
Valérie Baisnée, *"Through the long corridor of distance": Space and Self in Contemporary New Zealand Women's Autobiographies* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014), pp. xxvii+156, ISBN: 978-9-04-203868-4

Reviewed by **Tamara Iaccio**

The French scholar and women's autobiographies expert Valérie Baisnée brings a new perspective on autobiographies with this work on New Zealand women writers, which stands out from other studies of the genre for its focus on the concepts of self and space as features of the 'sense of identity' projected by autobiographies (x). The study brings together for the first time the works of Janet Frame, Fiona Kidman, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Laurie Edmond, Ruth Park, Barbara Anderson and Ruth Dallas, all published in a time-frame that goes from the 1980s up to 2008. As Baisnée states, this time-frame has been chosen not only because in those years a new interest in autobiography as literary genre emerged in New Zealand, but also, and more specifically, because of the rising of a new female awareness. Baisnée's study is, in fact, "firmly anchored in a feminist framework" (129) with regards to New Zealand women and their discovery of their own potential, both as women and as writers.

The work consists of five chapters that follow the lead of the 'journey' trope ushered in by the "Introduction", as each chapter is named after a place or a space that can be found in the works analysed: "Threshold", "Homes", "Displaced Bodies, Disembodied Texts", "Landscapes" and "Itineraries". As the chapters unfold, the reader is gently guided on a path which leads from one section to the next: the topics discussed in the first chapter lead to the following topics in the next, creating a flawless journey made of 'spaces' (physical, mental, cultural) that finds its destination in the "Conclusions".

In the "Introduction", also divided into five paragraphs, Baisnée identifies some core issues that will be covered extensively throughout the chapters, starting with an overview of the concepts of place and space across history and disciplines and of how the two have acquired an increasing relevance in all fields, whence derives the interest to investigate these concepts in autobiographies. The chosen time-frame of the study is particularly relevant, due to the changes which took place in New Zealand especially during the 1970s and 1980s, when issues regarding land, race and gender were brought out, following the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s (xxiv). History shows how diverse female experience is and an autobiographical account, with its personal point of view, is bound to present this

diversity (xxi). As the French scholar points out, the ‘personal’ has always a major political impact on the writing, and this is especially true for women, who are often relegated to a marginal position in the society, in their families and in their profession, and are therefore never allowed to stand up and express themselves (101). The subjectivity of the writer is indeed the primal focus of the study: in order to investigate its presence in the self-narrative, Baisnée employs space and place considering the two concepts complementary one to another; drawing on Michel de Certeau’s use of the terms, she writes: “place implies fixed positions ... space is characterised by movement” (xxi). The ‘fixed position’ of the place is perceived as a personal concept, for it is experienced by the subject and, therefore, it carries with it personal memories (xxi). In this perspective, “narratives are thus the interplay of places and spaces” (xxi). But, as the French scholar emphasises, an autobiographical work is also a cultural and ideological presentation of a writer since “the self deployed in these autobiographies is embodied and located culturally and socially” (129).

In the first chapter, “Threshold”, by quoting both Gérard Genette’s and Umberto Eco’s definitions (1-2), Baisnée introduces the concept of the liminal space that “perform(s) an important function for the reception of the text” (1): the ‘paratext’. Considering the paratext as a threshold makes one aware that its crossing signs the entering into another (wider) space. This topic also serves as a threshold for the rest of the chapter, as Baisnée performs an ‘external’ examination of the chosen autobiographies, starting from their titles, where is common the use of metaphors that arouse curiosity in the reader and break with the tradition of using the term ‘autobiography’ in titles (6), as in the case of *To the Is-land*, by Janet Frame, or *Hot October*, by Lauris Edmond. Baisnée then moves to a discussion of epigraphs, forewords and incipits; she underlines their function as places where the narrative begins and in which there can be found the recurrent topoi of a narrative of the self: birth, trauma, death and identity. The commonest trope of the autobiographical genre, “life as a journey”, hinted in the title of the study, is thoroughly discussed and analysed in a dedicated paragraph. By the end of the chapter the reader is accustomed to the image of ‘in and out’ that recurs in the study.

The last sentence of the first chapter introduces the following section: “the thresholds of autobiography logically lead to the entrance to a home, the space within which women do not fit as neatly as they are supposed to” (23). The connection of the sentence with the title of the second chapter, “Homes”, carries the reader seamlessly into an exploration of the trope of home in five autobiographies, providing the perspective of the writer and, more importantly, of the woman behind the writer. As Baisnée’s analysis underlines, what Gaston Bachelard defines as “archetype of space” (27) is often depicted as a contested zone, incompatible with the artistic life (54). Women either have to negotiate the space of home or have to accept its limitations, but home is a place that, even in

the imagined world of the narrative, makes the coexistence of the woman and the writer unconceivable, and this ultimately produces a feeling of displacement, both physical and mental.

This feeling of displacement is the focus of the third chapter, “Displaced Bodies, Disembodied Texts”, which examines three writers’ narratives – Frame, Edmond and Kidman – about the ‘rites of passage’ (57) in a woman’s life (menarche, loss of virginity, pregnancy, childbirth and abortion). As the title suggests, the chapter looks at the representation of the female body in self-narratives, since “bodies are our most private home, as well as the most public” (57). It is through the body that we experience space, for it acts as a link between the self and the outside. But the outside is layered with places (social, political, personal, etc.), which have each its own rules, by which a woman has to abide. Baisnée also stresses how, for a woman, every mention of the body carries with it political references that might become a tool of subjection – for women in general and feminist discourse in particular (59); the analysis of the autobiographies shows how the body is made visible or invisible as a reflection of woman’s status in society (60). After an examination of the main issues regarding the body in self-narration, the chapter ends with a comparison of the three autobiographies selected.

In the fourth chapter Baisnée directs her attention to geography, more specifically to “Landscapes”, the relevance of which in self-narratives is evident, for they are repository of personal meanings, and, as Baisnée underlines, they are “cultural and political products” (79). The texts examined in this section are those of Ruth Dallas (1991) and Fiona Kidman (2008), who wrote their works in different periods and were located at the extremities of New Zealand. Despite their differences, for both writers landscape triggers memories that, in turn, produce writing. For New Zealanders, landscapes are an important part of their identity, as Baisnée shows with an overview of landscape studies in New Zealand, in which she explores the evolution of the idea of landscape for the artists, to whom the connection with the landscape proves to be so strong that eventually they are left with “a sense of belonging to the landscape rather than to the people” (83). Comparing the two autobiographies Baisnée proves that places have been internalized by the writers, who feel both their ‘present’ and especially their ‘colonial past’: New Zealand places, in fact, not only carry personal memories, but they still bear the echo of the trauma of colonialism. The narrative picture of landscapes describes the perception of the authors, their own view and experiences of places; the ‘national’ understanding of the place is ignored, whilst the *memory* of colonialism appears much more relevant, due to its repercussions in the writers lives.

If geography and landscapes contribute to the formation of the writer’s identity, the fifth chapter of Baisnée’s study, “Itineraries”, examines the social and literary space of each writer in New Zealand to analyse the construction of the self-image

as writer within the self-narrative. Baisnée employs a methodology largely based on the work of the sociologists Bourdieu and Lahire, whose different views of the relationship between the writer and literature open to a set of possibilities when it comes to defining the self (98). In Baisnée's view, the general attitude for women writers was to separate their working/artistic life from their 'real' one (as wives, mothers, etc.), in a dualism that was shaped by the society they lived in. Their identity is therefore always under construction, especially within writing, the place in which "narrators re-interpret their memories and organise episodes to construct an identity over time" (102). Focusing on the women writers' education, Baisnée devotes a paragraph to the act of reading, which is the first approach to writing and the first pillar in the construction of their identity as writers: reading made the young writers realize that New Zealand was excluded from the world of English literature (mainly European) and created a sense of 'pioneering' in those who approached writing. "New Zealand women writers' self-image is constructed in a void, with the archetypal writers represented as a male European or American adult" (107). This perspective explains why New Zealand writers described the act – or even the aspiration – of writing as something "done against all odds" (108). After the investigation of the other factors that threatened the realisation of a career in writing (economical conditions, general recognition for the 'status' of writer – usually acquired through being a protégée of a well known male writer), the chapter ends with a brief overview of the competition that spread among the writers under analysis and their reaction to other women's fortune compared to their own.

In the "Conclusions" Baisnée stresses the relevance of the self-narrative as a mine of information about writing, the self and the space as it is experienced and interiorised by the female writer. Throughout the study the reader is constantly reminded of the feminist perspective adopted in the search for a female identity, which, in accordance to what Stuart Hall writes about all identities, depends on closure (112); the space in which the self exists and operates is a narrow one, hence the displacement felt by each woman writer every time she has to locate herself in a wider context. This idea is reinforced by the constant use of 'the liminal' in space, the thresholds and the margins, which appear to be the only spaces in which a woman can express herself.

Ultimately, liminal spaces are the primary focus of Valérie Baisnée's study. The margins of a book, the margins of literature, the margins of the world, the margins of social life; every topic discussed has its borders. This recalls the metaphor of the journey, which is not only appropriate for autobiographical work and suitable for writing and for Baisnée's study, but is also right to describe the experience of her reader, who is invited to explore a genre that has been marginalised for too long.

Since Baisnée started her dissertation talking about margins, it seems particularly fitting to end this review with the same image. It goes without saying that, for readers, the cover of a book gives the first impression of the book itself,

although it sometimes is overlooked or taken for granted. As a matter of fact, in many cases nobody pays the cover the attention it deserves. Baisnée knows how important this first contact between reader and book is, as she explains when discussing the “paratext”. The reader is solicited by the book to take a closer look at the cover: the picture on the front shows, in both its background and in close-up, the back of a woman walking through a narrow corridor. The two women are dressed differently. The back cover presents the same image, Stéphane Ouradou’s *Le Tunnel*, in mirror symmetry. Opening the book with the two covers side by side, each picture appears as the mirror reflection of the other. Even though this hint might be lost on the reader at first, through the reading of the book the relationship between cover and topics discussed becomes more evident, so that the cover turns out to be a perfect ‘para-text’. For, the book (the text) is divided into five chapters. So is its “Introduction” (the paratext). After reading Baisnée’s book, and after the examination of the cover, this cannot be considered a coincidence. Also, throughout the study the metaphor of the mirror is the most recurrent. From the cover to the last chapter the reader is always presented with a ‘reflection’ or mirror image: the front cover mirroring the back cover, the introduction mirroring the chapters, and so on for space/place, New Zealand writers/European writers, identity/memory, inner self/outer self. Every topic introduced by Baisnée has its counterpart, its reflection. Using the concept of space as compass the reader finds a new way for reading an autobiography, while the metaphor of the mirror that the French scholar masterfully employs makes the reader look at self, space and writing as being a reflection of one’s experience of the world.

Reading Valérie Baisée’s study in this way brings to mind what the law of physics states about two bodies that cannot occupy the same space at the same time. A limited space, such as a text, can defy this rule, occupying, through reflections, multiple places at the same time.