VISIONS, VOICES, AND VOISINAGES: CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN WOMEN’S SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

by

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Abstract

The last thirty years have been a time of considerable change in both Canadian religious life and in Canadian women's lives, as well as in the interrelationships between the two. While Canadian society has undergone a process of increasing secularization, Canadian women have been engaged in a struggle for equal rights within religious and secular institutions. During this time, both prominent and ordinary Canadian women have published, in ever-increasing numbers, autobiographical narratives centred on their experiences of the sacred. This study analyses the relationships between the guiding metaphors, the narrative forms, and the implied readers of sixteen contemporary Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies. The emphasis is on the dialectical negotiations through which these authors come to live in creative tension with their competing identities and loyalties.

Spiritual autobiography has received very little attention in Canadian literary criticism. Most studies of the genre equate it with the conversion narrative. However, the history of religious life-narratives is characterized by a diversity of literary forms, of which conversion is only one. If we define spiritual autobiography as a life-narrative with an explicit focus on the individual's relationship with a particular religious group or tradition, or in which the emphasis is on spiritual (as opposed to exclusively material, intellectual, or psychological) concerns, then a number of characteristics of the genre become evident. It is marked primarily by a double vision of the physical and spiritual worlds, by a literary hybridity that combines autobiography and hermeneutics, and by a strong orientation toward its reader. Furthermore, there are many tensions inherent in the genre itself, particularly for contemporary women: between tradition and innovation, between the individual and the community, between private and public identities, between religious and social engagements, between freedom and enclosure, between embodiment and spirituality.

The contemporary spiritual autobiographies in this study are divided into four groups of four texts each. The memoirs of Lois Wilson, Mary Jo Leddy, Andrée Richard, and Joanna Manning are narratives of public figures in Canadian churches. These women negotiate between public and private identities, and between religious and social commitments. The personal and introspective autobiographical accounts by Marcelle Brisson, Andrée Pilon Quiviger, Celeste Snowber Schroeder, and Micheline Piotte are
written by private individuals who focus on their everyday experiences. These women wrestle with the tensions between their realities as embodied beings and their more transcendent spiritual yearnings. Two books of autobiographical fiction by Jovette Marchessault and two works of nature writing by Sharon Butala are narratives by solitary mystics whose spiritual quests seek to reconcile cosmic, natural, and historical perspectives. Finally, four anthologies by women who perceive themselves as being on the margins of Canadian society (First Nations Christian women, women from a low-income neighbourhood, Jewish women, and Muslim women) find the sacred in their relationships with particular communities. However, a lively tension between individual and communal values never ceases to inform their writings.

The study concludes with some suggestions for further research into the genre of spiritual autobiography in Canadian literature, as well as a discussion of the implications of the rhetorical strategies of these authors for the teaching of spiritual autobiography in the secular academic context.
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In loving memory of my grandmother  
Jean Christy Anglin Owen  
(1912-2000)

And with joyful welcome to my niece  
Juliette Jean Aikman  
(born July 26, 2001)

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die . . .
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . .
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”

From Ecclesiastes 3.1-7
Chapter One

Placing Contemporary Canadian Women's Spiritual Autobiographies in Context

Introduction

Spiritual autobiography is a relatively unknown genre in the field of Canadian literature, for reasons that I will address further on. However, there are numerous reasons for undertaking an analysis of the genre as it has been practised by Canadian women over the last thirty years or so. I will be using the term “spiritual autobiography” to refer to life-narratives with an explicit focus on the individual’s relationship with a particular religious group or tradition, or in which the emphasis is on spiritual (as opposed to exclusively material, intellectual, or psychological) concerns. I do not intend to construct or promote an essentialist category of women’s spirituality, but rather to examine the very different ways in which individual women inscribe their spiritual life-narratives within – and at the same time, often, contest – their religious and social imagined communities. The last thirty years have been a time of tremendous change in Canadian religious life, in Canadian women’s lives, and in the interrelationships between the two. While Canadian society has undergone a process of increasing secularization, Canadian women have been engaged in a struggle for equal rights within both religious and secular institutions. Paradoxically, as Canadian women have taken on more prominent roles within their communities of faith, the public influence of religion within their national community has been on the decline. This is but one of many contradictions faced by contemporary Canadian women who choose to tell their life stories in a religious or spiritual context. The focus of this study will be on the discursive strategies that allow these authors to hold their conflicting loyalties, beliefs, and identities in a creative tension, through the imaginative use of metaphor, narrative form, and audience appeals.

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1 When I refer to “Canada” in this study, this term designates the entire country, including Québec, and “Canadian literature” embraces literature in both English and French (as well as other minority languages, which are not the subject of discussion here). The term “Québec” applies to the province of that name, while “English Canada” excludes Québec and other francophone communities. I will refer to the collective grouping of all francophone communities within Canada (including Québec) as “French Canada.”
The academic criticism of autobiography or life-writing, and in particular of women’s autobiographies, has gained momentum over the last twenty years, to the point where there are now a wide variety of competing and sometimes antagonistic critical approaches to the subject(s). Therefore I wish to clarify from the outset my motives for undertaking this study, the goals that I hope it will accomplish, and the contribution that I believe it will bring to the fields of Canadian literature and the criticism of autobiography. I will begin with what feminist sociologist Liz Stanley would call a brief “intellectual autobiography” (64) in order to situate myself in relationship to my subject of study. My own critical interest in women’s spiritual autobiography stems from what literary scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe, in their Introduction to the anthology Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader (1998), as the “most central” reason for “[t]he growing academic interest in women’s autobiography”: the fact that “women reading women’s autobiographical writings have experienced them as ‘mirrors’ of their own unvoiced aspirations” (5).² Women are not alone in confessing to a fascination with autobiographical texts as mirrors or models for their own lives. In Metaphors of the Self (1972), literary critic James Olney writes that his “interest in autobiography . . . is on the one hand psychological-philosophical, on the other hand moral; it is focused in one direction on the relation traceable between lived experience and its written record and in the other direction on what that written record offers to us as readers and as human beings” (x-xi). More recently, in Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography (1992), autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin offers a list of fellow critics who “testify” to a “felt difference” between reading autobiography and reading other (especially fictional) texts (21). Furthermore, some feminist critics, like Carolyn G. Heilbrun in Writing a Woman’s Life (1988), draw attention to the ways in which women’s actual life experiences may be shaped (whether consciously or unconsciously) by the narrative models available to them.

My own background, which has made me curious about the place of women’s spiritual autobiography in Canadian literature, has also made me especially sensitive to the areas of conflict, tension, and paradox within contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual life-

² The mirror metaphor, as Smith and Watson are no doubt aware, is one that has been criticized by many feminist theorists, from French feminist Luce Irigaray to Canadian literary critic Helen M. Buss. Nevertheless, it has rich connotations that literary scholars continue to mine, as the title of literary critic Susanna Egan’s recent Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography (1999) indicates.
narratives. I am a Christian whose spirituality has been deeply influenced by other religious traditions, most notably Buddhism and Judaism. I have studied Christian theology as well as comparative literature, and my interest in both religion and literary writing is personal as well as academic. As a feminist, I have struggled to reconcile my spiritual faith with some of the aspects of institutional religion that leave me (and many other women) feeling frustrated or excluded. As an academic, particularly one working in the area of religion and literature, I have often wondered what place my spiritual beliefs and practices have in the secular and often highly sceptical context of the university. As a Canadian born in Montréal at the end of the 1960s, and brought up in the competing contexts of Canadian multiculturalism and Québec linguistic tension, I feel uncomfortable with exclusivist definitions of my own spirituality, nationality, and linguistic and cultural heritages. I am interested in the struggles that the authors I study may also face in trying to reconcile their various identities: as women of faith, as Canadians, as feminists, and so on. In particular, as a literary scholar, I seek to understand the textual strategies that these writers use in order to hold these various identities or conflicting loyalties in a creative tension; one that will not overwhelm them, but rather will allow them to go on participating fully in their various communities. I have borrowed the notion of “creative tension” from Lois Wilson, the first woman moderator of the United Church of Canada, whose memoir I discuss in Chapter Three. Wilson uses the expression “creative tension” to describe her own attempts to live with some of the inner conflicts that she experiences between her feminism and her leadership role within a male-dominated institution, and between the exclusiveness and the inclusiveness of Christianity (78, 132).

Tension is created when women feel pulled in two or more opposing directions by competing or conflicting loyalties, beliefs, responsibilities, or assumptions. There are many ways to resolve such tensions, but contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers often seem to prefer the way of paradox, of accepting that the process of negotiating between apparently polar opposites may in fact be part of the spiritual life itself. Christian theologian and historian Esther de Waal, discussing paradox in the monastic Rule of St. Benedict, writes that “as we learn to live with paradox we have to admit that two realities may be equally true; we may be asked to hold together contrasting forces” (33-34). In order to hold their many identities and commitments in creative tension, the writers whose works I will be examining
in this study often engage in a series of dialectical negotiations between contradictory concepts. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson refer to the work of feminist critics Nancy K. Miller and Domna C. Stanton as a process of “map[ping] women’s dialectical negotiations with a history of their own representation as idealized or invisible” (10). Contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers must contend with many other established and often exclusionary dichotomies as well: public or private, embodied or spiritual, nature or culture, individual or community, religious or social, inside or outside, freedom or enclosure, tradition or innovation, sacred or secular. Following Smith and Watson, I will be referring to the rhetorical strategies through which the writers wrestle with these dichotomies as dialectical negotiations. Although these authors may not arrive at a neat dialectical equation of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, their texts bring two contradictory concepts into dialogue with each other, hold them in creative tension, and often arrive at paradoxical yet aesthetically and theologically satisfying solutions to the writers’ spiritual dilemmas. Women who choose to write sacred life-narratives identify which aspects of their inheritance are life-giving, and which are soul-destroying. Through their literary efforts, they often arrive at creative resolutions to these tensions or paradoxes, finding textual ways of transforming that with which they cannot live, into that with which they can. However, although sometimes they manage to resolve tensions rhetorically, at other times the assumptions of the genres and the metaphors that they use themselves create further dichotomies. The analysis of these “fault-lines” in women’s religious life-writing can be instructive for the study of autobiography in general, particularly for contemporary genres such as crisis writing and postmodernist autobiography. It may be that it is more difficult to resolve conflicts and tensions imaginatively in non-fiction writing than in fiction, poetry, and drama.

Developing an awareness of the tensions, conflicts, and paradoxes in contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies has also forced me to confront some of the tensions in my own work as a literary critic, as a feminist, and as an individual whose interest in religion and spirituality goes beyond the merely intellectual. I will discuss some of these

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3 In Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography (1999), literary critic Susanna Egan defines crisis as “an unstable condition seeking change,” and includes in her list of autobiographies of crisis: documentary film, narratives of diaspora, and accounts of disaster, illness, and death (5).
tensions at greater length in Chapter Two, when I present my theoretical and methodological approach. However, I wish to draw attention from the outset to the fundamental tension with which I have had to wrestle, one that I imagine is faced by all scholars who engage in the academic study of religion outside of theological institutions, yet who are themselves people of faith. Although I study the linguistic constructs of women spiritual autobiographers as rhetorical strategies, I have a fundamentally sympathetic attitude toward religious beliefs, spiritual practices, and sacred experiences. This sympathy creates a gulf between my approach to spiritual texts and, for example, that of postmodernist critics, of Marxist/materialist critics, or of psychoanalytic critics, whose discussions of religion in literature are based on the premise that “God” is a purely human construct. Here I am in agreement with English professor Graham Good’s contention in Humanism Betrayed (2001) that most theoretical approaches that are prevalent in academic circles today share a certain “hostility to religion (a hostility that is perhaps the strongest common trait shared by Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche)” (68). My own approach to the subject of religion and literature is radically different from this “hermeneutic of suspicion” (62). Although I recognize that spiritual autobiographies, like sacred texts, are discursive productions with particular material circumstances, I nevertheless give credence to the belief of these writers that there is a spiritual dimension to existence that they seek to express through language. I state this perspective not as an unchanging truth, but as a legitimate assumption that I bring to my study of these texts. Furthermore, I believe that a failure to take into consideration the uniqueness of the religious dimension of spiritual autobiography – without which the genre makes no sense as a genre – may in fact be an obstacle to a full appreciation and understanding of contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies.

One of the factors that makes it complicated both to identify oneself as sympathetic to religious concerns in literature, and also to define the genre of spiritual autobiography, is that there are no simple definitions for terms such as “religion,” “spirituality,” and “the sacred.”

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4 Although I wish to distance myself from a totalizing approach to a hermeneutics of suspicion, I also (like Good) recognize the importance of such an approach when used judiciously and in combination with other kinds of hermeneutics. For example, feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza proposes a model that combines a “hermeneutics of suspicion” with a “hermeneutics of proclamation,” a “hermeneutics of remembrance,” and a “hermeneutics of creative actualization” in reclaiming women’s experience as part of biblical interpretation (15).
I will use these words more or less interchangeably throughout this study, with slight nuances between them, relying partly on popular usage and partly on sociological definitions. The sociological definitions of religion that inform my use of the term are those that differentiate between sacred and secular consciousness, such as Roland Robertson’s proposal in The Sociological Interpretation of Religion (1970) that “[r]eligious culture is that set of beliefs and symbols (and values deriving directly therefrom) pertaining to a distinction between an empirical and a super-empirical, transcendent reality; the affairs of the empirical being subordinated in significance to the non-empirical” (47). This definition emphasizes the relationship between beliefs, symbols, and values (all of which are crucial to the literary study of spiritual autobiography), as well as the distinction made between the empirical (or profane) and the transcendent (or sacred) realms, a distinction shared by all the spiritual autobiographers in this study. Even when these writers experience and describe the profound interpenetration of the two realms, they give precedence to spiritual concerns in determining or influencing their behaviour and choices, particularly ethical ones. Emile Durkheim’s more functional definitions of religion also underlie the arguments in this study. Durkheim emphasizes religious practice as well as belief, and stresses the presence of community in the cultural production of religion: “[La religion] est un système de croyances et de pratiques relatives à des choses sacrées – croyances et pratiques communes à une collectivité déterminée” (70). While the presence of a religious community is central to most definitions of religion, popular usage tends to distinguish between religion as an organized and institutionalized set of beliefs, and spirituality as a more private and individualistic experience of the sacred, and my own emphasis will follow this practice.

Elsewhere, Durkheim defines “les êtres ou choses sacrés” as “ceux que défendent et protègent des interdictions, tandis que les êtres ou les choses profanes sont ceux qui sont soumis à ces interdictions et qui doivent n’entrer en contact avec les premiers que suivant des rites définis” (64). The sacred – as I will be using the term in this study – refers to anything that is considered to be holy, or that is associated with the religious or spiritual (rather than the purely material and empirical) realm of life. Although some scholars of religion and literature, such as William Closson James in Locations of the Sacred (1998), prefer this term because of its relative freedom from the more negative connotations that adhere to the words religion and spirituality, the fact that the writers I will be discussing themselves use the
words religion, spirituality, and spirit to refer to their own beliefs and experiences gives me
the incentive to reclaim this terminology for literary studies. I also wish to clarify my use of
the term theology. Theology, in this study, refers to any comprehensive system of thought
and philosophy regarding religion or spirituality, and not exclusively or necessarily to that of
Christianity. I use the word theology more in the sense of religious philosophy or spiritual
world-view – ways of thinking about the sacred – rather than strictly as discourse about, or
the study of, the Christian God. Finally, I will also be employing the term hermeneutics to
refer to “the theory of interpretation in general – that is, a formulation of the principles and
methods involved in getting at the meaning of all written texts” (Abrams 91). I have chosen
this word because of its roots in biblical interpretation, that is, in the interpretation of sacred
texts. Generally, I use the term in a fairly limited context, to refer to the particular
interpretive strategies (either implicit or explicit) of individual writers or anthologies.

Before I provide some of the necessary background to the study of contemporary
Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies, I wish to address one final consideration: the
aesthetic value of these texts as works of literature. Although I will continue to address this
question throughout my study, I will make two points here. The first is that I agree with
religious historian Virginia Lieson Brereton, and other scholars who work in the field of
women’s life-writing, that “literary merit . . . is an increasingly problematic ascription” (xiii).
One of the difficulties in assessing the literary merit of spiritual autobiography is that the
conventions of the genre are not widely known or understood, a lacuna which I hope to begin
to address in the remainder of this chapter. The second point is that in spite of this claim, I
do in fact have my own personal scale of appreciation for the texts in this study. However, I
have come to realize that theological and aesthetic considerations are not easily separated for
me, or for other critics. The literary texts that are the least satisfying to me from an aesthetic
point of view are those that also present what I consider to be the most superficial or
simplistic spiritual world-views. Nevertheless, I have endeavoured to approach each of the
books in this study both critically and with respect.

For I do have a great deal of respect for the genre of spiritual autobiography as it has
been practised by women. As Brereton points out in From Sin to Salvation (1991), in her
discussion of nineteenth and twentieth-century Protestant American women’s conversion
narratives, spiritual autobiography has generated many fascinating examples of “women’s
vernacular literature,” by offering women throughout the centuries “a rare and sanctioned way to tell their stories” (xi). Contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers are mapping new literary territory for women of all faiths in this country by attempting to write their spiritual life-narratives in a secular or multifaith context. Their rhetorical efforts not only provide a model for other religious women in the writing and living of their own lives, they also raise important questions for all readers regarding the transformative power of language and ritual, the inescapability of living within an ethical framework of some kind, the influence of deeply held beliefs and values on the living and writing of lives, and the importance, at times, of learning to dwell in paradox.

**Spiritual Autobiography as Genre**

The genre of spiritual autobiography is not a familiar one to most readers of Canadian literature, at least in part because there is very little critical literature on the subject. If the phrase conjures up any images at all from the history of non-fiction writing in this country, they are probably stereotypical scenes from a distant past: Jesuit priests recording their impressions of New France and boasting of the souls that they are intent on converting to Christianity; Presbyterian ministers hunched over their private diaries in dusty, book-filled studies; French Canadian nuns recording the ecstatic visions that lead them to found hospitals or schools; Protestant missionaries sending enthusiastic first-person accounts back to their home congregations in small, Canadian towns. While these historical images are all legitimate, I suspect that very few people would think of the literary productions of contemporary and sometimes iconoclastic Canadian women when they hear the term spiritual autobiography. The literary criticism of the genre of religious life-writing in general remains a fairly limited field, from which Canadian literature is almost completely absent. Such criticism is dominated by American and British scholars who focus on the Puritan conversion narrative as the exemplary representative of the genre, or on paradigmatic texts such as St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (ca. 397-400), John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), Cardinal John Henry Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), or Thomas Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain* (1948). Most critics typically focus on historical rather than contemporary examples of spiritual autobiography, and until fairly recently both
women’s narratives and non-Christian texts were viewed as problematic to the genre. This restrictive critical landscape has been changing over the last twenty years, as the study of life-writing and of women’s autobiography has been expanding. One of the difficulties that has plagued the literary criticism of spiritual autobiography has been disagreement over precisely what it is that characterizes the genre.

The notion of genre is a slippery term in literary theory. Critics find it difficult to agree on the exact characteristics and distinguishing features of a literary genre; for some, the label has a narrow meaning, while for others it is used more or less interchangeably with broader categories such as literary form or mode. In “Autobiographie et histoire littéraire” (1975), Philippe Lejeune argues that as critics and teachers, the choices we make with regard to our objects of study are not innocent. Genres, he insists, are social institutions with which we collaborate by consolidating them through scientific study (903-904). The parallel that Lejeune draws between the way in which a generic body or corpus is formed, and the more insidious exclusions of classism and racism, stands as a cautionary tale for any discussion of generic definition and classification:

Une fois décidé le choix de modèle, on constitue le ‘corpus’ par un système d’exclusions: on jugera soit comme des échecs ou des cas aberrants, soit comme des éléments extérieurs au corpus, tout ce qui n’est pas conforme au modèle. Le genre devient une sorte de ‘club’ dont le critique s’institue gardien, sélectionnant à coups d’exclusions une ‘race’ relativement pure. (914)

In this study I will adopt a very broad understanding of genre as “a recurring type of literature” (Abrams 75), recognizing that although genres are “rather arbitrary ways of classifying literature,” they are also “convenient in critical discussions” (Abrams 77). The books that I have chosen to refer to as spiritual autobiographies in this study could, and frequently do, receive other generic classifications. As theorist Heather Dubrow writes in an introductory volume on Genre (1982): “[G]eneric codes frequently function like a tone of voice rather than a more clearcut signal: they provide one interpretation of the meaning of the text, they direct our attention to the parts of it that are especially significant, but they do not and they cannot offer an infallible key to its meaning” (106). By re-examining spiritual autobiography as a genre, and by grouping the texts in this study around that heading, I will focus particularly on the ways in which contemporary Canadian women situate themselves
and their beliefs, through their writing strategies, in relation to their religious as well as their literary and cultural heritages.

Like autobiography itself, the genre of spiritual autobiography is a literary oddity. Any literary category that can encompass not only the reasoned theological reflections of St. Augustine's late fourth-century *Confessions* but also the impassioned sermons of nineteenth-century African American Methodist women preachers, not only the ecstatically erotic visions of medieval women mystics but also the staunchly repressed sexuality of Puritan conversion narratives, must be a capacious and fluid generic label indeed. The difficulties that literary critics experience in arriving at inclusive definitions for spiritual autobiography may explain why it remains largely unknown and unexamined as a separate literary genre. However, I believe that it is precisely by reviving the notion of spiritual autobiography as a genre that one may come to understand the connections between some of the different manifestations of this unique type of contemporary Canadian women's life-writing. In order to arrive at a definition of spiritual autobiography that is at once broad enough to encompass the wide variety of writings that have been designated by that label, and narrow enough to be methodologically useful, I will begin with a very basic definition of spiritual autobiography according to its subject matter (religious or spiritual concerns), its subject (the autobiographical "I"), and its literary form (prose). Other literary critics have also focused on subject matter as a starting point for their definitions of spiritual autobiography. For English professor and Jesuit priest David J. Leigh, in *Circuitous Journeys* (2000), "[w]hen [the] lifelong search for an ultimate reality that gives meaning to one's life in the face of evil, suffering, and death becomes the theme of [a] book, then the writer has created a 'spiritual autobiography' " (xi). Literary scholar Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, in *Archetypes of Conversion* (1985), describes the central concern of the spiritual autobiographer as "the growth of the soul" (35), and argues that it is important to retain "a distinction between secular and spiritual autobiography" (28). Similarly, literary historian Frank Bowman, in "Le Statut littéraire de l'autobiographie spirituelle" (1982), refers to the presence of spiritual autobiography in literature as "l'existence d'un grand nombre de textes où . . . le narrateur raconte sa vie ou une partie de sa vie comme une recherche et découverte de la foi" (316). Such a broad definition has the advantage of allowing us to classify various types of spiritual
autobiography, such as the conversion narrative, as literary modes rather than as the defining exemplars of the genre itself.

By adopting a definition of spiritual autobiography that is based primarily on subject matter, I am contradicting the work of many literary critics who view spiritual autobiographies and conversion narratives as synonymous. Critics such as Peter Dorsey use spiritual autobiography as a classificatory term that includes all of the secular developments of the genre, provided they share a set of "narrative strategies centering on conversion" (Dorsey, Sacred Estrangement, 3). However, such categorizations blur the distinctions between such texts and works of a more religious character in which the motif of conversion plays a less central role (or is completely absent), distinctions that create some of the unique and paradoxical qualities of spiritual autobiography, as we shall see below. In my view, what remains unique about spiritual autobiography in the contemporary context is its concern with a reality that lies both beyond and within the realm of the everyday, the ordinary, or the material. A spiritual autobiography is a life story told with an awareness of the presence of the sacred in the life of the individual. On this point I am in full agreement with theologian James McClendon, Jr., who argues in Biography as Theology (1990) that the life stories of certain individuals are best understood as lives lived in the context of a deep religious faith: "Our question must . . . be whether the life-experience of [these individuals] is or is not understood better when it is treated as experience with God; that is, whether (as I believe) the ongoing story of their lives makes more or fuller sense when the involvement of God in that story is recognized, or when it is bracketed" (160, emphasis in the text). All of the women's autobiographies that I will analyse in the following pages make fuller sense to me when they are read as testimonies to a life that is lived primarily in dialogue (and perhaps even in tension or in disagreement) with a religious tradition or a community of faith, a life that is imbued with a sense of the sacred.

Another insight of genre theory that helps to explain specific aspects of spiritual autobiography is the emphasis of certain critics on the relationship and expectations that genre establishes between readers and writers. Dubrow argues that "genre . . . functions much like a code of behavior established between the author and his [or her] reader" (2). Genre theory in literary criticism draws attention to the ways in which literary genres set up a contract with their readers, through which they convey a complex set of ideological histories.
and assumptions. In an article entitled "Genre as Social Action" (1984) English professor Carolyn R. Miller proposes an "understanding of rhetorical genre" that "is based in rhetorical practice, in the conventions of discourse that a society establishes as ways of 'acting together' " (163). Miller's discussion of genre as a discursive action that arises in specific, recurring contexts provides an explanation for the diversity of texts that have been classified under the generic label of spiritual autobiography. For one of the paradoxes inherent in the genre of spiritual autobiography is that although by its very definition it is concerned with allegedly universal truths and values, at the same time it is, like all genres, highly influenced by its particular social, cultural, historical, and religious contexts. Spiritual autobiographers writing from different historical periods, religious communities, and cultural groups are engaged in very different acts, and are bound by very different religious, cultural, and rhetorical constraints. Yet their shared emphasis on religious or spiritual life does indeed give their writings a unique set of common characteristics.

If we define spiritual autobiographies as life-narratives with an explicit focus on the individual's relationship with a particular religious group or tradition, or in which the emphasis is on spiritual (as opposed to exclusively material, intellectual, or psychological) concerns, then one of the few claims that can be made with any certainty about the genre is that it has found expression in a remarkable diversity of narrative forms. Most literary historians trace the progressive manifestations of the genre of spiritual autobiography from Augustine, through the visionary writings of the medieval mystics, to the Puritan, Quaker, and Methodist narratives of the seventeenth century. In the West, St. Augustine's Confessions (ca. 397-400) is generally acclaimed as the paradigmatic text for both religious and secular autobiography. During the Middle Ages, the genre of hagiography – biographies of the Christian saints, often with embedded autobiographical passages – flourished alongside the visionary writings of Christian mystics such as Teresa of Ávila, Hildegard von Bingen, John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Ignatius of Loyola, Mechtild von Magdeburg, and others. With the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on the individual's unmediated relationships with both God and sacred scripture came a veritable outpouring of conversion narratives. Such first-person accounts of the individual journey from sin to salvation became, for seventeenth-century Puritans and Quakers, a requirement for acceptance into the community of believers. The most influential of these autobiographies was John Bunyan's
Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666), which provided the model for many subsequent conversion narratives (and was itself already following an accepted formula), but lesser known works by both women and men have survived in great numbers.5 Somewhat more recent Christian spiritual autobiographies that have followed the Augustinian model of religious and intellectual conversion include Leo Tolstoy's Ispoved (1879; A Confession), Thomas Merton's The Seven-Storey Mountain (1948), Dorothy Day's The Long Loneliness (1954), and C.S. Lewis's Surprised by Joy (1955).

Along with the conversion narrative, the hagiography, and the visionary writings of mysticism, the spiritual diary or journal has also given rise to many thoughtful examinations of the spiritual life, such as the 1694 Journal of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, imitated by many of his followers. The apology has served to emphasize in particular an individual's intellectual and spiritual development; examples include John Henry Newman's defence of his conversion to Catholicism, Apologia Pro Vita Sua (1864), and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's epistolary defence of her theological writings, La Respuesta a Sor Filotea (1691; The Answer to Sister Filotea). Narratives of pilgrimage have left a legacy of exciting and animated religious autobiographies, and continue to provide a popular vehicle for sacred life-writing, perhaps due to the popularity of the journey as a metaphor for the spiritual life, as well as to readers' attraction to tales of exotic locales. Margery Kempe's visions of Jesus lead her to abandon her husband periodically in order to embark on lengthy pilgrimages in The Book of Margery Kempe (ca. 1436), while John Bunyan's allegorical The Pilgrim's Progress (1678) was far more widely read than Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666), his actual spiritual autobiography. In the tradition of the Christian mystics, many of them women, religious autobiography has often taken the form of an account of visions or ecstatic revelations. Well-known classics include Teresa of Ávila's Libro de la vida (ca. 1565; The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself), Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love (ca. 1373), Mechtilde von Magdeburg's Ein vliessendes lieht der gotheit (ca. 1270; The Flowing Light of the Divinity), and Hildegard von Bingen's Scivias (ca. 1140; Showings). In “La Relation de 1654 de Marie de l'Incarnation: Une autobiographie spirituelle,” literary critic Michela Mengoli-Berti argues that the writings of other women

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5 For studies of Puritan and Quaker conversion narratives, see Shea and Caldwell.
mystics were a far more important influence on the spiritual autobiography of the French Canadian nun than were the Confessions of Augustine, thus calling into question the insistence of literary critics on Augustine's text as the model for all subsequent spiritual autobiography. Missionary biographies and autobiographies, with their focus not on the conversion of the author but on the conversion of other people, flourished as a distinct form of religious life-writing from the seventeenth century onwards. As Terrence L. Craig observes in his study of the auto/biographies of Canadian missionaries, The Missionary Lives (1997), "[t]hese works documented a clear and ostensible evangelist spirit at work almost everywhere in the world" (4), and were written to offer "a report of the missionary's progress" as well as "to encourage further support and to stimulate readers to come forward themselves as missionaries" (xvii).

This overview of some of the literary forms associated with spiritual autobiography still runs the risk, however, of obliterating diversity through broad generalizations. One of the fundamental problems with most literary histories of spiritual autobiography is their complete neglect of texts outside the Christian tradition. While this absence may be justified in delineating the contours of the genre of Christian spiritual autobiography, it is an unacceptable oversight if one wishes to define spiritual autobiography in a wider context. Certainly, in examining Canadian literature of the final quarter of the twentieth century, the period encompassed by this study, it is crucial to be aware of the different issues raised by literary models from traditions other than Western Christianity. Even within Christianity, as we have seen, there are significant differences between the Catholic tradition of mystical and visionary writings, and the Protestant legacy of conversion narratives. While Christianity may well be unique among religions in its preoccupation with the inner life of the spirit and with the process of conversion, virtually all of the world's spiritual traditions have produced autobiographical writings that in some way document the life of faith or religious commitment. The literary forms of religious or spiritual autobiography are often determined by the models of life-narrative – and, indeed, by the very definitions of life, self, and soul – that are upheld by a particular religious tradition, spiritual community, or cultural and literary context.

Like Christianity, other religious traditions have narrated the religious life through their own doctrinal and cultural lenses. Judaism's recognition of the importance of history
led to an early emphasis on the individual's role in historical events, rather than on details of private spiritual experience. Exceptions include Hasidic literature, in which rabbis would sometimes describe their spiritual development, and the Kabbalistic literature of visions and mystical insights. Diaries and memoirs have long provided records of the religious persecution of Jewish people, from fifteenth-century accounts of their expulsion from Spain, to works by both victims and survivors of the Holocaust, such as The Diary of Anne Frank (1947). Islamic spiritual autobiography found its earliest model in the biographical dictionaries that began to be published from the ninth century onwards, based on oral traditions of Muhammad and his followers. Narratives of the pilgrimage to Mecca became common during the Middle Ages, and provided another literary form for Islamic religious life-writing. Medieval mystics were among the earliest Muslims to recount their visions and spiritual experiences, in works such as al-Munqidh min al-dalaal (ca. 1095; Deliverance from Error) by scholar and Sufi mystic al-Ghazzaalii, which is often compared to Augustine's Confessions. Like Christianity, Islam has its share of conversion narratives; a contemporary example well known to many Western readers is The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965, with Alex Haley), by the eponymous African-American activist.

Pei-yi Wu's seminal work on autobiography in China, The Confucian's Progress (1990), provides insight into the factors that shaped spiritual narratives by Buddhist Monks, Confucians, and Neo-Confucians. The constraints of traditional Chinese literature provided no models for self-revelation, and early spiritual autobiographers had to cloak their accounts in the ceremonial and self-effacing conventions of biography. Literary forms which offered a greater potential for the expression of spiritual concerns were the diary, employed as a record of self-examination by Neo-Confucian Wu Yü-pi (1392-1469), and travel literature, which gained enormous popularity through Confucian apostate and Buddhist monk Teng Huo-chü's Nan-hsün lu (1565; The Record of a Quest in the South). Canadian scholar Phyllis Granoff, in her extensive work on the spiritual autobiographies of medieval Indian Jain monks, notes that "remembrance of past births" or "[r]emembered autobiography plays a fundamental role in the Jain quest for salvation" (16). Indeed, the religious view, widespread in India, that the self or soul is an identity that encompasses more than one biological lifetime, expands the purview of spiritual autobiography beyond the boundaries of one historical life. Finally, it should be emphasized that in some spiritual traditions, the long history of oral rather than
written literature has led to a lack of emphasis on written forms of religious autobiography. Outsiders have sometimes attempted to record the stories of those coming from such communities. The resulting texts, though appreciably distorted and subject to criticism, have become popular spiritual and political documents. Guatemalan activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983, with Elisabeth Burgos-Debray; translated as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*) and Native American Black Elk's *Black Elk Speaks* (1932, with John Neihardt) have attracted a wide readership outside of their own religious and cultural contexts.  

The relationship between women and spiritual autobiography has historically been a very complex one, and women's productions of the genre today seem to occupy a complex liminal space in literary criticism. These texts are often ignored or dismissed by critics of spiritual autobiography because they do not conform to the male models of the genre, yet criticized by feminist scholars for adhering too closely to those same norms. In most of the general (that is, not specifically feminist or women-oriented) studies of the genre, spiritual narratives by women are excluded in one of three ways. First, they may be ignored completely in favour of the paradigmatic texts written by figures such as St. Augustine, John Bunyan, Cardinal Newman, and Thomas Merton, as in the studies of Robert Bell, Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, Heather Henderson, and Dennis Taylor. Second, women may be

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6 The 1999 controversy surrounding the authenticity and veracity of Menchú's autobiography illustrates some of the problems that can arise when two different cultural codes, with contradictory conventions of selfhood and storytelling, come into conflict. American anthropology professor David Stoll wrote a book disputing the veracity of some of Menchú's claims, arguing that the book "cannot be the eyewitness account it purports to be" (Wright A14). Other scholars defend Menchú's memoir, claiming that it is a *testimonio*, a form in which "a personal story . . . also contains a message from a subordinated group involved in a political struggle" (Wright A16). In *Circuitous Journeys*, David J. Leigh outlines some of the problems of authenticity surrounding the writing of *Black Elk Speaks*, in which the emphasis of critics is on the distortions of the translator rather than the indigenous narrator (Leigh 162-77). Both of these controversies demonstrate the ways in which different readings of the rhetorical "intent" of autobiography can result in very different assessments of the value of a text.

7 In *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740-1845*, religious historian Catherine A. Brekus makes a similar observation about nineteenth-century American women preachers: "Revolutionary in their defense of female preaching, yet orthodox in their theology, female preachers had been too conservative to be remembered by women's rights activists, but too radical to be remembered by evangelicals" (7). Similarly, in *Literature as Pulpit: The Christian Social Activism of Nellie L. McClung*, literary scholar Randi R. Warne describes how feminist and mainstream historical studies of McClung dismiss her religion, while accounts of Canadian religious history pass her over in favour of the work of clergy and other religious men.
mentioned as unproblematic adherents of a tradition that is apparently (since the issue is not discussed) free of any gender bias; this is the case with Frank Bowman's mention of St. Teresa, or Daniel Shea's discussion of early American women's spiritual autobiographies. Third, if women spiritual autobiographers deviate in any way from the masculine norms, their narrative productions may be denigrated. Bowman's dismissal of Margery Kempe with the words "il serait difficile d'attribuer à son texte une grande valeur spirituelle" (323-4) stands in stark contrast to Sidonie Smith's characterization of Kempe, in A Poetics of Women's Autobiography (1987), as "a medieval mystic" whose book is "a fascinating work, full of life and energy and travail as it captures the quality of medieval Christian life" (60). Linda Peterson, in "Gender and Autobiographical Form: The Case of Spiritual Autobiography" (1988), refuses to accept as true spiritual autobiographies texts that do not conform to generic norms, yet she does not challenge the norms themselves.

Another problem that arises in classifying women's spiritual autobiographies is that in recounting their religious beliefs and their relationships with communities of faith, women are almost as likely to write narratives that deal with a loss of faith as they are to affirm their spiritual beliefs. In Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith (1994), John D. Barbour refers to such narratives as "deconversion narratives," and points out that many conversion narratives, beginning with St. Augustine's, are also deconversion narratives. The writers of such accounts often unwittingly recreate the conventions of spiritual autobiography, and may champion a new faith or a new agnostic freedom as fiercely as any convert. Women often write deconversion narratives as an explicit condemnation of the repressive or sexist practices of the religious tradition which they have abandoned. One example of such deconversion narratives is the category of ex-nuns' stories. While in the nineteenth century such works often served as anti-Catholic propaganda or thinly-veiled pornography, in the second half of the twentieth century these texts can be voices of women's resistance to monastic structures that they have experienced as restrictive, and may indeed be a prelude to an alternative spiritual awakening. Barbour suggests that

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8 Frank Bowman takes a different stance in classifying such works as a distinct and antithetical category: "les autobiographies antispirtuelles qui racontent non la conversion, mais la perte de la foi" (329).

9 For more on this sub-genre, and on the social phenomenon of ex-nuns, see Griffin, Hollingsworth, and SanGiovanni.
deconversion narratives may find more sympathy with sceptical modern audiences than traditional conversion narratives, particularly as their content is often much more sensationalist than many mainstream conversion narratives. However, in this study my interest is primarily in women who, rather than rejecting religion entirely, either seek out new forms of spirituality, or find ways of living in a state of creative tension with the traditions which they challenge.

A genre that straddles the uneasy middle ground between conversion and deconversion is what literary critic Elizabeth N. Evasdaughter refers to as “Catholic girlhood narratives” (1996). Some of the writers she discusses would still consider themselves to be Catholics, while others describe their upbringing from their secular or atheist perspectives as adults. Catholic girlhood narratives offer a telling example of the fact that for many women, neither conversion nor deconversion is at issue in their spiritual lives. Rather, the challenge that such women face is in trying to occupy a middle ground, in which they struggle with, or are critical of, their religious tradition but do not leave it. Such narratives, as we shall see, offer a more nuanced vision of what the terms conversion and deconversion may mean for women. In “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers” (1980), Mary G. Mason argues that “[t]he dramatic structure of conversion that we find in Augustine’s Confessions, where the self is presented as the stage for a battle of opposing forces and where a climactic victory for one force . . . completes the drama of the self, simply does not accord with the deepest realities of women’s experience” (210). Mason’s suspicion is not necessarily of the trope of conversion itself, as literary scholar Peter Dorsey has argued (“Women’s Autobiography” 73), but of the battle imagery that accompanies it, and the resolution of tension through the annihilation of one of the opposing forces. As we shall see, many women spiritual autobiographers prefer the way of dwelling in paradox. Furthermore, in many contemporary women’s spiritual autobiographies, as we shall see, conversion refers not to an individual process of gaining faith, but to a prophetic activity of calling for change within social or religious institutions.

This brief overview of the varieties of narrative forms that spiritual autobiography has adopted in various cultural, religious, and historical contexts, and of some of the complications that arise when women adopt the genre, should make it evident that a simplistic equation of the genre with conversion narratives is unfair to the breadth of sacred
life-narratives that have been written throughout the centuries. Furthermore, there is often a strong correlation between the literary forms adopted by spiritual autobiographers, and the particular uses for which their texts were written. One of the features that links spiritual autobiography across diverse faith traditions and cultures, as well as across these various literary forms, is an emphasis on the individual life as a model for the reader. Spiritual autobiography is almost always, at some level, didactic; it is an example of a "rhetorical (in the classical sense of audience-directed)" genre, as opposed to a "mimetic" or "textual" genre (Snyder 2). Each of the narrative forms discussed above is directed at an audience in an effort to inspire, convert, convince, or otherwise influence the reader. Conversion narratives are often written to gain membership into a particular faith community, such as the Puritans or contemporary evangelical sects. The apology is a rhetorical form usually adopted by those who wish to defend their religious views against either established authorities within their own tradition, or outside critics. The missionary life is a way of promoting the success of foreign missions, of soliciting funds from congregations in one's home country, and of inspiring future missionaries. The record of mystical visions is both a way of sharing private religious experience with a larger community, and a way of establishing the spiritual authority of the visionary.\footnote{For a thorough discussion of the power struggles surrounding medieval women mystics' visionary discourse, see Jantzen.} The narrative of pilgrimage is an engaging narrative form that can capture and hold the interest of a wide audience, while providing a metaphorical or allegorical map for the spiritual life. The private diary or journal is a method of self-examination which becomes an invitation to the inner life for other spiritual seekers if it is published. The functional or pragmatic dimension of spiritual autobiography – that is, the fact that it is often written to fulfill a specific purpose, rather than having a primarily aesthetic intent – may help to explain the suspicion with which some literary critics and contemporary readers regard the genre.

Spiritual autobiography is a genre that places heavy demands on its readers. The relationship with an implied reader is often central to the text, expressed in the hope of the reader's conversion or transformation, or in the desire to provide the reader with a map or model. Indeed, although one can question the importance of the motif of conversion in the life of the \textit{writer} of spiritual autobiography, conversion is virtually always projected in some
way into the life of the reader of spiritual autobiography. Thus, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Kempe’s scribe writes himself into her account as the model of the sceptical listener (or reader) who is eventually won over by her narrative. Anne Bradstreet’s brief spiritual autobiography, “To My Dear Children” (ca. 1656), is written for the religious edification of her offspring and family (Mason, “The Other Voice” 209 and 229). The spiritual autobiographies of many of the medieval mystics (Teresa of Ávila, Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross) were intended as devotional manuals or instructions in the life of prayer, while others were presented as revelations directly from God, with the power to challenge existing theologies (Julian of Norwich, Hildegard von Bingen, Marie de L’Incarnation). Contemporary spiritual autobiographies, as David Leigh points out in *Circuitous Journeys*, often have a social or political component as well as a religious one, calling for the conversion not only of the reader, but of entire social structures and institutions (xiv). Thus, the reader is invited not only to follow the author on a path of individual, spiritual transformation, but to participate in the transformation of the world.

One way in which the authors of spiritual autobiography have traditionally attempted to convey their message to as wide an audience as possible has been by adopting the most popular genres of their culture and historical period. Although books such as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, John Henry Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s *La Respuesta a Sor Filotea* were originally written for a learned rather than a popular audience, spiritual autobiography has always had a certain affinity for what literary critic Thomas J. Roberts refers to rather affectionately as “junk fiction” (1-9). Religious life-stories such as the Puritan and Quaker conversion narratives, as well as Catholic lives of the saints and allegorical texts such as John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, were intended for a general readership. Similarly, in Québec during the 1930s and 1940s, spiritual autobiographies shared many of the conventions of popular or sentimental romance, and were widely read by people of the working classes (Gagnon, “Autobiographie religieuse et roman sentimental québécois”). Popular contemporary spiritual autobiographies, particularly

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11 See Mason (“The Other Voice”), Dorsey (“Women’s Autobiography”), and Smith (A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography) for discussions of the emancipatory politics of Kempe’s book.
those that might be labeled "New Age," often continue this trend by taking the form of adventure stories, such as James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy: An Adventure* (1997), or quest narratives, such as Lynn V. Andrews's *Medicine Woman* (1983). Public libraries often carry copies of books that academic libraries ignore, thus further emphasizing the apparent gulf between "high" and "low" forms.

Spiritual autobiography's tendency to oscillate between the poles of "high" and "low" literature is not the only paradox or tension inherent in the genre. Frank Bowman points out that the genre as a whole has been marked more by a propensity for literary hybridity than by any generic homogeneity. Indeed, he terms spiritual autobiography's exemplars "des formes plutôt excentriques du pacte [autobiographique]" (320), that is, heterogeneous texts that incorporate a wide variety of modes of discourse and literary styles. This hybridity exists in spite of spiritual autobiography's often formulaic and imitative qualities, which are in fact the subject of Bowman's article. Although he does not deny the importance of Augustine's text as the "modèle-prototype" of all subsequent spiritual autobiography (316), Bowman argues that the first spiritual autobiography is not, in fact, Augustine's *Confessions* but a lesser known hybrid text: "La premiere autobiographie spirituelle chrétienne n'est pas celle d'Augustin, mais de Grégoire de Nazianze; c'est un poème qui déjà mélange détails biographiques et méditations" (320). In *Women's Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America* (1999), literary scholar Kristine Ibsen refers often to "the rhetorical hybridity of the vida[s]" (13) or "lives" written by Spanish American nuns in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, who produced accounts of their visionary experiences at the behest of their confessors. These spiritual autobiographies employ not only confessional discourse but also the legal language of the Inquisition and its tribunals. Such hybridity seems to be a feature of many, if not most, spiritual autobiographies. Caren Kaplan's description of "out-law genres" in "Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects" (1988) is also helpful – perhaps surprisingly – in elaborating theoretical claims about spiritual autobiography. Kaplan's article is concerned specifically with women's postcolonial narratives of resistance (such as prison narratives,

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12 Journalist Ron Graham defines "New Age" rather dismissively as "the loose and controversial term broadly used to describe a loose and controversial mishmash of unusual cosmologies, spiritual practices, and health-food recipes" (*God's Dominion*, 65).
testimonio, biomythography, ethnography, and cultural autobiography) and with a concomitant criticism of resistance. Nevertheless, many of the characteristics of the out-law genres that she identifies are also shared by spiritual life-narratives. Kaplan writes that “[o]ut-law genres in autobiographical discourse at the present moment mix two conventionally ‘unmixable’ elements – autobiography criticism and autobiography as thing itself” (208).

What differentiates spiritual autobiography from the out-law genres described by Kaplan is that it tends to mix not autobiography and criticism, but theology or spiritual reflection with the account of an individual's religious journey or spiritual growth. This characteristic is what Linda Peterson refers to as “the hermeneutic origin (or basis) of the genre” (213), and is evident as early as Augustine’s Confessions. Frank Bowman fails to grasp the essential complexity and hybridity of Augustine’s spiritual autobiography, when he calls the last four books of the Confessions, in which Augustine shifts from the autobiographical to the hermeneutical or theological mode, “génériquement monstrueux” (318). They may be so in terms of narrow definitions of spiritual autobiography or of literary genre, but it is clear that such “generic monstrosity” may indeed be one of the defining characteristics of spiritual autobiography itself. The presence of theological reflection in such texts is of particular importance in the case of women writers, for often the recounting of their own experience opens up a space from which to challenge the authority of the religious tradition, or to call the faith community (or national community) to justice and transformation. In the context of spiritual autobiography, this hermeneutical method consists of a perpetual movement back and forth between the individual life, and the larger sacred or religious narrative. In particular, spiritual autobiography engages in acts of theological and ethical reflection that transcend the life story of the individual.

13 Testimonio or testimonial literature refers to resistance narratives by postcolonial subjects, often transcribed by or written in collaboration with an editor, in which the personal “I” usually evokes the solidarity of a group identification.
14 The term “biomythography,” coined by poet Audre Lorde to describe her book Zami, A New Spelling of My Name (1982), has been adopted by other gay and lesbian writers to refer to their efforts to create and celebrate a mythical historical context for their life-writing.
15 Cultural autobiography has been adopted by writers like literary critic bell hooks, who uses the genre of autobiography not to tell a personal story, but “to preserve and transmit experiences of black southern life” (Kaplan 212).
However, in "Gender and Autobiographical Form: The Case of the Spiritual Autobiography" (1988), literary critic Linda H. Peterson argues that the relative absence of spiritual autobiographies by nineteenth-century English women is directly related to "the hermeneutic origin (or basis) of the genre" (213). English autobiographers of the period were drawing on "a Protestant tradition of religious introspection" which borrowed its interpretive frameworks from the typological analysis of biblical texts (213). Women's participation in the hermeneutical process was not only generally discouraged on intellectual grounds, it was actively prohibited by most sects on the grounds of biblical authority. Peterson's conclusion is that such prohibitions effectively denied potential women spiritual autobiographers "the source from which self-interpretation proceeds" (216). Although the situation of twentieth-century Canadian women is admittedly very different from that of their nineteenth-century British counterparts, nevertheless, Peterson's argument raises two important points. The first point is that spiritual autobiography is strongly rooted in the interpretive traditions of its period, and that spiritual autobiographers attempt to make sense of their lives not only through the sacred texts of their religious tradition, but also through its hermeneutical methods. The second point is that gender is a factor that can complicate one's identification with the available models of interpretation. Thus, even contemporary Canadian women may find that they have to subvert or transform generic models because of embedded, formal assumptions about — and interpretations of — selfhood and the sacred. Furthermore, because feminist biblical hermeneutics has come into its own precisely during the period that I survey, many of the earlier authors that I study may not have had access to feminist hermeneutical models for interpreting their religious experiences. Therefore, they sometimes draw on interpretive models such as psychoanalysis that are equally problematic for women.

Women spiritual autobiographers, both historically and during the contemporary period, have had to contend not only with the limitations of certain hermeneutical models in making sense of their own experience. They have also had to wrestle with the fact that many of the qualities held to be desirable by the world's major spiritual traditions are qualities that have often already been imposed on women by patriarchal social structures. It may seem, therefore, to some women, that spiritual commitment comes at the expense of personal freedom and development as an autonomous human being. In At the Root of This Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst (1998) Carol Lee Flinders, a scholar of
women's mysticism, identifies four "critical stress points . . . along the interface between feminism and spirituality" (61), which she names "silence," "self-naughting," "redirecting desires," and "enclosure" (59-82). These stress points are among the tensions that women spiritual autobiographers attempt to resolve through their dialectical negotiations. "Self-naughting" refers to the fact that many religious traditions promote an ideal of selflessness or transcendence of the self that may seem antithetical to the writing of a narrative centred on the individual life. While the conventions of autobiography (particularly since Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, published in 1782) put the self at the centre of the textual enterprise, spiritual autobiographers are constantly (and perhaps not always successfully) trying to displace the self in order to place God, spirit, or the community of faith at the centre of the narrative. Indeed, the very notion of personal salvation or individual spirituality is alien to certain religious traditions. This displacement of the self is problematic for feminist critics like Patricia Meyer Spacks and Carolyn Heilbrun, who value autobiography as a literary vehicle for the proclamation of women's autonomy, individuation, and self-creation. In "Some Strategies of Religious Autobiography" (1974), Dennis Taylor's central argument is that the genre contains an inherent tension between ideals of disinterestedness and selflessness, and actual experiences of interestedness and selfishness that must be overcome by the autobiographer. This tension helps to explain why the genre is treated with suspicion by a feminist critic like Patricia Meyer Spacks, for whom the "mode of self-denial" of spiritual autobiography becomes questionable when it is adopted by prominent women activists and politicians (132). Literary scholar Carolyn Heilbrun, in an otherwise sensitive and insightful exploration of the writing of women's lives entitled *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), subsumes religious commitment under the only "plot" traditionally available to women, that of "put[ting] a man at the center of one's life": "Occasionally women have put God or Christ in the place of a man; the results are the same: one's own desires and quests are always secondary" (21). Such a remark denies the autonomy and agency of women who choose to write their spiritual life-narratives. The point of these brief observations is simply to draw attention to the ways in which a feminist approach to women's spiritual autobiography as a distinct genre can sometimes overlook the very questions that are central to the writers themselves, questions that may set them apart somewhat from their non-religious counterparts.
Other critics view the tensions between individual and communal (or relational) identities in women’s spiritual autobiographies in more nuanced ways. In "Women's Autobiography and the Hermeneutics of Conversion" (1993), literary scholar Peter A. Dorsey attempts to redress the fact that "the relationship between the traditions of the spiritual autobiography and women's life-writing has been regarded as being problematic — if not downright antithetical" (72). Dorsey is responding in particular to three feminist critics (Mary Mason, Sidonie Smith, and Linda Peterson) who demonstrate, in his opinion, a "suspicion of the form [of spiritual autobiography] as a vehicle for self-expression" (74). While not denying the historical factors that have complicated women's access to the genre, Dorsey argues that spiritual autobiography in fact exhibits many of the characteristics commonly associated with women’s life-writing: non-linearity, the importance of relationships, and a tension between public and private selves. He also suggests that the discourse of conversion "opens a space for actions and beliefs that go against existing cultural norms" (75). Spiritual autobiographies by their very nature call into question rationalistic and individualistic notions of selfhood and agency, and conversion discourse can offer women an alternative interpretive framework through which to view not only their experiences and their actions, but also the injustices of their social contexts: "Its purpose is to persuade others of the cogency of one's interpretation of the self and the world, and its very 'otherness' allows it to be used to challenge existing power relations" (85). Perhaps the most noteworthy contribution of Dorsey's article to this discussion is the idea that spiritual autobiography is not necessarily a confining genre for women, but can offer them a space from which to engage in counter-cultural critique. The limitations of Dorsey's argument are his refusal to acknowledge that conversion discourse can be a problem for women (as well as for others, such as Catholics and non-Christians), and that spiritual autobiography is not always counter-cultural, but rather has the potential to be a highly conventional genre.

Indeed, inherent in the genre of spiritual autobiography is a tension between tradition and innovation, between a conservative tendency to imitation and convention, and a propensity for spiritual autobiography to be associated with those on the margins of the religious tradition. On the one hand, as Frank Bowman and others point out, the very authority of the narrative may be determined by the extent to which the life of the autobiographer conforms to an ideal model or pattern. Thus, religious life-narratives may in
fact be one of the most formulaic or conventional of all autobiographical genres. On the other hand, both theologians and literary historians agree that spiritual autobiography is a genre that has generally been adopted by those on the margins of mainstream religious tradition, or those who felt that their communities of faith were somehow threatened from the outside. In this sense, spiritual autobiography may be closely related to genres of crisis such as narratives of illness, disability, and trauma. In *Biography as Theology* (1990), theologian James McClendon asserts that “confessional writing appears in the Christian movement whenever a believer finds it necessary to take a stand against the dominant thought-patterns of the day” (165). While women’s spiritual autobiographies may offer unique instances of the individual’s struggle either to leave a repressive religious environment behind, or to find ways to critique a religious tradition from the position of an insider, historically such texts have also given women the opportunity to belong to a specific community, and to gain power and authority within that context.

In *Women’s Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America*, Ibsen highlights one of the challenges faced by many women who choose to recount their spiritual life-narratives within the context of a particular religious tradition or faith community; that is, the challenge of “successfully negotiat[ing] the delicate balance between expression and obedience” (14). In the contemporary context, one might rename this as the balance between self-expression (that is, the expression of one’s private spiritual experience) and faithfulness to the norms of the religious tradition. Canadian women writing their spiritual autobiographies in the last thirty years of the twentieth century were faced with far fewer social and cultural constraints than Spanish American nuns writing three hundred years earlier. Yet they still had to work within certain limitations imposed by discursive norms, from the available literary genres to the prevalent religious images and symbols. This pull between tradition and innovation in the genre of spiritual autobiography is one of the strongest of the genre’s paradoxes for contemporary Canadian women.

If spiritual autobiography is such a problematic category, both in terms of literary classification and with regard to women’s life-writing, why retain the term at all? Here I align myself with the stance of Canadian literary scholar Helen M. Buss, who argues for the retention of the term autobiography as well as broader terms such as life-writing. In

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16 See, for example, Edkins and Brereton.
Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women’s Autobiography in English (1993), Buss defends her choice of the term autobiography to describe a fairly wide range of women’s life-narratives, from diaries to novels to postmodern literary works, with an appeal to her “own need to refresh old terms rather than invent new ones” (14). After deconstructing the Greek roots of the word autobiography (autos or self, bios or life, and graphie or writing), Buss goes on to “emphasize that the very unstable nature of the word is what makes it suitable for describing the writing acts featured in this study, for those acts have been found to be themselves fairly unstable” (15). Like Buss, I feel the need to refresh and reclaim existing generic terminology. By classifying all of the texts in this study as spiritual autobiographies, I hope not only to expand the generic boundaries that women themselves are already pushing and challenging with their writing, but also to show that spiritual autobiography itself is far richer in its literary possibilities and potential than many literary critics have imagined. I believe that an understanding of the historical diversity of the narrative forms grouped under the heading of spiritual autobiography will also help to explain some of the idiosyncracies of the products of contemporary Canadian women.

To summarize, spiritual autobiography is a life-narrative in which the author’s awareness of the sacred or religious dimension of life is central. Spiritual autobiography adapts itself to the narrative forms of the author’s religious, cultural, and literary contexts, and usually finds expression in hybrid genres. This literary hybridity has a hermeneutical basis, incorporating both self-disclosure and theological reflection, as the author seeks to understand her or his life in the light of sacred texts, religious beliefs, or other spiritual teachings. The relationship between spiritual autobiographers and their religious communities is a central aspect of spiritual autobiography, whether this relationship is one of affirmation, contestation, or rejection. The implied reader is a central participant in the discourse of spiritual autobiography, for the text often contains an implicit intention to convert the reader, or to invite the reader’s participation in the transformation of self and world in the context of the spiritual autobiography’s theological insights and ethical imperatives. Furthermore, there are many tensions inherent in the genre of spiritual autobiography, particularly as it is practised by women: between “high” and “low” literary forms, between self-disclosure (or self-assertion) and self-denial (or self-transcendence), between imitation and innovation. These tensions take on diverse nuances, and are resolved
in a variety of ways, depending on the spiritual autobiographer's historical, religious, social, cultural, and personal contexts.

Women and Religion in Canada: The Last Thirty Years

What, then, are the particular contexts that have influenced late twentieth-century Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies? Religion in Canada is a highly complex phenomenon, at no time more so than the present, and although there is no space in this chapter to do more than outline the contemporary situation, the major issues that affect the texts discussed in this study should become apparent. There is no lack of statistics on the religious preferences of Canadians. The question of religious affiliation is part of Census Canada data as well as the subject of various Gallup polls, and University of Lethbridge sociologist Reginald Bibby has conducted numerous surveys of his own, the results of which he discusses in two books: *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (1987) and *Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada* (1993). However, interpreters of the statistics on religious affiliation disagree about precisely what they signify for the relative importance of spiritual beliefs in the everyday lives of most Canadians. In *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Focus* (1993), sociologist W. E. Hewitt notes that although church attendance has been on the decline in Canada over the last fifty or sixty years, other statistics suggest that "religion continues to play an important part in the everyday lives of Canadians" (4). In general, sociologists of religion portray both English Canada and Québec as societies that have moved from a relatively strong religious homogeneity, to the contemporary situation in which the dominance of both Protestantism (in English Canada) and Catholicism (in Québec) is increasingly challenged by religious pluralism, secularization, and the privatization of spirituality. Between 1971 and 1985, according to Statistics Canada, there was "a rather dramatic rise in lack of religious affiliation" in Canada, as the numbers of those who identify themselves as having "no religion" rose "from 4.4 percent to 10.5 percent in a period of 14 years" (Hewitt 59). Some sociologists suggest that if one were to expand the category of "religious nones" to include "the unaffiliated," or those who have a religious affiliation but only occasionally participate in communal religious rituals, the number would climb to 30 percent (Hewitt 59). This
observation applies not only to English Canada, but also to Québec, as Pierre Boucher points out in his introduction to *Croyances et incroyances au Québec* (1991): “[D]es études récentes révèlent un paradoxe troublant. D’une part, une forte majorité de nos concitoyens affirme se référer et adhérer à la religion traditionnelle d’ici. Et du même souffle, les enquêtes démontrent que peu de gens adoptent les éléments fondamentaux de sa configuration religieuse” (7-8).

However, the situation in Québec has been somewhat different from that of the rest of English Canada, due to the strong links in the province between religion, culture, and politics at the communal level. Many historians and sociologists agree that the Quebec Act of 1774, in which the British government guaranteed the legal, linguistic, and religious rights of French Canadians, paved the way for centuries of domination by the Catholic clergy. Up until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, the Roman Catholic faith was inextricably intertwined with the French language and with French Canadian culture, as well as with a strongly communal and agrarian way of life. Although this link may have begun to erode as early as the late nineteenth century (with increasing industrialisation), the Quiet Revolution is perceived as the watershed period in Québec religious history for the enthusiastic embrace of secularism, and the rejection of many traditional Catholic values. With the Quiet Revolution, which followed years of conservative Catholic ascendance and political corruption during the regime of premier Maurice Duplessis, there came a profound questioning and often rejection of many of the beliefs and practices of Roman Catholicism, which many Québécois held responsible for their collective attitudes of unquestioning acceptance of authority. Even before the 1960s, however, many Québécois intellectuals were already accusing the Catholic church hierarchy of cooperating with the British and English Canadian oligarchy in Québec to maintain the inhabitants of the province in ignorance and servitude. Nevertheless, new readings of Québec religious history are now underway, and contemporary scholars also argue for the important contributions of the Catholic church to education, health care, social welfare, and letters. Many observers point out the powerful legacy of the Catholic church in Québec, such as a continued emphasis on communal values, as well as the strong connections between the religious faith of the past and the nationalistic pride of the present. An obvious

17 Perhaps the most famous of these accusations is the *Refus global* (1948) of Québécois automatiste painter Paul Émile Borduas.
and visible symbolic manifestation of such a link is the transformation of the annual St. Jean
Baptiste Day celebration into the current Fête Nationale (officially renamed and appointed
Québec’s national holiday by the Parti Québécois government in 1977). Religious parades
featuring representatives of John the Baptist have given way to processions of Québec flags
and smiling politicians.

Similarly, no discussion of religion in Canada is complete without some attempt to
come to terms with the complex relationships between aboriginal spirituality and
Christianity. The last three decades of the twentieth century have been a paradoxical period
for indigenous religions in Canada as well as for other faiths. During the 1960s and 1970s,
many spiritual seekers from European Christian backgrounds began to turn to aboriginal
spirituality to fill a perceived void in their own traditions, while at the same time many First
Peoples were rediscovering and reclaiming their own sacred roots. However, in the 1980s
the Canadian churches were forced to confront the fact that many staff members of Native
residential schools had severely abused the children in their care. The stories of physical,
sexual, emotional, and cultural abuse of First Nations children who had been removed from
their families and placed in the Catholic, Anglican, and United Church-sponsored schools,
left many Christian Canadians reeling in shock, and at the time of this writing it is still
unclear what impact the resulting lawsuits will have on the spiritual credibility and financial
solvency of the Canadian churches. The links between Christianity and colonialism are
undeniable, both in English and in French Canada. Yet the numbers of First Nations
individuals who are still practising Christians argues against a simplistic understanding of
monolithic cultural and religious imperialism. The question of whether aboriginal peoples
were actually converted to Christianity, or whether they in fact incorporated Christian beliefs
into their existing theologies and spiritual practices, has implications for the issue of religious
pluralism and syncretism today. Furthermore, as we shall see in Chapter Six, the notion of
conversion has also been turned upside down by First Peoples, as individuals who are the
grandchildren of indigenous “converts” now preach a message of repentance and reform to
the great-grandchildren of the European missionaries.

While the numbers of “religious nones” among Canadian-born Christians may be
steadily growing, the numbers of immigrants from non-Christian countries (and from non-
secularized Christian countries, that is, countries where the majority of people are still
practising Christians, often Roman Catholics) is also increasing (Hewitt 60). This trend has meant the arrival of growing numbers of new Canadians from non-Christian backgrounds (or from predominantly Christian countries where religion is still an important part of daily life), many of whom are more committed to their religious practices than Christian Canadians who would classify themselves as only moderately religious. In some cases, this phenomenon has led to radical demographic alterations in Canada’s religious landscape. In God’s Dominion: A Sceptic’s Quest (1990), journalist Ron Graham describes the changes brought about to the city of Toronto, once a Protestant stronghold, by immigrants from Catholic countries arriving in great numbers during the 1950s and 1960s: “[F]amilies rushed in from Italy, Eastern Europe, the Philippines, and Latin America, pushing Roman Catholics to the edge of becoming the majority in both the city and the country” (137). Graham also recounts a controversy that took place in 1988, “the so-called ‘l’affaire d’Outremont’ ” (279), in which anti-Semitic feeling was stirred up in this predominantly French Canadian (and nominally Catholic) suburb of Montréal. The outcry was triggered by an application for a building permit for a synagogue, but caused at least in part by a clash between the rising numbers of Hassidim (a highly visible Orthodox Jewish sect) in the community and “the declining birth rate among French Canadians” (278). These are but two examples of the effects of religious immigrants on a more secular (but nominally or culturally “Christian”) Canadian society.

However, in spite of their apparent secularism, the category of Canadians who profess “private religious sentiment not tied to church membership or affiliation” (Hewitt 60) may actually be growing. It is not unusual these days to find articles such as the recent cover story of Maclean’s magazine (April 16, 2001), entitled “Soul Searchers,” in which Sharon Doyle Driedger reports on the growing phenomenon of Canadians going on spiritual retreats: “It is a silent revolution. Quietly, privately, more and more Canadians are slipping away from hectic lives, claiming time for inner reflection, in solitude or in small groups of like-minded seekers” (42). The cover story of the May 2000 edition of Elm Street magazine, written by Linda Goyette and entitled “A Search for the Holy Grail: Pam Barrett’s AfterLife,” examines with a mixture of scepticism and respect the resignation of Alberta

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18 This Canadian magazine, devoted to “Canadian life/people/issues/style,” finds its way into “more than 600,000 homes in preselected subscriber copies of” some of Canada’s major national newspapers (Elm Street, May 2000, 16).
NDP leader Pam Barrett, after her near-death experience in the dentist’s chair on February 1, 2000. Similarly, although nationalism may seem to some observers to have replaced religion in Québec, studies show that a number of new faiths, sects, and cults are flourishing in the province. Pierre Boucher writes: “[L]es débris du ‘ciel québécois’ à peine effroncé, ont germé dans une terre religieuse en jachère. Le spectacle est étonnant: à nouveau le ‘Ciel’ s’alourdit ou s’égaie de sacré et de magie” (7). Even the established churches are attracting their share of spiritual seekers, as recent articles in both the The Vancouver Sun and The Globe and Mail attest. This private interest in spirituality is perhaps what supports the growth of the religious publishing industry in North America. In an article entitled “In Search of an Authentic Spirituality,” Canadian theologian Marguerite Van Die notes that “already in 1985 North Americans reportedly purchased over 37 million books on spirituality” (7). A recent issue of Quill and Quire (December 2000), a publication for Canadian booksellers, has a “Spotlight” section devoted to “Religious and Spiritual Books.”

Several considerations emerge from this brief overview of the changing patterns of Canadian religious life over the last thirty years. It is indeed clear that during that time, the relative homogeneity of Canadian religious life has become increasingly diversified, and that the Canadian spiritual landscape now includes a higher number of people with no religion, with religious backgrounds other than Christianity, or with more private spiritual beliefs, than ever before. The implications of such pluralism for the writing (and reading) of contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies are manifold. One might begin to expect to see the publication of more spiritual narratives by women from non-Christian religious traditions, narratives that might draw on literary models or textual practices unfamiliar to readers from a Christian background. One might also expect that for women writing from a Christian perspective, the tensions between individual expression and faithfulness to a community or tradition would be stronger than ever, in a context where allegiance to a religious community is increasingly becoming a mark of marginalization.

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19 See, for example, Charron and Profils des principaux groupes religieux du Québec (1995).
20 See, for example, “Non-churchgoers flock to ‘basic Christianity’ course,” The Vancouver Sun (Wednesday, February 14, 2001): A11, and “My long and winding walk toward God,” The Globe and Mail (Friday, December 29, 2000): A6-7, the last in a five-week Focus Special series on spirituality.
Furthermore, as theologian Sallie McFague argues in *Metaphorical Theology* (1982), regardless of the religious commitment of particular individuals, as a society “we are, even the most religious of us, secular in ways our foremothers and forefathers were not. We do not live in a sacramental universe in which the things of this world . . . are understood as connected to and permeated by divine power and love. Our experience, our daily experience, is for the most part non-religious” (1-2). This observation has implications for the readers of contemporary spiritual autobiographies, who may be unfamiliar with religious imagery or intertextual references to sacred writings. Even more crucial is the consideration that in Québec, the cultural climate over the last thirty years may have been more conducive to questioning and rebelling against the authority of the Catholic Church, than to the writing of devotional literature. At the same time, the growing interest in private spirituality may render contemporary readers particularly receptive to the genre of spiritual autobiography. Thus, for a contemporary, Canadian woman to write the story of her life within a religious framework is a complex rhetorical activity that is situated at the intersection of a variety of competing and sometimes contradictory discourses.

The last thirty years have been an important period for women in Canadian religious and secular life. The *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* was published in 1970, giving widespread recommendations for the improvement of women’s situations in all aspects of Canadian society: from access to government-funded day care programs for children, to more positive images of women in school textbooks, to the appointment of more women as senators and judges. The writers of the report note the growth of the feminist movement in Canada, observing that “as of March 1970, there were local units of the Women’s Liberation Movement in 16 cities from Vancouver to Halifax” (2). The rise of feminism, as well as the increased national attention focused on the status of women in Canada by the Royal Commission’s public hearings, also led to improvements in women’s positions within religious institutions. Although sociologists of religion in Canada, as we have seen, point to a decline in religious commitment over the last thirty or thirty-five years, women’s involvement in leadership roles within the Protestant Christian churches has
been slowly on the increase. In the Catholic context, the Second Vatican Council convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962, spent three years examining the role of the Catholic church in the world, and proposing changes that would help it to rejoin mainstream society. Vatican II had widespread effects that began to be felt around the world from the late 1960s on, and these included a greater freedom for both lay women and women in religious orders.

The role of French Canadian Catholic women in relation to religion is in many ways quite different from that of their English Canadian Protestant counterparts. The Catholic devotion to the Virgin Mary – which has had no counterpart in Protestant denominations until recent feminist evocations of Sophia (Wisdom), or feminine imagery for God or the Holy Spirit – has meant that women have had their share of veneration in the religious context. Indeed, some historians and sociologists argue for the strongly matriarchal character of traditional Québec society. Similarly, as Marta Danylewycz and other historians have shown, nuns in Québec religious orders benefitted from a great deal of autonomy and independence, both economic and spiritual. On the other hand, with a predominantly Roman Catholic population, women in Québec have not been able to accede to ordained positions within the institutional church as they have in the Protestant denominations in English Canada. Feminist theologian Monique Dumais draws attention to the Québec Catholic church’s emphasis on the sacred vocation of motherhood, and argues that this cult of motherhood has limited women’s perceptions of the other options open to them.

Background on Religion and Spiritual Autobiography in Canadian Literature

The last thirty years have also been a formative period for the field of English Canadian and Québec literatures. Both English and French Canadian authors have

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21 For example, although the first woman minister was ordained by the United Church of Canada only in 1936, by the year 2000 approximately 25% of all United Church ordained ministers were women (968 women and 2931 men), while diaconal women ministers outnumber the men 14 to 1 (247 to 17). Although such statistics are encouraging in that they point to change within religious institutions, they also draw attention to how far women still have to go in order to reach equal representation with men in positions of church leadership.

22 A collection of writings by Monique Dumais has been self-published under the title Ferveurs d’une théologienne (Rimouski: Département des Sciences Religieuses, Université du Québec, 1978). Essays by Dumais also appear in numerous publications on women and religion in Québec.
demonstrated a marked concern with questions of identity and nationalism, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. However, the role of religion in identity formation generally has not been addressed. The critic of contemporary Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies must contend with the relative neglect of religious or spiritual writings in the context of Canadian literary criticism. There seems to be a discomfort with issues of religion in Canadian literary circles that is not shared in the United States, where explorations of the religious origins of American literature abound. Scholarly studies such as Daniel B. Shea, Jr.'s *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (1968), Patricia Caldwell's *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (1983), and Peter A. Dorsey's *Sacred Estrangement: The Rhetoric of Conversion in Modern American Autobiography* (1993) have done a great deal to advance our understanding of the significance of spiritual autobiography (usually defined as Puritan conversion narratives) to the development of American literature. Literary scholars are not the only academics who assert the importance of religion in the formation of American culture. In *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (1990), political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset points out that unlike Canada, "[t]he United States is a country formed by Protestant dissent, by the groups known in England as the dissenters and nonconformists . . . The majority of the population have always belonged to, or adhered to, the sects, not to the various denominations which were or are state churches" (Lipset 74). Given that spiritual autobiographies are often written by those on the margins, or at a time when faith is threatened or in crisis, it is perhaps not surprising that a country founded by religious dissenters is rich in conversion narratives and other spiritual autobiographies, and that this genre has influenced American literature as a whole.

Whatever the reasons for the neglect, no comprehensive literary explorations of spiritual autobiography or religious literature have been attempted in Canada, making it more difficult to situate contemporary examples of the genre in their historical context. Although "Religious and Theological Writings" are considered to be a category worthy of inclusion in the first (1967) as well as the second (1976) editions of the *Literary History of Canada*, there is no mention of spiritual autobiography in either edition. In the second edition of the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1997), only two pages are devoted to "Religion and Theology" (as opposed to eight pages for "Exploration literature," three pages for "Pioneer
memoirs,” and four pages for “Travel literature”), and once again the genre of spiritual autobiography is not mentioned at all (991-993). In the context of Québec literature, sacred writing is interwoven throughout the history of the province’s discursive productions, as is evident from even a brief glance at the subject headings in the 1967 Histoire de la littérature française du Québec, edited by Pierre de Grandpré: the writings of “les pères fondateurs” and “l’éloquence sacrée” are treated as significant literary categories, and one cannot help noticing that many of the authors (particularly in the early volumes of the four-volume history) have ecclesiastical titles such as abbé or monseigneur. However, once again, spiritual autobiography receives no mention as a distinct literary genre.

It is difficult to assess the extent of religious life-writing in Canadian literature, due to the absence of a critical history of the subject. In the French Canadian context, some of the earliest writings produced in New France were the seventeenth-century Jesuit Relations. The visionary writings of Marie de l’Incarnation (published by her son in Paris in 1677) are considered as an example of early Québec Catholic mystical literature. As Victor-Lévy Beaulieu points out in the Manuel de la petite littérature au Québec (1974), stories of pious Catholics (many of them women and children) were a staple of popular literature in Québec during the nineteenth century. In English Canada, Terrence L. Craig’s study of Missionary Lives points to the importance of this genre to the Canadian churches. Certain prominent authors have published spiritual autobiographies, such as suffragist Nellie McClung (Clearing in the West in 1935 and The Stream Runs Fast in 1945), but English Canadian reference works are less comprehensive in their treatment of life-writing than their French Canadian counterparts.

Recent studies of the relationship between religion and literature in English Canada have focused primarily on male writers of fiction, such as Robertson Davies (Little), Morley Callaghan and Hugh MacLennan (Pell), or on particular (minority) religious groups, such as Mennonite writers (Reimer) or Jewish writers (Greenstein). None of the aforementioned studies has addressed autobiography, or women’s writing. Locations of the Sacred (1998), a recent publication by William Closson James, a Religious Studies professor, emphasizes women writers (Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Joy Kogawa, Marian Engel, and Aritha van Herk) as well as non-literary or non-fictional narratives, such as tales of canoe trips, or the complex web of stories woven around the 1941 Belcher Islands
massacre. For the most part, however, James chooses fictional texts over autobiographical ones, explaining that his interest is in "the religious imagination" in Canada, rather than in "organized religion . . . especially not in terms of doctrinal beliefs and attitudes, nor institutional affiliation and attendance at worship" (2). My approach differs from James's first by attending to the religious imagination precisely in non-fictional spiritual narratives, and second by considering institutional affiliation to be a significant factor in influencing the discursive choices of contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers.

Along with James's book, other English Canadian publications that have appeared recently attest to a renewed preoccupation with the dimension of the sacred in Canadian literature, and in Canadian women's experience. A Matter of Spirit: Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry (1998), edited by Susan McCaslin, brings together poems by sixteen Canadian writers (seven of whom are women), all linked by a concern with spiritual experience. Voices and Echoes: Canadian Women's Spirituality (1997), edited by Jo-Anne Elder and Colin O'Connell, is a collection of short stories and poems that purports to "present the ways that women have explored their spirituality" (xiii). The Winter 1997 issue of the York University periodical Canadian Women Studies / les cahiers de la femme, is devoted to the topic of Female Spirituality. The issue includes scholarly articles on the history of women's spiritual expression (from pre-Christian goddess worship to medieval mystics to eighteenth-century Newfoundland Methodist women), autobiographical reflections (by a Jewish woman who is a student of Buddhism, by a contemporary Hindu Goddess worshipper, by a midwife who is also a United Church minister, by women who reflect on the relationships between physical disability and spirituality, and others), creative writing, and book reviews. Many of the essays in the collection were originally presented at a gathering at York University in 1996, entitled "Female Spirituality: A Celebration of Worshippers, Goddesses, Priestesses, and Female Saints."

Compiling a bibliography of contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies is no simple task. The genre itself, as we have seen, is not a well-established or easily defined literary category. Canadian women’s religious life-narratives may be classified under any number of headings in book stores, for example: biography, non-fiction, Canadiana, essays, religion and spirituality, fiction, and even nature writing (in the case of Sharon Butala). I discovered many of the books analysed in this study during a determined
search through religious and general book stores and libraries (primarily in Montréal, Vancouver, Toronto, Sherbrooke, and Moncton), by contacting religious women’s organizations such as the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, and by scouring reference works such as The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature (Second Edition, 1997), Yvan Lamonde’s Je me souviens: La littérature personnelle au Québec (1860-1980) (1983), and Yvan Lamonde and Marie-Pierre Turcot’s La littérature personnelle au Québec (1980-2000) (2000) for mentions of religion and spirituality. Although the French Canadian bibliographies of life-writing are more comprehensive than their English Canadian counterparts (the social and political reasons for this difference can be inferred from the title of Yvan Lamonde’s collection, Je me souviens), neither community distinguishes spiritual autobiography as a distinct category of life-narrative, and the interested reader or researcher is left to ponder titles, book jackets, and reviews for hints of religious content. Of the primary authors whose texts are discussed in this study, only Sharon Butala (who is also a novelist and short story writer) and Jovette Marchessault (who is also a visual artist and playwright) receive entries in the Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature (1997). Only Butala’s The Perfection of the Morning (1994) is reviewed in the Canadian Book Review Index, and only Marchessault receives an entry in the Dictionary of Literary Biography’s Canadian Writers Since 1960: Second Series (1987). None of the authors is mentioned in Contemporary Canadian Authors (1996), Contemporary Canadian and U.S. Women of Letters: An Annotated Bibliography (1993), or Dictionary of Literary Biography’s Canadian Writers Since 1960: First Series (1986). By contrast, the reference works for French Canadian authors are much more comprehensive. The Dictionnaire des auteurs de langue française en Amérique du Nord (1989) has entries for Marcelle Brisson, Jovette Marchessault, and Andrée Pilon Quiviger.23

It is not difficult to speculate as to why spiritual autobiography has been virtually ignored as a genre in Canadian literature, although there is probably no definitive reason for this critical neglect. It may be worth rehearsing some of the characteristics of the genre that act as obstacles to its academic study. To begin with, as we have seen, spiritual autobiography

23 Andréa Richard’s and Micheline Piotte’s books were published later, in 1995 and 1999 respectively. The absence of any mention at all of Piotte may be because her first book was only published in 1988.
autobiography – like autobiography itself – is a notoriously slippery term to define. Most American literary critics equate spiritual autobiography with conversion narratives, thus privileging the form of the genre preferred by the Puritans and other sectarian Protestants. However, this definition has excluded many forms of sacred life-writing by Catholics, women, non-Christians, and others. Another reason for spiritual autobiography’s neglect may be the affinity of its authors for popular or vernacular forms of literature. Many authors of spiritual autobiography are not writers by profession, but rather are individuals who have turned to writing in order to make sense of their religious experience, and to convey their beliefs to others. This relative lack of experience with the craft of writing sometimes leads to texts of questionable “literary” value. Furthermore, literary studies take place today in an academic context that is often, if not hostile to, at least suspicious of or uncomfortable with, the subject of religion itself. The colonial and imperialistic overtones of some missionary auto/biographies, the unquestioning faith of many mystical visionaries, the overt proselytization of most conversion narratives, and the tendency of a great deal of contemporary spiritual literature to emulate popular psychology’s “self-help” books, may all help to explain why an agnostic or sceptical contemporary reader may find spiritual autobiography a problematical genre for academic research, for what is one person’s devotional literature may be another person’s propaganda or “junk” fiction.

This opinion is expressed in no uncertain terms by former Governor General’s Award juror T. F. Rigelhof.24 In an article published in the National Post on May 13, 2000, “Confessions of a Governor General Juror” (borrowing, ironically enough, its title from the very genre that Rigelhof dismisses), Rigelhof admits that, following the example of former juror Brian Fawcett,25 one of the “kinds of books [that] didn’t make it onto his shortlist” for the non-fiction award was “‘devotional literature’ . . . [that is,] works trying to sell us . . .

24 Vancouver-born T. F. Rigelhof (b. 1944), who currently teaches Religious Studies at Dawson College in Montréal, is the author of poetry, short stories, and essays. His memoir, A Blue Boy in a Black Dress (1995), was nominated for a Governor General’s Award in 1995. Rigelhof was also for many years a regular book reviewer and literary columnist for the Montreal Gazette, the Ottawa Citizen, the Toronto Star, and the Globe and Mail. A collection of essays based on his columns has recently been published under the title This Is Our Writing (2000).

25 Brian Fawcett (b. 1944) is a British Columbia poet, short story writer, and essayist who has worked as a community planner, an English teacher for a prison outreach program, and an editor. His writing has a strong social conscience and is often controversial.
God in various guises” (B10). While Rigelhof chooses the term “devotional literature” rather than “spiritual autobiography,” it is clear from his remarks that he is dismissive of any writing in which religious polemic seems to outweigh literary concerns. He justifies this exclusion on aesthetic and intellectual rather than ideological grounds, arguing that religious topics “require more awareness of the infinite complexities ‘of language and human realities’ than the authors acknowledge or even perceive in their works” (B10). However, Rigelhof himself is a former Catholic and ex-seminarian, and the author of what one might call an anti-spiritual autobiography or deconversion narrative. It is at least possible that his decision to exclude devotional literature is influenced as much by anti-religious sentiment as by literary judgement. Rigelhof’s comments are all the more surprising because author Sharon Butala, a former Governor General’s Award winner and fellow juror of Rigelhof’s, has been described by William Clososon James as “a foremost contemporary example” of a “nature mystic” (xiii). Furthermore, as prominent a Canadian writer as Margaret Laurence has used the term “spiritual autobiography” to refer to one of her most celebrated and controversial novels. In Dancing on the Earth: A Memoir (1989), she writes that “The Diviners came closest to being not precisely an autobiography, but certainly a spiritual autobiography” (6).

Margaret Laurence and Sharon Butala are by no means the only contemporary Canadian women authors who have embraced the allegedly unliterary genre of spiritual autobiography after establishing their literary reputations in other forms of writing. Canadian playwright Patricia Joudry, best known for her radio and television dramas written in the 1940s and 1950s, also published an account of her lifelong interest in spiritualism, From Spirit River to Angels’ Roost: Religions I Have Loved and Left (1977), and co-authored with Maurie Pressman a spiritual study entitled Twin Souls (1993). Acadian author Antonine Maillet, after establishing her reputation as the foremost contemporary storyteller of the Acadian people, wrote an intriguing but lesser known book called Les Confessions de Jeanne

26 A Blue Boy in a Black Dress (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1995) draws parallels between Rigelhof’s unhappy experiences (including a suicide attempt) as a Catholic seminarian and the murder-suicides of cults such as the Order of the Solar Temple. Rigelhof promotes an anti-authoritarian and scientific worldview that still values poetry and mystery. In his concluding chapter, he writes: “[T]he world in which I’m most at home is the one that comes as a simple gift from the natural order. We are star dust. I prefer the narrative epic of stars and neurons disclosed by science to any of the myths propagated by religions” (104-105).
de Valois (1992). This work is what might be called a “fictional biography,” that is, a fictional narrative (Maillet calls it “un roman”) based on the life of a real person, a nun who was teacher and mentor to Maillet herself (who was also, briefly, a nun). Québec Métis visual artist and writer Jovette Marchessault, now best known for her feminist dramas, actually launched her writing career with the two “fictional” spiritual autobiographies that I will be discussing in this study. Furthermore, over the last thirty years, from 1970 to 2000, growing numbers of ordinary as well as prominent Canadian women have written and published, in both English and French, autobiographical texts that focus on their spiritual lives and religious experiences. Yet for the most part, these books have received little critical attention, and only in rare instances, such as Butala’s award-winning The Perfection of the Morning (1994) and Marchessault’s award-winning Comme une enfant de la terre (1975), have they been considered as works of “literature.”

Part of the resistance to the study of religiously motivated literature is, as we have seen in Rigelhof’s objection to devotional literature, a suspicion of its polemical nature. However, to refuse to classify a text as literary merely because of its obvious ideological intent – because it is, in Rigelhof’s words, “trying to sell us God” – is to deny many works that are generally accepted as literary classics, from Augustine’s Confessions (ca. 397-400) to Pascal’s Pensées (1660), from Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress (1678) to The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965). One of the aims of spiritual autobiography is, in fact, “to sell us God”; Rigelhof’s objection is therefore to one of the most fundamental characteristics of the genre.

In Literary Theory: An Introduction (1996), literary critic Terry Eagleton points out that literature cannot be defined as including only “non-pragmatic discourse” and “self-referential language”: “[I]t would probably have come as a surprise to George Orwell to hear that his essays were to be read as though the topics he discussed were less important than the way he discussed them. In much that is classified as literature, the truth-value and practical relevance of what is said is considered important to the overall effect” (7, emphasis in the text). For a literary critic to avoid grappling with the questions of ethics and values raised by literature is to turn one’s back on the reason that many books are written in the first place. Rather than dismissing certain works as “unliterary” because of their subject matter, literary criticism can offer an understanding of language and rhetoric that allows us to examine the
textual strategies through which ideological arguments are constructed, including our own. These are precisely the questions that I will attempt to address in this study.

Research Questions

It would appear to be an opportune time to undertake research into contemporary Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies. Given the growing popular and academic interest in spirituality, as well as the increased marketing and commodification of devotional and religious literature, literary scholars need to have the critical language, the methodological tools, and the historical background to be able to assess and evaluate this contemporary phenomenon. The present study is a preliminary attempt to lay some of the necessary groundwork for this endeavour. My research has been guided by multiple aims. First and foremost has been the desire to examine the discursive practices of contemporary Canadian women who seek to narrate their spiritual lives in a predominantly secular and heterogeneous literary context. A second goal has been to invite my readings of these texts to contribute to the contemporary discussions of spiritual autobiography as a genre. A third project has been to reflect on the contributions of these texts to the field of Canadian literature as a whole, particularly in the rereadings of canonical women authors that they suggest. A fourth question has been what pedagogical challenges and contributions women’s spiritual autobiography as a genre might bring to the literature classroom, as well as to the general reader. Finally, given the complex and often problematic status of the genre in contemporary literature, a fifth aim has been to consider the future of spiritual autobiography in Canada.

Having opened this chapter with an intellectual autobiography, I will close it with something of an intellectual manifesto. I share with feminist literary critic Françoise Lionnet and others a sense of both hope and urgency with regard to the potential of literature, literary criticism, and literary pedagogy to transform both individuals and communities. In Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture (1989), Lionnet raises these issues in a passage that resounds with the conviction of a spiritual creed:

These are questions we must face with great urgency if we believe that intellectual work can have any kind of effect on reality, if we do not want our words to be . . .
aimless detours or strategies of deferral, and would rather choose to have them function as a means of transforming our symbolic systems, for the symbolic is real, and in symbols lies our only hope for a better world. To reinterpret the world is to change it. (26, emphasis in the text)

Some readers may find this emphasis on language, symbols, and interpretation to be an overly formalist way of envisioning the process of social change, and I would certainly agree with them (as, no doubt, would Lionnet) that other less literary acts are a crucial part of this process. Nevertheless, many of those who engage passionately with literature — whether as students, as teachers, as critics, or as lifelong readers — do so because this engagement enriches their lives in significant and unforgettable ways. On the one hand, literature often has an aesthetic beauty, a rhetorical force, and a visionary quality that has the power to inspire its readers. This is the argument made by scholars such as sociologist Robert Coles in The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination (1989). On the other hand, the critical study of literature can give its practitioners the conceptual tools with which to question and to challenge the discourses in which they find their own lives inscribed. This is the approach favoured by critics such as Terry Eagleton, who advocates a politically-aware rhetorical literary criticism in Literary Theory: An Introduction (1996).

Caren Kaplan’s suggestion, in “Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Subjects,” that certain forms of writing demand certain forms of reading, raises questions of responsibility for the critic of spiritual autobiography. If “resistance literature” demands “resistance criticism” (210), then does spiritual autobiography demand some form of spiritual or theological criticism? What is the difference between a literary reading and a theological reading of a spiritual autobiography? Kaplan’s work indicates that perhaps the two are inseparable; that in order to do critical justice to women’s spiritual life-narratives, one must engage with them not only on the literary, but also on the theological and ethical levels. On this point I would argue, with fellow comparatist Louise M. Rosenblatt, that the task of the teacher and critic of literature is to hold both aesthetic and ethical questions in tension, just as they always exist in relationship in the life of the text itself. In Literature as Exploration (1995), Rosenblatt writes that “[t]o view literature in its living context is to reject any limiting approach, social or aesthetic. Although the social and aesthetic elements in literature may be theoretically distinguishable, they are actually inseparable” (22, emphasis
in the text). The methodology that I will outline in the following pages attempts to combine aesthetic (or literary) and social (or theological) concerns, in order to elucidate the unique rhetorical activities in which contemporary Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies are engaged. These rhetorical strategies are of interest to me - as a literary scholar and as a woman of faith - not as purely aesthetic elements but for their wider social, political, theological, and ethical implications.

Such an approach does not imply an unquestioning acceptance of the religious views of the authors under consideration, but neither does it allow for the kind of all-encompassing dismissal of devotional polemic expressed by Rigelhof. Rather, it attempts to approach these works both critically and also with respect for their authors' religious views, however alien or familiar they may seem. The type of criticism of spiritual autobiography that I advocate is one that invites readers to engage not only with the writer's deeply-held beliefs and values, but also with their own. Each one of us approaches the study of all literature (and not only spiritual autobiography) with our own beliefs and values, which express themselves in our own lives through a comparable mixture of imagery, narrative form, and dialogical context as in the books that I analyse in this study. Religion may no longer be surrounded by the same social taboos in Canadian society as in societies or historical periods in which it is universally accepted as sacred and unquestionable, but in many cases it still retains the power to silence discussion, perhaps because of the realization that religious beliefs are often tied to people's deepest, most emotional, and most private experiences. I quickly learned that my topic of academic research is either a very effective conversation-stopper, or a subject that opens the floodgates to an individual's fundamental world-view. Discussion, disagreement, and debate have been part of the history of religions - even when such discursive activities were expressly forbidden - perhaps even longer than they have been part of the world of academic scholarship. I hope that the study that unfolds over the following pages will stimulate debate, dialogue, discussion, disagreement even, but above all, a dynamic reassessment of the place of Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies in the contemporary literary and academic contexts.
Chapter Two

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Corpus of This Study

In order to begin formulating some answers to the questions posed at the end of the last chapter, I have chosen to analyse sixteen contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies. For the purposes of this study, the term “contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiography” refers to any non-fictional, prose text published after 1970, in which a Canadian woman writes about any part of her life experience with an explicit focus on her relationship with a particular religious group or tradition, or on her own primary concern with spiritual (as opposed to exclusively material, intellectual, or psychological) concerns. The field of sacred life-writing by women in Canada is relatively limited, although it is steadily growing. Nevertheless, I have not included in the purview of my study all works by Canadian women that deal with religious or spiritual life. I have excluded works of fiction – even autobiographical fiction – with the exception of Jovette Marchessault’s Comme une enfant de la terre and La Mère des herbes. Although these two books draw on the conventions of fiction, they also engage the reader in a form of the autobiographical pact, by indicating that the name of the author, narrator, and protagonist are one and the same.¹ I have also included only published texts, as part of my interest lies in exploring the place of these works in Canadian literature, as well as their potential impact on readers outside of the author’s community of faith. Finally, I have excluded works of theology or other forms of non-fiction that do not have substantial autobiographical content.

Even within these restrictions, there are still more published spiritual autobiographies by contemporary Canadian women than can be adequately accommodated by one literary study. Therefore, the autobiographical writings selected for this study share a number of common characteristics and concerns, apart from their national affiliation and contemporary historical context. Each of the writers under discussion wrestles overtly with the ways in

¹ Philippe Lejeune’s classic formulation of the autobiographical pact insists that there be both “identité de l’auteur et du narrateur” and “identité du narrateur et du personnage principal” in the text (Le pacte autobiographique, 1975, 14).
which her identity as a woman interacts with her religious identity or her spiritual concerns, as well as with her national or cultural identity. I have also chosen texts that share certain common interests and themes: a concern for social justice or religious reform, an interest in embodied spirituality, a preoccupation with gender, and a certain awareness (or questioning) of a Canadian (or Québec) identity or context. For the purposes of textual analysis, I have not grouped these sixteen works together chronologically, but rather in terms of the relationships between the different authors and their faith communities or religious traditions. This method of organization is consistent with my thesis that there are significant connections to be made between the uses of metaphor and imagery, the narrative forms, and the theological or ethical stances adopted by each writer in relation to her imagined communities, both religious and secular.

The first group of texts, which are examined in Chapter Three, consists of spiritual autobiographies written by Christian women who see themselves as public figures, engaged in leadership roles within their spiritual communities. The four memoirs in this chapter are by Lois Wilson (the first woman moderator of the United Church of Canada), Mary Jo Leddy (a prominent religious journalist and social activist who was one of the founding editors of the alternative newspaper *Catholic New Times*), Andrée Richard (an Acadian ex-nun, founder of a contemplative Catholic lay community in Québec), and Joanna Manning (a well-known Catholic educator and outspoken critic of the Vatican). These four authors confront the conflicts that they experience in their lives between their public roles and their private faith, between their religious commitments and their social responsibilities. In Chapter Four, I examine life-narratives written by women whose relationship to the Christian tradition and to Christian community is somewhat more complex, and who write as private rather than as public figures. The four personal and introspective autobiographical accounts that make up this chapter are by Marcelle Brisson (a novelist and essayist who tells the story of her journey from convent life to secular, urban life), Andrée Pilon Quiviger (who has various vantage points that include mother, wife, psychologist, and writer), Celeste Snowber Schroeder (who writes from her perspectives as mother, wife, liturgical dancer, writer, and

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2 For a chronological listing of the works by date of publication, see Appendix I. For a chronological listing by the author’s date of birth, in order to highlight potential generational differences, see Appendix II.
biblical scholar), and Micheline Piotte (who identifies herself as a writer, a spiritual seeker, a psychologist, and a person with a disability). These four authors focus more intensively on their everyday experiences, and wrestle with the tensions between their realities as embodied beings and their more transcendent spiritual yearnings.

Chapter Five analyses two works of autobiographical fiction by Jovette Marchessault (a prominent Métis writer and visual artist from Québec), and two narratives of spiritual quest by Sharon Butala (a well-known Canadian novelist from the Prairies). Each pair of texts is interesting for the ways in which the books complement and, whether intentionally or not, rewrite each other. Both Butala and Marchessault situate their writing in tension with Christianity, and in relationship with aboriginal and nature-oriented spiritual traditions. Their narratives move sometimes uneasily between a lyrical nature mysticism and a more ironic or sceptical awareness of science and history, never quite resolving the tensions between the two perspectives. Although they portray themselves as solitary seekers, both authors have won Canadian literary awards, making them the most accepted of these writers by the literary mainstream. In Chapter Six, I discuss four anthologies or works of collective authorship. Two of these are situated within the Christian tradition (one by women from a low-income Montréal neighbourhood, and one a collection of interviews with First Nations women elders); another is a collection of essays by Jewish women; and the last is an anthology of biographical and autobiographical sketches by and about Canadian Muslim women. The contributors to these anthologies all emphasize the communal nature of their religious commitments, seeing themselves as fragments of a larger spiritual whole. Yet a lively tension between individual and communal values never ceases to inform their writings. Furthermore, they all perceive the groups to which they belong as being marginalized by mainstream Canadian society, and their writing becomes a way of making visible or audible the experiences of their religious, cultural, or economic communities. Finally, in my Conclusion, I make some suggestions regarding further research to be accomplished in the area of religious life-writing and Canadian literature, as well as reflecting on the implications of the rhetorical strategies of these authors for the teaching of spiritual autobiography.
The Double Vision of Women’s Spiritual Autobiography

One of the common rhetorical features that links spiritual autobiographies across different historical periods, narrative forms, and religious beliefs, is the fact that their authors write with a kind of “double vision,” aware of both their secular, cultural context and the more all-encompassing sacred narrative in which they see their own life story unfolding. Autobiography as a genre is already imbued with the double vision of the author who is at once protagonist and narrator, who is both the one who experiences and the one who interprets. Spiritual autobiography offers a unique instance of this double vision, in which the writer’s experience may be worldly, but the interpretation given to it is sacred; or, in a related fashion, in which the message is spiritual but the available literary forms are secular. On the one hand, even when the imagery used by spiritual autobiographers is literally drawn from their own lives (such as the figure of the mother, the image of the desert, the action of pilgrimage, the world of nature, and so on), it may take on added theological significance from its meaning in their religious traditions. On the other hand, the writers’ choice of narrative forms may rely as much on popular, secular literature as on the heritage of scriptural and classic texts. In addition, spiritual autobiographers may posit in their writing both a homogeneous audience composed of fellow believers, and a disparate audience consisting of non-believers whom the writers wish to convert, or of accusers against whom they must defend themselves. These dualities become a veritable multiplicity of competing factors for contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers, who may write out of diverse senses of identity: religion, culture, class, education, profession, gender, sexuality, language, physical ability, and so on.

I have borrowed the concept of a religious double vision specifically from Canadian literary scholar Northrop Frye. His posthumously published book The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion (1991), a series of lectures delivered at Emmanuel Theological College in Toronto, is Frye’s final work of criticism and also, in this case, of theology. At its simplest level, the phrase refers to “the double vision of a spiritual and a physical world simultaneously present” (85). This double vision is the hallmark of the

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3 On this subject see, for example, Neuman’s “The Observer Observed” and Egan’s Mirror Talk.
spiritual autobiographer, and it is the quality that I have referred to as the defining characteristic of spiritual autobiography: writing one’s life story with an emphasis on its sacred dimensions. Sharon Butala poetically captures this sense of a double vision as she reflects on her growing awareness that the moon is both sentient presence and lifeless satellite: “I would look up at the moon in the sky in all her phases and wonder how she could be both a goddess having control over life and death and, at the same time, a lightless, cold, dead rock hurtling through space, for I was beginning to suspect, even though I could not see how or find an explanation that satisfied me, that she was indeed both” (Wild Stone Heart, 171-172, emphasis added). Butala expresses a recognition and an imperative that is held in common by many of the world’s spiritual traditions: the inescapability of paradox, and the necessity of an act of faith in order to live with that paradox. From the baffling and cryptic pronouncements of Zen koans to the shocking and subversive parables of Jesus, from the rabbis’ competing interpretations of Torah to the adaptability of aboriginal spiritualities, all religious heritages wrestle with the inescapability of paradox, and model ways to live with it creatively, often through the vehicle of spiritual autobiography. “Even though [she cannot] see how or find an explanation that satisfies [her],” Butala comes to accept her double vision, and invites her readers (or attempts to persuade them) to do the same. In the contemporary intellectual and social context, it often seems that the word religion is synonymous with a religious fundamentalism in which spiritual and moral issues are starkly polarized, and in which the importance of paradox to human spirituality is ignored. The present would seem to be an opportune time to reclaim this category, particularly for those of us (such as myself, and many of the writers in this study) for whom the only choice open if we are to live with the many contradictions and tensions in our lives would appear to be a conscious decision to dwell in paradox.

Frye extends his concept of a double vision to human perceptions of language, of nature, of time, and of God. He contrasts the imaginative world of literature, where, in his terms, “the organizing principles are myth, that is, story or narrative, and metaphor, that is, figured language” (16) with the transformative world of sacred texts:

The literary language of the New Testament is not intended, like literature itself, simply to suspend judgment, but to convey a vision of spiritual life that continues to transform and expand our own. That is, its myths become, as purely literary myths
cannot, myths to live by; its metaphors become, as purely literary metaphors cannot, metaphors to live in. (17-18)

I would qualify Frye’s distinction by arguing that the reader (or interpretive community) plays a role in determining what makes a work religious or literary; thus, the New Testament (whatever its “intent”) is read by some people as “purely literary,” while other literary texts take on a religious meaning for their readers. Frye’s observations are particularly relevant to the context of this study, for if one accepts his distinction between imaginative and religious literature (however these terms might be applied to individual texts), then spiritual autobiography can be perceived as occupying a position somewhere between the two. Spiritual autobiographers attempt to show their audiences what it means to “live by the myths” (that is, narratives) of a particular religious tradition, and what it would look like to “live in the metaphors” of that spiritual heritage. Thus, spiritual autobiography becomes a particularly compelling way of communicating one’s religious tradition or spiritual experience to others. However, for contemporary Canadian women, these myths and metaphors may themselves be in need of transformation, and what the spiritual autobiography may “pass on to others” (The Double Vision 18) is as much a questioning or a dismantling of tradition as an attempt to live within it. This sometimes painful position makes the double vision of contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies somewhat different from Frye’s more classical stance. For as we shall see time and again in the texts analysed in this study, these women attempt to inscribe their life stories in the context of a tradition that does not always see their visions or hear their voices. In order to “live in the metaphors” and “live by the myths” of their spiritual heritages, they often need to discover ways of dwelling in paradox through imaginative and creative uses of the imagery and narrative forms of their religious and secular communities.

The double vision of spiritual autobiography may be one factor that helps to explain the highly conventional – almost clichéd – nature of some of the literary strategies employed by its writers. The writers of Christian religious life-narratives, for example, may turn again and again to the same biblical stories and metaphors in order to imbue their own autobiographies with significance: stories such as Jacob wrestling with the angel to illustrate spiritual crisis or psychomachia; Jesus’s encounters with Satan in the desert to allude to temptation; the image of “the peaceable kingdom” to describe the vision of an ideal society;
and so on. This imagery may seem conventional to readers familiar with the biblical tradition, yet it may appear fresh and challenging to readers from other backgrounds, just as the language of Muslim, Jewish, or First Nations writers may be particularly compelling to readers outside of those religious communities. Contemporary feminist spiritual autobiographers may find themselves in a particularly complicated position in relation to sacred imagery and ritual language, for even as they seek to challenge or to refresh the symbols of their religious heritage, they may also find comfort, solace, or inspiration in the very images they criticize.

Although Frye writes from his own explicitly Christian perspective – both as a literary scholar with an interest in the Bible and as an ordained United Church minister – his understanding of the transformative power of religious faith is profoundly dialogical and includes other spiritual traditions (The Double Vision 18). Thus, Frye’s notion of a double vision is not linked only to a particular religious belief system (although he discusses it in the context of Christianity), but to a more inclusive spiritual value system that includes such ideals as compassion and respect for diversity.4 This ethical stance becomes particularly apparent when Frye discusses the different levels of reading the Bible: the literal (a reading of the text as fact or history), the metaphorical-literal (a reading which considers the text as story or imaginative literature), the allegorical (a reading that reveals the deeper meanings of the text), and the moral or tropological (a reading of the moral truth or doctrine contained in the passage).5 It is obvious that Frye finds this last level, in which “the reading of the Bible . . . takes us past the story into the reordering and redirecting of one’s life” (78), to be the most valuable one. As an example of such reading, Frye offers Jesus’s parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10.29-37), which presents a challengingly inclusive ethic of compassion. Frye then goes on to describe how the reader may be transformed by reading such stories: “With such parables we begin to suspect that there may be two readers within us, and that one is beginning to form a larger vision that the other has only to attach itself to. That is, we are moving from a single or natural vision to a double or spiritual one” (78). This passage

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4 For a discussion of Frye’s “Christian humanism,” see Good 89-102.
5 Frye modifies the medieval system of “fourfold meaning” proposed by Thomas Aquinas and others, by adding the metaphorical-literal level after the literal, and by abandoning the final anagogic or apocalyptic level of interpretation (Abrams 95-96).
suggests that for Frye, the double vision is also an ethical one, and one which can be learned by reading.

Therefore, the double vision is not simply an attribute of the spiritual autobiography (that is, the text), but also a way of reading. Spiritual autobiography presents particular challenges to its readers, who may or may not identify with the religious beliefs or spiritual experiences of the author. Readers might pick up Lois Wilson’s or Mary Jo Leddy’s memoirs in order to learn more about these women as Canadian public figures (Wilson is currently a senator and Leddy was for many years a well-known journalist), or as prominent social activists (Leddy’s most recent book is an indictment of Canadian refugee policy and Wilson has been awarded numerous peace prizes). Women who are parents might be drawn to Celeste Snowber’s or Andrée Pilon Quiviger’s reflections for their emphasis on motherhood rather than their theological arguments. Micheline Piotte’s writings would certainly be of interest to readers wrestling with their own illnesses or disabilities, while readers from non-First Nations, Muslim, or Jewish backgrounds might wish to learn more about women from these groups by reading the collective autobiographies discussed in Chapter Six. Jovette Marchessault and Sharon Butala have received praise for the literary qualities of their writing, although the feminist and environmental aspects of their writing often receive more attention than their spiritual focus. Although readers may not pick up such books for religious motives of their own, they will quickly find themselves confronted with texts that demand spiritual and social engagements from their interlocutors. Thus, there may be tensions not only within the text of the spiritual autobiography, but also within the mind and heart of the reader or critic who is immersed in that text, or between the reader and the text. All of the spiritual autobiographies that I examine in this study attempt to teach their readers how to see with what Frye calls a double or spiritual vision.

Northrop Frye’s emphasis on “metaphor” or “figured language,” on “myth” or “story or narrative,” and on the reader’s role in interpretation provides three categories of analysis for understanding what is distinctive about contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies. Thus, there are three main literary techniques that a writer can use to situate herself in relation to (and perhaps in tension with) her religious and literary traditions. The first strategy is the use of metaphor, symbol, imagery, and other figurative language. Such tropes generally have a long history in both religious and literary texts, and the ways in
which an author has recourse to them in her text can either reinforce or subvert their inherited meanings and ideologies. The second technique through which a writer may orient herself to her religious and literary communities is through the combination of various narrative forms or modes of discourse: confessional literature, hagiography, popular romance, the spiritual diary or journal, the literature of travel or pilgrimage, nature writing, mystical or visionary literature, and so on. The choice of narrative forms — like the use of metaphor — also has profound implications for the theological and ethical orientation of a woman’s spiritual autobiography. Finally, an author can position herself in relation to her imagined communities by inscribing her reader or audience within the text itself. This rhetorical device is particularly important to the genre of spiritual autobiography, where the conversion or transformation of the reader is often a central element (or desired outcome) of the text. A critical approach to the study of contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies that would claim both aesthetic and social significance needs to keep in sight both figurative language, narrative forms, and inscribed readers, and the relationships that these linguistic features establish between the individual and the community or tradition. To that end, I employ three theoretical approaches in my methodology: the analysis of guiding metaphors and their role in life-writing and theological discourse (what I will call “visions”), the analysis of narrative forms or modes of discourse (what I will call “voices”), and the analysis of implied or imagined audiences (a network of interrelationships for which I have coined the term “voisinages,” in the interests of alliteration and out of respect for the one-third of my texts that are written in French).6

Visions: Guiding Metaphors

I have chosen the concept of “visions” as a broad term to refer to my analysis of the dominant metaphors of contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies. The

6 The French word “voisinage” has a somewhat broader meaning than its usual English translations, “neighbourhood” or “vicinity.” Voisinage signifies not only the neighbourhood, and by extension proximity in time and space, but the “ensemble des voisins” as well. Furthermore, it can also be used to refer to the relationships between those neighbours, as in the expression “vivre en bon voisinage avec quelqu’un” (Paul Robert, Le Petit Robert I: Dictionnaire alphabetique et analogique de la langue française, Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1989, p. 2111).
word "visions" has resonances with the spiritual experiences of mystics, both female and male, of many religious traditions, who have recounted their ecstatic glimpses of the transcendent, to the delight, edification, or consternation of fellow believers. Religious visions exist, therefore, precisely in the liminal realm between the earthly and the spiritual, between the seen and the unseen. Visions can also refer to prophetic dreams or imaginings about how individual and social realities can be transformed, as in "a vision of a better world." It is precisely these glimpses of the spiritual realm, and of the world as a transformed place, that contemporary Canadian women attempt to convey through the figurative language of their spiritual autobiographies. Furthermore, the metaphor of "seeing" itself becomes a trope in many of these texts, as the authors describe learning to see the world, their societies, and their religious institutions with new eyes: whether it is through the eyes of disadvantaged people from other countries and in one’s own community (Wilson, Manning, Leddy, *Hope is the Struggle*), or through adopting the gaze of the mother (Snowber, Quiviger) or of the lover (Richard, Brisson), or by developing greater attentiveness to the natural world (Marchessault, Butala, Brisson) or to one’s own dual cultural identities (Marchessault, *At My Mother’s Feet, From Memory to Transformation, Bridges in Spirituality*). All of these women are engaged in a process of trying to see what is unseen, and to make visible what is invisible. Their metaphors gesture toward the intangible world of sacred realities, as well as pointing out the blind spots in both their religious and national communities, where their own experiences (as women, as non-Christians, as people from impoverished neighbourhoods, and so on) have not been perceived.

In "Le Statut littéraire de l’autobiographie spirituelle," Frank Bowman suggests that the best approach to spiritual autobiography as a literary genre is the analysis of topoi (318). I agree with Bowman that the examination of literary tropes – their imitation and their transformation by writers – is one way of discerning a writer’s theological and ethical perspectives, as well as her or his relationships with both spiritual and literary rhetorical traditions. In *Metaphorical Theology*, Protestant feminist theologian Sallie McFague asserts that "[f]ar from being an esoteric or ornamental rhetorical device super-imposed on ordinary language, metaphor is ordinary language. It is the way we think" (16, emphasis in the text). McFague’s extensive research into the use of metaphors and models in both science and theology is supported by the conclusions of other theorists, linguists and philosophers of
language. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), argue that "[o]ur ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (3). These insights into metaphorical language support the argument that when women spiritual autobiographers are engaged in the process of developing metaphors for their religious experiences, they are also involved in acts of theological reflection. Such metaphors are not purely literary or purely imaginative textual constructs, but are "the way [spiritual autobiographers] think" about the meaning of their spiritual experiences, integrate those experiences into their lives, and share them with their readers.

The analysis of metaphors also provides one way to understand, explore, and contrast the multiplicity of ways in which contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers negotiate between the authority of tradition and the authority of their own lived experiences. The writer's use of literary images and symbols to describe spiritual experiences conveys, through a type of metaphorical theology, the concerns which are, for that writer, central to the religious life. Although Sallie McFague never explicitly defines "metaphorical theology," she uses the term to refer to a form of theological reflection that is funded by a diversity of metaphors and models, and that seeks to be both traditional and contemporary (14-29). As Frank Bowman notes, the same images can have very different meanings: "[I]miter n'est point répéter; on peut avoir recours au même topos pour exprimer des convictions fort différentes" (318). William Closson James takes this idea further by arguing that even symbols drawn from religious tradition can allow the literary imagination to move beyond the intellectual or dogmatic boundaries of its spiritual heritage: "Even in supposedly classic exemplars speaking in that small-town Canadian Protestant voice other nuances and yearnings are detectable. In the works of some authors so identified religious symbols provide a possible mode of imaginative escape from the confines of beliefs, creeds, and precepts" (*Locations of the Sacred*, viii-ix). Both Lois Wilson and Mary Jo Leddy use the metaphor of the "peaceable kingdom" to describe Canada, a biblical image whose application to this country can be traced back to historian William Kilbourn. Yet Wilson invests it with the revolutionary qualities of "a world turned upside down," while Leddy uses it specifically in the context of peace activism. Both Celeste Snowber and Andrée Pilon Quiviger explore the theological implications of motherhood and the image of the womb, but for Snowber it is a place of creative possibilities and freedom, while for Quiviger it is a false illusion of
security that must be left behind. Sharon Butala and Jovette Marchessault both envision the natural world as feminine presence, but for Marchessault the relationship with nature is one of kinship, while for Butala nature remains alien and other. Immigration is described as exile by the Jewish women in From Memory to Transformation, but as both hijra (sacred flight) and pioneering by the Muslim women in At My Mother's Feet. By attending to the differences between various authors' use of metaphor, and to the creative liberties that they take with traditional symbolism, we may glimpse the parameters of the sacred world as they experience and construct it.

Because I will be using the literary terms “image” or “imagery,” “figurative language,” “trope,” “metaphor,” and “symbol” throughout this study, at times virtually interchangeably, I wish to clarify from the outset the nuances in definition that apply to my own understanding of these words. When I refer to images in a text, I am referring to “objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a . . . work of literature, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in the vehicles . . . of its similes and metaphors” (Abrams 86, emphasis added). The terms trope and figurative language will often be used as synonyms to describe figures of thought such as metaphor, simile, synecdoche, and prosopopeia (Abrams 66-70). I will follow McFague’s broad definition of metaphor as not only a literary trope, but also a way of thinking, that finds similarity in dissimilarity:

Most simply, a metaphor is seeing one thing as something else, pretending ‘this’ is ‘that’ because we do not know how to think or talk about ‘this,’ so we use ‘that’ as a way of saying something about it. Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known. (15, emphasis in the text)

The concept of “metaphorical thinking” is a particularly important one in religious or mystical discourse, for the notion of a spiritual realm seems to demand figurative language in order to express how it is both like and unlike the ordinary, everyday, empirical world. I will lean toward the religious meaning of the term “symbol” in this study, seeing it as an image with a somewhat narrower or more specific range of significance than a metaphor; in the case of religious symbols, “concrete objects of this passing world are used to signify, in a relatively determinate way, the objects and truths of a higher eternal realm” (Abrams 207).
Finally, I will use the term "guiding metaphor" to refer to the dominant network of interrelated images, metaphors, and/or symbols that informs each of the spiritual autobiographies in this study. I have chosen this term because it resonates with the terminology of other literary scholars who have also made use of the metaphorical approach to the study of life-writing. James Olney's seminal study of autobiography, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (1972) remains a key text in the criticism of the genre. Olney's method is to examine the "symbolic images" (50) in the life-narratives (and, in one case, poetry) of seven well-known authors, claiming that "[t]he self expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors ... We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch its metaphors" (34). Olney's approach assumes that we can only know the writing self through its metaphors (a textual emphasis), but also that there is a human self who has written the text and who deserves our respect, a notion that I find particularly important in the literary analysis of living, contemporary writers. In *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography* (1984), Susanna Egan analyses the metaphors or "narrative patterns" (3) – such as paradise, the journey, conversion, and confession – that form the fictive templates to which autobiographers turn in attempting to give shape to the various stages of their life-narratives (childhood, youth, maturity, and old age respectively). Egan's "patterns of experience," like Olney's "metaphors of the self," are dominant metaphors that allow the reader to assess the more universal significance which the autobiographer attaches to her or his individual life.

In the critical literature devoted exclusively to spiritual autobiography, the method of analysing an author's dominant metaphors also prevails. *Archetypes of Conversion* (1985), a Jungian analysis of the life-narratives of Augustine, John Bunyan, and Thomas Merton by literary scholar Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, examines the paradigms of quest, family, and psychomachia (spiritual struggle or crisis) in these three classic texts. In *Circuitous Journeys* (2000), English professor and Jesuit priest David J. Leigh adopts the expression "directional images" to describe the central motifs of eleven modern spiritual autobiographies from different cultures and faith traditions (1-3). Similarly, in *Biography as Theology*, theologian James McClendon, Jr. argues for the revitalization of contemporary...  

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7 The lives examined by Olney are those of Michel de Montaigne, C. G. Jung, George Fox, John Henry Newman, Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill, and T. S. Eliot.
theology by attending to the life stories of contemporary “saints” (22-23) of the Christian church. McClendon proposes that “a key to these biographies is the dominant or controlling images which may be found in the lives of which they speak” (69, emphasis in the text). The suggestion of all these scholars, then, is that by examining the dominant metaphor of a person’s life (in the case of this study, a person’s life as it is textually constructed in a spiritual autobiography), one can gain insight into that person’s theological and ethical orientations. I have chosen the adjective “guiding” in order to draw attention to the fact that the prevailing metaphors of spiritual autobiographies guide not only the author’s shaping of the text, but also the life choices of the writer, and are offered as maps to the reader as well.

I am particularly interested in the tensions that may become apparent through an analysis of metaphorical language. Although at times the guiding metaphors employed by writers may be adjuncts to their rhetorical arguments, at other times the imagery may be in conflict with the stated theological intent, or with the narrative forms in which it is deployed. Like the scholars discussed above, I believe that the analysis of a text’s dominant metaphors can aid in the understanding and evaluation of its ideological and ethical (and, in the case of spiritual autobiography, theological) orientation. However, this orientation may be as much a series of dialectical negotiations as a set of theological pronouncements. In an analysis of Lytton Strachey’s use of metaphor in his biography Eminent Victorians (1918), literary scholar Ira B. Nadel argues that Strachey “not only uses metaphor to express its possibilities but analyzes metaphor to show its limitations” (150) by ironically undermining the grand and epic metaphors he employs. The authors examined in this study sometimes engage in similar processes, as in Quiviger’s rejection of the myth of Eden, Manning’s dismantling of images of papal authority, or Leddy’s questioning of the stark dichotomies of traditional Christian metaphors of darkness and light. By using metaphors critically as well as descriptively, the authors foreground the fact that the figurative language of their texts has an explicit theological intent.

The notion that autobiography can also be theology is an idea with important implications in the case of women writers. As we have seen, women have often found themselves excluded from (and by) hermeneutical and theological discourse. Furthermore,

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8 Frank Bowman suggests that “l’autobiographie spirituelle reflète souvent un système théologique” (325). I would replace the word “souvent” with the word “toujours.”
many women have also argued that their life experience has been neglected or denigrated by patriarchal theological traditions. To assert, as does James McClendon, the vital importance of lives and of life-narratives to the project of theology is to create a prominent place for the challenges that women’s lives can offer to their theological and religious traditions. Writing of guiding metaphors (or, as he calls them, “momentous images”), McClendon argues that “in all of us so far as we are religious, such images are of the very substance of religion . . . ; that these sacred images are not . . . peripheral to faith; that images, while not the only constituent of religion, are of central importance in it” (72, emphasis in the text). One of the most fundamental insights of feminist theology has been the observation that the language that humans use to describe the realm of the sacred has an undeniable relationship with the aspects of earthly life that are valued or given prominence. For example, images of God as “King” and as “Father” reinforce the worldly power of male rulers and authority figures. As Sallie McFague points out, “[t]he relationship between feminine imagery for the divine and the status of women in a society has been well documented in the history of religions” (Metaphorical Theology, 10). Thus, when Celeste Snowber and Andrée Pilon Quiviger celebrate feminine and maternal imagery for the divine, or when Sharon Butala and Jovette Marchessault describe a presence in the natural landscape that is both sacred and feminine, their literary strategies have theological, social and political implications. By choosing to write their life stories as spiritual autobiographies, contemporary Canadian women are implicitly or explicitly challenging the images and symbols of their traditions. Their works of spiritual autobiography as metaphorical theology help “not only to recover present experience in its full social and political dimensions as foundational for theology, but also to correct the bias in the experience which plays a foundational role in theology” (Gordon 130).

Images, for James McClendon, reach backward to tradition as well as forward to potential readers and to a transformed future: “To know its images is . . . to know a life, particularly to know it in connection with its creative sources (its ‘scripture’ and ‘tradition’) and its creative possibilities (the influence that life may have on others’ lives)” (162, emphasis added). This two-fold movement is absolutely central to the genre of spiritual autobiography as I understand it, and is of particular importance in the context of

9 Ironically, however, McClendon includes no women among his contemporary “saints.”
contemporary Canadian women who may stand in tension both with their religious and with their readerly communities. The gesture of self-location, of locating oneself in relation to one’s various imagined communities, is a complex one in these texts. At times the writers themselves may borrow images from two different communities and combine them, in order to breathe new life and significance into both of them. For example, Muslim Canadian women creatively juxtapose the Canadian image of the pioneer with the Islamic story of the hijra or flight of the Prophet, thus investing their immigration with significance in terms of both their national and their religious myths. In a different kind of rhetorical gesture, Mary Jo Leddy draws on conventional Christian images of light and darkness, of church and culture, but questions them to the extent that she breaks down the traditional dichotomies they represent, creatively dramatizing a third option or middle ground of reconciliation.

While both McClendon and McFague are Christian theologians, whose religious backgrounds influence their claims about the use of metaphor in biography and in theology, McClendon at least attempts to broaden the perspective of his study by suggesting not only that religions other than Judaism and Christianity may engage in metaphorical theology, but also that Christians themselves may creatively employ imagery from other traditions, contexts, and communities (74-75). My application of the theoretical models of McFague and McClendon to spiritual autobiographies by Jewish, Muslim, First Nations, Métis, and other non-Christian women is obviously not intended as an exercise in Christian imperialism, but rather as an affirmation of the presence of a diversity of faith and imagery in the Canadian religious and literary contexts. Most of the non-Christian authors in this study are conscious of the fact that they are writing for an audience that does not necessarily share their spiritual background, and they try to situate their metaphors for the general reader. Even some of the Christian writers, conscious of the secularism and lack of biblical literacy of their potential readers, take the time to explain the meaning of some of the rituals and images to which they refer. Perhaps as more contemporary Canadian women continue to write and to publish their spiritual autobiographies, they will find themselves communicating with an audience whose religious literacy is broad and diverse.

In focusing on the guiding metaphors of Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies, and reading them as examples of metaphorical theology, I have also been forced to confront the philosophical and theological assumptions that influence my own use of figurative
language. I have found myself joining the spiritual autobiographers themselves in groping for language to describe the ineffable experiences of the sacred. At times, others have pointed out to me how closely my own metaphors parallel those of the authors I study. This realization has been a reminder to me of how persuasive some of these texts can be, and of how powerful the pull of traditional or communal figurative language can be in attempting to convey a sense of the spiritual life. I have also gained a deeper appreciation for the tensions experienced by contemporary Canadian women writing their religious life-narratives. Furthermore, even as this knowledge has forced me to be alert to the assumptions behind my own analytical discourse, it has also reminded me that the metaphors that inform literary criticism also have significant implications for methodology. Throughout this study, I have attempted to keep in mind the metaphor of dialogue as a way of engaging with the texts I survey, allowing them where possible to "talk back" to my analysis and to my theoretical assumptions.

Voices: Narrative Forms and Modes of Discourse

The writers that I study situate themselves in relationship to their sacred and secular communities not only through their uses of metaphor, but also through their discursive choices, and those choices are inextricably linked to the theological and ethical visions that their texts embrace, as well as to their notions of "selfhood" or "identity." As we have seen, spiritual autobiography is a genre that centres on the author's experience of the sacred dimension of life. The writer can accommodate this theme to (or, can adapt to the demands of this theme) any number of literary forms: fiction, essays, travel writing, meditational or devotional writing, poetry, nature writing, journalism, adventure stories, self-help books, and so on. I refer to these narrative forms as "voices" because they are the broader literary structures through which contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers convey their sacred "visions" to their readers. A writer's manipulation of literary genre and generic expectations provides her with a way of situating herself with respect to both her religious and national literary heritages, often highlighting the connections or dichotomies between her experiences of the two traditions. As Shirley Neuman observes in her chapter on "Life-Writing" in Volume Four of the Literary History of Canada (Second Edition, 1976): "[L]ife-
writing is not a construct of facts, memories, and documents but is produced by the conjunction of, as well as the gaps between, the ‘selves’ inscribed by the conventions of different genres” (333). Narrative forms are, at least in part, social and literary conventions that contain within them different concepts of the narrated self. Therefore, by identifying the various narrative forms or modes of discourse that are incorporated into an individual woman’s spiritual autobiography, we can arrive at a better understanding of the ways in which the author may be either complying with or challenging the conventions of those genres, both at the level of textual identity and at the level of theological reflection.

The metaphor of “speaking” contained in the term “voices” is as central to my argument, and to the texts I analyse, as the metaphor of “seeing” implied by the word “visions.” Just as contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers see themselves as engaged in a process of making the invisible visible, they also draw attention to the need to speak of the ineffable, and of that which has been unvoiced or silenced in society. Whether the unspoken is women’s experience of sexuality in the Catholic church, or nature mysticism in a society structured according to a scientific world-view, or the experience of immigrants or the poor in Canadian society, the authors in this study raise their textual voices to fill the perceived silences in their religious and literary traditions. At the same time, paradoxically, they celebrate silence itself, and describe the difficulties of expressing spiritual experience in language. There are moments in each of the narratives during which the author’s voice seems to falter or to quail in the face of the paradoxical and mysterious nature of spiritual experience. Finally, I use the term “voices” in order to emphasize the oral qualities of many of the genres adopted by these writers: First Nations storytelling in Bridges in Spirituality, liturgy and ritual in Marchessault and Quiviger, the sermon in Snowber and Leddy, ritual and rabbinical questioning as well as academic performance in From Memory to Transformation.

In my analysis of the “voices” of Canadian women spiritual autobiographers, I will draw on aspects of the work of philosopher Paul Ricoeur, particularly on his interest in the modes of discourse that make up the biblical narratives. Although he is primarily engaged in biblical hermeneutics, Ricoeur himself distinguishes between “hermeneutics in general” which “is, in [philosopher Wilhelm] Dilthey’s phrase, the interpretation of expressions of life fixed in written texts,” and the peculiarly “Christian hermeneutics” that “deals with the
unique relation between the Scriptures and what they refer to" (Essays on Biblical Interpretation, 49). Ricœur's hermeneutics is concerned with the founding documents of a religious tradition; that is, with "the most originary expressions of a community of faith . . . those expressions through which the members of this community have interpreted their experience for the sake of themselves or for others' sake" (Figuring the Sacred, 37, emphasis in the text). His methods also apply to the study of spiritual autobiographies, which represent an ongoing dialogue between the life of the individual and the traditions of the community of faith. As literary texts such life-narratives are also "expressions through which the members of this community have interpreted their experience for the sake of themselves or for others' sake," although they are not generally "originary expressions." Furthermore, Ricœur makes claims about the literary hybridity of the Judeo-Christian scriptures that apply equally well, as we have already seen, to the genre of spiritual autobiography. In his argument, biblical texts are composed of a diversity of what he calls modes (or forms) of discourse: "narratives, prophecies, legislative texts, proverbs and wisdom sayings, hymns, prayers, and liturgical formulas" (Figuring the Sacred, 37). According to Ricœur, by understanding the relationships, particularly the "tensions and contrasts" (Figuring the Sacred, 39, emphasis added) between these various modes of discourse, the reader can come to a greater appreciation of the theological significance of the sacred narratives. Ricœur argues that this religious meaning is in fact inseparable from the forms of the biblical texts, contending that we cannot:

construct theologies of the Old or New Testament that understand the narrative category to be a rhetorical procedure alien to the content it carries. It seems, on the contrary, that something specific, something unique, is said about Yahweh and about Yahweh’s relations with the people Israel because it is said in the form of a narrative, of a story that recounts the events of deliverance in the past. (40)

Similarly, "something specific, something unique, is said" about the spiritual life through the hybrid narrative forms chosen by the authors in this study.

I have adopted the theoretical term "narrative form" from the book Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives (1989), edited by the collective Personal Narratives Group. This interdisciplinary group of women scholars argues that narrative form is preferable to the terms "genre" or "mode" in analysing a wide range of
women's texts, because it is "an inclusive term amenable to cross-disciplinary studies, [that] suggests in its more encompassing nature that a narrative might be viewed as fluid rather than fixed in the variety of shapes that it can assume. Thus it is important to locate and interpret its sources and to pinpoint the particular form that is adapted" (99). The narrative forms that spiritual autobiographers adopt allow them to make use of some of the strategies and assumptions of other genres, without sacrificing the overall double vision of the spiritual autobiography. Thus, Sharon Butala combines elements of the ghost story with her more predominant style of nature writing in order to emphasize the supernatural quality of her experiences. Jewish women can reclaim the rabbinic mode of discourse known as Midrash, without necessarily structuring their texts as classical works of scholarship.

The hybridization of various narrative forms can lead to creative but also disturbing tensions in the texts that I analyse. As the Personal Narratives Group puts it: "To interpret the narrative form . . . means attending to cultural models, power relations, and individual imagination. All are brought to bear on the act of self-interpretation articulated in the choice of the narrative form" (102). The conventions of the hagiography may appear compelling when combined by Mary Jo Leddy with her editorials about other Christians, but self-aggrandizing when used uncritically by Andréa Richard to tell her own story. The mystical and the scientific modes of nature writing create contradictions for Sharon Butala's efforts to condemn one over the other, a tension she attempts to resolve by turning to the mode of the fantastic in her second spiritual autobiography. Celeste Snowber's shifts from the introspection of mystical discourse to the didacticism of biblical scholarship and to the proclamation of the sermon prevent an easy dismissal of her book as sentimental or essentialist feminine writing. The collectively written books or anthologies discussed in Chapter Six suggest that the religious life of the individual is inextricably linked with that of the community, while the solitary quest narratives of Butala and Marchessault argue otherwise. To ask these questions is to take the analysis of these texts to a deeper level than that which is offered by a reading that is confined to the study of dominant metaphors.

Furthermore, by juxtaposing the guiding metaphors and the narrative forms of contemporary Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies, we may become aware of the ways in which the texts themselves attempt to model and almost to become the images they evoke. Wilson turns the memoir form upside down by focusing more on the stories of
ordinary people she has met than on herself as a prominent, public figure, and the many Christian social activists she describes form a virtual community of those who are "turning the world upside down," which the reader is invited to join. Manning's essay treats papal edicts, like unjust Catholic structures, as edifices to deconstruct. Through her subversive use of the psychoanalytic case study, Brisson re-enacts for the reader her liberation from both the convent and the restrictive elements of her own psyche. Piotte merges the images of her fragmented text and her mutilated body, inviting the reader into a relationship with both. Marchessault's *Comme une enfant de la terre* sweeps the reader along in the breathless, unceasing movement that the author describes as a form of prayer. The image of a quilt or banner becomes, for the authors of two of the collective anthologies, both theological metaphor and an analogy for their literary form. The symbol of the pioneer is an appropriate metaphor not only for Muslim Canadian immigrant women, but also for the ground-breaking anthology of their stories.

Another issue that comes into focus when the analytical category of narrative form is brought to bear on these spiritual autobiographies is the question of structure and liberation. Narrative form, particularly the conventions of established literary genres, can be a way of providing a written text with a specific structure. Similarly, the received traditions and practices of a religious institution are a way of giving a shape to the spiritual life. One might expect that contemporary women who struggle to transform some of the more confining aspects of their religious communities will also wrestle with the limitations imposed by literary form, and this is indeed the case for many of the writers in this study. Brisson subverts the genres of both the psychoanalytic case study and the ex-nun's story in order to convey her individual spiritual vision. Alternating between the intimate voice of the personal diary and the more authoritative voice of the newspaper editorial, Leddy strives to reconcile her private and public selves. Richard's fairly conventional memoir is interrupted by the genre of the popular romance, through which the author attempts to convey the sacred nature of sexual love and the importance of personal growth. Manning uses the relentless logic of the essay form to dismantle the arguments of Pope John Paul II regarding the status of women, yet her stance as a feminist leads her to mingle personal reflections and anecdotes with her more political and polemical writing. Both Quiviger and Snowber take the intimate form of the diary and turn it into a vehicle for public preaching.
Some of the narrative forms adopted by contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers, such as the essay, the diary, the memoir, the newspaper editorial, and the romance, will no doubt be familiar to most readers and critics of literature. Other forms, especially those that are drawn from religious discourse, or those that are governed by quite specific conventions, may require more explanation and background. These genres include the sermon, the autobiographical manifesto, the hagiography, the psychoanalytic case study, the ex-nun’s tale, nature writing, fantastic literature, parody, lamentation, oral narrative and storytelling, Islamic biography, and Midrash. In my discussion of each of the texts in this study, I will provide some theoretical background in order to situate these works in relation to the various narrative forms on which they draw. While this critical information will of necessity be somewhat limited, I hope to give readers an appreciation for the ways in which these writers locate their personal voices in relation to both tradition and innovation. Narrative form becomes one of many rhetorical strategies through which contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers are able to inscribe their experience within their religious and literary traditions, while at the same time claiming a distinct space from which to engage their audiences in both dialogue and debate.

Just as attending to the guiding metaphors of the spiritual autobiographers in this study has encouraged me to look more closely at my own use of figurative language, so too has focusing on the narrative forms of the texts made me more aware of the possibilities and limitations of my own modes of discourse, and of those employed by other literary critics. The fact that literary criticism often begins to sound like a manifesto or a sermon is evidence of the passion with which literary scholars engage with their subject, and defend their beliefs. However, such rhetorical force also reflects the ways in which academic discourse can participate in the same dogmatism and sectarianism as religious discourse. At times I have found myself frustrated by the constraints of the academic essay form, with its assumptions of authority and objectivity, its forced distancing of the writer from her or his subject, and its suspicion of the autobiographical voice; yet its logic and structure have forced me to pursue an intellectual rigour that has led to unexpected revelations. Some of the most nuanced discussions of the complex issues surrounding women’s religious life-narratives by contemporary feminist academics often themselves take the form of spiritual autobiography. Carol Lee Flinders’s *At the Root of This Longing: Reconciling a Feminist Hunger with a
Spiritual Thirst (1998), is an example of such a study. It straddles the line between academic and popular writing, just as it also attempts to bridge the gap between scholarly reflection and autobiographical musings. More than anything else, this particular mode of discourse – the academic essay – has forced me to confront the fact that I, like the authors I study, often make assumptions about the readers of my text.

**Voisinages : Communities of Writers, Texts, and Readers**

Theologian James McClendon, Jr. notes that “[t]he character we investigate in a biographical study is always character-in-community” (Biography as Theology, 170). This communal dimension of spiritual autobiography is what I have chosen to call “voisinage”: the sense that there is always in any text an implied reader or audience: single or multiple, homogeneous or diverse. The notion of voisinage also has unavoidable ethical implications. The question “Who is my neighbour?” is a fundamental ethical question in the Christian tradition, a query in reply to which Jesus is said to have told the so-called “Parable of the Good Samaritan” (Luke 10.29-37). The issue of voisinage is also an important one in the context of Canadian society and literature, in which the problem of who or what belongs or does not belong is often central to debates on everything from immigration, to Canadian identity, to the formation of the Canadian canon. Just as the term “visions” evokes the metaphor of making visible that which has been invisible, and “voices” alludes to the act of speaking the unspoken, so too, “voisinages” (particularly in connection with the “Parable of the Good Samaritan”) invites the inclusion of that which has been excluded. All of the spiritual autobiographies analysed in this study either challenge their various imagined communities to adopt stances of greater inclusiveness, or discuss their own sense of not fully belonging to one or more of those communities, or both. Wilson accuses middle class Christian Canadians of intolerance toward many of those who are on the margins of Canadian society. All of the writers who were brought up as Roman Catholics (Manning, Leddy, Richard, Brisson, Quiviger, Piotte, and Marchessault) criticize the Catholic church’s exclusion of women from positions of authority within the church, and the Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim authors also express their frustration over the differential treatment of men and women in their religious institutions. Many of the spiritual autobiographers in this study
express a deep activist or ethical imperative to their faith, believing that they have both a
moral and a material responsibility to reach out in compassion to those who are
disadvantaged in any way.

Canadian women who give their autobiographies a spiritual focus are writing from the
margins of many groups or communities with which they may partially identify: as
Canadians, their emphasis on the religious or spiritual dimensions of their lives may seem
strangely out of place in a predominantly secular society and in a literary tradition that has
often been uncomfortable with religion; as women engaged to some degree with traditional
religious structures and practices, they often feel that their experience has been ignored and
their voices have been silenced by those traditions; as women who may identify with various
aspects of feminism, their espousal of religious beliefs that seem to deny the self and accept
patriarchal models may puzzle or even anger other feminists. McClendon stresses that the
individual's relationship to any of the communities to which they belong may be strained,
and still be a life-defining relationship: "Individuals, while they may dissent from this or that
common conviction . . . nevertheless are shaped by the need to agree or to dissent, and so
their own convictions are formed in interaction with the community's" (18). These multiple
and sometimes incongruous textual or imagined communities are a complex and challenging
focal point of literary analysis in spiritual autobiography. In this study, I will approach them
from the perspective of reader-response criticism in its many different guises.

In her introduction to Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-
Structuralism (1980), literary critic Jane P. Tompkins writes that reader-response criticism
"is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated with
the work of critics who use the words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out
an area of investigation" (ix, emphasis in the text). It is crucial to keep in mind the role of
the reader in the interpretation of the guiding metaphors and narrative forms of contemporary
Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies. As Caroline Walker Bynum, a historian of
religion, points out in Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols (1986): "It is not
possible ever to ask How does a symbol – any symbol – mean? without asking For whom
does it mean?" (3, emphasis in the text). Theoretical concepts and methodological tools from
reader-response criticism, such as the notion of the mock reader (Walker Gibson, Wayne
Booth) or the implied reader (Wolfgang Iser), and the idea of the interpretive community
(Stanley Fish), offer contexts to help untangle who the various readers are for whom contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies may have meaning.

Walker Gibson was one of the first literary critics to articulate the conception of a “mock reader,” in his 1950 article entitled “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers.” Gibson proposes that there is a mock reader inscribed within the language of the literary text, and that when we read “[w]e assume, for the sake of the experience, that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume” (1). Gibson’s discussion of the mock reader raises questions of value judgement that are central to the interpretation of spiritual autobiography, particularly in the contemporary context. While the author of a religious life-narrative may on occasion construct a hostile mock reader who must be persuaded or converted, the majority of spiritual autobiographies are addressed to fellow believers or sympathetic mock readers. The non-religious readers (or the readers who do not share the same beliefs as the writer) of such a book may find themselves unwilling to enter into the role assigned to them. Gibson is unequivocal in his judgement of such works of literature: “A bad book . . . is a book in whose mock reader we discover a person we refuse to become, a mask we refuse to put on, a role we will not play” (5, emphasis added).

Although the question of the value of a book is not as simple as Gibson suggests, the notion that there are mock readers “we refuse to become” is a point that I will try to keep in mind when discussing the genre of spiritual autobiography. In The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961) Wayne Booth brings a nuance to Gibson’s argument, pointing out that in a case such as the one Gibson describes “it is difficult to know whether [the author’s] failure to carry me along is a failure of craftsmanship or a fundamental incompatibility that no amount of craftsmanship could overcome” (138-39). Whether such a refusal is the sign of “a fundamental incompatibility” between the reader’s and the author’s beliefs, or whether it is due to “a failure of craftsmanship,” are questions that affect the

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reception and criticism of sacred life-narratives in the contemporary Canadian context, as we have seen in the case of Fawcett and Rigelhof.

While Gibson's discussion of the mock reader supplies one component of my theoretical framework, I prefer Wolfgang Iser's notion of the "implied reader," who is a more active participant in the reading process than Gibson's more textually circumscribed mock reader. For Iser, the term implied reader "incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process" (xii). In other words, the implied reader is a textual element that requires the actual reader's participation in order to function. Furthermore, Iser – like fellow critics Françoise Lionnet, Robert Coles, bell hooks, and Louise Rosenblatt – espouses the belief that actual readers can be transformed by the reading process. This transformation takes place when we as readers align ourselves with the implied reader who is portrayed in the text. Such transformation – or conversion – is often, as we have seen, one of the desired outcomes of the spiritual autobiographer. Nevertheless, Iser reminds us that such transformation cannot occur without the reader's participation, and that it will require actions that lie outside the boundaries of the literary: "But this transformation of the reader into the image created by the author does not take place through rhetoric alone. The reader has to be stimulated into certain activities, which may be guided by rhetorical signposts, but which lead to a process that is not merely rhetorical" (30). A question that is particularly relevant to the study of spiritual autobiography is whether or not the reader desires to be transformed. In this study, for the most part, I have chosen texts to which I am at least partly sympathetic, and texts that have challenged me on intellectual, personal, and spiritual levels. However, there may be times in which a reader's participation may rather take the form of resisting transformation, and such a response may be an equally valid and necessary gesture.

Stanley Fish develops the concept of interpretive communities in his essay "Interpreting the Variorum" (Is There a Text in This Class?, 147-73). Fish writes that "[i]nterpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (182). In other words, interpretive communities are possessed of common hermeneutical methods, as in the example that Fish gives of the hermeneutics proposed by Augustine in On Christian Doctrine: "[E]verything in the Scriptures, and indeed
in the world when it is properly read, points to (bears the meaning of) God’s love for us and our answering responsibility to love our fellow creatures for His sake” (181). Although Fish offers this reading strategy as an example of a reductive hermeneutic which leads to “the endless reproduction of the same text” (181), he does not believe that other forms of interpretation are necessarily more valid, only more or less aware of their own bias. Fish’s ideas challenge my own interpretations of Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies by forcing me to confront my own hermeneutical biases, that have been shaped by my various interpretive communities. I have tried to discuss most of these perspectives in my “intellectual autobiography” in Chapter One: my identities and sympathies as a feminist, as a woman of deep spiritual faith, as a Buddhist Christian, as a believer in the transformative powers of literature. Some of these biases I share with some of my readers, while others I do not. What the notion of “voisinage” evokes for me is the willingness to enter into respectful dialogue with my various readers, the desire to seek out common ground as well as a productive clarification of differences, and the expectation that my own readers will do the same in return. The insights that can be drawn from Fish’s theoretical model are also, I believe, central to the work of the spiritual autobiographer: the process of writing a religious life-narrative is also a process of interpreting one’s life in the context of an experience of the sacred, while the act of reading spiritual autobiography may also shape the writing or living of the religious life.

Stanley Fish’s concept of the interpretive community has a theoretical correlate at the wider social or political level, in Benedict Anderson’s definition of nations as imagined communities. The idea of a large social or political community existing as a construct in the imaginations of all of its members, even if they have never met one another, provides a conceptual lens through which to view the sense of belonging and identification that the writers in this study may feel not only with their national communities, but also with their global religious communities. Thus, Christian writers often speak of “the Church” as both an international, earthly institution that transcends political borders, and a spiritual community that transcends earthly preoccupations. Muslim and Jewish writers also express a strong sense of belonging to an international, diasporic religious community. In Imagined Communities (1991), Anderson argues that “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). It is “the style in
which [communities] are imagined" that I will examine in the spiritual autobiographies in this study, whether the communities in question are national, religious, or cultural. Through the resonances of their guiding metaphors, through the conventions inscribed within their narrative forms, and through the implied audiences and interpretive communities embedded within their texts, contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers imagine communities (and sometimes, the transformation of those communities) that are as diverse as the writers themselves.

Furthermore, if one’s interpretive communities are variously religious, social, political, and feminist, then finding the guiding metaphors and narrative forms for that written life will present challenges that may need to be resolved from a literary point of view. These difficulties will be particularly severe in cases where interpretive communities are in conflict in some way. In Biography as Theology, McClendon acknowledges the dilemmas faced by those who are loyal to more than one ideological tradition: “Those who belong to more than one convictional community . . . form themselves and are formed by each community, though not without resultant conflicts in practice” (18). McClendon’s observations are particularly relevant for contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers, many of whom are explicit about their commitments or loyalties to communities other than their religious ones. Indeed, the tension between conflicting loyalties is at times a central theme of these women’s spiritual autobiographies, as when a writer is torn between a love affair and her religious vocation (Richard and Leddy), when her commitment to feminism seems to be at odds with the teachings of the church (Leddy, Richard, and Manning), or when her religious heritage makes her feel like an outsider to Canadian society (Jewish, Muslim, First Nations, and Métis women).

McClendon also emphasizes that the scholar who examines “such a life must have this communal dimension of her study always in mind, and the theological results of the inquiry are normally addressed to the community from which her interest first grows” (171), thus bringing a further dimension of voisinage into the picture: the readers of any academic study of life-writing. The community for which I write is primarily an academic literary community and not a theological one, yet I have had to come to terms with the fact that the ideal reader I envision for my study of these texts is very often a religious one. Just as the authors I study must situate themselves within various systems of imagery and discourse, and
in relationship to their imagined communities, so, too, I have found myself attempting to locate and define my own responses to these texts, as well as those of the other readers with whom I have been in contact, including committee members and friends. At times I have been reminded that the calls for social justice that resonate powerfully for me as someone from a Christian background may be experienced as excluding readers who are social activists but who are not motivated by religious or spiritual values. The Christian images and symbols that are so familiar to me as to be almost clichés may resound with fresh vitality for those unfamiliar with the biblical tradition. On the other hand, readers unfamiliar with the Judeo-Christian theological tradition may miss the nuances with which many of these writers transform familiar imagery in unexpected and often challenging ways. The reverse has also been true for me when I have discussed the stories of Muslim women with a Muslim reader and friend. Occasionally, when I have found myself approaching a certain text purely intellectually and critically, a conversation with another reader has reminded me of the awe, excitement, and gratitude that the same book can inspire in a reader who approaches it for guidance in their own spiritual life and practice. Conversely, when I have unquestioningly accepted the theological beliefs of a writer whose stance approximates my own, a few pointed questions from one of my committee members have reminded me to not to take that author’s world-view for granted in my own implied readers. My academic, intellectual, and spiritual processes have been enriched by trying to hold the experiences of these various other readers in tension with my own, while recognizing that no single reading can do justice to the multiple experiences of the readers of any one text. While I cannot resolve all of these questions and tensions, I can at least attempt to hold them up as correctives to my own blind spots and prejudices, all the while realizing that further conversations with future readers will reveal yet more unexplored territory. I hope that the readers of this study – women or men, academics or seekers, believers or agnostics – will find in the following pages many fruitful questions to ponder in relation to their own lives and work.

Thus the work of theologians such as McClendon – and of reader-response critics such as Gibson, Iser, Booth, and Fish – must be qualified by the reminder that the reader in relationship with the spiritual autobiography is not merely a textually constructed ideal or implied reader, but also a living individual. The guiding metaphors and the narrative forms employed by a spiritual autobiographer are important both for their relationship to religious
and literary traditions of figurative language, and also for the ways in which they are able to engage actual, contemporary readers of the text. Thus, "the dominant images that seem to shape the life of the subject" also "relate that life to the tradition in which the subject stands and to ourselves to the extent that these images speak to us" (Biography as Theology, 161). The "extent [to which] these images speak to us" may be as diverse and as complex as the individuals who engage with the spiritual autobiography itself. Where possible in this study I have attempted to refer to published reviews of the primary texts in order to assess actual readers' responses to the books. However, given the marginal character of spiritual autobiography, such articles have been difficult to find, and in most cases I have had to content myself with examining the traces of the textual implied reader, as well as my own reactions to the texts.

Furthermore, if the "selves" inscribed within the texts may be constantly shifting, and difficult to pin down, the same is true for the "reading selves" with which any one reader may approach a work of literature. Although I consider myself to be a person of religious faith, there are days when I read with the heart of the most hardened sceptic, or the eyes of the most committed atheist. This statement may sound shocking or paradoxical, but it expresses my experience as an avid reader of literature and as a woman committed to the spiritual life. In the first volume of her spiritual journals, A Circle of Quiet (1972), American children's author Madeleine L'Engle describes an exchange with a young high school student who asks her: "Mrs. Franklin, do you really and truly believe in God with no doubts at all?" To which L'Engle's reply is: "Oh, Una, I really and truly believe in God with all kinds of doubts." In her journal she goes on to add: "But I base my life on this belief" (63). Basing one's life on such beliefs is the fundamental challenge of spiritual autobiography, and those "all kinds of doubts" that we bring to the reading, writing, and criticism of spiritual autobiography— that willingness to map the dialectical negotiations of our experience, and to dwell in paradox— may be in the final analysis the most creative aspects of the genre, from both a literary and a theological point of view.
Chapter Three
Prophetic Visions, Public Voices

Introduction and Background

The first group of texts that I will examine includes authors who write out of a consciousness of their positions as prominent, public figures in Canadian churches. These writers choose to situate themselves and their narratives firmly within their respective spiritual traditions, while at the same time bringing challenges to the hierarchical structures of their religious heritages. Lois Wilson’s Turning the World Upside Down (1989) recounts some of the private and public experiences of the first woman moderator of the United Church of Canada. With Say to the Darkness, We Beg to Differ (1990), Mary Jo Leddy creates a hybrid of published newspaper editorials and private diary entries from her time as founding editor of Canada’s alternative Catholic newspaper, Catholic New Times. In Femme après le cloître (1995), Andréa Richard, the founder of two Catholic contemplative orders for lay people in Québec, denounces the restrictions of ordered religious life, and defies the Catholic church’s teachings on women’s ordination and clergy celibacy. Finally, Joanna Manning’s Is the Pope Catholic? (1999) is an autobiographical polemic against the sexist policies and practices of the Vatican under John Paul II, by a well-known Canadian Catholic educator and feminist critic. All four writers use some variant of the memoir or autobiographical essay, yet each one faces the difficult task of negotiating between private and public identities, of combining a personal story with a political stance.

While there are important differences between the ways in which these four women resolve the tensions between their private and public selves, there are some significant commonalities as well. To begin with, all four women are Christians (Wilson is Protestant and the other three are Roman Catholic), and the dominant images and symbols of their religious tradition, while perhaps in need of transformation, are nevertheless meaningful to their lives of faith. All four texts have a strong outward focus, in which the author’s hermeneutics is directed primarily toward the religious institution, rather than the self. All four writers engage in dialectical negotiations between the private and public realms, invoking metaphors that undermine or call into question the notion of there being
impermeable boundaries between the two. For Wilson, the motif of conversion that is so often a private experience in classical spiritual autobiography becomes an imperative that is projected into the public realm, and her memoir calls for the “turning upside down” of both religious and social structures. The contrasting images of light and darkness become part of the symbolic network through which Leddy voices her call for a “third option” that lies between church and culture, between public and private, between self and non-self. Richard juxtaposes the growth and evolution of her private life – with its experiences of illness, mystical experience, and erotic love – with the excessive restrictions imposed by her public involvement in a religious order. By doing this she promotes her vision of contemplative lay communities and her argument for women’s ordination and priestly marriage. Finally, Manning deploys a wide array of architectural, military, and imperial metaphors which she then caustically undercuts in her condemnation of the detrimental impact of the public practices of the Roman Catholic hierarchy on the private lives of women around the world.

At the level of narrative form, all four authors draw on genres that are associated with public lives, but then either subvert or transform them in significant ways by introducing highly personal modes of discourse. In Patterns of Experience in Autobiography, Susanna Egan argues that memoir is to be distinguished from autobiography by its “narration of public, externally verifiable events” rather than “the far more difficult narration of hidden experience” (11). Although all four of these authors engage in dialectical negotiations between the expression of private and public experience, they all share a commitment to describing “public, externally verifiable events” and facts: Wilson as a leader in her church, Leddy as a journalist, Richard as a teacher and advocate, and Manning as a feminist, teacher, and church historian. Wilson’s fairly traditional memoir nevertheless emphasizes her private struggles as a woman within a predominantly male profession. She also critiques the convention of the memoirist as the central figure of the autobiography by handing over her narrative to the stories of those who have taught her to see injustice with new eyes. As Leddy strives to articulate a theological third option, her narrative alternates between public newspaper editorials and private diary entries, with the distinction between the two modes of discourse becoming more and more blurred. The highly personal and self-revealing genres of the popular romance and the ex-nun’s story transform Richard’s otherwise conventional public memoir into a fervent autobiographical manifesto in support of the ordination of
women and the marriage of priests in the Catholic church. Finally, Manning combines the
tight arguments of the classical essay with the emotional appeals of personal experience in
order to dismantle the teachings of the current pope on both the public and the private level.

There are important similarities between the implied audiences of these four books as
well. All four assume readers who share a similar background to the authors themselves:
white, middle-class, Canadian Christians who lead lives of relative privilege. Through the
rhetorical appeals in their spiritual autobiographies, they seek to transform their audiences
into activists like themselves, who will share in their fight for global social justice and for the
full participation of women within the structures of institutional Christian churches. Part of
the dialectical negotiation between the public and the private in these memoirs, then, is the
sense that one’s personal spiritual experience must be a prelude to a wider social
engagement. Indeed, all four of these texts are works of theology and ethics, as well as
stories of personal experience. All four writers are conscious of the links between language
and thought, between images and behaviour. Their creative interpretations and incisive
criticisms of the hierarchical ideologies of Christianity – and of the imagery used to disguise
or to legitimize it – attest to their conviction that such images have very real consequences
for the lives of people of faith. All four authors stress the importance of moving from
theological reflection to public action and activism, and express their beliefs that the
consequences of Christian doctrine extend far beyond the “walls” of institutional churches.
Nevertheless, while all four writers seem to presuppose a wide audience for their books, their
use of language and imagery is situated so firmly within the Christian tradition – without
necessarily providing their readers with a gloss on the terms they use – that it may alienate
other activists who might share their social, if not their theological, agenda. They are
perhaps less successful in reconciling the tensions between their religious and social
responsibilities than in coming to terms with their public and private identities.


Lois Wilson’s memoir, Turning the World Upside Down (1989), is written from the
perspective of a woman who has held important positions of power within the Canadian and
international churches. From 1976 to 1979 Wilson was president of the Canadian Council of
Churches; in 1980 she was elected the first woman moderator of the United Church of Canada, a position which she held for three years; and she was one of the seven presidents of the World Council of Churches from 1983 to 1991 (65). Wilson’s memoir is largely structured around her experiences while holding these official roles, and it is undeniably the autobiography of a public figure. Her choice to make institutional structures and questions of power and authority central to her own spiritual life-narrative has profound theological and social implications. Images of buildings abound in Wilson’s book, as do discussions and analyses of institutional systems. The juxtaposition of these concrete and abstract structures creates a powerful guiding metaphor that allows her to engage in an impassioned critique of the systemic injustices that permeate both the structures of the Christian church and the institutions of power and wealth in our global society. The alternative vision of justice that Wilson offers is one in which relationships are reconfigured and human responsibilities are reimagined.

The guiding metaphor of *Turning the World Upside Down* is, as the title implies, the image of the complete reversal of the established order. Wilson first alludes to the notion of “turning the world upside down” in her preface, in which she refers to the imperialist and eurocentric map-making practices that have been challenged by people from what Wilson calls “the two-thirds world” (xi). While perhaps overly simplistic from the point of view of global politics and international relations, from the point of view of the genre of spiritual autobiography, Wilson’s emphasis on the physical movement of “turning upside down” breathes new life into the motif of conversion. The motif of “turning the world upside down” links Wilson’s memoir with the tradition of the Protestant conversion narrative, but in a way that challenges the dichotomies between private and public in the form. She makes an explicit link between the idea of conversion and its Latin root in the verb “to turn,” but rather than invoking the conventional and conservative notion of conversion as “turning toward” God, Wilson alludes to the “turning upside down” of unjust power structures and worldviews. She consistently portrays conversion as a public rather than a private act, as a social rather than a purely religious concept, as a corporate rather than an individual imperative. Thus the notion of conversion as a private spiritual experience is expanded into a definition that includes not only conversion to other points of view and other perspectives on global injustice, but also the necessity for systemic conversions within the church and in the world.
The world that Wilson wishes to see turned upside down is one of social structures and religious institutions, and her text is filled with architectural and spatial imagery. The very first metaphor used by Wilson to describe the United Church is rich with paradox. In her opening chapter, entitled “When I Was A Child,” Wilson discusses her earliest experience of Christian community: “My parents took me to church, and I associated being Christian with ‘belonging’ right from the start . . . the church made me feel accepted and secure; it soon became a second home” (7). This metaphor is deprived of its overtones of cosiness and safety, however, when it is juxtaposed with Wilson’s descriptions of her actual home. Wilson’s father is a United Church minister, and the family lives in a manse provided by the church. Their private home is thus also an extension of the father’s public ministry, so that Wilson remembers the “long lines of hungry unemployed men” who “beat a pathway to our front door” during the Depression years, and were not sent away “without a bite, however modest” (5). Later on, she lists the many people who were given sanctuary by her parents over the years, and remarks: “Our house was known as Grand Central Station” (13). She also writes about family canoe trips in the summer, during which the canoe became their “summer home” (10). By equating church with home, and then superimposing images of movement, travel, activity, and service onto the quieter and more domestic image of the home, Wilson thus affords her readers a glimpse into her vision of the kind of home the church or the Christian community should be: a place of movement and change, where social justice and community diversity are promoted.

Wilson’s preoccupation with buildings and building metaphors persists throughout her memoir, and provides a key to the theological and ethical dimensions of her writing, becoming a sort of “architectural hermeneutics.” She devotes eight pages to the story of First United Church in Hamilton, Ontario, whose church building burns down shortly after she and her husband Roy arrive in the community as ministers. The congregation ultimately decides to use the insurance money to build a community centre that includes low-income housing and other services along with a space for worship. Wilson both opens and closes this section with humorous anecdotes that underscore her ambivalence toward buildings and other structures. On the one hand, the community of faith is more than its building, as she tries to impress upon a corner store owner who commiserates with her over the “loss” of her “church” (51). On the other hand, she feels very strongly that the new church building
expresses the theological vision and social commitment of the congregation, and she is amused by a delivery person who has difficulty finding the building and bursts out in exasperation: “But this doesn’t look like a church . . . If it’s not a church, why didn’t you say so?” (59). Wilson goes on to express her own very different perspective: “To my mind, the complex looked exactly as a church should look. It placed the worshipping congregation just where it should be if it was ever to share redemptive energies with others in the centre of a human community of over a thousand people” (59). Thus, although the community of faith is more than its architecture, for Wilson that architecture can nevertheless reveal a great deal about the theology and ethics of the community.

Wilson’s fascination with buildings as windows into the spiritual and social values of communities or individuals persists throughout all of the anecdotes that make up her book. Architectural imagery functions in different ways in the text. At times, it provides a kind of scale for weighing spiritual values against materialistic or self-serving actions. The stories of a Brazilian Archbishop who sells his palace in order to build community centres (157), and of a Chilean woman who “would not trade her soul for a house” by voting for Pinochet (169), serve as ethical barometers for Wilson that reveal the integrity of individuals. At other times, Wilson’s descriptions of places of worship seem to be offered as illustrations of Jesus’s words in The Gospel of John that “in [his] Father’s house there are many dwelling places” (John 14.2, NRSV). For example, her lyrical remembrance of her first visit to a Hindu temple (66) reinforces her message of ecumenical and interfaith understanding. Overall, however, buildings in Wilson’s text are portrayed as physical manifestations of deeper social issues and systems. Her discussion of the apartheid regime in South Africa focuses on its spatial ramifications: the crowded living conditions in the black ghettos and in the legal-aid clinic that she visits, and the enforced segregation of people of different races (108-25). These intangible structures, institutions, and systems of power are Wilson’s real concern. She insists repeatedly that social justice requires not just compassion for others and charity, but a radical restructuring of social institutions. She argues that “[t]he problem [of poverty and suffering] requires us to review how human relationships are structured in our

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1 In Christian terminology, the word “ecumenical” generally refers to relationships between various sects and denominations of Christianity (Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox), while “interfaith” refers to relationships between different religious groups (for example, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and so on).
communities, our hemispheres, and our world. Working within a community to change the structures affecting individuals can help to prevent people from being victimized” (97-98).

This conceptualization of injustice in strongly spatial terms is not presented by Wilson as a natural way of seeing the world, but as one that she has had to learn from others. By experimenting with and disrupting the memoir form, Wilson leads her readers on a journey similar to her own, one that begins in the private and individual realm but emerges into the public and collective arena. Although Wilson elects to use the narrative form of the memoir for her spiritual autobiography, a logical choice given her position as a very public figure in the United Church of Canada and with the World Council of Churches, she also turns the memoir form itself upside down, using two different strategies in the two different parts of her book. In the first four chapters of Turning the World Upside Down, she disrupts the public memoir by including reflections on some of her private experiences as a woman: marriage, childbirth, being a mother, and so on. Wilson’s emphasis in this first section on what she later refers to as “the holy in everyday living” (140) anticipates the spiritual reflections that we will encounter in the writers examined in Chapter Four. For example, although she refuses to equate being a woman with being a mother, she nevertheless celebrates the experience of giving birth as “one of the most intense experiences of love and intimacy that [she] has ever had” (28), and describes her daughter’s birth in a brief yet tersely graphic passage: “It was an awesome event that a human being had actually emerged from my body with a great crescendo of water and blood and struggle and pain” (29). By including such intimate details of her experience as a woman in the first part of her memoir of her life as a public religious leader, Wilson implicitly challenges the assumptions of certain Christian denominations that women’s place is in the home and not at the altar or in the pulpit. Wilson argues that both places are hers, the intimate world of childbirth no less than the public realm of church leadership.

In the second and lengthier part of the text, which consists of the last thirteen chapters, Wilson further undermines the public form of the memoir by focusing more on the stories and lessons of the people she meets than on her own experience. In 1972 she attends a World Council of Churches conference held in Crete as a delegate with the Canadian Council of Churches, and she credits this journey with opening her eyes to issues of global injustice: “I began to look at the world in a different way. I had listened as these countries
and problems were presented by people intimately involved in them... I sensed the interdependence not only of the issues, but of people from all parts of the globe, including myself” (64). In the chapters that follow this early international experience, Wilson intentionally structures her narrative around themes and issues, rather than proceeding chronologically. She presents herself as someone whose travels and whose privileged positions of authority within the church allow her to listen to the stories of others, and to learn to see the world through their eyes. The anecdotes that she shares are peopled with individuals from different countries, faiths, and social positions, who offer analyses of their situations through structural lenses. It is this act of learning to see anew – of learning to analyse relationships and power structures from the point of view of the oppressed and the marginalized – that Wilson describes as the central conversion experience of her narrative.

The notion of conversion, then, is much more complex in Turning the World Upside Down than it would be in a narrative in which the emphasis is on the individual’s private spiritual experience, such as the Puritan and Quaker conversion narratives discussed in Chapter One. Wilson certainly describes her acceptance of the Christian faith and her call to public ministry in terms of spiritual conversion, but she does so in a perfunctory fashion and uses conventional language. Of her adolescent confirmation of faith, she writes: “It was a public sign of my conversion, of the turning of my life in a certain direction” (14). In the same understated way that she mentions her confirmation, Wilson also seems almost to pass over the issue of her call to the ministry: “[S]lowly but steadily there grew in me a deepening spiritual understanding of what God wanted of my life. There was no bolt from the blue, but during the spring and summer of 1948 I felt a growing conviction and certainty that I was being called to the ordained ministry” (21). These unimaginative descriptions are in stark contrast with the passionate narrative voice with which Wilson discusses her experience in Crete: “Crete opened up the world for me in quite new and exciting ways. It gave me a new pair of glasses. It transformed my parochial perspective to a global one and I ‘saw,’ Canada with new eyes. The trip marked my conversion to the world church and to the ecumenical movement. For me it was a veritable Pentecost” (60). Once again, the metaphor of “seeing with new eyes” becomes an important way for Wilson to describe her personal transformation. Significantly, in this passage the image of seeing anew is also combined with a reference to “Pentecost,” a Christian celebration that commemorates a time when the
Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and enabled them to speak in different languages. For Wilson, therefore, it is not enough to have a new vision; one must also give voice to it. One of the traditional images of “Pentecost,” that of tongues of flame descending from heaven, recalls the “bolt from the blue” that Wilson denies having experienced during her call to the ministry. Thus, at the level of the text’s figurative language, the conversion to a global world-view is given predominance over spiritual or vocational conversion.

All of Wilson’s conversion experiences are associated either with organizations or with geographical places, as she herself points out: “If the Student Christian Movement had been my conversion to the need for personal and structural transformation, Town Talk had been my conversion to community. If Crete had been my conversion to the ecumenical movement, India had been my conversion to the world” (80). Thus conversion, for Wilson, is a “turning upside down” of one’s life that happens in dialogue with others and requires radically new ways of living out one’s faith. Furthermore conversion – in Wilson’s view – is necessary not only for individuals, but for entire societies that may also be in need of being “turned upside down,” such as the old apartheid regime in South Africa (still in place when Wilson’s memoir was published): “The love of God demands a total conversion of the system that presently allows whites to believe that they are not accountable in any way to the black majority” (117). At the same time, Wilson addresses the notion of conversion that prevails in certain Christian circles, one that demands that non-Christians be converted to Christianity in order to be saved. As is typical of the anecdotal style of her memoir, she shares the insight in the form of a dialogue, and attributes the ideas to the person from whom she heard them, in this case a visiting priest and colleague from India: “What does conversion mean? How is it related to love? . . . It is more important to love each other than to simply name the name of Jesus” (209). Thus, Wilson’s spiritual autobiography challenges the notion that conversion is a private, religious experience involving the adoption of an exclusive faith, and proposes instead that it is a public and social transformation of one’s actions in the world. Conversion becomes a question of ethics, rather than beliefs or dogma.

The image that becomes, for Wilson, the symbol of a world transformed by God’s love, is “the peaceable kingdom”: “At the core of every historic faith there is a vision of ‘the peaceable kingdom,’ where the lion and the lamb lie peaceably together. The vision of a common future that honours diversity is universal” (78). Wilson returns to this metaphor at
the end of her memoir, in the final chapter entitled, appropriately, "The Lion and the Lamb." It is at this point that the reader realizes that the vision of the peaceable kingdom is central to Wilson's autobiography because it is at the core of her understanding of her faith, and of its imperative for her life's work: "Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom, of the lion and the lamb lying down together, is one of the strongest Biblical images that informs my life and work" (252). The image of the peaceable kingdom belongs not only to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also to the heritage of contemporary Canadian letters. It is a utopian image that historian William Kilbourn embraces in the title of an anthology of Canadian writings he edits entitled Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom (1970). Kilbourn optimistically expresses his hope that "this two-cultured, multi-ghettoed, plural community, this non-nation, nay-saying no-place of an un-Eden, this faceless unidentifiable blank on the map, 'this wind that lacks a flag', this Canada of ours, might be a guide to other peoples who seek a path to the peaceable kingdom" (xi). In a speech entitled "Preserving the Peaceable Kingdom" (1974), reprinted in The Passionate Observer (1980), historian Donald Creighton, referring back to Kilbourn's anthology, argues that the phrase "provides a key to the understanding of Canada" as a unique nation (42). Creighton however, unlike Kilbourn, emphasizes the conservative aspects of the image, with its evocation of monarchy. His interpretation of the peaceable kingdom seems to contain an implicit suspicion of diversity, as well as a homogenizing vision of Canadian identity.

Northrop Frye also takes up the image in his "Conclusion" to the second volume of the second edition of the Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English (1976), with a slightly different nuance. Frye refers to an early nineteenth-century painting by Edward Hicks entitled "The Peaceable Kingdom," which portrays "the reconciliation of man with man [First Nations peoples with Quaker settlers] and of man with nature [a group of wild animals grouped serenely in the foreground]" (360). For Frye, this painting becomes "a pictorial emblem" of the guiding impulse of Canadian literature, of "the haunting vision of a serenity that is both human and natural which we have been struggling to identify in the Canadian tradition. If we had to characterize a distinctive emphasis in that tradition, we might call it a quest for the peaceable kingdom" (360). For Frye, then, the peaceable kingdom represents a yearning for harmony and reconciliation that is at the heart of the literary imagination. Lois Wilson, however, by yoking this peaceful metaphor with passages
from the book of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, departs from the examples of her Canadian literary predecessors by investing the image with a sense of revolutionary urgency. In order to bring about the peaceable kingdom it will be “necessary to ‘pull down and uproot, to destroy and demolish, to build and to plant,’ as Jeremiah defines the prophetic task of effecting radical social change” (115). Through the imagery of both building and gardening, Wilson proposes a social and religious agenda that will be accomplished through hard work; not by those “who are sitting around twiddling their thumbs waiting for the peaceable kingdom miraculously to appear, but those who are ‘turning the world upside down’ by the way they live their lives” (252). The guiding metaphor of Wilson’s memoir, then, is paradoxically one of both peace and revolution, of a new way of seeing that leads to a new way of acting.

Although the metaphor of vision or the figure of the witness is central to Wilson’s memoir, it is not without its own inner tensions in the narrative. Wilson consistently portrays herself as a witness to events and to people in other countries. At times this role of witness is a formal and political one, as when she is part of an ecumenical Christian group sent “to monitor and observe the plebiscite on the future of the Pinochet regime in Chile” in 1988 (166). At other times she positions herself as a witness to “the suffering and the heroism” in other parts of the world, a witness whose “difficult” job it is “to bring that story home to Canadians” (94). At still other times Wilson’s experiences in other countries make her a more enlightened observer of the situation in her own country: “In Canada we also have an imbalance of race and power and a sense of helplessness about effecting radical change. The violence I saw in South Africa was a knothole through which I could see into the violence of our own society. Only the intensity and the history are different” (125). Yet the act of witnessing – with its overtones of passivity, and of distance between observer and observed – proves to be insufficient to the sense of solidarity and commitment that Wilson wishes to convey in her call for social justice. In order to communicate the inadequacy of the witness position, she tells the story of Maria, an Argentinian doctor, theologian, and shantytown worker, who invites a picture-taking group of visiting Canadian theological students to put down their cameras and “come over here and be with us” (105). Wilson’s commentary on this anecdote turns it into an ethical imperative: “’Come over here and be with us’ became for me a passionate rallying cry, signalling the opening up of a new world, the world of
mutuality and solidarity” (106). Yet there is an irony in the fact that Wilson’s own memoir contains numerous photographs, many of them picturing her with prominent religious figures. Wilson’s efforts to turn the memoir form upside down cannot completely undermine the assumptions of the genre itself, with its focus on the life of a famous, public person.

The implied audience of Turning the World Upside Down is presumably one that shares a great deal in common with Wilson herself. She portrays herself as both witness and storyteller to other privileged Canadian Christians. She constantly makes comparisons between her experiences in other countries and settings that she assumes will be familiar to other Canadians, at least through their collective national imagination. By holding up a mirror to herself which also reflects her audience, Wilson is also calling them to the same kind of social activism to which she has been converted. Wilson situates both herself and her readers in relation to the systemic injustices that she would like to see reversed. She positions herself as both witness and participant, as both Canadian and Christian, and does not shy away from exploring some of the tensions inherent in these juxtapositions of identities. Her first recognition of some of the ways in which these two identities may be intertwined comes at the life-changing conference in Crete, during which she describes the following meeting: “I met Loretta, a refugee from South Africa, who wanted me single-handedly to stop all Canadian companies from exploiting black workers and resources in her country ... Because she knew I was a Christian, she assumed that I would and could reverse Canadian policy” (61). For the first time, Wilson understands not only that her participation in an international community of faith gives her responsibilities that extend beyond the borders of her country, but also that her faith itself demands that she exercise the rights and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship in the light of her beliefs. Her response is to try to “take the world church home” (64), by attempting to help other Canadians to learn to see the world – as she has – through the eyes of some of its most oppressed and marginalized peoples. Her memoir itself is one of the ways in which she attempts to do just that; it is undeniably and unapologetically addressed to a Canadian readership, and Wilson does not

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2 It is worth noting here that generic conventions govern publishing as well as writing, so that the presence of the photographs in Wilson’s text may in fact represent the publisher’s rather than the author’s decision. Nevertheless, their presence remains in tension with Wilson’s explicit challenges to hierarchical and individualistic notions of power and of selfhood.
mitigate her criticisms of either Canadian public policy or the apathy of affluent Canadian churches.

When Wilson laments the injustices to be found within Canada as well as in the global context, she does so as a Christian calling to task a society supposedly based on Christian values: “Why is it . . . that the person of mixed blood, the native person, the homosexual, the criminal, the sexual offender, the person with disabilities, the functionally illiterate, and others assigned to the peripheries of our society continue to be excluded from much of Canadian life in a country that claims to have been founded on Christian faith?” (71). The dialectical negotiations in this passage are between inclusion and exclusion, with Christianity demanding a greater inclusiveness than is demonstrated by Canadian society. Yet even as she attempts to call attention to Canada’s Christian roots, Wilson is also uncomfortable with definitions of Christianity that are cultural rather than religious. She is highly critical of “the cosy middle-class churches in Canada, where for many Christianity was understood as part of the comfortable cultural scenery” (94). At the same time, Wilson’s position as a spiritual autobiographer does indeed offer a space from which she engages in the “counter-cultural critique” celebrated by Peter Dorsey. Although some of the imagery that she uses to refer to the Canadian context is fairly conventional, such as her references to the “wide open spaces” of the Prairies (97), she also challenges some of the complacent national myths that Canadians may have about themselves as an inclusive society.

The repeated emphasis on the metaphor of vision – of learning to see in a new way – has important implications for the implied readers of Turning the World Upside Down, who are invited to engage in their own process of conversion. As with many other spiritual autobiographies, Wilson’s writing addresses itself directly her audience:

I have written this book as though it were a conversation with you, the reader, about what the life of faith means to me . . . and about what things look like through the eyes of people living on the other side, or at the other end of the world. I hope it will evoke memories of your own life that will enable you to join that company of people all over the globe committed to turning the world upside down. (xi)

One of the assumptions that Wilson makes about her implied audience, however, is that it consists entirely of other Christians. This is probably a reasonable conjecture, given that readers drawn to this memoir will probably be United Church members who wish to learn
more about the first woman moderator of their religious institution. Nevertheless, Wilson’s limitation of her rhetorical appeals to those who share more or less the same social and religious background as she does may be one of the factors that also limits the appeal of her spiritual autobiography to a wider audience. By drawing on explicitly biblical imagery, such as the peaceable kingdom, and by situating her memoir in the Protestant tradition of conversion narratives (albeit with a public rather than a private focus), Wilson may be in danger of alienating her non-Christian readers. Although Wilson challenges her readers to expand their vision of who constitutes their neighbour, she herself assumes religion to be a vital component of social activism, and her invitation to the reader at the end of the book is an invitation to join a community of spiritual social activists. While this religious allegiance is unsurprising in an explicitly spiritual autobiography, it dramatizes one of the challenges that the genre faces in the contemporary Canadian context.

This potential limitation is unfortunate, for Turning the World Upside Down is an engaging critique of both church and society, by a woman who now plays a public role as senator in the Canadian political scene. One might ask whether Wilson’s involvement in federal politics will prompt a rereading of her memoir. Wilson herself is not unaware that a literary text may be insufficient to lead to the conversion of its readers. She does, however, emphasize the power of language and ritual to transform individuals and communities. Wilson closes her tenth chapter, “Standing Straight in a Circle,” in which she analyses the pyramids of injustice in the hierarchical structures of church and society, with the description of a ritual for women based on the form of the circle, and led by Catherine Brooks, a Canadian First Nations woman. The physical and spiritual experience of this ritual allows Wilson to see “life as a circle, not a pyramid” (155). Wilson’s dialectical negotiations between private and public come together in her description of the rituals of a church service devoted to the cause of peace: “I was able for one of the first times in my life to articulate how suffering needed to be led out of its private little corner and shared and transformed into public action . . . It was a remarkable service. It was one of those times when magic really does happen, and we left the service singing with hope” (242-43). These particular anecdotes highlight the importance of religious ritual in either reinforcing existing structures, or allowing a community of faith to enact different ways of being in the world. This emphasis on the performative and transformative power of ritual is not so much an assertion that the
symbolic is real, as Françoise Lionnet argues (26), but rather an affirmation that the symbolic must become real, and indeed has the power to do so in ways that can powerfully influence the lives of both religious and non-religious individuals.

**Mary Jo Leddy: Say to the Darkness, We Beg to Differ (1990)**

Mary Jo Leddy's *Say to the Darkness, We Beg to Differ* (1990) is the chronicle of fifteen years in the life of a prominent Canadian Catholic activist and journalist. While working on a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Toronto during the 1970s, Leddy was also the co-founder of Catholic New Times, which was started as an alternative to the conservative national Catholic newspaper, the Catholic Register. Leddy's memoir, like the other works under discussion in this chapter, epitomizes the fundamental quality that Peter Dorsey celebrates in women's spiritual autobiographies: the creation of a rhetorical space from which to engage in both a counter-cultural critique, and a critique of one's own religious tradition. In Leddy's own words, "[t]he structure of this book reflects the dynamic of one person's public and private reflections on a significant period in the church and in this culture" (4). Leddy, in the brief summary of her book that is offered in the Introduction, emphasizes not only the dichotomy of private and public, but also of church and culture, and of action and contemplation. In attempting to reconcile these seemingly contradictory elements Leddy opts, both theologically and rhetorically, for what she comes to refer to as a "third option" (211). This third option is not the inhabiting of a lukewarm middle ground, but rather the conscious decision to dwell in paradox.

Leddy's title is like Wilson's in that it points to the guiding metaphor of her spiritual autobiography. *Say to the Darkness, We Beg to Differ* evokes the images of darkness and light that permeate Leddy's theological reflections throughout two decades of editorial writing and private diaries. Images of light and darkness have a long history in the traditions of both Christianity and spiritual autobiography. In the popular (Christian) imagination, "light" has conventionally been associated with "goodness" or "blessing" and "darkness"
with “evil” or “sin.” Imagery of light and darkness is also central to the notion of psychomachia, or the battle between good and evil that is at the heart of a spiritual autobiography like John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners.* As we shall see, however, Leddy’s use of the imagery of light and darkness reflects not an absolute sense of good and evil, but rather her refusal to polarize issues of theology, politics, and ethics into simplistic choices. To begin with, the imagery of her title comes not from the Christian tradition, but from some street graffiti in downtown Toronto: “When we light a candle at midnight we say to the darkness we beg to differ.” Thus Leddy chooses to locate the source of her imagery firmly in the social issues of her world, and in the renegade cultural production of the graffiti artist, rather than in the symbols of Christian sacred texts. This choice situates Leddy’s spiritual autobiography firmly within a literature and a culture of religious and social resistance.

Leddy opens the Introduction of her autobiography with a characterization of light and darkness in “the children of [her] nightmares” and “the children of [her] dreams,” affirming that both her luminous night visions and her darker ones are equally a part of her: “I cannot abandon the children of my nightmares without denying the children of my dreams” (1). She closes her introduction with a waking vision that she has at the death-bed of “a wise old woman” and friend: “As I watched her go, I felt two ancient hands reach out for the child of my dreams and the child of my nightmares. Holding each by the hand, she walked between them as they went together down the long road ahead” (8). This evocative metaphor introduces an image of the reconciliation of light and darkness that accompanies the reader throughout Leddy’s autobiography. Although light and darkness always represent, respectively, good and evil in Leddy’s symbolic universe, and although Leddy emphasizes – both in her title and in her writing – the need to choose light rather than darkness, she nevertheless refuses to allow these images to collapse into a simplistic dichotomy, by introducing the reconciling metaphor of what she calls a “third option.” Her rhetorical and

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3 For a discussion of the symbolism of light and darkness in the world’s religions, see the R. J. Zwi Werblowsky’s article on “Light and Darkness” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion.* One can certainly challenge this dualistic use of symbols for its racist and sexist overtones (women and people of colour having been associated with sin and darkness). Leddy herself, as we shall see, explores the paradoxes of the symbol as well as its conventional meanings.

4 For a discussion of psychomachia in John Bunyan’s and Thomas Merton’s spiritual autobiographies, see Hawkins, in particular chapters 4.ii and 6.ii.
theological dedication to this third option becomes evident in her article on “Holy Saturday People” (166-67). Acknowledging people’s desire to hurry from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, from the darkness of the crucifixion to the light of the resurrection, she affirms the importance of Holy Saturday: “Most of our human experience falls in that grey area which is neither darkness nor dawn” (166). Leddy offers the traditional doctrine of the Catholic church as an alternative to cultural as well as theological formulations that hold that “human experience is only darkness or only light” (166): “Authentic Christianity has always said: there is no darkness so dark that it is not broken by some shaft of light ... And Christianity has also said: there is no light so bright that it is not diminished by the shadow of sin” (167). Leddy’s dialectical negotiations between light and darkness thus consist of a perpetual insistence that both are necessary components of the spiritual life. Furthermore, as we will see over and over again in the genre of spiritual autobiography, these images are not “merely textual,” but are perceived as real, as guiding metaphors that have the power to become acts of both theological reflection and ethical decision-making.

Like Wilson, Leddy evokes the metaphor of the writer as witness, and contrasts the image of the witness with that of the spectator or the bystander. The notion of the spectator is one that she borrows from philosopher Hannah Arendt, whose work on the Holocaust is the subject of Leddy’s doctoral dissertation. Leddy conflates the concept of the spectator with the image of the bystander in a graphic metaphor that demonstrates that no matter where one positions oneself in relation to injustice, one is taking a moral stand: “When the lives of the poor are being reduced to ashes, one is either fanning the flames or pulling people out of the furnace. There is no other option. Even bystanders fan the flames with the blink of their eyes” (110). Leddy frequently refers to the need to make moral choices as the fact that on some issues, there is “no middle ground” (89, 106). Yet she also acknowledges that taking an ethical stand is not always simple, and she cannot quite escape being caught in paradox, in the realm of both/and rather than either/or. When Israel invades Lebanon, Leddy’s pacifism comes into conflict with her extensive knowledge of the Holocaust and of the suffering and anti-semitism experienced by Jewish people throughout history: “[O]n the question of Israel I do feel caught in the middle. An uncomfortable place for me to be. Are there times and places when the middle ground is the only moral place to be?” (129). Thus Leddy refuses
both a complete moral relativism, and an unbending stance on ethical issues, embracing once more the third option of the individual responsibility to wrestle with paradox.

Like Wilson, Leddy both employs traditional Christian imagery in her text, and constantly draws attention to its radical rather than its conventional or conservative meanings. For example, the “Kingdom of God,” a metaphor with potentially imperialistic overtones, is contrasted with the “earthly Empire” of consumer society. Indeed, Leddy’s use of this metaphor parallels the sometimes shocking parables about the Kingdom of God that are recounted by Jesus in the Gospel narratives. When Leddy contrasts the Kingdom of God or the Peaceable Kingdom with consumer society, she is not preaching the replacement of the American empire with a Catholic empire. The Kingdom of God that she refers to is the radical and surprising kingdom of the Christian gospels, the vision that turned the Roman empire on its head and upset people’s expectations of what the words “religion” and “kingdom” should mean. Similarly, Leddy consistently describes the Spirit of God moving in unexpected places. In an article on Rome, she describes a community living out the true gospel not in the official pomp and pageantry of the centre, but on the margins, literally in the catacombs on the outskirts of the city (36-42).

Just as Leddy’s ethical and theological reflections seek to promote a third option between religion and culture, between public and private, so too do the modes of discourse of her spiritual autobiography alternate between the public voice of the newspaper editorial and the private voice of the diary. By interspersing editorials and articles written for both Catholic New Times and later The Toronto Star with her private diary entries from the same era, Leddy creates a unique and richly textured account of her spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and moral development during the period of her life covered by her autobiography (1976-1990). Because of the double voice of Leddy’s memoir, the dialectical negotiations between her private and public identities are presented much more starkly than in the autobiographies of Wilson, Richard, and Manning. In her introduction, Leddy refers to this tension as she articulates the reasons behind her decision to publish some of her private writings after years of having written with the very public voice of a journalist. She describes her efforts to keep her public and private selves separate, and her growing sense of the contradiction between her strong public stances and her private doubts and fears. Finally, she conveys her own realization that “the line [between her public and more personal life]
which used to serve as a protective boundary has become an unnecessary barrier in the telling of a longer and deeper story that is at once more truthful and more hopeful” (4). This passage foreshadows Leddy’s increasing efforts to allow her individualistic self or ego to dissolve into the “longer and deeper story” of Christianity and of Christian witness.

One of the most telling rhetorical markers of Leddy’s dialectical negotiations between her private and public identities is in her use of the first-person pronoun in her newspaper editorials. These public texts begin with the impersonal “we” of the editorial collective, then gradually adopt the more personal “I” of Leddy’s own ethical and theological struggles. Leddy’s textual self-positioning arises through the complex negotiation of her various identities: as a Catholic, as a journalist, as an activist, as a feminist, as a member of a religious order, as a graduate student studying the Holocaust, as a woman, as a Canadian. Leddy’s text gains much of its strength from her willingness to wrestle, both rhetorically and theologically, with her many identities, commitments, and identifications. Her consistent refusal to let herself be defined simplistically, or to have her ethical choices dictated, by any one of those identities, contributes greatly to the integrity of her critiques of both church and society. However, Leddy’s individual voice gradually achieves a more transpersonal perspective as she seeks to relinquish her “false self” in order to become the “true self” that she feels God desires her to be. This struggle is exemplified by an increasing suspicion of language and a more contemplative emphasis on simplicity and silence. It is precisely this attempt to renounce the ego that has led feminist literary scholars such as Mary Mason, Linda Peterson, and Patricia Meyer Spacks to the rather harsh criticism of women’s spiritual autobiographies discussed in Chapter One. It is important, therefore, to spend some time examining the ways in which Leddy’s textual struggle with her identities is not a passive renunciation of identity but rather a form of theological reflection, and ultimately a freely made ethical choice about how and for whom she is to live her life.

The identities that are most important and most problematic in Leddy’s text are those which on the surface seem most difficult to reconcile: as a woman (and a feminist), as a Roman Catholic (and particularly as a woman religious), and as a Canadian. Yet it is through her determination to live each of these identities fully that Leddy comes to know herself better, to be firmer in her ethical commitments and more nuanced in her theological reflections, and finally to arrive at a deeper understanding and expression of the third option
that she seeks between the extremes of church and culture, of conservativism and liberalism. Leddy's assessment of the inequalities of power within the church invokes the dichotomy between inside and outside, the conflict between staying in the church or leaving the church. When Leddy and other women are banned from preaching in the archdiocese of Toronto, she writes angrily in her journal about the women who "are just walking away [from the church], voting with their feet" (17). She, however, refuses to allow herself to be pushed out, arguing that "[i]f anyone is going to leave the church it should be [the conservative clergy], not us" (18). In a deft rhetorical and political move Leddy (in her private diary reflections) transforms the space of her editorials into the ecclesiastical space from which she and other women have been barred: "I'll keep on preaching, just from a different pulpit" (18). Leddy's rhetorical choices are linked with her ethical choices: she chooses not only to stay in the church, but also to fight the church from within its own rhetorical and theological tradition. Thus she turns to the biblical distinction between priests and prophets - the latter often being called on by God to criticize the former - in order to affirm that the Christian tradition gives authority to more than just the ordained clergy: "Women may be barred from the ranks of priests but they have been invited to join the company of prophets" (18).

This deft critique of the Roman Catholic church on its own terms - a process in which she engages throughout her autobiography - allows Leddy to maintain an uneasy tension between her feminism and her commitment to Christianity. However, some conflicts prove to be difficult to resolve, such as her feminism and her religious stance on abortion. In 1988, when the Canadian House of Commons is debating new legislation on abortion, Leddy is "plagued" by "phone calls from the press" who "want some token Catholic woman to say the hierarchy is wrong on this" (239). She finds herself pushed to take a public stand on the issue, when she would rather not. She agonizes over what to do, feeling trapped between her sense of "the amazing grace of simply being alive" and of being "haunted by the Holocaust, by the memories of a time when the powerful defined the weak out of existence," and her compassion for the position of "women who are . . . victims of this self-productive, often violent society" (240). Leddy describes her difficulty in taking a stand on the issue as a conflict between her own identities and loyalties: "If I choose to speak out of [sic] this I know I will be burning my bridges with the women I respect most. And I know I will be cast once again into the Catholic ghetto" (240). She does not want to align herself "with some of
the crazies in the pro-life movement" (239), yet she also acknowledges that “there have always been crazies in the marches I’ve joined. The peace movement was always full of crazies I would never have wanted to be seen dead with” (240). In the end Leddy opts to align herself with the most powerless members of Canadian society, the unborn. By doing so, she is forced to put ethical considerations above her loyalty to specific groups or identities. Yet she offsets the loneliness of this decision with an affirmation of a broader loyalty: to the human race as a whole, a commitment she has already made through her peace activism.

Leddy’s changing use of first-person pronouns (both the singular “I” and the plural “we”) in her public writing reflects her evolving sense of her own identity as both a private and a public person. Her earliest articles for Catholic New Times are editorials, written by her but edited in conjunction with an editorial committee, and meant to reflect the consensus of the group. In one of her early New Year’s Day diary entries she wrestles with her sense of her own inconsistencies and her desire to be “transparent” with others, and concludes: “Becoming transparent will mean making some choices” (26). The next piece in her autobiography is an article from Catholic New Times in which she uses the first-person singular for the first time. In this story of hope about the work of one nun among the garbage collectors of Cairo, Leddy (the narrator) undergoes a conversion process similar to the conversions of Lois Wilson: “I had never really thought about garbage before I went to Cairo. Now I wonder how I can think about the resurrection without remembering the garbage collectors of Cairo” (26). This first-person voice becomes a regular part of Leddy’s articles, giving opinions, engaging in theological reflection with regard to contemporary issues and current events, and often describing the transformation of her own ideas and beliefs: “A blank, beige area on the map – that used to be my predominant image of the desert. Now, having lived in the reality of the desert, I know it is the place where we both escape and encounter the reality of our life in the city” (96). At times, it becomes an intensely personal “I,” sharing her joy and grief over the birth of her friends’ baby boy who lives only a short time (114-116), or her inability to write immediately after her heart-shattering visit to Israel and Lebanon in 1983 (132-137).

The notion of voice, of speaking out on important issues, is as central to Leddy’s spiritual autobiography as is the motif of vision that permeates her imagery of light and
darkness, of witnesses and spectators. If the witness is the visionary alternative to the spectator, then the prophet is the vocal alternative to the priest or the "mouthpiece." Leddy objects to the idea of being a mouthpiece even for those groups with whom she identifies, such as women or the Catholic left. Of the latter she writes in her diary: "They appreciate me as a mouthpiece until I speak my mind" (199). One of the conflicts that is evident in the twenty-year span of Leddy's writings is her unwillingness to remain silent in the face of what she sees as injustice. Yet even this productive tension gives way to the greater paradox of the value of silence in the spiritual life. Although Leddy uses sophisticated, creative, and ever-evolving rhetorical strategies to convey her theological reflections and personal struggles, her relationship to language and writing grows more problematic as the autobiography progresses. Her conflicts with language parallel her identity conflicts, in the sense that as she moves to a more de-centred (or de-self-centred, that is to say, more God-centred) understanding of her own identity, so she arrives at a desire for a more de-centred use of language, one that honours the silences and the gaps as much as it does the words. After a thirty-day retreat in January of 1986, she writes in her diary: "I sense that the new depth of life that opened up for me on the retreat has made it somewhat more difficult for me to express myself - the words don't come as quickly or easily. There seems less to say and what I want to say is really something quite simple" (200). While on retreat, she wrestles with letting go of the self she has created in order to embrace her life as a gift from God: "So let me stop thinking about 'I' and let me say, 'Yes, You are the God of my life, You are my life.' Let me choose between the self I have made and the self that is being created by You...." (189). The final piece in Leddy's spiritual autobiography, an article for Catholic New Times, is written in the form of a poem, but the "I" narrator of its final sentence is not Leddy herself but Jesus (276).

Feminist critics may be understandably wary or suspicious of such attempts on the part of a woman autobiographer to abandon the ego. Nevertheless, as we have seen with Wilson's spiritual autobiography, such rhetorical strategies are not merely textual but have profound ethical and theological implications. Leddy's difficulties with language are struggles with the demands of the religious life, and her textual resolutions of those struggles are also theological and ethical choices. Abandoning the first-person pronoun is a rhetorical practice that is akin to the "dying to self" that Leddy sees as affording the freedom to act in
accordance with one’s deepest spiritual values. Leddy embraces the Christian ideals of sacrifice and of death to the self not as a way of turning one’s back on the world, but – paradoxically – as a way of being fully present to and active in it. In a late article on Miguel Angela Montenegro, a Salvadoran human rights activist, Leddy articulates what the notion of “dying to self” can mean in terms of a radical theology of incarnation and liberation: “[T]he cycle of fear, of destruction and degradation, is broken by those liberators who have died before they die. Their resurrection and that of their people begins even now” (260). Leddy rhetorically models this “dying to self” as her narrative “I” disappears even further in subsequent publications, which include a biography of her parents’ war-time experiences, Memories of War, Promises of Peace (1991), and a book of stories about the refugees with whom she currently lives in Romero House in Toronto, At the Border Called Hope (1997).

Leddy anticipates these future biographical sketches by telling the stories of others as part of her spiritual autobiography, just as Wilson does in Turning the World Upside Down. However, in Leddy’s Catholic hands the practice becomes more akin to the genre of hagiography, or lives of the saints, than the more communally oriented narratives of Wilson. For example, while Wilson writes glowingly of such groups as “the grandmothers of China, and of the U.S.S.R., and of North America too, who keep the heritage of faith and love alive for their grandchildren” (196), Leddy pays homage to individual and heroic Christian activists, most of them men: assassinated Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, Salvadoran activist Miguel Angela Montenegro, Canadian Catholic educator Gregory Baum, Saskatchewan NDP politician and priest Bob Ogle, and others. These portraits, though necessarily sketched through language, are intended as a response to the question posed by Leddy in her introduction: “In the end, I believe this is a question of faith to which we can only respond with our lives: which shall prevail – the darkness or the light? Only our lives give weight to our words” (5). The relative importance of actions over words is a theme to which Leddy returns again and again. For example, in an article about Rabbi Irving Greenberg’s speech on post-Holocaust theology, she writes: “He stressed the urgency of faith testifying in the present world through actions rather than through words. When children are burning in a pit, the response of faith is to leap into the pit to save a child rather than to preach about God’s love” (95). In a conversation with a fellow editor at Catholic New Times, Leddy succinctly sums up her belief in the implications of the Christian doctrine
of the incarnation, of God becoming human: "[F]or me, the Christian option is to give yourself totally in a real, imperfect situation, taking a real, imperfect position, knowing it has its limits. If you don’t give yourself totally in the historic moment, then there isn’t a real incarnation. Words have to become flesh" (125).

Paradoxically, then, these stories become Leddy’s way of acting in the world, as she understands it after hearing a talk by Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano: “I also think he is right about the importance of love stories, stories of goodness to help people remember their own dignity. I must try to do more of this” (103). Leddy describes the impact of such true life-narratives on her own life, as they provide small but real reasons to go on believing in the church (105). What all of the people that she describes have in common is the fact that they embrace a third option, going beyond the flawed structures of human institutions and patterns. The priest in a small village in Lebanon whose “words of forgiveness” after a horrible massacre offer “the possibility of breaking with the patterns of the past which threatened to overwhelm the present” (136); theologian Gregory Baum who is “an example of how to think without walls, of how to move beyond the institutional or psychological barriers which had kept theology confined and theologians protected from examination by the world beyond the halls of academia” (203). All of these figures function for Leddy as icons of Jesus Christ, whose “dangerous memory,” in the words of Leddy’s friend Mark, is “carried within the flawed structure of the church” (105). As she describes the ways in which these lives have inspired and influenced her own, Leddy – like Wilson – models the process of conversion for her readers.

Leddy’s implied audience, like Wilson’s, is unmistakably Canadian and generally assumed to be Christian, or at least to be familiar with and sympathetic to Christian values, imagery, and language. Leddy repeatedly insists that for her, religion is a public and not a private commitment. Like Wilson, she engages in counter-cultural critique, bringing biblical imagery and religious language to bear on public affairs. Leddy portrays Canada as a fairly homogeneous imagined community, in spite of its internal injustices and problems, and writes often of the concept of Canada’s “national soul.” Her critique of Canadian culture – of its rampant consumerism and unrestrained capitalism, of its institutional racism and other injustices, of the selfishness and apathy of its citizens – is made from an unapologetically religious, and specifically Christian, perspective. It is as a Christian and a Catholic that
Leddy takes a public stand on the abortion issue, and it is from this same position that she gradually comes to identify Canada as "a colony situated on the edge of that declining [American] empire" (209). Leddy uses overtly religious and biblical language to expose the problems that she sees in Canadian society and to propose solutions. She publicizes and endorses the church's condemnation of "the treatment of native peoples today" as "the 'original sin' of Canada" (83), and when aboriginal treaty rights are removed from the Canadian Charter of Rights, she laments: "We have gained access to the energy resources of the north and suffered the loss of our national soul" (103). To her growing sense that the United States is indeed a declining empire, and one determined to destroy the world through the proliferation of nuclear weapons, she opposes the biblical image also favoured by Lois Wilson, that of the "peaceable kingdom": "We affirm that our country / is called to be a peaceable kingdom, / not an outpost of empires / toying with global destruction" (139). For Leddy, the image of the peaceable kingdom evokes not the revolutionary social conversions of Wilson's text, but rather a radical pacifism and a commitment to a culture of peaceful resistance.

Trying to bring religious language, biblical imagery, and theological reflection into the centre of contemporary Canadian public affairs is a risky enterprise, yet Leddy continually asserts her belief that religion is a public and not a private commitment. As with Turning the World Upside Down, Say to the Darkness, We Beg to Differ runs the risk of alienating its secular readers - even those who are also activists - by implicitly insisting that Christian faith is paramount to social justice and to Canadian identity. Leddy's spiritual autobiography is not mentioned in the Canadian Book Review Index, although her biography of her parents' war-time experiences, Memories of War, Promises of Peace, published the following year, receives a glowing review. Leddy is listed in Canadian Who's Who, and was among those Canadians interviewed on June Callwood's Vision TV series "June Callwood's National Treasures." Nevertheless, Leddy's writing receives little attention outside of religious (primarily Catholic) contexts. This neglect prevents her critique of Canadian society from reaching a wider audience with which it might profitably engage. Leddy's rhetorical efforts at self-effacement may, in the end, have been entirely too successful from one point of view. However, if we examine her entire œuvre as her spiritual autobiography - a reading practice I will advocate in Chapter Seven - then one could argue that she in fact
models the very commitments that she advocates, losing herself in service to others as her response to the ethical imperative contained in her understanding of the Christian message, just as she invites her readers to do.


Like Wilson and Leddy’s spiritual autobiographies, Andréa Richard’s *Femme après le cloître* (1995) is a memoir written by a prominent religious woman who is very conscious of her position as a public figure. After more than twenty years as a nun in two religious orders (the Little Sisters of the Poor, a working order, and the Carmelites, a contemplative order) the Acadian Richard left the Carmelites in order to devote herself to teaching contemplative prayer to Catholic lay people in Québec. During this time as a spiritual teacher, she was involved in an intimate, sexual relationship with a Catholic archbishop, Monseigneur Éric Castonguay, who died of cancer before the two were able to follow through on their plans to move to the United States, join the Episcopalian church, and marry. The form of Richard’s memoir is initially somewhat deceptive. While the bulk of it focuses on her years of religious life and its struggles, and only two chapters and the epilogue on her personal relationship, it is in this latter part of the narrative that her autobiography shifts into a form that is closer to manifesto than to memoir, and that makes her agenda and motives for writing clear. Richard’s memoir is written at least in part as a justification of the loving relationship that she and Castonguay shared, and as a condemnation of the regulations of the Catholic church that forbade them to marry. She states in her epilogue that her autobiography is written “à l’heure d’un synode sur la vie ‘dite’ religieuse,” in the hopes that her “cri du cœur” will invite the Catholic church to “un questionnement sérieux” on the subject of some of its repressive policies (348). Her denunciation of ordered religious life is clear and unequivocal, and she calls on the authority of her own experience to support it: “Après avoir expérimenté deux modes de vie au cœur desquels je me suis vue obligée à beaucoup de dépassement pour renverser une optique faussée, j’en suis venue à croire que l’austérité du cloître nous ferme à l’amour” (347, emphasis added). Like Wilson, Richard uses the imagery of vision in order to describe her conversion (or de-conversion) to a new way of life outside the convent. By the end of Richard’s memoir it becomes clear that her
detailed descriptions of “unnatural” convent life are marshalled in support of her autobiographical defense of “natural” love.

Andréa Richard’s Femme après le cloître is a very public memoir, and not only because of the author’s consciousness of herself as a public figure in the role of a spiritual leader to her various communities. It is also the memoir of a woman who has decided to make her private life public, in a different way from both Wilson and Leddy. Unwilling to continue living with the contradictions between her private and public roles, she chooses to speak out against the dictates of the church that have made such dichotomies necessary, in her life and in the lives of other people. The conflicts between her public image and her forbidden romance, between her work and her love, create a tension in Richard’s life and in her narrative. Her attempts to resolve this tension ultimately result in the writing of her memoir, and in her political involvement in an organization that challenges papal and ecclesiastical authority: she is the co-founder of the “Collectif libre d’actions concertées (C.L.A.C.),” a group that lobbies for, among other things, the ordination of women in the Catholic church and the ability of priests to get married (340-41). Whereas both Wilson and Leddy call for structural changes within society as a whole, based on radical re-readings of Christian teachings, Richard’s focus is on institutional reform within the Roman Catholic church itself. Her memoir is in many ways a polemic against the hierarchical system within the Catholic church that prevents people from thinking for themselves, from developing their full potential, and from following what she believes to be the divine voice within themselves. Richard’s memoir rejoins Wilson’s and Leddy’s in its dialectical negotiations between private and public. Both Wilson and Leddy insist that religion belongs not merely to the private sphere, but to the public realm of ethical decision-making and social activism. Richard, by contrast, sees the Catholic church as invading the private life of its members, where it does not belong. She chooses to make the intimate details of her private life public, in order to break the taboos of secrecy and shame that hide clergy relationships.

The guiding metaphor of Richard’s memoir is that of the growth or evolution of the individual in loving relationships with God and with other people. The ethical imperative that drives her writing is the need to denounce the structures of religious life that inhibit this full flowering of the individual, particularly in the domain of sexuality and relationships. The central place of the metaphor of growth is evident from the very beginning of Richard’s
account, embedded in her acknowledgements and in her introduction. In her “remerciements,” she thanks all of those in whose company she has grown (“Avec vous tous, j’ai grandi”), and extends her forgiveness to all those who may have hurt her and her acknowledgement to those who may find themselves hurt by her portrait of them, since everything contributed to her growth (“tout n’était qu’outil de croissance”). She reiterates the evolutionary metaphor and her condemnation of the Catholic church in her epilogue: “La vie est une découverte perpétuelle avec et à travers laquelle je ne cesse d’évoluer et c’est la réalité de cette évolution même qui fait de moi un être uniﬁé et responsable de ses propres choix. Je refuse désormais qu’une Église despotique me conditionne à mon insu” (347). Richard’s rebellion against what she perceives as the repressive structures of institutionalized religious life dictates her life’s work: the founding of a community of lay people who will be linked by bonds of shared work and prayer, not by the rules of a religious order. She believes that she has succeeded in this work by founding l’Alliance, a charismatic prayer group. Ironically, it is Richard’s lack of control over the organization that permits the whole endeavour to go horribly awry, with accusations of sexual misconduct and an internal power struggle that eventually forces her to resign from the group. However, she is given a second chance in the founding of l’Arche d’Alliance, and learning from her mistakes, she takes a more proactive role in this second community.

Richard’s memoir elaborates on the central image of growth, establishing from the outset some of the dichotomies that permeate her narrative: the contrast between the world and the cloister, between the family (or the individual) and the institution, between that which is natural and that which is unnatural, between growth and imprisonment (or death), between intelligence (or experience) and blind faith. A network of interrelated images sets up oppositions between the restrictive or life-denying forces and structures in her life, and the liberating or life-giving ones: architecture, family relationships, the body, and the nation are all used as symbols of either imprisonment or freedom. In contrast to Leddy who comes to question dichotomies and seeks to dwell in paradox, Richard seems determined to reinforce but reverse these categories of opposites. While Leddy opposes images of light and darkness, public and private, religion and culture, but ultimately seeks a third option between the two, Richard condemns the “unnatural” world of the convent and promotes the “natural” world of romantic and spiritual love. Indeed, all of Richard’s dialectical negotiations
between opposites generally take the form of rapturous praise of one half of the dichotomy and vehement condemnation of the other. Such emphatic dualism makes for both an aesthetically and theologically less satisfying memoir.

Although **Femme après le cloître** is in many ways a ponderously conventional memoir (at 350 pages, it is the longest of the spiritual autobiographies studied here), it is nevertheless rescued from tedium by the juxtaposition of competing modes of discourse. Apart from the memoir form, the genres that contribute to Richard’s text are the hagiography, the ex-nun’s story, the autobiographical manifesto, and the popular, sentimental, or erotic romance novel. What these four disparate genres share is a commitment to bringing intimate and private experiences into the light of public scrutiny: the individual’s inner experiences and visions of the sacred (hagiography), the lives of nuns hidden behind convent walls (the ex-nun’s tale), the injustices experienced by members of a minority group (the autobiographical manifesto), or the emotional and sexual lives of individuals (the popular romance). Whether or not Richard intended these juxtapositions is debatable, for they have a tendency to undercut one another and at times undermine one another’s messages. Thus, the hagiography jeopardizes the group consciousness of the autobiographical manifesto, while the romance and ex-nun’s tale challenge the hagiography. However, some of these tensions are productive, such as when the romance rewrites the ex-nun’s tale by portraying healthy and positive relationships between (ex-)nuns and priests, or when the political commitment of the autobiographical manifesto provides a counterbalance to the selfishness of the romance or the self-aggrandizement of the hagiography. Similarly, the formulaic and sensational aspects of the romance, the hagiography, and the ex-nun’s tale are offset by the more experimental and political dimensions of the autobiographical manifesto.

From the beginning of Richard’s narrative, the family is portrayed as an organic and natural community, in contrast with the institutional and unnatural church. Richard describes her childhood as idyllic, and her familial environment as one that predisposed her for spiritual growth: “Si l’on considère la chance que j’ai eue de pouvoir évoluer dans une grande aisance – j’étais, matériellement et émotionnellement, comblée – il y a lieu de croire que mes prédispositions au rayonnement et à la dévotion étaient innées” (21). Richard describes her earliest spiritual experiences in the language of mystical love and intimacy. At the age of sixteen, in spite of her parents’ protestations, Richard enters a religious order as a postulant,
and her description of her first impression of the convent compares it unfavourably with her family home (which is always referred to as the “paternal” home): “Comme tout était sombre! La rareté de la lumière, le manque d’attrait des murs grisâtres, l’atmosphère glaciaire de ce lieu dénudé contrastaient sévèrement avec ce que j’avais connu sous le toit paternel” (33-34). Early on, Richard makes explicit the connection between the strict rules of the order and her sense of being imprisoned, of having her natural growth restricted: “Parfois, il me semblait que j’allais crouler sous le joug d’un règlement dont la stricte application éteignait mon enthousiasme tout en me confinant dans un univers de plus en plus clos” (46-47). Richard’s reference to a “joug” may contain a reference to the liberating words of Jesus in Matthew 11.30: “Oui, mon joug est facile à porter, et mon fardeau léger,” and thus an implicit critique of the convent whose “joug” is not at all “facile à porter” (Traduction Écuménique de la Bible).

There is more than a hint of irony in Richard’s descriptions of the cloister’s obsession with protecting its inhabitants from the outside world, revealing her growing frustration with the convent’s concerted separation of the sacred and the secular, of the spiritual and the worldly: “Lorsque, par exception, un ouvrier – un homme! – devait pénétrer à l’intérieur du cloître, la sœur qui l’accompagnait faisait retentir une clochette pour nous prévenir. Nous devions nous voiler le visage sur-le-champ” (203). The image of a man penetrating the interior of the cloister highlights the obvious parallels between the architecture of the convent and the female body. However, the body functions in Richard’s text as a symbol of all that cannot be completely contained by the restrictions of religious life. The body does not merely represent female sexuality, although the repression of this sexuality is denounced by Richard, as we shall examine later on. The body, for Richard, represents that which cannot be enclosed or extinguished: the indomitable uniqueness of the individual, the unquenchable fire of the human spirit. Richard’s narrative is peppered with anecdotes in which her body enacts a rebellion that is smoldering within her, but which the dictates of religious life prevent her from expressing. In one rather graphic incident from her novitiate, she vomits at the feet of the Mother Superior when the sisters refuse to heed her pleas to give her less food (80-81). Later in the memoir, when Richard is trying to obtain permission to leave her active order and join the contemplative order of the Carmelites (and later still, when she wishes to found a new Carmelite community in Acadia), her body once again comes to her aid, as it
were, in a series of illnesses that force her superiors to assign her to periods of bed-rest. These times of respite allow her first to pursue her contemplative vocation more fully, then to flee from the convent in France to Canada and her family for a period of convalescence, and ultimately to bring into question her commitment to life in a religious order.

Clothing is another important symbol, for Richard, of either the constraint or the freedom of the body. When she first puts on the religious habit worn by the Petites Sœurs des Pauvres, she describes at length her revulsion at its ugliness: “mon antipathie naturelle pour ce costume qui, chaque fois que je le revêlis par la suite, représenta une enveloppe de tristesse” (32). The habit is seen as something which robs her of her identity:

Mais une fois le costume réglementaire endossé, Andréa n’existait plus. Le personnage symbolique, la ‘Petite Sœur’ qu’on voulait toucher parce qu’elle renfermait déjà quelque chose de sacré, parce qu’elle était toute au Bon Dieu, venait de naître. Déjà, je n’étais plus moi-même. En quittant mes habits civils, je me délestais du même coup de mon identité. (33)

By the time Richard enters the Carmelite order, she has become far more critical of the sisters’ attitude toward clothing and the body. She describes herself as bursting with hidden laughter (hidden, significantly, behind her scapular), when a nun is accused of letting show something “aussi naturel qu’un cheveu” (203). She condemns, as bordering on insane, the rule that the nuns cannot even be naked while bathing in solitude, a rule which she admits she never followed (204). As Richard begins to spend more time outside the convent, she is increasingly aware of her habit as a kind of prison. During a visit to Canada to recover from an illness, she walks through the airport feeling like an extra-terrestrial, her clothing an inescapable weight: “Je ployais littéralement sous le poids de mon costume” (221). When Richard finally leaves her religious order, one of her first acts is to change her clothing. She describes this change in the language of her guiding metaphor of growth, with the image of a butterfly emerging from its cocoon: “‘Andréa, me dis-je, tu vas changer cela, tu n’es plus une terne chenille, tu as quitté ton cocon, tu peux déployer tes ailes.’ J’avais soif de beauté esthétique autant que de beauté spirituelle, j’avais le goût de me sentir attrayante, le goût

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5 Although the French word costume does not have as narrow a range of meaning as the English costume, nevertheless it does include the sense of theatrical attire or disguise, a secondary connotation which is probably not absent from Richard’s use of the term.
d'être femme” (286). There is a certain irony in the fact that although the uniform of the habit robs Richard of her identity, another type of clothing — which is noticeably “feminine,” yet arguably also a uniform of conformity — restores it to her: “[C]haque fois que je faisais l’acquisition d’une nouvelle pièce de vêtement, je me sentais redevenir féminine, redevenir moi-même” (287).

Richard’s emphasis on her desire to feel attractive and to be a woman underscores the denial and repression of feminine sexuality that she has experienced as a member of a religious order. In the chapter entitled “L’Amour au rendez-vous” (307-329), Richard addresses the issue of sexuality at length as she embarks on a description of her relationship with Monseigneur Éric Castonguay. She describes this chapter as “le plus délicat de ce livre et de ma vie de femme de Dieu” (307), but insists that it is not the most important chapter in her book. However, the passion and the lyricism with which she describes her relationship with Castonguay belie this assertion, as does the fact that in this chapter she at last makes explicit her motives for writing the memoir. Having been involved in a relationship that was forbidden by the laws of the Catholic church, and knowing many other couples in similar situations, she is convinced that it is the church that sins by forbidding marriage to its clergy. She states: “[E]t c’est pour offrir ma petite contribution à l’évolution positive du monde religieux que je pris la décision d’écrire ce livre” (319). Yet again Richard turns to her guiding metaphor of growth and evolution to convey her vision of the transformation that is necessary in the religious world.

Although she does not directly broach the subject of sexuality until the last fifty pages of her memoir, Richard prepares the reader for its importance in her introduction. The language that she chooses in the following passage emphasizes both her physical body and her sexuality as a woman, and her spirituality as a woman (or wife) of God:

On découvrira dans ce livre à caractère autobiographique des aspects insoupçonnés de la vie quotidienne en communauté et on y découlera mon ardent et constant désir de devenir une ‘femme de Dieu’. Ma longue réflexion a finalement débouché sur le monde, il y a vingt ans. Car je suis femme de chair et de sang, femme d’amour et je n’ai jamais été davantage ‘femme de Dieu’ que maintenant. Ma véritable vocation religieuse, résultant d’une intense recherche de vérité, s’est accomplie dans le monde et c’est pour témoigner de cette réalité que j’ai voulu me mettre à nu. (17)
The metaphor of nakedness, “se mettre à nu,” encapsulates both the “bare-all” style of Richard’s memoir, and her emphasis on the sacredness of the body and of human sexuality. The image of physical nudity is thus used not only to evoke a healthy and “natural” sexuality in Richard’s memoir, but also as a metaphor for the style of her text. Richard’s exhibitionistic nudity is a very different strategy from Leddy’s efforts to achieve a literary transparency that subsumes the self in the larger Christian story. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the religious concept of “dying to self,” which Leddy embraces as a paradoxical route to freedom, is vehemently rejected by Richard as yet another form of imprisonment and brainwashing.

As short as the final section of Richard’s book may be, the chapters that deal with her intimate relationship are among the most perplexing for the reader. Loaded with rapturous, sentimental prose, they often read like popular romance, at once passionate and yet still so beset by clichés as practically to retreat into abstraction. As editors Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce write in their introduction to Romance Revisited (1995), “romantic love may be thought of as a phenomenon which . . . is ‘always already written’ ” (12). Richard’s use of the emotional style of the popular romance to convey her rhetorical arguments is in conflict with her repeated emphasis on the importance of intelligence and reason in the spiritual life. Yet the affective links between women’s spiritual autobiography and the sentimental novel are explored by Virginia Lieson Brereton in From Sin to Salvation, as she describes the parallels between nineteenth-century women’s conversion narratives and the sentimental novel: “For their effectiveness the narratives depended upon the existence of a largely female audience that would consent to be moved, visibly and sometimes extravagantly . . . The assumption behind the narrative was that readers or hearers, deeply stirred by the conversion account, would go from vicarious participation to experiences of their own” (27). Richard’s memoir provides a variation on this rhetorical link between women’s spiritual autobiography and the sentimental novel. Writing against the repressive structures of the Catholic church that forbid sexual passion, her detailed descriptions of her own first experience with intimacy seem almost to be hurled in defiance of the church’s own (as she sees it, excessive) modesty and propriety.
For example, if Richard dwells at length on their first sexual encounters, it is at least in part to contrast the “natural” qualities of physical love with the “unnatural” restrictions of the Catholic church:

Nous fimes l’amour comme on se glisse sous une douche chaude dont on apprécie les bienfaits. C’était la première fois que je vivais une telle expérience, la première fois qu’un pénis gonflé s’introduisait en moi pour y chercher l’explosion salvatrice et pourtant, je fus surprise de la facilité avec laquelle je m’abandonnais, surprise de ma propre participation, surprise d’aimer à ce point quelqu’un. La nature reprenait ses droits. Je comprenais que l’amour ne s’apprend pas. Il est là, un jour, et on sait ce qu’il faut faire. (315, emphasis added)

Richard’s insistence on her own inexperience and virginity is neither superfluous nor coy; rather, it allows her to use the primacy of her new experience to assert the falsehood of the church’s teachings on love and sexuality. Even her description of orgasm as “l’explosion salvatrice” draws on religious language to express the sacredness of the sexual act. Richard repeatedly characterizes her relationship with Castonguay as not just a metaphor for divine love, but an earthly manifestation and lived experience of it: “[N]otre amour, c’était ce qui nous était arrivé de plus beau, c’était la plus grande et la plus ‘divine’ des expériences” (322). Richard’s arguments for the divine nature of their love are bolstered by her repeated assertions that the fruits of their love can be seen in the increased energy and vitality with which she and Castonguay are able to fulfill their religious vocations. Love, in Richard’s text, even has the power to work miracles similar to those of Jesus in the Bible; in a parallel with Jesus’ biblical healing of the paralytic (Matthew 9.1-8), Richard’s love for Castonguay gives her the determination to walk again after a car accident, in order to be able to be present at his bedside when he is dying of cancer (337). As literary critic Jean Radford points out in “A Certain Latitude: Romance as Genre” (1992), one of the relationships that romance seeks to establish with its readers is the validation of “female values of love and personal interaction against male aggression and competitiveness” (12). This generic code fits well with Richard’s praise of romantic and spiritual love and her critique of Catholic hierarchical and oppressive structures.

Richard’s spiritual autobiography also invokes the genre of the hagiography, which is intertwined with Catholic women’s visionary narratives. To begin with, she portrays herself
throughout the narrative as someone who enjoys a special relationship with God and who benefits from numerous spiritual gifts: the gifts of prayer, of contemplation, of premonition, of intuition, and even, on one occasion, of levitation. Richard frequently comments on the respect that her spiritual gifts command from others. Of the head nun who wants to question her about her levitation, she writes: "Elle comprit que mon état de béatitude exigeait son respect et sans terminer sa phrase, me laissa poursuivre mon chemin" (95). As with the writings of many of the medieval Catholic women mystics, Richard's accounts of her visions, premonitions, levitations, and other supernatural experiences come together to suggest a privileged relationship with God. However, Richard's text deviates from these earlier rhetorical models in that it is written neither at the behest of her confessor (as with most of the medieval visionary narratives) nor by a scribe or biographer (as with hagiographies). Thus, Richard's descriptions of her spiritual and psychic gifts often sound self-aggrandizing, while her invocations of what literary scholar Alison Weber (in reference to the Libro de la vida of Teresa of Ávila) calls "the rhetoric of humility" generally ring false. Richard's numerous protestations that she has no concern for wealth, rank, or status clash with her many descriptions of being honoured or flattered by the attentions of those in authority (for example, 46). Such false modesty can be contrasted with Wilson's rather frank admission that she loves "the 'star' status" associated with her role as moderator as much as she hates it (130). Richard's rhetoric of humility, on the other hand, sounds strangely out of place beside her rhetoric of self-aggrandizement. When she asks herself whether her own inner voice can be the voice of God, it appears to be a purely rhetorical question, for she clearly answers in the affirmative with her narrative. In Chapter Four we shall see Micheline Piotte expressing a similar belief. However, Piotte's text is much more immediate and plagued by doubts than Richard's, and the former's private reflections do not have the same public intent as the latter's memoir.

The performative and contestatory nature of Richard's memoir aligns it with the genre of the autobiographical manifesto, as literary critic Sidonie Smith defines it in Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body (1993). Femme après le cloître shares many of the characteristic actions of such texts, including the appropriation and contestation of sovereignty (of the Roman Catholic church hierarchy, "bringing to light" or "making manifest" that which has been hidden or ignored (the "healthy" sexual lives of Catholic
religious leaders), public performance or energetic display of identity, speaking for a group, and speaking to the future (Subjectivity 152-63). Where rifts appear between Richard’s memoir and the autobiographical manifesto are in her text’s resonances with the genre of the hagiography, for in setting herself up as extraordinary individual Richard also distances herself from the group on behalf of which she would speak out. For example, even as she argues on behalf of women’s equality within the Catholic church, in an article published in the Montréal newspaper Le Devoir (and reprinted in her memoir), Richard rhetorically differentiates herself from other women: “Ma place dans l’Église, je l’ai prise non seulement sans difficultés mais soutenue de façon privilégiée par les autorités d’Église . . . Ce n’est donc pas pour moi que je me suis engagée dans cette lutte, mais par solidarité avec les femmes” (340). Notice that Richard does not say “les autres femmes,” including herself in the group, but rather speaks of them as if they are an alien group with which she claims solidarity. By portraying herself as having won her place of authority with ease, Richard perhaps unwittingly undercuts the feminist cause she espouses by supporting the argument that capable women can indeed advance in the religious hierarchy.

Another mode of discourse that both permeates and troubles Richard’s memoir is the ex-nun’s tale, a genre with a long and rather sordid history in Canadian and American literature. The ex-nun’s tale is evoked by the title of the book, Femme après le cloître. In an article on historical writings by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English nuns, “Women’s History? Writings by English Nuns” (1992), historian Isobel Grundy writes: “Nuns and nunneries were much depicted by those outside the convent walls, from Restoration dramatists and fiction-writers to sentimental novelists and Romantic poets, all according to chiefly anti-Catholic and sexist stereotypes (127). The view from the outside was generally of the convent as a negative space, from the sinister cloisters and monasteries of Gothic fiction, to the convent as the tragic fate of the heroine of popular romance who refused to marry against her will, or who suffered the death of her beloved suitor. The use of ex-nuns’ stories as anti-Catholic propaganda has a long history in Canadian literature, dating back to the publication in 1836 of Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, as exhibited in a narrative of her sufferings during a residence of five years as a novice, and two years as a Black Nun, in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal. This text found itself at the centre of a storm of controversy and provoked attempts to reveal the book as the fraud that it
undoubtedly was. As Gerelyn Hollingsworth remarks in her book *Ex-Nuns: Women Who Have Left the Convent*: “Books about ex-nuns were the pornography of the nineteenth century: they told of sex between nuns and priests, underground passageways, murdered babies, whips, chains, midnight escapes, everything a fevered imagination could desire. They found an immediate audience; it was a respectable way of getting something sexy to read (90). The troubling aspects of the ex-nun’s tale as a model for Richard’s memoir lie in its profound anti-Catholic bias. Although Richard herself acts for reform within the church rather than condemning it altogether, the preface to her memoir by Claude Lemoine invokes the titillating pleasures, the sinister accusations, and the anti-Catholic bias of the genre when he writes: “Je souhaite aux lecteurs un bon divertissement . . . surtout . . . je propose aux lecteurs de se laisser aller dans les couloirs occultes des cloîtres, qui se voulaient les dépositaires et les flambeaux de la vraie religion!!!” (15). Such profound anti-Catholicism suggests that Richard’s memoir was published for a primarily Evangelical Christian audience.

Although Richard seems to be primarily addressing herself to a French Canadian Catholic readership who will be in sympathy with her calls for religious reform, she demonstrates a greater awareness than either Wilson or Leddy of her potential non-Catholic audience, offering frequent footnotes or glosses on the text to explain aspects of liturgy or ritual, or of life in a religious order. This technique serves partly to characterize as alien and obscure everything that is associated with convent life, as in the ex-nun’s tale (for example, 40). Although Richard constructs her implied reader as a sympathetic audience, her self-absorption actually renders her memoir more of a monologue than a dialogue. There is little sense in *Femme après le cloître* of personal accountability to a public community.

**Joanna Manning: Is the Pope Catholic? (1999)**

Joanna Manning’s *Is the Pope Catholic? A Woman Confronts Her Church* (1999) is a much more aggressively polemical work than any of the others previously discussed in this chapter, beginning with the title and its emphasis on confrontation. Manning is a Catholic educator who teaches in the Catholic high school system in Toronto, as well as an outspoken critic of the Catholic church and especially of the current pope, John Paul II, and the
international policies of the Vatican. As a result of her numerous newspaper articles and radio interviews, Manning - like Leddy and Wilson - has been a fairly well-known public figure on the Canadian religious scene (particularly in Toronto). Her spiritual autobiography, like those of the other authors discussed here, reflects an awareness of this status: "[S]ince 1989 my public comments on women and the Church have made me a controversial figure in the Canadian Catholic Church" (8). Like the others, however, it also strives to be a record of a more personal life story. The text - in ways similar to and yet different from both Richard’s and Leddy’s work - is an interesting hybrid: a reasoned argument against the teachings of the current pope, bracketed by and interspersed with stories from Manning’s own personal experience. Architectural, military, and imperial imagery provides both the content and the rhetorical strategy for Manning’s condemnation of sexism in the Catholic church. Referring constantly to the patriarchal and secretive nature of the Catholic hierarchy, Manning’s text is like Richard’s in that it strives to bring such private machinations under public scrutiny. She treats papal documents about the nature of women like a building that she dismantles brick by brick, with relentless logic, impressive scholarship and an appeal to personal experience. She describes herself as engaged in a war with the church, and draws on battle metaphors to describe the Vatican’s actions as well as her own. Finally, she ironically undercut the imperial trappings of the Roman Catholic church, using her credentials as a church historian to appeal to an image older than that of the empire: that of the pilgrim people in exile.

Manning’s polemic is aimed at exposing the hidden as well as the overt sexism of the Catholic church as institution, by examining the ways in which this very public religious organization influences the private lives of women around the world, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. In this way her book is very similar to Richard’s, although her broad social activism links her writing more closely with that of Wilson and Leddy. To argue her point, Manning uses a constellation of imagery and other rhetorical strategies. The particular form of her autobiography itself is the first of these strategies. The first two paragraphs of her introduction encapsulate the style of the entire book. The introduction opens with a brief vignette, a moment rooted in time and space, in which the sight of her dog licking the bruised face of a woman seated on the steps of a women’s shelter crystallizes Manning’s resolve to write a book about women and Catholicism: “My decision to write this book was sealed at
that moment” (7). In the next paragraph, Manning goes on to summarize the logic of her central argument: “I believe that there is a direct link between the teachings of the Catholic Church on the nature and role of women and the continuing, and in some parts of the world, increasing violence against women” (7). This movement back and forth between vividly described personal experience and succinct intellectual reasoning is the hallmark of Manning’s spiritual autobiography. She describes this writing practice as an explicitly feminist one, whose goal is “to meld theory and practice, scholarship and experience, and to draw on stories from my own life as well as what I have learned from other women to demonstrate the personal and political impact of the Church’s teaching. It is neither purely anecdotal nor purely analytical but, like life, falls into that gray area which is a mixture of both” (14-15). Manning’s desire to inscribe her writing within this “gray area” echoes Leddy’s efforts to live out a “third option.” It is because of her feminist argument that combining anecdote and analysis is “like life” that I believe it is important to consider Manning’s work as a spiritual autobiography. Her book highlights my argument in Chapter One that spiritual autobiography has always been as much about theological argument and reflection as it has been about personal experience. It is no accident that Manning cites “the Confessions of St. Augustine,” which is both the first spiritual autobiography and an early work of theology, as “one of the formative influences of [her] youth” (192).

Manning’s complex dialectical negotiations between the private and public realms centre on her critique of the Catholic church as an institutional structure with power not only over those women who are inside its sphere of influence, but over women worldwide, because “the tentacles of this particular institution reach into women’s lives around the globe” (14). However, this invasion of women’s private lives is not the product of intimacy but rather of distance, for the Vatican hierarchy is far removed from the realities of ordinary Catholics’ lives. Manning contrasts this distance with the closeness favoured by Jesus in the biblical narratives: “When Jesus taught, he sat with and walked among women, men, children, and animals. He listened. He based his teaching on stories from people’s lives. But in the vast silence of the chaste halls of the Vatican, amid the rustle of silk robes, nary a woman’s voice or child’s cry is heard” (66). The tension between these two sets of imagery in Manning’s text – the invasiveness of papal edicts combined with the disempowering
distance of the Vatican – serves the dual purpose of portraying the Catholic hierarchy as a threat to women, but one that is also weak enough to be challenged.

Manning locates her authority to write about Christian history by describing her extensive theological studies in depth. She then proceeds to juxtapose and contrast two narratives, two sets of imagery: that of the present-day Catholic hierarchy, stuck in the medieval world of crusades and the Inquisition, and that of the contemporary Catholics-in-exile, who remain faithful to an even older history, that of Jesus and his radical, pilgrim followers. She deploys the imperial imagery adopted by the Catholic church, only in order to expose it as an imaginative construction, rather than to see it as divinely ordained. She explains that “[t]he Catholic Church straddles the globe both through its religious institutions and through the diplomatic apparatus of the Vatican state” (152). Following the example of scholars of church history, she traces the roots of this global power to the church’s absorption of Imperial Roman power structures (20), and to the “gift of Caesars, both ancient and modern” (155) that created the political entity of the Holy See. By exposing the historical origins of the Catholic church’s institutional trappings, Manning is able to argue that this structure is a human creation, rather than divinely ordained. She also uses this imagery to condemn the Vatican’s characterization of Western feminists as cultural imperialists: “These fathers of the Church, their thrones, titles, and regalia lifted straight out of the Roman Empire, and seated on diplomatic territory granted to them at Caesar’s bequest, had the temerity to use the argument of ‘cultural imperialism’ once again to try to discredit the efforts of the UN PrepCom” (174).

Manning evokes the vitality and growth happening on the margins of the established church to counteract the monolithic power of the institution: “[T]he Spirit of God once more stirred the waters in my life, speaking through voices calling from the margins, far removed from any academic or political corridors of power” (36). For Manning, these “voices calling from the margins” have the power to undermine institutional hierarchy, and to create new forms of interpretation and relationship. Like Wilson, she uses the metaphor of vision to describe this new hermeneutics:

The Spirit is speaking at the margins in our time, in a diversity of tongues and through subversive narratives. This is leading to a deconstruction of patriarchal Church structures by the reading of Scripture through the eyes of those who have not
been considered reliable interpreters of the Word of God – women, the poor, and non-whites, for example. (206, emphasis in the text)

Manning also contrasts images of the institution or temple with images of the journey or pilgrimage. The latter were promoted by Vatican II, which “called on the Church to return to its most ancient roots: back to a dream forged by a wandering Exodus people and carried forward in the life of a poor preacher from Nazareth” (198). Manning uses this imagery of movement and journey to assert that the “structure” of the church cannot contain the “mystery” of Jesus Christ: “The presence of the Church as a sign of Christ in the world is a mystery until it is translated into a structure. When the structure no longer serves the mystery, the Spirit of Christ finds a way to break out and walk away” (191). Furthermore, by reclaiming the positive qualities of the notion of exile as part of the Christian tradition, Manning offers a powerful antidote to the threat of excommunication or expulsion from the Catholic church: “Catholics in exile have found that the God of life has accompanied us on our pilgrim way . . . The living God has deserted the temple in Rome and pitched a tent once more with the people in exile” (221). These positive images both undermine and provide a counterbalance to the imagery of imperialism that is equated with the institutional Catholic church.

Manning’s relationship to the metaphor of warfare is more problematic. She uses battle imagery to describe what she perceives as a concerted attack on women and feminism by the Vatican: “In the latter years of this papacy, a different image of the Pope has emerged. It is of a warrior Pope, determined to lead his troops into the third millennium on a crusade to subdue what he sees as a feminist revolt against women’s divinely appointed destiny” (76). Manning relates this “withdrawal into a fortress type of Christianity” (199) to the workings of “a delusional system” that must “convince everyone that the system is constantly under threat and must be defended against enemies, both internal and external” (197). By drawing attention to the “medieval” character of John Paul II’s politics and theology, through direct references to the crusades, Manning also emphasizes what she considers to be their reactionary qualities. She calls the Vatican’s current policies and the practices of conservative clergy “a throwback to the days of witch hunts and the Inquisition” (131, also 174). By equating the current pope with the Catholic church of the distant past, Manning is able to evoke the disempowering image of the museum, which makes present a
The majority of Manning's book consists of an intellectual argument that deconstructs the logic of the pope's pronouncements on women, pointing out their internal contradictions. For example, she writes: “Thus, according to this logic, even motherhood in women is derivative of fatherhood, which contradicts John Paul’s earlier assertion that motherhood is woman’s unique and supreme attribute” (71). At other times, she criticizes the hypocrisy of a pope who gives lip service to ideals of justice, but does not examine the systemic nature of injustice (77). She does not hesitate to label the pope’s thinking as heresy: “John Paul II has, I believe, forced the Catholic Church into a heretical position” (96). However, her critical method is not without humour, as she takes the pope’s teachings to their logical extremes, thus pointing out their absurdity. After a lengthy deconstruction of the Vatican’s teaching that women cannot be ordained because they do not bear a “natural resemblance” to Jesus, she concludes: “This is what the Vatican teaching on the vocation of the priesthood, which is at the heart of Christ’s work on earth, actually signifies: it is contingent upon the possession of male genitals” (99). Similarly, Manning dismisses the argument “that God had an ‘eternal will’ for the structure of the Church” by pointing out: “Taken to its logical conclusion, this approach would mean that when Jesus ascended into heaven, the whole Roman structure of the Church was already present on earth, complete with bishops’ miters and scarlet socks for cardinals” (115).

Manning refuses to relegate theological debates to the halls of academia, insisting, for example, that to claim that God is male and that women are therefore not created in the image of God “is not simply a theological debate within the Catholic Church, but one with wide repercussions in the contemporary world” (119). Central to her argument, on the practical level, is the idea that the structures of the Catholic church are themselves responsible for the violence and sexual abuse suffered by women and children; for example, in the case of the former residents of the Mount Cashel orphanage in Newfoundland (36-41). Her analysis is backed in many cases by reports that condemn the systemic abuses for which
the church is responsible, for example the Winter Commission report on the situation in Newfoundland (40), or the letter from the Assembly of Québec Bishops on conjugal violence (78). Yet most of these reports, like the Winter Commission’s, are “quietly laid to rest by the hierarchy of the Canadian Church” (40). At times, Manning’s analysis touches on highly controversial matters, such as when she equates the beliefs of Marc Lépine, who murdered fourteen female engineering students in the 1989 Montréal Massacre, with those of John Paul II: “As the Pope taught in Mulieris Dignitatem a year before the Montreal Massacre occurred, and as Marc Lepine [sic] believed, women belong in the home and not in engineering faculties” (141). This parallel is a shocking one; in spite of the feeling of many feminists that the Montréal Massacre was not merely an isolated incident but also reflected deeper problems in our society, to equate the pope’s teachings with an act of such extreme violence and misogyny is a disturbing accusation. Such aggressive polemical tactics demonstrate one way in which Manning, by adopting in her rhetoric the military strategies that she critiques in the writings of Pope John Paul II, inserts her discourse into the same sphere as his. It is primarily through the visionary and contemplative moments of her text that she manages to discover an alternative and less starkly polarized perspective.

Manning’s use of vivid imagery and detailed illustrations in her public polemic against the sexist practices of the Vatican is in contrast to the more personal and autobiographical portions of her text. In spite of her condemnations of Catholicism, she is surprisingly reticent – much more so than Wilson, Leddy, or Richard – about the tensions that she experiences between her roles of woman religious, feminist, wife, teacher, public critic, mother, social activist, Canadian, and Catholic. She describes her childhood as a more or less harmonious blending of spirituality and a commitment to social justice, and her approximately six years as a nun as a time of contemplation, study, and discovery. When she lists her reasons for leaving her religious order, she ranks the new developments introduced by Vatican II above her desire to get married (27). However, she does discuss a fundamental dilemma for her and for other Catholic feminists: whether or not to remain a Catholic. She describes this predicament (which becomes most acute for her after the issuing of a papal statement on women) using both a personal and emotional voice, and the spatial imagery of being either inside or outside of an institution or enclosure: “The ferocity of John Paul II’s 1994 pronouncement against women’s ordination left me stunned; I even contemplated
leaving the Catholic Church. How could I remain within an institution whose leaders had twisted the teachings of Jesus and betrayed the message of the gospel?” (9). However, she makes a conscious choice, like Wilson, Leddy, and Richard, to work for change “from within” the structures that she finds so oppressive: “Catholics such as myself have chosen to remain ‘behind the wall’ of patriarchal control in the Church in order to struggle for change from within” (15).

Thus Manning grounds her authority to criticize the tradition firmly within the tradition itself. As she expresses it: “I remain immersed within the Christian story” (91). Like Richard (though less extensively), she writes of her Catholic upbringing, and of the ways in which religion and spirituality permeated her life from an early age. Examples include the housekeeper who prayed successfully for Manning’s recovery from the whooping cough as a baby, and Manning’s childhood interest in the lives of the saints (18-20). However, she also weaves these stories of faith together with stories of rebellion and resistance. Her own birth was marked by “an act of female transgression” (18) – her mother’s “escape” from the hospital – and the saint she most admires as a child is St. Lawrence, a martyr who was killed for presenting the poor to the Roman authorities as “the treasures of the Church” (19-20). Thus, even Manning’s own critique of the Catholic church has precedents in the history of Christianity. She also refers to incidents in the history of the church in which the community of men and women of faith successfully challenged the dominant doctrine or practices (116, 195). Manning uses these examples to argue that tradition is as much about change as it is about continuity, and that “[f]rom the very beginning, God’s Spirit is shown to be active outside the boundaries of Church tradition and apostolic control” (117). She also uses them as evidence that even the very first pope (Peter) was “often fallible and inconsistent” (118).

Like Wilson, Leddy, and Richard, Manning uses personal anecdotes in the service of her public argument or manifesto, rather than as mere glimpses into her private life. For example, she uses an example of sexism in her own classroom to demonstrate how the teachings of the Catholic church influence young boys’ perception of women and of their relationship to them. After instigating a class discussion of sexual harrassment when her male grade 11 students continually bother a female student in the class, Manning is shocked when one of the boys argues: “But Miss . . . you can’t change thousands of years of
attitudes by passing laws. And anyway, you know that God is a man, and Jesus was a man, and the Church will never ordain women, so you will never be equal” (45-46). Reflecting on this incident, Manning extrapolates from the personal to the political, from the individual to the global, and writes: “In a flash, I saw women in all the Catholic cultures of the world, from Canada to Chile, from Portugal to the Philippines, imprisoned by the Church’s patriarchal principles and practices and often condemned to a life of subjection, including abuse and violence” (46). This line of argument, moving from personal experience to collective experience, helps to ground Manning’s polemic in contemporary issues, and lends strength to her claim that questions of theology have repercussions in the lives of believers and non-believers alike:

The issues surrounding the nature of God and the ability of women to represent God are not abstract or academic for a vast number of Catholic women in the world today. These are not merely obscure theological debates for scholars to pronounce on in the calm of libraries and lecture halls. They are life-and-death issues for thousands of women. (46)

Who is the implied reader of Joanna Manning’s spiritual autobiography, and of her condemnation of the very un-Catholic pope? Like the other writers in this chapter, Manning is conscious of the fact that she is writing to a Canadian audience. However, Canada for Manning is not primarily the wealthy Western nation in need of conversion that Wilson and Leddy describe. Rather, Manning’s focus on Canada is as a socio-political entity with a conflicted relationship to religion, specifically to Catholicism. Manning’s criticisms of the “tentacles” of the Catholic church extend to the ways in which it occupies a precarious – and in her view hypocritical – position in Canadian society. She is highly critical of the fact that Catholic schools and hospitals accept public funding, and then set policies that contradict the values of the rest of Canadian society (84-85, and 125). She compares the “hypocrisy” of the Catholic church in Canada with that of the Vatican on the world stage:

On the one hand, a Church institution welcomes the financial support of non-believers as well as believers by way of public taxes, and pays lip service to public democratic values. The Vatican pays nominal adherence to the democratic and egalitarian values of the United Nations Assembly in order to enjoy access to that Assembly, but rides roughshod over those values within the Catholic Church. (190)
The public/private split in the religious context thus becomes a very political one. For example, when Manning travels across Canada to speak to groups of progressive Catholics, she is “banned from Catholic Church premises” in several large cities, and so meets with other Catholics “in public libraries or in churches and halls belonging to other Christian denominations” (47). Similarly, the church’s teachings affect the private lives of Catholic girls growing up in Canada: “Catholic girls, even in a relatively prosperous society such as Canada, are still destined to ‘live under man’s influence’ because of the influence of the Church on Catholic families and Catholic schools” (122).

However, at the same time as she is critical of the place of the Catholic church in Canadian society, Manning also criticizes Canadian society using the values of that very church. Like other women spiritual autobiographers, she finds in the genre a space for counter-cultural critique, recognizing that “[w]hile religion did and still does play a role in sanctioning discrimination against women, it also has the potential . . . to play a major role in encouraging both Church and society to undergo conversion” (80). Like Wilson’s, Manning’s conversion to living out Christianity’s ideals of social justice comes about during her travels in a developing country. During a visit to Africa she is struck by the sense of community that she finds there, and when she tells the African women about the fate of the poor on the streets of Toronto, their reaction is one of disbelief: “‘It would be a disgrace to our whole community . . . for someone to be left outside with nowhere to live’” (53). Manning writes that this phrase, “a disgrace to the community,” becomes “like a mantra” for her, and inspires her decision to begin to bring together street people and Catholic school children in Toronto, as well as her choice to live in community with refugees in a home that she names after Anne Frank (53, 56). Yet Canada in turn becomes a place where values such as the equality of women and women’s rights challenge the patriarchal practices of other cultures, as Manning witnesses in Anne Frank House:

Structures of gender and power have unraveled when men arriving from patriarchal societies are faced with a female head of household. Some men from more traditional societies have felt threatened by the change that takes place in their wives when the latter realize that Canadian law does not permit a husband to use force with his wife. (57)
However, this championing of Canadian values on Manning's part is no simplistic or condescending position, for she also writes of the lessons in community that African women in particular have taught "the Canadians in the house" (58), as well as her shame at the hate mail she receives when she tries to help a Rwandan mother and child stay in Canada: "I was ashamed that my fellow Canadians could be so racist and hateful" (59).

Manning's writing shows an awareness of the difficulties faced by women who take a public stand on the supposedly private issues of religion and spirituality, not the least of which is unpopularity: "[a]n . . . action like this creates a polarized response: people will either admire you or hate you, but it is hard for them to remain neutral" (35-36). Yet in many ways it is precisely this response that the writing of Manning, Leddy, Wilson, and Richard seeks to evoke: the decision to abandon neutrality and to take a strong ethical stand. Manning finds the courage to speak out, at least in part, by thinking of the examples of courageous women in other countries who face horrendous consequences for challenging authority; in a sense, she returns to her childhood inspiration of the lives of the saints, replacing the Christian martyrs with transgressive women (41). Similarly, the very act of entering the public domain by writing about and challenging Catholic teaching is to enact a transgression of that very teaching, since "John Paul II’s anthropology divides male and female roles along lines of private and public domains" (144). She also sees her position of "privilege" as "a white Canadian woman" who has "enjoyed unique opportunities . . . to become theologically educated and literate in the language of the Church" as a position that brings with it "the responsibility to struggle against injustice" (51). Like Leddy, Manning asserts that silence implies consent with systemic injustices (43), and recognizes that the fear of speaking out causes many Catholics to be held "captive" by the church (100).

In spite of its adoption of the Vatican's imagery of warfare, and its radical polarization of the issues, Manning's spiritual autobiography also wrestles with paradox. In many ways, the title of Manning's spiritual autobiography stands as a summary of the book itself. The question "Is the pope Catholic?," so often used in conversation as the ultimate rhetorical question (what other answer could there possibly be but "yes"?), is asked "with the utmost seriousness" (12) by Manning herself, and one cannot help but read her vehement "no" between the lines of every argument that she marshalls in her text. She also activates the other meaning of "catholic," that is, "all-embracing" or "universal." At the same time,
however, the subtitle of the book, “A Woman Confronts Her Church,” with its use of the possessive pronoun, is not only confrontational but also echoes Manning’s fierce loyalty to—and continued positioning of herself and her spirituality within—the church itself, as flawed as it may be. Yet Manning’s loyalty is not to the structures of the Catholic church, but to the movement of the Spirit within it. Like Richard, Manning emphasizes her own experiences of prayer and contemplation as proof of her intimacy with God, and of her own process of theological discernment. She offers this mystical perspective on religion as a kind of defiant challenge to the efforts at control exerted by the Catholic hierarchy: “I was beginning to understand at a soul level that nothing, not even the Church, can come between anyone and God” (31). Prayer and contemplation offer the individual an experience of God that “exceeds all boundaries of creed or calling” (32). Like Leddy, then, and in spite of all her careful, logical argumentation, Manning also recognizes the limits of reason and language, and the need for faith. Her highly polemical spiritual autobiography closes not with logic but with a mystical vision, that of her experience of prayer in a “Women’s Temple” in the Nevada desert during a nuclear arms protest: “At that moment, I knew that the feminine divine presence which I could feel within that sacred place would heal our world, shattered as it was by war, racism, sexism, and environmental destruction. All my experience of God, illuminated by the personal and political events of my life, came together in that still point in the desert” (225). It is this vision and this personal experience, more than Manning’s carefully reasoned arguments, that allow her to affirm that “[f]or all women, whoever and wherever we are, this long time of exile will come to an end” (226).

Conclusion

The spiritual autobiographies discussed in this chapter are all written by women who are conscious of their positions as public figures in relation to their faith communities. Wilson, Leddy, Richard, and Manning are all engaged in dialectical negotiations between the public and private spheres, between the religious and social dimensions of their lives. All four authors are concerned with issues of religious and social reform, with the rights of women in the Protestant and Catholic churches, and with the tensions in their lives due to their roles as leaders or public figures within the institutional church. Although they
challenge the injustices that they observe within the institutional structures of both the Christian church and Canadian (or global) society, their use of metaphor suggests a fairly unproblematic adherence to their religious traditions. They also adopt many of the conventions of literary genres that are associated with public figures: the memoir (Wilson), the newspaper editorial (Leddy), the polemic (Manning), the manifesto (Richard). The focus of the hermeneutical method in these first four texts is definitely on the outward, public manifestations of the spiritual life: global politics and ecumenism (Wilson), the social gospel and social justice (Leddy), the implications of Catholic doctrine for the lives of women (Manning and Richard). Nevertheless, these public genres are disrupted by the inclusion of more intimate modes of discourse: the family memoir (Wilson and Richard), the diary (Leddy), the romance novel (Richard), the personal essay (Manning). Thus they are all hybrid texts that combine public narrative forms with more private and intimate modes of discourse.

The call to conversion in these works is a call to prophetic justice and to social change, and the reader is invited to participate in these conversions on both a private and a public level. The implied audience in all of these texts is a fairly broad one, as it is expected that the author's renown will appeal to a secular as well as a religious public. Thus, Richard explains aspects of the Catholic tradition to her readers, while articles by Leddy and Manning have appeared in national newspapers, and Wilson is currently a Canadian senator, bringing her spiritual values into the political arena. The choice to remain within the boundaries of their religious institutions, and to write in fairly conventional public literary forms, may appear to be limiting choices for these four writers. Yet by choosing to remain within both the religious institution and the parameters of a genre that is more concerned with public than with private life, all four authors are able to reimagine and reinvent their spiritual and literary heritages in ways that allow for greater freedom, and thus invest them with new possibilities for Canadian women spiritual autobiographers. All four of these texts have a strongly activist, idealistic, and utopian dimension, as they present their readers with a vision of what they consider to be a better world. This vision draws strongly on the pastoral tradition of a peaceable kingdom (Wilson and Leddy), on the sentimental conventions of the romance (Richard), and on the visionary traditions of women's mystical writing (Manning, Leddy).
In spite of their similarities, reading these four spiritual autobiographies together highlights some of the distinctive characteristics of their visions, voices, and voisinages, as well as some of the challenges and contributions they bring to the study of women’s spiritual autobiography as a genre. The dialectical negotiations of these four writers between public and private, between religious and social responsibilities, are accomplished in very different ways, with rather distinct results. Wilson introduces the stories of other people into the memoir form in an attempt to turn it upside down, and to model for her readers the processes of conversion that she has experienced in her life. Still, her book remains the story of a public figure, a witness whose identity is not lost in the stories of the people she tells. She always remains firmly in relationship with them, and never disappears from her text as a character, portraying herself rather as a private individual who comes to accept her responsibilities in the public sphere. Leddy models a different form of conversion, where her autobiographical “I” gradually disappears in the stories of the people she tells. Her self-effacement or textual “dying-to-self” is an ethical imperative that does not imply weakness but rather strength, as she transcends both public and private seeking a third option that is somehow a transparent realm between the two. Richard seeks to counteract the intrusion of the Catholic church into her private life by making that private life unabashedly public in all its minute detail, so that the church no longer has any power over her. The competing modes of discourse of her text, while sometimes jarring, demonstrate how complex the negotiations between various generic assumptions about identity can be. Finally, Manning also challenges the Catholic church’s effects on women’s private lives, but does so not through self-revelation, but by trying to give the public institution of the Vatican a private face, showing it as a socially-constructed institution made up of fallible individuals. Manning uses her public roles as teacher and historian to place herself on equal authority with the church, to write herself into the history of the prophets and exiles of Christianity, and to attack the church’s status as a public institution by showing that it has consequences for people’s lives that run counter to the ideals of Canadian society.
Chapter Four
Embodied Visions, Private Voices

Introduction and Background

While the four spiritual autobiographies examined in Chapter Three have an outward focus, turning their hermeneutical lenses on the social and religious institutions that are in need of conversion or reform, the four works discussed in this chapter have a more inward focus, with a hermeneutical method that is primarily concerned with finding the spiritual meaning of dreams, daily life, and bodily experiences. Although all four authors analysed in the following pages struggle with institutional religious structures that they find restrictive or unhealthy for their spiritual, psychological, and emotional development, their concern is not with institutional reform but with their own inner lives and spiritual growth. Marcelle Brisson’s *Par delà la clôture* (1975) is part psychoanalytic case study and part ex-nun’s story, in which she describes her reasons for spending thirteen years as a nun in a cloistered religious order. In *L’Éden éclaté* (1981), Andrée Pilon Quiviger addresses the spirituality of motherhood in the fragmented style of the diary form, peppered with dialogues with her children, biblical quotations, and echoes of Catholic liturgy. Celeste Snowber (Schroeder)1 also uses the experience of motherhood as the basis for her reflections on feminine spirituality. Her book, *In the Womb of God* (1995), combines the intimacy of the diary form with the exhortation of the sermon. Partly a diary and partly a map of the spiritual journey for fellow seekers, Micheline Piotte’s *Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu* (1999) places the author’s readings of biblical narratives alongside her interpretations of her dreams and of her bodily experiences as a person with a chronic illness that has left her disabled.

In this chapter, the dialectical negotiations between private and public that were examined in the previous chapter give way to a tension between embodiment and spirituality, as all four authors wrestle with what it means to live a spiritual life in a physical body. In order to resolve this tension, they rely on a hermeneutics of daily experience, finding

1 Although Celeste Snowber published her spiritual autobiography under her married name, she has since returned to the use of Snowber, and it is by this last name that I will refer to her in this study. However, in the Bibliography I have listed her under the name Schroeder.
evidence in the world all around them that there is indeed spirit in the world of flesh and blood. This attentiveness to personal experience gives these writers a greater freedom of expression than is encountered by those in the previous chapter, and this freedom is evident both at the level of narrative form and at the level of metaphor and imagery. Personal experience also becomes a corrective to inherited religious tradition, as these women argue for the validity of their interpretations of scripture and theology. The question of where to locate the authority to interpret spiritual experience leads to an exploration of the dichotomy between inside and outside in each of the texts. This dichotomy operates on a number of conceptual levels. At the theological level, it refers to the relative importance attached to the immanence (God within) or transcendence (God without) of the divine. In terms of community identification, these authors all struggle with their status as either insiders or outsiders in relation to their religious traditions (Catholicism for Brisson, Quiviger, and Piotte, and Protestantism for Snowber). A related question is whether authority (to interpret biblical texts, to make theological statements, and so on) resides inside or outside of the individual believer. Each author challenges this dichotomy in different ways, ultimately finding ways to locate sacred authority within herself, and to position herself both inside and outside of her religious heritage. While all four of these authors continue to situate their narratives within the Christian tradition, Piotte and especially Brisson find themselves on the fringes of that community of faith, anticipating the more solitary quests that will be the subject of the following chapter. However, with these four texts, boundaries are challenged, pushed, exploded, and dissolved, without being abandoned altogether.

There are many contrasts to be drawn between the four spiritual autobiographies in this chapter and those in the preceding chapter, at the level of guiding metaphors, of narrative forms, and of implied audiences. Although Brisson, Quiviger, Snowber, and Piotte – like Wilson, Leddy, Richard, and Manning – all contrast the limitations imposed by religious structures with the freedom that they understand to be part of the true spiritual life, their experiences are more personal and embodied than social and institutional. Brisson’s guiding metaphor of the clôture deconstructs any sense of an easy dichotomy between the outer, institutional structures and the inner, psychological ones that also imprison her. Similarly, Quiviger uses the explosive image of l’Éden éclaté to refer in turn to the Catholic church, the family, and herself as both mother and spiritual seeker, arguing that the Jesus’s message is
one of risk and sacrifice rather than comfort and safety. Snowber also focuses on her embodied experience with the metaphor of the womb, which is for her a place of freedom and creativity as well as comfort and security, and becomes spiritualized when she imagines being in the womb of God. Finally, Piotte’s image of a corps à corps struggle or embrace with God gives a physical reality to the spiritual relationship with the divine. Through their networks of figurative language, the authors in this chapter struggle to resolve the tension between their experience as embodied selves, and their awareness of a sacred reality that permeates the physical world.

In Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body (1993), literary critic Sidonie Smith argues that by “[w]riting her experiential history of the body, the autobiographical subject engages in a process of critical self-consciousness through which she comes to an awareness of the relationship of her specific body to the cultural ‘body’ and to the body politic. That change in consciousness prompts cultural critique” (131). The cultural critique of which Smith writes is paralleled by a religious critique in contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographers. Brisson’s rediscovery of her repressed sexuality, of her female body, and of the natural world around her prompt her escape from the convent and her critique of the restrictions of convent life. Drawing on their bodily experiences of motherhood, both Quiviger and Snowber critique the limitations of the metaphor of mother as it has been appropriated by Christian theology. Piotte challenges a long Judeo-Christian history of equating physical illness or disability with divine punishment, and instead learns to read her “mutilated” body as a gift, and as the text of her ongoing relationship with God. All four authors boldly insert their bodies and their physical experiences within the context of their spiritual life-narratives, asserting that they are not disembodied spirits but women of flesh and blood with particular contexts and histories that give meaning to, as well as challenge, their inherited religious understandings.

The emphasis on the body – and the underlying tensions between embodiment and spirituality – that characterizes the four texts in this chapter takes on a distinct significance for women, particularly in the context of Christianity. As Adrienne Rich laments in Of Woman Born: “The body has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit” (40). In general, Christian women – and all of the authors examined in this chapter locate themselves to a certain extent within or
in relation to the Christian story, if not always within the church as community of faith – have had to contend with their religious tradition’s denigration of women’s bodies. In *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (1994), Comparative Literature professor Elizabeth Alvilde Petroff writes that “[i]n medieval [Christian] thought, women were bodies (men were characterized as mind or spirit), and bodies were dangerous – dangerous to men and, therefore, to society as a whole. The physical austerities undergone by women mystics, and that young women often imposed on themselves, underscored society’s need to control and purify the female body” (205). Religious historian Caroline Walker Bynum’s studies of the connections between the ascetic practices of medieval Christian women mystics, and contemporary understandings of women’s eating disorders, in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987), suggests the complexities involved in some religious women’s attempts to negotiate between embodied and spiritual experience. Yet visionary women’s writings have always focused on bodies, both their own and that of Jesus (Petroff 204), and the authors in this chapter are firmly inscribed within such an embodied tradition of spiritual writing. Through various dialectical negotiations at the level of metaphorical thinking and narrative form, each one manages to find a way to affirm, through writing, her experience of being both a physical and a spiritual being, of living in a reality that is at once earthly and sacred.

Embodiment also requires some commentary in its relationship to motherhood. Although two of the authors in this chapter – Quiviger and Snowber – focus particularly on the maternal dimension of their embodied experience, their stance is far from essentialist. To begin with, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that merely portraying the experience of pregnancy, giving birth, and motherhood from the inside — that is, giving voice to the mother as subject of her own discourse — is a literary act that was almost absent from the field of Canadian literature forty years ago. In her memoir *Dance on the Earth* (1989), Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence writes almost disbelievingly of the fact that she wrote a birth scene from the point of view of the father in her first novel (*This Side Jordan*, 1960), and adds: "At that point I had borne two children, but women writers had virtually no models in describing birth, or sex, from a woman's view. We had all read many women writers, of course, but I had found no one who described sex or birth as they really were for women" (6). In *Wild Mother Dancing* (1993), the Canadian literary scholar and poet Di
Brandt records a similar frustration when she relates that after the birth of her first child in 1976, following the completion of her M.A. in Renaissance and Romantic Literature, she "realized suddenly, with a shock, that none of the texts [she] had read so carefully, none of the literary skills [she] had acquired so diligently as a student of literature, had anything remotely to do with the experience of becoming a mother" (3). Although enough has changed in the last twenty-five to forty years that Snowber’s invocation of motherhood as spiritual path may seem more conventional than radical, it is still important to point out that — as Brandt’s book and others chronicle — the subjectivity of motherhood is still a relatively recent phenomenon in Western literature. Furthermore, both authors use the experience of motherhood to challenge Christian theology in important ways: Quiviger by critiquing the Catholic metaphor of the “mother church” through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, and Snowber by coming to understand and appreciate feminine metaphors for God.

At the level of the implied audience, the four spiritual autobiographies in this chapter reveal an awareness of a far more intimate circle of readers than those in the preceding chapter. Rather than reaching out to the fellow activists posited by the other four women, these writers draw their readers in close, and address them alternately as fellow seekers or cherished friends. Brisson’s textual narratee is a “cher ami,” and she describes her conversations with the friends who urged her to write her memoirs. Quiviger frequently writes directly to her children, although her reflections are primarily aimed at fellow Québec Catholics. Snowber expresses her hope that her meditations will help others to discover the divine presence in their own lives. Piotte quite explicitly offers her text as a map to other spiritual seekers who may wish to be born again. These intimate audiences are at least in part a function of the narrative forms chosen by the writers in this chapter. All of them write less structured and more fragmented texts than the four previous authors, drawing on the private diary form as the basis of their books. In their introduction to an anthologies of excerpts from women’s diaries, Revelations: Diaries of Women (1974), editors Mary Jane Moffat and Charlotte Painter write that “[t]he [diary] form has been an important outlet for women partly because it is an analogue to their lives: emotional, fragmentary, interrupted, modest, not to be taken seriously, private, restricted, daily, trivial, formless, concerned with self, as endless as their tasks” (5). Estelle C. Jelinek echoes the same idea in her introduction to Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism (1980), commenting on the affinity of women for
narrative forms such as diaries, journals, and notebooks: “From earliest times, these discontinuous forms have been important to women because they are analogous to the fragmented, interrupted, and formless nature of their lives” (19).

Although one could take issue with Moffat, Painter, and Jelinek’s description of women’s lives as “formless,” the fact remains that the narrative forms of the four texts in this chapter are indeed less defined and more vague in terms of their generic boundaries than those in the preceding chapter. Each one of them gives the sense of being a “work in progress,” thus highlighting the ongoing and neverending process of spiritual growth. In particular, the four writers under consideration here draw links between their own experiences of life as fragmented and discontinuous – whether because of the demands of motherhood (Quiviger and Snowber), or because of the uncertainties of their spiritual lives (Brisson and Piotte) – and the literary forms in which they feel compelled to inscribe their narratives of those lives. Furthermore, the interiority of the diary form is challenged by all four writers, as they break down the boundaries between “inside” and “outside.” In Le Journal intime (1976), literary critic Béatrice Didier refers to the diary as a “refuge matriciel” (87) or a “prison matricielle” (116) that protects and encloses the self away from the outside world. However, the metaphors used by the authors in this chapter reject such security in favour of more risky spiritual, social, and artistic engagements.

Thus, a final characteristic of the diary form that is evident in all the books in this chapter is the private and solitary position of the author. Although each of the women here addresses her writings not only to herself but also to God or to her intimate (and potentially wider) circle of readers, each one must also wrestle with the loneliness of the conflicts between the circumstances of her life, her challenges to her spiritual tradition, and her deep yearnings to be part of a larger religious or social community. The diarist can be a lonely figure; indeed, Moffat and Painter argue that “loneliness [is] by far the most common emotion expressed in diaries; loneliness stemming either from physical isolation from normal outlets for discourse . . . or from psychological alienation from one’s milieu . . . or from lovelessness” (5). Each one of the authors in this chapter deals with that loneliness in different ways: Brisson by acknowledging it, Quiviger and Snowber by embracing it, Piotte by seeking to transcend it through union with God. The implied reader of each of these texts is therefore more invited into relationship with the author than challenged to a life of justice.
Marcelle Brisson: *Par delà la clôture* (1975)

Marcelle Brisson’s *Par delà la clôture* (1975) is a text that in some ways straddles the current chapter and the previous one, for it is a very public and social criticism of pre-Vatican II Catholic monastic life in Québec. *Par delà la clôture* is Brisson’s account of her thirteen years as a nun in a Benedictine order in Québec. The book is divided into three parts. In the first part, Brisson recounts a series of vignettes and short episodes from her life in the cloister, a life which she eventually abandons. In the second part, she attempts to analyse her motives for entering religious life, and to explain her reasons for leaving it. Finally, in a short epilogue, she describes her experiences as she begins to rebuild a life for herself outside the convent. A review of the book that appeared in October 1975 in the progressive Catholic cultural review *Relations* makes an explicit connection between Brisson’s story and the religious and political experiences of an entire generation of people in Québec: “Le temps et l’espace que l’écrivain y évoque sont d’ores et déjà intégrés à l’histoire du peuple québécois qui a dû longtemps cheminer, obscur et soumis, pour prendre conscience de sa propre identité et pour découvrir les voies déroutantes qui conduisent à la liberté” (Poulin 284). Thus, Brisson’s personal story of liberation from the oppressive structures of Roman Catholicism was seen by some of her readers as emblematic of the situation of Québec society as a whole. In this, her book parallels other critiques of their Québec Catholic childhoods, both autobiographical and fictional, by authors such as Claire Martin (*Dans un gant de fer* [1965] and *La Joue droite* [1966]), Marie-Claire Blais (*Manuscrits de Pauline archange* [1981]), and Denise Bombardier (*Une enfance à l’eau bénite* [1985]).

However, the images that Brisson uses to describe her experience, the generic choices that she makes, and the intense focus on her inner life and personal experience all link her book more closely with the spiritual autobiographies examined in this chapter than with those in the previous one. While Richard makes her private life public in order to call for reform

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2 *Relations* is a Jesuit-sponsored magazine that focuses on the links between social issues and Catholic faith. The first issue of the periodical was published in 1941 by the École Sociale Populaire.
within the church, Brisson’s avowed motivation is self-knowledge. The guiding metaphor of Par delà la clôture is one that runs through all four texts discussed here, in one form or another: the clôture or enclosure, in this case the monastic space of cloistered religious life. The word clôture has connotations other than religious, however; in its most general usage it simply denotes a fence or wall. This linguistic polysemy allows Brisson to explore the concept of enclosure on many levels, from literal and physical to metaphorical and spiritual. What emerges from the many significations of this guiding metaphor is a sense of the complexity of Brisson’s relationship with Catholic tradition, with Québec society, and with her own spirituality.

On the most literal level, the Benedictine order that Brisson joins is a cloistered order, meaning that the nuns are physically cut off from the outside world by the walls and bars of the convent. In a poignant scene from the first part of Par delà la clôture, Brisson describes a conversation between herself and her parents that takes place in the convent’s parlour during her novitiate. A sense of the labyrinthine spaces (both physical and rule-governed) that separate Brisson from the outside contact represented by this visit is conveyed by the fact that it takes her an hour to get the necessary permissions to go to the parlour; as she explains to her parents: “C’est compliqué d’aller au parloir: c’est un vrai voyage!” (14). Similarly, the fear of allowing the outside world to penetrate the enclosure of the convent is described with some irony by Brisson in the gesture of the Abbess, who traces the sign of the cross on Brisson’s forehead “afin de m’immuniser contre l’air mondain que je vais respirer” (14). Finally, it is only at the end of the dialogue, when Brisson says, “Je vous embrasse!” and her mother exclaims “À travers les grilles!”, that it is made explicit to the reader (at least, to the reader unfamiliar with Benedictine life in Québec in the 1950s) that Brisson has been separated from her family by a physical barrier during the entire lively discussion (17). Brisson’s narrative also draws attention to the physical enclosure of the convent when she discusses the construction work that takes place to enlarge the monastery during her stay there. The construction workers who build the new clôture become an important symbol of the outside forces that call Brisson back to a life beyond the walls of the convent that they are helping to build, reminding her of the life she lead before taking her vows: “Les ouvriers pénètrent dans notre sanctuaire et délimitèrent, à leur façon, notre clôture ... la femme en moi, si peu développée qu’elle fût, était inconsciemment flattée de constater que les ouvriers
la trouvaient à leur goût et se retournait sur son passage, tout comme autrefois les messieurs dans la rue” (88). The image of the male workers who penetrate Brisson’s sanctuary and awaken her dormant sexuality evokes the motif of the fairy tale “Sleeping Beauty.” However, Brisson does not portray herself as a passive but rather an active agent of her own liberation. Her desire to experience her own sexuality will be one of the factors that leads her outside the convent.

For it is not physical barriers alone that separate Brisson from the outside world, and that constitute the clôture of the title. Brisson refers to the doctrines and teachings of monastic life as a far more effective means of enclosure than any physical wall: “Tout ce qui est étranger n’a pas de place dans le monastère. Les paroles et les enseignements de l’autorité élèvent entre le monde et moi un mur plus épais que celui de la clôture” (13). The Benedictine nuns’ habit also becomes, for Brisson (as the garb of the Little Sisters of the Poor and the Carmelites was for Richard), a physical space that she enters, and that demarcates her religious identity as a bride of Christ from her former, secular identity as well as from the identities of those who still live in the world: “Me voici devenue la fiancée du Christ! La merveilleuse réalité est là, irréfutable. J’en suis même revêtue: Je puis la palper. Elle me couvre comme une tente de la tête aux pieds” (23). Similarly, in her analysis of monastic life in the second part of the book, Brisson reflects on the confining nature of the structured and ordered days of the nuns, suggesting that liturgical time, which is meant to liberate the spirit for prayer and devotion, can actually entrap the mind in conformity and mediocrity: “Est-ce que la stéréotypie des gestes et des actes n’engendre pas aussi celle des pensées? Est-ce que le milieu monastique, parce que religieux, échappe à certaines lois des groupes constatées partout ailleurs? Prenons le travail en usine ou dans un bureau…” (85). Brisson’s hermeneutics of attentiveness to the experiences of daily life allows her to identify the intangible as well as the tangible structures that restrict not only her life but also the lives of those outside the convent. Here Brisson hints at an observation that will become more explicit in the epilogue, that the refuge in monastic life is only one of many prisons in which the people around her have enclosed themselves: “En parlant plus intimement avec eux, je m’aperçois aussi que chacun est prisonnier, à sa façon, qui d’un mari exigeant et d’enfants turbulents, qui d’une carrière accaparante au point que tout loisir soit presque impossible” (114). This linking of her own experience of enclosure and freedom with the liberation
required by ordinary people in mundane jobs is one of the factors that gives Brisson’s spiritual autobiography its wider appeal within the context of Québec society.

The image of the clôture is by no means a simplistic one in Brisson’s text, creating an easy dichotomy between inside and outside. Images of enclosure are consistently juxtaposed with images of movement, and there is a sense of vast space and movement within the convent itself, just as there is the possibility of imprisonment outside of it, as we have already seen. To begin with, the first part of Brisson’s narrative, told from the point of view of her naïve younger self, affords a glimpse of the excitement and sense of adventure of the young woman entering monastic life. Although she certainly sees herself as entering a space of enclosure, she does so willingly (22). Furthermore, by entering into this enclosed space she sees herself as embarking on a journey in the footsteps of Christ – what she calls “mon pèlerinage vers la patrie céleste” (22) – along a path that leads ultimately to an unimaginably vast space, the kingdom of heaven: “Mais moi je sais que c’est à ta suite que je marche, ô Christ, mon Pasteur et mon Roi. Tu m’ouvres les portes de ton éternelle demeure” (23).

During her consecration ceremony, which takes place on the feast day of Joan of Arc, Brisson perceives her entrance into religious life as being as courageous a sacrifice as that of the heroine to whom she appeals: “O Ste-Jeanne d’Arc, puisque tu as vécu cela, jusqu’à la consommation de ton être, aide-moi à marcher sur tes traces, à sauver mes frères!” (40-41). Brisson’s spiritual experiences during her college years in the 1940s, before she enters the convent, centre on a group of activist Catholic friends who embrace a kind of nomadic religious life characterized by poverty, travel, ecumenism, and service. This religious movement is also linked to a desire to escape from the repressive political situation in Québec at the time: “Un vent du départ souffle alors sur le Québec. Nous voulons échapper à l’étouffement que nous ressentons sous le régime Duplessis” (70). Furthermore, just as entering the convent is initially seen by Brisson in terms of a journey metaphor (pilgrimage, adventure, and so on), so too is her departure from monastic life perceived as a movement prompted by the Holy Spirit. She describes it in a letter to her confessor as “le chemin nouveau où l’Esprit me pousse actuellement” (41). Thus Brisson turns her guiding metaphor of the clôture inside out, just as Quiviger and Snowber both do with the image of the womb.

The expansive imagery that Brisson uses to describe her early impressions of religious life serves to undermine the notion of a stark contrast between the inside and the
outside of the enclosure. Similarly, in her analysis in the second part of the book of the factors that lead to her departure from the monastery, Brisson further complicates the reader’s understanding of the meaning of the clôture metaphor. Through a course of psychotherapy aimed at healing her physical and psychological distress and at allowing her to remain in the monastery, Brisson comes to see that her symptoms are the result of her imprisonment not behind a religious clôture, but behind a psychic clôture of her own making: “La clôture de mes inhibitions s’étant ouverte, j’étais livrée au monde de mes fantasmes” (97). Similarly, she writes of her psychoanalysis: “[C]’est pendant ce temps que je pris conscience des contraintes qui m’emprisonnaient au monastère, autant que de celles qui m’avaient étreinte depuis ma première enfance” (106). The analogy that is drawn by Brisson between the physical enclosure of the cloister and the psychological enclosure of her own identity is particularly evident in the comparison of two passages from the second part of the book. In the first passage, Brisson describes her liberation from monastic life as a battle in which her allies are both her physical body (and its illnesses) and certain outside factors (the male construction workers and priests who enter the cloister and awaken her dormant sexuality, as well as her trips to Montréal for psychoanalysis):

Mais enfin, je ne suis plus au monastère. Et il n’y a pas eu de révolution pour m’en ouvrir les portes! Pas de révolution . . . sociale! Mais je me sens comme quelqu’un qui a livré un rude combat et qui a reconquis sa liberté à force d’une violente lucidité. Ce combat, comme on le verra, je n’ai pu le gagner d’un seul coup. Il m’a fallu l’alliance de mon organisme qui a été le premier à constater le régime auquel il était soumis. Et il m’a fallu aussi la complicité du milieu qui, si structuré et clos sur lui-même qu’il fût, a présenté quelques failles à certains moments et a permis à un air étranger de le pénétrer. (87-88, emphasis added)

The revolutionary imagery of this passage allies Brisson’s writing with the discourse of Québec’s Quiet Revolution. Even her “lucidité,” a metaphor reminiscent of the ocular metaphors used to describe the conversions in Chapter Three, is “violente.”

In the second passage, the enclosure that crumbles and allows access to the outside world is in fact Brisson’s old sense of identity itself, which must be torn down so that a new, more authentic identity can be discovered:
Quand je pense à ma psychothérapie, je ne puis m'empêcher d'évoquer l'art du vingtième siècle, en quête de nouvelles images de l'espace par la déstructuration de la matière. Chaque semaine pendant quelques heures éclataient pour moi les limites de ma clôture cependant qu'au-delà de l'effondrement de mes idéaux qui semblait entraîner la destruction de mon être, se dessinaient péniblement les coordonnées d'un nouvel espace. (99, emphasis added)

By using the guiding metaphor of the clôture to describe both the physical and doctrinal space of the cloister, and the psychic space of her own identity, Brisson effectively blurs the boundaries between inside and outside. She also takes responsibility for both her own sense of imprisonment and her own liberation. Furthermore, she creates the possibility of a sacred, inner space that is as valid a site of religious life and experience as the officially-sanctioned space of the monastery. Brisson’s analysis of her motives for entering religious life lead her to the conclusion that she was indeed called by God to a religious life, but that the convent was not a healthy environment in which to live out her vocation:

Est-ce que j’accepte que Dieu m’ait appelée à travers le méandre de mon inconscient que je connaissais mieux par l’analyse psychothérapeutique? je [sic] pense que oui. Mais puis-je persévérer à garder un regard lucide sur moi-même dans la vie monastique? Étant donné les mécanismes de la vie régulière d’une société soumise au pouvoir absolu, je pense que non. Je n’aurais pas l’équilibre nécessaire pour vivre une expérience d’ordre spirituel et mystique dans un milieu qui n’avait pas suffisamment de racines humaines. (107)

This conclusion is one of those factors that distinguishes Brisson’s narrative from the ex-nun’s tale, or from the other Catholic girlhood narratives of Québec women who recount their liberation from repressive or abusive Roman Catholic families, schools, or other structures. Brisson continues to embrace a spiritual and mystical perspective on life, in spite of her realization that she cannot pursue such experience within the convent.

The guiding metaphor of the clôture and its eventual disintegration allows Brisson to explore and transform a number of other related images from the Christian tradition. Brisson describes her gradual liberation from the physical and mental structures of monastic life in terms of the creation myth of Genesis. After eight months of psychoanalysis, Brisson begins to immerse herself in the natural world, first becoming interested in plants and trees, then in
birds, then in mammals, and finally in her own body (102-103). This sequence of discovery parallels the order of creation in the first chapter of the biblical book of Genesis, but the role of discoverer and cataloguer that Brisson claims for herself is not that of Eve (portrayed as the temptress in the Catholic tradition), but that of God the creator, or of Adam the namer of creation. The meaning that Brisson herself assigns to this episode is one in which she must rediscover the natural and physical world from which she fled in order to take refuge in the intellectual and spiritual realms: “Oui, j’avais couru trop vite dans les voies du spirituel, étouffant toute vie naturelle en moi, et je devais faire de nouveau l’apprentissage du monde extérieur et de ma propre vie: la vie végétale et animale étudiée en botanique et en zoologie me ramenant à mon être propre comme à un microcosme” (103). In this excerpt, Brisson passes judgement on a spirituality that is disembodied or disconnected from the physical and natural worlds. Thus, the emphasis on creation is also an effort to reclaim the body and the natural world as integral components of a healthy spirituality. As we shall see, the concern with a spirituality that is rooted in the body and in the earthly, ordinary, everyday world is a concern that is also shared, in different ways, by the three other spiritual autobiographers in this chapter.

Brisson also employs the resurrection imagery of the New Testament in order to describe her rebirth outside the convent. Just as she is considered by the Catholic church to have died to her old life upon entering the convent, so too, her monastic identity must die in order for her to be reborn in the world. When she enters the monastery as a novice, Brisson is given a new name, Soeur Thécla, the name by which she is known throughout the first part of her book. Similarly, the Abbess explains to her that after she has taken her vows, she will be literally dead to the world: “Après avoir reçu la consécration des Vierges, vous serez morte à jamais au monde. Vous vivrez cachée dans la face du Christ” (39). At the end of the first part of Par delà la clôture, which Brisson narrates from the point of view of her younger self, the reader is informed that Soeur Thécla’s narrative is over: “Ici finit le récit de Soeur Thécla. Celui qui est désireux de connaître les étapes et l’issue de son analyse thérapeutique devra consulter les archives du Centre de Psychothérapie!” (64). The second part of the book opens with an address to the reader, a “Cher Ami” who has inquired into the reasons that Soeur Thécla entered, remained in, and eventually left the cloister (67). The language in which Soeur Thécla’s “death” is described is reminiscent of the Christian imagery of the
resurrection, symbolized by an empty tomb from which the body of Jesus has disappeared without a trace:

Merci de l'interêt posthume que vous manifestez pour soeur Thécla. Elle est disparue de son monastère sans laisser de trace: non seulement elle ne figure pas au Martyrologe de l'Église, mais les Annales de la Communauté n'ont pas retenu son nom. — Et si par hasard, un fait rappelle son souvenir c'est sans doute par crainte qu'on le chasse. (67)

Even the suggestion that there is something fearful or subversive about the memory of Soeur Thécla links her story with that of Jesus, and the claim that her name does not appear in the list of martyrs also carries with it the unvoiced implication that perhaps it should. However, this passage also draws attention to the invisibility of women in the history of the Catholic church, particularly rebellious women.

Along with her use of metaphors that consistently disrupt any coherent distinction between inside and outside, another rhetorical strategy that Brisson employs in order to break free from the restrictions of ordered, religious life and of liturgical time is to adopt modes of discourse that are attentive to the minute particulars of daily life. Such awareness allows her to give primacy to her own experience and identity, rather than to the conformity demanded by convent rules and regulations. Her portrayal of convent life focuses on details such as descriptions of the other nuns and of their daily activities of meals, recreation, and chores, while her narrative of her life after leaving the order portrays a woman for whom the simple acquisition of an apartment, or the acts of cooking her own food or going on a date, are monumental experiences. Brisson’s rhetorical strategy is to contrast the daily experience of limitations, rules, and restrictions, with the daily experience of freedom. To this end, her book incorporates aspects of the narrative forms of the diary, the ex-nun’s tale (with its detailed and usually horrific descriptions of convent life), and the psychoanalytic case study (with its attentiveness to the meaning behind the most mundane words, gestures, and dreams of the analysand).

The primary narrative form that Brisson both adopts and subverts for the writing of her spiritual autobiography is that of the literature of psychoanalysis, particularly case studies such as Sigmund Freud’s *Dora*. In such texts, the analysand provides the analyst with a naïve subject for psychoanalysis, and it is the therapist who can perceive much more than is
accessible to the conscious awareness of the patient. Brisson’s book conforms to this model by presenting the first part of the narrative as the uncomprehending and naïve story of the young nun, and the second part as a more knowledgeable analysis of her unconscious and hidden motives. However, Brisson subverts this narrative form in one obvious way, by claiming the role of analyst for herself. This choice gives her the power to conceal or to reveal whatever she chooses in her narrative. In his “Prefatory Remarks” to *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905), Sigmund Freud expresses his opinion that he has a responsibility to make public both the psycho-sexual intimacies and the “most secret and repressed wishes” of his patients, in the higher interests of the scientific good (12). However, by taking control of her own narrative Brisson is able to decide exactly how much or how little to reveal to her readers, and indeed, she is fairly reticent on the subject of her sexuality. Furthermore, she refuses to allow anyone else the authority to have the final word on the meaning of her personal experience. One of the most disturbing aspects of Freud’s account of *Dora* for many contemporary readers is his interpretation of Dora’s disgust at the sexual advances of an older, married man as “entirely and completely hysterical” (36). Freud goes on to write that he “should without question consider a person hysterical in whom an occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable” (36-37). Although many of Brisson’s insights into herself come through a course of psychoanalysis, by writing her account thirteen years later, she is able to ensure that her retrospective vision of events stands as her “truth,” unlike the disempowered female subjects of Freud’s psychoanalytic case studies.

Another genre whose conventions are invoked by *Par delà la clôture* is the ex-nun’s tale. As we have already seen in Chapter Three, in the nineteenth century this narrative form was often a form of anti-Catholic propaganda as well as respectable pornography, while by the twentieth century it had become one of the many discourses of women’s liberation. Brisson, however, breaks with the conventions of both nineteenth-century and twentieth-century ex-nuns’ stories by refusing any easy dichotomy between the inside and the outside of the convent, as well as by her insistence on taking responsibility for her choices, rather than simply assigning blame to a supposedly corrupt or unhealthy system. Brisson’s references to her sexuality and to her sexual fantasies would seem to be in keeping with the assumptions of both the ex-nun’s tale and the psychoanalytic case study. However, once
again her own autonomy and authority as diarist disrupt these generic conventions. After a visit to the hospital, when Brisson begins to imagine that perhaps somehow she was raped and is now pregnant, she soothes her fears by examining her genitals with a mirror: “[J]e sens le besoin de voir de plus près les parties génitales de mon corps, comme si elles devaient me révéler un secret . . . je m’empare d’une petite glace qui se trouve à ma disposition et j’observe. De contempler mon propre corps me procure un certain soulagement” (46-47). With this specular imagery, Brisson takes charge of her own sexuality and of her own body, just as she will in her epilogue when she alludes to a sexual relationship and affirms the necessity of love and sexuality to “l’équilibre de la personnalité” (117). However, she consistently refuses either to demonize or to reify sexuality, seeing it as one form of relationship and engagement among many. Indeed, her book concludes with an emphasis on social and political relationships rather than sexual ones, another factor that inscribes her story within the larger history of the Quiet Revolution.

Brisson’s references to the implied readers of her spiritual autobiography also challenge any notion of a strict dichotomy between the inner and outer audiences of the text. On the one hand, Brisson explains that her friends have pressed her to tell her story in order to expose some of the oppressive structures of Québec religious life: “[I]ls sont assez violemment anticléricals et profitent du récit de mon aventure bénédictine pour ressasser les vieux problèmes des Canadiens français: ‘Écris-donc cela, ce sera le scandale de l’année!’ ” (114). On the other hand, Brisson explicitly rejects the notion of making her life public in order to cater to a societal desire for clergy-bashing: “Pour ma part, ayant liquidé mon passé et toute à la joie de la transformation opérée dans ma personnalité, je veux avant tout vivre: relater mon expérience pour en faire un succès facile de librairie ne m’intéresse nullement” (114). She emphasizes that her primary reason for writing her spiritual autobiography is the same as the motivation that led her out of the convent: the desire for self-awareness and self-understanding, or in the visionary metaphor that she employs, a desire for “lucidité,” for the ability to see clearly. By insisting that she does not have to be a specialist in order to reflect on and interpret her own experience – a claim that runs counter to both Catholicism and Freudian psychology in their most hierarchical forms – Brisson once again asserts her authority in the text: “Bien entendu, cher ami, vous ne trouverez pas ici l’analyse d’une spécialiste en sciences humaines, mais celle d’une personne qui réfléchit tout simplement sur
son destin pour y voir plus clair. Pour elle, en effet, l'effort de lucidité est maintenant devenu projet fondamental" (68, emphasis added). Thus, the metaphor of vision and lucidity that was used by the authors analysed in Chapter Three to describe a new way of seeing social conditions, is here turned inward on the self.

Perhaps the most salient quality of the implied reader in *Par delà la clôture* is that this person is given a liberty of interpretation that is equal to that claimed by Brisson vis-à-vis her own life. In the opening passages of the second part of her spiritual autobiography, in which the reader is addressed as "cher ami,“ Brisson emphasizes that by waiting thirteen years to tell the story of her experiences in the convent (which is, perhaps significantly, the same amount of time that she spent within the monastery itself), she has gained some distance both from the suffering she experienced within monastic life, and from her exclusive use of psychoanalytical models to understand that experience. While acknowledging her debt to Freud and psychotherapy, Brisson insists that “la lecture freudienne est une des lectures possibles des événements, mais pas la seule. D’autres l’accompagneront” (68). She then goes on to address the reader directly, as an individual with an interpretive freedom equal to her own: “D’ailleurs qui vous empêche de faire votre propre interprétation?” (68) This direct, almost playful invitation to the reader is yet another rhetorical strategy that explicitly distances Brisson’s narrative from the more judgemental and monolithic hermeneutical frameworks of the psychoanalytic case study and the ex-nun’s tale. Furthermore, it emphasizes yet again – this time in the realm of reading and interpretation – the central place of liberation in Brisson’s text.

For freedom is ultimately the highest value promoted by Marcelle Brisson’s *Par delà la clôture*, a liberation of the individual from repressive religious and psychic structures that is paralleled by the liberation of an entire society, the people of Québec. The guiding metaphor of the clôture and its disintegration, the subversion of the genre of the psychoanalytic case study, and the invitation to the reader to participate freely in the interpretation of the text, are all rhetorical strategies that serve to emphasize individual freedom and autonomy. Yet Brisson’s spiritual autobiography never ceases to dwell in the realm of paradox, in the uneasy liminal space between concepts of inside and outside, of

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1 By choosing the masculine singular form of the word friend ("ami"), Brisson is perhaps (consciously or unconsciously) invoking the male analyst of classical Freudian psychoanalysis.
individual and society. She refuses the simplistic anti-Catholic bias of the classic ex-nun’s tale, portraying the other inhabitants of the convent with sympathy and taking responsibility for her own choices, both to enter and to leave religious life. Furthermore, the final passage of the book combines a fierce desire for freedom and self-determination with a longing to be part of a larger social whole:

Et ce livre, qu'est-il pour moi? Une volonté bien ferme d'être moi, dans un contexte historique déterminé. Pendant treize ans de ma vie, j'ai vécu en dehors du temps . . . Mon expérience personnelle flottait dans des espaces vagues et éthérés. Il me faut récupérer ce temps et cet espace pour m'intégrer à l'histoire du peuple québéquois [sic]. (118)

The final, paradoxical image of the text stands as a fitting ending to a spiritual autobiography that asserts the inner freedom of the individual in spite of the restrictive forces of religion, family, and society: “Mon évocation ‘dans l’au-delà’ se conclut sur l’asphalte de la métropole montréalaise. Sous les pavés, la plage!” (118). Although Brisson rejects the vague and ethereal spaces of a religious life divorced from social and earthly realities, she nevertheless acknowledges the existence of a mystery beyond the urban asphalt, or the structures of the human psyche: “Sous les pavés, la plage!” This paradoxical allusion to an oceanic reality lying hidden below the pavement of the streets of Montréal evokes not only the notion of the unconscious, but also pushes Brisson’s rhetoric into the realm of mystical discourse, with its awareness of the mysteries just below the surface of everyday experience. This paradoxical ending makes Brisson’s book more of a spiritual autobiography than simply a classic deconversion narrative of the Quiet Revolution. During a period in which many Québécois were turning away from religion and spirituality altogether in their disillusionment with the Catholic church, Brisson leaves the secure confinement of the cloister for a more precarious and uncertain future as a spiritual seeker whose points of reference come from the natural world and her own body. The resonance of Brisson’s narrative with stories of spiritual quest or adventure lends her story an affinity with the works by Jovette Marchessault and Sharon Butala which are the subject of the following chapter.
Andrée Pilon Quiviger's *L'Éden éclaté* (1981) is an extended meditation on the relationships between motherhood, developmental psychology, spirituality, and the Catholic church. Like Brisson, Quiviger is influenced by both Freudian psychoanalysis and Catholic tradition, and also like Brisson, she uses her own experience as a woman to challenge certain aspects of both doctrines. However, whereas monastic life provides Brisson with experiences on which to reflect, Quiviger draws on her life as mother, wife, and writer in order to come to a deeper understanding of her faith. Her narrative begins on the day of her fortieth birthday, as she experiences a sense of dissatisfaction and questioning and asks herself what she has done with her life so far: "Qu’ai-je fait jusqu’à maintenant? Des enfants! Oui vraiment, mon œuvre, c’est la maternité. Faut-il en avoir honte au regard féministe dont toute femme, un jour ou l’autre, a chaussé les lunettes?" (14, emphasis added). Once again, an optical metaphor is introduced early in the text, this time in reference to the conflict that many women experience between motherhood and feminism. Throughout her spiritual autobiography, Quiviger will continue to employ the metaphor of vision as a way of exploring the paradoxes of the spiritual life. For example, seeing clearly – the imperative that is also embraced by Brisson – is contrasted by Quiviger with “l’obéissance aveugle” (55) demanded by the Catholic church. On the other hand, Quiviger's metaphor for coming to terms with the mystery at the core of religious life is the image of herself and her husband making love with their eyes closed, in order to open themselves to the transcendent. Thus, through the metaphor of sight, *L'Éden éclaté* emphasizes both the need to struggle for clarity of understanding and the necessity of acknowledging the mysteries beyond rational thought.

Like all of the writers examined in this chapter, Quiviger's spirituality is inextricably embodied in the physical and ordinary experiences of her life. The tension between Quiviger’s spiritual yearnings and the concrete embodiment of her situation as a middle-aged mother leads to a series of dialectical negotiations in which she moves back and forth between concretizing the spiritual (as in her portraits of Mary and Jesus) and spiritualizing the body (as in her extended reflections on the metaphor of the womb). Quiviger shares Brisson’s skepticism with regard to a spirituality (or, as she calls it, “la parapsychologie”) that is divorced from material and practical concerns (18-19). Yet at the same time, she
argues that too much concern with material satisfactions can block our experience of the sacred: “Bien sûr, l’intériorité présente un estomac à nourrir et un corps à vêtir. Mais à trop chercher le beurre sur le pain et à trop se passionner pour la finesse des tissus, on échappe à la saisie du souffle tenu qui passe dans le désert, de la brise légère perceptible dans le seul silence” (105). This dilemma is but one of many paradoxes that L’Éden éclaté explores. Indeed, Quiviger’s spiritual autobiography can be read as a celebration of paradox and a rejection of absolutes.

By emphasizing the embodiment of her experience as a mother right from the start of her narrative (for example, by commenting ironically on her varicose veins with the words “pour les jambes, vraiment, la maternité n’a rien de perfection” [19]), Quiviger authorizes this experience as a valid departure point for her acts of theological reflection and ecclesiastical critique. Indeed, it is precisely the silence of theology on the subject of motherhood (apart from what Quiviger sees as the impossible ideals of the Catholic teachings on family life) that prompts Quiviger to write her own work of theological reflection: “Puisque la théologie ne dit rien qui puisse alimenter les mères: me mettre à l’œuvre pour et par moi-même. Pourquoi pas?” (19, emphasis added). Even the metaphor she uses to critique the Catholic church in this passage draws attention to bodily experience: Catholic theology is not doing its job of feeding mothers. Motherhood never loses its dual qualities of embodiment and transcendence in Quiviger’s text. She describes throwing herself “à corps perdu” (14) into the acts of lovemaking and conception, and yet worries that mothers’ physical health receives more attention from society than their mental health (14-15). Over and over in her text, Quiviger asserts the primacy of experience as a source of interpretive authority, and describes this experience as embodied, physical, and tactile: “Je ne veux pas parler à partir des diplômes, somme toute relatifs. J’ai vécu. L’expérience maternelle et conjugale, quelques crises maturantes et quelques dizaines d’années de foi m’ont donné à observer, à réfléchir et à toucher du doigt certaines données existentielles. J’écris à partir de ce matériau” (48, emphasis added). One of the rhetorical strategies that allows her to affirm this experience is her choice of narrative form.

Thus, Quiviger’s insistence on the daily, physical realities of motherhood is also reflected in the mode of discourse of her spiritual autobiography. L’Éden éclaté consists of a series of nineteen chapters that comprise reflections on various themes pertaining to the
spiritual life: love, anger, forgiveness, money, miracles, the sacraments, the Virgin Mary, and so on. Like the other authors in this chapter, Quiviger adopts a narrative form that is related to the diary with its daily entries and meditations. Quiviger makes explicit the link between this type of writing and the experience of women who are also mothers and homemakers: “J’écris entre la vaisselle du déjeuner et la préparation de l’autre repas tout aussi éphémère, avec, entre virgules, un bout de lessive, quelque réponse au téléphone ou à la porte et, entre parenthèses, les cris à venir de la marmaille qui rentre pour dîner!” (49). Rather than seeing this style of writing as merely a lamentable necessity, Quiviger actually defends and celebrates it, asserting that it is the style which gives women the most freedom of expression: “Je ne veux pas perdre tout à fait le ton du délire parce que les femmes, si habituées à se taire, disent peut-être le meilleur de ce qu’elles pensent quand elles se trouvent au bord de la démence” (49). Quiviger’s emphasis on the figure of the loquacious and wise madwoman in this passage evokes not only the ecstatic form of writing promoted by French feminist writer Hélène Cixous as “écriture féminine,” but also the tradition of divinely mad female seers such as the Greek Cassandra. Quiviger thus situates her writing in traditions in which “délire” and “démence” are also associated with the expression of both personal and religious “truth.”

The guiding metaphor of L’Éden éclaté comes once again from the title of the book. It is an even more complex network of images and concepts than Brisson’s clôture, and indeed, Quiviger’s entire spiritual autobiography is an elaborate reflection on the implications of this metaphor. The title evokes the lost garden of Eden, but it is a loss that Quiviger celebrates more than mourns. She links the religious myth of Paradise with the feelings of union and security experienced by the child in the womb, and by the pregnant mother: “Nulle distance entre le Paradis et moi. À la droite du Père. Au centre de ma mère” (28). Thus, she explores the spiritual dimensions of a bodily experience that is common to all human beings. Birth is therefore akin to the mythical exile from the garden of Eden: “Expulsion radicale de l’extase. Délivrance maternelle qui m’enchaîne à moi-même . . .

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4 Quiviger writes that she studied theology and was introduced to psychoanalysis in France when she was twenty years old (in 1960). Although this would have been too early for her to have been introduced to the writings of Hélène Cixous, it is possible that she discovered them later, although she never mentions them as an explicit influence on her writing.
Dorénavant nomade, c’est de ma propre sueur que je signerai mon histoire” (28). However, rather than investing the image of the womb primarily with positive, nurturing qualities, Quiviger criticizes forcefully the desire of many Christians to remain in the womb-like security of a dogmatic church and an unquestioning faith, thus never fully reaching spiritual maturity: “Il n'y a rien dans l'Évangile qui invite au re-ventrage dans la sécurité des voies trouvées” (111). The word “re-ventrage” is a neologism invented by Quiviger that provides her with a vivid metaphor for criticizing conservative or reactionary theological positions: they are evidence of people’s efforts to crawl back into the womb, an obviously unnatural position. Indeed, Quiviger sees human beings as engaged in a perpetual quest to return to the womb, through the experiences of romantic love (93) and marriage (125), of motherhood (93), of money (99), or of the security of a dogmatic church. Her text proposes instead an acceptance of radical solitude and autonomy, without ever abandoning the ideals of either social justice or mystical union with the divine.

Quiviger’s dialectical negotiations between spirituality and embodiment begin with her sense of discontinuity between her own lived experience of motherhood and the teachings of the Catholic church on motherhood and family. Although her own experience is one that includes disappointment, failure, and imperfection, the Catholic image of the family is an impossibly harmonious ideal, which Quiviger describes with undisguised sarcasm: “[L]e christianisme nous offre le joli modèle de la Sainte Famille. Quoi de plus délicieux à contempler que cet admirable trio: la mère soumise, remplie de grâce, vierge par surcroît; le père-ouvrier dont les générosités puissent à l’inconditionnel et ce fils obéissant dont la sagesse n’a d’égale que sa gracieuse croissance” (16). She contrasts this traditional religious image with the reality of most Catholic families (especially the mothers), who are filled with guilt because they constantly fall short of the church’s teachings: “La Profane Famille tourne dans un cul-de-sac et la maternité qui devait parachever la femme risque de la rachever” (17). The guilt and disillusionment of motherhood is the unspoken secret of Catholic women that Quiviger takes it upon herself to give a voice to and to examine in her text, as she explores the tension between sacred and secular images of family, between an unattainable spiritual ideal, and a more challenging earthly reality.

Like Brisson, Quiviger situates her spiritual autobiography in dialogue with psychoanalysis. Whereas Brisson subverts the psychoanalytic case study by taking on the
roles of both analyst and analysand, Quiviger uses psychoanalysis as a hermeneutical lens through which to critique the Catholic church’s encouragement of what she views as an infantile spirituality. However, rather than adopting the anti-religious stance of psychoanalysis, Quiviger adapts its developmental models to her own ends. She employs psychological paradigms to show how Christianity can help people to abandon their illusions and embrace their autonomy, without rejecting spirituality and transcendence. She accomplishes this interpretive task by taking the Catholic metaphors (or, as theologian Sallie McFague might call them, models or even idols) of “God the father” and the “mother church,” and rereading them through the lens of psychoanalytic theory. Thus, the child (or Christian) must leave the mother in order to develop her or his full identity and autonomy, and it is the distance of the father that makes the first faltering steps toward selfhood possible (57). For Quiviger, faith is not passivity or security; it is movement, risk, and a willingness to dwell in paradox, the greatest paradox of all being that family and church should not be spaces of refuge, but spaces of freedom and liberation: “Réussir une famille, c’est réussir son éclatement. Réaliser une Église, serait-ce rompre l’uniformité de sa façade afin que jaillissent les multiples feux de la liberté individuelle et collective?” (110). Quiviger thus takes the metaphor of church as family to an extreme that deconstructs the assumptions behind the image, suggesting that if psychological maturity consists of leaving home (and leaving one’s mother), then perhaps spiritual maturity consists of leaving the church, or at least of finding ways to express one’s individualism and autonomy within it.

Quiviger’s emphasis on individual liberation, and on psychoanalysis as a hermeneutical tool, parallels that of Brisson, something that is hardly surprising, given the similarities in the socio-cultural contexts of the two Québec women, writing only six years apart (although Brisson is older by eleven years). Nevertheless, the implications of Quiviger’s insistence on spiritual liberation are very different from Brisson’s. Although both women celebrate an embodied spirituality, and they agree on the need for a balance between attention to one’s inner life and engagement with the world, Quiviger’s vision of that engagement is a much more justice-oriented one. Brisson emphasizes her working-class roots, and the fact that entering the convent was one way of trying to escape from the constraints of her class. When she re-enters the outside world, her concerns are with earning an honest living for herself, and exploring her sexuality. Quiviger, on the other hand,
wrestles overtly with the New Testament message of poverty and disdain of wealth (105). The need to leave behind the false or illusory securities of Eden brings with it a responsibility to engage in the healing of the world: “Une fois [que nous sommes] sortis du paradis, l’œil est appelé à l’ouverture et les bras au travail. Une fois sortis de nos propres blessures, nous appelle la blessure des autres” (106, emphasis added). As with the authors in the previous chapter, for Quiviger the metaphor of vision is used to describe a conversion to social action. It is perhaps not surprising that following L’Éden éclaté she writes a book, not about spirituality but about the resilience of an inner-city Montréal neighbourhood, entitled Au coin de la quarante-septième (1983), in which her vision of a church in the streets is realized: “Je rêve d’une Église dans la rue, là où le bien et le mal ne tranchent pas noir sur blanc et où les sourds, les boiteux, les aveugles et les prisonniers (nous sommes logés à l’une ou l’autre enseigne) crient à la libération” (112). It is only in 1988 that Quiviger returns more explicitly to the subject of religious life, telling the story of a particular women’s religious community (the monastery of the Dominican sisters of Berthierville, Québec) in Entre le fleuve et l’infini.

Like the other spiritual autobiographies in this study, L’Éden éclaté combines various narrative forms to create a hybrid text. Quiviger alternates between narrative forms that emphasize her embodied experience as a wife and mother (dialogue and diary-style reflections) and more hermeneutical modes of discourse (psychoanalytic interpretation, biblical hermeneutics, and theological reflection), in order to emphasize the legitimacy of her experience as a woman (who is also both wife and mother) as a standpoint from which to critique the Québec Catholic tradition. By setting up a constant interplay between meditations on her experience and theological reflection, Quiviger continually asserts her right to engage in a biblical hermeneutics informed by her own life experience. This interpretive engagement serves to break down the distinction between inner and outer sources of authority by establishing a dialectic between personal experience and biblical revelation, a relationship that Quiviger describes as “[l]a foi qui tend à naître, non plus à la faveur des dogmes, mais à travers l’expérience, si petite soit-elle, mise à nu dans la lumière des Révélations” (19). The tension between embodiment and spirituality, then, is addressed through a hermeneutic in which both physical experience and sacred texts are allowed to dialogue with and inform one another.
Quiviger’s hermeneutical method, like Brisson’s, places a high value on freedom of interpretation. Although both women are influenced by psychoanalysis, both distance themselves from it in important ways. Quiviger does so by drawing a connection between her personal and idiosyncratic style of writing, her rejection of absolutist metaphors in favour of partial and paradoxical images, and her refusal of totalizing systems of thought and interpretation:

Je ne dispose pas d’une grille de lecture quadrillée dans une discipline précise ou structurée. J’ai mangé quelque peu au ratelier de la psychanalyse, mais je ne suis pas psychanalyste. Je risque de faire beaucoup d’erreurs. Mais pourquoi ne prendrais-je pas le risque? En l’occurrence, celui-ci me paraît cohérent puisqu’un des objectifs de cette réflexion consiste précisément à récuser le mythe de la totalité. (47)

Quiviger perceives the abrogation of hermeneutical authority by the Catholic hierarchy as an effort to control the potentially explosive and liberatory possibilities of the New Testament texts: “Mais pourquoi n’auraient le droit de parler de Dieu que les docteurs de connaissance divine? Serait-ce pour mieux contrôler l’Esprit? Serait-ce pour endiguer, au profit des pouvoirs ecclésiaux, un message rempli de dynamite libératrice?” (47). This description of biblical texts as dynamite has a parallel in Jovette Marchessault’s belief that women’s stories are the dynamite that can explode the prisons of patriarchal social and religious structures, as we shall see in Chapter Five. Quiviger rejects the notion that any one person has absolute interpretive authority over the biblical texts (111), although she acknowledges the Catholic church’s very real power of censorship (125). Her own biblical hermeneutics, therefore, is an effort to unearth the radical and risky message of the gospel narratives. Just as her guiding metaphor promotes a spiritual maturity beyond the womb, so her hermeneutics, while honouring the desire for mystical union, is more concerned with liberation: “L’ensemble évangélique . . . convoquerait . . . aux éclatements de la coquille” (109).

Although Quiviger’s critique of the institutional Catholic church is in many ways as trenchant as Joanna Manning’s, it is grounded not in the certainty that she is right and the Catholic hierarchy is wrong, as in the texts of Manning and Richard. Rather, her critique is based on the radical uncertainty of a faith filled with doubts, of the impossibility of ever truly knowing whether or not God exists. For Quiviger this absence, rather than the presence of answers, is the basis of Christian faith, for it is an uncertainty that opens one’s mind to the
radical and shocking message of the Gospel narratives: "Il n'y a pas de réponse à la question de l'existence de Dieu... Il faut apprendre à marcher sans réponse. Car c'est la seule manière d'ouvrir son cœur à la nouveauté de l'Évangile" (55). Thus in Quiviger's text we can see how metaphor and narrative form both combine to provide a profound spiritual vision and theological commentary. The stance of uncertainty adopted by Quiviger's hermeneutics, the fragmentary nature of her discourse and its basis in everyday realities, and her explosive and subversive use of metaphors, are all upheld not as weaknesses of a text that might be judged disorderly on literary grounds, but as strengths and attributes of the mature spiritual seeker. Nevertheless, the unresolved tension in Quiviger's hermeneutics lies in the fact that although she uses her experience as a mother to critique the Catholic and psychoanalytic hermeneutical lenses, her experience itself is also "read" through those traditions. Thus Quiviger's text consistently portrays God as a Freudian father, and the mother as the domestic or infantilising force. Quiviger uses these images to criticize the conservativism of the Catholic "mother" church, but even this reversal of imagery leaves real mothers in a bind, because they are still essentially associated with negative rather than positive qualities. For example, she asserts that "la fonction maternelle adhère au couvage, au reventrage tandis que Jésus tend précisément à nous retirer du piège maternel pour pénétrer dans l'inconnu" (57).

Once again we see the double bind in which many women spiritual autobiographers find themselves, caught between their desire to retain traditional imagery and the insufficiency of that imagery to describe their experience.

One way in which Quiviger liberates herself somewhat from this hermeneutical bind is through her portrait of Mary the mother of Jesus, which not only provides an image of a woman who is both holy and earthly, but also gives Quiviger a language that manages to escape from the scientific and rational languages of psychoanalysis and Catholic theology: the language of liturgy and prayer. Although these languages are also adopted from the Catholic tradition, Quiviger rewrites them in subversive ways. For example, after a lyrical lament on the fleeting passage of time for her as a mother, Quiviger writes: "Et Marie gardait toutes ces choses en son cœur" (88). This well-known biblical reference to the internal musings of the mother of Jesus (Luke 2.19) links Quiviger's story with hers, making the biblical figure accessible and raising Quiviger's experience to the level of the sacred. This appropriation of biblical texts and of ritual language takes place particularly with regard
to Mary in her role as mother. In her chapter on Mary, Quiviger appropriates the story of Mary even further by writing a lament for her lost son in Mary's own voice: "Ô mon fils, ne vois-tu pas ce que cela me fait de te voir affirmer ton nom? Brûlure acide érodant le cœur des femmes quand le bourgeon de la serre se redresse au dehors" (138). The seamless shift from Quiviger's own voice to Mary's makes this insertion of fictional biblical discourse all the more powerful at the narrative level.

Quiviger also adopts the linguistic cadences of the Catholic "Hail Mary" prayer ("Je te salue, Marie, pleine de grâce...") in order to celebrate, not the image of Mary as perfect and inaccessible to ordinary women (that is, a highly spiritualized Virgin Mary), but the paradox of the embodied and earthly – as well as mystical and transcendent – experiences of the biblical Mary: "Je te salue, Marie, bousculée par les sursauts du ventre car tu ouvres le passage au frère universel. Je te salue, jeune femme, dont les eaux rompent et les ossatures s'écartent, car ce qui sort de toi renferme la plus puissante énigme de l'histoire" (137). Quiviger's imagery is all the more radical because in traditional Catholic theology, as journalist and historian Marina Warner points out in Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (1983), "the Virgin as mother is exempt by special privilege from intercourse, from labour, and from other physical processes of ordinary childbearing" (192). Quiviger's Mary is exempt from none of these things, yet she remains a mystical and awe-inspiring figure. Quiviger's rhetorical strategies thus both humanize Mary and hold up as transcendent the experience of ordinary mothers. Just as Quiviger's portrait of Mary contains a deeply humanizing Maryology (or, theology of Mary), so too, does the vivid portrait that she paints of Jesus convey a Christology (or, theology of Christ) that emphasizes his human rather than his divine nature. Indeed, Quiviger criticizes the premature divinisation of Jesus as a way in which people have avoided the thorny and difficult questions of embodied existence: "Le diviniser d'emblée a fait bifurquer le croyant des sentiers étroits en faveur des larges avenues balisées par une spiritualité divorcée du réel" (56). Thus, although Quiviger's portrayal of Jesus as the solitary seeker abandoned by the father contains an inherent Freudian critique of the mother, it also participates in the fragmentary, uncertain, and embodied nature of Quiviger's text itself.

Similarly, Quiviger's chapter on the Catholic sacraments adopts the language of ritual in order to critique and question the church's orthodox teaching on the meaning of the
sacraments. Quiviger offers an interpretation of the sacraments that is in keeping with her vision of the autonomy of the individual, and the liberatory potential of the New Testament message. Her sacramental theology emphasizes ordinary, everyday experience as a doorway to the sacred, and seeks to reinvest these traditional Catholic rituals with a sense of holiness of daily life: “La vie se célèbre. Ses cassures, ses extases et surtout son labeur quotidien méritent qu’on les regarde et, finalement, qu’on les épouse d’un peu plus près ou d’un peu plus creux à chaque fois. C’est là, me semble-t-il, le sens des sacrements” (113). In Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical (1997), Lutheran pastor and historian of liturgy Frank C. Senn writes that “[r]itual has to do not only with what a community does before God but also with what the members of a community do in interaction with one another. It is a pattern of behavior that expresses and forms a way of life consistent with the community’s beliefs and values” (3). Quiviger calls the Catholic church to task for celebrating sacraments that are not “consistent with the community’s beliefs and values.” The sacraments in the Catholic church (baptism, confirmation, eucharist, marriage, confession, ordination, and last rites) are fixed and can only be administered by ordained (male) priests. However, Quiviger devotes an entire chapter to exploring the daily realities that should be addressed by the rituals of the sacraments. For example, she criticizes the sacrament of infant baptism as “[u]n gros ballon sécuritaire posé sur l’âme d’un innocent” (115), which prevents the child from questioning and growing in faith. She asks why the Catholic church confirms people and then refuses to listen to their questions and criticisms: “Quelle cérémonie de confirmation parle aux élus de la joie qu’aurait l’Église à se voir déranger par leurs découvertes?” (117). She sees the eucharist as a reminder of our flesh and blood existence (118), compares the institutionalised Catholic sacrament of confession with the spontaneous acts of confession and forgiveness that take place in the context of family life (121-22), and asks why the Catholic church consecrates only the first (and easiest) step of marriage, the pronouncement of vows (124). Once again she turns to the language of daily life to criticize the institutionalised transcendence of the Catholic church: “Le mariage n’est pas tant un engagement à long terme qu’un risque quotidien” (125). Furthermore, Quiviger uses explicitly sacramental language to describe some of her physical experiences as a woman. For example, childbirth becomes for Quiviger a transcendental experience similar to the eucharist: “D’entre mes jambes coulent l’eau et le sang, sacraments des mystères de la vie.
L’évidence de la divinité se dévoile” (61). To equate the blood and water of childbirth with the wine of the eucharist that represents the essence of God is a truly subversive use of imagery, and one that reinforces Quiviger’s message that we are all priests at certain moments in our lives (127).

The implied audience of L’Éden éclaté is made up of both an intimate and a broader circle of readers. Quiviger confesses her doubts about publication, or about writing for anyone other than herself. Yet like Brisson, she undermines the distinction between inner and outer audiences by defending her right to communicate intimately with others: “Écrire, c’est d’abord entrer en contact avec le fond de soi et cet objectif pourrait largement suffire. En publiant, je m’attribue le droit de communiquer. Sur quoi pourrais-je fonder celui-ci? S’il existe un droit au cri, à la tendresse, à la poésie, c’est là que je fonde mes écritures” (48).

The moments of dialogue with her children in Quiviger’s text are paralleled by passages where they are addressed directly, as the most intimate audience of the text. However, these sections subvert the traditional motives for which women have addressed their spiritual autobiographies to their children; that is, for the offspring’s religious edification or in order to promote their conversion. Quiviger calls her children, not to conversion and submission, but to liberation and freedom from the securities of religious dogma. She writes to them in an effort to destroy their illusions about her perfection or omnipotence: “Mes enfants, il n’y a pas de vérité pure et, puisque vous la poursuivrez quand même, je vous en conjure, ne la cherchez pas auprès de moi. Même si, jadis, au creux de votre mère, vous avez vécu l’épiphanie d’une Béatitude” (36). She also urges on them not obedience but transgression, the transgression of finding their own identities that are distinct from hers: “Oh! mes enfants, transgressez la loi de mes pères et vous vivrez. Que j’endosse mon visage pour laisser le vôtre se déplier à contre-nuit. Transgressez. Transgressez-moi. J’essaierai de vous regarder vivre sans vous dévorer” (77). Quiviger’s children, as both actors in and the implied audience of her text, fulfill a role similar to that of God the father in Quiviger’s theological paradigm, calling her to greater spiritual, psychological, and emotional maturity.

The broader audience of L’Éden éclaté is, of course, other Québec Catholics whose comfortable faith Quiviger seeks to challenge. The book’s postface stands as a particularly

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5 See, for example, the discussion of Anne Bradstreet’s spiritual autobiography, “To My Dear Children,” in Mary G. Mason’s “Autobiographies of Women Writers.”
interesting document in this regard. Written by Jacques Grand’maison, a Catholic priest, theologian, and outspoken social critic from Québec, it functions not so much as an implicit imprimatur but rather as something akin to the testimony of Margery Kempe’s amanuensis: the testimony of a church father who has found himself converted by the powerful words of a woman speaking from the margins of orthodoxy. Like Kempe’s scribe, Grand’maison describes his own reading of Quiviger’s book in the postface, and the powerful emotional and intellectual response that leads to his internalization of the challenge offered by L’Éden éclaté: “[J]’étais atteint dans la fibre la plus sûre de mon âme: l’espérance, la chrétienne comme la politique . . . Dans quelle mesure, moi aussi, en étais-je encore au Ventre?” (143).

By inscribing his own conversion experience as a reader in the postface to Quiviger’s spiritual autobiography, Grand’maison invites other readers to follow his example. In a review of L’Éden éclaté that appeared in Relations in 1981, Diane Almeras discusses Quiviger’s book along with two other works that also have motherhood as their theme. However, Almeras considers Quiviger’s text last and, like Grand’maison, emphasizes her own response to the book as well as the effect she envisions it having on others (281). Robert Vigneault’s 1982 essay on L’Éden éclaté in Lettres québécoises (a secular, literary publication rather than a religious, social one like Relations) shows a similar enthusiasm for Quiviger’s text. Thus, Quiviger’s powerful and personal message of liberation, and of embodied spirituality, seems to have resonated with both men and women readers in Québec, who have been drawn to her spiritual vision as well as to her critical voice.

Celeste Snowber (Schroeder): In the Womb of God (1995)

Celeste Snowber, a liturgical dancer, educator, and author living in the Vancouver area, began writing In the Womb of God: Creative Nurturing for the Soul (1995) when she was confined to partial bed rest during the last months of her pregnancy with twins. She completed it during the boys’ infancy, amidst the demands of being at home with three children under the age of five. It is easy to anticipate some of the parallels between

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6 For an analysis of the thought of Grand’maison, see Gregory Baum’s “Jacques Grand’maison: Prophecy and Politics,” in The Church in Québec: 91-107. For a discussion of the role of Kempe’s amanuensis, see Mary G. Mason, “Autobiographies of Women Writers.”
Snowber's spiritual autobiography and Quiviger's, in spite of the geographical and cultural gap that separates Québec from British Columbia, and the temporal gap that separates the early 1980s from the mid-1990s. Snowber's book, in close kinship with Quiviger's, consists of eighteen chapters, each one a personal meditation on a particular image or theme. In the preface she describes it as "a series of reflections on seeing and attending to the contemplative in the cracks of life. It is about responding to the voice of God, which soothes, challenges, creates, and re-creates us" (xiii). The image of "attending to the contemplative in the cracks of life" parallels Quiviger's reference to her stolen moments of writing, interrupted by household chores, while Snowber's insistence on "responding to the voice of God" echoes Quiviger's preoccupation with the active (and not merely contemplative) dimension of the spiritual life.

*In the Womb of God* is the textual record of Snowber's practice of consciously attending to the presence of God in her life, what she calls "listen[ing] to the metaphors of our lives" (xiii). The idea that the physical world and people's experiences in it can reveal deeper truths about the realm of the spirit is an important notion in the genre of spiritual autobiography, and Snowber makes explicit use of this concept as she discusses her pregnancy and labour: "Never before has an experience taken on so much spiritual significance for me. Each stage of this birthing process parallels my spiritual journey — not a journey of constant spiritual highs, but a journey that embraces a time of desert waiting" (10-11). Snowber's hermeneutic, then, is turned on the body, nature, dreams, and the daily realities of life as a mother and a dancer. Even as she celebrates an embodied spirituality, the events and environments of Snowber's life are imbued with a significance beyond that of the material realm. We shall see this hermeneutic strongly at work in Piotte's text as well.

The guiding metaphor that informs Snowber's spiritual reflections is, as the title indicates, the space of the womb. As an artist whose medium is the body and movement, she is frustrated when confined to her bed and forbidden to dance during her pregnancy. However, pregnancy becomes, for Snowber, a metaphor for the creative work of the artist, and also for the transforming power of God in her life and in the world: "I, too, am woven day by day into the image of God, an image woven through my heart and body" (6). Whereas Quiviger calls upon her fellow Québec Catholics to leave the safe womb of the church and to follow Jesus's radical and lonely path of social justice, Snowber portrays the
womb as a nurturing and creative space, a place of renewal and refuge that is also vast and challenging. Perhaps even more than Quiviger, Snowber's rhetorical use of the trope of motherhood, far from being naïve, ends up challenging both religious and social norms by questioning assumptions about women, women's roles, and the nature of God.

Although Snowber seems to find her spiritual fulfillment in the traditional role of the self-sacrificing mother, it is her uneasiness with this role that lends both tension and depth to her text, as well as imbuing her writing with a certain wry humour. Her description of "embracing the pain and going within to find [her] focus" (10, emphasis in the text) during the birth of her twins becomes "a larger paradigm for [her] life journey" (10), but it also gives her the opportunity to reflect humorously on her fear of losing her intellectual edge to the physical demands of pregnancy and labour: "Silently I laughed, realizing that I had just delivered our first twin and my brain had not turned to mush! My creative juices were flowing, and I had to get ready to push out our second baby" (10). Like Quiviger, Snowber is honest about her loathing of what she calls "domestic tyranny" (21), and about the sheer physical exhaustion of being a caregiver for small children — especially for an artist whose medium is the body: "Three small bodies nourishing off mine leaves little else to utilize my body as an instrument of harmony in dance" (27-28). Later on, she states quite emphatically: "I don't always find being in the roles of mother and wife natural" (57), thus putting to rest any notions one might have of the text's uncomplicated essentialism. More importantly, what Snowber – like Quiviger – tries to convey is that even the daily and earthly grind or motherhood is spiritual, not because motherhood is women's ultimate vocation, but because the mother as individual can create a place of meditation for herself in the midst of the demands of family.

Snowber's emphasis on denying the self in parenting necessitates a discussion of some of the concerns of both religious and secular feminists regarding women, feminism, and spirituality. These concerns revolve at least in part around the fact that certain qualities held to be desirable by most of the world's major spiritual traditions are qualities that have often already been imposed on women by patriarchal social structures. Therefore, it may seem to some feminists that spiritual commitment comes at the expense of personal freedom and development as an autonomous human being. In her autobiographical work entitled At the Root of this Longing, Carol Lee Flinders identifies four "critical stress points . . . along
the interface between feminism and spirituality" (61), which she names “silence,” “self-naughting,” “redirecting desires,” and “enclosure” (59-82). In the Womb of God embraces especially the notion of "self-naughting" as a spiritual path — not perhaps one of choice, but one imposed by the necessities of motherhood: "At the heart of parenting is denying self. A friend of mine once said that she saw parenting as a journey in dying to self, a way in which she could enter Christ's journey" (58).

Furthermore, it is by embracing the role of mother — however difficult that may be for her to do — that Snowber gains access to a more subversive dimension of her imagery, at least when it is viewed within the Christian context: “[A]s I am the one nurturing, I begin to allow God to nurture me through them. I allow myself to be nurtured by God, who becomes a mother and father to me. To see God as mother, as father, is one of the most profound relational aspects of the Holy that I have glimpsed in a long time” (60). In Chapter Fourteen, "Moving Toward the Feminine Face of God," Snowber gives a description of what embodied spirituality can mean, and of how her own experience of motherhood has allowed her to reclaim, on a deep and visceral level, the feminine metaphors for God that the Christian tradition has long neglected:

Knowing a truth with your head is radically different from understanding it with your heart and body . . . It wasn't until this past year, as I plunged — and have been plunged — into mothering infant twins that feminine metaphors for God have reached not only my intellect but the center of my spirituality. I have had ample opportunity to live inside these metaphors . . . and I am beginning to see that God truly has a feminine side . . . I am finally owning and delighting in my feminine birthright as I acknowledge that these qualities are valued and cherished by God. (82, emphasis added)

Whereas Quiviger never moves beyond the Catholic and Freudian metaphors of God as “Father,” Snowber joins centuries of Christian mystics, both male and female, from Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) and Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), to contemporary Catholic theologians Matthew Fox and Rosemary Radford Ruether, in embracing feminine imagery for the divine. However, what is truly revelatory in the above passage is Snowber’s notion of embodied understanding; the idea that “living inside the metaphor” of the motherhood of God has positively challenged both her conception of God and her self-perception. Snowber
gives a vivid and visceral example of Frye's notion of "living in the metaphors" of faith, but it is a non-traditional or subversive metaphor that she reclaims and lives out.

To be able to experience feminine metaphors for God is to be free to contemplate the image of being formed and nurtured in the womb of God, and it is here that Snowber's writing most fully embraces the paradoxes of this image. Like the other spiritual autobiographers in this chapter, she undermines any notion of an absolute contrast between inside and outside. For even as she refers to God's womb as a "metaphor of absolute warmth and shelter" (107), it is also a vast space of freedom and of mobility. The text opens and closes with chapters that contain references to Snowber's womb as a "womb-studio" (2, 108), inviting the reader to envision God's womb as a space of dancing and movement as well as "warmth and shelter." Furthermore, in her preface she describes the spiritual life with which her book is concerned as "the common journey that we all share in the womb of God" (xiii). Snowber thus introduces a paradoxical yet telling image that recurs in all of the spiritual autobiographies in this chapter: that a space which initially seems to be one of enclosure and imprisonment (the womb, the convent, the disabled body, and so on) becomes (or leads to) a space of expansion, freedom, movement, adventure, and self-discovery. Dichotomies between inside and outside seem to break down as Snowber's language slides again and again into paradox. "God's Spirit is pregnant within me," she writes, effectively creating an image of the vastness of God's womb nestled inside her own (108). The final sentence of her book describes the womb of God as "a womb that is pregnant with the birth pangs of love," thus uniting in one paradoxical image the experiences of pregnancy and birth, of enclosure and expulsion, of safety and challenge, of nurturing and letting go (110). The womb is thus a more complex and less polarized metaphor for Snowber than it is for Quiviger, who sees it as both the illusion of Paradise and the refuge of conservatism.

Other paradoxes in Snowber's use of spatial imagery also challenge conventional tropes in the Western tradition of spiritual autobiography. The notion of the desert as a place of solitude, of testing, and of struggle (linked to the biblical tradition that early on in his ministry, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, where he was tested by the devil) is given a surprising twist by Snowber. She comes to see the fallacy of her assumption "that deserts usually happen in solitary places, with few people and generous portions of time, leaving one ample opportunity to wrestle along the spiritual journey" (15), and discovers instead that
"[her] desert of transformation is the suburbs, not the serene quiet of the monastery" (16).

Similarly, when she finds herself longing for "spaces of retreat" such as the monastery or convent, she begins to reflect instead on the metaphor of "family as sanctuary": "the place where I'm known — known with all my faults and frailties, known as broken clay. But I am also known as a beautifully cherished pot, a unique earthenware vase with blue-salt glaze" (56). She considers the notion that she may have been called to "the rugged intimacy of relational family," just as others are called by God to the solitude of the contemplative life (57): "My family is my sanctuary, my monastery. It is the heart of where God is forming me" (59).

The tension between freedom and enclosure in Snowber's use of the womb as a guiding metaphor is also paralleled by her preoccupation with both physical and metaphorical boundaries in the text. In Chapter Fifteen, she describes a scene in which the sight of a field of random wildflowers gives rise to a spiritual meditation. The field is contrasted in Snowber's imagination with the "carefully planned garden[s]" of the suburbs (88), and then leads to a reflection on the role of boundaries in her life:

I'm bone-tired of boundaries — boundaries of the Church in particular, where I am constantly forced into a role that is unsuitable to me; boundaries of expectations. It is painful to have fire in your bones to preach God's Word and yet be relegated to the background, particularly when you have more theological training than some of the male pastors! Boundaries are good things, but at times only in pushing them do we grow. (89)

This brief and frustrated attack on the hierarchical structures of authority in the church centres on the metaphor of the boundary as something that must be challenged or transcended in order to develop as a spiritual being: "Growing spiritually is pushing beyond the boundaries we put on ourselves" (90). This desire to be free of repressive religious and social boundaries also resonates with the emphasis on freedom and liberation found in Brisson's and Quiviger's texts. Furthermore, it is precisely by pushing generic boundaries that Snowber manages to inject the authority of the "preach[er of] God's Word" into her intimate and private spiritual reflections.

In the Womb of God recounts Snowber's encounters with God in the intimate spaces of her life: in the joys and the challenges of physical experience, especially pregnancy and
dance; in the relationships with her husband, children, and faith community; and in luminous and peaceful moments of awareness of the natural world. Most of Snowber’s book, like those of the other four authors in this chapter, has the fragmented and discontinuous style associated with women’s journal writing. However, Snowber’s inscription of her own experience within the biblical tradition, and her insistent reclamation of its feminine metaphors for God, allies her writing style as much with the genre of public preaching and scriptural teaching as with the genre of private meditation and reflection. Her constant references to biblical passages, to support and give theological validity to her spiritual musings, serve to establish her as an authority on the scriptural texts. Similarly, her direct—as well as indirect—references to her high level of theological education also serve the rhetorical purpose of displaying her credentials to the reader. These credentials allow her to insist not only on the validity but also the necessity of reclaiming feminine imagery for God, in order for women to be able to “embrace [their] own femininity with freshness and clarity” (39). She argues that “[o]ur image of God is closely interwoven with our image of ourselves. We need only study the history of Christian writings to see how gender has affected theological reflection” (81). The implication is that she herself has engaged in such study, and therefore has the authority to discourse on the subject.

To refer to Snowber’s reflections on motherhood as “preaching” is to invoke an oral mode of discourse (the sermon) that has a long and complex history, particularly with regard to women. In Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity (1998), editors Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker argue that narrow definitions of preaching—as an act that is performed by an ordained member of the clergy from a church pulpit—have prevented many women preachers from being recognized as such. We have already seen how Mary Jo Leddy, after having been banned from the pulpit, began to conceive of her newspaper editorials as preaching. In And Blessed Is She: Sermons by Women (1990), editor Edwina Hunter confirms that this phenomenon extends far beyond Leddy’s actions, when she writes that “Roman Catholic women are preaching and speaking publicly, in spite of papal edicts against this. In most cases, they cannot refer to their activities as ‘preaching’; however, that is exactly what they are doing and most effectively” (89). Although homiletical manuals and courses may exist in order to teach clergy how to preach effective sermons, women’s preaching has often been a spontaneous and subversive
activity that took place outside of or on the margins of mainstream religion (Farmer and Hunter 4; Kienzle and Walker 4). Preaching would seem to be identifiable more by the illocutionary acts in which the preacher is engaged, than by any specific literary form; preachers admonish, instruct and beseech (Brekus 2), and so on. The fact that Snowber’s preaching takes a written rather than an oral form means that the immediate, embodied context of the sermon is lost. However, her vivid illustrations taken from her daily life, as well as her acts of biblical exegesis, ground her preaching firmly in a hermeneutics of locating her personal experience firmly in the biblical narratives.

By injecting the fragmented and discontinuous style of the diary form with the hermeneutical authority and fervour of the preacher in her pulpit, Snowber manages to make a significant theological statement with her writing. Rather than denigrating her experiences of motherhood and elevating her theological and academic training, she manages to hold both in tension, and affirms that it is precisely in the dreaded mundaneness of our lives that we encounter the sacred: "The ordinary: that which I fear most is where I actually find God" (60). This emphasis on “the ordinary” reflects the fact that the spirituality Snowber celebrates is emphatically — and not just incidentally — an embodied spirituality. Even metaphors that are associated with the spiritual life in religious autobiography, such as the notion of a journey home, are located in the body by Snowber’s rhetoric: "[M]y concept of home is changing. Home is not a geographic place; it is much deeper than that. Home is about being at home in our bodies, listening to them, hearing the whispers within and those around us — seeing grace in our midst" (16). Like Brisson, Snowber seems to be engaged in a conscious rejection of any definition of spirituality that does not have its roots in the material world: "Spirituality is not ethereal, but real, embedded in earth, getting mud on our face. Spirituality is a messy enterprise" (95).

Although one could argue that Snowber's vision of an embodied spirituality is centred in the private realm of the family, her understanding of the radical implications of such a spirituality spills over into the ecological and social realms. She uses the Hebrew word shalom to refer to the ideal world or peaceable kingdom of God's divine plan, and then states:

In essence, shalom is to take full delight in our human calling — the calling to enjoy living before God, to enjoy living in our own physical surroundings, to enjoy living with our own fellows, to enjoy life with ourselves.
God's cause in the world concerns the totality of life, including the mind, heart, imagination, and body. Taking delight in creation and in physical reality is inherent in the understanding of shalom. (52)

If the purpose of the spiritual life, then, is "to take full delight in our human calling," including its physical dimension, then one could argue that the response urged on the reader by Snowber is one of living out the hermeneutical process in the body: "Not only must we reclaim metaphors for God that have been neglected in our biblical history but we need to find ways to live in them. Embodying these metaphors in our torsos, fingers, shoulders, and chests startles us into knowing the fullness of who God is" (85). Within this interpretive framework, Snowber's book Embodied Prayer (also published in 1995) can also be seen as an important volume of her spiritual autobiography, for it is the text which engages the reader even more directly with Snowber's teachings on embodied spirituality. While Brisson and Quiviger address their audiences primarily with a call to personal liberation from repressive religious practices, Snowber’s book is an invitation to her readers to join her on the spiritual path of embodiment. In this, her spiritual autobiography is similar to that of Micheline Piotte, the last author to be discussed in this chapter.

Micheline Piotte: Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu (1999)

Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu (1999) is the second autobiographical text published by Micheline Piotte, a Québec woman who has worked as an educator, consultant, and psychotherapist. Her first book, Au-delà du mur (1988), deals with her challenging experience of living with a congenital illness of the sensory-nervous system, an illness which leads to a series of hospitalizations and other losses over the course of her life, such as the amputation of both feet and some of her fingers. In Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu, she takes the telling of her story to a more explicitly spiritual level. Like Snowber, Piotte’s spiritual narrative is firmly rooted both in her experience of her body, and in her reading of and reflection on biblical texts and the world around her. Piotte’s dialectical negotiations between embodiment and spirituality lead her from an attempt to interpret the spiritual messages of her physical illness and disabilities, to a determination to embody her spiritual understandings in the world by creating a home for children with disabilities.
The guiding metaphor of Piotte’s spiritual autobiography, as with the other three texts examined in this chapter, is captured by the title of her book: Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu. The expression “corps à corps” implies physical contact, “[e]n serrant le corps d’un autre contre le sien (dans la lutte).” This image is rich in connotations, all of which are explored to some degree in Piotte’s writing. The metaphor of a battle, with the self and with God (or the Adversary, who is sent by God), is recurrent throughout the text: “Je deviens l’espace où deux forces s’affrontent: un Germe qui exige de croître, qui pousse à grandir, à accomplir le potentiel que je recèle dans le creux de mon ventre; l’autre qui résiste, qui se fait l’Adversaire” (166). The image of an intimate, physical wrestling with God has echoes in the Judaic and Christian traditions, in which the patriarch Jacob wrestles all night with a stranger who dislocates his hip, and whom Jacob will not release until he receives a blessing and a new name:

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” (Genesis 32.24-28)

I have quoted this biblical passage at length because although Piotte only refers to the story explicitly once in her narrative (100), it is an image that provides the foundation for her entire spiritual autobiography. Like Jacob, Piotte wrestles both with herself (that is, with her physical limitations, emotional difficulties, and spiritual doubts) and with God, in a “corps à corps” that is both a battle and a desire for greater closeness and intimacy. It is here that the complexity of Piotte’s use of this image becomes apparent, for her struggle is also a journey, an effort to break down the barriers that separate her from God, so that she can at last engage in this face to face, or body to body, embrace.

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The guiding metaphor of a corps à corps encounter or struggle with God also stresses the theological importance of the concept of embodiment or incarnation in Piotte’s text. In the Christian tradition, the concept of incarnation refers to the mystery of God becoming human in Jesus. For Piotte, embodiment or incarnation is more of a hermeneutical method, in which the outer landscape and the body become symbols for spiritual realities experienced in the inner landscape or soul. In Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu events in the exterior world become a mirror of Piotte’s journey through her own interior landscape, a journey whose ultimate goal is union with God. For Piotte, drawing on the writings of Annick de Souzenelle (primarily Le symbolisme du corps humain, 1984), the body — like the rest of the external world — speaks to us in a language of its own. Physical illness, disability, and other physical experiences are spiritual lessons that one must learn to read and to interpret; thus the physical body is in a sense spiritualized or allegorized. Piotte frequently turns to the Bible in order to decipher the language that her body is trying to speak to her. What is significant about locating spiritual experience in the body, is that ultimately both experience and the authority to interpret that experience come to be located within the self, rather than outside it.

The literary form or structure of Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu parallels that of Brisson’s Par delà la clôture. Piotte’s book has two main sections, which are framed by a short foreword and a very brief epilogue. The first part, entitled "L’expérience du chemin," is a series of journal-style reflections that describe the spiritual journey, with all of its struggles and breakthroughs, as it is experienced in an ongoing fashion by Piotte. In her foreword, she uses the metaphor of landscape painting to describe the uncertain nature of this part of the writing process: "[J]e décrit mon expérience du chemin comme elle est vécue. Je suis devant une grande toile sur laquelle je dessine des formes et ajoute des couleurs à mesure qu'elles s'imposent à moi. Je n'ai aucune idée du paysage que mes mains contribuent à façonner" (14). Here her text offers another parallel with Brisson’s in that both women describe the uncertain nature of the spiritual self with the metaphor of painting. The second part of the book is entitled "Comment naitre de nouveau?" and is a more abstract map of the spiritual journey, drawn from the particulars of Piotte’s own experience: “Dans la deuxième partie . . . j’esquisse le tracé de la route et les balises nécessaires à la compréhension de cette expérience” (14). Again, like the other three writers, Piotte uses this section to step back
somewhat from her own story and to become an authoritative interpreter of her own narrative. Thus, like the others, she also claims the right to give meaning to her experience without the intervention of ecclesiastical authority.

**Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu** opens with a powerful evocation of the physical limitations to which Piotte's body is subjected through disability, as well as the somewhat envious gaze with which she watches those who enjoy greater physical health and mobility than she: "Assise au bord de la rivière, je regarde les cyclistes qui dévalent le sentier et les joueurs qui courent autour d'un ballon. Serais-je plus heureuse si je pouvais bouger comme eux? Serais-je plus heureuse si... Tous les plaisirs et les biens de ce monde se succèdent devant mes yeux" (11). She delves immediately into paradox however, asserting that she is not suffering from physical ailments but rather from a spiritual hunger; that her imprisonment is not in her disabled body but in her longing for God: "Je me sentais dans un cul-de-sac, prisonnière de mon désir de Dieu" (13). Piotte's foreword thus introduces some of the dominant images and paradoxes that will inform the rest of her text. The exterior world that is evoked so vividly in her opening observations of the passing cyclists eventually becomes primarily a reflection of Piotte's own interior landscape: "Je découvre que ce qui se présente devant moi est un reflet et une objectivation d'un espace intérieur, à nommer et féconder" (127). Throughout the book the image of the self or soul as a rich inner world, inhabited by many colourful and diverse creatures and personalities, is central to Piotte's location of the sacred in her own physical form. The contradiction with which Piotte must wrestle, however, is that locating the sacred within the self does not make it any easier to attain.

**Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu** is rife with metaphors that describe the obstacles in the path of Piotte's quest for communion with God or Jesus. These images include the prevailing one of the prison. Sometimes Piotte uses the image of the labyrinth to describe her sense of imprisonment, a usage that reflects classical mythological rather than Christian roots: "[J]e tourne en rond, piégée dans un labyrinthe dont je connais de plus en plus tous les recoins" (160). Elsewhere in the text this image is given positive connotations by becoming a cocoon: "Je reste là, suspendue dans le vide, comme une chrysalide dans son cocon" (137). The notion of the spiritual life as a road or journey is predominantly evoked through the image of exile, and of wandering in the desert: "Je comprends peu à peu que le labyrinthe dans lequel je me sens piégée, est une terre d'exil, d'apprentissage et de maturation..."
nécessaires pour pouvoir continuer ma route. Je comprends aussi que pour sortir de cet exil et marcher vers la terre promise, il me faut affronter des obstacles et des épreuves” (165). As in the classic Puritan spiritual autobiography of John Bunyan, Piotte portrays the spiritual journey as a psychomachia or soul-struggle.

The door or threshold becomes another important symbol for Piotte, representing the final obstacle that stands between her and the spiritual realm in which she desires to live. She evokes this image in her foreword, as she describes her frustration when the reading of eastern religious texts allows her to glimpse a spiritual world that she cannot enter: “[J]e me retrouve, désenamorée, devant une porte fermée” (12). At one point in the narrative she has a dream in which she sees her spiritual progress as an endless succession of doors: “Dans un rêve, je franchis une porte et me retrouve dans un grand portique, face à une autre porte” (104). The apotheosis of Piotte’s spiritual autobiography is the realization that this door is an illusion, that what she believed to be outside of herself and unattainable, on the other side of the door, is in fact within her (as well as, paradoxically, outside of her): “Je croyais la lumière de l'autre côté de la porte. Elle est dans l’espace que j’habite. Elle est là et je continue de la chercher en avant, plus loin” (151). In a wonderful pun on the word porte (both “door” and “carry”), Piotte is only able to let go of her desire to pass through the door when she realizes that Jesus is with her and has been carrying her all along: “Je vois enfin Jésus . . . Il est là. Il me porte” (151). In the final, joyful conclusion of the first part of her narrative, the dichotomies between inside and outside break down altogether for Piotte: “La joie m’habite et m’enveloppe” (151).

The metaphors Piotte chooses to describe her spiritual journey (including the motif of the journey itself) have a long history within the Christian tradition. Piotte herself makes explicit the connections between her own story and the biblical stories bequeathed to her by her religious background. In her foreword, she writes of how she sought spiritual truths and enlightenment in various eastern religious traditions before being brought back to an awareness of the vitality of her own tradition by the writings of Annick de Souzenelle: “Elle redonne à l'Histoire sainte que j'ai apprise enfant, une vigueur et une actualité qui m'ébranlent dans le tréfonds de mon être . . . Les histoires et les héros de ma tradition, rapetissés à des figures morales et lointaines et empoissiés par l'habitude et l'insignifiance, ressuscitent” (12-13). In Piotte's writing and interpretation of her own life
experiences, the biblical stories and characters come to life, taking on a literal, eternal truth. This hermeneutical method has a long history in the tradition of Christian spiritual autobiography, stretching back to St. Augustine and John Bunyan. Such interpretation serves as one way in which believers — especially women — have been able to ground their authority, identity, and experience in the scriptural tradition, so as to claim their own place within the religious community.

However, Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu breaks with this tradition of Christian conversion narratives in that it is not written to gain membership in a particular religious community. Indeed, Piotte repeatedly portrays her journey as a solitary one, with only her friend Marie-Hélène and her books as companions and guides. The one time that she does think she has found a community of faith in a Christian orthodox setting, she is disappointed (for unspecified reasons). This episode gives Piotte the opportunity to reaffirm the personal and individual nature of her spiritual journey: “Il me faut prendre conscience que mon chemin, comme tout chemin, est personnel” (109). She therefore has more freedom to play with the scriptural texts, and less need to conform precisely to orthodox interpretations. Indeed, what is fascinating about Piotte’s hermeneutics is that she often alters the scriptural verses or narratives in order to make them fit with her own experience or interpretations. The result is the creation of a textual landscape that is both traditional and also radically challenging to aspects of the Christian tradition.

Like Richard, Piotte locates her hermeneutical authority in an inner voice that speaks to her throughout her recorded spiritual journey. Although she clearly and repeatedly locates this voice within herself, it frequently speaks to her in the language of scripture. One of the ultimate discoveries of her spiritual quest is that this voice is the voice of God within her, thus breaking down the boundaries between self and God and achieving the mystical union she has sought. This aspect of Piotte’s text is similar to Richard’s claims that people’s inner voices can also be understood as the voice of God. Such a conflation of her own inner voice with God’s also gives tacit authority to her own acts of writing and interpretation, presenting them as inspired and indeed, at times, almost dictated by God. For example, in an extended meditation on the passage in Genesis in which God calls Abraham to leave his homeland and travel to the land where God will lead him, Piotte reinterprets the biblical text as a call to turn towards her inner landscape. However, she actually places these words in the mouth of God,
equating God's words with the promptings of her own inner voice: "'Va vers toi,' dit la Voix. 'Va vers toi,' dit Dieu à Abraham" (36). In fact, God's words in Genesis 12.1 are narrated as: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Revised Standard Version translation). In keeping with her hermeneutic, then, Piotte transforms a command to go on a physical journey into an invitation to an inner journey.

Following the example of Annick de Souzenelle, Piotte embodies the biblical texts in her own life by reading her bodily experiences in the light of the scriptures. For example, at one point in her narrative she experiences the need to understand the spiritual message of her amputated limbs, and she turns to the New Testament passage: "Et si ton pied est pour toi une occasion de péché, coupe-le. Mieux vaut entrer estropié dans la Vie que d'être jeté avec tes deux pieds dans la Géhenne" (Mark 9.45). Although this may seem like a punishing text to apply to an amputation that was the result of a physical illness, for Piotte it becomes the occasion of a vision in which she presents herself "inaccomplie, bien-aimée de Dieu, à la porte du jardin d'Éden" (65). This embodied reflection on the biblical texts, similar to that of Snowber, is a hermeneutic that also serves to break down the dichotomies between inside and outside, as Piotte finds herself united with the Christian narrative: "C'est ce mur de séparation qui semble fondre. Pour la première fois, je suis dans l'Histoire de Dieu et cette Histoire est aussi la mienne. Ma vie de foi et ma vie sont une, intimement tissées l'une dans l'autre" (66). Such an intimate "weaving" of Piotte's embodied experience with the Christian stories is a vivid example of the double vision described by Frye, and it becomes Piotte's fundamental way of perceiving the events of her own life.

Piotte justifies this creative interpretation of scripture not only through the authority of her experience, but also through an appeal to the need to liberate God from human images and words about God. Once again conjuring an image of both an immanent and a transcendent God, and drawing an analogy between herself and language, Piotte perceives her spiritual journey as the liberation of both God and herself: "Toutes ces vieilles images de Dieu retiennent Dieu prisonnier. Mon chemin est l'histoire de la libération de Dieu en moi. Je ne serai jamais une femme libre tant que Dieu, en moi, ne sera pas libre" (121). Whereas Snowber asserts the importance of reclaiming feminine imagery for God because of its impact on women's self-perception and identity, Piotte takes the more radical step of
claiming that it is God who must be freed through the use of new images and metaphors for the divine.

Corps a corps avec soi et avec Dieu is explicitly addressed to readers who might also wish to be “born again” (although Piotte does not use this phrase in a narrow evangelical sense, but rather as her own way of understanding a biblical imperative), in order to provide them with encouragement on their own journeys: “Je souhaite qu’il donne le goût de prendre la route et soit pour tous ceux qui s’engagent sur le chemin de Dieu, une petite lumière au cœur des découragements et des tâtonnements” (14). Piotte herself consciously uses the metaphor of a map or plan to describe her text. At times, she conflates the process of writing with the process of spiritual growth, so that it seems that the former actually engenders the latter: without the act of writing, there would be no spiritual progress. Paradoxically, Piotte sees her writing as both inscribed within a story that has already been told and as taking place outside of any fixed certainties, narrative or otherwise:

Je sais aujourd’hui que ce que j’écris et ce qui m’arrive a été préparé de longue date. Le fil tenu reliant différents temps de mon histoire, est longue préparation et longue maturation. Il commence à émerger de la matière. Je ne peux qu’acquiescer et m’incliner à ce qui advient. J’écris ce livre qui me crée. Je ne sais trop qui enfante qui. Je ne sais l’avenir de ce livre, ni le mien. (43-44)

The image of giving birth to her book links Piotte’s spiritual autobiography not only with the narratives of motherhood by Snowber and Quiviger, but also with the literary history of the Quiet Revolution in Québec. At other times Piotte describes writing as a way of bearing witness (for others) to the spiritual experiences that she is having (87). In some cases writing even seems to be an act with the potential to create the future; she recounts the way in which the ending of her first book actually mapped out or foretold the course of her spiritual journey in the subsequent years (77).

Perhaps most significantly, Piotte at times describes her text as a body — her body. During a time of spiritual doubt, she writes: “Le doute m’assaille. Je regarde ce manuscrit et il m’apparaît vide. Un texte sans âme. Un corps sans souffle. Je me sens d’ailleurs en ce

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9 For more on “the childbirth metaphor and the Quiet Revolution” in Québec, see literary critic Valerie Raoul’s Distinctly Narcissistic (1993): 167-94.
momeht-ci comme ce manuscrit: formée, informée, consciente et vide” (92). In spite of her doubts, however, Piotte’s description of her text as an embodied presence becomes a powerful method of locating her authority to write of spiritual matters in the concrete reality of her personal experience. If spiritual truth is expressed in the body, and if Piotte's text is the embodiment of her experience, then by implication the reader is invited to discover in Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu the spiritual truths that Piotte has found to be written on her own body. The extended metaphors of the spiritual life as embodied and of the spiritual life as a journey are mapped onto the text, which is itself portrayed as an embodied journey. The reader, then, enters in an intimate way into the very fabric of Piotte's experience, thus further breaking down the walls between self and other which Piotte is so intent on destroying. Her theological hermeneutic expresses itself in a literary form and in metaphors that seek to recreate or replicate the very spiritual truths that she feels she has discovered in her life. Piotte’s spiritual autobiography, like Snowber’s, becomes a celebration of embodiment, of the incarnation of the Christian story in the life story of an individual woman: “Pour la première fois de ma vie, l'Histoire de Dieu et Son Incarnation me concernent intimement, dans ma chair, dans mon cœur, dans mon corps, dans mon cerveau. C'est la meilleure nouvelle que je pourrais annoncer. C'est la Bonne Nouvelle, sortie de l'histoire et des livres pour venir me visiter” (91). The “Bonne Nouvelle” of Piotte’s text is that through her writing, she has resolved the tension between embodiment and spirituality by coming to experience the sacred story of Christianity written on her own body.

Conclusion

In spite of their many common elements, the four spiritual autobiographies examined in this chapter present very different literary, theological, and ethical visions to their readers. At the level of their dialectical negotiations between embodiment and spirituality, between inside and outside, they offer different solutions to the tensions that they experience in their lives. Brisson is unequivocal in her judgement that the restrictive religious life of the cloister is both imprisoning and disembodied, cut off from the real worlds of nature, of social and political engagements, of human sexuality, and of mystical experience. Paradoxically, for Brisson the “talking cure” of psychoanalysis becomes a way of reconnecting with her body
and with the natural world, and leaving the convent becomes her way of re-integrating her personal story into the history and society of Québec. Nevertheless, she refuses easy dichotomies between inside and outside, recognizing that abdication of individual freedom is as much a psychological as it is an institutional issue. Quiviger gives flesh to the Catholic church’s metaphors, using her experience as a mother and her training in psychoanalysis to critique the image of the “mother church” as one that promotes a regressive and infantile spirituality. While grounding her autobiographical reflections firmly in her embodied experience and portraying the human anguish and loneliness of both Jesus and Mary, Quiviger also yearns much more strongly than Brisson does for a transcendent and unattainable God. Although she honours the sacred within her and in everyday life, God remains a distant and unreachable “Father,” whose very absence calls Christians on to spiritual maturity. Thus, Quiviger’s metaphors retain more tension and less resolution than those of Brisson.

Snowber also uses her experience as a mother to explore the embodiment of Christian religious imagery, but in her case she uses the figure of the mother and of the womb as metaphors for God, rather than the church. Although feminine imagery for God has a long and subversive history in Christian mysticism, Snowber also combines her experience as a dancer to imagine the womb as a dance studio, a place of creativity and freedom unlike the regressive “re-ventrage” critiqued by Quiviger. Rather than striving to connect with a transcendent and unattainable God, Snowber’s hermeneutic allows her to meet the divine in the “interruptions of splendour” in her life: her children, her art, and the beauty of the natural world. Whereas Brisson leaves the convent behind because it is too restrictive, Snowber strives to embrace the demands of family life as her own “monastery” or “desert.” Piotte lives out embodied spirituality in the most painful and radical way of all four authors in this chapter. Her spiritual autobiography is the story of how she learns to live within the narratives of Christianity – how these words become flesh, become real in her life – and of how she learns to read her own mutilated and ailing body in the light of the Christian and Hebrew scriptures. Piotte’s spiritual journey is thus both deeply embodied and highly spiritual. As with Brisson, the dichotomies between inside and outside ultimately break down for Piotte, as she discovers that the God she has been seeking has always been within.
At the level of narrative forms or voices, these four writers display a much greater awareness of the writing process than those discussed in Chapter Three. Moreover, the modes of discourse that they employ lead them to understand writing as process, and as part of the spiritual life itself. This awareness leads not only to more freedom of experimentation with literary form, but also to a sense that the text creates their lives as much as they themselves are writing the text. Both Snowber and Quiviger use the metaphor of giving birth to their books. Brisson and Piotte both use the second part of their texts to analyse and reflect on the “selves” inscribed in the first part. Thus, through the methods of psychoanalysis, Brisson’s account of her years in the convent metaphorically become a textual self whose experience she interprets. Similarly, Piotte’s text becomes her body, and her body the text of her life.

Brisson describes her book as “[u]ne volonté bien ferme d’être moi, dans un contexte historique déterminé” (118), thus implying that for her the writing process, has been a way of finally reclaiming her personal identity from its dissolution in the cloister and reinserting herself into Québec society. Quiviger describes her book as a “descent aux enfers” (19) which is both self-discovery and an attempt to purify her faith and to know God. Like Leddy’s memoir, Quiviger’s spiritual autobiography ends with a poem, in this case addressed to God. Quiviger’s text ends with the paradoxical assertion that the “descente aux enfers” leads to a radical solitude that yet partakes of the sacred: “L’homme ne plonge jamais qu’en lui-même. Mais peut-être est-il plus qu’il ne croit être” (140). Snowber describes how the process of writing her book – an experience that grew out of enforced solitude and bed-rest – led to “a new way of seeing, a new way of being, and a grateful, grace-filled awareness of the present” (xiii). Her last chapter draws a parallel between giving birth and the need to “let go” of her writing so that it can rejoin her readers in the world. Just as the writing has taught her, she must set it free to teach others. Finally, Piotte uses not only the metaphor of the body to describe her writing, but also the metaphor of the journey. Her writing leads her in unexpected directions, not only rhetorically but also in her life. Thus, her first book leads to the spiritual quest of the second, while that path itself issues into a new understanding of compassion and a commitment to living it out at Merhila, a home for disabled children and their families. All of the authors in this chapter, then, model the process of writing spiritual autobiography as a journey of self-discovery and self-interpretation that anyone can follow.
All four of these authors resolve spiritual autobiography's central conflict between self and selflessness in different ways by all four of these authors. Brisson plays with the imagery of birth and death, of unnaming and renaming, that surrounds the vows of religious life. Just as she dies to the world to become a nun, her religious self (Sœur Thécla) must die in order for Brisson to be reborn in the world. Nevertheless, subsequently she adopts a fierce sense of identity and independence as she involves herself in work, relationships, and politics. The spiritual dimension of her life remains present, but buried: "Sous les pavés, la plage!" Quiviger, in a somewhat different fashion, sees individual identity as an important dimension of the radical solitude of a mature spiritual life. She rejects the illusory fusion between mother and child, or between lovers, in favor of Jesus's solitary sojourns in the desert, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross. Snowber, frustrated by the experience of losing her self in the demands of motherhood, learns to embrace her path as a variant on monastic life. Nevertheless, by using her own experience as mother to develop a theology of the feminine aspects of God, she achieves a balance between self-naughting and self-affirmation or self-discovery. Piotte attempts to shed her false selves or false identities throughout her narrative, and her spiritual journey culminates in an experience of being loved and cherished by God just as she is. Far from resulting in selfishness, this experience of divine love leads to a desire to live a life of service to others insofar as she is able.

In spite of the intimacy with the readers established by each of these books, they all have at the core of them a radical solitude and a pervading sense of loneliness. In the convent Brisson remains a figure set apart from the rest of the community, and even her descriptions of her work, political activities, and social life back in Montréal seem rather detached from other people. Quiviger portrays the authentic spiritual life as one of fundamental solitude. Snowber, in spite of the demands of family life, describes herself as desperately lonely in the "desert" of the suburbs. Finally, Piotte presents her friend Marie-Hélène as her only true companion, in spite of her dream of community life at Merhila that is enthusiastically embraced at the end of her book. As we have seen in the introduction to this chapter, some critics see loneliness as a quality inherent to many women's diaries. Writing primarily to oneself or to God, no matter how many interlocutors are invoked, does not create the sense of community and public activity of the books in Chapter Three, whose authors seem always to be doing something, and are surrounded by other people. The invitation
contained in these four books is not to join a community of activists, but to attend to one’s own inner life, and to follow the meandering paths of the spirit wherever they may lead. With this invitation, these books rejoin the ones that I will discuss in the following chapter, in which the solitary quest is recounted on a grander scale, with all the colourful details of fiction and the passion of mystical discourse.
Chapter Five
Questing Visions, Mystical Voices

Introduction and Background

The third group of texts that I will examine includes two writers who stand in a very different relationship to Christianity, and to Canadian society, than the two preceding groups of authors. Paradoxically, although Jovette Marchessault and Sharon Butala are the most famous and the most “literary” of the writers in this study (their work has come to the attention of literary critics, has received literary awards, and has been included in reference works to Canadian literature), both women portray themselves in their spiritual autobiographies as solitary artists and seekers. Since publishing the first volume of her autobiographical/fictional trilogy, Comme une enfant de la terre (1975), which was awarded the Prix France-Québec in 1976, Marchessault has gained fame as both a playwright and a visual artist in English Canada as well as in Québec. Butala had already established a reputation as a novelist and short-story writer when her first work of spiritual autobiography, The Perfection of the Morning (1994), won the Governor General’s Award for non-fiction in 1994. Nevertheless, both women choose to position themselves and their texts somewhat on the fringes of Canadian society and culture. They portray themselves in their narratives as solitary seekers who are both insiders and outsiders with respect to the worlds in which they live. This self-positioning liberates them to experiment with spiritual experiences and narrative forms.

Both Marchessault and Butala see themselves as explorers of vast inner and outer landscapes and of wide open spaces; there is a sense in their narratives of great spiritual as well as literary freedom. They draw attention to the self-consciously constructed nature of their autobiographical texts, and seek out genres that will allow them to be both voices of social critique and visionaries of the natural and spiritual worlds. Although the sacred dimension of life figures importantly in the works of Butala and Marchessault, both women write from a stance that is explicitly outside of any single, established religious tradition. Indeed, both reject and criticize the mainstream Christian heritage that is part of their familial and cultural inheritance and seek elsewhere for the source of the sacred in their lives. The
sense of being alienated from their spiritual roots leads both of them to embark on a search for an authentic spirituality. The motif of the quest (which is also, in both cases, a homecoming) thus figures prominently in these books. Both authors find the source of the sacred in a relationship with the natural world, in aboriginal spiritual traditions, in the archetypal feminine, in dreams and mystical experiences, and in the creative practices of art and writing.

Jovette Marchessault’s *Comme une enfant de la terre* (1975) and *La Mère des herbes* (1980) are the first two volumes of an autobiographical/fictional trilogy that challenges the repressive elements of Québec Catholicism and English colonial oppression, and offers an alternative feminist and nature-oriented spiritual vision. These two books explore the author/protagonist’s sense of the sacred in the context of her childhood and young adulthood in Québec, as well as through the lives of her parents and, more importantly, her grandmother, who is an important spiritual teacher and mentor. While there are undeniably fictional elements in the first two volumes of Marchessault’s trilogy, by reading *Comme une enfant de la terre* and *La Mère des herbes* as spiritual autobiographies, I wish to show that some of the perplexing elements of these two works are in fact efforts to convey a cosmic perspective on human life, and to rewrite the story of religion in Québec to include aboriginal and women’s visions and voices. In *The Perfection of the Morning* (1994), Sharon Butala writes of her mystical experiences in a remote Saskatchewan landscape. As a novelist Butala, like Marchessault, demonstrates her awareness of the literary artifice that undergirds even a work of autobiography or non-fiction, yet she affirms that the truths that can be told in fiction may be more important than stark facts. As with Marchessault’s two volumes of her spiritual life-narrative, Butala’s second major autobiographical publication covers (literally) the same ground, from a slightly different perspective. In *Wild Stone Heart* (2000), she takes

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1 I have chosen to discuss only the first two volumes of Marchessault’s trilogy under the rubric of spiritual autobiography. To begin with, the autobiographical dimension of the novels is particularly evident in these first two books, which deal with similar material in slightly different literary forms. In both works, the author’s name is explicitly mentioned (in *Comme une enfant de la terre* she writes about her grandfather, John Marchessault, and in *La Mère des herbes* the protagonist refers to herself as “Jovette Marchessault” on the last page of the book), while in the third the protagonist is referred to as “Jeanne.” Many of the events of these two books correspond to verifiable details from Marchessault’s own life, thus justifying the label of autobiography. *Des cailloux blancs pour les forêts obscures* is a more overtly fictional work, and explores subjects and events that are much further removed from the earlier books.
her spiritual vision of the land around her to a different level, by recounting her growing conviction that the field where she walks is haunted by the spirits of its aboriginal past.

The outward, social focus of the authors in Chapter Three, and the inward, embodied focus of the writers in Chapter Four, give way in this chapter to a focus that is alternately universal or cosmic, and social or historical in its span. Thus, the dialectical negotiations in these four spiritual autobiographies are perhaps the most complex and difficult to pin down of all those examined in this study. I will describe the fundamental tension in the texts as that between myth (taken to include, in a broad sense, nature mysticism, poetry, liturgy, and fiction) and history (taken to include linear narrative and non-fiction or scientific modes of writing and thought). The authors' hermeneutical lenses are trained alternately on nature and on history, on mysticism and on science, on Christianity and on indigenous spirituality, on nature spirituality and on consumer materialism, as both Marchessault and Butala struggle to resolve tensions between their desire to belong to the natural world that is the site of their cosmic and mystical visions, and their recognition that they are part of historical and cultural narratives that deny and even destroy the sources of supernatural experience. The guiding metaphors of both authors' texts attempt to resolve this struggle by establishing creative tensions in their writing between movement (or quest) and homecoming, between masculine and feminine, between nature and art, between possession and dispossession. In Comme une enfant de la terre, Marchessault's bus trip from Mexico to Québec is also a journey back in time to retell the history of her people (both her aboriginal grandparents and the people of Québec). La Mère des herbes, however, has a more cyclical and centrifugal metaphor, with its emphasis on the seasons of the cosmic grandmother, and the importance of Marchessault’s childhood home. In The Perfection of the Morning, Nature is also portrayed as an archetypal feminine presence, yet Butala’s restless quest does not allow for the same sense of homecoming that is found in Marchessault’s second book. However, Wild Stone Heart adopts the potentially more sinister image of the haunted house (and haunted landscape), which paradoxically allows Butala to find a deeper sense of peace. One of the central messages of all four texts is that the creative powers of art and of the imagination can help breathe spirituality back into lives that have been deadened by illness, by oppressive social forces, or by depression.
Marchessault's and Butala's efforts to reconcile nature, history, and spirituality result in some unique combinations of narrative forms. *Comme une enfant de la terre* is a vibrant and kaleidoscopic work of literature that combines the movement of the quest narrative with modes of discourse as varied as lamentation, mystical-prophetic discourse, parody, and utopian fiction. *La Mère des herbes*, on the other hand, follows the cycles of the seasons and of the Catholic liturgical calendar, embedding subversive women's stories within a Catholic girlhood narrative. Both of Marchessault's spiritual autobiographies participate in postcolonial and feminist literature's project of challenging authoritative colonial and patriarchal narratives. Through a collage of diverse textual voices, she provides an ecstatic, visionary alternative to the traditions that have shaped her experience. Yet her texts remain linked to the systems that she challenges through both imagery and narrative form. Sharon Butala's choice of narrative forms places her texts in a less contestatory position in relation to literary and religious traditions. The genre of nature writing offers a literary form that is already a hybrid between spiritual, autobiographical, and scientific discourses, while the quest narrative is a classic vehicle for the spiritual journey. However, neither of these narrative forms provides an adequate fit for Butala's mystical experiences in *The Perfection of the Morning*, leaving her spiritual questions unresolved. In *Wild Stone Heart*, Butala introduces the ghost story or the fantastic mode into her writing, allowing her to further question the empirical world-view that is dismissive of supernatural experience. With both of her forays into the genre of spiritual autobiography, Butala chooses a combination of narrative forms that allows her to balance her experiences in the natural world with her growing awareness of the spiritual realities that permeate that context.

The term "mysticism" requires some elucidation here, because I have referred in the title of this chapter to both Butala and Marchessault as "mystical voices." Mysticism is a term that is difficult to define and that has been the source of much debate in theological and psychological circles (Ruffing 1). The popular conception of mysticism as transcendent and otherworldly experience belies the historical and cultural contexts of mystics themselves, as well as the social orientation of much mystical discourse. Indeed, it may make more sense to define many mystical texts as a "mystical-prophetic" mode of writing. In *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (1995), philosopher Grace M. Jantzen traces the contested history of the social construction of the term mysticism, showing that the prevailing definitions of the
concept have tended either to reinforce or to negate women's visionary authority. She argues that although mystics are often portrayed as solitary figures whose union with the divine is private, many of them (particularly women) have also been strong critics of religious and social institutions. Thus, at the heart of the phenomenon of mysticism lies one of the tensions that is central to the genre of spiritual autobiography as well: although the common understanding of the phenomenon "emphasizes the private, or at least incommunicable, quality of the experience . . . [m]ystics have, of course written quite openly and often abundantly about their experiences" (Dupré 246). Furthermore, these writings are situated in a particular religious, social, and historical context, and are often directed toward a specific community, calling it to social transformation. These brief observations on the figure of the mystic in religious history may help to explain the paradoxical position that both Marchessault and Butala perceive themselves as occupying. If one considers them as mystic-prophets, writing of solitary experiences yet also inserting their voices powerfully into their national communities as prophets and social critics, then it is perhaps easier to understand their portrayal of themselves as being on the fringes of Canadian society, even while their works have become fairly central to Canadian literature.

Furthermore, the preference of Butala and Marchessault for more symbolic forms of writing (Marchessault draws on archetypes from various spiritual traditions, while Butala refers often to the symbols of her dreams), can also be understood in relation to mystical discourse. In her introduction to Mysticism and Social Transformation (2001), editor Janet K. Ruffing writes:

Mystical texts emerge from the matrix of an encounter between the divine and the human. The profundity of this encounter often results in incredibly nuanced, rich, and paradoxical uses of language — sometimes ornately allegorical, sometimes sparse and demanding, sometimes full of sensual and erotic metaphors, and often extravagant and yet elusive. Frequently, the internal structure of these mystical texts defies explication or systematic ordering. (15)

All four of the texts analysed in this chapter engage in "nuanced, rich, and paradoxical uses of language," so much so that at times it is difficult to keep track of the many layers of dialectical negotiations in which they are engaged. Furthermore, all of them participate in a mystical understanding of time and of experience that calls into question the notion of linear,
chronological narrative; thus, both Butala and Marchessault adopt for their texts "internal structure[s]" that "[defy] explication or systematic ordering." Nevertheless, certain patterns and tensions do emerge from their inscription of their mystical discourse within the literary forms of their cultural and religious heritages, as we shall see.

The alternately celebratory and critical facets of mystical discourse that are present in the writings of both Marchessault and Butala have a parallel in utopian fiction as well, another genre that is evoked by both authors to different degrees. The utopian dimension of Marchessault's drama La Saga des pouilles mouillées (1981) has already been examined by literary scholar Bénédicte Mauguière, who draws a connection between the play and La Mère des herbes, "qui se voulait annonciateur d'une ère nouvelle, exorcisme qui s'inscrivait dans le désir de renouer avec une tradition mythique" (183). Mauguière describes the quest motif in La Saga des pouilles mouillées as a "voyage initiatique en quête d'une utopie féminine" (184), a phrase that also reflects the journey metaphor in Comme une enfant de la terre and the recovery of women's stories in La Mère des herbes. In Feminist Utopias (1989), literary critic Frances Bartkowski defines the utopian dimension of literature as that in which "longing and desire, anger and despair, are reshaped by hope" (10), and points to the future orientation of utopian fiction in which "a narrative sets the pattern of these desires and transformations as if a potential future had erupted into the reader's present" (10). Furthermore, utopian fiction, like spiritual autobiography, is strongly reader-oriented: "The utopian voice is always tendentious; it has designs on the reader. Often its didactic points are made in the form of long monologues and polemics and are just those aspects by which literary critics have often deemed it a marginal kind of fiction" (Bartkowski 9). In The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism (1994), literary critic M. Keith Booker argues that "dystopian and utopian visions" are not "fundamentally opposed," but rather are "very much part of the same project" (15). Thus, Butala and Marchessault's social or intellectual critiques and their visions of a different order, or a different way of being in the world, are part of the same utopian impulse. Although neither text is strictly a work of utopian fiction, once again we see that spiritual autobiographers are able to borrow from different literary genres without losing the sacred vision that animates their texts as a whole.
One of the qualities of both Marchessault’s and Butala’s spiritual autobiographies that may contribute to their comparatively wide popular appeal is the contestatory stance that both adopt in relation to established religion. Unlike the authors examined in the previous two chapters, who either critique or celebrate Christianity from a place within the tradition (Brisson is the one possible exception here), Butala and Marchessault explicitly reject Christianity, yet throw themselves enthusiastically into the spiritual quest. Such an attitude gives their literary creations a potentially broad appeal among the growing numbers of Canadians who portray themselves as having “private religious sentiment not tied to church membership or affiliation” (Hewitt, 60). Furthermore, although Marchessault’s books are written in French and are addressed to a specifically Québec audience, her works were both translated into English during the 1980s (Comme une enfant de la terre as Like a Child of the Earth in 1988, and La Mère des herbes as Mother of the Grass in 1989). None of the other French texts in this study has, to my knowledge, been translated into English. Also, the English translation of Comme une enfant de la terre leaves out “entire sentences from the French text that refer to the political history of New France and Quebec” (Vautier 110), thus mitigating the book’s criticisms of colonialism and its espousal of a unique form of Québec nationalism, based in the sacred geography of the land itself and in the union of the Québec and aboriginal peoples. Butala, on the other hand, as an outsider to the rural landscapes and communities she describes, takes care to situate her narratives for the non-Saskatchewan reader, and often portrays herself as an interpreter of the landscape for others. In both cases, the implied audiences have both an anonymity and a nebulousness that adds to the archetypal dimensions of the books.

Jovette Marchessault: Comme une enfant de la terre (1975)

Jovette Marchessault’s confusingly titled Comme une enfant de la terre/I. Le crachat solaire (1975) is actually the first volume (that is, I. Le crachat solaire) in a trilogy of what are often referred to as “autobiographical novels” (e.g., Andersen 29, Kellett 209, Benson and Toye, and Sage 420), originally to be grouped under the title Comme une enfant de la terre. However, the second and third volumes of this trilogy were only ever published under their individual titles, that is, as La Mère des herbes (1980) and Des cailloux blancs pour les
forêts obscures (1987), and the first volume has come to be known by the series title, Comme une enfant de la terre. It is by this title that I will refer to it from now on. However, it is important to note the cosmic/earthly split that is signified by Marchessault’s original title; the image of the “crachat solaire” refers to her soul’s plummet to earth to take on physical form, and so the emphasis of the original title is an image that encapsulates the dual nature of humanity as inherently both earthly and cosmic. This refusal to abandon either side of the cosmic/earthly polarity is one of the qualities that marks the use of figurative language in this first volume of Marchessault’s spiritual autobiography, which constantly strives to remind its readers of their spiritual heritage.

Marchessault is a Métis writer from Montréal, who is a visual artist as well as a published playwright and novelist, and also the only lesbian among the spiritual autobiographers analysed in this study (apart from some of the contributors to the anthology of Jewish women’s writing examined in the next chapter). Comme une enfant de la terre was Marchessault’s first literary publication. The generic status of her trilogy is open to question. She herself (or her publisher) refers to the first and third books on their title pages as “romans,” leaving La Mère des herbes without a generic label. However, many literary critics, such as Marguerite Andersen, Kathleen L. Kellett, and Gloria Feman Orenstein, emphasize that they are autobiographical novels. In the preface to La Mère des herbes, Gloria Orenstein argues that Marchessault’s contribution to feminist writing is her emphasis on the spiritual dimension of the autobiographical novel: “La contribution exceptionnelle de Jovette Marchessault à l’écriture féminine de notre époque est d’avoir élargi les dimensions du roman autobiographique en y introduisant celle du mythe et de l’expérience visionnaire” (11). From this statement, it is only a short leap to classify Marchessault’s work as spiritual autobiography, given that she includes autobiographical elements in the book, and that theorists of autobiography have drawn our attention to the fictional elements in all autobiographical writing. Furthermore, to read Marchessault’s book as a spiritual autobiography helps to make sense of some of its hybrid forms, and of some of the tensions in the text itself.

Comme une enfant de la terre consists of a series of twelve chapters that are referred to in French as “chants.” While the word “chant” can be translated into English as “song” (and, indeed, has been so rendered by the English translators of both books), it may be more
appropriate in this context to equate it with "hymn," "chant" (as in "chant Grégorien"), or even "canto" (with allusions to poetry and especially Dante’s *Divine Comedy*). All of these translations are preferable to the word "song," as they convey a more precise sense of the ritualistic quality of Marchessault’s prose. Indeed, early in the narrative she herself repeatedly positions her work in the biblical genre of lamentation, a specific form of Hebrew poetry: "À la prière je préfère la lamentation qui porte des noms divers" (18). “Je me lamente mais ne garde pas la maîtrise sur les incantations de ma bouche” (19). “Cette lamentation me pénètre le cœur d’une manière prodigieuse” (22). I will use the word “chant” to refer to each of the twelve chapters, for I believe it captures the hypnotic and incantatory nature of Marchessault’s writing. It is virtually impossible to trace a linear narrative through the twelve chants, although the protagonist begins in Mexico, travels across the Americas by bus, and returns home to Montréal, where she then recounts the life of her grandmother up to the time of her own birth. Each chant takes a central theme or image and then elaborates on it through imagery, parable, storytelling, ecstatic visions, and even parody, rather like a jazz musician improvising on a melody. The movement of the narrative is not so much linear as it is the movement of a pendulum swinging between opposites, moving back and forth between departure and homecoming, between hope and despair, between destruction and creation, between the past and the future. As we shall see, this cyclical or spiral movement is as central to Marchessault’s cosmological vision as it is to the literary structure of her book.

In many ways this structure parallels the form of the Hebrew communal lament, “a composition whose theme indicates that it was composed to be used by or on behalf of a community to express sorrow and grief over some calamity, physical or cultural, and to appeal to God for deliverance” (Ferris 1). *Comme une enfant de la terre* certainly partakes of this sense of a communal lament for a lost indigenous past, and for a lost Québec spirit crushed under English colonialism and French Catholicism. To read Marchessault’s text as a lament is to confront the scathing anger and inconsolable grief that are voiced alongside the more utopian and hopeful spiritual visions. Tod Linafelt’s description of the biblical book of Lamentations could almost apply to *Comme une enfant de la terre* as well: “This short biblical book affronts the reader with a barrage of harsh and violent images . . . the reader is not so much engaged by the book of Lamentations as assaulted by it” (2). Linafelt also discusses how biblical commentators have tended to “survive” the book of Lamentations by
glossing over its anguish and rage, and focusing instead on the shreds of hope contained within it. However, he argues that such a reading strategy “devalues” Lamentations by avoiding its “challenges [to] the reader’s theology or notions of how religious language should properly sound” (2). Given Marchessault’s determination to position her spiritual autobiography as a lament, I would like to argue that a similar imperative applies to the reader of her book. Although it is tempting to focus on the more positive imagery of her text, in order to do justice to her lament we need to acknowledge it rather than shrinking from it.

The guiding metaphor of Comme une enfant de la terre is the motif of the journey, which is movement through both time and space. Movement has many meanings in Marchessault’s text. The notion of travel is related to the idea of a spiritual quest, and this connection is made explicit throughout the book. In a typical passage, Marchessault lists one after another the archetypal goals of the spiritual quest in various traditions: “[J]e cherche un amour, une amitié, un mariage, un livre, un vase sacré, une épée à deux tranchants, le cône d’un vieux volcan, le troisième œil de Shiva qui représente le sens de l’éternité sur le front des innocents” (106-107). She thus alludes in rapid succession to both positive and negative images: romantic love, friendship, and marriage; a holy book or scripture; the legend of the Holy Grail; the two-edged sword that refers to both the word of God and the ideals of chivalry and justice; the volcano that is associated with passion, creativity, and destruction; and the Hindu God of Destruction. The goal of travel is both a physical homecoming – “Qu’il me soit donné après tant d’errance d’aborder à une table ronde où ma mère mettra la nappe, le couteau et le pain des anges” (134) – and a spiritual one: “Je suis en route pour une destination divine” (65). Throughout her deployment of these images, Marchessault’s narrative rejoins that of the spiritual quest that leads to a definite goal.

However, movement in Comme une enfant de la terre is also a sacred act in and of itself, for twice in the Fourth Chant, Marchessault repeats the formula that her travels are a form of prayer: “Ce voyage est [un] pur mouvement de prière dans l’action de l’éternité” (70, 74). Yet Marchessault also portrays herself as deeply in love with the ephemeral inhabitants of time: “Par penchant naturel, j’aime tout ce qui est éphémère: ma grand-mère, ma mère, mon père, mes chats, l’odeur des ruches, les livres, l’ombre d’une forêt sur la neige; marcher en raquette, la nuit, sur la rivière Ouareau gelée . . .” (17). As with all of the contrasting images in Comme une enfant de la terre, there is a deep theology at work here:
her continual insistence on both eternity and time is an affirmation of her own nature that is both earthly and spiritual, and proposes a vision of human life that refuses to neglect either of the two dimensions. Furthermore, travel is portrayed as an integral part of Marchessault’s identity, inherited from her grandmother’s “cellules nomades” (262) and the nomadic traditions of her other ancestors (43). Marchessault’s spiritual vision, then, is one that holds in tension the images of quest and of homecoming, of time and of eternity. Although the narrator’s travels seem to have their origin in a quest for her spiritual roots, she discovers that nomadism itself is her tradition; that is to say, although initially she seems to have a goal to her spiritual quest, movement becomes an end in itself, thus subverting the genre of the quest narrative. Marchessault’s dialectical negotiations between homecoming and quest result in a text that strives to remind her readers of their cosmic roots; to call on them to remember that although they may be nomads in a world of oppression and suffering, their true home and birthplace is among the stars.

Furthermore, just as we have seen in many of the other spiritual autobiographies in this study, Marchessault’s guiding metaphor and her narrative form bear a close resemblance to one another. Thus, she portrays the act of writing as itself a form of movement, as a path that the reader can follow in order to gain access to the incommunicable: “Comment exprimer l’ineffable? Les mots m’apparaissent comme des escaliers en spirales qui aboutissent à une porte. Qui s’ouvre! . . . Et si je veux prendre la parole, il ne me reste qu’une chose à faire: me mettre en route et m’expliquer avec l’univers” (105-106). The notion of “s’expliquer avec l’univers” once again captures the determination of spiritual autobiography to invite the reader into a spiritual experience outside the realm of the text itself, as well as the mystic’s desire for union with the “real.” Marchessault’s prose itself joins in this invitation by capturing this sense of breathless movement, by which the reader is swept along through a text that is part lamentation, part utopian vision, part liturgy, part prayer, part parody, and part chant. Marchessault’s is probably the most relentlessly hybrid of the texts we have examined so far, and indeed the notion of hybridity is not only part of her textual practice but part of her self-definition as well.

Textual hybridity, and the continual blurring of boundaries between modes of discourse, has important ramifications in Marchessault’s symbolic universe, where there is a perpetual urge to break free of rigid structures, both physical and mental. This desire echoes
the struggles of the writers examined in both Chapter Three and Chapter Four, but is portrayed as even more radical and chaotic:

Je dois quitter mes maisons, mes terminus, mes gares, mes lits de pierres, de briques, de bois et cette autre maison plus ancienne, à cloisonnement cellulaire. Une maison glorieuse, certes, que je transporte partout avec moi comme les escargots. Tant pis si pour diriger ma course je fais voler en éclats mes structures, les glacières où je conserve mes petites idées sur de la glace à côté de mes opinions, de mes informations les plus récentes. (106)

For Marchessault, to break free of structures and restraints is a gesture of opening that can free not only the work of art, but also the human soul. Thus, once again we see that in spiritual autobiography, literary strategies have significant theological implications. Art can open the door to the mysteries of the universe, as when Marchessault and her grandmother draw colourful chickens together: “La porte des Mystères était en train de s’entrebâiller” (253). Similarly, art can open the closed spaces inside of people, as do the performances of Marchessault’s friends for the people of Québec: “[V]os voix étaient comme une clé divine qui ouvraient nos coffres, nos bahuts, nos cercueils de pin, de noyer, de merisier, où les vents de la folie et de l’espoir gisaient entre nos piles de linge d’hiver, nos ossements en forme d’ostensori, et notre abdication en forme de pain d’autel” (168). Movement can lead people out of the “cocon de l’indifférence,” or the “cocon des habitudes” (312), that is, the narrow spheres of their social and religious institutions (309-312). Whereas the authors examined in Chapter Three call for the dismantling of unjust structures in order to bring about a more egalitarian society, and the authors in Chapter Four try to free themselves from structures and boundaries that limit their spiritual potential as individuals, Marchessault’s mystical and visionary project partakes of both individual and social liberation. However, it is a call for liberation that celebrates freedom and creativity for their own sakes, and not as part of any wider narrative of religious commitment.

Certainly, Marchessault’s relationship to religious tradition is a complex one. On the one hand, she is highly critical of the imposition of Christianity by the colonizers of the Americas, and of its deadening effects on the spirit of the people of Québec. Some of her most ironic and angry prose is directed at this target, as in the following passage describing the activities of the conquistadores: “Entre-temps, tout n’est que pillage, vols, rapts, viols,
tortures, menaces et coups, et baptêmes” (79). She is highly critical of the cooperation between institutional religion and colonialism, which she refers to as “les rites immondes d’un colonialisme que le vampire clérical voulait à tout prix spiritualiser” (155). On the other hand, certain passages in her text reveal an affinity with the mystical aspects of Christianity and other religions. Her ecstatic prose often draws on the archetypal images of all spiritual and philosophical traditions, piling them one on top of the other without any kind of hierarchy or discrimination: “L’univers a autant de centres qu’il contient d’êtres vivants, dit-on” (123). Marchessault portrays herself, like her text, as a postmodern hybrid “rejeton” who lays claim to absolutely everything, thus not only reclaiming what was stolen by the colonizers, but laying claim to their traditions as well. She creates a strong poetic argument for a religious pluralism rooted in native spiritual traditions that are both earth-based and celestial. The predominant image Marchessault uses to describe the source of spirituality is that of the cosmic mother, the Great She-Bear: “Voyez-la la Grande-Oursonne! Elle est vaste comme le ciel . . . Voyez comme elle est blanche la Grande-Oursonne: blanche comme le lait, le sel, la neige, le mercure, le diamant, la résurrection et la vie” (337). In Marchessault’s eclectic text beliefs are less important than contemplation, prayer, and artistic creation: “Ne sais plus si je crois au bien, au mal; à mon bien, à mon mal . . . Je ne sais même plus si je crois à l’union permanente avec le Grand-Esprit . . . Tout ce que je sais c’est que je dois maintenir tout mon être dans la contemplation vivante” (235). This tendency to value mystical experience above theological or ethical reasoning is an emphasis that runs throughout both of Marchessault’s books, and situates her writing in the realm of mystical discourse. Furthermore, its rhythmic, entrancing prose also has the effect of maintaining the reader in a state of “contemplation vivante,” thus once more challenging spiritual autobiography’s status as purely textual.

Marchessault’s relationship to Canadian society is also a complex one. At the beginning of Comme une enfant de la terre it is not Canada that she describes, but “l’Amérique,” a geographical space that embraces Mexico and Canada as well as the United States, and does not recognize the political boundaries of nation: “Les Rocheuses remontent les États-Unis jusqu’au Canada, jusqu’au Nord du Nord, enchaînées, toutes à leurs mystères” (47). Marchessault contrasts this “géographie sacrée de la terre amérindienne” (347-348) with the social construction of “l’Amérique,” a society that worships consumerism and
progress, and is governed by “les gnomes hystériques” (16). The cities of “l’Amérique” are portrayed as places of conformity, stalked by the Angel of Death, and lacking in spirituality, in contrast with the beauty of the land itself:

Les villes de l’Amérique sont des monuments aux morts: elles sont le réceptacle des morts violentes, ignominieuses, dégradantes. N’y cherchez pas le Jardin des Hespérides, Le Paradis de Dante, la Toison d’or ou le Graal ou le Royaume d’Ophir! N’y cherchez rien. Toute la nuit elles sont éclairées afin que nous puissions voir L’Ange de la Mort, celui qui est couvert d’yeux et d’écaillles, marcher au milieu des rues. (66)

Just as we shall see in the case of Butala, for Marchessault, spiritual quest cannot take place in the city, which is marked by its lack of spirituality. It is the experiences of nature and art that are sacred, and Marchessault’s spiritual vision is deeply linked to the earth.

Marchessault positions herself as a Métis, as the hybrid or “rejeton” of two cultures (32). At the same time, however, she acknowledges that all inhabitants of “l’Amérique” are sites where a multitude of cultural and historical identities intersect, in their collective memories and imaginations, if not in fact:

Chaque être de l’Amérique porte dans son flanc une sainte, un voleur, une menteuse, un président des États-Unis, un goître hideux . . . C’est comme si chaque être de l’Amérique expiait une tare ancestrale, tout en continuant dans ses bars, ses maisons de passe, ses églises, à distiller la démocratie comme un alambic intarissable. (89)

She herself, although she identifies strongly with her First Nations roots, is also able to admire the visionary gifts of Christopher Columbus (82), and even compares her own explorations, though perhaps somewhat ironically, to his (59-60). At the same time, she laments all that was taken away from her ancestors by the colonial invaders: “Rendez-moi mon canot! Rendez-moi mon pays! . . . Rendez-moi mon air de joie et l’immensité du royaume oublié” (20). When the perspective of Marchessault’s text narrows to focus on Québec rather than on the entire North American continent, her sense of identification remains equally ambivalent. On the one hand, Montréal is her home, the place where she belongs: “À Montréal, je me sens parfaitement chez moi et je rime à quelque chose” (195). She is also proud of the distinctiveness of French Canadian culture in the context of American cultural homogeneity (183). Although she laments the oppression of her people by
Catholicism, she also has a sense of Québec as a more spiritual society than the rest of North America: "J'envie retrouver mes terres dans l'espoir d'y vivre encore dans les rayons de tous les Sacré-Cœur des chapelles, des couvents, des églises, et témoigner, rendre grâce" (105). On the other hand, by positioning herself as Métis – as literally both an insider and an outsider – Marchessault is able to create a textual space from which to both celebrate and critique the spiritual heritage of her home province. She does so through a combination of various narrative forms, ranging from parody to utopian fiction.

The parodic elements of Marchessault's book are generally in reference to Christianity or colonialism. For example, when she finds herself choking on a tasteless cheese sandwich during her travels in the United States, she prays to the Christian God for help in swallowing, invoking her many years of eating the consecrated host during mass (133). Yet there is a serious critique in this playful parody, one which is made explicit in the following passage, where Marchessault contrasts the pollution of her body by such artificial nourishment, with a more natural yet mystical diet coming directly from the earth (133-134). In another passage, Marchessault parodies Christian prayer by linking the ambiguous phrase "Oh Christ!", which can be either prayerful or blasphemous, with a litany of the submissive and oppressed qualities of the people of Québec, ending her list with the supplication: "Oh Christ! Donnez-nous la force de continuer, au nom du père, de la mère, ainsi-soit-il" (289-290).² One of the most significant of the ironic fables in Comme une enfant de la terre, particularly in the context of women's spiritual autobiography, is the parable of the disease of silence in the seventh chant, which provides Marchessault with a negative foil for the more hopeful and utopian visions that she develops in the rest of the chant.

The parable of the disease of silence is a heavily ironic fable about the oppression of the people of Québec by the colonial English government. Marchessault tells the story of a mysterious disease that affects French Canadians, depriving them of the power of speech: "Cette maladie paralyse le larynx et les mâchoires, elle écrase sous un silence total ceux qu'elle frappe" (158). When the English "éminents spécialistes du silence" (163) are finally appealed to for a cure, their answer is simple and direct: "Nous connaissons cette maladie,

² In Chapter Three of New World Myth, Vautier provides a sustained analysis of many of the parodic elements in Marchessault's text.
dirent-ils, elle est sournoise, elle apparaît souvent dans nos colonies. Nous possédons un remède efficace pour l’enrayer définitivement... Il n’y a qu’une voie de guérison, qu’une solution: couper la langue!” (164) The literary counterbalance to this dark fable is a euphorically utopian perspective that both contains and defuses it. The parable of the disease of silence is set in the middle of the seventh chant, a chapter that is primarily a hymn in honour of a performing troupe composed of Marchessault’s friends, who travel around the province of Québec retelling and naming the history of their oppression: “Sans patauger, sans bafouiller, sans hésiter, vous saviez recréer, improviser d’une façon magistrale, le récit de notre résistance dans les filets du gouvernement colonial, dans la mâchoire du vampire clérical qui nous persécutait, nous pressait comme des citrons depuis un siècle” (144-145). She credits the voices of these artists and performers with the survival of the French Canadian language and culture: “Nous étions menacés de disparaître, et c’est à vous, nos voix, que nous devons notre survivance” (157). She describes them in overtly religious terms as prophets, bearers of the good news, “rois mages” like the biblical three kings (175). Furthermore, the seventh chant ends with a prophetic account that imagines the reversal of the linguistic paralysis of the Québec people, once they are able to reconnect with their true spiritual roots: “Nous sommes chose vivante, relative au Grand-Esprit, comme la chasse, la pêche, la parole et l’écriture. Ce pays d’arbres immortels a mis un larynx d’or dans nos gorges. Pour l’instant... nous bafouillons le quotidien, nous radotons dans nos verres de bière mais les temps viendront où, cuirassés de peaux de langue, nous parlerons de nos visions” (184-185). By combining echoes of the prophetic language of the Bible with images of nature and aboriginal spirituality, Marchessault achieves a union of the dual identities of her hybrid self, connecting the people of Québec with the land and with indigenous spiritual traditions. These intermittent utopian visions of Comme une enfant de la terre are what give the spiritual autobiography both its cosmic dimension and its sense of hope in the midst of misery and despair. This is not to mitigate the force of Marchessault’s lamentation, but rather to emphasize the unceasing dialectical negotiations between a mystical and a historical vision, the former providing hope in the face of the latter’s despair.

Like Quiviger’s prose, Marchessault’s writing participates in the “délière” of the female visionary or prophet. In keeping with this image of an inspired orator, she emphasizes the fact that she is an autodidact, who never actually completed high school but
was always a voracious reader, and she lists her readings as another might list degrees or other credentials:

\[
J'\text{empruntais deux ou trois livres que je lisais, d\text{'}vorais dans moins de vingt-quatre heures. Des livres \text{\'}tranges, des noms magiques: Emp\text{'}d\text{\textquotesingle}docle, Popol Vuh, Paul Klee, La Venta, Miguel Angel Asturias, Patrice de la Tour du Pin, Herm\text{\'}s Trismegiste, Paracelse, Rainer Maria Rilke, Dada, Paul Gauguin, Kafka, Saint-Jean de la Croix, Raymond Abellio, Nicolas Berdiaeff, Madame Blavatsky, Nicolas Flamel, Jean Cocteau, Giono, Jean Gen\text{\textquotesingle}t, Supervielle. (57)}
\]

Marchessault’s eclecticism is evident in this passage as she combines artists (Paul Klee, Dada, Paul Gauguin, avant-garde multi-media artist Jean Cocteau), mystics (fifth century philosopher and mystic Empêdocle, Saint-Jean de la Croix, Patrice de la Tour de Pin, Hermès Trismegiste, theosophist Madame Blavatsky), writers (Rainer Maria Rilke, indigenous Latin American writer Miguel Angel Asturias, Kafka, Raymond Abellio, Giono, Jean Genêt, poet Jules Supervielle), sacred texts (the Mayan creation story Popol Vuh), and physicians (Paracelse), alchemists (Nicolas Flamel), and religious philosophers (Nicolas Berdiaeff). At the same time, she emphasizes the fact that her travels and other experiences have brought her far more knowledge and wisdom than a university education: “La vie ainsi vécue est bien plus précieuse, bien plus universelle que tout ce qu’aurait pu m’apporter de longues années d’emprisonnement dans les universités de la mort” (122). Like the medieval mystics and the biblical prophets, Marchessault locates her authority primarily in her visions, and in the fact that she does not choose but rather is compelled to speak (or, in this case, to write): “Cet air me fouette, me force à discourir; je suis au centre d’un espace sacré et des oiseaux multicoles foncent vers moi, me forcent à ouvrir la bouche en me chatouillant les lèvres avec leurs plumes . . .” (100-101) This motif of the reluctant prophet, common to biblical prophecy, raises once again the tension of self-expression and self-transcendence that is at the core of spiritual autobiography. Marchessault’s prophesying is empowering in that it gives her a voice, but to a certain extent it also involves a loss of self.

Marchessault’s theology and her ethics are closely tied to her deployment of images of space and time. She recognizes that the spaces of poverty inhabited by many of the people of Québec, such as the city street to which her family moved from the country when she was a child, teach only despair (240). Hell, in Marchessault’s cosmology, is a lack of space (as
well as a lack of movement), a state of being cut off from nature, from the imagination, and from a memory of one’s cosmic roots: “[L]’uniformité, le nivellement sont partout . . . l’enfer n’est plus sous nos pieds mais dans nos têtes parce que l’imagination et le rêve se meurent . . . nous étouffons . . . nous ne pouvons plus aller nulle part . . . il n’y a de place en terre d’Amérique que pour les cimetières, les universités, les hôpitaux et les cadillacs de la pègre” (49). The greatest sin is humankind’s destruction of the natural world, and its rejection of the gifts of its physical and spiritual heritages: “[N]ous n’avons plus de voix, de cœur . . . nous sommes déboisés, désertés . . . nous ne savons que trembler de peur et haïr, tuer, excrémerter . . .” (50) This theme will be more fully explored by Marchessault in La Mère des herbes, which is a more linear account of her growth, forgetting, and remembering, during her childhood, adolescence and young adulthood.

Marchessault’s eclectic visions and impassioned voices are directed toward an audience that is as diverse and as universal as the traditions on which the author draws to form the spiritual fabric of her text. In Marchessault’s view art can provide a way of reminding readers of their own forgotten spiritual heritages. The twelfth and final chant of Comme une enfant de la terre contains long passages that are addressed directly to the readers, inviting them to wake up, and to remember their cosmic births. The numerous imperatives and exclamation marks of this passage give it the urgency of the autobiographical manifesto form discussed in Chapter Three:


Furthermore, the performative and communal aspects of the autobiographical manifesto link it once more with the liturgical or ritual dimensions of Marchessault’s text. Her spiritual autobiography has not so much a dual audience as a dual motivation: that of awakening her readers and shocking them out of their conformity through her parodies and lamentations,
and that of giving them hope for transformation through her utopian visions. For Marchessault, the utopian dimension of literature can bear witness to “l’insuffisance de ce monde tel qu’il nous est donné,” while at the same time pointing toward eternity, toward “le Cœur du Monde, le cœur des êtres” (124). Ultimately, the act of artistic creation links the artist with the creative powers of the universe: “Ça doit être un grand bonheur que de contempler l’imagination à l’œuvre; ce serait contempler la création du monde en quelque sorte” (100). In Marchessault’s spiritual vision, then, to give birth to a work of art is to give birth both to the self, and to the entire universe. The significance of this rhetorical act on Marchessault’s part cannot be underestimated. By aligning herself with the divine or cosmic mother, Marchessault affirms the sacredness of her own nature as woman, as Métis, as Québécoise, thus affirming a spiritual heritage that values her and her people for precisely who they are. Like many of the other Canadian women spiritual autobiographers examined in this study, Marchessault is able to affirm for herself a spiritual heritage in which she partakes of the divine or cosmic nature of spirit. This affirmation can be read even more clearly in the sequel to Comme une enfant de la terre, for in La Mère des herbes, Marchessault tells the stories of creativity and resistance of the women who inspired her.

**Jovette Marchessault: La Mère des herbes (1980)**

Jovette Marchessault’s La Mère des herbes (1980), the second book in her autobiographical trilogy, was published five years after Comme une enfant de la terre. Like the first text, it is composed of chapters that are called “chants.” In La Mère des herbes there are only seven chants, which recount an apparently much more linear narrative than the previous work. However, the literary form of Marchessault’s second book is once more circular as well as linear, moving through a cycle of innocence, abuse, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth. La Mère des herbes expresses much more anger and resistance toward Christianity than its predecessor, and sets up a more stark contrast between Christianity and earth-based or creation-centred forms of spirituality. This negative comparison is accomplished primarily through a juxtaposition of the cyclical rhythms of nature with the oppressive rhythms of the Christian liturgical calendar, and also through Marchessault’s constant alternation between images of life, growth, and creativity, and images of death,
oppression, abuse, and stagnation. Issues of gender also take on a greater importance in La Mère des herbes than in Comme une enfant de la terre. In the later work, Marchessault offers the reader many examples of strong and creative women who are reclaiming their own spiritual power and happiness, and who are rewriting and retelling history to include women’s stories and women’s spiritual experiences. Marchessault’s grandmother is an especially important character who takes on mythical associations, as she is compared both with the figure of the cosmic/earth goddess and with Jesus Christ. The larger theological and ethical questions raised by the rhetoric of La Mère des herbes have to do with both the extent to which Marchessault’s writing manages to break free from the patriarchal dualisms of Christianity and the constraints of Christian liturgical time, and the extent to which her text remains trapped in and reproduces those same literary and theological constructions.

La Mère des herbes, then, stands in a somewhat different relationship to the Christian tradition than Comme une enfant de la terre. Virtually absent is the admiration of Christianity’s mystical aspects, and in its place there is a much more scathing criticism of the oppressive elements of Catholicism. La Mère des herbes could easily be classified in the category of Catholic girlhood narratives described by literary scholar Elizabeth Evasdaughter, and discussed in Chapter One. The first three chants describe Marchessault’s innocent early childhood years living close to nature by the side of the Ouareau river; the fourth chant is the fall from innocence or the move to a poverty-stricken neighbourhood in Montréal; the fifth chant discusses Marchessault’s Catholic education; the sixth and seventh chants deal with the soul-numbing world of work. The book closes with the death of Marchessault’s grandmother, a spiritual crisis that results in a spiritual and artistic rebirth for the author. More radically than many of the Catholic girlhood narratives (both fictional and non-fictional) written by other Québécoise writers (Marie-Claire Blais, Denise Bombardier, Claire Martin, and Anne Hébert, among them), Marchessault’s text offers an alternative spiritual vision to the omnipresent authority of the Catholic church. Marchessault refers to the people of Québec as “les tribus catholiques” (e.g., 24) and she positions herself as both an insider and an outsider in relation to this group.

Marchessault accomplishes this act of self-positioning by setting up a series of textual contrasts between the repressive elements of Christianity, in relation to which she is both victim and collaborator, and the more life-sustaining spiritual lessons that she absorbs from
the natural world, from her grandmother's stories, and from the examples of the strong women who surround her from her earliest childhood. On the one hand, her mother and grandmother are both Catholics, and Marchessault herself is not able to escape the requisite convent school education: "Il y a deux choses qui m'ont accompagnée presque toute ma vie: le petit catéchisme et le Diable" (169). By the end of her schooling, she describes the conformism that has been instilled in herself and in all of her classmates: "Après huit ou neuf années d'école, nous étions à peu près toutes au même point: la tête basse, le dos rond, les pieds plats, défaitistes, à bout de souffle en ce qui concerne la voie qui mène à la découverte de soi, stade final de l'identification avec l'univers" (175). On the other hand, as a child she is highly suspicious of the rigidity, hatred, and hypocrisy of her Catholic neighbours: "Il leur manque quelque chose. Quoi? je ne sais pas. Nous ne savons pas. Tout ce que nous savons c'est qu'avec eux nous sommes tout de suite à l'étroit . . . Leurs actes et leurs paroles ne semblent jamais coïncider" (57).

Marchessault's grandmother Louisa, on the other hand, is both healer and herbalist, and it is by accompanying Louisa on her herb-gathering trips into the forest that the young Jovette and her friend Maurice find themselves immersed in a pre-Christian spiritual landscape. This education in nature is contrasted with the oppressive Catholic education that awaits the young children: "Mais en attendant, en attendant qu'ils nous apprennent de long en large l'Enfer, grand-mère nous entraîne avec elle: ce n'est pas une chute mais plutôt un élan, une passion dans l'espace, une marche en avant qui donne sang, odeur, identité à toutes les choses de la terre et du ciel" (74). Marchessault's earliest religious experience is one of nature worship: "Grand-mère et moi, nous allions à l'aube comme d'autres vont au médecin, à l'église" (49). Nature is both a source of healing and a place of spiritual experience. Marchessault describes the soul as a forest, again in the context of the destruction wreaked by the forces of Catholic conformism: "L'Énorme-normal et son armée de censeurs vont se mettre en route pour une longue promenade dans votre âme humide et tendre comme les sous-bois de ces forêts qui se tiennent debout dans l'humus de la terre amérindienne" (74). She contrasts her own and Maurice's curious and loving attitude toward snakes with the fear and hatred shown by "les tribus catholiques," and then goes on to juxtapose the Catholic mythology of the serpent with the stories preserved by goddess-worshipping societies (80-84). Marchessault also describes the sacred caves or grottos that she and Maurice explore
when they accompany Louisa into the woods: “La caverne est un lieu essentiellement fermé. Un lieu caché comme le cœur ou la matrice... En entrant dans la grotte, nous changions d’identité... Qui étions-nous? Qui étions-nous vraiment?... Des enfants de la terre à la recherche d’une Mère universelle, mère cachée dans les galeries souterraines, mère oubliée depuis longtemps...?” (77)

The episode of the grottos introduces the themes of memory and forgetting, and of sacred time, which are also central to Comme une enfant de la terre. In La Mère des herbes, childhood is portrayed as a time of innocence and being close to the natural world:

Après le chant du coq, il ne nous restait plus qu’à passer une bonne journée ce qui est relativement facile quand vous avez entre un jour et quatre ans et que tous vos réflexes sont des réflexes d’amour... À cet âge-là on en sait plus long au sujet de la Lune, de l’eau, des herbes, d’un œuf qui sort du troufignon d’une poule de la terre promise qu’au sujet d’une vedette de cinéma, d’un athlète professionnel ou d’une publicité pour laxatif. (21)

Gradually, the Catholic education to which the people of Québec are subjected erases these memories from their minds, replacing them with the “mémoires d’enfants de cœur” (75) that contain only the most horrific stories of the Bible, and the sense of guilt and sin taught by the catechism. However, even as she presents a grim portrait of this process of conformism to the “Énorme-normal” (74), Marchessault also presents an alternative vision of sacred time, one that is embedded in the form of her spiritual autobiography. The cycles of nature are described over and over in the text, particularly the coming of spring that follows the Christian period of Lent, a time of repentance and fasting, and Passion Week, which commemorates the death and resurrection of Jesus: “Ouais! Ouais! Ouais! La Mère des herbes était en train de mettre au monde ses filles végétales, ses filles vénérées dans ce ciel de Printemps qui suit de peu la semaine de la Passion chrétienne” (42). Marchessault’s descriptions of the explosion of springtime in Québec and the rest of Canada become more and more elaborate and passionate as the book progresses (for example, 157-158), and the primacy of springtime over Passion Week becomes more and more explicit:

Ici, sur la terre du sacrifice permanent, dans notre calendrier liturgique, ce temps correspond à celui de la Passion, de la souffrance volontaire du grand mâle eucharistique. Mais c’est secondaire, conçu pour nous distraire, le temps de la
Passion. Un complot de la gendarmerie royale! Ce qui est vital, essentiel, ça se passe ailleurs, là-haut, du côté de la Mère des herbes qui lutte, lutte contre les ténèbres, l’enfer du Père, le jugement dernier, les convulsions apocalyptiques. (217)

The cycles of nature are contrasted with the Christian liturgical calendar, and also with the hellish cycle of poverty and despair that reigns in the urban landscape to which the young Jovette is banished with her family (112). An early St. Jean-Baptiste parade with decidedly pagan overtones is contrasted with a later urban celebration of the same holiday that is utterly disappointing to the young Jovette (167). This complete reversal of the traditional meaning of the Christian Passion and other liturgical celebrations is one of the strategies that Marchessault employs in her narrative to make explicit her sense of the connection between patriarchal Roman Catholicism and the abuse of women and children. Like Manning, who presents a similar argument, Marchessault’s images are intentionally shocking and provocative, designed to shake the reader out of her or his accustomed perceptions of the Christian myth.

Marchessault’s choice of literary structure in La Mère des herbes wrestles overtly with the theology of sacred time, as envisioned both by Catholic teaching and by a more nature-oriented spirituality. In the preface to the book, Gloria Orenstein describes it as a “rite de passage sacré féminin” and a “voyage chamanique” (10). However, more to the point is her claim that in Marchessault’s world-view, the Christianisation of the First Nations peoples of the Americas is akin to the Fall from Paradise in Christian theology (11). The structure of La Mère des herbes certainly parallels the Christian myth of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the dwelling in sin (or limbo or purgatory), followed by rebirth or resurrection. Marchessault’s childhood begins in innocence and natural beauty. The move to the city is like the expulsion from the garden or the fall into sin, a sense of loss that is imagined as a gaping wound by the terrified young narrator of the text: “Ville en vue! Ville en vue! Nous changeons d’état, nous cripons. Une artère géante se met à saigner quelque part en nous. Torrentielle est son flot. Je ferais n’importe quoi pour cette artère, n’importe quoi pour arrêter cette hémorragie” (112). Marchessault also employs the image of a gaping wound in Comme une enfant de la terre, signifying that when human beings are cut off from the natural world, they are spiritually wounded. The conformity and abuse perpetuated by patriarchal Catholic culture plunge Marchessault into a world of despair. Before she is even old enough
to start school, the sight of some of the neighbourhood girls being beaten by their father causes the young Jovette to attempt to kill herself and her family by turning on the gas stove at night. The fact that Louisa turns off the gas taps and saves the family does not prevent Marchessault from dying a progressive spiritual death during her years of Catholic education and work as an unskilled labourer. Marchessault rediscovers an innocence of a sort through her close friendship with a gay man, Jean-Luc Rapide-Danseur, a relationship that reconnects her with the spirituality and the friendship with Maurice of her childhood: “Avec lui, je retrouvais des émotions de l’enfance, du temps au bord du fleuve, avant l’âge de la raison, quand j’avais l’impression de faire partie du mouvement des marées, des phases radieuses de la Mère des herbes, du départ des oies sauvages, de l’arrivée des voiliers d’outardes et nuages de brumes aux premières chaleurs de l’été” (194). However, it is not until her grandmother’s death that she is able to say “no” to the forces of death and conformity, and embrace the life of a creative artist (241).

The reader must decide how successful Marchessault’s rhetorical strategies are in offering an alternative to the paradigms of Catholic theology. By echoing the pattern of Fall – Death – Resurrection in her own narrative structure, is Marchessault not merely recreating and perpetuating the Catholic world-view from which her artistic creation seeks to escape? A number of discursive elements save La Mère des herbes from remaining trapped within the Christian perspective that it seeks to challenge. The first of these is the co-existence, alongside the patriarchal Catholic narrative of sin, guilt, abuse, and despair, of the presence and celebration in the text of women’s unheard or forgotten stories, and of the figures of strong and independent women. In every case it is through some form of artistic creation that these women affirm their independence from a male-dominated Catholicism and society. The first of these women is Belle-Beatrice, Maurice’s mother, whose piano playing and singing fill the young Jovette and Maurice with wonder, and allow them to glimpse the covert rebellion of a stunted spirit (26). Marchessault returns to the figure of Belle-Beatrice at the end of the book, with a short description of her rebellion even in death, a rebellion which foreshadows Marchessault’s own revolt against Catholic doctrine at her grandmother’s death (209-210). The Pépin sisters, who figure as the community madwomen or scapegoats, also loom large in the landscape of Marchessault’s childhood. Oppressed by a tyrannical elderly father, they blossom with happiness after his death, and this spiritual resurrection is
greeted with suspicion and animosity by the members of “les tribus catholiques”: “Lui mort, elles se mirent à ressusciter. À ressusciter de jour en jour, de plus en plus souvent, d'une façon évidente, choquante pour tout le monde” (65). The neighbourhood teenage girls, who throw their repressed sexual feelings and creative energies into the writing and production of a play that celebrates some of Québec’s early women saints and mystics, are another important influence in Marchessault’s childhood. The amateur yet powerful work of art that these young women produce also stands as a symbol of rebellion and rewriting of women’s history:

Elles nomment des choses invisibles, pas disables, dans un effort constant de transfigurations à partir de nos hérosines nationales, nos hérosines récupérées depuis belle lurette par l’Église ou le gouvernement . . . Ne vous y trompez pas, les parents, vous assisterez à un miracle: les mots se feront incantations, fusées éclairantes, dans la nuit du mois d’août. (94)

This retelling of history from the point of view of rebellious women becomes a supplement to the historical revisions in *Comme une enfant de la terre*, in which the histories of aboriginal peoples and of French Canadians challenge the dominant colonial narrative. Furthermore, the notion that in drama, words can become “incantations, fusées éclairantes,” links Marchessault’s writing once more with the participatory and communal events of liturgy and ritual.

On the other hand, once the young Jovette moves to Montréal with her family these powerful female figures are replaced by the trapped and unhappy neighbourhood mothers, whose monologue of despair is nevertheless captured in all its hopeless beauty by Marchessault’s lyric prose: “Ce monologue était sans pareil: j’entendais aussitôt un bruit sans fin, un jaillissement continu qui me faisait frissonner, qui me sifflait aux oreilles comme si le monologue des mamans était fait d’eau gazeuse. Un jaillissement continu avec dedans des temps alternés de passion, de rages, des cris en verre filé qui déchirent la peau de la gorge, rapent la langue” (121). Marchessault, the narrator, expresses her anger at these women for not rebelling and breaking out of their repetitive and closed stories:

Maman il aurait fallu crier. Hurler! . . . agresser! ogresser! montrer les dents, lever les poings. Crier maman! Crier maman! couper les mots, les déchiqueter. Maman t’as toujours eu peur des mots! De l’asile itou. Pourtant t’étais une folle dans ta
maison, une réfugiée politique dans ton pays, sur ta planète. Maman tes cris, pis nos cris à nous, les enfants battus, nos cris à toutes nous autres il aurait bien fallu que quelqu’un les entende. (123-124)

Once again, the power of words to break the silence and to effect change is affirmed by Marchessault’s determinedly visionary text.

Marchessault’s grandmother, Louisa, is without a doubt the most important and the most constant female figure in this literary community of alternative women saints. She is a Catholic but, in Marchessault’s view, a “heretical” one, who is more interested in stories about angels and demons than in Catholic ritual and doctrine: “C’était une hérétique, ma grand-mère; une hypostase, une femme de cirque, une sauvagesse, une cueilleuse d’herbes, une qui avait vécu en concubinage . . . Quand grand-mère parlait du diable ou des anges, on sentait qu’elle les avait essayés tous les deux et pouvait comparer” (172). Some of the stories that Marchessault tells about Louisa draw parallels between her life and the biblical narratives about the life of Jesus. The descriptions of Louisa’s work as a healer are reminiscent of the stories about Jesus’s healing ministry: “Grand-mère soigne à tour de bras, crève des tumeurs de l’intérieur, des abcès de l’extérieur, calme des inflammations, insuffle du courage à des langueurs. Ils viennent de partout, de tout bord, tout côté avec leurs langues paralysées, leurs gaz dans le ventre, leurs insomnies, leurs brûlements internes . . .” (89)

Similarly, Marchessault’s invitation to all suffering souls and all earthly creatures to come and join her at her grandmother’s deathbed has echoes of the biblical Passion narratives and Nativity stories:


In this passage, Marchessault offers a more chaotic and animated vision of the “peaceable kingdom”; one suspects that Leddy and Wilson’s versions of the metaphor might be too dull for her taste.

Louisa is also equated with the figure of the cosmic nature goddess or earth mother, La Mère des herbes, because of her connection with herbs, healing, and the natural world:
“Grand-mère récolte! Louisa cueille avec des gestes millénaires les herbes de la vie perpétuelle . . . Grand-mère nous ensemence! Et cela se fait malgré l’atroce douleur qui circule sur la terre” (76). This goddess-centred narrative is presented as an exuberant alternative to the Christian narrative. The cosmic grandmother is depicted as both more powerful and more loving than Jesus Christ, for she does not bargain with the lives of her earthly children: “Elle ne vient pas nous racheter la Grand-Mère: elle sait que nous ne sommes pas à vendre. Se contente de nous mettre un printemps miraculeux dans l’imagination, puis de semer ses filles bien-aimées dans la terre” (158). Springtime is thus presented as a stronger spiritual force than Easter.

A whole network of imagery surrounds and upholds Marchessault’s spiritual vision of a feminine, earth-based, creation-centred spirituality. The contrast of images of movement with images of homecoming, so central to Comme une enfant de la terre, is still present in La Mère des herbes, but is overshadowed by the juxtaposition of images of life with images of death. Marchessault’s feminine and feminist cosmology gives traditional Christian symbols a new interpretation. The author continues to use the literary strategy of juxtaposition, placing old symbols alongside new ones, or including pairs of contrasting images in the autobiography. The flesh-less angels, for example, are compared with Louisa’s flesh-and-blood stories (33-34), and menstrual blood is discussed alongside Jesus’s blood (166). The Catholic sacrament of baptism is critiqued at length for its doctrine of original sin (126-130), while other waters are portrayed as symbols of a more life-giving theology. The water of the womb is a space of equality and of connection with all forms of life, described as “les neuf mois pendant lesquels tous les êtres sont aquatiques, sans distinction de races, de sexes, de classes sociales, entre les tendres parois de la matrice” (35). Vaginal juices are celebrated as a symbol of female sexuality and freedom, “[u]n huile cordiale qui augmente la chaleur du corps en tout temps” (72). The healing waters of tears that Marchessault shares with her mother and grandmother after Marchessault’s attempt to kill the entire family are a more important sacrament than that of confession or repentance: “Ma mère pleurait goutte à goutte, ma grand-mère itou et puis moi. Toutes les trois dans le lit, en train de nous laver de toute culpabilité, en train de nous guérir de mon geste de mort” (146). The Ouareau river of Marchessault’s childhood, to which she returns at her grandmother’s death, is a symbol of eternity and resistance (20-21), as well as being equated by Marchessault with her
grandmother – and thus the cosmic grandmother – herself: “Regarder le fleuve ou regarder grand-mère, c’était presque la même chose . . . regarder grand-mère dans les yeux ou regarder le fleuve, c’était rencontrer toutes les rivières, s’y engloutir entière, d’un seul coup, sans se faire mal, sans s’égratigner les genoux” (237). These images are all reminiscent of Quiviger and Snowber’s embodied spiritualities, in which images of the female body are reclaimed and sacramentalized from the Christian tradition that has often denigrated them.

Parody also helps Marchessault’s text to free itself from Catholic theological structures. It is through its use that La Mère des herbes enacts a resistance to Catholicism’s patriarchal authority. In Marchessault’s spiritual autobiography, parody consists of imitating the words of the oppressor – in this case, Catholic theology – to such an extent that their utter absurdity becomes apparent to the reader. For example, while discussing the widespread physical abuse of children, especially girls, by their fathers, Marchessault parrots the Catholic doctrine of original sin in an exaggerated way that emphasizes the sheer perversity of seeing children as capable of such evil:


Similarly, Marchessault parodies the widespread cultural narratives of women’s hysterical nature, turning them back on the patriarchal culture that invents and circulates them (200-203).

The use of parody is part of a more general emphasis on refusal and revolt in Marchessault’s spiritual autobiography. La Mère des herbes condemns the ways in which Catholic teachings silence people, especially women and children. Marchessault also notes ironically that God and Jesus, by contrast, have a great deal to say: “Dieu parle beaucoup. Son fils encore plus!” (170) From her earliest childhood, Marchessault is fascinated by stories of spiritual revolt, such as the tale of the Serpent (84-85), or the story of Lilith (179): “Et ce qui m’enchanté, ce qui me met l’eau à la bouche, fait battre des ailes à mon cerveau,
ce qui me met tout un printemps intérieur dans le corps, c'est cette phrase qui dit que le Serpent se dressa contre Dieu. Que c'est beau! Se dresser contre! Se dresser contre le premier oppresseur" (84-85). Marchessault’s vision of “se dresser contre” is very different from Piotte’s notion of a “corps à corps” encounter with God. While Piotte’s image includes blessing and tenderness as well as struggle, in Marchessault’s there is only rebellious battle. She consistently portrays the Christian God as patriarch, oppressor, and murderer, and the Catholic cult as a ritual celebration of infanticide: “L’acte liturgique est un infanticide, il est honoré, respecté, pratiqué dans tous les patriarcats de l’Orient, pis de l’Occident” (160-161). Marchessault’s portrayal of the social environment of her childhood and young adulthood in Montréal thus take on a spiritual significance as well. As with the other spiritual autobiographers examined so far, Marchessault views issues of religious and social justice as inextricably linked. Catholicism bolsters the abuses of patriarchal society, justifying the abuse of children (especially girls) by their fathers (135), and elevating employers far above their inferior workers.

This aspect of Marchessault’s argument is very similar to Manning’s, and indeed, the ironic tone of the two authors is quite similar, although they employ very different narrative forms, giving Manning’s argument the weight of rhetorical reasoning, and Marchessault’s the power of emotional passion. Acts of refusal, rebellion, and resistance – such as the acts of artistic creation by women discussed above – are actions which carry the potential to break the links of this chain of oppressive tradition: “Si toutes les mamans, les femmes, les enfants s’étaient mis à crier . . . d’un seul coup, ensemble, en chœur . . . on faisait sauter le couvercle du ciel, s’effondrer la calotte de la terre . . . Et nous autres on ferait autre chose: du passionnant, du vital, n’importe quoi à l’exception de ce qui a toujours été mal fait, bâclé” (124). The need to yell, to say no, to use words as if they were “dynamite” – “[u]n mot qui vous saute dans face” (132) – offers possible ways of opening up new metaphorical and actual spaces for women. Marchessault’s angry litany of rejection that drowns out her grandmother’s last rites (238-240), and her refusal to be numbed by tranquilizers during the funeral, pave the way for her final act of rebellion, that of quitting her spirit-numbing job in order to live in her grandmother’s house and explore her vocation as artist and writer:

Je suis allée vivre au bord de la rivière Ouareau. Pour faire quoi? Rien. Simplement me donner une chance . . . Et puis, que je me suis dit, peut-être qu’un jour je pourrai
créer quelque chose, témoigner de l’espérance, de la vie. Peut-être même que j’écrirai quelques lignes, à propos d’une grand-mère, de moi, de la Terre, de la Mère des herbes, d’une baleine qui n’est jamais plus remontée en surface. (241)

Thus, the act of refusal is also an act of spiritual and artistic affirmation, and with it La Mère des herbes comes full circle back to the writing of Marchessault’s first literary work, Comme une enfant de la terre.

This tension between refusal and affirmation is at the centre of Marchessault’s theological, ethical, and literary visions in La Mère des herbes. Through the rhetorical use of irony and parody, Marchessault rejects that which her words appear to be affirming, while her gestures of refusal become themselves affirmations of a more life-giving spirituality. By borrowing from the narrative structure and symbols of Christian liturgy, Marchessault is able to invest old literary and theological patterns with new meaning. While La Mère des herbes does not completely break free from the cycles of liturgical time and Christian suffering, in the context of Marchessault’s literary œuvre, Comme une enfant de la terre and La Mère des herbes are artistic gestures of revolt that pave the way for a veritable outpouring of creative and innovative writing. So much so that by the time Des cailloux blancs pour les forêts obscures is published seven years later, it is hardly recognizable as the third book in a trilogy, bearing as it does greater resemblance to the dramatic works published by Marchessault in the interim (the book consists largely of dialogues between “Jeanne” and her lesbian lover, and then between “Jeanne” and her lover’s father). The self-reflective and even circular ending of La Mère des herbes leads the reader back to the beginning of Comme une enfant de la terre, which marked the first step in Marchessault’s journey as a writer. Although it does not address the reader as directly as some of the passages at the end of Marchessault’s first text, the ending of this second volume also participates in the project of spiritual autobiography, inviting readers to consider what gestures of rejection and affirmation may be necessary to free their own souls.

Sharon Butala: The Perfection of the Morning (1994)

The Perfection of the Morning (1994) is Sharon Butala’s literary attempt to understand her mystical experiences in the natural world, and to come to terms with a
profound mid-life crisis. Butala's spiritual journey begins with a sense of alienation from both her social and her natural surroundings. Her book is the account of a radical change in her life, when she goes from being a divorced academic living in Saskatoon, to living as the wife of a cattle rancher in a very remote area of southwest Saskatchewan. This move leads Butala from her familiar, urban environment — which had seemed to her to be the centre of culture, thought, and social interaction — to a part of the province (and of Canada) that she had never even known existed. The isolation, loss of identity, and loneliness that she experiences living on her husband Peter's ranch slowly lead her to develop a relationship with Nature, which she begins to conceive of as a presence. Through a spiritual quest that consists of solitary walks in the prairie landscape, close attention to her dreams, and the avid reading of books on religious and spiritual phenomena, as well as the discovery of her vocation as a writer, Butala moves from a place of alienation to a place of interconnection and interdependence. Like Marchessault in Comme une enfant de la terre, Butala is engaged in writing a sacred geography of the Canadian landscape. She attempts to demonstrate not only that rural community and a relationship with the land are important aspects of Canadian life, but also that this relationship is essential to the spiritual well-being of the nation's inhabitants.

The Perfection of the Morning consists of a preface and eleven short chapters, each of which develops a theme related to Butala's "apprenticeship in Nature" (the subtitle of the book): for example, the dreams and mystical visions that give rise to Butala's spiritual quest ("Dream Coyote"), her encounters with domesticated and wild animals ("Animal Kin"), or her experience of the archetypal feminine soul ("Luna"). In her preface, Butala draws attention to the fictional and non-linear qualities of her book: "What is true are thoughts, dreams, visions. What may or may not be true are the order and timing of events, the perception and linking of them... In writing what the world will call autobiography, I am torn between the facts and history and the truth of the imagination, and it is to the latter, finally, in terms of my personal history, that I lean" (xiv). This contrast between the truth of

\[3\] In Perfection of the Morning, Butala always refers to Nature with a capital "N," representing the personification of the landscape as a (feminine) presence. Because this is not simply a literary strategy, but forms part of Butala's spiritual understanding in this book (an understanding that changes in her second book), I will follow her usage and refer to Nature throughout my analysis.
facts and the truth of the imagination is a theme that runs like a thread throughout Butala's text. It is never fully resolved, for Butala's choice of literary genres creates a perpetual tension between the spiritual and the material, between the scientific and the mystical.

Butala's relationship to established religious traditions is a complex one. Like Marchessault, though in far less detail and with less importance attached to it, Butala describes a Catholic childhood and education that include First Communion and convent school. For Butala, the references to her Catholic childhood seem to be important primarily because her first mystical experience takes place during her First Communion (17-18). However, because her mother was "an unwilling Catholic" convert from Anglicanism (18), Butala's relationship to Catholicism remains marginal and seems to leave her with little but the memory of a mystical experience, and "a powerful sense of [her]self as a sinner, as unworthy, as always guilty" (17). In fact, like Marchessault, Butala rejects not only Catholicism, but "all forms of organized religion," and she writes that she "detest[s] theology" (158-159). This disgust with systemic religion extends itself even to feminist rituals of goddess worship (158-159), which might seem to be more compatible with Butala's often essentialist views of Nature and of the archetypal feminine expressed most succinctly in the following sentence: "[W]e all know, we all understand in our hearts that women are the soul of the world" (188). She also dismisses Eastern forms of spiritual practice, such as sitting meditation, which she describes as "not only difficult but irritating in the extreme" (125-126), although she tells this story in the context of her own dawning realization that her daily walks on the ranch are a form of meditation and a quest for "inner stillness" (125).

Also like Marchessault, Butala turns to various spiritual and psychological texts in order to try to understand her own mystical experiences:

I keep remembering – I think it's a Sufi belief – the saying that when the pupil is ready, the teacher will come. My teacher was to be books. I devoured them: from Jung to Joseph Campbell to the Bible and Bullfinch's Mythology, from William James and Evelyn Underhill to Thomas Merton. My experiences out on the prairie with their mystical nature and my dream-life, together with my ruminations coming out of all that reading, were working to take me into books about mysticism itself. (69)
This passage provides a significant contrast with the comparable list of names and titles in Marchessault’s *Comme une enfant de la terre* (57). To begin with, Butala’s catalogue is less eclectic than Marchessault’s, consisting exclusively of writers on mysticism and comparative religion from the Western, Christian tradition. Furthermore, Butala turns to books in order to understand her experiences in Nature, whereas Marchessault searches through books themselves for the answers to her questions about the meaning of life but ultimately prefers the immediacy of experience to the distance created by books and formal education. This comparison between the two authors dramatizes one of the tensions that is at the heart of Butala’s narrative: while she writes of the importance of trusting her personal experiences in the natural world, she is constantly turning to the authorities of texts – whether they are books on mysticism, on aboriginal history, or on local flora and fauna – in order to make sense of those experiences. Furthermore, Butala and Marchessault offer their own books to their implied audiences as a kind of textually mediated mystical experience. As with the tension between public and private in Chapter Three, or between embodiment and spirituality in Chapter Four, we can see that the ambivalence of these two writers’ positions between mystical experience and cultural or historical narratives is never fully resolved.

The guiding metaphor of *The Perfection of the Morning* is the symbol of Nature as a feminine presence, mentor, and teacher with whom Butala enters into relationship. This is not a single or monolithic relationship, but rather it is what she describes as a “fabric” of relationships (18-19) with living beings and with the land itself. Butala’s use of imagery and symbols in *The Perfection of the Morning* has significant theological and ethical implications. One of the most pervasive images that she uses is that of Nature as a living presence. The personification of Nature in this spiritual autobiography raises important questions about the use of symbols and metaphors in religious or spiritual language. For ultimately landscape or Nature, for Butala, is not a metaphor but a reality that is both physical and spiritual. That is, the landscape through which Butala walks is not merely a reflection of her own psyche or soul – as it might be in an allegorical narrative of pilgrimage such as Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, or even in Piotte’s or Snowber’s experiential hermeneutics – but is a unique and real entity with whom Butala understands herself to be entering into relationship. This attitude toward the natural world is very different from the medieval Christian idea of reading Nature like a text, in the same way that one reads the
Bible. Butala’s notion of Nature as a feminine presence is also different from Jovette Marchessault’s vision of the goddess as both cosmic She-Bear and earthly Mother of the Grass. Marchessault’s nature goddess is, like her grandmother, a strong and loving presence – awesome perhaps, but a source of strength in which one can find refuge. Butala’s Nature is far more impersonal and difficult to define. She describes it as “a larger creature with its own needs and desires and way of being in the universe” (116). However, this personification is far more than a literary trope. For Butala, it is a reality that is both physical and spiritual, and that has important implications for how one lives one’s life:

I became cautious. I thought, What if I am walking inside the mind of a creature – call it what you will – what if the earth really is a living being and my presence here is only on sufferance? If I am learning new things about myself and extrapolating from these things to this natural world and its nature, then it behooves me to walk carefully, to pay attention, to show my growing respect in every possible way. (127)

There is a sense in which the guiding metaphor of The Perfection of the Morning takes on a life of its own, or is overshadowed by Butala’s own awareness that it is not merely a metaphor, but rather a physical and spiritual reality that requires an ethical response from her.

The natural world also fulfills another function in The Perfection of the Morning: it becomes Butala’s sacred imagined community. Having left behind her family and friends in Saskatoon, unable to feel completely at home in the rural community to which her husband Peter has always belonged, and unwilling even through her spiritual experiences to pledge allegiance to a particular religious tradition or community, Butala’s sacred community is a natural and mystical one. She enters into relationship with the land itself, both as material and spiritual presence, and as the archetypal goddess figure of her dreams. She comes to know the wild and domesticated animals that she encounters on a daily basis. She also begins to feel a link with the past inhabitants of the land, the aboriginal people whose spirituality she comes to feel that she understands, because it was shaped, as hers is, by the land itself. All of Butala’s mystical experiences share a common characteristic, that of making her feel connected in some deep way to something greater than herself. She describes the “cloud of white light” (17) that fills her chest at her First Communion as “not myself, it was both within me and bigger than me” (18, emphasis in the text), and she uses the metaphor of fabric to recount the vision of interconnectedness that she has three months
after her son’s birth: “What was extraordinary was that I saw clearly, indisputably, finally, that the child, the grass, the trees, the sky above were all woven of the same material, were all part of the same fabric, which was the fabric of which the universe is made, and that this fabric lived” (18-19, emphasis in the text).

In The Environmental Imagination (1995), literary critic Lawrence Buell comments on "the tendency among many writers and critics to want to represent the essential America as exurban, green, pastoral, even wild" (32). This desire leads to the use of literary topoi such as "the motif of the (re)turn from the city to the rural place of cultural origin and spiritual centeredness" (20). Don Scheese confirms that “[i]n Canada a nature writing tradition emerged along a similarly classic pastoral pattern” (30). Thus the movement from urban to rural space is central to Sharon Butala's spiritual quest in The Perfection of the Morning. Although when she moves to the cattle ranch her identity is that of an urban woman, her relationship with the natural world gradually leads her to remember and to reclaim her rural roots. She begins to recall her early years living in "the bush in northern Saskatchewan" (6), and takes pride in the fact that she can trace her family tree back to pioneers and farmers on both sides. This nostalgic pastoral vision has decidedly biblical and Edenic overtones: “[M]y sisters and I grew up with the notion of the farm as a mythic paradise from which we had been expelled, by drought and bankers, and could never return” (5-6). Such a vision has implications for Butala’s relationship with the natural world, which then becomes a way of trying to recapture that sense of a lost Eden. Like Marchessault, Butala understands human beings to have an intimate relationship with Nature, the loss of which can lead to profound distress. This understanding is very different from Quiviger’s use of the Edenic metaphor, in which such nostalgic images are symptomatic of a desire for “re-ventrage” rather than spiritual growth.

The language of scientific inquiry also stands in an uneasy relationship to The Perfection of the Morning. This tension between mystical and scientific discourse may owe much to the conventions of the genre of nature writing. In Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing (1992), literary critic Scott Slovic points out that “[m]ost nature writers, from Thoreau to the present, walk a fine line . . . between rhapsody and detachment, between aesthetic celebration and scientific explanation” (4). Other theorists and critics of nature writing also point to “the contrasting strands of the scientific and pastoral traditions” in the
genre (Cooley 6). Throughout the text Butala is critical of the insufficiency of scientific knowledge to explain all aspects of the human and natural worlds, and of the way in which scientific materialism makes it difficult for people to even recognize or acknowledge, let alone describe, their mystical nature experiences:

I think we have so allowed the scientific approach to the world to take over our perceptions that we are afraid to mention such experiences for fear of being laughed at or vilified. When we do, we find ourselves stammering, struggling for words, never being able to convey in language to our own satisfaction exactly what it felt like or looked like or what sensations it evoked in us. We struggle against skepticism, our own as much as anyone else’s, and in time we lapse into silence about them and a whole, valuable dimension of human experience remains unsung and unvalidated. (55)

In spite of her professed anger at scientists (56), Butala herself adopts an attitude toward her spiritual experiences that bears a striking resemblance to the scientific method of inquiry and to Cartesian philosophy. She discusses her frustration with the writings of medieval Christian mystics and with organized religion, and she vows to adopt an experiential approach to her own spirituality:

I, and nobody else, would determine what my own real experiences were and had been. I might be wrong, but against whose standard? If I was absolutely, ruthlessly honest with myself, stripped away all self-pity, examined all the evidence I could locate, then concluded something – even if it was that I couldn’t conclude anything – then that conclusion would be the rock on which I would found my life from then on. (72, emphasis added)

In spite of her dismissal of science Butala’s descriptions of her spiritual experience are largely empirical and experiential, using words such as “standard,” “honest,” “examined,” “evidence,” and “conclusion.” Furthermore, the image of founding one’s life on a rock is an important Christian metaphor. Like Marchessault’s texts, Butala’s writing also bears the traces of the religious, philosophical, and literary traditions that she rejects.

Another narrative form that Butala shares with both Marchessault and Piotte is the motif of the journey or quest, which is also a crisis or struggle. What Butala describes as a “profound personal and spiritual crisis” prompted by her “dramatic change in lifestyle” when
she moves to the country (66) leads to "about five years of the most intense psychic travails" (150). This spiritual crisis, accompanied by dreams and other mystical visions in the natural world, in turn leads Butala to try to understand her experience. She frames this effort at understanding as a quest; like the solitary hero of myth, Butala searches for the clues that will help her to understand her identity and to make sense of the world around her. The language of Butala's text is riddled with metaphors that express this search. She describes herself as engaged in a "quest for Self": "I grabbed at clues wherever I found them . . . I haunted bookstores when I was in the city, searching the shelves, I did not know precisely for what" (68). She searches in the natural world as well as in books: "I walked the roads and the fields, searching for clues . . . I waited for [animals] to speak to me; I was looking for hints, for clues, for explanations, above all, for consolation" (74). Elsewhere, she states explicitly that she is looking for answers to life's deepest existential questions, and believes that she will find them in the natural world: "What is life? I asked myself. Why am I here? Or anywhere? What is the meaning of these stones, this grass, this landscape? I hoped that if I listened hard enough, looked hard enough, was still enough and quiet enough, the answers would seep into me" (127).

Butala subverts the quest motif, however, by arriving at no final, startling conclusion. Rather, her spiritual autobiography is the story of a gradual awakening to her physical senses and somatic intelligence, to a world beyond the material realm, to her identity as a woman and as a writer, and to the realities of the natural world that she learns to inhabit and call home. The final paragraph of her spiritual autobiography is a description of "meaning" and "truth" as a felt sense that there is "more . . . to the world than meets the eye" and "that the world fails to dissolve at the edges into myth and dream, only because one wills it not to," insights that have permeated the entire book and that seem to describe the quest itself more than any final resolution (191). Just as the journey in Marchessault's *Comme une enfant de la terre* becomes an end in itself by being a form of prayer, so too, Butala's solitary walks in the prairie landscape ultimately become their own reward. Butala's book presents not so much a well-defined spiritual vision, as an account of the process itself of learning to perceive the world around her with more than her physical senses. Butala's detailed descriptions of this process are one way of inviting her implied audience to share in her discoveries. However, the more insistent invitation in the text is for readers to go out and
imitate Butala, and to see for themselves. With this invitation, Butala achieves an intriguing resolution of the tensions between her mystical and scientific voices: mystical experience itself is portrayed as universal and as scientifically repeatable by anyone, given similar conditions and contexts in the natural world.

Thus, Butala locates her appeal to her implied audience precisely in the tensions and paradoxes of her narrative. For example, the uneasy balance between the mystical and the scientific (or factual) voices in her text allows her not only to claim her personal spiritual experiences as evidence of a broader spiritual reality, but also to challenge her readers to verify their authenticity by creating similar experiences for themselves: “I was making a conscious effort to note and examine how I felt, something which most people don’t bother to do, but perhaps if more did – and had a range of experiences to compare – we might begin to delineate the parameters of such phenomena” (119). Similarly, Butala’s position as both insider and outsider in her new community turns out to be the perfect vantage point, in her opinion as well as that of the national news media, from which to inform the rest of Canada about the drought of the 1980s and its effect on the people of the Canadian Prairies (175). Butala also embraces her dual status as nature writer and mystic to propose a vision of social change that involves the repopulation of the rural landscape:

Though we can’t all live on the land, we have to keep a substantial proportion of us on it in order to reestablish and maintain our connection with Nature . . . It is unbelievable to me that futurists and experts at universities and in government don’t see how important it is to all of us that a stable body of people remain in intimate touch with the land, and include it in their equations about the future. (180)

Like Marchessault in Comme une enfant de la terre, Butala offers a utopian vision of the future, with the difference that Butala proposes her vision in all seriousness as one that should be considered by Canadian policy-makers. In this her text rejoins the more activist memoirs of the authors in Chapter Three. However, in The Perfection of the Morning, Butala’s solitary quest and mystical experiences remain paramount.

Just as the landscape portrayed in The Perfection of the Morning is both physical and spiritual, the latter both hiding behind and imbricated with the former, so too, Butala’s mystical experiences are both spiritual and physical. Her “apprenticeship in Nature” is in many ways the story of her gradual discovery of, and belief in, a somatic intelligence that
connects human beings with the natural world in profound and forgotten ways. She begins to
learn this type of thinking as soon as she settles in to life on the cattle ranch: “I didn’t have
to think at all with my mind. I thought instead with my bones and my muscles, with some
deeply human place in my gut” (46). Many of the strange occurrences that Butala describes
in her spiritual autobiography – knowing that the stone a friend had picked up was a stone
scraper, feeling a cramp in her abdomen and then coming across a description of the same
feeling in a book she is reading on out-of-body experiences, feeling compelled by a will other
than her own to walk until she comes to a group of stone circles that she hadn’t known about
– seem to be offered primarily as evidence that “areas of the body other than the recognized
five senses are able to apprehend information about the world which often is not available
through the acknowledged senses,” and also that “our technological prowess has outstripped,
overwhelmed and in some cases destroyed abilities which we all once had, and which people
who remain close to Nature have maintained” (122). This embodied intelligence and
awareness that Butala describes is very different from Snowber and Piotte’s desire to embody
Christian metaphors in their lives, in order to “live in the story” of Christianity. Butala,
rather, is trying to read an unwritten story, and to tell what she believes to be an unspoken
tale: that of the powerful connection to the natural world that all human beings possess.

If there is an answer to be found in The Perfection of the Morning, it is the promise
that is held out by virtually all spiritual autobiographies: that the reader, too, may be
transformed if she or he is willing to follow the same path as the author. It is perhaps in this
dimension that the narrative’s greatest strengths lie, for Butala’s writing and her spiritual
vision seem to be most at home – like Jovette Marchessault’s – in the ephemeral and earthly
realm of movement and time. Butala’s descriptions of the landscape and of her actual
experiences in it are in many ways more satisfying than her efforts to invest it with some
kind of astonishing meaning. Similarly, her emphasis on process – on walking as meditation,
on the importance of engaging in efforts to see and to understand one’s surroundings in order
to know how to live in them – may be more satisfying than her actual conclusions. The
question raised quite powerfully by The Perfection of the Morning – and by all spiritual
autobiographies – is: How can we, as readers, judge the authenticity of their spiritual and
ethical visions without going out and trying to experience what they have experienced? It is
this question that pushes Butala’s and other spiritual autobiographies continually beyond the boundaries of the literary.


*Wild Stone Heart* (2000) was published six years after *The Perfection of the Morning*, and to a large extent covers the same physical, temporal, and spiritual ground as the latter. The book is divided into three sections, made up of two to four meditative essays each, and entitled “Wild,” “Stone,” and “Heart.” The narrative is framed by a prologue, “Hauntings,” and an Epilogue, “The Gift.” As in *The Perfection of the Morning*, each essay is an extended reflection on a particular experience or subject: “Abundance” recounts Butala’s effort to get to know the native plants and wildlife of the field in which she walks; “Stones and Bones” explores issues around the discovery of dinosaur bones by someone from the nearby town; “The Moon” is a profoundly eerie account of a moonlit odyssey across flooded fields; and so on. What differentiates Butala’s second spiritual autobiography from her first is, in many ways, a change in perspective. This shift is evident in many of the small details that greet the reader of this book. For example, the subtitle, “An Apprentice in the Fields,” evokes that of Butala’s previous work (“An Apprenticeship in Nature”), but makes it more personal (apprentice instead of apprenticeship), and more specific or narrow in its focus (the fields rather than Nature). Similarly, the book’s dedication “To The Spirits of the Field” (italics in the text) and the epigraph taken from “a Lakota Creation Story” also alert the reader to a deeper emphasis on, and indebtedness to, aboriginal spirituality, than in *The Perfection of the Morning*. Whereas in the first book Butala attempts to adapt to the landscape and to make the shift from city dweller to rural inhabitant, but still unquestioningly adopts the perspective of the pioneer and even of the colonizer, in the second book she attempts more and more to see the natural world through the eyes of its original inhabitants, the First Nations people who have long ago been displaced or decimated. In a June 2000 interview in Vancouver’s *Shared Vision* New Age magazine, Butala acknowledges her more polemical intent in this second book: “*Wild Stone Heart* is an attempt to understand and get my readers to understand what we stole from the First Nations people when we took their land. Once we comprehend that, our approach will have to be different to the First Nations people. Where
that leads I don’t know. You don’t know where the very work you’ve done is going to take you” (“Wild Stone Heart: An Interview with Sharon Butala” 27).

In *Wild Stone Heart*, Butala once again invites her audience to join her on a journey that is a process of learning how to see differently. However, whereas in *The Perfection of the Morning* Butala learns to see the land as a feminine presence, in *Wild Stone Heart* she begins to perceive it as being inhabited by the spirits of the aboriginal peoples who lived and died there. The guiding metaphor of *Wild Stone Heart* is that of the haunted house that becomes a haunted landscape. Butala’s choice of guiding metaphor and narrative form in *Wild Stone Heart* fits seamlessly with her experience of the “spirits of the land,” for the second stage of her spiritual autobiography begins like a ghost story:

> Our house was haunted. It was haunted from the time it was an unfinished shell sitting on its foundation . . . until recently, a period of a good twenty years. I say “haunted” blithely, without apprehension, not caring any more if I’m believed or not. I know no other word for what happened to us and there is no other explanation, although for a very long time I would never have said so out loud. (1)

Here Butala returns to the theme of speaking the unspoken that she initiated in *The Perfection of the Morning*. By inscribing her text within the tradition of fantastic literature, Butala invokes a genre that at least recognizes the dimension of the supernatural and the spiritual, and allows it to be more easily voiced. Furthermore, by turning to a fictional genre she is able to break more fully with the Christian tradition that she rejects, and the tradition of scientific writing that she deems insufficient, while still engaging with the literary heritage of Western culture that she continues to embrace. Butala acknowledges the incongruities of applying the narrative form of the ghost story to her experiences in the prairie landscape: “In such a setting, ghosts seemed to us so Old World, so impossibly anachronistic and out of place on the clean, bright prairie and under such an endless, open sky” (9). This passage is important for several reasons. It establishes a tension between Butala’s experience and her choice of narrative form that lends added weight to her choice of the ghost story as a model. It sets her up as a sceptical and rational narrator who finally becomes converted to a belief in the presence of ghosts, not only in her home but also in the landscape itself. Finally and perhaps most importantly, it introduces with what can later be read as a sense of irony toward her earlier self, the blindness of which Butala accuses both her fellow Canadians and herself:
the inability to see that the so-called New World has its own ghosts and spirits of the aboriginal past, who are far more a part of the land than the descendants of the European settlers will ever be.

Wild Stone Heart fits less easily into the pastoral mode of nature writing exemplified by The Perfection of the Morning, but it nevertheless continues to incorporate the scientific or objective mode of naturalist prose, with its detailed descriptions of plant and animal life, and of archeological sites. For example, like an excited botanist, Butala offers long catalogues and descriptions of the wildflowers that grow in the field where she walks, as she learns to recognize them. This aspect of her writing bears more resemblance to the texts of nineteenth-century amateur botanists such as Catharine Parr Traill, than to any other genre in Canadian literature. Even Marchessault’s descriptions of nature in La Mère des herbes are more mythical than scientific. As in The Perfection of the Morning, Butala’s physical experiences in the landscape are always preludes to (or imbricated with) spiritual ones. Hence, by learning to recognize and name the native plants and wildflowers that grow in the field, she begins to attune her sensitivity to the point where she will eventually recognize the spirits of the land as Native spirits. Here, as in the first book, Butala’s writing exhibits a tension between her love of books and her reliance on them for knowledge, and her desire to abandon all outside knowledge and belief systems in order to experience and discover the natural and spiritual worlds for herself, without any outside influence. This attitude is exemplified by her failure to look up the plant known as Indian breadroot in any of her botanical guides, followed by her instantaneous and almost mystical recognition of the plant when she does come across it: “As I stared at it, I saw it had a kind of hyperreality; it virtually glistened with it. . . . It was so perfect, so precise, that to my eyes it looked as if it had just sprung up there by the flick of an enchanter’s wand. And I knew at once without the slightest doubt, despite still not having looked it up, that this was Indian breadroot” (58). For Butala, one of the gifts of her explorations in the natural world is that of “finding once again what I liked myself” (22), rather than having it dictated to her by others.

In Wild Stone Heart, as in The Perfection of the Morning, Butala’s bodily experiences figure prominently in her text, although this time her narrative is preoccupied with a mysterious illness (characterized by overwhelming fatigue) rather than with the concept of somatic knowledge. Here again she sees physical symptoms as having spiritual meanings or
even causes, describing the “physical thing” that “was happening to [her]” as a loss of “energy” (31):

How I knew this wasn’t a physical ailment, or why I was so sure this was the case, I cannot explain. I can only say I felt that my exhaustion when walking was an infirmity with a spiritual or a psychological basis, one which carried meaning that I had not, as yet, deciphered but one that was my duty, and mine alone, to understand and deal with. (33)

This passage exemplifies many of the characteristics of Butala’s narrative voice: her impassioned search for spiritual meaning, even in the context of a physical illness; her reliance on her intuition that allows her to know things that cannot be proved by rational or scientific evidence; and her sense of herself as a solitary seeker, one who must find meaning alone, and on her own terms. It also links her hermeneutical method with that of Piotte, who also searches for the spiritual or psychological meaning in her physical symptoms. Furthermore, as we have already seen with many of the other spiritual autobiographers in this study, the location of experience in the body is one way of locating hermeneutical authority firmly in the self, as Butala does with great determination.

Along with the genre of nature writing, Wild Stone Heart participates in what literary critic Nancy H. Traill terms “the paranormal mode” of the fantastic (17). In Possible Worlds of the Fantastic: The Rise of the Paranormal in Fiction (1996), Traill argues that various modes of the fantastic arise depending on the relationship between the “natural” or “physically possible” and the “supernatural” or “physically impossible” (8-9). Traill describes the paranormal mode as that in which “supernatural and natural are no longer mutually exclusive. The opposition loses its force because we find that the word ‘supernatural’ is merely a label for strange phenomena latent within the natural domain” (17). According to Traill’s definition, The Perfection of the Morning, with its story of Butala’s discovery of her embodied yet extrasensory perceptions, would also fall within the realm of the paranormal mode of the fantastic. Yet it is Wild Stone Heart, with its haunted houses and its spirits of the field, that evokes the genre of the fantastic more powerfully for the reader. The chapter entitled “The Moon” is far eerier than any of the those in The Perfection of the Morning. However, as with the other modes of discourse that she employs, Butala subverts the paranormal mode by acknowledging its ordinariness: “The whole business was, in
general, more annoying than frightening, more irritating than horrifying, eventually more boring than interesting” (11). Similarly, rather than describing her mystical experiences and visions as paranormal experiences that are completely outside the realm of the ordinary, she writes of them in the language of learning to see ordinary reality more clearly: “[W]hat had happened was that my eyes had opened to see what is always there” (67, emphasis in the text).

The quest narrative is also once again a motif in Wild Stone Heart, but this time one has a sense that Butala is fleeing from some undefined but felt presence in the landscape, rather than that she is moving towards a specific goal. She describes herself as a “strange driven self” (165), possessed by forces that she does not understand, which she ultimately concludes are the spirits of the land trying to make her see them and empathize with their tragic history. In her prologue she writes of the ghosts in her and Peter’s house that “[i]t was as if they were trying to rouse us to something – some kind of action, an awareness of something, some new knowledge – but had no way of telling us what it was they wanted. Whatever that might be . . . we could only wait and hope it would be revealed eventually” (12). Butala herself is a willing participant in this quest for answers, which, as in The Perfection of the Morning, takes the form of walking the field and trying to be open to what it has to teach:

I would just walk and think and study what was there, and in time the meaningful pattern I felt sure was there would become evident to me. Or if not a pattern, I would find clues that would make the actual events that happened here clear to me. I didn’t know exactly what it was I was seeking, although I thought it was something concrete, a history, a sociology, the life story of a people. (25)

Although Butala’s insistence on the concreteness of history and sociology may seem an odd choice of words, it is in keeping with her unwillingness to separate the material and the immaterial realms (thought, spirituality, and so on). She often juxtaposes concrete and spiritual images in her metaphors, for example, by writing of “the bedrock of mystery” (29). Furthermore, it emphasizes an important difference between her two spiritual autobiographies. While The Perfection of the Morning understands Nature as an archetypal feminine spirit, Wild Stone Heart is the story of Butala’s growing conviction that the sense of presence she feels in the field comes from the spirits of the aboriginal people who have died
there: “I wondered if... whatever haunted the vast space between me and the earth and the
distant blue of the sky, was not God (whatever that might be) or even Nature (whatever that
might be), but the restless spirits of the many unhonoured dead of this field” (158).

Like The Perfection of the Morning, Wild Stone Heart does not offer specific answers
to Butala’s ultimate questions about life and spirit. Yet in this second book, she seems more
at peace with the human limitations that may make it impossible ever to rest in certainty,
having obtained those answers. Using the journey motif (“My odyssey is ended”), she
describes nature as a teacher who has “held out promise to [her] of answers to the great
questions,” without actually giving her the answers themselves: “It is as if I’ve been taken to
the very brink where the answers lie, as far as one can go, to the distant edge of this physical
world, and allowed a glimpse through the veil into another one” (200). Butala’s reference to
Homer’s Odyssey, the archetypal (male) quest narrative, offers a telling clue to some of the
tensions in her narrative. For although Odysseus eventually arrives back home, it is a home
that has become strange and “other,” and from which he has been dispossessed by the suitors
who crowd around his wife Penelope. Similarly, by the end of her “odyssey,” Butala has
been somehow spiritually dispossessed from the landscape that she loves, as she recognizes
that it has finished revealing its story to her, and it is a story that excludes her from its
indigenous past and spiritual heritage. Whereas the movement in The Perfection of the
Morning is from alienation and displacement, to connection and homecoming, in Wild Stone
Heart Butala goes from feeling haunted and possessed, to feeling safe and at peace, yet
curiously displaced (or dispossessed) from what she had come to think of as home. This
tension between possession (by spirits) and dispossession (from the land and her home) is
one that leads to a paradoxical sense of freedom in Butala’s text. Although Butala portrays
herself – like Marchessault the prophet in Comme une enfant de la terre – as being possessed
by forces she does not understand and cannot control, being dispossessed or exorcised of
these spirits only occurs when she has been dispossessed from her proprietary relationship to
the land.

Furthermore, this spiritual dispossession enables Butala to achieve a sense of peace
with her own religious and cultural heritages. Although she still does not embrace
Christianity or any other form of organized religion in Wild Stone Heart, she does
acknowledge that the spiritual traditions of First Nations people can never be her own, and
that she will have to come to terms with her cultural and spiritual hybridity: “I’m a hybrid. I’ve been taught European culture as the only kind of culture that counts . . . [but] I’ve absorbed this North American Great Plains landscape into my blood and bones” (183). By expressing her conscious awareness of both her spiritual bond with the Canadian landscape and her intellectual connection with European culture, Butala helps the reader to understand the tension in her text between consulting those she perceives as experts (scientists, anthropologists, botany texts, histories of First Nations peoples), and relying only on her own visions and experiences in the land itself. At the end of Wild Stone Heart, the images of movement and homecoming are united in a final paradox that encapsulates Butala’s spiritual vision: “To understand the profound meaning of land – to walk on it with the respect, born of real understanding, of the traditional Amerindian, to see it as sacred – is to be terrified, shattered, humbled, and, in the end, joyous. It is to come home at last” (188).

In spite of this continued tendency to essentialize or romanticize traditional First Nations peoples, Butala remains a visionary voice in Wild Stone Heart, for her utopian dream is no longer one of social but of ethical change. Rather than imagining the repopulation of the rural landscape (by, presumably, Canadians of European descent) that had animated her prose six years previously, Butala expresses a more muted hope for its gradual repossession by people of First Nations ancestry: “I wondered if perhaps in the second millennium [the dream of having all of southwest Saskatchewan as an aboriginal homeland] will be fulfilled. I even hoped it would happen, slowly, as we occupiers die off, sell out, are bankrupted, and one way or another leave” (198). Once again, the tension between possession and dispossession is felt in Butala’s narrative, as she recognizes that the possession of the land by people of First Nations descent will result in her eventual dispossession from it. Whereas The Perfection of the Morning is more firmly inscribed within the discourses of colonialism that Marchessault so fiercely challenges and parodies, in Wild Stone Heart Butala’s vision of the landscape is transformed from a purely archetypal one, to one that is grounded in historical reality. Thus, Butala discovers a more authentically mystical voice, one that holds social and spiritual realities in a more creative tension.

In Wild Stone Heart, Butala seems to posit a dual readership, perhaps reflecting the fact that her previous spiritual autobiography was met with both adulation and criticism. On the one hand, she imagines a much more sceptical and hostile audience than in The
Perfection of the Morning. From her opening description of the haunted house, where she writes almost defiantly that she doesn’t “[care] any more if [she’s] believed or not” (1), to her closing jibe at literary critics who would be happier if she called her book “a myth” than if she insists that “every word of it [is] true” (197), Butala seems to assume an almost hostile readership. On the other hand, her book is primarily addressed to those who, like her, may be open to learning to see the Canadian landscape with new eyes. In her epilogue, she describes her “knowledge of the field” as “a gift” given to her “only so that [she] might pass it on to others” (200): “I would try to give it to those most needing to know these teachings, those who saw without seeing, who knew and denied what they knew” (200). Like Marchessault in Comme une enfant de la terre, who wishes to awaken her readers to the aboriginal prehistory and spiritual history of the (North and South) American landscape, Butala feels called to make other Canadians conscious of the spirits of the original inhabitants of the land beneath our feet. However, Wild Stone Heart returns us to the difficult question of whether spiritual autobiography is primarily addressed to those who already share the author’s beliefs and values, or whether it is possible for a text’s subversive message to reach and to convert an audience of readers who do not share the author’s values.

Conclusions

In spite of the similarities between the spiritual autobiographies of Jovette Marchessault and Sharon Butala, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter, there remain profound and obvious differences in the textual strategies and spiritual visions of these two writers. Nevertheless, in all four works discussed above, the literary, theological, and ethical dimensions are so closely intertwined as to remain inseparable. Marchessault’s adoption of some of the narrative techniques of feminist utopian fiction offsets her use of irony and parody, in order to offer the reader a spiritual affirmation that goes deeper than her angry rejection of patriarchal Catholic structures of social and literary dominance. Butala’s insistence that her mystical experiences in nature are both physical and spiritual, and that the landscape is also both a physical and a spiritual reality, is inextricably linked with her style of writing that moves back and forth between attempts to give objective descriptions of nature and history, and recognitions of the limits of language to capture her experience for the
reader. Both authors wrestle with similar tensions between individual experience and spiritual tradition, yet from opposite angles. Marchessault rejects Catholicism to embrace the aboriginal spirituality that is her grandmother's legacy, yet she cannot completely rid herself or her texts of the symbols and motifs of Christianity. Butala, on the other hand, yearns toward a spiritual heritage that she cannot fully claim, for in spite of her unusual experiences in the prairie landscape, and her sense that they have their roots in aboriginal history, she has to acknowledge to herself and to her readers that the path of First Nations people is not her own.

These differences between the two writers are also compounded in each case by differences between the two texts written by the same author. Reading these works together, we can see how the authors' spiritual visions change in subtle ways from one book to the next. In some ways, the spiritual perspective of Comme une enfant de la terre is closer to that of Wild Stone Heart than it is to that of La Mère des herbes, and the same is true of the other two books. The sense of the natural world as an archetypal, feminine presence is powerful in both La Mère des herbes and The Perfection of the Morning. Similarly, Wild Stone Heart's portrayal of the Native spirits of the land brings it closer to the portrayal of aboriginal spiritual history in Comme une enfant de la terre. The overall result is that in both cases the two works by a single author complement each other, giving added depth to each writer's sense of the sacred. Neither history nor myth is neglected, and the experiences of women and of aboriginal people are mapped indelibly onto the Canadian spiritual landscape. Furthermore, the motif of the quest that both authors use to describe the spiritual life becomes an open-ended one, which does not finish at the textual boundaries of the written book. Butala refers to Wild Stone Heart as "a companion to The Perfection of the Morning, a deepening of wisdom" ("Wild Stone Heart: An Interview with Sharon Butala," 26). Similarly, Marchessault describes the third volume in her autobiographical trilogy, Des cailloux blancs pour les forêts obscures (1987), as a book that she wrote with more tenderness and compassion than La Mère des herbes: "Dans ce livre, j'enlève des armures ... Certains événements m'ont secouée, ces dernières années ... Aujourd'hui ... [i]l n'y a pas du tout de confiance entre les hommes et les femmes et cela crée des malentendus. Alors, j'espère qu'il y aura dans l'avenir des pensées de confiance" (Royer 15). Butala's and Marchessault's reflections on the ongoing evolution of their creative and spiritual lives invite
us to remember that literary criticism can also be a dialogue, and that authors – like readers –
can be transformed by the process of writing and of reading their own work.
Chapter Six
Shared Visions, Communal Voices

Introduction and Background

The final group of texts that I will discuss consists of four works of collaborative authorship. In each of these books, the spiritual autobiographies of more than one woman are gathered together under the rubric of a shared social, cultural, or religious identity. What these identities have in common is that each one has historically been invisible in some way to mainstream Canadian society; that is, to middle class Christians of European descent. The interviews in Bridges in Spirituality (1997) honour the life stories of First Nations Christian women elders who have worked to integrate their Christian faith with their indigenous spiritual heritage. A second collectively written book, Hope is the Struggle (1996) documents the growing awareness and social activism of a group of women from an impoverished Montréal neighbourhood, brought together by a church-sponsored community centre. The voices of Canadian and American Jewish women are heard in From Memory to Transformation (1998), a compilation of writings originally presented at a conference in Toronto. Finally, At My Mother’s Feet (1999) is a collection of biographical and autobiographical sketches that celebrates the contributions of pioneering Muslim women to Canadian society. The dialectical negotiations at work in these four spiritual autobiographies are between individual and communal identities, as well as between dual cultural, religious, or social heritages.

It is not possible to do justice to the nuances of each of the individual life-narratives contained in these anthologies. My goal is rather to show that when taken as a whole, each of these texts – like the spiritual autobiographies examined in the previous chapters – provides the reader with a guiding metaphor that expresses the book’s theological, ethical, and literary visions. Although these texts, like many of the others, do not fit into the traditional definitions of the genre of spiritual autobiography, they share a great deal with other examples of spiritual life-writing by Canadian women. Furthermore, they raise important questions about the relationship between “mainstream” Canadian culture and individuals whose religious, cultural, and social heritages place them on the margins of
Canadian society. Each of these collective spiritual autobiographies is engaged in a process of writing its subjects into a broader narrative of Canadian identity, and of including their religious heritage as an integral part of our national story. For many of the writers, this practice is perceived as a process of making visible that which has been invisible, or giving voice to that which has been silent: the spiritual lives and stories of women who are not upper- or middle-class Canadians from European and Christian backgrounds.

In many ways these four books stand in stark contrast to all of the other spiritual autobiographies examined in this study, whose individual authors, in spite of their relationships with their communities of faith, nevertheless publish books that establish them as the solitary authors of their own stories. Perhaps the strongest exceptions in this regard are Lois Wilson, Mary Jo Leddy, and Jovette Marchessault, whose narratives contain embedded within them the stories of other people's spiritual lives. However, the collaborative nature of the texts in this chapter suggests that for these authors, the spiritual autobiography of the individual cannot be disconnected from the stories and traditions of the community. Indeed, all of the women who share their life-narratives in these works attest to the importance of community in their lives, whether it is the community of a neighbourhood that is struggling with poverty and injustice, or of First Nations people trying to reconcile their traditional spiritual ways with the teachings of Christianity, or of a strong diasporic Jewish or immigrant Muslim community, whose adherents feel a sense of global religious identity although they are minorities in the country that they call home. Nevertheless, at the level of the individual narratives, many of the contributors still wrestle with the tensions between the autobiographical "I" and the self-transcendence required by the spiritual vision, or the self-denial demanded by the religious community, especially of its women members.

More than any of the others analysed so far, these four books raise important questions about identity and belonging. The very act of publishing a collective rather than an individual spiritual autobiography attests to the importance of the community in the spiritual life of the individual. Yet the relationship between the individual and the community is a complex one in each case, and is not without its struggles. Jewish feminists question how much of a patriarchal religious heritage is worth preserving, and work to honour their roots even as they create new and more inclusive traditions to pass on to future generations. Muslim women lament the lack of strong female Islamic role models in the popular media,
while not always finding support and affirmation for their work within their own community of faith. First Nations Christian women try to find ways to feel at home in a religious institution that has participated in their oppression and abuse. Women who wrestle with the reality of poverty in their lives challenge the structures of a hierarchical Christian church through its own sacred texts, inviting the broader circle of believers to join them in their struggles. Throughout the pages of these collective spiritual autobiographies, the individual voices of women reflect not only on their relationships to their faith communities, but also on their ties to a national community that often seems to have forgotten them, or to have written them out of its history. Thus, the First Nations, Jewish, Muslim, and economically impoverished women all address directly the issue of their invisibility in the narratives of Canadian and mainstream Christian identities.

It is far more challenging to identify the guiding metaphors at work in collectively authored texts than in those conceived by a single imaginative intelligence. Nevertheless, from each of the collaborative spiritual autobiographies in this chapter, a unifying image emerges, whether it is arrived at by consensus (Hope is the Struggle), or through the efforts of the editors and publisher (Bridges in Spirituality and At My Mother’s Feet), or mentioned by only a handful of the contributors but implicit in the work of all (From Memory to Transformation). What the guiding metaphors of these four works have in common is that each one highlights the necessary and creative relationship between the individual and the community, between fragments and the whole. Those individual pieces may be the scraps of material that make up a quilt (Bridges in Spirituality), the fabric panels that come together to form a banner (Hope is the Struggle), the personal stories of women that fill in the gaps and silences of traditional sacred texts (From Memory to Transformation), or the pioneering spirits of women whose uncelebrated, individual acts of heroism contribute to the growth of a nation (At My Mother’s Feet). In each of these images there is the promise and the affirmation that the whole is richer because of the sum of its parts, but also that the parts belong inextricably to the whole. As with all of the other contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies examined so far, the guiding metaphors of these texts have profound implications for what it means to live a spiritual life.

Generically, these four texts raise questions that have not been examined by the spiritual autobiographies in the previous chapters. The genres of oral narrative, storytelling,
performance, and conversation are of central importance to these works, where women’s lives are not always told in their own words. The stories in *Bridges in Spirituality* are based on either interviews and conversations, or the collected writings and speeches of the women elders, but they always display a strong editorial presence. *Hope is the Struggle* documents the conversations between the members of the writing collective, so that the book and the process that creates it become one and the same. *From Memory to Transformation* has its genesis in the performative context of a conference, and its essays preserve the sense of being oral presentations. *At My Mother’s Feet* is put together from oral as well as written submissions, and two of the stories are women’s recollections of their mothers. Literary scholar John D. Niles describes the contributions of oral narrative to human culture in *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature*:

> It is hard to imagine what human life would be like without oral narrative, for it is chiefly through storytelling that people possess a past. It is through prized stories, often enshrined in a ritual context, that a complex religious dimension is added to life. It is also through storytelling, very often, that people articulate their cherished values and, by playing with modes of reality other than the merely palpable, make possible a future that differs from what now exists. (2)

By emphasizing the spoken rather than the written word, these four texts engage their readers and their traditions in the ways outlined by Niles above: by looking to the past, by addressing the sacred dimension of life through ritual, and by offering glimpses of a future transformed by hope. The expansion of the boundaries of spiritual autobiography to include collective and oral narratives does not require a huge conceptual leap, given the genre’s historical connections with oral testimonies. However, the further one expands the boundaries of the genre, the more important it becomes to keep in mind the role of the audience and of the performative context of spiritual autobiography, a context that is increasingly diverse and complex for contemporary Canadian women authors.

The role of the reader takes on a particular significance in oral literary genres. In the direct, sometimes conversational style of these four spiritual autobiographies, the reader is often addressed explicitly, or the presence of the audience is implied very strongly in the writing. The often didactic quality of oral narrative emerges powerfully from these texts. In some cases the compiler is also the initial reader or audience of the story being told, and that
story is then filtered through the editor on its way to the broader audience of the book. Furthermore, each of these books is written with the consciousness of a dual audience: first, there is the audience which shares the social, cultural, or religious context of the text’s authors; and second, there is the wider audience which does not, and whose education is one of the stated aims of the text. Both audiences are addressed explicitly, and both are given instructions – either implicit or explicit – on how to be a good listener. The qualities of the implied readers of these four books raise retrospective questions about the other spiritual autobiographies in this study, whose assumptions about the homogeneity of their audiences become more glaring when read alongside the narratives of women who cannot assume that most other Canadians will share their experience.


Bridges in Spirituality: First Nations Christian Women Tell Their Stories (1997) is an anthology of short autobiographical narratives by five First Nations Christian women elders. Each life story is pieced together from interviews and conversations with the two compiling editors, Joyce Carlson and Alf Dumont, or from written documents and speeches by the women elders themselves. Sarah Simon (a Gwich’in or Dene elder), Dr. Jessie Prettyshield Saulteaux (an Assiniboine elder), Gladys McCue Taylor (an Anishinawbe or Ojibwa elder), Gladys Taylor Cook (a Dakota elder), and Vi Smith or Wii Bistaii (a Gitskan elder) were all born between 1901 and 1929, and grew up hearing the stories of their parents’ or grandparents’ conversions to Christianity. They also lived through a period of Canadian history that witnessed the creation of residential schools, and both the loss and the recovery of many aboriginal spiritual traditions. Their collected stories stand as powerful testimonies of women who have had to find ways of bridging the gaps between two different cultures, and who have sought to reconcile their Christian faith with the teachings of their own elders and ancestors. The dialectical negotiations in their stories are between individual experiences and communal values, as well as between European Christian and First Nations spiritual heritages.
Each of the five narratives that make up *Bridges in Spirituality* has a distinct character of its own. Three of these autobiographical sketches are recorded and edited by Joyce Carlson. The story of Sarah Simon (b. 1901) documents the oral history of the first encounters of the Dene people with Christian missionaries, as told to Simon by her grandmother. Simon’s narrative centres on the importance of the church in her life. Her grandmother was a devout Anglican, and Simon married a Gwich’in man who worked as a missionary among his own people and was eventually ordained as an Anglican priest. Simon herself worked as a midwife, as well as trapping, hunting, and doing missionary work with her husband. Hers is the story of a woman who fully embraced Christianity, without giving up her native language and culture. The narrative of Dr. Jessie Prettyshield Saulteaux (1912-1995) has a very different emphasis, opening as it does with the story of Saulteaux’s grandmother, who was not a Christian but an Assiniboine medicine woman. Although Saulteaux’s parents were Christians, her story honours all that she learned from her grandmother as well. Saulteaux worked as a midwife and later as a lay minister with the United Church. She helped to establish a training centre for First Nations theological students, which was named after her. Saulteaux’s reflections gently reconcile Christian teachings with indigenous spiritual traditions. The story of Gladys Taylor Cook (b. 1929) is a narrative of trauma and healing that addresses the subject of the sexual and physical abuse suffered by First Nations children at the residential schools run by the Canadian government and churches. Cook describes the abuse that she endured at residential school, as well as the racial discrimination she experienced upon leaving school to find work. She also describes her healing process, which was aided by both Christian and Native spiritual traditions.

The two remaining autobiographical sketches are edited by Alf Dumont, largely from the writings of the women elders themselves. Regarding the section on the life of Gladys McCue Taylor (1914-1993), Dumont writes: “Her story is told here through a collection of her writings from several sources. They are the stories she told me, the jottings she made on scraps of paper she found in hotel rooms or in margins of business agendas, and excerpts from her well-crafted, eloquent speeches” (74). These fragments of memories, dreams, stories, poems, theological and personal reflections, speeches, and prayers are filled with lyricism and with images drawn from the natural world. They reflect an adamant and unapologetic blending of spiritual and cultural heritages. The story of Vi Smith (b. 1916)
intersperses passages of autobiographical narrative with excerpts from speeches given by
Smith to various groups (the Anglican General Synod, an Anglican women’s conference, and
church leaders and Sunday School teachers) and with passages from a primer on Gitksan and
Wet’suweten society co-authored by Smith. As the daughter of a hereditary West Coast
chief and the wife of a Scottish Canadian immigrant, Smith describes not only her aboriginal
cultural heritage but also the challenges that she has experienced as someone who lives in
two cultures at once. These challenges come to the fore in her involvement in the fight for
Native land claims, yet like the others in this anthology, her story consistently emphasizes the
similarities between the best of the Christian and the First Nations spiritual traditions.

Although it is difficult to identify a single guiding metaphor which unites all the
narratives in the book, there is one image that is singled out as having a special significance
by two of the elders, as well as by the editors (Joyce Carlson and Alf Dumont) and the
publishers (The United Church Publishing House and The Anglican Book Centre). This is
the image of the star quilt that graces the cover of the book: the central shape of a pale, pink
star formed by eight diamond-shaped pieces of cloth, that radiates out into larger and larger
stars in darker and darker colours. At the beginning of each of the narratives in the text, there
is a head-and-shoulders photograph of the elder, with the points of the quilt’s star radiating
out from behind the picture like a halo. What exactly is a star quilt or star blanket? Two of
the elders, Saulteaux and Cook, make reference to this important artifact in their narratives.
Saulteaux links the symbolism of the quilt to the spiritual beliefs of her ancestors, who “saw
everything as sacred” (41), and describes the star as an image of the Great Spirit: “In our
tradition there is a special blanket called the star quilt. . . . It is patterned after the morning
star. Just before the first light of dawn there is a star in the east, as the colours of the new day
begin to spread in the sky. It is said that it is the brightest of all stars. This star most
represents the Great Spirit, shining through the darkness, greeting the first light” (41). This
passage demonstrates the primacy that Saulteaux gives to aboriginal beliefs. Cook’s
description of the star quilt emphasizes both the honour in which the recipient of the blanket
is held by the quilter, and the oral traditions of the First Nations people:

The star blanket is really important in our culture. . . . It is a high honour to receive a
blanket. The burst on the star blanket is recognized as growth outwards, with the
colours going from lighter to darker shades. As the colours grow darker, the feelings
of deep respect, honour, and friendship for the person receiving the blanket get stronger... 

Star blankets are given at births, as well as deaths and celebrations of thanks. Teachings about the star blanket and many other traditions of our culture weren’t written. Everything was taught through words, but the words were very carefully chosen. (141)

The image of the star quilt, foregrounded by the cover of Bridges in Spirituality and by the photographs of the elders, and accorded a great deal of importance by the two women who describe it for the reader, becomes a guiding metaphor with immense explanatory power for the anthology as a whole. Not only does the image of the quilt encapsulate many aspects of the spiritual vision of the women elders interviewed, it also serves as a metaphor for the literary form of the book itself and for the relationship that the work seeks to establish with its audience.

As Saulteaux points out, the star quilt is a metaphor for a spiritual vision in which all things are connected, and in which all of creation is sacred. Vi Smith describes this world view with regard to the Gitksan relationship with the land: “There is an intricate relationship between people and land. We are the land. The people are the land. We cannot separate ourselves from the land... It is sacred” (164). The star quilt, with its blend of colours and fabrics, is also a metaphor for the blending of European (Christian) and First Nations traditions in which each of the elders is engaged in her own life. The quilt was a form of handiwork that was brought to North America from Europe, although it is also clear from Saulteaux’s and Cooks’ descriptions that they claim the star quilt as one of their “own” traditions.¹ Many of the elders make straightforward comparisons between elements of Christianity and of indigenous spirituality, seeing very little difference between the essential natures of the two. Saulteaux sums up the issue with great wisdom and simplicity: “I think we should look at it in this way. Both are good. I’ve heard men talk about the white man’s religion being the Bible, cross, and holy water; and the sweetgrass, pipe, and ceremonies are

¹ A small detail of a star quilt graces the table of contents of McKendry’s Canadian history of Traditional Quilts and Bed Coverings, although in her book she refers to the pattern as “Star of Bethlehem,” offering another gloss on the relationship between First Nations spiritual traditions and European Christianity.
the Indian way” (70). Smith expresses a similar sentiment, urging a gathering of leaders and Sunday school teachers to learn about both the Christian and the Gitksan spiritual traditions (174). Nevertheless, this blending of two cultures is not without struggles and anguish. In one of the fragments of her narrative, Gladys McCue Taylor writes: “My heart ache from last evening still hangs on. Those days come often now. It makes me wonder if it is any use trying to fit into the white world of my children. My roots are very obvious” (83). Yet in another moment, Taylor is able to celebrate the dual heritage of a child whom she loves: “Child of two cultures, you are rich. You travel through your two different worlds, learning all the best and good ways of each” (75). The star quilt, with its creative possibilities and spiritual meanings “rooted” firmly in both indigenous and European cultures, is an appropriate metaphor for the creative efforts at religious pluralism or syncretism of these First Nations Christian women elders.

Perhaps the most powerful commentary on the complexities of this religious and cultural blending focuses on the notion of conversion, a theme that is, as we have seen, central to critical discussions of spiritual autobiography, although its relevance and meaning are often problematized by women writers. Until recently one of the myths of Canadian national history and identity has been the conversion of First Nations people to Christianity by European missionaries. The stories in Bridges in Spirituality offer a corrective to this historical narrative, by giving the perspective of the grandchildren of those converts. In some of the vignettes and reflections of the women elders the very notion of conversion – as a turning away from old ways and toward new ones – is called into question. Rather, Christianity is accepted alongside indigenous beliefs because it is seen as essentially equivalent to them, or at least fundamentally compatible: “People respected missionaries and priests because of the similarity of their beliefs” (Vi Smith, 158). Furthermore, as they take on leadership roles in the church First Nations women elders draw on their aboriginal spiritual heritage to call the wider Christian community (including themselves) to a type of conversion: a turning back towards some of the fundamental truths of Christianity that have been forgotten. For example, Smith issues a prophetic reminder that Christianity is a religion of justice and compassion when she addresses a group of church leaders: “We, who call ourselves Christian, are still the revolutionaries who imagine a world in which true freedom is still possible and love is the prime motive and the Spirit guides our lives. Even within the
church we lack the courage to commit ourselves fully to such a world” (176). This appeal to tradition by those who were once invisible within the church (and within Canadian society) calls the religious (and national) community to task for its lack of faithfulness (and hypocrisy). This rhetorical practice runs throughout the spiritual autobiographies discussed in this chapter, and offers a significant example of the complexities of the relationship between the individual and the community.

The star quilt stands as a rich metaphor for the surprises generated by such challenges from the margins, for it is associated with women and with women’s handiwork such as needlepoint, knitting, and quilting, which until recently were undervalued as creative artwork. Similarly, Canadian history has not recognized the contributions of First Nations women, a point that Joyce Carlson makes explicitly in her preface to the anthology: “My hope is that [this writing] will assist all Canadians to affirm the important contributions of First Nations women to the stories of all our families and to the development of this country” (3). The notion of valuing the contributions of women elders or female ancestors is a theme that runs through all of the collective spiritual autobiographies examined here. In Bridges in Spirituality there is a strong sense of matrilineage, of cultural and spiritual teachings being passed down through grandmothers and mothers to the next generation. Simon’s story opens with a discussion of the birth of her daughter, which allowed Simon to grieve for her own mother who died giving birth to her (7). Saulteaux’s autobiography begins with a tribute to the ecologically respectful spiritual practices of her grandmother, an Assiniboine medicine woman (39). The passage that is chosen to stand at the head of Smith’s narrative is one that affirms her debt to the women in her family: “We are a matrilineal society. The robes I wear embody the spirit and strength of my mother, my maternal grandmother, and my maternal aunts and uncles” (147). Even Carlson pays tribute to her own mother’s work as an artist who valued indigenous women: “My own mother . . . intuitively understood that something was missing from our own family and community when the First Nations women were unnamed and their contributions unaffirmed. An artist, she painted their faces emerging from darkened canvas” (2). By writing these women into the narrative of Canadian history and identity, Carlson and the elders are engaged in a process similar to that of feminist art

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2 For an insightful analysis of the contributions and the limitations of needlework as a women’s art form, see Parker.
historians who promote the artistic merit of women's crafts, helping us to see their complex and skilled handiwork with new eyes. Once again, as with so many contemporary Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies, the authors are engaged in a process of trying to make visible that which has been invisible.

The image of a quilt, in which the smaller pieces are part of a larger whole, reflects the deep sense of belonging that each elder describes in relation to her community. The star blanket is a symbol that unites the sense of past and future that is central to the experience of community portrayed in *Bridges in Spirituality*. During the opening of the training centre named after her, Saulteaux experiences a spiritual vision that brings together the notion of individual and community, of past and future:

> I was standing at the ceremony, and it seemed to me that I saw a clear light around the people in the ceremony . . . And then later on I saw many little lights and I think that those lights are like many little stars and those lights are the lights of our young people as they begin to take training and become leaders in our communities. (68)

The small stars are individual leaders, yet they are also part of a light that shines around the people of the entire community. Smith describes the same idea through a different image: “A flock of birds, one unit is composed of many identities. Each part is beautiful, functional, distinctive. Together they inspire and uplift. Our spirits rise with their rising” (181). These images that portray the relationships between the individual and the community have profound ethical implications. As Smith points out, the choice to focus on the interconnectedness of all living beings means that we are obliged to take responsibility for the results of our actions:

> We are each separate and unique, but we are also related to each other. There is great value in our individuality, but individuality only has real meaning within the context of interdependence . . . What does all this mean on a practical level? It means that any war will have repercussions the world over. It means that how I respond to those repercussions makes a difference to the present movement towards peace. (182)

Each of the elders whose story is told in *Bridges in Spirituality* shines with her own fierce individuality, yet each one continually affirms that without the love, support, and teachings of her family, culture, and community of faith, her life would be meaningless.
The star quilt is also an apt metaphor for the literary form of *Bridges in Spirituality*, an anthology whose life stories have a curiously disconnected yet connected feel to them. The narrative forms that make up the book include storytelling, anthropological data, oratory (speeches and talks), interviews, previously published works, official documents (appearing in the appendices), and private papers (diaries, marginalia, and so on). These various modes of discourse are brought together by the two editors of the anthology, Joyce Carlson and Alf Dumont. One potentially disconcerting aspect of *Bridges in Spirituality* is the fact that Carlson and Dumont have the first and last word in each section, with a great deal of historical, biographical, and even anthropological commentary interspersed throughout the stories of the elders themselves. This editorial practice is disturbing because of its potential colonizing influence on the words of the five women elders, given that Carlson is non-aboriginal and Dumont is male. Even though they make an effort to be culturally sensitive, the editors’ interjections still run the risk of coming across as pedantic, and of reducing the emotional and spiritual impact of the elders’ stories themselves. This editorial practice is most intrusive in the narrative of Simon’s life, perhaps because Simon is the oldest of the elders and the one most influenced by traditional Christian beliefs as taught by the missionaries. For example, when Simon comments that her grandparents got married and “didn’t live together like before because now they had religion,” Carlson offers the commentary that “Sarah’s family embraced Christianity and tended to negate the belief system that had guided their lives previously. Prior to the arrival of missionaries, the people had their own deep religious beliefs” (16). This editorial addition seems to represent an effort to bring Simon’s narrative more in line with those of the four other elders, who integrate their indigenous spiritual traditions more consciously with their Christianity than does the slightly older and more traditional Simon.

However, the editorial shaping of the spiritual life-narratives in this anthology serves another purpose as well, for it is clear that Carlson and Dumont hold the five women elders in the greatest esteem. For example, at the end of Smith’s narrative Dumont writes that “[i]n her lifetime, Wii Bistaii has become an extraordinary healer, building deep and firm bridges between spiritualities of the Gitksan and the many people who have come to call this country their home” (189). Gladys Taylor Cook’s story ends with Carlson’s list of her achievements and accomplishments (143), details that the reader would not have discerned from Cook’s
own more humble words. It gradually becomes clear that the role of the editors in this anthology is similar to that of the makers of a star quilt or star blanket: they seek to honour the recipient of the blanket, in this case the women elders themselves. Thus, Bridges in Spirituality partakes not only of the genre of spiritual autobiography, but also of sacred biography, or “accounts of lives of persons deemed to be holy” (“Biography” 220). The distinction is an important one, for in spiritual autobiography we have only the author’s assurance of the significance and authority of their sacred vision, while in religious biography, particularly in the context of the individuals who have been held up as elders in the First Nations spiritual traditions, an entire community has testified to the holiness of the individual’s life.

The reader is also an important part of the pattern of the “star quilt” that is Bridges in Spirituality, sewn as she or he is into the very fabric of the storytelling relationship. There are numerous references in the text to the role of the listener in the dynamic of oral narrative. When the elders discuss the significance of storytelling in their various cultures, they emphasize the active role of the listener. Although the storytelling relationship is a didactic one, with the speaker imparting the lesson or wisdom, nevertheless the audience must be ready to hear. In his introduction to the book and to the notion of elders, Alf Dumont emphasizes their role as storytellers. Yet he also insists that it may take time and effort for the listener to understand the meaning of the stories told:

Often the stories they tell for the situations we are facing may not make sense to us at the time. We are asked to reflect on the story that we are told, until we can see what is being taught. We are not to raise questions until we have lived with the story for some time and listened to it many times to gain the wisdom that has been offered. To hear the truth and understand the truth and then to apply the truth may take months or even years. (5, emphasis added)

The concept of “living with the story” evokes Frye’s notion of “living by the myths” of a religious tradition, thus reminding us that in this conceptualization of spiritual autobiography (as storytelling), the role of the reader may be akin to that of the spiritual autobiographer herself. Furthermore, this notion of the hard work required to understand and live out the wisdom of a story is very different from the popular perception of storytelling as a diverting form of entertainment. Such a model of the relationship between audience and narrative calls
for a form of reader response that is active and embodied, rather than passive and purely intellectual.

Appendix One to *Bridges in Spirituality*, like the postface by Jacques Grand’maison to Andrée Pilon Quiviger’s *L’Éden éclaté*, stands as an ideal or exemplary reader response to the material contained in the spiritual autobiography itself. This appendix contains transcripts of the apologies made to First Nations people on behalf of the United Church of Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada in 1986 and 1993 respectively. Both apologies make references to the act of listening, whether to its absence in the history of the church, or to its importance in the current context, and the United Church apology also uses the metaphor of vision. “We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality,” apologizes the Moderator of the United Church of Canada (191). “Together here with you I have listened as you have told your stories of the residential schools. I have heard the voices that have spoken of pain and hurt experienced in the schools, and of the scars which endure to this day” (191-192), confesses the Primate of the Anglican Church, whose hearing of the stories of abuse prompts an apology and a promise to work toward healing between the church and First Nations people. Appendix Two offers resources on the impact of the residential schools, and further resources on First Nations culture and Native spirituality are provided at the very end of the book. Given, then, that *Bridges in Spirituality* is designed at least in part as a teaching tool for non-First Nations Christians (in the United and Anglican churches), Appendix One offers a model of reader response. We are meant to listen to the stories of the elders, and to be moved to work for change and reconciliation in the church and in our own hearts.

However, if the appendices offer one explicit avenue of reader response to the text, the separate introductions written by Joyce Carlson and Alf Dumont, and the foreword by Stan McKay (the first person of First Nations background to be elected as Moderator of the United Church of Canada), offer another, related response: not only empathy and apology, but also celebration and transformation. McKay asserts that “[t]hose who encounter the stories of indigenous women elders in this book will be blessed” (vi), thus proposing a model of reading as relationship (“encounter”) and as benediction (“will be blessed”). Dumont shares his own experiences of learning from elders in his life, and offers the reflection on the
role of the listener in the storytelling relationship that was discussed above (5). However, it is Carlson who makes an explicit connection between listening to the stories of the elders and having a transcendent experience of the sacred. After describing a childhood experience in nature during which she felt “at one with the universe . . . separate and yet a part of everything” (1), Carlson writes:

I now believe this to have been a transcendent moment, a moment when the Great Mystery, the Divine Otherness is near. Such moments have occurred again and again in the writing and editing of these stories. It happened as I walked with Sarah Simon in Fort McPherson . . . Such a moment occurred on a hillside in the Qu’Appelle Valley when Dr. Jessie Saulteaux described the northern lights coming down to meet the dancers on the night her mother died . . . When I looked with Vi Smith out her living room window at Stekhoodinahl Mountain as she told me the Legend of the Mountain Goats of Damlaxan . . . When [Gladys Taylor Cook] described unconditional love . . . I had yet another glimpse of the transcendent. (1-2)

I have quoted from Carlson’s introduction at length because she offers a vision of the experience of the sacred that is central not only to Bridges in Spirituality, but also to all of the collective spiritual autobiographies discussed in this chapter: a vision in which the sacred is found in relationship and in community. In this understanding of spirituality, the storytelling relationship is a locus of the sacred, not only when the listener finally understands the meaning of the tale (as in Dumont’s example), but through the simple act of attending to the sacred in another’s life story. Such a vision of the connection between audience and spiritual autobiography implies not the “conversion” of the reader, as in the Augustinian model, but rather the kind of communal relationship that is established by liturgy or ritual. I will discuss this model of reading at greater length in Chapter Seven.

The Women’s Collective of St. Columba House: **Hope is the Struggle** (1996)

The authors of Hope is the Struggle (1996) refer to themselves as The Women’s Collective of St. Columba House, a community centre described as “an outreach ministry of The United Church of Canada” (vii). St. Columba House is located in Point St. Charles, “one of the most impoverished neighbourhoods in Montréal, with high unemployment, poor
education, high numbers of single-parent families and enormous energy required for survival” (vii).\(^3\) The group of women who put together this testimony to their collective growth in spirituality and social activism consists of four residents of Point St. Charles – Melissa Chamberlain, Elizabeth Garbish, Donna Leduc, and Myrna Rose – and the (then) director of St. Columba House, Faye Wakeling. *Hope is the Struggle* is made up of seven chapters, each one an extended conversation between the members of the women’s collective on some facet of the concept of “hope.” In Chapter One, the women discuss the genesis of the book, express their conviction that the notion of hope is central to their experience, and tell the stories of their involvement with St. Columba House. In Chapter Two, they explore the idea of hope in relation to community, while in Chapter Three they link hope to the activities of various community groups. Chapter Four deals with finding hope through a method of Bible study that puts marginalized people at the centre of the gospel message. Chapter Five wrestles with the presence or absence of hope in paid employment, Chapter Six describes the hope gained by visiting other grassroots community groups in Mexico, and Chapter Seven addresses the potential of hope to bring about personal, communal, and social transformation.

As with *Bridges in Spirituality*, the guiding metaphor of *Hope is the Struggle* is the image that adorns the cover of the book. In this case, it is a banner created by the various community groups that operate out of St. Columba House: the Alternate School (a bilingual daycare), the Family Lunch Program, the Women’s Discussion Group, Hand in Hand (a program for intellectually challenged adults), the Welfare Rights Committee, Point at Work (a co-operative furniture reupholstery business), the Point Adult Centre for Education (a popular education and literacy program), and the Summer Day Camp. The banner is made up of individual squares decorated with pictures or symbols that represent the activities of a particular group, with one square contributed by each group. The squares are arranged in the shape of a cross. The women of the collective spend a great deal of time describing this banner and its significance to them. They assert its importance by identifying it as the “focal point” of St. Columba House: “The banner hangs in our Main Hall in the midst of all the activities, organizing, community meals and meetings. It has become a focal point that has

\(^3\) The authors themselves prefer the term “impoverished” to “poor” or “low-income,” because of its political implications: “It is not a condition, but it is something imposed on you” (24).
helped our Worship Group share with others our understanding of theology that comes out of our day-to-day experiences in the struggle for a more just society" (66). The banner is also the focal point of the published text. Not only does it adorn the cover of the book, but a guide to its layout and a description of the various community groups are provided on pages xii and xiii. As a guiding metaphor the banner, like the star quilt of Bridges in Spirituality, represents not only a theological and ethical vision, but also the collaborative writing process itself.

Like the star quilt in Bridges in Spirituality, the banner is an example of a form of artwork traditionally associated with women, yet it also has a militant history in the Christian church. By holding up this image as a symbol of their community, the women’s collective not only affirms the importance of women’s work and promotes a vision of spirituality as concrete, earthly, and embodied, but also links their actions with the “battles” of Christians who struggle for justice in other countries. This is particularly important in the context of poverty from which these women tell their stories. As Donna points out: “The church preaches a heavenly God, when what we need, and I think people are looking for, is an earthly God . . . God is in the struggle” (21). The banner’s genesis parallels the consciousness-raising process in which the women’s collective is engaged throughout the book, by awakening them to the differences between viewing their work as marginal, and viewing it as central. They describe how at first they try to create the banner by arranging the squares “around an outline of the cross,” until Melissa suggests that they “use the pieces themselves, to form the cross” (66). The women describe what a “powerful moment” it was “as [they] realized the significance of what [they] had done”: “We had made a statement that the work of the people is the Christ in our midst – the ongoing presence of God in our suffering, pain, despair, joy and celebrations – the continuing struggle to build a more just

While one may think of banners in military or political processions as historically belonging to the province of men, the banners and other cloth hangings that decorate the interior of churches have traditionally been the work of women, as have the vestments worn by the (historically, usually male) priests themselves. In a passage from The Geometry of Love, Margaret Visser provides a wonderful description of the feminine quality of such handiwork: “During the annual week of festivities in honour of Saint Agnes, red and plum velvet hangings with gold embroidery clothe the apse; there are red hangings at the parapets of the gallery and also at the door to the canonry from the street . . . The clergy wear seventeenth-century red and gold vestments on the saint’s special day . . . Pink and purple flowers . . . deck the altar. The overal effect is delicate, solemn, and intensely female” (72).
community” (66). As with the “transcendent moments” described by Joyce Carlson in her work as an editor of Bridges in Spirituality, the scene portrayed in Hope is the Struggle is an important theological statement as well as being an autobiographical story. Like Carlson, the women’s collective of St. Columba House affirms that the sacred is located in the midst of community and is not separate from it.

The banner thus becomes a metaphor for the community of faith as it is experienced by the women’s collective of St. Columba House. All of the women discover their individual gifts in community, and it is through their community involvement that they come to a deeper understanding of their faith. In a discussion on the importance of the church in their lives, most of the women dismiss the relevance of Sunday worship services in their lives. Yet they all agree that they have found their spiritual home in St. Columba’s combination of worship and activism: “We see St. Columba House as a church in action. For us, and many in the community, this is a place where we feel God’s presence, where all people are welcome and where they gather to celebrate, to eat, to worship and support each other” (21). For the authors of Hope is the Struggle, St. Columba House is a site of paradox. It offers the sense of community and belonging that one would expect to find at home or at church, while paradoxically drawing the women out of their homes and their passive pews, and into social action and work in the world. All of the women, in sharing their personal stories, confess that through their involvement in St. Columba House they have ended up doing things that they would never have dreamed possible: speaking in public, teaching, starting their own business, traveling to Mexico, writing a book. Similarly, St. Columba House is paradoxically both a place of solidarity and communal action, and a forum where individual gifts are celebrated and encouraged to grow. Thus, the dialectical negotiations between individual and community in Hope is the Struggle are contained and resolved in the actual community of St. Columba House.

The banner is also a metaphor for the collaborative writing process. Like Bridges in Spirituality, Hope is the Struggle is a literary work that retains the traces of its genesis in oral conversations. In the case of Hope is the Struggle, the discussions held by the members of the women’s collective of St. Columba House are inscribed within the written narrative. Thus the predominant narrative form of the book is that of the transcribed group discussion. The text abounds with verbs and expressions that indicate speech, such as “commented,”
"jumped in to say," "interjected," "agreed," "continued," "began to speculate," and "discussed," to offer but a small sample taken from two pages at random (88-89). These group discussions are modeled on the popular education methods and the Bible study groups of Latin American Base Christian communities (a hermeneutic that has come to be known as Liberation Theology). It is no accident that the chapter that deals specifically and overtly with Bible study, Chapter Four ("Hope - Shifting from Margins to Centre"), is the nucleus of the book's seven chapters. Significantly, Chapter Four is also the chapter in which the genesis of the banner is described, as a project that grew out of the Worship Group's search for a way to "express through some symbol the connections between our work for social change and the gospel" (61). By putting the individual squares at the centre of the cross, the women affirm that their work for social change is the gospel, or the "good news" of Christianity.

The method of Bible study popularized by the Latin American Base Christian communities is both concrete and revolutionary, for it invites those who are oppressed or marginalized to read their stories and concerns as being at the centre of the biblical narrative, and assures them of God's "preferential option for the poor." The hermeneutics of Liberation Theology can be understood not only as the process of putting the marginalized individual at the centre of the biblical narrative, but also as a way of situating the life story of the individual within the broader narrative of the community of faith. The authors of Hope is the Struggle are constantly seeking parallels between their own experience (and that of the other residents of Point St. Charles), and the stories of scripture. For example, they compare the desperate plight of the unemployed in Montréal with that of the workers in one of Jesus' parables (18, 64-65, Matthew 20:1-17), and see the narrative of their own empowerment as women in the story of "the healing of the bent over woman" (47-49, Luke 13:10-17). By identifying their own life experience in the biblical texts, the women of St. Columba House find the courage and the strength to carry on in their struggles for justice, knowing that they are not alone. They are inspired by figures like the widow who pleads for her rights with the unjust judge (62, Luke 18:1-5). These biblical narratives are embodied by the women of St. Columba House in the same way that Snowber and Piotte bring biblical characters and

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5 This phrase was popularized and published by a meeting of Latin American bishops in 1973, and has become one of the key expressions denoting the praxis of liberation theology (Rowland 5).
metaphors to life in their own daily experiences. However, there is one key difference: in *Hope is the Struggle* the communal and social justice dimensions of the stories are emphasized over and above their private and devotional meaning. Thus, once again, these spiritual autobiographies rejoin the more public memoirs of Chapter Three.

What is perhaps most startling about the hermeneutical process that Liberation Theology has inspired, and what makes it so empowering for those who have felt relegated to the margins of theological discourse by class and level of education, is that it is a method of interpretation that privileges experience over academic study. This emphasis allows the women's collective to argue for the primacy of the meanings that emerge from their thoughtful and engaged group discussions, as, for example, in the story of the widow and the unjust judge:

We marvelled at how this widow, who had so few rights and was the most vulnerable in biblical times, could ever have known that she should fight for her rights . . . This determination and faith is the point of Jesus' message. Most Bible commentaries focus on the comparison of the unjust judge and a just God, missing the heart of this story of courage. (62-63, emphasis in the text)

While these women are emphatic in their insistence that other commentators have "miss[ed] the heart" or truth of the story which they themselves have understood, their hermeneutical authority is grounded in collective conversation rather than in the solitary voices heard by Richard and Piotte, or the individual mystical visions of Marchessault or Butala. An important theme in all of the spiritual autobiographies in this chapter is that although religious tradition needs to be enlivened by new meanings and new interpretations, this process of renewal must be a communal rather than an isolated effort.

An even more surprising example of this hermeneutic occurs when the women discuss "the Parable of the Gold Coins," in which the servant of an absent king is punished for hiding a gold coin instead of investing it (130-135, Luke 19:11-27). Rather than seeing the king as a metaphor for God, the women turn the passage upside down, naming the king as an unjust employer, and identifying the parable's only element of hope as the condemned
servant who stands up to the king and accuses him in return (134-135). They understand this parable to mean that even when a situation is hopeless, one can still take a stand for what one believes. The biblical narrative thus becomes an inextricable part of their own story: “Our collective stories are so connected to this tough parable and we have now seen it as a reality check and a challenge to never use the word ‘hope’ lightly” (135). What this example demonstrates is that the hermeneutical process is an ongoing practice for the authors of Hope is the Struggle: “Every time we read this passage, we get something new out of it and it brings strength” (134). Also, hermeneutics is portrayed as a lived experience, rather than a purely intellectual enterprise. The search for hope in the scriptures becomes, in itself, an act of hope and faith that is also grounded in the realism of their situation.

For the authors of Hope is the Struggle, the valuing of experience over theological or academic expertise proves to be a challenge:

Our reading of scripture repeatedly breaks open the text in new ways with the intuitive identification with the powerless in any story or encounter. It has been a gradual process for us to feel confident in the significance of our own interpretations and it has been tough to let go of deeply-rooted beliefs in an all-powerful, judgemental, male God. (61)

Yet this hermeneutical work bears fruit when the women’s collective is invited to visit grassroots Christian groups in Mexico, accompanying a group of United Church theological students. In this context, the women of Point St. Charles are able to honour their ability to “identify so directly with the Mexican people [they] met, feeling a really strong bond and connection that transcended all language barriers,” and they can acknowledge that the gift of their experience is as important as the theological students’ “skills of analysing and articulating what [they] were experiencing from a theological perspective” (102). The two groups come into conflict over their interpretation of the theological significance of the “Jesus dolls” carried by Mexican women in religious processions, yet the women from St.

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6 For examples of the traditional interpretation of this passage, in which the king is equated with Jesus and the “fearful” servant with an unfaithful Christian, see Harper's Bible Commentary, gen. ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper, 1988): 1037, as well as The Interpreter's Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1951-57): 327-334, in which the parable is read as a straightforward allegory: “The gospel story teaches that the second coming of Christ will be delayed; that Christians have specific duties in the interim; and that there will be a last judgment with rewards and punishments” (328).
Columba House are able to affirm an understanding of the spiritual meaning of the dolls that comes out of their own experience. In a sense, with Hope is the Struggle we have come full circle back to Wilson’s and Manning’s memoirs, but where the two more privileged authors needed to learn to see the world through the eyes of the “two-thirds world,” the women of St. Columba House describe a process of learning to trust the vision of their own eyes.

Hope is the Struggle shares with the other collaborative spiritual autobiographies in this chapter a strong sense of the necessity of linking past and future. The process of group discussion is seen as a fundamental way of making this connection between past actions and the hope for future transformation: “As we spoke of the significance of these long-time struggles in our community, we appreciated how important this history has been in providing the base that has allowed this community to survive . . . [T]he hope for the future comes out of such shared experiences” (30). Again and again the authors tell how stories of “collective action” have given the residents of Point St. Charles hope and courage to carry on in their struggles for social justice (for example, 42). For the authors of Hope is the Struggle, as for the other spiritual autobiographers discussed in this chapter, the efforts to link past and future are fundamentally a question of survival. Just as the First Nations women elders worry about passing on the best of their indigenous traditions to their children and grandchildren, and helping them to break free of cycles of racism, poverty, and addiction, the women’s collective of St. Columba House seeks ways to embrace the positive values of community in Point St. Charles, while empowering their children to escape the welfare system and its legacy of poverty (22, 83-84). The final section of the book records a conversation between the members of the writing collective on the process of writing itself, in which the women all acknowledge how the experience has helped them to make connections between their faith and their social actions: “Through our writing collective, our eyes have been opened to new insights about our work and struggle. The circle goes around, as Myrna often says – an intertwining spiral of experience, analysis, action, and reflection. At the core of it all is the powerful sense of the presence of God who is with us in the midst of the struggle” (136). Thus the actions of seeing (having visions) and speaking (finding one’s voice in order to express those visions) inform one another in a never-ending process: the act of discussion and writing leads to new insights, as well as to the confidence to share those visions with
others. Once again, we see that writing can play an integral role not only in transcribing, but also in creating, the spiritual life.

Like the First Nations women of Bridges in Spirituality, and like the Jewish and Muslim women whose stories will be discussed further on, the women of Point St. Charles belong to a demographic group that is often invisible in mainstream Canadian society: in this case, that of people who belong to impoverished communities. The concerns of the women’s collective of St. Columba House extend beyond Point St. Charles to the provincial and national contexts: “We are deeply concerned about the mounting unemployment in our community, in Québec and across Canada” (85). One of the realizations that comes to the women while writing the book is that if individuals living in poverty are to improve their conditions, they need to work together as communities. The process of putting their concerns at the centre of the biblical narratives must be complemented by the fight to bring their concerns to the centre of the national agenda: “In the present socio-economic crisis in our country, we see no signs of hope that there is a will or determination to work for a more just society . . . This is an enormous challenge to impoverished communities like ours. Community building is essential if we are to survive this onslaught and continue to be a community with spirit and hope” (130). Community thus becomes, for the individual struggling with poverty as for the individual Jewish person, Muslim, or First Nations Christian, a promise of solidarity and visibility. Whereas an individual can be easily ignored, a community that speaks and acts together is more difficult to dismiss.

The narrative form of Hope is the Struggle, rooted in group discussion and Bible study, presents its audience with both opportunities and challenges. By including a record of their actual discussions in the written text, the women’s collective of St. Columba House affirms the process of conversation and consensus through which the book was written. The reader is drawn into the conversations as a participant, for the discussions and arguments are recreated in great detail and nuance throughout the book. At the same time, however, the colloquial style of the narrative may threaten its authority as a literary work. The text carries some of the repetitiveness of an ongoing discussion between friends or colleagues, just as the diary formats of Quiviger, Snowber, or Piotte’s spiritual autobiographies contain some of the repetitiveness of daily life. Nevertheless, this characteristic is as much a strength as a liability, for in the end, Hope is the Struggle itself stands as a testimony to an achievement
that many of the women in the writing collective felt was beyond their reach: the publication of a book. As Myrna writes:

I often wondered as I was growing up what it would be like to write a book or for that matter have anything to do with one. I used to think how smart a person is to be able to write something people will read . . . but what could I possibly write about? . . . I hope our stories do get published. Maybe other women will get hope and strength to carry on to make our community and world a better place to live. (136)

Myrna’s reflections give voice to the ideal reader response envisioned by Hope is the Struggle: that readers may find hope in the midst of their own struggles, through hearing the stories of other women who have worked for social change in the light of their religious faith.

Like the other collective spiritual autobiographies analysed in this chapter, Hope is the Struggle has a dual implied audience: those who share the context of poverty and struggle that is the daily reality of the women of Point St. Charles, and those who do not. Whether or not the former group would have the time, energy, or education to read this book is debatable. However, the engagement of St. Columba House in adult education programs – part of the ongoing story of the spiritual autobiography that continues outside the boundaries of the written text – will at least attempt to ensure that such a readership is a possibility. Furthermore, like the other four texts this one is also engaged in a process of making visible those who have been invisible in the history of Canadian society and of the mainstream Canadian churches: those who come from economically impoverished communities. If the theological hermeneutic in which the women’s collective of St. Columba House is engaged is one of placing their experience at the centre of the biblical narrative, then the more economically privileged readers of Hope is the Struggle may have to come to terms with their place on the margins of the gospel stories. The members of the wider audience of this book may need to acknowledge that they have more in common with the intellectual but unfeeling theological students, or with the unjust rulers of the New Testament parables, and may be required to reflect on the implications of such parallels for their own social responsibilities. By painstakingly recording the course of their own spiritual and social awakenings, the authors of Hope is the Struggle ensure that attentive and willing readers will have little choice but to engage in the same process in their own lives. What is perhaps most encouraging for any reader of this collaborative spiritual autobiography is the fact that
nowhere do its authors imply that the task of personal and social transformation is an easy one. As Wakeling points out in encouragement to the members of Point At Work, the struggling furniture reupholstery co-operative: “Your work is valuable, your commitment is really an act of faith, and for those who can see this, you are a sign of hope” (58). To be a sign of hope in the midst of unjust or hopeless situations is indeed the goal of many contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies, whether narrated or lived.

Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe, eds.: From Memory to Transformation: Jewish Women’s Voices (1998)

Like Bridges in Spirituality and Hope is the Struggle, From Memory to Transformation: Jewish Women’s Voices (1998) has its genesis in an oral and performative context; in this case, a conference by the same name held in Toronto in 1996. Of the twenty-two contributions that make up the anthology, sixteen are by women who identify as Canadians or who live in Canada; the remaining six are written by women from the United States and Israel. However, many of the writers living in Canada identify more in these essays with the diasporic Jewish community than with Canadian society, as we shall see further on. From Memory to Transformation is divided into four parts, and most of the pieces of writing that make up those four parts contain an element of spiritual autobiography. “Part One: Legacy” includes two studies of the place of women in traditional Jewish music and literature, an essay about support groups for the daughters of Holocaust survivors, and an autobiographical narrative about a search for family memories in Poland. “Part Two: Identity” contains a reflection on what it means to be a secular Jew, the discussion by a visual artist of the role of memory and forgetting in her artwork, the curator’s description of an art exhibit that formed part of the conference, and the story of a friendship between two Jewish women, one lesbian and one heterosexual. “Part Three: Religion and Ritual” gathers together reflections on the role of memory in Judaism, on inclusive language and theology, on the transformations being effected by women rabbis, on the challenges of raising a Jewish lesbian family, and on new rituals by and for Jewish women. “Part Four: Activism and Social Change” includes an essay about the Moroccan-Jewish community of Montréal, a discussion of the responsibilities of Jewish women with respect to economic justice, and the
thoughts of three writers of Jewish children’s literature. As this brief overview suggests, there is an emphasis throughout the anthology on the diversity of contemporary Jewish Canadian women’s experiences.

The relationship between identity and community is a complex and often troubled one for the contributors to From Memory to Transformation. As editors Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe make explicit in their introduction, the anthology “is an expression of a new social movement – Jewish feminism – that is transforming the secular and spiritual components of Jewish life” (9). They point out that contemporary Jewish women have a much more challenging time understanding and expressing their identity than did their foremothers:

If our mothers or their mothers had been asked how they identified themselves as Jews, they would have given well-defined, prescriptive and proscriptive answers based on their religion and traditions, centuries old. Today, the issue of identity is much more complex. How can we define ourselves as feminists and still be part of the continuum of Jewish traditions? What part of the legacy do we question and what part do we retain in our search for identity? (10)

As we have already seen, these questions are not unique to Jewish women, but are faced by many women spiritual autobiographers, who engage in dialectical negotiations between “expression and obedience” (in Ibsen’s terms), or between tradition and innovation. The contributors to From Memory to Transformation are part of what Susannah Heschel refers to as “[t]he most recent wave of Jewish feminism, beginning during the 1960s,” that is made up of women who are “not breaking away from the community, but struggling to become full members of it” (xv).

However, the issue of belonging is a particularly poignant one for the authors of these often autobiographical essays, because many of them are the children of Holocaust survivors or diaspora (immigrant or refugee) Jews, who often feel cut off from their roots and their history in other countries. The role of memory and family history in identity formation is further complicated when families may refuse to talk about painful memories, or when all of a family’s possessions may have been lost or destroyed during times of war and persecution. As Swartz writes in her story about traveling to Poland in search of her family’s roots: “I have felt very vulnerable in my quest for family history. A child of survivors, I am imbued
with the importance of not forgetting. Yet there are no photographs and few witnesses to my parents’ stories” (75). The paradox of being called upon to remember a history that is too painful to be handed down is one that the contributors to this volume must resolve in various ways. They do so primarily through the guiding metaphor at work in From Memory to Transformation, which is not a visual image like the star quilt or the banner, nor even a motif such as wandering or exile, but rather a hermeneutical practice specific to the Jewish tradition, one that carries with it a wealth of associations and implications for the work in which the contributors to this volume are engaged. As with Bridges in Spirituality, it is challenging (and perhaps deceptive) to try to identify a guiding metaphor for an anthology made up of individual (and in some ways unrelated or unconnected) pieces of writing or oral narrative. Nevertheless, in From Memory to Transformation, the notion of Midrash, a creative rabbinical hermeneutic, is mentioned by two of the women in their autobiographical reflections, and their definitions of the term allow for a broad application of its meaning. The concept of Midrash can then take its place at the core of a complex web of images and themes that are explored by the other authors in the volume. In a panel on “Women Rabbis Transforming the Religious Establishment,” Rabbi Elizabeth Bolton defines Midrash in the following way:

There is a traditional Jewish text, also a process, called Midrash, or interpretation. It involves reading between the lines, filling in the blanks in biblical and other stories. Creating Midrash has been a critical step in the development of our laws, customs and traditions. Traditional Midrash was created by rabbis in the last few hundred years. (204, emphasis mine)

Bolton’s definition of Midrash raises some important points. The image of “filling in the blanks” is a suggestive one; as we shall see, it can be applied to many other aspects of Jewish women’s experience besides the interpretation of sacred texts. This image also fits well with the project of making visible the invisible, or making audible the silenced, in which all of the spiritual autobiographies in this study are engaged. The fact that Bolton describes Midrash as both “text” and “process” relates it to the forms of spiritual autobiography that all the authors examined in this study have adopted. Furthermore, Bolton’s insistence that Midrash is a relatively recent phenomenon in Jewish history, “created by rabbis in the last few hundred years,” implicitly gives contemporary Jewish women permission to situate
themselves in this creative, scholarly lineage. Bolton goes on to make this permission explicit when she writes: “The rabbis were able to take a biblical text and elaborate and embellish to suit their own purpose— and their material became another layer in the sacred canon. So I think if they can do it, we can too!” (205). Bolton herself uses Midrash explicitly to confront the absence of lesbian relationships in the Torah. However, the process of Midrash permeates From Memory to Transformation, even when it is not named as such.

Midrash, like all the other guiding metaphors employed by contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers, is not merely a convenient image but one that expresses the theological and artistic vision of From Memory to Transformation itself. In her discussion of the concept of zakhor, the Jewish commandment to “remember,” Norma Baumel Joseph argues that this ritual obligation is a religious imperative that includes not only the received, patriarchal versions of Jewish history, but also the stories and voices of women that have been left out, forgotten, or silenced (178). Thus, feminist Midrash becomes a way of filling in the gaps of Jewish tradition and honouring a commandment that up until now has been only half followed. In her discussion of “New Rituals for Jewish Women,” Pearl Goldberg carries on with the image of “filling in the blanks” by describing how “women who see themselves as persons in their own right, with full responsibility and obligation as Jews, find gaps in ritual that cry out to be filled” (224), such as the historical lack of parallels to the brit or male circumcision ceremony, and to the bar mitzvah. Susan G. Cole, in her essay on Jewish lesbian parenting, also takes the process of Midrash into the realm of the performative, or of lived experience, when she writes that lesbians’ “appropriation” of the “strong women” in the Bible “will feel less [strained] as more and more lesbians write their own Midrash with their own lives” (220). She also praises the work of creative writers who “are reinventing our past so as to make lesbianism a part of our cultural and community mosaic” (220). Thus, like spiritual autobiography, Midrash is a narrative form, a hermeneutic, and also a way of life.

The mosaic image employed by Cole conjures up the concept of the Canadian mosaic, a metaphor for a practice of multiculturalism that honours the integrity of different

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7 This imperative “to remember” is a part of the survival practices of other minority groups as well, as evidenced by the Québec slogan “Je me souviens,” and the work of Marchessault to rediscover women’s and native people’s histories.
traditions while including them in a larger whole. However, some of the contributors to From Memory to Transformation draw attention to the exclusion of their Jewish heritage from the Canadian mosaic. The metaphorical filling in of textual gaps and silences that is accomplished by the hermeneutical work of Midrash can also be seen as a process of making visible that which has been invisible. Just as the contributions of First Nations women have been excluded from the writing of Canadian history until recently, editors Swartz and Wolfe comment on the reasons for the absence of Jewish women from the narrative of Canadian identity: “Systemic, ongoing anti-Semitism in North America has also exacerbated the problem of lost memory. Traditional sources for relating heritage mostly kept Jews, along with other minorities, invisible” (12). Children’s author Rhea Tregebov describes “the invisibility of being Jewish” as “a product of looking out into the available cultural paradigms and seeing next to nothing that reflected my own experience” (292), while young adult fiction writer Sharon Kirsh tells of her struggle “both to take the time to recall what life was like for a Jewish girl growing up in that era in that particular place, and to value it as one tiny piece in the tapestry of our modern culture” (297). Both authors, by writing fiction for young people that portrays various realities of Jewish Canadian life, are engaged in a process of Midrash on the canon of Canadian literature, filling in the blanks, gaps, and silences with the stories of their Jewish experience.

The sense of not fully belonging to Canadian society is part of a wider condition of rootlessness and diaspora that forms a complex part of identity and belonging for many of these Jewish women. This is particularly true as they come from a tradition in which wandering and exile form a significant part of their inherited religious legacy. Swartz describes a feeling that is shared by many of the other contributors to From Memory to Transformation, that of not feeling that she belongs anywhere: “I have never felt that I had roots in any one place. Mostly I identify as a diaspora Jew – a Jew from nowhere or, in my better moments and perhaps more accurately, from everywhere. A child of survivors, I have

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8 On the topic of exile in Judaism, see the entry on “Galut” (“exile”) in The Encyclopedia of Judaism, ed. Geoffrey Wigoder (New York: Macmillan, 1989): “The concept of exile or of the Jewish people living outside of their land is found early in the Bible... In rabbinc terminology, Galut came to mean the whole tragic state of exile and alienation, both physical and psychological, in which Jews found themselves after 70 CE... It meant homelessness, encountering hostility and discrimination, and an all-pervasive sense of alienation” (275).
not yet found a place where I belong” (75). The image of having or lacking roots returns again and again, often in contrast with other Canadians who seem to have deeper roots. Greta Hofmann Nemiroff, in her “Speculations of a Secular Jew,” writes: “I am only partially nourished by the yet shallow roots set down by my parents in Quebec, a place where the ‘elect’ themselves proudly and exclusively refer to the depth of their somewhat deeper roots with the expression Québecois de souche” (108). However, for some of the contributors, this rootlessness becomes a positive and creative empty space, rather like the gaps that can be filled with Midrashic invention. Judith R. Cohen writes about her research into Judeo-Spanish Sephardic song, suggesting that this music is part of the cultural legacy of non-Hispanic Jewish people as well (49-50). Yolande Cohen and Joseph Yossi Lévy assert that the Moroccan-Jewish community in Montréal does indeed give them a sense of belonging: “[W]e are like the farmer who does not have a problem finding his roots, since they are always under his feet. So, too, our feet are rooted in our communities” (268). Even Nemiroff admits that her marginal identity as a secular Jewish feminist living in Canada is precisely that which creates a space of difference from which to write about her experience (108). Artist Yvonne Singer echoes this question when she asks: “Are the conditions of being uprooted and alienated from my place of birth responsible for making me an artist?” (111). Thus, the historically sorrowful image of exile can become a space for the creation of new identities for Jewish Canadian women.

Perhaps largely in response to this dialectical negotiation between the images of exile and rootedness, From Memory to Transformation has the hybrid quality of other contemporary Canadian women’s spiritual autobiographies, affirming that theology, criticism, and the narration of personal experience belong side by side. However, the highly intellectual narrative forms that the contributors to this anthology prefer have a particular significance when viewed in the context of the Jewish rabbinical tradition. Here again the notion of Midrash is helpful, for Midrash is at once scholarly commentary and imaginative storytelling, blending theology and narrative. As the rabbinical tradition of intellectual study and scholarly debate has a place of central importance in the history of Judaism, it seems in many ways appropriate that the forum for Jewish women’s autobiographical and spiritual reflections should be an academic conference. In a 1967 essay entitled “The Jewish Intellectual in an Open Society,” Jewish American theologian and novelist Arthur A. Cohen
writes: "God is seen by the rabbis as a studious and learned God, attending to the study of Scripture and its Commentaries, conducting in paradise a vast Talmudic Academy to which all those deserving and undeserving in the House of Israel are assembled in study and contemplation" (133). The importance of study merits a separate entry in The Encyclopedia of Judaism (669-670), in which "the centrality of Torah study" is emphasized: "The Talmud debates which is more important, action or study, and decides on study, 'for it brings one to action'" (669-670). The insistence that study "brings one to action" links the social engagement of the contributors to From Memory to Transformation with the activism of the women's collective of St. Columba House, and of the women elders in Bridges in Spirituality.

The Jewish tradition also emphasizes ritual, and this attention to the rituals that surround everyday acts is present in the discursive practices of the anthology. For example, the importance of questions and answers is alluded to by more than one of the authors in From Memory to Transformation. "I will conclude in the traditional Jewish way: with questions," writes Rabbi Elyse Goldstein towards the end of her discussion of inclusive language in Judaism (195). Similarly, several of the chapters incorporate the traces of conversations (for example, in the panel of women rabbis or in the description of workshops for daughters of Holocaust survivors) or performances and stories that bear the imprint of ritual (for example, the description of the work of the Minyan of Crones, or of the artwork of Yvonne Singer, or Joseph's discussion of forgotten women's prayers and rituals). The performative nature of ritual offers Jewish women the kind of embodied spiritual practice that First Nations Christian women discover in the healing power of stories, or the women's collective of St. Columba House finds in social action. Nevertheless, the Jewish tradition remains "a culture based . . . forcefully on the word" (122), so that the role of language in ritual remains central. As Goldstein writes in her essay on inclusive language, echoing the arguments of generations of feminist scholars: "Language both reflects and creates reality" (190, emphasis in the text). The ability of language to create reality is precisely the power of ritual and, as I will argue in my Conclusion, in many ways spiritual autobiography bears a closer relationship to ritual than to to any purely textual form.

Like Bridges in Spirituality and Hope is the Struggle, the complex relationship between the individual and the community in From Memory to Transformation lends the text
both a past and a future orientation. Just as Midrash is seen as a traditional interpretive activity that can be appropriated by contemporary Jewish women, so too, does Rabbi Elyse Goldstein see the work of writing inclusive language prayers and liturgies as a creative act that will invent new traditions for future generations (196). Rabbi Nancy Wechsler-Azen offers an image that captures this sense of the individual’s place in the transmission of tradition: “I am well aware that these past twenty-five plus years of women as rabbis is a small link on the long chain of Jewish tradition. How we consciously choose to lead as women rabbis will have a profound impact on how Judaism will look in the next millenium” (201). The daughters of immigrants and of Holocaust survivors, like Swartz, share their fear of not being able to transmit family and religious history to their own children, because these histories are completely removed from their own memories and experience (75). Yet contributors like Swartz and Singer go to creative lengths to appropriate this history for themselves, either through travel or through art, while others affirm the power of the imagination to create both past and future. Goldstein repeats the words of “Nelle Morton, an early feminist thinker and writer . . . : ‘Failing to have memory, invent’ ” (194-195). This is precisely what many of these Jewish Canadian feminists do, whether their inventions are ritual, artwork, literature, support groups, or prayers.

Like the other collective spiritual autobiographies in this chapter, From Memory to Transformation has a dual audience inscribed within its pages. In their introduction to the volume, editors Swartz and Wolfe write that they “believe [the book] will prove a useful resource for women who are struggling to create fulfilled, equitable and enriched Jewish lives for themselves and their families” (10). Indeed, the anthology offers stories and testimonies that bear witness to the diversity, the challenges, and the accomplishments of contemporary Jewish Canadian feminists. However, the editors also express their “hope that the book will enable a broad audience of readers to gain a more complete understanding of the lives and aspirations of Jewish women today” (10). Given the explicit and implicit discussions of anti-Semitism in the anthology, the desire to speak to a non-Jewish audience is an important dialogical choice. For contemporary Jewish Canadian women, unlike their Christian counterparts, the education of non-Jewish readers carries with it an element of survival. In many ways, the same is true for Muslim Canadian women as well.

*At My Mother's Feet: Stories of Muslim Women* (1999), a project initiated by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, like the three other collective spiritual autobiographies examined in this chapter, represents an effort to make visible the contributions to Canadian society of a group of women who have been invisible because of their religious and cultural heritage. In her introduction to the book, Vision TV journalist Sadia Zaman describes the negative portrayal of Muslim women as victims that is common in the Western media, and then protests that there are "many other truths" about Muslim women "that rarely make it to the public arena" (9). She goes on to describe the aspirations of *At My Mother's Feet*: "This book tries to get at some of those other truths through women who have felt excluded from our public history most of their lives" (9). This exclusion of Muslim women from Canadian national history is brought home by the fact that "[t]here was no official record of Muslim women in Canada until the 1980s. For the first time, in the 1981 Census, religious affiliation was recorded by gender and province" (15). This historical invisibility of Muslim women is one of the inaccuracies of the Canadian national narrative that *At My Mother's Feet* seeks to correct.

This short collection of life-narratives, numbering 120 pages in total, has a fairly straightforward structure. After an introduction by Zaman, a chapter on the historical background of Muslim women in Canada written by Zohra Husaini, and a short discussion of Islam that is followed by a glossary of relevant Arabic words, the book consists of seven biographical or autobiographical sketches of Canadian Muslim women, the majority of them immigrants. Each chapter has as its title the first name of its subject. The first two narratives, "Amina [Haidar] & Rikia [Saddy]," and "Najabey [Jazey]," are the stories of Lebanese and Syrian Muslim immigrants, told by their daughters (and, in one case, granddaughter). The other five chapters, "Lila [Fahlman]" (from Saskatchewan), "Solmaz [Sahin]" (an immigrant from Turkey), "Atiya [Jafri]" (an immigrant from Pakistan), "Mariam [Bhabha]" (a French Canadian convert to Islam), and "Adeena [Niazi]" (a refugee from Afghanistan) are all narratives by the women in their own words, although Zaman acknowledges that "[s]ome of the stories were developed from written submissions, one from
an oral submission, and the rest from in-depth interviews" (10). Jafri’s story is translated from Urdu into English by her daughter.

The guiding metaphor of At My Mother’s Feet is the image of the pioneer, chosen and defined collectively by the members of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women. Zaman describes this collaborative process in her introduction:

It was Muslim women themselves, who, at the 1997 CCMW conference in London, Ontario, defined the term ‘pioneer.’ During a workshop about forty women decided a pioneer is someone who creates change, is determined and courageous, is a risk-taker who initiates leadership, is patient and resilient, is driven and balanced, is often an outcast in society yet compassionate, and someone who has a vision of the future.

(10)

This comprehensive vision of what it means to be a pioneer provides a correlative to the predominant myth of pioneers as heroic figures or as the founding figures of Canadian society. The entry on “Pioneer memoirs” in the 1997 Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature suggests that “[t]he accurate tales by pioneers of their heroic battles against harsh climate, homesickness, isolation, and poverty are the epics of Canadian literature” (921). By inscribing their auto/biographical sketches within the genre of the pioneer memoir, and by redefining the notion of the pioneer in their own terms, Muslim Canadian women thereby claim their places in the ongoing epic of Canadian literature and history.

Zaman calls attention to “the spirit of a pioneer” demonstrated by her own immigrant mother, and many of the other authors place Muslim women's pioneering accomplishments at the centre of their narratives. For example, the autobiography of Lila Fahlman is a story of “firsts”: she was “the first Muslim woman in Canada to run for political office” (64), was one of the founders of the Canadian Council of Muslim women, was “the first Muslim woman in Canada to sit on a school board” (66), and she played a central role in the preservation of the Al Rashid Mosque in Edmonton as a historical building, by having it moved to Fort Edmonton, the site of a pioneer village (66-67). Najabey Jazey’s daughter, Maryam Campbell, writes that “[i]n those early days” after her mother first came to Canada (around 1915), she “did a lot of things that most pioneer women in that day and age had to do” (48). This is not the era that we normally associate with pioneer narratives, providing a reminder that life in Canada has continued to be harsh for new immigrants. In the chapter on
historical background, Husaini tries to give names and stories to some of the earliest Muslim women immigrants to Canada (15-18), praising them as “heroic women” who “worked hard to sustain their families and to build their communities within an alien culture and language” (18). Already, the interdependence between the individual and the community is present and problematized by the rhetoric of this passage. For while it is seen as important to name and make visible the individual women, it is also perceived as important to affirm their contributions to the building of community.

The choice of the pioneer as a guiding metaphor is particularly conducive to a sense of congruence between the Canadian and Muslim experiences, especially when the notion of being a pioneer is juxtaposed with the Islamic concept of migration, or of the hijra (flight) of the Prophet Muhammad. Atiya Jafri’s autobiographical narrative begins by drawing an explicit parallel between the migrations of Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad, and the immigrants who make their new homes in Canada (85). In the introduction to the book Making Muslim Space (1996), editor Barbara D. Metcalf elaborates further that "[f]or some Muslims, there is a particular sense of merit and satisfaction because of the difficulties of practice in a larger environment that is not Muslim" (8). Metcalf goes on to point out the relevance of the term hijra to Muslim migrants:

In describing the choice to reside in non-Muslim territories, certain terms resonate, notably hijra . . . Hijra may long have been understood as movement from a land where one could not lead an Islamic life, typically one of non-Muslim rule, to a land ruled by Muslims. Today, it can continue to mean physical movement, this time from a land of Muslim settlement, but of poverty, to a non-Muslim land of greater opportunity. (19, italics in the text)

Another contributor to At My Mother’s Feet, Solmaz Sahin, describes the “sense of merit” in being a devout Muslim in a non-Muslim country, when she writes:

Sometimes I complain about being here . . . I left a life that was easy for me as a Muslim for one that has been much more difficult. One day when I was complaining, a family friend said those who leave are special people with a vision chosen by God. Living in a Muslim country I may not have felt the need to serve Allah as much. Here I was given the opportunity to serve Him better. Perhaps this was my mission. (84)
Whereas the image of exile inscribes immigration with a sense of loss for many Jewish Canadian women, the equation of immigration with hijra and pioneering becomes an imaginative opportunity for Muslim Canadian women to invest the activity with more positive connotations.

The juxtaposition of the image of the Canadian pioneer with that of the Muslim hijra is a masterful literary achievement, for it reconciles two imaginative conceptualizations of identity, allowing Muslim women to belong fully both to their Canadian context and to their Islamic heritage. This dual sense of belonging — both to the worldwide community of Muslims and to Canada as a nation — finds expression throughout this short collection of autobiographical narratives. Maryam Bhabha, a French-Canadian convert to Islam, writes: "I hope this story will give my daughter a sense of belonging. And maybe one day my granddaughters. We do belong to Canada, all of us" (110). Bhabha is a particularly interesting case in point for the juxtaposition of Canadian and Muslim identities, as she is proud of her roots as “a 17th-generation Canadian” (99), yet by wearing the hijab (head scarf) that identifies her as a Muslim woman, she comes up against the prejudice of people who admonish her: “Can’t you dress Canadian?” (99). Although proud of her heritage as a Québécoise, Bhabha asserts the primacy of immigration as a fundamental part of Canadian identity: “We all came here from somewhere, except for our native peoples” (99). Afghani refugee Adeena Niazi echoes this sentiment when she claims: “I chose [to come to] Canada because Canada was a land of immigrants” (113). Solmaz Sahin uses the image of a transplanted or grafted plant to describe the difficulty for Muslims of putting down roots in a new country, a challenge that future generations of Canadian Muslims may take for granted (84). However, it is Atiya Jafri who offers one of the most poignant images of belonging to Canadian society when she tells of her sense of identification with Margaret Laurence’s irascible and alienated – and quintessentially Canadian – protagonist of The Stone Angel (1964), to the point where Jafri applies for permission to translate the book into Urdu (93). It is also Jafri who ends her story by sharing “some wisdom with the younger [Muslim] sisters” (94). “You will choose the best of both worlds,” she assures them (95), echoing the prayer of Gladys McCue Taylor in Bridges in Spirituality (75). Thus, the dual images of pioneer and hijra are at the centre of these women’s dialectical negotiations between their Muslim and their Canadian identities.
Images of nature and of the land are inextricably linked with the notion of the pioneer in the mythology of Canadian identity, and natural imagery appears in various contexts in *At My Mother’s Feet*. The notion of the homestead or home evokes a sense of belonging to a particular place, to a specific area of land. For Aliya Mohammed Ali, telling the stories of her grandmother Amina and her mother Rikia, the theme of the “love of the land” (30) becomes a concept that links her parents’ experiences as Lebanese immigrants in Canada with their roots in Lebanon. Ali describes this love as a passion that “followed” her father from “the family orchards and farms in the Bekaa . . . through the farmlands to his first homestead in Saskatchewan” (30). The stories told by Ali’s grandmother Amina become for her grandchildren “a strong link with the land of [their] ancestors” (35). For Ali’s family the land provides a sense of belonging in both countries, for although her father says of Canada “[i]t is God’s country” (31), her mother also travels to Lebanon “to settle family property to ensure that [her children] would have [their] inheritance whenever [they] returned” (36). The land is thus paradoxically both home and not-home. In Lila Fahlman’s narrative the natural world takes on an even broader significance. At the end of a description of her home on a hill in the country, surrounded by a landscape filled with wildlife, she writes: “I call this home, but it is God’s domain, the largest mosque built by Allah” (69). By linking the Canadian landscape with a place of Muslim worship, Fahlman writes her religious heritage onto a space that has previously been claimed primarily by Christians. This metaphorical act parallels Fahlman’s insistence that the Al Rashid Mosque belongs in Fort Edmonton, along with the other historically Canadian (and exclusively Christian) places of worship (66-67).

Other images of land and home in *At My Mother’s Feet* explore further aspects of the relationship between identity and belonging for Muslim Canadian women. Several of the women’s homes are described as places of generous hospitality and activity, such as Rikia Saddy’s Edmonton house that is “open to friends and many visitors from all parts of the world” (32), to the point where her son is not surprised to see pictures of the family home at a public slide show that he attends in India (34). The home of Solmaz Sahin’s family in Niagara-on-the-Lake is “called ‘the house of the imam [or religious leader]’ because there was hardly any Muslim activity that did not start in [their] home” (81). These portrayals of the home are reminiscent of Wilson’s descriptions of her childhood home, in which she describes the centre of faith and worship (the home or the church) as a place that is open to
all those in need. Indeed, the mosque is also described as a place that welcomes non-
Muslims as well as Muslims (33). Yet such images of home (or mosque) as a place of
welcome and belonging are also contrasted with the sense of not being at home anywhere,
which is similar to the lack of roots lamented by the Jewish Canadian women writers. Sahin
describes the anguish of feeling like a foreigner both inside and outside of her own home,
because of the increasingly Canadian identities of her Turkish-born children (75-76).
Similarly, she uses the word “guest” to describe her position in Canadian society, even after
more than thirty years of living in this country. In spite of her assertion that “for the most
part Canada has been a generous host,” her writing carries an awareness of the discrimination
and oppression faced by various ethnic groups within Canada itself (85). Like Wilson,
Leddy, and Manning’s critiques of Canadian society from their religious perspectives, At My
Mother’s Feet gently challenges the national myth of Canadian openness and tolerance.

Paradoxically perhaps, the loneliness faced by the Islamic immigrant in a non-Muslim
country is one of the factors that contributes to the strong sense of spiritual community in At
My Mother’s Feet. Atiya Jafri gives a particularly poignant description of the feeling of
isolation that she experiences when she is separated from her extended family for the first
time: “Coming from a country where I was surrounded by family, I had never been alone in
a house. I was terrified when the children went off to school and my husband to work. But
somehow I got over the fear and slowly adjusted” (89). Something that many Canadians take
for granted – the relative solitude of the nuclear family – is experienced as strange and
frightening by many women from predominantly Muslim countries, as well as many others.
Gradually, however, other Muslim families in Canada become a kind of extended family for
immigrants, as in the case of Sahin (79), Jafri (90), and others. Yet just as the Jewish
feminists who contribute to From Memory to Transformation struggle to define their
relationship to their religious and cultural heritage, Muslim Canadian women also feel at
times excluded by their communities. In her introduction, Zaman writes of the lack of
support for her aspirations to be a journalist, for journalism “was considered an immodest
profession for a woman” (8). Bhabha describes getting “flack from Muslim brothers and
sisters” when she begins to do relief work with Muslims in Bosnian refugee camps: “What
do you think you are doing, you are just a woman?” (105). Similarly, Sahin recounts how in
the early days of the establishment of Canadian Muslim organizations “women were often
the unsung heroes who toiled in the background . . . so that our husbands could do this volunteer work” (80). These complaints bring us back full circle to the writers in Chapter Three, indicating that Muslim women share their Christian counterparts’ struggle for full recognition and participation within their own religious tradition. The publication of *At My Mother's Feet* – like the Jewish feminist Midrash in *From Memory to Transformation* – is an important discursive action that breaks the silence surrounding Muslim (Canadian) women’s experiences, and that helps to inscribe their voices into the predominantly male Islamic historical and religious narratives.

The narrative forms that make up *At My Mother's Feet* show a heavy reliance on the spoken genres of storytelling and oral history. All of the biographical and autobiographical sketches are written in a colloquial or conversational style that bears the imprint of oral reminiscences. However there is another literary genre, and one that is specific to Islam, that also contributes to the discursive background of the anthology. Biographical collections have played an important role in the history of Islam, particularly in recording the transmission of the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad. In *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections* (1993), Ruth Roded suggests that the numerous entries on the Female Companions of the Prophet and on women Mystics in Islamic biographical dictionaries provide an important corrective to any assessment of Islam that denies the role women have played in the creation and preservation of religious tradition. In keeping with this sense of the importance of the oral and written transmission of spiritual life-narratives, *At My Mother's Feet* is clearly a legacy from Muslim women to their daughters. In the introduction to the book, Sadia Zaman writes:

As the mother of a daughter, I have a vested interest in fostering a sense of collective history. My daughter's strength will come not only from her great-grandmother, her grandmother, and perhaps her mother, but also from the stories of the Muslim women who helped build this country. So this project is a labor of love, for my daughter, and for all the daughters and sons. (12)

This emphasis on the book as “labour” once again evokes the metaphor of the hard-working pioneer. Other contributors to the volume echo this vision of a maternal religious legacy. Campbell shares the story of her own mother’s life and credits her with being her earliest religious teacher (43, 48-49). Ali ends her narrative with a lament for the “gaps in [her]
knowledge” of her “family, faith, and culture”: “Often I have thought – as in the past – I’ll ask mother. But mother isn’t there anymore” (38). Like From Memory to Transformation, then, At My Mother’s Feet is an attempt to fill in some of the gaps in the religious histories of Canadian women from non-Christian spiritual heritages.

At My Mother’s Feet carries within its pages the imprint of a dual audience, and as with Bridges in Spirituality, the non-Muslim readers of the anthology are offered models within the text itself of the desired reader response to the book. A powerful example of interfaith dialogue and respect is offered in the story of Jazey, narrated by her daughter Campbell, who writes: “Hundreds came to my mother’s funeral. The Archdeacon of the Anglican Church, C.R. Elliott, sent a letter to my family, thanking my mother for showing him our ways. He respected her for the way she had conducted herself as a Muslim” (48). There is a strong insistence in many of the narratives on the respect that Muslim women have for other people’s religious beliefs, a reiterated theme that calls for a concomitant esteem on the part of non-Muslim readers. Some of the narratives describe the sense of community between Muslim and Christian Arab immigrants, who find that in the Canadian context their cultural similarities are more significant than their religious differences, and who share in each other’s sacred holiday celebrations (44). Bhabha, who has experienced both support and intolerance from her French Canadian Catholic extended family, writes simply: “The Qur’an tells us, to me my religion, and to you, yours. I respect that” (99). Yet this respect is not without its own challenges, for the devout Muslim women also remind others of their responsibilities to their own traditions, as in the case of Jazey, who takes a Jewish couple to task for eating pork (44). One of the most significant achievements of At My Mother’s Feet is that it makes the faith of Muslim Canadian women visible, mapping it onto the Canadian religious and literary landscape, so that it requires a response and an engagement from the non-Muslim reader. Sahin writes that “part of the secret of a good life is a strong community of faith” (84), while Niazi affirms that “[her] faith has been a real source of strength for [her]” (119). Like Jewish women, Muslim women historically have too often faced religious persecution for them to feel comfortable with invisibility. Educating the non-Muslim reader thus becomes, as it is for Jewish women, an act of survival.
Conclusion

The four collaborative works discussed in this chapter share certain common characteristics that open new perspectives on the genre of contemporary Canadian women's spiritual autobiography. All of them challenge not only the vision of Canadian identity as defined by European, middle-class Christianity – a vision which has been in the process of shifting over the last thirty years – but also the identity as defined by secular multiculturalism. This occurs because all of these writers assert that their religious heritages and spiritual worldviews are an integral part of their Canadian identity. At the generic level, all of them challenge the notion of spiritual autobiography as an individual act, attesting to the important role played by the community of faith. Indeed, for the contributors to these four volumes, the sacred is discovered and experienced in relationship and in community: through socially engaged Bible study discussions and community work, through listening to the stories of elders, through joining with other women to fill in the gaps and silences of tradition, through the struggles to form new communities of faith in a foreign land. These four collective spiritual autobiographies offer a powerful alternative to the more private, mystical, and individualistic understandings of spirituality that are prevalent today, and to the traditional model of the spiritual life as the heroic journey of an individual. Furthermore, their visions of embodied and socially engaged forms of religious practice write spirituality firmly into the context of everyday life in Canadian society. With these four texts we come full circle, back to the authors discussed in Chapter Three, whose private selves were often subsumed by their public responsibilities.

However, the four spiritual autobiographies discussed in this chapter problematize the relationship between women and their religious and national communities in a much starker way than those in Chapter Three, demonstrating that the interactions between individual and community are not always easy. Each of the four books offers a model of the ways in which the resources of an exclusive tradition can themselves be used to argue for greater inclusiveness. In *Hope is the Struggle*, new readings of biblical texts move impoverished communities from the margin to the centre of God's concerns for social justice. At *My Mother's Feet* draws on the tradition of Islamic biographical collections and the genre of the pioneer narrative to affirm the importance of women in both the Muslim and the Canadian
literary and historical traditions. From Memory to Transformation adapts the rabbinical practice of Midrash to the contemporary needs of Jewish feminists and daughters of Holocaust survivors. Bridges in Spirituality enacts indigenous Canadian storytelling practices in order to bring an aboriginal model of teaching to non-First Nations Christians. There is a subversive element in each of these four collective spiritual autobiographies, as they employ the literary and hermeneutical tools of their respective traditions in order to call them to task for their silences, their exclusions, and their blindness on the subjects of gender, race, and class.

From a literary point of view, these four texts invite us to consider the unique contributions of oral modes of discourse to the genre of spiritual autobiography. Although the traces of orality may be more obvious in these works than in those discussed in the preceding chapters, nevertheless the spoken word has a presence in the genre of spiritual autobiography that cannot be ignored. This is as true for the performative nature of the Puritan confessions as it is for the assertions of a contemporary Catholic women like Mary Jo Leddy who – forbidden to preach publicly in a church – describes her writing as a form of pulpit. The power of oral discourse cannot be underestimated in these spiritual autobiographies, for they engage the reader much more directly and more forcefully than a written text whose performative context is less obvious. When the orality of a written work continually asserts itself, it becomes more difficult to evade questions of reader responsibility or polemical intent, and to rest comfortably with spiritual autobiography as a purely textual genre. This sometimes discomfiting tendency of spiritual autobiography to break free of the boundaries of the discrete, written text is one of the many challenges of the genre that I will address in my concluding chapter, as I bring the discussion back to the place of contemporary women’s spiritual autobiographies in the evolving and expanding canon of Canadian literature.
Conclusion

Visionary Voices in our Voisinage:
Reading Contemporary Canadian Women's Spiritual Autobiographies

[W]hat justifies you then, if God never existed, in missing God like someone who has passed away and in searching for God as though God were lost? Why don't you think of God as the one who is coming, who has been approaching from all eternity, the one who will someday arrive, the ultimate fruit of a tree whose leaves we are? What keeps you from projecting God's birth into the ages that are coming into existence, and living your life as a painful and lovely day in the history of a great pregnancy?

— Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

I have entitled this final section of my study “Visionary Voices in our Voisinage” because I wish to conclude by examining what I feel are the unique contributions of contemporary Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies to the fields of Canadian literature and autobiography studies. Whether we like it or not, whether we choose to pay attention to them or not, these visionary voices are those of our neighbours. They form part of our literary and cultural landscapes, even as the authors try to map the contours of a new spiritual landscape for themselves and for others within the Canadian context. Rilke's words in the epigraph to this chapter evoke the secular and sceptical milieu in which contemporary Canadian religious life-narratives are inscribed. Yet in spite of McFague's insistence that we no longer live in a sacramental universe; in spite of the sociological studies that indicate decreasing religious commitment on the part of increasing numbers of Canadians, and in spite of contemporary critical theory's hostility to religion, the authors that I have studied write with a double vision in which the spiritual and material worlds are not only "simultaneously present" (Frye 85), but inextricably intertwined. Contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers find themselves dwelling paradoxically between religious worlds in which their experience as women has been neither acknowledged nor valued, and secular worlds in which their spirituality has been downplayed or ignored. Their texts, unique documents of lives lived “as a painful and lovely day in the history of a great pregnancy,” contain visions of the spiritual life that strive to be inclusive and relevant for twentieth-century Canadian women.
In many ways my conclusions to this study are already embedded in my text itself. Through exploring the history of spiritual autobiography as a genre I became aware of the incredible diversity of literary forms in which sacred life-writing has found expression. This awareness (confirmed by other literary critics) led me to posit the heart of the genre as its double vision and its focus on the sacred, rather than the motif of conversion as other scholars have argued. By applying that definition of spiritual autobiography to Canadian women’s life-writing of the last thirty years, I assembled the books that form the corpus of my study. Finally, through a close reading of the texts themselves, I formulated the characteristics of the genre of spiritual autobiography that I believe to be central not only to these contemporary works but to historical manifestations of the genre as well: its literary hybridity, its emphasis on hermeneutics, its relationship to a spiritual imagined community, and its invocation of (and invitation to) an implied reader. I hope that my readings of the spiritual autobiographies in this study have challenged and surprised some of my own readers, by unsettling their expectations of what is associated with religious life-writing. Unlike Rigelhof, I believe that these authors do indeed have an awareness of language and its possibilities and limitations for conveying an understanding of the sacred dimensions of life. There are two dimensions of this study that I wish to address in greater detail in these concluding reflections. The first of these is to suggest some directions for future research in the field of spiritual autobiography and Canadian literature. The second is to consider what the discursive strategies of the authors examined in this study might have to teach us about the reading and the study of spiritual autobiography.

One of the first tasks that presents itself for further research is the writing of a comprehensive history of spiritual autobiography in Canada. I pointed out the absence of such a resource in Chapter One, and it could be argued that to precede such an enterprise with a study of contemporary exemplars of the genre by women may be somewhat premature, because it focuses on a doubly marginalized form of religious life-narrative without there being an adequate historical context. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the challenges that Canadian women have faced in writing spiritual autobiographies since 1970 point to some of the wider tensions and paradoxes inherent in the genre itself, issues that would have to be kept in mind in exploring the history of the form in Canada. Furthermore, a satisfactory history of the genre would need to emulate the practice of Québec dictionaries of
life-writing, such as those edited by Yvan Lamonde, which include unpublished archival manuscripts in addition to published texts. Particularly in the field of spiritual autobiography, where many of the early examples of sacred life-writing may have taken place in religious communities or in the private, unpublished diaries of individuals, such investigation seems paramount.

Even in the absence of such a historical reference work, I hope that this study has developed a sufficient theoretical language in relation to sacred life-writing to contribute to rereadings of canonical Canadian authors with some of the characteristics of spiritual autobiography in mind. I hope that I have made it abundantly clear by now that when I make this suggestion I am not referring to the motif of conversion, but rather to characteristics of spiritual autobiography such as its inherent tension between identity and transcendence, its preference for hybrid forms, and its affinity for liturgical and ritual language. Earlier in this study I noted that Margaret Laurence has referred to *The Diviners* as her spiritual autobiography. One might ask what significance such a designation has in the context of Laurence’s actual memoir. Although I have not considered *Dance on the Earth* (1989) as an example of spiritual autobiography, because it focuses primarily on Laurence’s relationships with her various “mothers” and on her growth and development as an artist, nevertheless the book can be read as a document that affords significant insights into Laurence’s religious beliefs and the influence of her spirituality on her writing. Furthermore, Lois Wilson’s *Turning the World Upside Down* contains a brief but fascinating embedded spiritual biography of Laurence, a record (from Wilson’s perspective) of Laurence’s ambivalent but strong relationship with the United Church of Canada. Other questions to address to canonical women writers might include: What glimpses into the spiritual life are afforded by a comparison of Margaret Laurence’s letters to other writers, and Gabrielle Roy’s letters to her sister Bernadette who was a nun? What visions of art and spirituality might be gained by reading Marchessault’s texts alongside Emily Carr’s and William Kurelek’s autobiographies of their spiritual lives as artists? What might be suggested by a rereading of Patricia Joudry’s published (and unpublished) literary works alongside a new understanding and reappraisal of her spiritual beliefs? Although Antonine Maillet denies that *Les Confessions de Jeanne de Valois* is a spiritual biography, what might be gained by reading her novel in the wider
context of the genre? Working through the answers to each of these questions would enrich both the study of Canadian literature, and the field of spiritual autobiography.

It may also be time for a re-evaluation of the place of religion in Canadian literature and identity. Although we have come a long way from the time when Canada could be referred to as “God’s dominion,” and when the Christianity of the majority of Canadians could be taken for granted as a meaningful social and ethical commitment, the Canadian literary and cultural landscapes are perhaps less secular than many people believe. Publications such as From Memory to Transformation and At My Mother’s Feet attest to the central importance of religion in the lives of many non-Christian Canadians. Furthermore, the current interest in individual spirituality that is prevalent in North America has led to the publication of books such as Canadian religious journalist Douglas Todd’s Brave Souls: Writers and Artists Wrestle with God, Love, Death, and the Things That Matter (1996). Significantly more than half of the artists interviewed about their spiritual beliefs by Todd are Canadians, and the essays that he writes about his conversations with them point to the ongoing importance of spirituality in the lives of Canadian authors, even when those beliefs may not be explicitly expressed in their writing. Journalist Ron Graham’s God’s Dominion: A Sceptic’s Quest (1990), with its paradoxical subtitle, contains echoes of a spiritual yearning for a certainty of faith that the author feels is beyond his reach. Sociologists of religion seem to agree that both English and French Canada are in the midst of great religious change, and that the diversity of spiritual paths open to the individual is growing. The literary study of spiritual autobiography might help such narratives seem less alien to Canadian culture, by giving them a context and a history even when they are also new and innovative. For as we have seen, the dialectic between creativity and imitation is at the heart of spiritual autobiography as a literary form.

The metaphor of voices and its relationship to modes of discourse is an invitation to explore the genre of spiritual autobiography in literary forms other than the non-fiction prose narratives to which I have confined myself in this study. The current popularity of sacred life-narratives suggests a variety of possible outlets for the genre. We have already seen that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is often tenuous. Poetry is one potential vehicle for spiritual autobiography, and indeed there are many Canadian women poets whose writing would lend (and, indeed, has lent) itself to consideration as spiritual autobiography:
Anne Hébert, Lorna Crozier, Margaret Avison, and others. Unpublished manuscripts are another potential source of material on women’s religious life-writing, as I have suggested above. The affinity of contemporary spiritual autobiographies, particularly those by New Age authors, for fictional forms such as the adventure tale and the pilgrimage, suggests a further blurring of the boundaries between fictional and non-fictional forms. Finally, the growth of the internet has given rise to many spiritual autobiographies of private individuals being posted on their web sites, or on sites that are devoted to a particular religious group or community. One only needs to enter an internet search with the words “spiritual autobiography” in it, in order to be deluged with stories of individuals’ conversion experiences, or of their ancestors’ religious histories, and so on. In some ways the internet seems to function like a virtual confessional, in which spiritual seekers can recount their tales to an unseen and anonymous audience. However, given the historical importance of communal context to the genre of spiritual autobiography, further research is necessary to determine what impact the “virtual communities” of the internet will have on the continuing evolution of spiritual autobiography as a genre.

However, apart from such apparently coherent and distinct genres, the hybrid voices of spiritual autobiography deserve further investigation. Hybridity remains one of the most intriguing features of the genre, apparently present from its inception. One of the achievements of such literary hybridity is the author’s inscription of identity within various complementary or competing modes of discourse. Although this is perhaps the feature of spiritual autobiography that makes it the most easily dismissed from a literary point of view (one has only to think back to Frank Bowman’s dismissal of Augustine’s Confessions as “génériquement monstrueux”), it is one of the most versatile aspects of the genre from a theological or philosophical point of view. Given the variety of forms that spiritual experience can take in our increasingly plural Canadian society, hybridity offers the individual writer immense freedom of expression, while still providing the broad generic contours and expectations of various modes of discourse. This potential diversity of forms is both an opportunity and a challenge for the spiritual autobiographer, as the immense rhetorical freedom may be somewhat illusory. As I have argued in this study, genres contain embedded assumptions about identity and world-view that can either complement or contradict the guiding metaphors of the spiritual autobiographer. However, literary hybridity
can be a particularly useful creative strategy for contemporary spiritual seekers who have difficulty reconciling their different identities and loyalties. Furthermore, a recognition of the historicity of literary hybridity in spiritual autobiography may help spiritual autobiographies to take their place alongside other contemporary hybrid narratives, such as postmodern autobiographies and autobiographies of crisis.

I would like to suggest that the Canadian context offers a unique contemporary voisinage for the writing and reading of spiritual autobiography. Although American literature is dominated by the influence of the Puritan conversion narrative, Canadian literature has no equivalent counterpart. More research is necessary to determine what impact missionary auto/biographies, mystical or visionary writings, spiritual diaries, narratives of vocation, religious journalism, public preaching, and other religious modes of discourse have had on the development of Canadian letters. However, the contemporary context, at any rate, seems to be one that is open for experimentation and innovation, and far less bound to conversion discourse than American literature. Although most of the spiritual autobiographies in this study were written by women who were brought up during a period of Canadian history when mainstream Christianity was more dominant, I would speculate that we will soon witness the publication of greater numbers of narratives written by spiritual seekers who were raised during a more secular, individualistic, and pluralistic context. The ways in which their sacred life-writing will conform to or diverge from established religious and literary modes of discourse will bring new insights to the study of spiritual autobiography.

The metaphor of voisinage also invites reflection on the contexts of studying and teaching spiritual autobiography. In this study, although I have consistently advocated a reading of religious life-narrative that is respectful of the authors' spiritual beliefs, I also recognize that to teach the genre in a literary classroom would be to open the classroom to intense debate and disagreement on the subject of students' deepest beliefs and values. However, I believe that it is the responsibility of the teacher of literature not only to model ways of reading, but also to model forms of respectful discussion as an academic discourse. I have described these visionary voices as engaged in dialectical negotiations between conflicting concepts, seeking out rhetorical strategies that will allow them to hold opposing forces in creative tension, and to dwell in the paradoxes of the spiritual life. I would like to
propose that their dialectical negotiations provide strategies not only for the reading of spiritual autobiography, but also for academic and pedagogical discourses. The methodological approach that I have chosen is one that I believe highlights the connections between figurative language, literary form, and reader response. The guiding metaphors and narrative forms in contemporary Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies contain embedded hermeneutical practices, influencing not only the literary and theological visions presented in the texts, but also the book's relationship to its diverse audiences. A hermeneutics is not only a way of interpreting a text, but also a way of perceiving (a vision), a way of communicating (a voice), and a way of acting in the world (in one's *voisinage*). Furthermore, readers as well as writers operate with hermeneutical strategies, as they interact with the texts, with their own lives, and with their readers.

The dialectical negotiations between public and private, and between religious and social realms of existence are perhaps most obvious in the books examined in Chapter Three, where narrative forms associated with a private voice disrupt the memoirs of public religious women. However, these dialectics are present in all of the other spiritual autobiographies as well. In Chapter Four, private modes of discourse, when published, become public forms of witness to the neglected feminine and embodied dimensions of spirituality. Furthermore, the private sacred reflections of Brisson, Quiviger, Snowber, and Piotte all issue in social action of one form or another. The private, mystical visions of Marchessault and Butala in Chapter Five are also public exhortations calling society back to its spiritual roots in the natural world. The anthologists in Chapter Six have a different agenda, making their private stories public in order to combat their invisibility in the Canadian social and religious landscapes. By breaking down the strict dichotomies between public and private, between religious and social, these authors suggest new ways of reading spiritual autobiography into the field of Canadian literature.

One of the obstacles to the study of spiritual autobiography may be our contemporary perception of religion as a private and personal rather than a public and social commitment. Perhaps it is time to map religion once more onto the field of Canadian literary history, to unearth our spiritual history, and perhaps even to discover that it has been as often subversive as conformist. Such a mapping is already underway in the studies of William Closson James, Ron Graham, Marilyn J. Legge, Barbara Pell, Dave Little, Al Reimer, Michael Greenstein,
and others. Making religion public in university classrooms may be a more daunting task. Most people are all too familiar with the kind of bitter dissent that can be provoked by religious debates. The explicitly polemical nature of many spiritual autobiographies certainly helps to complicate the situation. However, sacred life-narratives may aid in their own discussion, by providing literary models that incorporate both confessional and critical modes of discourse.

The dialectics between embodiment and spirituality, between immanent and transcendent notions of the divine, and between inner and outer spaces are most obvious in the narratives discussed in Chapter Four, with their narrative emphasis on the experiences of daily life, and their focus on women's bodies as sites of the sacred. For Brisson, Quiviger, Snowber, and Piotte, inner and outer boundaries between self and God become blurred, but the authority of the religious tradition is abandoned completely only in Brisson's case. For the authors examined in Chapter Three, spirituality is embodied not only in the individual life, but also in the lives of those in need of justice, and in social and religious structures in need of transformation. When examined from this perspective, these writers' stance is similar to that of the anthologists in Chapter Six, for whom the sacred is embodied in those who have been excluded from, or rejected by, mainstream society and religion. The spirit is a subversive force that can never be fully contained by institutional structures, and that finds ways of breaking free, in the same way that the writers in Chapter Four do. In Marchessault and Butala's mystical visions of the cosmic dimensions of the natural world, spirituality becomes embodied in the sacredness of all matter.

The contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers examined in this study all participate in a simultaneous celebration of body or matter and spirit, and share a determination to hold both embodiment and spirituality in creative tension. This particular dimension of their texts points to another aspect of sacred life-writing that makes it a difficult but important genre to recuperate for the field of Canadian literature. For one of the disconcerting aspects of spiritual autobiography is its tendency not to be disembodied and ethereal, but to make concrete and embodied demands on its readers: work for social justice, liberate yourself from what binds you, enter into a relationship with the natural world, look at me and listen to my story. Above all, spiritual autobiography is an invitation to experience. "Taste and see that Yahweh is good," sings the Hebrew psalmist (Psalm 34.8a). "Read about
our spiritual lives, but only as a prelude to engaging deeply with your own," urges the eclectic chorus of contemporary Canadian women in this study. These observations bring me back to my discussion in Chapter One of the fact that for critics such as myself and Louise Rosenblatt, the aesthetic and the social elements of literature are inseparable. Yet how is one to teach such an approach? For if spiritual autobiography demands an embodied response from its readers, is it not one that must be made outside of the classroom?

In order to answer this question more fully, I must undertake a more nuanced discussion of the reader of spiritual autobiography. Having enacted my own readings of these sixteen contemporary Canadian women's spiritual autobiographies, I remain aware of the gaps between my own experiences and assumptions as a religious reader (that is, a reader who wishes to engage with the theology of the texts), and those of a non-religious reader (that is, a reader who is willing to engage with the literary dimensions of the texts but who has little interest in their theological implications). This gap is produced at least in part by my insistence on defining spiritual autobiography in terms of its subject matter. Those definitions of the genre that focus on the motif of conversion are more readily recuperated by non-religious readers, for the trope of conversion itself has been absorbed by secular discourse. However, I do not believe that religious and non-religious readers are incompatible, or that they cannot enter into dialogue with one another, or even, as I stated in Chapter One, that two such readers cannot coexist within the same person. Indeed, as I argued in Chapter Two in relation to Frye's distinction between "religious" and "literary" texts, the question of what makes a text religious or literary (in terms of its effects on the reader) resides largely within the reader or the interpretive community. Thus, my hypothetical non-religious reader may switch roles when we are reading a different kind of text, such as a political tract or a self-help book or a romance novel. I hope that the reading strategies that I propose in this Conclusion will be of use to both kinds of readers.

One difference between religious and non-religious readings of a spiritual autobiography may lie in the reader's willingness to enact the liturgical or ritual dimension of the text. I have already discussed the use of liturgical or ritual language in relation to Quiviger, Marchessault, and From Memory to Transformation. In The Truth of Broken Symbols (1996), philosopher and theologian Robert Cummings Neville argues that in the theological understanding of religious symbols, such images do not merely represent
something, but also act as "instruments of transformation, of shaping religious, familial, and other communities, of leading the soul to greater perfection, or the person to enlightenment, or to attunement" (1-2). Through the double vision of spiritual autobiography, metaphorical language not only takes on the power to shape reality, but is often conflated with reality. This means that what a non-religious reader might interpret metaphorically is actually intended as a literal statement by the spiritual autobiographer herself. This metaphorical-literal dimension of spiritual autobiography may be one of the characteristics of the genre that limits its appeal to those who also acknowledge the same guiding metaphors as containing significant, even literal, truths about existence. To read spiritual autobiography with an openness to the potentially transformative power of its guiding metaphors seems to me a very different activity than to read spiritual autobiography critically, as a literary text whose symbols have no force outside of a certain rhetorical power of persuasion. A liturgical reading of a spiritual autobiography means that for the duration of our immersion in the text, we participate in the transforming or liberating structures of its imagery and narrative form. Nevertheless, this aspect of spiritual autobiography need not be a total obstacle to its appreciation by non-religious readers. The audiences of religious life-narratives are free to read the texts' metaphors on any level that they wish. However, by being attentive to metaphor in spiritual autobiography as a way of engaging in theological or philosophical thought, it may be that readers can learn to be more aware of their own processes of metaphorical thinking. The metaphors that underlie our world-views have important consequences for the ways in which we think about our academic subjects as well as our lives, and being able to recognize them in our own and in others' thinking may be an aid to dialogue and discussion, particularly on sensitive topics such as religion and spirituality.

A further reading strategy that I would propose for religious life-narrative, which literary critic Nancy K. Miller suggests for the reading of women's autobiography in general, is the consideration of an author's entire œuvre as constituting her or his spiritual autobiography. For if spiritual autobiography is characterized not by a narrative of conversion but rather by a hermeneutical process, and if many authors seem to require more than one text in order to explore fully the ramifications of that process, then perhaps the genre is more open-ended than any single text would suggest. One might speculate that all of the rhetorical strategies examined in this study – the guiding metaphors of the spiritual
visions, the narrative forms of the discursive voices, the implied audiences of the imagined voisinages – are in fact part of a wider process of hermeneutics in which the spiritual autobiographer is engaged. Furthermore, if the reading of spiritual autobiography has the potential to transform the reader, and if the reader is invited to write her or his own sacred life-narrative as well, then the author may also participate in the same transformation and invitation, as a reader of her own text. In this understanding of the genre, a spiritual autobiography could never be understood as a single work, but would rather be characterized by the ensemble of the individual’s discursive productions as they relate to the question of what it means to live a spiritual life: private diaries, published writings, oral narratives, public performances, theological arguments, liturgical rituals, and so on. We have already see this process at work in the authors in this study. Both Marchessault and Butala reach new levels of understanding of the sacred in their serial spiritual autobiographies. Piotte’s first book leads her to the writing of the second, while Snowber’s autobiographical reflections and her theological work on embodied spirituality are published simultaneously and complement one another. Leddy’s life-writing has taken the form of her memoir, a biography of her parents, and an account of her work with refugees. An understanding of spiritual autobiography as an ongoing text (both written and lived) may also be helpful in recuperating the genre in secular contexts, for such a perspective underscores the evolving rather than the dogmatic aspect of religious beliefs.

The dialectical negotiations between mystical and empirical or historical understandings of reality are also central to all of the spiritual autobiographies in this study, and not just those of Butala and Marchessault. Indeed, the tension between these engagements with the world is at the heart of any contemporary spiritual life that is lived in a primarily secular context governed by a predominantly scientific world-view. Contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers model ways of trying to live in harmony with both of these perceptions of reality. Thus, for the authors in Chapter Three, social activism takes place in a context surrounded and imbued by mystical experience. Prophetic visions and relationships with the sacred give these authors both the authority for their social actions and the hope to carry on with their struggles. For the writers in Chapter Four, mystical experience is embraced for its potential to free the individual from social and historical constraints. Social and political theorist Roger S. Gottlieb writes that mysticism has “for
thousands of years signified the attempt to move beyond the confines of society and history – to break the bounds of normal human interaction, normal consciousness, and normal physical reality” (179-80). Women struggling with the boundaries and limitations of their religious traditions find in mystical discourse the visions to challenge their heritages, while inserting their voices within their social and historical realities. For the anthologists of Chapter Six, the transcendence of mystical union with the sacred is discovered in community, and history itself is perceived as sacred history. The tension between mysticism and rationalism or empiricism is one of the factors that complicates the academic study of spiritual autobiography. Nevertheless, once again these books themselves provide possible resolutions to such conflicts by combining the confessional and critical modes of discourse. Because mysticism sees nature and spirit as inextricably intertwined with society and history, spiritual autobiographies demand that their readers engage with them both on the intellectual and the imaginative levels.

The dialectic of individual and community also pervades all of the books in this study. Wilson, Leddy, Richard, and Manning all argue in various ways that belonging to a community of faith is crucial, even if that community is in need of reform. The authors in Chapter Four provide more ambivalent perceptions of this relationship, taking from the tradition or community what is meaningful for them, and wrestling with or imaginatively transforming the rest. Yet all of them see their lives as inscribed within the narratives of wider social, political, and religious groups. Even Butala and Marchessault, as we have seen, are unable to completely shed the modes of discourse and the systems of thought that have shaped them. However, by venturing out from the community as women, artists, and visionaries on solitary quests, they are able to return as prophetic voices seeking to write new spiritual narratives. Finally, the writers of Chapter Six share an understanding of the sacred in which community and relationship are central, but are only as strong as the spirits of the individuals who constitute them. In the contemporary context with its emphasis on private spiritual seekers, these narratives force a re-evaluation of the importance of holding both individual and community in creative tension. Furthermore, in the academic context of the study of spiritual autobiography, the dialectical negotiations of these authors provide means of understanding and appreciating the various ways in which members of an academic community can situate themselves in relationship to one another.
At the centre of spiritual autobiography there is an encounter with the sacred that demands a response: whether it is to work for social justice, to enter more deeply into relationship with another person or with a community of faith, or to attend to the contemplative experiences in one's life. Indeed, all of the books in this study have evoked a combination of such gestures on the part of their authors. However, the one response that they all share in common is the act of writing a spiritual autobiography, of attempting to convey their vision of the sacred to others, and to call forth a parallel response on the part of their readers. Thus the invitation of spiritual autobiography is also an invitation to writing, and virtually all of the authors in this study describe the activity of writing as being an intrinsic part of their spiritual and hermeneutical processes. Janet K. Ruffing writes that “[i]n some sense, the truth disclosed in a mystical text [and, one could add, in a spiritual autobiography] can be appropriated only if the reader is willing to allow the text to evoke a response – a response that entails a changed view of reality, a willingness to try out through participation his or her own understanding of the text as a guide for his or her own living” (15). Not all readers will wish to use all spiritual autobiographies as “guides for [their] own living.” However, all readers can respond to the invitation of religious life-writing to engage in the open-ended process of writing their own lives.

Having reached the end of this study, I am left with an awareness of the gaps and silences in my own writing. Some of these I have attempted to fill in these concluding pages; others, I hope that my readers will, like the Jewish women in Chapter Six, fill with creative and critical Midrash of their own. The largest gap that I still perceive is that which I have alluded to above in my discussion of religious symbols: the gap between what a theoretical-critical reading can bring to my experience of a text, and what a spiritual-contemplative reading can bring to my engagement with the same work. The interpretive frameworks that most adequately describe my experience of reading spiritual autobiography are not those of literary theory, nor even of theology. They are the imaginative suggestions of the writers themselves, whose embedded hermeneutics engage me on a far deeper level than the intellectual. I do not mean to set up an irreconcilable dichotomy between critical and contemplative reading. Like the authors in this study I prefer to dwell in paradox: between the intellectual satisfaction and critical rigour of discursive analysis, and the willingness to enter into these textual creations as I would participate in a sacred ritual, with an openness to
being transformed by the experience. Perhaps the greatest contribution of spiritual autobiography to both literature and theology is its inextricable blend of life-writing and hermeneutics, of spiritual narrative and theological reflection. For contemporary Canadian women spiritual autobiographers, the imaginative and the critical faculties are never separate. Quiviger dreams of inventing a "calligraphie du silence" (139) in order to write about her experience of prayer, and perhaps this desire encapsulates the fundamental paradox of spiritual autobiography: its attempt to see the invisible, to speak the unspeakable, to know and enter into relationship with that which it acknowledges to be unknowable. If I value these texts for the questions they have forced me to ask myself and to answer, I value them just as much for the mysteries that they have left me to ponder.
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## Appendix I

**Chronological List of Primary Texts (by date of publication)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/Group/Series</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marcelle Brisson</td>
<td><em>Par delà la clôture</em></td>
<td>1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jovette Marchessault</td>
<td><em>Comme une enfant de la terre</em></td>
<td>1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jovette Marchessault</td>
<td><em>La Mère des herbes</em></td>
<td>1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrée Pilon Quiviger</td>
<td><em>L’Éden éclaté</em></td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lois Wilson</td>
<td><em>Turning the World Upside Down</em></td>
<td>1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Jo Leddy</td>
<td><em>Say to the Darkness, We Beg to Differ</em></td>
<td>1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon Butala</td>
<td><em>The Perfection of the Morning</em></td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andréa Richard</td>
<td><em>Femme après le cloître</em></td>
<td>1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>Celeste Snowber (Schroeder)</td>
<td><em>In the Womb of God</em></td>
<td>1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women’s Collective of St. Columba House</td>
<td><em>Hope Is the Struggle</em></td>
<td>1996</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Nations Christian Women Elders</td>
<td><em>Bridges in Spirituality</em></td>
<td>1997</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jewish Women’s Voices</td>
<td><em>From Memory to Transformation</em></td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna Manning</td>
<td><em>Is the Pope Catholic?</em></td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micheline Piotte</td>
<td><em>Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu</em></td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Muslim Women’s Association</td>
<td><em>At My Mother’s Feet</em></td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon Butala</td>
<td><em>Wild Stone Heart</em></td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix II

Chronological List of Authors (by year of birth)

Lois Wilson (1927 –) Turning the World Upside Down
Marcelle Brisson (1929 –) Par delà la clôture
Andréa Richard (1934 –) Femme après le cloître
Jovette Marchessault (1938 –) Comme une enfant de la terre, La Mère des herbes
Sharon Butala (1940 –) The Perfection of the Morning, Wild Stone Heart
Andrée Pilon Quiviger (1940 –) L’Éden éclaté
Joanna Manning (1943 –) Is the Pope Catholic?
Micheline Piotte (1944 –) Corps à corps avec soi et avec Dieu
Mary Jo Leddy (1946 –) Say to the Darkness, We Beg to Differ
Celeste Snowber (Schroeder) (1999 –) In the Womb of God
Women’s Collective of St. Columba House (n/a) Hope Is the Struggle
First Nations Christian Women Elders (n/a) Bridges in Spirituality
Jewish Women’s Voices (n/a) From Memory to Transformation
Canadian Muslim Women’s Association (n/a) At My Mother’s Feet