebec’s cultural independence from France, its colonial *mère patrie*, recognizing that nations can share other kinds of ties than those forged through colonialism [...]” (234). See also Nicolas Dickner’s *Nikolski* (2005) for a similar focus on central and South America. *Frog Moon*, by the Franco-Ontarian writer Lola Lemire Tostevin, also explores a turning-away from the cultural mecca of Paris (Europe’s colonial centre for francophones) and a turning-to the narrator’s home ground (Northern Ontario). See my forthcoming “Hemispheric Travel” for a study of Dickner’s *Nikolski* in the context of a cultural shift in our fictions from a European-based thematic to an inter-American context.

Notes” 339). *Our Lady of the Lost and Found* contains many reflective passages: comments on historiography, philosophy, and reflections on the nature of story, truth, science and history. The didactic impulse is very strong in both novels, and the urge to teach is evident in discussions of works of religious art from Old World civilizations. As in *Hier*, the narrator of *Our Lady* revisits art which takes its subject from the Virgin Mary.

In this article, I explore how these novels highlight mystical women of the cultural past, in their discussions of art, culture, the Old World (Europe) versus the New World (represented respectively in these two texts by Quebec City and rural Ontario). I examine the limits of the contemporary worldview in these works’ turn to mysticism as a means of accessing “ultimate” experiences. I propose to illustrate, through my close readings of these two fictions, that some senior women writers’ focus in the twenty-first century may move from a strong thematization of feminist and postcolonial politics, writing, sex and love as the ultimate “highs” to a stronger focus on *summa plus ultra* experiences of art and spirituality. These two writers’ previous advocacy in their works for the power of transformative sexual pleasure has shifted into a later-day poetics which gives priority to the sacred and to mysticism. This shift produces texts which turn away from contemporary postcolonial and political concerns in our fiction(s) to explore alternate worlds.⁴

⁴ There are two major divisions within the larger field of postcolonial literary theory, corresponding to the two types of previously European ‘colonies: “settler colonies” and “colonies (of occupation)”. Quebec, due to the multi-layered nature of its colonisations,⁴ is situated somewhere between these two categories, whereas English-speaking Canada is generally described as a “settler culture.” Postcolonial literatures within a culture, suggests Arun Mukherjee, are not always “parodic rewrites,” but are often engaged in conversation with each other and not with those of some distant place. And yet, both novels examined in this article are less concerned with “here” and very much taken up with objects from a distant place—Europe—and creatures from beyond this place: a woman on the road to sainthood (Guyart) and Mary, the Mother of Jesus in the Catholic tradition.

Nicole Brossard's *Hier* (2001)

Laurent Mailhot's early article, "Romans de la parole (et du mythe)," draws a dividing line between Québec's experimental novels and novels which are out of a particular tradition—one focused on orality, the grandfathers (and, I would add, grandmothers, such as in Jovette Marchessault's novels 1975, 1980), on "long ago and far away," and on storytelling. Mailhot argues that the work of Nicole Brossard is exemplary of the first type of fiction: the language- and theory-based novel. He writes: "A côté de la production romanesque théorique, expérimentale, métaphysique—de Nicole Brossard à Louis-Phillippe Hébert [...]—il existe dans la littérature québécoise contemporaine une fiction qu'il faut situer quelque part entre l'oral et l'écrit, entre la tradition et la modernité" (84). However, Nicole Brossard's 2001 novel, *Hier*, translated by Suzanne de Lothbinière Harwood as *Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon* (2005), does not fully correspond to Mailhot's definition of the experimental novel. Of course, this being Brossard, one finds in the novel a profound reflection on the world of women, and it certainly displays its share of metafictional techniques and other stylistic elements from *l'écriture au féminin*, which have been thoroughly investigated by various academic analyses of the text, by scholars such as Louise Forsyth (2005), Claudine Potvin, Barbara Godard, Louise Dupré, and many others.⁵ The tone of this novel, however, is different. There is decidedly an end-of-career "feel" to it, which has been remarked upon by more than one critic or reviewer. Brossard is *not* at the end of her career; she has of course published other works since the 2001 publication of

⁵ The reception of *Hier* varies from reviewers seeing this novel as being all about form and language to others noticing that Brossard has given more importance to plot and content in recent years. David Ingham writes: "If 'novel' is too limiting a word, then so is 'plot.' [...] While it is tempting to see the novel as set in the minds of the characters, the 'real' setting is the text itself" (n.p.). However, as Julie Beddoes remarked quite some time ago, contemporary novels are not anywhere as experimental of those of the 1980s (132), and Brossard, like other novelists, has placed more emphasis on content in her more recent work, while maintaining the strong thematization of writing and of a vibrant community of women.

Hier.⁶ This novel begins a different exploration: despite its extensive investigation of form, the novel turns to content that highlights the treasure troves of the Old World.

As a cultural critic who focusses on the development of the imaginaries of the New World,⁷ I was taken aback by the switch in gears in Brossard's focus. Many of her previous novels thematically highlight New World issues, as seen, for instance, in her love and exploration of the living entity that is the city of Montreal in *French Kiss*, or in her meditation on the desert and the limits of the possible in *Le Désert mauve*. Indeed, as Barbara Godard has pointed out, the greater part of *Le Désert mauve*, in the "real world" of the novel, is written and situated not in the American desert, but "under the cool northern light where Maude Laures performs an intralinguistic translation of Laure Angstelle's fiction and renders it as Mauve, the Horizon" (204). Brossard's poetry, formalist as it often is, also signals her interest in the New World. Her poem in the anthology *Paris/Québec*, entitled "The Palm Trees of the Luxembourg, portrays Paris as one element of the contemporary postcolonial imaginary of Québécois writing. In it we read: "a few steps away from here and from the Sorbonne/a garden *and the palm trees which I've come to believe are mine.*" (Bertrand 31; my emphasis). Although her writing is, according to Mailhot's binary division, of the European formalist type, her content, in my opinion, has been steadily focused on the territories explored by what Mailhot calls "romans de la parole et du mythe" (84)—that is to say: the New World. This novel, however, is different. Karen S. McPherson provides a succinct summary of Brossard's *Hier*:

Hier presents four women each with her own history and her own unfolding story and all struggling to situate themselves in relation to past losses. Simone Lambert, curator of the

⁶ She has published, among other texts, *Musée de l'os et de l'eau* (Montréal: Éditions du Noroît, 2008); *La capture du sombre – roman* (Montréal: Leméac, 2007); *Cahier de roses & de civilisation* (Trois-Rivières : Éditions d'art Le Sabord, 2003). She will probably join the growing ranks of productive senior women writers, like the prolific P.D. James, who at 92 published a pastiche of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, entitled *Death Comes to Pemberley* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2011).

⁷ For an overview of this field, see for instance Bouchard 2001; Jordan 1994; Turner 1995 and Vautier 1998, 2007, 2009.

Musée de la Civilisation du Québec, is haunted by the death of her lover Alice and by the departure and loss of her daughter Lorraine; Saskatchewan novelist Carla Carlson comes to Quebec to write the stories of loss she has inherited from each of her parents; Simone's granddaughter Axelle Carnaval—through her scientific work in gene manipulation—seeks a way to deal with the loss of her parents; and the narrator *Je*, who works for Simone and whose job is to write the explanatory texts that accompany the museum exhibits, has been a compulsive note-taker and journal-writer since the recent death of her mother. (56)

This novel disparages multiple cultural aspects of the New World, especially the New World that is centered on Québec, to celebrate the cultural bank of masterpieces that the European Old World offers. Its strong didactic focus is on Old World paintings and significant sites, particularly cities such as Venice, which are invested with a high cultural “gloss.” McPherson notes that in this novel, “the emphasis seems to have shifted significantly towards connections to the past—an emphasis thematically evident in abundant references to museums, journals, ruins, relics, grandmothers, uncovered texts” (55-6).⁸ The past that is venerated in *Hier*—and the word is not too strong—is the European one, as the novel repeatedly denigrates aspects of Québécois culture. For instance, the character of the Saskatchewan writer says: “je meurs par en dedans en regardant *ton* fleuve, en écoutant les chansons de *ta* Diane Dufresne et les poèmes de *ton* Gaston Miron. Et ce fou d'Hubert Aquin que tu me demandes de lire” (*Hier* 65).⁹ One of the characters, Simone Lambert's colleague, Fabrice, is exemplary of this focus. Described as “lui qui respire si mal dans sa propre culture” (17)¹⁰ he strongly dislikes the artifacts which represent the past of the New World in Québec, which he dismisses as “tous ces éclats de deuil qui nous hantent au nom de la civilisation [...] nous vivons entourés de collections de flèches, de crucifix, de chapelets, de ciboires, de berceuses. Ça me rend fou” (17-18).¹¹ These particular artifacts, of

⁸ Indeed, Claudine Potvin has explored the text as museum in several of Brossard's latest works (2005).

⁹ “I'm dying inside, looking at *your* river, listening to the songs of *your* Diane Dufresne and the poems of *your* Gaston Miron. And that crazy Hubert Aquin you want me to read” (*Yesterday* 40).

¹⁰ a “man who has such difficulty breathing in his own culture” (*Yesterday* 12).

¹¹ “all these fragments of mourning haunting us in the name of civilization [...] We've been living among

course, apply to Quebec's *peuples autochtones*, to its Catholic heritage and to its tradition of storytelling.

Fabrice, a sophisticated charmer, revels in Old World treasures, and he persuades Simone Lambert to go to the Venice Biennale by seductively enumerating the unchanging beauty of its host city. Simone Lambert, although she does not easily tolerate Fabrice's criticism of Quebec City and its past, also expresses, elsewhere in the text, the great need she has had to head for "uncharted territory," (*Yesterday* 24)¹²: to "aller vers des villes anciennes comme si elle avait compris que seuls les vestiges du passé pourraient allumer en elle un vivre au present vertigineux" (36).¹³ And, indeed, freed from personal responsibilities because her unknown granddaughter has cancelled her expected visit, Simone Lambert goes directly to Italy:

Sans hésiter, Simone Lambert s'est dirigée vers l'embarcadère [...] Les siècles défilent. Jusqu'à ce que le bateau accoste, Simone aura marché coude à coude avec les artistes et les savants de la Renaissance. Oubliant la condamnation qui pèse sur son sexe, elle aura fait preuve d'esprit en chacun de ses échanges imaginaires avec les marchands, les militaires et les hommes de Dieu. (123-4)¹⁴

This quotation makes a link between the fifth woman of the novel, Mère Marie de l'Incarnation, and the three mature characters in *Hier*, all of whom, as Louise Dupré argues, "represent versants of the same woman, a contemporary woman who questions herself in order to rethink civilization's values" (92). It ties the idea of flouting the life sentence of her sex, that of motherhood and family responsibilities, with freedom and culture.

collections of arrows, crucifixes, rosary beads, ciboria, rocking chairs for [...] years. It drives me crazy" (*Yesterday* 12-13).

¹² "viv[re] à perte de vue dans l'inédit," (*Hier* 36).

¹³ "turn toward ancient cities as if having understood that only the remains of the past could ignite in her a vertiginous sense of being alive in the present" (*Yesterday* 24).

¹⁴ "Without any hesitation, Simone Lambert heads for the *embarcadero* [...] Centuries fly by. Before the boat docks, Simone will have walked elbow to elbow with Renaissance artists and scholars. Flouting the life sentence weighing on her sex, she will have demonstrated cleverness during each one of her imaginary exchanges with merchants, military men and men of God." (*Yesterday* 78).

Marie de l'Incarnation, one of the first European female settlers of the French New World, chose to liberate herself, of course, from that very life sentence. In *Hier* there are several intertextual references to this nun, Marie Guyart, who spent the greater part of her life in the New World as Mère Marie de l'Incarnation, the founder of the Ursuline Convent in Québec City in 1632.¹⁵ As Joyce Marshall explains in her introduction to *Word From New France*, Guyart married—reluctantly—at 18, was a widow at 20, and then lived with family members in her home city of Tours. Working in her sister and brother-in-law's river transportation enterprise, Guyart rapidly rose to a position of great responsibility within the business, dealing on a regular basis on the river docks at Tours, with “les marchands, les militaires et les hommes de Dieu” (*Hier* 124).¹⁶ This successful businesswoman chose to become a nun in the Ursuline order, and then chose to abandon her son Claude to go to Canada, imbued as she was with the fervour and the determination that characterized the French Catholic Counter Reformation. In the thousands of letters she wrote from her cloistered convent in Québec City to this abandoned son whom she was never to see again, she frequently relived the anguish of their separation and the strong impulse which motivated her to leave.

Marie de l'Incarnation is introduced near the beginning of *Hier*:

Assise devant la grande fenêtre de son appartement qui donne sur le fleuve, Simone Lambert relit pour la quatrième fois en vingt ans la correspondance de Marie de l'Incarnation. Tous les cinq ans, elle se replonge dans le quotidien de la Nouvelle-France autour de cette femme qui plus que tout l'intrigue. À chaque lecture elle essaie de départager ce qui appartient à la femme, à la France, au XVIIe siècle, au hasard d'une vie comme cette liberté qui lui fut redonnée deux ans à peine après son mariage. Simon

¹⁵ Along with Lambert, Carla Carlson “répond qu'il y a belle lurette qu'elle lit Marie de l'Incarnation” (*Hier* 107) [states that she has “been reading Marie de l'Incarnation” (*Yesterday* 66)]. Simone Lambert lives on “rue de Bernières” (*Hier* 22; *Yesterday* 16), named after the putative husband of the Ursulines' primary benefactor, Madame Marie-Madeleine de la Peltrie: Jean de Bernières. De Bernières became the order's financial factorum in France, collecting the thousands of *livres* that Marie de l'Incarnation's correspondence solicited with success, to aid with her work in Québec City.

¹⁶ “merchants, military men and men of God” (*Yesterday* 78)

Lambert a toujours aimé les livres autobiographiques et la lecture de la correspondance des grands et ce monde et des femmes qui en constituent le cœur. (21)¹⁷

Even before Marie de l'Incarnation makes her initial appearance, the reader has been prepared for the theme which she embodies: on the first page, the narrator states that she cannot explain "l'amour d'une mère pour ses enfants" (12);¹⁸ she then mentions, almost in passing, "[les] enfants errants que l'on voit dans les films de guerre [et] leurs mères, [...] leurs yeux fous quand elles viennent de comprendre qu'elles ne les reverront plus" (13).¹⁹ The text abounds with women who do not have children, who have been deprived of their children, or who have chosen to live without their children—Marie de l'Incarnation and Simone Lambert being foremost among them.²⁰ Alice Parker has pointed out that in this novel, "[as] in other works, Brossard distances herself from traditional narrative techniques, eschewing causality and linearity. [Here] we find ourselves in a mythic dimension, with characters who, like the gods, speak in riddles, prophetically, for our instruction" (77). *Hier* ties the freedom of being childless or child-deprived to the desire (another strong motivator of Brossard's work) to collect those moments of special significance: those moments of "transcendental experience" (Morgan 204) that take us, as Parker says in a very different context, out of "the material realm" and into the "primal mystery" (75).

¹⁷ "Sitting in front of the big window of her river-view apartment, Simone Lambert is reading the correspondence of Marie de l'Incarnation for the fourth time in twenty years. Every five years she immerses herself in ordinary life as it was lived in New France around this woman who captivates her more than anything. With every rereading she tries to sort out what belongs to the woman, to France, to the seventeenth century, to the random circumstances of a life, such as the freedom this woman recovered barely two years after marrying. Simone Lambert has always enjoyed autobiographies, enjoyed reading the correspondence of the world's great men and of the women who make up its core" (*Yesterday* 15). In a non-fictional passage, Brossard writes: "We forget too easily how marvelous it is to be able to choose the men and women of other centuries with whom we wish to pursue a conversation. Literature and books make it possible for us to converse with those with whom it seems to us we have things to share, to discuss" ("Fragments" 28). Jean-Daniel Lafond's ONF film on Marie Guyart, *Folle de Dieu*, starring the renowned Marie Tifo in the title role, appeared in 2008. In *Hier*, Brossard mentions "les fous de Dieu" (101) of past centuries ("fools for God," *Yesterday*, 63).

¹⁸ "a mother's love for her children" (*Yesterday* 9).

¹⁹ "wandering children seen in war movies [and] their mothers, their crazed eyes when they've just grasped the fact that they will never see them again" (*Yesterday* 10).

²⁰ Ceri Morgan, discussing the construction of a "feminine family tree" in Anne Hébert's *Le premier jardin* (1988), proposes that "*Hier* offers us the more mystical, but nevertheless still practical, maternal figure of Marie de l'Incarnation" (202). Obviously, I do not read this figure as an embodiment of the maternal, at least not in the traditional acceptance of the term.

Louise Dupré's contrast between "novelists' novels" and "poets' novels" is useful here (85). She argues that by foregrounding women's voices in *Hier*, Brossard "always seeks to give witness to a vision of the subjective, personal world" (85). The characters are fascinated by one recurring "scene," that of the dying (not the death) of René Descartes, which is replayed in various ways throughout the text. As we read in *Hier*: "À lui seul, il représente toute une généalogie de penseurs, nouveaux et anciens, qui comme lui sont sur le point de souffler sur la chandelle brûlée à tout jamais par les deux bouts de la vie et de la mort » (316).²¹ McPherson notes that Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* is the "classic formula for defining identity" (61). But in the French tradition, it is also strongly associated with the concept of Cartesian rationality, out of which flows Western philosophy's proclivity for rational thought, logic, order and a bias for what is often presented as a masculine way of thinking. In *Hier*, Descartes and his rationality must give way to a composite of a mature woman who wishes to meditate upon the treasures of European civilisations, who wishes to revisit special places and feelings, including those provoked by the appreciation of art and of spirituality, and, in so doing, create a new myth of the middle-aged female intellectual appreciator of the *summa plus ultra* and of beauty.

In this light, we can understand the penultimate sentence of the novel: "Tant mieux si l'écriture permet de détourner le cours des choses et d'irriguer là où le cœur est sec et demandant" (*Hier* 346).²² The Catholic Counter Reformation, of course, prized mysticism in its conception of spirituality. It is possible that this novel represents a fundamental shift in Brossard's focus: from political texts that detailed female sexual *jouissance* to a text that gives a much stronger emphasis to metaphysical moments played out against the memories of those

²¹ "Unto himself he represents a whole genealogy of thinkers, new and old, who like him are about to blow out the candle forever burnt at both ends by life and death" (*Yesterday* 204).

²² "So, all the better that writing makes it possible to redirect the course of things and to irrigate where the heart is dry and demanding" (*Yesterday* 229).

physical experiences. As Morgan argues, “In *Hier*, this lesbian jouissance is found only in traces in the text” (203). Morgan cites one of the four women characters, the writer Carla Carson: “je rêve d’une génération qui serait portée sur le silence comme d’autres le sont sur le sexe” (*Hier* 325) and then writes: “The last part of the sentence seems to refer to Brossard’s earlier work and, for me, adds to the poignancy of the novel, which displaces sexual desire from the centre of the narrative, with the only sexual activity that is explicitly occurring in the present being the masturbation carried out by Axelle, whose life is dominated by her work as a genetic scientist” (205). Decidedly, in this novel, Brossard is “pursu[ing] a conversation” (Brossard, “Fragments” 28) with those women associated with the mystical world, women whom we perhaps know from long-ago and partially forgotten Catholic-school teachings of the past, in order to turn to metaphysical experiences associated with art, culture, and spirituality.

This would explain the different “tone” of this novel, which combines the notions of cultural memories and the distant past with a very studied meditation on silence, and on great works of art and literature from the Western European tradition. In *Hier*, Marie de l’Incarnation is joined by the characters’ discussion of another figure of a mystical female genealogy: the Virgin Mary. In this text, she is not discussed as a religious or as a maternal figure, but as the subject-matter of awe-inspiring art. This focus is found in a discussion between Simone Lambert and Fabrice, which begins with an explanation of why Caravaggio’s *Death of the Virgin* “a fait scandale en 1601” (67)²³ and then lists European paintings that focus on this scene: “Giotto en 1310, Hugo van der Goes en 1478, Albrecht Dürer en 1510, Nicolas Poussin en 1623, Carlo Maratta en 1686” (68). In this exchange which foregrounds love of women, literature, art and theatre, one character says: “à l’époque, il était interdit de peindre les saints sous les traits de personnes vivantes. On ne soupçonne pas aujourd’hui à quel point l’art était alors codé et

²³ “created a scandal in 1601” (*Yesterday* 41).

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combien il était risqué de sortir des rangs. [...] Savoir détecter une transgression, une anomalie, un clin d'œil fait partie intégrante de mon métier, de mon plaisir ” (67-8).²⁴ This innovative novel presents its readers with such an “anomalie;” its author is perhaps making a “clin d’oeil” in our direction as she explores a new shift in her usual concerns.

This different dimension in Brossard’s impressive body of work may very well indicate a “turn” in the career of prominent women writers who first began writing in the 1960s (Brossard) or whose thematics are concerned with this same time-period (Schoemperlen). In her work on ideologies and identities in Québec women writers of the 1970s, Bénédicte Maugière noted the very strong “*fonction sociale de la littérature au Québec*” (3). However, times change, interests vary, maturation can bring other matters into focus. Brossard had long supported the notion of an “utopie féminine,” but one anchored in *this* world. As Louise Forsyth argued in the 1980s:

Each of Brossard’s works is a further step in her strategy to give form to women’s reality and to achieve political goals through her writing [...]. She has already accomplished major change in the Quebec political and socio-cultural scene [...]. The aim of her activities as a writer and political activist is to establish her place, as a woman, at the centre of society’s cultural and political space. (“Beyond” 169)

With this novel, however, Brossard turns somewhat away from *here*—this New World—and toward a double focus on mysticism and the artistic treasures of the (European) past. This fiction may well indicate a new exploration of these matters by the writers of her generation.

Schoemperlen’s *Our Lady of the Lost and Found* (2001)

Diane Schoemperlen’s *Our Lady of the Lost and Found*, also published in 2001, offers an interesting parallel to *Hier*. Schoemperlen is known for her poetic attention to the quotidian, the

²⁴ “At the time it was forbidden to depict saints with the features of living persons. Today we have no idea how heavily coded art was back then and how risky it was to venture off the beaten path. [...] Knowing how to detect a transgression, an anomaly, in a flash, is an integral part of my job, of my enjoyment” (*Yesterday* 41).

ordinary, and the “details of daily life” (Hartley 182).²⁵ However, this reputation is not universal; Eva Tihanyi proposes that Schoemperlen’s work “has been frequently hailed as innovative, experimental, unconventional.” (n.p.). Like Brossard, Schoemperlen is interested in the writings of other women; in 1997, she edited *Vital Signs*, a collection of short stories by “new women writers in Canada.” These selected stories often address questions of morality and ethics, as well as relationships between men and women.

In *Our Lady*, a narrator/writer offers a detailed self-portrait of her situation in the world: a woman in her mid-forties, of average height and weight, a writer who has never been married, and who lives alone in her own home. The unnamed narrator hints at the concept of solidarity with other women, although this theme is not as strongly foregrounded as it is in much of Brossard’s work. She writes: “I do not long to be young again, nor am I especially afraid of growing old. These days I am looking at the lines in other women’s faces and finding them beautiful” (12). The first pages describe the “ordinariness” of the narrator’s days, as she begins to write another novel. However, hints are everywhere that something extraordinary will happen, and indeed, the Virgin Mary makes her appearance in the narrator’s home in the third chapter, arriving casually, as an unknown neighbor might visit. In retrospect, however, the narrator states that she had seen portents of the arrival without understanding their import. The novel then alternates between describing the daily activities in which “Mary” and the narrator engage during the week: making breakfasts, going to the Mall, cooking—being around the house—and stories of other Marian apparitions. Interspersed among these activities is a discussion of the science versus art debate, which in Schoemperlen’s work, is based on an investigation of Heisenberg’s

²⁵ See for instance Santarossa 2001; Hartley 2001; and Wilson 1990.

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uncertainty principle.²⁶ The narrator sums up it succinctly: “Heisenberg’s principle means that when any system is observed, the observer necessarily exchanges energy with that system and thereby changes its original properties” (*Our Lady* 235). She goes on to say: “I am no scientist but I can see how the uncertainty principle effectively made the idea of complete objectivity impossible and how the irrefutability of facts has been cast into question ever since” (235). Heisenberg’s theory was more revolutionary during the heyday of historiographical questionings and literary postmodernism in the 1980s than it is today. At times, the novel’s investigation of this principle’s rapport with the story/history debate feels somewhat dated, although that statement does not apply to the explanatory gloss the narrator provides of the concept by describing a Western male anthropologist’s observation of a clitoridectomy (female genital mutilation, FGM) in Africa. The satiric thrust of this long passage underlines the general lack of knowledge of women’s history in our contemporary world, while providing a great many facts about FGM at the same time:

The anthropologist knows that although FGM is usually thought of (if it is thought of at all) as a primitive ritual once performed in certain barbaric Third World countries, it is none of these things. It is still a current practice in twenty-six African countries, as well as in parts of Asia and the Middle East. [...] The anthropologist has also read that the last recorded clitoridectomy performed in the United States took place in 1948. It was performed on a five-year-old girl as a cure for excessive masturbation. The anthropologist has not found this fact in any of the standard history textbooks written by men. It appears only in a book of women’s history, as if it were just another one of those marginal topics gathered under the umbrella of the phrase “Women’s Issues.” You know, all those little things that women worry their pretty little heads about: cellulite, stretch marks, wrinkles, facial hair, housework, child care, equality, breast cancer, rape. (236-7)

In keeping with the Catholic focus of the novel, the passage concludes with a satiric mention of one of Caravaggio’s paintings, and a remark in passing that the thorns used on the girl

²⁶ In “Author’s Notes,” the author states that a 1997 article by Marilyn Simonds in *Brick* about the “fiction/nonfiction continuum” led to her exploration of this concept (342). Brossard’s discussion of the science versus art dichotomy in *Hier* is developed in the many scenes that involve the dying of Descartes, as well as by Axel Carnaval’s scientific work on gene manipulation.

undergoing the clitoridectomy are from the same type of tree as those used in the building of the Ark of the Covenant. This pointed meditation on Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and other similar meditations scattered throughout the novel, allows the narrator to engage with the science/art debate, and to present the "ordinariness" of Mary's visit(ation) as a bridge between worlds. Mary, a holy entity, by her presence alone, intervenes in the ordinary days of the narrator and thereby changes the internal focus and the worldview of her hostess.

The strong didacticism in both novels is centered partly on works of religious art from Western European civilization. As in *Hier*, the narrator of *Our Lady* revisits art which takes its subject from the Virgin Mary: *The Annunciation* by Fra Angelico; *Virgin and Child* by Jean Fouquet; *Glorification of the Virgin* by Geertgen tot Sint Jans; *Mater Dolorosa* by El Greco, and toward the end of the text, in the context of a discussion of postmodern indeterminacy, *The Madonna of Port Llagat* by Salvador Dali. Mainly, however, numerous stories of Marian visitations constitute the main didactic thrust of the novel: "Our Lady of Czestochowa" in Poland (149); "Our Lady of Good Counsel" in Italy (154); "Our Lady of La Salette" in France (256). Interspersed with these stories are reflections on the relationship between history/reality and fiction, signaled by epigraphs such as this one from Brian Morton: "The world, the human world, is bound together not by protons and electrons, but by stories" (*Starting Out in the Evening* 185; cited in Schoemperlen, "History (3)," *Our Lady* 143). The fictional Mary is often the teller of the tale, and her wry and sardonic wit provides one of the pleasures of reading this novel.

As the week progresses, the narrator begins to tell her visitor the story of her own life. In a similar vein to Brossard's text, the middle-aged narrator reviews her life in terms of loss: "It took me even longer to understand that, once you have reached a certain age, you can no longer suffer one loss at a time, that loss is cumulative and, with each new experience of it, all your old

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losses will join forces and come back *en masse* to haunt you” (*Our Lady* 287). Her losses revolve around love and men, and the fact that, as she says, “I have come now to the place in my life where I have to admit that it is not going to turn out the way I had assumed it would. I am not going to get married, have children, and live happily ever after in all the traditional ways” (320)²⁷. It is the presence of the divine in the home, the presence of Mary, which has brought her to this slow realization of her personal situation: “Now I understand that it is time I stopped telling the story of my life only in terms of the men I have loved, lost or found or both” (326). Noting that her own “penchant for order and clarity does not happily or easily admit the contradictions and the opposites within [herself]” (326), the narrator says: “Perhaps it is some subliminal collective nostalgia for the good old days of Plato and Heraclitus (before Einstein and relativity, Heisenberg and uncertainty, quantum physics and chaos theory) that keeps us stuck in the resolute land of opposites” (327). The narrator then proposes that it is “time now to venture out of the comforting land of either/or and travel into the uncertain territory of both/and. Time to realize that irony is not cynicism, paradox is not chaos, and prayer is not wishful thinking. Time to accept the possibility that these, irony, paradox, and prayer, are the still points, the thin places, the perfect quantum qualities” (327). The novel ends with the departure of Mary, who leaves as quietly as she had arrived, but who leaves behind a statue of herself to keep the narrator company as she metafictionally finishes her open-ended text.

The tone of this novel is quite different from Brossard’s *Hier*. It echoes that of minimalist fiction.²⁸ There is no sense of ecstasy, nor a desire for compelling experiences in this novel; the

²⁷ As Susan Elmslie writes, the “pitfalls of romantic relationships are common to Schoemperlen’s characters” (1040).

²⁸ See Robert R. Wilson, who argues that Schoemperlen’s fictional world (several years prior to the publication of *Our Lady*) “lacks spectacular events and transcendental themes. [...] Loss is a recurring theme [in her work] but it occurs on the level of daily desire and frustration. It happens in the relationships between men and women, not in history” (n.p.).

narrator employs a measured prose throughout. And yet, faced with the turmoil of the postmodern world, this narrator explores that other world, the world of miracles, Marian apparitions and the thin place to which the act of writing takes one. In an interview, Diane Schoemperlen agrees that this novel is her “spiritual autobiography” (Santarossa n.p.). I find it interesting that two twenty-first novels highlight mystical women of our cultural pasts and Old World religious art in their discussion of loss, writing and significant experiences.

Conclusion

In her contribution to the collection *Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century*, Edwina Gateley reflects at length on “the loss experienced by vast numbers of people [that] leaves a deep vacuum” and that we are “shedding, inexorably and irretrievably, images and symbols [...] that have defined our self-understanding for the past millennium.” (62) In “the third millennium,” she notes, the “ecclesiastical structure is hierarchical and patriarchal,” and consequently, our “spiritual ground [is], without doubt, shifting” (63). From the Christian perspective out of which she writes, she turns to Sophia, “Wisdom, the feminine principle of the Godhead” (65). “To encounter Sophia,” argues Gateley, “is to open oneself to the mystical experience” (66). Brossard and Schoemperlen’s novels provide illustrations of this act: an opening of oneself to the mystical experience. I see these two twenty-first century novels as heraldic texts, indicating a “turn” that may be read as a betrayal of former postmodern and feminist positions; indeed, one senses this reading in some book reviews of these novels. As usual, Brossard is ahead of women writers of her generation, leading the way into new explorations. Schoemperlen, in a different type of text—one that works with both intuition and quasi-“Descartian” arguments—arrives at a similar place: “the place where literature comes from. [...] where] the opposite of knowledge may not be ignorance but mystery” (*Our Lady* 270-71). Senior women writers in this country, who have

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contributed so much to the way we see ourselves in our New World, who have done so much to *put women into that world*, are indicating that they now wish to explore other realms: the mystical, the world of art and the cultural pasts of their heritages.

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