

POETIC POLITICS

I have divided my presentation into two parts. The first part has to do with the body of writing, its motivations, its energies. The second part has to do with the references and values that surround us and the kinds of linguistic reaction they call for when we disagree with them. I say *when we disagree with them* because I don't believe that one becomes a writer to reinforce common values or common perspectives on reality.

I would like, in this talk, to make space for questions regarding different rituals, different approaches, different postures that we take in language in order to exist, fulfill our needs to express, communicate, or to challenge language itself: hoping that by playing with language it will reveal unknown dimensions of reality. I have been writing for more than 20 years. I have written poetry, novels, texts, essays. Today, I am still fascinated by the act of writing, the processes, the trouble, the pain, and the joy that we go through in order to put in words what we feel, what we recall vaguely but which insists on being recalled, what we envision whether it is full-length images or enigmatic flashes running through our brain like a storm of truth.

Those who are familiar with my work will know that one of the most recurrent words in my texts is *body* (*corps*). This word is usually accompanied by the words *writing* (*écriture*) and *text* (*texte*). The expression *Le Cortex exubérant* summarizes my obsession with body, text, and writing. For me the body is a metaphor of energy, intensity, desire, plea-

sure, memory, and awareness. The body interests me in its circulation of energy and the way it provides, through our senses, for a network of associations out of which we create our mental environment, out of which we imagine far beyond what we in fact see, feel, hear or taste. It is through this network of associations that we claim new sensations, that we dream backward in accelerated or slow motion, that we zoom in on sexual fantasies, that we discover unexpected angles of thought.

I have always said that writing is energy taking shape in language. Sexual, libidinal, mental, and spiritual energies give to us the irresistible need to declare things, to make new propositions, to look for solutions which can unknot social patterns of violence and death, to explore unknown territories of the mind, to search for each of our identities, to fill the gap between real and unreal. In other words, energy motivates us to write but it also needs to find its *motive* to be able to do this. Energy has to go out and has to come in. The body is its channel. But the body claims to be more than a channel: it thinks of strategies to regularize the flow of energy. The body alone cannot process all energy, it needs language to process energy into social meaning. Among the uses that we make of language, there is a privileged one called creative writing. It is in this sense that I say that writing is shaping figures and meanings within the merry-go-round of energy that traverses us. Filtered by language, this energy finds a rhythm, becomes a voice, transforms itself into images and metaphors. Energy that is too low keeps you silent, energy that is too high makes noise instead of meaning—even though silence and noise can eventually be interpreted as an historical momentum.

Sexual, libidinal, mental, and spiritual energies provided with a *motive* or an *object of desire*, or both, engage us in a creative dimension. When these energies synchronize they offer a privileged moment to a writer. Most of the time we call this “inspiration.” These energies can

also work alone or in combination. Sexual energy produces a multiplicity of images and scenarios. Libidinal energy creates projects and goals. Mental energy provides for sharpness and for abstraction. Spiritual energy links us to a global environment. Yet all these energies can stagnate or make you mad if they don't meet their object of desire, or organize themselves in such a way that they can at least dream of—or figure out—their object of desire.

Now let me make a distinction between the motive and the object of desire. The motive is something that whatever the situation eternally returns in the work of an artist. The motive is roots, flesh and skin. It is *incontrovertible*. It is inscribed in us as a first and ultimate memory. It is carnal knowledge. All good writers have a strong motive. The motive is most of the time hidden in the core of a work, hidden but recurrent as a theme. It seems to me that motive (a good reason and a pattern) is a personal, existential question that makes one endlessly repeat: why or how come? It is a three-dimensional question caused by a synergetic moment, this moment being either traumatic or ecstatic. With the synergetic moment gone, we are left with this three-dimensional question, a question to which we can only respond with a two-dimensional answer—that is, a partial answer that obliges us to repeat the question and to try other answers. We answer in two dimensions because we think in a chronological way, one word at a time, one word after the other, while the body experiences life synchronously. Writing, we have to make choices, to separate things. Naming is separation, it portions out reality. Dreams are 3-dimensional but we forget about them or cannot understand them.

As for the object of desire, it is probably always the same one mediated by different people we fall in love with, by books we cannot recover from, by situations to which we respond passionately. For me, a good writer or a good painter always repeats the same motive, the same

question, the same statement in all her or his works. Think of Kandinsky, Rothko, Betty Goodwin. Great artists are always driven by a motive while fairly good creators have to rely on their objects of desire: if the object isn't there, then nothing happens but sweat.

It is well known that people give and take energy from one another; that blame, insult, humiliation take away energy; that praise, love, and respect multiply energy. The principle is very simple. But it gets complicated when it applies to the way men and women are positioned in regard to language's patriarchal values. We cannot avoid questioning this cultural field of language, which both provides us with energy or deprives us of it. What I call the cultural field of language is made of male sexual and psychic energies transformed through centuries of written fiction into standards for imagination, frames of references, patterns of analysis, networks of meaning, rhetorics of body and soul. Digging in that field can be, for a creative woman, a mental health hazard.

This second part is more personal. What I propose to discuss is a kind of trajectory in my writing. I would like to show how my politics of poetic form—my Poetic Politics—have been shaped within a socio-cultural environment as well as through private life. But I would also like to talk in general terms of the behaviors that we encounter in writing while we make space for ourselves as well as for ideas that we value and themes that we privilege.

Since in principle language belongs to everyone, we are entitled to appropriate it by taking the initiative to intervene when it gives the impression of closing itself off, and when our desire clashes with common usage. Very young, I perceived language as an obstacle, as a mask, narrow-spirited like a repetitive task of boredom and of lies. Only poetic language found mercy in my eyes. It is in this sense that my practice of writing became at once a practice of intervention and of

exploration—a ludic experience. Very early I had a relationship to the language of transgression and of subversion. I wanted strong sensations: I wanted to unmask lies, hypocrisy, and banality. I had the feeling that if language was an obstacle, it was also the place where everything happens, where everything is possible. That I still believe.

I have often said that I don't write to express myself but that I write to understand reality, the way we process reality into fiction, the way we process feeling, emotion and sensation into ideas and landscapes of thought. After all, the difference between a writer and a non-writer is that the writer processes life through written language and by doing so has access and gives access to unexpected, unsuspected angles of reality—which we commonly called fiction.

What about expressions like *strong sensations*, *transgression*, *subversion*, and *ludic experience*? Let's start with "strong sensations" and "ludic experience." What do these expressions oppose? For me, they oppose boredom and daily routine; in a word: *linearity*. Behind that there is obviously a statement something like: "I am not satisfied with what society offers me as a future or imposes on me in the present because if I were to follow its directives, it would mean that I would have to lead a boring, middlebrow, puritan life." This means that I value research, intelligence, and pleasure. It also means that I cannot function with clichés and standard values that somehow seem to narrow the possibilities of life: life of the mind as well as life of the emotions. Indeed, our emotional and our critical spirits are more and more eroded.

To be more concrete, let's say that I started to write, in the early '60s in a Québec which was at a turning point of our history, a period that we have called the "quiet revolution." Yes, everything was being questioned: education as well as social, political, religious, and cultural life. To my generation, the dream of an independent, French, socialist, secular Québec provided for audacities, transgressions, and a quest for col-

lective identity. But underneath these changes was essentially the question of identity. Who were we? Who are we? We have a Canadian passport but our soul and tradition are not Canadian, we speak French but we are not French, we are North American but we are not American. As a young person and as a young writer there were three kinds of institutions that had a sour taste to me:

First: *The Catholic Church* because it had a strong influence in almost every field of Québec society and mainly because of its control on education and sexual life (marriage, contraception, abortion, homosexuality).

Second: *The Canadian Confederation* and all its British and Canadian symbols. I resent profoundly how as French Canadian we were despised and discriminated against by Anglo Canadian politics. I have always made the language issue a personal thing. Today I am still vividly hurt when someone who is living or has been living in Montréal for many years addresses me in English.

Third: *The literary establishment*. When you write you write with and against literature. You write out of inspiration from writers and books, but you also write against mediocrity and the clichés the literary establishment promotes. Maybe it has been unfair to some writers of the generation that preceded mine, but I was fed up with poems talking about landscapes, snow, mountains, and the tormented rhetoric of love and solitude. At the same time, I felt deeply for Québec literature which the generation of *La Barre du Jour* and *Les Herbes rouges* were about to rediscover and to renew at the same time.

So all together those three realities set up for me a social and literary field that I could oppose and later on transgress and subvert. Very early my poetry was abstract, syntactically nonconventional; desire with its erotic drives had a great part in it. Part of what I was writing was consciously political, at least at the level of intention. Let's say that my

“basic intention” was to make trouble, to be a troublemaker in regard to language but also with values of my own embodied by a writing practice that was ludic (playing with words), experimental (trying to understand processes of writing), and exploratory (searching). You see, it brings us back to my values: exploration (which provides for renewal of information and knowledge), intelligence (which provides the ability to process things), and pleasure (which provides for energy and desire).

So from 1965 to 1973, I can say that I would see myself as a poet—an avant-garde poet, a formalist poet. Being a woman was not at stake, didn't seem to be a problem. Of course it was not a problem because in some way I was not identifying with femininity nor with other women, with whom I felt I had nothing to share. I could understand and talk about alienation, oppression, domination, exploitation only when applied to me as a Quebecer. I was a Quebecer, an intellectual, a poet, a revolutionary. Those were my identities. They were all positive and somehow they were valued in those years of cultural changes and counterculture. So in some way by transgressing I was still on the good side.

But in 1974, I became a mother and about the same time fell in love with another woman. Suddenly, I was living the most common experience in a woman's life which is motherhood and at the same time I was living the most marginal experience in a woman's life which is lesbianism. Motherhood made life absolutely concrete (two bodies to wash, to clean, to move, to think of) and lesbianism made my life absolute fiction in a patriarchal heterosexual world. Motherhood shaped my solidarity with women and gave me a feminist consciousness as lesbianism opened new mental space to explore.

All this to say that my body was getting new ideas, new feelings, new emotions. From then on my writing started to change. It became

more fluid, though still abstract and still obsessed with language, transgression, and subversion; but this time I had “carnal knowledge” of what I was investing in words. My frame of references started to change and new words (words that I had never used) started to invest my work: vertigo, cliff, amazon, sleep, memory, skin. I started to use new metaphors to understand things: the spiral, the hologram, metaphors which would help me to drift away from a linear and binary approach. Questions started to flow about identity, imagination, history, and more and more questions came about language and the incredible fraud I was discovering in the accumulated layers of lies told about women through centuries of the male version of reality. Which is to say that I also had to deal with contradictions, paradoxes, double binding, tautology in order to understand what I would call “the father knows best” business. Patriarchy being a highly sophisticated machine, it takes time and energy to understand how it works.

Now I would like to try to answer more precisely the questions raised in this series of lectures on “The Politics of Poetic Form.” While writing this essay, I found myself saying: “It is not in the writing that a poetic text is political, it is in the reading that it becomes political.” I knew something was true and wrong at the same time with this statement and therefore I decided to divide it in two affirmative statements, which are:

A. It is in the writing that a text shows its politics.

B. It is in the reading that a text has a political aura.

I believe that a text gives subliminal information on how it wants to be read. Its structure is itself a statement, no matter what the text says. Of course, what the texts says is important but it is like body language. Body language tells more about yourself and how you want to relate with someone than do your words. I would like to point out three aspects in which a text shows politics: its perspective, its themes, its style.

The perspective. What I call the perspective is an angle from which we orient the reading of a text before it is even read. This can be done by *quotations* beginning or inserted in the text, for example from Virginia Woolf, Marx, Martin Luther King, etc. This can also be done by *dedication* of a poem to someone whose name will ring a political bell. For example, dedicating your poem to Che Guevara, to Valerie Solanas, to Paul Rose, or even to Ben Johnson. The third way is to *title* your poem or your book in such a way that it will suggest some political metaphors. For example: *Chili's Bones Flowers*, *Clitoris at Sunset*, *The Color Purple* (in which we read subliminally "people of color") or *Give Em Enough Rope* (which can be understood "give them enough rope to hang themselves" or "give him enough rope to do want he what"). Quotations, dedications, and titles provide for immediate references or statement. They tell a state of mind, they point out literary, cultural, or political networks.

Themes. There are themes that are bound to have if not ideological at least a troubling effect: *Sexuality*, eroticism, homosexuality, lesbianism — something is always at stake with eroticism because it deals with limits, morality, and the unavowable. *Language*—writing about language, pointing out how language works or giving feedback on how what is being read has been written can also imply politics of awareness because it takes away the "referential illusion" of the reader.

Postures. *Disqualifying symbols of authority* by uncovering the lies and the contradictions on which they have been constituted—God, Pope, President, Man, or little man (as in husband, lover, or father). *Valuing marginal experiences*—valuing people who are inferiorized, for example valuing women as subjects.

Style. Shaking the syntax, breaking grammatical law, not respecting punctuation, visually designing the text, using the white space, type-setting as you choose, using rhythms to create sounds. All of these have

a profound effect on readers, offering a new perspective on reality through a global formal approach as did for example the impressionists, the cubists, and the expressionists in painting and as did, in literature, the surrealists, *le nouveau roman*, the post-moderns. Among writers we can name Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Monique Wittig for *The Lesbian Body*.

So by changing the perspective, the themes, or the style, somehow you deceive the conformist reader in her or his moral or aesthetic expectations and you annoy her or him by breaking the habits of reading. At the same time, you provide for a new space of emotion and you make space for new materials to be taken into account about life and its meaning; you also offer the non-conformist reader a space for a new experience—traveling through meaning while simultaneously producing meaning.

These interventions send a message in which the poet says: I don't agree with prevalent moral or aesthetic values. I am not respecting the status quo. There is more to life than what we are thought to believe, there is more to language than what we are used to expecting.

While the statement "It is in the writing that a text shows its politics" repels or seduces the reader (most of the time belonging to the dominant culture), the second statement "It is in the reading that a text becomes political" calls for a **process of identification** from the reader belonging to a minority or treated as such.

I believe that a lot of writers belonging to minorities whether sexual, racial, or cultural, or writers who belong to groups who live or have lived under colonization, oppression, exploitation, or a dictatorship, are bound to have a highly loaded personal memory out of which they express themselves as individuals. But inevitably their personal story converges with the one of thousands who have felt and lived the same experience. Memory, identity, and solidarity are at stake when *reading* is

taken as political; just as transgression, subversion, and exploration are at stake when *writing* is taken as political.

Anyone who encounters insult and hatred because of her or his differences from a powerful group is bound, soon or later, to echo a *we* through the use of *I* and to draw the line between *us* and *them*, *we* and *they*.

WE triggers emotions based on solidarity, memory, identification, complicity, proudness, or sadness.

THEY triggers emotions based on anger and revolt. Hatred also: THEY cuts the relation.

YOU (in the plural *vous*) triggers accusations, blame, reproach. It maintains the relation because it is a direct address. *You* calls for negotiation just as *they* calls for struggle.

We all have an I/We story and a We/They story. If you belong to a dominant group, *they* is either laughable, insignificant, or used as a scapegoat. If you belong to an oppressed group, *they* is targeted as enemy because they have proved to be a real threat or danger to your collectivity or your group. As an example, I could draw a personal chart which would read like this:

I/we writers	you non-writers	politically non-pertinent
I/we poets	you prose writers	politically non-pertinent
I/we women	you men	politically pertinent
I/we feminists	you sexists	politically pertinent
I/we lesbians	you heterosexuals	politically pertinent
I/we Quebecers	you Canadians	politically pertinent

People from groups who have been politically, economically, and culturally silenced or censored have expectations that one of them will speak about them and for them. Women have those expectations, feminists, lesbians, Indians, blacks, Chicanos have those expectations. Those readers want so much to hear or see things about themselves

that they can even overestimate the political involvement of a writer. That is why writers from those groups are often asked the question: Are you a political writer? *Êtes-vous un écrivain engagé?* A question that embarrasses them and which they will be tempted to avoid by saying that they write what they write because they are creative. Which is true, but not as simple as it seems. For example, while writing a feminist article, I questioned myself wondering who is writing my text: the poet, the feminist, or the lesbian. I came up with this answer: The feminist is moral, responsible, fair, humanist, has solidarity. The lesbian is audacious, radical, takes risks, strictly focuses on women. The creative person has imagination and is able to process ambivalent emotion and contradictions as well as transforming anger, ecstasy, desire, pain, and so on, into social meaning.

So altogether, I would say that one's Poetic Politics shapes itself within the weaving movement of personal motive with energy, identity, knowledge, and the ability to process emotions, ideas, sensations into a meaningful response to the world. As for myself, my poetic is essentially to make space for the unthought. As a woman, I am left with a language that has either erased or marginalized women as subjects. Therefore in my poetic I perform what is necessary to make space for women's subjectivity and plurally, to make space for a positive image of women. This task engages me to question language—symbolic and imaginary, from all angles and dimensions.

In conclusion, I would like to say that a good part of my life has gone into writing and it probably will continue to be like that. In the desire and the necessity to reinvent language, there is certainly an intention for happiness, a utopian thrust, a serious responsibility. It is because I feel both profoundly in me that I continue my course of writing. Voyage without end, writing is what always comes back to seek me out in order to distance death and stupidity, lies and violence. Writ-

ing never lets me forget that if life has a meaning, somewhere it is in what we invent with our lives, with the aura of streams of words that, within us, form sequences of truth. There is a price for consciousness, for transgression. Sooner or later, the body of writing pays for its untamed desire of beauty and knowledge. I have always thought that the word beauty is related to the word desire. There are words, which, like the body, are irreducible: To write *I am a woman* is full of consequences.

Coda

Poetry: For me poetry is the highest probability of desire and thought synchronized in a meaningful voice. Poetry is a formal and semantic intuition that is brought forth by our desire, this desire not knowing the laws that motivate it.

Text: The text is a thoughtful reflexive approach of the processes of writing and reading. When we play the text against the poem, it is as if we would like to tame the irrational of the poem. A text can be written without “inspiration,” without a story. To write a text, you only need a “motive” to trigger the pleasure of writing and to perform or to explore in language.

Now I would like to establish the rapport—the connection—I have with poetry, prose, writing, and language. This I can say now, but even five years ago I would have been unable to identify this rapport.

A) My rapport with **poetry** has to do with the voice finding its way at the very moment of synchronization of thought and emotion. It is the rapport of intelligence in the sense of comprehension (to take with one self).

B) My rapport with **prose** and novels resembles my rapport with reality as it is in daily life. I find prose and daily life so boring that I can only exist in these two realities by making **ruptures** in the sentence or in the discourse, by seeking surprises and discoveries, by expending

meaning. Writing prose, I need to explode the narrative, the anecdotal, the linearity of time, the normal mumbling of characters. That is why my novels are anti-novels that challenge traditional novels.

C) My rapport with **writing** has to do with desire and energy. This rapport is essentially ludic and about exploration. The body and the act of the eyes are mainly involved.

D) My rapport with **language** is a matter of perspective on patriarchal knowledge and on its symbolic hierarchal/dualist field. It calls for *vision* rather than for subversion. It calls for awareness, concentration, sharpness. Vision goes beyond transgression because it brings forth new material.