

Prévost's *Histoire d'une Grecque moderne* or The Emerging Self

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ABSTRACT

In "Prévost's *Histoire d'une Grecque moderne* or the Emerging Self," I propose to read the eighteenth-century French writer's text as the struggle of an evolving feminine consciousness within a patriarchal universe. The heroine's quest for self-realization may be defined in Lacanian terms as the interplay between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, as well as between orientalism and western ideology. The heroine is indeed a "Grecque moderne," who challenges the Symbolic which rules the novel. The seeming progression of a female destiny develops into a cyclical pattern. Fragments of the life of a silenced woman remain at the end of this disquieting narration.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article intitulé, "Prévost's *Histoire d'une Grecque moderne* or the Emerging Self," explore la lutte d'une conscience féminine au sein d'un univers masculin. La recherche de la découverte de soi en termes lacaniens se définit au niveau de l'Imaginaire et du Symbolique. L'héroïne, une "Grecque moderne," met en question le domaine du Symbolique qui domine le texte. La progression apparente d'une destinée féminine aboutit en trajet circulaire. Les fragments d'une vie de femme réduite au silence demeurent à la fin de cette narration troublante.

According to the critic Pierre Fauchery, the eighteenth-century novel witnessed "l'installation de la femme au centre du monde romanesque."¹ Women fulfilled essential roles in major novels as revealed by their names in titles: Marivaux' *La vie de Marianne*, Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* and *Histoire d'une Grecque moderne*, Sade's *Justine*, Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*. However, within the feminocentric novel lies an androcentric universe. The Abbé Prévost for example, only allows the reader to view the heroines through the eyes of their lovers. Both *Manon* and the *Grecque moderne* are perceived through the subjective intermediary of the masculine "je." The narrators depict the heroines as inscrutable, sphinx-like, and ambiguous. They endeavour with limited success to decipher the woman they love. Nancy Miller refers to the Prévostian hero as the "decryptographer" of the feminine.² Nonetheless, a developed image of the heroines emerges.

In this paper, I propose to read *Histoire d'une Grecque moderne* as the struggle of an evolving feminine consciousness within a patriarchal universe. The heroine's quest for self-realization may be defined as Lacanian terms as an interplay between the imaginary and symbolic stages, as well as between orientalism and western ideology.³

In the imaginary or mirror stage where the narcissistic foundation of the ego is laid, the child exists in a state of fusion with the mother, continuous and at one with her. The stage is characterized by the child's contentment and oneness with the mother. The child's sense of his/her fragmented and impotent being is quickly dissipated upon viewing and assuming his/her total image in the mirror; a cause for jubilation. The importance of the image lies in the formation of self through the mirror and the mother. It operates as the source of later identifications. Sexual and psychological differences remain dormant during this prooedipal state.

In the symbolic stage, the next moment in the constitution of the subject, the father intervenes as authority figure, an agent of culture and the law rescues the child from the pull of the specular realm. The infant from that moment on will strive to recapture the once-experienced sense of totality and plenitudes as he/she develops an identity within the configuration of the family.⁴

However, as the psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray's interpretation of Lacan's view of femininity reveals, in both registers, the female infant is mediated by the male.⁵ The image in the mirror stage is masculine and represents the Phallus as the ultimate sexual criterion. The female infant thus suf-

fers from deeper alienation than the male infant. The mirror stage is not a joyful experience for her.

In *La Grecque moderne*, a worldly and experienced French diplomat in Constantinople meets Zara at the harem of the local Pasha. The narrator teaches her the principles of virtue and praises the fortunate condition of western women. Subsequently, he fulfills her wish to be freed from a state of slavery only to become his most prized possession.

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As one of twenty women in the seraglio, Zara appears undifferentiated from her female companions who wear similar clothes and colours. She later tells the diplomat the story of her life, how she finally realized dreams of comfort, wealth and riches. She describes her period in the harem as "le plus heureux temps de ma vie."⁶ Zara identifies with the females in the harem: "Je me flattai que partageant le même sort, nous nous trouverions quelque ressemblance par le caractère et les inclinations." She experiences security with female associations. Unaware of moral strictures, object of exchange and pleasure, the women reflect and necessarily mirror their destiny and being. Female bonding operates as a mode of relational self-definition.

Although Zara's mother is noticeably absent from the narrative, the bond the heroine establishes with other women functions as a substitute for maternal attachment present in the preoedipal period. The heroine's life appears complete and fulfilling. The jubilation in the "mirror" parallels the child's joy at his/her specular image.

However, the experience of joy does not remain an ecstatic experience. Zara begins to feel a sense of lack and becomes melancholic. She rejects her luxurious environments and her companions: "Je me demandais encore, comme j'avais fait dans ma solitude, pourquoi je n'étais pas heureuse avec tout ce que j'avais désiré pour l'être ...dans un lieu où je croyais toute la fortune et tous les biens réunis." (26). Alienation from the self follows.

The heroine's withdrawal unto herself is interrupted by the arrival of the diplomat who eventually liberates her from absorption in the Imaginary. Reborn from prolonged childhood, Zara adopts the name of Théophé, initiating a new period in her life. She addresses him as "mon Libérateur," "mon Père." He has rescued her from a state of contemplative narcissism as she undergoes the law of the father and the realm of the Symbolic. The female infant turns away from the mother or mother substitute

and welcomes the father as agent of her wish fulfillment. Although Théophé bestows a name and identity upon herself, the father continues to be the mediator of the daughter's evolution.

In the harem, Théophé was subject to the rule of the Cheriber, and in her recently acquired freedom, she exists within the patriarchal domain of the diplomat. He attempts to recreate her in his own image of the ideal woman, a western version based on the courtly notion of feminine perfection defined by virtue, morality, modesty, and chastity. The narrator endeavours to purify her from a sullied past to render her worthy of his love. In order to direct her education and form her judgment, he assigns her *Les Essais* of Nicole, *La Logique de Port Royal*. He refers to her as "une conscience que était mon ouvrage" (50). "Je lui promis avec une estime constante, tous les soins dont j'étais capable pour achever l'ouvrage que j'avais eu le bonheur de commencer," he adds (53). She becomes a Galatea to this intrepid Pygmalion.

The diplomat develops an obsessive attachment to his creation and denies her any expression of self. After all, he claims, he paid a high price to obtain her, "J'ai acquis tant de droits sur elle" (48). He refers to his passion as one "dont j'espérais toute la douceur de ma vie" (78). He views her as instrumental to his happiness and a comfort to his rapidly approaching old age.

In her quest for selfhood, Théophé struggles to free herself from a state of dependency, a man she does not love, and a past she strives to flee. He undermines her desire for self-determination. A prisoner of patriarchal enclosures, freedom of space is denied her. Her plans for escape are thwarted as when the narrator discovers the heroine is about to embark on a boat for Sicily. The harem maintained her in an infantile state while the diplomat's house in Constantinople, his home in France where the heroine is immured and guarded by servants who spy on her every move, serve to insure her cloistered condition. The father figure must free the daughter from his pathological and fetishistic love to insure her maturation.

The heroine resists the narrator's relentless pursuits to capture her. His initial project to make her his mistress fails, but her inaccessibility intensifies his desire. However, she has provoked in him feelings of "répugnance": "Je consultai ma délicatesse sur les premières répugnances que je m'étais senties à lier un commerce de plaisir avec elle" (30). Her loose sexuality in the harem offends his sensibilities. Consequently, he interprets her resistance in a self-flattering way, namely that her fascination with vir-

tue will serve to render her truly worthy of his love. He undertakes to explore her obscure origins and excavates her past. Convinced of her aristocratic background based purely on circumstantial evidence, and persuaded of her desire for virtue, he proposes marriage.

The heroine refuses the offer to become his wife. She strives for an expanded personal universe and seeks authenticity of self which is continuously challenged by prescribed gender roles. Patriarchal expectations deny the heroine's quest for self-expression. Like her spiritual sister Roxane of Montesquieu's *Les lettres persanes*, Théopé resists an engulfing, subservient female destiny. Marriage will serve to legitimize and bind her and will also restrain her maturation.⁷ As with other eighteenth-century feminocentric novels, "marriage as an index of social optimism (even muted or parodied) (does not) offer itself as a plausible fictional solution to the problematics of self and desire."⁸ Théopé wishes to direct her own destiny.

The diplomat haunts the heroine to the very end. This aged Don Juan's suspicions increase as she attempts to run away with a man who claims to be her brother, Synèse. The attention she welcomes from other admirers such as the French nobleman in Livourne, the French count, exacerbate the narrator's jealousy as she represents for him the incarnation of the evil, ungrateful and untrustworthy female. The symbolic register entails the binding of female energy.

The opposition and juxtaposition of inner and outer space structures the novel. Patriarchal topography is represented as claustrophobic and repressive. On the other hand, the outer world signifies adventure, growth and freedom, a masculine privilege in the novel. Théopé's last refuge from the diplomat's pursuit is her room and more significantly her private inner world. However, the diplomat violates her privacy as he searches her bed sheets furiously for signs of a lover, and on another occasion, inspects her room for hidden lovers.

Double masculine representation of femininity characterizes the feminocentric novel of the eighteenth century. The narrator characterizes Théopé as an enigma and his ambivalent attitude toward her varies from viewing the heroine as "une femme unique" to "jeune coquette," "infidèle," and "perfide, ingrate," (95, 50 and 45). The diplomat writes: "Tout ce qui la regardait depuis que je l'avais vue pour la première fois avait été pour moi une énigme perpétuelle, que son discours même me rendait encore plus difficile à pénétrer" (51). The narcissistic narrator consistently interprets her actions and words in his

favour. However, he becomes quite baffled once her ways betray her virtuous principles as when she reacts favourably to admirers' attention. The possibility to express one's erotic self is essential to growth and self-realization. The narrator stands as the guardian of her virtue.

The hero's "système" of conquering Théopé and purifying her so as to render her a virtuous woman, translates into the desire to control and neutralize female energy and sexuality. The destiny of the female in the novel of the period lies in either marriage, the convent, or death. Théopé represents disruptive sexuality; as one character claims, "on reconnut qu'une si belle femme ne servirait qu'à jeter de la division dans la société" (108). Such a taboo against the expression of female sexuality and its transgression leads to the heroine's self-destruction or to her destruction by society.

In fact, the novel poses the "riddle of femininity."⁹ The pursued woman in Prévost's texts is depicted as obscure, the "dark continent." The enigma of femininity is doubled by orientalism. Théopé often appears veiled. The oriental woman does not speak for herself, does not represent herself, and she symbolizes Otherness as uncanny and threatening.¹⁰ Consonant with the stereotyped notion of the multiple identity and the labyrinthine mind of the oriental female, Théopé denotes unlimited sexual promise and luxuriant sensuality for the narrator. She incarnates fluidity, fantasy, and "unheimlich" as well. Her veil conceals mysterious female sexuality. Théopé remains elusive throughout the text as the Cartesian and western diplomat attempts to sequester her from the world in an effort to master and imprison her mind and soul. The narrator desires to objectify a consciousness which is denied individuality and is reduced to solitary confinement.

The Orient is "less a place than a topos, a set of references."¹¹ The critic Edward Said maintains: "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself against the Orient as sort of surrogate and even underground self."¹² In the European western mind, associations with the Orient include a universe of dreams and fantasy, illusions, nature, intuition, the unconscious, whereas the west is characterized by dualism, culture, the father, Cartesianism, consciousness. Metaphorically, the Orient may well represent the imaginary realm and the west the symbolic. In the novel, the diplomat strives to control and master the Imaginary and circumscribe it within the Symbolic. The diplomat does not explore his other self. The quest to decipher and capture Théopé translates as a relentless metonymic pursuit of signifiers.

Ornamentizing the female body not only fetishizes it but also conceals its sexuality. The luxurious decorations and jewels lavished upon Théophé while in the harem function as chains. Thus, the novel dramatizes a hero's ultimate desire to bound femininity. The inverse of the Pygmalion myth operates in the text. In lieu of freeing the marble woman, the diplomat aims at turning the woman into stone as a form of hyperbolic possession.

Théophé fulfills archetypal roles in the novel. As the "creation" of the diplomat, she plays the daughter role with a tyrannical father. As an idol in his "sanctuaire" (a haven or sacred place), she serves as object of worship to be adored and adulated, as the unpredictable and unattainable woman she embodies the 'femme fatale.' She challenges prescribed gender roles of daughter, wife, nursemaid. Ultimately, however, the heroine's trajectory of subjecthood beyond resistance remains unexplored: "La subjectivité déniée à la femme telle est, sans doute, l'hypothèque garante de toute constitution irréductible d'objet, de représentation, de discours, de désir."¹³

The relationship of author to character in the novel prefigures any literary independence of the heroine. Caught in the web of the narrator's discourse, Théophé is eclipsed in a net of signifiers. The diplomat remains master of his text.

Unable to decipher the heroine's seemingly inconsistent behaviour, the diplomat turns to the reader for clarification: "J'ai formé le dessein de recueillir par écrit tout ce que j'ai eu de commun avec cette aimable étrangère, et de mettre le public en état de juger si j'avais mal placé mon estime et ma tendresse" (121). He adds "Je rends le lecteur maître de l'opinion qu'il doit prendre" (117). Like other eighteenth-century heroines, Théophé reflects the narrator's own needs and allows him to write mostly about himself.

The heroine's trial has already taken place and the narrator has judged her guilty. As he develops the "procès de mon ingrate" (106), his confession intends to disculpate him and portray him as victim, "un amant rebuté...trahi" (11). Of what does her guilt comprise—not loving her benefactor? expressing her desire for self-determination? wishing to recreate herself in her own image?

The inability to express the self leads to the alienation of the heroine from herself and others. Théophé suffers from the diplomat's cruel persecutions, his overwhelming accu-

sations, doubts, and incessant interrogations of her actions, requiring her to prove her innocence and justify her every move. She retreats within to a melancholic state. The narrator notes a "changement dans son humeur" (101), "apparences de mélancolie," fever and fainting spells. The heroine declares: "La dissipation des plaisirs m'amuse moins qu'elle ne m'ennuie. Je pense...à me faire un ordre de vie...conforme à mes inclinations...un couvent" (116). Théophé abandons painting, an outlet for the expression of self in the text. The withdrawal unto the self entails narcissistic dimensions: "The libido withdrawn from the outer world has been directed on to the ego, giving rise to a state which we may call narcissism."¹⁴ In fact, "the female protagonist's melancholic retreat into narcissism may be...the only form of autonomy available to her in a society where woman's assigned function in the Symbolic is to...guarantee the transmission of the Phallus."¹⁵ The seeming progression of a female destiny in *La Grecque moderne* develops into a cyclical pattern. We witness a return to the imaginary stage.

Fragments of the life of a silenced woman remain at the end of this disquieting narration. Théophé disappears from the novel, dying in a "funeste accident" recounted to the narrator months after the event. Théophé is indeed the "Grecque moderne" as she challenged the Symbolic which rules the novel. She is denied access to this realm as well as the opportunity to explore the riches and interrelation of both the Imaginary and Symbolic.

Nonetheless, just as with the narrator, the reader projects his or her own fantasies unto the text, and thereby resuscitates the Imaginary. Behind the "récit mensonger" of an obsessed narrator lies the "femme mensongère" and the "lecteur mensonger" leaving the "plaisir du texte" as the only concrete experience. "The Imaginary," writes Naomi Schor, "is not...a stage to be outgrown, but...an irredicable constituent of the human psyche, and more important...the essential, indeed, the only matrix of fantasy and fiction."¹⁵ Théophé remains "l'autre texte" the narrator never writes.

NOTES

1. Pierre Fauchery, *La destinée féminine dans le roman européen du dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972), pp. 10-11.
2. Nancy Miller, "L'histoire d'une Grecque moderne: No-win Hermeneutics," *Forum*, 16, 1978, pp. 2-10. The critic uses the term in reference to the narrator of the novel, but is also applicable to other Prevostian heroes.

3. For an illuminating analysis of the roles of the Imaginary and the Symbolic in a nineteenth-century heroine's development of self, see Naomi Schor, "Eugenie Grandet: Mirrors and Melancholia" in *Breaking the Chain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
4. Texts which elaborate the notions of the Imaginary and the Symbolic are: Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits; Séminaire I: Les écrits techniques de Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), and *Séminaire II: Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1978); Anthony Wilden, *The Language of the Self* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968); Anika Rifflet-Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (Brussels: Dessart, 1970). See also Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 21, ed. James Strachey (24 vols.); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). The psychoanalyst emphasizes the impact of the preoedipal stage in women and the subsequent creations of female bonds.
5. Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1977), p. 115. See also *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1974).
6. Prévost, *Histoire d'une Grecque moderne* in *Oeuvres de Prévost* (Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1982), p. 25. All subsequent references will appear as page number and are included in the text.
7. Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 45.
8. Nancy Miller, *The Heroine's Text* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 82.
9. Naomi Schor, "Smiles of the Sphinx: Zola and the Riddle of Femininity" in *Breaking the Chain*.
10. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 6.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 177
12. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
13. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme*, p. 165.
14. Freud, "Narcissism," in S.E.
15. Schor, "Eugénie Grandet: Mirrors and Melancholia," p. 91.