

Nelly Arcan: The Death of a “*femme de lettres*”

Homage to a Warrior in the Fight against Social Constructions of Beauty

The first time that I read *Putain*¹ by Nelly Arcan, I thought that it was a *trash* version of *Pavillon des enfants fous*² by Valérie Valère. Valérie Valère was one of the first anorexics to write a literary testimony of the illness and was also considered a “shooting star of French literature”³ that became extinct prematurely. Moreover, Valérie Valère wrote another novel, *Magnificia Love*⁴, which tells the story of a dancer in a Parisian cabaret and resembles *Putain* in certain regards.

When Nelly Arcan’s first novel came out, the media were especially interested in its presumed to be biographical elements and in its title, which promised erotically explicit passages that would be reminiscent of the work of the (also famous) Catherine Millet.⁵

Yet, the book has a sanctimonious and castrating side, to re-appropriate a term from psychoanalysis, a discipline which seems fundamental to Nelly Arcan.⁶ It is harsh in its interpretation of men. It is similarly harsh in its treatment of women. From my point of view, it is a book filled with ugly truth.

Intellectuals and academics have dwelled on the importance of anorexia in this novel.⁷ Unfortunately, it’s an aspect of the book that the general public has not quite been able to decipher. The following extract from *Putain* is very full of meaning for me:

“ (...) I was anorexic in school because it was necessary for me to distinguish myself, watch me disappear and see the ways in which I loved life, (...) and when others [referring here to her school friends] began to lose weight, I knew that I was lost, that they had made me lost, I knew that I had to leave for the city because they would follow me there where I wanted to be alone. It is important not to forget that I was hungry during this entire time and I learned that it had been no use being hungry when the whole world can starve themselves until they are force fed in the hospital, until their hearts stop beating, and, at that moment, I

¹ ARCAN, Nelly, *Putain*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2001, 186 pages.

² VALÈRE, Valérie, *Le pavillon des enfants fous*, Paris, Stock; paperback, 2005, c1978, 157 pages.

³ http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Val%C3%A9rie_Val%C3%A8re and the site dedicated to Valérie Valère www.lascartasdelavida.com/valerie. Valérie Valère died of an overdose of medication at 21 years old, having written 7 books.

⁴ VALÈRE, Valérie, *Vera; Magnificia Love; et Pages diverses*, Paris, Christian-Bartillat, 1992, 344 pages.

⁵ MILLET, Catherine, *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, Paris, Éditions Seuil, 2001, 220 pages.

⁶ FORTIER, Isabelle, *Le poids des mots, ou, La matérialité du langage dans Les mémoires d’un névropathe de Daniel Paul Schreber*, Mémoire de maîtrise en études littéraires, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2003, 114 pages.

⁷ KING, Andrea, *Figures de subversion : anorexie, prostitution et écriture dans Putain de Nelly Arcan*, Mémoire de maîtrise en études littéraires, Queen’s University, 2004.

left them, I left the country for the city. I wanted to work and I became a whore. What a silly thing. What a beautiful sequence of events, from anorexia to whoredom. There was only one step to make, and it was still my mouth that worked, taking in my mouth all that I could take and making up for lost time.”⁸

I have heard commentaries and read messages on blogs that claim that it was impossible for Nelly Arcan to have been anorexic because, according to these opinions, all anorexics are emaciated and don't have a sexual life. The psychic dimension of the illness has completely been left out of their theses.

However, Nelly writes: “I will always be anorexic, even though the sickness has been displaced, having passed from one mirror to another, from a body making itself thinner to a body covering itself with lingerie. And this body, which is no longer that of the child, but not yet that of a woman, is never mine because someone keeps it with him- it belongs to my father.”⁹

Moreover, the action of vomiting, of being nauseated by oneself and others, is very present in her books. She says: “In my life, vomiting has been an event, the pinnacle of the evening. Vomiting is one of the only activities over which I have control, outside of my voice that narrates to myself this story in a closed circle.”¹⁰

Placed against society's expectations, she seems dominated, on her knees, until the end. I refer once again to her own words: “To no longer have the strength to kneel down all the time, whether in front of a man or in front of a sink, from the moment that I was younger, only a little, to the moment that I can close my eye on that which enters my mouth or exits it.”¹¹

It should be stated that her suffering has not attracted much sympathy. Nelly Arcan was not necessarily appreciated by everyone. Her physical appearance diverted some. Her discourse and appearance disturbed. What pains me, however, is that very few people are curious to discover the reasons that pushed her to conform to a plastic ideal and to denounce the constructed notions of beauty.

In an interview for the magazine *l'Actualité*, she seemed to explain what led to her adolescent anorexia. She found her body unappealing: “I understand that, for men, an ugly woman has no value, unless it is their mother, she says. When I became not bad as an adult, my sole goal was to stir desire.”¹²

⁸ ARCAN, Nelly, *Putain*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2001, pages 93-94.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pages 168-169.

¹⁰ ARCAN, Nelly, *Paradis, clef en main*, Coups de tête, Montréal, 2009, page 13 of the online version: <http://www.coupsdetete.com/index.php?id=24>

¹¹ ARCAN, Nelly, *Putain*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2001, page 169.

¹² An article by Mélanie Saint-Hilaire published in *l'Actualité* magazine on September 15, 2007, *La deuxième vie de Nelly Arcan*, found online at: <http://www.lactualite.com/culture/la-deuxieme-vie-de-nelly-arcan>

In her second opus, *Folle*,¹³ which reads as a suicide note to her old love, she returns to the death that has been predicted since she was 15 years old. “According to the statistics, those who let themselves die of hunger take longer to die but do so nevertheless. That is to say that a slow death pays off in the long term. It has also been said that dying of hunger gives a great deal of visibility in the family which must reorganize itself in order to avoid ending up at rock bottom. As soon as I left the hospital, I became anorexic.”¹⁴

She seems unable to tolerate not being the only, not being unique, not being the best. The theme of competition between women is very present in her work. She seems “mad with jealousy, with bodily hatred, and with the dictatorial power of the image.”¹⁵

Several years later, in *L'enfant dans le miroir*,¹⁶ she again returns to being fifteen: “It was 15 that saw a major problem arise, the problem of weight. Today, I still have this problem; it's a very heavy problem.”¹⁷

She also evokes, in this story of evil, the vastness and hunger of the interior: “Since the time of my anorexia, I have mistrusted my appetite, which was much bigger than the healthy weight programmed into my genetic code; my voracity has nothing to do with my hunger, my voracity was always that of a child who wants to kill herself by swallowing everything in front of her because of being hungry. Without a doubt, I acquired a taste for this behaviour.”¹⁸

Her fourth book, *À ciel ouvert*,¹⁹ also deals with the themes of eternal youth, the quest for perfection, and a certain injustice that exists between men and women with respect to their embodiment.

Her thesis of “burka de chair” was thus developed. For Nelly Arcan, Western women would be prisoners of the restrictive norms of beauty.

One might have the impression that Nelly Arcan was herself trapped in this ideal flesh. Certain people mocked her ideas since she seemed to flaunt the stereotypical standards of beauty.²⁰

Nelly Arcan is often presented as a “bitch,”²¹ or as being anti-women.

¹³ ARCAN, Nelly, *Folle*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2004, 204 pages.

¹⁴ *Idem*, page 15.

¹⁵ Les mots sont de l'éditeur qui présente son livre sur la *postface* de *Folle*.

¹⁶ ARCAN, Nelly et BOURGUIGNON, Pascale, *L'enfant dans le miroir*, Montréal, Collection Bonzaï au Marchand de Feuilles, 2007, 61 pages.

¹⁷ *Idem*, pages 32-33.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, page 55.

¹⁹ ARCAN, Nelly, *À ciel ouvert*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2007, 271 pages.

²⁰ Les passages de Nelly Arcan à la télévision dans des émissions comme *Tout le monde en parle*, autant en France qu'au Québec, ont suscité de vives réactions. L'écrivaine y est humiliée.

But, this is not how I see it. For me, she is a kind, tolerant, and engaged woman, who dares to speak about subjects that are not necessarily politically correct. She has said, and, more so, written, that which had not yet been spoken.

I did not personally know Nelly Arcan, but for me she represents a warrior, a generous woman who emblemized hope. I find her provocative. Perhaps she wanted to provoke a reaction to and thus shift in contemporary values.

She dared to speak of her interior “dragon” and of her creative force which was truly dreadful.²² Her demons are spread throughout her work. She even took part in a documentary about madness called *Le diable au corps*²³ along with Johanne Prigent.

In choosing writing as her preferred form of self-expression, she also changed her identity. Isabelle Fortier became Nelly Arcan. I have the impression that many people confuse Nelly Arcan and Isabelle Fortier.

To not know one’s identity and to live under the gaze of others is always dangerous.

Her last completed book, *Paradis, clef en main*,²⁴ is truly a hymn to life. But, she herself is dead. She has put an end to her suffering. Her suffering, then, is also dead.

There is an expression that says that “One must suffer to be beautiful;” but one can also die to be beautiful. Nelly Arcan said: “I have not learned to live under the gaze of others. But, I will have to free myself of this. Because it is mortal (...) It is mortal, because it does not last. That is to say that, from the moment where I am no longer this, it is death that awaits me.”²⁵

I must stress that eating disorders should never be considered as the “simple superficiality of young girls.” They are serious illnesses. They are not a phenomenon of or caused by the fashion industry, but a deep and critical problem.

²¹ Elle parle de cette méprise lors d’un entretien touchant avec Marie-France Bazzo :

<http://video.telequebec.tv/video/725/nelly-arcan-n-est-pas-celle-que-l-on-croit>

²² Odile Tremblay a écrit dans *Le Devoir* un article intitulé *La belle et le dragon* publié dans l’édition du 28-29 août 2004 : <http://www.ledouvoir.com/2004/08/28/62384.html> et Nelly Arcan parle de cette force du mal en elle lors de son dernier entretien télévisuel avec François Parenteau, pour l’émission *Club social*, en présentant *Paradis, clef en main* : <http://www.tv5.ca/webvideo/club-social-avec-nelly-arcan-1314.html>

²³ *Le diable au corps*, Montréal, Office national du film, 52 min. 2007, une réalisation de Johanne Prigent et un scénario de Nelly Arcan et de Johanne Prigent. Johanne Prigent a aussi réalisé un film sur l’anorexie, avec la participation au scénario de Monique Gignac, *La peau et les os*, Montréal, Office national du film, 88 min, 1988.

²⁴ ARCAN, Nelly, *Paradis, clef en main*, Montréal, Coups de tête, 2009.

The books of Nelly Arcan reflect what is intrinsically ugly in our society, and this is possibly one of the reasons why certain people are incapable of reading them. They are simply too hideous for eyes accustomed only to superficial beauty.

I greatly admire the talents of Nelly Arcan, both as a writer and as a satirist.²⁵ I was sincerely moved by her disappearance. It did not have to happen, nor should it ever have to happen to those suffering from anorexia or bulimia. Society “killed her by using her own hand”²⁶

I believe that certain initiatives like the *Charte pour une image corporelle saine et diversifiée*²⁷ or programs that promote different forms of beauty and the importance of self-esteem²⁸ show that we are moving in the right direction. I suspect that the burden women have to carry is more overwhelming than ever.

I would like for women to attain the soul and essence of well-being. I think that ANEB could be an ally in this combat. I hope that this organization can carry more weight and show more prominence in society. Nelly Arcan took the risk of expressing herself. Her words screamed with anger. Her ideas confronted prejudices.

Finally, I would like to use this opportunity to thank her for sharing herself with us, for her talent, her intransigence, and her devotion. I hope also that we read that which she had to say.

With all my heart, I wish you eternal peace.²⁹

Dear Isabelle, your message is for me, and for many others still living.

Stéphanie Tessier

Montréal, November 4, 2009.

²⁵ Elle fut notamment chroniqueuse au journal *Ici*.

²⁶ Maurice G. Dantec (<http://www.mauricedantec.com/article/article.php/article/l-etincelle-et-les-extincteurs>) rapporte : « Car c'est en tant qu'écrivain que Nelly Arcan a été « suicidée » ; comme le dit fort justement, et dans une perfection lapidaire, une certaine CalamitySandrine sur un blog québécois où j'ai vainement tenté de discuter, « on l'a tuée de sa propre main ».

²⁷ La Ministre québécoise de la Culture, des Communications et de la Condition féminine, Christine St-Pierre, a dévoilé cette Charte :

<http://www.communique.gouv.qc.ca/gouvqc/communique/GPOF/Octobre2009/16/c7564.html>

²⁸ Le programme de Dove est un exemple de programme pour l'estime de soi :

<http://www.pourtouteslesbeautes.com/overview.asp?section=campaignun>

²⁹ J'aimerais simplement redire que je ne connaissais pas personnellement Nelly Arcan. Sa vérité lui appartient. Et je souhaiterais également offrir mes condoléances à ses parents, à son conjoint et à ses proches.

