

World Literature Today

Book Review

November – December 2009

Jan J. Dominique's first published literary text is an intimate memoir. The main protagonist is a child/woman with a dual name, Lili, who is also Paul. *Memoir of an Amnesiac* is the nonlinear account of a Haitian-born girl who lived and became a woman in Montréal, where Dominique lived from 1970 to 1979. The novel's historical context is generally unspecified in order to better represent the consciousness of its young protagonist. Although there are letters, incompletely dated (e.g., 197 – in part 2), there is an attempt to de-historicize the text by foregrounding the subjective realm of memory.

Since Jean Dominique, Jan's father, was assassinated in 2000, it is important to note – something the publication data doesn't, but the useful interview with the author at the end does – that the French text was first published, not in 2004, but in Haiti in 1984, when her father, radio journalist, was in exile in New York and before the departure of "Baby Doc" Duvalier.

Lili evolves from a naïve Haitian schoolgirl to an intelligent, politically active woman. The murky nature of political events linked to an ever-present "man in black" and the furtive conduct of her father both represent well the limited awareness of the young schoolgirl. The reader is stretched out on the street with Lili when, on the way to school, she has to be shielded from stray bullets by a protective candy salesman. Thereafter, her father drives her to school. The paternal slap teaching her the need to better control her words and facial expressions in a hostile outside world, the cook laughing while feeding leftovers, Lili's desire to be plain and not have a "big bust," and her right to the bottom three shelves of her father's bookcase – these are some of the seminal experiences of Lili that the narrator saves from the menace of "non-memory".

Paul is the confusing name for Lili in Montreal when she "starts over," liberated from the "man in black." Incidents involving racism in Canada and her union activities are presented in the same veiled way, as memory fragments mulled over but not often generalized about. The awakening of the narrator's thoughts on gender provide an intimate counter discourse, a "feminine consciousness," a kind of "gentleness" that counters that of a certain Romain who wants to "lock [her] up" in marriage or the words of a desire-imbued male: "Come, I want you!" Thus, the "little girl" gradually begins her "enthusiastic march" toward womanhood.

The rehashing of events approximates the machinations of memory. The ordering of the facts of a capricious consciousness is done by writing, an activity the narrator is constantly reflecting upon and for which she is always trying to stake out adequate space in her life.

Although literal translations do occur, Irlene Francois's translation is fluid; she should be commended for her success in making more Haitian literature available in English.

Robert H. McCormick, Jr.
Franklin College, Switzerland.