FEMINISM AND THE FEMININE
IN YOLANDE VILLEMAIRE'S
LA VIE EN PROSE

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Abstract

Exposing the fallacies of the existing ideological system founded upon a linguistic system of signifieds, recent women's writing has aimed to deconstruct the numerous hierarchies and stereotypes used against women, thus clearing a space for the hitherto repressed feminine and the marginal. The inclusion of a vast range of intertextual borrowing in *La Vie en prose*, by Yolande Villemaire, challenges the elitist boundaries erected by the closed academic literary world, incorporating elements from all genres and levels. Thanks to the diversity and number of these borrowings, *La Vie en prose* refuses the setting up of any new hierarchy, constantly questioning any classification to the extent that the whole concept of valorisation becomes ridiculous and irrelevant. This variety is imitated on an "intratextual" level as the text appears to be made up of a number of diverse texts produced by a dozen or so women writer-narrators. Again, the process of classification is thwarted as the idea is shown to be not only patriarchal but also a result of a fundamental need or insecurity which apparently motivates the patriarchal obsession with nominisation and labelling. Similarly, the deceptive nature of the discourse which expresses this ideology, traditionally seen as concrete and infallible, is exposed and deconstructed. The "one word for one meaning" doctrine is replaced by a myriad possibilities of signification and
language, as the text plays with the power of association which constitutes the text's digressive quality, exploiting both the phonetic and the graphic. This treatment of language represents an attempt to destroy the phallocracy through a dismantling of its discourse, seen as a powerful political and repressive tool. The "feminine", traditionally seen as the antithesis is reinscribed in a fluid and infinite discourse which patterns the rhythms and indeterminacy of women's jouissance. This is reiterated in a focus given to women's sexuality and to a fragmented feminine subject, considering the question of "nature versus nurture", the "maternal instinct", women's sexual pleasure and their relationships with men. The text refuses all possibilities of hierarchisation on the literary, sexual and any other level, while the "laugh of the Medusa" echoes throughout.
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INTRODUCTION
"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - nothing more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

Through the Looking-glass and what Alice found there.

Lewis Carroll
La Vie en prose has received considerable critical attention since its appearance in 1980. Described variously as polyvocal, pluridimensional and post-modernist, the text has been included in the rapidly increasing corpus of feminist literature emanating from Québec, placed beside the works of Nicole Brossard, Carole Massé, France Théoret and Louky Bersianik. It is widely considered representative of l'écriture féminine, a term launched by French feminist writers such as Hélène Cixous and Annie Leclerc. There are indeed many characteristics shared by this movement and La Vie en prose, but there are also many discrepancies which dispute not only such a classification, but also the apparent feminism of Villemaire's text. In this study, the relationship between La Vie en prose and trends in women's writing today, will be considered, in an attempt to establish the extent of the feminist elements of the text in relation to its other aspects.

Although it would seem that to prescribe the characteristics of l'écriture féminine is a contradiction in terms, as will become apparent, it is necessary at this point to establish a working definition which will serve as a basis for further discussion. What follows is therefore not intended as an exhaustive analysis of the style, but rather as a general background to its development providing a selection of certain predominant elements which are most relevant to a study of Villemaire's text.
It is hardly necessary to recall that throughout the history of Western civilisation, Woman has been in a position of subjugation within a male-dominated system; used as goods in exchanges - the commercial and political transaction of marriage rendered respectable by its sacred epithet. Denied her freedom of choice, of movement and of thought, Woman has been created or constructed according to the current social requirements of what she "should be" or, to quote the famous statement of Simone de Beauvoir: "On ne naît pas femme, on le devient." This describes accurately the process by which Woman is moulded and comes to see herself in the image which society, dominated by a male-orientated ideology known as phallocentrism, has created for her. The various female stereotypes of mother, virgin, whore, witch, serve as neat classifications with which Woman has been branded and thereby limited and objectified, while Man, who has the power to name and cast roles, is the free subject, the One to whom Woman is always "Other."

There have obviously been attacks on this distribution, or rather monopoly, of power, either in the form of concerted efforts (such as the Suffragette movement at the beginning of the century or the Women's Liberation movement of the 1960's) or in the prominence of individual women (as rulers or intellectuals) who have managed to achieve success, by
exploiting the chinks in the armour of phallocracy. Yet it is only relatively recently that, instead of attempting to compete and achieve equality within a masculine value system, thus being forced to deny their sexual difference or their femininity and to assert masculine characteristics, women have begun to emphasise and to take pride in their "differences," until now denigrated and repressed. Of course, a few isolated individuals such as Mme de Lambert in the eighteenth century and Christine de Pisan in the fourteenth, adopted a positive position regarding the moral superiority of feminine values. This position however, is linked precisely with the conservative (and possibly deceptive) ideology of equality in difference, still represented by "Real Women," which the more recent writers, mentioned above, are attempting to eradicate. This reversal is particularly noticeable among the most recent French feminist theorists and writers, who focus on the development of a new language to express feminine identity and sexuality.

For Marxists, language is a powerful tool in the promotion and perpetration of ideology (capitalist, in this case) in an insidious fashion: the "ruled" unconsciously imitate the language of the "rulers" while it is this very language which establishes classes and limits their members to the position assigned them. This observation may be directly applied to the representation of women within the predominant
ideological discourse, indeed, this is a position taken by various Marxist-feminists who see women as a social class. For structuralists and deconstructionists, language structures the subject and even the unconscious is "structured like a language." Woman is caught in a vicious circle, speaking and being spoken by a language which is thrust upon her and which forces her into the role of a "ventriloquist's doll" speaking someone else's words, and so a subject of the "énoncé" rather than a speaking subject or a subject of the enunciation. In this sense, Woman has no "voice" within this discourse with which to express herself and her sexuality. The task, then, is to create a new "feminine" discourse, thereby exposing the inadequacy of the present system in its lack of space for "womanspeak."

It is important to remember, at this point, that this is not a call for a whole new language exclusive to women: indeed Genet and Kleist, among others, have been celebrated as writers of l'écriture féminine while many of the characteristics of the "style" are shared by writings deemed post-modernist. It is rather a "re-writing" or re-defining of the available language, although, once again, the word "definition" seems to have a too precise, aggressive sense. Here the influence of Derrida is apparent, as the existing system, ridden with binarities, hierarchies and closed
categories, is deconstructed, questioning the accepted authority of patriarchal language. This "re-writing" commonly takes the form of the exploitation of clichés and borrowed references taken from other texts. While the extent and range of this borrowing varies from text to text, it is perhaps nowhere as pronounced as in *La Vie en prose*, where the extensive references to other texts are matched by references to the variety of texts internal to *La Vie en Prose*. The implications of intertextuality within women's writing today and within post-modernist literature will, in the first chapter of this study, be considered in relation to the function of intertextuality as it appears specifically in *La Vie en Prose*.

A second characteristic owes a great deal to Jacques Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud, in particular his work on hysteric and female sexuality. French feminist writers such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig emphasize women's "psychosexual specificity" (albeit in different ways), thus uncovering what has been repressed. Hence the call by Cixous for a writing driven by images of the female body, focusing on gestation and lactation and the attempt to represent directly Woman's "jouissance" or sexual pleasure, as now understood through modern psychoanalytic theory. As "jouissance" is not easily translated into English, the following description is helpful:
Women's jouissance carries with it the notion of fluidity, diffusion and duration. It is a kind of potlatch in the world of orgasms, a giving, expending, dispensing of pleasure without concern about ends or closure.13

The word thus has the sense of the multiple, the indefinite and the fragmentary, all of which the "style" of l'écriture féminine attempts to convey and exploit.

The texts by these writers are remarkable in their refusal of linearity and logic, exploiting the plurality of meaning inherent in language, invoking a play of signifiers rather than a chain of signifieds, thus questioning the value of language as an efficient communicational tool while enjoying the endless possibilities innate and untapped within it. Similarly, as Woman is seen, in effect, as the antithesis of the writing subject, the narrative perspective tends to be diffuse or polyvocal, its point of reference endlessly elusive. Lastly, the refusal of closure which this treatment of language enforces is reiterated on the level of textual definition as theory, autobiography and fiction are combined, while prose takes on a poetic quality and the various genres overlap to create a hybrid, unclassifiable text. "Discontinuity" becomes characteristic of the "feminine" text, as opposed to the logical progression and neat conclusions of the "traditional," while the value of such logic and neatness is questioned and found lacking. The relationship between Villemaire's treatment
of language, her constant digressions, multiple narrative voices, and joy in word play will be considered in relation to this tentative description of feminine writing, which will be expanded in the second chapter.

Finally, the theory surrounding *l'écriture féminine* has frequently been criticised for being too abstract, too academic or elitist and thus of limited political effectiveness, risking rather a further repression of Woman through its tendency to teeter on the verge of a biological essentialism in its preoccupation with the female body and apparent acceptance of the "eternal feminine." The final chapter will examine Villemaire's presentation of women who are in effect practitioners of this discourse, in order to consider the relationship between the ideas espoused by the author and her narrators and the practical implications of these ideas as demonstrated by the text.
Notes

1 See, for example, Caroline Bayard, "Letters in Canada, Poésie." University of Toronto Quarterly 50. 4 (summer 1981) 41-45.


3 Beauvoir, "Introduction" to Le Deuxième Sexe. 16.

4 One has only to think, for instance, of the current British Prime Minister, frequently depicted as a cigar-smoking, pin stripe-suited man, or as a tank commander, to see the sacrifices made in the name of success and power!

5 Key texts must include: La Jeune Née by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément; Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un by Luce Irigaray; various works by Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig.

6 Christine Delphy, for example, a Marxist-feminist sociologist cited in Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory. (London & N.Y., Methuen, 1985); also Simone de Beauvoir's Le Deuxième Sexe is fundamentally socialist although the relationship between Marxism and Feminism is seen as fundamentally problematic due to the diversity of women's culture, background and education.


8 "Womanspeak" or "le parler femme" is a term launched by Luce Irigaray in her Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un to describe a women's discourse which can only take place in man's absence. This will be reconsidered later in the study.

9 Hélène Cixous for example considers writing of Jean Genet to be inherently feminine; she also discusses the work of Lkeist in this sense, in her La Jeune Née.

10 My hesitation to use the word "definition" in relation to women's writing and use of language results from the clearly phallogocentric connotations of definition - any attempt to define results in an attempt to limit, to contextualize or to enclose: it is precisely this closure that women's writing is striving to "explode": the term will
evidently be used throughout, but with caution.


12 The term "psychosexual specificity" is used by Jones, Anne Rosalind, with reference to Cixous.

Chapter 1: Intertextuality/ Intratextuality
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you
won't you join the dance?

Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll
Until recently, a text was considered to be the property and the creation of its author, whose supposed intentions were to be respected and whose originality was to be extolled. This however ignores the inevitable influence of preceding works on any author affecting both the pattern of writing, and, to a certain extent, the content. Thus, according to Michel Butor: "la formule du roman habituel est donc tout simplement une sorte de parodie. La plupart des écrivains, le sachant ou non, prennent des livres célèbres d'autrefois et maquillent leurs rides."¹ More recent texts are created with this in mind and, rather than aspiring to "originality," exploit and expose their various influences, deliberately borrowing from other sources. The works of Borgès, Aquin, John Barth and other postmodern novelists, incorporate a vast range of references from all periods, creating the heterogeneity of levels and epochs typical of post-modernism's neo-baroque character. These practices are evident in works by recent feminist writers such as Nicole Brossard, France Théoret and Louky Bersianik. In Yolande Villemaire's La Vie en prose, however, the practice of borrowing reaches Promethean proportions, as whole phrases, titles and "catchwords" are incorporated into the text, often without the slightest bibliographical reference or indication.² At one point, for example, the narrator says: "A imaginer comme une escarceloucule ou un cristal dans les mains d'Alice de l'autre côté du miroir." (129) where the title of Lewis Carroll's work, Through the Looking-Glass, is assimilated by
the text. Later, a paragraph begins: "Cuba coule en flammes au milieu du lac Léman" (268) while elsewhere the narrator says: "j'entends quelque chose dans le fond des choses." (244) thus twice incorporating the opening line of Prochain Episode by Hubert Aquin. Similarly, "les blocs de glace erratiques" and "la neige noire" (126) refer respectively to a collection of essays and a novel by Aquin (Blocs erratiques and Neige noire), while "la neige-neige de ce douze janvier" is reminiscent of Emile Nelligan's "Ah! comme la neige a neigé" in the poem "Soir d'hiver" and, a catch-phrase from Ionesco's La Cantatrice chauve is presented, as a quotation, but with no indication of its source: "Vava m'a d'abord abondamment gratifiée de 'comme c'est bizarre et quelle coïncidence ma chère Bobby Watson' avant de bien vouloir cesser de faire le sphinx" (93).

The field of intertextual reference does not restrict itself, however, to the "literary cannon." The text borrows heavily from all domains, incorporating elements from cinema, television, the world of music, the Bible, mythology and publicity, to the extent that Lewis Carroll, Aquin and Ionesco rub shoulders with Wonderwoman, Hitchcock, Edith Piaf and the Holy Virgin. Thus the text constitutes a veritable form of literary pop-art in which, as Lise Potvin describes it, the various references "composent une 'Bibliothèque de Babel'."4 In this chapter, the various effects of intertextuality will be
considered in reference to women's writing today and its various post-modernist traits, compared to the particular use of intertextuality in La Vie en prose.

First of all, the idea of a text as a perfect unit, complete in itself and categorisable, is undermined by the inclusion of borrowed references. In each case, the referents, as Jameson describes, "are other images, another text, and the 'unity' of the [work] is not in the text at all, but outside it, in the bound unity of another book." In La Vie en prose this effect is accentuated, first by the number of citations of texts which themselves incorporate a wide intertextual reservoir (Zazie dans le métro, "Jules et Jim," Jonas and Le soulier de satin among many others), while references to works by Hubert Aquin are very frequent, especially to Trou de mémoire, where the intertext takes the form of footnotes to various sources, some of which are completely bogus; some, by a second editor, simply criticise previous editorial interventions, while others indicate a reference, which, while not the text actually sought, provides a clue to the required source: thus the process of referentiality is continued by the reference itself.

This is also demonstrated by the deliberate citation of references within other texts to yet more texts, such as the
narrator's comment: "Dans le journal d'Anais Nin que je suis en train de lire, elle rapporte qu'Henry Miller parfois dort trop.... Elle dit que ché pus qui a dit (Rank peut-être) que 'la névrose altère le sens du repos' " (96); and elsewhere:

... je cherche le motif de l'enchainement du réel d'Alexandre dans la fiction de French Kiss, ce roman que Nicole Brossard a écrit pour les singes comme le disait si bien le perspicace Réginald Martel, dans La Presse, en 1974. (290)

Thus, in each case, referentiality is taking place on a number of levels, causing the final "full stop" to be continually deferred, leaving the principal text unfinished or "open" and thus fragmented.6

This deliberate repudiation of closure and unity represents another reason for the attractiveness of intertextuality to contemporary women writers. It is also a trend which takes place on a linguistic level and will therefore be discussed later in greater detail. Suffice it to say here, that in this way, the logical causality of the "traditional" text is left behind. Logic, causality, closure and unity are traditionally seen as related to the desire for order and thus as inherently "masculine" constructs, while openness and the fragmentation produced by the continual rupture from the narrative thread are characterised as positive "feminine" traits.7
The text is further left "open," as any reading or interpretation of it must inevitably be influenced by the reader's cultural background and his/her recognition of, for example, the Gospel, in the film *Je vous salue, Marie*, or of *Robinson Crusoe* in Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*. The necessity for the reader's familiarity with the reference and the process of recognition belong to what Jakobson calls the conative function.\(^8\) Thus, the "holes" in the reader's cultural background contribute to the openness of the text, as, in this way, all readings must inevitably be different. Once again, the incorporation of intertextual references has the effect of a resistance to classification as the very idea of a single reading becomes ludicrous.

The conative function is important, as an intertextual reference, whatever form it may take, is not simply an allusion to another text or work. The reference operates in such a way that the text incorporates not only the citation or the cited text, but also all that may have been written about that text; its "kudos" or the "myth" which surrounds it. The reference has in effect already been "coded" in some or other context by critical response. It occupies a certain corner of the literary world and belongs within a particular discourse which, according to Barthes, may take any form:

Le discours écrit, mais aussi la photographie, le
cinéma, le reportage, le sport, les spectacles, la publicité, tout cela peut servir de support à la parole mythique.\textsuperscript{9}

The referentiality of the intertext even in its most simple form thus works on multiple levels. First, the text which incorporates its reference is already coded by various discourses; this reference, however, must also have had various influences or "origins" and therefore an intertext of its own -- whatever form this may take -- and again, the intertext will have a code of its own, and so on.\textsuperscript{10}

Taking an example from \textit{La Vie en prose}, the narrator(s) cite(s) Flaubert's novel \textit{Bouvard et Pécuchet} on various occasions, thus in effect bringing together the two worlds or codes of \textit{La Vie en prose}, a late twentieth century Québécois novel, and a "celebrated" work by one of the "great" nineteenth century French writers: and by those simple epithets a form of the coding of each is already fairly evident. Similarly Villemaire quotes from (and acknowledges her debt to) Aquin's \textit{Trou de mémoire}:

\begin{quote}
Le Québec serait cette poignée de comédiennes bêgles et amnésiaques hantés par la platitude comme Hamlet par le spectre. Tout le monde a comme son texte sur le bout de la langue et personne n'arrive à se rappeler le premier mot de la première ligne de cette histoire insensée dont, faute de commencer, on ne connaîtra jamais la fin. (196)
\end{quote}

Here, then, an "extra layer" of reference is added as \textit{La Vie en prose} incorporates \textit{Trou de mémoire} which has itself previously
incorporated *Hamlet*, which already has an intertext of influences, predecessors and codes. Again, here, the three worlds or codes are drawn together.

However, the juxtaposition of such disparate elements cannot be innocent. Such a combination is unharmonious: one has only to think, in musical terms, of the clash or discord, and the incongruity which is produced when two tunes, perfectly harmonised in themselves, are put together: a Renaissance lament and the *1812 Ouverture*, for example, or Beethoven and the Sex Pistols.... It is this noisy union which André Belleau terms "le conflit des codes": conflict as the combination of two alien codes cannot be peaceful and a reaction is inevitable.

The reaction produced takes the form of a Bakhtinian carnivalisation, as described by Belleau in his essay "Carnavalesque pas mort?" Taking once again the reference to Flaubert's novel, the title, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is transformed into the rather unlikely pet names of two little girls "Bip and Pola" (138), here causing a combination of "high literature" and "childspeak." while the incongruity (and indignity) of "les anges qui se prennent pour Superman" (251) is quite evident! In each case, the association of two levels has a dual effect: a reduction of the "elevated" and an elevation of the "lowly." causing a demythification of each of the elements (in the sense
of a removal of the code). The legend of Arachné is treated in much the same way: first, the legend is reduced or demystified by its association with an actual spider in the narrator's room, thus rendering the mythological banal. Secondly, this Arachné is "assassinated" (176), a rather grandiose and incongruous term for the extermination of an insect, while the whole incident is related in a facetious tone which removes any mythological kudos. The narrator says:

Les nymphes venaient admirer ses tapisseries; mais la déesse, jalouse, s'étant déguisée en vieille - et je l'imagine assez sous les traits de la matrone grise aux cheveux pris dans une resille qui fait la loi à la cafétéria -, Minerve, donc - mais Ovide l'appelle parfois Pallas - se faisant passer pour une vieille femme, avertit la vantarde Arachné qu'elle peut bien prétendre être la meilleure tisseuse d'entre toutes les mortelles, mais wow les moteurs, pas question de s'imaginer l'égale d'une dééssse. Arachné lui dit de manger de la marde, la vieille se métamorphose en Minerve et le combat commence. (173)

Finally, the epithet "Arachné bionique" (277) brings together the two worlds of Ancient Greece and of the United States of the 1970's, as the wonder of Greek mythology is put into contact with a popular television show, causing each to be seen in a new way, illustrating the process of "defamiliarisation" which Nepveu describes. 12

By juxtaposing such mutually alien domains, the writer creates an oxymoronic structure - by definition paradoxical and ambivalent. The two elements are closed, not in order to
eliminate, but precisely to emphasize their difference: as Belleau says: "La vision carnavalesque" or the aim of such a juxtaposition as is caused by intertextuality, "instaure précisément une interaction dialogique entre les oppositions puisqu'elle ne cesse de les rapprocher tout en les maintenant distinctes."13 This, then, is the effect to which the narrator is referring when she says: "Dans la dédicace de mon exemplaire [de French Kiss] Nicole avait écrit quelque chose comme 'il est question de deux géographies à la fois' " (290); the two worlds are thus maintained while their combination creates a new space or an opening for a new dialogue, which, as Patrick Imbert describes it, "marque une nouvelle vague de contestation."14

In this way, the very criteria by which the elements have been coded are questioned. The heterogeneity of the intertextual citations and references, the inclusion of everything from "Superman" to the Divine Comedy, from Van Gogh to Barbie Dolls stretches to and beyond all limits the criteria by which Art itself is defined. The barriers that would normally exclude some of these elements and the value system on which any cultural hierarchy would be founded are themselves shifted or dismantled, bringing the marginal into the centre to stir up and dissolve all hierarchical constructs. As Frederic Jameson describes, this amounts to "the effacement... of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the
older distinction between high culture and so-called mean or popular culture".\textsuperscript{15} In this way, the elitism of the patriarchal literary cannon and of cultural definition is challenged.

La Vie en prose follows, by its use of intertextual borrowing, a policy or a "poetics of transformation" as the references and the text are affected by their juxtaposition.\textsuperscript{16} At the same time a "poetics of rupture" is apparent as the text is continually interrupted, its narrative level fluctuating due to the inclusion of so many disparate elements. The referent and the text are thus liberated from their code and are opened to new interpretation, as cloistered images are reanimated, even resurrected. The subversive nature of the practice is apparent. The effect, as Jameson describes, "is of a restructuration of a certain number of elements already given; features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant and features that had been dominant become secondary."\textsuperscript{17} Here also the attraction of the practice to women writers is evident, as the dominant value system, the patriarchal hierarchical system responsible for the discourse in which the referents are coded, is subverted by the recontextualisation of certain references, calling attention not only to their appearance within that new context, but also to that value system which had attempted previously to fix and label them.
The tendency of this process, evidently, is to set up a dichotomy between the old and the new and in effect, to construct a new hierarchy by a reversal or inversion of the old. *Kamouraska*, by Anne Hébert, provides an example in which the romantic novel of the nineteenth century is "recycled" in a text written in 1970. Similarly, *M. Melville*, by Victor-Lévy Beaulieu is a rewriting of Melville's *Moby Dick*, while *Je vous salue, Marie*, the film by Jean-Luc Godard or Denys Arcand's *Jésus de Montréal*, are based on the Gospel. This technique is also practised in *La Vie en prose* with parodic effect, as the writer/narrators imitate various styles, texts and phrases from other works. The circular dialogue from *En attendant Godot*, for example, appears in an altered state as the "characters" X and Y pass the time:

Y: Qu'est-ce qu'on attend? Godot?  
X: Peut-être. 
Y: Est-ce lui qu'on entend?  
X: Peut-être. Godot n'est qu'une dame en rose dans un fiacre. (39)

Later, the narrator discusses her writing: "C'est pas du vraiment vrai. Pourtant ces choses se sont passées. Quand j'écris que c'est pas du vraiment vrai, je mens à moitié" (50), again a passage very reminiscent of Beckett's writing. Similarly the "typical" detective novel, complete with mistaken identity and coincidences, is presented as a novel written by one of the narrators at an earlier stage:
C'est une histoire de jumeaux - un gars et une fille - qui, par jeu, se substituent l'un à l'autre en échangeant leurs vêtements le jour de l'initiation pour la rentrée des classes. L'un des deux, on ne sait pas trop lequel, est tué et le coupable est un prof de judo qui a profité de l'illusion temporelle en prenant l'avion pour Val d'Or en passant par Ottawa où il a fait une escale-alibi avant de revenir par un autre avion qui atterrit à Dorval au moment même où il prétend s'être trouvé dans le Nord-Ouest où il ne connaît malheureusement personne qui pourrait corroborer son témoignage. (95-6)

The number of coincidences and subordinate clauses - the whiles, wheres and whos - is exaggerated, thus challenging a whole genre of texts by exposing and exploiting its idiosyncracies to ridiculous proportions. Through this process, the "original" text (or texts) is reduced to the level of a stereotype - easily recognizable, even over-familiar, now rendered in some way comic or at least imperfect by the simple (ab-)use received at the hands of the text. In contrast, the text (the parodist) is elevated. There is, therefore, a danger that, rather than breaking down a fixed system, "...cette dichotomisation...sécurise, car elle est l'expression d'un pouvoir, celui du parodieur qui a l'esprit critique et le bon sens avec lui";19 thus one system is exchanged for another, setting up a new hierarchy in which the text is superior to its intertext.

However, the instances of such imitation are so frequent and so diverse that La Vie en prose does not simply present two
opposing systems to be reversed: rather it offers a whole series of systems which, by their mutual contact and the effects of rupture and transformation which this contact produces, reverse and reverse again in an endless oscillation or dialogue in which no stagnant hierarchy is possible.

In the same way, _La Vie en prose_, along with texts by Ducharme and Poupart among others, plays with citations from other texts, not just quoting but distorting the quotation. The opening line from _Prochain Episode_, for example, "Cuba coule en flammes au milieu du lac Léman, pendant que je descends au fond des choses," here appears as:

Cuba coule en flammes au milieu du lac Léman
pendant que je me rappelle le prochain épisode en pleurant dans la cage de fer gris d'un wagon-lit qui file vers Kurchatov. (268)

Elsewhere, various titles are taken and altered: _A Midsummer Night's Dream_ becomes "Le Cauchemar d'une nuit d'avril" (253); meanwhile _Alice in Wonderland_ is transformed into the antithetical "Alice au pays des hostilités" (289). Similarly, within the chapter heading "Ton nom de Los Angeles dans mon réel désert." for example, the novel by Marguerite Duras, _Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert_ is easily recognizable as the referent. This title appears on several occasions in its various transformed states: "Ton nom de Gabriel Archange dans Aurel désert" (122) and "Ton nom de St. Germain-des-Prés dans Aurel désert" (84), both of which maintain precisely the
paradigm of the original; later it appears first in a truncated form: "Laure-de-son-nom-d'Aurel" (261) where the structure is still familiar, thanks to the name attached to a location, and finally in an extended form as "je commence par faire mes dévotions aux reliques de Félicité Angers sur un air disco dans le musée de Laure Conan désert" (264), while again the juxtaposition of religion and popular music is apparent adding to the process of rupture. Thus, while the resemblances are apparent enough for the "énoncé" to be recognized, what Riffaterre would call the "stylistic function" of the new version assures that the difference or alterity is striking.  

The effects of such recycling and distortion in La Vie en prose are multiple. In the first instance, the text, which draws so heavily and so blatantly from other texts, exposes the background of culture, what Imbert calls "le texte public" or "le baggage culturel," treating it as "common land": thus the text advertises by its exaggeration, the process of borrowing and recycling which necessarily takes place in any text, as Barthes describes in his essay "The Death of the Author." By its openness and frequency, this practice and the idea of the possibility of originality are both parodied, as the process reaches the point where it is no longer clear whether this is "la mimésis de l'écriture ou l'écriture de la mimésis."
At the same time, the appropriation and abuse of the various citations (i.e., their distortion and disorientation within a new context) undermines the authority of the author of the "original" text or the intertext. Thus, not only is the sanctity of the referent itself demystified, but also that of the "Author" as the transcendental signified, the proprietor of the text, a model imbued with hegemony or with the concepts of paternity and of hierarchies. Here, in contrast, "le sujet énonciateur [est éliminé] sous un dialogue de textes sans origine." 25

The practice of intertextual borrowing in feminist writing represents a desire to recycle and to reappropriate the cultural background and control which have been traditionally a masculine prerogative or, as Patricia Smart describes: "une tentative de réapproprier le fond de l'expérience selon les termes d'une économie au féminin." This relates to Cixous' call to women to rewrite history, allowing themselves the place they have been denied. 26 The attempt to "feminize" art or culture is further emphasized by the vast number of references to women authors, singers and fictional characters; from Laure Conan to Julia Kristeva, Edith Piaf to Carla Bley and Wonderwoman to Anna Karenina (along with all the feminine characters of La Vie en prose) as a vast reservoir of marginal figures are given their share of the limelight.
The recycling process also demonstrates how any movement or attempt to change a system is engrained with elements and effects from that system. In this way, the idea of the creation of a "new" system (or a new culture, as in this case) is questioned. What Villemaire's text presents instead, by its flagrant borrowing, is a "counter culture," which, although in opposition to the existing system, cannot be set up as a "binary opposite," thus preventing the two from being simply reversed. The relationship between the two is that of same/other, resemblance/difference, where the Villemairien counter-culture occupies both poles of each coupling simultaneously. Here, the deconstructive nature of Villemaire's text is evident: the process of bringing disparate elements together, not to eradicate their difference but to emphasize it, resulting in a form of Verfremdungseffekt or alienation technique. In Derridian terms the process belongs to "l'opération féminine," as the distance created by the juxtaposition is itself the "feminine," the familiarity and alterity of the citation, two incompatible notions are recognized at the same time. Again, in Derridian terms, there is a third element in the couple and this element is both and neither familiarity and alterity, both and neither resemblance and difference. Villemaire's narrator describes this as she observes that "la distinction n'existe pas ... Si elle n'existe pas, elle existe pourtant simultanément." (94) Once again, the relationship between text and intertext is
presented as dialogic: both elements are active, neither dominant, neither fixed. Within the context of La Vie en prose, where does the dominance lie in the couple Arachné and the Bionic Woman? Or, how is the hierarchy balanced in the couple Erica Jong and Virgina Woolf? Leonard Cohen and Eric Satie? and so on. In this way, the hierarchisation, so prevalent within the phallogocentric system, is exposed as misguided and partisan, while classifications and categorisations are exposed in the fluorescent light of artificiality.

Once again, this process knows no bounds: the positively baroque excess of borrowing which takes place in La Vie en prose suggests that not only is the text "laughing at" the "traditional" text, covetous of originality, logic and linearity, but also at those (feminist or other) texts which, by their own parodism or exploitation of other texts, attempt to subvert those texts while setting themselves up as in some way superior. Thus, the use of intertextuality in recent texts is shown to be as much guilty of "stylistic mannerism," "excessiveness" and "eccentricity," in Jameson's terms, as the very texts that are intertextualised and parodied for their own particular stylistic traits or coding.29

The "parody of parodists/pastiche of pasticheurs" is demonstrated by the "internal intertext" or the "intratext"
which imitates the process of borrowing from other texts by a parallel system of borrowing among the texts which apparently constitute *La Vie en prose* (although the layers of referentiality are perhaps not so multiple). The (supposed) author of these texts - based on the members of Villemaire's "Rose Sélavy" workshop - meet periodically to discuss each other's manuscripts.30 The text is thus immediately scattered with references to the various works: it opens with a meeting to discuss "Noémie Artaud's" latest manuscript, while later the final passage of her text is quoted, presumably by another author in another text (96-7). The film *Pink Lady*, Blanche's work, crops up sporadically throughout the text, from the incipit onward, but it is not until the final section, "Vol de nuit," that the narrators/characters actually see the film (333 et sequitur). While references to the film are paralleled by references to "la dame en rose" and by the nick-name Bryan gives to one or more of the narrators, "Pink Lady Rose." Elsewhere the narrators prepare to read another manuscript, "Le Livre-Sphinx" by Gloria Olivetti (140) which is later included in the text, constituting a large central portion. *La Vie en prose* is likewise a text within the text, while its author/narrator comments on the intertextual similarities between it and "Le Livre-Sphinx" which her "futés lecteurs" will doubtless have noticed (207).

The intratextual references also take the form of
quotations and repetition, contributing greatly to the auto-referentiality of the text. The phrase "une histoire peuplée de bonnes et braves héroïnes," which appears in five different forms early in the text (25-6), reappears much later as the narrator talks of "ce labyrinthe infernal de braves et bonnes héroïnes enchaînées jusqu'au vertige." (257) Similarly, the May Day call (280) recalls the section "Jour de Mai" where the translation (though it is impossible to say which is the "original") gives the citation a different sense, thus distorting the phrase just as _La Vie en prose_ distorts extracts from texts external to itself. Elsewhere one narrator writes that "le roman.... devrait commencer sous le soleil exactement" (105) while the section is indeed entitled "Précis d'énergie solaire."31 Finally, the phrase "l'aube se lève au-dessus des Sourdes-Muettes" appears at least four times, eventually attributed to its "original" author: "l'aube se lève au-dessus des Sourdes-Muettes comme dans le roman de Solange" (346; also 172, 320, 323).32

By thus imitating the intertextuality so extensive within the text and so popular with contemporary writers, Villemaire's text undermines, or at least questions through parody, the validity and effects of the process. Having shown how the text can remain open, thanks to the conative function of parody (i.e., the dependence on the recognition or non-recognition of each citation and the infinite number of
possible readings which this fluctuation may produce), Villemaire's text demonstrates the other side of the coin. The intratext shows how this very function tends towards elitism by the inclusion of so many little known references, many of which would be totally unfamiliar outside a specific group. In *La Vie en prose* itself, the number of "in-jokes" at the expense of literary theory, for example, would be passed over by a vast number of readers, while a non-Québécois reader is also at a "disadvantage" due to the myriad references to the literary institution, corpus and traditions of Québec. This tendency is pushed to extremes as the narrators, a small circle of fringe writers and artists, quote and recycle one another's work: what reader outside this circle, reading their texts in isolation, would be able to identify and appreciate the almost incestuous intertextual borrowing which takes place among these writer-narrators? The text thus demonstrates how such borrowing is, paradoxically, in danger of creating a closed circle -- and indeed *La Vie en prose* itself has been accused of being a book written for writers33 -- as the group of writers create their cultural space within their own discourse or code. This tendency towards privatization, while contributing to the fragmentation and heterogeneity of modern literature, smacks of elitism and cliquishness - such as the privatization of language also demonstrated by the coded letters Rael sends to Nane (313) and elsewhere as the narrator and X talk in their "langage codé." (187)34
The conscientious reader who attempts to identify the various citations and to attribute them to their appropriate source also finds him/herself being quietly laughed at as he/she turns his/her attention to the intratext (the phrase "being led on a wild goose chase" springs to mind!). At the beginning of the text, "Noémie Artaud's" manuscript is examined by another writer who, by a study of the writing, attempts to identify the author behind the pseudonym "Noémie":

C'est seulement à la fin que je me suis rendu compte que ça se passait sur la lune....Pour moi, c'est Rose qui a écrit cela, ça lui ressemble!.... C'est curieux, en tout cas.....parce que cette histoire, si on excepte le côté "lunatique" qui me fait l'attribuer à Rose, ressemble beaucoup à ce qui est arrivé à Solange....au point que je suis en train de me demander si ce n'est pas Solange elle-même qui se cache derrière cette Noémie.(77-8)

A reasonable piece of anlaysis, apparently; however, this is later undermined as "Noémie" would appear to be another name for Vava:

Noémie rougit, elle dit que dans son prochain roman, elle promet de ne pas utiliser nos vrais noms. On vas-tu le publier sous "ton nom de plume" celui-là ou bien si on va écrire Eva-Véra Indianopolis tout au long. (113-4)

(this being Vava's full "day to day" pseudonym or nick-name, her "real name" apparently being Dionne Lepage). This is doubly ironic, as it is Vava herself who was trying to identify the text!)
Similarly, any attempt to identify the "author" of the texts in which the narrator is awaiting a letter is thwarted, as finally one of them admits:

Solange attend une lettre....Nane, elle en écrit. D'autre aussi attendent des lettres Noëlle, en Haute Provence, Laure de son nom d'Aurel, attend dix-neuf jours une lettre de Djinny. Djinny, à moi, n'a jamais écrit. (302)

The various incidences which seem to refer to the same circumstances and therefore to the same author and narrator are thus fragmented and indistinguishable. Later, the reaction Solange receives on reading an extract from her latest text reinforces this confusion:

Lotte dit: c'est drôle, ça me fait penser à la pièce que je suis en train d'écrire. C'est très différent, mais au fond c'est la même chose.... Nane dit: ouais, c'est drôle, moi aussi je trouve ça. Et Rose et Vava. (265)

This would seem to be a warning to the reader that distinction between the texts is impossible while also commenting once more on the inevitable influence of other writings or writers and questioning the concept of originality.

Finally, the reader is given a clue which helps just enough to send him/her back to the beginning to try again:

...tout le roman m'est apparu comme l'histoire de la passion de Nane Yelle pour Rael, personnage énigmatique qui, dans la vie réelle s'appelle Réal et dont elle vient aujourd'hui de recevoir une
lettre. Quand Carl me demande si c'est moi Nane, je dis que bien sûr que non. Que moi c'est Noëlle. Il dit que oui, mais que c'est pas mon vrai nom ça. Noëlle. Je dis que bien sûr que non, que personne n'ose s'appeler par son vrai nom... Il dit que oui, mais qu'il sait, que je m'appelle Vava, qu'il y a une vrai Noëlle et que ce n'est pas moi. Je dis que Noëlle n'est pas plus Noëlle que moi, que ce n'est pas plus son vrai nom à elle que Vava n'est mon vrai nom à moi.... (310)

thereby revealing the various layers of shared pseudonyms behind which the authors hide themselves, which is further complicated by the use of the same names for their characters. Thus "Le Livre-Sphinx," which is attributed to Nane (141) but uses her name for a character, later would seem to be written by Solange, writing an autobiographical text, as she says: "Ma passion pour Rael, passion que j'ai attribuée à Nane pour me faciliter les choses, m'aura du moins permis d'en arriver à avouer cela." (352) The section "On y danse tout en rond" is attributed to Noëlle (329): yet, as shown above, Noëlle may be another name for Vava, or the pseudonym of one of the other narrators. In this way, the narrators/writers seem to "cancel each other out" until, under the wealth of names, there remains just one, or perhaps two - Vava and/or Solange: the significance of this process from a narrative perspective and subject position will be considered at a later stage.35

Through the use of the intratext, the reader is constantly thwarted in his or her efforts to identify the text and its author and is therefore unable to "furnish the text with its final signified";36 thus the text is left open, while
the desire to regulate, to order, to complete is shown to be comic or pointless. Instead, the reader is drawn into the game, encouraged to search by the number of puzzles and red herrings deliberately set up by the text, constituting its ludic, playful nature.

This quality is also evident in the anarchic use of intertextual borrowing, in which the effects of conflict, rupture, transformation and difference each act as a catalyst for the others: nothing in La Vie en prose can remain unaffected. The total and constant disintegration of systems which this provokes is, as Pierre Nepveu claims, verging on the apocalyptic, "style Chamberland" (another recurrent reference in Villemaire's text) whose montages of song lyrics, handwritten poetry, newspaper clippings, photographs and illustrations parallel Villemaire's exhaustive patchwork.37

However, despite the inevitable inference of "la vie en rose" which makes its presence felt throughout, from the title onwards, La Vie en prose does not offer the assurance of the golden age or utopia and general salvation which is promised in Chamberland's later works. This state is searched for, perhaps wished for, as the narrator says: "Comme les gnostiques de Princeton qui pratiquent le montage positif, je veux voir la vie en rose et croire aux utopies de Chamberland." (197) Yet it is also seen to be unreal or artificial, as she talks of the
day when "l'opticien réparait mes lunettes roses que j'avais brisées dans un moment de découragement" (197), as well as a temporary state of bliss, the clichéd colour of love and romance: "C'est toujours avec toi que je danse la vie en rose" (227). Nevertheless, although a utopic vision is questioned, a dystopia is in no way set up in its place:

Ce n'est peut-être qu'une danse de la vie en noir en rose... Mais c'est tellement évident le noir, que ça serait cyclope de ne voir que ça. N'ouvrir que le bon oeil serait tout aussi bête. Alors je louche. Et s'ouvrir alors, parfois, le troisième." (197)

Once again, the two extremes of perception, total optimism against total pessimism, are both seen as short-sighted, while the narrator prefers to "squint" - here a figurative expression of the sideways shift of the deconstructive "process": "le mouvement oblique" which Derrida talks of 38 - thus allowing a third, alternative vision which includes and rejects both extremes simultaneously. The result is a final refusal of the possibility of an inversion of values or perception, which ultimately is nothing but the exchange of one atrophizing system for another (phallogocentrism for hysterologocentrism, perhaps). This is not, evidently, a simple avoidance of the question, rather an answer which forces continual questioning, leading the reader on a proverbial merry dance throughout the text: the "belle sarabande baroque" which
Lise Potvin describes, thus, finally, causing the text to exude energy. *La Vie en prose* does not, then, concern itself with arrivals. it is not the grail but the never-ending quest which is important: as Suzanne Lamy perceives:

"...pour la dame en rose, pour Vava, pour Rose, Solange ou Nane, l'important n'est pas [d'aller quelque part et de savoir comment y aller] mais d'aller tout simplement."

To conclude briefly, the multiple effects of intertextuality render it attractive to feminist and postmodernist writers alike: its carnivalisation, the rupture and transformation that it causes, the conflict of codes and the dismantling of barriers and classifications, undermine and subvert the patriarchal or phallogocentric systems which evaluate and hierarchise its various elements. *La Vie en prose* takes the process to extremes, refusing to allow a new system to erect itself as a result of the subversion it causes, parodying instead, by its intratext, even those texts which might well be considered in the same genre, but which, perhaps inadvertently, by their literary techniques and borrowings, tend to be exclusive and elitist and risk replacing one hierarchy by another. *La Vie en prose* renders the concept of hierarchy and the desire to hierarchise, ridiculous and impossible, offering instead a constant process of recycling and renewal, of dismantling and rebuilding. This demonstrates the creative emphasis and unbounded energy which ride on the
humour inherent within the text, while this energy and movement are evident also in the language and structure of La Vie en prose, as will be shown in the next chapter. The text refuses all "closure," thus endorsing the multiple subversive effects of its intertextuality.
Notes

1 Michel Butor, Répertoire III page 9, quoted also in Patrick Imbert, Roman québécois contemporain et clichés Cahiers du CRCCF, 21. (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1983).

2 References throughout the text to Yolande Villemaire's La Vie en prose are to the second edition, Coll. Typo 2 (Montréal: Les Herbes Rouges, 1984).


7 The words "masculine" and "feminine" are not used here in terms of "male" and "female", i.e., in terms of biological gender, but rather as specific subject positions - a central concept which will as such be considered in detail at a later stage.


10 The word "code" is used here in André Belleau's terms, as in his essay "Le Conflit des codes dans l'institution littéraire québécoise" in Surprendre les voix (Montréal, Boréal, 1986) 167-74.


13 See André Belleau, "Carnavalisation et roman québécois: mise au point sur l'usage d'un concept de Bakhtine" in Etudes françaises 19.3 (hiver 83-4) 58.

14 Imbert, Roman québécois. 113.

15 Jameson. 112.

16 Paterson, especially 322-3.

17 Jameson. 123.


22 Imbert, Roman québécois. 130.

23 See Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text.

24 Imbert, "Parodie", 44.


27 Imbert, Roman québécois 141; also in Paterson. 320.


31 Potvin, 416.

32 There are also a number of references to Villemaire's own works: the "roman policier" mentioned as an earlier text by one of the narrators has a title close enough to *Meurtres à Blanc* to recall Villemaire's text, while the phrase "le temps se fait nuageux avec périodes ensoleillées ou ensoleillé avec périodes nuageuses" (105) is recycled in her short text "Du Côté hiéroglyphe de ce qu'on appelle le réel," as "ces nébulosités variables d'ensoleilllements avec périodes nuageuses et d'ennuagement avec périodes ensoleillées," while the references to the time when Nane, Rose and Maud worked for Belle Canada is developed in a later radio play, *Belles de nuit*.

33 For example, Claude Sabourin, "Le Côté centripète de ce qu'on appelle l'écriture: proses et poésies villemairiennes, d'un texte à l'autre," *Voix et Images* 33 (printemps 1986)437: "Qui parle chez Villemaire? ... L'élite. D'où parle-t-on? De haut, de loin, dans un regard en plongée."

34 Jameson, 114.

35 Once again, the excessive use of a particular technique results in an effect alien, even opposite, to that for which it was "intended". Here, the pseudonym, which traditionally hides and mythifies identity, has the effect of evacuating identity.

36 Barthes in "Death of the Author".

37 Nepveu, 160.

38 Derrida, 116.

39 Potvin, 407.

Chapter 2: Textuality
Les mots ne nous apprennent que des mots.

Saint Augustin

C'est de toute beauté de voir la danse de quelqu'un qui aime à ce point le langage.

La Vie en prose
The political significance and potential of language have long been recognized. In Marxist terms, for example, language is seen as one of the major means by which the State apparatuses - the exploitative governing forces of society - function. Language, or discourse, codes and labels objects, concepts and people, thus "fixing" them in a way which creates and perpetuates around them repressive myths. Recent feminist texts examine this phenomenon, focusing as one would expect on the representation and treatment of women within the predominant ideological discourse of Western society - namely, that of phallogocentrism.

The phallogocentric discourse is constructed around the Phallus: the word is not, here, synonymous for penis, but rather, used in Lacanian terms to signify such concepts as paternity, property and the hierarchies or succession which these entail, as well as the single or unitary and unified. It also turns on the concept of the "Logos," the word as "transcendental signified." a unit complete in itself with a single, incontestable and essential meaning. The proximity of this system to the Platonic system of absolute and universal truths, is apparent.

However, for this system to succeed, answers must be found and absolutes either discovered or created in order that the actual absence of such absolutes need not be recognized.
Thus the expedient repression of doubt and questioning must inevitably take place to quash anything that might threaten the "laws" or "truths" of the Phallus. In this way, any troubling element - which in Derridian terms is "feminine" - is forced to the margins of the system, leaving what is, ironically, a "castrated" truth. The closed and finite system expresses itself in a similarly closed discourse, which does not question, but rather vaunts the precision of its inherent and communicative values.

Within this discourse, Woman's "place," her role and her voice, are prescribed for her. It forms and shapes her, moulding her into the image it has already reserved and created for her, thereby forcing her into those stereotypical rôles traditionally allotted to Womankind: thus Woman's "femininity" - that which makes her a woman, or her difference - is repressed, as there is no place for it within the phallogocentric discourse. Women are thus born into an existing linguistic order, within which they have no voice, speaking lines from someone else's dialogue, as Hélène Cixous describes it: "Everything turns on the Word: everything is in the Word.... we must take culture at its Word as it takes us into its word, into its tongue.... as soon as we exist, we are born into language and language speaks (to) us, dictates its law, a law of death." Language is a powerful tool or a powerful weapon; indeed, to quote Cixous once more: "No
political reflection can dispense with language, with work or language."\textsuperscript{4}

The writers who today may be labelled as belonging to the group who espouse \textit{l’écriture féminine}, work precisely from this viewpoint, attempting to reintegrate into language whatever the phallogocentric discourse has systematically repressed. In this way, such writers as Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, among others, create a new discourse, reanimating those elements which have been fixed or labelled, while reworking their own woman’s identity within that discourse. Thus the values inherent within phallogocentrism are rejected and replaced by a writing based on what Cixous terms a "feminine libidinal economy." This writing aims to express woman’s psychosexual specificity, while setting in reverse, in effect, the centrifugal force which has pushed the feminine to the margins in the name of "order" and "neatness." The goal, then, is to deconstruct the phallogocentric ideology by dismantling its discourse, permitting the creation of a new space for Woman’s voice and words, allowing her to write and rewrite continually her own script and finally, to create her own identity thorough a style and language which formulate and express it.

\textit{L’écriture féminine} bases itself upon women’s sexuality: the female sex organs are set in opposition to the male
phallus, the figure of "glorious monosexuality" giving way to the sense of the multiple as opposed to the unitary. This idea is represented in Luce Irigaray's punning title "Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un," where first the denigration of feminine sexuality is announced (i.e., the denial of woman's sexuality as legitimate and of her ability and/or right to experience sexual pleasure) and secondly, this very concept is undermined by the ambiguity of the title, since the idea of the sex as "not one" but as "more than one" is also expressed. Irigaray goes on to say:

la femme "se touche" tout le temps sans que l'on puisse d'ailleurs le lui interdire, car son sexe est fait de deux lèvres qui s'embrassent continûment. Ainsi, en elle, elle est déjà deux - mais non divisibles en un(e)s - qui s'affectent.

Elsewhere she says:

Le femme a des sexes un peu partout. Elle jouit d'un peu partout. Sans même parler de tout son corps, la géographie de son plaisir est bien plus diversifié, multiple dans ses différence, complexe, subtile qu'on ne l'imagine.

The multiplicity and indeterminability which this conception implies are reflected in the writings loosely termed examples of l'écriture féminine.

This chapter will examine the way in which Villemaire's text treats both the masculine discourse and ideology and the feminine, in terms of the aims and style of l'écriture féminine.
From its very title, *La Vie en prose* signals a study of the relationship between life and art, fiction and "reality," or language as an expression of "le vécu." The very nature of "reality" and "truth" are suspect, as shown when one of the narrators asks Vava: "Comment veux-tu écrire la vie quand tu ne sais plus ce que c'est, que tu ne l'as jamais su..." (347). Later the narrator cites *Les Femmes et le sens de l'honneur* by Adrienne Rich, in which the author apparently says: "la vérité n'existe pas. Ni même une vérité. Que c'est un réseau de complexités la vérité...." (351) In this way, *l'écriture féminine* joins modern philosophy in striking a great blow to the very foundations of phallocentrism, as truth is redefined in opposition to its traditional status as universal value or transcendental signified. "*La vérité,*" a single, unquestionable truth does not exist, no more than does "une vérité" — one truth as opposed to another, which is, therefore, not universal. The only truth that exists is one which is unknowable, precisely because it is multiple. This is similarly considered in Derrida's *Eperons*, as he examines Nietzsche's work:

*Mes vérités, cela implique sans doute que ce ne sont pas des vérités puisqu'elles sont multiples, bariolées, contradictoires. Il n'y a donc pas une vérité en soi, mais de surcroît, même pour moi, de moi, la vérité est plurielle.*

Villemaire's narrator goes on to say:
Je voudrais écrire la vérité, toute la vérité et je n'y arrive pas. C'est beaucoup trop compliqué; il y a dix mille choses à la fois dans chacune des choses. (351)

Once again, the illusory nature of the unitary fixed philosophy of phallogocentrism is undelined.

This leads to what must be the most quoted passage from the text:

La vie en prose, parce que la distinction n'existe pas. C'est l'univers du rose: entre le rouge de la révolution et le blanc de la fête. Une sorte de tremblement entre le noir et le blanc, un lieu dialectique où la membrane curieuse qui accomplit la mission de son ADN et s'obstine à écrire son nom, se saisit de l'hémisphère du silence pour dissoudre. Toute est dans toute et y a rien là comme dit cet être hybride d'une science-fiction mutante qui court les rues. C'est la pure vérité pourtant. (129)

The "lieu dialectique" which the narrator describes is a space in which categories are no longer possible, where everything is a part of everything else: one of the narrators says, for example: "la vie c'est la mort aussi, [que] c'est lié indéfiniment. Quand on assure la vie, c'est qu'on craint la mort." (347); and elsewhere: "De la Vierge ou d'Ariane, du pareil au même" (84). Distinction thus becomes impossible as, once again, here as discussed in the first chapter, unitary, defined concepts are deconstructed or ridiculed and shown to be both themselves and other.
This is practised throughout La Vie en prose in the form of an concerted resistance to definition and naming, which is immediately apparent, first of all, on the level of textual definition. La Vie en prose calls itself a novel (roman), a recognized literary form, of which a reader might expect certain characteristics. However, this text possesses few, if any, of what might be considered prerequisites for the traditional novel (some sort of "plot" and developed character, for example) and plays with the very idea of genre and classification. Opening with what looks like the transcription of a Kaffee-klatsch, the text continues as a personal diary complete with dates and place names as "subheadings," followed by a Beckettian dialogue, followed in turn by letters and song lyrics (in "Lettre d'amour à mon ange gardien"), prose-poetry ("Delta/écho, sierra/tango") and so on, creating a generic "patchwork."

Elsewhere, the difficulty of classifying is imitated on the level of the intratext as the various works by the different writer-narrators are considered. At the beginning the women talk about Blanche's film, Pink Lady: it is described variously as "le plus beau film d'amour", "un peu space-opéra", "une sorte de thriller art-déco" and "une sadhana tantrique." (7) Each successive term is a little more obscure or figurative than the previous one, leaving the reader equally at sea as to the actual nature of the film: the made-up "sadhana-tantrique" would seem to be as informative as any
other epithet! Later Rose attempts to assign her own work to a particular genre, having decided against "space-opéra" as her text Yvelle Swannson is "du craché-vécu" (368), finally selecting the term "roman-savon", a "new" term, as none of the existing labels really "fits."

The combination of genres which the text presents and the difficulty in defining the text itself which this combination causes, constitute a deliberate effort to resist definition, thereby undermining the pigeon-holing mania of the literary cannon, which insists on categorising according to structure or genre, or "value" and "level": and here, as already mentioned, the text incorporates a whole catalogue of levels and discourses, ranging from Harlequin Romance to literary theory, to childspeak and so on. Such a refusal of classification is evident in other recent feminist works: Nicole Brossard's *French Kiss*, for example, also uses cartoons, while Hélène Cixous combines literary theory and prose poetry in her works, thus representing a move to "faire sauter les barrières entre les genres" in an attempt to break down and question the very value of the limiting, exclusive system of nominisation. This deliberate resistance is described by Hélène Cixous in her "manifesto" for women's writing, "Le Rire de la Méduse":

Impossible de définir une pratique féminine de
l'écriture, d'une impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais théoriser cette pratique, l'enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle n'existe pas. Mais elle excédera toujours les discours que régit le système phallogocentrique: elle a et aura lieu ailleurs que dans les territoires subordonnés à la domination philosophique-théorique. Elle ne se laissera penser que par les sujets casseurs des automatismes, les coureurs de bords qu'aucune autorité ne subjugue jamais.11

There are, however, certain characteristics of the style of writing to which Cixous refers, as will become apparent, but the resistance to the classifying process results from the fact that the desire to label is seen as an inherently masculine trait, "betraying a phallogocentric desire to stabilize, organize and rationalize."12 As Toril Moi points out: feminists have consistently argued that "those who have the power to name the world are in a position to influence reality."13 In effect, in Villemaire's text the naming process is blocked as "un genre qui n'en est pas un" - to use Irigaray's word-play - is created, unnamable and unclassifiable, which thus undermines, even subverts, the naming authority. It would seem that to make any attempt to label La Vie en prose would be to fall into a trap and to perpetuate the values of the neat, orderly phallogocentric system, while at the same time, attempting to close or repress an apparently irrepressible text.

This defiance was previously mentioned, as evident in
the multiple layers of pseudonyms which cover the writer-narrator(s). The reader is once again drawn in, deliberately tempted - dared, even - to analyse, to label, as the whole idea of nominisation is treated as a trap or a joke and the reader is led on a "merry dance." Later in the book, for example, at another meeting:

Marie dit: c'est quoi une auto? Rose répond que c'est une machine. Quelqu'un demande c'est quoi une machine. Rose dit que c'est une sorte de Chine. Lotte demande c'est quoi la Chine. Rose, au bord des larmes, dit que c'est une question qu'elle s'est toujours posée [sic]. Et alors, Solange, très fact-to-fact, dit que la Chine, c'est une étiquette qu'on met sur les choses. (259)

Here the process of defining, or the attempt to define is parodied as the label proffered in each case gets further away from the initial object. The search for definition or identification is thus presented as endless and/or pointless, as a quest for the Holy Grail or the city of El Dorado: a process of infinite regression, in which each question leads only to another.

Elsewhere, the process is seen as a human necessity, as much a need as food, or as an addiction: "Un violent besoin de nomination s'ouvre comme une chausse-trappe" (88), as though the need to define is seen to result from a sense of lack, a desire to explain and to understand. This same need is demonstrated when the narrator desperately tries to understand why Maud had said that Lotte "est bel et bien revenue de New
York" (89-96), considering the numerous possibilities, finally and conveniently introducing a figurative third party: "Quelqu'un à qui elle aurait raconté l'incendie.... quelqu'un qui aurait été l'objet de la même méprise et qui nous aurait aussi confondues, Lotte et moi." (95) Thus a solution is discovered, although its expediency and the number of coincidences it requires, as well as the number of possibilities it ignores - in short, its decidedly shakey foundations - are painfully apparent. Here the analytic, ordering reader is addressed as he/she attempts to identify the narrator-character and solve the mystery, as, once again, it is this desire or need for order which is at the basis of the phallogocentric discourse. The answers offered by Villemaire's text, however, are either openly artificial, or are themselves simply further questions.

The same undermining process is evident in the wealth of adjectives and qualifiers which overwhelm the text, in a psychedelic use of colour. "Les anges bleus", "les dames en rose", "les cheveux roses", "les ondes vertes", "les lèvres rouges, les joues rouges, les yeux rouges," flash like neon signs from page to page, while elsewhere a single adjective is not sufficient; a song by Carla Bley is 'beau comme "le beau temps sonne comme une casserole sur la pluie du temps"' (370); and **Close Encounter** (sic) is described as "beau comme une annonce de Corn Flakes" (139). Here, then, one word is "not enough" as other words are needed to explain and qualify the
qualifiers, leading once again to the idea of infinite regression. One of the narrators says at one point: "il faudrait bien que j'apprenne à écrire sans adjectifs et sans peur" (129), thus drawing attention to the use of adjectives as strengtheners and playing with the idea that "les mots sont faibles" in the sense that a single word or adjective is never sufficient to encapsulate a specific "meaning" or to communicate a certain sense.

In this way Villemaire's text questions the absolute communicative value of language, as used within the predominant ideological discourse, which turns on a series of concrete "meanings" and where this "meaning" - the signified - is both all important and possible: a discourse which thus ultimately deceives itself knowingly, as language is here, as in other examples of écriture féminine, constantly seen and presented as inadequate, at least in its ability to transmit or encapsulate meaning.

In "Le Livre-Sphinx" the narrator considers, in a slightly more theoretical way, the nature and value of language and the act of writing, coming to the conclusion that:

Le langage est lui-même une litote et ses productions, peut-être des super-litotes. Il y a peut-être davantage de réel dans le "a noir" de Rimbaud que dans n'importe quel traité sur l'aleph, la Grande Mère, le sunyata ou l'être et le néant. Et il y en a peut-être encore davantage quand alpha elle-même s'éteint. (160)
This suggests that the very attempt to transmit meaning or to describe the "real" or "reality" ensures that that meaning will be absent, and that language evacuates meaning rather than expressing it. Similarly, later, the narrator decides:

\[
\text{si la vérité était transmissible, tout le monde l'aurait communiquée à son frère, j'ai beau avoir peur, je l'écris quand même car je suis bien contente, moi, que ceux qui en savent un petit bout me le disent, même si, bout à bout, ces micro-vérités ne seront encore qu'une carte très approximative du territoire de l'Ultime Réalité. (215)}
\]

In this way that the closed absolutism and precision of patriarchal discourse is questioned and found lacking, as the "one word for one meaning" philosophy is replaced by the exclamation "comme si un mot pouvait tout expliquer" (52), while the process of writing or typing reveals...

\[
\text{la fragmentation imbécile du langage et le dérisoire étincelant de ces "marques" qui, au lieu de faire surgir la fiction, n'en font que mettre à jour les mailles, tout comme du réel, jamais les mots ne sauront rendre compte. (160)}
\]

However, "black and white" being so totally alien to Villemaire's text, this is in no way a purely negative attack either on the ideological discourse or on language itself: rather, this "discovery" as to the nature of language is presented as liberating.

\[
\text{La Vie en prose turns precisely on the idea that}
\]
language "ne peut pas appeler un chat un chat" - that one word is never enough, exaggerating its lack of precision and inherent signification. In this way the text escapes from the strictures of the prisonhouse of phallogocentrism, breaking away from the necessity of logical progression and allowing words to flow as if they had a life of their own. This endows the text with a digressive quality, as the writer-narrators allow themselves to be "side-tracked," recording their interruptions and flights of thought or fancy. The narrators' attempts to relate an incident, for example, are constantly thwarted:

Je pouvais bien rire, l'été dernier, à Avignon au cours d'un récital de poésie "féminine" qui semblait fondé sur la thématique du chien.... Des chiens, il y en a plein dans ma vie et dans ma prose, ça en devient chiant. Clin d'œil aux psychanalystes: moi je déchiffré tellement vite maintenant et ça bloque toujours en deuxième chakra, alors c'est rendu que je m'en crisse. De tête de chien astral en Caniche Head, comme j'ai entendu la première fois ce nom de Conishead Priory où j'ai fait connaissance ave Manjushri, Chenrezig et Cie., en bouledogues hypnagogiques et en tantous très réels comme cet autre chien policier que promenait le diable que j'ai rencontré rue Saint-Denis le jour où j'ai suivi la pleine lune du printemps qui était grosse à ce point que maman, dans l'auto, tandis qu'elle me reconduisait chez moi, l'a elle-même prise pour un OVNI. Haudites parenthèses! (200)

Here, the point of the story is lost or at least endlessly delayed, as the narrator tries in vain to get a tight rein on the words which, apparently, have a momentum of their own.

The discontinuity is caused by the associative quality
of language; although each word may be given a specific value or significance within a given phrase or context (denotation), so, depending on its context, it also has the capacity to signify an infinite number of other concepts (connotation), depending on the background, experience and thought processes of the speaker/writer (as well as on those of the listener/reader). The passage above, for example, shows the narrator's thought patterns wandering away from the "story" as the word "chien" conjures up another idea or memory leading her to a particular dog, which, in turn leads her to recall a specific day and the details of that day: all apparently "irrelevant" to the anecdote about the poetry recital in Avignon. It becomes evident that the text progresses as a result of phonetic – in the case of Conishead/Caniche Head – graphic and mnemonic association, creating a stream of consciousness effect which, while revealing the subconscious workings of the mind, also demonstrates the play of signifiers taking place throughout the text, thereby creating "une galaxie de signifiants, non une structure de signifiés"14; or, to quote Lewis Carroll: "No word has meaning INSEPARABLY attached to it, a word means what the speaker intends by it and what the hearer understands by it."15

Earlier, the narrator comments on a similar digression:

Du changement d'orbite de la métaphore psychanalytique à la métaphore sociale, je ne suis pas directement responsable. Ce sont les mots qui
ont tendance à confondre l'histoire personnelle à l'actualité régionale, nationale ou internationale. (199)

The interruptions to the linear progression of the narrative are blamed on language itself, as words get out of control: the narrator declares, with a comi-tragic air:

Les mots sont forts, hélas, et ont tendance à s'imposer contre l'hémisphère du silence: j'aimerais arriver à écrire des silences qui s'entendent. Mais les mots tendent à la détente, les mots jasent et le texte est ravi par l'anecdote. (129)

The text is open to all the possibilities of language, once again questioning the logic and purity of the phallogocentric discourse, built on absolutes, which deafens itself to the myriad "meanings" or associations evoked by each word. Here, each word has a specific intended concept or signified, which is itself a signifier for another concept, which, in turn is simultaneously a signifier..... Villemaire's text thus demonstrates a never-ending process of signification, to the point where, to borrow Derrida's phrase, there is no longer an "hors-texte," as the "hors-texte" has itself become text, incorporating what would, in a traditional phallogocentric discourse, be left unsaid.

By indicating the "writability" of all things and showing how everything is material for writing, the text erodes the distinction between fiction and reality to the extent that "on dirait qu'il y a des points entre la fiction et le réel"
Life is evidently seen as material for fiction: the spider plant. "la sansevière" (216) for example, forces the narrator to write the word "araignée" and the match, by falling into the typewriter and blocking the "P", forces the narrator to remember "cette pyromane qu'elle avait rencontrée, un mois plus tôt, sur le traversier de Lévis." (85). Yet the two "levels" become confused to the point where it is unclear as to which influenced which. The narrator remembers, for example, "ce jour de juin où .... la fiction a basculé dans le réel, comme dans cette scène du roman policier que j'ai écrit il y a quelques années." (50) Once again, as in the preceding discussion, the point here is not to conclude that there is no difference between the two, rather that the two become confused and that the distinguishing process is never-ending.

The very attempt to bring Order to the "Chaos" of language is shown to be ridiculous and self-defeating, as the narrator asks:

\textit{Pourquoi relit-on ce qu'on vient juste d'écrire, sinon pour contrôler le degré de pertinence linguistique d'un message dont on risque de perdre ainsi la suite qui de toute façon n'existait pas, puisqu'on est revenus là au point du départ.} (162-3)

Any process of order and control is seen as patriarchal and restricting. The narrator-writer says: "j'ambitionne sur le pain bénì en me refusant à mettre au point final" while the fullstop, the omega of the sentence is described as "l'instance paternelle de la langue maternelle" (170). Elsewhere the
process of editing is seen as a great loss, the cutting out of the deviations, the frustrations and such like, which all contribute to the finished, published work:

On devrait sans doute savoir renoncer aux charmes manuscrits que sont les ratures, les flèches, les enluminures de points, les mots repassés et les dessins dans la marge, le temps d'une cigarette de réflexion avant de poursuivre parce qu'on pense qu'on a perdu ce qu'on voulait dire ce qui est bien la plus démente version de la fiction. (161)

Again, what is "normally" unsaid or unwritten is here reconsidered, its exclusion seen as loss, reiterating the idea of the masculine text being a "castrated" text.

The digressive quality of La Vie en prose, with its chatty tone, discontinuity, and the predominant use of the first person in the narrative, gives the text an oral/aural quality, as though the reader is faced with the transcription of the narrator's thought, spoken into a tape recorder. This effect is further suggested by the opening and closing words of the text: "Vava dit... comme dirait Vava," and by the inclusion of numerous colloquialisms and the use of joual in dialogue. The text is frequently interrupted by "Toujours est-il...," while the character-narrators talk in terms of "quossé ça", "t'as-tu vu", "anyway un freak enterre un freak" (343), "Ché pus qui...", "ouache", "ouen", which while contributing to the "oralitude" of the text, also draw attention to the use of joual in Québécois literature and to another case of a marginal/minority group challenging the dominant ideology
through a challenge to the ideological discourse.\textsuperscript{16}

This also represents the erosion of the distinction between written and spoken language, as the "voice" of the narrators can be "heard" behind the text. This "privileging of the voice" is significant to women's writing. In the work of Cixous, for example, "writing and voice ..... are woven together;"\textsuperscript{17} while, according to Toril Moi, the voice is significant because "finding its source in a time before the Law came into being, the voice is nameless: it is placed firmly in the pre-Oedipal stage before the child acquires language and thereby the capacity to name itself and objects."\textsuperscript{18} The voice is thus closely connected with the Imaginary Order, the Lacanian "féminine".

The effect here is of a lid being lifted, or of a gag being removed, allowing Woman's voice to flow unimpeded. It is as though Woman has at last found her own voice, at last been allowed to speak her own words, and has consequently become a full speaking subject: the hysteric has found a sympathetic, uncritical listener. The accusation of "discontinuity" which her speech might provoke, belongs solely to the phallogocentric discourse and so is here disregarded or irrelevant.

The text thus critiques the various fallacies of the phallogocentric discourse, reliant as it is on a system of
exclusions and rejections. The possibility of a neat, unified, conceptual world is shown to be ludicrous, while the language used to express such a world, by its foundation on a system of universals or transcendental signifieds, cannot be anything other than downright deceptive. Stefano Agosti describes this in his introduction to *Eparons*, as the clarity of this discourse....

Thus by aspiring to express truth and meaning, this discourse ensures that truth and meaning will be perpetually absent. Villemaire's text exposes the castrated, atrophaic nature of this discourse, replacing it with a digressive "discontinuous" magma of words, in a parricidal attack. In contrast to the exclusive ideological discourse. *La Vie en prose* opens itself to everything, creating a psychedelic and metaleptic discourse in which, as Agosti says:

> le sens n'est pas ailleurs, mais se fait et défait avec elle.... Car cette écriture ne dit rien mais bien mêlé et confond, pousse sur les marges ce qu'elle dit, s'empare des marges pour que rien ne se fixe là. C'est une écriture obscure, qui efface ce qu'elle trace, qui disperse ce qu'elle dit.21

This is illustrated by the constant questions which the text...
provokes: first, those posed directly by the text itself: the "comment ça?", "qu'est-ce que c'est?" and so on, which punctuate the text; as well as the questions raised by the metalinguistic discourse, which, although "dispersed," continue throughout the text, commenting on the nature of language, writing and the feminine. This is reiterated in the questions posed by the bemused reader, attempting to arrange things into some kind of order or at least to trace a thread or two. This, however, as described in an earlier section, is a never-ending process, for indeed the text itself confesses: "c'était un processus qui semblait ne devoir jamais s'arrêter." (50) Even the writer-narrator has to admit defeat on this point, and says: "A force de suivre tous les fils à la fois je perds le fil" (282) while she needs a "guinea pig" to test out "les multiples pistes qui s'offrent à moi pour faire débouler toutes les autres." (194) Once again, the infinite propensity for signification which language possesses and displays, is seen as an unfathomable source, actively self-propagating, giving the writer not the difficulty of "finding" the right words but of "selecting" from among the multitude simultaneously presenting themselves to her.

However, the process of questioning, which takes place on both sides of the text, creates, yet again, a feeling of perpetual motion and energy as ideas and queries are thrown back and forth. The search for *le mot juste* or for something concrete on which to build, being continually thwarted, becomes
exuberant, the thrill of a chase which has no end - while language, the medium of the search, becomes a source of somewhat anarchic pleasure. Just as, on the discursive level, the text rejects all regulating standards, on the linguistic level it liberates itself from all strictures, drawing on both the phonetic and graphic aspects of language, and inviting the reader to join the "dance." (198)

The twins, Bip and Pola, who have at an early age decided that language is an out-of-date method of communication, create a "roman-fleuve," written phonetically. As the usual structures of words are broken down, their work must be read aloud to be understood: "I LÈTÈ DE PÉTISAMI KIȘÈ MÈ LILI ET ODILE UN JOURE IL VU UN DINÖZARE IL LON TUÈ." (136) Earlier a whole section is written in a similarly childlike manner, while the narrator talks of a word game (played while staying with "Matante Anne" and "Nononcle Nick"): "ronron-macaron-ma-petite-soeur-est-en-prison-fait-sissi-fait-cela-apitchou" (53); where a child-like pleasure in words is evident.

Elsewhere, the various homonyms of words are exploited in a process of punning: Lisle, for example, says: "qu'un jour elle avait fait le pari d'aller au pari. On dit à Paris qu'on lui disait. Elle disait non, aux Paris. Parce que Paris c'est une ville d'eau où tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick." (132) Similarly, later, the narrator addresses herself to
Solange: "Solange Tellier, t'es liée par le sang rouge de ton père Guillaume Tell et t'es pas mal pomme à rester plantée.... Solange t'est rien, Solange Therrien." (240) Again there is play on the phonetic similarities of two different orthographic structures, while later: "Oh pourquoi Hiroshima ma mère m'as-tu légué ton prénom d'ange solaire...." (240), the name Solange being reduced to its etymological roots. The name of the author Gabriel Marquez is used in the same way: "car vous avez été marquée par l'archange Gabriel et le saint-fantôme" (241), while elsewhere the name of a town, "Urbino," is taken literally: "C'est une inside joke, très bissextile, vu qu'Urbino est une ville binaire qui attrappe les logiciens-machines." (198) Finally, the name "Leila" which appears at various stages, recalls first the colour "lilas" which pervades the text and was also formerly worn by Lotte, while her explanation as to her reason for wearing it: "parce que je voulais qu'on me lise," (7) recalls also the implied imperative "lis-la!" again, playing on the name; finally this is reversed: "alors on la lit." (198)

Once again, the practice of punning underlines the polysemic quality of language, showing how ultimately artificial it is to assign any one meaning to any one word. Here also, the masculine discourse, based on a univocal concept of language, is subverted as the text demonstrates how the same spoken sound may have multiple graphic or written forms, as in the play on "vers la mer"/"vers la mère"/"vers l'amé." or in
the breaking down of the name Georges: "je OR je" which is taken from French Kiss and the writing of "homme" as "OH".

Furthermore, the text uses a number of anagrammes, total reorganisation of either individual or groups of words, such as "hypocrite" which becomes "etircophy" (92) while the author's name itself appears in a jumbled form as "Noé-Vladimira Yelle" (133). Thus the structures of words, concrete in a phallogocentric discourse which has no room for "fun," are shaken up to demonstrate the creative possibilities and the ludic potential of language.

The text also makes frequent use of the palindromic: "elle ira M" (290), for example, is the name "Marielle" in reverse, while earlier in the text, the phrase about the variable weather, "le temps se fait nuageux avec périodes ensoleillées ou ensoleillé avec périodes naugeuses" (105), is self-reflecting and "works both ways," thus exploiting once more the visual aspect of language to create a phrase with its own internal poetry and completeness, as does the name "Sabada Dabasa."

Here the aesthetic pleasure in language is revealed and exploited. The section "Delta/écho, sierra/tango" demonstrates this at length, as for example, in the passage:
je je je dans la pyramythe des j qui filent à
l'anglaise dans le diamant compulseur des
inframondes, machinant à laver l'organisme de ses
spasmes programmés à main gauche. Sabada Dabasa
fait passer le drachmé dans sa main droite. Elle
me fait des tours de magie blanche dans le noir du
noir. (238)

Similarly, in "j'ai le coeur en tournesol au coeur du mot
heart/earth/art triptyque à la hache dans mon coeur arcane six
du réel" (237) the internal patterns, rhythms and beauty of the
words are high-lighted. Elsewhere language is seen as having a
texture and colour of its own:

Rose dit qu'elle écrit phantasme avec un ph pour
que ce soit plus liquide et clef avec f comme dans
"femme".... que langage avec un c'est pas comme
langage sans u. Que sans u c'est moins vert.....
Ben vert comme dans Rimbaud: a noir, e blanc, i
rouge..... Alice l'interrompt, dit: tu devrais
plutôt chercher la couleur des consonnes. (369)

Within the text, language is thus seen as an infinite source of
pleasure: unrestricted and limitless, words breed of
themselves, recognizing no barriers or rules, thus constituting
a "texte de jouissance" which, according to Roland Barthes....

met en état de perte...... déconforte (peut-être
jusqu'à un certain ennui), fait vaciller les
assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques,
du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses
valeurs et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son
rapport au langage.

This treatment of language, while not exclusive to
feminine writing, demonstrates a rejection of traditional
strictures of discourse, in a manner very close to the
discursive techniques of Cixous, Brossard, Gagnon and Irigaray,
among other representatives of l'écriture féminine. This represents an attempt to "dismantle the patriarchy by the dismantling of patriarchal language"\(^{23}\) while trying to make a space for the feminine within language.

This "attack" similarly involves a reinscription of what has traditionally been avoided in masculine discourse, namely women's sexuality, or more specifically, a writing by women, of women's sexuality, in women's discourse. In *La Vie en prose*, the menstrual cycle, for example, is described in terms reminiscent of Cixous, as the narrator expresses her own physicality and sexuality, talking of "les profondeurs de ma féminité" (217), while the act of sexual intercourse is similarly described in "Jour de mai":

On dérive au gré des courants, on dérive. Mon clitoris fait un petit bruit d'eau sous la caresse insinuante de ta main. Je suis toute en eau, en train de me noyer dans l'éternité. Tu roules des hanches et je tiens tes hanches dans mes mains pour ne pas sombrer.... On respire, bouche contre bouche, fatigués et on coule, dans l'orgasme, dans le sommeil, je ne sais plus. On coule de tendresse, de chaleur, on coule. (296-7)

This space given to women's sexuality and *jouissance* is evident in many examples of l'écriture féminine, as women are encouraged to "write themselves and their bodies" insisting that "to write from the body is to recreate the world" while such writing will "realize the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her
native strength." At the same time, then, the act of writing her sexuality is designed to eliminate woman's sense of alienation to her own body, to bring her more in tune with her sexuality and her "difference."

Such writing involves not only a more graphic woman-centred description of the feminine, but also, as previously described, it rides on the rhythms and patterns of a feminine psychosexual specificity, including the flowing discontinuity and multiplicity of the discourse and the privileging of the voice. Similarly, woman's cyclicity is imitated by the patterning of Villemaire's text with its self-repeating themes and phrases, the recurrence of the meetings between the narrators, for instance, which appear at apparently regular intervals, while the narrator frequently talks of "l'éternel retour des mots et des choses" (162). This is also recalled by the repeated figures of circles and spirals, common to women's writing today, each "symbolizing" the infinite, used to figure women's indeterminacy.

This usurpation of patriarchal language necessarily involves an examination of the subject and the relationship between the subject and language. The unitary subject which confidently says "I" is seen as an inherent part of the phallogocentric discourse and culture. It is a "masculine" subject and here the word is not synonymous with "male", but
signifies rather a specific subject position whereby the subject sees itself as an entity complete in itself, and distinct from the world. Yet the system which turns on such distinct categories and entities has already been shown to be fallible and self-deceiving. Frederic Jameson describes the concept of the individual as a product of the bourgeoisie, the hegemonic class, and thus as a myth. Consequently, the subject, as a product of the system, must be as castrated and fallible as the system itself. It is by the deconstruction of the discursive system, dependent on logic, coherence and unity that, by contrast, women's discourse and that of the avant-garde, with their "breaks and dislocations reveal the cracks in the social and cultural façade of the subject." In the space cleared by the death of this subject, is placed a "feminine" subject (again, not necessarily "female"), which is in effect the antithesis of the unitary subject. Characterized as multiple, fluid and indeterminate, this feminine subject, or "feminine libidinal economy," bases itself rather on the rhythms of woman's sexuality (as described earlier). Multiple and indefinable in herself, the woman subject is presented as such throughout La Vie en prose, by means of a shifting narrative position and a multiple perspective.

A dozen or so women are apparently working and writing together, the combination of their texts and voices already causing a disintegration of the traditional solitary narrative
voice, while dispersing and multiplying the perspective. However, as described earlier, these voices are practically inattributable. Although they speak in the first person, creating a wealth of "I"'s, their owners, or the speaking subjects they announce, are indistinguishable. These words do not "belong" to one more than to any other, as the narrators may be cancelled out through a disentangling or an uncovering of their pseudonyms, leaving just two, or perhaps only one presiding voice. In this way the single subject is shown to be fragmented and polyvocal. As Carla says, looking through the "octascope" "il y a huit Solange qui lui sourient à la fois" (360-1); and elsewhere:

je rougis des pages et des pages, cherchant à rouer "je" dont je ne sais même pas c'est qui puisque c'est une autre, même si elle parle, elle aussi, à la première personne. (242)

Here, then, the writing subject and the written "I" are shown to be separate: a difference, though not a complete distinction, lies between the subject and itself. Again:

je je je dans la spirale du temps perdu dans la nuit des temps et pourtant ce n'est pas moi qui parle, c'est je je je, un autre et je pourtant est une autre qui vole une phrase au continuum des calligraphies palimpsestes de ce qu'on appelle les choses de la vie. (238)

The subject is thus already fragmented in itself and is further split from itself as "I" becomes "an other" again
showing the distance between the subject of enunciation and the fictional subject of the discourse. Here, then, the distinction does not lie between the speaking/writing self and the "rest of the world," or between self and "other," as with the masculine subject. On the contrary, the subject is portrayed as both itself and other at the same time: a sort of "l'Un est l'Autre."\(^{29}\) which both challenges the phallogocentric unified subject and embodies the feminine libidinal economy which is "open to difference" and interchange.\(^{30}\) again allowing the inclusion of what has been marginalized, as Villemaire herself says elsewhere: "l'on sait bien qu'il y a toujours de l'un dans l'autre et de l'autre dans l'un."\(^{31}\)

Thus \textit{La Vie en prose} "deconstructs" the patriarchal discourse by showing its blind assumptions and prejudices, while offering in its place a feminine discourse, a goal espoused by the writers of \textit{l'écriture fémininé}, with which \textit{La Vie en prose} has many similarities. However, as always, it is not a case of a simple, uncomplicated substitution of discourses: feminine for masculine. The character Carla illustrates quite clearly the attitude to the feminisation of language, as practised by some feminist writers. Carla, a delightful character, uses the feminine of nouns and of invariable phrases, insisting that "quand on est une fille, il faut parler au 'féminine' " (19) refering to Julien as "ma chérie" and informing the narrator: "none, none, que c'est
seulement la douze juillette son avionne." (340) Elsewhere, the narrator states that:

je ne referai pas la grammaire en moins sexiste car elle me donne déjà assez de troubles comme ça et les précisions style 'quelqu'un(e)', ça alourdit sans changer rien à rien. (26)

Similarly, while Woman is here given a chance to use her own voice and to speak her own words, there are times when it is questionable as to whether it is the woman who is speaking the words or whether the words are speaking the woman. Her attempts to get a grip on her language are presented with comic effect; the passage above, for example, ending with the exclamation "Maudites parenthèses!" (200) shows the narrator's frustration or annoyance. Elsewhere the narrator opens a long banal parenthesis on her habit of signing and dating books, only to say:

(.... Je viens de raturer quelques lignes de digression supplémentaires sur mes différentes signatures dont l'évolution s'est malheureusement interrompue vers mes quinze ans. C'était bien plat et n'apportait strictement rien au fil de l'intrigue. Assez d'autisme. Rompant avec toutes les règles je m'apprête maintenant à vous fermer la parenthèse au nez même si, au fond, elle est pas finie.) (24)

Here her digression is reread and "controlled" but only to the point of making it a slightly less lengthy digression than before: it is as though "relevance" were no longer an issue, as though instead the voice, the act of speaking, were all that
mattered. This discourse thus also receives its share of criticism. While antiphallogocentric in the extreme, it is also shown to be somewhat frustrating and "impractical": alright in its place, but not suitable when there is work to be done. At the beginning of the novel, one of the women attempts to start the game of infinite regression as described earlier: "...faut qu'on se décide à commencer la réunion. Alice dit c'est quoi une réunion? Carla dit ben, une réunion, c'est.... Vava dit a dit ça juste pour niaiser, Carla" (10) where the idea is seen as perhaps rather childish and irritating, or as an old joke.

Nevertheless, Villemaire's text has escaped from the confines of the patriarchal discourse, leaving behind it ideas of necessary linearity, logic and continuity, showing them to be artificial and incongruous, as the very notion of an absolute value or concept is rejected. Similarly, La Vie en prose refuses to be pigeon-holed in any way, exploring and playing with numerous styles and discourses - even, it would seem, that of l'écriture féminine, despite its many similarities with the style. However, an anarchic text in perpetual motion, constantly questioning and changing, La Vie en prose remains an extremely feminine text in Derridian terms, as well as in terms of its overall character, colour and texture. The text liberates itself of any strictures, shaking off its shackles and revelling in its new found freedom, taking the opportunity, like Villemaire, to experiment "dans tous les
sens. "38
Notes


2 Derrida 54.


4 Cixous, "Castration" 45.

5 Cixous, in "Le Rire de la Méduse."

6 Irigaray 24.

7 Irigaray 28.

8 Derrida 102.

9 See, for example, Cixous' "La Venue à l'écriture" written with Annie Leclerc and Madeleine Gagnon whose writings also illustrate this combination of theory and practice, (Paris: U.G.E. 10/18, 1977); also Nicole Brossard's *French Kiss*, (Montréal, Editions du jour, 1974).

10 A common goal among feminist and avant-garde writers alike, Madeleine Gagnon mentioned it during a conference at the University of British Columbia, March 1988.

11 Cixous, "Méduse" 45.

12 Moi 159

13 Moi 158


Cixous, "Jeune née" 170, quoted in Moi 114.

Moi 114.

Stefano Agosti "Préface" to Derrida's Eperons, 20.

Agosti 22.

Agosti 20-22.


Cixous "Méduse." quoted in Jones 250.

Monique Wittig, for example, uses the circle as a strong figure of women's sexuality in Les Guerrillères (Paris, Edition de Minuit, 1969).

Jameson 115.

Furman 74.

Lise Potvin eliminates all but Solange and Vava, while Pierre Nepveu, for example, claims there is just one narrator, though he does not specify who this might be: we prefer to leave the question open, as both, or neither, may be "correct"!

Elisabeth Badinter has written a book of the same name, though her choice of title seems to result from a rather over-optimistic opinion that sexual equality has been achieved already: see L'Un est l'autre: des relations entre hommes et femmes (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1986).

Moi 113.

Conclusion
This study has considered some of the various linguistic and structural devices of *La Vie en prose* in relation to the style and "philosophy" of *l'écriture féminine*. The use of a vast intertextual reservoir challenges the elitist boundaries set up by the closed academic literary world, by introducing what would normally be excluded. The literary melting pot which this constitutes is matched both by the references of the intratext, which imitates and parodies the textual (and other) borrowings of the intertext, and by the mixture of genres and discourses exploited on the textual level. The combination of these devices results in a text which deliberately resists the classification and labelling, which is not only a necessity to the patriarchal literary cannon but also a foundation of the patriarchal phallogocentric system itself. Such resistance challenges an ideological discourse which relies precisely on the neatness and logic of a univocal and unitarian language made up of assigned "signifieds", based on a clear cut "one word for one meaning" doctrine. Within the text the very idea of a neat categorisable world and of fundamental truths is demolished and shown to be a fallacy, as is the discourse which claims to express it.

In place of this simple restrictive system, Villemaire's text allows language its full potential. Consequently words and text flow where they will, switching from subject to
subject as each word serves as a breach to a reservoir of others which, in turn open the floodgates to a perpetual torrent of language. This playing on the power of association, while not unique to V illemaire or to women's writing (works by Joyce and Sollers, for example, treat language in a similar way, as does the poetic) is linked with the unconscious or the Lacanian Imaginary Order, usually associated with the feminine, as it implies a rejection of the order and lack of the Symbolic or "masculine," phallogocentric Order.¹ The digressions which result give the text a conversational tone, an "oralitude," as though a mute had found her voice and revels in the pleasure of her own speech and discourse. At the same time the distinction between spoken and written discourse is eroded, as the polyvocal and polysemic qualities of language are exploited. By these means the communicative precision of language is questioned, again eating away at the base of phallogocentrism, while its ludic and aesthetic richness are brought to the fore.

Similarly, the relationship between the subject and language is examined, the subject itself no longer being presented as a unified whole, as is the case with the dominant masculine subject, but as fragmented, plural and polyvocal, a fluid, indeterminate and positively feminine subject whose discourse follows the rhythms of women's indeterminable and multiple sexuality, in a style very close to that of l'écriture féminine and texts by other feminist writers.
Having undermined the very foundations of phallogocentrism, the text does not rush to set up its own discourse as the new and correct system. Instead, this discourse is itself undermined constantly, self-reflecting and self-parodying, always in a process of transformation, questioning and exploring, both making space for the hitherto rejected feminine and leaving room for the masculine in its apparent recognition of the "practicality" of the masculine discourse and the love of men obvious throughout. Thus, while not endorsing one hundred percent the style of *l'écriture féminine* - including its pretensions and foibles among those to be laughed at, and incorporating positively anti-lyrical passages as different from *écriture féminine* as black is from white, thereby questioning its political application - Villemaire's text recognizes and explores the necessity of a new discourse, playing with possibilities.

Such a text is open to the accusation of being over-academic and itself elitist, but the practical implications of a new discourse and the force behind it are also considered. The political, i.e., feminist strength of the text and of women's writing, is tested out by the many women subjects of the text, examining the relationship between the writer and the apparently feminist writing.

While Nane Yelle, Solange, Vava and the others are
elusive, indeed sometimes unidentifiable, and it is their voices that the reader hears and their words which he/she reads. A context is established, however, which leaves the reader with the impression of having spent time in the company of "flesh and blood" women, not perfect, not infallible, whose lives do not run smoothly, "real" women, who live, write, laugh and love. A new type of mimetic illusion, reflecting the incoherence and the interferences of life, is brought into play.

The characters' relationships and reactions to men and women are examined throughout the text: Vava's relationship with Lexa, for example, is traced, although evidently not in a linear "love-story" fashion. Vava's declaration of love for Lexa comes at the end of the text (364), when it would appear that the couple has already broken up irreconcilably, while the ups and downs of any relationship are imitated by the discontinuity of the narration. The swing from the description of "le délire de Lexa, hurlant de joie sous mon étreinte, abandonné, souriant, Lexa le macho, renversé de plaisir, superbe," (288) and of the mutual ecstasy of love-making, to the hurt which Lexa's mere presence causes, is plotted at intervals throughout the text. Similarly treated is the joy another narrator shares with her lover:

Quand il grogne le matin dans son lit et qu'il fuit toute caresse derrière les parois du sommeil, elle
apprend à se retrancher dans la distance, fait le ménage de la salle de bain, joue dans l'eau avec le Mickey Mouse en plastique qu'il lui a donné pour son anniversaire, reprend la lecture de La Grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte. Mais quand il apparaît souriant et que ses lèvres brûlantes s'attardent dans son cou, elle jette ses bras autour de lui pour mieux boire la chaleur apaisante de son corps. (247)

The natural pleasure in each other's bodies and company, evident here along with the sharing and understanding of a satisfying relationship, is contrasted with the rejection felt as one of the narrators says:

Il m'a fait l'amour tendrement, doucement, mais sans sourire, sans m'ouvrir le lac tranquille de ses yeux.... Cette fois, il m'a retiré son âme et je n'ai senti que la houle de nos corps réunis. Mais sans les vertiges, sans l'abandon, je touche pas le septième ciel.... je me demande.... pourquoi j'aime quand même cet abruti qui semble, depuis quelque temps, résolu à refuser de partager son plaisir. (355)

However the difficulty of leaving a man who treats her in this way is also shown as the narrator admits her love and/or dependence:

....quand il m'invite dans son lit, je m'y glisse et je l'invite aussi dans le mien. Le temps d'un simulacre d'union qui ne me convainc plus, le temps d'une nuit blanche de temps en temps, plus seule avec lui que seule dans mon lit. (355)

The narrator thus describes the conflicting emotions of love mingled with the sense that what the other people say: "que je gâche ma vie pour lui" (354) is in fact, or in a
logical, practical sense, quite true.

However, logic and practicality are once again shown to be irrelevant as the narrator describes her relationship with Djinny - an affair which is given almost a mythical status.

Si je ne riais pas, je sens que je pourrais facilement retomber dans cette passion qui m'aveuglait à tel point que j'en oubliais toute dignité. Je l'aimais, je l'aminais, c'était tout ce que je savais. Je me fichais du monde entier... (222)

The women of the text are open to loving and to being loved, to all the risks and hurt that accompany the pleasure. The male characters, though less developed, are portrayed as being equally susceptible: Benoit, for instance, goes through heartbreak at the same time as one of the women, while of Djinny, the narrator says: "c'est quand même un peu triste de s'être aimés autant pour être si peu des amis maintenant" (223), and the hurt is evidently felt by both partners.

Thus, while the majority of the women are evidently "feminist," as is illustrated on the structural and linguistic levels, the text shows that role reversal or a rejection of men is neither possible nor desirable, by eroding the distinction between men and women and between stereotypical "masculine" and "feminine" roles and characteristics.

On a basic level, one of the narrators says:
Il y avait des vertiges d'ironie dans mon "Ah! que c'est donc commode un homme dans la maison"... car c'est moi qui répare tout ce qui nous tombe dans les mains, des poignées de porte aux tiroirs de la cuisine dans notre appartement de Montréal..... (192)

She shows her own independence, and undermines the cliché of the handyman about the house. Similarly the women laugh at the tradition of male superiority. In response to Vava's exclamation "qu'elle est écoeurée de faire partie de la race inférieure," for example:

Noëlle dit... Dans la prochaine vie, tu seras réincarnée en homme.... Je dis que Pauline m'a raconté qu'une de ses amies croit dur comme fer qu'être une femme c'est la dernière réincarnation. Qu'on a toutes été des vers de terre, des poussins, des vaches, des hommes, des chats avant. Noëlle dit: "Les hommes, c'est même avant les chats?" ...... Vava dit que dans "Je t'aime, je t'aime" de Renais, Catherine dit que l'Homme avec un grand H a été créé pour assurer gîte, nourriture et confort au chat. (337)

The text inscribes the question of "nature versus nurture," the idea that sexuality is learned rather than inherent and that hierarchisation is arbitrary. This is particularly noticeable as one of the narrators awaits her period, considering her reactions to it and to the idea of motherhood. It would seem, initially, that motherhood is perceived as an instinctual "urge": as the narrator says, "j'avais enfin cédé à l'espèce en faisant l'amour.... sans que j'aie prévu le moyen d'empêcher la rencontre de nos cellules
reproductrices" (185) she later talks of "les moments d'obéissance à l'espèce" and of "mon destin biologique" (186) both of which apparently dictate that pregnancy and motherhood are the natural states for women. However, at the same time, the narrator challenges this idea by her obvious relief when her period arrives (early) and by the fact that she warns her body that it will not get another chance. The question is posed most overtly, later, where she says:

Le taoisme ne fait aucun sens pour une femme qui se demande anxieusement si elle attend un enfant. "Let everything be allowed to do what it naturally does, so that its nature will be satisfied" dit le Chuang-tzu. Est-ce qu'on a tout dit quand on a dit que la reproduction de l'espèce est un phénomène qui est dans l'ordre des choses? (217)

Here the validity of the statement is questioned along with the concept of "nature" - evidently taken by the Chuang-tzu to be an absolute - asking whether indeed it exists as a transcendental or universal value, or whether the very concept of nature is a product of social upbringing. While in keeping with the text, the answer is not stated categorically, the ironic tone of the statement undercuts the idea of the "natural" rejecting it as another phallogocentric device which chooses to ignore the various other practical and personal factors involved in motherhood.

The concept of sexual difference is similarly considered, in Hervé's letter, for instance, where she
describes a relationship which is seen as ideal in the way the two reflect each other so perfectly, until a sort of "dawning of sexual awareness." As Hervé says: "bien sûr il a un zizi, ce que j'ai pleuré longtemps sans le savoir, parce que je croyais que c'était juste un cliché psychanalytique" (69). The recognition of their physical difference and the significance of this difference is seen as a form of loss, in view of the restrictions placed upon gender: not, however as a simple jealousy of the other sex:

Here the text touches on the idea of a common basic androgyny, corrupted and repressed by the social conventions of the phallocracy. Once again, the divisions established purely according to gender are questioned, by a critique of the justice and validity of a system which demands the repression of marginality, and the subsequent setting up of gender-based hierarchies.

Villemaire examines the various aspects of sexual relationships as well as the nature of sexuality, the sometimes biting use of irony making her position clear. Questioning stereotypes rather than simply reversing roles and knowing that the cut-and-dried attitudes towards relationships and sexuality
are impossibly and callously over-simplistic (always ignoring the basic illogical and fallible character of men and women) the text advocates, on a personal as well as on the linguistic and literary levels, a rejection of preconceptions and expectations. This rejection is doubly liberating as it does not erect new standards or stereotypes.

A sign of this liberation is precisely the writing and artistic experimentation in which all of the women take part, exploring their own creativity and developing their own ways of expressing their "difference." Their relationship to language is critical in the liberation of both women and men from the phallocracy or phallocentric system, hence the central position given first to the act of writing, through the self-referentiality of the text, making this the story of a writing rather than the writing of a story, and secondly, to the writer within the text. While technically bearing many similarities to the style of l'écriture féminine - namely the fluidity of the prose, the discontinuity and the plurivocality of the narrative and the focus on women and their bodies - La Vie en prose resists the epithet. By continually questioning its own "validity"; constantly writing, unwriting and rewriting itself, the text (or texts) subverts the whole system of classifications set up by an elitist phallocracy, deconstructing its neat, orderly categories ranging from Art to gender and sexuality, making room for the feminine and the marginal in a whirlwind of energy and constructive laughter.
Notes

1 Moi 99-101.

2 The question is discussed at length in Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe*, while women's "essence" is much exploited in the writings of Hélène Cixous, to the extent that she has been accused of setting the feminist movement back in her concentration on women as childbearers and so on.
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