

Identity: Between Imposture and Fiction¹

Anne-Marie St-Jean-Aubre

“When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant. . . . the words seemed not so simple. The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, *women and what they are like*. . . .”
Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*²

I would like to share some food for thought on the relationship among identity, imposture, and fiction. I intuited this relationship in several texts: two award-winning American novels adapted for film, *The Hours* (Michael Cunningham, 1998) and *Revolutionary Road* (Richard Yates, 1961), and *L’imposture*, a play by Evelyne de la Chenelière presented in 2009 at Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (Montreal, Quebec), whose main character, Ève, is a successful novelist, married with two children. Between these two novels – which feature women frustrated without knowing why, failing to convincingly embody their role as housewife, mother, and wife, and blind to the source of their unhappiness – and the title *L’imposture*, a connection emerged. It had to do with identities that are imposed on us, defined by others for us; these pre-established categories into which we must fall are identity-deceptions, whereas self-identities approach the fictional.

I am not setting up an opposition between fiction and reality, since identity is obviously part of the daily reality of every subject and has a direct impact on her life. I think of identity as a fiction, rather, because identity becomes a reality for the subject only by being shaped by language, and both – identity and language – involve retrospection and projection. Subjective identity thus seems to slide toward fiction: the story that one tells oneself about one’s life, the story of which one is the hero. I do oppose fiction to essence, to uniqueness, because this narrative identity is constructed, and therefore malleable. As a construct, it is based on the use of imagination and creativity.

You have probably realized already that my thinking is in line with a constructivist take on the question of identity. Indeed, I consider all identity to be a construct resulting from the interaction of many factors, including gender, race, class, personal choices and encounters, culture, and other things. Identity is neither a hidden essence that one must work to reveal, nor a completely determined and imposed entity, a social destiny dictated from outside. Rather, it is always the product of a negotiation between the dictates of an external environment and a subject’s desires and needs. These forces sometimes act in concert, sometimes against each other; it takes work to maintain a precarious balance. In this regard, one of the great contributions of feminism is not only to have put discussions about identity on the agenda, but also to have complexified them. It seems to me that feminism started with the awareness that “woman” is an imposture: it is a traditional image defined by male discourse, asserting a place that does not necessarily correspond to women’s own desires, which are erased by an education that leads them to (re)produce a preconceived model. Jerome Bruner, author of *Making Stories: Law, Literature*,

¹ This text is an expanded version of “L’identité: entre imposture et fiction,” which was first published in French in 2012, in a collection of essays titled *Femmes: théorie et création*, eds. Thérèse St-Gelais and Martine Delvaux (proceedings) (Montreal: Éditions du remue-ménage), 75–80.

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004 [1928]), 3 (emphasis added).

Life, explains, “So automatic and swift is this process of constructing reality that we are often blind to it. . . . Only when we suspect we have the wrong story do we begin asking how a narrative may structure (or distort) our view of how things really are.”³ It is in this sense that the issue of deception is at the heart of the feminist movement, because the movement exposed women’s suspicion about the story that they were told about themselves.

A Collective Ethos Revealed

With *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, Betty Friedan liberated an entire generation of American women by naming the imposture that no one spoke of, the “problem with no name” – the title of one of her chapters. She explains in her book that in the United States, during the fifteen years following the end of the Second World War, the cultural prescriptions suggested to women through magazine articles (written by women for women), television programs, films, and pop-psych books were so strong that women had no leverage for negotiating their individual identity. With the advent of the consumer society and mass advertising, a single definition of “woman,” reducing her to the role of mother, wife, and housekeeper, was played in a loop.⁴ Friedan, who worked in the women’s magazines sector at that time, said that the formal rule dictating the editorial choices of these publications was: women must be able to identify themselves, and they do not identify with what is outside of the domestic world. Every topic had to be approached from the angle of the feminine mystique, despite the fact that these magazines’ readership was largely made up of women with at least a high school, if not a college, education.⁵ This bias colouring information given to American women, and especially the fact that their life could have no meaning outside of their relationship with their husband and children, eventually led to an identity crisis. Rather than subscribing to the idea that women’s dissatisfaction was linked to their feminine nature, suggesting that they needed to adjust to their role,⁶ Friedan addressed this stance in order to deconstruct its workings.

Where did this restrictive definition of womanhood come from? Friedan states that starting in 1949, the discourse that she calls the “feminine mystique” – ideas and norms presented as essential factors of femaleness – convinced women that their dissatisfaction was caused by their desire to be something other than what they were – by their envy of men. They had to accept their own nature and recognize that they could realize themselves only through sexual passivity, male domination, and maternal love.⁷ Denouncing this imposture, which was the fiction of a single identity prescribed from outside as a model, Friedan helped American housewives pinpoint the cause of their feeling of emptiness, giving them permission to affirm themselves differently.

As Jean-Claude Kaufmann writes in his book *L’invention de soi. Une théorie de l’identité* [Self-invention: A theory of identity], identity is first deployed in the world of representation before it can become a condition of action, guiding concretely the course of people’s lives.⁸ What he means is that, drawing on our understanding of our past, we first imagine possible future identities, and then we work to make them a reality. Seen in this light, identity is concerned

³ Jerome S. Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 8–9.

⁴ Betty Friedan, “Metamorphosis: Two Generations Later,” in *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: WW Norton, 1997 [1963]), 18.

⁵ Betty Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 79–122.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68–70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 91–92.

⁸ Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *L’invention de soi. Une théorie de l’identité* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004), 170–74.

mainly with self-invention. But for that imagined identity to become a condition of action, leading to change, the subject must first believe in the story that she tells herself, in the meaning that she gives to her own life. If her faith in the self-images that she puts forward wavers, or if she is unable to realize them because of restrictive cultural contexts, the result is depression, a state of mind that intermingles two failures: failure of meaning and failure to act. This is exactly the situation experienced by women in the 1950s and 1960s, described in other words by Betty Friedan, and found in the novels *The Hours* and *Revolutionary Road*.

A Collective Ethos Challenged

Depression and madness caused by “identity-imposture” is also what Kate Zambreno writes about in her book *Heroines*, in which she looks at the lives of the muses of the great modernist novelists, the wives or mistresses who were characters in their husbands’ books as they were struggling to find their own words, their own voices. Zelda Fitzgerald, Vivienne Eliot, and Colette Peignot, known as “Laure” after she died – rejected, respectively, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, T. S. Eliot, and George Bataille for their emotional excesses – wrote diaries and attempted to publish their works. Zelda Fitzgerald even fought to establish her right to her own story, after F. Scott Fitzgerald, backed by her doctors, decided that her life was “raw material” for his books only, as Zambreno recounts it:

The doctor as go-between tells Zelda that if she could not write “masterpieces,” like her husband, then her “ambitions” to write would only further “depress” her. “I will always be unhappy then,” she said. “I was a good deal more unhappy when I did not want to write.” . . . Zelda begs to be put away again. Scott tells her that that can’t happen, as he doesn’t believe she’s actually “insane.” It is ultimately decided that until he is done with *Tender [is the Night]* she cannot write any more about psychiatry. Scott tells Zelda – “If you write a play, it cannot be a play about psychiatry, and it cannot be a play laid on the Riviera, and it cannot be a play laid in Switzerland; and whatever the idea is, it will have to be submitted to me.” He ends with: “I am the professional novelist, and I am supporting you. That is all my material. None of it is your material.”⁹

Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, convincingly shows that madness and feminine feelings of dissatisfaction have a long intertwined history. Zambreno also alludes to this: “These muses of modernism were often objectified twice over, through literature and often through psychiatry.”¹⁰ What changed over time is that instead of this amalgam being seen as a natural one, women’s chronic unhappiness gained a philosophical and political value.

Referring to Theodor W. Adorno, Judith Butler, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, suggests that moral doubts occur only when the collective ethos with we live is no longer unanimously shared. Only under these circumstances does the invisible and taken-for-granted “ambience” informing our lives suddenly become very tangible: it no longer fits our aspirations, it’s felt as restrictive, it’s violently imposed as an unavoidable context. And violence is the key here. As Butler explains, what is violent is the discrepancy between one’s understanding of one’s life and the behaviour that one is asked to adopt, a situation arising when the collective ethos seems anachronistic.¹¹ Could excessive emotions, fits, destructive behaviour, and other pathologizing

⁹ Kate Zambreno, *Heroines* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 217–18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007, p. 3-9.

factors be reactions to an imposed collective ethos felt as anachronistic? In Zambreno's opinion, "Socially sanctioned 'illness' was the only safe way for HER to ever go outside the strict boundaries of behaviour."¹² What other choices did she have if she didn't fit the mould? "Madness" is a term that Zambreno uses "to describe these women's alienation, because [she] see[s] their breakdowns as a philosophical experience that is about the confinement, or even death, of the self."¹³

By writing their lives, those mad muses were doing more than just chronicling in their diaries, they were giving themselves a form, an identity, performing on the stage made of the norms and values of their time, and testing its limits. They were risking their intelligibility by longing for another way of being. And because they were going against the collective ethos of their time, they were diagnosed as mad, as illegible. This diagnosis reveals the extent of the authority of what Butler calls the "inhuman" to limit the subject's options; as she puts it, "The 'inhuman' designates the way in which the social world impinges upon us in ways that make us invariably unknowing about ourselves."¹⁴

Plays addressing traditional social categories in a feminist perspective also denounced the well-known figures of the mother, wife, virgin, whore, witch, and hysteric – all female characters whose universe was confined mostly to their relationships with men. In response to these limited definitions of female characters, feminist playwrights in Quebec in the 1970s and 1980s created alternative female figures, models of independent and dynamic women, or featured the lives of historically important women whose value had not been recognized. This early wave aimed to create empowered women in order to expose the imposture to which women had been subjected by being reduced to roles corresponding to men's vision of them. But then, there is the trap to be avoided of pressuring women to be perfect by setting the standard with these characters – great models, women who can do and have it all, it seems, but at what cost? To quote Zambreno again, on Second Wave feminists' take on writers such as Zelda Fitzgerald, Vivienne Eliot, Jean Rhys, and Jane Bowles, "There is this sense reading de Beauvoir and others that the woman writer must write an empowered woman, like Jo in *Little Women* or something. Maybe these women writer's heroines or anti-heroines are not empowered – but maybe they render honestly a flawed and skewed subjectivity. My main problem with de Beauvoir is that she doesn't give the silly girl any space to revolt. Maybe the girl seeks revenge by wedging herself in the larger cultural conversation."¹⁵

Having it all: the feminist promise. The problem with this idea is that it erects other kinds of barriers that, in the end, have the same negative effects, making women feel inadequate – no longer because they can't act but because they are judged as not acting enough. As Anne-Marie Slaughter, the first woman to hold the position of director of policy planning at the State Department in the United States, told *The Atlantic* after she chose to leave her dream job to return to her family when her teenage sons needed her, "I'd been the one telling young women at my lectures that you can have it all and do it all, regardless of what field you are in. Which means I'd been part, albeit unwittingly, of making millions of women feel that *they* are to blame if they cannot manage to rise up the ladder as fast as men and also have a family and an active home life (and be thin and beautiful to boot). . . . It is time for women in leadership positions to recognize that although we are still blazing trails and breaking ceilings, many of us are also reinforcing a falsehood: that 'having it all' is, more than anything, a function of personal determination." She

¹² Zambreno, *Heroines*, 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁴ Butler, *Giving an Account*, 106.

¹⁵ Zambreno, *Heroines*, 263–64.

then quoted Kerry Rubin and Lia Macko's *Midlife Crisis at 30*: "What we discovered in our research is that while the empowerment part of the equation has been loudly celebrated, there has been very little honest discussion among women of our age about the real barriers and flaws that still exist in the system despite the opportunities we inherited."¹⁶

Identity, Narrative, Fiction, and Faith

So, what about plays that address the problem of identity without necessarily claiming to be feminist, without portraying empowered women? An interesting position to contribute to discussions on the issue of identity would be one that clearly posits that if identity has been an imposture it is because it is primarily a fiction that a woman tells first to herself, and then to others. This is what Évelyne de la Chenelière's play *L'imposture* does. And maybe, by reflecting on one's own power in writing one's own life, a breach can be opened in which imagining oneself can lead to acting on one's life.

L'imposture takes place at three different times, whose episodes intermingle. First is the scene of the dinner party, in 1989, hosted by Bruno and Ève, a successful writer, for Frédérick, a bachelor disappointed with his life, and Élise and Sébastien, a couple expecting a child. After they leave the party, Élise and Sébastien die in a car accident, an event that triggers Ève's decision to have children. This episode takes place before the birth of Léo and Justine, Ève and Bruno's children. Then, sometime around 2009, there is the promotional interview that we see projected on the backdrop of the set, in which Léo, now a young man, talks about his first novel. Throughout the play, excerpts from the novel are read by an off-stage voice or projected on the backdrop. At some point, we realize that this novel, about a son's perception of his mother, a writer, was actually written by Ève and given to her son so he could pose as its author. Finally, there is the temporality that corresponds to Ève's writing of the novel, coloured by everything that happens in her life. Pretty quickly we understand that what the play shows is somehow located between Ève's real life and its formatting in the novel, its "fictionalization." We know this because the beginnings of most of the scenes are announced by chapter titles from the novel, projected on the backdrop – for example, *Chapter 1: My mother is a woman who writes*; *Chapter 2: My mother has a dog*; *Chapter 3: My mother experiences desire*. As spectators, we see things mainly through Ève's mind's eye, as most moments correspond to her restaging of important scenes of her life as she writes her novel. Thus, the play involves Ève's self-image meeting what she believes others think of her, and she puts her thoughts in her son's mouth, as the narrator of her novel. This crossover illustrates that it is not so easy to relate to others and to ourselves, since our story quickly reflects what we think others think of us.¹⁷

As so, *L'imposture* seems to complicate the relationships between the externality – the social variable – of identity, marked by the commitments that we make to others and the cultural requirements to which we are subjected, and the building of a subjective identity, which involves the creation of self-image and self-narrative through the use of language and storytelling. In the play, we find the same tension about work-life balance that I discussed above, with Ève saying metaphorically in her novel that she sees herself being dragged by her dog instead of being the leading woman she dreamt of embodying when she was a little girl, holding the leash with self-confidence.¹⁸ And why would she have decided to offer her most accomplished book to her son,

¹⁶ Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," *The Atlantic*, July-August 2012, accessed January 26, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>.

¹⁷ Bruner, *Making Stories*, 84.

¹⁸ Évelyne de la Chenelière, *L'imposture* (Montreal: Leméac, 2009), 22.

if not to make amends, feeling that she may not have been the mother she was hoping to be, as Justine, her daughter, had left home and was involved with a man who was in a gang? She adds, in Act 5, “That’s the problem: when we expect something, we end up disappointed. It happens to me all the time. When we plan something in our head, and what happens after doesn’t match our projections, it is very disappointing. That’s why I force myself to not expect anything. Because it’s too hard for me to bear the difference between my projection of life and life itself.”¹⁹ That’s one way of coping with feelings of dissatisfaction that we aren’t finished with. Slaughter reminds us, quoting the economists Justin Wolfers and Betsey Stevenson, that “‘although women as a group have made substantial gains in wages, educational attainment, and prestige over the past three decades . . . women are less happy today than their predecessors were in 1972, both in absolute terms and relative to men.’”²⁰ Would that be because now that there are multiple possibilities to choose from, and so it’s harder to gain a feeling of fulfilment, as we have the luxury of wondering what would have happened if we had chosen another path?

The play echoes the ideas formulated by theorists such as Bruner, Kaufmann, and Nancy Huston, who, using different arguments, all suggest that identity exists mostly in a narrative form. Bruner’s thesis in *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* is that humans know the world, reality, only through language used to construct stories. He firmly states that narrative conventions – stating that a story is made by an agent who engages in an action for a specific purpose, using all the means that she needs, as the result of a trigger or disruptive element²¹ – reflect the way we understand and represent reality. Nancy Huston makes a similar comment in *L’espèce fabulatrice* [*The Tale-Tellers: A Short Study of Humankind*]: “To speak is not merely to report reality: it is also, always, to shape, interpret and invent.”²² Thus, in her view, it is through storytelling that we are able to make sense of our reality and our identity. Huston pushes this idea further by asserting that we are the novels we construct to narrate our lives: “*I* is my way of conceiving of all my experiences.”²³

What Huston adds to Bruner’s line of thought, then, is the importance of the speed with which the subject learns about the temporal span of her life, starting with birth and ending with death. It is because she has “the intuition of what a full life is,” something that she sees as “a meaningful path,”²⁴ that the subject thinks of life in the form of a story. Kaufmann concurs when he states that it is the narrative nature of identity that makes it a driving force for action, propelling and orienting the subject’s future. Indeed, the subject interprets the causal links in her past in the light of her present. This retrospective movement leads her to understand how past events proceeded in a certain way, to justify the present from where she thinks and to plan a future that she envisions. It is why the narrative part of identity construction is key to self-orientation. In other words –Kaufmann’s – “Ego builds its *memory* in a given direction as it builds its projects, orienting (or attempting to orient) future actions. It unifies itself while giving sense (meaning and direction²⁵) to its life.”²⁶

¹⁹ Ibid., 31–32 (our translation).

²⁰ Slaughter, “Why Women.”

²¹ Bruner, *Making Stories*, p. 47.

²² Nancy Huston, *L’espèce fabulatrice* (Arles: Actes Sud, Babel series, 2010 [2008]), 18 (our translation).

²³ Ibid., 27 (our translation).

²⁴ Ibid., p. 14 (our translation).

²⁵ In French, “sens” means both “meaning” and “orientation,” a play on words that is impossible to translate into English.

²⁶ Kaufmann, *Invention*, 159 (our translation; emphasis added).

How is *L'imposture* connected to the above discussion? The play presents Ève's point of view on her life, a thread that she spins while writing her novel, mixing moments of retrospection and projection. Both Ève's words and the staging of the play relate to Bruner's stance on narrative identity, which he defines as a fundamentally unstable element that must make what is familiar – the past – coexist with the horizon of future possibilities.²⁷ We recognize this principle at work in the play because multiple incidents linked to the episode of the dinner party (the past) are restaged, each time slightly differently, as if to emphasize that elements significant to the unfolding of Ève's life are announced by this scene, but also that these events are constantly re-created in her mind, portrayed each time differently to justify an ever-changing present and a continually reimagined future.

It is here, in these operations, that the fiction lies. Bruner points out that we cannot verbalize the experience we have of the world without adopting a viewpoint that gives consistency and continuity to the vicissitudes of life.²⁸ Every story is always told from a singular perspective, which, by shaping the raw material – the factual bases – of the story, involves fiction. This subjective history, one version among others of the meaning that can be attributed to the course of events, becomes the reality by which we live, the one guiding our actions and acting as a basis for our identity. *L'imposture* stresses the important role played by this idea of perspective or viewpoint, which is at the heart of the play, since all of the characters – what they are, but also what they think – are made accessible to us only through Ève's vision of them, forming the basis of her novel. Thus, not only does the play show us that self-identity is a construction that needs fiction to become integrated, but also that our personal relationships are full of fiction too – that is, biased, subjective, necessarily based on a singular perspective: ours.

L'imposture sensitizes us to the discrepancies that exist between the perception that we have of ourselves and the perception that others have of us. We also find fiction within these discrepancies, since fiction offers the only way to overcome the impossibility of having a completely clear knowledge of the other standing before us. One sentence, important not only because it is repeated as a leitmotif four times in the play, but also because it ends the last scene, summarizes this idea: "Our quest . . . to be loved for what we are not."²⁹ With these words, Ève recognizes that we love people for what we imagine them to be, and we are loved not for what we are, but for the idea that others have of us. In the end, to accept the fiction of interpersonal relationships is to accept that every relationship is based on an act of faith, since absolute transparency between two people is impossible.

The need for an act of faith – first, in one's identity, and then in the ability of others to perceive us as we wish to be perceived – betrays the presence of fiction in these two situations. Finally, we might conclude that we can understand identity as a fiction in two opposite ways: on the one hand, seen through the guise of an imposed nature, identity becomes an imposture limiting the subject's capacities, fuelling her feeling of inadequacy, which can lead to depression or madness; on the other hand, perceived as an individual fiction, the story that one tells about oneself, identity acquires mobility, malleability, that, although it can be agonizing, gives the subject the opportunity to think herself otherwise and to act so that this projection can become a reality. And having that possibility, at least, is a start.

²⁷ Bruner, *Making Stories*, 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁹ De la Chenelière, *L'imposture*, 102 (our translation).

References

- Bruner, Jerome S. *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.
- Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*. New York: Picador, 2002 [1998].
- De la Chenelière, Évelyne *L'imposture*. (Montreal: Leméac, 2009.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. With "Introduction," published in 1973 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary and a preface, "Metamorphosis: Two Generations Later," published in 1997. New York: WW Norton, 2001 [1963].
- Huston, Nancy. *L'espèce fabulatrice*. Arles: Actes Sud, Babel series, 2010 [2008].
- Kaufmann, Jean-Claude. *L'invention de soi. Une théorie de l'identité*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2004.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004 [1928].
- Yates, Richard. *Revolutionary Road*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2008 [1961].
- Zambreno, Kate. *Heroines*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012.