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Sergio Kokis's *Le Pavillon des miroirs* and Jean-François Chassay's *Les Ponts*

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Volume 24, Number 2, 1999

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl24_2art08

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Vautier, M. (1999). The Rôle of Memory in two "fictions de l'identitaire" from Quebec: Sergio Kokis's *Le Pavillon des miroirs* and Jean-François Chassay's *Les Ponts*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 24(2), 141–150.

Article abstract

Numerous contemporary Québécois fictions show a willingness to engage in necessarily non-solidly-defined memories, to accept the nebulous quality of these memories, and to revel in this dynamic praxis. Sergio Kokis, in *Le Pavillon des miroirs*, investigates the notion of identity through memory. Instead of resolving his identity issues through involvement with the community, Kokis's narrator uses his paintings to connect his memories to l'identitaire. In Jean-François Chassay's *Les Ponts*, unstable and unverifiable memories have replaced history in the process of creating l'identitaire. Through their explorations of memory and l'identitaire, these two Québécois novels constitute examples of a postcolonial exploration of identity as process and memory as mouvance.

The Role of Memory in two “fictions de l’*identitaire*” from Quebec: Sergio Kokis’s *Le Pavillon des miroirs* and Jean-François Chassay’s *Les Ponts*¹

MARIE VAUTIER

IN THE EARLY 1980S, contemporary fictions from both English-speaking Canada and Quebec were fascinated with problematic issues in political history, and the genre identified by Linda Hutcheon as “historiographic metafiction” was prominent in both areas.² Among the numerous examples of this type of fiction, one need only recall novels by Daphne Marlatt (*Ana Historic*), George Bowering (*Burning Water, Caprice*) and Rudy Wiebe (*The Scorched-Wood People, The Temptations of Big Bear*) or Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska (*La Maison Trestler*), Jacques Godbout (*Les Têtes à Papineau*), and Jacques Poulin (*Volkswagen Blues*). As I argue in *New World Myth* (1998), historiographic metafiction such as these provided a wonderful forum for investigations into the notions of postmodernism, “truth,” and the historical past.

In the later half of the 1980s and in the 1990s, however, the fields of inquiry have changed. Contemporary novels see issues of public history yielding to private memoirs, and investigations of postmodern indeterminacy yielding to postcolonial explorations of memory, community, and identity. The recent emphasis on autobiographical fiction, the quasi-fictional journal, and what is now frequently referred to in Quebec as “l’écriture de l’intime” (Lamarre 7) has signalled this change in focus.

In a 1995 article, “Être ou ne pas être postmoderne au Québec,” André Lamontagne notes the continual preoccupation with the question of identity in contemporary novels and theoretical works from Quebec. As he argues, a preoccupation with “La problématique identitaire et son corollaire, la fascination pour l’Autre que l’on observe autant dans la fiction que dans la réflexion critique (chez Pierre Nepveu, Simon Harel, Pierre L’Hérault, Sherry Simon) font se démarquer la littérature québécoise de la *doxa* postmoderne” (42). It is possible that the widely perceived hesi-

ration to adopt the term “postmodern” in Québécois discursive practice is linked to this ongoing fascination with *l’identitaire*, and to stronger links to postcolonial practices than to postmodernist ones.

Memory is one of the main issues thematized in postcolonial texts, tied as it is to the notions of history, imperialism, and identity — cultural, national, racial, linguistic, gendered, and personal identities.³ Oblique and brief references to the supposedly hegemonic history and culture of Quebec that appear infrequently in English-language postcolonial theoretical works assume, as Beryl Langer states, that “the question of national identity in Quebec has long been resolved” (147). However, my observations of many contemporary fictions from Quebec — especially but not exclusively fictions of *l’écriture migrante* — indicate that Québécois perceptions of their histories and cultures, as mediated through the theme of memory in these fictions, have long been perceived as multifaceted, fragmentary, adaptable, multiple. Postcolonial approaches to memory as a device of “*l’identitaire*” was discernible in early writings by “*écrivains migrants*” such as Marco Micone and Régine Robin. Robin’s early novel, *La Québécoise* (1983), strongly thematizes the complex links between memory and personal, familial, political and gendered identities. While the novel initially received a rather limited and negative reception in Quebec literary circles, more recent studies regard it as exemplary in its investigation into the changing issues of identity in contemporary Quebec and seminal in its approach to memory as an important aspect of *identitaire*.⁴

One must exercise caution when applying contemporary postcolonial theories of memory from the Anglo-American sphere of influence to texts from Quebec. For instance, in their introduction to the 1996 American collection of essays, *Memory and Cultural Politics*, the editors confidently proclaim that, in the United States, “ethnic memory represents a real challenge to hegemonic constructions of nation, culture, history” (Singh 5-6). The term “ethnic memory” is an American one,⁵ and the binary opposition proposed by these editors (and adopted in most of the essays in the collection) sets ethnic memory up against strongly defined hegemonic notions of history, culture, and nation. For instance, contributor David Palumbo-Liu argues that the two “ethnic” texts he discusses “share methods of inverting the history-memory relation — both stabilize memory, imbuing it with the status of history, and destabilize history, critiquing its modes of assigning significance” (212-13).⁶ Palumbo-Liu uses the word *history* “to name the dominant discourse assigning significance and

order to things" (212), and his analyses detail how both protagonists "embark on a project to manipulate memory to the point of history, taking deeply personal memory and elevating it to the status of the historical" (213). For this critic, then, it may be said that the notion of memory is the David to the Goliath that is "history." In Quebec, however, as Patricia Smart, Gilles Pellerin, and others have argued, creative work continually demythifies and reinvents Quebec's historical pasts and its heroes and heroines. For various political, religious, and social reasons (which I have explored at length elsewhere),⁷ Québécois today live with conflicting versions of the past and coexisting yet wildly different belief-systems in the present. Thus, Palumbo-Liu's concept of a "particular stabilized notion of history" being attacked by "ethnic memory" is a world-view assumed by the more solidly-defined Euro-American cultures, and not necessarily applicable to postcolonial novels — especially, perhaps, to those of contemporary Quebec.

My readings of numerous contemporary Québécois fictions discern a willingness in these fictions to 1) engage necessarily-non-solidly-defined memories (memories of history, of identity, of family, of sexual abuse, of lovers, and so forth); 2) to accept the nebulous quality of these memories — the "ineffable" quality they possess; and 3) to revel in this dynamic praxis, which ties memory to "*l'identitaire*" — defined by Sherry Simon as "*l'identité considérée comme une construction*" (9).⁸ Two recent novels from Quebec, Sergio Kokis' *Le Pavillon des miroirs* and Jean-François Chassay's *Les Ponts*, illustrate some aspects of the role(s) memory plays in contemporary Québécois fiction.

Le Pavillon des miroirs was published in 1994, eleven years after Rob-in's *La Québécoise*. Kokis's novel, which he has said he wrote for himself with a view to sharing it with a few friends, received a much warmer reception in literary reviews in newspapers and periodicals than earlier *écriture migrante* texts, given the change of cultural climate between the early 1980s and early 1990s. Thus, in *l'Actualité*, Kokis is described as belonging to those "qui ... sont devenus des fils importants du tissu social et culturel d'ici" (Gendron 36). The novel was awarded several important prizes in 1994-95, despite worthy competition from novels such as *Va Savoir* by the celebrated author Réjean Ducharme and the non-fictional essay *Genèse de la société québécoise* by Fernand Dumont. A prolific novelist, Kokis has subsequently published several other novels and is widely recognized as a strong emerging voice in contemporary Québécois literature.⁹

Le Pavillon des miroirs investigates the notion of identity through memory; it portrays an unnamed narrator vividly recalling and reflecting

upon his childhood and adolescence in his country of origin, Brazil, while installed in his art studio in a cold, unspecified but easily identifiable Quebec, frequently described metaphorically as “Le froid intense des longs janviers” (*Pavillon* 18). Even and odd-numbered chapters signal the alternation between the two sites. The usual Old World/New World dichotomy gives way here to a north-south pole, namely Brazil/Quebec, thereby depriving this novel of a definitive foundation myth against which to articulate the resistance theory of postcolonial studies. Instead, the narrator turns to memory, or, more precisely, his own reflections on memory, which are sensual, visual, and intellectual, to address the thorny questions of identity, or rather, “*l’identitaire*.” As Marc Lapprand notes in his review of this novel, “en s’établissant définitivement à Montréal, via l’Europe, [le narrateur ...] tente de retrouver sur la toile, non pas ses origines, mais sa raison d’être” (137).

The narrator reflects upon horrific incidents observed during his childhood, such as the gang-rape of a helpless woman, the indescribable poverty and hopelessness of rural Brazilian villages, or the anonymous traveller who fell from a train and, like a human spider, took far too long to die. The narrator, writes Lapprand, “se montre capable de décrire des scènes d’une violence insoutenable avec le plus grand détachement” (137). However, in the introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth argues that “in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it” (“Trauma and Experience” 6). “The traumatised,” she writes, “carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). Kokis’s narrator, in his willingness to be this type of “symptom,” constitutes in some respects an example of the idea that memory in postcolonial novels occupies a site of in-betweenness. Thus, at the beginning of his narrative, Kokis’s narrator states that his traumatic experiences seem to him unreal, and only recuperable through the use of colour in paintings: “Tous les efforts de la mémoire ne produisent qu’un pâle reflet de ce qui fut... seules certaines images mentales insolites gardent les couleurs et le mouvement qu’elles avaient au moment où elles se sont imprimées dans mon esprit. Comme des traumatismes” (19-20).

Unlike many postcolonial novels, Kokis’s text does not have his narrator turn to the community to resolve his identity concerns. On the contrary, the novel contains lengthy passages which disparage the notion of community: “Les gens d’ici,” he writes, “ont beau parler de communauté ou de culture autochtone, en jouant les ethnologues en bermuda, ce n’est que de la mauvaise foi” (257). Elsewhere, however, he admits that

it is his choice to be in a state of “permanent strangeness” in the community, and that, in a way, he is content to be where he is: “Parfois ça m’agace quand j’entends d’autres étrangers se plaindre ... Mais je ne réponds pas ... Comme à l’internat, je n’avoue pas mon contentement, puisqu’après tout c’est l’exil” (306).

Instead of resolving his identity issues through involvement with the community, Kokis’s narrator uses his paintings, especially his self-portraits, to marry the nebulous but definitely nightmarish quality of his memories to the dynamic praxis that constitutes “*l’identitaire*.” In a very primary way, these works embody “l’identité considérée comme une construction” (Simon 9).¹⁰

In one of many conventional articles on memory and imagination published in the American anthology *The Anatomy of Memory* (1996), Patricia Hampl argues (according to James McConkey, in his brief introduction to her text) that “The ‘real job’ of the memoirist ... is to find the answer to the final question, and to connect that answer to the more abstract issues that underlie life itself” (McConkey, intro. to Hampl’s “Memory and Imagination” 201). However, the narrator of *Pavillon* does not seek such a resolution, although he does ask the questions. Nor is this narrator motivated by a propensity to seek *l’identitaire* in individualism and isolationism (as has been suggested in book reviews), but by a recognition that his painful past must co-exist with his chosen present — and that he must come to a place of living-with-the-tensions — tensions provoked by these memories and their final unresolvability. For this narrator all the memories culminate in his self-portraits: “Chaque autoportrait est ainsi unique, en deçà du mouvement, imparfait et inachevé” he writes (254). And indeed, all his paintings tend toward this *identité en mouvance*, this *identitaire*. On the last page of the text, he writes: “Je me rends compte que c’est ma propre image que je regarde, sous toutes ces méta-morphoses. Elles forment un tissu de souvenirs que j’appelle identité” (370-71).¹¹

I would argue that “la mémoire de *l’identitaire*” is not confined to the writings of first-generation *écrivains migrants* such as Robin and Kokis. Because multifaceted, overlapping, and even contradictory versions of the past form an integral part of the appreciations of memory in postcolonial settings, recent fictional works by non-immigrant Québécois writers also explore the complexities of “la mémoire *identitaire*.” An illustration of this postcolonial appreciation is found in Jean-François Chassay’s *Les Ponts*, subtitled “l’histoire d’une famille” and published in 1995.

Almost all the reviews of the novel dwell on its author’s fascination with l’OULIPO, the French “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle,” founded

by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau in 1960. Practitioners of *l'écriture oulipienne* create a work while following pre-established linguistic and structural constraints. One of the better-known examples of this practice is *La Disparition*, a detective novel by Georges Perec in which the letter “e,” the most frequently-used letter of the French alphabet, has “disappeared.”

Chassay is a follower of *oulipien* practices, and his second novel, *Les Ponts*, constitutes a humorous, ironic tip of the hat to other “romanciers du langage.” Before setting pen to paper, Chassay had established a detailed plan: each chapter was to open with a style which recalled other writers, from Hubert Aquin to Don DeLillo, each chapter was to consist of exactly eleven pages, and the text was to contain any number of what I would call “activités dérisoires” which signal both the absurdity and the pleasure of inventing prose.

Despite the ludic quality of *oulipien* writings, it is possible to establish a poetics of the movement, as Marc Lapprand has illustrated in his recently published work *Poétique de l'Oulipo*. In the same way, it is possible to see in this exceptional novel the bridges between, as the author says, “la grande Histoire et sa propre histoire. D'où l'idée de famille” (Milot D1).

The family is at the heart of this novel's reflections on memory and *l'identitaire*. Collective, communal, genealogical memories are set up and then undercut in *Les Ponts*. This novel tells the convoluted story of five siblings, descendants of one ironically-named Georges Dupont. Five generations of this patriarch's descendants have engaged in a ritual he initiated: recording the daily weather in Montreal. In various interviews, Chassay has noted that the family is one of the last bastions of traditional values in the contemporary era, and he takes pleasure in deconstructing it. The novel's characters are constantly thematizing the links between history and the family: “Imaginer continuellement que sa famille, c'est l'Histoire” says Emma (164). Her brother, Stéphane, this generation's weather recorder, reads the ritual as a means toward identity: “Et lui [...] il écrit la température. Tous les jours. Les fragments de son histoire, de sa famille, de tout ce qu'il est, de sa culture, au sens fort, passe [sic] par l'inscription quotidienne du climat sur une page blanche, dans un cahier noir”(138).

The strong insistence upon “ritual” in *Les Ponts* recalls Pierre Nepveu's observations on contemporary Québécois literature in *l'Écologie du réel*. After “l'esthétique de la fondation” (the sixties) and “l'esthétique de la transgression” (the seventies), comes “l'esthétique de la ritualisation,”

where out of postmodern disorder is born ludic creativity. “Le ritualisme contemporain,” writes Nepveu, “me paraît une tentative de réponse éthique et esthétique à la confusion ambiante” (213). *Les Ponts*, however, seeks not so much to provide a response to this confusion, as to enjoy the ludic praxis of existing in a post-History era. In *Les Ponts*, unstable and unverifiable memories have replaced history in the process of creating *l’identitaire*. Thus, we read that “l’Histoire est une somme de petits étonnements successifs, grâce auxquels on se rend compte de la nécessité d’être naïf,” whereas “La mémoire [est] tendue, ouverte, prête à tout” (29).

Réjean Beaudoin’s excellent review of *Les Ponts* underlines the relative youth of its author and the attitude his generation has towards history: “Héritier d’une culture médiatique qui consomme quotidiennement sa rupture avec l’Histoire, l’esprit ‘postlyrique’ [des écrivains comme Chassay] consistera en une interminable évasion” (192). At the end of the novel, all occasions for the definitive establishment of a familial history and a familial identity have been undercut. For instance, the exactness of the ritual has been subverted — we discover that the patriarch deliberately falsified his recordings — and the generational link has been destroyed, (the paternity of the baby born to the next generation is suspect). The very ludic quality of the text keeps us guessing. As Beaudoin writes: “On ne saura jamais avec certitude si le propos du livre tend vers l’effacement pur et simple du pesant discours historique ou vers la recherche amusée de son renouvellement” (191).

Discussing the notion of identity in contemporary texts, the Australian postcolonial critic Helen Tiffin argues for a “liberation into a world in which one’s own identity may be created or recuperated not as an alternative system or fixture, but as a process, a state of continual becoming in which author/ity and domination of any kind is impossible to sustain” (179). Through their explorations of memory and *l’identitaire*, these two Québécois novels constitute examples of such a postcolonial exploration of identity as process and memory as *mouvance*.

NOTES

¹ I express my gratitude to the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria for a research fellowship which gave me time to finalize this article.

² See chapter 4 of Linda Hutcheon’s *The Canadian Postmodern*, “Historiographic Metafiction,” for an extended discussion of this term. (61-77)

³ In Quebec, the historical colonization of the Amerindian and Inuit peoples by both the British and the European French and the historical British colonization of the *Canadien*, along with the problematic relationship between the Canadian and Québécois governments

and the First Nations today constitute but one component of a complex postcolonial situation. The second component of the complex postcolonial situation is that Quebec does not have one cultural face to present to itself. As Maïr Verthuy and Lucie Lequin argue in their (new) contribution to the second edition of the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, *écrivains migrants* (they use the term "neo-Québécois") have changed the cultural face of Quebec: "Thanks to neo-Québécois writers, the way Quebec is perceived has also undergone transformation. . . .cultures now meet and marry in Québécois literature, and there is emerging a new hybrid mix that, like many hybrids, is stronger than its component parts" (776).

⁴ See among many possibilities, textual analyses by Simon Harel, Claudine Potvin, Anthony Purdy, Christl Verduyn, and myself (forthcoming).

⁵ In Canadian discourse, this term is usually put in quotation marks to signal its strangeness; in Quebec, the term itself is rarely used, but the concept is suggested in the expression "l'écriture migrante."

⁶ Palumbo-Liu does a comparative study of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and a short story by the American Alice Walker. My objections to the inappropriate appropriation of *Obasan* as an Asian-American text are found in my forthcoming article, "Memory, writing and identity/identitaire."

⁷ See my *New World Myth*.

⁸ Robin's exemplary early novel, *La Québécoise*, (1983), provides an initial illustration of the *struggle* to arrive at a postcolonial interplay between memory and identity. In a later non-fictional work, *Le roman mémoriel* (1989), Robin reflects on memory/lies, quoting a great deal from her own scholarly works, while explaining to an obviously non-Québécois and non-Canadian readership the "mouvement d'affirmation nationale au Québec" (111). In *Le roman mémoriel*, Robin describes her novel (*La Québécoise*; English translation: *The Wanderer*) in terms that recall a memory of exile, proposing that "le va-et-vient entre Paris et Montréal met en place l'étrangeté de la culture québécoise et l'impossibilité de mêler les imaginaires et les mémoires" (132). Despite the very great respect I have for Régine Robin's acuity and scholarship, it is my impression that she is unable to fully investigate the questions of memory, identity, and postcolonialism in her intellectual work, as she operates (as she herself acknowledges) from an ideological position innate in those who have been trained to the "Goliath-like" concepts of history and identity. Simon Harel has also noted that Robin assumes a "lieu de fondation" against which to position herself. In her novel, *La Québécoise*, argues Harel, this "stabilité identitaire . . . est bien sûr attribuée aux Québécois" ("La parole orpheline de l'écrivain migrant" 411). I would argue, however, that this homogenous identity so easily assumed by Euro-American powers is elusive and unfounded in the complex postcolonial situations of Quebec.

⁹ For Kokis's novels, see *Negao et Doralice* (1995); *Errances* (1996); *L'Art du maquillage* (1997); and *Sourire blindé* (1998). For a very brief reference to Kokis' importance in contemporary Québécois literature, see Pierre Nepveu, *Intérieurs du Nouveau Monde* 329-30.

¹⁰ The use of painting in *Pavillon des Miroirs* recalls similar parallels found in Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter* (1997).

¹¹ Although this novel is definitely postcolonial in its inquiry into the notions of memory and identity, it is more traditional in other ways. To my surprise, only one of the many reviews I have read of this novel critiques its disparagement and objectification of women. Although this aspect of the novel is outside the range of the present inquiry, I do intend to address this issue in a longer study of *Le Pavillon des miroirs*.

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