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Overlapping genres, as portrayed in Marie Ndiaye's *Autportrait en vert* (*Green self-portrait*)

ELSA POLVEREL

Abstract: « It's the evening and the Garonne River is rising hour after hour in the darkness ». Page after page, the water penetrates the text and the walls; the banks become porous, permeable. Identities blend and confusion invades the text, the narrator and the reader... " You have to watch and wait". Along with the rising waters, the narrator's encounters with the women in green increase in timelessness, and exist as incarnations of the flooding Garonne. *Autportrait en vert (Green self portrait)* by Mary Ndiaye is a work which, through its structure and writing, challenges the notions of literary, photographic, identity and normative genres by jeopardising and questioning our own representations of the world.

Keywords: Overflowing – Self-portrait – Women in green – Garonne – Photography

Résumé: « C'est le soir et le niveau de la Garonne monte heure après heure dans l'obscurité ». Page après page, l'eau pénètre le texte, et toutes les parois, les bords-durs deviennent poreuses, perméables. Les identités se mélangent et le trouble envahit le texte, la narratrice, le lecteur... « Il faut attendre et surveiller ». Au fil de la montée des eaux les rencontres de la narratrice avec les femmes en vert se multiplient dans un hors temps comme des incarnations de la Garonne en débordement, de changer de socle. *Autportrait en vert* de Marie Ndiaye est un ouvrage qui par sa structure et par son écriture questionne les notions de genre littéraires, photographiques, identitaires, normatifs en mettant en danger et en doute nos propres représentations du monde.

Mots-clés : Débordement – Autoportrait – Femmes en vert – Genre – Garonne – Photographie

Overlapping genres, as portrayed in Marie Ndiaye's *Autoportrait en vert (Green self-portrait)*¹

Elsa Polverel²

A request...

Or rather an order from Colette Fellous, murmured into the ear of Marie Ndiaye on an unremarkable June evening, "What if you wrote a self-portrait, Marie? How would you talk about yourself in a book? Alone with the book, no gossip; what would you say?"

Self-portrait. The word is launched into the night, on the banks of the Garonne, and rebounds on the watchful hills. Marie Ndiaye accepts, of course, but not in any old way, "*I don't reveal things to Cristina, do I? Of course not, it's not in my nature*"³. So the piece won't be from my nature, but it'll be a piece of writing, just so you know. Marie Ndiaye's idea of a joke is to present her *auto-portrait en vert* with a pink tint, candy pink even. Each work in this collection is published in a particular colour, J-B Pontalis in *Le dormeur éveillé (The Awakened Sleeper)* believed he had been assigned yellow; for Marie Ndiaye it's pink. Why not green? Surely because it's too obvious; choosing green would have influenced our reading, and might have even facilitated it. And yet, Marie Ndiaye never wants to hold reader's hand. In fact, when you know that Marie Ndiaye is the only woman to be published in this collection, her choice of pink boggles the mind...

Along with the narrator we live in the expectation of the rising river, an unresolved question; will it flood the text? So let's watch out (!) and look at different strains of the text, punctuated with the narrator's encounters with women in green, to find the answer.

But most importantly, to which literary genre does self-portraiture belong? Self-portraiture is an interpretation of oneself and the world, and of the profound link between the two. That's why self-portraitists ask who they are at the time of writing, not how they came to be who they are. That's what distinguishes it from autobiography. Self-portraiture puts a spatial structure in place, in which different aspects of the self-portraitist's identity will then be outlined. What is outlined and produced within this structure is a stranger to the times, and isn't assigned a particular time or duration. This is why self-portraiture is non-narrative and non-chronological; it often functions

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² Elsa Polverel is a PhD student in Literature, under the supervision of Mireille Calle-Gruber at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University, Paris 3.

³ Marie Ndiaye, *Autoportrait en vert (Green Self-portrait)*, Paris, Mercure de France, 2005, p.18. Translation.

by association of ideas or by themes. We can therefore translate the demand made on Marie Ndiaye as, "Who are you in this world? Look at yourself in a mirror and tell us what you see".

Notice first off that it is possible to find autobiographical elements that enable us to connect Marie Ndiaye and the narrator, such as the place where the story unfolds, the number of children, the name of her husband Jean-Yves (writer Jean-Yves Cendrey), her presence in a literary symposium in Ouagadougou, but that's all secondary. What is important is to make use of the literary forms in order to discuss a subject that is difficult to grasp, and particularly to define the subject that is being discussed. Through the structure of her work, Marie Ndiaye calls into question the nature of the subject; subject – author personified or the subject of a text? What does the personal pronoun used hide? Marie Ndiaye's employment of a self-portraiture structure serves to extend that structure and to blend it with that of a novel. So it is neither novel nor self-portrait. Indeed, she could have chosen to present scenes, reflections and stories of her life one after the other without any coherence and it would have provided a fragmented portrait of what she is as the genre of self-portraiture demands. However, she goes further than that; she begins *Auto-portrait en vert* as though it were a novel that respected the rules of narration; that is to say coherence and concordance of tenses, coherence of place and characters. But she does none of that. She prefers to move from story to story as though she were freely following her train of thoughts, a thought in motion, reflected in a mirror. The story functions through an association of ideas; it follows the women in green through the contours of the text. What makes for common ground and a point of convergence for self-portraiture and novel is primarily the notion of tense. The story starts by establishing a tense and a subject that keeps changing throughout the rising waters. The text begins in the present (which is rare in Marie Ndiaye's work as it happens) but doesn't keep to it. The present tense, among others, is a tense of secrets, of the spoken word and of words murmured one evening by the fire. However, she never completely confides her secrets to us and quickly distances herself. She navigates between the French present, past perfect and imperfect tenses. She changes tenses from paragraph to paragraph but also from sentence to sentence, "*It was a dazzling and hot autumn morning. The children had bare arms and legs.*"¹ It's as though there's a desire to change the tense. "*All the young women are in shorts*"². The narrator finishes her story in the future tense, like in folk tales. Wasn't all that just a fable? The second point of convergence with the novel is the notion of subject. Who is speaking? Marie Ndiaye assumes "I" to keep it at arm's length. It is both the "I" of the narrator and the "I" of Marie Ndiaye that is speaking. As we've seen, the "I" doesn't have a clearly defined referent. "I" is there but its identity can only be perceived through relationships with other people and the relationship

¹ Marie Ndiaye, *Autoportrait en vert*, op.cit., p.10. Translation.

² Marie Ndiaye, *Autoportrait en vert*, op.cit., p.16-17. Translation.

with otherness; it means trespassing and forcing oneself to look at the other and to therefore interact with the other, a painful adjustment. Moreover, while the story takes place in the first person singular for the most part, we dive, without warning, into the story of Jenny, set somewhere where it is not possible for the narrator to be. At this point also, the subject is called into question; is it really the same "I"?

Marie Ndiaye plays with literary genres not for vain amusement but because it's necessary; necessary to introduce movement where there has been too much rigidity of theories, necessary to go beyond the preset rules of text structure to create ambiguity of subject, or subjects.

Marie Ndiaye is obliged to enlist the service of the other, or others; a solitary self-portrait can't exist. A self-portrait is always a relationship between oneself and oneself moderated by a third party. The third party may vary; there are photographs, the women in green and even the text itself. She speaks of herself but through others, though others in her, through her in others.

This game between forms enables her to flit between reality and imagination. The story courses perennially through reality and imagination without interruption. We dive into a world verging on madness. She also forces the reader to follow her into murky areas. We were aware of the danger before and we will remain so because the reader pact is continually redefined throughout the text, just as the subject of the action is continually redefined.

If things aren't real, isn't it dangerous to lead people to believe that they are? This is a question that spans Marie Ndiaye's story, is it not? Isn't it problematic for readers to leave aside their concept and perceptions of reading to dive into the flooding of the Garonne with Marie Ndiaye, to the point of almost drowning? *Auto-portrait en vert* is towards someone, for someone. Marie Ndiaye addresses repeatedly the reader; it creates the illusion of orality, "Did I say that?" Yet the reader's place isn't easily found in Marie Ndiaye's work, because she provokes the reader with an introverted text. It's a perpetual interrogation of oneself on the part of the reader. The story could be stifling, devastating if it wasn't segmented to allow the readers to find their bearings and get their breath back.

With Marie Ndiaye's writing there is always the notion of segments. Her writing and train of thought are disjointed, that is, they are under construction, fractured; a work in progress and in transition.

Progressively, it is the text that gains the upper hand. Sentences follow on from one another nicely but you have the impression that something is missing. Tenses are missing, as are gaps between sentences. This is what creates the sensation of never knowing where you are, or in which world the characters evolve. It is in the gaps in language that something can be said in silence. A hint of a whisper. The segmentation of the text doesn't correspond with stories or

dates. Every author writes in an organ of the body. Marie Ndiaye writes in the lungs, in the suspension of the lungs, where air seeks air.

Another voice apart from that of the words is also heard; the photographs in the work tell another story. There's a game in the photographs used: what can you really see? The eye needs time to adjust and decipher. Marie Ndiaye transforms the question "who are you?" into "where are you?" The choice of photographs isn't coincidental. What are the photographs saying? They speak of oneself and of time, of evidence of reality and of identity. What subject is represented here? The photography imposes an alternative relationship with time and space on us, one in which the readers must once again lose themselves in order to rediscover themselves. Because photos, as Roland Barthes said, are a pure representation of time taken in a duel movement: they must be inscribed into the passing of time. The photos in Marie Ndiaye's self-portrait play on two aspects. There are portraits and landscapes; there are anonymous photos and photos from the photographer, Julie Ganzin. In all, 17 photos can be found, 9 of which come from a private collection. Of the private photos, no names are given. Like ghosts that haunt a text, personal legends like the women in green. However, in both the private and public photos, Marie Ndiaye is neither in front of nor behind the lens, she is out of sight. She continues her game of hide-and-seek with reality in order to change its consistency. In Ganzin's shots, the woman in the photograph is completely blurred with the landscape. The woman is the landscape. There is no border between the two. If you're alert you'll see that one of the photographs used is upside down. You have to turn the book the other way to see the young girl, hair in plaits, in the diving position as though she was about to dive into the branches of the trees. You can notice a fire in the distance. Later, the same photograph is the right way up but something is missing: the young girl has gone up in smoke. Photos appear many times in the text to create a sort of repetition; repetition in the sense of resonance, like an echo of your voice and of sounds, something that repeats in the text and that forms part of the text itself, like recurring motifs that insist, or resist to use a Derridian expression. However, when you think there is parity, there is only disparity because the photo is never the same. Moreover, the piece of writing begins with the only colour photo, tinted green. It's of a woman with long blond hair with her back to the camera and who is signalling with her left hand. The book ends with a black and white photo. It is much clearer but this time the woman, still with her back to the camera, is stuck to the tree. It's difficult to tell her apart from the tree trunk. The tree is the symbol of knowledge, the knowledge is there, up close, but it is unattainable. A woman's knowledge was there, but it has already disappeared. These two photos at the start and end of the book are called "Décrire" ("Describe"). In the French word "décrire" the word "rire" (to laugh) is present; as is "écrire" ("to write"), is it not? This tells us to stop writing in order to keep laughing. In describing something, it is also said that writing flows

naturally out of itself. Writing demonstrates how to look elsewhere, further, into the field of interpretation. Photos display what's there but nothing more. It's up to the eye to see, or not as the case may be. From the fixed point of photographs, through the accumulation of photos, Marie Ndiaye creates movement, and establishes communication between photographs and text. Perspective is nothing but an effect of truth and madness. In photos you hope to discover things that you don't know about yourself; it's a quest for personal identity and the identity of others in the reality of form. Forms age over time, transform, but they retain a constancy that enables us to recognize a form after time has passed. But, asking Marie Ndiaye the same question again, "who are you?" she evokes the women in green.

The world that Marie Ndiaye depicts is extremely feminine, almost completely devoid of men, with the exception of her father and the narrator's husband. It is a world full of women in green, children, landscapes and the Garonne. What does *Auto-portrait en vert* tell us? There's one woman, a mother of four children living next to the Garonne who meets women in green at different points in her life. But who are these women in green? What is special about them? What is significant? What is subjective about them? What link exists between them and the narrator? What do we understand by women in green? Women who have green eyes and who wear green dresses. There are many apparitions and reappearances of these women; they never appear in the same form. On the contrary, each one reveals one aspect of the narrator.

The women in green serve to personify and sexualise the writing.

"In order to bring me calmly through my moments of stupor, deep boredom and crippling lethargy, I have to remind myself that these moments adorn my thoughts, my inner-being, and that they are there, both real beings and literary figures, without whom the harshness of existence seems to eat away at skin and flesh until there's nothing but bone left."¹

For Marie Ndiaye, without the women in green, life isn't worth living. These women are literary figures that enable her to stay on track and to give meaning to her life:

"In my sisters' tidy kitchen, I wonder how one can bear to live a life devoid of women in green, carving out their ambiguous silhouettes in the background"²

The women in green aren't reassuring figures or protectors; rather they are strange figures that are even frightening at times. The constant encounters with the women in green create structure. They are alluring but extremely worrying. These encounters save her from entering an

¹ Marie Ndiaye, *Autoportrait en vert*, op.cit., p.77. Translation.

² Marie Ndiaye, *Autoportrait en vert*, op.cit., p.77. Translation.

insane world and allow her to display her own originality. The women in green are like a space of expectation and creation. The women in green are like a river: the Garonne. The Garonne is extremely gluttonous, a legend; you have to read to the end. The expectation of the flooding of the Garonne punctuates the story, maintains the rhythm and conceals anxiety. The Garonne acts as a thread. It functions like a motor, like a recurrent theme. It's during the flooding of the Garonne, while we wait, that the other stories are played out. The Garonne serves as a location to convert writing to action; where the imaginary finds its strength. This is why the story ends with this question, "Is the Garonne in fact a woman in green?"

Finally, most importantly don't ever reply to the tremendous question: who are you? Otherwise you'll kill the movement, the hope and the desire of elsewhere. The question, "who are you?" is one that should be endlessly repeated over time, from when Marie Ndiaye first carefully opened the doors... Thanks to the flooding, Marie Ndiaye never stops shifting the boundaries of genres, of all the genres. Again, she surprises the reader, ignores codes, breaks the mould, and leaves you wanting more; wanting to see another photo and desiring another flooding.

At the end of the narrative, the Garonne has flooded, the villagers are contemplating the water, the feminine has inundated the text, and the reader has gone adrift. From afar, we are looking at the solemn form wandering (a form introduced in the first few pages). But most importantly, don't see it and pretend, like the narrator, not to have seen anything, "Honestly, I didn't see anything; nothing at all. What happened?" and we, not as gullible as that, remained as quiet as the children:

"The children look at one another sternly. Their lips are really red. Without consulting one another any more, they choose to remain silent"¹.

So all that time passed and we saw nothing?

Translated by Esther Cottey

¹ Marie Ndiaye, *Autportrait en vert*, op.cit., p.93. Translation.