Trading Secrets - Introduction [1]

Trading Secrets (Confidence pour confidence) is Paule Constant's seventh novel and, although three of her previous works were finalists, this is the first to receive France's highest literary honor, the Prix Goncourt (1998). It contains, as many critics have noted, links to all of Constant's other novels. In addition to its traditional "unities" of time, space, and action, it is connected to the earlier works through the author's characteristic treatment of her characters, narration, and themes.

Constant's characters are at once caricatures and painfully "real." Some of them reappear (as in Balzac) from one novel to another and some of them simply continue the struggles of earlier characters, but all of them illustrate dysfunctional and neurotic solutions to the problems they face. Constant uses "mirrored" scenes, inverted or played out differently, to reflect or recall scenes from the earlier novels and to underscore the unity of her *oeuvre*, as well as to treat the recurrent theme of the idealized image associated with a longed-for identity. The overriding theme of exile (both geographic and psychological) is as evident (if not more so) in this novel as in her novels of Africa and South America, or the second of the "Tiffany" novels (which takes place in a convent school in France).[2] And, as in the earlier novels where she has been fiercely critical of colonialism, *postcolonial* colonialism, and the narcissism associated with both, in *Trading Secrets* her pen finds its target in the American discourse of political correctness that sometimes confuses identity (knowing who one is) with having a story to tell (narration) as well as national/ethnic origin (knowing one's "source/roots") with being "original".

Trading Secrets is about four women aging with difficulty in spite of the advances of feminism. It is an incisive portrait of painfully complex, psychologically damaged individuals, all of whom have been, in some sense, "colonized." The women are gathered on an Easter Sunday morning, after the close of a feminist conference at a fictional university in Kansas. Three of the

women are guests of the fourth, the organizer of the conference, and they are lodged in her house in varying degrees of discomfort. In the opening scene the landscape is frozen, just as the women are «condemned» inside the house whose doors and windows are electronically sealed. In the kitchen a small rat (jerboa) is dying in its cage, a deliberately obvious mirror of the four women trapped in the sealed house.

The women are apparently sharing their solitude with one another through their remembered stories. However, despite their obvious similarities, both the stories and the women remain isolated and alone; each one wants to be someone else. Paule Constant herself has said, "Ce qui réunit ces femmes est que chacune d'entre elles voudrait être l'autre. C'est un livre en miroir. C'est un titre en miroir, faussement doux: Méfiance-méfiance." ("What unites these women is that each one of them wants to be the other. The book is a mirror. The title is a mirror, falsely sweet. Suspicion-suspicion.") Each character's preoccupation with being another, «idealized self,» reflects the inability to be her own «real self,» to use Karen Horney's terms. Each of these characters is a portrait of disconnection from the self that reflects the fear of being apprehended (shamed) by the others, the fear that the fiction she presents as her life will be exposed.

All of Constant's central characters suffer a devastating deficit, from which none recovers. Whether male or female, sympathetic or disagreeable, they experience their own absence and God's absence, their inability to <u>be-in-relationship</u> (to use psychologist, Jean Baker Miller's term), either in the world or with themselves. Absence in <u>space</u> is also absence in <u>time</u>, as well as the absence of "voice." Constant's characters don't know <u>where</u> or <u>when</u> they are. Her female characters confront a violent rupture in childhood associated with abandonment and absence that leaves them in a sea of irreparable loss, and which recalls for anglophone readers the novels of Jean Rhys. The ever-present "huis clos" (no exit) that transforms itself into an arena,[3] making

victims of both the persecutors and the persecuted, is nowhere more carefully crafted than in Trading Secrets.

Lola Dhol[4] is a failed Norwegian actress, an alcoholic who screams as a form of auto-therapy, and a narcissist. She is terrified of impersonal hotel rooms as well as of her growing anonymity; she is assigned to sleep in the hostess's own room. Her self-absorption originates in privilege and in the expectation that such privilege should continue. She knows that, as Simone de Beauvoir says, her «biographie officielle ne [se] confond pas avec [sa] véritable histoire» (Beauvoir 534) ("official biography does not correspond to her true story"), but this is what she wants to keep out of consciousness. She imagines that, if she holds on long enough for the right role, as Beauvoir says, «la gloire [...] rejaillira sur elle» (Beauvoir 538) ("glory [...] will splash back on her"); the admiration and devotion of others that she believes are due her will confirm her own view of herself.

Babette Cohen[5] sleeps in the basement with the laundry hanging all about her, reflecting her anxiety about her former immigrant status. She is a perfectionist who feels herself obligated to expose the truth behind others' facades but this is simply a way of protecting herself from the truth of her own situation. She sees herself as superior to Gloria in all matters of taste, intellect, and professionalism. "[I]t made her irritated to see how rough Gloria was, how coarse, how she never did anything carefully no matter what" (*TS* 155), and she sees in Lola a sniveling and slovenly 'has-been.' It does not occur to Babette that the confusion of material wealth and professional exactitude with the elusive dignity she seeks is as pretentious as any of Gloria's attempts to fabricate an identity, including a recently discovered plagiarism-in-progress, or Lola's obsession with her fading beauty and loss of reputation. Babette, however, is facing the desertion of her husband after twenty-five years and the loss of dignity this implies for her recalls her childhood exile from Algeria. The psychological demand that others strive to keep up her

own standards recalls Franz Fanon's observation, «[t]here is no forgiveness when one who claims a superiority falls below the standard» (Fanon 24). As much as Babette has accomplished, somehow it will never be enough.

Aurore Amer[6] is a white French novelist who grew up in Africa and who feels herself "a prisoner to some modern alchemy" (*TS* 33) which terrifies her. In many ways she remains a child; in friends' homes she is perpetually assigned to a child's bedroom. Feeling trapped in a closed space, Aurore seeks at once freedom and protection, both of which remain out of reach. She obsesses about going to work or perhaps to live in a zoo with monkeys like the one she had as a childhood pet. She seeks a location of "safety" with non-speaking sub-human creatures that underscores her tragic sense of isolation.[7] In the kitchen, she is unable to make a place for herself among the others. She observes condescendingly that they have put everything into their idealized professional lives, while longing for the traditionally romanticized lives of women who do not work; she sees them all as mistakenly bound up in what they imagine is reality. Unlike these "other" women, Aurore thinks she is able to name her disconnection, "It's being out of sync with time, with space, with others, with women, with men" (*TS* 42). Yet Aurore has no place among these women, no place of being-in-relationship, for although her struggle does include the added dimension of a certain degree of consciousness, knowing that one is struggling is not enough; being-in-relationship takes a commitment to being in the present, and Aurore is not ready to do this.

Gloria Patter,[8] the hostess, aggressive and arrogant, is as isolated and alone as the other women. She is a black American of Caribbean origin who wishes she were African but cannot find her place in any culture. Just as the other women are uncomfortable in their assigned places in her house, Gloria is ambivalent and defensive about her living situation. She worries about what her neighborhood, a largely poor black community, says about her. Her house has suffered

both fire and flood damage in recent years, and is now protected by an integrated security system, for which she has a remote control. (She has constructed a system of defense around an existence that is as precarious as that of the other women.) She is in the process of plagiarizing one of Aurore's novels, which she plans to call a "translation" if she is caught. When she strangles her daughter's dying rat, the others are shocked, but Gloria defends herself from the implied reproaches. She accuses the other women of complacency and assumes responsibility for the act, even though this confirms her as someone who does the dirty work of others.

Gloria's ideal image of herself is that she is a prize-winning African writer of fiction with a story to tell, and she resorts to theft as a shortcut to self-expression. (The book she is "writing" bears a close resemblance to Constant's White Spirit.)[9] She states in defense of her project when Babette confronts her, "I want a book that tells about my birth; I want a book that tells about my childhood; I want a book that says that I am someone somewhere" (*TS* 158). What Gloria wants is a "nation [read origin/identity] as narration" (Bhabha 142). In some measure, Constant is here de-fetishizing the notion of ethnic "origins" as the "source" of identity, and this character makes present the difficulties inherent in the effort to equate origin with originality. The act of plagiarism is a deliberate effort to confuse identities, and Gloria seeks recognition in the illusion of being her "ideal self," who is, for the moment, Aurore.

By killing the dying rat, Gloria reappropriates in real life the act/"origin" she has already stolen in her written work; she lays claim to it for herself, hoping to eliminate the notions of originality and plagiarism. It becomes her act, which she then claims is not violent but "thoughtful" and worthy of respect, like her "translation" of Aurore's text. She seeks, like the magician through a sleight of hand to replace the notion of mimicry (as in Bhabha) with that of subversion (as in Bakhtin), by which she means to establish her authority. The calculated aspect of this mirrored action is meant to separate her from subservience, but she cannot defend her

behavior without placing herself in the role of the black slave, a figure of tragic exile in American culture.

Although these four women are certainly trading secrets, they are neither facing their private fears and losses, nor helping each other to do so. Each one is trying to avoid the implications of her loss. For Lola it was rape; for Babette it was being exiled at the time of Algerian independence; for Gloria it was being orphaned and poor in the Antilles in the 1940-50s, and black in America in the 1960s; and for Aurore it was being orphaned when her parents died in a fire. In spite of momentary confidences, not one of these women is really *listening* to the others. Each one is thinking about herself in an illusory past or future while the other is talking. Each one is avoiding her own responsibility for her current situation.

The central motif of mirrors is visible in the scenes that recall the other novels, in the scenes in front of the bathroom mirror, and in the characters who want to be each other. More importantly, however, Gloria's plagiarism, as well as the rat-killing scene in the kitchen, are also reflections and reproductions that link this novel to Constant's earlier works and to her message. It is primarily in Gloria's actions that the author situates her criticism of cultural developments that foster aggression, especially the narcissism and vindictiveness that are intimately involved in the usurper's demand for recognition of an identity that is confused with idealized longings or illusions. Nevertheless, <u>all</u> the women display behaviors and states of being that both describe and ensure psychological exile.

American readers will perhaps wonder why Constant chooses to include a character whose portrait could be construed as racist. Constant is taking a stand against violence by showing us how aggression has worked its way into modern culture in the guise of excuses (substitutions) for dealing with the realities of life and as distractions from the issues in question. Constant's treatment of Gloria, as well as the other women, is meant to show how easy it is for

those who have been subjected to the disdain of dominant groups, i.e. colonized, to slip into behaviors that arise from anxiety. It also shows how these neurotic behaviors easily become obsessional. Although it does attend to the rhetoric of ethnicity in the discourse of political correctness, this is not about the race of the character; it is a statement about evolving postcolonial Western culture. It is about the substitution of an unoriginal, idealized action/narration/self for a missing or inaccessible sense of the "real" self (Horney). Indeed, the character, Gloria, is meant to draw attention to the particularly American way of dealing with reparation for colonial losses, even though (perhaps because?) colonialism in American culture (as in the treatment of the underclass) is something we prefer to ignore.

With each of her novels, Constant underscores the degree to which violence is becoming increasingly prevalent in our world, and Trading Secrets situates itself within this larger context. It does not seek to denounce American women, either black or white, in academia. Rather, it seeks to call attention to the experience of loss associated with dissociation, colonization, and exile, which are found even in intellectually gifted, academic, and professional women. These (postcolonial) women are the result of practices exposed in the earlier novels, and the reality, both cultural and psychological, is that Constant's are "true" stories. As much as any male characters in fiction, her female characters represent the problems of being human, and it is this distinction that makes this novel a landmark in French literature.

Readers are rarely indifferent to Constant's writing; the works demand a response, often at a visceral level, to the devastation in her fictional world. If there is hope in this world, it is not in the characters or their stories, but in the author's commitment to writing the stories and creating the characters. That the characters are destined to fail does not preclude, but necessitates, hope. The telling of stories presupposes that the listener/reader will understand in what sense they are meaningful, and that, in the case of tragic events, the catastrophic misfortune

will influence his/her life accordingly, so as to prevent such dreadful encounters in 'real' life. The reader understands that stories of devastation are meant not only to speak the writer's experience and give it meaning, but to demand, and to expect, that the actions in question will not be visited upon others. Constant courageously demonstrates the nature of destructive behaviors, and she suggests that consciousness of this dimension of human understanding (difficult as this is to achieve), as well as a commitment to being-in-the-present, are what contain the promise of hope.

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Notes

[1] I would like to thank Janine Ricouart, Liz Constable, Betsy Wing, and Madeleine Hage for their suggestions in preparing this Introduction.
[2] *Ouregano*, *White Spirit*, *Balta*, *La fille du Gobernator*, and *Propriété privée*
[3] Constant, personal conversation, 1998
[4] Her name evokes her "doll"-like condition.
[5] Her surname is meant to indicate her Jewish origin.
[6] Aurore's name suggests the death of the rat (la mort au rat), as well as à mère, amer, and à mer.
[7] It calls to mind John Bowlby's studies on attachment, abandonment, and loss using monkeys, which echoed in primates the human responses to loss of connection with the mother. In these studies animals deprived of all forms of touch became either aggressive or psychotically withdrawn.
[8] "Gloria" suggests Karen Horney's "search for glory", while "Patter" evokes in English a magician's distracting chatter, in Latin (pater) the Name-of-the Father (Lacan), and in broken French, *pas-terre*, or no-land.
[9] Like Lola in *White Spirit* who seeks literally to erase her sexuality and her skin color, Gloria pursues these goals metaphorically.

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