



Photo by Pierre Vals. Françoise Giroud, 1946 (Opale/Leemage/Belga Image).

“An Hour of Our Life in the Mirror of My Mood”: Innovations and Legacies of French Literary Journalism in the Work of Françoise Giroud

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Abstract: Françoise Giroud (1916–2003) was the joint founder, with Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, of *L'Express*. She was the managing editor until 1974 and gained political recognition when she became the secretary of state for women's affairs, 1974–1976. This article revisits Giroud's work, at a time when French journalism seemed particularly moribund from a literary point of view. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the purge of the press and the trauma of the Holocaust contributed to new and increasingly widespread protocols of journalistic writing in France, founded on a search for objectivity and neutrality. Giroud clearly stated that journalistic writing differs from literature: “Journalism is a technique; it is not an art, nor a pale copy of literature, as is sometimes believed.” But her attitude is more ambiguous than one might think, as she wrote novels, many biographies, published a whole series of diaries, and several collections of her articles. Yet in the preface to *Portraits sans retouches* (Portraits without Revisions, 2001), she does not shy away from stating, slightly paradoxically, the following: “The articles are written quickly to be read quickly and forgotten quickly.” In fact, Giroud's articles merit a literary evaluation because they should be understood in the context of the long heritage of French literary journalism. I will thus go back to the schools of Giroud, which shaped her practice of literary journalism, before outlining some of its principles. Within the framework of this article, I will focus in particular on one of the techniques of subjectification, which I call journalistic enallage.

Keywords: Françoise Giroud – French literary journalism – *L'Express* – *Portraits sans retouches* – Lazareff newspapers – French cinema – French women's journalism – female journalistic tradition – enallage – *Amazones de la République*

Founded in 1953, the weekly *L'Express* played an active role in the campaign against torture in Algeria. By 1964, it also became the first French press media outlet to adopt the news magazine format. For these reasons, *L'Express* has attracted much critical attention, more by historians and political analysts¹ than by literary scholars, who have shown little interest, with the notable exception of François Mauriac's "notepad."²

Françoise Giroud (1916–2003) was the joint founder of the paper, along with Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber. She was the managing editor until 1974 and gained political recognition³ when she became the secretary of state for women's affairs between July 1974 and August 1976.

This article wishes to revisit this wordsmith, who enjoyed her heyday in a period when French journalism seemed particularly moribund from a literary point of view. In fact, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the purge of the press and the trauma of the Holocaust contributed to new and increasingly widespread protocols of journalistic writing in France, founded on a search for objectivity and neutrality. Giroud is among those who clearly stated that journalistic writing differs from literature: "Journalism is a technique; it is not an art, nor a pale copy of literature, as is sometimes believed."⁴

Yet Giroud's attitude is more ambiguous than one might suppose in that she wrote novels, many biographies (of Alma Mahler, Cosima Wagner, Jenny Marx, and others), published a series of diaries, and above all published several collections of her articles.⁵ The gesture of collecting in particular is often an attempt to rescue a journalistic oeuvre from oblivion, to have the writer emerge from the carapace of the journalist. Yet in the preface to *Portraits sans retouches* (Portraits without Revisions), she does not shy away from stating, slightly paradoxically, the following: "The articles are written quickly to be read quickly and forgotten quickly."⁶ Even more clearly, in the collection of her editorials for *L'Express*, she explains:

Written quickly in order to be read quickly, it may be that these articles suffer much from being reread, that they repeat themselves or contradict themselves or also that, removed from the event, they have withered. I do not know.

I publish them unaltered, without subtracting anything from them out of opportunity or vanity, knowing the risks I am taking with a deferred reading of that which was a reflection of a moment, of a day, of an hour of our life in the mirror of my mood. Because of a person who wants to grab hold of a handful of water, we say that he is mad.⁷

I would here like to be this mad person who tries to grab hold of a handful of water. In fact, it seems to me that Giroud's articles merit a literary evaluation because they should be understood in the context of the long heritage

of French literary journalism.⁸ I will thus go back to the schools of Giroud, which shaped her practice of literary journalism, before outlining some principles. Within the framework of this article, I will focus in particular on one of the techniques of subjectification,⁹ which I will call journalistic enallage.

The Literary Schools of Françoise Giroud

Giroud, "thrown into life with no other luggage than heterogeneous reading and a degree attesting to the fact that she could take down, in shorthand, 130 words per minute,"¹⁰ would train in three complementary schools: that of cinema scriptwriting; that of the Lazareff newspapers, which in the post–Second World War period constituted one of the forms of hybridization between the press and literature characteristic of France since the nineteenth century; and lastly, that of the tradition of women's journalism, which, without ever disowning it, she would considerably develop.

In the interwar period, Giroud had been the first script-girl of French cinema. She wrote more than twenty film scripts and contributed to the writing of more than sixty. This activity gave her skills in composing dialogue, manifest in her articles. Some of them are genuine sketches caught in passing. Her repertoire swings between the writing of a complete sketch and that of a simple caustic response. She can stage anonymous characters just as she can have celebrities soliloquize. Above all, scriptwriting taught her that an article is constructed like a story. Her articles are scripted, "taut" until the final full stop. As she recalled:

Writing apart, which can be neither explained nor taught, but comes from a mysterious part of the brain, what I had benefited from was an apprenticeship in scriptwriting at a time when the cinema told stories. Rhythm, no lengthy passages, nor digressions, a taut narration in which everything must drive the action forward, on a conveyor belt: it is that which I had in a way incorporated. When I had understood that, I was able to convey this piece of knowledge, in addition to certain basic principles concerning the news and which everyone knows (which is not to say that they are respected).¹¹

Her second schooling was that of the Lazareff newspapers. In the interwar period, *Paris-Soir* was the newspaper which, under the guidance of Jean Prouvost and Pierre Lazareff, had maintained the nineteenth-century tradition of writing by established authors (Jean Cocteau, Joseph Kessel, Saint-Exupéry, Blaise Cendrars, Colette and others submitted articles to this newspaper) and which pushed the school of reportage the furthest. And during the occupation, Giroud contributed to *Paris-Soir*, the daily that had taken refuge in Lyons. When Lazareff exiled himself to the United States, which left Hervé Mille to manage the newspaper, Giroud noted:

I had an excuse to come and see him: two stories written on the off chance. The daily newspapers were publishing stories every day at that time. He glanced over what I had brought him and got me to talk.

When he discovered that I had knowledge of what was called Parisian life, in other words essentially the world of entertainment and its activities, he said to me, “You could maybe write some pieces on the subject. . . . We’ll see. Come back tomorrow. I am keeping this story.”

The next day something incredible happened. He had me sit down opposite him—he worked on a plank perched on some trestles—and said to me: “You will remain there. . . . There is no desk. Look, I need three pages on. . . .” I have forgotten what. I remember only that he snatched each page from me when it was scarcely finished, without letting me reread it.¹²

For several months, seated on a chair opposite one of the greatest professionals of French journalism, Giroud underwent a kind of practical training program. She learnt how to write headlines, to copy edit, and to balance out columns. Following Liberation, Giroud co-managed, with Hélène Lazareff, the wife of Pierre, *Elle*, a woman’s magazine of a new genre. There, Giroud considerably modernized the writing by highlighting concrete questions concerning women: female sexuality and pleasure, contraception, celibacy, and material independence. She herself also regularly published fiction, stories, and serialized novels to supply the magazine. She wrote reportages and launched major inquiries combined with psychological tests. But she was genuinely acknowledged as a major writer when she published, in *France-Dimanche*, another Pierre Lazareff weekly, a series of audacious portraits of the Paris glitterati, a series in which she made full use of her address book—filled thanks to her contacts in the cinema world—to paint a few spirited, indiscreet portraits of the era’s major stars.

Giroud also inherited the rich tradition of French women’s journalism. Female journalists had in fact invented a whole arsenal of attitudes, forms of writing, and practices designed to circumvent the gendered constraints, which, since the nineteenth century in France, had denied them access to certain positions and discourses within newspapers as a whole. In particular, the daily newspaper was a work environment that had integrated the model of gendered public space, one that took shape at the end of the eighteenth century based on treatises written by physiologists and doctors.¹³ In effect, during this period a gendered model of society, organized according to two hierarchized and complementary spheres, spread. The “theory of two spheres” pays considerable attention to physiological differences, which are no longer purely envisaged in terms of bodily functions, but in terms of essences,

which, in addition, are said to determine social destinies. Woman was defined through the family and the interior, which were declared to be her specific domains, unlike Man, whose nature destined him to life in the exterior. A new semantics, which also divided the field of journalism, established itself to designate male and female characteristics by pairs of opposites, hierarchized for male advantage: independent/dependent; rational/emotional; fit for public activity/fit for domestic activity.

The gendering of journalistic genres and the ease of access to such, or such a form of writing within the framework of a mixed periodical space, was explained by this theoretical view of the sexes. Political and diplomatic columns were addressed to men, while sections of the newspaper that concerned the house, private life, and society life were intended for women. For a long time, political columns in generalist periodicals were practically inaccessible territory for women, who early on had to invent strategies in order to discuss politics at all. Let us not forget that to their subaltern status within society as defined by the Napoleonic Code, and to their illegitimacy in certain public places such as meetings, is added a discrimination that fundamentally excludes their journalistic activity from being treated in the same way as that of men: up until 1944, women had neither the right to vote, nor the right to be elected to important positions in this public sphere on which newspapers were reporting. On this basis, how can it even be imagined that they could give an account of the real in the same manner as the powerful and the established? True enough, when Giroud embarked on her journalistic career, the right to vote had been granted to women, and she did not suffer from the same flagrant lack of legitimacy as the female journalists who preceded her. However, she would often relate the difficulties she experienced in writing her first political editorial in *L’Express* in 1957, when journalist and government critic Servan-Schreiber was called up to serve in the army in Algeria. Giroud uses a perfectly eloquent comparison to describe the attitudes the majority of women have towards political expertise: “I nevertheless had a flaw concerning politics. With it I cultivated the relation one has with a foreign language when one understands it and when one decides not to speak it.”¹⁴

Which female journalistic traditions did Giroud inherit? A practice of the spiritual column and the epigram (“While at the age of 25, one ‘wants it,’ at the age of 45 one has it. But one no longer knows what one wants”¹⁵), which she borrows from a legacy of women columnists which starts with Delphine de Girardin and subsequently nourished by Gyp, Colette, and Odette Pannetier; an overhanging position as a political Cassandra, which Giroud adopted from major writers such as George Sand and Marie d’Agoult, and which she would use, for example, in 1968, when she prophesized a major

catastrophe on several occasions; the practice of immersion journalism, a tradition from which she draws that begins at the Frondeuses, from Séverine to Maryse Choisy. Thus, in 1952, during a reportage in the United States on the occasion of the presidential election, she got herself hired as a saleswoman in a major New York boutique, Lord & Taylor, to better report on American society. Yet all these writing practices, which suppose a strong staging of the self and a little fictionalization, come under literary codes as much as those of journalism. There was, moreover, not a female journalist before 1940 who did not also have a novelistic, theatrical, or poetic body of work to her credit. To be a woman of the press before the war was to be a woman of letters. Can we extend this conclusion to Giroud?

Journalistic Enallage

Her articles, even the driest and the most technical, effectively borrow from the literary matrix. In an essay published several years ago,¹⁶ I had suggested defining this matrix around four principles, which could be mobilized by the journalist: fictionalization, ironization, conversational writing, and personal writing. Yet Giroud's great strength lies in her ability not only to mobilize these four principles but also to hybridize them. She is reputed for her acidic and corrosive pen, as well as her witty remarks, but she also does not hesitate to invent short stories with characters which are too typical to be true, to mount dramatic sketches¹⁷ to illustrate her subjects, and above all to stage herself in a more or less veiled manner. Several biographies,¹⁸ autobiographical works,¹⁹ and confidences on the part of those close to her²⁰ have recently lifted the veil on the private life of the public figure that was Giroud. Yet it is disturbing to reread these articles when one has had access to this confidential information because this new reading reveals, even behind technocratic articles, initially unsuspected confessions and disclosures of privacy. The articles can yield various readings, and behind the experienced journalist, behind the writer herself, there also emerges a woman at her most private. And this layering of meaning fully justifies us in talking of the literary journalism of Giroud.

One of the most effective stylistic techniques she uses in this context seems to me to be journalistic enallage, in this case a technique that consists of substituting a personal pronoun for another more expected one. The most frequent enallage consists of substituting "I" for "one":

Every day for the past twenty-five years Madeleine Renaud has proven that she is, quite simply, a great actress. But that the practice of her art, the large fees and the big posters have not succeeded in leaving a mark on her is an inexplicable mystery. She is the opposite of the "screen legend"; she is someone *with whom one would like to exchange the addresses of dressmakers,*

*to talk about the cost of living, and the worries one's children cause; she is, by a miracle, someone who also knows how to listen.*²¹

The enallage, the shift to "one," is more than an economical manner of maintaining a sense of intimate confidence (look, confides the article, how close I, Françoise Giroud, am with Madeleine Renaud), all the while introducing dialogue (not only between the journalist and the female reader, but between the female reader and the star), fiction (the fiction, oh so gratifying for the female reader of *France-Dimanche*, of her closeness to Madeleine Renaud), and irony (for how can one also imagine that this supposition is not to be read with a pinch of salt?). An enallage can go as far as having erotic properties and involving the reader or rather the female reader in the fantasy of a smoldering liaison with Clark Gable: "Having seen him up close, being tempted to see him from even closer still is not ruled out."²² Or in the idea of flirting with Erich von Stroheim:

He will get to his feet twenty times to light your cigarette, will welcome you with the most exquisite politeness in the splendid property he bought five years ago in the vicinity of Paris, he will not accept you bending down to pick up a glove, and will say to you in his supple and husky English:

I know you . . . Have I tried to sleep with you? I have no memory because I drink like a fish.²³

Here the enallage is even more erotic because Giroud has purely and simply used a "you" instead of an "I," which enables the lucky female reader to take the place of the female interviewer. She will use the same, almost erotic complicity with certain politicians in her editorials for *L'Express*, giving the reader, thanks to enallage, the feeling of having been taken into the confidence of the Fifth Republic. Moreover, at *L'Express* she trained together with Michèle Cotta and Catherine Nay, women journalists who knew how to use their physique and their allure as a political asset. A recent book has even nicknamed them *Les Amazones de la république* (Amazons of the Republic).²⁴

In fact, throughout her life, in her editorials as much as in her portraits, Françoise Giroud made repeated use of this curious personal blurring, which at once authorizes the "one" or the "us," or the "you" instead of the "I," and thus universalizes personal positions or opinions. But also in saying "I" in place of "one" or "us," and thus enlisting, subjectivizing, or personalizing journalistic discourse, she turns herself into the personal witness-ambassador of the nation. Obituaries, as shown by those she wrote for François Mauriac, Coco Chanel, or Marilyn Monroe, are often the opportunity to produce a self-portrait in disguise (here a "he" or "she" is in place of an "I"). It is thus in the portrait of Mauriac that she provided a poetic key that seems to be the

one to her oeuvre: “He had discovered the best way of speaking of others: through oneself, and everything is in the prism.”²⁵

The practice of blurring also enables her to offer sentences with the value of universal maxims but also doubtless personal confidences: “Once one loses one’s parents and the veil which separates us from death tears, one unconsciously takes the place of the deceased and starts to resemble them.”²⁶

We could enumerate Giroud’s other stylistic techniques, but the enallage is sufficient to render still readable and fascinating but often technical editorials that one might have thought outdated. It is indeed a question of showing “an hour of our life in the mirror of my mood,” but she could have equally written “an hour of my life in the mirror of our mood,” or “an hour of your life in the mirror of my mood.” The possibilities are, if not endless, then at least sufficiently diversified to create a completely fascinating system of reflections. Françoise Giroud’s *L’Express* is the hall of mirrors of the press article.

The example of enallage also enables us to inscribe Giroud within a genealogy of spiritual and literary journalism such as has been historically practiced by women journalists. I will finish by quoting two exhilarating journalistic phrases, created on the same syntactical template: “When one wants to dry out a marsh, one does not let the frogs vote.”²⁷ And, “When one drives with a wheel loose, one does not know when one will kill oneself.”²⁸ The former was written by a journalist from the nineteenth century, Delphine de Girardin, the inventor of the genre of the Parisian chronicle in 1847, the latter by Giroud. The superimposition of these two quotations manifests a certain similarity of writing, in the causticity and irony whose gendered foundations demonstrate the existence in France of a female literary journalism, doubtless stimulated by the specific constraints to which women journalists were subject.²⁹

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Notes

1. See Françoise Roth and Serge Siritzky, *Le Roman de L’Express* (Paris: Marcel Jullian, 1979).
2. See Philippe Baudorre, ed., *François Mauriac, un écrivain journaliste* (Paris: Minard, 2003), and Bernard Cocula, *François Mauriac, écrivain et journaliste* (Bordeaux: Sud-Ouest, 2006).
3. Giroud always maintained that she voted left in the two rounds of the presidential election of 1974, but Valéry Giscard d’Estaing had for a long time planned to legislate on the status of women, which he found “scandalously offensive and unjustly inferior on many points.” See Laure Adler, *Françoise* (Paris: Grasset, 2011), 363. To lead this project, it seemed natural to him to appoint a major journalist who had cleverly and passionately stood up for the cause of women for some twenty years in the political and social editorials of *L’Express*.
4. Françoise Giroud, *On ne peut pas être heureux tout le temps* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), 110.
5. See, for example, Françoise Giroud, *Françoise Giroud vous présente le tout-Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), or Françoise Giroud, *Portraits sans retouches* (Paris: Folio Gallimard, 2001), or Françoise Giroud, *Une poignée d’eau* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1973).
6. Giroud, *Portraits sans retouches*, 9.
7. Giroud, *Une poignée d’eau*, 8.
8. This research focuses on the collected articles of *France-Dimanche* and *L’Express*, collected in *Une poignée d’eau, Portraits sans retouches*, Jacques Duquesne, *Françoise Giroud: une plume engagée à L’Express* (Paris: L’Express, 2013), and the

editorials of *L'Express*, collected thanks to surveys of the weekly news magazine's archives. We can also refer to the online documentary database of scanned articles of the Giroud endowment fund: <http://www.francoisegiroud.fr/3.aspx>.

9. The process of subjectification, through which a subject expresses themselves in an utterance, makes their voices heard in the text itself and allows the reader to make an enunciatory authority coincide with a signature.

10. Giroud, *On ne peut pas être heureux tout le temps*, 36.

11. *Ibid.*, 110.

12. Françoise Giroud, *Leçons particulières* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), 102.

13. See Pierre Roussel, *Système physique et moral de la femme* (Paris: Vincent, 1775), or Julien-Joseph Virey, *La Femme sous les rapports physiologique, moral et littéraire*, 2nd Edition (Paris: Crochard, 1825).

14. Giroud, *Leçons particulières*, 184.

15. Giroud, "À l'échelle du temps," in *Une poignée d'eau*, 10. Originally published in *L'Express*, October 3–9, 1966, 103.

16. Marie-Ève Thérénty, *La Littérature au quotidien. Poétiques journalistiques du XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2007).

17. See for example Giroud, "Dîner en ville," in *Une poignée d'eau*, 246. Originally published in *L'Express*, January 23–29, 1967, 61.

18. Christine Ockrent, *Françoise Giroud, une ambition française* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), and Laure Adler, *Françoise* (Paris: Grasset, 2011).

19. Françoise Giroud, *Histoire d'une femme libre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013); Giroud, *On ne peut pas être heureux tout le temps*.

20. Alix de Saint-André, *Garde tes larmes pour plus tard* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).

21. Giroud, *Portraits sans retouches*, 42 (my emphasis).

22. Giroud, *Portraits sans retouches*, 335.

23. *Ibid.*, 293.

24. Renaud Revel, *Les Amazones de la république* (Paris: Éditions First, 2013).

25. Françoise Giroud, "François Mauriac," *Une poignée d'eau*, 468. Originally published in *L'Express*, September 7–13, 1970, 36.

26. Françoise Giroud, *Une poignée d'eau*, 10. Originally published in *L'Express*, October 3–9, 1966, 103.

27. Vicomte de Launay, "La Croix de Berny," *La Presse*, July 11, 1847, 2.

28. Françoise Giroud, "1001 numéros de *l'Express*," *L'Express*, September 14–20, 1970, 59.

29. For more on this, see my forthcoming work, *Femmes de presse, femmes de lettres (1836–1944)*.