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## Fighting the Other Within and Without: Confrontation as the Driving Force in the Work of Lydie Salvayre

Although the novels of the French writer Lydie Salvayre tend to be soliloquic, they are far from being mono-logical: founded on the clashes of different logics and systems of value, discourses and desires, they embody the protagonists' inherent antagonism and rage, reflecting the violence of the outside world. This study analyses some common matrixes underlying Salvayre's prose. It focuses on the manifestations of resistance to either external or self-imposed oppressions, restrictions and mystifications. It aims to demonstrate that Salvayre's novels not only represent subjects in permanent and incurable crises, but also challenge the very imperative of the subject's constitution through the foreclosure of the other, of what is outside the self.

Salvayre's texts are typically monologues in which an individual strives to affirm his or her distinct unicity and separation from the rest of the universe. These discourses are defensive, since the protagonists present themselves as endangered by an external element, oppressed in a relationship or socially marginalized. At the same time, they are sarcastic and often (self)destructive. In those cases where the word is given to more than one character, the interaction does not result in a dialogue but in a series of speeches which do not intersect. The subjects blindly plead their cause and recognize only aggression and malevolence in the others' discourse. The most obvious example can be found in the novel *The Cintegabelle Conference* (*La Conférence de Cintegabelle*): a local intellectual delivers a lengthy, pompous and heavy lecture on what he calls the lost art of conversation—cultural heritage which was once preeminently French, and is today sadly abandoned. Ironically, he who speaks out as a defender of the conversational virtue, remains blatantly monological; although very careful not to lose his listeners, he does not leave them any time even to answer his questions, showing interest in nothing but his own voice. Another irony resides in his confession that he used to be bored by the conversations with his wife

while she was alive, whereas now that she is dead, he converses with her regularly and with great satisfaction.

The confessional dimension is often fundamental in Salvayre's novels. Her debut, *The Declaration* (*La Déclaration*), is a cry of despair and revulsion of a man who experiences his life as constant incarceration and torture. Although he does name those whom he considers responsible—his mother until his adulthood, then his wife and finally the doctors, after his nervous breakdown—his outburst is not addressed at anyone in particular; it is more of a general statement of pain and hatred. Like in the other Salvayre's case-studies, the protagonist seems to be suffering above all from the absence of a concrete, palpable target. He can declare a war against the ugliness and the alienation of the surrounding world, but not really wage it. The enemy is not an instance but more of an omnipresent, overwhelming condition, interwoven with the self. Deprived of an object, verbal violence simply turns delirious. In this respect, the protagonist is a prototype of Salvayreian characters, who all seem conceived to illustrate the Oedipus complex<sup>[1]</sup>, or the supremacy of the Lacanian phallus—a mental category standing for the object of desire which everyone, men as well as women, feels as necessarily missing (Lacan 93-101). This double absence of objects, in other words the inability to focalize both the desire and the anger, prevents these characters from becoming complete, fully functional persons.

Salvayre's forth novel, *The Power of Flies* (*La puissance des mouches*), relies on a similar structure: the narrator is incarcerated in a literal sense, for a murder he committed. The cause of misfortune is again a strong, tyrannical character of a parent, this time a father, and the rest is a typical topology of Salvayre's prose: loathing of one's own body, a bad marriage, abuse at work, the dichotomy of spiritual values versus the decadence of the social context. The narrator is telling his confessional story to several persons—a judge who instructs his case, a nurse, a psychiatrist—who all remain silent. This does not prevent him from speaking relentlessly, but it does not bring any comfort either, so he appears hopelessly isolated in his complaint.

Those of the Salvayre's characters who participate in real interactions experience only frustration or humiliation. This is particularly the case of her three female first-person narrators, in the novels *Everyday Life* (*La vie commune*), *The Company of Ghosts* (*La Compagnie des spectres*) and *Portrait of the Writer as a Domesticated Animal* (*Portrait de l'écrivain en animal domestique*). Each

of them is the weak party at the beginning of the novel. They reveal feeble personalities, readiness to obey or to be manipulated, a private life deprived of substance, and they appear completely unconcerned about their bodies, as if displaced from them. All three are dominated by a masculine, father-like figure: in the first—to which more attention will be dedicated later—this role is taken by an employer who is also a symbolic substitute for a deceased husband. In *The Company of Ghosts*, it is represented by a process-server sent by the court to evict the protagonist from her apartment. At the beginning of the novel, there is a clear distinction between the outside and the inside: the apartment is a safe place, a fortress in which she lives with her mother, regardless of society's judgment. The safety of the cocoon is broken by the penetration of the masculine element into this feminine domain. The court official is phallic even in his physical appearance and behavior: upright, stiff, headstrong, resilient to all supplications. The female protagonist spontaneously assumes a humble and submissive attitude, and the novel is built upon her uprising, by which she overturns the situation. In *Portrait of the Writer as a Domesticated Animal*, the dominant male is an industrial magnate, a financial ruler of the world to whom the narrator sells her soul: as the title indicates, she voluntarily accepts to be enslaved and debased, substituting her artistic aspirations for the well-paid job of writing the memoirs of the Hamburger King. Again, the awakening of her resistance is central to the novel.

These various incarnations of the law-of-the-father not only represent the masculine principle of subjugation, but also the right to speak or impose silence. They inscribe the criteria of what is proper and decent. In the semantic space of Salvayre's women, they embody what feminist theories call the phallic gaze: the mechanisms of control and, implicitly, of self-regulation (Irrigaray 53). The very production of a subject—its subjection (*assujétissement*), is necessarily a means of oppressive regulation (Butler 1992: 344-361). But at the beginning of each of the three novels, Salvayre's female subjects are deliberately debased: defective, each in her own way incompatible with society's expectations, they live on the outskirts of legitimate and validated domains. They belong to the abject (the unlivable, the uninhabitable) zone of the social life (Kristeva 1980: 27-35). They are the social abjection: victims of the exclusionary matrix which is the negative aspect of the imperative of identification. In Lacan's theory, the notion of abjection designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality (Lacan 93-101). The notion is compatible with the Freudian

Verwerfung (Laplanche 163-167), foreclosure, standing for what may not enter the social without threatening psychosis, leading to the dissolution of the subject itself—which is what happens to Salvayre's protagonists. The forming of a subject requires an identification, which forecloses the abject. The principal aspiration of Salvayre's female protagonists is therefore to consolidate their selves within the boundaries of the socially recognized, in other words to acquire a presentable identity. This implies, in general, above all articulating one's position in opposition to what is non-self, to the other; and for Salvayre's women in particular it means finding their own voice to confront an instance of authority, to attack its discourse. In this process, they meet a double structural impediment. On the one hand, it is difficult to define the enemy, because it turns out to be disseminated, dispersed throughout the network of (mostly oppressive) social relations. On the other hand, they fail to circumscribe the self which they are supposed to defend from the loathed other. Drawing the line between the inside and the outside, in fact, easily becomes a mechanism of confusion. Judith Butler writes: "The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (Butler 1993: 3). In Salvayre's fiction, the result of the subject's inability to exclude the abject is an escalation of the initial crisis: the struggle for confirmation leads to disintegration.

This evolutionary pattern can be probably most clearly observed in the second novel, *Everyday life*. Its protagonist, Suzanne, a lady close to the age of retirement, has spent the whole of her professional life as an unconditionally devoted secretary to an impeccable Mr. Meyer. The novel opens with the arrival of a rival: a young and attractive fellow secretary. Although Suzanne is not openly threatened to be dismissed, the very possibility of a change in her universe is so terrifying that she quickly sinks into insanity. Her fear transforms into anger, which evolves into verbal and eventually even physical violence. Suzanne's monologue begins with a declaration of war, pronounced by an egomaniac who is preparing, within the fortress of her self, for the battle against the invader: "It has been only two days since the new secretary arrived, and I am already talking about evil, I am pronouncing this word too big for my mouth, I am already thinking of fighting and taking up arms" (Salvayre 2007: 11).

Suzanne presents this external element, the new secretary, as intentionally destructive, as the incarnation of evil, in contrast to her inside, which is supposed to be vulnerable, romantic, sophisticated and extremely precious. In her eyes, an immense gap separates this interior from the rest of the world, which she perceives as highly repulsive, vulgar and violent. Whatever is non-herself affects and concerns her only marginally, including the difficult relationship with her daughter. The echoes of the surrounding world which reach her through the media only confirm her scorn, disgust and a feeling of moral superiority.

Ironically, however, Suzanne's discourse reveals her as one of those persons who lead a monotonous, hollow, impassive life, who are socially invisible because of their uninteresting physics and personality, who are completely devoid of distinctive features. A long time widow, she identifies herself entirely with her work, even though it actually consists of menial, often humiliating tasks. Suzanne is therefore an employer's dream: since she has no extra-professional activities and no emotional life, all her energy is preserved for office tasks, which she approaches with utmost solemnity. When her colleague protests that they are being treated as slaves, Suzanne rises in defense of her duty, which she holds sacred. The perversity which Salvayre implicitly denounces here is that, from the corporate point of view, this kind of person is not a freak, but exactly the ideal worker of today: brain-washed and dehumanized, she is optimally efficient, and the fact that her professional activity leads to absolutely no personal fulfillment is irrelevant. In liberal societies, this ideal is replaced by pre-designed happiness created in marketing agencies; the individuals are thereby reduced to egocentric consumers, free from such anachronisms as cultural heritage, spiritual life, empathy:<sup>[2]</sup>

Suzanne is emotionally impotent; she disdains people who show affection: "Sympathy fills me with disgust. Sympathetic people can use a single smile to sneak into your heart and ravage it shamelessly. Because sympathetic people interpret the tiniest smile as an invitation to dig through your heart in all directions and to ravage it shamelessly" (Salvayre 2007: 21). When she spots goodness, she spontaneously interprets it as hypocritical. But this only makes her a more dedicated worker.

The drive of Suzanne's attachment to her job is not affective but moral, but in this respect she is ridiculously obsolete; in the liberal environment, ethical issues have been erased by pure

pragmatics. Moreover, the morality of her attitude is fake, a façade she is trying to maintain for the sake of her fragile equilibrium. She reveals it by occasional slips, like the resolution to prevent the new secretary from taking the seat next to the window as if it were the last frontier: “the window through which my dreams come and go” (Salvayre 2007: 34). Zealous as she appears, she is actually somewhere else, outside this office window. However, given her lack of interest if not contempt for almost everything, it is difficult to imagine what the content of this outside would be, as well as what is left to compose her identity.

In the world which we perceive as a place which is not our own, “it can often seem that the body, our body, belongs to the world and not to our ideally constructed selves” (Brooks 5). Suzanne’s fearful respect of her employer, Mr. Meyer, is mixed with unspeakable affection, not only because it is inappropriate but also because she seems to have banned the sexual dimension from her existence. Everything that is corporeal fills her with disgust, particularly her neighbor’s attempts at seducing her. Her younger colleague’s erotic presence inspires her for remarks which one would expect from a child with undeveloped sexuality: “She has huge breasts. Gloomy and hypocrite breasts which she points at others not in order to stir their senses, undermine their spirit or inflame their lust, as fatal women do, but to crush, daze, choke and terrify them” (Salvayre 2007: 23). The body is clearly the source of evil, the object of horror, the incarnation of abjection.

To those of the Salvayre’s protagonists who do engage in sexual encounters, these bring only disappointment and suffering; they reveal the will to dominate as the underlying principle of all human relations. Rather than uniting, physical contacts confirm the protagonists’ conviction that the gaps which separate human beings are insurmountable and bodies surrendered to sexuality act as each other’s resonance chambers of solitude. All three Salvayre’s female narrators seem to be stuck in something like Lacan’s mirror stage (Lacan 93-100). They seek to accomplish an impression of their own integrity in the others’ eyes like an infant does in the mirror—whereas their inner sense of the self remains incoherent, unformed, incompletely separated from its surrounding. The only identity which they can claim is the one which is provided by the others’ gaze. As subjects, they are nothing but products of social imperatives. They do not identify their selves with their body: they are what others make them, so their existence is a displacement.

The dramatic movement of *Everyday Life* is founded on the frustration of a dominated, degraded feminine subject who does not even realize her failure to constitute herself as a full subject until she grasps it in the mirror-image of another's presence. The arrival of a competitor turns out to be convenient: hating the new secretary mobilizes whatever affective life there is in Suzanne. The fact that this person wishes no harm to her makes this antagonism paranoid, and the story is basically about the thin line between the protection of personal integrity and a pathological obsession. The enemy, however, be it real or a fabrication, gives Suzanne's existence substance and meaning, it gives a name and an incarnation to the unhappiness which has long been unpronounceable, to this otherwise vague condition typical of Salvayre's protagonists. Indeed, hatred confirms Suzanne's existence because no other feeling could. The younger secretary's talk about her own family irritates the protagonist to the extreme because it only reminds her of her own failure as a mother. The colleague's massive, insistent and gladly exposed body produces the inverted image of her own corporeal deficiency. On the other hand, once the antagonistic passion is incarnated, Suzanne's body awakes and starts hurting, it betrays her. She feels pains around her heart, which remain inexplicable to her doctor. The primacy of the body may be most dramatically felt in its failure (Brooks 6). Suppressed as it may be, the body will sooner or later claim its presence, since whatever is spiritual is utterly dependent of materiality.

The corporeal is always a suspicious, shameful, if not malign element in Salvayre's prose. Her protagonists also suffer from the damage done by Descartes, who is held responsible for displacing the body from the language and installing it as the object of discourse, when it is not expelled from it. In Salvayre's universe, Descartes stands as a paradigm for the French mentality, which is repeatedly depicted as rational, stiff, disincarnated, and dualistically opposed to Spanish baroque, playful, visceral, and shamelessly obscene manners. René Descartes' dualism, which posited a thinking essence distinct from corporeality, is considered as a symbolic moment of passage to the modern conception of a body. Francis Barker writes: "The Cartesian body is 'outside' language; it is given to discourse as an object (when it is not, in its absent moment exiled altogether) but it is never of languaging in its essence)" (Barker 99). In one after another Salvayre novel, the main character either excludes the body from cognition, or vituperates it for acting as a prison and a source of pain, for materializing the process of death. The *Mila Method* (*La méthode*

Mila) is even entirely focused on Decartes' thought, reconsidered from the deathbed: as a whole, the novel is an elaborate but violent repudiation of the conviction that the effort to sublimate the corporeal will help us accept material decay and mortality. Just like in *Everyday Life*, Salvayre juxtaposes glorious spiritual elevations with brutal, naturalistic spectacles of humiliation towards the end of individual life. The images of old age constantly return exactly because it is the suppressed other, the abject which is foreclosed. So the oldness reappears in its most frightening aspects, notwithstanding the narrator's efforts to show it in a ridiculous, grotesque light.

Towards the end of *Everyday Life*, Suzanne is in a therapeutic swimming pool, "surrounded by a pile of dismembered, lost and helpless old people, confronted with this heap of flaccid, jaundiced flesh, and this provokes her extremely cruel thoughts" (Salvayre 1989: 82). Realizing that the efforts to keep her body under control are vain, Suzanne is overcome by anger, which develops into demented rage. At this particular point she goes on violently mocking these helpless creatures tortured by the medical staff. Throughout the novel, her discourse is increasingly marked by the very characteristics which she ascribes to the outside world: contempt, rudeness, mediocrity, vulgarity, racism, execration, etc. As the psychosis evolves, Suzanne accuses the doctors of only be interested in the body liquids and their vessels, whereas they have no clue about the precipices of life or its complex texture (Salvayre 1989: 78). But she is herself very far from grasping the causes of her torment, namely the organized reduction of the subject to its functional dimension, the exclusionary matrix and various mechanisms of repression, indiscernible in this complex texture of life and therefore unassailable. Fascinated by its surface, struggling with simulacra, she mystifies the inside and romanticizes its content, rather than admitting its absence. All of that makes her a paradigmatic postmodern subject. Writing about the programmed narcissism of contemporary people, Julia Kristeva affirms that they do not have the time or the space necessary to create their own soul: "Cornered by stress, impatient to make and spend money, to enjoy and die, men and women today deprive themselves of the representation of their own experience which we call spiritual life" (Kristeva 16).

Salvayre's first-person narrators maintain conflictual relations both with their surroundings and their body, which they perceive as a prison. Each in his or her different way, they embody the syndrome of the individual life as a hollow shell. It is exactly the embodiment that seems to be their major



problem: they rely on various occupations to maintain the illusion of a purpose, of order and rectitude, but the sphere of the self remains unoccupied. In Salvayre's prose, this set of conditions typically evolves into a spiral of constricting and frustrating relationships, within the family and in the professional sphere, resulting in the feeling of multifold separation, reclusion and oppression. This is also the main content of the narratives; the discourses which are engendered by the subjects' urge to speak reflect the violence observed in the texture of social relations. Various forms of abuse and malevolence inscribe a negative, antagonistic charge: a residual rage and readiness to explode should a pretext occur. Salvayre's protagonists are in a more or less desperate need of such a pretext, of a concrete, solid object which could stimulate and channel their unused affects, because they suffer from basically the same syndrome: their emotional as well as professional life do not provide them a recognizable, credible self. Therefore they view a confrontation with whatever comes at hand as a means to acquire an individual identity.

A confrontation normally implies the ambition to resolve something, to overcome or overturn the situation. This goal relies on several presuppositions: that it is possible to objectify the enemy, that this target is outside the self, and that there is a sensible distinction between the inside and the outside, the self and the other. However, Salvayre's subjects typically discover these presuppositions to be false: the otherness identified as the target turns out to consist of nothing but misleading signs, echoes, symptoms, and the protagonists face the incapacity to distinguish themselves from whatever deplorable and disgusting characteristics they have been ascribing to the world. The futility of their struggle leads to an implosion when the antagonistic charge returns to the sender and provokes psychotic deviations.

Each of the three novels addressed culminates in some kind of a nervous breakdown, manifested by a delirious verbal outburst. In the circumstances described above, the outcome can not be positive: for Salvayre's protagonists, there is no deliverance or recovery. The discharge of accumulated tension does not abolish the instance of power. After an eruptive moment, reality returns: these women remain oppressed, marginalized, abjected subjects. However, their movements of emancipation imply an orgasmic dimension which seems to redeem the whole life of imposed silence and passive subjection. Salvayre's final note appears to be the gain of self-articulation, accessible to everyone. Far from simply confirming the impossibility to conquer the

outside, these novels read as incitations to find oneself within language, to evolve into a subject of speech.

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[1] The Oedipus complex here does not imply a static myth reflecting the real situation of a father, mother, and child, but as “a structure revolving around the question of where a person can be placed in relation to his or her desire” (Mitchell 24).

[2] Pascal Bruckner's *Euphorie perpetuelle* is a thorough analysis of the categorical imperative of happiness as a marketing product.



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