

# Marie Cardinal's *Comme si de rien n'était* : Language and Violence

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Marie Cardinal's most recent novel, *Comme si de rien n'était* ("As if nothing had happened"; 1990) continues the exploration of violence that she began in earlier works.<sup>1</sup> Once again, she shows particular interest in language as a vehicle of violence. This time, however, she departs from the relatively straightforward narration of her previous works, and tries to create a form that itself conveys how language may be used in a violent manner, and that also suggests how it may be used to avoid this process.

*Comme si de rien n'était* consists of a series of passages, often quite short, each recounting conversations or events in the lives of a wide variety of often unconnected characters. Mimi and Simone, two cousins in their sixties who telephone each other to discuss personal concerns and world events, appear more frequently than the others. Several paragraphs describe the dismay and disorientation of a character who has just received bad news. These passages are repeated at the end of the novel, and we realize that they are Simone's reactions on learning that Mimi is very ill and possibly dead. Some of these passages (perhaps all of them) are part of a manuscript that Simone is writing. She is also writing about a Madame de la Porte, and we assume that certain passages earlier in the text concerning a character of this name are also by Simone. After the novel proper, there are brief biographies of characters who enter peripherally into the novel, or who have had some influence on the lives of the characters in the main section.

Cardinal's depiction of violence against individuals, and particularly against women, is often quite explicit: the murder of several women at the École Polytechnique in Montreal; the case of the male character who regularly beats up the woman with whom he lives; stories of oppression emanating from Eastern Europe. It is language, however, that plays the main role in the imposition of violence. We are alerted to the importance of language in human relationships by the fact that one character, Solange Dumont, is an avid solver of crossword puzzles who often thinks about words and who draws our attention to the fact that they are not a static or neutral medium. "Words are like flowers, they're living, they're on the move," she says (93). Language structures our experience of reality, and, as language changes, so does our relationship to the world around us. Georges, who is a teacher of linguistics, frequently explains the derivation of words, and how their meaning has changed with time. These changes reflect and help form the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live. A language spoken by a particular

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the following editions of Cardinal's works, all of which are published in Paris: *Autrement dit* (Grasset/Livre de Poche, 1977), *Une Vie pour deux* (Grasset/Livre de Poche, 1978), *La Médée d'Euripide, Avant-propos et texte français de Marie Cardinal* (Grasset, 1987), *Les Pieds-Noirs* (Belfond, 1988), *Comme si de rien n'était* (Grasset/Livre de Poche, 1990). All translations from these works are my own.

national group is also closely linked to the attitudes of that group. Georges says: "Words tell the desires of peoples, their thoughts and their obsessions. No words are gratuitous" (70). Mimi regrets never having learned German because she knows that the language of the great German philosophers conveys the essence of their thought, some of which is lost in translation.

On an individual level, different people use language in their own way to express their particular experience and attitudes. Georges sees language in historical terms, and, for him, words are "laden with their history" (69). For Simone, they are the substance of poetry and dreams, while Mimi feels language is the expression of philosophy and ideas. Solange is able to solve the crossword puzzles in her newspaper because she shares certain attitudes with their author. She knows what words to expect from him because she knows that he is "a leftist too, and an anticlerical. A man who isn't young, certain slang words that recur are dated" (65).

Language is a particularly powerful instrument in conveying and imposing a system of values. Hence, when Mimi's husband leaves her, he is dismissed by her family as "an adventurer" and "a rogue" (13). Mimi accepts these judgments and the shame they imply for her because she married him. On a political level, too, language is frequently used to impose values and beliefs. This is illustrated when Solange is unable to find a ten-letter word in her crossword, defined as "threatened species." Mimi, who knows the politics of Solange's newspaper, guesses that the word is "communiste." This particular word is, as it happens, an excellent example of how politics and language are intertwined. For Mimi, "communism" has always meant "a dream, an ideal" (81) and "a hope" (35). For Georges, who has seen the effects of a communist regime in Poland, the word signifies the loss of his ideals and "my dead youth" (81). For those who have lived under communism, it means the imposition of an authoritarian point of view through a language that will admit only one interpretation. It means acceptance of the Party's views, and the impossibility of thinking or speaking outside these views. Simone says: "No word, because we don't know it, should prevent us from speaking" (134). Yet communist regimes have robbed whole nations of words to express their revolt. Hence, Georges discovers that Polish students, when they use the word "democracy," "don't know what that word means" (107). They are unable to tell him what they want in place of the crumbling communist system because they lack the word to express it.

Western society suffers from the manipulation of language too. According to Simone, for the French government, "democracy" still means what it meant for the ancient Athenians, "who thought neither women, nor foreigners, nor slaves had a say in this subject" (83). Words are frequently used in such societies to sell—a political viewpoint, a set of values, a commercial product. One character spots a sign in a shop window that makes no sense. She realizes, however, that words like "satisfaction" and "confidence" are used in it to sell. "It's like election speeches," she concludes (71). Words used this way are intended to lull, and their parameters are stretched to the point that they become empty of precise meaning. This is the case of catchphrases and trendy jargon. Simone points out that the word "sign" and its derivatives have become such empty words, used by people in senseless phrases like "the semiotics of my bicycle," "the semiology of my orgasms," and "the signifier