

Narrating the Final Loss: Scenes from the Maternal Deathbed in Gabrielle Roy's *Le temps qui m'a manqué* and Francine Noël's *La femme de ma vie*

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AS ADALGISA GIORGIO REMARKS in her introduction to *Writing Mothers and Daughters*, “the mother-daughter dyad is still the dominant structuring principle of female identity in Western cultures.”¹ Prominent feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow and Adrienne Rich have illustrated in great detail the impact of this unique female-to-female relationship on the daughter’s psychological and sexual development and, moreover, her own relationship to motherhood.² It is generally agreed, however, that far from being an unproblematic cathexis, the mother-daughter bond is wrenchingly complex, so much so that Phyllis Chesler has labeled it “woman’s stormiest love affair.”³ In the field of literary studies, proponents of *écriture féminine* such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous view maternal symbiosis as a core feature of the daughter’s text.⁴ Indeed, so pervasive is the presence of the mother in the daughter’s narrative that Marianne Hirsch has identified a distinct genre of matrilineal literature, namely “the mother-daughter plot,”⁵ in which the daughter, via writing, is always thinking back through the mother in some respect. Lori Saint-Martin develops this concept further, arguing that the relationship between mother and daughter must be viewed as a powerful dynamic “qui se trouve à la source même de l’écriture au féminin et qui surdétermine les structures narratives et même, dans une certaine mesure, le langage.”⁶ For scholars of matrilineal literature, the daughter’s text emerges as an important space for maternal reconciliation in the aftermath of a rupture from the mother.⁷

Unsurprisingly, then, a large body of mother-daughter writing is posthumous in nature (occurring after the mother’s death) and characterized by a need, on the part of the daughter, to return to the mother and atone for previous conflicts. Indeed, according to Annick Houel, one could even argue that the mother’s death is a necessary condition for reparative mother-daughter writing. In her essay on the death of the mother in women’s writing in French, Houel observes that “les filles ne peuvent pas dire leur amour pour la mère que celle-ci une fois morte.”⁸ In this respect, the maternal deathbed emerges as a pivotal incident in the daughterly text, serving both as a site of relational

renegotiation as well as a highly condensed metaphor for the fundamental mother-daughter anxieties. Judith Kegan Gardiner unpacks the rich symbolism of the maternal deathbed scene in women's writing, arguing that the dying mother often represents the oppressive aspects of institutional motherhood and 'traditional' womanhood that the daughter, quite literally, wishes to bury. Moreover, Kegan Gardiner highlights the mother's passing as a threshold moment that allows mother and daughter, perhaps for the first time "at least fleetingly to feel themselves [...] as interdependent yet separate identities."⁹

It is widely agreed among grief scholars that, due to the unique and often intense nature of the mother-daughter bond, the death of the mother gives rise to a markedly distinct form of bereavement on the part of the daughter. For Moss et al., the daughter's grief for the mother remains largely transitional instead of ever reaching a point of resolution, with the emphasis on the need to maintain a continuing bond with the deceased mother.¹⁰ Similarly, Martha Robbins, in her study of bereaved daughters, argues that, in terms of the daughter's experience of grief, the actual physical death of the mother is eclipsed by a deeper sense of loss, that of the mother-daughter relationship itself.¹¹ This loss, in turn, leads to an ongoing process of bereavement whereby the daughter becomes fixated on reconstructing the mother. Hope Edelman supports this view in her study of motherless daughters, arguing that, when a mother dies, a daughter's mourning never completely ends. The daughter's longing for the mother, she writes, never dissipates but, rather, "hovers at the edge of her awareness, ready to surface at any time, in any place, in the least expected ways."¹²

This article will examine the significance of the maternal deathbed and the impact of the final loss of the mother on the daughter in two autobiographical texts by Quebec women writers, Gabrielle Roy and Francine Noël: *Le temps qui m'a manqué* (2000)¹³ and *La femme de ma vie* (2005), respectively.¹⁴ Both use the mother's death as a springboard for reflection not simply on their own identity as daughters, but also on the mother's personal and intimate singularities outside the maternal role. For Patricia Smart, *Le temps qui m'a manqué* and *La femme de ma vie* constitute a form of elegy to the mother without, however, idealizing the latter and diminishing the ambivalence of the mother-daughter relationship.¹⁵ Smart describes these *révélés de vie* as "une tentative de voir clair dans les fils enchevêtrés d'une relation changeante" (Smart 360) and recognizes the important role that narratives of the mother's death play in the articulation of the maternal voice and the shifting of the mother from the position of object to subject in the daughter's story. Of course, recounting the experience of maternal loss is not exclusive to the mother-daughter relation-

ship. However, the unique qualities of this particular dyad, noted by both feminist and psychoanalytic theorists, inflect the manner in which the mother's death is negotiated by the daughter through the text. Simone de Beauvoir was perhaps one of the first to comment on the "doubling" of the mother through/in the daughter as a direct consequence of biological sameness and societal constructions of femininity.¹⁶ It could be argued that it is this very emphasis on what Adrienne Rich describes as a form of osmosis between mother and daughter, "a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, pre-verbal, a knowledge flowing between two alike bodies" (Rich 220), that distinguishes the maternal deathbed scene in the daughter's narrative from other accounts of maternal loss. It serves not only as a site of reflection on the mother's life and passing but, by extension, the daughter's own sense of interrelatedness with the event too. This article is interested, therefore, in the extent to which Roy and Noël are inspired by the maternal deathbed to come to an enhanced understanding of their mother's subjectivity as both separate and symbiotic and, in addition, to appreciate better the synergetic reciprocity between the maternal and their own creativity. This realization becomes all the more significant in the context of a mother-daughter exchange of sorts between our two selected writers, with Noël referring to Roy in a personal interview as "une mère, une mère spirituelle."¹⁷

Mothers and daughters in the œuvre of Gabrielle Roy and Francine Noël

The significance and uniqueness of the mother-daughter relationship as well as its enduring nature long beyond the mother's death is a trope that permeates the entire œuvre of Gabrielle Roy and Francine Noël, autobiographical and fictional. In relation to Gabrielle Roy's writing, Lori Saint-Martin observes that, right from the publication of the author's inaugural novel (*Bonheur d'occasion*),¹⁸ "la mère est au centre du monde de la fille" (Saint-Martin 122). Furthermore, Saint-Martin hails Roy as a ground-breaking writer in establishing a separate and authentic maternal subjectivity within the daughter's text. She writes:

La première au Québec sans doute, Gabrielle Roy interroge l'expérience de la fille sans passer sous silence le point de vue de la mère. Elle ébauche une reconnaissance de la subjectivité maternelle et elle inscrit la voix de l'aînée dans le texte de la femme plus jeune, si bien que deux subjectivités, deux voix s'y enchevêtrent par moments. Chez Gabrielle Roy, la mère a une subjectivité, une voix propre, que lui refusent bien des textes féministes plus tardifs. (Saint-Martin 121)

I would argue here that, for Roy, the maternal deathbed scene is pivotal to the daughter's conceptualization of the mother as an individual entity. Roy's

biographer, François Ricard, also comments on the centrality of the mother and daughter relationship that underpins the majority of her writing, not only in terms of her fictional characters but also between Roy and her own mother, Mélina Roy, to whom her first novel *Bonheur d'occasion* is formally dedicated. Ricard comments, “L'échange de voix, l'interminable réparation du silence entre la fille et sa mère défunte, la romancière, en un sens, va les poursuivre tout au long de son œuvre.”¹⁹ With the mother's death occurring in 1943, two years before the publication of *Bonheur d'occasion*, it would appear that much of Roy's literary career was subsequently spent trying to make amends with and to return to the deceased mother whom she felt she had abandoned in order to become a writer.

Similar to Roy, the intense preoccupation with mothers and daughters in the work of Francine Noël, again in autobiographical and fictional writing alike, has not passed unnoticed by critics. Feminist scholars of Noël's first novel *Maryse*²⁰ have commented on the vein of matrophobia (that is, the fear of becoming like the mother rather than of the mother) which runs throughout, with Katherine Roberts describing the text as “hanté par un désir de renier, d'oublier le passé pauvre et humiliant vécu chez sa mère”²¹ and Saint-Martin highlighting the theme of maternal rupture that comes to the fore in Noël's work.²² Undercutting the matrophobia present in Noël's writing, however, is a clear desire to understand the mother and enter into dialogue with her, a desire most evident in her autobiographical/biographical text *La femme de ma vie*, which will serve as one of the key focal points of this article. This text, Suzanne Giguère remarks in her review for *Le Devoir*, is not simply “une quête des origines personnelles,” but also, and perhaps more strikingly, a “devoir de mémoire,” a testimonial and tribute to Noël's now deceased mother, Jeanne Pelletier.²³

Le temps qui m'a manqué

Published for the first time in 1997, fourteen years after the author's death, *Le temps qui m'a manqué* is part of a more extensive body of unfinished autobiographical writings by Gabrielle Roy.²⁴ The text opens with the arrival of a telegram from her siblings announcing the death of the author's mother and depicts Roy's subsequent journey back home to Manitoba to view her mother's body one last time and make preparations for the funeral. As Roy travels by train, she reads and rereads the telegram, and the devastating impact of the news becomes clear to the reader: “Maman est morte. Je n'arrivais pas encore malgré tout à le croire tout à fait, tout au fond de l'âme” (*Le temps* 14).

Given that the death of the mother has already taken place, Roy is deprived of the possibility of a final reconciliation through attendance at the

dying mother's bedside. In the case of Roy, therefore, the concept of the maternal deathbed is extended to include the return to the corpse, first visiting the actual bed in which the mother passed away and, shortly afterwards, the open coffin in the funeral parlor. At the same time, however, the acute sense of loss that Roy feels at having been denied the opportunity of physical presence during the mother's final hours serves to highlight the significance of the maternal deathbed scene in the negotiation of the daughter's bereavement. Roy repines, "Pourquoi ne m'as-tu pas attendue" (*Le temps* 25), and, during the train journey, she is tormented with questions and alternative scenarios. For example, had she received the telegram earlier, she could have had time to travel home and be with her mother before her passing. She is haunted by the idea that she may have overlooked earlier signs of her mother's illness and should have been better prepared. She also wonders if she should have foregone the travel undertaken for her writing that caused her to be so far away at the time of the mother's death:

Je m'imaginai que, partie plus tôt, je serais arrivée à temps pour revoir ma mère vivante et recueillir son dernier regard. Et je me faisais de ces choses que maintenant je n'aurais jamais une sorte de trésor que, même l'ayant perdu, je posséderais en quelque sorte pour toujours. (*Le temps* 15)

In Roy's mind, she has been deprived of a central moment in the mother-daughter trajectory that attendance at the maternal deathbed would have permitted, that is, the necessity for both to "faire leurs adieux sur cette terre" (*Le temps* 15).

Failing to say goodbye at the maternal deathbed provokes a deeper crisis in Roy, most notably in terms of her desire to recompense the mother through her writing. This crisis is intensified by the fact that it was her writing that caused her to be so far away from her mother at the time of her death: "Pourquoi maman serait-elle morte avant que je n'aie eu le temps de lui apporter la raison d'être fière de moi et que j'étais allée au bout du monde lui chercher au prix de tant efforts?" (*Le temps* 14). The return home in advance of the funeral and the viewing of the mother's corpse become a substitute of sorts for the missed opportunity to be present at the maternal deathbed before the mother's final parting. Significantly, when Roy is led into the mother's bedroom by her older sister, Clémence, both instinctively gravitate towards the bed where the mother passed away. Roy remarks, "Elle m'indiqua le petit lit où maman avait subi sa dernière crise, et qu'est-ce qui nous a poussées à nous y asseoir toutes les deux, côte à côte, plutôt que de prendre place sur des chaises?" (*Le temps* 46). While sitting on the bed, Clémence goes through the minutiae of the

mother's last day alive, from the moment she awoke that morning right through to the end. In this way, there is a simulation of the maternal deathbed scene. Through Clémence's detailed description as well as the physical proximity to the exact spot where her mother passed away, Roy is able to experience the final moments vicariously. This experience is heightened by Roy's close observation of the surroundings as she tries to imagine what her mother saw and how she felt on that particular day as she lay dying on this bed, thereby creating her own inner psychic experience of an event that she was unable to attend.

Once Roy has had sufficient time to linger in the mother's bedroom and recreate a version of the recent event for herself, it is time to visit the deceased mother at the funeral parlor where she is laid out in an open coffin. As previously stated, I see the coffin as an extension of the maternal deathbed for a number of reasons. First, given that Roy does not have the opportunity to be at the mother's bedside while she is dying, viewing the corpse in the coffin takes on the same reconciliatory function that would normally be accorded to the maternal deathbed. Second, the deceased mother's body on display in the coffin at the funeral parlor occupies a liminal space similar to that of the dying mother's body on the maternal deathbed. Both are caught somewhere between this life and the next, hence, of her mother's corpse Roy remarks "Maman n'était plus de notre monde, avec nous. Pourtant elle l'était encore quelque peu, à attendre les derniers rites dans cette espèce de maison recueillie, au cimetière" (*Le temps* 56). Third, and most pertinently in terms of the mother-daughter relationship, as is the case for the maternal deathbed, the coffin is where the daughter is confronted with her mother as separate and forced to recognize her, perhaps for the first time, as an autonomous subject. Alone with the corpse at the funeral parlor, Roy scrutinizes her appearance, seeking to reconfigure the mother as she knew her in life. Instead, she notices other layers to the mother's identity hitherto masked from the daughter's gaze. There is a glimpse of the woman beyond motherhood now that the previous "traces de la souffrance" (*Le temps* 50) that Roy had so keenly associated with her mother have been erased from this "resting" face. The mother appears "rajeunie" (*Le temps* 50), almost to the extent of having been returned to childhood. Roy remarks, "Je ne pouvais pas ne pas voir que dans ce cercueil pour ainsi dire trop grande pour elle, ma mère n'avait plus l'air que d'une enfant" (*Le temps* 52).

As she stands by the coffin, Roy reflects on her relationship with her mother and is confronted with unfamiliar and uncomfortable feelings of separateness: "elle était à jamais éloignée de moi et jamais plus n'aurait besoin des

biens qu'enfin je pouvais lui apporter" (*Le temps* 50) and "cette vie que j'apercevais à présent ne pas bien connaître" (*Le temps* 53). Roy is crushed by an overwhelming guilt in the coffin scene, with the sight of her deceased mother giving rise to a desire to atone: "seule auprès d'elle [...] il me semblait que je lui devais des explications" (*Le temps* 53). Kegan Gardiner states that the maternal deathbed (and, in particular, the coffin scene) can serve to amplify the mobility and freedom of the daughter in contrast to the mother's life-long existence of servitude and immobility (Kegan Gardiner 159). Roy's career as a writer necessitated sustained periods of absence from the mother. Indeed, as previously indicated, she had been travelling for this very purpose when she received the telegram announcing her mother's death. Seeing the mother in the coffin is a reminder, therefore, of the dynamic nature of the daughter's existence and the ease of movement that she enjoyed at the expense of the mother-daughter relationship and without her mother being able to avail herself of a similar privilege. It is understandable that such a realization, intensified by the vision of the static corpse/coffin, should provoke a sense of remorse and culpability in the daughter, which, in turn, generates a desire to avenge the mother: "Je me surpris à lui promettre, tout en pleurant, que j'obtiendrais, pour la consoler et la rehausser, bien d'autres médailles, des dizaines de médailles" (*Le temps* 54).

It is also worth considering the notes that accompany the published edition of *Le temps qui m'a manqué* where there are additional references to the maternal deathbed/coffin scene. These notes, prepared by the editors, include certain excerpts from drafts of the text located in Roy's archives. In what has been labeled *Cahier 1*, there is an extensive description of Roy's visit to the funeral home. During her encounter with the mother's corpse, Roy becomes acutely aware of the severance between mother and daughter brought about by death, and it is even possible to detect an undertone of resentment at what she perceives as an abandonment by the mother. She writes, "Peut-être que je n'existais même plus dans la conscience de ma mère. Cette pensée, de toutes celles que j'éprouvai alors, me fut sans doute la plus cruelle car elle laissa ses traces en moi pour toujours. Aujourd'hui encore j'en reconnais la blessure" (*Le temps*, Note 20, 100–1). There is further insight into the significance and symbolism of the maternal deathbed/coffin scene to be found in the notes. Both Kegan Gardiner and Robbins contend that part of the impact of the loss of the mother for the daughter stems from an unraveling and mourning of the cultural myth of motherhood (Kegan Gardiner 148, Robbins 42). Interestingly, as Roy views her mother in the coffin, she makes the following observation: "Je m'approchai plus près encore du visage de cire comme pour mieux

comprendre ce qu'avait été la vie de cette morte et, la revoyant par étapes, je crus voir la vie d'autres femmes de sa génération" (*Le temps*, Note 20, 100). Roy's presence at the coffin-side, therefore, does not simply trigger an interrogation of her own personal, internalized image of the mother but, rather, incites wider reflection on the mother's position within the predominantly patriarchal institution of motherhood itself, a theme that will recur throughout her fiction.

La femme de ma vie

Francine Noël's *La femme de ma vie* differs from *Le temps qui m'a manqué* in that it does not open with the death of the mother having already occurred. Written ten years after the event, *La femme de ma vie* follows a linear trajectory, unlike *Le temps qui m'a manqué* which is more fragmented and circuitous in style.²⁵ Smart describes Noël's text as "l'évolution du rapport entre une fille et sa mère au fil d'une vie" (Smart 360). The reader is guided through the various stages of the mother-daughter relationship, from the daughter's childhood and adolescence into womanhood, before reaching the mother's old-age and final decline in health in the aptly titled concluding chapter "L'office de ténèbres."²⁶ Following cancer and other interrelated health complications, the mother's death does not come quickly in the way that it does in *Le temps qui m'a manqué*. Instead, Noël describes it as "sa lente consommation" during "un été de doute et d'attente" (*La femme* 126, 120). The daughter's experience of the maternal deathbed is not then limited to one single scene, for Noël becomes her mother's primary carer during her decline. The daughter's attendance at the maternal deathbed is associated with intense carework, which Noël refers to as "une routine de survie" (*La femme* 122). Unlike Roy who is denied the opportunity to be present at the maternal deathbed, Noël states, "je fréquentais ma mère plus que je ne l'avais jamais fait" (*La femme* 123).

Through the detailed descriptions of the maternal deathbed in *La femme de ma vie*, which repeatedly shifts from home to hospital, we gain an insight into the impact of such relentless carework on the mother-daughter relationship. One of the first observations that Noël makes is the role reversal that occurs now that the mother is fully dependent on the daughter: "elle devait compter sur moi pour tout" (*La femme* 122). Interestingly, like Roy, Noël remarks that the dying mother has returned to a state akin to childhood: "elle était devenue une vieille petite fille fragile" (*La femme* 125). The maternal deathbed, however, is not just a place of care but also of ongoing mother-daughter conflict. From Noël's perspective, the mother has become "tyrannique et vindicative," convinced that "son statut de grande malade lui donnait

tous les droits” (*La femme* 125, 128). Exasperated, Noël even considers abandoning her “au milieu de sa dévastation” (*La femme* 125), but chooses to stay because, like Roy, the daughter feels an overwhelming sense of duty towards the mother coupled with guilt: “j’avais envers elle une dette de vie que je n’acquittais pas” (*La femme* 145). The image of the maternal deathbed as a place of reconciliation (as harbored by Roy, hence her devastation at having missed the opportunity to be present) is continuously undone in *La femme de ma vie*. While Roy believes that the maternal deathbed would have brought about atonement and peace between mother and daughter, Noël reveals that, in spite of her continued presence at her dying mother’s bedside, many regrets on the part of the daughter after the mother’s passing relate to the unsaid between them: “Je ne me consolais pas de nos conflits non résolus” (*La femme* 157). At the same time, there is some solace to be gained from the daughter’s attendance at the maternal deathbed. Unlike Roy who laments the fact that her mother passed too quickly, Noël is grateful to hers for this final visit: “Je crois qu’elle aurait pu partir plus tôt [...] mais j’étais toujours ailleurs [...] et patiemment, elle m’avait attendue” (*La femme* 150).

Due to the number of hospital admissions to which the mother is subjected as her illness progresses, Noël is well-positioned to engage in a criticism of the (mis)treatment of the elderly who are terminally ill in clinical settings. On several occasions, even though it is clear that the mother is “de plus en plus souffrante” (*La femme* 152), Noël and her mother are sent home from the emergency room, and no treatment is offered. Accessing a maternal deathbed then is a challenge in and of itself in *La femme de ma vie*, with overcrowded and understaffed hospitals and the fact that, due to her mother’s advanced age, “son cas n’est pas prioritaire” (*La femme* 151). Noël frets, “Je commence à penser que ma mère mourra sans autres soins que les miens et sans médicaments pour alléger ses douleurs” (*La femme* 152). When death is imminent, however, Noël’s mother is eventually fully admitted to hospital and permitted to stay. In spite of previous tensions between mother and daughter during the prolonged period of care, the maternal deathbed becomes a site of fusion between the two during the final days. Noël alludes to her own embodiment of the mother’s physical state, remarking that “Chaque fois que je l’approche, j’ai l’impression d’entrer avec elle dans la mort” (*La femme* 150). Paradoxically, however, the maternal deathbed, as discussed in relation to *Le temps qui m’a manqué*, is also a place where the boundaries between mother and daughter and their existence as separate beings come to the fore; hence Noël adds, “Mais je ne peux pas souffrir à sa place, mourir à sa place” (*La femme* 150). Noël makes further reference to the previously evoked role-reversal between

mother and daughter that is brought about by the maternal deathbed. She writes, “je m’asseoyais dans son lit et je lui tenais la main, comme à une enfant qui a besoin d’être rassurée” (*La femme* 154). In the final moment before her death, the mother calls out for her daughter. It is only when she is reassured that her daughter is close by that she is able to depart: “craignant que je sois partie [...] elle m’appela: *Francine*. ‘Oui, maman, je suis là, je reste avec toi toute la journée.’ D’une voix chargée d’angoisse, elle demanda: *La nuit aussi?* Je dis: ‘Oui, la nuit aussi.’ Sa main se détendit et elle ne dit plus rien” (*La femme* 154). Thus, in *La femme de ma vie*, the maternal deathbed is shown to be a complex and circuitous space that oscillates between mother-daughter symbiosis and separation.

A final point to note in relation to the maternal deathbed scene is the daughter’s distress at no longer existing in the mother’s consciousness once the mother has deceased. Noël writes:

Ce qui rend la mort révoltante, c’est de savoir que l’être cesse d’exister à tout jamais. [...] La mort marque la perte de la conscience individuelle et de la mémoire [...]: tout se dégrade et se disperse, et plus jamais ne se retrouveront ensemble les molécules ayant formé tel corps, tel cerveau uniques. Jeanne Pelletier ne pense plus et ne sent plus rien. (*La femme* 163)

The grief then that is experienced at the maternal deathbed concerns more than just the loss of mother but also of the self, the daughter whose gaze can no longer be returned by the mother.

Returning to the mother

In both texts, the loss of the mother leads to a bereavement that is predominantly characterized by depression and an embodiment of the death itself through feelings of dying or a wish to die. Noël describes this loss as “un long dérangement” and reveals that “malade, j’ai pensé mourir à mon tour” (*La femme* 157). Roy escapes to the countryside for the purpose of journalistic research but also in an attempt to heal. However, the beauty of her surroundings only exacerbates her grief and she fails to find any respite there. Roy writes, “mes sanglots éclatèrent à la pensée d’un monde encore si beau dont maman n’était plus, dont maman était exclue, dont maman ne faisait plus partie” (*Le temps* 87). During the worst moments of grief, there is a sense that Roy would prefer to no longer exist without the mother: “par moments, je ne savais pas si je n’en voulais pas plus à maman de m’avoir mise au monde que d’être morte” (*Le temps* 39).

While the yearning to return to the mother is profoundly painful, it is also motivational in that it generates the creation of a textual space where both

Roy and Noël are able to reconfigure and pay homage to the mother. In addition, far from being a site of pure maternal idealisation, the memoirs serve as a forum for further reflection on the complicated nature of the mother-daughter relationship and its ongoing imprint on the daughter's identity. As Nancy K. Miller comments, "the re-creation of the mother in writing after her death can be a way of coming to terms with the power of that unchosen bond between women."²⁷ For Noël, writing the mother constitutes "une simple petite bataille contre l'envasement de la mort. Un mémorial. Le refus de la perte" (*La femme* 165). As Smart observes, in the case of both writers there is explicit recognition of "l'influence capitale du talent de [la] mère dans [leur] propre vocation de romancière" (Smart 361). In an interview for Quebec women's magazine *Châtelaine*, Roy draws attention to the impact of her mother on her writing, asking, "Que serais-je moi, sans le souvenir de ma mère? Si elle n'avait pas été, serais-je capable d'écrire ce que j'ai écrit? J'en doute."²⁸ A similar remark is made in *Le temps qui m'a manqué* during the burial scene where Roy refers specifically to the interconnection between the mother's death and her creativity: "Je venais de comprendre que de ma mère morte je recevais, à travers ce qu'elle avait aimé et m'avait fait aimer, plus encore peut-être que ce qu'elle m'avait donné au temps que nous appelions celui de sa vie" (*Le temps* 60).

In *La femme de ma vie*, it is quite clear that Noël's writing has been inspired by her mother, as she states, "ce qu'elle m'a légué de plus fort, c'est le verbe. J'ai attrapé son amour des histoires" (*La femme* 162). Writing after the mother's death becomes a way of reuniting with the mother and, perhaps, achieving the reconciliation that had been hoped for at the maternal deathbed, but which was not fully achieved. Smart argues that these (auto)biographical accounts spurred on by the mother's death are important milestones in the renegotiation of the mother-daughter relationship. They are at once a "voyage vers la compréhension et l'amour" in relation to the mother and a "voyage vers soi" (Smart 365). In fact, similar to Houel's observation cited earlier, Smart contends that "il se peut que la mort de la mère ait été la seule façon de résoudre la terrible ambivalence de la fille et de libérer en elle le flot de l'écriture" (Smart 343). The maternal deathbed emerges, therefore, not simply as a place of loss but also as a potential site of 'birth': a 'birth' with regards to the daughter's renewed appreciation and understanding of the mother; a 'birth' in terms of the writing that ensues; and, finally, a 'rebirth' of the mother whose memory will now be preserved through literature. In this respect, the text transcends the maternal deathbed as the last *corps-à-corps* between mother and daughter and instead becomes the more definitive space of reunification.

Conclusion

If the mother-daughter dyad is the central relationship in the subject formation of the daughter, then the maternal deathbed scene is the crucial moment around which the daughter's bereavement text pivots. As outlined in this article, the maternal deathbed scene emerges as a microcosm of the broader mother-daughter narrative, capturing all the key emotions and struggles that characterize the relationship more generally. In the case of Roy, I have shown how the maternal deathbed scene causes feelings of guilt and regret to resurface followed by a need for reattachment. It also compels the daughter to acknowledge the mother as an autonomous subject. For Noël, the maternal deathbed is not a single scene but, rather, a prolonged series of visits to the dying mother, which draws our attention to issues of care and conflict between mother and daughter. Noël reveals the constant attendance at her mother's bedside as encompassing the same fluctuating desires of separation followed by reunification that commonly define the mother-daughter relationship. Noël's text also alerts us to the impact of the role-reversal between mother and daughter when the former becomes wholly dependent on the latter for survival.

Despite the importance accorded to the maternal deathbed scene, in both texts it betrays expectations when it fails to perform as the ultimate site of reconciliation. Having missed the opportunity to be present at the actual death, Roy seeks a synthesis with the mother from the coffin scene that does not fully occur. While she persists in believing that she has missed out on the final unification with the mother that she believes the maternal deathbed would have provided, it is clear from Noël's text that this assumption of merngence is delusory. Noël's experience reveals the possibility of a complete and honest opening up of mother and daughter to each other at the maternal deathbed to be a mythical construction. The deep-rooted tensions persist, and while the daughter is, of course, physically close, much remains unsaid between mother and daughter, and attendance at the maternal deathbed does not always bring the closure that is anticipated. It is only via the daughter's writing then, generated by the maternal deathbed and the final loss, that this longed-for reconciliation with the mother can effectively be achieved.

The final point to make in this article relates to the specific writing process involved in the depiction of mother's death. In many ways, it is possible to view the death writing of Roy and Noël, with its intense focus on either the dying body or deceased corpse, as a narrative act of maternal resuscitation or, moreover, exhumation. This act is amplified by the fact that the writing process, in both cases, occurs after the mother's passing. In the same way, how-

ever, that actual resuscitation and exhumation often give rise to difficult ethical questions, so too does the post-death text. There are numerous issues to consider that relate to the public mise-en-scène of the private maternal death-bed scene. On the one hand, it could be argued that the re-enactment of the mother's final moments in life/on earth for literary purposes is, perhaps, unethical, and furthermore, given its entanglement with the daughter's own personal identity question, verging on the narcissistic. On the other hand, the role that maternal death writing plays in the final resolution of the complex mother-daughter dynamic cannot be underestimated. As the analysis of Roy and Noël's texts has demonstrated here, it is through writing the mother's death and revisiting the last encounter that the daughter is able to give shape to her grief and better understand the foundational nature of this particular relationship. The conclusion of the mother's life, therefore, does not lead to the end of the mother-daughter dialogue, which is now extended and, indeed, immortalized thanks to the daughterly narrative. In this respect, maternal death writing functions as a hugely beneficial form of scriptotherapy, which allows the daughter to heal and move forward without ever forgetting her creative indebtedness to the mother.

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Notes

1. Adalgisa Giorgio, ed., "Introduction," *Writing Mothers and Daughters* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 7.
2. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999), and Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton Press, 1976).
3. Phyllis Chesler, "Preface," in Judith Arcana, *Our Mothers' Daughters* (London: The Women's Press, 1981), xv.
4. See Luce Irigaray, *Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979), and Héléne Cixous, *Le rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (Paris: Galilée, 2010).
5. Marianne Hirsch *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1989).
6. Lori Saint-Martin, *Le nom de la mère: Mère, filles et écriture dans la littérature québécoise au féminin* (Quebec: Nota Bene, 1999), 17.
7. See Suzanne Juhasz, "Towards Recognition: Writing the Mother-Daughter Relationship," *American Imago*, 57:2 (2000): 157–83.
8. Annick Houel, "Mort de la mère et relation mère-fille chez Marie Cardinal et Noëlle Châtelet," in *Les mères et la mort: Réalités et représentations*, Elisabeth Lamothe, Pascale Sardin, and Julie Sauvage, eds. (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2008), 119.
9. Judith Kegan Gardiner, "A Wake for the Mother: The Maternal Deathbed in Women's Fiction," *Feminist Studies*, 4:2 (1978): 148.
10. Miriam Moss et al., "Impact of Elderly Mother's Death on Middle-Age Daughters," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 37:1 (1993): 1–22.
11. Martha Robbins, "Mourning the Myth of Mother/hood," *Women and Therapy*, 10:1–2 (1990): 41–59.
12. Hope Edelman, *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* (London: Yellow Kite, 2014), 27.

13. Gabrielle Roy, *Le temps qui m'a manqué*, François Ricard, Dominique Fortier, and Jane Everett, eds. (Quebec: Boréal, 2000).
14. Francine Noël, *La femme de ma vie* (Montreal: Leméac, 2005).
15. Patricia Smart, *De Marie de l'Incarnation à Nelly Arcan: Se dire, se faire par l'écriture intime* (Montreal: Boréal, 2014).
16. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe, Tome II: L'expérience vécue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).
17. Julie Rodgers, "Francine Noël: Entretien," in *Canada: Text and Territory*, Máire Áine Ní Mhainnín and Elizabeth Tilley, eds. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008): 116.
18. Gabrielle Roy, *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945) (Quebec: Boreal, 1993).
19. François Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy, une vie* (Quebec: Boréal, 2000), 243.
20. Francine Noël, *Maryse* (1983) (Quebec: Bibliothèque québécoise, 1993).
21. Katherine Roberts, *Je suis ce pays: Nationalisme, féminisme et point de vue dans l'œuvre romanesque de Francine Noël*, Mémoire de Maîtrise, Département des études littéraires (UQAM, 1995), 31.
22. Lori Saint-Martin, "Histoire(s) de femme(s) chez Francine Noël," *Voix et Images*, 18:2 (1993): 246.
23. Suzanne Giguère, "Dans la ramure d'un immense tilleul," *Le Devoir*, 9 April 2005, f3.
24. This wider body of work includes *La détresse et l'enchantement* (Quebec: Boréal Express, 1984).
25. While the fragmentary style of *Le temps qui m'a manqué* could be a result of the fact that the text remained unfinished, it is equally possible to interpret it as a characteristic of grief writing.
26. In an earlier article, I look at all aspects of the mother-daughter relationship in *La femme de ma vie*, whereas here I concentrate on the mother's death and, more specifically, the maternal deathbed scene. See Julie Rodgers, "La relation mère-fille dans *La femme de ma vie* de Francine Noël," *Francofonia*, 57 (2009): 88–89.
27. Nancy K. Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 2000), 90.
28. Alice Parizeau, "Gabrielle Roy, la grande romancière canadienne," *Châtelaine*, 7:4 (1966): 123.

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