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A Conversation with Michèle Roberts, about Novels, History and Autobiography

By M. Soraya García-Sánchez¹

Abstract

Michèle Roberts is a contemporary feminist writer born in England in 1949. Brought up with two languages and cultures, she was educated at a religious school and she later lived in a convent for a long time. The conversation presented below took place in London in August 2010. The purpose of this interview was to talk with Michèle Roberts about her writing and the link between her novels and her memoir. The contemporary and feminist writer talked about Virginia Woolf, Marion Milner, about personal and public spheres, about exploring when writing and about being an artist, among other topics. The conversation is thus presented in full as it happened.

Keywords: memoir, Michèle Roberts, novels, women's writing

Michèle Roberts is a contemporary feminist writer born in Hertfordshire, England in 1949. She was brought up with two languages and cultures and she was educated at a religious school. Half-English and half-French, Roberts also lived in a convent for a long time, and these facts have influenced her works. Daughter of an English Protestant father and a French Catholic mother, Roberts has always combined her personal inner feelings with the political outer thoughts in her narration. Not only were her parents relevant in her upbringing but also her grandmother. As the novelist has commented on various occasions, the figure of her grandmother gave her freedom and inspiration at the time of writing. Her grandmother introduced Roberts in the art of storytelling and thus in the process of imagining, dreaming and inventing (*The Book of Mrs Noah*). In relation to her family, Roberts has also revealed how her battle with her mother—that body of authority who wants to have power over her daughter and makes her behave according to the morality required by society—has been depicted in her works of fiction (*A Piece of the Night*). On the other hand, not only the relationship between mother and daughter, but also the union between father and daughter, and her wish to be accepted by the male body, are reflected in novels like *Impossible Saints*.

Roberts attended Oxford University where she read a Bachelor of Arts in English. It was during these years at university that Michèle Roberts became a member of the “Women’s Liberation Movement,” which she has always supported by writing articles in magazines like *Spare Rib* and *City Limits*. Michèle Roberts has not only been a feminist activist, but she has also performed other professions such as a librarian in Bangkok, a cook, and a creative writing professor at the University of Norwich. Although she lives between France and England, Roberts has also resided in Thailand, Italia, and USA.

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Through exploring, reading and writing, and through the revision of stories Michèle Roberts has fought against the stereotypes marked by society, and against the doctrines defended by the Catholic Church, although she recognises that this religious culture has given her both stories and a productive language. Roberts has always fought back against authoritarianism, against Catholicism, and it is by means of her novels how the feminist writer creates new women who are liberated from religious, social and political margins. In this line, there are many depictions of the body and sex in Roberts's heroines. For Roberts, the female protagonist is rescued in order that she can verbally and sexually express herself being triumphant before the Fathers of the Church. For that reason, Roberts subversively finishes with the binaries between good and bad women in novels such as *The Wild Girl*, for instance, in which not only being a woman is fully depicted and celebrated but also, the sexual union with the man.

Michèle Roberts's production is quite varied. The contemporary author has written novels, short stories, poetry, articles and essays. This conversation, however, did especially focus on her works of fiction. Her first novel was written when the author was 29 years old, *A Piece of the Night* (1978), and it shows biographical data about the search of her persona and her sexuality. *The Visitation* (1983), *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) are three novels that deal with biblical women. Roberts has been inspired by women's position in the Church and she provides other ways of being for them: Eve, Mary Magdalene and Mrs Noah. Roberts is more experimental in her writing with *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), a narration that combines different voices and historical periods with the three main protagonists: Flora, Hattie and the Pharaoh's daughter. *Daughters of the House* (1992) won the *W. S. Smith Literary Award*. *Impossible Saints* (1997) and *Fair Exchange* (1999) are two novels inspired by historical women, being Saint Theresa of Ávila in the first narration and Mary Wollstonecraft in the latter. *The Looking Glass* (2000) is the novel set in Normandy just before First World War, in which Genevieve is alone in search of a home and of love, that of the poet Gérard. Charlotte Brontë's individuality and myth is revisited and rewritten in *The Mistressclass* (2003), a novel that combines the Brontë sisters' accounts with those of two writers and sisters living in contemporary London. The two narrations intertwine to connect past and present. *Reader, I Married Him* (2005) is about Aurora, the woman who transforms her persona every time she gets married.

In the conversation presented below, Michèle Roberts talked about her novels and also about her memoir. She described how her autobiographical account, *Paper Houses: A Memoir of the '70s and Beyond* (2007) took place mainly in the city of London during revolutionary years for young women who wanted to be heard and who wanted to enter into the public domain. Michèle Roberts also talked about her beginnings as a writer during the 70s in such a urban space. The figure of the female *flâneur* who strolls around London to explore and to observe instead of being observed, was also discussed in this conversation.

This interview took place in a café during my research stay at the Institute of English Studies (IES), School of Advanced Studies at the University of London on August 13th, 2010. I would like to thank both the IES at the University of London for their hospitality and support while I visited them, and the Agencia Canaria de Investigación, Innovación y Sociedad de la Información (ACIISI), for funding this research work. Without the support of both institutions this conversation may have not

taken place. My special thanks to Michèle Roberts for her kindness and for sharing some of her time to discuss about her work.

Hi Michèle, thank you very much for your time here today. Hi. The first question I would like to ask you is, obviously, I have enjoyed thoroughly the reading and analysis of Paper Houses: A Memoir of the '70s and Beyond. And I cannot stop connecting your memoir with those autobiographical writings by Virginia Woolf. Why have you chosen the form of the memoir to write one of your most recent literary works? Have you preserved that polarity between fiction and fact or between the narrator and the narratee?

I have to tell you something quite banal which is that my dear publisher suggested that I write a memoir. It was her idea. I then thought what I should write about. And I thought. I'd like to write about the seventies because I think they've become very misrepresented in modern culture at the time of cultural self indulgent, nonsense, on the one hand, and the glamour of Baroque, but also, on the other hand, puritanical feminisms. And of course, feminism wasn't puritanical. So I thought I can set the record straight. And I also realised in the seventies when I did get going as a writer, so it was about my beginnings. And because I am a kind of Marxist too I've believed in history and that memory involves history in complicated ways. I was going to write about my self starting as a writer and about the seventies and I had to write about the politics of the time which I was very involved in as a woman and as a writer.

So, for the second part of your question, I quickly realised that to write a memoir, you have to give it a form, a shape. And that's where you draw upon your fictional knowledge of the form. Because similar chronology isn't enough, I think. Well to get it published these days, there has to be a story. So, I came up with this idea of a story about my move from house to house to house to house. And it would be a story not only about what happens in the house but between the haunting, on the street, because that is where politics will happen, on the street. So for women just as much as for men because the whole thing about the women movement was about as women we could leave their house and could live beyond the street and demonstrate, to make theatre, to enjoy yourself, to go for walks, to meet each other. So that is how the form of the memoir slowly arrived.

In relation to Virginia Woolf, would you say that she was a kind of literary mother in your writing?

Well, she is and she isn't and that is perhaps what you'd say about all mothers, that you are ambivalent about them. You love them and hate them. They give you life but also they smack you in the face. So, of course she was a major influence on me as a young woman reader. And I think I admire the way in which every sentence is so downfall, created. She is never banal. But on the other hand, I thought because I her novels had really very little about the body in them, not really a visible, sweaty, bloody, shitting body. But I did find it very interesting. In her diaries there is much more body. And in her letters. So when she is at *The Lighthouse* (1927), for example, the body is there. And then one of her memoirs, which is really beautiful, *Moments of Being* (1976),

that I think I read several times. And she starts really with a bodily life of the child that she was. And I think somehow she is connecting that to the desire to write. She does it much more open. This is at the end of her life. So the child and young woman bodily life are connected to writing, whereas in her novels, that connection is very implicit.

Also, Michèle you don't mind that I use your first name, of course... You have become a prolific writer dedicated to different writing forms but you have mostly written novels. What correspondence do you see between the woman's novel and the woman's memoir?

First of all, I would just need to say that although my publishers were thought postmodern they are very close to modern poetry. And they have quite other connections with other forms like theatre or plays. I think I became interested in fictional forms which involved looking at the inner life of the person. I am really, really interested in the secret unconscious mind and the paranoia. It may be speaking under the first person or it may be speaking over the shoulder. That does connect the memoir, I think, because in a memoir there is a certain speaker who currently, just currently is trying to tell the truth. And what interests me is that in a memoir apparently you can tell the truth but you can lie as much as you like, you can leave out parts as much as you like, which is really a fictional way of writing. And in a novel you are very deliberately playing that notion of telling the truth. So, for me, yes, there are bridges. And I think my work, my novels often look at the memoir. For example, *The Looking Glass* is a novel absolutely compared to the memoir in the first person. And I think, *Impossible Saints*, although it was written in the third person, it's absolutely concerned with a non-fictional form. So, for me, they interconnect but I couldn't tell you so in an abstract, theoretical way. All I can tell you is in this particular book I was exploring and the interconnection overlapped. So they do interconnect. And maybe one of connections is that women are traditionally told to lie, and that's quite interesting. What do you lie about? Do we lie? Shall we tell the truth? It's this Freudian thought...

Yes, another question related to your memoir is London. London has been the location chosen to write this personal account of your life in the controversial 70s and 80s. Did you want to connect your own persona's progress and your identity with the urban city of London?

Yes, I did very much. That was just side of me though because I am half-French and half-English, although I grew up in a suburb, which is half way between the country and the city, I tend to line up my father and my English life and the city. My mother was from the French countryside. And I am currently living in both French countryside and the city of London. So, that memoir... So, I think my formation as a young woman is really, really about the city. It's all very important to say the city is the place where I became politicised and became a feminist.

Oh God, it's huge topic, isn't it? Since modernism, I think, lot of radical artists were marching away from the countryside in their visions, from a world of agriculture and the reaction of all types of notions... And I think the idea of "You cannot make art about the countryside, it has to be urban". Well, I'm not actually sure about that because

I've written a novel set in the French countryside (*Daughters of the House*, for instance), which are about politics, and not about the city. When I came to write about my formation, it was about the city. Yes. That was something to do with walking the streets and meeting people. Because in the countryside you've got to walk and you don't know who you will find in your walk.

Yes, I think I do remember one example in your memoir in which you compare the city of Oxford as a kind of countryside and the city of London. And also in that comparison I remember that you criticised the male society watching you, the woman. How scared you could feel in the countryside of Oxford and how more secured you could feel in the city of London.

True, although in the city you got harassed by men all the time, you could run away quickly round the corner, or into a shop or into a pub whereas in the countryside if you are in a field and there is a man is harassing you it's hard to get away. I mean I was harassed all the time, which is what happens to young women all the time in those days. I think women still get harassed a huge amount. Because I am older I don't feel it in the same way. The city in that sense is a lot of safer. And the city traditionally tells us as women not to stay safe, to feel always scared.

And I wonder now, talking about cities, how much of truth was there in the story of Bangkok. Did it really happen to you?

Oh yes. It was very scary. *Thanks God that you are here.* Although this young man, I think he was also so frightened about what he had done. I mean I did know that he wasn't going to rape me but still it was all very, very frightening.

The next question is about the female flâneur, would you say that you have combined both modern and postmodern techniques in the writing of your personal account?

Oh God, that's a difficult question. *Both laughing.* Well I suppose, I became aware that at the moment a lot of men are writing about walking in the city: Ian Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd. Some write about psychogeography, and sometimes of course about being a *flâneur*... And I got terribly irritated because they never refer to women, as beings that can walk around. The women are completely absent in this account. And I know from my reading that modernist women writers loved walking the city. They were doing it. Virginia Woolf, you know, and her diaries are full of her walking. Dorothy L. Sayers, Katherine Mansfield ... I mean all these modernist women who were living and writing in London walked around the city at a time of great recording and brilliant example. And my taste of this, as a postmodernist perhaps is to make judge. And I just noticed the word, the man is a *flâneur* and a woman who would walk the streets, a streetwalker, will be a prostitute. And I think that tradition is there. There is something deeply difficult and problematic for the woman who likes roaming the streets by herself, she is still seen as a problem. And I wish she, ... all these dangerous things didn't do that, all she's is just

harassed and aggressed. But for men is just different. It goes back to Baudelaire, the *flâneur*, doesn't it? I mean, I don't think he would walk the streets with a female companion. He was looking at women. But perhaps there is a switch for woman to be an object and becoming a subject, I don't know if that is modernist or a postmodernist, but it makes sense. You're perceived to be the object instead of the public subject. But of course to do that you have to defy yourself a bit and short respond it. And I put the picture in here (*Paper Houses: A Memoir of the '70s and Beyond*). That is a picture of me in my outfit walking in the street. It's a self portrait. *Oh, yes, how beautiful. I didn't know that. Yes, ya. Both laughing.*

Let's keep talking about women's writing. In Paper Houses, as in most of your works of fiction, you have used the first person narration to tell the personal story, which, at the same time, is connected to the public history. Could you talk a little bit about that connection between the inner and the outer worlds in Paper Houses as part of your developing identity, or as part of a rebirth?

Gosh. It was a kind of project to trying and map the inner life to the outer life and remap that outer life back to the inner life. And I think I was doing that while I was reading about a wonderful psychoanalyst and writer called Marion Milner. She was not other thing but an analyst. She wrote *On not Being Able to Paint* (1950), *Eternity's Sunrise: A Way of Keeping a Diary* (2010) and *A Life of One's Own* (1934). And she talked about creativity a great deal. And she was the first person I was reading in my late twenties who was suggesting that your inner world connected intimately to the outer world via emotions, for example, desire or fear. And I got on reading a whole project of writers. Julia Kristeva became very important. She talks about, this is complicated... She talks about the way you abstract words to make our emotions, that you might say I felt angry or I felt great. She had this wonderful life as part of this currently bodily feeling, which we call emotions. And I connected that to the metaphor and how we make metaphor out of this currently bodily feeling. And we made the metaphor by subjecting it onto an image in the outside world which connects everything to Marion Milner's idea. And I began to see that metaphor remains profoundly important to me because it connects us to the world. It's always taking our inner life and saying: it's part of the universe, it's part of the world. Because I might say I'm feeling as cold as that and then I am immediately hot. And it matters to me more and more because in the modern world metaphor is not fashionable and people are supposed to be like little atoms although we are all sort of connected by machine, mobile phone or email. With this connection I am part of universe which is expressed by metaphor. I'm very fond of it. I think it's incredibly important. It is a kind of religion. That is a very long way to answer it.

Yes, thank you.

Sorry, can I say something about... Not all my novels are written in the first person. Quite a few are in the third person. *Yes, you said that Impossible Saints is one of them.* And it is an experiment. I come back to the first person because I feel it's always

not me that in the first person. It's a paradox. While in the third person I can be in there much.

Would you confirm that you have been concerned with the dearth of women in the critical canon of great writers by remembering and rescuing women and giving them a voice in your novels?

Yes. It's not even just in the canon of literature. It's a kind of women giving to the world. It's not recognised. It's not valued. The women are valued as mothers. They are also sentimentalised and Christianised. They may be valued as writers or scientists. But then their body would be taken away. I think culturally women are devalued of when women are in the world not on the world. Because my place is writing, I look at women writers. So, yes, I would confirm it. Yes.

Just another question in relation to Paper Houses again. You have dealt with different topics such as language, freedom, writing, sex, love, friendship, family, exploring, and marriage, among others. Marriage has always been a recurrent topic in women's narrative and in Paper Houses you describe two different marriages in your life, being the one with Jim the most celebrated experience in which you felt not only a woman but also an artist. Could you talk about that link between domestic life and professional writing?

Well, I have to be very personal. That's fine. The lovely thing about Jim was he immediately recognised me as a fellow artist. It was normal. That was wonderful. He was the first man in my life who ever thought that it was completely normal that I become an artist. And of course, he understood feminism. He had many artist friends, many women. He liked women very much. And then he immediately offered me a home because I was homeless. And because he worked at home, we were both living in an artist studio, really. So, he didn't break the artist practice with being a father who was there at home looking after his sons. And that was really inspiring because I had quite a lot of space in the house, a space to start with my writing and together, I think, we tried to find a way where we integrated domestic life and art. And of course it was a time in which many writers were looking at those connections anyway. I mean *postfeminists* and *postdomestic* I think it's called, it became a subject. You know, you had Mary Kelly showing dirty nappies in the art gallery. You had women artists actually talking about housework. It was a good time. So, all I can say is integration in somehow was something that it was dead but it was possible to kind of revalue domestic as a space in which things happen. Of course as a woman I knew domestic violence happened in a domestic space, child abuse has already happened in a domestic place, rage happened in a domestic space. We tried to be living in a domestic space and also in an artistic studio. It was all very inspiring.

I don't really have a last question but I was now wondering about that domestic place, that place of your own to be writing. And I wonder if you wouldn't mind describing how it is like. How is that place of your own like

when writing? Well, do you mean, in abstract or in reality? *I mean in abstract, as a writer.*

Yes, because of the idea of *Paper Houses*, it could be anywhere. That is about my life. I've lived in many places. I've moved a great deal. So, it's something temporary. It needs have a lot of capacity for solely view and privacy. But then it needs to be a magic place that can attract all the selves, somewhere where at 6.00 o'clock people come in, and we cook, and eat, and dance, make love, eat, get bored and drink. That's what I've conveyed in the sacred convent in *Impossible Saints* because in the way we have to live in a guttural culture with small houses. You've seen it in Twickenham: streets and streets and streets of tiny houses. And they all have a sitting room, a kitchen, a dining room, two bedrooms for the children, one bedroom for their parents. Who gets any privacy? How can you be artist in that surrounding? In England men go to their shed. To the garden shed is where the man go and the woman has no where to go. So, I talk about this all the time with my partner as half of the time we live together, and half of the time I say no, it's impossible. I wouldn't have much space because he is a psychiatrist and works at home. So, this ideal place really has a table, a chair, and I'll have a laptop, and I think it'll have a window. Ideally, it has a little garden. So, it is a paper house folded up. It's a book. It really is. And then, yes, I am very materialistic. You know in my fantasies. I'd love to live in a very beautiful house, very luxurious, a French manner house, bla bla bla. I don't have the money for that. I've always lived in small places but I'm very happy. So, really my house, my writing house really is my imagination. It really, really is. This time and space here is also a paper house. As soon as I have a view... I could sit here with my diary, my notebook and this is a house because at the time we are talking we have made a house. I really believe it's true.

OK, thank you very much for your time here today, Michèle. That was very interesting.

Well, thank you!

Both Laughing

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