

Sens public

Sens
[public]

The repentance of a bastard A study of Violette Leduc

Anaïs Frantz

2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064271ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064271ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Département des littératures de langue française

ISSN

2104-3272 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Frantz, A. (2009). The repentance of a bastard: A study of Violette Leduc. *Sens public*. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064271ar>

Article abstract

Born spuriously from the union between the son of a well-to-do family and a chambermaid, Violette Leduc finds the means of exerting another kind of authority through autobiographical writing. It's the incredible authority of a bastard whose poetic strategy takes the form of repentance – the French word “repentir” can both mean “a feeling of guilt” and “the visible modification applied to a painting”. What with its on-the-spot alterations, the repentance of “La Bâtarde” gives the reader a sense of the immense vitality of an existence presenting itself as being at once in-the-wrong, awkward, and adulterated. The interweaving layers of such a text magnify its complexity.

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) Sens-Public, 2009



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>



Revue électronique internationale
International Web Journal
www.sens-public.org

The repentance of a bastard

A study of Violette Leduc

ANAÏS FRANTZ

Abstract: Born spuriously from the union between the son of a well-to-do family and a chambermaid, Violette Leduc finds the means of exerting another kind of authority through autobiographical writing. It's the incredible authority of a bastard whose poetic strategy takes the form of repentance – the French word "repentir" can both mean "a feeling of guilt" and "the visible modification applied to a painting". What with its on-the-spot alterations, the repentance of "*La Bâtarde*" gives the reader a sense of the immense vitality of an existence presenting itself as being at once in-the-wrong, awkward, and adulterated. The interweaving layers of such a text magnify its complexity.

Keywords: autobiographical awkwardness; genders ; poetic skill ; literary authority ; biographical illegitimacy

Résumé: Née d'une union non reconnue entre un fils de bonne famille et une femme de chambre, Violette Leduc trouve dans l'écriture autobiographique le moyen d'exercer un autre genre d'autorité. C'est l'incroyable autorité d'une bâtarde dont la stratégie poétique prend la forme du repentir, au double sens du sentiment de culpabilité et de la correction apportée à un tableau. Expression d'un re-trait sur le vif, les repentirs de *La Bâtarde* donnent à lire la vitalité surprenante d'une existence fautive, maladroite, sous rature, dont la tissure du texte magnifie la complexité.

Mots-clés: maladresse autobiographique ; genres ; adresse poétique ; autorité littéraire ; bâtardise biographique

The repentance of a bastard¹

Anaïs Frantz

"Please forgive my crossings out"
(The start of a letter to Jacques Guérin, 2 Jan 1954)²

"The smudge is a tear"
(The end of a letter to Simone de Beauvoir, 10 June 1965)

"A large tear falls on to the sacred page that I found here
instead of you"
(Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde*)³

The focus of this study will align itself with a word that Mireille Calle-Gruber gave us to consider this year during a seminar on "poetic genres"⁴: that word is "awkwardness". In particular I'm writing this study after reading and studying "Confession d'un maladroit" ("Confession of an awkward person") by Friedrich Schlegel in October.

Questioning genders from the angle of awkwardness means straightaway emphasising the *incalculable* character of literary work, and *moving the authority of discourse* as concerns the subject performing the utterance. Sarah Anaïs told us last year of the *failure* in producing gender, and we analysed the performativity of gender since the theory of Judith Butler⁵. With Schlegel's work we contemplated the search for an *unprecedented relationship* that introduces "humanity" through the double meaning of the French word "relation" (connection and relationship): indeed, Schlegel inextricably links romantic relationship and poetic creation.

The work of Violette Leduc is both similar to and separate from Schlegel's "Confession d'un maladroit". In this case we would have to speak about the "Confessions of a bastard", and it is

¹ Original french version available on line:

<http://www.sens-public.org/spip.php?article639>

² *Violette Leduc: Correspondance, 1945-1972*, Les Cahiers de la N.R.F., Gallimard, 500 p. Texts chosen, annotated and prefaced by Carlo Jansiti. Avril 2007. Translator's version.

³ Friedrich Schlegel, "Fantaisie en style dithyrambique sur la plus belle situation", *Lucinde* (1799), trans. J.J. Anstett, Aubier Flammarion, 1971, p.61.

⁴ Seminar given by Mireille Calle-Gruber, Centre de Recherches en Études Féminines et de Genre (CREF/G). Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris 3.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. (Feminism and the Subversion of Identity)*, 1999), Routledge, 1990.

likely that the *maladroit* and *la bâtarde* would find many commonalities. Would this not just be the *performativity of confession*: where the reader understands the confessions of the *maladroit* and *la bâtarde* to be a fault *in the writing*? Indeed, how would a *maladroit* convey the defect that distinguishes him if it weren't *through awkwardness* and plain *awkwardly*? Furthermore, how could *la bâtarde* describe her state without the very form of the confession testifying to this effect?

Awkwardness, as we said before, refers to the question of the *relationship with the other*, of the difficulty of skill, and of the irreducibility of the differences that adulterate every relationship, be it sexual, poetic or otherwise. In this way, under the pretence of confessing personal weakness, the "Confession d'un maladroit" reveals the *condition of the subject in the world*. Moreover, it is the confession of *la bâtarde* that, beyond a personal story, intimately captures the connection between the subject and the uncertain "authority" of the discourse. I'm referring to the studies of Émile Benveniste here, who in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*⁶ shows the *game of subject* in discourse. In the chapter entitled, "Subjectivity in language", Benveniste highlights the *irreducible presence of language* in its embodiment of the relationship with oneself; he uncovers the guise of authority in discourse. *La Bâtarde*, Leduc's self-expression, thus becomes emblematic of the *condition of the subject in discourse*.

The writing of confession *assumes responsibility* for the defect it describes. The writing maintains an ambiguous discourse on the subject in question. On the one hand, it deflects the defects onto the text: it's the *work of a form* that makes you aware of the fault in question. But on the other hand, the writing of the confession relates the defect to *the subject* who is unburdening herself of it: the form of the text accounts for a *transformation*. It is the writing of the confession that thus displays the *traces of metamorphosis* instead of the utterance. Far from condemning the subject who has bared all, the text reveals a *new syzygy*.

*

One consequence of Schlegel's "Confession d'un maladroit" is, and we've already seen this, a "moral person" made "likeable" through the awkwardness of his utterance, just as he becomes malleable and open to new relationships. *La bâtarde* deals with the matter of morals less directly than the matter of *legitimacy*. A bastard child is one born from a union that is not recognised by the law. In Christian tradition, into which Violette Leduc was born, a union that was not recognised by the church was immediately declared immoral, and the bastard child was born "by nature" into immorality. In early 20th Century France the girl/mother wouldn't have had any rights. These are the circumstances into which Violette Leduc was born into. Born in 1907 in Arras from an illegitimate union between the son of an upper middle class family from

⁶ Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Problems in General Linguistics), Gallimard, 1966.

Valenciennes and a chambermaid, Violette Leduc grew up in the shame of her circumstances. Her childhood years were split between Arras and Valenciennes; she was brought up by her mother, grandmother and godmother.

Although the confession of a *maladroit* betrays the subject that it actually improves upon with an unprecedented syzygy through the awkwardness of its form, the confessions of a *bâtarde* immediately manage to distort the “autobiographic pact” and to imply *another kind of authority*. Tension is generated in Leduc’s work through the *incredible authority* of a bastard. In effect, the bastardisation of the voice that produces the utterances prevents the very possibility of a confession verging-on-discourse from coming back to illegitimate possession of the floor and from revealing the *fault* (the absence of legitimacy at the origin of the discourse). It is not possession of the floor that the text shows us, but a *repossession of speech* following a ban.

This is why I’m going to discuss not the confessions of a *bâtarde* but the *repentance of a bâtarde* in the writing of Violette Leduc. In its etymology just as in the action that it conveys, the French word “repentir” presupposes *a fault*; it speaks of repossession, it implies a retreat. For me, it embodies the tension present in Leduc’s discourse, where the voice producing an utterance discredits the authority of the discourse that Leduc produces. She also *builds upon* an improbable, unbelievable and other authority. I will analyse the effects of this in the account of Leduc’s journey to the act of writing that the author sets out at the end of the first part of the autobiographical trilogy, *La bâtarde*.

In 1946, Leduc’s first narrative was published with Gallimard in the “Espoir” collection directed by Camus. From then on, the autobiographical vein in Leduc’s work of was obvious. But it wasn’t until 1964 that she publically assumed her autobiographical stance in publishing *La Bâtarde*, again with Gallimard, that was prefaced by Simone de Beauvoir. Camus and de Beauvoir are not the only “authority figures” to have nurtured the budding writer Violette Leduc. She would probably have never become a writer if it weren’t for the encouragement of writer Maurice Sachs that she received in 1942 when she went with him to Normandy and lived off profits from black market deals.

I will come back to this matter but I would first like to retrace the steps of the existence of *la bâtarde*⁷ and present an outline of her writing.

*

So Violette Leduc spent her childhood between Arras and Valenciennes. Her mother sent her to boarding school at the age of five. With the death of her grandmother in 1916, the separation from her mother had a profound effect on the little girl. Accounts of these childhood wounds are

⁷On the life of Violette Leduc, see Carlo Jansiti, *Violette Leduc, biographie*, Grasset, 1999.

found in *L'Asphyxie*⁸. In 1924, Violette Leduc met Isabelle at the high school where she was boarding and she experienced her first romantic encounter. The story of this passion gave rise to a text published in 1966 under the title *Thérèse et Isabelle*⁹, which forms the censored part of Leduc's third novel, *Ravages*¹⁰. The clean version of *Ravages* was published by Gallimard in 1955.

In 1925, Violette Leduc began an affair with a female supervisor at the college where she was studying. The two young women were sent away from the institution because of the scandal. They settled close to Paris and lived together for several years. Leduc met a wedding photographer in Paris and she married him in 1939. They divorced a few years later. In this time, she worked for a publishing company called éditions Plon and was seriously ill for several years; she then went to work for Synops to write scripts. Thanks to the recommendation of Maurice Sachs, who she met at Synops, she began to write news for the *Pour Elle* review (For Her) and to carry out fashion reports.

Maurice Sachs was the first of Leduc's three *impossible loves*: there was him, Simone de Beauvoir and a gay man called Jacques Guérin, who she met through Jean Genet. In return, these three characters played an extremely important role in the creation and publication of Leduc's work. Maurice Sachs gave her the impetus to begin the act of writing; Simone de Beauvoir re-read and corrected her writing, assisted and encouraged her along the way, and enabled her to publish her work. She prefaced *La Bâtarde*¹¹ and thus greatly helped the writer gain recognition in the mid-60s. It was her again who published the third part of Violette Leduc's autobiography after her death in 1973. As for book-lover Jacques Guérin, he paid for *L'Affamée*¹² and *Ravages* to be first published.

Before Leduc found success with the publication of *La Bâtarde* in 1964, she had by no means discovered her authority as a writer. This work, as well as the author's letters published in 2007 by Carlo Jansiti¹, testifies of the doubt and suffering that the author endured after the successive commercial failures of her publications. After the publication of the clean version of *Ravages* in the 1950s, and when *L'Asphyxie* and *L'Affamée* were rubbished, Leduc became really depressed; she sunk into paranoia and tried sleep-cure. After her convalescence Simone de Beauvoir advised her to begin writing her autobiography.

*

⁸ Violette Leduc, *L'Asphyxie*, Gallimard, 1946. (trans. D. Coltman, *In the Prison of Her Skin*, Random House)

⁹ Hors série Littérature, 1966. Publication intégrale par Carlo Jansiti chez Gallimard, 2000.

¹⁰ Violette Leduc, *Ravages*, Gallimard, 1955. (trans. D. Coltman, *Ravages*, Random House)

¹¹ Violette Leduc, *La Bâtarde*, Gallimard, 1964. (trans. D. Coltman, D. Levy, *The Bastard*, Dalkey Archive Press, 2003)

¹² Violette Leduc, *L'Affamée*, Gallimard, 1948. (*Starved*)

When at the end of *La Bâtarde* (at the end of the book which gave her public recognition) Leduc comes back to the story of her journey to writing, she both closes and opens a door, something that still remains unresolved at the end of the third volume of the autobiography published by Simone de Beauvoir after Leduc's death. The story of *La Chasse à l'amour*¹³ (*The Hunt for Love*) was effectively finished in 1964, before the publication of *La Bâtarde*. The tale of literary success had yet to be told.

In reality, success didn't appease her doubts and contented unhappiness, or her taste for martyrdom, which even tended to aggravate her paranoia. It is important to highlight one point about the biography: writing *La Bâtarde* didn't resolve anything. The book that sold so well couldn't heal the existential wounds of the author, or repair the bastardisation. The writing had to continue, and she would continue to toil right up until her last moments of lucidity, before falling into a semi-coma and dying at home in Faucon (Vaucluse) at the end of May 1972.

It must also be remembered that the success of *La Bâtarde* in 1964 was, to my mind, distorted. Outside of the circles of art and literature, people didn't read the book because of its singularity of style, but because of the scandal it created. Two taboo issues were raised in Violette Leduc's story: firstly the author's lesbian relationships, (the poetic depictions were a first for this genre of writing), and secondly the story of black-market trading. Despite the originality of the tone of the book and its unclassifiable literary genre, it is these two scandals that are responsible for the popularity of the book. They could also explain why the book didn't win the Prix Goncourt.

*

There's one last point that I have to mention before moving on to the analysis; Leduc's taste for Martyrdom. Leduc's narrations rejoice in describing the ugliness of her face in a way which she exaggerates and mythifies, in dramatising her awkwardness, in portraying the humiliation and suffering that she has experienced and even inflicted upon herself. The second account, *L'Affamée*, is a long, tortured monologue of her unrequited passion for Simone de Beauvoir, who is designated by the personal pronoun "she" in the book.

L'Affamée is the book that most resembles the novels of Jean Genet such as *Le Miracle de la Rose* (Miracle of the Rose). Leduc thought that he was a brilliant and contemporary poet. It's in this poetic line of Christian mysticism and under the banner of Jean de la Croix's exact lyricism that I think Leduc's masochistic tendencies as regards her character should be read, without forgetting the dolorous influence of *Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau that she kept as bedtime reading for many long years. It's this maxim that I'm setting down as the basis for my

¹³ Violette Leduc, *La chasse à l'amour*, (*The Hunt for Love*), Gallimard, 1973.

paper: behind Leduc's autobiographical act there is no more substance than there is paper. She presents literary tradition, reader experience and the attempt at writing as "failed".

In my view, Leduc's work exists as a search less autobiographical than it is *poetic*, in the same way that Schlegel dreams of the realisation of the "subject" by and in the writing. Where the "truth" that the author seeks to portray comes more from a different communion with the reader, whose place is firstly inhabited by the author; in other words the truth that originates from an *encounter that is all at one impossible and total*, and even from the *joy of the text*, than from an account of past events.

Like Rousseau, Leduc knows that she is condemned, she is already guilty, a bastard, and it's from the basis of the "subject's" defect that the work is expressed. Like Schlegel, Leduc is awkward, her possession of the floor is out of place from the outset, her manner of address is both vain and amoral, and it's a matter of giving a form to this awkwardness. What is achieved comes from an impossible desire for *recognition*. The desire is utopian because the differences irreducible in the relationship with self and the other are, and because the guise of the subject is denounced by the very expression that gives the subject authority in the discourse. But the desire is also authentic and expresses itself in the tenuous future of interpretations. In my opinion, it is this *modest authenticity*, uncompromising and somewhat removed from the "autobiographic" act, that endeavours to capture the repentance of *la bâtarde*.

*

I will therefore go through the account that Leduc gives of her journey to the act of writing. The event is crucial in autobiography because it *captures the moment when utterance gives birth to subject* in writing. I would like to show *how* Leduc finds herself in the role of describing this "engendering", how she frustrates the laws of the "autobiographical genre" as Philippe Lejeune defined it: a "retrospective story in prose that a real person tells of his/her own existence, when that person highlights his/her individual life and in particular the account of his/her personality"¹⁴. Lejeune thus defined, the autobiographical text: "Imagine that the author (as figures on the cover), the narrator of the story and the character described are one and the same in name"¹⁵. In reality, Lejeune's definition considerably minimises the *autobiographical event*.

The writing of *Confessions* by Saint Augustine displays a lot more than "parity of name" between the author and the sinner who produces the utterance: the writing reveals to the reader

¹⁴ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Seuil (*The autobiographical pact*) 1975, p14. Translator's version.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.23. Translator's version.

the *engendering of everything else* from the intimate place of discourse, and it shows the incommensurable dimension of the "subject" within the text. In *Essais*, Montaigne encourages the reader to "rediscover oneself" which "conflicts with making up one's mind"¹⁶. Far from promising "parity" with the subject of the writing, Montaigne underlines the *differences* that the text reveals between "author" and "subject" found in the *literary attempt*. Indeed, Rousseau, in the introduction to *Confessions*, once again puts the absolution of the subject it to the judgement of the reader; the subject that he presents "in all the truth of nature"¹⁷, in this case in "culpabilité" (guilt), both in the sense of error and in the sense of the related French verb "couper" (to cut up); it is a subject that the reader will have to reassemble in the vain hope of recognising and understanding. The reference to the Last Judgement defers the moment of pardon to a post-death tense and language. What Rousseau pleads for at the beginning of *Confessions* isn't innocence: what he asks for is the *reader's attention*; what he promises is the *narrator's gratitude*, in other words *poetic reconciliation* with the author.

Straight away in *La Bâtarde*, the notion of parity that Philippe Lejeune as described is deconstructed. Right from the beginning, the voice speaking questions, "Violette Leduc, who's she?"¹⁸ The voice is not only *removed from* the name that is supposed to represent "the real person" (the author), but it is also *behind* as regards the ascribed retrospective position. And yet "Violette Leduc" doesn't predate the so-called "autobiographical" work of Violette Leduc. And neither the trilogy no the so-called fiction texts offer any "resolution" to the bastardisation of the "person" in question besides in the chemical sense of the word "solution": a "separation of tissues that are normally continuous" in the heterogeneous form of multiple texts of a bastardised genre.

"Maurice said to me the next day: "Your unhappy childhood is beginning to bore me to distraction. This afternoon you will take your basket, a pen, and an exercise book and you will go and sit under an apple tree. Then you will write down all the things you tell me.

"Yes, Maurice," I said, feeling upset.

He will read what I've written, he'll tell me it's no good, I said to myself at three that afternoon. I put the pen, the paper and some blotting paper into my basket.

A tree to choose, a road to be taken. Why not begin with a good afternoon to Mme. Meulay? ... The crossroads was waiting for me, the house was cool, Mme. Meulay was complaining in the lower part of the village, Gérard was waiting for

¹⁶ Mireille Calle-Gruber, « Tourner autour », dans *La Différence sexuelle en tous genres*, (sous la direction de Mireille Calle-Gruber), revue *Littérature*, n°142, juin 2006, p.89

¹⁷See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, introduction to *Confessions* (1782-1789). Translator's version.

¹⁸Violette Leduc, trans D. Coltman, *La Bâtarde*, p.19. Dalkey Archive Press, 2003

Maurice. He was waiting to love Maurice in the Apollinaire poems Maurice would recite. Literature leads to love, love leads to literature.

I took the road alongside the stubble field. The cry came out of the earth. Larks, fireworks display spread over the earth, where were you? I was walking by heart, and with dry eyes I wept. Garlands of cattle sleepwalking beside the wire fences and the gates. I hid myself in the hedge, I saw a world at liberty. Write. Yes, Maurice. Later.

The mare was weeping over the eyes of the horse. He was the most diligent, the most self-effacing. The sow was too naked, the sheep was overdressed. A chicken was in love with a cow. She was following it, caged between four legs. Should I move on? I could never be tired of watching the foal following its mother. A heifer began to run. I waited for harmony to be restored before I moved on.

Lucid sparkles on the Métro steps, I have not forgotten you. The poem that swells in my throat until it is as big as a goiter will be the poem I like best. Let me not die before the music of the stars is enough for me.

Sitting beneath an apple tree laden with green and pink apples, I dipped my pen in the inkwell and, with my mind a blank, I wrote the first sentence of *L'Asphyxie*: "My mother never gave me her hand." Light with the lightness Maurice had given me, my pen had no weight. I went on writing with the carelessness and the facility of a sailing ship blown before the wind. The innocence of a beginning. "Tell the paper about your childhood." I told the paper. The fury of a peacock in the meadow, its metallic chuckles, interrupted me. The peacock fell silent again, my pen lay at rest beneath the flight of two butterflies chasing one another. The birds suddenly stopped singing and then I sucked my penholder: the pleasure of foreseeing that my grandmother was about to be reborn, that I was going to bring her into the world; the pleasure of foreseeing that I would be the creator of my grandmother whom I adored, of my grandmother who adored me. To write ... That seemed superfluous to me as I remembered my tenderness for her, her tenderness for me. I wrote to obey Maurice. I am afraid of damp. I stopped writing when I felt the grass wetting my skirt.

That evening, I showed Maurice my homework. He read, I waited for him to give me my good or my bad marks.

"My dear Violette, there is nothing left for you now but to continue," he said to me.¹⁹

The passage is set in 1942; Leduc joined Maurice Sachs in a small village in Normandy, where he is in hiding (more because he is debt-riddled than because he is Jewish). He writes *Le Sabbat*. Mme Meulay is a villager who these two characters live next to. Gérard is a young Jewish refugee who Leduc is jealous of because of his literary friendship with Sachs. Leduc loves Maurice Sachs, who rejects her with the ambiguity and cruelty of his strange temperament.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.417-418.

The first step to "repentance"

Leduc began to write *in the remorse of a failed relationship*, and in the sorrow of a repressed desire for an illegitimate union: between a homosexual misogynist and a gay woman married to a man. In ordering his friend to write "all the things she tells him", Maurice Sachs effectively relegated to paper the story that they would never live together. It's a story of a split, but also of reconciliation and encounter, in other words, *to repent* in the visual sense of modifications made to a work while it is being created, which leaves the different stages of the correction visible: "'My dear Violette, there is nothing left for you now but to continue,'" he said to me" The use of the French past historic in the aside (he said to me), marks the separation of the paths that the two characters take from this point on, side by side, but each on his/her own side, like two inhabitants of the language forever separated by the common search for an unusual past. (Maurice Sachs's narrative has the subheading "the scandalous memoirs of Maurice Sachs"). Just as Gérard loves Maurice "in the Apollinaire poems" so it is only by going down the personal route of writing "memoirs", or in other words in stepping back from the object of desire in literary recollection, that Leduc encounters Sachs, or at the very least she comes as close as possible to the love he won't ever give her.

"Literature leads to love, love leads to literature". This chiasmus implies an irreparable gap that underlies every desire, romantic or literary. Far from resolving the tension, Leduc's "*rapport*" (meaning both "relationship" and "report" in French), with/about the journey to the act of writing, exaggerates the chiasmus because the text doesn't bring together or complete anything, and far from reconciling, it separates: life from the book, and Maurice from his illegitimate desire for an impossible union. The chiasmus device is used again at the end of the journey when the narrator foresees the return of the character of her grandmother in the narrative (who died in real life): "the pleasure of foreseeing that I would be the creator of my grandmother whom I adored, of my grandmother who adored me." And further on: "I remembered my tenderness for her, her tenderness for me." The repentance here is legible. Epanorthosis, which leads the sentence to correct itself, doesn't erase the original version; it adds to it and leaves possibilities open. It generates ambiguity as regards the temporality of the phrase, which leaves the reader the space to correct and interpret. The use of the French imperfect tense in, "grandmother whom I adored", which refers to the childhood days past, agrees with the use of the near future tense "my grandmother was about to be reborn," thanks to the literary act that marries the temporalities that life separates. The birth of the narrator's love for Fideline²⁰ occurs suddenly: from what is written in the narrative. Furthermore, shifting the personal pronouns and possessive adjectives serves to *beat about the bush* when it comes to the loving relationship between grandmother and

²⁰ Violette Leduc's grandmother's name.

granddaughter. The author makes sure so as not to downplay the “pleasure” aspect when approaching this relationship. The chiasmus game played with the words leaves it up to the reader to gauge the potential of *constantly evolving relationships* in place of the expected narrative of an “individual life”.

The scheme of the writing is evident. No dichotomy can withstand the *journey to the written word*; not the radical boundary between life and death, nor the classification of relationships that mechanically deprive friendship of love, the individual of the plural, and the text of a “real” existence. What is more, the text doesn’t fulfil life: *it leads to it*. And vice-versa, life won’t satisfy the written word: *it leads to it*. Between these two poles as much irreducible as irreconcilable, the path ahead remains impossible to find. Endless and unique every time, the use of the present tense promises *the arrival of the story*.

The miracle of repentance

Instead of an absence of connection, the writing generates a *new reciprocity* and it falls to the reader to weigh this up in light of what Lejeune deems “autobiography”. The picture that the narrator paints of animals in the field also highlights something *unconnectable that is momentarily reconciled* in the writing’s repossession of the text. Ascribing the following words to the animals serves to personify beasts: the verb “was weeping”, the adjectives “diligent”, “self-effacing”, “naked”, “(over)dressed”, the nouns “its mother”, the expression “was in love”. Whereas the verb for which she is the subject, “be tired” (“rassasier”) is amphibian. Although mixing the species frustrates the reference system, the paragraph finishes with the term “harmony”. More insidiously, mixing the species distorts the “parity” of the subject and narration and discredits the authority of the utterance. The verb “to weep” that the narrator associates with the horse’s mane acts as *its own person* three lines beforehand: “I was walking by heart, and with dry eyes I wept”. To the ear, the conjugation sounds the same in French in this instance (“pleurais”) as in the following paragraph (“pleurait”), but the difference in endings is apparent to the eye: “The mane was weeping over the eyes of the horse”. From the “ais” ending to “ait” ending, the subject person has changed from the first person to the third person; a third person animal and not even an object: the ending of the verb refers to the “mane” and not the horse. An illegitimate inbreeding is produced between the narrator’s eye and the “self-effacing” eyes of the horse, as the reader looks on troubled. The logic of the description overwhelms. The “subject” of the writing flows out of the place that the autobiography has reserved for it; it sinks and sullies the story of “one’s own existence” as recommended by Lejeune.

Repentance is taking shape

In the same way as a horse's mane bleeds into a lock of hair and as the verb "to weep" merges one paragraph into the next, so person and beast are mixed through phrasing. This is the way in which what Philippe Lejeune calls the "retrospective story in prose that a real person tells of his/her own existence" is presented: instead of a neatly pre-packaged story, *poetic madness* undoes all chronology. In any case, the inconvenient images and interfering narrative markers don't generate anything that can be reduced to a "real" or psychological story. Although the word "coeur" ("heart") appears, inexplicably linked to the word "pleurer" ("to cry"); although the hen that is "in love with a cow", and the tearful horse's mane evokes a heartache that the narrator discreetly silences; although the inconvenience of the under-dressed sow and the weirdness of the over-dressed lambs spoil "the neat existence" of the animals and suggest an uncomfortable bastardised utterance, beginning with the verb "to bore me to distraction", these fictional interpretations are not adequate to explain the strength that overwhelms the derision of the passage.

The text is devoted to *testing* and not understanding. The narrator concedes to "Maurice's" demand: "I wrote to obey Maurice." The author give the impression of leading a fulfilled life: she *speaks to* unfulfilled loves and she exhausts the impotence of the discourse in replacing what is lost. She clings on to sentences and she teases the very essence of life from the vocabulary, reviving ossified formulae of language. The expressions "by heart" or "penholder" thus regain vitality. The "heart" starts to beat in the body of the syntagm once more; and the pen gets carried away with itself. The text surprises itself in rejoicing in connection errors, construction gaps and distortions; in other words it enjoys the "crossroads" of an illegitimate narrative.

The repentance of love

In fact, the repentance for Sachs unearths signs of an ancient thwarted love that the writing paradoxically liberates while concealing it.

"...with my mind a blank, I wrote the first sentence of *L'Asphyxie*: "My mother never gave me her hand." Light with the lightness Maurice had given me, my pen had no weight. I went on writing with the carelessness and the facility of a sailing ship blown before the wind. The innocence of a beginning."

Light, lightness, pen, carelessness, facility, innocence... the tone of the narrative is distorted. Literally, the author distorts the "emphasis" that Philippe Lejeune puts on an autobiography as the "individual life" of the autobiographer. In the story of *La Bâtarde*, the emphasis isn't on the "account of the personality" of the author, but on how the author *interprets* her *own writing*. The

interpretation is shown who *reveals the text*, in the dual sense of discovery: on the one hand the interpretation bears witness to a familiarisation, the repossession of the story by a new authority. On the other hand, it depicts the writing and the reading of the work, and recounts the production of the written word. "I wrote", "He read": Again, the reader authority witnesses the *repossession of the text*. Here again, the reader thus becomes aware, not of the "real person", the author but – of the *linguistic game* that tells a story. The "lightness" of the breath that gave birth to *L'Asphyxie* isn't contradictory to the title of the book. Leduc is referring to the "lightness" (i.e. "fickleness") of Maurice; to the meagre importance the character ascribes to Leduc's love for him. She tells of the *suffering of a story* that is built around the absence of reciprocated desire. The term "lightness" describes the author's irony as regards her character and as such the *material distance of the word* that both condemns her love and redeems the story. There, "a world at liberty" is found: in the *language game* and not in the "je" ("I") of the "real person", the author. It is found in the "innocence of a beginning", something to endlessly produce, to test and to tempt. If the quill doesn't exert itself in confessing maternal disillusionment, it's because it has already been blown away by the wind of the sentence.

Therefore, Leduc's journey to the act of writing does not depict the birth of a writer, but the *discovery of interpretation* in place of the "subject" who writes, thanks to which the *bâtarde survives (outlives)* the "real person". No "individual life" can withstand the journey to the written word: whereas the sur-vival is already heightened due to a life lived in excess, in the plural, and due to the network of lines and images that make up the text. But also, and in an inseparable way, sur-vival exists because of a *life already repossessed*, because of breath regained after learning of the bastardisation, and because the reader relieves the subject of discourse. The repentance of the desire that Leduc represses for Maurice reintroduces a *forgotten painful memory* into story, it rakes up a *narrative injury*. It's "with [her] mind a blank" that Leduc wrote the first sentence of the book that marked her arrival as a writer. She pulled the "subject" of the locutionary act in *L'Asphyxie* from the emptiness of a blank page, from the chaos of language, from the "nothingness" that preceded the written word, in other words, from the absence of love, for the *lack of connection*, from the impotence of memory to satisfy desire. The whole work resounds of the discovery of this *flaw* at the origin of the discourse. The flesh of the story remains marked by paratext, sentences are short of breath, the logic that links the paragraphs is bastardised; while the "lightness" of tone discredits the work that weaves the book together.

Such is the strain of repentance

The subject of the locutionary act has barely taken the floor before the narrative has chopped it down like wheat in the text. The withdrawal exposes a field deserted of language: it displays

loss; it shows the separation of the "subject", it cries the death of the "author". The repentance aids an *illegitimate birth*. A strange and delicate mating scene thus takes place when the "subject" of the writing spawns itself:

" I told the paper. The fury of a peacock in the meadow, its metallic chuckles, interrupted me. The peacock fell silent again, my pen lay at rest beneath the flight of two butterflies chasing one another. The birds suddenly stopped singing and then I sucked my penholder: the pleasure of foreseeing that my grandmother was about to be reborn..."

Here, the story is really told between the lines, just like flighty butterflies, and the thread of the story recommences in a flurry of wings. A network of unexpected meanings penetrates the intelligibility of the text; where life and death, human and animal, male and female, subject and object, silence and crying weave a tapestry where the author is caught up in her own game of language. "I am afraid of damp. I stopped writing when I felt the grass wetting my skirt." The two instances of the first person personal pronoun contradict each other: the first refers to a general truth in the present tense, the other to a past event in the past historic tense. And yet in the mad logic of the story, temporality gets carried away, the humidity of images pierces the tense of the utterance. Literally speaking, the author's space is wet, as though the ink hadn't yet dried and as though she had continued to impress upon the page the remorse of someone unloved.

We're into the economics of repentance

A piece of writing that cries *instead* of the author. The journey of pen to paper doesn't stop shedding its tears under the "diligent" eye of the reader. The perspective is confused. In the haze, the pact is upheld, this "autobiographical pact" that Lejeune defines and Leduc deconstructs. "Lucid sparkles on the Métro steps, I have not forgotten you. The poem that swells in my throat until it is as big as a goiter will be the poem I like best. Let me not die before the music of the stars is enough for me." The paragraph in turn invites the reader to the act of repentance: to go back 100 pages in the book and to resume reading at page 311 (original edition), at the moment that Violette leaves the newsroom, and when thanks to Maurice she is hired to write short stories:

"You write, oh la la there's a thing, the spangles on the steps of a Métro station whispered in my ears. [...] I shall describe you. *You haven't the talent* [...] It all has to stay inside? *Absolutely*".²¹

²¹ Violette Leduc, trans D. Coltman, *La Bâtarde*, op.cit., p.320. Dalkey Archive Press, 2003

"To stay inside": the repentance doesn't sooth or liberate: it hinders and asphyxiates. It banishes the pen to the plague of language. It stops breath from exiting at the pivotal moment of "a road to be taken"; at the "crossroads" of a "tree to choose". It's the crucial moment in the journey of Eve's act in the bible story of *Genesis*; it's the impossible moment of becoming aware of death at work in every desire. And it's in the strain of the act of writing, between "reality" and the page, in nature's bastardised secretion of a "goiter", that the autobiographer commits herself: "Let me not die before the music of the stars is enough for me."

*

Therefore, it's really a case of something quite "superfluous" in the story of Leduc's journey to the act of writing, as she tells it: a never-ending flow (super flux) of a "total voice" to revive Schlegel's dream of a "total humanity".

Leduc's "autobiographical" voice is uttered in the French future indicative tense ("The poem that swells in my throat until it is as big as a goiter"). Her voice asserts itself in the silence of spheres; it feeds off what starves it, in the same way that Eve chose to pick the forbidden fruit. It promises *bastardised legitimacy of the writer*. Where, like she wrote about Jean Genet's work: "The greatest nobleness [...] mixed with the greatest obscenity"²².

La Bâtarde is added to "real life", the text doesn't identify itself with "the person". The story intensifies what's missing and the writing overwhelms *the suffering of the text*. The book gives rise to another kind of transposition than that of the "personality" of an author in a piece of writing. There is a *poetic* transposition: a transformation, like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar leads to the growth of a butterfly's wings; where the verb "to foresee" doesn't mean to schedule, to control or to act with intention but to act with *consideration*, affection and willingness, in order to develop other kinds of relationships possible at the time of the locutionary act, and in order not to "familiarise oneself" with the differences but to *tend to* value the differences and to liberate the "subject" of the writing from the shackles of genre, be it literary, biological or grammatical.

Translated by Esther Cottey

²² Letter to "Alain", 29 March 1948, in *Violette Leduc : Correspondance, 1945-1972, op.cit.* Translator's version.