Truth and Lies, History and Fiction,

in Michèle Roberts's *The Looking Glass*

Sarah Falcus

The understanding of history as a linear and unproblematic narrative, dominated by kings and queens, warriors and heroes, has long been denied by women writers. As Linda Anderson argues, these events 'take on a different meaning, a different configuration when we begin to see through them – in both senses – to women's concealed existence in the private sphere of family and home' (Anderson, p.130). Women have little place in traditional linear history and have come to deny its authority and question its dominance. Frieda Johles Forman, in her introduction to a 1989 collection of essays on women's temporality, argues that women suffer from a lack of history, an unrecorded past, and that this 'absence strikes at odd, unsuspecting moments' (Forman, p.8). But this absence of history is changing, as women begin to write their own stories and their own conceptions of the past. Women's time and the political implications for feminism of feminist historiography have spawned a wealth of writing in recent years. Even in the academic world of history, reliance upon major events as the narrative of history has been undermined by the possibility of a narrative of everyday lives, of everyday events and occurrences.1 However, this re-recording and re-making of history is fraught with danger, as Anderson warns:

> The 'reclaiming of history', the discovery of how our foremothers preceded and even anticipated us, can help to assure us that, despite the evidence, we do in fact exist in the world; yet if we ignore how that existence is textually mediated we end up simply reconstituting 'reality' as it is. (p.134)

Anderson argues that, despite the development of a critique of history's claim to objectivity and a growing awareness that historical narrative is creating meaning, not just interpreting events, women writing historical narrative have failed to question the dominance of traditional assumptions. Anderson claims that history differs from fiction in its claim to somehow offer a link to the 'real', which is a repression of difference. It is vital for women to break the link between history and the 'real' and highlight the mediated nature of any narrative, historical or fictional, thereby defusing the power of linear, authoritative, historical narrative and opening up gaps in which women can tell their own stories and their own 'herstories'.

The 'reclaiming of history' is something integral to much of Michèle Roberts's work, as she re-contextualises, re-configures and rewrites myth, biblical scripture, apocryphal texts and historical figures. Roberts's work draws heavily upon historical and mythical narrative, from her fifth gospel of Mary Magdalene in *The Wild Girl* (1984) to her presentation of the world of Victorian spiritualism in *In the Red Kitchen* (1990). Her latest novel, *The Looking Glass* (2000), builds upon the presentation of history already found in its predecessor, *Fair Exchange* (1999). Both of these novels draw upon the recorded lives of famous literary figures. *Fair Exchange* rewrites the events surrounding the births of William Wordsworth's first daughter and Mary Wollstonecraft's first child. Using the perspective of female

servants, this novel highlights the marginal and glories in the minutiae of everyday life. Similarly, The Looking Glass mines the recorded lives of two French literary giants, Gustave Flaubert and Stephan Mallarmé, again presenting this story from the perspectives of marginal female figures. This novel does not take on 'the ideological legacy' of realism, a charge Anderson levels at historical narratives, but undermines this legacy, creating a metanarrative debate about the reliability of the narrative, even as it progresses. In this way, *The Looking Glass* acts out the 'sliding between positions', which Anderson argues is the future for feminist history:

> I want to think how, in 're-imagining history', the emphasis could be placed in different ways, shifting […] between both terms without seeking a resolution: between the resistance and transformation implied by the action of 're-imagining' and a 'history' which has both determined the moment and has already been imagined. The view of history which emerges is not as something that exists outside us, that we can position ourselves in relation to once and for all. Rather our knowledge of it is something that we now actively shape, even as we are shaped by it. (p.135)

The structure of *The Looking Glass* and its use of historical and other sources ensures that this novel engages in the shaping of history, whilst acknowledging that this process indeed shapes us.

The use of historical sources in *The Looking Glass* blurs the boundaries between history and fiction, truth and lies. Roberts's "Author's Note" in this text provides overt references to the use of historical sources. In this case, the lives of both Gustave Flaubert and Stephan Mallarmé are cited as sources for the text.[2] The novel tells the tale of a poet, Gérard, through the eyes of five women around him: Geneviève, Millicent, Isabelle, Marie-Louise and Yvonne. It is Flaubert's life that provides the model for the relationships and many of the events in the novel. Gérard is largely based upon Flaubert; both live with their mother and niece and consider art to be their lifetime vocation. Both indulge in some kind of sexual/romantic relationship with their niece's governess, whilst continuing an affair with a married woman. There are many other points of similarity, some of which will be addressed in this article. The contribution of the events of Mallarmé's life is more obscure. Geneviève's confusion and mental instability does suggest a parallel with Mallarmé, who suffered from mental health problems as he tried to write his 'Great Work', in which he dreamed of reproducing the structure of the universe and locating and representing 'Beauty' (Michaud, pp.54-68). And Gérard, an author, writes poems and not novels, in line with Mallarmé rather than Flaubert. Marie-Louise's discussion of Gérard's poetry in her narrative also suggests a style reminiscent of Mallarmé rather than Flaubert.[3] And the debate about the role and necessity of art and the artist is indebted to both Flaubertian late romanticism and Mallarmian early symbolism. This novel enters into a complex relationship with the historical figures it admits to mining. Despite some use of both Mallarmé and Flaubert in the figure of Gérard, both writers are actually mentioned in the text as significant artists. Geneviève notes that Mallarmé married a governess when she is attempting to construct a fantasy future for herself with Gérard (Roberts, 2000, p.234).[4] It is even suggested that Gérard visits the Rue de Rome when he is absent from Jumièges: this is where Mallarmé held his Tuesday night salons for the 'Mardistes'. The text is

littered with references, both obscure and overt, to both writers and to their friends and families, foregrounding the creative use of historical sources.

The Looking Glass is dedicated 'for the muse this time'. The muse is the silent object of the artist's contemplation and takes on an added significance in this novel since Louise Colet, Flaubert's lover, on whom Isabelle's narrative draws, was actually referred to as 'the muse' by Flaubert and others (Oliver, p.43). Flaubert certainly used Colet, along with many other sources, in his *Madame Bovary* (1857), and some biographers suggest that the letters he addressed to his lover during this time became a kind of cathartic endeavour that enabled him to continue his tortured literary progress. But Colet is not the only muse in this text. Geneviève is connected to the Flauberts' servant, Miss Julie, who served the family for many years and told Flaubert many of the mythical tales he later used in his writing. She also served as the model for Félicité in *Un Coeur Simple* (1877) (Oliver, p.25). Choosing the name Geneviève for this character also links the tale to Mallarmé, whose daughter bore this name and was very close to the poet, and the recipient of many of his thoughts and musings (Michaud, p.131). What these women have in common is their role as stimulus for language and creativity in the male writer/poet, often being in a sense less than object and simply the memory of the woman/object of contemplation. This silencing continues in biographical and historical accounts of these figures, which concentrate upon Flaubert and Mallarmé as subjects. Miss Julie is limited to minor references in a number of Flaubert biographies (Steegmuller, p349; Oliver, pp.24-5). And, although Louise Colet plays a large part in any biography of Flaubert, her own voice has been silenced, since the letters she wrote to her lover were later burned by his niece, Caroline. *The Looking Glass* concentrates upon stories which have been suppressed or lost: the servant, the governess, the indecision of the niece writing her uncle's memoirs, the supplementary information provided by the niece's contemporary. These perspectives all suggest the alternative focaliser, the point of view and information subordinated by history. In a rather ironic role reversal, it is Gérard who becomes the muse for the women in this novel. They express their own needs, desires, experiences and lives whilst considering their relationships with Gérard, making him the silent, refracted and ventriloquised object of their musings. It is Flaubert and Mallarmé who are the 'insubstantial wraith[s]' floating through this text (Roberts, p.236). They are the objects in the text and they are the silenced figures.

The braided narrative structure of *The Looking Glass* ensures that this novel internalises and demonstrates the process of history in its very construction, making this text far less stable than its predecessor, *Fair Exchange*. The five tales that make up *The Looking Glass* provide different and often contradictory perspectives on the same events. The story of Geneviève is interwoven throughout the novel, opening and closing the text. This tale is chronological, moving from Geneviève's departure from the orphanage through her time at the Colberts' house to a dream of return to Blessetot, where she was first employed. Interspersed with this narrative are the stories of Millicent, Isabelle, Marie-Louise and Yvonne. These tales disrupt not only the textual space of Geneviève's tale, but also its temporal structure, since they are all focusing on the same events, from both present and retrospective positions. This is the creation of a history, without subsuming many perspectives to one

dominant and authoritative account.

This multiplicitous textual structure and the temporal positions of the narrators further echo historical research and narrative in the variety of styles presented. All of the narrative threads are first person, but they differ in their intended audience and their location in time. Geneviève is telling the story of her life, a retrospective account of events that took place during the spring and summer of 1914. Hers is a detailed version of this period of time. In this, it is echoed by Millicent's diary, which covers a period from June 10th to August 11th. The other narratives, however, condense longer periods of time. Isabelle's letter brings together the sixteen months of her affair with Gérard, culminating in her meeting with Millicent after the cessation of the affair. Marie-Louise, Gérard's niece, is attempting to narrate her memories of her uncle, which necessitates writing a memoir of her own childhood. And, finally, Yvonne, a contemporary of Marie-Louise, is speaking to a researcher about her memories of Gérard, Marie-Louise and Madame Colbert. Marie-Louise and Yvonne were children during the summer of 1914 and both provide sweeping remembrances of life in the Colbert household, relating these to present events and obviously omitting much of the detail provided in the other narratives. These narratives represent many of the sources from which conventional historical narrative is cobbled: diary, retrospective research, memoirs and letters. Roberts is undoubtedly indebted here to the structure and theoretical basis of *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), a source mentioned in her Author's Note. Barnes' biographical novel introduces a fictional biographer who is in turn researching Flaubert, a historical figure. The narrative is fragmentary, incorporating biographical detail, travel writing, fictional accounts of figures in Flaubert's life, the biographer's version of Flaubert's dictionary and other narrative threads. As the text progresses, the certainty of the narrative, and therefore the processes of both history and biography, are steadily eroded, until the tale becomes the story of the biographer's own life. The immediate structure of Roberts's text is undoubtedly similar in its use of history and fiction, if such a distinction can be made. All of the tales in *The Looking Glass* are partial, providing certain details and omitting others, highlighting the fragmented nature of memory and history. Each narrative questions and disturbs each other thread, producing a tangled skein that cannot ultimately be unknotted. This is the process of history.

Yvonne's narrative provides a particularly good illustration of the way this text uses its multi-layered structure to question both its own reliability and that of the sources on which it draws.5 Yvonne describes Marie-Louise's treatment of her uncle after his death, a description which draws upon the actions of Caroline Hamard after the death of her uncle, Flaubert. Just as Caroline burned Flaubert's lover's letters and arranged her uncle's affairs to present him in the best possible light to the public (Steegmuller, p.354), so Marie-Louise puts 'on show' a construction of Gérard's life, omitting the areas which do not fit her scheme. Yvonne's description of Marie-Louise's display of Gérard's personal effects is particularly humorous in the light of the novel as a whole:

> You can study the beautiful pink and red decorated porcelain plates off which
> he dined every day, the very smart blue silk robe he wore (copying Balzac

perhaps) for composing, the handsome leopardskin rug on which he lay while in the throes of inspiration [...]

You can look at the bottle of lime eau-de-Cologne presented to him by his mother, his rosary, his crucifix, along with his books... (Roberts, p.261)

The preceding chapters of the novel show up the artificial nature of this display. Geneviève describes the 'fine porcelain plates painted with red flowers' as the household's best china, which was certainly not used everyday, but reserved for special occasions (p.208). The robe worn by Gérard is not blue silk, but, in Millicent's words, is a 'battered pink brocade dressing-gown tied with a yellow tasselled belt' (p.107). Gérard does not have a leopardskin rug in his study, but a rug of white bearskin, on which Marie-Louise lies as a child during her lessons. The lime eau-de-cologne is not a present from Madame Colbert, but from Isabelle (p.167-8). And, finally, the rosary and crucifix supposedly belonging to Gérard run counter to Yvonne's earlier assertion that he is in fact an atheist (p.258). This description of Marie-Louise's arrangement of Gérard's effects is of course from Yvonne's point of view and so in itself is not unbiased; however, it does rather amusingly underline the business of historical mythmaking.6

The effect of this multifaceted version of people and events is to destabilise the notion of any kind of textual authority in this novel. Millicent's diary of her time at the Colbert household in Jumièges interrupts Geneviève's narrative. The young governess describes her impressions of life in the family and in the village, suggesting a romanticism that cannot be given free rein in the mundane duties for which she is employed.7 Millicent's narrative contains an inherent comparison between herself and the base, inarticulate character she assigns to Geneviève. She describes the servant as a 'simple character', smelling of baking or of sweat. Seeing Geneviève slowly cleaning under the direction of Madame Colbert, she calls her lazy. When Geneviève refuses to recite poetry for Millicent, she assumes that, as a servant, Geneviève cannot appreciate what Millicent considers to be art (p.110). What is interesting in this account is that Millicent's narrative is preceded by Geneviève's tale, which demonstrates an emotional and intellectual sensitivity and a complex character. This undermines Millicent's account and emphasises her snobbery and her youthful ignorance. Geneviève demonstrates an awareness of all that goes on in the Colbert household, making acute remarks about its inhabitants. But even her perspective is not allowed to dominate the text: Millicent's narrative does dispel some of the romanticism and fantasy that Geneviève's own tale contains.

Geneviève's next narrative goes on to describes Millicent as a young and naive governess, who is living in a dream of love for Gérard, 'weav[ing] her life into a shining love story like a cobweb spangled with rain' (p.158). Both Isabelle and Marie-Louise add their opinions of Millicent to those of Geneviève. Isabelle meets the governess after her departure from the Colbert home and describes Millicent as a rather pretty, though badly dressed, young girl, who is 'eager as a puppy dog waving its tale' (p.195). For Marie-Louise, 'Miss Milly' is the kind governess of her youth, who flushed pink whenever her uncle was near and who was suddenly sent away, an event for which the child blamed herself (p.229). Even Yvonne has an opinion of Millicent, formed from the information she has been given by Marie-

Louise. This complex process of characterisation is mirrored in the descriptions of incidents in the text. Events are often described from more than one perspective, or, tellingly, omitted from some narratives. Isabelle's visit to Jumièges is a good example of this process. This incident is based upon a visit made by Louise Colet to Flaubert at Croisset, described in many biographical sources. (Barnes, p.169; Steegmuller, p.306). Millicent provides the longest version of the visit, which is extremely subjective and descriptive. Isabelle distils this into a one-page account and Geneviève and Marie-Louise do not mention the incident at all, though both Isabelle and Millicent suggest that Geneviève was present at the time. This treatment of one incident is telling, since it reinforces the representation of history and narrative as a process of exclusion and interpretation.

The structural play with history and the reliability of historical sources is echoed in the actual textual sources to which this novel is indebted. As already stated, this novel draws upon the recorded lives of Flaubert and Mallarmé, but these sources are used indiscriminately alongside other fictional and mythical roots. Neither history nor fiction is privileged. A good example of this is the use of events in Flaubert's life, his novel *Madame Bovary* and Julian Barnes' 'Louise Colet's Version' in *Flaubert's Parrot* as sources for Isabelle's narrative. Many critical texts discuss the links between Flaubert and *Madame Bovary*, and his use of friends, lovers and acquaintances in this text (Spencer, pp.112-33). Francis Steegmuller, an early Flaubert critic, argues that *Madame Bovary* is based heavily upon the story of the Delawares, who were acquaintances of the Flaubert family and whose fate matches closely that of the Bovarys. However, this tale illustrates immediately the complexity of historical and critical interpretation and its tendency to suggest clear parallels between fiction and 'real life'. Steegmuller relates this account of the Delawares' fate, based upon the letters of Flaubert and Louis Bouilhet. It is Bouilhet who provides the details of the Delaware story to Flaubert and he in his turn has presumably acquired this knowledge through local gossip, since, according to Steegmuller, the Delawares' fate 'had recently been the subject of much comment in that part of Normandy' (Steegmuller, p.219). This web of knowledge and communication suggests the difficulty in trying to assert unproblematic sources of reference and present a 'truthful' account of the relationships between fiction and 'real life'. *The Looking Glass* exploits this indeterminate 'truth' in its use of various fictional, biographical, epistolary and historical sources in Isabelle's tale, highlighting the mediated nature of historical narrative, in line with Linda Anderson's argument. Identifying connections between these various sources and this tale illustrates immediately the complex nature of Roberts's blending of textual interpretations to blur the boundaries between fiction and fact, pointing toward the unreliability of narrative itself.

Isabelle's tale is her account of her marriage to Armand and her affair with Gérard. She takes Gérard as a lover whilst still married, slipping away to spend afternoons with him in hotel rooms, arriving and departing veiled in black. Preening herself and enjoying physical vanities, she uses this affair to spice up her mundane existence with her staid and sexually unadventurous husband. The plot here is obviously influenced by Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which also drew upon his affair with Colet. Isabelle's married life is dominated by her husband and his sister.

Like Emma Bovary in Yonville, she feels enclosed, claustrophobic in her shoebox shaped kitchen (Flaubert, p.79). Echoing Emma's frustration during meal times, Isabelle is incensed when Armand and Marie accept as their due her food preparation and service. Both Emma and Isabelle choose to relieve their boredom and frustration in sexual release, indulging in extra-marital affairs to provide the excitement and interest lacking in their own marriages and lives. Both become more interested in matters of dress and personal vanity. For Emma, this leads to debt and eventual destruction, but this is not the case for Isabelle. When lectured by Marie on her inappropriate vanities, mimicking the advice given to Emma by Charles' mother, Isabelle states in response: 'I earn the housekeeping money myself, out of the income from the shop; it's quite distinct from my clothing allowance which I also earn myself' (Roberts, p.177). Significantly, Isabelle's occupation provides her with the support that Emma lacks. This occupation also gives Isabelle a power over Marie, as she holds 'the gathers of her nasty dark skirt fast in one hand', preventing her sister-in-law from running to Armand to complain of his wife's behaviour. Isabelle's financial independence means that she does not end up in debt and despair, but, when left in a difficult situation after Armand's untimely death, she is able to support herself by her needle. Her husband's death also allows Isabelle to rid herself of her sister-in-law and enjoy the physical space that formerly depressed her with its crowded and enclosed atmosphere. The responses of Emma and Isabelle to the loss of their lovers similarly suggest Roberts's intention to depict Isabelle as a strong and self-determined character, who will not end up in the desperate position of Flaubert's heroine.

When Rodolphe abandons Emma Bovary, she reacts by falling ill, and on recovery finds a replacement lover in Léon. Her eventual suicide comes after the escalation of her financial problems and the refusal of both Léon and Rodolphe to help. Isabelle reacts to both the awareness of her mistake in marriage and the cooling of Gérard's affections in a far more robust way. Realising her error in marrying the pragmatic Armand, she refuses to act 'crazily like one of those heroines in books [...] who ended up ruined, in disgrace, and killed themselves', citing *Madame Bovary* itself as an example (p.184). Isabelle begins an affair with Gérard a year after marrying Armand, but, unlike Emma Bovary, she does not look on Gérard as her saviour. Whilst loving and desiring him, she nevertheless uses Gérard as a way to endure her life with Armand and as a way to explore the nature of her own desire and her own needs. And when Armand dies and Gérard is frightened away from her, Isabelle throws herself into the practicalities of her life and the need to keep afloat financially. Her sexual desires find their expression in a series of anonymous lovers that she picks from the streets. The reverse of Emma's insistence on loving dependence, Isabelle chooses to assuage her loss in emotionally independent physical enjoyment and finds that Gérard loses his centrality in her life as a result.

Reading Isabelle's tale as a rewriting of *Madame Bovary* illustrates Roberts's intention to recreate this 'heroine' as a strong and self-sufficient woman, who can accept love without dependence and give herself without losing herself. However, Isabelle's tale is not simply a redrafting of *Madame Bovary* in a more acceptable twentieth century form. As I have already pointed out, Flaubert drew upon a number

of sources for his rendition of the tormented adulteress. Critics have long documented the twisted relationship between Flaubert's life and his literary output, drawing close parallels between *Madame Bovary* and the Flaubert/Colet affair. The account of Flaubert's relationship with Louise Colet is based upon his letters to her over a period of many years. It is these letters which also document the lengthy process of writing *Madame Bovary*. Colet's letters were burned by Flaubert's niece, Caroline (Marie-Louise in *The Looking Glass*), in a supposedly moral gesture. It was Colet herself who saved Flaubert's correspondence and therefore his account of their affair (Steegmuller, pp.237-307 & p.354). This of course means that any narrative reconstruction, of which there have been a number, of this period of Flaubert's life is necessarily given only from his perspective. Colet's perspective is lost. With this in mind, Julian Barnes recreates 'Louise Colet's Version' of the relationship in *Flaubert's Parrot*.8 Colet is generally represented as a publicly successful, but artistically defunct poet, a serial adulterer and a possessive and jealous lover. Barnes writes Colet's first person defence of her actions, in which she argues that Flaubert was a cruel and tyrannical lover, who preferred her absence as muse to her presence. Roberts's tale of Isabelle incorporates many of the details found in Barnes' version, including Flaubert's boast of his past sexual prowess, the significance of the rose given by Flaubert to his lover and her version of the visit to Croisset (Jumièges).9 Both Barnes and Roberts demonstrate a familiarity with the letters of Flaubert in these writings, but, whilst Barnes' biographer's version is defensive and retaliatory, Roberts's Isabelle suggests a more creative and positive blending of fiction and history.

Isabelle's tale also enters into the debate upon the nature of the writer and art, which is manifest throughout the novel. The structure of *The Looking Glass* draws attention to the inadequacies and unreliability inherent in textual production, and this is openly debated by the narrators themselves. Isabelle echoes Barnes' Louise Colet in her analysis of Gérard as a writer who thrives on absence: 'He kept a woman [...] at a distance, so that her absence could provoke him to desire her, to write a love poem [...] He only believed in loss, in not having' (Roberts, p.193). This is the use of woman as muse. As well as drawing upon Flaubert's stated need for artistic solitude, this dialectic of presence/absence also utilises the Mallarmian obsession with binaries, stemming from Hegel's Nothingness/Being opposition. Mallarmé turned to art as a 'quasi-religious function', according to Gordon Millan, and this is how Isabelle reads Gérard's relationship with his work (Millan, p.155). Millicent supports Gérard's position, tellingly expounding the necessary solitude of the male artist: 'He must sing. He must fly about the world, create his own world, not get caught in snares and traps, return and give songs to those who can't fly with him or after him' (Roberts, p.111 my italics). Ironically, Millicent is seen as one of these snares and traps by Madame Colbert and despatched back to England. This is a Mallarmian conception of art as a higher intellectual form, whose meaning is not easily available to the lay person and which, directly or indirectly, excludes women as writers. A further connection between this concept of poetry and Mallarmé is provided by Millicent's description of the Japanese cabinet in which Gérard keeps his poems, letters and pictures, which is similar to the cabinet in Mallarmé's study at Valvins, and possibly the source for his unfinished collection 'Le Tiroir de lacque' (Millan, pp. 262-7 & p.320). Millicent imagines Gérard 'rummaging for

words in the little drawers' and 'shaking out loose words, tipping them into a bag, mixing them up and so making a poem', but she concludes that this cannot be his method of poetic composition, since it is 'too much like playing' (Roberts, p.120). The haphazard nature of this image of the poet's craft is at odds with the painstaking care with which Flaubert and Mallarmé are reputed to have constructed their novels and poems, but echoes the construction of this novel in the sense of multiplicity and creativity it invokes. The perception of the artist/writer as solitary genius represents the binary of art and life which Roberts's work consistently tries to undermine, with the wider aim of breaking down other binaries which ensure women's subordination.

Isabelle's image of herself as poet-dressmaker-lover symbolises the multifaceted and interrelated nature of language, artistic production, desire, and experience found in all of Roberts' novels. When Gérard compares poetry and sex, Isabelle relates this to her work as a seamstress: 'I added my own understanding: how desire fitted bodies with each other like well-cut clothes. Without desire you couldn't cut or stitch' (p.170). Gérard channels his desire primarily into his work, using even his sexual appetites as a way to conjure desire to feed his literary productivity. This links Gérard closely to Flaubert's presentation of the dangers of uncontrolled desire in *Madame Bovary*.10 The fear of desire, which is linked in *The Looking Glass* to both sexuality and the full experience of life, is something that Isabelle analyses in Gérard. Isabelle's own understanding of desire is of a force inherent in all areas of her life, in her work and her love, and she can therefore state confidently to Gérard that she too is a poet, though perhaps not of the literary variety (p.170). Her psychoanalytic reading of the relationship between Gérard and his mother paints a picture of Gérard as the man afraid of the phallic mother, both desiring and rejecting her at the same time (p.193). This obviously draws upon the Freudian model of the mother/boy child relationship, particularly his discussion of the child learning to control presence and absence through the 'fort da' game. Isabelle's analysis positions Gérard in terms similar to Luce Irigaray's discussion of the male tendency to confuse women's sexual and reproductive function with their whole, thereby subsuming womanhood into the totality of motherhood (Irigaray, pp.16-17). Without a valid representation of women's subjectivity, and particularly their sexuality, this confusion cannot be addressed. This analysis is interesting in terms of the information it provides about Gérard and his mother, and Gérard and Isabelle, but this psychoanalytic reading is also pertinent to the discussion of this novel as a re-enactment of the process of history, for such types of Freudian analysis are often undertaken in the biographies of historical figures. Isabelle's psychoanalytic insight reminds us, once again, of the partiality and bias inherent in all accounts of history and historical figures.

Despite Isabelle's assertion that she is a poet, she does not find it easy to express herself in language. Cowed by Gérard's literary prowess, Isabelle refuses to communicate her feelings fully in the written word. As she states, 'I could dress well on a small income; I could cook; I could manipulate scissors, cloth and thread to perfection; but my prose had no style or elegance; my grammar was weak; my spelling merely inventive' (Roberts, p.187). So Isabelle resorts to scribbled notes and hasty messages, writing only in her imagination long letters to the absent

Gérard. Even the notes that Isabelle does write must be sent to her lover via the Jumièges doctor to avoid detection by Madame Colbert.11 Similarly, in *Madame Bovary*, Emma writes letters to no one, and the only fragment of this writing that enters the text, as Stephen Heath points out, is her suicide note (Heath, p.99). Emma's silence would accord with the reading of Emma as hysterical, a popular nineteenth century medical diagnosis and something about which Flaubert was knowledgeable. The silent hysteric is of course a position well catered for in patriarchy, but, unlike Emma Bovary and Louise Colet, Isabelle is not left in this position of silence, presented in history and language by others. For this narrative is Isabelle's love letter to Gérard, 'language that can flow and does not have to stop, a long cry uttered in silence' (Roberts,p.187).

Isabelle's narrative illustrates the multiplicitous and creative use of source material in this novel. Her tale draws upon many historical and literary sources, without privileging either form, and therefore questions the traditional superiority and claim to truth inherent in historical narrative. Similarly, Isabelle herself is providing a historical narrative, the voice she has long suppressed. But, in line with the general aims of this text, her narrative is itself questioned and destabilised, both by those around it, and by the presence in her tale of psychoanalytic readings of Gérard and his mother and Isabelle's own obvious partiality and bias. Rather than subsuming and attempting to eliminate this subjectivity, this novel revels in the inherent instability of its narrative threads, and indeed of all narrative, highlighting the inability even of the narrators themselves to limit and ultimately close their accounts.

The Looking Glass enacts the 're-imagining [of] history' outlined by Anderson in its structure, theme and exploitation of sources. By concentrating on marginal perspectives, those of female servants and children, this novel turns Flaubert and Mallarmé into muses. But, rather than simply reversing the roles and shedding light into dark corners, *The Looking Glass* refuses to allow its women narrators to become authoritative voices, simply replacing the male perspective. These women undermine each other textually even as they support each other in the tale. Throughout the text, the metanarrative debate about the reliability of language and of history emerges again and again. Geneviève concludes her tale, and the novel, by considering the nature of language and of history, suggesting that narrative imposes an order upon the thoughts and words she holds: 'when you smoothed and flattened and straightened the story out, made it exist word by word in speech, you lost that heavenly possession of everything at once' (p.275). Telling the truth is difficult because the truth is not linear, but jumbled; it is not obvious or straightforward, but constantly changing and diverse. This conception of language encapsulates the picture of narrative and of history which this novel has created, disturbing traditional assumptions of linear and unproblematic historical narrative. This is not just a 're-imagining' of a particular historical narrative, but a re-imagining of what history can be.

In line with this questioning of linearity, this novel presents a complex timescale, which is repetitious and cyclical. History is not presented as a movement from A to B, but a series of re-traversals, covering the same ground on different feet and

indulging in a process of retrospection which, by its nature, can never be authoritative or true. At the conclusion of the text, Geneviève determines to return home to the place of her first love, her love for her substitute mother, and the place of her movement into puberty and womanhood. Her journey is one of discovery, as she intends to lose both her own story and those of others. Yet, in an ironic final twist, Roberts positions Genevieve at a historical moment which is ineradicably etched into linear history, a time that will break and change history forever, 'this early summer of 1914' (p.277).

Notes

1 The introduction to Arlett Farge's *Fragile Lives* provides a useful overview of the difficulties historians find themselves in with regard to their source material, as Farge debates the use of archives, fragments of lives from that vast repository of once-pronounced words' (Farge, p.1). Farge is attempting to negotiate the growing awareness of the partiality and over-generalisation that is part of the historical narrative, whilst not abandoning the necessity of this process of history.

2 Despite the dates of the historical Flaubert and Mallarmé being firmly in the nineteenth century (Gustave Flaubert 1821-1880; Stephan Mallarmé 1842-1898), this text is set in the early twentieth century, concluding on the cusp of the First World War.

3 Marie-Louise discusses the 'jagged dissonant lines' of Gérard's *Men and Mermaids* and its complex themes and images (Roberts, 2000, p.234). This echoes Mallarmé's use of the spatial and his intention to make meaning obscure and complex. Mallarmé's final poem, *Un coup des Dés* is an example of this (see Pearson, pp 235-292).

4 Mallarmé married German governess Marie Gerhart (see Millan).

5 Yvonne's note may be based upon Gertrude Colier's memories of Madame Flaubert, apparently produced at Caroline Hamard's request. Collier was a family friend of the Flauberts (see Oliver, p.18).

6 The process of historical investigation undertaken by the biographer in Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* is influential in the description of this 'Musée Colbert, parodying the traditional biographical portraits of Flauberts House and study. Barnes too draws attention to the rug in the study, which is mentioned in many biographical accounts of Flaubert, and upon which Caroline Hamerd apparently lay as her uncle tutored her (see Steegmuller, p240; Barnes, p.49).

7 Millicent is based upon Juliet Herbert, who was governess to Caroline Hamard, Flaubert's niece, for a length of time at Croisset. The relationship between Flaubert and Herbert is a matter of much debate among critics and biographers. See Oliver for an investigation of this relationship.

8 It is significant, in line with the discussion of textual authority and the creation of history and biography, that it is Barnes' fictional biographer, Geoffrey Braithwaite, who is writing this version of Colet's Story.

9 Flaubert sent Louise Colet a Rose with the instructions that she put it to her mouth and then 'you know where'. Barnes quotes this letter from Flaubert in 'Louise Colet's Version', *Flaubert's Parrot* (p.167).

10 See Heath, p.94.

11 Flaubert instructed Louise Colet to send all letters via Maxine Du Camp (see Steegmuller, p.74).

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