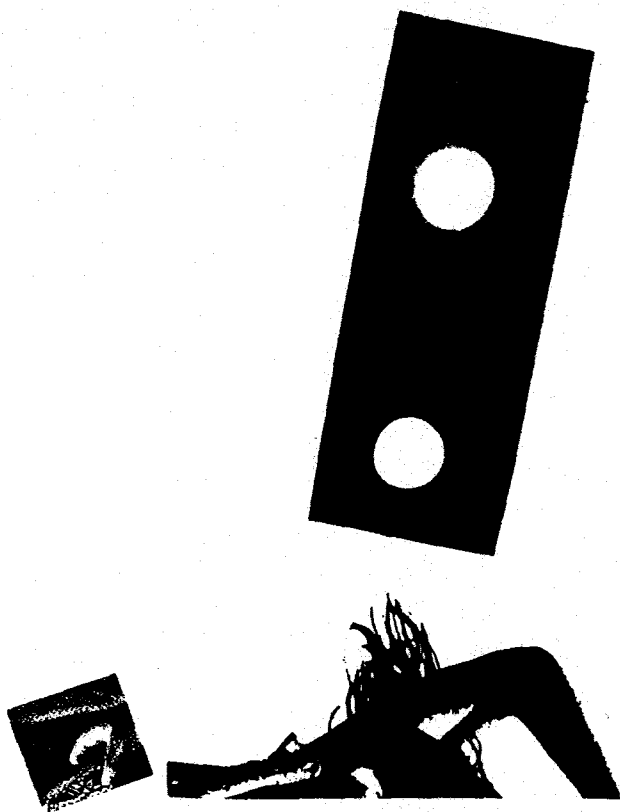


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Writing, Reading
and the Imagined Reader /
Lover

traduit par Suzanne
de Lotbinière-Harwood



In the past, a person who couldn't read or write made an X for her name on contracts, confessions, testimonies, etc. Beside the X would be written in script her name and the words "her mark." Having achieved anonymity in the process of naming herself, the non-writer agrees to a lower class distinction. In a popular drama, however, she would be presented as wise or at least shrewd — except in the illuminated scene of the awkward X. Being shown how to hold the pen and so forth, and then the gracelessness of the cross itself, the one who signs is exposed not only as nameless in writing, but as causing others to be employed to translate her official identity (i.e. her father's name.) Did anyone read her the fine print? What does her X agree to? That she is a witch, that she owes somebody something (money, goods, chastity) or that somebody owes her something (property, inheritance). One leaves this picture with tender feelings for her vulnerability, hoping she will be all right in the end.

"It was at Plash that the Beguildys lived, and it was at their dwelling, that was part stone house and part cave, that I got my book learning. It may seem strange to you that a woman of my humble station should be able to write and spell, and put all these things into a book." (Mary Webb, *Precious Bane*, 1925) The narrator in this novel, which takes place early in the 19th century, is taught to write by Mr. Beguildy, a magician, thus affirming the etymological link between grammar and glamour, i.e. beguilement, from the days

in which book-learning and writing, especially by women, was regarded with suspicion (and it still is) as a form of sorcery. Prue Sarn was eventually accused of witchcraft, but was rescued from the ducking-stool by her love the weaver, Kester Woodseaves. Her witchcraft was proven not only by her book-learning and ability to write, and by the tragic events in her household, but most undeniably by her appearance : she had a hare-lip and was suspected of cavorting with hares on certain Sabbath eves. Articulate, her mouth was the source of her misery. Her mouth was the reason for her (temporary — the novel is a romance) loneliness.

When I am writing and pause to think, the words I have already written have no history. They do not constitute the case of a moment ago. They are merely what went before, like the tracks of someone. They are signs, and they float, as it were, in an absolute present — a hall of mirrors in which I search for a true reflection or am amazed by the inventiveness of the distortions. I do not know, in the presence of these words, what I mean. They function, rather, as a momentum, from which I seek its rhythmic extension, and sometimes, at the end of a poem, its cessation. Or the already completed stanzas can be abstract patterns into which I gaze — meaning as Arabic or as, simply, tracings, pressures, marks, glyphs. And which I look through with a view to the other side, as into a mandala or a crystal ball. This “other side” is the rest of the poem, of course, which means that I don’t invent anything at all but merely look to the other side of the words I have already written. This is like reading but it is not the same thing. I can read other people’s writing but I can only love/criticize/deny/hate/stimulate/change/

excuse/be embarrassed by my own. My own words (or rather, combinations of words, since nobody uses her own words) I am in a Relationship with. They judge me, I judge them ; they accuse me, I accuse them ; they amaze me, I amaze them ; I love them, I am not so sure they love me. I am jealous and believe they have a better relationship with others.

I never read my own work when it appears alongside the work of others in a magazine or anthology. Like Barthes, who believes his lover possesses a brilliant originality whereas he himself is banal, mass-produced, I am astonished by the genius of the writing of others beside which my own not only pales, but worse, appears as an impersonation of writing. A tremendous forgery has occurred and I am the only one who knows about this crime. In the meantime, bleached of reality in the spectacle of the Book, like the illiterate making the X in front of the one who can truly read and write, whose authority is undeniable and legitimate and unapologetic, who outclasses me forever, my own writing appears unsophisticated, exposed, laid bare. Like my own body I know the geography, tendencies, and basic unalterable musculature of my own writing. I see it the way I see my own motionless image in the mirror. What does the beloved see ? That face, those lines, that look. So that I do not "read" my own writing so much as introject an imagined reader/(lover), not always the same one that I have invented in the process of writing/(seduction). As Prue Sarn is lifted into her lover's arms, he kisses her "full upon the mouth." (Remember the harelip, source of her words, her difficulty in life.) These are the last words of the novel. At

the end of one of my poems, "Usage", I address the "dear reader" and ask "Will you marry me?" Some people take this literally, and really, they are not far wrong in doing so.