

□ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

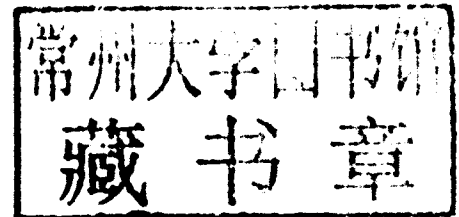
**CLC 372**

Volume 372

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short-Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

**Lawrence J. Trudeau**  
EDITOR



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## Preface

**N**amed “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 3,000 authors from 91 countries now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Before the publication of the first volume of CLC in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. CLC, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially necessary to today’s reader.

### Scope of the Series

CLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors of the twenty-first century. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 covered authors who died after December 31, 1959. Since January 2000, the series has covered authors who are living or who died after December 31, 1999; those who died between 1959 and 2000 are now included in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. There is minimal duplication of content between series.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science-fiction writers, literary and social critics, world authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each CLC volume contains individual essays and reviews selected from hundreds of review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning an author’s career from its inception to current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other works that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in CLC provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

CLC is part of the survey of criticism and world literature that is contained in Gale’s *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), *Shakespearean Criticism* (SC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC).

### Organization of the Book

A CLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the author’s name.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication information of each work is given. In the case of works not published in English, a translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is a published translated title or a free translation provided by the compiler of the entry. As a further aid to the reader, a list of **Principal English Translations** is provided for authors who did not publish in English; the list selects those translations most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, plays are dated by first performance, not first publication, and the location of the first performance is given, if known. Lists of **Representative Works** discussed in the entry appear with topic entries.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
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- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

## Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors who have appeared in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Drama Criticism*, *Poetry Criticism*, *Short Story Criticism*, and *Children's Literature Review*.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of titles published in other languages and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, plays, nonfiction books, and poetry, short-story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks. All titles reviewed in *CLC* and in the other Literary Criticism Series can be found online in the *Gale Literary Index*.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hébert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82. Print.

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# Lucette Desvignes

## 1926-

(Born Lucienne Jeanne Parent) French playwright, novelist, short-story writer, nonfiction writer, and critic.

### INTRODUCTION

Lauded for the psychological acuity and historical accuracy of her two multigenerational sagas based on her own ancestors, Lucette Desvignes is also a respected playwright, short-fiction writer, and poet. Her most acclaimed series, *Les mains nues*, known in English as the Naked Hands trilogy, chronicles the lives of several Burgundian families of potters, starting with the patriarch, Francis, and spanning the period between 1830 and 1960. Within a larger social context that includes the 1832 cholera epidemic and the struggle of craftsmen potters to survive a changing economy in which their products were being increasingly replaced by mass-produced goods, Desvignes portrays the daily lives, personal challenges, and gender relations of ordinary men and women. Taken as a whole, the novels trace the aspirations, disappointments, changing family relationships, and unpredictable affairs of the heart of multiple generations of men and women. Initially hampered by the traditional disdain of Parisian publishers and reviewers for provincial authors and subject matter, Desvignes persevered until her works saw publication. Since then, she has been regarded as a premier contemporary author and has been the recipient of several major prizes and honors.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Desvignes was born on 1 May 1926 to Marie-Germaine Barraud and Jean Parent in Mercurey, a village in the Saône-et-Loire area of the region of Burgundy, France. Both parents were teachers, and the family—which also included a brother, Bobby, and a half sister, Simone—moved to Chalon in 1929 when Jean was appointed headmaster of the École de Garçons du Centre. Desvignes's parents were known for their progressive views on education, and the three children grew up in a household that encouraged intellectual pursuits, with the author attending the Collège de Jeunes Filles. The family's life was disrupted by the Nazi occupation of France from 1940 to 1944, particularly because the school where they lived became a locus of war; it was requisitioned first by the military to house French soldiers going to the front, then by Nazi troops occupying Chalon, then by French prisoners of war, and finally by the French Liberation Army.

Desvignes received her diploma in languages and philosophy in 1944, by which time most of World War II had ended. She then commenced graduate studies at the University of Dijon, earning master's degrees in English in 1946 and in law in 1947. In 1948, she married André Desvignes and began teaching high-school English. In 1949, she was appointed to a position at the Lycée Pontus de Tyard, a coeducational institution that was formerly the Collège de Jeunes Filles, her own place of education, and stayed there until 1959. In the course of her time teaching, Desvignes gave birth to her two children, Yves-Antoine and Jean. She was appointed assistant in comparative literature at the Faculté des Lettres at the University of Lyon and, after eight years, received the post of lecturer in comparative literature and theater history at the University Literary Center of the University of Saint-Etienne. During this time, Desvignes completed two dissertations and received a doctorate from the University of Paris in 1970. She ultimately rose to the rank of full professor, also creating the Centre d'études comparatistes et de recherche sur l'expression dramatique at her university. Tragedy struck in 1976 when Desvignes's twenty-five-year-old son, Yves-Antoine, drowned and, soon after, her husband nearly died of a heart attack. Desvignes retired early in 1983 and decided to devote herself to writing.

She had begun to write during her academic career, composing two plays, *Marsyas*, which was written in 1957 but was never fully published or performed in French, and *La grange aux rencontres* (1964; published as *Strange Encounters*), as well as short stories, essays, reviews, and scholarly studies. With the publication of the first volume of her Naked Hands trilogy, *Les nœuds d'argile* (1982; may be translated as *Bonds of Clay*), Desvignes embarked on a fiction career that would include two more volumes, *Le grain du chanvre* (1985; may be translated as *The Texture of Linen*), and *Le livre de Juste* (1986; may be translated as *The Book of Juste*), as well as *Les mains libres*, known in English as the Free Hands series, which includes *Vent debout* (1991; may be translated as *Head Winds*) and *La brise en poupe* (1993; may be translated as *Tail Winds*). Desvignes was honored with the distinguished title *Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques* in 1978. *Bonds of Clay* received the Prix Roland Dorgelès in 1982, and Desvignes was awarded the Prix Bourgogne for the trilogy as a whole in 1986. In 1984, she received the Prix de l'Humour Alexis Piron for “Une consultation” (may be translated as “One Consultation”), which was later collected in *Famille, familles* (1988; may be translated as *Family, Families*). In 1991, the Prix Lucette Desvignes de la Nouvelle

was established in honor of the author in Chalon-sur-Saône. Since that time, a scholarly journal, *Studies on Lucette Desvignes and the Twentieth Century* (later titled *Studies on Lucette Desvignes and Contemporary French Literature*), has been devoted to studies of her work, and a Center for Studies on Lucette Desvignes was founded in 1997 at Ohio State University at Newark. Following her retirement, Desvignes traveled frequently with her husband. She currently resides in Dijon, where she remains active, publishing more than two dozen works in the last thirty years.

## MAJOR WORKS

Desvignes's early works grew out of her academic work and her interest in classical literature. Her first play, *Strange Encounters*, remains her best-known dramatic work. In it, an elderly vagrant couple, Gus and Hanna, find shelter in a village storage shed. Over the course of the next night, they are forced to relive traumatic episodes from their past, enacted on stage in cinematic fashion. Reminiscent of Greek drama, the play explores how their images of themselves, as well as those of their lives, change as they confront painful, long-buried facts about their son's killing of their daughter and his subsequent disappearance. *Marsyas* concerns a musical contest between the flute player Marsyas and the god Apollo. While he is punished by the gods for his challenge to their supremacy, Marsyas becomes a spokesman for humanity and his music a sacred legacy that lives on. The one-act *Eurydice*, *Eurydice* (1986) echoes the Orphic myth and transports it into 1920s France. In this piece, Desvignes focuses on the workings of fate and the consequences of the characters' self-inflicted losses and failures to communicate with one another.

Although she has written in several genres, Desvignes is best known for her novels and short stories. Set in her ancestral Burgundy, they incorporate the history of her family, her childhood memories, and her intimate familiarity with everyday life in the region. The Naked Hands trilogy traces the history of a family of potters over several generations and the tragic consequences that result from the quest for a secret pottery varnish. *Head Winds* and *Tail Winds* together form another family saga, the Free Hands series. In these two novels, Desvignes fictionalized the history of her husband's forebears, starting with their life of desperate poverty in Luxembourg and their decision to immigrate to the Americas. A number of other novels, including *Clair de nuit* (1984; may be translated as *Night Glow*), *La maison sans volets* (1992; may be translated as *The House without Shutters*), and *La nuit de la chouette* (2001; may be translated as *The Night of the Owl*), entail a mysterious murder, a detective plot, and a development of psychological themes, respectively.

Other works include several collections of short stories, many of which previously appeared in the journal *Studies*

on Lucette Desvignes. The six stories in *Family, Families* as well as the collection *Affaires de familles* (2001; may be translated as *Family Matters*) deal with various aspects of family life and its impact on individuals. Other collections, such as *Contes du vignoble* (1993; may be translated as *Tales of the Vine*) and *Le Père Noël est un chien* (2000; may be translated as *Santa Claus Is a Dog*), treat the lives of wine-growing villagers, their rich vernacular, local traditions, and local customs from the region of Burgundy. In addition, she has published the autobiography *Le miel de l'aube* (1999; may be translated as *The Honey of Dawn*). A frequent traveler, Desvignes has also written travel sketches, including her most recent *Italie, ô Italie* (2014; may be translated as *Italy, Oh Italy*).

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have praised Desvignes's dramas, especially *Strange Encounters*, for their exploration of psychology and myth and have compared her works to those of French playwrights Jean Anouilh, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. Tzushow Chuang (2005) analyzed the seminal role of memory in *Strange Encounters*, paralleling it with French writer Marie Cardinal's use of it in her memoir *The Words to Say It* (1975). Chuang observed that in both works, facing the events of the past leads to the possibility of psychological healing. Jerry L. Curtis (2010) approached this same theme through an analysis of Desvignes's successful use of the technique of *dédoublément*, or "doubling," in *Strange Encounters*, whereby Gus and Hanna confront another aspect of themselves in a sequence that brings back painful memories of their past.

Desvignes's novels and short fiction have been the major focus of critical attention, however. In an earlier essay, Curtis (2005) remarked on the hallmarks of her style, pointing out the key elements of personal memory, research, and setting in her works. Focusing on her intuitive ability to assign roles and personalities to her characters, he concluded that she "has developed the skill of combining memory and imagination into a singular narrative style that renders her writing credible." Approaching the author's work thematically, Patrick Brady (1986; see Further Reading) considered Uncle Thurauld in *Bonds of Clay* as a Devil figure, contrasting him with Baron de Charlus in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27). Discussing male versus female discourse in *The Book of Juste*, Brady borrowed elements of chaos theory to argue that nonlinear, disordered discourse in the novel actually masks a higher form of order. Explicating the various theoretical approaches to translation, Brian E. Rainey (1998) recounted his own experience as a translator of one of Desvignes's stories and described his efforts to convey accurately Desvignes's tone and historicity in the tale. In a 1998 essay, Desvignes herself elaborated on her use of history in her works, emphasizing her desire "to restore the

voices of people as they were probably never allowed to express themselves" in their own era.

Jelena Krstovic

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*La grange aux rencontres* [published as *Strange Encounters*]. Théâtre de la Baleine, Lyon. 13 Apr. 1964. (Play)

*Marivaux et l'Angleterre: Essai sur une création dramatique originale* [may be translated as *Marivaux and England: Essay on an Original Dramatic Creation*]. Paris: Klincksieck, 1970. (Criticism)

*Travaux comparatistes* [may be translated as *Comparatist Studies*]. Ed. Lucette Desvignes. Saint-Etienne: Centre d'études comparatistes et de recherche sur l'expression dramatique, U de Saint-Etienne, 1978. (Criticism)

*La cour bergère, ou L'Arcadie de Messire Philippes Sidney: Tragi-comédie* [may be translated as *The Court Shepherdess; or, Arcadia of Sir Sidney Philippi: A Tragicomedy*]. By André Mareschal. Ed. Desvignes. 2 vols. Saint-Etienne: U de Saint-Etienne, 1981. (Play)

\**Les nœuds d'argile* [may be translated as *Bonds of Clay*]. Dijon: Civry, 1982. Rev. ed. Paris: Mazarine, 1985. (Novel)

*Clair de nuit: Roman* [may be translated as *Night Glow: A Novel*]. Paris: Fayard, 1984. (Novel)

\**Le grain du chanvre, ou L'histoire de Jeanne* [may be translated as *The Texture of Linen; or, The Story of Jeanne*]. Paris: Mazarine, 1985. (Novel)

"Eurydice, Eurydice." *France Culture*. Radio France 1. 6 June 1986. (Play)

\**Le livre de Juste* [may be translated as *The Book of Juste*]. Paris: Mazarine-Fayard, 1986. (Novel)

*Canicule: Nouvelle* [may be translated as *Dog Days of Summer: A Short Story*]. Dijon: Aléï, 1987. (Short story)

*L'éditeur et la dame* [may be translated as *The Editor and the Lady*]. Fête du Livre de Beaune, Beaune. 18 Oct. 1988. (Play)

†*Famille, familles: Nouvelles* [may be translated as *Family, Families: Short Stories*]. Dijon: Aléï, 1988. (Short stories)

*Le cri du ventre* [may be translated as *The Cry of the Stomach*]. Lyons-Feyzin, Mairie. 12 Oct. 1989. (Play)

‡*Vent debout: Roman* [may be translated as *Head Winds: A Novel*]. Paris: Bourin, 1991. (Novel)

*La maison sans volets: Roman* [may be translated as *The House without Shutters: A Novel*]. Paris: Bourin, 1992. (Novel)

*Le marché aux bœufs de St-Christophe-en-Brionnais* [may be translated as *The Beef Auction of St.-Christopher-of-Brionnais*]. Strasbourg: Chambre à Part, 1992. (Non-fiction)

‡*La brise en poupe: Roman* [may be translated as *Tail Winds: A Novel*]. Paris: Bourin, 1993. (Novel)

*Contes du vignoble* [may be translated as *Tales of the Vine*]. Dijon: Bourgogne-Rhône-Loire, 1993. (Short stories)

*Le miel de l'aube: Une enfance en Bourgogne sous l'occupation* [may be translated as *The Honey of Dawn: Growing Up in Burgundy during the Occupation*]. Précy-sous-Thil: Armançon, 1999. (Autobiography)

*Le Père Noël est un chien: Contes de Noël* [may be translated as *Santa Claus Is a Dog: Christmas Tales*]. Précy-sous-Thil: Armançon, 2000. (Short stories)

*Affaires de familles: Nouvelles* [may be translated as *Family Matters: Short Stories*]. Précy-sous-Thil: Armançon, 2001. (Short stories)

*La nuit de la chouette* [may be translated as *The Night of the Owl*]. Auxerre: NYKTA, 2001. (Novel)

*Le journal indien* [may be translated as *The Indian Newspaper*]. Précy-sous-Thil: Armançon, 2003. (Poetry)

*La seconde visite* [may be translated as *The Second Visit*]. Précy-sous-Thil: Armançon, 2003. (Novel)

*Petites histoires naturelles: Au fond du jardin, l'eau* [may be translated as *Natural Tales: Out in the Garden, Water*]. Verón: Renarde rouge, 2008. (Poetry)

*Voyage en botulie: Roman* [may be translated as *A Journey into Botulism: A Novel*]. Précy-sous-Thil: Armançon, 2008. (Novel)

*L'histoire de Colombe: Une menante sous l'ancien régime; roman* [may be translated as *The Story of Colombe: A Servant under the Old Regime; a Novel*]. Précy-sous-Thil: Armançon, 2010. (Novel)

*Nouvelles à chuchoter au crépuscule* [may be translated as *Short Stories to Whisper at Twilight*]. Dijon: Bourgogne, 2011. (Short stories)

*Italie, ô Italies* [may be translated as *Italy, Oh Italies*]. Précy-sous-Thil: Armançon, 2014. (Nonfiction)

## Principal English Translations

*Telling It like It Was: Seven Short Stories and a Modern Tale*. Ed. Jerry L. Curtis. Trans. Brian E. Rainey et al. Newark: Center for Studies on Lucette Desvignes, the Ohio State U-Newark, 2002.

§*A Translation of Three Plays by Lucette Desvignes: Eurydice, Eurydice; Strange Encounters; and Marysas; or,*



The Rebellious Flautist. Ed. and trans. Curtis. Lewiston: Mellen, 2002. Trans. of *Eurydice*, *Eurydice*; *La grange aux rencontres*; and *Marsyas, ou Le rebelle à la flûte*.

*La poésie de Lucette Desvignes = The Poetry of Lucette Desvignes*. Ed. and trans. Curtis. Potomac: Scripta Humanistica, 2005.

*Short Fiction by Lucette Desvignes: A Dual Language Book*. Comp. and trans. Curtis. North Richland Hills: Ivy Hallis Academic P, 2007.

*Encore toi, Electre!: Pièce en cinq actes = You Again, Electra!: A Five-Act Play*. Ed. and trans. Curtis. Lewiston: Mellen, 2008.

*Psychological Sketches: A Collection of Short Fiction*. Ed. and trans. Curtis. Lewiston: Mellen, 2008.

*Animal Tales: A Collection of Short Fiction*. Ed. and trans. Curtis. Lewiston: Mellen, 2009.

*Vignettes of Burgundy: A Collection of Short Fiction*. Ed. and trans. Curtis. Lewiston: Mellen, 2009.

*Village Stories: A Collection of Short Fiction*. Ed. and trans. Curtis. Lewiston: Mellen, 2010.

*Italian Travel Writings: A Collection of Short Fiction*. Ed. and trans. Curtis. Lewiston: Mellen, 2011.

\*These three novels constitute *Les mains nues*, known in English as the Naked Hands trilogy.

†Includes the short story "Une consultation" [may be translated as "A Consultation"] and "Affaires de famille" [may be translated as "Family Matters"].

‡These two works constitute *Les mains libres*, known in English as the Free Hands series.

§Includes the English translation of *Marsyas, ou Le rebelle à la flûte*, which was written in 1957 but was never performed and has not been published in French.

## CRITICISM

### Carole Brooks Platt (essay date 1989)

SOURCE: Platt, Carole Brooks. "Mythic Choices in Conflict in Yourcenar, Hébert and Desvignes." *Degré Second* 12 (1989): 33-7. Print.

[In the following essay, Platt traces the legacy of the mythical Great Goddess or Great Mother "as creatrix and organizer of the universe" in works by Marguerite Yourcenar, Anne Hébert, and Desvignes. Platt finds that in *Bonds of Clay*, Desvignes portrays "an equalitarian ideal where love and compassion are the true sources of joy in that difficult project we call life," exhibiting "the most human" message of the three authors.]

Myths tell stories and the stories they tell contain attitudes about the genders incarnated in the mythic characters. Myths bear the mark of history. As invaders and new ideologies conquer a land, the mythic stories change to satisfy the new masters and to rationalize and justify changing social practices. Sometimes the more recently established mythic choice of a society never succeeds in fully extinguishing a previous, contradictory choice. This earlier choice lies entrenched in its people's national and/or poetic consciousness and in times of crisis may arise as a solace and as catalyst for growth or change.

If we accept the mythological hypothesizing of Robert Graves and Joseph Campbell, a culture's mythic choices are rarely clear-cut. Graves systematically uncovers a prehistoric matriarchal mythic paradigm and its correlative ritual behind the well-known polished facades of the later versions of the Greek myths and the Hebrew creation myth of Adam and Eve.<sup>1</sup> Matriarchal myth postulates the primacy of the Great Goddess or Great Mother as creatrix and organizer of the universe. The ritual of her worship included the annual sacrifice of the king, who was the Goddess's consort and subordinate to her, and his replacement by a new king who would suffer the same fate at the end of the year. This ritual expressed the primitive belief that life could only proceed from death, in a revolving ritual emulating the cyclical change of the seasons. The willing extinction and symbolic resurrection of the God/king and his cyclical union with the Goddess/queen ensured the perpetuation of all aspects of life in the natural environment. Without this ritual it was believed that spring would not follow winter, neither humans nor animals would be fertile, and crops would die.

Aside from the gruesome aspect of male sacrifice, which entailed castration, burning or drowning, and dismemberment, Goddess worship had the salubrious effect of underlining the solidarity of all manifestations of life, the sacredness of sex, the inextricable link between life and death, and the power of the feminine. Goddess religion allowed for the simultaneous existence of opposites, especially as far as the feminine is concerned. Woman was creatress and destructress. She was Queen of the Heaven and Earth Mother. She was lover as well as mother and mediator of the cosmic and creative forces.

Later patriarchal versions of the myth seek in revenge to neutralize the powerful feminine, desexualize her, and compartmentalize her into a series of weaker goddesses. The Father becomes enthroned as the supreme creative force and the heroic masculine, ego-dominating mode is stressed. Woman is merely a vessel who nourishes the father's seed. The Hebrew creation myth likewise excises the feminine from the sacred power source, allows man to bear the first woman from a rib in his body, as Zeus bore Athena from his head, and blames she who would have knowledge and power for bringing sin and death into the world.

When writers use mythic stories or patterns to structure their texts, whether consciously or unconsciously, they choose between contrasting mythic paradigms, the matriarchal and the patriarchal, with their inherently different gender visions. When we analyze French literature and popular folklore, patterns and practices emerge pointing to both types of mythic choices. While a patriarchal tradition based on Greco-Roman influence has dominated, a matriarchal countercurrent has also existed owing in part to the particular strength of Goddess worship in France. The literature of courtly love celebrated submission to, and desire for, the exalted Dame. The Romantic poet was inspired by his muse and his poetry expressed a yearning for a return to the mother (to nature, to sentiment and emotion, even to the tomb). The surrealist poet through union with woman, hoped to attain a privileged, unfettered realm of reality.

Each of these instances of the resurgent feminine principle in male-authored literature came in times of social upheaval (the Crusades, the Revolution and its after-shocks, and World War I) which allowed for a shuffling of the gender status quo and permitted a breakdown of social and literary constraints and conventions. As Otto Rank has stated, "every revolution which strives for the overthrow of masculine dominance shows the tendency to return to the mother."<sup>2</sup> This mother, perceived with longing and anxiety alike harks back to the physical mother of infancy, (what Dorothy Dinnerstein has called the "magically powerful goddess mother of infancy"<sup>3</sup>), but also to the perpetuated archetype of the love/death goddess of prehistory. The French artist's choice of matriarchal myth stems then both from the universal resurgence of the feminine in times of crisis and from the particular survival of archetypes and folk practices associated with his people's ancient worship of a powerful female deity.

An analysis of *L'Oeuvre au Noir* by Marguerite Yourcenar, *Kamourasha* by Anne Hébert, and *Les Noeuds d'argile* by Lucette Desvignes allows us to trace the Great Mother's legacy through the prospective of contemporary women writing in French. These writers are particularly interesting for the excellent quality of their texts as well as for their differing national origins (Belgian/French, French-Canadian, and Burgundian French respectively). In their works we witness simultaneous and conflicting matriarchal and patriarchal mythic choices. The primary mythic choice, deriving from the author's personal and historico-cultural circumstances, is undermined by a secondary mythic choice, a sort of mythic denominator. The chafing of the two creates conflict and thus the dramatic tension of the novel. Each of these authors uses the notion of the return to the mother, either as primary or secondary mythic choice, for the solace, liberation, and growth that their male literary forbearers had sought. None neglects the necessary element of sacrifice. But each uses matriarchal myth in a unique way suited to her personal vision.

In the case of Marguerite Yourcenar, personal history preconditions her primary mythic choice. Yourcenar's mother

died nine days after giving birth to her only child. Raised by her father exclusively, guilty and angered by the death of her mother as Linda Stillman has suggested,<sup>4</sup> and unconsciously fearful of the mortal dangers of childbearing (her grandmother and great-grandmother had also died following childbirth)<sup>5</sup> Yourcenar tends to deny the feminine. Her work is self-protective, self-effacing, "fathered-identified." She strictly adheres to historical accuracy and legitimate, authoritative, masculine modes of expression. Male protagonists personify her most important literary visions.

Female portrayal amounts to a betrayal as women are both quantitatively and qualitatively reduced in Yourcenar's work. They typically suffer tragic fates as scorned lovers or death-bound nurturers. Maleficent female mythical beings (who lure men only to destroy them) abound. Yourcenar clearly prefers simple, passive, nurturing creatures to embody the feminine in women.

A patriarchal mythic choice then governs *L'Oeuvre au Noir*; specifically, the kabbalistic myth of Adam Kadmon, or man alone before the advent of Eve. However, as we might expect from Yourcenar's Belgian/French national origins, shards of matriarchal mythic material lie buried in her psyche. But the matriarchal must become transfigured in an acceptable way to her predominantly male-identified literary imagination. So it is within her male protagonist that Yourcenar resolves her conflicting patriarchal and matriarchal mythic choices.

Zénon, the heretical alchemist and doctor of *L'Oeuvre au Noir*, is the illegitimate son of a suffering, scorned woman (a recurrent type as we have noted). Zénon spends his childhood abandoned by his mother. Deprived of the positive experience of the nurturing, good mother, Zénon views women either indifferently or in their devouring archetypal aspect. The animus traits of intellectuality and rationality dominate him; he develops a rigid persona, a hardened mask, to protect his vulnerable ego.

However, while living his solitary masculine ideal and rejecting women, Zénon develops the mythical feminine within himself. As an alchemist, he belongs to an all-male celibate society; but, as Eric Neumann says, the practitioner of this occult art draws on his feminine, chamanistic side.<sup>6</sup> As a doctor, he practices the healing arts associated with the feminine for millennia. As evidence of his female mythic identification, the serpent for him is a symbol of wisdom and immortality, not the maligned, evil creature of patriarchal myth.

The metaphor of fire characterizes Zénon's mythic ambivalence. Although, as an alchemist, he devotes his life to the mastery of the furnace-enclosed masculine fire, raging feminine fires seem to haunt him. Bonfires from the earliest times in Europe marked fertility rites associated with Goddess worship; but in the Renaissance they were converted into the patriarchal purifying fires of the witch-craze. Drawn to the male contemplative fire, Zénon is



also lured by a series of these raging feminine fires which might be said to stand for his anima rising. He is also to be sure terrified at the prospect of being burned at the stake.

Breaking down *L'Oeuvre au Noir* into its component parts, we witness first Zénon's external quest to be "plus qu'un homme" and second the circular return to his native Bruges where his feminine self makes increasingly strident demands. He comes to realize that his quest must be internal requiring disintegration and reformulation of the self as in ancient goddess myth. Zénon plunges into the abyss, primeval symbol of femininity central to "l'oeuvre au noir." There he dissolves his too rigidly defined patriarchal self through a return to his own feminine depths. Like the philosopher/king of alchemical tradition whom Jung has described, Zénon arises from the transmutation process purified and selfless, reborn from the Mother and reflecting her essence.<sup>7</sup>

Zénon's psycho-alchemical death and rebirth through the feminine repeats itself in the imagery of his actual death by suicide. First, he projects the image of a spirit child through a psychic self-fertilizing and begetting. Next, he visualizes a sun bleeding into the sea. This vital reabsorption into the watery depths is a maternal death according to Bachelard. Zénon drowns the consuming fires of his anima through the metaphoric merging with Mother. Finally, the sun rises out of sea in a radiant rebirth beyond sexual difference. Transported from the mortal human field to the celestial realm of light, he makes the final ecstatic leap beyond the ceaseless cycle of deaths and births where day and night meet and contradictions are resolved.

Turning to *Kamouraska* by the French-Canadian Anne Hébert we now encounter a powerful matriarchal mythic choice undercut by the conflicting demands of a passively-defined femininity in a patriarchal society. Since Québec has mythologized the strong, fertile, nurturing mother who holds together the fabric of society, it is not surprising to find that matriarchal myth dominates the fiction of one of her writers. In a letter to me, Hébert avowed her belief in the power of women and the influence of strong women who surrounded her in childhood. Probing her work, it becomes clear that Hébert wishes to empower women at the expense of men. In order to do so, she rejects the specifically French-Canadian maternal myth and delves more deeply into her inherited French psychic structures. There she resuscitates the ancient mythic female whose sexuality overrides her maternity. The structure of her narrative follows the paradigm of the archetypal goddess whose new consort must kill the old king, like the model of the original Clytemnestra myth.

Hébert's use of matriarchal myth resembles Yourcenar's in that both invent protagonists who plumb the unconscious mind in search of self-enlightenment and rebirth. But, where Yourcenar portrays a disembodied feminine in the male psyche, Hébert empowers *woman* herself through the

mythic feminine. Her protagonist, Elisabeth, who has murdered her abusive husband through the proxy of her lover, twenty years later during a drug-induced sleep re-imagines the original events surrounding the murder scheme, for which she is subsequently acquitted. Throughout the text she is caught between her patriarchal role as irreproachable and submissive wife of her second husband, M. Rolland, and that of her matriarchal, authentic self who lusts for freedom and union with her chosen lover. In her unconscious imaginings she sheds the guilt of her murderous act and labels it a sacred rite. In her "king must die" mentality, Elisabeth links love and death in an equation inherited from her most primitive matriarchal foremothers. Justice, she asserts, can be established only by fire and the blood of sacrifice. The identity with Goddess ritual is so complete that she connects the fertility of the land with the murderous rite. Unlike Zénon, who succeeds in being purified and reborn through the feminine, Elisabeth never integrates the empowered feminine encountered in her unconscious with her conscious self. Awakening, she learns that her second husband, whom she had thought near death, is quite imperiously alive. She condemns herself to the perpetual role of submissive wife of patriarchy as her Goddess self dies. She sacrifices the powerful, but deadly, matriarchal role not only because the old king lives, but also because of her own apparent dis-ease with the empowered feminine. Her mythic conflict remains permanently irresolvable; the resurgent Goddess is suppressed for the sake of security in a patriarchal world.

In striking contrast to the use of matriarchal myth in Hébert and Yourcenar, Lucette Desvignes valorizes the creative and nurturing side of the feminine, the sacredness of sex, and the unity of plant, animal and human life. Male sacrifice to the feminine is replaced by a more pernicious patriarchal demand for sameness from generation to generation which denies its sons independence and the possibility of creativity and renewal.

*Les Noeuds d'argile* springs from Desvignes's balanced childhood in the harmonious landscape of her native Burgundy, where in folk practices and beliefs vestiges of a matriarchally-based *religion de la terre* still exist. Threatened in her teens by the discordance and horror of the German occupation, an authentic aspiration toward reconstruction and a profound belief in the need for tenderness between individuals informs her work. She creates characters with positive elements of both sexes within them and propounds the joy of merger. Her protagonist Marrain, a young potter financially dependent on the older generation of family potters, is a man with an unrepressed feminine side.

Desvignes's androgynous primary mythic choice is based on the model of a paradisiacal vision of the myth of Adam and Eve. Eve's nurturance and the close inter-relatedness of the couple ensures that Eden is indeed a paradise. Life, for Desvignes, attains its apogee during those moments when

the self is transcended and essences, whether plant, animal, or human, merge. For Desvignes, genders do not need to be in conflict; they can and should be mutually supportive. Woman in her nurturing function remains central to survival, when she is lost or abandoned—the male dies.

Marrain and his young wife Jeanne live in a perfectly symbiotic state. Theirs is the rare, joyously depicted marriage of modern literature. Marrain's equal-marriage ideal overthrows the patriarchally-prejudicial account in Genesis. His personal mythology resembles the couple-based mythology prevalent in pre-Christian Burgundy. Symbiotic merger, which manages to retain and reinforce the integrity of the self, exemplifies Marrain's (and Desvignes's) vision.

Unfortunately, through his secondary conflicting mythic choice, Marrain drives himself from Eden. When he becomes a father, he identifies with the classical version of the Hercules myth and its exaggerated notion of masculinity. Instead of exploring his feminine creativity in a sacred act of devotion, he strikes out on a masculine quest to discover the formula for a certain blue glaze his wife's uncle had promised and failed to give him and which he feels he needs for the family's financial security. Instead of overthrowing the sacred king (represented by the old generation of potters) to establish his new reign on the matriarchal model, he obsessively searches for the same blue glaze. The quest kills him—a result of his forsaking the androgynous symbiotic ideal for the solitary masculine quest. In his final moments, however, he does return to the aesthetics of merger expressing his and his author's predominant mythic choice.

Each of these authors weaves into her text an ancient gynocentric mythical design which symbolizes the continuity of life and death and the role of sacrifice. A common matriarchal thread runs through the texts without binding them into a unified feminine fabric. The style of each author is distinguished by her personal and national origins. Yourcenar's mythical feminine serves men; it allows for male psychic rebirth while disenfranchising real women. Hébert empowers woman herself, but erects a monument to destructive female power which becomes even more exaggerated in subsequent works. Desvignes extols nurturance and merger, expressing the earth religion of her region and her desire for equilibrium, while deploring a senseless sacrifice, now connected to patriarchy's inflexible demand for paternal reproduction. Lucette Desvignes's message, notwithstanding the pessimistic conclusion, is the most human since she depicts an equalitarian ideal where love and compassion are the true sources of joy in that difficult project we call life.

#### Notes

1. See Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948; New York: Farrar,

Straus, and Giroux, 1982) and Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols (1955; New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

2. Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929) 92-3.
3. Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977) 85.
4. Linda Stillman, "Marguerite Yourcenar and the Phallacy of Indifference," *Studies in Twentieth Century French Literature*, 9, No. 2 (Spring, 1985): 261-77.
5. See Marguerite Yourcenar, *Souvenirs pieux* (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1974) 26.
6. Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim (1955; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) 296.
7. See C. G. Jung, "Psychology and Alchemy," *Collected Works*, 2nd ed., vol. 12 (New York: Pantheon, 1953).

#### Patrick Brady (essay date 1994)

SOURCE: Brady, Patrick. "From Feminism to Chaos Theory: Nonlinearity in Lucette Desvignes." *Discontinuity and Fragmentation*. Ed. Freeman G. Henry. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994. 101-08. Print.

[In the following essay, Brady comments on the characteristics of male and female discourse, as defined by critic Marsha Warren, in Desvignes's *Bonds of Clay* and *The Book of Juste*. Using the principles of chaos theory, he argues that while nonlinearity in feminist discourse appears disorderly, it actually conceals a more complex form of order.]

The principle of discontinuity has been a central focus of avant-garde research in the sciences for decades. Its application to the humanities, however, has been much slower to develop.

Seventeen years ago, I published an essay in this series adumbrating the application to cultural studies of a new method of analyzing discontinuous process.<sup>1</sup> That method, derived from topology (a domain of mathematics), was called "catastrophe theory." The article in question was reprinted in 1978, in modified form, in my volume *Structuralist Perspectives in Criticism of Fiction*.<sup>2</sup> At that time, no-one else in the humanities had shown any interest in this theory developed by René Thom, and I myself certainly had no idea that it would re-emerge somewhat later in the form of chaos theory and in this new form take on the importance chaos theory has today in a multitude of disciplines, including the humanities.<sup>3</sup> Chaos theory focuses primarily on four features—concealed order, constrained