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Voicing the Voiceless:

Language and Genre in Nellie McClung's Fiction and Her Autobiography

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ABSTRACT

While Nellie McClung is best known as an advocate for women's participation in public life, she gained much of her authority on the public stage from her popularity as a writer of sentimental "family fiction." Both her fiction and her autobiography adopt many of the conventions of the genre, but also challenge those conventions by emphasizing the violence of patriarchy and the resulting alienation of women from language and from concepts of unified selfhood. McClung's writings stretch the definitions of popular genres by stimulating the readers to question the conventions to which they adhere.

RÉSUMÉ

Bien que Nellie McClung soit mieux connue comme défenseur de la participation des femmes à la vie publique, son autorité sur la scène publique était principalement due à sa popularité comme écrivaine de romans sentimentaux "de famille". Dans son oeuvre de fiction aussi bien que dans son autobiographie, elle adopte les conventions de ce genre, mais en même temps elle les contraste en insistant sur la violence du patriarcat et sur ce que cette violence entraîne, c'est-à-dire l'isolement des femmes par rapport au langage et aux concepts d'une identité unifiée. Les écrits de McClung élargissent les définitions des genres populaires en incitant le lectrices ou les lecteurs à mettre en question les conventions auxquelles ils-elles souscrivent.

> How find a voice, make a choice strong enough, subtle enough to cut through those layers of ornamental style, that decorative sepulcher, where even her breath is lost?
>
> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum*

Nellie McClung is best known in Canada today for her role as an activist in the women's movement of the early twentieth century. The story of her triumph in the "Women's Parliament" during the suffrage agitation has attained the status of an enabling myth for many Canadian women; her participation, along with her close friend Emily Murphy, in the famous "Person's Case," has recently been celebrated. But consideration of her role as an activist and propagandist for women's participation in public life has often overshadowed interest in her career as a writer of popular fiction. In fact, it was the considerable public visibility which she attained as a best-selling author which lent her credibility on the public stage, and her first appearances on behalf of the WCTU were public readings from her novel, *Sowing Seeds in Danny*.

McClung wrote that Charles Dickens' portrayal of poverty in Victorian England inspired her to become a "voice for the voiceless" (*Clearing*, p. 281) by writing fiction. For McClung, the "voiceless" are not the factory workers of England, but Canadian women, kept silent by convention and socialization as well as fear, lack of education and plain bone-tiredness. Her fiction and her autobiography are dominated by the theme of women coming to speak their experience, to demand that their voices be heard in everyday life and in legislation. Her stories thematize the problem of self-expression for women and radically question the ability of language to convey feminine experience. But this questioning also rebounds on McClung herself; like her characters, McClung is also "voiceless," and her stories show that, just as conventional language has left out women's desire, conventional genres have left out the feminine.

McClung's fiction conforms to the paradigm of "domestic family novel" popular in the first decades of the twentieth century, which usually "recounted the growing up and first love experiences of a child or family in a manner notable for its excess of 'syrupy pathos, sentiment and optimism'" (Vipond 1979, p. 104). In Canada, McClung's work, as well as that of L.M. Montgomery and the prairie stories of their contemporaries Arthur Stringer and Robert Stead, generally fits this pattern. As Nancy Armstrong has argued in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, the domestic novel participated in the split between the feminine personal and the masculine public spheres in the eighteenth century, inscribing the removal of the issues of sexuality, domestic power relations and the household economy from political discourse. But like many other marginalized practitioners in this genre, McClung subverts the formula of the domestic novel even which she uses it. She re-imports the political into the domestic novel, confusing the boundaries of the genre and its permitted subject matter.

Feminist literary theorists, from Virginia Woolf to more recent French, Canadian and American writers, have problematized the relationship of women writers to language, and to the conventional literary genres. If we accept that linguistic expression works to maintain existing power groups, how can the marginalised speak their experience without re-inscribing their marginality? Women have not yet found a wholly satisfactory way to step outside of language, which is vitally constitutive of identity as well as thought, and yet avoid silence. As Luce Irigaray rhetorically points out in the epigram to this paper, the question of how to find a voice in a language which is layered with historical resonances of sexism is ever-present for the woman writer. For Irigaray, the answer is to write always in a way which expresses her knowledge of the sexist nature of language and her dissent from it. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, suggests that women writers will use the conventional elements of style, genre and subject matter to signal their dissent by subversion. In Woolf's feminine style, the patriarchal sentence is "broken" to express a woman's relationship to language and to her body (Woolf, p. 75); the feminine genre breaks the "sequence" of generic elements to express a woman's distinct view of life and her awareness of a masculine audience continually telling her what and how to write (Woolf, p. 76); the feminine subject matter becomes the feelings and thought of women as they wash dishes and raise children (Woolf, p. 83). McClung's determination to be a "voice for the voiceless" female is initially a project to write about feminine subject matter. But as "domestic family fiction" is primarily defined by optimism and sentiment, her distinctive choice to address the violent reality of women's lives brings her to a quarrel with genre as well.

The first example of the "domestic family fiction" (according to Mary Vipond) was *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch* by American author Alice Caldwell Hegan Rice, a bestseller in Canada and the United States from 1902 to 1903. While the book was nominally the story of Mrs. Wiggs and her family's struggle to survive in poverty, in fact the family serves merely as a kind of comic relief to the real story, a romance between the two upper-class young people who befriend them. *Mrs. Wiggs* was so well known that when McClung submitted *Sowing Seeds in Danny* for publication, the reader complained that it was a "feeble imitation of Mrs. Wiggs" (*Stream*, p. 77). In fact, considered as an imitation of *Mrs. Wiggs*, McClung's book *was* feeble. *Sowing Seeds in Danny* is infinitely more complex, more charitable, and more realistic. It never makes fun of the poor, as does *Mrs. Wiggs*. But the publisher's comment points out an important aspect of McClung's relationship to genre; when she tries to do something new, or better, it is likely to be considered a bad imitation of something else.

McClung's relationship to the genre is that of an outsider, whose commitment to realistically telling the lives of women make the conventions of the genre seem extraordinarily artificial. She questions whether women can find their desire under patriarchy; she questions the status quo. She questions the conventions of romantic love and of the "happy ending," both of which offer an unconvincing closure to a story in which men as a group are the problem. Similarly, McClung's position as an outsider to patriarchal self-assertion complicates her relationship to the genre of autobiography. Her books subvert the conventions of a claim to significance, originality, and a contribution to history by highlighting self-lessness and self-effacement. Like her characters, McClung works against convention to speak her own experience, but she must fight not only the physical and conventional constraints of patriarchal society, but the linguistic and literary ones as well.

A major feminist theorist of her time, McClung defines the feminine voice in her book *In Times Like These* as more than simply the anger of women against unreasonable constraints. She identifies the reality of women's lives as nurturing, cyclical work, characterized by patterns of repetition, interruption, and openness towards the needs of others. Anticipating the preoccupations of recent feminist theory, she implies that the splitting off and repression of "feminine" values is essentially constitutive of

patriarchy, and that the silencing of women is a necessary part of the maintenance of patriarchal power. She advocates allowing the feminine virtues of mother love, sympathy, forgiveness, gentleness and morality to "speak" in the private life of marriage, and in the public life of political organization. The values associated with mothering give women direct power to change the world, McClung states:

> Women must be made to feel their responsibility. All this protective love, this instinctive mother love, must be organised in some way and made effective. There [is] enough of it in the world to do away with all the evils which war upon childhood, undernourishment, slum conditions, child labour, drunkenness. Women could abolish these if they wanted to. (*Stream*, p. 27)

This "mothering" is not limited to biological mothers; it is a characteristic common to women in general. McClung insisted that the feminine values of gentleness, nurturance, and tolerance should be valued equally or even higher than masculine power, direction, and conquest in society, and that such a revaluation must result in better lives for women. In her active political life, McClung battled the forces that kept the feminine silent by fighting for women's suffrage and for prohibition of the sale of alcohol. She "spoke out" for the necessity of changing the legislation which allowed husbands to have financial, legal and physical control over their wives. She wrote of women's desire for abolition of war in *The Next of Kin* and *In Times Like These*; she spoke out strongly for women's engagement in foreign affairs and was a delegate to the League of Nations in the 1930s.

But despite her public reputation as a political reformer, satirical speaker and journalist, McClung writes in her autobiography that she considers her primary vocation to be writing, not active politics. Her desire to be a "voice for the voiceless" was conceived at an early age; McClung wrote throughout her adult life, publishing sixteen books from her first bestseller in 1908 to the second volume of her autobiography in 1945. Her fiction consistently engages the forces she battled as a public figure — the physical, social and conventional forces which keep women silent in public and private life.

The barriers to self-expression in a society organised according to masculine concerns are the thematic focus of many of McClung's fictions. In her stories and novels, women are silent partners in the project of pioneer life, the conquest of the wilderness and the provision of material wealth, contributing their labour without a legal or a moral stake in the results. In McClung's books, rural women work incessantly. They make food, clothing, soap and furniture. They keep livestock. They plough and dig potatoes, and take a hand in harvest time. They feed the threshing team of twenty men, who would refuse to work on a farm unless the food was exceptionally good. They bear children without the help of doctors and are up and working the next day. Beatings, threats and criminal indifference are commonplace in the desperate landscape of McClung's stories. Exhaustion from overwork and childbearing makes women passive and self-effacing. The power of a community standard created by men in their own interest, and backed up by the church and the courts, keep women silent in the face of physical, emotional and financial abuse at the hands of their husbands and fathers.

In the story "Carried Forward" (in the collection *All We Like Sheep*), twelve-year-old Hilda Berry is badly beaten by her father when she tries to tell him that the housekeeper he has hired is starving his children and drugging his new baby. Hilda is left alone to care for her family because her mother has died of "overwork and childbearing" (*Sheep*, p. 201) and she is driven to the brink of infanticide trying to cope with childcare and housework, "work without end, a dizzy round, bewildering and numbing because there was no end, no hope of achievement" (*Sheep*, p. 208). Her mother "never grumbled — never got mad — took it all" (*Sheep*, p. 191). The mother's final advice to Hilda is to "Learn to speak out ... when you feel something ought to be said.... Don't let anyone make you so frightened that you cannot speak" (*Sheep*, p. 211). But Hilda finds that speaking out in her own defence and in defence of her dead mother is not sanctioned by the community. The group of men who gather at Annie Berry's funeral agree that her father has behaved correctly and that the women of his family are at fault for dying: "It was quite evident that Luke Berry had been badly treated" (*Sheep*, p. 186). The minister certifies the community judgement by remarking that he finds the funerals of young women unpleasant because "It is so very hard on the husband and father" (*Sheep*, p. 200). Only the neighbour women, sitting silently around the casket, acknowledge that the mother suffered and the daughter will suffer more, but they are "afraid to speak" (*Sheep*, p. 196). They convert their "wordlessness" into energetic housecleaning. Their sympathy for Hilda remains inarticulate; their contempt for the "husband and father" is silent.

For McClung's characters, as for Adrienne Rich many years later, spoken language is of necessity "the oppressor's language" which can be used to keep women silent as well as to liberate them. The word of law which encodes the standards of the rural community literally denies

women speech by giving them no grounds from which to reply to a husband's threats. In *Purple Springs*, Mrs. Paine lives with the threat that her husband will deprive her of her home, her livelihood and custody of her children if she defies him. She remains silent, replying to his threats that "there is nothing for me to say" (*PS*, p. 173). Her husband suspects her silence covers "something sinister and unknown" which he must vigorously control. But Mrs. Paine's silence is dictated by the word of law, a language which literally gives her no reply to her husband's threats. The lawyer, Peter Neelands, quotes the laws which recognize his right to speak, but deny hers: "She has no claim on her home, nor on her children. A man can sell or will away his property from his wife. A man can will away his unborn child...." (*PS*, p. 185). There is, in fact, nothing Mrs. Paine can say to her husband. Similarly, Annie Gray is silent before the laws which deny her a voice in the custody of her child. As a widow, she has no right to determine the smallest element of her son's life. In the absence of her husband, her father-in-law is automatically the child's legal guardian. When her father-in-law accuses her of having had the child illegitimately, she cannot answer the charge. She remains silent despite severe social ostracism because she knows her silence is her only legal defence: "Only the unmarried mother has the absolute right to her child" (*PS*, p. 264). She explains to the crusading Pearlie Watson why women cannot speak out to change the laws: "Women who are caught in the tangle of these laws, as I was, cannot say a word — their lips are dumb. Others won't say a word for fear of spoiling their matrimonial market" (*PS*, p. 244).

When McClung writes the story of the Finnish immigrant girl in *Painted Fires*, Helmi Milander, she again voices experience hitherto untold in the generic domestic fiction. McClung includes details of the physical experience of childbirth and the discomforts of breastfeeding in her account of Helmi's life in Canada. She transgresses social taboos by blaming men in general for the numerous illegitimate pregnancies among immigrant girls, and graphically portrays the way men, women and the legal system take advantage of girls who know no English. Ignorance of English also helps Helmi maintain her innocence. She is able to withstand demands for a self-revelatory confession from the narrow-minded evangelist supervisors of the Girl's Friendly Home because she is neither an articulate speaker nor a vulnerable listener. But Helmi does learn to communicate by using the straightforward and universally understood retaliatory force of her own body; she knocks them down. Again in a break with convention, Helmi is not "punished" for her quick temper and her physical violence. She eventually is reunited with her husband and lives in luxury with her beloved baby.

Language remains an ambivalent tool in McClung's books because it carries patriarchal history in its structure and vocabulary, and so limits the ways in which women's experience can be perceived. The speaker of McClung's autobiography recounts the way that a neighbour's experience of childbearing in poverty is only expressed as joke:

> I remembered with particular bitterness hearing the men in our neighbourhood joke about Mrs. Jim Barnes who got her husband to move the stairs every time another baby was coming. She said it made her feel she had a new house .... I could see Mrs. Barnes, a pallid, overworked little Englishwoman, homesick, and old at thirty. They already had more children than their little house could hold. Two little ones had died, but these husky brutes ... could laugh and actually find a cause of merriment in the poor woman's pain. (*Stream*, pp. 16-17)

McClung's persona vows to find new ways to communicate subjective women's experience in language. A figurative language which communicates pain as merriment clearly needs some modification before it can express the same pain as pain.

Yet McClung also depicts the possibility of women "mastering" language, twisting it to express their desire. The character of Pearlie Watson (whom McClung in her autobiography states is partially based on herself) learns to "speak out" for herself and for other women in the three books which depict her life: *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, *The Second Chance* and *Purple Springs*. Remarkable in her childhood for her determination to learn to write and to recite, Pearlie encounters the suffragist movement at the Normal School in Winnipeg and returns home to speak out for her neighbours. She confronts Mrs. Paine's husband and the prospective buyer he has found for their farm, and tells Mrs. Paine's side of the story: "I am going to do something for you that no one has ever done. I am going to tell you something.... Mrs. Paine would never tell you" (*PS*, pp. 181, 186). She manages to persuade the buyer that the sale should be put off. Pearlie also speaks for Annie Gray by confronting the evil father-in-law with Annie's side of the story, winning his sympathy for her suffering.

Pearlie's ability to speak for women, to articulate their silenced desire, is in itself the source of power which changes society in these stories. Her participation in the Women's Parliament depicted in *Purple Springs* shows

the power of speech alone to change patriarchal society. In an episode based on McClung's own experience in the Manitoba suffrage fight, Pearlie merely stands before an audience and delivers a parody of the Premier's speech denying a suffragist petition for the vote. Her mere act of speaking a man's words in the manner of a specific man, mocking his power and the system of power which gave it to him, literally destroys the Premier, personally and politically. The words themselves, charged with the weight of women's silences, have the power to change reality.

Yet in none of these stories does the "happy ending" won by speaking really resolve the issues raised by women's silence earlier in the story; the "quest motif" of the story is not resolved by the "romance ending" (DuPlessis, pp. 3-4). Hilda Berry's father remains a brute, with no interest in his children's welfare beyond what the neighbours might think: "Starved mentally and spiritually they might be, and he would feel no pang of conscience" (*Sheep*, p. 229). Helmi retires with husband and child to a luxurious farm home, but dishonesty and croneyism in the justice system and narrow prejudice in Canadian attitudes towards immigrants remain. Annie Gray is still legally at the mercy of her father-in-law's uncertain temper, despite his recognition of her rights as mother of his grandchild. Mrs. Paine has temporarily stalled the sale of her home, but the laws that allow her husband to sell it persist. Pearlie Watson learns how to distance her romantic fantasy of marriage from marriage law through her defence of Mrs. Paine and Annie Gray in *Purple Springs*. While she is able in the end to declare her love for Dr. Clay, her marriage will still bring her under the confines of the legal contract that victimized her friends. The sentimental "happy endings" of these stories, in which the man miraculously comes to a change of heart through the *dea ex machina* of Pearlie's voice (or God's love, or other manifest coincidences), cannot possibly "close" the issues raised by women's silence and speech.

The story "The Neutral Fuse" shows McClung's difficulty in reconciling an optimistic ending with the desire to "speak out" for women. Disregarding the strictures of realistic fiction, McClung writes two endings to the story of a woman who is caught shoplifting. In the first ending, the protagonist is convicted and sentenced by a male judge, but this conclusion is superceded by an account of the understanding and medical treatment the same woman receives from a female judge and a female psychologist. The second ending of "The Neutral Fuse" probably expresses McClung's hope that the appointment of her friend Emily Murphy (who also wrote fiction under the pen name "Janey Canuck") as the first woman police magistrate in the Commonwealth heralded a new understanding of women's lives, and a new value on "feminine" qualities in the legal system. By including both endings, McClung can reconcile the "happy ending" of the "bestseller" genre with what she saw as the real conditions of women in society, and claim both are "realistic."

But in the very inconclusiveness of these endings lies McClung's challenge to the genre of popular fiction, and the nub of her desire to write out women's lives. McClung worked within the limits of a genre which by definition reproduces the social status quo; she wrote "bestsellers," domestic formula fiction with a recognizable cast of children, dogs, reformed drinkers, smalltown gossips and land-obsessed farmers. While the popular novel could challenge the assumptions of everyday life by appealing to outworn sentimentalism, (Ralph Connor's crusading Christian reform novels are an example); in general, the "generic contract," then as now, required the author to present a movingly emotional and optimistic story which required little in the way of intellectual engagement. The story that McClung recognized as a story, a story which would sell to a mass periodical like *Canadian Magazine*, must end optimistically, even if that optimism denies the naturalized realism of the plot. A serious presentation of the logical consequences of wife abuse in the lives of women would either make McClung's stories "bad" examples of the genre, or examples of a different genre. McClung wrote the "safe" story by including the "happy ending," but the facts of the story subvert it.

McClung's stories reveal a profound suspicion of generic conventions which adds to the impression that her stories do not believe their own endings. Romantic love is ridiculed repeatedly, in the "Edythe and Egbert" subplot of *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, in the "Family Herald" stories of *Clearing in the West*, and in sundry other short stories. In each case, "real" love is found to have little relation to its fictional counterpart, and to have more practical value in the long years after the wedding. Similarly, in *Clearing in the West*, young Nellie McClung questions the pastoral for its contrast with her own knowledge of rural life. She reads Milton's "L'Allegro" and discovers it leaves out most of what she knows.

> [T]here were times when I wondered how happy the mower and the milkmaid really were, interesting and romantic as they were to the poet when he ... knew he was going home to a warm fire and an easy chair.... What did he know about them anyway? Quite likely the milkmaid had chapped hands.... And all of them were probably underpaid and overworked.... (*Clearing*, p. 226)

McClung's youthful heroines in *Sowing Seeds in Danny* and *Clearing in the West* are aspiring writers, and their verse displays their knowledge that the poetical conventions they have learned in school do not encompass their own experience. In *Clearing in the West*, the verse that "Nellie" writes more specifically points up the way in which traditional genres exclude women's experience. She writes a poem along the lines of a Victorian exhortation to hard work, explaining why she cannot feel enthusiastic about learning to crochet lace to trim her underwear:

> The heights by great men reached and kept
> Were not attained by sudden flight,
> Buy they, while their companions slept,
> Were toiling upward in the night.
> They did not leave their reading books
> To fool around with crochet hooks;
> They did not slight their history notes
> To make lace for their petticoats;
> But step by step they did advance,
> And gave no thought to coat or pants!
> So let my steps be ever led
> Away from wool, and crochet thread;
> And let my heart be set to find
> The higher treasures of the mind.
> (*Clearing*, pp. 137-38)

The violent contrast between the expectations raised by the conventional first few lines and the sudden introduction of schoolgirl English — "fool around" — and obviously unconventional material — wool and crochet hooks — does more than demonstrate "Nellie's" literary influence upon that justly famous prairie poet, Sara Binks. It shows forcefully how the genre of poems which exhort children to hard work and excellence simply do not include women. These examples of a theme of questioning literary conventions have the unescapable effect of allowing the reader to question the stories' own conventions.

In their presentation of women's lives, McClung's stories question most elements of the popular novel. The given gender hierarchy is questioned; the traditionally silent sex speaks. The choice between "good" and "evil" is sometimes exaggeratedly clear, but often creates a sympathetic victim in the husband who seems oppressed by his own weakness and the everlasting pressure to make money. The optimistic triumph of sentiment over material life is challenged by the mere fact of women's continuing toil, which clearly does not let up simply because she has "made it up" with her husband. The narrative elements of a formula story are present in McClung's stories, yet each is qualified, questioned and challenged in a way which constitutes a critique of the genre itself.

Similarly, the challenge to conventional elements speaks the feminine in McClung's autobiography, published in two volumes as *Clearing in the West* (1935) and *The Stream Runs Fast* (1945). The challenge to a unified, continuous self; the challenge to the traditional claim of a personal contribution to history; the challenge to a claim to distinctiveness; the challenge to the idea of personal rebellion characterize McClung's writing about herself. But the pre-eminent challenge of a woman's autobiography, according to Sidonie Smith in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, is the challenge to a male subject. The writing of an autobiography by a woman is a fundamental challenge to the genre which is founded on the silence of women. Autobiography, to the extent that it creates and celebrates a separate, autonomous and continuous self is an exercise in the repression of the mother's voice, and is therefore fundamentally an assertion of masculine selfhood, "an assertion of arrival and embeddedness in the phallic order" (Smith, p. 40).

> During the past five hundred years, autobiography has assumed a central position in the personal and literary life of the West precisely because it serves as one of those generic contracts that reproduce the patrilineage and its ideas of gender. Women who do not challenge those gender ideologies and the boundaries they place around women's proper life script, textual inscription and speaking voice do not write autobiography. (Smith, p. 44)

The mere fact of McClung's writing her life as a woman, supposed to be self-effacing, defined by relationship, and silent in public life, is a challenge to the genre which reifies the difference between the feminine and the masculine sense of self. In her novels, McClung confronted the silences in her characters' lives; in her autobiography, she voices the silences of her own life.

McClung's autobiography, like others of the genre, reflects her self-consciousness as a writer. Because no autobiographer can hope to represent the entirety of her subjective experience, McClung must choose between episodes and interpretations to create a fictive persona who is distinct from her creator. As a professional writer, McClung has a sophisticated awareness that she is not merely recounting the episodes of her life in chronological order,[1] but creating a pattern which makes sense of her life, which reflects a gradual linear development of her feminist awareness. McClung acknowledges in the introduction to *The Stream Runs Fast* that the conscious work of shaping her memories into a narrative is not simply a naïve process of putting her memories in chronological order, but one in which the dual voice of the self as creator and the self as

created object intertwine. Her project is an attempt to "untangle the threads of life and weave them into a pattern" (*Stream*, p. 301). McClung was well aware of "the approved manner" (*Stream*, p. 2) of beginning and ending stories and uses that in shaping her autobiography. The story follows the conventional structure of an autobiography, beginning with her birth, an account of her forbears, her education and the formative episodes of her childhood, leading to a "conversion" scene soon after her marriage, a public career and a respectable old age. The artificiality of the narrative is confirmed by its resemblance to McClung's novels: a structure of discreet episodes marked by chapters, each ending with a symbolic reference, an ironic joke or a sentimental moral.

Most critical definitions of autobiography focus not on the structure of the narrative but on the "self" created by it: unique, essential, autonomous, which creates itself by its "willingness to challenge cultural expectations and to pursue uniqueness at the price of social ostracism" (Smith, p. 9). This "conventional" self of autobiography rarely appears in autobiography by women (Mason, p. 231; Stanton, pp. 14, 16) and does not appear in McClung's autobiography. Instead, McClung's attempt to write a conventional autobiography which creates a discreet, organically developing self is sabotaged by her awareness of her reader. As a member of the public McClung harangued in her suffrage and temperance battles, the reader is ready to judge McClung not only on her literary ability and her political commitment, but on her "womanliness" and her reputation as a wife and mother. Because the woman autobiographer is always read "as a woman" first, the conventional focus on self may be read as self-ish, aggressive, self-aggrandizing (Smith, p. 49). In self-defence, McClung seeks to deflect attention away from herself. In addition, McClung battled with the public perception of her created by the popular press as "Windy Nellie," the loud-mouthed, unattractive suffragist, a neglectful mother and a vindictive wife. In order to get a sympathetic hearing from her audience, she must emphasize her difference from "Windy Nellie," and her self-effacing, shy and "ordinary" commitment to the submissive role of wife and mother. Thus, the dual voice of the narrator and the narrated self is further complicated by the contradictory attempt to write her life as a public figure to fulfill reader expectations of the genre of autobiography, while at the same time demonstrate her "womanliness" to the reader by focussing on the private sphere of the family.

Part of her strategy of self-effacement is the creation of a multiple self, a self who has no self, but is merely the sum of the influence of her family, her experiences with other women, and her choice to be a writer. Members of her family "create" her, McClung suggests in her account of her childhood; Nellie has no characteristics of her own but gets her self-confidence and love of fun from her Irish father, and her personal strength and moral rage for reform from her Scotch mother. Her father explains:

> "[your mother is] Scotch," he said, "They're very serious people, a little bit stern, but the greatest people in the world for courage and backbone. The Irish are different; not so steadfast or reliable, but very pleasant. Irish people have had so much trouble, they've had to sing and dance, and laugh and fight, to keep their hearts from breaking." (*Clearing*, p. 36)

Throughout both volumes of the autobiography, Nellie repeatedly calls on her "Scotch caution" or her "Irish temper" to explain her actions; the little girl who likes to dance in front of crowds, but lies awake nights worrying about whether she closed the hen-house door, thus comes to her career as a social reformer and public speaker by heredity.

In addition to becoming the repository of her parents' traits, Nellie becomes the sum of her experience of the women she meets. Her mother, Mrs. Mooney, typifies the "pioneer woman" in the autobiography: "calm, cheerful, self-reliant, and undaunted" (*Clearing*, p. 82). Strong-willed and courageous, Nellie's mother is also in her own way an artist, providing the civilizing necessities of home-made carpet, curtains, bread, soap and clothes for her family, and expressing her own creativity in her weaving and sewing. She provides a strong thread of historical continuity in Nellie's feminism.[2] The "minister's wife," a suffrage supporter and member of the WCTU who also delivers babies and teaches Sunday school, creates a "fine frenzy of high endeavour" (*Stream*, p. 288) in the youthful Nellie, who resolves to be just like her. Negative models of a woman's life also shape Nellie's self. One "painted doll" sets out to walk from Winnipeg across the prairie in a silk dress and high heels; one farm wife refuses to demand a re-arrangement of her farm to make her own heavy burden of work easier. Such women also form Nellie's "self" by providing examples of "how not to be," and contributing their voices to Nellie's political agitations for more opportunities and better legal protection for women.

But Nellie has few models to show her the way to her chosen career as a writer. She can find only one way for a prairie girl to become a woman writer; she must become a teacher. Even so, she laments to another aspiring teacher, her friend Bob Naismith: "Your life is cut out for you Bob, it lies straight ahead, but mine isn't" (*Clearing*, p. 234).

But even in the choice of a vocation which is an assertion of self, Nellie is self-effacing. She says her desire to write grows from her feminine altruism; she wants to speak out for the poor and oppressed, and to lighten the burdens of those who toil. She believes that Dickens spoke out for the poor of England, and she hopes, like him,

> to be a voice for the voiceless as he had been a defender of the weak, a flaming fire that would consume the dross that encrusts human souls, and a spring of sweet water beating up through all this bitter world to refresh and nourish souls that were ready to faint. (*Clearing*, pp. 281-82)

She finds her vocation in the self-abnegation of speaking not with her own voice, but only with the voices of others.

Nellie grows up within the strict moral system that her mother determines, and the form of her challenge to that conservative view of women's place grows out of her mother's response to the conditions of Western life, rather than from a rebellion against it. "For women, rebellious pursuit is potentially catastrophic. To call attention to her distinctiveness is to become 'unfeminine,'" Sidonie Smith writes (pp. 9-10). And, like other women autobiographers, McClung wishes to create a persona whose conservatism and devotion to her parents will be beyond reproach. Nellie admires her mother's resourcefulness; this convinces her of women's strength. She experiences her mother's fear of pioneer isolation; this convinces her of the necessity of social programs in rural areas. She laments, with her mother, the loss of her loom; this convinces her of the necessity of women's fight for recognition of their work. Nellie's political concerns are thus presented as an outgrowth of the life of her mother rather than a liberal individualist rebellion against it.

McClung also emphasizes Nellie's closeness to her parents and her conservative mother in order to counter the charge that her feminism arises from permissive, or unconventional, or neglectful parenting. She defends Nellie by rejecting the model of the child growing into independence by opposing its parents, and shows instead a model of mature sympathy with her parents' hard struggle:

> People who write about their own family usually tell much of family tyranny and misunderstanding ...but I have not much to say about parental oppression. My parents were hard-working folk, greatly concerned with the problems of making a living, tired many a time with the day's work and perplexed with life's cares, but they were never too tired or busy to comfort a sad little heart.... (*Clearing*, p. 25)

McClung shows that despite the charges made by the press, Nellie's feminism did not arise from rebellion or mistreatment; Nellie does not disagree fundamentally with the generation that came before. Instead, McClung shows that like little Hilda Berry, the heroine of "Carried Forward," Nellie carries the debt owed to her mother's generation into the twentieth century.

McClung's statement of her purpose in writing an autobiography makes clear that she is aware of the convention of claiming a personal contribution to history as a justification of autobiography. In the introduction to *The Stream Runs Fast*, she states that she wants her book to leave a "legacy of truth" to future generations.

> In Canada we are developing a pattern of life and I know something about one block of that pattern. I know it because I helped make it, and I can say that now without any pretense of modesty, or danger of arrogance, for I know that we who make the patterns are not important, but the pattern is. (*Stream*, p. x)

Later in the book, McClung complains that history books leave out women (*Stream*, p. 25), giving added force to her claim for her book as a historical document. But McClung's metaphor of a quilt pattern, which is created by an anonymous woman in her desire to serve her family, reveals her ambivalence about the focus on her own contribution to public life which the genre of autobiography seems to demand. The metaphor diverts attention away from her own role while apparently justifying its importance.

McClung repeats the pattern of diverting attention away from her public life throughout *Clearing in the West* and *The Stream Runs Fast*. When she comes to the story of her contribution to the Women's Parliament, surely her most public success in the Manitoba suffrage fight, she refers the reader to the fictionalized Women's Parliament in *Purple Springs*, and then reprints two newspaper accounts of the evening. Her chapters on the suffrage agitation are not chronological narratives of a struggle which proceeded by well-thought-out stages, but collections of witty anecdotes about her speaking engagements and those of her allies. Her participation in the famous "Person's Case" is recounted in fewer pages than her trip to Mexico in old age. Even her birth, arguably an occasion of historical importance in itself, is related in the third person from the point of view of her brother Will, who is disappointed that the new baby is "only a girl" (*Clearing*, p. 5).

McClung chooses to deflect attention away from her personal contribution to history as a strategy of self-

defence, and one which Estelle Jelinek has also remarked in the autobiography of another famous suffrage activist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Focussing attention on her public life calls into question her very femininity, as McClung was fully aware; she recounts in her preface and in her journalism the accusations that political life had made her a bad mother, a vindictive wife, a mannish, unattractive harridan. In reply, McClung emphasizes that her feminist persona is an ordinary, "normal" woman, shy in public situations, concerned about her appearance, and fundamentally interested in the private life of home and family. Like any "normal" woman, Nellie remembers the details of new dresses and home décor; she gets her hair "done" before speaking engagements; she tells anecdotes about her children's precocity, and distracts herself from her political setbacks with orgies of housecleaning and baking. She justifies this studied ordinariness as a didactic strategy to help advance the cause of feminism; when McClung writes of Nellie's shyness, her worries over clothes and hairstyles, she says she continues the process of proselytizing for the cause by creating a bond with the "ordinary women" who read her book (*Stream*, p. 221). But Nellie's anecdotes about her children, her pride in a cashmere dress with lace collar, also "prove" that all suffragists are not comic man-haters. As Jelinek remarks of Stanton, "By casting herself within the framework of an ordinary life, she was attempting to counter the unidimensional public image of herself as a brilliant, argumentative, sharp-witted, unrelenting reformer" (Jelinek, p. 73).

The central episode in Nellie's public career is her "conversion" to a life of political activism on behalf of other women. In a traditional autobiography, the "conversion" scene is a moment of revelation which confirms that the uniqueness felt by the protagonist is an asset which will aid in the achievement of a goal. Nellie's "conversion" to a life of activism on behalf of women comes not when she recognizes her uniqueness, but when she becomes pregnant and suffers horribly from nausea.

> my stomach was sick, and I saw no beauty anywhere. If it had been a man's disease, it would have been made the subject of scientific research and relieved long ago. But women could suffer; it kept them humble! I had heard about the curse of Eve and here it was in full measure. But what useful purpose did it serve? (*Stream*, pp. 15-16)

Nellie's miserable physical state leads her to sympathize with the other women she knows who suffer in having children, and to recall the callous treatment of such women by local men. She decides that "Women had endured too much and said nothing," and pledges that "Women should change conditions, and not merely endure them..." (*Stream*, p. 16). The contribution to history which she says is the justification of her book is thus an act of solidarity with others, of self-effacement in recognition of her common lot with other women.

Significantly, Nellie experiences her moment of "conversion" when she recognizes her kinship with all women, and *not* when she meets a militant suffragist. An earlier episode in which she is taken under the wing of a suffrage supporter and attends a meeting with her, prompts Nellie to the resolution that she will never become a political activist (*Clearing*, p. 311). Nellie's experience disproves the old saw that women are generally content and only stirred to action by unreasonable troublemakers. It also expresses the absence of a personal will to political action by showing how Nellie recognizes her vocation through the undeniably appropriate experience of pregnancy and motherhood.

Beside a cursory account of her pregnancies and the expression of love for her children, the autobiography contains no reference to sexual life. Following one of the few acceptable "life scripts" open to a woman, that of the good wife and mother, McClung studiously represses even the expressions of female sexuality which she allows to her characters; the pleasure of breastfeeding, for example, which Helmi Milander enjoys in *Painted Fires*, or the physical attraction felt by the protagonists of "Red and White." McClung's account of Nellie's romance and marriage to Wes McClung is a cipher, expressing few personalized details and no sexual attraction. Instead, McClung uses her romance to make a political point about the general belief that romance is the fulfillment of a woman's life. As a child, Nellie dreams of kisses, ball gowns, Lords, emotional crises and adulterous love affairs, spurred on by the novels and sentimental stories she reads. In contrast, the story of her own courtship and marriage is private and matter-of-fact. Nellie sets out to meet Wes McClung, the son of the local minister, when he is working at the local drugstore; she wants to find out if she can make the minister's wife her mother-in-law. She mentions him once as accompanying her on weekend drives; the next time he appears in the book she is introducing him to her parents as her future husband. No first kiss, no other potential loves, no crisis over choice of husband appears in the book; instead of expressing the inner life of a woman, the book downplays romance in order to refocus the story of a woman's life beyond marriage.

The defensive voice of self-effacement in *Clearing in the West* and *The Stream Runs Fast* creates the focus on the external elements of McClung's life rather than on her inner life. McClung was conscious of the book's unconventional focus on relationships outside herself and even prints an excerpt from a letter from Laura Goodman Salverson which complains about the external focus.

> If I seem to the reader too introspective and disposed to spend too much time analyzing my own feelings and reactions, let my good friend Laura Goodman Salverson take the responsibility.... she said ... I was too objective, too concerned with events, conditions, and developments. Autobiography should have in it the mind and soul of the writer. "Be more personal in your new book," she said. (*Stream*, p. 145)[3]

But McClung cannot be "more personal": her long public career has made her too sensitive to the possible misreadings of her "self" that an exposure of her "mind and soul" would risk. Like many women autobiographers, she studiously avoids a focus on her motivations and meditations.

> Attuned to the ways women have been dressed up for public exposure, attuned also the price women pay for public self-disclosure, the autobiographer reveals in her speaking posture and narrative structure her understanding of the possible readings she will receive from a public that has the power of her reputation in its hands. (Smith, p. 49)

She creates a self who "reveals more about her autobiographer's present experience of self than about her past" (Smith, p. 47), a self who embodies the strength and nurturance which McClung saw as the main features of a publicly active woman, and whose constant focus on the needs of others makes her inner life a blank.

Despite the self-consciously literary nature of the autobiography, McClung presents it as an account of actual events, a "legacy of truth" (*Stream*, p. xiii) to future generations eager to understand how the battle for the vote was won and why the battle for prohibition was lost. She had concluded, with Churchill, that "Words are the only things that live forever," and so she shapes her book to justify her feminism in the eyes of a changed world, to lament the loss of the community values of her childhood, and to reflect upon her own naïvité in believing that the two reforms for which she fought so hard would substantially change women's lives. As she had perhaps foreseen, her autobiography was for some years the only account of the suffrage battle in Canada and remains an important source for historians. The contradiction between self-conscious shaping and the claim to objective truth is never resolved in the books, perhaps because McClung does not perceive it as a contradiction. Her task, as she states it in *Leaves from Lantern Lane*, is to create work which reflects "the foundation timbers of truth" (p. 44); that her version of truth may be perceived as a "doctrinal adhesion" (p. 44), a self-conscious creation of her feminism, does not trouble her. Her eagerness to justify herself and, in so doing, to provide a model of reformist feminism for her readers are the "doctrinal adhesions" which dominate *Clearing in the West* and *The Stream Runs Fast*.

Thus, *Clearing in the West* and *The Stream Runs Fast* voice the problematic of the female sense of self. While referring to the conventions of the genre, McClung's autobiography expresses the feminine by its qualification or lack of the elements which constitute the genre: the masculine subject, the unitary self differentiated by rebellion, the historically significant public career. Her work undercuts the liberal individualist ideology of selfhood as uniqueness, wholeness, originality, and separateness, by positing a female subject who defines herself by connectedness, continuity, openness, and relationship.

Similarly, McClung's fiction voices the feminine in its challenge to the optimistic ending characteristic of the "bestseller." The "gaps" and "ruptures" which disturb the naturalized realism of the stories uncovers the ideology of maintaining the status quo which the bestseller promotes, and reveals the task of challenging the hierarchy of gender. That these stories (and the autobiography) use the genres determined by patriarchy to "voice the voiceless" feminine is perhaps their limitation as feminist advocacy; to assert a difference is always to assert a difference from, and so a relation to. McClung is limited in her writing and her political life to advocating reforms which finally maintain the "cohesion, the articulation, and coherent expansion" of genres and of society, rather than a revolutionary vision of either.

NOTES

1. Historians and some critics have tended to read the autobiography as a simple account of McClung's life. Matheson and Lang, "Nellie McClung: Not a Nice Woman," offers a paraphrase of the autobiography as historical account of McClung's life; Cleverdon, Strong-Boag and Bacchi also recount information from the autobiography with no qualifications. See References for bibliographic information.
2. See Deborah Gorham's discussion of the connection between "Nellie's" feminism and the depiction of her mother in *Clearing in the West* (Gorham, 1976). However, Gorham assumes that the incidents in the book are simple fact and equates the persona with McClung herself.
3. This letter is not among McClung's papers at the Public Archives of British Columbia.

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