

A Writing of the Multiple

Louise Dupré

Travel, adventure, exploration, so many terms that refer us to displacement, to shift, to passage, to this breakaway from closed territories, from all sorts of alienation, individual as well as collective. It is slow crossing symbolic spaces to invent an imaginary between-places that institutes zones of interference on the cultural map and that, creating flux, shows glimpses of new configurations.

Yes, it is a question here of spaces. Open areas where one doesn't feel imprisoned, where it is possible to circulate freely. And no one can be surprised that this problematic of displacement is being proposed to us by a Québécoise, a descendant of women and men for whom taming hostile spaces was a matter of survival. Physical survival, since they risked getting lost in a forest or dying in a storm. Cultural survival, since this small conquered people, "without history, without literature," according to Lord Durham, has resisted assimilation.

It is astonishing that that's where we still are today, faced with this question of survival, which means that in Quebec, we cannot think about the transcultural in the same way one can in France or the United States. Cultural survival for us hasn't yet been assured: the birthrate of Francophone Québécois has become one of the lowest in the world, and newcomers are integrated into the anglophone North American culture. The real question for us remains: will French still be spoken in Montreal

two or three generations from now? Will the political and cultural project that followed the "revenge of the cradle" have succeeded in safeguarding our difference so that we don't disappear into the anglophone sea?

This is to say that the problematic of métissage is a delicate one for us to approach, which leads us to that other question: how do you define a cultural métissage when you feel threatened with disappearance? How do you open up your territory without risking death? This is a proposal that is given, too often, a quick answer: in order not to be assimilated, we must ourselves assimilate the foreigner, oblige him to speak French, make him a Québécois. We find ourselves facing a recycling of old models that do nothing to change our mentality. From conqueror to conquered, it's the same battle.

But to change mentalities, ways of thinking, is precisely the difficulty. Man repeats what he knows: one who has been colonized, when confronted with others, adopts the same behavior as the colonizer. We can take a step forward and arrive at Nicole Brossard's question: what exactly does "cultural métissage" mean if we cross only macho, gynophobic, misogynist, phallogocratic or simply patriarchal cultures?¹ How can we manage to change the axiological system except by opening up to other values of a feminine character? How do we get to where the cultural territory is accessible to women's culture so that encountering the other's space carves out other figures?

The answer is, for the moment, on the order of a utopia,

which should be seen, according to Robert Musil, as "experience in which one observes the possible modification of an element and the effects it would produce in this complex phenomenon we call life," as the "equivalent of a possibility."² This utopia invites us to think the end of the millennium in terms other than failure, disaster, desolation.

This doesn't mean we have to shut our eyes. In Quebec, the recession, the constitutional crisis, the native question, family violence are all there to remind us of reality. As in other western countries, we're witnessing a rise of the right that tends to undermine the convictions of the baby boomer generation; the left has a harder and harder time making itself heard; unions have become corporations; women's movements are strongly attacked.

Nonetheless, feminism has done the best because it's constituted as a polymorphous movement rather than as an ideology. The presence of women writers has been decisive. They instituted for women that gap in the imaginary where space for speech could open up, an intimate speech that aims at reinscribing the body in language. Not only on the thematic level, but on the level of the work of language. They wanted to tear the tightly woven veil of the symbolic to reinsert the drives. They wanted to reintroduce into French a language before language, dating from the period where the child lived body-to-body with its mother. A glossolalia outside of signification, calling into question the arbitrariness of the sign, a language

that doesn't forget that it is rhythm and music. Affect, emotion. Let us remember that emotion comes from motion, movement; so it's a matter of putting language into movement through which we savor once again the language of our first sensorial experiences. A savoring of language that recalls the Baudelairian universe of correspondences where perfumes, colors, and sounds respond to one another.

This is what poets, those sons of the mother, have understood, as Julia Kristeva says, since poetry, by lifting the bar between signifier and signified, is a speech that searches for a femininity, even when it's men.³ It's hardly surprising that in a 1981 interview, Nicole Brossard had this idea that seems to me to parallel Robert Musil's: "utopia isn't a dream, it's an emotion," that is, a possibility of displacement, of de-centering.⁴ A passage from the other's reason to a reason that no longer erases the primary processes. A mode of thinking in which the logic of contradiction yields to a logic of the aporia, a logic in which oppositions can exist without excluding one another. A woman-logic, as Christine Buci-Glucksmann affirms in La raison baroque and that Alice Jardine calls gynesis.⁵

If there is a reason to think the transcultural, it is certainly on the basis of this other logic that functions outside of exclusions and binary models; in this becoming-woman that Deleuze and Guattari propose, in a deconstruction of western models seen not in terms of a bankruptcy of the totalizing meta-narratives that founded modern thought but in terms of new

narratives that no longer correspond to predetermined models, of narratives that continually reinvent their form. A way of seeing that has a relationship to the working in the dark of the poet, who moves by groping, constantly losing his landmarks, his identity, to end by reconstructing a work that, having become distanced from him, is a passage to the other, an inscription of the Other in textuality. It is stripping bare, a desubjectivization that inscribes, in itself, the possible as necessity.

Isn't this what Nicole Brossard's text is about? About a transformation that goes through the processes of literary creation, about the body's different postures confronted by discourse that comes out of a theoretical truth to take root in a practice? It is, indeed, a question of writing, of this signifying presence in language that operates by diverting meaning: entrance into a dynamic that aims at breaking the stasis of conventional meaning, of common sense, to turn words around, meanings topsy turvy so that the signs begin to vibrate with all their strings. Wouldn't these rituals be as many postures that one might assume in relation to the other? Couldn't we envisage them as a metaphor of the transcultural? This is how I would like to examine them.

The ritual with trembling, the first ritual, the one in which the whole body concentrates intensely to remember childhood and to unravel the knots that have formed in one's throat takes us back to the impulse behind the woman who comes to writing, an

impulse that can no longer be repressed, can no longer be deferred. One thus meets emotions bound to primordial experiences and one feels the urgency of making them into the singularity of speech, of putting them into words. At this stage, writing is what matters, a writing with no object. A pure, performative act. Under the push of memory, what counts is the possibility of moving into action. A shaking up, a putting into movement. If the change isn't yet concretized, it is, nonetheless, under way: there's something of a beginning here. Already writing is full of consequences.

The ritual with shocks follows. This stage when the subject questions the logic in which s/he is enclosed in order to deconstruct it. It is a process through which s/he undoes the history that has constituted her/him to accede to her/his own desire. Outside of parental and societal expectations. As has been noticed, this work resembles the analytical cure; without it, reconstruction isn't possible. There is something of writing the very first texts here, writing of the coming to consciousness, where writing signifies I am not.

The ritual with shifts accounts for the passage from I am not to I am. Not through reuniting with a fixed identity or reconstituting oneself as image, but rather in the perception of oneself as form. Then follows the process of relinquishment put in place in the ritual with shocks; one finds oneself up against a writing that goes beyond signification to open up on meaning, on the multiplicity of possibles. It is a matter of recognizing

an alterity in oneself that is no longer threatening and can, from now on, be constituted as a movement toward the other. A moment when, having identified the oppressive mechanisms of the learned language, one discovers the unknown possibilities of a new language.

This is where, it seems to me, thinking about invention becomes possible. When the individual becomes conscious that this relinquishment is not death of the self but abandonment of an image emptied of her/his movement, s/he can live this negativity not as a negation but as something positive. S/he is able, then, to move on to the fourth ritual, the ritual with breath whose goal is to adjust the voice, to distance parasitic noises, to bring our mental and psychological time into harmony with cosmic time. That is to get to the point where one no longer only writes I am but I am a woman or I am a man; I am anglophone or I am francophone; I am Québécoise or Canadienne by showing that in the encounter with other universes, difference comes to carry a vision of a creative world.

In the domain of writing, this journey leads to a dialogism, according to Bakhtin's term, that opens up new possibilities.⁶ As far as the social realm, we have to admit that we're still dealing with models that are more on the order of fiction than of reality.

This is how I understand Nicole Brossard's to write "I am a woman" is full of consequences. From this standpoint, the figure of the lesbian carries a new meaning, since she belongs to a

reality that culture has completely occulted. She is women's repository of a knowledge of the body that exceeds the symbolizable, that manages to account for its existence only in rhetorical work, a translation of an implausible truth where desire is a spiral to metaphors, that is, producing a language that, breaking the narrow circle of repetition, keeps on enlarging a territory where proper language reveals its inability to tell, its lack. A language of subversion.

This knowledge of the body is a memory of the mother's body, of this first object of love from which we had to detach ourselves without managing, for all that, to mourn it. This knowledge of the body that is the lesbian's allows her to make a new journey toward the same. For, according to Luce Irigaray, before being heterosexual, desire in women is homosexual.⁷ This return to the same becomes an encounter with oneself, where what matters is precisely the movement toward, the impulse that leads to the journey, a burst, through which one rids oneself of one's learned skin to adopt a position of nakedness that favors creative work.

But this journey also means that the woman lover is encountered as same and as other since she is both similar and different, familiar and foreign. This is a stage that constitutes an active differentiation, not a violent cut or break, but that puts in place a problematic of relation. This is a movement that has a link to Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance*.⁸ And that is where lesbian speech can open us up to

the transcultural, the first form of the transcultural, let's not forget, being an exchange between women's culture and men's culture. There can be no true heterosexuality if woman lives this entry into masculine culture as a deportation from her own universe. There will be no true heterosexuality as long as the the transmission of women's culture is stifled.

It is only from that point on that we can put in place a poetics of the transcultural, as the facts in Quebec have begun to show. So in the middle of the native crisis during the summer of 1991, when tempers were highest, an Indian woman leader from British Columbia who had been working on a solution, declared that the crisis would have been resolved much earlier if the negotiations had been in women's hands. That very year, native women separated from their leaders who were fighting for complete autonomy in legislative matters because the women wanted to continue to be protected by the Canadian charter. And in the middle of the constitutional crisis, as Quebec is questioning its attachment to Canada, a number of Québécoises, before deciding whether they are for Quebec's separation, are wondering whether independence will come with them or bypass them, by suppressing their values.

But it's not a matter of erasing all cultural distinctions in the name of a woman-reality. As Nicole Brossard's text aptly reminds us, my truth as a western White woman is not the truth of a woman from the third world. The true can exist only on the condition that it is not opposed to the false. This is a logic

of the aporia, once again, that comes from thinking about inquiring, that asks us to recall constantly that woman seeks to be all by accepting to see herself as not all, to represent herself symbolically in culture in a mobile, changing, moving way. In a plural way. To make her presence inaugurate a system where the transcultural, like the writing of the multiple, happens in the encounter of as many potential readings. There where the mourning of History permits the invention of the poem as a form of a becoming that doesn't erase the hand's gesture.

Translated by Katharine Ann Jensen

Louisiana State University

Notes

1. All quotations from Nicole Brossard's essay appear in italics.
2. Robert Musil, L'homme sans qualités, quoted by Christine Buci-Glucksmann, La raison baroque. De Baudelaire à Benjamin (Paris: Galilée, 1984), 199. Robert Musil, The Man without Qualities, trans. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Knopf, 1994).
3. Julia Kristeva, La révolution du langage poétique (Paris: Seuil, 1974). Revolution in Poetic Language, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
4. Claude Beausoleil, Hugues Corriveau, Louise Cotnoir and LIse Guèvrement, "Interview with Nicole Brossard on Picture Theory," in "Traces, écriture de Nicole Brossard," La nouvelle barre du jour no. 118-119 (novembre 1982): 185.
5. Alice Jardine, Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1985).
6. Mikhail Bakhtin, Esthétique et théorie du roman (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).
7. Luce Irigaray, Le corps-à-corps avec la mère (Montréal: Les éditions de la pleine lune, 1981).
8. Jacques Derrida, "L'écriture et la différence." Théorie d'ensemble (Paris: Seuil, 1968).