

The Doubly Complicit Memory

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HOW CAN WE APPROACH the duplicity of language without recalling the two meanings of the word “duplicity”? First, as “characteristic of doubleness,”¹ then as falseness, hypocrisy. For that is really the question here: the double face of language, as in the expression “two-faced,” which uses a mask to hide its other, its split which plays between the signifier and the signified arbitrarily, according to Saussure,² in order to create an integrated process of communication.

What about the speaking subject—the unary*, thinking, transcendental subject who performs a transparent act in the tradition of Descartes, ejecting his utterance, who is exterior to a predicate forever separated from him, and over whom he looms as Master? Here, we are right at the heart of the symbolic, and the subject, far from being lost there, establishes himself like a son imitating his father’s speech. Abandoning the mother, he now passes over into the realm

*The French word is a neologism ‘unaire,’ so I’ve translated it as ‘unary’ to correspond to ‘binary’ and the French ‘binaire.’ K. M.

of order, the law, the Phallus. Language assures the subject's social insertion in the patriarchy. This subject speaks, but is also spoken through. And history speaks, or rather avoids speaking about the murder of the mother, leaving this tricked Oedipus with a triangular relationship that resolves itself through identification with the Father, with the Same.

And what can we say about her, the daughter, who is alienated from this language in which she can never recognize herself as subject, who sees herself cut off from mother, who finds herself without a penis with which to identify with her father? In language she is always spoken about, she, a stranger to the act of speech. Despairing of her case, she could try to imitate masculine speech. But with what risk does she undertake this circumnavigation, this pretense which distances her from her own body? She will never become a father, never, and her speech will always remain an act of borrowing. Where is she in this imitation, and what will she encounter, if not hysteria, female-language, in which the language of the body manifests itself on the side of the symbolic that speaks at the margin, painfully, off-kilter.



And I, I, a Québécoise, doubly alienated, twice removed from my mother, thrown into an abyss by the Father, that anglophone who conquered my own father on whom he imposed his language, I try desperately to reverse the trend, to redirect it to its origins. I throw myself completely into it, questioning CODES and NAMES: I want to discover women's language, beyond all national languages, which dares to present my relation with the world, reality and love in terms other than those of castration.

To throw myself completely into it and, as a francophone woman, to complete a journey with my anglophone sisters to the deepest shadows so as to recover the memory of our mother tongues to get beyond the power struggles with a subversive complicity which helps us to discover the richness of our differences in one and the same bond with the mother.

To affirm our women's language, de-centred, eccentric in relation to the symbolic, changeable, passionate, and linked to the semiotic *chora*³. As in the subversion of the norm, the logical and grammatical norm, as in prosody, as in the language of gentle madness, as in laughter. Where women talk among themselves in open and in-finite communication, where they write in the feminine in their fictions. Where they talk nonsense in relation to the law, to power, to the forces of power, so as to undermine them.

For this is where, in popular thought, women's language is experienced at the margin of the symbolic, and consequently devalorized. Remember the Tunisian proverb: "By his silence, man refuses, by her silence, woman consents." And isn't what is called idle chatter, gossip, what woman's conversation has retained of the chant, precisely the inclusion of presymbolic rhymes in language, rhymes which, among men, only the poets, true sons of the mother, have known how to preserve?

It's not a question here, however, of sending woman back to her "feminine nature," a consequence of the "eternal feminine." Let's say rather that woman perceived as other has been excluded from language. The use of all language by the-dominant-male has led to the sexualization of language, and woman finds herself facing an excision of the real. She must cross over it, make it deviate so she can find her own speech. She sees herself denied access to certain words (for example, the coarse words of men); she lacks vocabulary, in many cases, and is unable to give her version of events.

All the principles and preconceptions that weigh us down are found in the words we use, let alone that we are excluded from these same principles and preconceptions.

Marie Cardinal, *Autrement dit (To Say It Another Way)*⁵

From the start a booby-trapped terrain, language is erected against woman who must ceaselessly question and evade it. For her it's a matter of succeeding in detouring the masculine language in order to give a linguistic shape to her own reality, her imagination.

We have to find the means at all costs. No longer separate the speech act from the spoken, make the female-subject surface in a language where we can meet ourselves. Represent the feminine subconscious. Grasp language and penetrate what it discloses: *jouissance**. To give voice to contradictions, and to no longer try to deny them through unity and coherence: to open up words, spread them across the page, accept the shadows, bring out their liveliness and colour. To enter the symbolic or to leave it, always remaining flexible.

If we don't invent a language for our body, there will be too few gestures to portray our history. We will weary of the same few gestures, and our desires will remain latent, and in limbo. Lulled to sleep, unsatisfied. And delivered over to the words of men.

Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is not one*⁶

A matter of real urgency. To refuse the mask, refuse the double-play of language: the dichotomy of signifier/signified separated by a bar (Saussure), the dichotomy of language/speech (Saussure) and competence/performance (Chomsky), the binarity of opposites. To give vent to a plural language that catches all the nuances of words beyond fixed definition, that abandons the order of the theological substantive, of ownership. A language of relations, of drift, alive with all our seedings.



Man has been given THE language; hence the split for woman set in relation to the masculine universe. When she speaks to a speaker, social rules oblige her to express herself in his language: the dominant discourse of communication setting up its "free arbiter," academic discourse, discourse of supply and demand, discourse of cas-

*Roland Barthes' term for pleasure, ecstasy, sexual pleasure. K. M.

tration. Nothing but transvestism,* mimicking man so that woman can make a place for herself at the heart of the phratry. And it's in relation to the masculine language, to its values, that she will see herself evaluated, will evaluate her own competence.

The double stakes the contemporary woman must face. Or else stay amongst women, attempt nothing in the men's realm, work to make a new culture emerge, a culture in which the values of competition and ownership would no longer have a place, a culture in the feminine which would give women back their bodies, a women's language which could be developed outside established contexts. The risk of such an enterprise: the ghetto. Or else seek to enter the male world, play on its grassy borders while trying to change them from within and risk alienation, loss or self. Two different stands which divide women today and determine their political, social, and sexual choices. Must one join political parties with their power plays? or not? Must one work within already established social structures? Must one have privileged relations with men?

Women search for solutions appropriate to themselves. And this alternative means not curbing feminism to a narrow truth confined to "the correct line," but rather giving birth to diverse feminist tendencies, at the heart of which the individuality of women, their cares and their desires, are not drained off to profit an ossified theory. In this respect, feminism offers itself as practice in the feminine.

I wish to love in my female tongue. To explain as I please in my male tongue, since I possess both and the former remains to be asserted.

Madeleine Gagnon, *La venue à l'écriture?* (Coming to Writing)

Despite risks, women act confident. So Madeleine Gagnon divides up the functions of her double language: love for women's language, rationality for men's language. There a creative fissure is at work: not the fissure of a split subject but the meeting of two principles.

And Luce Irigaray carries the feminine into the body of theory in

* literally a female-gender transvestite, the reverse of the usual. D.M.

her recent writing: *Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre* (And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other, 1979), *Amante marine* (Marine Lover, 1980), and *Passions élémentaires* (Basic Passions, 1982). Here, the rigidity of academic language is abandoned, the female question is explored in a shifting language, a language tending towards metaphor and metonymy, where a woman-*I* situates itself; and this subject *I* is not detached from its predicate but winds around it without ever bringing it to a standstill or doing it to death. This is one of the ways it is possible to theorize in the feminine.



A search for the feminine which makes itself felt also in fiction. Women who write are of necessity preoccupied with *language*, with *form*, since for them it's a question of subverting masculine language. A desire, therefore, to de-articulate the dominant discourse, to split open syntax, to let the over-flowing feminine into the signifier, to reinvent vocabulary, to reinvest it with new signifieds. And so, in Quebec, the coincidence of the literary avant-garde⁸ with works by women: a dialectic relationship which has allowed both the new writing and women's texts to spill over, to sustain an innovative dynamism.

Note, however, that men's and women's writings do not merge; rather they meet in their differences. Writing remains this "return to the matricial* paradise/. . . / A man's return is a return to the Other. A woman's return is a return to the Same. Perhaps that's why the act of writing is more of a complete return for a woman than it is for a man."⁹

Sexuality of production in relation to the avant-garde: I am thinking here of Nicole Brossard, Madeleine Gagnon, France Théoret, Yolande Villemaire; Gail Scott for English Canada. Sexuality otherwise elaborated by Hélène Cixous, Chantal Chawaf in France; in the USA by Mary Daly who attempts a return to the roots of words as a way of stripping them of their patriarchal connotations.

* *matriciel*, pertaining to a matrix and by extension from *la matrice*, the womb. D.M.

Is it that texts in the feminine are haunted by the death of language? Or is it rather that masculine language is already dead since it is built on the eviction of the mother, on the absence of pre-symbolic rhythms and glossolalia? Isn't it a matter of making holes in language? Of making audible the tempo that women adopt when they speak amongst themselves, "the litany form"¹⁰ of their oral exchanges which doesn't respect the signifier/signified split but never tires of giving meaning to the signifier itself?

Affirm that women's language corresponds with poetic language. Affirm the poeticity of writing in the feminine conscious of its oral nature, searching for the mother. Emphasize the particular breathing of words that stick to your skin, scatter in many directions, desperately try to lose good sense, **THE** sense*, the one, the right, that are given over to the figure of speech, abandoning forever the arbitrary nature of the sign. Words that smell, far from hiding their odours, that say and visualize blood, milk, shit, make these things felt and are themselves felt, words that abandon any interest in fixed geometries, in reassuring/restraining dichotomies, so as to enter into the meanderings of a memory speaking its subconscious, its story and its utopias.

Duplicity of language? Complicity, rather, since we are no longer dupes. We can no longer be satisfied with miming and the law. We want to invent/regain a language derived from the body, there where the mother, long before the father, labours.

**le sens* refers not only to sense but also to meaning and direction. D.M.

Notes

¹The French definition "caractère de ce qui est double" comes from *le petit Robert* (Paris, 1969), p. 521.

²Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, translated by Wade Baskin (N.Y. 1959).

³This notion is used by Julia Kristeva. She borrowed the term *chora* from Plato who defined it as: “a flexible receptacle of combinations, contradictions, and movement, necessary for the functioning of nature before the teleological intervention of God, and corresponding to the mother.” For Kristeva, the semiotic *chora* “is concerned with the shape of a process, which, in order to be the subject’s, crosses over the unary severance which establishes it and calls forth, in its topos, a battle of impulses, which starts it moving and endangers it.” The *chora* plays “with and through the body of the mother— of the woman— but in the act of significance.” J. Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris, 1977), p. 47.

⁴Henri Meschonnic, *Pour la poétique V. Poésie sans réponse* (Paris, 1978), p. 206.

⁵Marie Cardinal, *Autrement dit* (Paris, 1978), p. 89.

⁶Luce Irigaray, *Ce sex qui n'en est pas un* (Paris, 1977), p. 213.

⁷Madeleine Gagnon, “Mon corps dans l’écriture” (“My body in writing”), in *La venue à l’écriture* (Coming to Writing, by Hélène Cixous, Madeleine Gagnon, Annie Leclerc) (Paris, 1977), p. 66.

⁸The term “literary avant-garde” is understood to refer to the movement which developed in Quebec about 1965 around the literary journals *La nouvelle barre du jour* and *Les herbes rouges*. This calling nationalist poetry into question was carried out through a poetry of rupture: rupture with the preceding poetic code, formalist work, new sets of themes, new ideologies: marxism, feminism, the counter-culture, the theme of the city, of the body, of writing.

⁹Beatrice Didier, *Lécriture-femme* (Woman-writing) (Paris, 1981), p. 274.

¹⁰Suzanne Lamy, *D’elles* (Montreal, 1979), p. 63.