

The Quasi “Confessional Autobiography”: *Mort d’un silence*, by Clémence Boulouque

Confessional literature immediately brings to mind the *Confessions* of St. Augustine from the late 4th century, and *Les Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau from the 18th century French Enlightenment. Whereas the former oriented his tome around praising and petitioning God (I, 1:1-2), the latter sought to persuade both God and his readers of the sincerity and usefulness of his account for the comparative study of mankind (2). St. Augustine focused on the sins and pleasures of his youth before his conversion to Christianity (viii); Rousseau insisted on the truthfulness of his self-portrait from childhood to adulthood (4).

The autobiographical works of St. Augustine and Rousseau were valued as “culture capital” for centuries in that they recorded “accomplished lives,” according to literary scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (*Women* 5). Women’s life writing, by comparison, was seldom taken seriously (*Women* 4). Not until the 1960s and 70s, following the bestseller status of personal narratives by Simone de Beauvoir, Anaïs Nin, and Mary McCarthy, to name just a few, were women’s voices heard (*Women* 6). Critical scholarship on women’s autobiographies since that time has undergone an important transformation: from reading women’s life writing in comparison to men’s to seeing autobiographical texts by female authors as richly mingling diverse factors such as politics, history, and psychology in their description of women’s subjectivity (*Women* 23-40). In short, the autobiography has become more polymorphous (May 215).

Mort d’un silence, Clémence Boulouque’s first book, for which she was awarded the Prix Fénelon in 2003, was written when she was 26 years old. It deftly weaves rhetorical, psychological, and political threads as it recounts her childhood and her father’s death. Unlike

the so-called “complete” confessional literature alluded to above, written during the authors’ middle and old age, Boulouque’s personal writing moves by fits and starts in its re-exploration of her childhood relationship with her father, his suicide, the consequences of his act, her coming to writing, and her ultimate transformation into a creative young adult. Rather than claiming to be comprehensive, *Mort d’un silence* discloses certain facts pertaining to the first-person narrator and her family while remaining silent about others. This oscillation between revelation and secrecy further underscores the author’s life-writing as a continual search for the self, an unfinished construct. My analysis focuses on the rhetorical, psychological, and political aspects of the first-person narrative in Boulouque’s first book.

From its onset, *Mort d’un silence* defies easy categorization. The first sentence fragment, “New York, septembre 2001” (13) puts the narrator and the reader into a well-known city in the recent past. We learn that the speaker used to enjoy cinnamon tea at Border’s books and the view of St. Paul’s Chapel when not on the Columbia University campus. A second brief section refers to the disappearance of the World Trade Towers “one Tuesday morning” (13) as sentences give way to fragmentary expressions. The last two expressions sum up the New York City catastrophe as follows: “Le terrorisme, les absents” (14). The same preoccupations propel the subsequent narrative section in which we learn that the narrator’s name is Clémence, that she is French, and that she shares her personal story about terrorism and the dead with her university roommate as they wait for telephone service to be restored (17). The delay in hearing/reading the narrator’s account continues for four more pages as the brief outline of events on the well-recognized date of September 11, 2001 further entices the reader. The summative terms in this section, “Le terrorisme, mon père, ma perte” (18), leave the reader wondering how this constellation of words will intersect in the narrator’s account.

The deferral of information about Clémence's past heightens the reader's curiosity at the beginning of *Mort d'un silence* through the rhetorical figures of *paralepsis*, *aposiopesis*, and *paronomasia*. *Paralepsis*, the Greek word for "omission," or "disregard" (Lanham 71) occurs at key moments in the text. For example, the narrator tells us "Je suis la fille du juge Boulouque, du terrorisme, des années quatre-vingt, des attentats parisiens" (20) only to add, "Et je suis orpheline de tout cela" (20). In the first utterance, she summarizes her life; in the second, she seemingly negates it. As in the opening pages of the book, the narrative simultaneously draws us in and rejects us. The second paragraph on page 20 follows the same movement: rather than concentrating on her childhood, the narrator returns to the present moment of writing in order to say that "no one remembers [her] father and that the wave of terrorist attacks in Paris in the 1980s is confused with the ones that came later"(20). This change in point of view illustrates the narrator's tendency to understate her emotionally charged past. At the same time, it indicates the complex narrative scheme of the book: childhood memories and sensations are juxtaposed with those of two adult narrators, the 24-year-old Clémence, Columbia University student, and the 26-year-old Clémence, autobiographical writer.

Paralepsis appears in other scenes from *Mort d'un silence* in which tragic circumstances overcome the narrator as a child. For example, when she learns that her father will be accompanied by a bodyguard, she bursts into tears because such a change frightens her. Clémence the adult writer sums up the event by recalling "la sensation d'une main passée dans mes cheveux et de l'étoffe de la chemise de mon père sur ma joue" (35). Without understanding the reasons behind the extra protection for her father, the narrator states simply that as a nine-year-old, she felt "overwhelmed" (36). The absence of details on the adult narrator's part and the effectiveness of physical comfort in calming the 9-year-old Clémence bespeak the narrator's

young age at the time of the incident all the while allowing the reader's imagination to conjure up the scene.

Likewise, *paralepsis* helps the narrator restrict the scope of her memories, while hinting at the writing process as selection. She states, "Je ne parle que de cela. De mes yeux d'enfant sur son regard perdu Le reste n'est que vacarme, coups infligés pour rien" (59). These few lines reinforce the fact that at age nine, she sensed that something was troubling her father but that his problems exceeded her capacity for understanding. *Paralepsis* enables the adult narrative voice to tell us that of her childhood memories, the ones relating to her father stand out; she refers to the lesser important ones using the terms "le reste," "vacarme," and "coups infligés" (59). By seeming to pass over her more insignificant memories, the narrator nevertheless alludes to the richness of her relationship with her father.

Aposiopesis, or "stopping suddenly in midcourse – leaving a statement unfinished" (Lanham 15) also contributes to the disclosure and concealment tension of the narrator's account. One such example occurs just months before her father's suicide, in a half-finished note to her late grandfather, in which Clémence says, "Beaucoup de choses ont jailli de notre vie: papa fait du terrorisme (...)" (87). The ellipsis closing the sentence implies that the 13-year-old Clémence did not comprehend her father's *anti*-terrorist activities at the time that they were happening. Moreover, it indicates the poignant quality of such a remark for the younger adult narrator who rediscovered the note years later, and for us, the readers, already acquainted with Judge Boulouque's date of death.

Similarly, the narrator enumerates a series of expressions qualifying her father only to "finish" the list with an ellipsis, as follows: "Je suis la fille d'un homme, qui était magistrat, qui n'a peut-être pas supporté le système . . . qui en a été fauché, qui. . ." (58). *Aposiopesis* at the

end of the series reminds us of the years that have ensued from the time the narrator experienced her father's death to the time she chose to write about it. The older "voice," that of an adult, has gained a depth of understanding about her deceased parent that the young daughter lacked. The ellipsis is a visual indication of the fact that the narrator could continue her description of her father if she wanted to do so; it also connotes that she has limited her enumeration of the judge's traits in order to stress what she said initially, namely: "Je suis la fille d'un homme. . ." (58).

A third rhetorical element evident in *Mort d'un silence* is *paronomasia*, or "punning; playing on the sounds and meanings of words" (Lanham 73). The narrator's use of the term "orpheline" is a case in point (20, 127). In the first instance, she refers to herself as "orpheline de tout cela" (20). The antecedent of "cela" is a long sentence characterizing the narrator as "la fille du juge Boulouque, du terrorisme, des années quatre-vingt, des attentats parisiens" (20). Associated with the word "orphan" are the notions of death, the lack of one or both parents, loss, and bereavement. At the same time, the sentence, "Et je suis orpheline de tout *cela*" [my emphasis] minimizes the narrator's childhood experiences in order to suggest that she has moved beyond her status of orphan to something else. Recounting her story belongs to the vague future alluded to in the expression "de tout cela" (20).

However future-oriented "orpheline" may strike us at the beginning of *Mort d'un silence*, the term, in summing up the narrator's writing near the end of the book, has an ironic cast. When the adult narrative voice declares that she is *only* an orphan with her story ["Je ne suis qu'une orpheline avec son histoire" (127).], we readers know that she is indeed *that*, and so much more. Through her autobiographical *récit* (account), she has shared her childhood preoccupations, her thoughts as a foreign student at Columbia University on September 11, 2001,

her concerns about the future of humanity, as well as her speculations about a possible commitment to writing (127) in the future.

Besides the word play on “orpheline,” *paronomasia* is again evident in the narrator’s use of the expression, “la fille du juge Boulouque.” The term initially appears on page 20, as the narrator reveals her identity for the first time. She explains who she is in the conventional way, that is, by disclosing her father’s family name, “Boulouque.” She later uses the same expression, “Fille du Juge,” with the nouns capitalized, to refer to the mythic concept of a daughter following in her father’s professional footsteps. The capital letters connote a formidable idea whose details the narrator has not explored. A slightly altered version of the expression, “la fille du juge” mars Clémence’s childhood. She is called “Sale fille de juge” during recess at school when she is 10 years old, at the height of the Gordji Affair in France (43). Although the “juge” mentioned here is generic, Clémence realizes for the first time while being taunted that her relationship with her father can be hurtful.

Near the end of *Mort d’un silence*, the lack of capital letters in the expression “Je suis la fille du juge Boulouque. . .,” (125), goes along with the narrator’s acceptance of the trite aspects of her story: every daughter will confront the death of her father at some point, just as she realizes that she will always be his descendant. In the three examples cited above, the word “fille” changes meanings from “daughter in a family” to “despicable individual” to “adult in the same career as her well-known father” to “Judge Boulouque’s offspring.” The last example stresses the narrator’s importance in her own right as well: the sentence begins with “Je” and ends with an unspoken “sauf moi”: “Je suis la fille du juge Boulouque et cela ne rappelle plus rien à personne, *sauf moi*” [my emphasis]. With each utterance of the modified expression, “Fille du Juge,” the narrator makes a stronger statement about her own individuality.

If the narrator relies on *paronomasia* or “punning” as a technique for imparting imagistic continuity to her text through the repetition of similar terms, she speaks more directly in *Mort d'un silence* about her coming to writing. For her, the assumption of authorship has progressed slowly in that it has involved coming to terms with her life experiences and then committing them to paper successfully (18). Moreover, the numerous unsatisfactory attempts that she has made have overshadowed her faith in her ability as a writer (19). The narrator nevertheless recognizes the therapeutic value of the written word as follows: “Ne pas garder mon deuil pour moi. Tuer le silence”(19). Writing provides her with the means for overcoming her silence about her father’s death, thereby allowing her to chart her spiritual progress towards adulthood.

The 26-year-old narrator speaks frankly at the end of the novel about the psychological benefits of writing: uncovering memories increases our self-knowledge and ultimately changes us. A series of verbs connoting aggression indicates the violent, painful aspect of such a transformation: “Alors, je barre, je raye. Je biffe ce que j’écris, ce que je crois être moi, pendant quelques minutes ou quelques pages” (127). Implicit in the narrator’s creation of an autobiographical account is the idea of excising less pertinent aspects. She sums up the process as follows: “Je me détruis, sans me tuer. Je suis l’aînée de mon père, qui rature sa vie au lieu d’y renoncer” (127). In the end, the writing act allows the 26-year-old narrator to re-interpret her relationship with her father, recognize her separateness from him, and gain a sense of control over her own life.

Writing as cure or “scriptotherapy” is a late 20th century term referring to “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (Henke xii-xiii). For the narrator, Clémence, this means recalling her childish reactions to the events leading up to her father’s suicide, re-examining her feelings as a university student in

New York City in September 2001, and commenting on herself from the vantage point of a 26-year-old engaged in writing her first book. In remembering her preoccupations at the age of nine, for example, the narrator insists on her similarity to other spoiled little girls by revealing her indulgence in sweets to the point of making herself sick (25-26, 47) and her imaginary illnesses in order to stay home from school (24-25). She also emphasizes the gestural rather than verbal bond that she shared with her father: for example, when she traveled by air for the first time, she wordlessly took her father's hand at the moment of take-off, only to find it damp, like her own (30-31).

By comparison, the narrator of university age is able to articulate the political impact of September 11, 2001 for her, personally. At first, the noise interrupts the quietness of her morning routine (13-14). Later, in racing home after the World Trade Towers have been destroyed, she repeats "If I can just keep it together" as a mantra (18) while feeling tremendously alone. She also admits to having tried to escape her memories of her father by studying at Columbia University only to find out that "memories are not place-specific. Places can be destroyed, but the memories remain with us" (130). The jarring events of September 11, 2001 trigger the release of the 24-year-old's silenced memories, emotions, and personal story through speech and later through writing.

According to psychologists from the 19th-21st century, exposure to an event reminiscent of one's original trauma can provoke an emotional response similar to one's reaction in the past (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 167). Moreover, one may only begin to understand the trauma in revisiting it, that is, in processing it for the first time from a more distant standpoint (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 4). The narrator's witnessing the Twin Towers disaster and its devastation for New Yorkers plunges her back into the evening of December 13, 1986 when she heard her father's

gunshot and then lost him forever (Caruth, *Trauma* 5). Her reawakened feelings of helplessness and loss, accompanied by a large dose of compassion, thus compel her to share her own story with her roommate.

The retelling of the narrator's story in written form two years later further reiterates the therapeutic aspect of writing. Psychologist Jennifer Freyd sums up the process as the “episodic interpretation and reintegration of previously disjointed sensory and affective memories” (170, quoted in Henke xii), whereas Shoshana Felman has called retelling a traumatic experience the site of a “surrogate transference process” in which the author anticipates “a public validation of his or her life testimony” (25, quoted in Henke xii). For Clémence, the 26-year-old narrator, coming to writing also indicates a self-affirmation (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 21-23). By reimmersing herself in her earlier memories, she evaluates herself both at the moment of writing and at other points during her lifetime: she states, “. . . je ne témoigne de rien d'autre que de mon enfance espionne. Ce sont là des méfaits que je ne regretterai jamais – grace à eux, j'ai davantage de souvenirs de mon père . . .” (75). The narrator asks forgiveness of no one; rather, she justifies the times that she eavesdropped on conversations not meant for her because they afforded her more memories of her father.

Additionally, she muses about her father's suicide in terms of herself: she was thirteen at the time of his death and, at a moment just beyond the composition of her account, specifically, at 26 years, eleven months, and six days, she will have lived more than half her life without her father (20-21). What predominates in the previous sentence is the idea that the narrator has *survived* her father's death. By commenting on feelings towards her late parent at three different ages, the narrator imparts continuity to her seemingly fragmented life-writing.

As a first-person autobiographical account, however, *Mort d'un silence* makes no claim to tell everything about the author's life, in the manner of Rousseau or St. Augustine. Nor does it pretend to reveal the author's darkest secrets and confessions. Instead, Clémence Boulouque's adult narrator uses the rhetorical figures of *paralepsis*, *aposiopesis*, and *paronomasia* as a way to conceal and reveal information pertaining to distinct moments in her life: her spoiled pre-adolescence and her father's death, her grief resulting from his demise, her reactions to the events of September 11, 2001 as a student in New York City, and her committing her ideas to book form.

Only in reading the narrator's memories of being a Columbia University student do we gain an awareness of her political preoccupation with the world at large, a characteristic of her young adulthood. It is here that she reveals her regrets as an adult. She apologizes to Americans in general for her presumptuous belief that she could share in their pain on September 11, 2001 when she was not directly touched by the disaster. She also expresses feeling sorry for having imposed her desires on New Yorkers: she wanted to donate blood and volunteer at St. Luke's Hospital, but was not needed (128-129). As she summarizes, "J'aurais voulu leur dire mon amour" (129), we realize that she *has indeed* conveyed her feelings towards her adoptive country, albeit belatedly, through her written narrative.

It is interesting to note at this juncture that Clémence's *récit* is told from the perspective of an individual, a "me," versus a collective "them" until its final pages. As a solitary little girl and young woman, she has always confronted her parents, grandparents, reporters, fellow students, and the like, alone. On the fourth to the last page of the book, however, the narrator feels a sense of community while attending a synagogue on September 11, 2001. The rabbi exhorts his congregation to examine its "truths;" in using the first-person plural subject pronoun

“nous,” we understand that he has included himself (128). As a result of this service, Clémence draws closer to her readers in the closing lines of her book, in which she intimates that others have endured loss and suffering similar to her own: “Ce passé, comme un pas qui nous porte. Vers eux. Vers nous. Vers. . . (130). Her final ellipsis, another example of *aposiopesis*, connotes the unfinished quality of her evaluation of the past. Although she has shared “a significant slice of her life” (May 214), 13 years in all, with her readers, the unknown future looms in the three points of suspension that conclude her self-writing.

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