Subversive Texts: Québec Women Writers

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From the very beginning, women writers have played a leading—if not principal—role in the development of Canadian literature, in English Canada as well as in Québec. Were men too busy toiling the land to trifle with ink and paper? Were their hands too callous to pick up the pen? Did women have nothing better to do than to put words into scribblers? But women's diaries clearly reveal that female settlers did not spend their time in parlours or drawing rooms; their families and the land kept them quite busy, too. And still to-day, a great number of women write and do other work as well: more than half of the members of the Writers' Union of Canada, for instance, are women; 43% of the Canadian work force is female, and women continue to take charge of most of the house and family work that needs to be done. In other words, women have always had work to do; idleness is not what has been driving them to write.

Rather than ask why so many women take up the pen or turn to the word-processor, we might search for the reasons which have made it possible for some of them to be so successful in reaching wide audiences. In fact, that is the intention of Nicole Brossard, one of Québec's leading writers, when she asks in *Liberté,* in 1976, to which collective schizophrenia the fantasies of women writers appealed and what oppression they brought into the open.[1]

Of course, Brossard asks this question about Québec writers and their success in Québec. But the success of *les écritures au féminin* goes beyond linguistic boundaries. Since the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and René Lévesque's coming to power in 1976, English Canada has been more attentive to Québec, and those interested in literature have been somewhat more curious to learn about Québec writers. English-Canadian feminists, since the early 1980s, have been in very active communication with feminists in Québec, as evidenced, for instance, by the bilingual Dialogue Conference held in October 1981 at York University in Toronto—an event which Barbara Godard, one of its

[1] "La femme et l'écriture," *Liberté*, 18.4-5 (1976): 106-07.

driving forces, calls "a breaking of the cirlce," during which women writers and critics, "explorers in language," crossed "linguistic frontiers," as well as boundaries of content, "establishing the grounds for a feminist aesthetic, exploring the textual implications of feminism, as ideology impinges on language, symbols, plots—the traditional areas of literary analysis."[2]

West Coast Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots held a bilingual conference in 1983, which was attended by 800 women. This soon led to bilingual publications such as *Women and Words/Les Femmes et les Mots* (Madeira Park: Harbour, 1984), *Character/Jeu de lettre* (Montréal: NBJ, 1985) by poets Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt, and *Gynocritics/La Gynocritique*, edited by Barbara Godard, which presents the papers given at the Dialogue Conference. The meetings and writing retreats of Women and Words/Les Femmes et les Mots continue to bring together anglophone and francophone writers, both experienced and aspiring.

Thus the feminist network is breaking down linguistic boundaries within Canada, as it is breaking down racial and political borders on a world-wide level. Feminist translators such as Barbara Godard, Yvonne M. Klein, Patricia Claxton, and Suzanne Lotbinière-Harwood, to name but a few, are doing their share to facilitate exchanges and foster a growing intertextuality. National Film Board films such as *Some American Feminists* (1976) by Nicole Brossard and Luce Guibault, and the recent *Firewords* (1986) by Dorothy Hénault—a trilogy exploring the worlds of Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, and Jovette Marchessault—contribute to a better understanding also. Most recently, the Third International Feminist Book Fair, which took place in Montréal in June 1988, enabled women writers, as well as feminist translators, publishers, and critics to experience their differences, as well as their affinities and their common ground, and further strengthen the network.

What about the anglophone public in general, readers outside the feminist and bibliophile circles? In which ways has this wider public become acquainted with the women writers of Québec? Many people have read the shorter texts of Gabrielle Roy, such as *La petite poule d'eau* (Montréal: Beauchemin, 1950), a book frequently used in high school French classes. And Canadian literature classes often include Roy's novel *Bonheur d'occasion* (Montréal: Beauchemin, 1945), in its first English translation by Hannah Josephson (New York: Reyaul, 1947; To-

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2 Barbara Godard, ed., *Gynocritics/La Gynocritique* (Toronto: ECW P, 1988) iii.

ronto: McClelland, 1980) under the title *The Tin Flute.* Roy's novel can be studied as a social document also and thus seems to have provided generations of high school students with information on the social problems of Québec. English-Canadians may also have seen the film version of the *The Tin Flute* and may have become acquainted, again through the medium of cinema, with Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). They may have seen Antonine Maillet's play *La Sagouine* (Ottawa: Leméac, 1973), a one-woman show performed all across Canada, on stage and also on television. Generally speaking, however, the English-Canadian public remains somewhat ignorant of Québec's literature. Over the last few years, the proportionate number of translations has actually been decreasing, a trend which has, however, had no impact on the translations of women's writings.[3]

Why are feminist literary texts given preferential treatment? As Nicole Brossard implies, the works of women authors appeal, in their native tongue, to a wide audience of Québécois, because they express a discontent with tradition, question reality, and bring the oppression of individuals and groups into the open. Oppression and revolution, discontent and social change—these are themes dear to the heart of the Québécois. They are dear to the heart of English-Canadian women also. Québec women writers have been writing novels of transgression: transgression with regard to form—which makes their texts particularly important to anglophone writers—and transgression with regard to patriarchal traditions—which explains the great appeal they have for a more general feminist readership in English Canada.

Taking *The Tin Flute* as an example, Marie Couillard, in "La femme-écrivain canadienne-française et québécoise face aux idéologies de son temps", shows in which ways Gabrielle Roy—with whom the contemporary feminist literary tradition begins—questions the "validity of human models transmitted to us through the ideologies of the XIXth century."[4] In this novel, the stereotype of the powerful father—provider and protector—present in so many earlier Québec novels, has been replaced by the portrayal of a tired, rather helpless man, Azarius Lacasse. His wife, Rose-Anna, as well as the couple's oldest daughter, Florentine, manages to earn what the family needs in

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[3] According to Sherry Simon in "The True Québec As Revealed to English Canada," *Canadian Literature* 117 (1988): 31-43, the number of translations from French to English has declined in recent years, after a surge in the 1960s and 1970s, with the exception of translations of feminist literary texts.

[4] *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, Special Issue: "Ethnicity and Femininity," 12.1 (1981): 50.

order to keep it from drowning in the poverty which is their lot. Following old Québec tradition and the teachings of the Catholic church, Rose-Anna has twelve children; Florentine becomes pregnant during her first sexual contact with a man. To them, maternity is a burden; giving birth is a tiring, rather than a glorious, experience. Roy ignores the stereotype of woman as the sacred mother and guardian of tradition and religion. Instead she shows woman abused, debilitated by poverty and pregnancy, over-worked, imprisoned in a circle of daily worry and care-giving from which there is no escape. For Rose-Anna and Florentine, there is no greatness in maternity. Female children seem to be destined to mirror their mothers, to lead a life similar to theirs, while male children abandon their mothers as soon as possible, in the (most often) futile attempt to find greater freedom.

In Gabrielle Roy's *Windflower* (Toronto: McClelland, 1975; Joyce Marshall, trans.), Elsa's son, Jimmy, leaves his mother without even saying good-bye. Elsa, an Inuit, had also become pregnant at first contact—rape, actually, by a white man, an American G.I. ridiculously afraid of mosquitoes. She marvels at her son when he is born. But we must note that he is her first baby and that she will not have twelve children, as does Rose-Anna. Nor has she grown up, like Florentine, surrounded by innumerable siblings. Yet she ends up being a slave to her son, and we may conclude that her life is not her own. Such seems to be woman's destiny, to Gabrielle Roy's regret.

Despite all their differences, Elsa the Inuit woman, Rose-Anna, and Florentine have much in common. Comparing their lives allows us to see quite clearly Roy's views of motherhood and the way in which it governs women's existence. Furthermore, it is important to remember that Roy issues her challenge to cultural stereotypes and patriarchal values which entail female servitude to family and Church, raises questions concerning social justice, and speaks out against war quite early in Québec feminist history. When Antonine Maillet raises the same questions with *La Sagouine* in 1973, she, in fact, echoes Gabrielle Roy, who had had the courage to transgress early on—some thirty years before Louky Bersianik proclaims in *L'Euguélionne* (Montréal: La Presse, 1978): "Transgresser, c'est progresser" (211).

In the same year—1945—that Gabrielle Roy published *Bonheur d'occasion*, Geneviève Guèvremont published her novel *Le Survenant* (Montréal: Fidès) also. Her text could be read as contradicting Roy's: the mother figure is pale, almost absent—perhaps wiped out by too hard a task?—while the father

is strikingly strong and commanding, a patriarch *par excellence.* But as James A. Herlan shows in "*Le Survenant* as Ideological Messenger: A Study of Geneviève Guèvremont's Radio Serial," the novel, as well as its adaptation for the radio, caricatures the extreme paternalism and traditional ideology characteristic of Québec under Maurice Duplessis.[5] This was not perceived by the critics nor the listeners, nor was it seen by the viewers of the later television series. The subversive sub-text seemingly disappeared with the help of a patriarchal interpretation, but in fact Guèvremont in *Le Survenant* questions what she depicts.

Anne Hébert is another writer who is not always seen as a feminist transgressing and de-constructing traditional values and cultural myths. However, as Marie Couillard and Francine Dumouchel write in "Symphonie féministe," Hébert's *Les Enfants du Sabbat* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) can serve as another example of textual subversion of the androcentric/patriarchal model.[6] According to these two critics, Anne Hébert uses the technique of the magnifying—and thereby deforming—mirror to offer androcentric society a different view of its own mythologies and phantasms. In the novel, Soeur Julie of the Convent of the Ladies of the Precious Blood frees herself of the restrictive surroundings of the convent and confronts society's spokesman, a medical doctor who wishes to operate on her in order to remove all that is troubling her—her female organs and reproductive apparatus—and throw all that obscene paraphernalia into the garbage. Soeur Julie turns Dr. Painchaud into a very ordinary man, unable even to control his own impulses. She brings a similar fate upon two priests: one will have to leave the convent in disgrace, while the other is left pondering over her child—which she abandons in order to pursue her liberation—and his own violence, ordinary man's violence. Couillard and Dumouchel regard Soeur Julie as a woman of extraordinary powers, who defies mysogyny and reveals the basic, unflattering truths of the masculine characters.

In *Kamouraska,* a novel which reconstructs a nineteenth-century murder from a woman's point of view, Anne Hébert shows woman as guilt-ridden outsider, a prisoner in marriage. At the same time, the book demystifies male grandeur. Elisabeth's first husband, Antoine Tassy, the Seigneur of Kamouraska, is a worthless alcoholic. He will be murdered by Elisabeth's lover, Dr. Nelson, a seemingly intelligent man who is destined to fail and who will blame Elisabeth for his failure.

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[5] Paula Gilbert Lewis, ed., *Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism: Women Writers in Québec.* (Westport: Greenwood P, 1985) 37-51.

[6] Godard, *Gynocritics/La Gynocritique* 78.

Her second husband, M. Rolland, is a pathetic little notary who has managed to cause her eight pregnancies in eighteen years and who could do her no greater favour than to die, yet he does not. Kamouraska is the name of a Québec town in which Hébert may, according to Murray Sachs, in "Love on the Rocks: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska,*" have seen the word 'amour' imprisoned within the walls of the harsh sounds of the two *k* 's (Lewis 115). It is tempting to take Murray's analysis of the title a little further: *k* in the French alphabet is called "ka," *k* times two reads "kaka," the phonetic equivalent of "caca", which leads us to see "amour" as surrounded by faeces. The novel subverts the traditional institution of marriage and the myth of blissful love. Tassy compares marriage to a heavy cord choking man and woman; Elisabeth speaks of murderous infamous, fatal love, of the folly of love.

In Marie-Claire Blais's novels, women's liberation from patriarchy is again a central theme. In her first works, woman herself, as mother, perpetuates traditional myths, and her daughter must rebel against her. In *La Belle Bête* (Montréal: Cercle du Livre de France, 1959), a daughter sets her mother on fire and abandons her own daughter before throwing herself under a train, a series of catastrophes provoked by the slavish love of the older woman for her beautiful and more or less retarded son. Mother/guardian of man and thus of patriarchy, at the expense of woman's well-being. . . We are reminded of Mary Daly's pointing out, in *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon P, 1978), how cleverly men, over the centuries, have arranged to have the dirty work done by women—mothers, daughters, sisters. Chinese women/mothers bound the feet of girl children; Indian women prepared widows for the funeral pyre; African women practise, still today, sexual mutilation of girls; female nurses lead women to the tables of the (mainly male) gynecologists. And mothers, in the Québec novel, have frequently been shown as educating their daughters for a restricted life. In *La Belle Bête,* as in Anne Hébert's earlier work *Le Torrent* (Montréal: Beauchemin, 1950), this leads to violence and murder.

In Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (Montréal: Editions du Jour, 1966), it is the strong and dominant Grandmother who rules the family of poverty-stricken farmers. The mother, who works in the fields and also cooks for the family, has, when the novel begins, just given birth to her sixteenth child, Emmanuel. She is a pale and rather silent creature, thoughtful with regard to her children, but unable to assert herself vis-à-vis her ignorant husband, whose manly deeds consist in beating the children and impregnating his equally powerless wife at regular intervals. A daughter, Héloïse, does not follow

the traditional path into marriage but, rather, takes the alternate route to the nunnery. She is caught having intercourse with her confessor, has to leave, and later enters a brothel where her sexuality and kindness can blossom. Marie-Claire Blais draws a very clear parallel between brothel and cloister, thus again deconstructing conventional concepts, destroying false dichotomies. In fact, her novel, like the world in general (contrary to popular belief) is "one of these strange gardens in which, as elsewhere, the graceful plants of Vice and Virtue grow with stems inextricably intertwined" (*A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* [New York: Grosset, 1969; Derek Coltman, trans., 152]). In this novel of transgression and subversion, mother's position as gatekeeper of tradition is de-glorified. While Grand-mère Antoinette seems to fulfill that role in a rather untraditional way, as she dominates men and even clergymen, Emmanuel's mother is a victim to be pitied. She is the housewife, Marie, whom we meet again in Denise Boucher's play, *Les fées ont soif* (Montréal: Intermède, 1978); Grand-mère Antoinette could be a Widow/Virgin Mary; and Héloïse a Virgin Mary/Whore Madeleine. The three women created by Blais in *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* are thus forerunners of Boucher's three female characters. Blais, like Boucher, questions stereotypes. Boucher does so by enclosing them in their roles with the help of plaster, chains, and leather from which they will break loose, whereas Blais intertwines and confuses the roles, negating them by blurring distinctions.

While Blais, in her first works, directs her anger against the mother figure, as traditional psychology demands of women, she soon gives it another direction, taking man and the patriarchal world for target. In *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel,* man seems ridiculous—as father, as priest, as notary. Society—with its institutions such as the Church, the school, and the brothel—is dominated by men and is evil, even though the brothel—under the cheerful supervision of Mme Embonpoint—offers Héloîse some possibility for relative comfort and security. In still later works, Blais' vision again has shifted. In *Les Nuits de l'Underground* (Montréal: Stanké, 1978), she tells of a lesbian world from which man is simply excluded. In the androcentric world of pre-feminist Québec, the mother figure had been idealized and imprisoned in a myth, which creative, wild, bewildered and, at the same time, clear-sighted women such as Hébert and Blais needed to violate in their early works. Later, the two writers come to see the female figure differently. In *Kamouraska,* Hébert portrays the murderous mother as victim. In *Nights of the Underground* (Toronto: Musson, 1979. Ray Ellenwood, trans.), as well as in *Un Sourd dans la ville* (Montréal: Stanké, 1979) and *Vision d'Anna* (Montréal: Stanké, 1982), Blais

progresses to a depiction of satisfying relationships between women and to the re-valorization of female nurturing. As Mary Jean Green says in "Redefining the Maternal: Women's Relationships in the Fiction of Marie-Claire Blais," this "holds out the hope of survival for all of us" (Lewis 137).

We may compare this new way in which Blais's women relate to each other with what happens in Denise Boucher's *Les Fées ont soif:* having transgressed the stereotype, having broken out of it, women can reach a new understanding. In Boucher's play, the three women unite in female solidarity and then invite the men in the audience to "imagine. . . imagine. . . imagine. . . " a different world, recreated by women. Blais's vision, like Boucher's, encompasses what might happen to man under the liberated woman's touch: in her latest novels, a young male child is usually being cared for and educated by a nurturing woman, outside the patriarchal realm.

Denise Boucher can be called an iconoclast. At least that is how she appeared to the Montréal Arts Council when its members read her play in the spring of 1978, with a view to subsidizing its production by the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. A scandal ensued; letters and articles were written in great numbers; groups formed for and against; and the TNM staged the play—a great success—without any subsidy. It is a play with three characters: the Virgin Mary, the Housewife Marie, and the Prostitute Madeleine. The play is a monologue spoken by three voices, telling of the three stereotypical positions of women in the patriarchal world. The three figures accuse society of having silenced, alienated, violated, raped, and maddened woman. They revolt. The statue drops her rosary, which, in the play, is a heavy chain; the housewife drops her apron with a bang, as if it were made of lead; the whore sheds her shiny boots. The invitation to imagine a world freed of stereotypes is then chanted in a three-part monologue.

The play uses a very outspoken language, necessary because stereotypes are not easily shattered. The Virgin Mary calls herself "the priest's wet dreams. . . the tool of impotence. . . " asking, "Have I no daughter to liberate me, to de-virginate me?" (*The Fairies Are Thirsty* [Vancouver: Talonbooks, trans. Alan Brown, 21-22]). Marie, the housewife, expresses her boredom, her revolt at her mother's teachings of cleanliness, femininity, purity. She also accuses man of having created a language in which she expresses herself only with difficulty. She is willing to abandon her children. Madeleine, the prostitute, states that man's head"is just a garage where he

parks his precious phallus" (40). She refuses to enjoy being raped, as she is supposed to do. The three women consider themselves "political prisoners" within patriarchy (47). The ending, with its call for peace and happiness, is somewhat surprising. It is also, after all the harsh details of the play, dramatically effective and powerful.

When Boucher wrote her play, Québec women had already claimed the theatre as a space for themselves. Often collective and often improvised, many of the plays of the *Théâtre des Cuisines,* for example, or the *Théâtre expérimental des Femmes,* use the stage as a political platform, where the private, including one's sexual preference, can indeed become political. According to Jane Moss in her essay on "Women's Theatre in Québec," the monologue form is given preference here over the dialogue and often reflects woman's fear of loneliness, her feeling of alienation in a man's world and within a man's language (Lewis 243-54). Nicole Brossard has linked the theatrical monologue to women's diary-writing. We can go one step further and say that this monologue, spoken in public, often before all-female audiences, is a *prise de conscience,* yes, as are the notes in the diary, but it is also a *prise de contact* with others, often leading to a collective monologue, as in *The Fairies are Thirsty.*

When looking into an enlarging or deforming mirror, in an amusement park for instance, or at caricatures, we laugh. And laughter constitutes another tool used by Québec women writers to demystify that which imprisons woman. Louky Bersianik, in *L'Euguélionne* (Montréal: La Presse, 1976), creates a female being from outer space who arrives on earth and is surprised and shocked by what she sees. Most of the time, she laughs at it.

The Greek word "euaggelion" means "good news". The name Euguélionne is, of course, its feminized version, and the Euguélionne is a bearer of good news for women. She is a new Christ who, in the course of her visit, gains a female following. At the end of her travels, she dies, as did Christ. Her body is riddled with bullets from the rifles of male executioners. She rises from the dead, not in a vertical movement toward heaven, away from all human beings, but rather in a curve which becomes a shower of stars of joy falling on the spectators. In Hénault's film *Fireworks,* this is clearly represented by luminous and colourful showers of fireworks that travel toward the earth.

Bersianik's book, which she calls a triptych novel, is, in fact, a parody of the Bible, as her later work, *Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* (Montréal: VLB, 1978), is a parody of Plato's *Banquet. The Euguélionne* (Victoria: Porcépic, 1981, Gerry Denis, Alison

Hewitt, Donna Murray, Martha O'Brien, trans.) parodies sacred male writings, the Bible mainly, but also the writings and theories of Freud and Lacan, called Saint Siegfried and Saint-Jacques-Linquant in Bersianik's register. It challenges, deflates, and deconstructs androcentric ideology, its sexist discourse and practices, its mysogynist reality, its harmful dichotomies including the male-female one. Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed sees in *L'Euguélionne* "un appel à la subversion du cercle (de l'enfermement) et à l'éclatement du miroir (la reproduction du même)" (Godard 29). The circle is a prison with "le cercle de famille" and the wedding-band as its reality and symbol, as are also the monotonous chant of the spinning-wheel or the wheel of the sewing machine—in *The Tin Flute* the wheel of Rose-Anna's sewing machine never stops turning—and the clatter of the plates which women must wash again and again. Another challenge Bersianik raises is her questioning the dichotomy of fullness versus hollowness—fullness associated with the penis; hollowness, including intellectual hollowness, attributed to woman. In her work, holes are meant both to receive and to pour out love.

Bersianik, a very scholarly writer, takes the myth out of mythology; her particular targets are Oedipus, Agamemnon, and Zeus. She subverts philosophy, especially the theories of Plato, Aquinas, Marx, as well as the Judeo-Christian tradition. She questions psychoanalysis and denounces history and language as developed by man. She wishes to contribute to the shattering of the reign of patriarchy which, she believes, if the world is to survive, must be followed by a different time in which women will be a positive, joyful force.

Joy is one of Bersianik's inspirations. In *Pique-nique sur l'Acropole,* she brings women who do not have the money for a banquet to an outdoor picnic. Here they will joyfully discuss their sexuality in all its multiplicity, speaking in a choir of multiple voices of the female body as a source of creativity, with the skin and its pores/holes being receiver and giver of female speech, touch, and pleasure.

Lesbian pleasure may well be the greatest transgression of them all, in every day life as well as in literature. Lesbian writing became possible in Québec through the rising wave of feminism, which came in the wake of nationalism, at a time when Québec was ready for social change. Next to Louise Maheux-Forcier, Marie-Claire Blais, and Michèle Mailhot, Jovette Marchessault and Nicole Brossard are its most important representatives.

Jovette Marchessault, the self-educated daughter of a working-class family of mixed French and Native ancestry, is an accomplished sculptor. Made of found objects, her sculptures often represent the Earth Mother and are placed, or at least photographed, outside, in touch with the earth. She also paints and creates masks, recalling her North American Indian heritage. Like her sculptures, her novels and plays create a new mythology no longer founded on the words of the Fathers but which, instead, recognize women's power and promise. In her 1981 play *La Saga des poules mouillées* (Montréal: La Pleine Lune, 1981), she brings together four Québec women writers of different times, for an evening of food, drink, dance, song, and discussion of women's creativity, of women's writing. They are Laure Conan, the first professional writer in Québec (who published in 1884 *Angéline de Montbrun,* a psychological novel), Geneviève Guèvremont, Gabrielle Roy, and Anne Hébert. With the plays *La terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc* (Montréal: La Pleine Lune, 1981) and *Alice & Gertrude, Natalie & Renée, et ce cher Ernest* (Montréal: La Pleine Lune, 1984), Marchessault again analyses the position of women writers, in the belief that her works of solidarity and recognition will map out for herself and for other women writers ways to pursue their creative journey.

Marchessault can be angry: three texts, "A Lesbian Chronicle from Québec," "The Angel Makers," and "Night Cows," published in a volume called *Lesbian Triptych* (Toronto: The Women's P, 1980. Yvonne M. Klein, trans.), first published in French as *Triptyque lesbien* (Montréal: La Pleine Lune, 1980), are frankly explosive. In the first text, a child tells of three Bulls proclaimed by government officials in consultation with virtuous members of the Church. The first Bull, called "Normal School: The bull dog," orders all lesbian girl children to enrol in "normalizing schools" where they shall learn to negate their "vicious lesbianism" (32). The second Bull is "the institution of the family. . . a bulldozer in a big dose" (32) which teaches little girls and growing lesbians how to smile in the patriarchal world where they must encounter pots and pans, dishcloths, cookbooks, brooms, mops, garbage cans, maternity, mayonnaise, white sauce, and other such matters. The third Bull is the Channel-Bull, also called Bur-lesque, which allows for "all the little services that lesbians who have been pacified, lobotomized, mastered, and neatly framed" render to "the beloved community" until such time as the lesbian, "too old, or too tired, or too depressed. . . joins the diaspora of cheap lesbians who bob like corks in dirty water, floating and sometimes going under—waitresses, both on the ground and in the air, charwomen, cooks, housewives, streetwalkers, unemployed lesbians with no place else to turn" (33).

While "Lesbian Chronicle" deals with realities, "Night Cows" is about emotions and sensuality. It begins like this: "My mother is a cow! That makes two of us. Two beautiful milk cows" (73). Cows, apparently naturally nymphomaniac, fly in Marchessault's text to a mythical "rendez-vous in the Milky Way" (75). Here mothers and daughters are reunited, talk and listen to each other, feel each other's "splendid garments. . . rosy openings. . . female roundness moist with dew" (78). The cows listen to female crows telling of happy times "before the establishment of the Order of Castrators" (79).[7] They also tell of times of "exterminations, massacres, extortion, the long march of the females to the slaughterhouse, to the stake, the mass grave, the bridal suites of torture" (79). In "The Angel Makers," mothers and daughters are united in the sacred ritual of abortion, during which a revolutionary mother is midwife, abortionist, and creative goddess, assisting women in their desire to break out of the vicious circle of self-sacrifice in order to establish a new world of personal freedom and choice.

In a letter to Gloria Orenstein, Marchessault writes about her experiences during the conception of "Night Cows":

> In the last few days, what a rush of images, as if my memory were surfacing, the memory that was mine before my birth. My mother talking to me and to herself when she was carrying me in her belly. . . and this monologue stimulating me on every level. I believe this monologue was my introduction to the essential flow of language.[8]

According to Barbara Godard in her introduction to Yvonne M. Klein's translation of the work, Marchessault is, in fact, responsible for bringing the theme of the corporeal reality of the mother tongue to Québec literature (19).

But the woman writer who has most strongly influenced Québec literature and anglophone writings is, undoubtedly, Nicole Brossard, an innovative writer and radical feminist.[9] Drawn toward abstraction, she sees the art of writing as a scientific and intellectual experience. Questioning established cultural patterns and value systems, her texts—more than twenty books,

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[7] Cows, it seems, are naturally nymphomaniac, but are often castrated, clitoridectomized, in order to become better income-producing animals.

[8] Quoted from Barbara Godard's introduction to Yvonne M. Klein's translation of *Tryptiche lesbien, Lesbian Triptych.* (Toronto: The Women's P, 1985) 19.

[9] For an analysis of Brossard's writings, see also Marguerite Andersen, "Women of Skin and Thought," *The Women's Review of Books* 4.4: 16 and "Nicole Brossard: un imaginaire tonique," *Resources for Feminist Research/ Documentation sur la recherche féministe* 15.4 (1986-87): 22-24.

since 1965, of prose, poetry, essays, and often a *mélange* of the three—have since the 1970s been showing Québec writers the way to *modernité* and from there to *postmodernité*. Her 1987 novel, *Le Désert mauve* (Montréal: L'Hexagone), was hailed as the first truly post-modern text of Québec literature. It is a text in which the writer uses a variety of approaches to come close to her subject, the entry into the world of a female adolescent. It is a book seemingly found and in need of translation. Places and objects, characters and scenes, dimensions, the desert, the light, and women move through the pages, followed closely by the writer, who carefully circles them until it becomes evident that a total clarification is, in fact, impossible.

Brossard's writing is literary theory as well as political statement. It promotes and uses almost exclusively women's images, symbols, language, and experiences, with the aim of placing woman in the centre of society, culture, and politics. In her poetic prose, writing perpetually resists two elements which could, like parasites, invade the text. One is reality; the other is plot. In *Un Livre* (Montréal: Editions du Jour, 1970), Brossard states that tangible evidence is not the essential of literature; her writing does not include the already seen, heard, observed, understood, said, written. Brossard demands of herself a different *écriture*. She brandishes suspended meanings, rides astride syntax, shifts vowels, dilates syllables, breeds analogies, takes stabs at traditional narrative. Her writing feeds, as she says, on zigs and zags and detours. The emerging text is condensed and, at the same time, exuberant, lucid, and essential—textual essence and energizing fluid, a literary super-fluid.

Brossard's imaginative texts are painted on the canvas of Québec history, women's history, women's lives, their loving and their thinking. They exalt women and their creative powers, joyously overturning such negative symbols as the castrating abyss, the devouring mother, woman as sinner. We encounter in these texts a euphemization of the female body, of belly, vulva, breasts, and lips. Brossard sees women as intelligent, playful, productive, imaginative, creative—all at once. Her women are women of skin and thought, of their own will and voluptuousness. Having overcome their isolation, they are free to create a network of women, a network also of intertextuality, strengthened by a common drive, a collective desire that generates pleasure, hope, thought, certitude, dream, and emotion.

Amantes (Montréal: Quinze, 1980) brings us into the centre of Nicole Brossard's work. We penetrate into the open, yet secret, mandala of women's existence. The title of the book announces the celebration of lesbian love, and, as the combination

of conventionally opposite concepts is one of the features of Brossard's *écriture,* this celebration is exuberant yet reflective, bringing together the many polarities of the female being. We read of lesbian rejoicing and of rejoicing over text. Reading and writing are simultaneously and equally important. Reading and delirium (lire et dé-lire) are interconnected; sensual pleasure and intellectual discourse are punctuated by kisses.

The complex design of a mandala is often enclosed by a square. A symbol of outer space as well as an image of the world, it is also a shrine for divine powers. In *Lovhers* (Montréal: Guernica, 1986, Barbara Godard, trans.), the Barbizon Hotel for Women, in which the lovhers meet, rises like a clitoris on the map of New York.[10] In the rectangular building of the hotel, Brossard assembles the circle of four lovhers, cardinal points of woman's intimate universe. And, of course, the mandala houses an exemplary and multiple figure: woman. She is represented by a symbol, namely her mouth—a mouth which Brossard juxtaposes with the vulva, a mouth to speak and to give and receive love, as well as text.

I read *Lovhers* as an illustration of the ancient myth of Baubo, almost erased by patriarchal censure. In the myth, Baubo, who was nursemaid to either Demeter or Persephone, manages to make Demeter smile again, after the abduction of her daughter. She achieves this by lifting her gown and exposing her vulva in a gesture of female pride and communion. The Baubo figure was worshipped during the festivities of the thesmophoria, a women's festival which included lesbian activities, a festival, one of the most important of ancient Greece, from which men were excluded. Far from being one of the curious obscenities of mythology, the Baubo myth emphasizes the possibility of solidarity among women and, like *Lovhers,* celebrates women's pride, their friendship, intimacy, pleasure, and strength.

Lovhers speaks of woman's journey toward the luminous centre of female intimacy and inscribes in it the word "mouth" which is at once lips, tongue, language, and vulva. Parole de femme, voluptuous orgasm, utopia, this is what happens in the shameless orgy within the walls of the Barbizon mandala where the forces of women converge. This location, this happy island, exists outside the patriarchal world. It is a place where, thanks to Brossard, women are finally stripped of their "shameful parts"

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[10] The French edition of the text is actually illustrated with photographs of the New York skyline, thus making the geometric design of the mandala visible. Unfortunately, the English edition has not included these images.

and feeble minds, where they come into possession of their bodies, their thinking, their imagination, able to express themselves without inhibition. Brossard's *Amantes* is the ultimate transgression.

Is utopia dangerous? Brossard does not think so. On the contrary, she believes that we cannot live without its challenge. According to her, men have so far been unable to take up Denise Boucher's invitation to imagine that a sisterhood of women could re-invent the world. This lack in man's imagination has marred the female imagination also. For this reason, Brossard asks us to accept the challenge of imagining the island of utopia as an island for women only. For those who, like me, find man's world insufferable dangerous, Brossard's utopian island can be something like a clearinghouse for the mind, a pleasure-house, a dream instead of a nightmare; fleeting, yes but absolutely essential.

Québec women writers. While this essay has left many unnamed, and has, for reasons of time and space, not spoken of poetry, it has attempted to show that the women writers of Québec are a collective force which demystifies, de-constructs, and shatters patriarchal values, and which offers feminist alternatives for the recreation of our world. Having created the poetic novel, as well as the novel of parody, literary genres for which Québec is by now well-known, they express in these works their concern with oppression, as well with difference, woman being the Other, different from man, speaking in a voice different from patriarchal discourse. Their subversive texts are stepping-stones on the path to new forms of being and of writing, to a future which, if they and women in general are heard, may well be less destructive.

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