

CHAPTER 1

L'ASPHYXIE: THE DOUBLE FACE OF MATERNITY

The twenty-one tableaux which make up *L'Asphyxie* describe the dealings of its heroine, a child of indeterminate age, with her mother, her grandmother and a host of curious and frequently grotesque individuals who inhabit the provincial French town in which the work is set. The organization of the novel's episodes is associative rather than chronological, and seems (at least initially) to indicate that the narrator's memory is ranging in an unsystematic way over events which took place during her childhood.

The text engendered by the narrator's retrospective activity is equivocal in status. Although (superficially) realistic, the oddness of many of the individuals encountered by its heroine and the seemingly disconnected nature of its episodes means that at times it resembles an extended dream-sequence. Moreover, while the tale we are told is clearly the creation of an adult who is recalling her past, it frequently appears, despite the passage of time, to be coloured by the perceptions and responses of the child she once was. In other words, the distance between narrating and narrated/protagonistic selves seems somehow to be erased.¹ This is not always the case, since there are moments when it is evident that the narrative perspective of the novel is exclusively that of the heroine's older self. In the first chapter, for example, the way in which the different concerns of the little girl's vain, ultra-feminine mother and her unaffected, gluttonous grandmother are suggested indicates that the narrator is a mature adult, who can revive and describe the past with humorous detachment:

Quand nous rentrions, [ma grand-mère] offrait une bouchée à sa fille qui la refusait.
– Allez vous coucher, ça conserve.
Se trouvant suffisamment conservée, ma grand-mère commençait de modeler un chausson aux pommes. (*L'Asphyxie*, p. 10)

However, for much of *L'Asphyxie*, the analytic or ironic perspective of the unnamed, older narrator seems to be submerged by that of the novel's naïve, unworldly child-heroine, so that there is a blurring within the narrative of the distinction between her outlook and that of her adult persona. This characteristic of the novel makes it quite different from *La Bâtarde*, in which Leduc's

narrator Violette periodically employs the present tense in order to digress from her retrospective account and comment upon her past or present circumstances, or even to address her readers directly — a strategy which emphasizes her separate narrating presence and draws our attention to the gulf that exists between her older and younger selves. Given the ambiguity surrounding the narrative focalization in *L'Asphyxie*, it is safe to assume that the novel's account of its heroine's relations with what are in fact two maternal figures, her mother and her grandmother, somehow amalgamates a youthful and an adult vision of these relations. This chapter seeks to examine some of the different ways in which Leduc's portrayal of mother/daughter interaction in the novel may be read.

THE TEXT AS ACCUSATION: THE MOTHER ON TRIAL

Existing critical explorations of *L'Asphyxie* have assumed that its heroine is Violette Leduc herself, or rather the child she once was, and that the mother and grandmother in the work are thinly disguised versions of her own mother and grandmother. Furthermore, critics who approach the text from a biographical perspective have tended not only to concentrate more or less exclusively on the account we are offered of its heroine's unhappy relationship with her mother, but also to suggest that *L'Asphyxie* constitutes a passionate condemnation of Berthe Leduc by her daughter Violette. Colette Hall observes, for example, that in *L'Asphyxie* 'the uncaring mother is crucified', and argues that for Leduc, in 1946 at least, 'writing becomes a cathartic experience during which the mother is immolated'.² Reading *L'Asphyxie* simply as a *roman-procès* ignores the complexities of what is a rich and polysemic text. However, the accusatory dimension of the novel, since it is the one to which (biographical) critics have responded most readily, requires elucidation.

Two aspects of maternal inadequacy emerge from Leduc's description of the central mother/daughter relationship in *L'Asphyxie* and, initially at least, seem to justify reading the work as an attempt to put the mother portrayed within it on trial. The dual nature of the mother's 'wickedness' is established in the first of the novel's twenty-one tableaux. Firstly, she appears here as the embodiment of denial, because of the physical and affective deprivation to which she exposes her daughter. Maternal denial takes various forms. The bitterly poignant opening sentences of *L'Asphyxie* indicate that a fundamental and very obvious feature is the mother's determined refusal of the comfort of physical contact:

Ma mère ne m'a jamais donné la main. . . Elle m'aidait à monter, à descendre les trottoirs en pinçant mon vêtement à l'endroit où l'emmanchure est facilement saisissable. Cela m'humiliait. (p. 7)

In this tableau, physical communication between mother and daughter is rendered impossible by the mother's consistently rejecting attitude. Even when the child, realizing that her mother is distressed and herself in need of comfort, attempts to provide this, she faces repudiation:

Ma mère répétait entre ses sanglots:

– Nous n'arriverons à rien, à rien!

J'accourus et je me jetai dans ses bras. Elle me repoussa:

– Pieds nus sur le carrelage! Tu veux me faire mourir de chagrin . . . ? (p. 13)

The mother's extreme preoccupation with her appearance means that her child is exposed not only to physical and emotional deprivation, but also to rejection of a more pernicious kind. Overweening maternal vanity ensures that the mother's gaze is almost always focused on her own image, rather than upon her daughter. The little girl, admiring but excluded, is left to watch her mother watching herself in her mirror, and suffers, in consequence, from a damaging lack of maternal recognition:³

Elle avait l'habitude de poser son chapeau sur sa tête quand elle était encore en pantalon, chaussée de bottines lacées jusqu'au dessous du genou. Elle avançait, reculait, en se préoccupant seulement devant la glace de son visage et de cette immense galette qui basculait sur son chignon perdu. [...] Le sac perlé et l'ombrelle à la main, elle séduisait le miroir. C'était la répétition générale. (p. 8)

The other feature of maternal conduct which seems to be the object of Leduc's ire in *L'Asphyxie* is the mother's capacity for rage and for punitive violence. The 'regard dur et bleu' which she directs at her daughter acts as a cipher for the maternal anger and its paralysing effects which are constantly evoked in the text. In the first tableau, and in those that follow it, the *regard maternel*, on those occasions when it is trained upon the little girl, functions as an annihilatory force, rather than a source of comfort and reassurance:

Cette fois, on bougeait dans la chambre de ma mère. Nous avions peur.

Elle ouvrit la porte. Un ouragan.

– File te coucher, me dit-elle, avec son regard dur et bleu.

Je filai mais je laissai la porte ouverte. Ainsi je restais en contact avec ma grand-mère. Nous nous protégeions à distance. (p. 12)

Denial and punitive rage continue to be associated with the child-heroine's mother throughout the novel. Individual chapters in which the mother appears stress one or the other of these fundamental aspects of her responses to her daughter. In the fifteenth and eighteenth tableaux, it is the mother's capacity for anger which is the key focus. Her rage becomes so extreme in these episodes that she appears not only as a persecutory but also as a destructive and life-threatening figure. In the the final tableau, on the other hand, Leduc foregrounds the deprivation to which the child is exposed by her mother, and the paradoxical role this plays in the little girl's intense attachment to her. It is

clear from the language employed at this point in the novel that the narrative voice recalling the events which followed the mother's decision to leave her daughter in school during a public holiday is that of the heroine's adult, analytical self:

Après la messe, nous avons acheté des gâteaux. Nous fîmes une pause sur un banc de la place Verte pour les manger. La surveillante les avalait en lisant. Je n'existais que pour moi et c'était monotone. Ma mère m'occupa. Je désirais sa présence mais si elle était passée à proximité du banc, j'aurais peut-être tourné la tête d'un autre côté. N'était-ce pas l'impossible en elle qui me passionnait plus qu'elle-même? (pp. 181–82)

The combination of maternal denial and retributive fury to which she is subjected generates the feeling of *écrasement* that the child experiences in her mother's company. This feeling assails her with such frequency that the last words of *L'Asphyxie*, 'C'était une mère irréprochable' (p. 188), inevitably seem, on first reading at least, to be highly ironic. The little girl's perception of her mother as a destructive force is intense, and explains the emphasis that has been placed upon the accusatory aspect of *L'Asphyxie*. However, despite the presence of a body of 'evidence' which seems to vindicate interpreting *L'Asphyxie* as an attempt at maternal denunciation/crucifixion, such an interpretation is unnecessarily restrictive. For one thing, it obscures the political, polemical dimension of the novel, a dimension which effectively exculpates the mother, and considerably attenuates the irony permeating the concluding words of the text. Underlying the account we are offered in *L'Asphyxie* of mother/daughter interaction is a powerful if implicit critique of sociosexual oppression, which Leduc appears to have woven into her narrative with considerable care. The presence of this critique — which is illuminated by a feminist reading of *L'Asphyxie* — reveals the superficiality of those interpretations that deal solely with the expressions of daughterly pain and accusation contained in Leduc's first novel.

Since it allows *L'Asphyxie* to constitute more than an exercise in personal, autobiographical retrospection, and therefore extends the scope of the work, a feminist, sociopolitical analysis of the novel is undoubtedly more helpful than the biographical approach delineated above. However, like the biographical approach, this model of interpretation provides only a partial account of the text. In the next section of this chapter, the nature — and drawbacks — of a political reading of *L'Asphyxie* will be examined.

THE TEXT AS POLEMIC: AN ASSAULT ON PATRIARCHY?

The central mother-figure of *L'Asphyxie*, like Leduc's own mother Berthe, has been seduced and abandoned by a wealthy young man. In the course of the novel, it becomes apparent that she has been left with a daughter who

resembles her father, is consequently a constant reminder of his betrayal, and is a focus for the mother's frustration and despair ('— Tu n'en feras jamais d'autres. Ses défauts, tu les as tous. Sans tête, sans cœur', p. 50). Maternity is presented in the work as a state fraught with tensions, and as a source of grief rather than satisfaction to the woman who has given birth to its heroine.

The simple inclusion of this information may allow the reader to gain some understanding of the mother's (reprehensible) conduct towards her child but it cannot, if taken in isolation, be considered as proof that in *L'Asphyxie* Leduc is actively seeking to exculpate the mother. None the less, it is possible to read her text as a feminist work, in which the underlying cause of 'bad' maternity are teased out, and in which it is patriarchy rather than maternal inadequacy that is ultimately condemned. The feminist subtext of *L'Asphyxie* emerges from key passages in which manifestations of the mother's cruelty towards her child are juxtaposed with indications that the society inhabited by mother and daughter is governed by a system of institutionalized masculine privilege which oppresses and frustrates women. The resultant explanation of the heroine's mother's deficiencies in terms of the existence and consequences of sexual (and social) inequality is reinforced by the novel's account of a failure on the part of other women characters evoked in the text to be 'good' mothers. This failure, Leduc hints, like that of her heroine's mother, is due to the particular social order circumscribing the lives of these women, an order which appears to preclude harmonious and equal relations between the sexes.

The political/feminist aspect of *L'Asphyxie*, which is intuitive rather than didactic, is particularly apparent in the eighteenth tableau, one of the lengthier and more important episodes in the novel. In this chapter, the heroine, who has lost her umbrella, is subjected to an assault by her mother whose violence verges on the annihilatory:

– Dire que je me crève pour ça. Elle nous mettra sur la paille. Un parapluie tout neuf. Le plus beau de la ville. Ça n'est pas digne de ce qu'on fait pour elle. Ça n'a rien dans le cœur, ça n'a rien dans le ventre. Maboule! Espèce de maboule.

Elle secouait mes épaules, elle secouait mes bras. Elle me projetait en avant, elle me projetait en arrière. Elle me jetait sur le côté. C'étaient autant de gestes qui me mettaient à l'Assistance, mais elle ne lâchait pas mon bras . . . (pp. 127–28)

In the course of the attack, the child becomes almost incapable of thought or action. Eventually, she is reduced to a state in which her vulnerability is compared to that of a lilac tree battered by the storm raging outside:

Elle me fit tourner comme notre petit lilas au fond du jardin. Je me pliais, je me relevais en même temps que lui. Mes pleurs coulaient partout, comme les gouttes d'eau qui s'égrènaient de ses feuilles en forme de cœur . . . J'étais épuisée. (p. 129)

A biographical critic would undoubtedly view the pathos conveyed by this passage as part of Leduc's indictment of a mother/monster who victimizes her

daughter. It is noticeable however that in the above extract, the emphasis is on the child's sufferings rather than on the mother's cruelty. Absence of explicit reproach suggests that Leduc's depiction of 'bad' maternity may be more complex than critics have allowed, and that she is preparing the ground for an exculpation of the mother. A number of aspects of the 'umbrella episode' indicate that this is indeed the case.

The significance accorded by Leduc to the umbrella, whose loss is the immediate cause of the mother's anger, is one of the means by which exculpation is suggested. This object does not function simply as the stimulus for yet another display of maternal violence. The way in which Leduc describes it, and the place in the narrative at which its loss is evoked, also ensure that our attention is drawn to the mother's unfortunate situation (the actual source of her cruelty toward her daughter) and, more importantly, to the child's father — who, together with the social/sexual order he represents, is responsible for the circumstances in which mother and child find themselves.

The mother's position, which she resents, results from her seduction and her status as an unmarried parent, and is characterized by marginalization and poverty. In the light of this, the fact that the umbrella she gives her daughter is no ordinary *parapluie*, but rather one which is 'tout neuf', and 'le plus beau de la ville' (p. 127), is telling. Her decision to buy it suggests an attempt on her part to transcend the opprobrium accorded to women with illegitimate offspring and to offer her child a symbol of the (inaccessible) luxury she associates with the world inhabited by her aristocratic seducer, the world of the rue des Foulons ('la rue la plus imposante de la ville', p. 39), which has remained closed to herself and her daughter because her former lover has refused to legitimize them. The loss of the umbrella, on the other hand, signals (to her and to the reader) the fruitlessness of her efforts. By presenting an apparently neutral object in terms which must remind us, however implicitly, of the mother's problematic situation and her incapacity to improve her own lot or that of her child, Leduc goes some way towards mitigating what seems initially to be an exclusively denigratory portrayal of 'bad' motherhood.

Leduc's exculpation of her heroine's mother in this episode is reinforced by her description of an apparently coincidental encounter between the little girl and the man whom we know to be her father. The mother's seducer appears for the first time in the eighth tableau, in which he is portrayed as an 'homme lâche' (p. 46), who has more or less abandoned his former mistress and their child, and has been able to do so because he belongs to a sex and class which place him above reproach. In the eighteenth tableau, the heroine meets this man once more, after she has discovered that she has lost her umbrella and shortly before she falls victim to the rage its loss provokes in her mother. The encounter occurs as she returns home with a schoolfriend, trembling at the prospect of what awaits her there:

Alors l'homme de la rue des Foulons surgit: il s'adressa à Mandine:

– Qu'est-il arrivé à cet enfant?

– Elle a perdu son parapluie.

Il s'éloigna, rassuré, pressé, dégagé. (p. 124)

The reappearance here of the mother's seducer is highly significant. By placing the meeting between child and father where she does, Leduc is able both to draw our attention once again to the mother's difficult situation and to hint strongly that her subsequent mistreatment of her daughter is an expression of her own helplessness, a helplessness caused by the sufferings she has endured at the hands of an indifferent, heedless male. In other words, Leduc constructs this tableau in such a way that maternal sadism is shown to be a concomitant of the mother's exposure to sexual and social injustice, and is therefore somehow excused.

Our sense that Leduc uses contextualization in order to exculpate the mother and to make a 'political' point is intensified by an observation made to the child by her grandmother after the mother has abandoned her assault upon the little girl and has retired in order to repair her damaged appearance. This completes the 'frame' into which the scene of maternal violence is inserted, and reinforces the denunciation of sexual inequality contained in this chapter:

– Je crois que ça ne va pas avec lui. C'est pour ça . . . Elle n'arrive pas à ce qu'elle veut . . .

Pendant l'orage, j'avais donc servi de double à l'homme qui ne cédait pas.
(p. 132)

We can deduce that the 'lui' to whom the grandmother refers here is not the mother's seducer but rather a second male character, who also appears for the first time in chapter eight. The mother hopes that this man will marry her, in spite of the burden she carries. He is evidently refusing to legitimize their relationship, and it seems likely that it is the mother's stigmatization by and within a social order that condones men who father bastards but not the women who bear them which has provoked his refusal. Leduc indicates, through the grandmother's words, that the anger the mother directs at her child during the 'umbrella episode' is certainly exacerbated and probably caused by the intractability of her new suitor — hence the heroine's perception that she has become the 'double' of the individual concerned.

Leduc's account of her mother's violence is therefore placed between references to not one but two denying male figures, both of whom frustrate the mother's efforts to resolve her difficulties. By situating the horrific exchange between mother and daughter within this framework, Leduc strengthens our sense that *L'Asphyxie* constitutes an instinctively feminist text, which exposes the social inequities to which women are subject. Her framing technique means that the mother's cruelty emerges as the consequence of a damaging disequilibrium between the sexes, which women cannot hope to combat. The reader's

impression that the mother is as worthy of pity as the child whom she mistreats is reinforced by a remark the narrator makes as she recalls the grief her mother's enraged behaviour provoked in her. Her tears, she implies, were caused as much by her sense of her mother's pain as by her own sadness:

Alors le chagrin me prit en main. C'était une sève qui circulait en moi comme l'eau dans les noyères . . . J'oubliai ma mère et moi-même en pleurant de toutes mes forces pour nous deux. (p. 130)

The stories the heroine of *L'Asphyxie* is told about other mother/daughter relationships intensify our feeling that Leduc contextualizes 'bad' motherhood in such a way that she ultimately produces a feminist critique of sexual inequality rather than an impassioned outburst against maternal monstrosity. The 'readings' the heroine's mother and grandmother make of their own backgrounds and of the women who gave birth to them reveal that the little girl is the descendant of three powerless and victimized mothers, who were all brutalized by their partners and were consequently, to a greater or lesser degree, unavailable to their daughters.⁴ On one level, the narrator's inclusion of these narratives-within-the-narrative simply serves to explain the failure of both her mother and grandmother to achieve wholly 'good' maternity in terms of the model of inadequacy each inherited from her own mother — a phenomenon likened by Adrienne Rich to the continuation, from generation to generation of Chinese women, of the practice of footbinding.⁵ However, the stress Leduc places in *L'Asphyxie* on the link between male selfishness and 'bad' motherhood means that this explanation, although relevant, does not go far enough. Her account of the circumstances which generated the form of maternity adopted not only by her heroine's mother but also by her grandmother and great-grandmother transforms her novel into a kind of chronicle of suffering motherhood. In *L'Asphyxie*, Leduc is quite clearly endorsing the point made by Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe* that 'il n'existe pas d'instinct maternel: le mot ne s'applique en aucun cas à l'espèce humain. L'attitude de la mère est définie par l'ensemble de sa situation et la manière dont elle l'assume',⁶ and is clearly blaming masculine exploitation for the maternal failings she delineates. Consequently, it is naïve in the extreme to suggest, as one critic has done, that 'il n'y a pas dans l'œuvre de Violette Leduc de dimension politique ou idéologique'.⁷

The ideological aspect of Leduc's novel inflects her account of the men her heroine encounters, and is particularly apparent in her descriptions of their sexuality. If the mother's seducer, in spite of his cavalier behaviour, is portrayed with a modicum of sympathy, M. Pinteau, M. Panier and the anonymous individual who exposes himself in the fourth chapter are presented as grotesque sexual deviants, whose aberrant eroticism is frightening. Male non-desire is also depicted as damaging to women: Georges Dezaille and

M. Barbaroux (who remains 'off-stage') not only subject female characters to sexual denial but appear to take a perverse delight in doing so.⁸ The brutalization of women by men is all too usual within the universe Leduc creates in *L'Asphyxie*. An encounter between a young woman and an unknown male at a fair, witnessed by the child-heroine early on in the novel, emblemizes this aspect of the relations between the sexes. The stranger's 'playful' attempts to suffocate the young woman (which look forward to M. Pinteau's semi-strangulation of the heroine herself, as he assaults her in his greenhouse), symbolize the harm done to women by men, and give us one possible indication of why Leduc chose to entitle her first novel *L'Asphyxie*. The only male character of any significance who deviates from the pattern of oppressive, damaging behaviour displayed by other men is Fernand, the *contrebandier*. This seductive personage is described sympathetically by the narrator — yet, in the ninth tableau, she suggests strongly that his gentleness and incapacity to hurt stem from an unarticulated desire to achieve a devirilized state, rather than from an effort to adopt a non-harmful stance *vis-à-vis* the opposite sex.⁹

With the exception of Fernand (and several minor male characters), men appear in *L'Asphyxie* in a negative light, and the female characters consistently emerge as their victims. There are only two women in the novel who escape this fate, and offer its heroine a less discouraging model of femininity than that incarnated by the female members of her family circle. Both are encountered in the final tableau. One is the young pianist, whose playing inspires the child's imagination. The other is the teacher who comforts her after her mother has left her in the empty school, whose intelligence and independence stand in stark contrast to the passivity and impotence the little girl has observed in other women, and who indicates to her that there are means through which an apparently ineluctable feminine destiny of suffering and dependency may be avoided:

– Tu iras à la bibliothèque. Tu trouveras un livre sur la table. Tu le liras. Tu ne comprendras pas. Ça ne fait rien. Ça déposera. Tu pleures comme une femme, il faut abandonner les gamineries littéraires. Si le chagrin ne sert à rien, il est grotesque. Je ne veux pas que tu sois grotesque. Embrasse-moi et tiens-toi droite.
(p. 176)

Clearly, then, *L'Asphyxie* cannot be read simply as a work of disguised autobiography in which a mother (Berthe Leduc) is put on trial, because it also constitutes a forceful feminist critique of the society in which the central, unsatisfactory model of maternity depicted within it evolves. Leduc's exegesis derives its power primarily from her explanation of the deficiencies displayed by her heroine's mother in terms of the latter's unfortunate relationships with men, and from her evocation of other maternal figures who are at once inadequate and victimized. Leduc's denunciation of sexual inequality is extended by her presentation of the male characters with whom her heroine

comes into contact as figures of oppression, and by her depiction of femininity as a state of asphyxiating subjugation, from which only a few women are able to escape.

Since it enables us to gain a broader understanding of *L'Asphyxie*, and of the nature of the relationship between the heroine of the novel and her mother, a 'political' interpretation of the kind outlined in the preceding pages seems more satisfactory than a biographical reading. None the less, the sociopolitical approach still fails to tell the whole story. In the last analysis, this sort of interpretation must be considered limited because it allows no room for the elucidation of a fundamental aspect of *L'Asphyxie*, that is, the dialectical, oppositional vision of maternity the text offers the reader. The account given in the novel of the child-heroine's relations with not one but two, radically different, maternal figures, whom she perceives respectively as her 'good' and 'bad' mothers, is an essential part of Leduc's tale. Neither a biographical interpretation nor a feminist reading of *L'Asphyxie* provides a complete explanation of the maternal opposition which exists in the text, and of the role played by the subjective responses of the heroine herself in its formation. A psychoanalytic approach to the novel, on the other hand, does illuminate this key facet of the work.

THE MOTHER DIVIDED

The maternal opposition of *L'Asphyxie* is created by the systematic juxtaposition of positive and negative images of motherhood, which are embodied by the child's grandmother and by her mother. Its fundamental significance is suggested by the fact that it not only represents a major thematic strand of *L'Asphyxie*, but also appears to influence the way in which the novel is constructed. The organization of the work's tableaux and of the subsections within them seems, initially, to be more or less random. However, a careful examination of the text rapidly reveals that the structure of the tale reflects its heroine's extreme preoccupation with her two mothers, and her need to measure them against each other. Throughout the novel, episodes involving the little girl's (bad) mother alternate with others in which her (good) grandmother is evoked, so that the narrative focus constantly shifts between one maternal figure and the other. This oscillation continues to determine the organization of the narrative even after the seventh tableau, in which the death of the grandmother is recounted. In other words, 'external', chronological time is superseded in the text by a more idiosyncratic, private order of temporality that reflects the heroine's overwhelming concern with the nature of, and differences between, the two models of maternity to which she is exposed.¹⁰ The emphasis upon maternal dualism in *L'Asphyxie* is, in consequence, intense.

The maternal opposition is established in the opening tableau of *L'Asphyxie*. Our awareness of its existence is due primarily to the stress placed on the very different treatment the heroine receives at the hands of the two mother-figures with whom she interacts. As the opening section of this chapter indicated, if she is with her mother, the little girl experiences denial, rejection and alienation, especially when exposed to the mother's averted or annihilatory gaze. The grandmother, on the other hand, provides the little girl with the nurturing and attention she craves. She shares with the child the sugary treats forbidden by the mother, treats which the old woman and her granddaughter enjoy conspiratorially. She also gives the child the physical affection that the latter is unable to obtain from her mother. Her unremarkable, sexless appearance ('elle ressemblait à un curé sans âge', p. 13), unlike that of her coquettish, narcissistic daughter, is a source of reassurance to the heroine of the novel. Her gaze, in contrast to the 'regard dur et bleu' of the mother, holds no terrors for the little girl, since it is a 'lac de douceur' (p. 13), which comforts the child. Her stories afford her granddaughter the stimulation her youthful imagination requires. The grandmother's caresses, the kindness and concern she displays toward the little girl, her readiness to entertain and protect her all mean that she represents a form of maternity which differs considerably from that embodied by the child's harsh, self-absorbed mother.

Maternal dichotomization is reinforced in more complex ways in *L'Asphyxie*. Rather curiously (at least for the reader unfamiliar with the fluid, shifting nature of gender identity in the Leducian creative universe), both mothers have a 'male' aspect, but the masculine traits each displays are antithetical. The child's mother's authoritarian character and more particularly her harsh, penetrative gaze afford her a phallic aura which stands in direct contrast to the priestly (and therefore, for Leduc, emasculated) persona of the gentle grandmother.¹¹ The maternal opposition is further strengthened by the existence in the novel of other women who function as maternal doubles, extensions of one or the other of the two pivotal mother-figures portrayed in the text. The 'badness' of the 'bad' mother is mirrored by Mme Bave's heedless treatment of her daughter Clémence in the nineteenth tableau, and by the cruelty manifested toward a fragile butterfly by Mandine, the heroine's friend.¹² We are reminded of the heroine's 'good' mother by the café-owner, Juliette, who offers the child the sweet things she loves and who 'se coiffait deux fois par semaine, mais qui avait une bouche si bonne et si nette' (p. 42), by Mme Barbaroux's greedy enjoyment of cakes and *absinthe*, and also by the comforting schoolmistress encountered by the little girl in the final chapter, with her 'chaussures d'homme' and 'opulente tresse grise' (p. 176). Even the female characters in the silent films the heroine adores emerge as the cinematic counterparts of the two polarized maternal figures between whom she oscillates. The division of these characters into 'anges gardiens' or 'démons

féminins [que les acteurs] séduisaient facilement' (p. 78) turns the account of the child's trip to the picture palace with her grandmother into a *mise en abyme* which subtly but forcibly recalls the dialectical vision of motherhood contained in *L'Asphyxie*. Despite its centrality, however, the maternal *clivage* which Leduc's narrator creates cannot be taken at face value. Although the novel's account of its 'good' and 'bad' mothers appears on first reading to be reliable, there are a number of indications in the text that this is not in fact the case.

There are, for example, various signs which suggest that the maternal figures portrayed in *L'Asphyxie* are fantasies, creations which are devoid of objective truth. The fantastic aspect of the heroine's mothers is suggested by the exaggerated way in which their contrasting characteristics are depicted. In the eighteenth tableau, the force with which the cruelty displayed by the 'bad' mother is evoked ('Elle m'attendait, paisible comme un commissaire dans l'esprit duquel vadrouillent des abominations', pp. 127–28) and the extravagant description of the environment in which the scene of maternal violence occurs ('Le temps faisait de la mise en scène. Sur les façades des maisons, c'était théâtral', p. 124) mean that the account of maternal wickedness offered to the reader lacks credibility. The unreality of the 'bad' mother is also hinted at in the description we are given in the first tableau of her self-absorbed parade before her mirror:

Elle avait l'habitude de poser son chapeau sur sa tête quand elle était encore en pantalon, chaussée de bottines lacées jusqu'au-dessous du genou. Elle avançait, reculait, en se préoccupant seulement devant la glace de son visage et de cette immense galette qui basculait sur son chignon perdu. Le dressage de la voilette était fantastique. Elle la choisissait parmi des flots de tulle dans une boîte. Elle devait adoucir ou souligner ses traits.

– Qu'est-ce que tu penses de celle-ci?

Je répondais que je trouvais joli ce fin treillis gris et ces petites abeilles plus irréelles que la voilette elle-même dont on l'avait décorée.

– Je te demande ce que tu penses par rapport à moi.

Par rapport à elle, je ne pensais rien. (p. 8)

On one level, this extract simply reveals the mother's narcissism, and the sense of alienation her vanity arouses in her daughter. The closing words of the passage, which suggest that the veiled coquette has somehow ceased to seem real to her child, can be taken merely to indicate the heroine's feelings of exclusion. However, the fact that the mother's face *is* veiled, and that the veil which obscures it is a 'voilette . . . *fantastique*', decorated with 'abeilles *irréelles*', may also constitute a signal that in this passage (in which the mother is described for the first time), and perhaps throughout the novel as a whole, we are being shown a personage whose face is no more than a fantastic mask and who should not, therefore, be taken at face value.

The (objective) truth of the heroine's 'good' mother is also cast into doubt. In the opening chapter, a passage of description relating to the grandmother

draws our attention both to the unparalleled beneficence the little girl associates with the old woman and, simultaneously, to her fundamental unreality:

Je me couchai et m'endormis. Quand j'ouvris les yeux, je vis au plafond une tache qui se déplaçait. Grand-mère entrait dans la chambre, le quinquet à la main. Dans sa longue chemise de nuit, elle ressemblait à un curé sans âge. Je ris tout haut, je sautai à pieds joints sur la natte. Je la secouai, je m'ébrouai contre elle.

Je levai la tête. Son regard était un lac de douceur. Son regard comblait mon élan.

Ses cheveux cendrés, son visage serein me fascinaient. Il me semblait qu'elle se mouvait au-dessus de la carpe, qu'elle venait jusqu'à nous grâce à un fil de la Vierge. (p. 13)

In the above extract, the grandmother, enveloped in a soft, enfolding glow, becomes an ethereal, disembodied being, a vision of serenity and gentleness. The reference in the passage to a 'fil de la Vierge' establishes an oblique analogy between the 'good' mother of *L'Asphyxie* and the Virgin Mary, Western culture's most complete symbol of perfect motherhood. The idealization of the old woman which emerges from the above account and the disincarnation to which she is subject attenuate the credibility of her portrait to such an extent that we are encouraged to perceive her, like the child-heroine's mother, as a fantasy.

If certain elements of *L'Asphyxie* hint strongly that its maternal figures are illusory entities, others indicate that the *clivage* separating them is less complete than it at first appears. A series of tiny but important similarities in dress and gesture reduce the gulf dividing the mothers, leaving the reader with the feeling that the maternal split is somehow artificial.¹³ Furthermore, there are two passages in the novel in which the ambiguity surrounding the 'elle' employed in order to evoke one of the novel's maternal figures makes it temporarily impossible for the reader to see which mother it is. This ambiguity contributes considerably to the demolition of the maternal opposition. The first of these passages occurs at the end of the third tableau, as the narrator describes the stranger she and her mother met at the fair and his efforts to impress:

On reprenait *Les Pas des Patineurs*. Je donnai mon ticket au garçon de manège. De nouveau, l'étranger était près de moi. Il lançait des serpentins à proximité de ma mère. Il regardait au-delà des choses et des gens. Il cherchait encore à plaire à ma mère en m'installant dans une gondole. Il descendit en marche aussi bien que le personnel. Elle se serait assise à côté de moi. Nous aurions sucé de grosses pralines. Elle m'aurait montré les personnes que nous connaissions. Elle aurait dit que nous allions manger des frites chez la fille de la chaisière de Notre-Dame, que les cornets étaient petits, mais les frites bien en chair. Puis elle m'eût fait monter sur un manège modeste et m'eût souri à chaque passage . . . (p. 22)

In this extract, it seems initially that 'elle' refers to the mother. The narrative appears to suggest that she would have joined her child in the *gondole* and

offered her treats, had it not been for the presence of the stranger whom, we learn earlier on in the chapter, she finds attractive and seeks to please. The references to 'pralines' and 'frites' and to the smiles that 'elle' would have directed at the child indicate however that the woman evoked here is the grandmother, whose company would have afforded the child a greater degree of pleasure than that of the 'bad' mother. By omitting to preface the second part of the passage with an explicit conditional phrase (for example, either 'Si l'étranger n'avait pas été là et que ma mère ne l'eût pas préféré à moi-même' or 'Si ma grand-mère avait été avec moi') Leduc leaves room for the ambiguity which diminishes the *clivage* between the two mothers.

The same technique is employed at the beginning of the fourteenth episode. The account of the heroine's acute discomfort as her clothes and face are cleaned and inspected recalls the description given in the opening chapter of the daily rituals to which she is subjected by her mother, so that it seems at first that it is she, rather than the grandmother, who is the 'elle' referred to here:

– Assieds-toi.

Elle me déchaussa, tourna mes souliers, racla les semelles avec le couteau rouillé. Des languettes de boue séchée tombèrent sur un journal. Enfin, elle frotta le dessus mais la propreté des semelles la captivait.

Elle me poussait contre le dos de la chaise. Elle vérifiait mes yeux: avec un doigt, elle désirait emmener ces petites saletés dans la courbe de mes cernes. Pour mieux inspecter mes oreilles, elle enfonçait presque son nez dedans. Elle se penchait sur ma robe. Avec un ongle, elle décolla deux confettis de sucre fondu. Ils étaient transparents comme du tulle extra-fin. Cette robe fut flagellée. Elle brossait fort. Malgré les couches de vêtements, ma peau se hérissait. (p. 83)

A number of aspects of this extract lead us to suppose that the child is in the company of her 'bad' mother. The preoccupation with being clean and impeccably dressed displayed by 'elle', the roughness with which the little girl is treated, the reference to her 'robe . . . *flagellée*' all remind us of the mother and her habitual conduct towards her daughter. Consequently, the third paragraph of the tableau comes as something of a surprise:

Je ne reconnaissais plus grand-mère. Cette propreté d'exaspérée n'était pas dans ses habitudes. Elle devait subir une influence. (p. 83)

The ambiguous and confusing nature of the 'elle qui flagelle' reflects the fact that the actions of the 'good' mother recalled by the narrator at this stage in her tale were, for once, uncharacteristic. The child's failure to recognize her grandmother and her perception that the old woman is in the grip of some alien influence emphasize this point. Yet the fact remains that the employment of an inexplicit 'elle' temporarily adulterates the distinction between the heroine's two maternal figures, even though the narrator rapidly re-establishes the maternal *clivage*. Indeed, the ironic observation 'elle devait subir une influence', which is undoubtedly intended to remind the reader of

the gulf separating the two mothers, effectively makes us more aware that this gulf has been dissolved, albeit briefly.

The fact that both the reality of the maternal figures portrayed in *L'Asphyxie* and the rigidity of the divide separating them are called into question means that while it is tempting to accept without challenge the novel's account of 'good' and 'bad' mothers, to do so is unjustifiable. It is, however, possible and indeed logical to approach the maternal figures of *L'Asphyxie* as 'object doubles' fantastically decomposed facets of a single, whole mother whom the reader never actually sees but whose 'invisible' presence we may, and do, intuit. If we read the 'good' and 'bad' mothers in this way, we must attempt to understand what it is that provokes the decomposition of which they are the product.

In his psychoanalytic study of literary doubles, Robert Rogers observes that object doubling is 'subjective in origin (the split symbolizing conflicting attitudes on the part of the perceiver rather than significant dualities in the object)' and that it derives from 'the perceiver's ambivalence toward the object'.¹⁴ He also comments that 'whenever we encounter decomposition in a literary work we may expect to find that the splitting depicts, in one way or another, some very elemental division in the human mind'.¹⁵ Rogers's remarks help us to see that the existence in *L'Asphyxie* of two polarized and essentially fantastic mothers can be taken not only as a sign that the text involves object doubling but also as a symptom of the unconscious — and destabilizing (because inwardly divisive) — ambivalence felt by its central character towards a maternal figure who is the focus of both her love and her hate. In other words, the dualistic vision of motherhood offered by the novel may be interpreted as an indication of its heroine's contradictory responses to a woman whose reality is effectively hidden *behind* the text. The maternal figures depicted *within* the text may be viewed as phantasms, symbolic projections of these responses, whose only 'truth' is that conferred upon them by the child-heroine's psyche.¹⁶

If we accept that the maternal split dominating *L'Asphyxie* is a function of the child-heroine's subjectivity, and more specifically of the conflicting unconscious feelings she harbours towards her mother, then we obviously need to establish the source of these decompositional sentiments. It is helpful at this point to refer to the writings of Melanie Klein. In Klein's work, the splitting by the human child, in response to its exposure both to maternal nurturing and to maternal denial, of its mother (and particularly of the maternal breast) into good and bad, gratifying and denying entities, is a central theme. As the Kleinian analyst Hanna Segal explains, 'quite early, the [infantile] ego has a relationship to two objects; the primary object, the breast, being split into two parts, the ideal breast and the persecutory one. The phantasy of the ideal object merges with, and is confirmed by, gratifying experiences of love and feeding by the real external mother, while the phantasy of persecution similarly

merges with real experiences of deprivation and pain'.¹⁷ Arguably, the heroine of *L'Asphyxie* manifests unconscious reactions which are not dissimilar to those of the Kleinian child, even though she is no neonate. Consequently, it is possible to read the novel, from a Kleinian perspective, as an extended and fundamentally infantile psychic fantasy, transposed into literary narrative — particularly since, as Juliet Mitchell observes, in the unconscious (as theorized by Klein) 'infancy is a perpetual present' and 'the past and the present are one'.¹⁸

Given that the heroine's 'good' mother is associated in the novel with food and pleasure, she may logically be read as a projection of the little girl's appreciation of maternal gratification. This explains the idealization of the old woman which permeates the novel, particularly since, in Kleinian terms, 'idealization is bound up with the splitting of the object' and 'springs from the power of the instinctual desires which aim at unlimited gratification and therefore create the picture of an inexhaustible and always bountiful breast'.¹⁹ The little girl's idealization of her 'good' maternal object and her attempts at identification with her are of such magnitude that she seeks, on occasion, actually to incorporate the 'good' mother within herself, thereby achieving a lasting unification of self and good object.²⁰ Introjecting the 'good' mother is made possible through the consumption of the cakes and sweets the grandmother offers the child. These are perceived by the little girl as the very essence of the beloved maternal object:

Dans la nuit, nous mangions la moitié de ce chausson remarquable. On retrouvait ma grand-mère dans sa pâtisserie simple et légère. Elle avait le don. (p. 10)

The remarkable character of the pastries evoked here reflects the fact that they constitute an extension of the grandmother and allow the child to take her into her own body. Nevertheless, the cannibalistic pleasure she experiences as she introjects her good object is ultimately adulterated, since in the end introjection arouses guilt. Guilt is provoked by the connection the heroine makes between her loving consumption of her 'good' mother and the latter's frailty and eventual demise. The child's anguished sense of this connection is suggested in the tenth tableau, which reinforces Klein's point that the infant who has introjected its good object, initially out of a desire to protect it, 'dreads that he [sic] has forfeited it by his cannibalism'.²¹

In this episode, the little girl, who is staying with her aunt in the country, learns of the death of a class-mate's grandmother. The news distresses her because her own grandmother has recently died, and her distress is intensified by her friend Olga's apparent absence of grief. The reproaches the heroine expresses to the other child when she sees her eating instead of mourning, and the anxiety she experiences during their encounter, are indicative of a deep-seated belief on her part that her desire to internalize her grandmother has somehow contributed to the disappearance of the old woman:

- Pourquoi ne pleures-tu pas, Olga?
 - Pourquoi veux-tu que je pleure?
 - Tu as oublié?
 - Mais non, puisque je vais chez le menuisier. Elle semblait invulnérable. Je l'enviai.
 - Tu ne la regrettes pas?
 - Qui?
 - Elle.
- Elle sortit de sa poche un écheveau de jujube. Elle introduisait les lacets dans sa bouche à la façon d'un charmeur de serpents. Je la secouai:
- Ne mange pas de jujube aujourd'hui.
 - J'en mange tous les jours.
 - Olga, n'en mange pas.

Un rire robuste secoua son petit corps d'athlète. Ses dents, ses joues, ses mollets resplendissaient. Elle mâchait le jujube avec application. Elle s'éloigna, superbe de vie. (p. 63)

The heroine's extreme preoccupation here with the jujubé, which reminds us of the treats offered by her 'good' mother and of her perception of these as the means by which she might achieve introjection, indicates that the anguish she feels stems from an unspoken awareness that her efforts to incorporate her 'good' maternal object have harmed the latter. Consequently, the vulnerability displayed by the 'good' mother throughout the novel may be read as a projection of the guilt the heroine's attempts at internalization cause her to experience, just as the kindness and nurturing embodied by the grandmother can be taken to reflect the child's appreciation of maternal gratification.

The excessively denying aspect of the 'bad' mother means that it is equally logical, once we approach *L'Asphyxie* from a Kleinian standpoint, to view her as a phantasm generated by the little girl's paranoid response to maternal deprivation. The retributive rage the mother frequently displays can be explained in a similar fashion, even though the connection between the heroine's own unconscious reaction to maternal denial and the 'bad' mother's capacity for anger may initially appear obscure. This connection is illuminated in the fifteenth tableau. In this section of the novel, we learn of the 'bad' mother's refusal to keep her daughter at home. The child, who is being sent to boarding school, is taken here to purchase items of school clothing. The essential focus of the episode is therefore, once again, her experience of maternal deprivation and denial. Faced once more with this prospect, the heroine is filled with an anguish which is so intense that it fills her whole body ('J'étais gonflée de peine comme une nacelle qui va monter', p. 101), and which provokes an outburst of maternal fury almost as extreme as that described in the eighteenth tableau:

- Mais qu'est-ce que tu as? Réponds, sauvage. Tu m'énerves! Si tu savais comme tu m'énerves!

Ce crescendo durait. Elle grinçait des dents. Elle me jetait sur une chaise. (p. 101)

The rage displayed here by the 'bad' mother may simply be understood as a sign of the irritation she feels at the sight of her daughter's embarrassingly public unhappiness. However, in Kleinian terms it constitutes a more complex phenomenon. Towards the end of the tableau, as she describes her mother's anger at the spectacle of her tears, the narrator comments: 'J'étais dans une cage, délivrée de ma peine mais livrée à elle' (p. 101). This observation is significant, since it establishes a vital link between the distress the heroine experiences as she faces the possibility of maternal deprivation ('J'étais gonflée de peine'), her projection of this suffocating, invasive distress into the outside world ('J'étais [...] délivrée de ma peine') and the fury her 'bad' mother subsequently manifests ('J'étais [...] livrée à elle'). The narrator's remark effectively implies that the enraged violence of the 'bad' maternal object is ultimately the consequence of a kind of 'projective identification', a defence mechanism by means of which the anguish felt by the child as she confronts maternal rejection, and the unspoken rage which undoubtedly accompanies it, are externalized, and are transmuted in the process into *maternal anger*.²² In other words, it is the subjective reaction of the child-heroine herself that is the real source of the fury described here, a fury which is her own but which she effectively projects onto her 'bad' mother, with the result that a hated maternal figure becomes a hateful and persecutory mother. The guilt the little girl experiences as she witnesses her mother's actions ('Je me sentais coupable. Elle serait de plus en plus en colère', p. 101) reinforces our impression that it is the child herself who is responsible for the annihilatory rage she imputes to her 'bad' maternal object.

In the eighteenth tableau, there are further signs that maternal rage is the result of 'projective identification'. Here, the loss of the mother which is the source of the heroine's pain, is figured, symbolically, by the loss of the famous umbrella, a gift the child has received from her mother. Significantly, the umbrella is not explicitly named until the seventh page of the chapter, a fact which intensifies our sense that there is more at stake here than the disappearance of an everyday, insignificant object. Once again, exposure to a form of maternal deprivation, signalled by the absence of the umbrella, causes the little girl to feel intense, invasive anguish ('Alors le chagrin me prit en main. C'était une sève qui circulait en moi comme l'eau dans les noyères . . . [...] J'étais gonflée de lui', p. 130), and, once again, it seems that her expulsion of her own, harmful anguish somehow engenders the maternal violence to which she is subjected in this episode:

Elle s'était jetée sur moi. C'était le commencement de la délivrance. La catastrophe venait au monde. Je l'avais sortie de moi-même, la catastrophe me soulageait. L'angoisse plierait bientôt bagages. (p. 127)

At this point in her story, the heroine seems to be so much in the grip of the projective impulse that it is not only her 'bad' maternal object but also the

environment in which mother and daughter find themselves which appears hostile and persecutory — and, moreover, quite fantastic:

Les nuages courroucés nous suivaient. (p. 124)

Le ciel blasphémait avec sa couleur. (p. 125)

[. . .] le temps s'énervait. (p. 127)

Une pluie méchante piquait la terre. (p. 128)

All of the above endorses a Kleinian reading of *L'Asphyxie*, which frames the novel as a symbolic, subjective account of the ambivalence provoked in its daughter-heroine by her conflicting experiences of maternal deprivation and gratification. It is these experiences which, arguably, constitute the true source of the dichotomous vision of maternity that dominates the text. The maternal opposition appears to remain largely unresolved in Leduc's heroine's mind, since her 'good' and 'bad' phantasmic mothers still figure in the final tableau of *L'Asphyxie*. However, there is some evidence in the text of a movement towards a synthesis of its divided maternal figures, and therefore of a more realistic relationship with the 'hidden' mother on the part of its heroine. Since the maternal split portrayed in the novel is indicative also of a profound division within her own psyche, maternal synthesis is, in fact, a step the child-heroine must ultimately make, if she wishes to overcome inner fragmentation.²³ As Segal observes, for Kleinians at least, 'as the mother becomes a whole object, so the [. . .] ego becomes a whole ego and is less and less split into its good and bad components. The integration of both ego and object proceed simultaneously'.²⁴ A nascent acceptance of synthesis is revealed in the 'umbrella episode', which we must now re-examine.

Paradoxically, the maternal *clivage* seems at its most intense here. The scene of 'bad' maternal violence, which is the focus of the opening section of the chapter, is immediately followed by another, very different episode, in which the heroine, in the company of her grandmother, enjoys once again the experience of maternal gratification. The juxtaposition of these two scenes brings the 'good'/'bad' mother split into sharp relief. In the second one, the nurturing aspect of the 'good' mother is stressed:

J'appuyai ma joue contre son épaule couverte de lustrine noire. Je posai ma main sur son genou de femme éteinte. *Le temps coulait comme du lait.* (p. 132, my emphasis)

On pouvait tout se permettre. Je pris grand-mère par la main.

– Promets que tu te laisseras faire.

– Promets que tu n'as pas mal . . .

Elle était mon sauveur et ma compagne. (p. 133)

The identification which the child-heroine consistently seeks to establish between herself and her good object, and her intense need (also evidenced by her earlier, introjective activities) to protect and preserve the old woman, are

indicated here by her efforts to become a 'mother' too — which further complicates the kaleidoscope of maternal doubles *L'Asphyxie* contains. The little girl's desire to accede to 'maternity', and the confusion between 'good' maternal object and daughter which this desire produces, are suggested in the section of the text in which her attempts to nourish her grandmother are described:

Je vis les fraises qui faisaient le gros dos sous les feuilles bombées. J'en cueillis beaucoup. Je préparai les tartines, j'écrasai dessus les fruits. Je saupoudrai et je déposai les nourritures sur une assiette précieuse. Je courus avec.

– Si tu la casses, nous sommes perdues!

Mais le bonheur n'est pas maladroit. (p. 133)

The love the little girl feels for her 'good' mother is made most apparent when she offers her a gift of roses. The giving of these flowers symbolizes the harmony which exists between the child and her 'good' maternal object, and the liquid, refreshing 'scintillements' they exude suggest once more that, for the moment, the boundary between the roles of *nourrisson* and *nourrice* is being blurred:

Elle m'accompagnait du regard. J'étais deux fois plus légère . . . Je cueillis d'abord la plus grosse. Je la tenais comme un cierge. Je prenais des précautions pour la lui donner avec des scintillements dessus. Elle la regarda et la posa sur ses genoux.

– Mets-la grand-mère!

– Je suis trop vieille . . .

Je pensais qu'elle était plus jeune que tout le monde mais je ne savais pas le lui dire.

J'en cueillis avec cet acharnement qui me prenait quand je volais de la luzerne pour nos lapins . . . Je ne laissai que les malheureuses. Je les avais déposées dans mon jupon de dessus pour ne pas salir ma robe. Je préparai mon élan. Je réussis à les jeter toutes sur son écourt qu'elle creusait pour les recevoir.

Nous nous baissâmes en même temps. Je frottai mon visage sur tous les pétales. Elle avait seulement appuyé sa tête sur la mienne. Sous cette tendre protection, je respirai le parfum qui se faufilait profondément en moi. Les scintillements rafraîchissaient les lèvres, les paupières, le lobe des oreilles . . . (pp. 134–35)

Leduc's opposition of positive and negative models of motherhood emerges so strongly in this tableau that a synthesis of her two mother-figures seems out of the question. Nevertheless, fusion does eventually take place, albeit temporarily. This occurs once the 'bad' mother resurfaces in the text, in the form of the 'naine du quartier', whose characteristics indicate that she, like Mandine and Mme Panier, is one of the 'bad' maternal doubles of the novel. The parallel between the *naine* and the heroine's mother is hinted at as the dwarf chides the grandmother for her lack of interest in the recipe for rabbit pâté she has brought her. It is established through references to her (grotesquely) coquettish, ultra-feminine aspect and through the employment of the verb 'accoucher' which suggests that she too is a (displaced) maternal figure:

– Je venais vous dire que mon pâté de lapin est au four. Si vous voulez le voir . . .
 – Je n'y tiens pas, répondit grand-mère qui pensait peut-être à notre évasion impossible.

– Je vous trouve bizarre . . . Il est vrai que l'orage agit sur les personnes de nos âges . . .

La naine repoussait le sien avec une coquetterie grotesque.

– Vous ne dites rien. Décidément, je vous répète que l'orage ne vous réussit pas.

Grand-mère contemplant le corps de ballet formé par la lessive qui séchait, qui dansait, qui suppliait dans le jardin de nos voisins.

– On te parle, grand-mère.

La naine accoucherait-elle encore d'une autre phrase du genre féminin?

(pp. 135–36)

The two maternal objects, the 'good' grandmother and the 'bad' maternal double, the coquette/dwarf, are symbolically conjoined by the child's decision to give the *naine* the roses she has picked for her grandmother. The transfer of the flowers from one mother to the other establishes a kind of union between the two maternal figures which briefly erases the *clivage* between them:

La naine tapa du pied.

– Vous m'agacez avec vos mystères.

Notre bonheur m'inspira.

– On a cueilli ça pour vous.

Elle m'embrassa. Sa fine moustache couchée me souleva le cœur.

– Vous vous êtes dévalisée pour moi?

– Votre recette valait ça, enchaîna grand-mère qui me donnait enfin un coup de main.

– Des fleurs. C'est la première fois que ça m'arrive . . . (pp. 136–37)

It is obviously possible to interpret the gift of the flowers merely as a tactic adopted by the child-heroine in order to resolve an awkward moment. At a deeper level, however, it signals her unconscious integration of two previously divided, antithetical maternal phantasms. The heroine's own happiness in this section of the eighteenth tableau indicates that she may be in the process of healing a profound psychic rift within herself. Once she returns to school, however, the synthesis she has achieved breaks down. That fusion is rapidly replaced by renewed fragmentation and separation is suggested in a passage in which the narrator recalls how her teacher instructed her to sit between two fellow pupils. The contrast between these two girls, who are presented simply as 'la brune' and 'la blonde', together with the fact that they are also described as 'twins' by the schoolmistress, indicates that they too are substitutes for the artificially divided mother/objects of the novel, mothers who have been integrated by and within the psyche of its heroine but who are, by this stage, being pulled apart once more. The way in which the 'twins' are told to 'se desserrer' makes it possible to interpret an apparently anodine incident both as a reminder of the child-heroine's recent attempt to fuse the

maternal phantasms her unconscious has generated and as a sign of her (stronger) need to maintain, for the moment at least, the phantasmic maternal *clivage*:

– Desserrez-vous les jumelles. Elle se mettra entre vous deux... Vous la surveillerez...

Je me plaçai donc entre les gendarmes. J'éprouvais l'équilibre d'une pendule entre deux chandeliers. L'une brillait par l'intelligence et l'application, l'autre par un coup de crayon extraordinaire. On revisait les croisades. Je me contentai de croiser les bras. (p. 138)

The heroine's sense of well-being here indicates that however satisfying her earlier movement towards synthesis has been, she is enduringly wedded to her familiar vision of maternal fragmentation, and remains therefore in the grip of inner division. We must consequently read *L'Asphyxie* not only as a literary representation of the depths of its daughter-heroine's psyche, but also as the account of an inner duality which, in the last analysis, is unresolved. It is impossible to establish definitively whether the narrator whose voice conveys the psychical rift to which her younger, protagonistic self was subject has herself achieved total integration. As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan observes, 'narration-as-repetition seems [...] double-edged: it may lead to a working through and an overcoming, but it may also imprison the narrative in a kind of textual neurosis, an issueless reenactment of the traumatic events it narrates'.²⁵

It should be quite clear by this stage that the reader is under no obligation to interpret *L'Asphyxie* simply as a work of personal retrospection in which Violette Leduc's traumatic bond with her mother Berthe is the central focus. Both the sociopolitical/feminist and the psychoanalytic interpretations delineated above reveal the richness of the novel's treatment of the mother/daughter dynamic, and enable us to see that *L'Asphyxie* represents much more than a literary *procès* in which Berthe Leduc's maternal shortcomings are revealed and denounced. Since it is a psychoanalytic, and specifically Kleinian, approach which allows the reader to gain the fullest understanding of the intricate system of parallels and *dédoublements* lying at the heart of the text and of the heroine's complicated relations with the maternal figures with whom she interacts, this final reading appears the most satisfactory. As my next chapter will indicate, psychoanalytic theory — of a different kind — also enables the reader to penetrate the complexities of the account of mother/daughter bonding offered in Leduc's third novel, *Ravages*.²⁶

NOTES

1. '*L'Asphyxie* is an impressionistic text composed of fragments of memories, tidbits of conversations, brief appearances by assorted characters, and isolated images (of a fair-ground, a schoolroom, a concert). Though selected and conveyed by an older narrator, they nevertheless retain the character they had when perceived by the child. [...] Seldom does the older narrator, who seeks to re-create these early impressions, intervene directly.' (Isabelle de Courtivron, *Violette Leduc*, p. 18.)

2. Colette Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 233. Hall also describes *L'Asphyxie* as a 'text dripping with hate', and observes that in the novel 'Leduc unleashes unabashedly her hate for a mother who "never held her hand"' (*ibid.*).
3. Ronnie Scharfman describes the relationship between the heroine of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette, and her mother in terms which illuminate the similarities between Jean Rhys's text and *L'Asphyxie*: 'Self-absorbed, [the mother] is imprisoned in a destructive narcissism. Antoinette, who is fascinated with her mother's beauty, watches it more than she interacts with it. She watches her look at herself in the mirror, watches her sleep, watches her when she brushes her hair, watches her when she dances. But she never sees herself reflected there. Her mother's concern for Antoinette is mainly as a disappointing, narcissistic extension of herself. Although the daughter desperately seeks the sense of safety which an acknowledged identification with her mother might confer, the mother bars her from this feeling of unity and dooms her to a sense of fragmentation' (Ronnie Scharfman, 'Mirroring and Mothering in Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Têlumée Miracle* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), 88–106 (p. 100)).
4. The heroine's mother tells her in tableau 8 that she was more or less abandoned by her mother, the child's grandmother, because the latter, married to an unfaithful husband whose uncaring attitude and premature death left her unprepared for the rigours of life, was incapable of looking after her daughter ('... Maman était molle. Veuve à vingt et un ans. Ses parents m'élevaient. Ils m'ont fait entrer chez les Sœurs', p. 51). In tableau 17 the little girl's grandmother tells her that her own mother also 'failed' her by turning to drink, but did so because the man she lived with mistreated her, disregarded their child, and never stopped hoping that the wife who had left him would return and displace her ('Il nous privait de tout. Ma mère se mit à boire, un peu, pour oublier cet éternel mari abandonné, ma naissance désordonnée', p. 116).
5. 'A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman. Like the traditional foot-bound Chinese women, she passes on her own affliction.' (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 243.)
6. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), pp. 323–24.
7. Hall, *Les Mères chez les romancières du XXe siècle* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, 1983), p. 237.
8. Mme Barbaroux's obsessive need to clean and polish, described in tableau 14, is the concomitant of the sexual denial to which she is subjected by a husband who, the narrator implies, is either terrified of his wife's sexual overtures or, more probably, is a sadist who enjoys frustrating her. Once the tramp Georges Dezaille understands in chapter 11 that the heroine's adolescent friend Mandine is seeking some kind of sexual gratification from him, he too takes pleasure in withholding the satisfaction she craves. Clearly, in the world of *L'Asphyxie*, sexual contact with men, whether imposed or refused, is problematic for women.
9. Charles-Merrien (who reads *L'Asphyxie* as an autobiographical fragment, hence her decision to refer to its anonymous heroine as Violette) finds evidence of Fernand's desire for devirilization in the ninth tableau. She attributes it to a sense on his part of an incurable impotence which can be relieved only by total castration: 'Malgré sa séduction naturelle, il est en effet habité par une "impuissance à faire quelque chose", impuissance derrière laquelle il faut entendre, une incapacité de prouver sa virilité. La petite Violette, après avoir dansé avec lui, essaie de le rassurer, lui répétant "qu'il l'a blessée" en la serrant trop fort. Ainsi, elle le reconforte sur son impuissance, lourde à porter, dont une castration le libérerait: "Il était désespéré, vaincu éternellement, quoique vainqueur dans l'aventure, la tête et la nuque offertes à un bourreau qui ne viendrait pas."' (Charles-Merrien, *op. cit.*, p. 191).
10. John Sturrock's remarks about the distinction, in the *nouveau roman*, between chronological, objective time and personal or individual time, are helpful to an understanding of *L'Asphyxie*: 'What the imagination has to work with are public facts that have been absorbed into private consciousness and retained in the memory. [...] We can, and invariably do, examine our past in a different order to that in which it was actually given to us. This new order will, inevitably, be a more personal and revealing one, it is the order which the psychoanalyst must try to extract from his patient by techniques of verbal association' (John Sturrock, *The French New Novel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 23).
11. According to Freud, the unconscious establishes a 'substitutive relation between the eye and the male organ which is seen to exist in dreams and myths and phantasies' — which, he argues, means that 'the self-blinding of the mythical criminal, Œdipus, was simply a mitigated form of the punishment of castration' (Freud, 'The Uncanny', *SE*, 17, p. 231). The existence

- of the eye/penis equation, and the association of scopoc activity with the phallus — both of which are firmly entrenched in our (post-Freudian) culture — makes it hard not to view the mother of *L'Asphyxie*, with her 'regard bleu et dur', as virile, or, as Charles-Merrien puts it, as a 'femme phallique' (op. cit., p. 197). Charles-Merrien suggests that on those occasions when the child-heroine is with her mother, 'elle ressent constamment [sa] virilité, surtout à travers "le bout menaçant" de ses bottines' (ibid.). Virility, therefore, becomes associated with 'bad' motherhood in *L'Asphyxie*. 'Good' maternity on the other hand, embodied by the grandmother, when given a 'masculine' form, assumes one which is clearly devirilized (i.e. which is that of the 'curé sans âge'). Leduc's linking of 'good' motherhood and neutered, sacerdotal maleness resurfaces in *Trésors à prendre*, in a description she gives us of her own grandmother. Here, she explains her valorization of the castrated/priestly masculinity she discerned in Fideline in terms of the fear of men and pregnancy her mother instilled in her: 'Ma grand-mère, ma folie. [...] Je l'ai aimée parce que sa longue robe noire ressemblait à une soutane, parce que la soutane est une robe d'homme, parce que les hommes en robe ont un sexe qui a disparu dans l'ampleur de l'étoffe, parce que ma grand-mère était longue, plate comme un prêtre, parce que je croyais qu'un prêtre n'était pas un homme. Craignant ma mère qui me séparait d'avance des autres en me décrivant des monstres, craignant ces monstres, je me suis tournée vers celle qui ne ressemblait ni à un homme, ni à une femme' (*Trésors à prendre*, pp. 111–12).
12. The way in which Mandine, once she finally traps the butterfly in tableau 18, is described as 'un aigle avec une proie' (p. 121) and the account of how she holds the insect ('Avec la main gauche, elle saisit une aile qui se croyait libre. Elle le brandissait à bout de doigt, comme un acrobate qui en élève un autre à la force du poignet', p. 121) recall descriptions of the 'bad' mother's treatment of her child, especially in tableau 1 ('Elle [...] me souleva de terre comme un poulet qu'on enlève par une seule aile', p. 7). Earlier parallels between Mandine and the mother emerge in tableau 11, where Mandine's efforts to seduce Georges Dezaille (p. 71) remind us of the scene in tableau 8 between the 'bad' mother and her seducer (p. 45). Since the mother's former lover is described in tableau 8 as a 'fuyard' (p. 47), who is as hard to entrap as the butterfly Mandine pursues in tableau 18, and since the French verb 'papillonner' has sexual connotations, we can find another link — between the 'bad' mother's seducer and Mandine's 'papillon' — which further reinforces the Mandine/'bad' mother parallel. The fact that the butterfly, tormented by Mandine, also functions as the double of the child-heroine herself indicates the richness and flexibility of Leduc's exploitation of *dédouplements* in this text.
 13. The reader can find identificatory parallels between the 'good' and 'bad' mothers by tracing references to the hairpins (pp. 8, 36), boots (pp. 8, 86) and plain garments (the grandmother has a 'jupe ample de curé', p. 85, while the mother has a 'jaquette monacale', p. 73) each wears. Both mothers make an identical, curious movement before the child-heroine which strengthens their identification: at the fair in tableau 3, the 'bad' mother draws 'arabesques' in the litter of streamers at her feet (p. 21), while the 'good' mother designs figures of eight in the dust of her attic floor in tableau 17. The blue of the mother's 'regard' is reflected in the grandmother's blue apron — which sets up a further (surprising) parallel.
 14. Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), p. 109.
 15. Ibid., p. 44.
 16. Hall comments that 'the pattern of love and hate in *L'Asphyxie*, dissociated in the two figures of the Mother and the Grandmother, embodies the ambivalent nature of maternal love which can be a positive and a negative force at the same time' ('*L'écriture Féminine and the Search for the Mother*', p. 235). While helpful, her account of ambivalence/splitting in the novel remains unsatisfactory, because it does not pinpoint the relationship between maternal division and the instinctual desires of the child-heroine herself, and focuses solely on the dualistic character of mother-love.
 17. Hanna Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein* (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), p. 26.
 18. Juliet Mitchell, 'Introduction', in Juliet Mitchell (ed.), *The Selected Melanie Klein* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 9–32 (pp. 26, 27).
 19. Klein, in *ibid.*, p. 182.
 20. In Kleinian terms, this process is one of introjection. Introjection signifies the infant's efforts to internalize/identify with the good object. It is the consequence of the fact that the infant 'fears internalized persecutors against whom he [sic] requires a good object to help him [sic] and of the infant's 'phantasy that the loved object may be preserved in safety within oneself' (*ibid.*, p. 119).

21. Ibid.
22. Juliet Mitchell explains this mechanism as follows: '*Projective identification* was first described by Klein but has been developed much more fully by Kleinians subsequently. In this the ego projects its feelings into the object which it then identifies with, becoming like the object which it has already imaginatively filled with itself. [...] Its own destructive feelings — emanations of the death drive — make the baby very anxious. It fears that the object on which it vents its rage (e.g. the breast that goes away and frustrates it) will retaliate. In self-protection it splits itself and the object into a good part and a bad part and projects all its badness into the outside world so that the hated breast becomes the hateful and hating breast' (ibid., p. 20). Segal observes that 'projective identification has manifold aims: it may be directed towards the ideal object to avoid separation, or it may be directed towards the bad object to gain control of the source of danger. Various parts of the self may be projected, with various aims: bad parts of the self may be projected in order to get rid of them as well as to attack and destroy the object' (op. cit., p. 27), and comments also that 'the projection of bad feelings and bad parts of the self outwards produces external persecution' (ibid., p. 30).
23. It is a key Kleinian point that the splitting of the maternal object is indissociable from the splitting of the ego. Laplanche and Pontalis comment: 'le clivage des objets s'accompagne d'un clivage corrélatif du moi en "bon" et "mauvais" moi, le moi étant pour l'école kleinienne essentiellement constitué par l'introjection des objets' (J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse* (Paris: PUF, 1967), p. 67). That auto-division is the inevitable corollary of maternal splitting is suggested in *L'Asphyxie* by the way in which the child-heroine is identified both with the 'bad' mother and with her opposite, the 'good' grandmother. The 'doubling' of child and 'good' mother emerges time and again in the novel, for example in tableau 5, where the little girl, 'imprégnée de [sa grand-mère] comme nous le sommes d'un parfum' (p. 26), mimics her cough ('Je toussais. Je pensais que je ressentirais son mal, que j'attirerais son attention', p. 28). Child/grandmother doubling is also apparent when the heroine imagines herself at school, dressed in 'tabliers de serge ou de lustrine' (p. 99) — her grandmother habitually wears a 'tablier' and in tableau 18 she is clad in 'lustrine noire' (p. 132). Identificatory parallels between child and grandmother are particularly palpable in the scene in the garden in tableau 18, where the two characters seemingly exchange roles. The identification of the child with her 'bad' mother is indicated by the little girl's activities before a mirror in tableau 2 ('J'enfonçai mon pied dans l'espadrille, j'avancai, je reculai devant l'armoire à glace, croyant rectifier ma démarche', pp. 15–16), by the fact that she finds herself draped by M. Pinteau in the same 'tulle' which covers her mother's hats ('Il se pencha en avant, ouvrit un tiroir, sortit du tulle vert et le drapa autour de mes épaules découvertes', p. 34) and by the way that she tugs at her grandmother in tableau 12 ('Je tirai grand-mère par la manche, mais elle était partie fort loin', p. 7), since this reminds us of the mother's usual method of obliging her child to move ('Tout à coup, elle pinça le tissu de mon manteau à l'endroit où l'emmanchure est facilement saisissable', p. 43). The child's decision to offer her grandmother a pile of *tartines* in chapter 18 (p. 133) recalls the 'bad' mother's preparation of her daughter's snack in tableau 8 ('Elle me préparait une tartine de saindoux qu'elle agrémentait de sucre', p. 40). All of the above indicates that the maternal split reflects division within the ego of the child herself, which requires healing. Her inner fragmentation seems at one stage to be articulated explicitly in the text. This occurs as the narrator recalls the confusion she felt as she listened to her ailing grandmother groan, in a passage in which the questionable character of the maternal opposition is also indicated again: 'Elle gémit. Était-ce bien elle qui gémissait? On gémit encore. Je me pliai en deux pour écouter. Ce n'était pas elle. Ma mère?' (p. 27, my emphasis).
24. Segal, op. cit., pp. 68–69.
25. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, 'Narration as Repetition: the Case of Günther Grass's *Cat and Mouse*', in Rimmon-Kenan (ed.), *Discourse in Psychoanalysis and Literature* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 176–87 (p. 178).
26. A shorter, earlier version of the argument contained in this chapter appeared in *The Modern Language Review*, 88 (October 1993), 851–63.