

DALHOUSIE

FRENCH STUDIES

Women and Space

Études réunies par
Marie-Claire Barnet et Shirley Jordan

Marie-Claire Barnet and Shirley Jordan: Introduction

Michael Worton sur Nathalie Rheims

Anne Simon sur Marie Darrieussecq

Carol Murphy sur Sylvie Germain

Diana Holmes on Nancy Huston and other writers

Kathryn Jones sur Leïla Sebbar

Lucile Desblache sur Maryline Desbiolles

Gill Rye sur Christine Angot

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Catherine Rodgers sur Paule Constant

Shirley Jordan sur Marie Ndiaye

Marie-Claire Barnet sur Marie Desplechin

M-C. Barnet and S. Jordan Interviewing Marie Darrieussecq

Reviews

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DALHOUSIE FRENCH STUDIES

Women and Space

Marie-Claire Barnet and Shirley Jordan: Introduction	3
Michael Worton: Buildings to grow in: constructions of identity in the novels of Nathalie Rheims	7
Anne Simon: Déterritorialisations de Marie Darrieussecq	17
Carol Murphy: Sylvie Germain, Sculpteur des lieux de mémoire	27
Diana Holmes: No Common Places: Exile as Loss and Gain in the Work of Nancy Huston and Other Writers from Elsewhere	33
Kathryn Jones: Franco-Algerian Sites of Memory: Leïla Sebbar's Journeys of Remembrance	43
Lucile Desblache: Moving Mountains and Waters: Maryline Desbiolles' connection to the non human	53
Gill Rye: Public Places, Intimate Spaces: Christine Angot's Incest Narratives	63
Elizabeth Jones: Home Space, Language and <i>Non-lieux</i> in the 21 st Century: Inscribing Loss, Plurality and Exile in the Work of Régine Robin	75
Catherine Rodgers: Physical, Social and Textual Space in <i>Sucre et secret</i> by Paule Constant	87
Shirley Jordan: Fantastic Spaces in Marie NDiaye	97
Marie-Claire Barnet: État des lieux et de la banlieue : de Batz à Bobigny par Marie Desplechin	109
Marie-Claire Barnet and Shirley Jordan: Interview with Marie Darrieussecq	123
Reviews (see p. 2)	131
Notes on Contributors	145

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Buildings to grow in: constructions of identity in the novels of Nathalie Rheims

Michael Worton

Over the past decade, Nathalie Rheims has established herself as one of the most interesting writers in contemporary France. Her first three texts, *L'Un pour l'autre*, *Lettre d'une amoureuse morte* and *Les fleurs du silence*, are quasi-autobiographical and marked by a preoccupation with death. Thereafter, she writes novels which draw on previous genres and therefore could be considered pastiches: for example, *Lumière invisible à mes yeux* and *L'ombre des Autres* evoke the Gothic novels of such writers as Ann Radcliffe and Edgar Allan Poe; *Le rêve de Balthus* sits in the contemporary genre of quest-novels charting the quest for immortality through cultural artefacts (other celebrated, if less accomplished examples of the genre include Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and even Dan Brown's *The da Vinci Code*); *L'ange de la dernière heure* inscribes itself in the great tradition of mystical writing by women, such as *La sua Vita* by the 16th-century mystic and reformer of the Carmelite Order, St Teresa of Avila, and *La Dévotion au Sacré-Coeur de Jesus*, by the 17th-century nun, St. Marguerite-Marie Alacoque.

Her novels are unusual, speculating on the nature of presence and absence through narratives that are both mysterious and mystical. She is fascinated by the way in which we inhabit the world, by the ways in which the physical is inextricably bound up with the metaphysical, creating a world peopled by ghosts, supernatural apparitions, ectoplasmic emanations, angels and demons, and by the possibilities of belief, be this religious or quasi-scientific. Her own background and beliefs are complex

Je suis juive de père et de mère. Je suis juive comme je respire. Vers 10-11 ans, j'ai eu une demande mystique. Et je me suis rendu compte qu'on ne m'avait jamais parlé de religion à la maison. J'ai demandé à ma mère ce qu'était Dieu. Elle m'a rétorqué : « *Je ne sais pas* ». Je me suis alors tournée vers ma « nanny » qui était catholique et pratiquante. Son commentaire fut : « *Pour toi et moi ce n'est pas la même chose* ». Après avoir sollicité l'autorisation de mes parents, elle a répondu à mes questions. Puis je l'ai accompagnée à la messe le dimanche. Donc, aujourd'hui, je suis juive mais je crois au Dieu des catholiques. C'est chez lui que j'ai trouvé les réponses aux questions que je me posais.¹

All of Rheims's novels are quest novels, as she seeks through her narratives answers to metaphysical questions, including, crucially, the question of how identity and belonging are established and maintained. In her novels, the main protagonists are women and what links these very different narratives is how a sense of their identity is established through the places and spaces in which her women live and move. This article thus aims to explore some of her novels in the light of views on how women inhabit space from philosophers and feminist thinkers. I have long been interested in the ethical implications of some of Rheims's work and in the implications for the reader of her choice of

¹ Interview with Nathalie Rheims in *Paris Match* 26 September 2002, published on the Nathalie Rheims website, <http://www.nathalierheims.com/rub/presse/presse2.php?art=46>, last accessed September 2005. This webpage is no longer accessible, but see also similar comments by Nathalie Rheims in her interview with Paul Wermus, <http://www.nathalierheims.com/IMG/pdf/tribune.pdf> and in "La tentation du voile", an interview with Frédéric Barrault, <http://www.nathalierheims.com/IMG/pdf/spectacle.pdf>, both last accessed 14 September 2008.

discourse in which are fused mysticism, esoterism and pastiche,² but I have also become increasingly fascinated by her explorations of the public and private worlds that women inhabit. Her novels offer creatively idiosyncratic interventions into the debates around the often overly narrow dichotomy of public space vs private space and they all, in different ways, interrogate the notions of home and of fixity of being and identity. Furthermore, her novels audaciously call for a response that is “not of its time”: as readers, we are summoned to think in new ways or, perhaps more accurately, in ways which are inhabited, haunted, by voices that speak (of) the past. For this reason, I have found the work of Heidegger particularly illuminating as a prism through which to consider her work, since he couches his philosophical meditations on being and time and on how humankind can poetically dwell in the world in a language which is sourced deep in the past, a difficult language of metaphysics which nonetheless has the magic - and the wonder - of litany, of song. My exploration here is therefore underpinned by Heidegger’s thoughts in his 1954 essay, “Building Dwelling Thinking”, and will also in a sense follow the trajectory proposed by the title of one of his most important collections of essays: *Holzwege* (1950; translated into French as *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part*), i.e. paths (fire-breaks) in a forest which lead nowhere but which are essential to the health of the forest and also provide the pleasure of exploring the forest for itself rather than as something simply to walk through.

L'ange de la dernière heure is the story of a happy, healthy young woman at the end of the twentieth century who chooses to enter an enclosed religious order, the Communauté des Moniales Victimes du Saint Sacrifice.³ A novel about the struggle against evil and the role of religious vocations, it ends with the nun’s willed “dying to the world” in order to combat the Devil in (metaphorical) unarmed combat and to save the world through prayer, although this entails a loss of everything outside the convent. In this mystical tale, we come to understand that she is indeed the ultimate chosen sacrificial Victim; she gives herself totally to God, understanding that she must give herself up to loving God and to comforting him for the chaos in the world. Finally, when she suspects that Satan is in the convent, she tries to discover whether he is lurking in one of her sisters or in one of the biblical texts, and finally realises that she has been called to the monastic life precisely in order to ensure that she and her sister nuns will keep the devil imprisoned within the walls of the convent.

Lumière invisible à mes yeux is a Poe-esque ghost story, a “metaphysical thriller”, which narrates the story of a young woman who inherits a house from someone of whom she had never heard. She takes the train to the location given to her by the lawyer. When she mounts the train, there is nobody else on board, but when she leaves her compartment and returns a few minutes later, suddenly there is a man reading a book there – although he does not acknowledge her presence. She arrives at her destination, a village which, she discovers, is called Lumière. She is continually confronted by beings who silently appear and disappear, and when she enters her newly acquired house, she finds it full of daguerreotypes which are portraits of dead people. However, she comes to realise that these portraits do not so much represent the dead as serve as sarcophagi for them. For the ghostly house owner who has chosen her to be the “guardian of the abyss” and who now appears to her briefly, the burning question is why the living do not allow the dead to die in peace and return to the “abyss” of nothingness and oblivion. He has collected the

2 See Michael Worton, “Images of the dead: an exploration of the hidden world of Nathalie Rheims’s *Lumière invisible à mes yeux*”, *Nottingham French Studies* 45, 3 (Autumn 2006), 119-135.

3 Rheims was inspired by reading an article in *National Geographic* on the Religieuses Victimes du Sacré-Coeur de Jésus, which is the most enclosed order of nuns in France. After she had started writing, she discovered that the daughter of one of her friends had decided to enter this convent. She then spoke with both the family of the young woman and with the Mother Superior of the community in order to enrich her understanding of the life of enclosed orders.

portraits in order to protect them from prying, voyeuristic eyes, but she finally decides to pack all the portraits into a trunk and takes them to the train station to await a train that will take them back to daylight, in other words taking them from their tomb in the village of Lumière (and taking herself from the penumbra of ghostliness) back to daylight and the openness of the gaze of others (“qui nous ramènerait vers la lumière”; 62).

L'ombre des Autres is a novel about spiritualism set in Paris and England in 1886. “Les Autres” are the dead who wish to maintain a relationship with the living. The main character Tess, is a student at the Salpêtrière under Professor Charcot, and the novel engages *inter alia* with the 19th-century debates about the relationship between science and spiritualism, introducing into her fiction other historical figures such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Léon Denis, the author of *Jeanne d’Arc médium* (translated by Conan Doyle), and Edouard Drumont, the anti-semitic author of *La France juive*. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Tess’s uncle Émile, with whom she was in love, had been brought back to life by the spiritualists, following the experiments that he had done on bringing birds back to life (in its turn, this experimental work had been based on St Francis’s dialogues with the birds). A constant concept of the novel is the relationship between the neurological work of Charcot and that of the spiritualists, but woven through this tension is an abiding concern with place and time, as Tess seeks understanding and belongs alternately in France and England.

Martin Heidegger argues forcefully in “Building Dwelling Thinking” that, through building, man creates a place for himself in the world, an identity, a history. For him, building is essential for the creation of subjectivity and is, indeed, fundamental to humanness: “To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell” (147); “Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth” (148). His philosophical discourse is often highly poetic, even mystical, tying the presence of his thinking to the tradition of thinking about the human and the divine that has its origin in the pre-Socratic philosophers: “Being ‘on the earth’ already means ‘beneath the skies’. Both of these also mean ‘remaining before the divinities’ and include ‘belonging to men’s being with one another’. By a primal oneness the four – earth and sky, divinities and mortals – belong together in one” (149); “When we speak of man and space, it sounds as if man stood on one side, space on the other. Yet space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience. [...] when I say ‘a man’, and in saying this word think of a being who exists in a human manner – that is, who dwells - then by the name ‘man’ I already name the stay within the fourfold among things” (156).

Heidegger identifies the two fundamental aspects of building and dwelling as construction and preservation. It is important to note that he highlights this duality, since otherwise his views can be seen as narrowly patriarchal for his emphasis on building.

The house as closure and restriction

I should like here briefly to rehearse some of the positions advanced by first- and second-wave feminists, as these continue to inform many of the contemporary debates about the private/public divide and women’s place. Culturally, women are associated with the home, defining it but, crucially, not owning it. They are also often defined by their relationship to the home and its upkeep, and to the raising of children. Furthermore, in this (prevalent) cultural construct, the home frequently represents the desire for a stable, unitary identity. However, these identifications are not liberating for women; on the contrary, they serve to oppress them and contain them in a space that can become a prison. The woman *is* the home, she *is* place and location, often without ever having a

Lumière

1 Sacré-
ing, she
with both
rich her

room of her own, to use Virginia Woolf's political concept; more profoundly, she never has (a) dwelling of her own in the Heideggerian sense of the term.⁴

As Simone de Beauvoir has argued, domestic work is a form of exploitation and oppression. Beauvoir emphasises how household tasks oblige women to work, but without *producing* anything. They merely perpetuate the present situation and their very situation imprisons them in immanence. Men, on the other hand, live/are thereby permitted/freed to live in movement, in progress. In other words, man's existence is a transcendence, in that he can express and live out his subjectivity (227-30). As Irigaray argues: "Elle devrait être le lieu sans l'habiter. Par elle, le lieu serait à la disposition de l'homme sans qu'elle en dispose" (56).

The man constructs the family home, and the woman's task then consists of reflecting the man's identity back to him, of maintaining and strengthening the development of his subjectivity at the expense of her own. However, in her identification of housework only with immanence, Beauvoir is (or chooses here to be) blind to the work of maintenance and preservation that is richly creative and socially cohesive, and that Heidegger sees as one of the two fundamental modes of dwelling.

I should make it clear at this point that I question the attacks on the idea of home and house as totalizing, imperialistic, patriarchal,⁵ since the home is surely (also) the site of the preservation of the family, a place of security, privacy and, potentially, of individuation, and a real and symbolic place of safety. Nonetheless, I recognize that as a locus of repetitive work/drudgery and the site of traditional, patriarchally determined gender roles, the home can indeed be a prison-house for women.

Irigaray also stresses that women's domestic work serves to maintain the edifice of masculinity, which though apparently solid and "massive", is extremely fragile:

Historiquement, le féminin a servi à la constitution de l'amour de soi de l'homme. Non que cet amour ait été ni soit simple à établir. Loin de là. Non qu'il allât ou aille de soi. Il y allait – je l'ai déjà dit – de la nostalgie, de la foi et de l'espérance, du retour au passé, du suspens à l'au-delà, au transcendant inaccessible, du recours à l'existence de l'âme, au travail, à la création de l'œuvre et, d'abord, de cette œuvre, la famille : maison, femme et enfants, relais de soi. Il fallait beaucoup de choses pour advenir à un amour de soi toujours menacé, toujours en péril, toujours instable, souvent blessé ou ridiculement boursoufflé : le manque d'assurance se retournant en surassurance apparente, gonflage social ou intellectuel, qui ne trompe personne et surtout pas les femmes. (65-6).

In a characteristically provocative paragraph, Irigaray focuses her engagement with Heidegger on the masculinist nature of his conception of dwelling, positing woman as one of the houses man constructs (and on a par with both his physical dwelling-places and his conceptual dwelling places such as theory and language: "*Habiter est le trait*

4 In this respect, see Irigaray's statement that when struggling to liberate herself from the world constructed by men, she realised that she needed not simply "a room of one's own", as Virginia Woolf proposed, but "une 'âme à moi'", a true sense of interiority (2001, 46). She applies this argument more explicitly elsewhere in her work when challenging patriarchal notions of architecture and interior design; see, for example, Andrea Wheeler, "About being-two in an architectural perspective: interview with Luce Irigaray", *Journal of Romance Studies* 4.2 (Summer 2004), 91-107 and Luce Irigaray and Andrea Wheeler, "Being-Two in Architectural Perspective. Conversation", in Luce Irigaray, *Conversations* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 53-72.

5 See Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics : What's Home Got to Do with It?" in Teresa de Lauretis (ed.), *Feminist Studies/Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 191-212; Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects : Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," *Feminist Studies* 19, 1 (Spring 1990), 115-50; Bonnie Honig, "Difference, Dilemmas and the Politics of Home.," *Social Research* 61, 3 (Fall 1994), 563-97.

fondamental de l'être de l'homme. Même si ce trait demeure inconscient, inaccompli, notamment dans sa dimension éthique, l'homme ne cesse de se chercher, se construire, se créer des maisons partout : des grottes, des huttes, des femmes, des villes, du langage, des concepts, de la théorie, etc' (133).

In other words, the home can be the locus of oppression and also of alienation from the self and the potential for transcendence. In *Lumière*, the young woman has been chosen to succeed the portrait-keeper in *his* mission: she is to take on a protecting and nurturing role, continuing *his* work – and she must therefore condemn herself voluntarily to imprisonment in the mausoleum which houses and protects the portraits. Her delivery of the portraits to the light is therefore equally a liberation of herself – by herself – from the tyranny of paternalism, enclosure and subservience.

As Iris Marion Young argues in her important essay on “House and Home”, “Man puts woman in her place, so that he can return to the original maternal home. Nostalgia is this recurrent desire for return, which is unsatisfiable, because the loss is separation, birth, mortality, itself” (258). Whilst the power of such nostalgia is undeniable in the social order, the question of the temporality of responsibility in relation to identity formation has become an important issue, with thinkers such as Irigaray contending in much of her work that the very fact that woman is defined and situated as protective and nurturing is what enables man to build for dwelling. In other words, woman must therefore precede – and be responsible for making possible – building and therefore, ultimately, male subjectivity.

In the context of nurturing, it is all too often forgotten that for Heidegger, building is also an act of protective gathering, of bringing together disparate objects and surroundings which have no centre or relationship until they are gathered round the building. In this, his thinking is not very different from that of feminist theorists such as Iris Marion Young who insist on the value of preserving, maintaining, holding together (a family/home/friendships/etc), whilst also recognising that preservation is not always transformational and can be deeply conservative. However, Young creatively distinguishes between preservation and construction in terms of their place in time: “The temporality of preservation is distinct from that of construction. As a founding construction, making is a rupture in the continuity of history. But recurrence is the temporality of preservation. [...] Preservation entails remembrance, which is different from nostalgia. [...] Remembrance is the affirmation of what brought us here” (Young, 274-5).

Home-making is, of course, much more than constructing walls and a roof: it is about furnishing it and personalizing it with objects which have or acquire meaning. And here the role of the woman, and especially of the mother, is crucial, as I shall discuss further when considering Gaston Bachelard's approach to dwelling, where as the phantasy figure who creates the nurturing space that her husband and children will cherish as their primal and symbolically eternal home.

However, this home-making role can be turned against the woman, when she is abandoned by husband and/or children. In *L'ange*, the mother is a single parent who had slept only once with the father-to-be of the young novice who was then killed in Indochina. When her daughter enters the convent and eventually prepares to take her final vows, she gradually realizes that she is totally alone and that all of her constructing and nurturing work has had no purpose – or at least has no purpose now, since her daughter will never return. In other words, she has constructed her life and home for an other (her daughter), and so she progressively moves from using objects associated with her daughter as means of conjuring her back into presence with her to enclosing herself with

6 See, for instance, D. J. Lenep. “The Hotel Room” in Joseph J. Kockelmann (ed.), *Phenomenological Psychology: The Dutch School* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 209-15.

them, and finally to divesting herself of all objects, retreating into the solitude and bareness of depression: "Elle rangeait inlassablement ses vêtements d'écolière, ses jouets, les plaçait, les déplaçait. S'en débarrasser et les garder en même temps" (70); "Elle restait seule avec ses objets, ses souvenirs, enfermée, sortant parfois mais évitant de parler à quiconque. [...] Elle avait enlevé les miroirs et gardait ses volets clos" (130); "Tout avait disparu dans la maison, objets, images, souvenirs. Elle restait là, assise ou allongée, entre le lit et sa chaise, ne voulant plus rien voir, rien entendre" (156).

The house as refuge, security

Gaston Bachelard analysed the nature and the importance of dwelling, from a quasi-psychoanalytical perspective: "L'acte d'*habiter* se couvre de valeurs inconscientes, des valeurs inconscientes que l'inconscient n'oublie pas. On peut marcotter l'inconscient, on ne le déracine pas." (Bachelard, *Terre* 119). Bachelard reminds us that traditional psychoanalysis has characterised the return to one's native country or place of birth as "un *retour à la mère*". (121) However, for him, this is an over-simple explanation, one which does not adequately recognize that the (undoubtedly powerful) archetype of the mother does not obliterate or veil the archetype of the home-house. According to him, (poetic) thinking about the house develops what he calls "une philosophie du repos" (122). For him, the birth-place, la *maison natale* is always-already lost: "Cette maison, elle est lointaine, est perdue, nous ne l'habitons plus, nous sommes, hélas!, sûrs de ne plus jamais l'habiter. Elle est alors plus qu'un souvenir. Elle est notre maison de rêves, notre maison onirique" (95-6). This originary house is essentially "une image qui, dans le souvenir et les rêves, devient une force de protection" (119). Nonetheless, this image of maternal protectiveness, the maternal home, is in very real terms "un refuge, une retraite, un centre" (102). And one could also argue that woman as mother represents the home, is the focus and the locus of nostalgia and longing for lost oneness.

Later, in *La poétique de l'espace* (1957), Bachelard returns to the idea of the house as a refuge and as our first universe, stressing that "la maison protège le rêveur, la maison nous permet de rêver en paix" (26). The house where one was born and, *a fortiori*, one's childhood bedroom, are places where one dreams and lives out one's dreams alone; they are places where one feels secure and therefore empowered to dream and dare to hope (*Terre* 103).

Bedrooms are particularly important in Rheims's work as places where growth and transformation, both internal and external and, indeed, supernatural, can take place. In *L'ange*, the young woman chooses from an early age to strip out all unnecessary objects and to cover the mirror in her bedroom. Unlike her mother's later depressive decision to remove all traces of warmth, humanity and individuality, this is a voluntary, driven choice to strip bare: "J'avais toujours aimé les endroits dépouillés, vides" (165). From childhood, she has been preparing for the "cellule glacée" in the convent, where she will live out her vocation and find union with God.

The young woman is no dysfunctional solitary or marginal figure. While acutely aware that she is somehow different from her peers and the other villagers, she is sociable and loves to spend time with her friends. On one occasion, she goes to the annual fair with her boy friend and the two of them visit the "Gallery of Monsters", where they see such "attractions" as the Bearded Lady, the Siamese Twins, the Living Mermaid, the Dog-man, etc. He asks her which of them she would choose to be if she had to be one. She hesitates to answer because she feels close to all of them and distant from those who are gawking at them. Faced with her silence, he tells her that she is indeed a strange creature, but that she is strange in her androgynous nature, being in fact an angel – and then he kisses her. Her response is to flee him and the throng of villagers who seem to close in on her as she rushes home: "Haletante, j'arrivai devant ma porte, entrai,

m'enfermai à double tour, me précipitai dans ma chambre. J'éteignis la lumière, fermai les volets et, à genoux, priai pour retrouver mon calme" (115).

Her bedroom is indeed her most secure and safe place, the place where she can wholly be herself. This bedroom is not, however, filled with dolls, toys and pictures; it is the precursor of her monastic cell and the place where she can think - and disappear from the world in preparation for her future, much more profound disappearance from the world of the everyday.

In *L'ombre des Autres*, the manor house of Tess's beloved uncle is a nurturing house, which "abritait la famille d'Émile depuis trois siècles" (16). She longs to see and inhabit again her childhood bedroom, which has remained intact, unchanged, with all her favourite childhood objects still there:

Tout était là, intact, immuable, c'était le lieu de son enfance, celui de l'insouciance, le nid des oiseaux, la caverne des souvenirs. Le même papier rose, aujourd'hui délavé, recouvrait les murs. Le lit-cage aux barreaux d'acier surmontés de boules argentées était toujours là.

Même son vieil ours l'avait attendue dans le fauteuil. [...] Elle sourit dans le miroir. Elle avait encore son air d'enfant sage.' (25).

Whenever strange events perplex and frighten her she seeks to return to the apparent (and desired) safety of her bedroom several times. When her uncle Émile has finally been resurrected by the spiritualists but has chosen to return to his dead wife rather than remain with Tess, and when she has pleaded in vain to be enabled to cross to the other world to rejoin him, she takes final refuge in her bedroom, calling out repeatedly to Emile but receiving no response. She opens her eyes to find Lulu, her faithful minah bird and medium's 'familiar', returned from the dead and sitting on the rails of her bed come to tell her that it is going to the other world as her messenger. The novel ends: "Tess ouvrit grande la fenêtre. Lulu s'envola. Elle le vit disparaître derrière l'horizon" (295).

Tess found security and reassurance in the closure of the manor and especially of her bedroom, but it is only by opening the window onto the world of the unknown that she can liberate herself from childhood fantasies and return to her scientific work and finally establish an identity that she has chosen for herself as an adult.

In *L'ange*, the young woman always felt different, estranged from the other people in the village. As we have seen, she would return to her bedroom as the place where she could be secure. However, she has another favourite place: the gypsy cemetery on the hill above the village, to which she goes when she wanted to think and be calm - and also find signs about her future: "Marchant au milieu des mausolées de verre aux noms féériques, elle venait là calmer son trouble. Leur transparence éclatante donnait aux reliques mortuaires une esthétique de fête foraine. Elle laissait sa fièvre s'exténuer dans les méandres du cimetière gitan" (22). Often uncertain about her identity, she identifies with the gypsies, feeling herself to be "venue d'une errance qui ne retrouverait ses racines qu'au terme du voyage, en ce lieu funéraire [le cimetière gitan]" (143-4). The openness of the gypsy cemetery is contrasted with the closure of her bedroom and later of the cloister. However, these apparently opposed places are linked: a week before taking her final vows, she has a dream in which she understands that she was never really alone and that she has always been accompanied by "une âme soeur", who was born (and died) on the same day as she was born, and whose simple tomb is in the gypsy cemetery (160). As she chooses to marry Jesus as a nun and to prepare herself for her essential role as Victim, she realizes that physical, metaphysical and metaphorical openness and closure are linked one to the other and that events prophesy future events whilst also being bound back to past events and places.

During her novitiate, life in her village goes from bad to worse, as crops fail, the cattle fall ill and die, there are mysterious deaths and gossip is rife, as the terrified

villagers seek scapegoats for these tragedies. First of all, they decide to cancel the annual fair brought by the gypsies. Then, armed with sickles and pitchforks like a crazed army out of a Bosch painting, they drive the innocent gypsies out of the village and the region. Furthermore, they run to the gypsy cemetery, deface tombs and exhume a small coffin (that of the 'âme soeur) and throw it into the river. The age-old enmity between the sedentary and the nomad is resuscitated and the nomads driven away because they are different, alien – and thus always to blame. It is therefore clear that the village is in no way a place of security and focus of justified nostalgia; for itself and as a microcosm of the world, it too needs an “angel” to save it.

The young woman begins her life between worlds – between the small world of her home and village and the world of God to which she is called. The former seems to represent security, stability and love, whereas the latter is strange – and wholly incomprehensible to her mother and most of her friends. She also lives and moves in two spaces: the open and the closed, ultimately choosing the closure of the convent, paradoxically in order fully to live openness to the infinity that is God. She needs the physical and symbolic constraints of the convent in order to combat the Devil and save the world – and thereby to bring to her village and to the world safety, freedom from fear and a sense of sure identity.

Conclusion

Rheims's idiolect, the poetico-mystical specificity of her discourse, calls for a reading that enters into texts which speak strangely, yet also with the familiarity of a language and concepts that have deep, if somewhat buried cultural resonance. Rheims's novels are in no way naively emotional outpourings of nostalgia or piety. Rather, they seek to grapple with issues of identify, belonging, life and death in ways that go beyond the traditional binary oppositions.

Iris Marion Young's work, especially her analysis of Heidegger, seems to me important and illuminating, in the way that she demonstrates how preservation entails remembrance rather than nostalgia. I would introduce another term which is at the core of the Christian faith towards whose mysteries Natalie Rheims was so drawn from her early childhood: commemoration. The ultimate commemoration is, of course, the Eucharist, wherein the most humble of acts (the eating of bread and the drinking of wine) are transformed into the great symbolic act of re-enacting the sacrifice of Jesus. What makes this commemoration so powerful is precisely the very ordinary status and quality of the acts, which through their endless repetition, become the foundation of the Christian faith. The commemoration also harks back to an ancient time when hospitality was shown by the act of breaking bread together, of sharing food and wine. Young's engagement with Heidegger recognizes the masculinist dimension of his privileging of construction and highlights preservation, the other crucial element of dwelling for him. However, she herself does more than simply invert a binary opposition: by introducing her own allusive and elusive use of the Christian term “remembrance”, she shifts the discourse on building and/as dwelling into new mystico-philosophical domains.

If there is a single drive that links all of Rheims's protagonists, it is their desire to save, be it to save a beloved uncle as in *L'ombre des Autres*, one's own mortal life through the collection of paintings (in *Le Rêve de Balthus*), a series of portraits (in *Lumière*), or, in her most audacious depiction of saving, the nun's struggle with the devil in *L'Ange* to help God to save the world. These supra-human ambitions are enacted in struggles which occur both in the protagonists' minds and in their engagement with others within the closed spaces of their bedrooms and homes and in the open spaces that they choose to frequent in search of calm or of understanding. In this way, the blurring of the open vs closed opposition brings about a dissolution of the private vs public opposition and ultimately, indeed, of the immanence vs transgression opposition that has

haunted much modern thinking. To read Rheims through Heidegger is to recognise the increasing importance of dwelling in a world wracked by uncertainty and by emotional and physical homelessness; it is also to recognise that preservation as dwelling may well be more important than building as dwelling.

Finally, in its most radical and audacious act in the modern world which Heidegger calls our “age of desolation”, i.e. in its celebration of the urge to save and preserve, Rheims’s work brings us to a focus on a sometimes overlooked element of Heidegger’s essay on “Building Dwelling Thinking”: his concept of saving/sparing:

To free really means to spare. The sparing itself consists not only in the fact that we do not harm someone whom we spare. Real sparing is something *positive* and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own nature, when we return it specifically to its being, when we “free” it in the real sense of the world into a preserve of peace. To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. The fundamental nature of dwelling is the sparing and preserving. It pervades dwelling in its whole range (149)

Rheims’s female protagonists operate what I would define as a Heideggerian mode of saving and sparing. In this, they are not alien figures acting in the margins of society and modern life. Rather, they achieve dwelling and bring others to the peace “within the free” that safeguards the being of things.

Nathalie Rheims is indeed a strange and disconcerting writer. Her novels present women who inhabit culturally recognisable personal spaces, which are nonetheless latently worlds of difference. Her discourse does the same, signifying simultaneously through reference and through allusion and evocation to cultural and discursive worlds that resonate with both familiarity and alien otherness. The transformations and the transgressions in and of her work are all directed to healing, to saving, to making dwelling possible. Through entering her house of language, we, like her characters, may find that we are no longer quite who we thought we were – but that is probably a good thing.

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