

## Suzanne Lamy: 'Talking Together'

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### Suzanne Lamy: Des femmes parlent

*Faisant particulièrement référence à 'Deux femmes parlent' dans d'elles, Simon décrit les commentaires de Lamy sur le dialogue dans l'écriture féminine, qui comprend entre autres l'importance de la situation (les facteurs matériels et institutionnels qui déterminent l'écriture), le passage de l'oral à l'écrit et comment ce passage caractérise l'écriture et l'expérience des femmes de par les hésitations, les pertes, les travaux inachevés; traite aussi du rôle du rire et du silence, de la relation existant entre Marguerite Duras et Xavière Gauthier et des lecteurs dans ce dialogue.*

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In the short chronology of feminist criticism in Quebec, 1979 belongs to a period of heroic beginnings. And Suzanne Lamy's *d'elles* – published that year – is very much a product of those times and that spirit, exuberant witness to a time of discovery.

What remains most striking about the essays now is the way they bring into existence a new kind of critical object. The writing which Suzanne Lamy chose to analyze was not a series of static artifacts but a 'place' somewhere between speech and writing, social acts and institutions, traditional and emergent practices. A certain number of forms became privileged expressions of the tension between social determinants and textual experimentation: 'bavardage' (gossip, chatter), litany and dialogue were the most important of these. Each brought into play the parodic dialectic between the negative heritage of women and its revalorization in renewed forms.

But *d'elles* did much more than just stake out a new critical territory. The series of essays is also an extended meditation on language and power. In its very materiality (its use of metaphor and complex modes

of authorization) as well as its integration of the major themes of the French attack on the subject (Blanchot, Barthes), *d'elles* established feminist criticism as central to the issues of language as defined by modernity. This is particularly clear in the essay 'Deux femmes parlent' which speaks, through a reading of *Les Parleuses* by Marguerite Duras and Xavière Gauthier, of the social and esthetic dimensions of dialogue.

The dialogue form takes on special importance in Lamy's work because it calls attention to the *situation* which is inscribed in all speech. Here, writ large, are the essential determinants of all writing – the material and institutional factors which create its legitimacy.

*The specificity of the dialogue / discussion resides in its 'situation' which has a determining influence on the form and implies a number of points to be agreed upon: the type of transcription, the relationship between the participants, the role of the animator (leader or foil), the choice of themes, the purpose and audience of the discussions.*<sup>2</sup>

'Situation' or 'place' takes on a broad importance in all of Suzanne Lamy's critical work – and in this we can read the importance of writers like Barthes (especially in *The Lesson* and *Degree Zero of Writing*) and Blanchot (*L'Entretien infini*). Her most trenchant observations were those which unmasked the contradictions or paradoxes of a speaking situation – that of Hélène Cixous' one-way address to a large audience on the 'discourse of love' (*Spirale*, no. 6, janvier 1980, p.3), or of Marguerite Duras' being adored by those whose critical tenets were to separate author and work (*Marguerite Duras à Montréal*, Editions Spirale, 1981). All of Lamy's feminist criticism is marked by an intense concern with the constraints of the 'speaking situation' which determine the production of women's writings and of their critical reception.

The dialogue (when it is also a text) is further marked by the specific ways in which it is made to pass from oral to written forms. With a few examples at hand (*Autrement dit*, Annie Leclerc and Marie Cardinal; *L'Eclat de la lumière*, Anne Philippe) Lamy hasards the generalization that women are more comfortable with hesitations, losses, incompletions of the spoken form than the men she quotes. The risk they wish to take is precisely to be 'faithful to the word,' to the life and spontaneity of the spoken word.

*These are engaging books in which voices move without constraint or affectation, faithful to the etymology of the word entretien (conversation, interview) which is to hold together, to prolong, to extend. And why not linger a moment at this prefix 'entre' (between), the clever, sinuous line that separates and divides, but just as subtly brings together and unites ... Between our hands, between your lips, between our two mouths: a passage, in joy. Words, breath, eyes. Together. Through the same hollows, creeks and craters as travel all things as they come to life, grow and die out. A voyage confident of a warm welcome, of openness and exchange. (p.38)*

As in her discussions of gossip and litany, Lamy defines (women's) dialogue as a form which belongs at once to oral and written modes. This is the true novelty of women's writing and its utopian promise.

*These conversations are not minor writings; they are the full and concrete counter-melodies of their respective works, important because they set off many more resonances. Another history begins with them. A new form has been born, out of the rhythm of their breathing, of the close contact of distance and harmony, of the light gravity of these women for whom the outer bark cannot be separated from the density of beings. (p.50)*

The dialogue between Marguerite Duras and Xavière Gauthier becomes a model. True equality is probably 'not of this world' (p.46) but the closest we can get to it, for Suzanne Lamy, might be in a dialogue of the kind Duras and Gauthier produced in *Les Parleuses*. It is the intensity of her admiration for this work which surely brought Suzanne Lamy to write this essay. All the same, the 'tunnels' of analysis (p.38) with which she approaches these exemplary dialogues are complex. As in much of her writing, Lamy combines the enthusiasm and complicity of the 'I' with the collective social dimension of the 'we' and the impersonal voice of authorized knowledge. All three are mobilized here to show that the dialogue form as used by women is different in intent and mode from our conventional understanding of the form. Laughter and silences are essential.

*Laughter is a part of the discussions: we laugh with those we love, just as we share their silences. There are many silences in this transcription*

*and they mark important breaks: moments of latence or doubt, of transparency, of dead-ends, of eyes which meet or look away ... at this? or that? an insect, a flower, the memory of a bamboo shoot ... (p.48)*

This doesn't mean that the discussions are frivolous. Lamy emphasizes Xavière Gauthier's role in forcing Duras to confront certain philosophical questions or at least to admit directly that she is avoiding them. What emerges from this dialogue, which is allowed to follow its own laws, are very surprising kinds of revelations.

*Complicity does not do away with rigour, but this various outpouring allows for the most intimate confessions; the most extraordinary avowals come out quite naturally. (p.48)*

The apparent disorder of the whole suggests a new richness of perception, 'nocturnal' in its unshapedness, revealing the processes of thought itself.

*Words come together in dense, wild patterns, barely detached from the nocturnal matter from which they emerge. Thought is interiorized before your eyes, preserving its vigour and immediateness, bare, in shreds. (p.47)*

*I love the disparateness of it all, the image of our world as debris and sudden bursts of sunshine, the willingness to let thoughts stray, the refusal of an arbitrary order. Ideas come one after the other, and then intersect: creativity, feminism, social organisation, politics, passing events, sexuality from all angles: faithfulness, motherhood, prostitution, possessiveness ... (p.49)*

Dialogue, 'in the full sense of the term' (p.45) is an ideal: a shared quest. It is knowledge revealed as process, communion achieved as an equality of voice. In contrast to inauthentic dialogue, the 'monologue in disguise' (the false pretenses of the interview which claims to be a discussion among equals, the terrorism of equality preached from on high) the phrases of true dialogue are interchangeable; they could be attributed to one or the other of the speakers. 'The exchange is full of supple and secret movements; the words turn into echos of themselves.' (p.46) What is dialogue if it is not the 'recognition that one cannot, alone, reach the fundamental truths?' (p.45)

*The minimal distance necessary to the course of the dialogue forces the reader to be attentive, to pass from one to the other, to insinuate herself between the openness of Duras and the slight stiffness of Gauthier. Sometimes the reader is provoked by the daring, even extreme positions which are taken, sometimes with an almost terrifying, ominous sense of conviction. The firmness of these views force the reader to turn back on her own past, to her half-baked Marxist-Leninist analyses or experiences of women's conditioning and lack of nerve ... I am confronted with the woman I was, the woman I am. Caught up in the tempo of this communication which affects my behaviour, my thought, my emotions and my senses, I implant myself into certain parts of the text, opening up a new course. (p. 50)*

The dyad of dialogue is broken; now there are three. The reader insinuates herself into the space between the speakers, absorbed in the back and forth movement between the two. Her fascination is slightly tinted with the curiosity of the voyeur. She watches thought in the process of coming to life and wonders how she will in turn begin her own dialogue with new readers.

And then we are there, readers to the second degree, peering over the critic's shoulder. Can the enthusiasm of beginnings come to life once again? We can but envy the amorous intensity of Suzanne Lamy in dialogue with Marguerite Duras in dialogue with Xavière Gauthier.

- 1 For a more developed analysis of Suzanne Lamy's feminist criticism, see S. Simon, 'Suzanne Lamy: le féminin au risque de la critique,' *Voix et images*, no. 37, automne 1987, pp. 52-64 and Lori Saint-Martin, 'Suzanne Lamy, Pour une morale de la critique,' pp. 29-40.
- 2 All quotations are from 'Deux femmes parlent ...' (*d'elles*, Editions de l'Hexagone, 1979) and are translated by me.