

Poetics of the Other: Five Feminist Writers from English Canada and Québec

by

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This volume considers the work of five feminist writers from Québec and English Canada: Nicole Brossard, France Théoret, Di Brandt, Erin Mouré and Lola Lemire Tostevin. Poetry is the predominant genre in this study, although these writers' transgression of generic boundaries involves a blending of poetry with prose and of the creative with the theoretical. In keeping with a feminist critical tradition in Canada and Québec, I refer to these writings as "écritures au féminin," or writings in the feminine. This study not only investigates their attempts to inscribe female alterity ("the feminine") within language and subjectivity, but of even greater significance are these writings' contributions to the notion of a feminist ethics.

The perspective adopted in this study is a literary, philosophical and feminist one, situated at the confluence of contemporary ethical theory and feminist literary criticism. The shared ground of the five writers lies in their self-conscious explorations of a distinctly feminist poetics centred on theories of sexual difference and oriented around the maternal. These writings expand and also complicate the notion of an ethics of alterity as it pertains to issues of gender, language and writing, of subjectivity, and of relational exchange. The feminist ethics outlined here is derived from Emmanuel Lévinas' challenge to metaphysical ontology, Paul Ricoeur's own relational theory, and Luce Irigaray's application of ethical theory to sexual difference. These theorists premise their versions of ethics on the interrelated notion of same and other, applied by Irigaray and other feminist theorists to the mother-child dyad. The writers in question offer various configurations of the maternal dyad to reveal one possible model of a relational ethics. This maternal model underlies constructions of female subjectivity along with other modes of social and sexual interaction represented in these writings. However, representations of female intersubjectivity also contain the possibility of ethical breakdown, as well as the necessity of constant renegotiation. The difficulties and contradictions encountered in these literary

formulations of self and other are the crux of a feminist ethics which demands the careful, yet not always sustainable, balance between identification and differentiation, or sameness and otherness.

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I dedicate this thesis to my mother.

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Part 1

Towards a Feminist Ethics

Introduction: Dialogues of Difference

The shared ground of the five writers figuring in this study lies in their self-conscious explorations and inscriptions of a feminist poetics. They write out of and, at times, about different Canadian provinces. These women write as women and about being women in what could be called a postmodern literary setting. Nicole Brossard, France Théoret, Di Brandt, Erin Mouré and Lola Lemire Tostevin produce texts self-consciously centred on theories of sexual difference which, at one point or other, invoke the maternal. Most importantly, these five writers present, in a variety of ways, what I shall call a feminist ethics, which defines itself through its efforts to think the female other in its challenge to the totality and assimilation of the self-same. This comparative study will show how theoretically informed and formally experimental feminist writings can expand, enrich and also complicate the notion of an ethics of alterity as it pertains to issues of subjectivity and human relations, as well as gender, language and writing.

By the mid-seventies and early eighties, literary feminism in Québec had distinguished itself by its formal subversions and innovations. It was also known for its appropriations of the philosophical, linguistic, psychoanalytic and literary theories of French contemporary thinkers, who continue to fall under the heading of poststructuralism. Approximately ten years after their Québécois predecessors, a group of English-language women writers undertook a similar literary pursuit, and were perhaps less prolific yet no less intellectually fervent. It may be necessary to point out that not all feminist-oriented writings in Québec and Canada can be characterized or ever characterized themselves by the theoretical focus that defines the feminist writings under study here. Not all works by women necessarily avow themselves to be feminist or even welcome the appellation of feminism, let alone mesh theoretical discourse with their creative practices. The specific focus of this study is the theoretical, self-conscious feminist works of these five authors in whose articulation of female alterity I am particularly interested. As I shall demonstrate, both

poetically and theoretically, they translate this otherness into a feminist ethics. This concept is the topic of the next chapter.

In this introduction and in most of this study, poetry will be the predominant genre of investigation, although part 4 will treat Théoret's eventual turn to prose. The "écritures au féminin" in Québec and writings in the feminine in anglophone Canada have grown out of specific poetic movements, as we shall see in the sections that follow.¹ If "first-generation" feminist poets like Brossard and Théoret have extended their textual explorations to prose (including fiction), genre-bending has always been part of their poetic practice. To various degrees, writing in the feminine involves a mixing of genres or a transgressing of generic boundaries for all five writers. In other words, their poems open to prose form, narrative and theory, just as their prose work sometimes opens to verse and lyricism.² The works examined here often underline their own theoretical and formal strategies. In plural and individual ways, they seek to incorporate a discourse centred on the female body, language, and (inter)subjectivity within the poetic or prose work itself. The first chapter will consider how the works of the writers in question continue to fall under the rubric of "écritures au féminin" or writings in the feminine. Predominant in this kind of writing, the notion of female alterity will connect them to the feminist ethics conceptualized by French and North American theorists.

Critical and creative work on "difference" has shown how theories of alterity must be premised upon the interrelated notions of sameness and otherness. These notions have been (re)configured by the thinking of philosophers, psychoanalysts and feminist theorists that openly informs the texts under study as well as my own analyses of these texts. Of crucial relevance here, the feminist theories of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Kelly Oliver and Jessica Benjamin do, in

¹ For ease of expression, I shall refer to "writings in the feminine," or the practice of writing in the feminine, in relation to both English and French contexts.

² Obviously, genre-bending does not originate with feminist writing. Worth noting is the fact that, against the neoclassic insistence on generic "purity" and hierarchy, the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century helped destabilize generic fixity, precisely with a new poetic form "which combined natural description, philosophy, and narrative (James Thomson's *Seasons*, 1726-30)"—such as pastoral, lyric and epic (Abrams 76).

turn, find a positive dialectic between same and other in the mother-child dyad. As we shall see, this dyad or “corps-à-corps” is conceptualized as an already linguistic, social relation, a core component of language (Kristeva) and, by extension, a model of social, ethical relationships and selfhood (Irigaray, Oliver, Benjamin). My choice of these five writers stems from their various, feminist configurations of the maternal, and of the mother-daughter relationship, as one possible model of a relational ethics. This maternal model underlies constructions of female subjectivity. And it is taken in different, at times incompatible, directions by the five writers as they treat other modes of social and sexual interaction.

Chapter 1 thus presents a particular theory of ethics, starting with Emmanuel Lévinas’ challenge to metaphysical ontology and his formulation of an ethics of alterity. I then turn to Paul Ricoeur’s intervention in Lévinasian ethics, and consider the relevance of his relational ethics to writings in the feminine. Finally, I look to Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference and notion of a “female ethics” to explain, and anticipate, the importance of maternal identification and differentiation in this feminist literature. The relevance of ethical theory to writings in the feminine is then explored more specifically in relation to their formal and ideological features. Anticipated by this first chapter, the three chapters of part 2 consider how, in their earliest works, Brossard, Brandt and Théoret attempt to unveil and redress the suppression and “negative otherness” of the mother and the daughter. All three use textual mimicry as a productive gesture, but in very different ways. Through the metaphor of matricide, Brossard re-deploys the suppression of the mother by phallogocentric psychoanalysis; Brandt ironically mimics the sectarian male discourse of her Mennonite upbringing; Théoret’s representation of hysterical mimicry offers a subversive performance of cultural conceptions of femininity. In their individual ways, they uncover a relation to the maternal, either through the mother-daughter relationship, the actual practice of maternity, or the (hysterical) subject’s renewed link to a so-called pre-oedipal (but socializing) mother. In part 3, I show how Mouré’s and Tostevin’s deconstructive poetics is intimately connected to their reconfigurations of the maternal. The feminist specificity of their texts is apparent in their dual appropriation of deconstruction, that is to say, in their treatment of Derrida’s

notion of différance in relation to Kristeva's notion of the semiotic chora. This connection between Derrida's grammatology and Kristeva's semiotics is implicitly inscribed in Mouré's and more explicitly in Tostevin's formulations of excess. More specifically, this maternal excess is shown to model a relational ethics.

More comparative in scope, the last two chapters in part 4 examine the doubleness of feminist theorizing in representations of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Chapter 7 considers feminism's often problematic relationship both to humanist ontology and its deconstruction by poststructuralism, as it manifests itself in works by Théoret and Tostevin. To a different extent and in very different ways, a double bind results from the claim of the subject's instability and the recognition of the necessity for female self-autonomy. Yet, especially in the later work of these two writers, conceptual collapse is prevented by an ethical conception of the self which recalls Ricoeur's notion of selfhood and Irigaray's ethics of love, introduced in chapter 1. In close relation to the doubleness examined in chapter 7, the final chapter considers certain religious, if not mystical, reversions to transcendental conceptions of self and other, especially in the more recent publications. I consider where certain representations by Brandt, Mouré and Brossard posit a female subject who at times alternately assumes an original integrity, longs for escape, or threatens to eclipse the other with her desire for grace. I argue that ensuing suggestions of utopian exclusivity, or lesbian untouchability and even transcendence, are not compatible with a social constructionist perspective: this perspective insists on the (social, cultural, historical) "situatedness" of the subject, as well as the primacy of the other over the self. Yet, as I also examine, Brandt, Mouré and Brossard also counter their own notions of exclusivity by privileging both a relational and differential intersubjectivity which, in turn, recalls that maternal model.

In the sections of this introduction, I shall present a comparison of feminist writing in Québec and English Canada since the mid-seventies, outlining the traditions they emerge from, the influences they felt, and other movements they are often paired with (predominantly, postmodernism). This introduction is not intended as an exhaustive historical study of feminist and postmodern literature in Québec and English Canada. It merely situates feminist expression in

relation to certain political times, social circumstances and other literary movements, some of which will be recalled in the chapters to follow.

Closing Gaps

Feminist literature produced by women has made its presence known, albeit in different stages and with differing impact, in both French- and English-speaking literary Canadian milieus. Conferences, collaborations and collectives have been extremely important in establishing contact among women writing in French and English (more precisely, between Québécois and English-speaking feminists), and also among English-speaking women writing from various geographical regions of Canada. The Dialogue Conference held at York University in 1981, transcribed and published in 1987 as Gynocritics/La Gynocritique, constitutes one of the most successful literary and theoretical dialogues between the two cultures. Bringing together articles by Canadian and Québécois writers and critics, the book, according to editor Barbara Godard, sets out “to rethink the act of reading with respect to the work of women writers in this country” (i), as well as dealing with “the charting of sexual differences within literary institutions” (i). The notion of sexual difference operates as the unifying thread in the book. The essays address and seek to redress the exclusions and domination of androcentric discourse and its resulting hierarchical conceptions of difference within the fields of knowledge, writing, and criticism. Yet the challenge of this volume rests not only in its critique of a traditional formulation of difference, that is, of the female other as a negative reflection of the self-same subject. It also involves proposals for alternate models of female alterity.

The title of the book derives from Elaine Showalter’s term for a current of feminist criticism that looks at literary history’s encodings of gender. Yet the Canadian book’s form of gynocriticism extends to female creativity itself, to women as producers, and not just interpreters, of textual meaning. It thus also includes women who often do both. Gynocritics encouraged the involvement of critics in the forging of a feminist aesthetics and emphasized the influence of feminist creative writers on the directions of the criticism itself. As such, Gynocritics stands as an

example of what much contemporary, postmodern criticism has presented in the past twenty years: the critic as theorist, extending in some cases to the theorist as creative writer.³ What Gynocritics revealed was that boundaries, both generic and cultural, were beginning to blur in feminist criticism and poetics. These blurred boundaries were also related to the bilingual format of the conference that worked to make mutually familiar the different literary and academic milieus. As Godard argues, the conference even represented the allegorical bilingualism of feminists living in two worlds, one defined for and one defined by them.

The book also takes on the outdated notion that anglophone feminism necessarily gives primacy to social action and American-influenced empirical thought, as opposed to Québécois feminism's bent towards continental philosophy. It signals new directions in English Canada where, in the early eighties, the questions of language and formal experimentation were taking centre stage in women's writing. On this front, another important point of contact between Québécois and English-speaking women writers occurred at the multicultural, feminist forum, *Women and Words/Les Femmes et les mots*, held in Vancouver in 1983. Transcribed and published as In the Feminine: Women and Words, the conference brought together women across Canada to discuss issues of writing. The event has been described as a turning point by a number of women writing in English, especially in terms of their exposure to the work of Québécois feminists. The 1986 collection of essays, A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing, confirmed the growing interest in Canada in anglophone feminist writing, that is to say, in writing of a certain style. This is not to discount the substantial attention also received both earlier and later by P.K. Page, Dorothy Livesay, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant. Yet another collaborative effort between English and French writers, the book includes essays by both critical and creative writers (although, unlike Gynocritics, the essays are all presented in English or

³ This is certainly not a new phenomenon in the history of poetry. For instance, one could recall Coleridge's "gloss" to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and also his Biographia Literaria, or Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads. If a bit too categorical, André Gide's statement that "all great poets eventually become critics" (qtd. in Bloom and Trilling 633) does recall at least "a partial roster of the poets whose critical writing is of the highest interest: Dante, Goethe, Schiller, Wordsworth, Shelley, Arnold, Baudelaire, Valéry, Eliot" and, of course, Coleridge (Bloom and Trilling 633).

English translation). As editors Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli indicate, the collection “documents a conversation, sometimes of long standing, sometimes tentative and beginning, among women writers from a variety of linguistic, social and national backgrounds, among poets, novelists, dramatists, non-fiction writers, critics, theorists” (ix).

A more recent compilation of essays written in both French and English is found in Women’s Writing and the Literary Institution, proceedings of a conference held at the University of Alberta in 1989. The title itself emphasizes a prevailing concern of feminist critics in the nineties: writing in the feminine and the writer’s relations to the literary institution, including issues of production, legitimation and reception (Potvin i). Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard also confirmed the ties between anglophone and francophone feminist literatures with their collaboration in Mauve (1985), as did earlier the founders of Spirale, Gail Scott and France Théoret. So too does the journal Tessera, writings from which were compiled in the 1994 volume, Collaborations in the Feminine. These publications and dialogues highlight women, words, differences and commonalities. They also encompass the plurality which inescapably marks any notion of Canadian literary feminism as a whole (including Québec). To delineate some of the common features of writings in the feminine is not to efface differences between the distinct contexts out of which each party (writer, critic, theorist) evolves. But it may begin to efface the all too limiting and factitious binary oppositions (two or many solitudes, anglophone centre versus francophone margin, or vice-versa). Such dichotomies have had and continue to have more to do with the power of a particular political rhetoric than with literary production itself—at least in terms of feminist literature. Literary historical research reveals some of the incompatibilities of francophone and anglophone Canadas. Yet, we cannot be completely bound by such oppositions. In short, perhaps such established models of irreconcilable differences do not signify as much for feminists writing in Canada.

This is not a new observation, to be sure. Neuman and Kamboureli point to a similar dissemination of the margin/centre cultural paradigm in their 1986 preface to A Mazing Space (x). Godard observes as much in her consideration of the impact of theory on creative feminist

production in English-Canada (“Theorizing” 11). In her comparative work, The New Poetics in Canada and Québec, Caroline Bayard argues that “such feminist concerns [as women’s tongue and women’s bodies] are what best connect Québec’s literature of the last fifteen years with that of Canada’s” (159). With the growing presence and development of feminism through theoretical, experimental works in both English and French, perhaps it is possible to begin to consider closing the gap between two cultures (which in themselves are already plural anyway), if not in terms of an entire literary past, at least in terms of certain literary moments.

Yet, a few points of difference must be acknowledged. Feminist literature in Québec has received a considerable amount of institutional attention, notably in contrast to feminist works produced in English. Undoubtedly, Brossard and perhaps even Madeleine Gagnon are known more widely in Québec, in and outside academe, than experimental writers like Marlatt, Tostevin, Brandt and Mouré. According to some critics, radical subversion and literary experimentation are “almost a kind of norm” (Canadian ix) in Québec, as Linda Hutcheon contends in her study of postmodern English-Canadian fiction. In English Canada, it is safe to say that such subversive and experimental styles of literary practice (feminist and non-feminist) remained somewhat peripheral in the early seventies. When some did provoke media and public responses, these have ranged “from absolute silence to a political scrutiny bordering upon libel,” as Bayard notes in turn (112).⁴ Perhaps, as Hutcheon indicates, English Canada’s “more conservative cultural history as a colony” (3) has distinguished it from the more overt tendencies towards the revolutionary and the radical markings of the Québécois socio-political and cultural spheres. However, as Hutcheon adds later on, the anglophone world has indeed shared (obviously in a different manner, in the face of a different history) nationalist politics and the emergence of the women’s movement in the sixties and seventies (both of which are portrayed in the early novels of Margaret Atwood). Anglophone Canada too has seen “the ‘inscription’ into history of those previously silenced ex-

⁴ Bayard gives the example of the Governor General’s Award granted to bp nichol in 1971, which may have broken the public indifference to concrete poetry and art in Canada, but nonetheless sparked responses from parliamentary members to nichol’s supposedly “obscene” work (304).

centrics: those defined by differences in class, gender, race, ethnic group, and sexual preference” (Hutcheon 11). With more dialogue between the two linguistic groups, a growing availability of translations and even, as Neuman and Kamboureli point out, an increase in bilingualism, the interest in theory (French and feminist Québécois) has worked its way into those texts written in English by Canadian women. Yet feminists producing theory or language-oriented works in English have faced a highly polarized reception that can range from acclaim, national recognition and celebration, to harshness, dismissal and down right nastiness.⁵

In her 1988 article, “Au noir de l’écriture,” Dupré notes a decline in the critical reception and study of feminist Québécois works. Lori Saint-Martin makes a similar observation in her introduction to the 1994 collection, *L’autre lecture* (11). According to Dupré, the heart of “écritures au féminin” seems to need a pacemaker, especially in comparison to the twelve preceding years of feminist literature in Québec (“Au noir” 66). Feminist writings are inevitably dependant on literary institutions (academic and non-) which, ultimately, negotiate and at times regulate bursaries, subsidies, sales, publicity and, to a large extent, critical reception. As Dupré asserts elsewhere, “L’écriture peut difficilement fonctionner à vide: elle a besoin d’être nourrie, de

⁵ One prevailing response by reviewers to the poetry of Tostevin and Mouré pinpoints this difficulty. See Whittaker’s mainly positive review of Tostevin’s work. The difficulty of Mouré’s poetry is noted by one reviewer as part of her appeal (Fagan C7). Yet more often than not, this difficulty becomes the source of frustration for a number of critics. The poet is accused of a defensive warding off of criticism (Tregebov, “Corrections” 54), of too much obscurity (Carey 27), of “refusing us entrance into an obscure world of personal meaning” (Raglan 97). Brandt seems prone to polarized responses as well; this fact is not so surprising in light of the two works which have dealt with her native Mennonite community, hence attracting both the anger of the “official community” and the strongly appreciative, at times emotional, responses of some of her Mennonite readers. There is a range from the celebratory reviews (Tammaro and Boire) to the completely negative ones, like the review by Judith Fitzgerald who accuses Brandt not only of writing sentimental and “jejune” poems, but of also failing to “fully comprehend the art, craft, shape, and tradition of poetry” (15). Speaking of the great tradition, Louis Dudek’s 1989 article on modernist poetry in Canada cannot go without mention here. Readers of a 1989 issue of *Open Letter* are given an overview of how the “real poetry” of Canada focusses on “the most important world literary development” (29) and relates “the condition of man” (32) (and is, according to this article, written by men: bissett, nichol, McCaffery, Norris). The development of what Dudek lists (or lumps together) as “Atwoodism,” “feminism, regionalism, ethnic emergence, or the emergence of the institutionalism of the subsidized presses” is said to have “nothing to do with the emergence of mainline modernism” (29). But it is perhaps difficult to accept that these same “developments” in poetry are “not at all significant for the history of poetry,” and “if anything encourage regressive conservatism” (29).

prendre une certaine place dans la vie littéraire” (“La critique” 71). This turns out to be a difficult goal to pursue (in both cultural contexts) when the works themselves often insist on generic blurring at the very moment that the culture advocates a return to a ‘generic purity.’ According to Dupré, such purity is the preference of the Québécois literary institution as a whole (“La critique” 71-72). Moreover, the continuing presence of certain misogynist attitudes in the reception of works is detected by Dupré and also by Smart in her introduction to *Voix et Image*’s special edition on Théoret. Yet it is the lack of male criticism that Dupré and Lamy point out as well: their concern is the danger of “ghetto-izing” writings that are self-avowedly “au féminin” (Saint-Martin, Introduction 19). The predominance of female reception and criticism indeed may increase this danger, as does feminist critics’ tendency to offer a “critique de la complicité”⁶ rather than a “critique de la distance” (Dupré, “Au noir” 68).⁷

Feminist critics like Dupré, Smart and the late Lamy are apt to call on their male colleagues to partake in the reading and interpretation of feminist literature.⁸ What is seen here is not an implied need for male approval. Rather, these feminist critics are inviting men to keep in mind what women have learned through their own acquired right to read and interpret the great Western literary masterpieces. Hence, the validity of Dupré’s deceptively simple observation that “Les livres de femmes n’appartiennent pas qu’aux femmes . . .” (“La critique” 73). Lamy is certainly correct in her assertion that this simple understanding needs to be ingrained in both men and women: indeed “c’est beaucoup—des hommes et des femmes à ébranler et à convaincre” (“L’autre” 23). Yet, since no one really speaks of “writing in the masculine,” one may ask whether “l’homme” remains the implied norm, even the institutional norm, for writing in the

⁶ Throughout this volume, where there is no mention of “emphasis added” in parenthesis, underlining is used to indicate italicized words in the cited text.

⁷ However, male critics have been more inclined to tackle Brossard’s work which is known—whether or not this is relevant to the attraction of male critics to her work—for its ‘cerebral’ quality (Philippe Haek, Pierre Nepveu, Winfried Sie:nerling, Robert Dion).

⁸ See in particular Suzanne Lamy’s “L’autre lecture,” which concludes with a letter to a fellow critic, implied as male and addressed as “toi,” encouraging him to read and respond to feminist theory and literary production.

feminine. My answer to this question, as the next chapter will indicate, is no. Suffice it to say here that both Québécois and English Canadian writings in the feminine abide by theories on female specificity and difference. These discourses raise issues pertaining to the political acquisition of equality/sameness and recognition in the (literary and social) culture, as this acquisition also depends on assertions and proper configurations of sexual difference. Such configurations involve the treatment of and conduct towards the female or/and male other—the other’s body, the other’s alterity, the other’s subjectivity. It is this treatment that will present the possibility of a relational ethics applicable both to lesbian and heterosexual relationships. Certainly, the difficulties associated with the political ramifications and issues surrounding reception, readership and publication are not easily surmounted. Yet, perhaps feminist literature’s ethical models of difference which, we shall see, depend on processes of recognition, can begin to answer this need for open dialogue, this need to hear and listen to the other.

Québec

The sustained impact of language-oriented poetics on Québécois literature is not all that surprising. As a minority on a predominantly English-speaking continent, and for well over two-hundred years, Québec has displayed its sensitivity to linguistic issues and cultural survival; these concerns have been at the heart of its political, religious, social and legislative policies, institutions and cultural directions. From its clergy-dominated political days, the conservatism of the Duplessis government, the “Révolution Tranquille” of the sixties, the language laws and the nationalist resurgence in the politics of the nineties, language has been the prevailing point of contention in Québec cultural life. This concern with the spoken, lived and transformed language (French) has perhaps never found its artistic vehicle as completely and as vehemently than in the nationalist poetry of the fifties and early sixties. At that time and before, poets such as Anne Hébert and Alain Grandbois no doubt prepared the way for this period of “recentrement territorial,” especially with their invocations of Québec’s own mythologies. But it is the urgency of the politically charged and meticulous poetic forms of Gaston Miron, Paul-Marie Lapointe, Gatien Lapointe and Jacques

Brault that produced a nationalist movement in Québécois poetry.⁹

For a period of approximately ten years, poetry actually dominated the literary production of Québec. However, for many of its critics, Québécois nationalism was seen as having its foundations in decades of argument advocating the dependence of national survival on women's familial roles as mothers and only as mothers, while the male role of power (the father figure) was said to descend hierarchically from God.¹⁰ Yet the liberal politics of 1969 Québec did entail the creation of the leftist feminist FLF (Front de libération des femmes), followed by the Centre des femmes and its journal, Québécoises debout. Nationalist poetry's proliferation of a decolonizing discourse of (political) difference would provide feminist literature with certain terms of reference. Yet, the later practitioners (including feminist writers) of a "modernité" or "poésie formaliste," "infra" or "nouvelle" in Québec would seek not only to transgress but reject, as a false and limiting convention, the transparency of language assumed by some militant poetry and cultural "prise de parole." These new poets would reject what they perceived as a nostalgic appeal to history. They would also reject the rhetoric of a political and artistic current which became representative of a

⁹ Miron's publication house, L'Hexagone, was the cultural, ideological and organizational, as well as ground-breaking and institutionalizing force of Québécois poetry in the fifties. It introduced a "poésie du pays" which correlated with the swift changes in institutional structures, economic relations and culture, and with the urbanizing and secularizing of Québec during the Quiet Revolution. A nationalist fervour was indeed articulated through those poetic elements pursued by the forbears of later Québécois poetry: myth, love, even religion. In the sixties, a Marxist-Socialist perspective permeated nationalist writing. Québec was not only depicted and poeticized as its own nation, but also as an industrial society dominated, both economically and politically, by the rest of Canada. Writers who gathered around Parti Pris as well as Maintenant, Révolution Québécoise and Socialisme promoted the idea of a "Québec laïc, indépendant et socialiste" (Maughey 48). From Parti pris sprung the M.L.P. (Mouvement de libération populaire), which merged with the Parti révolutionnaire québécois in 1966.

¹⁰ Patricia Smart refers to a "figure maternelle solitaire et puissante" within Québec's traditional ideology of national survival as a "construction idéologique créée par une hiérarchie mâle rattachée à l'Église catholique et modelée sur la France pré-révolutionnaire: hiérarchie dans laquelle le pouvoir se transmettait en lignée directe de Dieu le Père au Roi de France au père de famille, et ensuite au fils aîné—l'épouse et les plus jeunes enfants de la famille étant relégués au statut d'"autres." " (Écrire 30). Smart also cites Henri Bourassa who insists, in 1925, on the traditional role of the mother as the very foundation of French-Canadian society, with feminism considered a dangerous and anarchical Anglo-Saxon import (Écrire 30-31). More recently, in his 1995 "yes" referendum campaign, Lucien Bouchard linked reproduction to Québec sovereignty in his lamentation about the poor birth rate in Québec. Feminists have indicated the reminiscence of Duplessis's "antifeminist nationalism" that defined the "perfect woman" as the "wife-mother" in a similar time of decline in birth rate (Verwaayen 12).

conservative, “male political establishment” (Gould, Writing 15).

It was as if to prove Jacques Godbout’s assertion, “la littérature de la révolution tranquille était écrite par les anciens du collège classique” (qtd. in Mailhot and Nepveu 25), that a new generation of poets transformed Québécois literature in the sixties. The spreading of nationalist ideas through poetic writing was dissipating. In 1965 Nicole Brossard, Roger Soublière, Marcel Saint-Pierre and Jan Stafford founded the pivotal journal, La barre du jour, a forum for the articulation and developments of Québec’s new poetics. By 1970, Claude Bertrand, France Théoret and others had published “Les dix propositions,” a collective, “formaliste” manifesto which appeared in La presse (thus acquiring media exposure). Moreover, the writing at the newly founded Les herbes rouges complimented that at La barre du jour, and introduced poets François Charron and André Roy into the scene of experimental poetics. Against the prevailing referentiality of the Hexagone players, a number of poets turned to the linguistic sign itself to unveil its ontology, exploring the theories of French structuralism. Challenged was the belief in the “ability of words to name effectively the sociopolitical reality of Québec or, for that matter, any other social reality” (Gould, Writing 54). That is not to say that the project of what was called “modernité” was not political. “Nous voulions que l’esprit contestataire entre aussi dans la littérature,” states Brossard, implying a contestation at the level of form, of textual materiality, rather than a distinct political agenda (in Bonenfant, “Ce que” 71).

The “formalisme” pursued for a time by Brossard and Théoret was thus prevalent (and bound to be re-defined by feminism). Brossard’s appropriation of Rimbaud’s slogan, “il faut être absolument moderne” (changed to “résolument moderne” [Lettre 45]), harked back to the modern poets of nineteenth-century France, namely their impulse to radically break from convention and tradition. Yet as Karen Gould argues, Brossard’s and many others’ poetic applications of this modern resoluteness shifted “the writer’s focus away from the exploration of intensely personal experience and toward the vigorous pursuit of new avenues in textual production” (Writing 53). Thus, Québécois “modernité” purposely recalled the theories channelled through Tel Quel by Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva and Sollers. Also influential were the writings of Blanchot, as well as

the novelistic experiments of Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Duras and, at home, those of Hubert Aquin. New poetic practices assimilated Barthes' notion of the death of the author, structuralism's dismantling of the integrity of the sign, of meaning, of a single truth, and of authority. Yet distinguishing itself from a French "modernité" that consisted mostly of (structuralist, and later poststructuralist) theorizing, Québécois "modernité" was first and foremost a literary practice. In fact, the poetry's distinct feature was its blurring of theoretical and creative practice, to produce what Brossard would later term "fiction théorique." As Jean Yves Collette observes: "La modernité québécoise a inventé, sans même y penser, le concept de 'TEXTE' comme genre littéraire. . . . Le 'TEXTE' c'est la conscience expérimentale du langage dans un système de production. . . . Tout ce qui n'est pas 'TEXTE' n'est pas moderne et continue de renforcer les genres de la tradition" (qtd. in Royer 89). This almost draconian fixation on what did or did not constitute a modern 'TEXTE' caused more than a few internal debates and resignations at La barre du jour.¹¹ Yet Collette's description of Québécois modernity's articulation of theory through literary form sums up well Brossard's formalist phase and later works.

As Brossard would display time and again, the poet was considered a technician, poetry a science, as the text blurred the boundaries between theory and poetry. If the poetry was its own theory, then the writing was its own reading, staging its own self-encounters, its own hermeneutics, drawing attention to its gestures of rupture, of dissemination, and its influences. As Brossard again indicates, the text of "modernité" was a "lecture-écriture, la relecture du texte au moment où le texte s'écrit" (in Bonenfant, "Ce que" 79). Going back to Rimbaud (and perhaps Mallarmé) in "L'épreuve de la modernité," Brossard describes this writing which, Robert Dion aptly remarks, was indeed a hermeneutical writing, a writing of self-interpretation. The poem, Dion suggests, was "le texte et son commentaire" (256), a notion we shall consider further in the

¹¹ In 1966, Michel Beaulieu, Yvan Mernard and Raoul Duguay broke with the founders of the journal who disfavoured the more political writing that the three decided to pursue in Quoi, through their interest in music and sound poetry. France Théoret, who left in 1969, was also critical of the "texte limite . . . fait pour l'oeil" and thus lacking "la sonorité, la voix" (in Bonenfant, "Le fantasme" 88). Eventually Marcel Saint-Pierre also left the journal to pursue his "real interests," which lay in historical materialism (in Bonenfant, "Ce que" 77).

next chapter. If, as Gagnon observes, the formalism conceived by Brossard and her contemporaries reveals “une génération où des poètes ou des romanciers expliquent eux-mêmes aux critiques, ou aux lecteurs ce qu’est la ‘textualisation’ ” (“Parler” 17), the explication and the text were not made the more accessible to the reader. In the sixties, the insertion of literary theory into the creative text certainly shook a number of academic traditions: the gap between critic and writer, the topological, historical idea of the creative oeuvre (Dion 252), as well as conventional modes of reading (the process of deciphering ‘meaning’ and identifying ‘form’ in a text where ‘meaning’ and ‘form’ remained in crisis).

A considerable shift from Brossard’s own “texte” of so-called semantic neutrality was her own 1974 “Context exhubérant.” Published in La barre du jour, this text inserted a sexually-distinct ‘I’ and introduced the feminist orientation of what would remain Brossard’s experimental style. Brossard’s new feminist voice would result in the fiction theory of L’amèr, fuelling the feminist movement about to explode on the Québécois poetic scene. La barre du jour’s 1975 issue, “Femme et langage,” and the journal’s new title, La nouvelle barre du jour, that followed two years later, asserted feminism’s insurgence upon the theories and textual productions of Québécois modernity. If formalist poetics had set out to break the rules, it had created new ones; Québécois literature was again under self-scrutiny. Many of the formalist poets and theorists (Beaudet, Charron, Beausoleil, Gagnon) were sounding the death bell of modernity’s arid rejection of ideology and its referents. And the feminist voices of Carole Massé, Louky Bersianik, Gagnon, Brossard and Théoret were insisting that discourse was not only always already ideological, but also gendered. Reality, history, truth and subjectivity were still objects of deconstruction, but they were also recognized as multi-layered and, especially, since they were constructed they could be prone to re-constructions. As Brossard argues:

Il faut bien dire cependant que les questions posées par l’analyse féministe sont devenues ‘brûlantes,’ si je peux dire, car, dans la mesure où le féminin traditionnel et le neutre-masculin éternel sont remis en question, cela occasionne un déplacement des champs d’intérêt et de vision. Cela oblige à questionner la réalité, le quotidien, le vécu, la

représentation. Il est évident aussi que, dans la mesure où le féminisme met en doute la crédibilité et la légitimité du pouvoir masculin, cela occasionne un grand éclat de rire, parfois jaune, devant un certain nombre de ses ruses intellectuelles et formelles. (in Bonenfant, "Ce que" 78)

No doubt this "neutre-masculin" was the guise under which Brossard's own "formaliste" text had unfolded. Brossard indicates that part of her early project was to forget "que j'étais une femme, c'est-à-dire que j'appartenais à la catégorie des non-pensantes"; feminism would, as she puts it, work to "de-neutralize" her (in Bonenfant, "Ce que" 80). It was precisely through women writers' renegotiations of the formalist current in Québec that questions of gender and the inscription of feminine difference quickly began to take centre stage. Despite what is considered as the conjuncture of formalism's and feminism's "manifestations explosives de l'incrédulité" (Koski 4) towards Western humanist thought, the differences between the two movements would actually constitute some of the defining features of Québécois feminist aesthetics. With the development and emancipation of a feminist consciousness, the political and aesthetic features of "modernité" were not only to be expanded, but some of them rejected, notably "le texte fétiche, devenu trop réducteur" (Brossard, Lettre 48). Brossard, Théoret and Gagnon began to perceive and treat language not only as "an intrinsic part of social constructs" but also "of sexual constraints, of the physical as well as political texture of the writer's and her reader's existence" (Bayard, New Poetics 94).

In its quest for a gender-specific inscription in language, feminist writing began to insist on the necessity of (re)inscribing the female body (maternal, sexual—heterosexual or lesbian—intellectual) in a symbolic order which had always been interpreted on masculine grounds. Retaining the poetics of deconstruction and transgression pursued by the "formalistes," feminists integrated modernity's experiments while transcending its limitations and its "aseptic" language (Théoret, "Writing" 362). As Théoret recounts, formalism had inscribed the speaking subject as "a textual presence abstracted from its history" ("Writing" 362). Now, the importance of historical, social and cultural conditioning could no longer be ignored. The concrete economic

and socio-cultural context of oppression and the work towards social change, explored within formal experimentations seeking a female-specific inscription in language, would figure as the fundamental and motivating concerns for feminists. “Il faut être résolument moderne” became “Il faut absolument être rebelle” (Brossard, “Ludique” 110).¹²

Feminist poets, novelists, theorists, essayists and dramatists established dialogues, friendships and a sense of collectivity in their works not only among themselves, but also with French thinkers and writers like Irigaray, Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Annie Leclerc, Claire Lejeune, Monique Wittig. The American women’s movement also left its imprints on those Québécois experimental texts that sought a more ‘woman-centred’ approach in their targeting of the patriarchal family, social policies, institutions and cultural myths—especially concerning the misogyny and male supremacy within Québécois culture’s religious and cultural discourses. Even more indispensable than the praxis-oriented facet of American feminists was the poetry of Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, and even the philosophy of Mary Daly for whom the physical, the sensual, the feminine and the historical were always already culturally scripted, and seen to mesh with, rather than oppose, poetic and theoretical language. In view of the historical pervasiveness of the Catholic Church in all aspects of Québécois life, and in view of both its repression as well as implicit condemnation of the sexualized female body, new articulations were certainly welcomed.

¹² Presenting themselves as the subjects of language, the texture of which they simultaneously continued to deconstruct and expand, women writers also became the producers of many journals, collaborations, plays and discussion groups in the second half of the seventies. Among some of the most notable feminist productions are Denise Boucher’s and Gagnon’s 1977 Retailles, the feminist journal Les têtes de pioche founded by Brossard and Théoret the year before, the theatrical, collective, often militant works, Môman travaille pas, a trop d’ouvrage (1975), Si Cendrillon pouvait mourir (1975) and La nef des sorcières (1976), Denise Boucher’s temporarily banned play, Les fées ont soif (1978), and Jovette Marchessault’s La saga des poules mouillées (1980). Between 1974 and 1980, the women at the fore of Québec’s literary (especially poetic) feminist production were Gagnon with Pour les femmes et tous les autres (1974), Louky Bersianik with her feminist ‘Bible,’ L’euguélonne (1976), Brossard with Mécanique jongleuse (1974) and L’amèr, ou le chapitre effrité (1977), and Théoret with Bloody Mary (1977), dedicated to Nicole Brossard. Yolande Villemaire, Francine Déry, Josée Yvon also appeared on the scene with titles that evoked the sexed and sexual body, the efforts to decode and re-code its (often violent) script. Some of these titles include Villemaire’s Que du stage blood (1977), Déry’s En beau fusil (1978), and Yvon’s Filles-commandos bandées (1976). Works questioned, dismantled and renewed the literary, philosophical and psychoanalytical discourses on maternity, femininity and female difference.

The focus began to shift from the victimized body to its affirmation in discourse. As Gould indicates, the feminist reorientation of the forms of “modernité” posed the question of whether “the mother, the maternal, la maternité [could] actually be ‘modern’ ” (Writing 27). Dissention over (re)configurations of “woman,” not to mention over class solidarity, the concept of ‘sisterhood’ and the politics of sexual preference, have broken up some collaborative efforts as well as directed new ones. Yet this multiplicity of approaches, ideologies and influences shows that no single organizing manifesto or cohesive philosophy inscribing the feminine can really be pinned down in these texts (Gould, Writing 30). Nonetheless, the feminist project of “écriture au féminin” contemplates female alterity in what Gould calls “all [its] conceivable forms of expression— philosophical, psychological, intellectual, biological, sociological, political, and aesthetic” (Writing 40).

Just as Québécois feminist writers may have retained from the literature of the Quiet Revolution the thematic of (though not the aesthetics behind) the discourse of decolonization, they have both retained and abandoned some of the ‘regulations’ of “modernité.” Of relevance to the authors in this study is the fact that some critics argue that the intersection of Québécois modernity with and its continuation into feminism has caused a shift in “modernité,” pushing it into postmodernism (Dupré, Stratégies 18). The 1980 Colloque Nouvelle barre du jour would enforce the view that poetry was no longer strictly (or merely) subversive and transgressive, but that feminist writing added a new and crucial dimension to “modernité” (Mailhot and Nepveu 33). As Dupré in turn argues:

La conscience féministe aura eu des effets évidents pour réorienter l’écriture vers un référent débordant l’auto-réflexivité, chez les femmes d’abord, mais aussi, par effet d’entraînement, chez les hommes. Pensons plus particulièrement, sous des modes différents, à Philippe Haeck et à Hugues Corriveau. L’insertion d’une subjectivité au féminin aura permis d’opérer un déplacement de la modernité, c’est-à-dire de réintroduire, dans un formalisme qui risquait de tourner à vide, de devenir fétichiste, cet existentiel dont parle France Théoret: la souffrance, la folie, l’amour, la maternité, la réalité du quotidien,

le sentiment. (Stratégies 17-18)

Along with “formalisme,” literary feminism refused the possibility of any direct access to external reality as well as the humanist, ego-centred Cartesian subject. Yet in its own distinct fashion, writing in the feminine signalled the poetic text’s return to a representable past, to history as historiography, and to the prevailing question of subjectivity. In this, Dupré argues, lies the pull towards “postmodernité” (Stratégies 18). Indeed as the editors of Les Discours féminins dans la littérature postmoderne also contend: “Il n’est pas possible de tenir convenablement compte du postmodernisme au Québec des quinze dernières années sans reconnaître le rôle capital qu’ont joué dans son émergence de nombreuses écrivaines, théoriciennes et artistes féministes” (3).

In the quest for identity (however arbitrary), for an inscription of the feminine that would in itself motivate a poem, a certain readability became one of the new dimensions of contemporary writing. This readability certainly transgressed those formalist texts labelled as hermetic, elitist and unreadable (Dupré, Stratégies 17).¹³ In light of this preoccupation with not only the signifier but the signified, and the desire to forge a speaking subject of language, of history and of social conditioning, Dupré is perhaps again correct to suggest that this new readability belongs to Québécois postmodernism as well. To recall Guy Scarpetta, postmodernism may not be so much about doing away with the referent or even breaking the rules of syntax and semantics, but may be more an attitude. From Dupré’s point of view, postmodernism, à la Scarpetta, informed by feminism, is “une façon moins radicale de voir la modernité” (Stratégies 20). But perhaps it is also a more complex version of “modernité,” as the deconstruction and the affirmation of the subject can share the same textual space, as does the invocation of all genres and the rupture with generic convention.¹⁴

¹³ Notably in the broader context of the modernism/postmodernism divide, postmodernism’s rejection of the elitism, inaccessibility and exclusivity of modernist art is often used to mark the differences between the two. See Huyssen.

¹⁴ As a number of critics have observed, internal debates such as the periodization of the postmodern or, more specifically, the tug-of-war between modernism and postmodernism specific to the Anglo-American critical circles, are not so relevant in Québec. Moreover, hesitation towards the postmodern crops up among critics, despite the considerable critical impact on Québécois literary criticism of Lyotard’s 1979 La condition postmoderne, (ironically) commissioned in a

Feminism's intersections with, delineation from, and intervention in, the Québécois "modernité" of formalist and postmodernist texts has preoccupied a number of critics: Dupré, Gould, Smart, Potvin, Godard (Paterson, "Le postmodernisme" 82). In some aspects, feminism may be formally allied to formalist and postmodern revisions of form and literary convention, and to its questioning of Western master narratives (of universality, objectivity) that underlie power and social structures (Saint-Martin 22). But it certainly remains intentionally and, we shall see, ethically distinct from (and at times incompatible with) the ideological ambiguity of certain postmodernisms and from their incredulity toward any coherent form of subjectivity (Saint-Martin 22).¹⁵ For some postmodern writings the critique of established literary, cultural, political orders does not always include those that rest on and prolong sexual oppression. Postmodernist texts may subvert and transgress the dominant discourses of Western culture and the notions of unity or homogeneity that characterize them without seeing this problem. Postmodern incredulity can even reveal what Paterson calls a "libéralisme illusoire" ("Postmodernisme" 35), which either ignores the problem of patriarchy as one of these master discourses, or re-enforces a phallogocentric view of

legitimizing effort on the part of the Québec government's university counsels, and the equal if not stronger impact of Scarpetta's 1985 *L'impureté*. Despite the critical efforts of Janet Paterson, Barbara Godard, Kathleen Kells, Louise Forsyth and Raija Koski, there is still a sustained resistance to the topic of postmodernism. For instance, see Pierre Milot in his 1996 *L'incessant bavardage public* or Louky Bersianik in *La main tranchante du mal*. Another complicating factor is the slipperiness of the term "modernité." For the journal, *Lettres Québécoises*, contemporary writing is often categorized under "modernité," as it is for Pierre Nepveu and Théoret—just as "modernité" and "postmodernité" are sometimes interchangeable terms in Québécois criticism. Koski, Kells and Forsyth indicate that in Québec and France, "modernité" is still used by many critics and authors to connote what is considered as postmodern practices in anglophone contexts (7); Québécois postmodernism, they argue, is to be considered in terms of its relationship to "les modernités française et québécoise" rather than Anglo-Saxon postmodernisms (3). In fact, if there is a uniquely Québécois postmodernism, it remains inseparable, they continue, "de la poésie formaliste des années 1970 et du mouvement féministe" (4). Perhaps it is Paterson who most aptly sums up what has become the elusiveness of the terms modern and modernity in Québec. Québécois critics themselves, she points out, use postmodernism "avec une certaine distance qui n'est pas sans rappeler l'attitude de Scarpetta" ("Le postmodernisme" 80). Whereas for anglophone critics, postmodernism figures at a more conceptual level of discussion, in Québec it becomes "une herméneutique des textes" (80), seeking those "'moments postmodernes'" with regards to a vast cultural, social and literary context (80).

¹⁵ The essays collected by Linda Nicholson in *Feminism/Postmodernism* also deal with the feminist-postmodernist debate.

the world and of the other (of woman).¹⁶ In short, and as we shall see again in part 4, if some postmodern practices often remain politically ambivalent, the same cannot be said for feminism. As Paterson again claims, if postmodernism shares with feminism a radical incredulity and Lyotardian sensitivity to difference, this incredulity is not always the same: unlike postmodernism, feminism always consists of “une remise en question du métarécit patriarcal” (“Postmodernisme” 43). As I argue in the following chapter, it is this kind of questioning that can open onto various formulations of the ethics of alterity inscribed in the texts to be studied.

English Canada

With a proliferation of poetic production and little magazines, the sixties and seventies are sometimes viewed as English Canada’s literary renaissance. What were mostly experimental and indeed postmodern poetics making up this literary scene cannot, as Margaret Atwood cautions, be seen as “a creation *ex nihilo*” (xxxvi). Canadian modernist poetry contributed to, and did not just contrast with, the unfolding of a postmodern poetics. As was the case for Québec’s nationalist poetry a decade before, the sixties saw poetry momentarily become the predominant form in Canadian literary production. Somewhat recalling the American modernist-postmodernist debate, the relationship of Canadian postmodern poetry to modernism (Canadian and American) is one of continuity and difference.¹⁷ In addition to the American influence and the emphasis on locality and

¹⁶ To illustrate this point, Paterson gives the examples of Gérard Bessette’s *Le Semestre* and Christian Mistral’s *Vamp*, while acknowledging that there are male postmodernist novelists, like Jacques Poulin and Yvon Richard, who do give female marginality and subjectivity serious consideration. “Postmodernisme et féminisme: où sont les jonctions?” 27-44.

¹⁷ As the editors of *The Making of Modern Poetry* indicate, what English-Canadian poets and critics have discussed as modernism since the forties has roots dating back to the nineteen-tens and twenties. One of the earliest displays of modern poetic trends in Canada appears in Arthur Stringer’s 1914 work, *Open Water*, in which he advocates the use of free verse, especially the new forms and imagism of Ezra Pound. Also championed by F.O. Call, free verse was to liberate “Canadian poetry from the trammel of end-rhyme, and to liberalize its methods and its substance” (Dudek and Gnarowski 3). Although, in the early twenties, poets (like Dorothy Livesay, W.W.E. Ross and Raymond Knister) tackled modernist forms on an individual basis and generally in isolation from one another, McGill University and Montreal magazines soon after became the centres for Eliot-inspired practitioners and modernist spokesmen, F.R. Scott and A.M. Klein. The modern direction in the poetry of writers like Scott, Klein as well as A.J.M. Smith and (in a different sense) E.J. Pratt implied an assault on a Canadian parochialism, and the perceived,

the quotidian, among the most important and influential characteristics for later trends is the connection drawn between poetry and criticism by modernism, as well as the philosophical orientation of poetic practices. Some modernist poets even transformed their practices according to specific trends developed in literary criticism, particularly in response to Northrop Frye's theories of literature and the critical practices advocated in The Canadian Forum. Although some writers like Desmond Pacy held to an objective, "neutral," "descriptive" and "socio-historical interpretation" in criticism (Dudek and Gnarowski 156), Frye's reviews, books and lectures, with their theories that were antithetical to the school of realism, played an important role in realigning some modern poetics in the fifties and early sixties, namely those of Jay Macpherson, James Reaney and Eli Mandel. And with the importance a number of poets allotted to his privileging of classical and Biblical myths, dreams, history and narrative unity within the poem, Frye's literary theories began to show how—for these three poets—criticism and poetic practices were not separate entities but played into one another.¹⁸

In Canada as well as Québec, the impact of the American Beat poets (Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti) would launch a poetry of protest, discontent and disillusionment,

lagging Victorianism of Canada's early poets like Charles Mair and Charles Heavyside. A modernist poetics consisted of the blending of symbolism and mythology with realism, irony, satire, cynicism, everyday speech (which would be prevalent throughout the century's poetic practices in Canada). With the decentering of poetic production from its Montreal core by the late forties, the Canadian scene was home to poets such as Douglas Le Pan, Robert Finch and Earle Birney. Indeed, one of the features that marked Canadian modernism in the forties was its diversification.

¹⁸ Although diffuse and fragmentary, Canadian modernist practices may also have anticipated the burgeoning of publishing houses in the sixties (Anansi, Oberon, Coach House, Talonbooks) and of journals and magazines (Tish, Gronk, blueointment), by developing a cultural nationalism: writers staying in the country rather than writing and living in New York or London (Atwood xxxvii). What Margaret Atwood stops short of calling the "golden" age of forties and fifties Canadian poetry (xxxvi), which also included works by Miriam Waddington, P.K Page and Jay Macpherson, would have a considerable impact on its more theory-bound successors. Later in the fifties, poetry began to enjoy an increase in audience (though not the kind of media exposure of Québécois nationalist manifestos). This exposure in English Canada was mainly due to the fresh appeal of the poet as public personae and performer, perhaps never so well incarnated as by Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen, and even earlier by the public chanting of Native poet Pauline Johnson (whom Atwood hesitantly considers as a possible poetic "ancestor" of The Four Horsemen and their venture into sound performance [xxxiv]). In short, the condition of Canadian poetry, traditionally considered as an art geared toward a select audience and resistant to popular and commercial culture (see Dudek and Gnarowski 233), was beginning to shift by the late fifties.

of irony and bawdiness, such as Leonard Cohen's poems (and novels) or the countercultural poetry and music of Lucien Francoeur. In 1961, the first publication of Tish announced a new phenomenological and experimental poetics; what would later be called postmodernism had arrived onto the scene of Canadian poetry. Although other regional dynamics have contributed to a contemporary poetry rooted in locality and women's experience (for instance Patrick Lane and Saskatchewan-born poet Lorna Crozier), my main concern here is this West Coast group also known as the Tishites, because of their influence on the later development of writings in feminine. For the same reason I shall also recall other Canadian "deconstructionist" practices that insist on the primacy of language and the operations of history and gender, and that explore generic crossings and the long poem (as practiced by Atwood, Ondaatje, Kroetsch and Don McKay, among others). Finally, the "language" poetics described by Steve McCaffery will also be seen to anticipate the formal and theoretical strategies of recent feminist writings.¹⁹

The experimental poets of the sixties brought speech into writing, theory to practice, reading to writing, and the unconscious (indeed, one form of otherness) to consciousness. Also relevant to writings in the feminine is the poetics advocated by Tish, rejecting the unitary, solipsistic self, the yearning for a lost order, and the belief in the timelessness of poetry sometimes detected in those Canadian works influenced by Eliot, Pound, Stevens or even Stein (Neuman, "After" 63). Yet the experiments and manifestos of Tish also drew on Pound's sense of poetic

¹⁹ Also part of English Canada's new poetics are a few more marginal trends that feminist literary practices have, to a certain extent, retained or restored. In the sixties and seventies, the development of photo-offset technology and the establishment of alternative small presses made possible the visual patterns, typographical play and collages produced by bill bissett, Joe Rosenblatt, Earle Birney and bp nichol, who participated in Canada's new ('concrete') poetics (New 224). A number of poets organized their practices around "underground" magazines like Ganglia or presses such as Blewointment, Anansi, Coach House and Véhicule (New 225-226), and in 1970 the Toronto Research Group was formed by bissett, nichol and McCaffery. Yet, the feminism discussed here does not really retain the manipulations of type, nichol's hand-drawn poems and "alphabetical deconstruction" of the very constituents of language, or bissett's phonetic spellings and mantrist exaltations. Nor can the influence of the sound performances of (often Dada-influenced) groups like Owen Sound, the Véhicule poets or The Four Horsemen be detected in later feminist production. Rather, writings in the feminine retain the self-consciousness and self-theorizing processes at the heart of these concrete and sound experiments, just as they appropriate (as we will see later) to its own ends the deconstructive philosophy and artistic practices of these postmodern texts.

musicality, William Carlos Williams's stress on rhythm and speech, and Stein's focus on the process of writing as reflected by the text itself (Neuman, "After" 63).²⁰ Notably, the Vancouver Poetry Conference, held at the University of British Columbia in 1963, brought the Tish group into contact with American Black Mountain poets Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan. Strongly influenced by Pound, the Black Mountain poets supported the direction of the Canadian experimentalists towards the notion of "no ideas but in things." They promoted speech rhythm as a poetics and proposed a practice that was "a challenge to speech as much as to social custom" (New 224).²¹

With Marlatt's "no more the notion of filling up a form" (What 23), Tish writing measured versification according to breath, indulging the elements of speech (colloquialism, slang, cussing). Reality was not rendered inaccessible or non-existent, but mediated or represented by subjective perception. The self-conscious, often playful foregrounding of language in dealings with the past, the self, nature or the everyday also anticipates some similar theories and forms of writing explored by feminist writers. In short, Tish constituted a new postmodern poetics that was constructionist as well as phenomenological. A subjective, always historically- and culturally-grounded perceiving 'I' remained open-ended, "in-process," to borrow from Kristeva, and productive of a text which drew attention to its own mechanics. Strategies of deferral and self-reflexivity, as well as the encoded theorizing and positioning of a speaking subject through a minimalist, colloquial

²⁰ Moreover, some works by Eliot, Williams and Stein can also be characterized by the use of fragment, discontinuity and self-consciousness. In all, a clear move from modernism to postmodernism is difficult to distinguish in contemporary Canadian poetry (and, some argue, in other postmodern genres). In "After Modernism: English-Canadian Poetry Since 1960," Neuman takes into account those poets who seem to have been caught between generations, namely Purdy, Mandel, D.G. Jones, as well as Livesay, in the erotic, self-assertive and feminist poems written later in her life (58-60).

²¹ In the first issue of the little magazine Tish, Frank Davey describes his avoidance of "ornament" and his association of a poetics of "simplicity with current slang" (Keith 114). Sharing with the concrete and sound poets an openness to popular culture and Beat philosophy as well as a focus on the operations of human consciousness and the senses, Tish's Western contributors included Davey, George Bowering, Fred Wah, James Reid and Lionel Kearnes (also the first editors of the magazine), as well as Daphne Marlatt (then Buckle). They sought to subvert the trends of some of their forebears—the traditionally mythical and archetypal motifs and forms of Reaney or Robert Finch, and even the anti-intellectualism of Irving Layton.

and philosophical language mark the postmodern strategies launched by Tish and further pursued despite the folding of the journal.

To recall the Québécois literary context, we can note a distinctive point of similarity between the two contemporary literatures in the correlation of literary critic/theorist and creative writer. The anthologies produced by a number of writers, including Atwood, Davey and Ondaatje, show their concern with the reading and reception of literature.²² For Robert Kroetsch and Davey, the concern is specifically with the reception of postmodernism, and for Bowering, nichol and Tom Wayman, one focus is the comprehension of their own texts (indeed the ironic, self-deprecating persona, “Wayman,” in Waiting for Wayman). Often the creative text meshes with the theory that fuels it. The text enacts a self-reflexive monitoring of its own processes, as do works of Fred Wah, Dennis Lee or Stephen Scobie.

If the “proprioceptive” (Neuman, “After” 63) concerns of Tish influenced the major poetic activity of the sixties, what might be called a more distinctly “deconstructionist” poetics seems to have determined the direction of postmodern and feminist poetry in the seventies and eighties.²³ For example, Kroetsch and Atwood have adopted a “deconstructionist” approach in dealing with historical characters or events (as written, fictionalized history or historiography). In turn, Steve McCaffery has turned to the tradition of metaphysical thought and a more theoretical (and explicitly Derridian) analysis of linguistic patterns.²⁴ By the mid-eighties, deconstructive practices would

²² By Atwood: The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English, The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English. By Davey and Fred Wah: The Swift Current Anthology. By Ondaatje: The Faber Book of Contemporary Canadian Short Stories, From Ink Lake: Canadian Stories, The Long Poem Anthology, and Personal Fictions: Stories by Munro, Wiebe, Thomas, and Blaise.

²³ I shall reserve the term, “deconstructive poetics,” for those works (like Mouré’s and Tostevin’s) that self-consciously engage with and inscribe Derridian theory. This does not discount the possibility that “deconstructionist” texts may in turn have been inspired from reading the same sources (i.e. Derrida’s writing), but the recall of the philosophy itself does tend to be less overt.

²⁴ However, as William New observes, one of the predominant forms in the seventies was lyric poetry, which focussed on the observing ‘I’ and its socio-political involvement, and on historical themes. He includes here the early works of Erin Mouré, those of Susan Glickman, Lorna Crozier, Roo Borson, Doug Fetherling and Pat Lowther (238). In turn, Laurie Ricou

make considerable inroads into women's texts—notably through Tostevin's and Mouré's feminist appropriations of Derridian theory, or Betsy Warland's scrupulous investigation into etymology in Proper Deafinitions (1990). Similarly, the focus on an unstable, 'deferred' subject of language (and distinctly, for feminism, as culturally determined and sexed) finds some of its strongest expression in Tostevin's Double Standards (1985) and 'sophie (1988), Gail Scott's Spare Parts (1981), and Ann Diamond's A Nun's Diary (1985), among others.²⁵

Apart from the important increase in contact and communication with Québécois feminist writers, what anticipated (if not directly influenced) the deconstructive theory inscribed in some of the texts by Mouré, Tostevin and, to a lesser extent, Brandt (whose work tends to recall the "deconstructionism" of Kroetsch or Friesen) was what is called language writing. By the late seventies, nichol and especially McCaffery, both part of the Toronto Research Group, were involved with the experimental poetry of the American L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e Review, which included the contributions of Clark Coolidge, Bruce Andrews, Ray di Palma, Ron Silliman and Barbara Barrack. And once again, Canadian postmodern poetry found inspiration in the late modernism of Charles Olson, Gertrude Stein and John Cage. It is the interest in French theory, especially the works of Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari,

identifies a kind of "high modernist tradition" (19) in what he considers as metaphysical lyric produced in the eighties, particularly by P.K. Page, Miriam Waddington, D.G. Jones, Phyllis Webb, Margaret Avison and Irving Layton (20-25).

²⁵ Evoking "Wordsworth's ultimate autobiographical long poem, The Prelude" (Ricou 28), contemporary Canadian poetry often self-consciously combines poetry with narrative, historical documentary, autobiography, anecdotes and everyday events, such as Atwood's The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970) or Patrick Friesen's genre crossings in his 1980 chronicle of Mennonite life in The Shunning (anticipating Brandt's own feminist critique of her Mennonite community). As Ricou again suggests, the blending of different genres and linguistic forms, the "historiographic" long poem's "'novelization' of poetry" (26), and the text's attention to its own mechanics of writing are analogous to Hutcheon's notion of postmodern fiction as "historiographic metafiction" (6). The focus falls on the indeterminacy not only of genre and language, but also of truth or fact, of history, of the past, of subjectivity: "How do you grow a prairie town? / . . . / How do you grow a past / to live in" (38), Kroetsch's speaker asks repeatedly in Seed Catalogue. As he adopts the un-literary form of the seed catalogue used by prairie farmers, Kroetsch's long poem presents itself as proverbial, vernacular and testimonial. He deconstructs the notion of order in relation to historical event, articulating the past, the self and the poet as products of language rather than posing any of these as an authority or a determinable presence: "But how do you grow a poet?" (41).

that was most pronounced in language poetics. As McCaffery describes in North of Intention, language writing sought an “interface between writing and philosophy” or the “philosophization of literature” and “poeticization of philosophy” (114), which certain Canadian modernist poetics had also attempted in different ways, and which writings in the feminine would in turn continue to promote. Language writing’s generic blending insisted further on the crossing of disciplines with one another—of theory and creativity, of philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis and literature—inscribing a theory of writing and of subjectivity within the poetic or prose work itself.

We could say that the densely theoretical poetics and French philosophies informing L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e Review (and language writing in general) resemble the “formaliste” strategies of Québec’s poetic modernity. However, language writing’s preoccupations with the representation (rather than the impossibility or rejection) of reality, alternative meanings and subjectivity (the ‘text as self’ and the ‘self as text’) recalls more adequately the postmodern concerns of Tish and other experimental poetics. On the one hand, by 1980 McCaffery’s language poetics avowed itself as “anti-representational, anti-referential” (147), waging its attack “on the completed thought, the dead-spot of description and the centripetal, self-annihilating push of language chained by reference to reality” (147). On the other hand (as in Tish), it was “the philosophic (metaphysical) notion of an unmediated, transparent connection with ‘reality’ at the other side of language” (125) that was resisted, not reality itself. McCaffery’s invocation of Derrida’s notion of différance, as the process of referring by deferring within the operations of language, becomes crucial in the exploration of textual alterity and polysemy in writings in the feminine. McCaffery’s work explores “an economy of excess” which, in a 1978 poem entitled “Lyric’s Larynx” (included in North of Intention), reveals his preoccupations with the unconscious and the subject of desire, thus recalling Lacanian and Kristevan theory. Suffice it to say here that the poetic preoccupations with the self as a textual effect, with the libidinal economy of language and the precarious opposition between nature and culture, do not originate with writings in the feminine. According to McCaffery’s speaker: “the body at all times houses the / linguistic and pre-linguistic. / ‘the frontiers of the cultural and / biological are not fixed.’ ” (178). Yet the analysis of

a number of women's texts will show that the sex and desire of this body, its encoded experiences, do take on a specificity that belongs to women (and to their individual texts).

It is at the onset of the women's movement that Margaret Atwood published Power Politics (1971), Marlatt and Mouré began to apply their feminist views to their writing, as did Sharon Thesen and Tostevin in the early eighties. However, we cannot say that feminism necessarily had a direct impact on the new poetics of English Canada. As mentioned before, in Québec the strict practice of formalism was seriously reconsidered and, by many, abandoned with the proliferation of new feminist perspectives. If then, as a collective, explosive effort and literary practice, Québécois feminism was actually a major agent in directing a literary "postmodernité," the same role cannot be granted to feminism in English Canada. It may only be logical that anglophone feminism did not so much intervene, but rather, managed to "intersect with" (Neuman, "After" 68, emphasis added) what was already a postmodern aesthetics in the early and mid-eighties. By the time feminism organized as a poetics in the feminine, the postmodern mode—self-conscious, self-disruptive, prose-like, discordant and libidinal—was already in practice. This said, we must acknowledge the women's movement which was already active in the political and cultural spheres. And we cannot forget those explicit efforts of the early (though still isolated) feminist writings of Marlatt or Tostevin in promoting language-theory as a deconstructive and feminist literary practice.²⁶

Despite what is still today the rather marginal status of feminist poetics in English Canada, it may still be possible to note, with caution, the markings of women's intervention in the experimental or language-oriented poetic scene, and in the poetic response to the theories of postmodernism themselves. In the past, such interventions have included Marlatt's rejection of the omnipresent (always masculine) 'I' and her feminist stance within a phenomenological context

²⁶ In his survey of Canada's poetry from the years 1972 to 1984, Laurie Ricou observes that an "emergence of a distinctly feminist poetry promised the most fundamental reassessment of the nature of language. But only a disappointing few of the deliberately feminist poets fulfilled their potential to write radical political poetry, or, more important, to dismantle the language to expose its gender bias" (45). However, a few years later the shaping of feminist poetry into a "distinctly feminist" aesthetics in style, strategy and politics would be well under way.

(Neuman, "After Modernism" 68), as in How Hug a Stone (1983). Perhaps this was indeed "a rare moment in Canadian poetry, where feminist 'themes' such as Livesay's and Atwood's [had] been far more common than [had] attempts to develop specifically feminist poetics" (Neuman, "After Modernism" 69). More recent are Mouré's feminist appropriation of Derridian theory in Furious (1988) and Tostevin's ironic report of Derrida's "seminal course," given during the 1987 International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies in Toronto. Again, feminist writing must and will be considered innovative of and distinct from, even though often formally similar to, a postmodern aesthetic. The body in language which McCaffery began to unravel takes on the shape of the female and maternal body, in/as language in Marlatt's Touch to my Tongue (1984) or, as will shortly be examined more closely, in Tostevin's Gyno-Text (1983). As Neuman indicates, "French poststructuralist theory proves crucial in bringing about this conjunction" of postmodernist and feminist poetics in Canada ("After" 68), due mainly to the increased contact with Québécois women writers in the eighties as well as the translations of Québécois and French texts. Finally, not only do Derrida, Barthes and at times Lévinas serve as important intertexts in the formation of a specifically feminist poetics, but so does the feminist thinking of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva. As Tostevin suggests in her book of essays, writing in the feminine may have welcomed nichol's legacy of "the writer written by his poetry" as "a subject that never stands still, never remains the same" (Subject 148). But as the body of work dealing with female alterity shows, the cultural, historical, and ethical positioning of this 'I' must and will also be developed, inscribed, recognized, as sexually specific.

An increase of feminist activity in the social sphere and through the alternative feminist presses occurred in the seventies (including the founding of the Women's Press and, in 1975, the Vancouver publishing house, Press Gang).²⁷ Along with the earlier women-oriented presses and

²⁷ If not all necessarily self-avowed feminist-inspired writers, women's participation in the new presses and periodicals of the seventies has been 'recovered' by Pauline Butling and Becki Ross. In "Hall of Fame Blocks Women," Butling in particular shows Canadian literary history's 'forgetfulness' when recording women's participation in the founding and operating of new presses and magazines. Her focus on BC little magazines allows her to reconsider women's involvement in concrete journals such as Tish (Marlatt, Gladys Hindmarsh) or blewointment (Martina Clinton, Maxinne Gadd)—their roles or even presence hitherto ignored or marginalized

journals, and though still not channelled through mainstream publishing, feminist cultural activity was pursued through a number of periodicals: Fireweed, Healthsharing, Broadside, Room of One's Own. These journals were definitely beginning to address more specifically women's interests. Feminist events such as the aforementioned Women and Words Conference would encourage English Canadian writers to explore feminist thought and theory through poetic expression, including formal experimentation. Such experimental writing revealed a continuation of the postmodern poetics in Tish or language writing. Yet even prior to this event, individual literary efforts were shifting the focus from the signifier itself to the reappropriation of the referent as well. Mouré's poet-speaker was already tackling sexual oppression in her 1979 Empire, York Street. In her 1982 How to Hug a Stone, Marlatt's shift from her phenomenological work with Tish to feminist theory introduced a lesbian voice and radical perspective on historicity, sexual difference, etymology, and the exploration of a feminine/maternal language. By 1982 Franco-Ontarian poet Tostevin was exploring her own inherited "double discourse" (patriarchal and English) as a doubly marginalized subject in Color of her Speech, and then appropriating Kristeva's semiotic theory in Gyno-Text.²⁸

by histories provided by Barry McKinnon and Louis Dudek. By the same token Butling questions the very processes of constructing literary histories. Butling reveals that four women (Livesay, Anne Marriott, Doris Ferne and Floris McLaren) started and operated Contemporary Verse which ran between 1941 and 1952 and was revived by Livesay in 1974 as Contemporary Verse II. We can also add here The Tamarack Review, of which poet Anne Wilkinson was founding editor and patron. By 1977 Marlatt would start her own magazine, Periodic, with Paul de Barros.

²⁸ By the mid-eighties, women who identified themselves as women of color organized around Sister Vision, and by 1987 f. (Lip) was founded. Raddle Moon published only women writers; and in 1989 Ragweed was created to address lesbian-feminist writers and readers, along with Waves, the bilingual journal, Lesbian Fury/Furie lesbienne, as well as Lavender Times and Womospace. It seems that, with the proliferation of feminist journals, problems with government financing have escalated and the conditions of distribution and production worsening as a result. As Masters indicates, by the mid-eighties the Conservative government "forbade women's groups from advocating any particular stand on abortion (read pro-choice) or promoting any particular lifestyle (read lesbian)" in government-financed presses (409); by 1990, all operational support to nationally funded periodicals was cut—and if some of them folded, others, new and already founded, continued (409). Ross in turn notes similar difficulties, especially in terms of imposed government regulations on content, for the production and distribution of Québécois lesbian periodicals as well: hence the suspensions of La vie en Rose, Amazonne d'hier and Lesbiennes d'aujourd'hui (183). By 1990, federal budget cutbacks led to the withdrawal of 100% of the funding to feminist magazines like Healthsharing, Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la recherche féministe, Canadian Women's Studies, as well as funding to NAC and CRIAW

In the journal, Tessera, feminist theoretical writing and the attempt at mixed generic forms continue to preoccupy critical thought, as it does this study of ethics and literature. Begun in 1984 by Marlatt, Godard, Kathy Mezei and Gail Scott, Tessera acts as a meeting-point for feminist writers, theorists and critics. The theoretical perspective is considered a powerful vehicle for opening new and multiple spaces for women writers' reconfigurations of difference and subjectivities. However, the question of "theory" has figured as a dividing line between the two contexts, and has been debated among women writers in English Canada. A 1986 issue of Tessera presented a collectivity of voices on this question, particularly in the dialogue titled, "Theorizing Fiction Theory." As Gail Scott argues, in the eighties the inscription of theory directly within the creative text (here called fiction theory) was already well in place in Québec and, for a second generation of Québécois feminists, already "entendu rather than directly engaged" (7). This points to a major difference between the two cultural manifestations of feminism in Canada. As Scott continues, if theory is somewhat already "assimilated into the form" by Québécois feminists (7), it is because these "women have given themselves permission" to do so (7).

Yet in the same dialogue, Kathy Mezei suggests that theory has become, for many women, almost "prescriptive or formulaic" (7) and for her, as a reader, feminist writings have all begun "to sound the same" (10). In fact, Mezei reflects the view of a number of women writers. Her frustration fits within the ensuing debate about whether or not theory should be used in writing at all, as Kamboureli's 1991 article examines. Kamboureli outlines the continued resistance to theory in English Canada, a resistance that Tostevin in turn claims to have encountered in English Canada. Tostevin recalls the reluctance in some English Canadian writers in the seventies to embrace French (poststructuralist) thought, which may have been gaining momentum in Québec but elsewhere was still considered too "French," Eurocentric, "foreign," or simply irrelevant (Subject 11). Marlatt makes a similar comment on this tendency in English Canadian women's writing. She indicates that "except for a few key figures, like Atwood and [Phyllis] Webb, the 'critical' has been kept separate from the 'creative,' as if one might taint the other . . ." ("Theorizing" 11).

Amidst what Kamboureli calls the “benign and malign reception of literary and feminist theory by women writers in anglophone Canada” (7), she notes how a tendency in some writers’ “malign” view of theory and its use within the creative text shows a rather gross reduction (and generalized notion) of “theory” to one universal language. Namely, theory is limited to deconstruction which, according to Paulette Jiles, “makes people very angry” (qtd. in Kamboureli 11). Theory also gains the reputation of being prescriptive, irrelevant, elitist, male-centred and ethnocentric, is perceived as a threat “to the sovereignty of literature” and thus assumed to belong strictly to academic discourse, which in turn is wrongly assumed to “belong to the masculine domain” (14). Referring to interviews with Audrey Thomas, Sharon Thesen, Paulette Jiles and Libby Scheier, Kamboureli outlines these concerns with the ‘tainting’ effect of theory. As Kamboureli argues, such resistance reveals not only the “fear of inaccessibility” but also re-asserts certain “humanistic dialectic boundaries,” such as the “rift between the academic and the writerly, between men and women” (14), between the personal and the political.²⁹ Perhaps one of the most disturbing presuppositions which Kamboureli discerns in the resistance to theory is the presupposition that theoretical feminist literature is more ‘fitting’ to Québécois women writers than it is to anglophones. Thomas is quoted in saying that Brossard’s work shows how “the French women writers seem to have a better grasp of what all this is about” and “don’t need all that philosophical backup group” (qtd. in Kamboureli 17). But this assumption may well be a reverse form of the ethno/franco-centrism—a charge laid on those theoretically inclined anglophone writers who integrate literary theory into their textual practices.

Theory is certainly not a universal or a masculine-owned language. Nor is there a singular poetics of deconstruction traversing feminist texts. As the works to be examined here will show,

²⁹ Kamboureli quotes Thomas: “We speak from the heart and we will be understood. And what we do is talk about forbidden subjects. That’s the way in the end to defeat the patriarchal use of language. Talk about subjects that interest us, that may not interest men. I think we’re falling into a scholarly trap because most male writers, curiously enough, are academics and they like this kind of language because, for one thing, it’s useful for conferences. . . . I try and talk in accessible language. . . . I want people to read my stuff—I don’t just want academics to read my stuff” (qtd. in Kamboureli 13-14).

the theories recalled and evoked by a text are always “subject to and structured according to its [the literary text’s] own needs” (Tregebov, “Introduction” 27). The texts in this study use theory in their practices of a specific, self-conscious poetics that often draws attention to its own ways of viewing and reviewing the world. They seek to mesh with their theoretical contemplations the practices of poetry and fiction, the creation of images and metaphors. More generally, no literary text can be immune to its intersections with the discourses surrounding it (politics, philosophy, aesthetics). And it is the self-consciousness of this intersection that characterizes these texts as well as their feminist orientation, their examination of the materiality of language, and their awareness of what has shaped and been shaped by language. In the end, we might say that a text’s (and so much more an author’s) intentions are always already surpassed. So too are the intentions of these writings in the feminine. Even the most self-conscious feminist text will find its encoded intention exceeded by its counterpart which is reading, inviting other modes of thought to operate within, and outside it. One of these modes of thought is indeed a feminist theory of ethics, to which I now turn.

Chapter 1

Writing (as) a Feminist Ethics

This study of works by Brossard, Brandt, Théoret, Mouré and Tostevin will not only treat their writings in terms of a feminist poetics which attempts to inscribe female alterity (“the feminine”) within the language and subjectivity of the text. It also considers how this poetics, as a writing in the feminine or “écriture au féminin,” opens onto a feminist ethics. I shall consider these five writers’ contribution to a particular notion of the ethical, that is to say, to an ethics of alterity (or of the other), which stems from a feminist perspective and necessarily constitutes a relational ethics. My understanding of ethics, a broad term to be sure, lies at the (eclectic) confluence of a number of philosophical writings in which the question of alterity has been pivotal. In this study, a feminist ethics will be premised upon Lévinas’ concern with a post-humanist or post-Enlightenment theory of the other, Ricoeur’s own development of a relational ethics, and most importantly, Irigaray’s rendition of an ethics of sexual difference.¹ The chapters that follow will also consider how some poetic works are informed by the poststructuralism (and possibly ethical perspectives) of Derrida and Kristeva. With the exception of Ricoeur, the theorists mentioned here are all openly invoked, at one point or another, in the self-conscious literary texts under study. In such occurrences, I shall speak—as appropriate—of direct or deliberate appropriation, textual recall, invocation of or allusion to the theory. For the sake of clarity, I shall reserve the term *intertextuality* for my own connections drawn between certain ethical and poststructuralist theories and the texts under study, to what Hutcheon calls the “hermeneutic mode” of *intertextuality* (“Intertextuality” 349).²

¹ Here and throughout the chapters that follow, I also draw from other feminist theorists’ contributions to a theory of ethics, namely Moira Gatens, Jessica Benjamin, Elizabeth Grosz, Hélène Cixous, Tina Chanter, Kelly Oliver, Marianne Hirsch, Sheila Mason Mullet.

² In this sense, Hutcheon writes, *intertextuality* “can and does violate historical time” (349). She continues: “Readers connect up the texts they have previously read, and their reading is rarely, if ever, totally chronological in terms of the dates of publication of what they read” (349). However numerous and conflicting theories of *intertextuality* have been, they do illustrate that any reading is forcibly *intertextual*, that “a text is not a self-sufficient, closed system” (“Intertextuality” Godard 568); my analyses of feminist, theoretically-oriented poetry will confirm this. The notion

The present chapter seeks to anticipate and conceptualize a feminist ethics traversing these Canadian and Québécois texts. This ethics will be modelled, following Irigarayan thought, on a particular configuration of the maternal and, by extension, of female alterity. The strategies, models and metaphors employed to (re)define subjectivity, intersubjectivity and the functioning of language are always set in relation to a notion of the other that is specific to each author, each work, and each theory that informs a particular creative text. Although from different positions and with different goals in mind, the women writers in question inscribe the primacy and irreducibility of alterity which, we shall see, is the very condition of a relational ethics. An ethical conception of the other (as primary and irreducible to the self-same) will be, more often than not, considered to be an inherent component of subjectivity, of interrelations, of language and of the writing process represented in the literary works under study. In short, my interest in associating these writings with a theory of ethics stems from their treatment of alterity at a subjective, intersubjective, and textual level.

In keeping with the general notion of the ethical as that which is concerned with human conduct (Concise Oxford), we can say that the other must be treated as irreducible, as an other in and of itself, in order to be ethically conceived (again in the Lévinasian sense). As I will consider below, part of the history of Western philosophy (particularly the metaphysical tradition) has connected ethics to a set of moral principles, a code of rules of conduct or morality that refers to a 'Law' of authority (God's, Man's, the State's) practiced by the Cartesian subject of understanding, which anticipates the Enlightenment man of reason or the humanist liberal individual (as in individualism).³ As the following chapters on negative renditions of difference will demonstrate,

of "restricted intertextuality" might fit my use of the general term here, for its focus on "relations between several texts," despite the irony that such a notion involves—the very practice of "influence tracing which the term [first] sought to displace" ("Intertextuality" Godard 569). Finally, my own "restricted" (Godard) or "hermeneutic" (Hutcheon) mode of intertextual reading may partly recall Michael Riffaterre's rendition of intertextuality as dependent on the reader's recall of other texts, and German theorists such as Stierle who locate intertextuality in hermeneutics ("Intertextuality" Godard 570).

³ The Cartesian subject of understanding or consciousness refers to Descartes' account of the free-willing and thinking human being. The Cartesian cogito consists of the subject's declaration, "I think therefore I am": 'I' thinks and is because 'I' is assumed to be "'present' as

feminist poets (here Brossard, Brandt and Théoret) are certainly concerned with the treatment of the female other and her body, in a socio-symbolic order considered to be grounded in a logic of self-sameness (which is analogous to this humanist Cartesian 'I'). In readings of texts by Brossard, Brandt and Théoret, we shall find the dismantling of binary interpretations of sex, gender and difference that disallow ethical relations within and between the sexes. However different their works, all five writers will be shown to situate the genesis of an ethics of alterity in what they consider to be a suppressed element within patriarchal logic: maternalism.⁴

De-Coding Ethics

How can one relate to another without reducing the other to a function of oneself? Is it possible to participate in a process of human identification without negating the un-replaceability—or radical alterity—of the other? According to Lévinas, most philosophers of Western metaphysics (from Parmenides to Hegel) have denied such possibilities. Their

the thought to speech”(Assiter 32). Herein lies the basis for the unitary subject of self-certainty (that overrides Cartesian doubt), and for language as the direct expression “of mental experience” (Assiter 66). Furthermore, the subject exists as radically divided: composed of the essence of thought and of the essence of body. Cartesian dualism posits the free will of mind or soul in contrast to the determined body: “Action in one equals passion in the other with soul and body incapable of acting or suffering in concert” (Gatens 109). As Alison Assiter explains: “It is the Cogito that splits reason and its ‘others’—madness, dreams, errors, the senses. Reason is affirmed over and against unreason. It is the Cogito and its reasoning powers which provide the foundation for the discourse of the human sciences, which ‘objectify’ ‘the subject.’ In the post-classical period, the Cartesian subject is replaced by the liberal humanist ‘individual’ ” (74). Part 3 will qualify this all-encompassing (and rather reductive) rendition of humanism (as does Assiter in her book).

⁴ The term, maternalism, is meant to resonate with Kelly Oliver’s term, “female maternal.” Oliver’s excellent readings of Kristeva’s and Irigaray’s work in *Womanizing Nietzsche* begin to develop the notion of a feminist ethics, and my initial interest in the correlation of maternalism and ethics is indebted to Oliver’s work. My use of the term, maternalism, is not intended to be limited to the practice of motherhood itself (biological or surrogate)—although it will, at times, refer to this practice. Maternalism connotes, of course, that which is related to the mother. But more than this, I understand maternalism to be of or like the mother: the first, same and other woman, the mother not all of us are or can be, but have or have had, symbolically or in the flesh. On one level, maternalism will be conceptualized partly from the psychoanalytical rendition of the mother-child bond, and partly from ontology: a relation of sameness and differentiation (here of female sameness and female differentiation). On another (though interrelated level), maternalism is also associated with a “signifying space, both corporeal and mental” (Tostevin, *Gyno-Text* N. pag.). And, as this signifying space, the maternal can function as a socializing space, thus as one possible model of a relational ethics.

preservation of the full presence and univocity of the subject has privileged the unity of the self-same over the other. It has preserved what critics of the tradition commonly call ontology's repetition of sameness. Lévinas thus associates with Western egocentrism the assumption of totality and the tendency toward all-inclusiveness, toward knowing, unifying and assimilating all that is exterior to being.⁵ In short, Lévinas seeks to dismantle the concept of unitary identity which he associates with totalization and "the concept of cogito given by Descartes in his Second Meditation" (Lévinas, "Ethics" 77). According to Lévinas, as traditional metaphysics (built on the knowledge or assurance of being) seeks to unify and categorize, it also subsumes, assimilates and reduces to the same—"appropriates and grasps the otherness of the known" ("Ethics" 76). In contradistinction to this tradition, Lévinas insists on thinking the other abstracted from the self-same. He posits the notion of radical alterity as the foundation of any ethical relation, as it is the other that can interrupt the totalizing tendencies of the self-same.

Lévinas' ethical thought distinguishes itself from certain traditions of moral philosophy. As Moira Gatens observes, theories of morality have often proven to be "the product of whichever group has monopolized political right" (99). This privileged group traditionally dignifies its "needs and desires" with "rationally grounded principles" to convert them "into rights and virtues" (99), assuming that others outside this group will "share the same needs and desires and concur with what a specific historical body takes to be a rational judgement" (99-100). From a feminist perspective, "a universal ethic . . . amounts to the subjection of women, the colonized, the 'barbarian,' the 'primitive,' and so on, to the one Law, whose author wrongly sees himself as 'the universal man' " (Gatens 43).⁶ In Lévinas' work, it is with the rejection of traditional metaphysics that ethics can become the initiator of ontology. In other words, the positing of the other's

⁵ Critics have noted that Lévinas finds exceptions in his accusations of this kind of violence in metaphysics, especially in Plato and, in some respects, in Descartes. See Chanter 183-184; Rosmarin 32.

⁶ As Alasdair MacIntyre expands even further: "however they may aspire to achieve more than this, [Aristotle and Kant] always do articulate the morality of some particular social and cultural standpoint: Aristotle is the spokesman for one class of fourth century Athenians [made up of Greek male citizens], Kant . . . provides a rational voice for the emerging social forces of liberal individualism" (qtd. in Gatens 99).

irreducibility and primacy to the self initiates subjectivity (or being), intersubjectivity and, potentially, the multiplicity of meaning. Ethics renders obsolete the 'One' and rejects the binary premises and the assimilating logic of sameness on which notions of logocentrism, monotheism and phallogocentrism are built. Of crucial importance to a feminist ethics is Lévinas' critique of the assumption of similarity among individuals, collected under one moral code made to represent a universal 'Law' and its applicability.⁷ Lévinas also outlines his rejection of traditional ontology, particularly of the full awareness and unquestioned status of one's existence, concepts which generate universal and transcendental maxims about the self and the other. In short, Lévinas' relevance to a feminist ethics and the literary works under study lies in his attempt at dismantling "the concept of [unitary] identity" (Chanter 182). In his ethical philosophy, he attempts to render obsolete the assumption of self-enclosure, intentionality and individualism.

Yet, Lévinas does not do away with elements of metaphysics (being, knowing and identity) altogether. This too is an important factor in conceptualizing a feminist ethics which, in the end, is always concerned with the inscription of a speaking, acting, and somewhat coherent, female subject. As the works of Théoret and Tostevin will demonstrate in part 4, the other may put the subject into question, in necessary excess of itself, but a certain reversion to the notion of autonomy (of sameness) must prevent this destabilized subject from conceptual collapse. Although he is critical of metaphysics, Lévinas does not avoid it, nor does he pretend to, as the title of his best known work, Totality and Infinity, reveals. But it is another notion of metaphysics that he seeks to inscribe in his philosophy, another conceptualization of being. For Lévinas, the meaning of metaphysics changes because he founds it on the idea of radical alterity. Metaphysics (as the philosophy of mind, as ontology) must originate with a subject's relation to an other; it rests on an ethical relation that insists on the priority of the other which must indeed remain prior to the

⁷ To give another brief example, the assumed abstract neutrality of Kant's deontology generally posits impartial agents of moral value-acts who rule for the good of the majority. This universalized model may too readily assume the interchangeability of people. It may also falsely assume the similarity of their needs in so far as elements of difference (gender, race, class, age, religion) among persons are discarded, as are the very particularities of human relationships. For a more elaborate critique of Kantian deontology, see Sherwin 4-9. I shall re-consider feminist critiques of universalized models in part 3.

assimilative needs and powers of the self-same.

Lévinas' reinterpretation of "infinity" itself retains a metaphysical terminology, particularly the Cartesian notion of infinity or God.⁸ Rather than attempt to prove God's existence, Lévinas renders infinity as the ultimate symbol of exteriority and irreducibility (which Descartes also discusses in the third Meditation), and applies these notions to his account of a theory of the other beyond the service of the self-same, beyond transcendental idealism. Even if "the other who presents himself as absolutely or irreducibly other, also signals God" (Chanter 184), this signalling occurs in the human realm or, as we shall consider shortly, in the Lévinasian face-to-face encounter. In other words, in Lévinas' work God is used to represent the irreducibility or unknowability of the other. As we shall also consider in feminist literary works, the encounter with the other occurs in intersubjectivity (the encounter of two others, a kind of face-to-face), and foregrounds (like Lévinas) the irreducibility of the other.

At the heart of ontology, then, Lévinas attempts to posit a "multiplicity . . . which refuses totalization" and which will both precede and exceed "the egoism and tyranny of ontology" (Hand 5). In "Ethics as First Philosophy," Lévinas opposes ontology as first philosophy to ethics as first philosophy. The former is associated with intentionality or being as the assurance of self-presence, which "wipes out all otherness by murder or by all-encompassing and totalizing thought" (85). The latter, ethics as first philosophy, is associated with "mauvaise conscience" (85), a non-intentionality because of the otherness (the other's demand) that predates intent. Rather than an assurance, being becomes a matter of justification and "right to be" (86)—"not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law or judicial entity, but because of one's fear for the Other" (82).⁹

⁸ As Lévinas explains, Descartes (in his third Meditation) sets out to prove the existence of a perfect God, through the very inability of the (imperfect) 'I' to grasp the idea of Him (hence, 'Cartesian doubt'). This idea of God overflows and remains external to the thinking 'I.' It is an idea so perfect, superior and excellent that it must have been put into the mind by an external source, and therefore must already exist (Éthique et infini 86). To quote Descartes: "Then there is no doubt that I exist, if he deceives me. And deceive me as he will, he can never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something" (Meditations 17).

⁹ In "Ethics as First Philosophy," Lévinas' notion of "fear for the other" is one he uses to replace self-presence as the foundation of being, which refers here to the unitary, sovereign subject's usurpation of the other's place. It is the face of the other that puts this self-present 'I'

Lévinas conceptualizes this multiplicity in terms of the self's infinite obligation to the other that the 'I' experiences in the face-to-face relation. The 'I' is faced by the other, which Lévinas takes pains to posit as that which is exteriority itself, and introduces something radically new, resisting "absorption into the I's habitual reduction of the alterity of things to itself" (Chanter 189). In short, the 'I' is never 'I' without the other. As part 3 will consider, such a dialectic is crucial to poststructuralist applications of this 'encounter' to the workings of language itself, as well as the question of subjective difference.

Ethics, then, is a matter of subjectivity for Lévinas, in terms of a self's infinite obligation to the other. It is to this connection of ethics and subjectivity which I shall return time and again in my literary analyses. Lévinas posits a relation to the other (as ultimately the other person) where there is no return to the self-same, by which the 'I' is never 'I' without the other. Yet, of great relevance to a feminist ethics' insistence on sexual specificity and female selfhood, it is the priority of the same that Lévinas wishes to put into question, not its actual existence in interrelations or subjectivity. In his later work, Lévinas' notion of "having-the-other-in-one's-skin" (Otherwise 115) conveys quite beautifully (and perhaps too rarely) how the same and the other can indeed dwell in a fruitful exchange. Here, "The psyche can signify this alterity in the same without

into question, and the face-to-face that calls on the responsibility of the 'I' for the other (which is to say that the face-to-face is the prototype of ethics): "in its expression of its mortality, the face before me summons, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness, separated, in some way, from any whole, were my business. . . . The Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question" (83). With reference to Heidegger, Lévinas continues: "I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if the Da of my Dasein is not already the usurpation of somebody's else's place" (85). This appeal to responsibility for the other returns the subject "to the interiority of non-intentional consciousness, to mauvaise conscience, to its capacity to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice, and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it" (85). The profound connection of Lévinas' philosophy to Judaic history and philosophy will have to remain beyond the scope of this study. But the face-to-face does draw our attention to the biblical commandment it elicits: "Thou shalt not kill" (Éthique 81). The fundamental aspect of Lévinas' ethics is this disarming call to responsibility by the other. It is the self's vulnerability that is key to Lévinas' philosophical rejection of egocentrism. Accordingly, I am held "hostage" in my responsibility for the other: "Subjectivity is being hostage" (Otherwise 127). It is the other, and the other's call, that have subjected the self to the accusative mode, left it without recourse to any form of totality of being. And it is the other's face that is said to paralyze the powers of a self-same: "the ethical resistance that paralyzes my powers and from the depths of defenceless eyes rises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution" (Totality 199-200).

alienation. . .” (Otherwise 114-115), as “the force of an alterity in me” (Otherwise 114). Identity is thus not only breached but it is also seen in a new light. Whether this balance between a (redefined) same and a radical other can always be maintained remains to be seen—both in this theoretical survey and, most importantly, in the feminist works that will be considered in the subsequent chapters.

From a similar standpoint, Irigaray sets out, in An Ethics of Sexual Difference, to describe her feminist ethics against and beyond the Cartesian paradigm, while retaining (and expanding on) certain dimensions of Descartes’ philosophy. As Irigaray states: “To each period corresponds a certain way of thinking. And even though the issues relating to passion and its ethics which need careful consideration today are still clearly linked to Descartes’ wonder and Spinoza’s joy, the perspective is no longer the same. This change in perspective is, precisely, a matter of ethics” (116-117). Although I shall examine later how Irigaray applies Descartes’ wonder to a renegotiation of maternalism as a social, ethical space (and a model for intersubjectivity as such), I want to stress here that “the perspective is different” and “a matter of [sexual] ethics” because, Irigaray informs us, one “ethical imperative would seem to require a practical and theoretical revision of the role historically allotted to woman” (117). In Irigaray’s writings, the task not only consists of discarding negative images but also of creating new models by which women can constitute what she calls their own becoming. Thus, on the one hand, there is a constant need for the analysis of how women (and their bodies) have always been and continue to be conceived as the negative of the male self-same (for example, in psychoanalytical and social discourses). On the other hand, there is the need to discover how female otherness can be re-conceived in ethical terms, for thinking otherness abstracted from the negative, from a norm or truth, from ‘universal man’ or a singular value system.

As Gatens points out, the re-inscription of the female body necessitates “addressing the other, the ‘thou’ of our social relations” (39). This is an ethical concern in the more general sense of the treatment of others. For, do not interpretations of difference and embodiment (of sex and gender) “affect the way women treat other women, women treat men, men treat other men, and

men treat women” (Gatens 39)? More specifically, Brossard’s and Théoret’s critiques of the patriarchal and phallic norms by which female difference has historically been conceived follow from Irigaray’s critique of Freud’s logic of (male) sameness, which asserts the masculine as the sexual model. In a way that recalls Lévinas’ detection of the violence of metaphysics, Brossard’s early “fiction théorique” displays how this Freudian model renders inadmissible the mother-daughter relation (or, as will be explained below, the female’s relation to her own sameness, as an irreducible otherness), beyond a logocentric paradigm of a priori value in sameness. Finally, the critiques of such paradigms undertaken by all five writers will seek, in Irigaray’s terms, to leave the female other “open, her threshold free, with no closure, no dogmatism” (Ethics 118), but irreducibly (or “infinitely”) other. Beyond assimilation or reduction, there is the possibility of “resemblance . . . without semblances” (This Sex 216), a notion that will be particularly crucial in literary renditions of what Irigaray in turn calls a “female ethics” (Ethics 108).¹⁰

Relating Ethics

In Oneself as Another, Ricoeur posits a relational ethics that retains from Lévinas the other’s irreducibility. Yet, what is particularly important to a feminist ethics is that he seeks to get beyond Lévinas’ inability to re-conceptualize the same outside the ontology of totality once and for all. Ricoeur argues that in Lévinas’ work, “Because the Same signifies totalization and separation, the exteriority of the Other can no longer be expressed in the language of relation” (336). For Lévinas, this revelation of the other’s alterity to the subject is an interruption. What exactly is being interrupted? For one, it is what Lévinas calls “the independence and sovereignty of enjoyment” (Totality 114) (“la souveraineté de la jouissance” [Totalité 86]) that seems to reside in the subject at the onset of his/her existence, before the encounter with the other’s face. In such a

¹⁰ I shall be appropriating this term, “female ethics,” in later chapters, in reference to a woman-to-woman relational ethics (in terms of the mother-daughter relationship, lesbian love, and/or female friendship). Although a female ethics is enabled by a feminist viewpoint, it is not to be completely conflated with a feminist ethics. The reason is that a feminist ethics can also open onto a relational ethics compatible with heterosexual love as well as other social relations, as the later chapters will show.

state, I would be looking to fulfil my needs through a narcissistic experience and enjoyment of the exterior world, whose otherness, according to Lévinas, will only be reabsorbed into myself, into my sense of identity. Even though such “jouissance” remains an example of what the face-to-face encounter denies the subject, is there still not a contradiction here? Subjectivity is constituted by the other. But in order to arrive at what can arguably be called the conversion to a new ontology ascribed by the other in the same, it seems that Lévinas first assumes for the self the very totality that he rejects—the very totality that the other’s face must indeed interrupt. Has not some singular form of being been assumed by me if it need be so radically interrupted by you? The totalizing impulses of the same must have been presupposed if it is so radically put into question and disarmed by the other.

Because Lévinas premises the same on the principles of totality and separation, Ricoeur argues, there can be no relation or language to express the other. However, Ricoeur is not looking to revert back to the symbiosis and integration that Lévinas so adamantly rejects. Like Lévinas’ relationship to metaphysics, there is another type of relation that is conceptualized and, in fact, made possible by Ricoeur’s ethical philosophy. The sustained idea about the egocentric subject (always before the encounter with the other) prompts Lévinas’ insistence on the non-relational aspect of his ethics. After all, if one is so prone to reducing everything to the self-same, the existence of the other must indeed initiate the absoluteness of the separation. Paradoxically, Lévinas’ presupposition of ontological totality seems to force him into an ethical theory that ends up almost lacking an ontology. What is important to a feminist ethics is Ricoeur’s model of the subject as both generator and product of an ethics, “the formation of a concept of selfhood defined by its openness and its capacity for discovery” (339).

Having both recourse to and distance from Lévinas, Ricoeur offers a concept of “ipséité” or selfhood, which in turn renders the terms of his own ethics crucial to an ethics in feminist, and female-specific, terms. In fact, Ricoeur’s intervention in Lévinasian ethics offers two of the most important concepts to the feminist ethics which, we shall see, traverses some of the writings in the feminine. The first is the capacity of identification with a same without necessarily reverting to

assimilation or objectification. The second is the necessity of autonomy (a form of sameness) without the reversion to unitary subjectivity. As feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin argues, the “mutual recognition” that would constitute a relational ethics, that would condition this capacity of identification without objectification, indeed “includes autonomy” (22).¹¹ Whereas Ricoeur finds in Lévinas’ philosophy of the other “the polysemic character of otherness” (Oneself 317), he wants more forcefully than Lévinas to interweave it with a philosophy of the same (of selfhood) and, by extension, of agency. What is crucial for Ricoeur is to counter what Lévinas’ face-to-face insists upon—basically “that otherness is . . . added on to selfhood from outside, as though to prevent its solipsistic drift” (Oneself 317). Unlike the Lévinasian subject whose solipsism must be interrupted by the other, Ricoeur proposes a theory of subjectivity in which the subject is already inhabited (and constructed) by the other: otherness is already part of “the ontological constitution of selfhood” (317). Moreover, if he refuses what he calls (Descartes’) “apology of the cogito,” he also refuses “its overthrow” (4). Ricoeur seeks what the face encounter’s own destitution of the cogito finds inadmissible: the subject’s own capacity (indeed an “autonomy”) to discern and recognize his/her responsibility for the other.

According to Ricoeur, subjects are agents of action, of ethical action, likened, as we shall consider briefly, to textual interpreters who are constantly interpreting themselves. Once the subject’s constitution is founded on the dialectic of sameness and otherness, the subject’s own ethical intent provides precisely that which can be found missing in Lévinas’ insistence on the self’s paralysis and the other’s absolute exteriority. Unheard of in Lévinas’ ethical world, but crucial to a feminist ethics, the particular kind of ‘I’ in Ricoeur’s thinking can also take the initiative in assigning responsibility, and in relating with the other without assimilating the other to itself. In

¹¹ Coming from a psychoanalytical and feminist perspective, Benjamin emphasizes a “relational perspective” in her work on the development of subjectivity and intersubjectivity (3). In her rethinking of object-relations theory, Benjamin adds “an insistence that psychoanalysis be viewed as operating in a two-person rather than a one-person field, so that two subjectivities, each with its own set of internal relations, begin to create a new set between them” (3). The “relational perspective” thus applies to the “internal” development of the subject—Ricoeur’s redefinition of the same as selfhood—and to the subject’s relation with others in social relations which require the subject’s capacity for coherent, autonomous recognition of the other—Ricoeur’s ethical relation which, as we shall see, he presents as solicitude.

short, reciprocity becomes an ethical possibility: “A two-pronged conception of otherness remains to be constructed here, one that does justice in turn to the primacy of self-esteem and also to the primacy of the convocation to justice coming from the other” (331). In Ricoeur’s writing, the Lévinasian formulation of otherness must become homogenous to the formulation of selfhood, to the primacy of the self with the other than self (“oneself as another”), if ethical action is to take place. Although Ricoeur may overlook the instances in Lévinas’ writing where the same does manifest itself as a same with and for an other (positing “the other within me”), his insistence on branding the self with agency, through an insistence on likeness (sameness) and reciprocity, relates to what we shall examine as Brossard’s (Irigarayan) notion of a “*même différence*” in relation to sexual difference. In Ricoeur’s ethical theory, there is a process of identification, or “the admission that the other is not condemned to remain a stranger but can become my counterpart, that is, someone who, like me, says ‘I.’ The resemblance based on the pairing of flesh with flesh works to reduce a distance, to bridge a gap, in the very place where it creates a dissymmetry. . . . It is here that the analogical transfer from myself to the other intersects with the inverse movement of the other toward me. It intersects with the latter but does not abolish it. . . .” (335).

Oneself as Another is clearly a kind of continuation of the narrative theory (always a theory of hermeneutics for Ricoeur) figuring in the three volumes of Time and Narrative. In fact, the proposed notion of selfhood stems directly from a notion of narrative identity. Setting the functions of reading and interpretation (that is, of hermeneutics) at the forefront of his thinking, Ricoeur’s theory of narrative anticipates his ethics. In fact, his hermeneutics or theory of interpretation constitutes an ethics. As Ricoeur indicates, ethical philosophy involves a “hermeneutic of the self and its other” (20-21). One point is clear: both narrative and ethical theory are generated by Ricoeur’s notion of selfhood which, beyond Lévinas’ thinking, “implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other. . . .” (3). Ethics develops precisely from the narrative plane, and particularly from Ricoeur’s revision of the theory of mimesis: “It thus appears that the affection of the self by the other than self finds in fiction a privileged milieu for thought experiments that cannot

be eclipsed by the 'real' relations of interlocution and interaction" (330). In short, if ethics posits an encounter with the other as other and a redefinition of difference within sameness, so does Ricoeur's conception of hermeneutics.

I would like to give one example of Ricoeur's hermeneutic pathway to ethics, since it reveals both an appropriation and reversal of Lévinas' assumptions about the ontological subject. Another reason for this brief explanation lies in the fact that Ricoeur's intervention in what he considers as the pointless, conceptual collapse of the postmodern self in crisis will underlie many of my readings of writings in the feminine; most notably, it will inform my analysis of Théoret's own struggle with this crisis in the double contexts of "modernité" and feminism. Even in the case of the "nonsubject" (of Musil's or Beckett's work) which declares itself as "nothing," Ricoeur refuses (in contrast to Lévinas) to overthrow the idea of an initiating, autonomous subject (166). Turning to linguistics and "the semiotics of the subject of discourse" (166), Ricoeur signals that this "nothing" is still attributable to a speaking 'I'. As the 'I' signals for the reader its loss or crisis of identity, the 'I' that is "nothing" is but "a self deprived of the help of sameness" (166); it can still be read in terms of selfhood (that is to say, like narrative identity, can serve as a model of selfhood). If the self-effacing 'I' is identifiable by its position in (or constitution by) language, there is still the question posed by literary fiction and its effect on the trajectory of 'fiction to life,' or of narrative to ethics: "How, then, are we to maintain on the ethical level a self which, on the narrative level, seems to be fading away?" (167). Once again, Ricoeur mediates the complex poles of his hermeneutics into a tension composed of how one "can say at one and the same time 'Who am I?' and 'Here am I!'" (167). This is the challenge of a post-Cartesian ethics in so far as this "fruitful tension" (167) comes about because of ethics, that is to say, because of the primacy of and the obligation to the other that Lévinas has in turn postulated. Even in the crisis that the 'I' undergoes, it is ultimately responsible for the other and thus responsible for identifying itself in relation to this other.

Although their conclusions are more or less similar, is not Ricoeur's logic nevertheless the reverse of Lévinas'? If the Levinasian other can interrupt the ontology of the self-same, the

Ricoeurian other can interrupt the complete effacement of existence (to which the modernist and postmodernist subject are prone), in order to restore the self—not as self-sameness—but indeed as selfhood. Moreover, there is no danger of all-encompassing sameness in this restoration, since it was never assumed in the first place. In this sense, the self in crisis is a concept that Ricoeur qualifies by relating it back to Lévinas' philosophy. What Ricoeur's presentation of narrative identity, as the anticipation of ethical theory, underlines is how the other's interruption can break through the complete dissolution of subjectivity. He argues that "it is still necessary that the irruption of the other, breaking through the enclosure of the same, meet with the complicity of this movement of effacement by which the self makes itself available to others" (168). As ultimately suggested by Ricoeur's qualifications of his own narrative theory, selfhood proposes the dialectic that is most crucial to both his ethics and hermeneutics, as well as the inscriptions of female selfhood we are about to consider. This is "a dialectic of ownership and of dispossession, of care and of carelessness, of self-affirmation and of self-effacement" (168). Again, Ricoeur's argument finds support in Benjamin's own insistence on the factor of identification in differential theory. "One need not," she argues, "assume that the process of identification always falls along one side of the axis of sameness-difference" (51). And, as we shall see shortly, "the category of identification continues to be central to all theorizing about gender . . ." (Benjamin 52); it is also one important component of a female ethics.

The interrelation of selfhood and ethical theory is developed as Ricoeur unravels his definition of ethics as an aim or an intention, which is in turn directly entwined with a hermeneutics of the self and of action.¹² For Ricoeur, ethical intention is an "aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions" (172). The aim of the good life is once again entwined with hermeneutics as it involves the processes of interpretation — of one's actions, of oneself. From the self-interpretation which, according to Ricoeur, is always at work in any act of interpretation,

¹² By insisting on the notion of ethics as an aim, Ricoeur puts ethics before morality. He is not discarding morality but rather its rendition as an actualization of the ethical aim as a fixed code imposed from outside or above on the self or agent of action. Ricoeur argues that such actualization can change along with the self in becoming. See Oneself as Another 169-180.

unfolds self-esteem — the accomplishment of selfhood in ethics. Like selfhood, self-esteem refuses to fold onto itself, to retreat into its ownness (as sameness). As selfhood can only be constituted by the other than self for which it is responsible, so is self-esteem dependent on the notion of solicitude. Solicitude, or the sustained, affectionate concern for the other, is that which defines the ethical aim for the good life, necessarily “with and for the Others” (181).

In light of Ricoeur’s two-pronged analysis of the other and the self, the place of solicitude on the pathway toward a feminist ethics will become particularly important in thinking about gender relations, as further examination of Irigaray and the three poets figuring in the next part of this study will demonstrate. Whereas one of the models presented to posit an ethical intersubjectivity will be the mother-daughter relationship, the model employed by Ricoeur is friendship, one he derives from Aristotle. From this ancient philosopher, Ricoeur wishes “to retain only the ethics of reciprocity, of sharing, of living together” (187). Solicitude, “both that which is exerted and that which is received” (330), is the very condition of ethics as Ricoeur defines it, and indeed finds a model in “the dialectic of self-esteem and friendship” (330). It is in friendship that the desire “to live well” first unfolds (183), where the dialectic of same and other can be seen to operate. As in Lévinas’ concept of the face-to-face, specificity and difference are not paradoxical but become complementary. Their functioning together is crucial to the ethical relation and the ethical aim, to the irreducibility of the other as such. Self-esteem too is composed of these two elements of specificity and difference, whereby the subject still “perceives itself” but “as another among others” (192): “In this sense, solicitude replies to the other’s esteem for me” (193). Although not an easy task, this idea of similitude will figure as a crucial component of female alterity in my subsequent readings of Irigaray and feminist literature, for in similitude “the esteem of the other as a oneself and the esteem of oneself as an other” become interdependent (194). Again, this is the dialectic that will figure as the core of the mother-daughter bond, or of the subject’s relation to maternalism (its trace in language, its representation as a signifying space).

The third component of Ricoeur’s ethical theory is the idea of just institutions, in which equality that gives “to each, his or her right” (194) is still modulated in accordance to sameness and

difference: “Similitude is the fruit of the exchange between esteem for oneself and solicitude for others. This exchange authorizes us to say that I cannot myself have self-esteem unless I esteem others as myself” (193). The dialectic at work in solicitude and self-esteem is as much a premise of institutional justice and equality as it is a premise of interpersonal relations: “Equality provides to the self another who is an each. . . . Because of this, the sense of justice takes nothing away from solicitude; the sense of justice presupposes it, to the extent that it holds persons to be irreplaceable” (202). In terms of this un-replaceability, we can recall Lévinas’ notion of infinity. It is the irreducibility of alterity (intrinsic to Lévinas’ infinity) that Ricoeur’s writing discerns in narrative, philosophy and ethical theory, and that stands as the key concept to a hermeneutics of the subject, which always implies a hermeneutics of the other. Again, Ricoeur pursues the dialectic of the self and the other than self through the idea of self-esteem. And it is self-esteem that opens onto the admittance of what Ricoeur calls above similitude, in turn a postulate of justice. In fact, this reworked notion of sameness will figure as a crucial component of female alterity in the work of Irigaray. For again, in similitude, “the esteem of the other as a oneself and the esteem of oneself as an other” become indeed interdependent (194).

Feminizing Ethics

As Ricoeur’s work demonstrates, there have been numerous models of otherness posited throughout the history of Western philosophy: Aristotle’s treatise on friendship, Hegel’s master-slave relationship, Heidegger’s strangeness of being in light of its own historicity of being-in-the-world, Lévinas’ face-to-face encounter, Ricoeur’s own notion of selfhood. From the onset, it may appear that feminist theorists’ relation to ethical philosophy would be of a totally different nature than Lévinas’ or Ricoeur’s. For instance, Irigaray’s motives and grounds for her own complaints about some of Lévinas’ propositions no doubt reveal themselves to be specific to her feminist concerns. Yet, Irigaray’s attempt at providing an ethics of sexual differentiation not only makes use of Lévinas’ thinking about alterity; it also (inadvertently) renders itself analogous to Ricoeur’s conceptualization of selfhood. Most importantly, it will serve as a basis for my detection of the

feminist ethics presented by Brossard, Brandt, Théoret, Mouré and Tostevin. The questions to ask are two. First, what is the source of Irigaray's initial discontent with Lévinas? And second, how does Irigaray appropriate some of the terms Lévinas still provides for her own expanded notion of an ethics of sexual difference? Thus, although I have begun to indicate where and how a feminist ethics can derive from Lévinas' philosophy and its influence on Ricoeur's rethinking of the same, important differentiations must also be made. One good starting point for this process is indeed Irigaray's own response to the "blind spots" of Lévinas' representation of a feminine other.

Although it bears enormous importance in Totality and Infinity, the face-to-face is not the only prototype of ethics offered in the course of Lévinas' writing. An earlier work, Time and the Other, posits the feminine, and a later work, Otherwise than Being, posits maternity. The earlier work deals with the feminine in relation to an erotic (and unquestionably heterosexual) relation. It is also where Lévinas can be credited for apprehending the feminine on the basis of radical alterity, of a "contraire absolument contraire" (Time 48); this concern will figure through various forms in the texts under study, but most particularly in Tostevin's treatment of love in 'sophie. As Lévinas states: "Neither is the difference between the sexes the duality of two complementary terms, for two complementary terms presuppose a preexisting whole" (Time 49). In fact, eros or heterosexual love is a form of "pathos" for Lévinas (49). If it consists of a duality, this "duality of beings" is "insurmountable" as both beings dwell in a relation with that which always slips away: "The other as other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us; to the contrary it withdraws into its mystery" (49). From a feminist perspective and, again as we shall see in some of the love poetry, the potentiality of Lévinas' contribution to the theory of an ethical sexual exchange (hetero- and homosexual) is considerable. For, as Chanter indicates, Lévinas can be credited with thinking about sexual difference in terms of alterity (202), of identifying alterity with gender. For Irigaray, this identification is crucial since, according to her, women have historically been reduced to the status of the other of the (male) same, rather than allowed to constitute themselves on their own terms. In Lévinas' early writing, the feminine, as a radical other, thus appears to present "the most fruitful possibility of providing a radical break in the hegemony of

Eleatic being as oneness, sameness, unity, allowing the other to remain other without being reduced to the logic of the same” (Chanter 202-203). In the feminist critique of the so-called humanist, neutral subject who is nonetheless presupposed as male, the irreducibility of sexual difference becomes tantamount. By referring back to Lévinas, it becomes possible to see how the feminine can be held in a relation that is independent of the masculine same — though only up to a certain point.

For Lévinas, the ultimate result of the erotic encounter is fecundity, that is to say, the child and, most of all, the father’s relation to the son. “How,” Lévinas asks, “can the ego become other to itself? This can happen only in one way: through paternity” (*Time* 52). In her “Questions to Emmanuel Lévinas,” Irigaray certainly has cause for questioning this sudden leap to paternity in Lévinas’ discussion of fecundity. Although Irigaray argues that Lévinas’ model assimilates the child to the father, it seems to me that Lévinas is quite clear about not making the son’s alterity a kind of “alter ego” for the father (*Time* 52). The more obvious problem identified by Irigaray is that his patrilineal model abandons the feminine altogether, leaving it unacknowledged and inconsequential, a mere vehicle for the father-son ethics that is finally proposed. And thus more questions arise. Having come so close to an ethics of sexual difference in which the female subject was constituted in and of herself, in and of an irreducible otherness, why must Lévinas subjugate the erotic relationship to the production of the son?¹³ Why must the ultimate ethical condition only be found in male reproduction and, by extension, in male sameness?¹⁴

¹³ As Irigaray observes: “After having been so far—or so close—in the approach to the other sex, in my view to the other, to the mystery of the other, Levinas clings on once more to this rock of patriarchy in the very place of carnal love” (“Questions” 183).

¹⁴ In *Totality and Infinity*, the feminine does not completely disappear from Lévinas’ philosophical discourse. Not only is the erotic relationship rejected as a proper prototype of ethics, but the feminine is relegated either to an animal state or basic need (Irigaray, “Questions” 187), or yet again rendered as man’s bridge towards his ethical destiny, of which woman can never fully partake (Chalier 122-123). If woman is beloved, she is again an objectified necessity, submitted to a (heterosexual) male subject: “Necessarily an object, not a subject with a relation, like his, to time. She drags the male lover into the abyss so that, from these nocturnal depths, he may be carried off into an absolute future” (Irigaray, *Ethics* 194). On a more positive note, Lévinas’ rendition of the feminine is what “aids the dissipation of the virile” of being (Chalier 122), and may well convert ontology into an ethics. Yet the feminine still remains barred from its own ascension to the ‘height’ of the ethical condition. Women are barred from an ethical relation par excellence,

Clearly, Lévinas' propositions can be seen to constitute a stumbling block for feminism. He runs the danger of repeating Western culture's tendencies to reduce the feminine to a maternal and purely biological destiny or, at most, to a subservient social role. It is indeed Irigaray, as well as Brossard and Brandt, who explicitly declares the urgent need for women to abandon forever such roles attributed to the Lévinasian mother: "Eternal mediators for the incarnation of the body and the world of man . . ." (*Ethics* 109). Yet, if Irigaray presents her own notion of a "female ethics" (*Ethics* 108) ("éthique au féminin" [*Éthique* 106]), it is by providing the feminine with the radical alterity that Lévinas poses, but then takes away. This "ethics in the feminine" is the necessary step towards Irigaray's own envisioning of an ethics between the sexes. Lévinas does, nonetheless, remain crucial to Irigaray's feminist re-negotiation of the same and the other. Lévinas' and more forcibly Ricoeur's renegotiation of the same and other than same, of the alterity within and constitutive of the subject, are central notions in Irigaray's development of the love for the same other. This love is the basis for both what she herself calls a "female ethics" and an ethics of sexual difference. It is especially Ricoeur's renegotiation of selfhood as self-esteem, and the (Lévinasian) dialectic of the like and the foreign that he insists upon, which seem to prove most analogous to Irigaray's own dialectic as it pertains to mothers and daughters, to the female subject's relation to a first other.¹⁵

Before launching into a fuller examination of Irigaray's ethics, we might consider its relevance to the study of writings in the feminine in Québec and English Canada. Although it will become clearer in the last section of this chapter, suffice it to say here that, for the writers in this study, writing itself is conceived as the subject's uncovering of and initiation to alterity (to her own difference, to the other outside herself, and to the radical difference of language). In Hélène

that is, until we reach *Otherwise than Being*. Here, as the ultimate "gestation of the other in the same" (75), maternity is the very achievement of ethics: the "signification for the other and not for itself" (80). Yet, if acknowledged, the feminine is stripped completely of its erotic aspect and relegated to an all-vulnerable maternity that serves as the dominant metaphor of responsibility for the other.

¹⁵ The appropriations by Ricoeur and Irigaray of a Lévinasian ethics are so similar that it is difficult not to read them as analogous, even though an avowed connection between them, as there certainly is with Lévinas on Irigaray's part, remains absent.

Cixous' words, writing is "a ceaseless exchange of one with another—not knowing one another and beginning again only from what is most distant, from self, from other, from the other within" (Newly 43). As I shall demonstrate through various textual analyses, the premise for a feminist conceptualization of alterity is the renegotiation of self and other, of sameness and difference, operating at both a textual and subjective level. Cixous' insight into writing as a kind of exchange with the other entails the fundamental question of this redefined sameness as difference, which constitutes female alterity and poses the need for female specificity, hence the primary question of sexual difference. Feminist writers' concern with alterity, at the textual and subjective levels, explains the remarkably consistent, though certainly not the singular (or for some, even the central), concern with maternalism: with a same, as another which, as Irigaray proposes along with Lévinas and Ricoeur, may well constitute the ultimate ethical negotiation. At one point or another in the work of the five writers under study, the expression of sexual difference involves a theoretical reconstitution of the desiring mother and mother-child bond, love of the other modelled on the love of sameness as difference. A poetics of otherness will thus also posit itself (at times) as a poetics of motherness which, in a sense, is also a poetics of sameness.

If the attainment of social equality is surely not an issue that should be trivialized, it is another (more Ricoeurian) notion of sameness that is invoked by Irigaray. As Gatens observes, the conception of female alterity, against the supposedly neutral humanist subject, "disrupts and belies the supposed liberal principles of equal treatment . . ." (52). As Ricoeur's insistence on solicitude suggested in turn, in order to attain equality and more just societies, the dichotomous and historically violent struggle underlying the same/other opposition must be transgressed. Some feminist theorists have argued that this opposition can be re-articulated by superimposing a constructionist notion of the body onto a theory of sexual difference. Chanter's study of Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference indeed reveals a "loosening up of rigid distinctions between sex and gender" (39) in recent feminist critical discourse. As Québécois and English Canadian feminist writers give precedence to bodily and maternal metaphors in their work, the recognition of what Pamela Banting calls "the relations between corporeal and linguistic substances" (151) becomes

particularly crucial to understanding a feminist poetics of the other.¹⁶

In Claudia Moscovici's terms, Irigaray proposes a female specificity as she "mediates between the twin problematics of radical essentialism and radical constructionism"; for Irigaray, "gender is neither eliminated as a category used to identify, critique, and transform gender-based domination, nor posited as an essentialized and exclusive signifier of social difference" (Moscovici 23). At the threshold of nature and culture, then, Irigaray posits the "sexuate body" (Moscovici 27); although it is still material and physical (which gender is not), sex itself is already gendered, that is to say, "not only gender but sex too is a socially defined category of analysis. . . . The scientificity of the concept of 'sex' is open to question" (Chanter 43).¹⁷ As the theory of Kristeva and the poetic appropriations by Mouré and Tostevin will also indicate, the body is not a neutral,

¹⁶ In France, the U.S. and Canada, an essentialism debate has flourished in many forms but basically comes down to a pitting of the constructionist perspective against such theories of difference—no less a debate over de Beauvoir's lasting legacy of the sex/gender distinction in The Second Sex. The constructionist point of view stems, it seems, from the necessary (though potentially colour blind) recognition of a certain sameness between and within the sexes, an equality that is crucial for redressing social, cultural and psychological injustices. The biological language of an equally important need to affirm a specificity, an alterity in non-oppositional terms for the female subject, addresses the need to transgress the 'norm' claimed as neutral and universal, but recognized as patriarchal and exclusive. A split construed between anglophone and francophone perspectives in the Canadian-Québécois feminist context and debates about the influence of French theory (as well as American (re)interpretations of this theory) on Canadian feminist criticism have left their marks on essentialist debates in anglophone circles. In 1991, a special issue of Tessera was allocated to the question of essentialism, particularly with reference to feminist writing in Québec and English Canada and Hélène Cixous' "écriture féminine." In the end, a number of feminists have recognized the need to surpass dichotomous thinking patterns, such as the binary opposition set up between the bodily and the social, nature and culture. Supporters of a feminism of difference (particularly Tina Chanter's favourable readings of Irigaray in Ethics of Eros) consider that setting up a rigid distinction between sex and gender reverts to old metaphysical and ontological dichotomies such as same/other, nature/culture, fixity/change: "Defined according to their biological sex, women and men are considered to have stable, fixed identities, empirically established by reference to the body, which thus serves as a kind of unchanging ground"—that is, for the imposition of the cultural construct of gender (Chanter 25). Chanter points out that sustaining "the sex/gender divide," in the refusal to question the organization of sex itself, "comes very close to positing sex as a universal, given for all eternity, innate and unavoidable, while gender is construed as variable from one culture to another, changing over time . . ." (25).

¹⁷ Yet following Tina Chanter's point of clarification, this does not mean that one collapses into the other; if sex is always already gendered, "sex does not become entirely indistinguishable from gender" (44). Also see Judith Butler's Bodies that Matter, where the non-necessity of gender roles is not set up to "dissolve the particularity of bodies" (Chanter 271), such as those bodily drives, which I will examine in terms of Kristeva's semiotic chora, always produced within the social domain of gender.

passive, blank slate for the imprint of gender/culture/language. According to Irigaray (as well as Kristeva, Cixous and a number of Canadian and Québécois feminist thinkers), even the drives, oriented around the mother-child dyad/triad, are already social in the sense that they are always already (pre)linguistic and intersubjective; the subject is born and remains in process, in becoming, at the threshold of nature and culture.

Returning to the notion of an assimilating logic of sameness, it is an “archaic” same that is to be rejected, Irigaray argues (*Ethics* 97). But what does she mean by an archaic same? As in Lévinas’ critique of the totalizing subject, Irigaray considers that traditional ontology has been unable to provide a relational model outside the repetition of the same, outside the “nostalgia for a return to the ONE WHOLE”; it is the “desire to go back toward and into the original womb” (*Ethics* 100). For Irigaray — who is, let us not forget, a psychoanalyst — this nostalgia springs from specific epistemologies and particularly from their interpretations of the first relation with the mother. As for many psychoanalysts, the mother-child relationship is held to be a prototype “for all subsequent relations” (Oliver, *Womanizing* 166). If, as Freud’s and Lacan’s theories have presupposed, the relation with the mother is considered an archaic, asocial fusion that must undergo a hostile separation so that subjectivity can socially constitute itself, what hope would there be for a relational ethics among adults? One answer, at least for Irigaray, lies in the rethinking of the mother-child bond. As in Ricoeur’s relational ethics, this project extends to a rethinking of sameness which, for Irigaray, is a “sameness, womblike and maternal, [that] serves forever and for free, unknown, forgotten” (98).

Irigaray emphasizes Freud’s own metaphysical positing of a masculine norm in his theory of sexuality. She attacks the notion that phallic desire in both boys and girls is the edifice or prototype of sexual difference, which remains tied into a desire/struggle for the phallus. Femininity itself then is constituted on phallic premises, a logic of masculine sameness. Irigaray also critiques Lacan’s own theory of language as paternal, phallic ‘Law’ (culture) intervening into (and opposed to) the potentially devouring maternal fusion (nature). In short, Irigaray’s challenge to psychoanalysis attempts to redefine the “pre-oedipal” as always already discursive and sexed.

She thus conceptualizes a specificity to female desire, here built upon the need for sameness and the recognition of difference, an ethical, non-sacrificial, non-paralyzing or, in Lévinas' words, "non-interchangeable" ("Ethics" 84) bond with the mother. To recall again Lévinas, subjectivity becomes "the gestation of the other in the same" (Otherwise 105). From Freud and Lacan, Irigaray retains the notion that sex is nothing essential in itself but rather constituted in relation to an other (such as the mother). Yet unlike Freud and Lacan, Irigaray posits that this other—again, the mother—is neither annihilating (because of nature) nor annihilated (because of culture). As we shall read in Mouré's Furious: "The female imaginary exists . . ." (100).

Writings in the feminine interpret the mother as they do female sexuality and the unconscious: beyond (but not ignoring) their biological existence. The mother takes on a " 'civilizing' role," to borrow from Kristeva (in Guberman 10). The maternal itself is associated with language acquisition and intersubjective exchange, and thus offers one possible way to configure (textually and subjectively) an ethical model. As Oliver aptly demonstrates, the mother-child dyad is postulated as always already a triad by both Kristeva's and Irigaray's (albeit different) revisiting of psychoanalytic theory; it begins to negotiate the constructive dialectic between same and other. This new dialectic, as a potential ethics, is premised on the refusal of Lacan's rendering of the phallic mother and of the pre-oedipal dyad (the mother-child dyad before entry into the Lacanian symbolic order), let us say here the maternal body, as asocial, non-linguistic, as an object. Both Kristeva and Irigaray repudiate Lacan's conceptualization of the Real as void or blank, necessarily sacrificed in light of the predominance of the Phallus, of the 'Law' of the Father. For Lacan, this 'Law' constitutes language and culture, where desire is lack, 'deradicalized' in that it is the already accomplished subjugation of the subject.¹⁸ In "Stabat Mater," Kristeva situates herself in contradistinction to what she considers a patriarchal,

¹⁸ In Family Values, Oliver observes that in "Lacan's account, the father is associated with the Name or No; that is to say, the father brings language and law to break up the primary dyad" (4). Oliver also notes that "Western images of conception, birth, and parental relationships leave us with a father who is not embodied, who cannot love but only legislates from some abstract position, and a mother who is nothing but body, who can fulfil animal needs but cannot love as a social human being" (3).

monotheist and Western cultural tradition, or the logic of sameness that suppresses the mother as a sexual being, as an other. Kristeva thus insists on a female and maternal alterity—where the mother is other (than uniquely a mother), where she is sexual and her sexuality does not define itself by male parameters. The (m)other speaks and the (m)other desires, as Brandt’s poetry will reaffirm time and again.

In a more consistent challenge to Freud and Lacan, Irigaray turns to none other than Descartes. In his notion of “wonder”—of the “first passion” (Ethics 12)—she perceives “a possibility of separation and alliance” (Ethics 13). Irigaray conceptualizes wonder as a primary passion, intervening in what has been conceived, in psychoanalysis, as homeostasis, or the undifferentiated symbiosis of the “corps à corps” with the mother. In this primary passion of wonder, it is the woman-mother who appears to the child: “Not the eternal feminine of images or representation(s). But a woman-mother who keeps on unfolding herself outwardly while enveloping us?” (Ethics 81). According to Irigaray, this primary recognition of the other is “without nostalgia for the first dwelling. Outside of repetition. It is the passion of the first encounter” (Ethics 82). It leaves no grounds for a nostalgia for wholeness that ultimately does violence to the (m)other by assimilating her to a self-same, to the original, all-encompassing “envelope” (Ethics 83); here, “Love of same is love of indifferenciation . . .” (Ethics 97).

Indeed the denial of maternal subjectivity by the masculine symbolic is a good indication of the perpetuation of the fantasy of the same. Throughout her work, Irigaray insists on the need for redefining the process of maternal identification, but she does not try to deny the psychic and cultural processes of assimilation and aggression that are still with us. In other words, the relational model she proposes is perhaps ideal, but it is not normative; ethical recognition is not ensured. Benjamin’s own psychoanalytical reflection on recognition and the maternal dyad is perhaps helpful “to counter” normative assumptions about “relational theories” (Benjamin 46). Her theory explicitly includes what she calls “the duality of psychic life, both the fantasy of maternal omnipotence and the capacity to recognize the mother as an other subject” (85). According to Benjamin, and in contrast to a normative, simplistic theory of ideal interrelation, “The

breakdown of tension between self and other in favor of relation as subject and object is a common fact of mental life” (47). Although this chapter and most of the texts by the five writers in question insist on this capacity for recognition, the fantasy of maternal omnipotence, as well as its extension to other social relations, will also figure in the texts under study—at times self-consciously unravelled by the writers, at others, much less so. Part 4 will deal with such ethical breakdowns, and the conclusion will return to the limitations inherent in any ideal.

Irigaray thus does not set out to deny the perpetuation of nostalgic yearning for the maternal as a lost wholeness. She in fact argues that such yearning has served as the edifice of the whole of metaphysical philosophy. It constitutes what Lacan in turn calls the fantasy of the Other: the Other is a realm of fantasy, driven by the fantasy of reclaiming the phallic mother (the [not|All-Mother). Although this desire to reclaim is theorized as ‘fantasy’ by Lacan, his argument for its unavoidability as a fantasy—especially when it comes to relations between the sexes and the constitution of femininity—remains locked in a logic of self-sameness as a determining premise for the construction of subjectivity; it is also locked into the notion of the maternal as an asocial, unmediated, non-linguistic, uniquely natural space. Joined by Benjamin and other feminist ethicists, Irigaray argues that the cultural constitution (which psychoanalysis merely reflects) of the mother, as closure, “envelope,” and all-encompassing, must be relinquished.¹⁹ Love for and from the mother, which Irigaray still calls a love of sameness (in relation to both boy and girl) must be seen to present “a form of innerness that can open to the other without loss of self or of the other in the bottomlessness of an abyss” (Ethics 69). And does not Irigaray reinforce alongside Ricoeur that it is through love of sameness (already love of the other) that love of difference is possible? She continues:

No love for that which is the same as me, but placed and maintained outside myself in its difference, can take place without

¹⁹ It is to Spinoza that Irigaray turns in this treatment of the maternal same. Applying Spinoza’s concept of God as “that which is its own place for itself, that which turns itself inside out and thus constitutes a dwelling (for) itself,” Irigaray seeks to posit a paradox in the “maternal-feminine”: a source that is not a source, that is to say a same, but an other as well, one that may “envelop” ‘man’ but may also “envelop herself” (Ethics 84-85).

- an interpretation of the love of sameness: a still undifferential maternal-feminine, substrate for any possible determination of identity;
- a point of view that would emerge from or transcend that ancient relationship;
- a horizon of sexual difference.

Three conditions that are really one. (*Ethics* 99)

To return to what Kristeva views the “problématique féminine . . . situated in this ethical place” (“À partir” 500), we learn once again that understanding “woman’s place” in culture entails understanding love in relation to maternalism. Crucial to both Mouré’s and Tostevin’s “maternal poetics,” Kristeva’s study of maternalism postulates a “heretical” ethics (“Stabat” 185, emphasis added), which “demands the contribution of women” (“Stabat” 185), of desiring women, and of mothers as “our speaking species” (“Stabat” 185). Some of Kristeva’s essays pay close attention to the mother-child pairing and even the ethical potential of women as mothers, going so far as positing pregnancy itself as what can give a woman one (if not the ultimate) possibility of reaching out to the other and extracting herself from her doomed fantasy of oneness. However, Kristeva does not reduce the mother to a mere reproductive function. Rather, maternity—inside and outside her discourse on pregnancy—can be social, civilizing and, above all, ethical. Here, again, the woman-mother is inscribed as a desiring, multiple subject-in-process whose sexuality is polymorphous. It is this positing that is geared towards not only the reevaluation of sexual difference as an ethics (which is taken much further by Irigaray), but also of the social and love relations among women themselves and of social relations in general, including those between men and women. The point is not that we must all be mothers but that we all have mothers.

This reading of Kristeva and Irigaray may still present a potential dilemma. As both theorists work (though to a different extent) within the context of female specificity—let us call it a feminist discourse on female selfhood—a model of ethics grounded as such in the maternal body has and can pose a difficulty not only to non-feminist but also to feminist audiences, male and female. Does this model apply to women alone? How could a distinctively woman-centred model set up the possibility of ethical relations in general, that is to say, between men and women, or

among men, and not only among women themselves? In response I borrow from Oliver's suggestion that we view the figuration of this social maternalism—a model of the recognition of both sameness and difference—precisely as a model. Somewhat echoing the remark with which I opened this section, Oliver indicates that philosophy has a long tradition of using models to describe “the pattern, logic or structure” of a concept or “a relationship that is not necessarily inherent in only this particular model” (Womanizing 186). In the case of the social maternal, it “is meant to vividly indicate how intersubjective relationships operate” (Womanizing 186), not necessarily to represent the only possible operation of intersubjectivity.²⁰

In An Ethics of Sexual Difference, Irigaray's ultimate goal is to formulate a “sexual or carnal ethics,” a “genesis of love between the sexes” (17), a theme we shall consider in part 4. Not only would the alterity of a man be irreplaceable, but the alterity of a woman could both be discovered and sustained. It is the model of a maternal same-other which provides the crucial pathway to a feminist ethics, in which each sex is allowed to transgress its traditional and “ideological ruts” (Gallop, Thinking 8). As for the future hope of sexual equality in difference, it is only possible, Irigaray argues, through the establishment of an “éthique au féminin.” This ethics is modelled on what is again the openness and mutuality invested in the mother-child relation, the first accession to and recognition of alterity. In terms of a female countergenealogy which will figure predominantly in writings in the feminine, it is modeled on “a shared enveloping of the child by the mother and of the mother by the child” or “an openness, in addition to that mutual love, which allows access to difference” (69), and more precisely, on “the enveloping between mother and daughter, daughter and mother, among women” (69).

The possibility and potentiality of a “love of self among women, in the feminine” (101) are

²⁰ In Womanizing Nietzsche, Oliver gives examples of other philosophical models that describe subjectivity and intersubjectivity. As she points out, Hegel's The Phenomenology of Mind describes “the onset” of intersubjectivity in terms of the struggle between master and slave or lordship and bondage. Surely, Oliver points out, we are not meant to actually “become slaves in order to become self-conscious” (187). In relation to her study of philosophy and the feminine, she is “not suggesting that we need to become mothers in order to achieve this intersubjectivity”; rather “[i]t will suffice that we all were born from the body of a mother” (187)—“dead or alive, known or unknown” (186).

what prompt Irigaray's insistence on the mother-daughter relationship. She sets out to demonstrate how, in a Freudian (oedipal) model and, by extension, patrilineal model, love between mother and daughter can hardly exist, as girls and women are reduced to reflections and projection that only come from the other: a "reduction to a sameness that is not their own" (104).²¹ This scenario, which Irigaray examines in great detail in her earlier works, is the farthest from what she imagines as a "loving ethics" among women (104). Again, there can be "no love of other without love of same" (104). There is a slight inversion of Lévinas' focus here, the one observed in Ricoeur's notion of selfhood and solicitude. In short, Irigaray seeks out what Ricoeur in turn dispels from the dialectic of same and other: Lévinas' notion of the other in the same as constitutive of any relation, of any subject. Moreover, there is an echoing of Ricoeur's relational ethics in this positive dialectic of difference, similitude and mutual recognition. Irigaray's importance to this literary study of a feminist ethics lies in her attempt to establish female difference as an irreducible alterity, specific to itself, and un-assimilable to the self-same in its relationships or its own conception. Drawing on her model of female filial love, she also reinvokes the notion of infinity that seems to have crossed the history of Western ethical philosophy:

Women must love one another both as mothers, with a maternal love, and as daughters, with a filial love. Both of them. In a female whole that, furthermore, is not closed off. Constituting, perhaps, both of them in one female whole that is not closed up, the sign of infinity? Achieving, through their relations with each other, a path into infinity that is always open, in-finite. (105)

It is the irreducibility of the other to the same that remains the pivotal component of a feminist ethics, as is Irigaray's own recasting of the same (the maternal) in light of radical alterity.

²¹ As Drucilla Cornell writes in her reading of Derrida's thinking on "woman," it is "the otherness of the Other" that is marked "as beyond any of her fantasy embodiments"; this "makes a significant contribution to re-thinking how the 'thereness' of the other" also "demands the recognition of the singularity of her being. It is her uniqueness, her singularity, her being that constitutes her alterity that calls us to justice. It is the Lacanian law that woman must be denied the otherness of her being for man 'to be' man" (199-200).

Writing Ethics

A social model of maternalism figures strongly in writings in the feminine. For some, it is one of their predominant features. In order to articulate a specific alterity accorded to female subjectivity and writing, Brossard, Brandt, Théoret, Mouré and Tostevin demonstrate the need to resurrect the mother as a subject and in relation to language. Through appropriations of Irigarayan and, as we shall see later, Kristevan theories of difference, they seek “a language that is not a substitute for the experience of a corps à corps as the paternal language seeks to be, but which accompanies that bodily experience, clothing it in words that do not erase the body but speak the body” (Irigaray, Sexes 19). As I turn to Québécois and Canadian feminist literature, it should be apparent that the projet of conceptualizing, affirming and inscribing sexual difference entails not avoiding or ignoring a discourse on the maternal, the body, female sexuality, or the interconnections of nature, culture and language. Rather, it is important to face head on these contentious issues, and transgress binary arguments (such as the sex/gender division) that might stall or even disallow their exploration.

For an opening definition of writings “in the feminine,” we might turn to Théoret who remarks that there is nothing essential about women’s differences, as women “*écrivent à partir de la culture*” (Entre 152). In terms of the ethical perspective of this literary study, this remark recalls Derek Attridge’s reflection on “creation” as “the act of breaking down the familiar [which] is also the act of welcoming the other; the event of the familiar’s breaking down . . . also the event of the irruption of the other” (22).²² Important to keep in mind is what has already been pointed out in the introduction, namely that there is no single, organizing manifesto or cohesive philosophy used to inscribe the feminine in Québécois and English Canadian feminist literature. But it is also possible to argue that a self-conscious theorizing and poetic rendering of female selfhood, modelled on the mother-daughter bond, constitutes an initial feature of commonality. And it is

²² Attridge’s essay, “Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other,” appeared in the January 1999 issue of PMLA. The journal’s special topic on “Ethics and Literary Study” acknowledges the increasing “resonance” of ethics in literary criticism “during the past dozen years” (7), as Lawrence Buell indicates in his introduction.

neither strictly biological or cultural determination, but this very self-consciousness, that relegates these writings “au féminin.”²³

As Louise Dupré also contends in response to her own question whether there is “such a thing as an essentially feminine writing” (“From” 355), the encoded feminist awareness in these works operates within the complex processes of language and culture, of signifying structures that are not neutral but already sexually marked. As Shirley Neuman in turn indicates, writings in the feminine address “the question as not one of ‘woman’s language’ but of ‘woman’s relation to language’ ” (Gilbert and Gubar, qtd. in Neuman, “Importing” 401). And these “écritures,” according to Suzanne Lamy, open onto “l’*éclatement et le recentrement des signes et des corps—nos corps étant, dès l’origine, des corps parlés, des corps marqués*” (“L’autre” 27). As critical studies such as those by Smart, Dupré, Godard and Neuman have shown, this poetics often stages a “redécouverte” with a maternal other (Dupré, *Stratégies* 27). In her study of Brossard, Théoret and Gagnon, Dupré describes this “renouement” in Kristevan terms, branding Québécois “écriture au féminin” as seeking a “langue d’avant langue” (13) or “interdit[e] de la proximité de la mère, le refoulement de la jouissance attachée à la relation maternelle” (26). This “langue,” Dupré argues, opens onto a “redécouverte d’un corps à corps avec la mère, avec l’autre femme” (27) and, as we shall see in the works of Théoret, Tostevin and Brandt, with “l’autre homme.”

In her study of Québécois literature’s representations of the feminine, Smart notes: “La récupération de la figure de la mère, la patiente archéologie des mythologies du passé à la recherche de traces féminines, l’exploration de nouveaux rapports entre les ‘dualités’ du corps et de l’esprit, de l’émotion et de la pensée, de la fiction et de la théorie . . . sont autant de facettes de la

²³ Although preoccupied, as was Cixous’ notion of “écriture féminine,” with women’s exclusion or marginalization in given literary traditions and symbolic structures, Québécois and anglophone writings in the feminine are distinct from this movement. Cixous’ “écriture féminine” extends to male writers such as Joyce and Genet, and to the ‘feminine writing’ detected by critics in earlier works (from George Sand and Virginia Woolf to Nathalie Sarraute). Writings in the feminine limit themselves to a feminist consciousness that is not only implicit in the text but made to generate a female-oriented mode of writing. Moreover, defining sexual difference beyond essentialist, metaphysical presumptions that they attempt to dissolve, writings in the feminine hold to the importance and value of specifying whether it is a man or a woman who writes. Notably, male poets such as Robert Kroetsch in English Canada and André Roy in Québec express and act out a similar need in some of their works, foregrounding a male-specific poetic eroticism.

déconstruction de l'ordre symbolique patriarcal . . ." (Écrire 297). Focussing on the examination of the "murder," of "la voix du féminin-maternel meurtri" (21), in the "roman-de-la-terre" and other Québécois writing, Smart also concludes that there is a need for a resurrection of the maternal as an alterity, as her critical project (in turning to Théoret) looks for "la vraie mère" who is the mother, "corporelle, humaine et aimante" (329), traditionally and suspiciously absent in favour for a "femme-objet" or a "mater dolorosa" (332). Di Brandt's doctoral thesis on contemporary women's maternal narratives also begins to show where, in her words, "the maternal subject has begun to be articulated in a way that's useful for rewriting and identifying the place of the mother in narrative" (Wild 7), despite (and perhaps unrelated to) many writers' rejection of maternity as a life-choice. Brandt observes that Canadian women continue to write "mother-stories" despite some of the theoretical and social difficulties of such a project, and "in defiance of the constraints of the Western narrative tradition with its long history of enforced maternal absence" (Wild 16). In light of this artistic and political effort to bring the mother into public, social, literary and theoretical discourse, Brandt even sees "the emergence of a powerful women's community in Canada, which speaks for and through the maternal," and which (hopefully in light of my own study) points to the possibility of a "cross-cultural" conversation of the maternal (Wild 157-158). As Brandt implicitly acknowledges, this conversation may indeed offer an ethical model of relating to the other: "I will look to the other where s/he is without trying to bring everything back to myself" (Cixous, qtd. in Wild 158).

The practices of deconstructing, (re)writing and (re)reading in the feminine refute the 'Law' of the Father through critiques of the (Lacanian) symbolic order and the dichotomies of traditional metaphysics. However, there is no question of invoking the reverse of this 'Law': a so-called 'Law' of the Mother. If posited as a model for intersubjective exchange, maternalism is not invoked as a new authority, but rather as an irreducible alterity, a like and an other, a kind of Ricoeurian similitude we could say, involved in the founding of the (Kristevan-like) subject-in-process or the (Irigarayan-like) subject-in-becoming. As Banting argues, "Neither text nor body is the site of origins. The site of origins is endlessly displaced . . ." (228). As feminist writers seek

an alternative representation of female corporeality and pleasures, as they seek to encode and mark bodies differentially by exploring and exploding given social significations, perhaps we should think of not one female body inscribed in textuality but of many bodies: hetero- and homo-erotic, maternal, suffering and joyful, textual, ethical, even spiritual. For instance, Brossard's deconstruction of the mind/body dichotomy culminates into her notion of the "cortext" (in turn borrowed by Théoret and appropriated by Mouré). In her essays, Brossard rejects the notion of extra-discursive bodies. And as Godard argues, bodies are read "to the letter" ("Essentialism?" 36), for "woman" only becomes, writes, loves, or exists when she is " 're/cited' " ("Essentialism?" 37).

As I turn to the "maternal poetics" of Brossard, Brandt and Théoret in the next chapter, and then to the feminist deconstructions of Western metaphysics by Mouré and Tostevin in part 3, the very gestures of inscribing female alterity will become non-dissociable from a notion of linguistic or textual alterity. As Théoret indicates: "Le langage au féminin n'est pas une langue nouvelle au sens où il faudrait parler d'un nouvel idiome. Le langage au féminin est déplacement du symbolique. . . . En abolissant la frontière entre nature et culture, en révisant les rapports entre nature et culture, les écrivaines font une relecture culturelle rétablissant, réactualisant la littérature des femmes, produisant aussi leur lecture de toute littérature" (*Entre* 152). This very engagement with and working through given linguistic, psychoanalytic and theoretical parameters entails discoveries of alterity on what are the interrelated levels of both the text and the subject.

The early context of Québécois feminism revealed, as we saw in the introduction, that "écriture au féminin" and the practice of "fiction théorique" were, for a while, more or less synonymous. Feminist texts (by both anglophone and francophone women) continue to stage the conscious invocation and evocation (from the reader's perspective) of feminist thought in their work. They also continue to renew literary conventions and find new forms of expression. However, generic transgression may not be, in and of itself, necessarily the prevailing concern that it was at the outset of Québécois feminism. Certainly, anglophone writings in the feminine have embraced the practice of formally experimental, polemic, militant, cerebral, but also sensual and

emotional, writing. In Marlatt's words, "fiction theory" provides "a corrective lens which helps us see through the fiction we've been conditioned to take for the real . . ." ("Theorizing" 9). And as we shall see with Tostevin's vertical verse lines in Gyno Text, Mouré's supplementary structure in Furious, and Brandt's use of enjambment and verse mixed with prose, form is certainly explored and traditional generic boundaries often exploded, opened to various maternal and feminine inscriptions. Yet these anglophone texts do differentiate themselves from the radical mixing of genres which was undertaken by Théoret and Brossard in their early work. It would be fair to argue that Tostevin, Mouré and Brandt are exploring/exploding formal conventions within the confines of poetry, whereas the very distinction of a work's genre is much more ambiguous and arbitrary if we consider L'amèr, Bloody Mary, and Une voix pour Odile.

How do the formally innovative and theoretical aspects of these feminist works relate to an ethics of alterity? The other, we shall see, is a veritable condition for subjectivity. It is also the condition for writing and reading, indeed opening up "unknown and unspoken dimensions of reality" (Brossard, "Before" 64) that, in an ethical perspective, the other always has the potential of offering. As Théoret argues, writings in the feminine do not posit or assume a new tongue, but constitute a project of displacement which, to various degrees, blends literary genres and theory to offer an ethical 'poesis' that works "to enlarge, to increase, to augment the capacity of meaning of our language" (Ricoeur, "Poetry" 450). The meshing of theory and creation, as conducive to literary creation and the expression of both female and textual alterity, is partly what defies and expands generic boundaries. The expanded boundaries of writings in the feminine could thus be considered as showing one way in which literature is prone to bringing "about unexpected reshapings of the familiar" (Attridge 25)—of discovering the other of the same.

As first and foremost a self-conscious practice, writing in the feminine can also be considered an ethical practice of excess, one that also bears within itself its "other" that always exceeds it: reading. It often inscribes a kind of self-reading in the text itself, as well as a process of interpreting other texts (the text's own 'sources.')

As Cixous suggests, "Writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned) of same and of other

without which nothing lives . . .” (Newly 43). Because of this self-inquiry and the theoretical interrogation of cultural and textual frameworks, the speaker/writer is also a kind of reader, writing and reading herself into the cultural order. In this sense, writing is always already reading, “l’écriture comme lecture,” Kathy Mezei suggests, “jouant sur une intertextualité flagrante ou subtile” (“La lecture” 28). The feminist, theoretical and often self-reflexive text indeed draws attention to the question of interpretation in general, to the writer as her own theorist and, to some extent, her own reader.

As we shall consider throughout, Brandt, Théoret, Mouré and Tostevin also blur distinctions between creation and interpretation, self-consciously representing the practice of writing as a kind of re-reading or self-reading. These writers’ strategies of melding theory and creative writing also contribute to the open dialectic of theory, poetry and fiction—indeed “l’écriture [au féminin] comme lecture [au féminin].” This also constitutes the feminist and philosophical scope of the text itself, or the theoretical interplay that, at times “flagrant,” at times “subtle,” calls upon the critic’s own melding of “reading genres.” More precisely, if the encoded, self-aware invocations of theoretical paradigms are to be discerned by the critic (or outside reader), the more “subtle” (less avowing) evocations—increasingly prevalent when theory is more “entendue” by recent practices—also provoke the critical application of theoretical readings to their texts. Finally, my readings will seek to flesh out the theories enacted and, we must admit, somewhat authorized, by certain texts. They will also bring to the literature theories that intertextual readings bring to mind in this critical formulation of a feminist ethics. Perhaps, this very mélange of intended allusions to theory and “hermeneutical intertextuality” transgresses what Lévinas denotes as the potentially “closed and circular nature of this self-conscious awareness” (Hand 75). Like the works under study, my own critical undertaking cannot avoid making meaning. It can, hopefully, avoid its encapsulation, respecting the un-decidability and openness, hence the alterity, that must remain unpredictable and, in some ways, unknowable.

Part 2

Maternal Plateaux: Brossard, Brandt, Théoret

The second part of this study explores what I have called the genesis of a feminist ethics of the other and, in direct relation to this ethics, the genesis of female selfhood. If the starting point of all three poets in question is a critique of the social order's organization of sexual difference, this critique does not present a single feminist discourse against patriarchy. After all, not all patriarchies are the same, and as Kathleen Martindale observes, different women suffer under various systems, "to different degrees and in significantly different ways, in terms of race, class, ethnicity and sexual preference" (54). Although, in the works to be examined, the speakers' lives are not self-consciously complicated by their whiteness, their positions are under-written by sexual preference, ethnicity and class.¹ Nicole Brossard situates her feminist fiction-theory well within a (European-based) psychoanalytical discourse and Québécois middle-class family structure. In her prose-poetry, France Théoret depicts a French, colonized and working-class Québec before the Quiet Revolution. Di Brandt's writing is inspired by her own orthodox Mennonite background, in which Low German and English both constitute the lingua franca; High German is the official, sectarian language, and English is the language of choice for the "treacherous" poet-daughter.

At times I refer to the speakers of these works as poet-speakers, simply to foreground that the inscription of female selfhood is often pursued by a first-person narrator, who is concerned with the act of writing itself or even faced with her own struggle for authorship.² As the next three chapters will demonstrate, Brossard, Brandt and Théoret set out to unpack and redress the treatment of the injured, suppressed or "negative (m)other." One strategy these writers adopt is the

¹ Marlene Nourbese Phillip, Claire Harris and Leila Sujir from English Canada, as well as Ying Chen, Anne-Marie Alonzo and Nadine Ltaif from Québec, are among some women authors who deal with the mother within the context of racial difference, exile and history.

² Worth noting here is the lyric heritage of many writings in the feminine, considering this prominence of first-person utterance. The Romantic Period is particularly responsible for elevating lyric to "the quintessentially poetic type" (Abrams 76). Meditative "poet-speakers" are certainly present in Wordsworth's famous Ode on "Intimations of Immortality," and later in the mystical, elliptical short lyrics of American poet, Emily Dickinson.

problematized reproduction of the very system under attack. I shall argue that, to various degrees, all three use mimicry as a productive gesture. However, this is where the similarity ends. It is in profoundly different ways that Brossard's rather shocking deployment of phallogocentrism's suppression of the mother (matricide) and Brandt's ironic paraphrases of pious discourse constitute a form of mimicry in the face of master narratives. Meanwhile, mimicry (or hysterical mimicry) figures as Théoret's major strategy in her early work, as the performance of femininity eventually gives way to an alternative version of it—the potentiality of female selfhood.

Within the specific contexts that frame their writing, Brossard, Brandt and Théoret demonstrate how sexual difference can be regulated through its very negation. As the previous chapter suggested, all five poets under study view alterity as initially steeped in a notion of maternalism, either in terms of mother-daughter relations, the very practice of maternity, or the idea of female similitude. The theme that crosses all the poetic texts under study evokes or at least anticipates Ricoeur's ethical aim of solicitude: for, at the core of the relation to the (m)other, is this idea of similitude, "the esteem of the other as a oneself and the esteem of oneself as another" (Oneself 194). Brossard, Brandt and Théoret represent their poet-speakers' disclosure of and initiation to alterity—a kind of subjective (m)otherness and textual mothertongue.³

The next three chapters concentrate on the maternal in its various representations, forms and functions, and in relation to feminist re-interpretations. Like Ricoeur's ethical concern in Oneself as Another, at stake here is the status of the same. An important postulate of female selfhood, female sameness (or specificity) is far from easily renegotiated, perhaps because women have been cast for so long in the role of man's other by philosophical, literary, psychoanalytical, religious and other cultural narratives. Thus the focus for the three poets in question is inevitably on the very constraints or those "ideological ruts" out of which women must write themselves, if alterity is to serve any positive end. It should become clear that the degree of facility and the strategies adopted in order to transgress these constraints vary greatly from one poet to the next.

³ Throughout these chapters, I spell 'mothertongue' as one word, deriving it from Daphne Marlatt's prose text, "Musing with the Mothertongue," which concludes the poems in Touch to my Tongue and establishes its link with Kristeva's semiotic (see Chapter 4).

As Sara Ruddick points out, “Conceptions of ‘maternal thinking’ are as various as the practices of mothering from which they derive” (52). Brossard’s lesbian mothers, Brandt’s earth-mother goddess, and Théoret’s hysterical Medusa will re-enforce this point.

Yet, the themes in these texts can also appear to stand quite far from an ethical position, or at least from the relational ethics imagined by Irigaray, Ricoeur or Lévinas. Perhaps this is to be expected, as no ideal, ethical or otherwise, is necessarily either eternally sustainable or automatically acquired. Violence is not only exhibited in the patriarchal control over maternalism or in fantasies and demands that deny the mother’s subjectivity, her otherness. As we shall see, Brossard’s rhetorical, self-conscious strategy consists of deploying the very violence of matricide to a productive end. Brandt’s representations of the “murder plot” between mothers and daughters also include the (verbal) brutality and destructive factors of the mother-daughter relationship. Finally, it is Théoret’s hysterical speaker who not only performs but initially internalizes, and projects back, the violence of her symbolic (social) context. It is not, then, to the reformulation of the female subject’s ideal relation to the maternal and female other that I turn to, but rather the constantly negotiable and conditional aspects of this potentially ethical exchange.

Chapter 2

Nicole Brossard: (M)Other to (M)Other

In her first feminist fiction theory, L'amèr, ou le chapitre effrité, Nicole Brossard presents a sharp critique of Western, androcentric representations of maternity. The book's first epigraph offers an explosive anticipation of Brossard's attack: "C'est le combat. Le livre. La fiction commence suspendue mobile entre les mots et la vraisemblance du corps à mère dévorante et dévorée."¹ "Dévorante et dévorée": such are the attributes of this "corps amer," this "corps [de la] mère," that Brossard sets out to textually reproduce and then subvert. They are also what entails the text's re-conceptions of sexual difference, which recall Irigaray's critiques of psychoanalysis in Speculum of the Other Woman.² In direct relation to Brossard's lesbian perspective, most of Irigaray's writings address the repression of the mother-daughter bond, of "the desire for likeness, for a female likeness" (This Sex 65), and the reduction, conflation and limitation of female sexuality to maternity. As Brossard's epigraph indicates, her text sets out to redress the reduction of female sexuality to a reproductive role and the representations such reductions have produced ("mère dévorante," Freud's 'devouring mother'). It seeks to redress the mother's dispossession ("mère dévorée") of her own sexual specificity and otherness, and will posit the mother-daughter relationship as the model of a lesbian ethics. The questions to consider are thus three. How does L'amèr subvert phallogocentric renditions of the maternal and the feminine? How is Brossard's analysis of the mother-daughter relation integral to her expression of lesbian alterity (or otherness) in ethical terms? Finally, are Brossard's transgressive strategies—chiefly her reproduction of patriarchal violence—effective, necessary, and let alone resonant, with an ethics of the other?

¹ There are no page references in citations of L'amèr's two epigraphs since no pagination is given in the text.

² L'amèr's treatment of sexual difference textually recalls many of Irigaray's concepts in Speculum. But L'amèr can also evoke the further elaborations of Irigaray's theory in This Sex Which is Not One, An Ethics of Sexual Difference and Sexes and Genealogies (all published after L'amèr). Except for the notion of "même différence" (35) and one poem's epigraph, rarely does Brossard's text directly cite Irigaray. But its own psychoanalytical critique as well as maternal and lesbian ethics can effectively be read in light of Irigaray's philosophy—and thus in light of this chapter's "hermeneutic mode" of intertextuality.

Double Combat

In *L'amèr*, Brossard's speaker inscribes herself simultaneously as the outlawed daughter and the caring mother. This liminal position follows from her movement against and toward maternalism—the doubled edge of the text. It is often on the same page or even within the same passage that the enunciating “je” speaks as both daughter and mother. Yet, from the onset, the relation of daughter and mother is less than ideal. In the daughter's position, the speaker imagines a “rapport à cette femme [the mother]” that is “purement biologique” (18). This rapport is shown to stem from a psychoanalytical conception of the lost “corps à corps,” of an all-encompassing, asocial dyad, occupied by a potentially monstrous “maman” who could suck back her children through “le tube digestif, eût-elle d'une faim meurtrière ravalé son enfant” (18).³ On this same page, the speaker is also mothering her own daughter. Yet her actions of love and care are described as a purely domestic and robotic: “Tous les matins, on m'appelle maman. Je me lève. Je l'embrasse et je lui prépare son déjeuner. . . . J'ouvre la porte du réfrigérateur. J'ouvre les tiroirs. Je fais cuire les aliments” (18). It is on the first page of the text, and through a declared assault on the womb, that the speaker's shifting positions from daughter to mother are most forcefully and disturbingly assumed: “J'ai tué le ventre. Moi ma vie en été la lune. Moi ma mort. Trente ans me séparent de la vie, trente de la mort. Ma mère, ma fille. Mamelles, une seule vie, la mienne” (11). Whose “ventre” is under assault here? As the subject, “je” (or “moi”) refers back to both “mère” and “fille”; she is both murdered and murderer, her act both matricidal and suicidal.

As daunting and aggressive as this attack on the mother and the female self presents itself, it is meant as an attack on old myths and fantasies produced, the text argues, by an androcentric “industrie” (11) which has determined the mother-daughter relationship. In the idea of a “Matrice et matière anonymes” (11), the mother-daughter relation is momentarily suspended, effaced and

³ Likewise, in *Sexes and Genealogies* Irigaray writes that this “devouring monster we have turned the mother into is an inverted reflection of the blind consumption that she is forced to submit to” as “murder, whether real or cultural, serves to erase the debt” (15). In this essay, Irigaray considers the inadequate representation of both the mother's desire (as insatiable) and the child's desire for the mother (also as insatiable) in psychoanalysis, both stemming from the oedipal account that I examine below.

“anonymous,” having been put to death. Matricide/suicide become necessary though not final or even adequate acts of resistance. They constitute the extreme metaphor for Brossard’s violent theoretical insurrection against the “Réseau clandestin de reproduction” that her speaker attacks through such textual “mesures de guerre” (11). Through this rhetorical gesture, the speaker justifies this violence in her address to lovers and daughters, promising at once a revisionist, affirmative counterproduction: “Vos corps, amante et fille. J’écris pour ne pas vous abîmer vos corps et pour y trouver mon vide, mon centre” (11). Reminiscent of the “centre blanc” of Brossard’s formalist poems, this “centre” will be far from neutral.⁴ Rather, it will be feminized and lesbianized, filled precisely with what Irigaray argues to be inadmissible in phallogocentric theories of sexuality: a female likeness (or sameness). Brossard anticipates this likeness in her abundant use of the possessive case in this first passage, “moi,” “ma,” “me,” “la mienne.” The text continues to show its two edges: in its condemnation (through reproduction) of regulated and suffocating relations between mothers and daughters, and in its struggle to re-define them. But perhaps Brossard/her speaker should still be held accountable for the disturbing effect of her reproduction of the very violence she deplores in patriarchal control. Is the contrast between her desire not to “abîmer” the bodies of women and her own violent, matricidal metaphor an intended irony? What is the extent of her complicity with the order she so forcefully denounces?

If the speaker’s identity or speaking position is unstable and her treatment of the mother is double edged, the text’s own status, declared in the second epigraph as a “Théorie fictive,” is in turn generically liminal. As Brossard’s fiction theory defies generic categorization, it also adopts a variety of genres all at once. *L’amèr*’s tone is militant, political and personal. As we shall

⁴ Between 1965 and 1974, Brossard’s experimental poetry played with the notions of the blank or white point, of neutrality and of excess. In *Le centre blanc*, the writing is ascetic, impersonal, the use of the infinitive re-enforcing the (claimed) neutrality of a dissolved, naked enunciation, of an erased, absent ‘I.’ The “centre blanc” is the text’s non-point of arrival, “le dernier centre” (233). When “tout se neutralise,” there is the explosion of “rien,” of “silence” (233). This white, neutral point is the product of “l’exploration ou le sondage minutieux des / structures . . .” where “dénuder le sens sa non-évidence” (194) deconstructs anticipated meanings. A “post-formalist” Brossard recalls: “Le je était évacué. . . . Le corps réapparaît, mais il n’appartient à personne. . . . C’est un corps neutralisé, ‘inconscient’ de son âge, de son genre sexué, de sa classe sociale, de son environnement géographique. Un no-body qui éblouit la conscience” (in Bonenfant, “Ce que” 80).

consider below, the speaker's emphasis on the different stages of her life is suggestive of autobiography, while the style of writing remains theoretical, even cerebral, yet metaphorical. The writing unfolds through a fragmentary, fictional narrative expressing Brossard's feminist politics, and then turns into prose-poetry. The speaker (in a way, her own reader) is constantly referring to the process of writing a book that will undo the constructions within which she simultaneously dwells: "J'ai perdu maman. Cela pourrait devenir un livre. . . . Parce qu'il faut que j'écrive ce livre. Comme pour nous vider d'un rapport symbolique ou pour le mettre à exécution . . ." (18). Divided into five self-contained sections, L'amèr as a whole is a "chapitre" that disintegrates from within. According to its second epigraph, it undergoes a "Blessure stratégique" and a "sens suspendu," what we could indeed call an "effritement." In fact, the combat is always linguistic. "Traverser le symbole alors que j'écris" (14) involves the use of puns, neologisms, ellipses and syntactical breaks in an insurgence against a (Lacanian) symbolic order that defines and regulates sexual difference. The most obvious exercise of language is the repetition and phonetic conflation of the signifiers contained in the title—"mère," "amer," "mer"—and their semantic weight: "l'Amère dépendance" (13), "Toute mère" (13), "le clan des mères patriarcales" (24), "Clownes maternelles" (35), "mères enlacées" (27), "fille-mère lesbienne" (34), "'mer de la moelle osseuse'" (74), "déesse-mère" (74), "l'amer comme la peur" (81), "pareille à la mer" (83). Most readily, "l'amer" invokes the speaker's avowed bitterness at these totalizing female representations. Yet "la mère" will also provide a model of ethical intersubjectivity, associated with the natural elements of earth and sea, the suppressed but civilizing power of female genealogies, and even mother goddesses. Even though Brossard's own text constantly moves between damaging and renewing conceptions of maternity and female sexuality, I want to stress now her critique of the negative representation of women in her text—of the mother and daughter as "negative others."

The negative renditions of the maternal in L'amèr stem from the text's main point of analysis and attack: the representation of one sex, that is to say, of the female sex by the other. A number of critics have argued that many Western master narratives (scientific, religious, linguistic, nationalist, psychoanalytic and philosophical) have assumed a language "produced by a sexually

indifferent subject from an unspecifiable perspective” (Grosz, “Philosophy” 137). Ensuing from this assumption, it is argued, have been logocentric, hierarchical and dichotomous thought patterns upon which claims to universal maxims have resided, where one term generates a non-reciprocal definition of the other as its negative: mind/body, rationality/sensuality, self/other and, by extension, male/female, masculine/feminine, same/other. As many feminists argue, a lack of understanding in the area of sexual difference has ailed Western culture at large. The actual denial of difference is certainly well represented by traditional psychoanalytical thinking, particularly Freudian and Lacanian theory. Both Irigaray and Brossard detect a Law of the same in Freud’s and Lacan’s accounts of sexual difference. Both women set out to invoke psychoanalytical discourse and use it against itself, one through the medium of philosophy, the other through the medium of fiction theory.

In a critique of the logic of sameness (a logic that still holds ethical theorists’ attention), Irigaray uses Freud’s work as a prime example of the discursive reduction of the other “to the Other of the Same” (This Sex 99) which, in Freud’s writing, entails the predominance of a single libido (the male’s). According to Irigaray in Speculum of the Other Woman, this logic of the same not only forbids and denies desire that is not heterosexual and male, but also advocates the renunciation of the mother in favour of the father, or at least the paternal metaphor that stands for culture, Law and language: “Desiring the father implies hating the mother. Desiring a representative of the ‘opposite’ sex entails, at least for the little girl, rejecting a representative of one’s own sex and, indeed, as we shall see, the representation of one’s own sex” (40). What Irigaray calls “‘indifference’ ” (28) is the product of a sexuality and gender constructed exclusively on male terms, and thus of the negative alterity granted to the feminine in a phallogocentric representational economy.⁵ What Freud re-enforces, argues Irigaray, is the desire for the same,

⁵ Irigaray’s critique here stems from Freud’s account of castration and penis envy. In Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, he argues for the “wholly masculine character” (7: 219) of libido in boys and girls. For Freud, “libido is invariably and necessarily of a masculine nature, whether it occurs in men or in women and irrespectively of whether its object is a man or woman . . .” (7: 219). Freud uses the theory of castration to account for the inequality between the sexes: “The conviction which is finally reached by males that women have no penis often leads them to an enduringly low opinion of the other sex” (7: 195). In his lecture on “Femininity,”

“for the self-identical, the self (as) same, and again of the similar, the alter ego and, to put it in a nutshell, the desire for the auto . . . the homo . . . the male” (26). Because he derives sexual difference “from the a priori assumption of the same” (27), the female not only lacks what the male has (the penis), but confirms man’s assurance of his (self-)possession. Female sexuality is defined as “merely the other side or even the wrong side of male sexualism” (51), ensuring “the function of the negative . . . in what could be called a phallogentric—or phallotropic—dialectic” (52).

How are psychoanalytic conceptions of sexual difference thus re-deployed in *L’amèr*? Again, the intention of Brossard’s fiction theory is clearly articulated, this time on the final page of a book: “à ce que se perde la convulsive habitude d’initier les filles au mâle comme une pratique courante de lobotomie, je veux en effet voir s’organiser la forme des femmes dans la trajectoire de l’espèce” (99). The negative “state of difference” or “l’état de la différence” (the title of the second section) recalls Freudian and Lacanian versions of female sexuality, defined by an “effet de la soustraction” (36) and under the demands of masculine desire. As Freud speculates, woman knows no desire or pleasure of her own and, as Brossard terms it, one way or the other she is outlawed and rejected, “illégitime”(15) and subservient to those “lois qui nous séparent de nous-mêmes, qui nous isolent des autres femmes” (*Lettre* 30). As *L’amèr*’s speaker observes, “subir le père (de corps) ou de représentation (frère, amant, mari) ramène toute femme à son illégitimité” (15). In this same passage she also has a “ventre gros,” the logical fulfilment of female sexuality ultimately restricted to motherhood, as “la fille-femme expie déjà la naissance possible d’un nouvel être” (15). In fact, “La légalité pour une femme serait de n’être pas née d’un ventre de femme” (14), for the maternal body is also outlawed and rejected, even though the role of “mère patriarcale” (14) or “mère symbolique” (15) presents itself as the only acceptable option for the

Freud even claims “that the little girl is a little man” (22: 118) in the pre-oedipal stage. According to “Female Sexuality,” as women must repress their masculinity they become prone to neurosis and hysteria, and develop hostility toward the mother as the notion of her castration allows the girl to turn away from her, lower “the active sexual impulses,” and mark “a rise of the passive ones” (21: 239). In the previous *Three Essays*, Freud indeed writes: “These determinants, therefore, are intimately related to the essence of femininity” (7: 221), whereas men retain the erogenous zone of childhood.

daughter. This option is a “Cul de sac idéologique” (21), unavoidable “si elle veut survivre” (15) within a phallic economy. It is unavoidable if a woman is to compensate for the lacking and castrated mother—the mother she has rejected, must sacrifice, yet must still become, the mother whom the speaker has symbolically assassinated: “Qui de génération en génération se reproduit. Vache et bâtarde. Toutes aussi illégitimes” (14). In describing her own birth and initiation into an order that has anticipated her difference as a state of lack, loss and alienation (17), Brossard’s speaker in turn wonders: “À quoi peut-elle [la mère] bien vouloir m’initier. Les mères patriarcales ne pouvant initier leur fille qu’à l’homme. La confiance ne règne pas entre nous. Vendues, à perte” (16). The development of her own specificity, of a sexual likeness to the mother beyond the terms of any reproductive function, is simply inconceivable in the negative “état de la différence” to which both mother and daughter are subjected. As Irigaray observes, “nothing of the special nature of desire between women has been unveiled or stated. That a woman might desire a woman ‘like’ herself, someone of the ‘same’ sex, that she might also have auto- and homo-sexual appetites, is simply incomprehensible . . . indeed inadmissible” (Speculum 101).

This sacrifice of maternal sameness is experienced not only as a bodily loss or unavoidable rupture of the mother-child “corps à corps” or with the “cellule maternelle” (16), but as a regulation of desire through the father’s language. Brossard’s text turns to Lacanian theory, staging a kind of parody of the oedipal scenario, or the child’s entry into the socio-symbolic order (culture) once the asocial and “asymbolic” maternal dyad (nature) is abandoned. As is now well known, Lacan’s revision of Freudian psychoanalysis posits the father’s prohibition of the mother as a condition for the child’s entry into the symbolic. As chapter 1 argued, for Lacan the sacrifice of the mother is the underlying condition of societal organization, when she is posited as the initially phantasmic (not)All-encompassing object (the lost “object a” or “the place onto which lack is projected,” the “‘stand in’ for desire” [Rose 48]). This necessary deprivation which re-enforces the nature/culture dichotomy assures once again the predominance of the phallus (as the signifier of lack and its denial, regulating desire) in the symbolic sphere of interrelations and intersubjectivity.

L’amèr parodies this kind of accession to language, under the defining surveillance of the

(Lacanian) Other (the symbolic, the father). In this determination of the status of her difference, Brossard's own little girl enters into the social sphere which is regulated by the father's Law and dependent on the sacrifice of the mother. That she enters it on a "Dimanche" also recalls the more specific context of the Catholic household, Sunday being the holy day of the Christian paternal God, whose authority was traditionally conferred on the father:

Ils sont différents: elle et moi nous nous touchons. Lui, il me parle. Je ne comprends pas bien. Il faut que je me concentre. Je ne puis à la fois garder le contact physique avec ma mère et l'écouter en même temps. J'essaie de le comprendre. De le saisir. C'est mon père après tout. Il s'existe. Il faut que j'apprenne à parler. Mot à mot comme lui. . . . Pas question que ma mère vienne me toucher quand il est là. (31)

The syntax of the first three lines reveals the juxtaposition that Brossard begins to draw in this passage. Mother and daughter, "elle et moi," are the (grammatical) subjects of reflexive personal pronouns conveying the reciprocity of "nous nous touchons." Yet, in Brossard's text, the father-daughter relationship is ordered through a single acting subject's embodiment of male authority ("il me parle"). "Lui," the "pouvoir systématique" (32), organizes and controls the constitution of difference, the paternal/symbolic code acting on the daughter: "Lui, il me parle." She is the target of his speech, already destined to become the spoken, desired object rather than a speaking subject of her own desire. It is as "étrangère comme un autre sexe" (32) that the daughter assumes her place in the symbolic code, entering the contradictions of an "état" that both marks her as other (as not male) and seeks to abolish her alterity (as her own sexual specificity).

Under the assimilating gaze of the self-same, her otherness will be further marked as both invisible (a lack) and visible (a confirmation of male possession), in these paradoxical efforts of abolishing "la différence qu'il a lui-même choisi d'accentuer" (33). The entry into the Lacanian symbolic is indeed described as a process of internalizing the male gaze (the other's look) and the dominant discourse: "La fille a vu le sexe de son père comme en un rêve. Fiction: la réalité lui sort par les yeux" (31). The bluntness of this line echoes (just as it undercuts) Lacan's rendition of the oedipal moment, which constitutes the "female little man" 's renunciation of her desire for the

mother and corresponds to linguistic acquisition (Neuman, "Importing" 397). What is internalized and what "transforms" (32) the little girl is a "fiction." The line strongly suggests a play on Lacan's own notion of fiction, which he uses to describe the illusion or fantasy of the other sought out by the desiring (male) subject. But Lacan's admission that this is indeed fantasy or fiction is also undercut by Brossard. For, as she demonstrates here, Lacan fails to acknowledge the limitations of sight and perception, as he reduces difference to "an instance of visible perception, a seeming value" (Rose 42). As Brossard writes: "Illusion, métamorphose: regard de l'autre. Idée fixe ou juxtaposition de ses corps de mère et de femme. Non, elle n'a pas renversé la tête à cause de la jouissance. Elle a basculé toute entière à l'idée même que la différence la coupait en deux" (36). This "idée même," as the monopoly of sameness, again reveals that the other's defining gaze organizes female sexuality into its poles of fictional representation and into a difference that is merely "l'effet de la soustraction" (36).⁶

Brossard's break with the rules of syntax also serves her in her critique of Lacan's own demarcation of (yet compliance with) the order of desire that he describes as a fantasy of complementarity and unity. As Brossard's paternal figure "s'existe" (31), his existence is confirmed by the other (the female child) whom he assimilates to his own image; "la logique du même visiblement s'amorce" (43) and the girl becomes "double d'un même" (43): "Écroulée. Perdante" (42). She is literally fixed in a book of patriarchal Law and meanings, where the mother's body and speech have no legitimate place: "Je suis entrée fixe vive dans le livre, par ce premier combat, de ma main repoussant le corps de ma mère, de ma bouche écartée à m'organiser

⁶ This notion of invisibility and visibility which Brossard conveys in "L'état de la différence" derives from Lacan's rendering of the phallus as bearing the meaning of lack and of the denial of that lack at the same time. More precisely, the Lacanian mirror stage, castration complex and oedipal crisis split the subject who misrecognizes itself as a whole but lives by the other's gaze upon itself (first experienced in the mirror stage), its subjectivity constituted by the other's language. In the constitution of sexual difference (a non-symmetrical difference instilled in castration and the Oedipus situation), this dependency gravitates around the phallus (or around lack: having or not having, being or wanting), where the male is the subject of desire, desiring the other who will confirm what he has and guarantee his (imagined) unity. Man therefore desires the other who lacks (desire becomes desire of the other, which is lack) and perpetuates his fantasy of 'oneness' through woman. In other words, woman, as the object of the desire of the other, confirms the male subject's existence as a desiring subject. See "The Meaning of the Phallus" in Feminine Sexuality 84.

comme lui, pour parler vrai. Sous ses yeux” (32). The daughter’s attempts at “parler vrai” indicate her initiation into a Logos that is analogous to the logic of self-sameness, which overrides the categorical, systematic ordering of sexual difference: “Science du regard: observation. Usage précis de la différence: contrôle et maîtrise de ce qui est sous observation, appelant la logique de la spécialisation” (33). Following this entry into the patriarchal “livre” is an extrapolation on “la perception de la différence”: “J’ai choisi d’abord de parler de son regard. Parce que c’est ainsi que commence la perception de la différence” (33). As Winfried Siemerling indicates, the father’s grasping, assimilating and controlling gaze, later described by Brossard as “L’acte violent de l’oeil” (50), produces “a distancing of the other” (179), “à isoler pour mieux la contraindre, se contraindre. Ce qu’il choisit de regarder, il choisit de ne point le vivre” (L’amèr 33).

In this process which takes place in a “laboratoire idéologique” (33), Brossard shows how it is not the other’s own particularity that is sought out nor the civilization of the child in her own person, in her own sex. Rather, the parodic scenario initiates the assimilation of the child to the parent in authority and the culture at large, “tentant de produire à partir des différences” this “unanimité factice” (33). In fact, the female other is “exiled” and “entrapped” (42). She wears the Lacanian mask that her own symbolization under the primacy of the same (the phallus) has given her. This mask is the only available expression of her sex which, at this point, is merely an inferior male “semblance”: “faire semblant-semblance dans l’acceptation des règles de son jeu; différente et étrangère pour l’enjeu de la conquête. Écroulée. Perdante. Il a des yeux partout sur mon corps” (42). It is this paradoxical and negative difference that Brossard’s little girl must assume for herself: “cherchant à l’engloutir elle lui pèse lourd intérieure comme une mère. Insoutenable mais urgente pour le reproduire. Elle sera donc codée, légiférée. Ensanglantée” (33). Again, the only tolerated position for woman within these parameters is that of the lacking though fulfilling other, indeed “comme une mère” who, in turn, is sexually “untenable” yet “urgent for reproduction.” Maternity is no more than the daughter’s destiny as a function of human reproduction. The mother remains “inaccessible sexuellement” (15), forbidden and “incestueuse” (15), asocial and sacrificial (in the oedipal model), impossible (in terms of her own desire) and

“Mythiquement recouverte” (25).

Yet, we recall at this point in the text that L'amère opened with the confession of a daughter's matricide, the violent metaphor for the text's strategy of transgression. As the speaker indicates: “J'ai tué le ventre et fait éclater la mer” (12). And as she claims further: “On ne tue pas la mère biologique sans que n'éclatent tout à la fois la fiction, l'idéologie, le propos” (21). Yet, there is a difference between the speaker's claim here and what we have seen Brossard's text actually doing. Rather than simply “blowing away” these patriarchal (Lacanian) “fictions” and trying (in vain) to erase them from the scripts of history and culture, Brossard's analytical “chapitre” demonstrates how inadequate constitutions of difference must be dismantled from within. It is not so much that the body, the “ventre,” the very product of these constructions, must be “blown up” but that they must be redefined. In addition to wondering about holding Brossard accountable for the violence of her words, one may question whether this murderous trope is even necessary for her project. Another question thus arises. Is the violence, both exhibited and self-inflicted by a speaker who is daughter and mother, in truth a mere variation on Freudian oedipal hatred? Instead of opposing the denounced order, is Brossard's speaker/little girl replicating the daughter's hostility toward the castrated mother? Here, I would stress again that Brossard's mimicry, however disturbing and perhaps even unnecessary, is not mere replication. Rather, the murder imitates the act of matricide of which, we have seen, Freud, Lacan and the Western philosophical tradition stand accused, to then redeploy it in an act of renewal. Despite its hostile, negative outlook, the text will seek to offer more adequate and positive interpretations, giving rise to a new mode of sameness, which will in turn edify an alternative state of difference: “En elle, sous l'horizon se pratique une alchimie . . .” (12). No doubt, Brossard's matricide produces a startling aggression, but it also seeks a resurrection of this body. In fact, her subversion demonstrates how the female (m)other is already “deadened” by her cultural foes and the violence of phallographic dominance, which Brossard does not hesitate to redeploy.

Changing Difference

Brossard's fiction theory sets itself up as a double combat, both killing the mother and re-fictionalizing her: "Ne pas songer que d'elle surgit la mort sinon qu'à la reconstituer" (93). Here, at least, the strategy is somewhat more qualified, the promise of renewal more readily expressed. But the language that fills the first section of the book is still bellicose. The war-like cry of the speaker not only threatens patriarchal logic and the propagation of the human species, but also sounds the furthest from a mother-daughter ethics: "Le dernier assaut sur le ventre. La mutation. Utérus cousu. 'Aujourd'hui maman est morte'" (23). Words such as "Chaos," "flamber," "cible," "noyer," "fendu," "mort," "bataille," "mutilés" (12-13) fill these first pages, charging its self-proclaimed "voracious fiction" (12) that seeks to redeploy the fiction of the castrated mother, of those "mères patriarcales" (16). Strategically burying a function which has been used to define and actually engulf female sexuality, the speaker targets "le ventre." Yet she also contemplates a new morphology, that is to say, she re-conceives the maternal in new terms.⁷ The declaration of war on phallogocentric myth proceeds with an "Inversion stratégique: cette femme-mère a perdu son ventre. Mais conserver la couleur de son sexe" (15). Again, it is not some real or essential female sex that is "conservé" but its "colour," another kind of visibility influenced by perception and selectiveness.

Brossard's text transforms the order of the self-same. It is here that her text offers a new rendition of maternalism, which will serve as the premise for the relation of the female subject to her female other—and thus for a lesbian ethics. Brossard's speaker undermines the control of the female "state of difference" by proposing an alternate notion of sameness that will confuse the dichotomous categories of self and other. In both Brossard's and Irigaray's thinking, this alternate sameness is the condition of a female ethics. Brossard's renegotiation of female alterity involves

⁷ I use the term morphology in its Irigarayan sense, where it refers to the way the body (anatomy, sex) is culturally represented or formed by language. As Elizabeth Grosz explains, morphology is used by Irigaray as a "psycho-social and signifiatory concept" (Sexual xix) which "replaces the biologism and essentialism of notions of 'anatomical destiny' pervasive in psychoanalysis. For Irigaray, it is not women's anatomies but the psychological and social meaning of women's bodies within patriarchy that is seen as castrated. Morphologies . . . are also the effect of a socio-symbolic inscription of the body, producing bodies as discursive effects" (Sexual xix).

the daughter's relation to her own sameness, to her mother, and to the "corps à corps" relation which is in need of re-definition. This relation would take "each figure back to its source, which is among other things tactile. It comes back in touch with itself in that origin without ever constituting in it, constituting itself in it, as some sort of unity" (Irigaray, This Sex 79). This "origin," if founded in the maternal, is always already other, necessarily a non-origin, as the (m)other too is preceded by, exceeded by, and full of her own alterity; she too is a desiring subject, other than just a mother. In L'amèr, the "corps de trop," repressed by a phallic linguistic economy, is exposed as "le lien occulté qui livre le corps" (38), through the affirmative deconstructive gestures of Brossard's fiction theory. Her play is on the signifier, "différence," whose signified changes or slips through the various contexts it is given: "De la différence à la différence: l'entre-deux. Un espace fiction" (38).⁸ The textual desire to "perturber le champ symbolique" (25) in order to "conquérir la différence" (38) produces this positive "espace de fiction. The patriarchal Logos has been interrupted by a similar fissure, "ouverture dans l'épaisseur de la matière," wherein lies "le corps d'une autre femme," a "même" (38) who is always already other. As opposed to a mother "étrangère comme un autre sexe" (32) in that other Sunday scenario, here "Maman est là, étrangère comme une autre femme, proche comme une origine" (20).

The text's representations of an "étrangère," "une autre femme" and the other "proche comme une origine" are crucial to its ethical perspective. Most importantly, they convey the renegotiation of maternalism not only as compatible with a desiring and speaking subject, but also as a linguistic, social space, where nature and culture are no longer opposed. The "corps à corps" of this "origine" is retained as the "temps au coeur de la langue" (16), "la lettre à l'origine" (78), or a "langue d'avant langue" (Dupré, Stratégies 13). It is not the realm where "il n'y a pas de mots"

⁸ Although Brossard's poetic and fictional texts (as opposed to some of her essays) do not directly avow an intertext with Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, the positive inscription that difference (female, maternal and lesbian) undergoes in L'amèr can evoke two concepts in Derridian deconstruction: the dismantling of the founding principles of Western thought (same vs. other) and the affirmative gesture of prompting the movement of play within the field of language. In this affirmative gesture, hierarchical opposition is confronted in order to reverse and displace it, as well as allow what Derrida terms "the irruptive emergence of a new 'concept'" (Positions 42).

(79), but the realm where “le verbe d’action circule” (78). Could we not say then that the mother-daughter relation and, by extension, female sameness, is constructed “à partir de la lettre” and confined to language? Produced by the text’s feminist “déconditionnement,” this kind of “ouverture” to the (m)other finds its most provocative expression in “La végétation,” which follows “L’acte de l’oeil.” In contrast to Lacan’s theory of symbolization that makes the dyad anti-social and prohibited, Brossard invokes an idea of maternalism that is always already a civilized space, where “la chair va se civiliser” (87). Brossard’s representation thus recalls Oliver’s own reexamination of maternity in Womanizing Nietzsche. There, Oliver insists on the recognition of the mother as a desiring, speaking subject for the rendition of the mother-infant dyad as always already social, “as the foundation of the social [and the ethical, Oliver later suggests] rather than a threat to it” (165). The relation to the maternal in this light would be the first ethical relationship on which others would be based, recalling Ricoeur’s own notion of similitude in which “the esteem of the other as a oneself and the esteem of oneself as an other” function dialectically (Oneself 194). In relation to this wider model, there is a noticeable shift in the section entitled “L’amèr,” where the resurrected mother also becomes the speaker’s “sister,” “ma soeur” (40). The speaker even finds herself in Lévinas’ “face à face” (40)—a prototypical encounter of the same and the other—“solidaire de nos différences,” now that the mother has ceased “d’enfanter” (40).

Under these new terms, the maternal other can receive recognition: “Je la vois venir. Il y aurait un rapprochement quelque part . . .” (72); “Foulée ployée la même” appears “En écho” (77, emphasis added), as “un corps de femme à mes yeux, le sujet” (76). This re-construction is once again the product of a double vision. The status of the maternal and even of the speaking ‘I’ is conditioned by the transforming “acte de l’oeil,” the affecting gaze. As noted by Christian Bök, the short prose texts of “L’acte de l’oeil” describe the assimilative phallogocentric gaze of the self-same, the violent act of the “voyeuristic,” “specular” and “staring” eye (30). However, as observed by Siemerling, “the self’s consideration (the French ‘regard’ can also mean respect, and concern) for/of another woman in a differential space that reveals both sameness and difference . . .” (179-180). In this third section of L’amèr, Brossard evokes both notions of

“regard.” The once objectifying look develops into a loving, respectful, unassimilating gaze under this more positive light, allowing for the representation of an irreducible “figure” who is “méconnaissable à toute allure,” “illisible” and “migratoire” (59). As Bök notes, the titles of the short texts in this section expand with each added page, gaining “an extra, lexical fragment” (29) until they unfold into one full and enigmatic title, “L’acte violent de l’œil au mauve épris s’infiltrer ravi déployant la” (L’amèr 58), leading into the inscription of this “figure,” of this new “réellité” (66).

Like the attack on the maternal womb in “L’amèr” (but far less aggressive), the new process of “figuration” is both deconstructive and re-constructive of a female “state of difference.” Yet unlike the exterior gaze of the self-same and the daughter’s internalization of the Law, this new kind of specularization projects the poet-speaker’s own self-refiguration: “Elle dissout le contrat qui la lie à la figuration. . . . C’est que dans son interprétation de la figuration, de l’évidente forme, visiblement, elle a modifié le songe” (60); “la figure (ou comme un réflexe) désigne une nouvelle configuration propre à infléchir le sens commun” (63). Self-reflexive, “propre” (as sameness) and positively visible, could Brossard’s “figuration” still be accused of re-investing in the illusion of unity, of falling back into an equally patriarchal myth of self-configuration? As L’amèr reveals, the other is always conditional to the self in Brossard’s writing. The sameness that fuels the “réellité” of this figure, a figure self-inscribed in the feminine, is therefore not the sameness that alienates the other. It is the sameness that was suppressed by the patriarchal gaze, where “je” could not be “la même” (36) but only subjected to a masculine same. In relation to Ricoeur’s ethical notion of selfhood, it is the sameness of a positive difference that is sought out by the speaker’s re-configurations, the sameness of her own specificity and sex, given the possibility of a new model in the maternal: “il y a toujours un corps de trop dans sa vie. Toute mère. Tout enfant. Le même” (13).

In “La végétation,” the speaker attempts a “revirement de la matrice” to “produire et vouloir de toute façon, le ventre” (80) in its various and irreducible figurations. In sharp contrast to the matricidal act of the first section, the metaphor of a prehistoric civilisation, of the speaker’s

“ancêtre de femme et déesse-mère (74), recalls the “figurine” conceived by “L’acte de l’oeil.” The (m)other is reconstituted and, in her physicality, language and spirituality meld. In this process of being “civilized,” the speaker/daughter inscribes herself as entrenched in nature, the writing of the text accomplished through mind, body and senses: “je m’entête et procède civilisée parmi la végétation” (80). Yet this is no reversion to an essentialist femininity. As Godard notes, the speaker is “civilized because of her body, her senses. Her very inseparability from nature makes her literate. . . .” (“L’Amèr” 26). And as Brossard’s speaker explicates, she possesses a “langue versatile miscible avec le bruit le sel la peau . . . c’est civilisée que je suis me faisant lettrée mais corps pareille à la mer . . .” (83). She is “pareille à la mèr(e)” for she can also possess, rather than repress, her sameness to the mother. Dichotomies which have sustained themselves by immolating the (m)other are dismantled, including the opposition of nature and civilisation, of body and language, of physicality and spirituality. The daughter re-constitutes herself, is re-born after a “meurtre de nerfs . . . à court d’encre” (79): “je me refais” (72). As the inscribed writer of the text, the speaker constitutes herself in her own specificity, one that is modelled on the maternal—on a same other.

Loving (M)Other

“L’amèr” describes a second “dimanche” quite different from the Lacanian scenario of “L’acte de l’oeil,” representing what Irigaray later calls a “loving ethics,” modelled on both maternal and filial love (Ethics 104). Here, the speaker is the mother who writes, “ma fille est malade. La fièvre. Forte. Angoisse . . .” (20). She is also the angry daughter who confesses once again, “j’ai tué le ventre” (20). Yet what follows is the speaker’s reminiscence of a Sunday morning spent with her daughter and her own mother:

Un dimanche matin en écoutant Édith Piaf. Nous dansons toutes les trois. Je suis dans leurs bras. Nous nous chuchotons partout des bruits dans les oreilles et sur la bouche. Nous dansons très collées. Très serrées. Personne ici ne veut se perdre. . . . Maman est là étrangère comme une autre femme, proche comme un origine. J’essaie que nous n’avons

peur de rien, ni elles, ni moi, ni elle.

Ma mère par abstention écris que je m'abstienne de toi. La fièvre est tombée. (20)

The “corps-à-corps” evoked through the dancing “très collées” is made up of the contradictions which, I would argue, are the very components of the text’s ethical perspective. It is a space of touch and language (“matière et les mots” [20]), closeness (“collées,” “très serrées”) and necessary distance (“par abstention,” “que je m’abstienne de toi”). Here, no one “veut se perdre,” as the fantasy of an archaic maternity of undifferentiated, asocial, indeed impossible, love and care is rejected. The mother-daughter tie itself is re-negotiated and re-fastened rather than sacrificed, the speaker’s violent language notwithstanding: “Que nos corps ne soient pas immédiatement mutilés par la prise des mains, par l’étreinte chaude” (13). The speaker can occupy this space as mother and daughter, in her own specificity, irreducible to either of these positions: “Nous ne pouvons soutenir qu’un seul corps à la fois. Chacune le sien. Que ce soit clair” (13).

Yet Brossard’s renegotiation of female difference does not stop there, as she ultimately postulates an explicit lesbian desire:

S’il n’était pas lesbien, ce texte n’aurait point de sens. Tout à la fois matrice, matière et production. Rapport à. Il constitue le seul relais plausible pour me sortir du ventre de ma mère patriarcale. Et de distancer d’elle suffisamment mon regard pour la voir apparaître autrement que fragmentée dans ses parties métaphoriques. (14)

In other terms, what gives the text its meaning is the dialectic inherent in Brossard’s lesbian subjects and her accounts of the writing process itself: a dialectic of sameness and otherness which will continue to be portrayed in terms of textual mobility (the spiral, the aerial letter), as chapter 8 will consider more closely. The necessary paradox of sameness and otherness is precisely what Brossard’s text moves toward: a version of the lesbian subject who oscillates between and unbinds the categories of ‘inside’ and ‘out,’ who incarnates lesbian love and anticipates a lesbian form of writing. Again, “s’il n’était pas lesbien, ce texte n’aurait point de sens.” It would have “point de sens” for the “sens” forged by the inscription of a lesbian subject finds root in this very

paradox of same and other, in the as yet 'unsaid' relation to the other, as to the mother herself. Like the mother-daughter relation, lesbian intersubjectivity is premised on the functioning of a "même différence" (35), on the priority of "la même femme," alluding to Irigaray's own call for "female sameness" (Speculum 101): "C'est en caressant le corps d'une autre femme sur toute sa surface de vie qu'elle tue la mère, que naît la même femme" (21).

Brossard's own representation of the mother-daughter relation as a love for a same other becomes the speaker's model for the relationship with her lover, indeed making Brossard's text "lesbien plus qu'incestueux" (15). The censorship over the desiring (m)other is lifted; the speaker is led "vers le corps d'une autre femme" (38) (this "autre" as mother, as lover), entailing what the speaker calls "la dernière contradiction" of the "Fille-mère lesbienne" (34). Again, Brossard's "mêmeté" is related to Ricoeur's notion of similitude. If applied to this context of a lesbian ethics, similitude delineates "the fruit of the exchange" (Oneself 193), "the resemblance based on the pairing of flesh with flesh" (Oneself 335), that is certainly at the heart of Brossard's notion of "une différence près" (39). The ethical relation to (and modelled by) the mother-daughter relation is now transposed to and reinvested in the love for the other. Thus, if the traditional psychoanalytic notion of the child's relationship with the mother is upheld, it is certainly another kind of relation that prefigures and allows the subject to develop reciprocal, intersubjective relationships.

From the metaphorical matricide/suicide declared on the first page to the recasting of the maternal other on newly negotiated terms, the female subject finds new ways to relate to and exist as (m)other, forging a feminist and lesbian ethics.⁹ Brossard's re-conception of a "même différence" (35) deliberately alludes to Irigaray's argument for a female sameness, invoking the "tactile homosexuality" of Irigaray's work (Grosz, "Hetero" 338). It is "modeled on the corporeal

⁹ I recall again Oliver's idea of the maternal (which she terms the "female maternal" and theorizes through close readings of Kristeva and Irigaray) to suggest that this redefinition of the mother (as social, as subject, as desiring), that is to say, the notion of love of an other prefiguring the self and summoning it to responsibility, can be seen to serve as a model for ethical relations not only between women, but between men, as well as between men and women. Obviously, my consideration here of the redefinition of the love of sameness is specific to the lesbian and woman-centred context of Brossard's fiction theory. It will be treated differently (although still as the love of a prefiguring other) in relation to texts dealing with heterosexual love (Théoret, Tostevin, Brandt).

relations of the pre-oedipal daughter to her mother,” on the (social) “corps à corps” with the mother and a female desire that the oedipal structure attempts to eradicate, on a “similarity with and difference from the other” (Grosz, “Hetero” 338). Yet, in relation to Brossard’s overtly lesbian poetics, one question remains. Are lesbian relations ultimately placed outside patriarchal functioning, rendered untouchable by phallogocentric structures? If nothing else, Brossard’s appropriation of psychoanalytic terms shows how her engagement is, at least in L’amèr, constantly with the order under attack. Lesbian love figures as an alternative to the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality that denies her female subject’s corporeality and desire. The lesbianism conceptualized by Brossard’s fiction theory presents itself as a mode of resistance, of transformation even, that seeks to open up our symbolic order to that which both exceeds and constitutes it. Yet, perhaps there is still a utopian, rather naive and even dangerous ideal also set up in its place. Chapter 8 will address these questions more directly.

But in L’amèr, love is the redemption of the “ventre” and “sexe” of “la mère,” “the crucial transfiguration of desire for the other (as object?) into desire with the other” (139), as Irigaray writes in I Love to You. This is the notion that is also at the heart of Lévinas’ ethics as “first philosophy,” of his belief in “the force of an alterity within me,” within the self which may “exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation” (Otherwise 114-115). In This Sex Which Is Not One, Irigaray’s re-working of sameness through the interplay of identification and differentiation culminates in “When Our Lips Speak Together.” Here, the analogy of a multiple female sex that is truly “never one” generates a theory of the other as same and different. In other terms, the theory recalls Ricoeurian “resemblance,” as female sexuality already contains the other within itself: “Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other” (Irigaray, This Sex 24). Such is the ethical relation evoked in the poetic philosophy of “When Our Lips,” a love of the other through likeness without the guilt, the debt, the assimilation of self and other: “so long as you are neither my counterpart nor my copy. . . . We live by twos beyond all mirages, images, and mirrors. . . . we relate to one another without simulacrum. Our resemblance does without semblances; for in our bodies, we are

already the same" (216). Is it this "resemblance without semblance" that also constitutes Brossard's own "équation différentielle." Indeed, the heterogeneity within sameness dismantles the negative connotations of difference and the organization of subjectivity under the dominance of the logic of the self-same: "Et c'est cette même différence que je cherche sur ton corps, autre, de femme au même regard que le mien. Pareilles comme une équation différentielle. Dérivées de nos fonctions. De but en blanc dans le spectre lumineux. Projetées l'une contre l'autre ainsi qu'un rêve polysémique" (35).

It is as "purielles" (39) that Brossard inscribes the relation to a same-other, which in turn generates her notion of an "écriture au féminin," also an "écriture of jouissance," a "jouissance active de la rupture" (38) that will "speak the body" and allow the subject to declare, "je dis corps . . ." (91), maternal "corps," lesbian "corps." As the milk of the "patriarchal mother" dramatically "sours" (19), as "la mère" becomes "amère," this very acid begins to infiltrate "le papier du livre" (34). Indeed, the need to topple the symbolic order through writing (again as a kind of theoretical re-reading) underlies the entire work: "l'encre ou salive. Libre association. Perverse comme une sensation de maternage en cours" (39). Just as the already castrated mother is resurrected as a desiring subject, this "acidity" is transformed into the positive "contradictions" of "fille-mère lesbienne," of "la même femme" who is also an irreducible other, "cette autre passion. La même" (68). The female other is "infiltrated" into the writing "pour y faire surgir non pas le refoulé mais le déployé" (77). It is a textual otherness that recalls the female subject postulated on the maternal, and the act of "courir le risque du ventre délibéré comme avec des rives et des rages dedans . . ." (78). "[C]'est écrit," Brossard writes, "tout de même il a un corps de femme à mes yeux, le sujet" (76). For Brossard, the other woman is a veritable condition for subjectivity and, as chapter 8 will explore further, a condition at the heart of the writing process itself.

Chapter 3

Di Brandt: Maternal Kores

In her critical work, Wild Mother Dancing, Di Brandt chooses Aeschylus' Oresteia and the motherless Athena to illustrate the denial of the mother in classical Greek mythology, a denial that Brandt extends to the Western literary tradition as a whole. Sprung motherless from Zeus' head, Athena pronounces Orestes' fate after his (and Electra's) murder of Clytemnestra, following a mad cycle of murder and revenge.¹ Athena's exoneration of Orestes not only condones the necessity of Clytemnestra's murder but forever undermines the powers of Clytemnestra's Furies, "Goddesses of retributive justice," especially in matters involving matricide (Smith 84). In this same text, Brandt cites Irigaray's critique of Freud's theory of patricide as the founding edifice of culture, in which Oedipus figures as a prime example; like Irigaray, Brandt insists instead that an even more archaic murder underlies and precedes patriarchal culture in the West (13). Indeed, as the product of a father who is the only source of life and who "can father forth without a mother," Athena declares: "No mother gave me birth. I honour the male, in all things but marriage. Yes, with all my heart I am my Father's child" (qtd. in Brandt 11).

Of the five writers included in this study, Brandt is the one to deal most explicitly with the mother-daughter relationship. Alongside Irigaray, Kristeva and other feminist theorists (Marianne Hirsch, Mary O'Brian), Brandt addresses the suppression of the maternal within the West's master narratives, including male and female literary practices, psychoanalytic theories, as well as Judeo-Christian and Greek mythologies. Like Brossard, Brandt finds in these narratives "a vindication of matricide in the name of son-and-Father" (Wild 13). But unlike the matricidal redeployment undertaken in L'amèr, Brandt does not mimic this patriarchal violence as a strategy of counterproduction. Yet, as the first part of this chapter will consider, a literal reproduction and ironic displacement of the master discourse of symbolic religious doctrine (belonging to Brandt's native Mennonite community) does constitute her main subversive strategies in Questions i asked

¹ Electra and Orestes avenge Agamemnon, murdered by their mother Clytemnestra, who in turn has avenged her daughter Iphigenia, killed by Agamemnon.

my mother. Brandt's parody of (female) mysticism exposes the oppressiveness and inadequacies of the sectarian discourse, in order to then envision or anticipate other possible configurations of female subjectivity and sexual difference. The second part of this chapter will consider how Brandt's dissident tampering with given, so-called official narratives gives way to revisions of mother-daughter stories in Mother, Not Mother. Here, Brandt seeks to offer an alternative to the "murder plots" of mothers and daughters, at times alluding to the myth of the earth-goddess Demeter and her daughter Kore Persephone. What are, we must ask, the constraints from which the poet-speaker must emerge in order to envision a new relationship to the mother—that is, to envision a female countergenealogy? And what are the terms of this new configuration once it is inscribed through Brandt's renegotiation of the mother-daughter relationship?

"Letting the Silence Speak"²

Brandt's first and most controversial work, Questions i asked my mother, describes a struggle for voice and authorship, which the author identifies with her own "trauma of breaking through the strict codes of separatism and public silence . . . in the Mennonite community of south-central Manitoba . . ." (Dancing 9). As Hildi Froese Tiessen indicates, it is "the ownership of language" (14) that is at stake in the poems' "sceptical inquisitiveness" (14) of the community's control of language and interpretation, of the power discourse in place. From this struggle, the poet-speaker will begin to emerge from her negative position as the dutiful but sinfully curious daughter, to address her mother on new terms and speak her own desire, as she shouts "from rooftops what should only be thought guiltily / in secret . . ." (Foreword).³

In contrast to L'amèr's early declaration of war on the womb, the speaker of Questions i asked my mother quickly discovers that wrestling with the master narratives in which she has been raised involves the painful acquisition of authorship or linguistic ownership. Brandt adopts the

² From Brandt's essay, "Letting the Silence Speak," Dancing Naked 18-23.

³ I do not provide page references in citations of the foreword to Questions i asked my mother because no pagination is given in the text.

familiar feminist gesture of both subverting and commemorating the master narrative under scrutiny, before attempting to re-write it while “translating remembering claiming my past” (Foreword). Her speaker invokes a fundamentalist Mennonite upbringing steeped in biblical teachings which, in turn, are adapted through the patriarchs’ interpretation of the Word. She finds that the inscription of her own narrative is in itself a matter of hermeneutics, and it is this very discovery that the book’s Foreword addresses:

learning to speak in public to write love poems
 for all the world to read meant betraying once &
 for all the good Mennonite daughter i tried so
 unsuccessfully to become acknowledging in myself
 the rebel traitor thief the one who asked too
 many questions who argued with the father & with
 God who always took things always went too far . . .

To go “public,” italicized so that it connotes almost an obscenity whispered under her breath, involves going against the private seclusion valued by her orthodox Mennonite community. It is connected to the difficulty of breaking “centuries-old taboos against self-expression and art-making and public speech” (Dancing 9). As a woman, to write about love and desire is the ultimate transgression committed by the daughter who once asked “too many questions,” by “the questionable one” (Foreword) who, as a child, was already arguing with the biblical and real-life fathers. Undertaken with difficulty and a deep sense of “exile,” this “whispering in pain” (Foreword) is indeed about to be taken “too far.” Despite a history of silence and self-denial, the poet-speaker will gain a voice of her own and, in some of the poems, a sense of irony.

Named “Diana” in the text, the speaker traces some of her experiences from childhood to womanhood. Although much more overtly autobiographical than L’amèr, Di Brandt’s text refuses autobiography as its only generic qualification. It even opens with an epigraph that warns, “Some of this is autobiographical / & some of this is not.” Much of Brandt’s writing is in prose-poetry, adopting a conversational, informal, even colloquial tone. The speed and breathless quality of her

lines result from the use of enjambments, run-on-sentences and parataxis, which contribute to the poems' "partial views and associations" (Silliman 84) as well as the double meanings of their irony. Aware of its own writing process, yet much less overtly theoretical than Brossard's writing, Brandt's poetry nonetheless encodes a particular feminist interpretation (again, writing as reading process) of the body, sexuality, difference, and language. Most importantly, Questions i asked my mother insists on the risk, difficulty and cost for the female writer who breaks away from the rules, the official histories and even the community which have constituted her, contained her, at times abused as well as protected her.

By going "too far" and "taking things" literally, by "taking" or stealing the biblical Logos as the "rebel traitor thief" that she is, the poet-speaker will offer a literal and deliberately vulgarized version of piety, ironically mimicking the female mystic's love for her Man-Jesus.⁴ In other words, she brings the secular and so-called "imperial language of English Canada" (Tiessen 15) into the Mennonite's discursive practices, presenting a "translation" and a series of "blasphemous acts" (Tiessen 15).⁵ A sequence of poems titled, "missionary positions," plays with the supposedly fixed meanings of biblical and New Testament scriptures. In other words, it presents literalizing paraphrases of the sacred Word which, given the 'absolute' relation of its signifier and signified, should remain untranslatable, its signifiers unexchangeable (Söderlind 12).⁶ In short, the poems offer a set of incongruities that correspond to what Linda Hutcheon calls an "Irony Oppositional," or the "subversive doubling within and against the dominant" discourse (Splitting 8). It is as a "missionary" that Brandt's speaker also inscribes herself as the bride of a very physical (and well endowed) Jesus Christ. Rather than the virginal bride that the Christian nun-

⁴ Anne Diamond employs a similar strategy in A Nun's Diary.

⁵ In her reading of Brandt's (and Rudy Wiebe's) "dissident gestures" in terms of postcolonial resistance, Tiessen considers how the secularization of the (German Mennonite) community's sectarian language shows Brandt to be both in a position of the colonized (the one struggling to appropriate the power of discourse) and of the colonizer (the one using and thus complicit with the imperial language, English) (15).

⁶ In "Des tours de Babel," Derrida defines sacred language as the indiscernibility of "meaning and literality" (203) and thus as the absolute untranslatable text (203-204).

missionary symbolically represents, the speaker is sexually united with her “great godman” (29), Jesus, depicted as a hot and passionate groom. Yet the speaker’s “position” does not always refer to her role as his faithful, all-giving wife. It also connotes the various sexual positions in which she also finds herself engaged with Christ’s twelve apostles (supposedly a “good number for mates” [33]).

As Grace Kehler observes, Brandt actually follows (one could say mimics) the Mennonite tradition of interpreting biblical renditions, since unlike the Catholic Church, the founding sixteenth-century sect encouraged “individual hermeneutics” (24). In fact, the ironic, literal paraphrasing of biblical symbols recalls what Brandt has described as her own “Mennonite upbringing regarding language—that you should always use it in a completely literal way, in a kind of super realism . . .” (in Patterson 36). It is this hermeneutic and “super realist” tradition that the speaker deploys, ironically imposing her own interpretations in order to contest given meanings. By “squandering stealing the family words,” she stands as “the one out of line” (Foreword):

i can
 tell you right off the old man
 in his room demands bloody hard
 work he with his rod & his hard
 crooked staff well jesus he’s
 different he’s a good enough lay
 it’s just that he prefers miracles
 to fishing & sometimes i get tired
 waiting all day for his bit of
 magic though late at night i burn
 with his fire . . . (28)

Through her own explosive hermeneutics, the speaker is “squandering” sacred symbols, disrupting religious authority with her conversational rhythm, flippant tone and use of colloquial expressions. Her irony undermines the seriousness of mystic knowledge and the unknowable

grandeur of the “old man” himself. As the enjambed lines accelerate the narrative and the lack of end-stopped lines causes ideas to shift in the middle rather than at the beginning of lines (as in the fifth, eighth and tenth lines), the text resists linear thought and pretends to operate through free-association.

This challenging of religious learning is anticipated early in the book, when the adult Diana argues with her father over the meaning and actual grammar of a biblical passage. The father is angry at and frustrated with his daughter’s insistent attention to syntax. Since her attention to the materiality of language begins to detach the signified from its signifier, it renders their relationship arbitrary, and the truth of the Word is undermined, as is the fixity of official biblical interpretation.⁷ As Kehler notes, once the Word loses the “ability to impose limits on interpretation” (22), the supposedly unquestionable truth of the belief system is challenged and its authority is undermined. Again through irony, these limits are lifted. The monologic meaning of the Bible, only “revealed to those gathered together / in His name” (Questions 4), is undercut by the speaker’s relations with her Man-Jesus. In “having God for a father & jesus / for a lover . . .” (28) she confronts Christian veneration with illicit sexual desire, producing the incongruity or “shiftings of language” in which, Hutcheon argues, irony resides (Splitting 26).

Kehler also indicates that Brandt’s “missionary position” poems are where “the authorized and the illegitimate resonate” (21). Christian discourse is suffused with sensuality and altered by the colloquialized interpretation of Christian love and the male God. While the poet-speaker complains about the Father’s “rod” as well as his “hard” and “crooked staff” (28), she appreciates one of the apostles (perhaps Peter/“Pierre”) who is “hard as a rock” (33); there is also “jesus” himself who brings her “deep joy”: “. . . he was the world’s greatest / lover so gentle and rough his / lips & his tongue & his soft hairy / belly his thighs & the nakedness of / his soft hard cock . . .” (35). However, the point of reference for this expressed, “illegitimate” pleasure is still a

⁷ Analogously, in The New Sentence, Ron Silliman argues that, in “language poetics,” grammar becomes “meter” (86) or “prosody” (88), in so far as the analysis of syntax and language undermines ideology since it “prevents most leaps beyond the level of grammatical integration” (87). Referentiality is exceeded since the signifier is brought back to the fore; there no longer is “the overwhelming of the signifier by the signified” (16).

male authority—the male Logos, the “Word made Flesh.”⁸ Although sexual passion for the other will become an important component of a healed and healthy female subject in *Agnes in the Sky*, here only his sex is the active sex, the ultimate source of the speaker’s pleasure and so-called salvation. The male lover’s anatomy is referred to again through concrete biblical imagery paired with the incongruous sexual meanings attached to it.

In a tone similar to the “missionary position poems,” “Testimony” parodies a Mennonite communal ritual, “testimony time” (*Dancing* 41). In her book of essays, Brandt describes testimonies as the “one time you could get up in front of the community and tell your own experience like it was, naming your own haphazard life, the way it didn’t fit the official story” (41). She continues: “What these confessions were for, of course, was to purge us of our separate and distinct lives, to bring us back to the fold, humbly, on our knees, to make us belong again, to reclothe us, as it were, in the old familiar, and family, narrative” (41). By sharing her individual, unofficial hermeneutics and disclosing her sexual affair, Brandt’s speaker is indeed brought back to the familiar narrative of Christian passivity and salvation; yet she still interjects popular culture into her own testimony, like the lines from the song, “Amazing Grace”: “yes i was lost & then i was found / . . . / lord i’m saved brothers & sisters / jesus saved me” (35). Yet Diana is merely “re clothed” by the old narrative of her sexual difference, her “dark gaping void” recalling the taboo and illicitness of the female body expressed in an earlier poem, “Shades of Sin.”

In this poem, the female body is shown to be marked by sin because of its easy provocation of male desire. For, as the poet-speaker ironically echoes her mother’s words, men’s “biological urges unlike our own could not be helped” (8). Diana also describes how her mother rushed her daughters through a room full of nude portraits at the art gallery for “the sake of our education” (11). Although this exposure to adult female nakedness, “this totally new vision of the

⁸ Brandt’s target is a logocentric discourse, especially if the Logos (Greek for ‘word’) is viewed in terms of “a theory of creation which passed from Tantrism through Neoplatonic philosophy to Christianity” (Walker 545) and finally proposed that a god creates through the power of words. As Walker explains, “when the name was spoken, the thing materialized. The Logos, then, was divine essence concentrated in a Word and made manifest, as Jesus was called ‘the Word made Flesh’, ” synonymous with truth and law (545).

world” (11), is initially “untouched by more familiar shades of sin” (11), it soon awakens in Diana a deeper awareness of the prescribed denial of the body, and especially of the female body. To recall L'amèr, Brandt describes yet another “état de la différence,” where female sexuality has no model to define itself by, other than the official discourse that censors and regulates it. Parts of her body are named just as they are rejected and censored, the Logos psychologically internalized as the first and last authority:

say to yourself each time lips vagina tongue
 lips do not exist catch the rising sob in
 your throat where it starts deep under your
 belly the tips of your breasts your secret
 flowing your fierce wanting & knowing say
 to yourself the ache in your thighs your big
 head full of lies your great empty nothing
 despise despise the Word of God is the Word
 of God sit still stop your breathing look
 down at your numb legs your false skirt sighing
 sit still & listen (12)

The body is coated with interpretations sprung from the Father’s Word (or the speaker’s parents), ironically entailing what is a rather hyperbolic recitation of the speaker’s own self-denigration. The run-on quality of the sentences, caused by the lack of punctuation and again by the use of enjambment, conveys the deep internalization of a given doctrine, emphasized by the self-commanding verbs (“say to yourself,” “sit still”). However, this mimicry is productive. It allows Diana to speak her “fierce wanting & knowing” in the fourth, fifth and sixth lines, a desire inserted there, even though the words are still grammatically connected (and formally so because of the lack of punctuation) to the discourse that denies this sexual awareness. The paratactic statements also cause the ambiguous doubleness of acceptance and resistance; in the eighth line, that which is to be despised, the body or “the Word of God,” is left unclear, and filled with irony.

The lack of a sexual model (of female sameness) is perhaps what prompts a later poem's immeasurable yearning for the absent mother through what is again a hyperbolic mode of expression: ". . . i need a / dozen arms a hundred breasts i need a / thousand love songs mother a lap as big / as earth" (58). Once the ironic position of the earlier poems is relinquished, the poet-speaker is left with the sense of her emptiness, of her negative difference, mirrored back to her through repetition: "because she is not here i will / hold myself in my arms stroke / the emptiness in my belly with / unseeing hands rock my unspoken / grief back & forth back & forth" (62). For the most part of Diana's childhood, her mother is either silent or absent, or she is accused of having suppressed her daughter's inquisitiveness. Yet, even though Diana's questions are aimed directly at the biblical fathers' discourse and are reprimanded by her real-life father, the book bears the title, Questions i asked my mother, with signposts in it that remind us that the speaker's ultimate address is to the mother rather than the father. Although the mother is portrayed as fearful, helpless, at times angry, it is she who frames the whole collection, including "missionary positions" which actually begins with an address to an implied listener, "let me tell you" (28). This "you" is indeed the mother who, after all, figures in the book's title, and also in the affectionate self-excusing, "just kidding ma" (34), at the end of the sequence. In the last two sections of the book, an "old mother" connected to the earth even begins to respond to the poet-speaker's yearning for the mother and the bond which has been denied. But first, it is both the discordances and reconcordances of the mother-daughter relation that I want to examine. For, as we shall see, the daughter's demands and expectations imposed on the mother play an important role in determining whether a female relational ethics in Brandt's poetry is even possible.

Persephone's Turn

In the couplets of Mother, Not Mother and some poems of Questions i asked my mother, the daughter's yearning for her mother strongly recalls and at times even deliberately alludes to the myth of Demeter who, from earliest cults onward, has been connected to birth, motherhood, earth, power, control, and Kore-Persephone. A victim of Hades and trapped in his underworld,

Persephone is separated from her mother for a good part of the year, and becomes the heroine of the plot that Brandt re-plays in a modern, Judeo-Christian context.⁹ According to Irigaray, the mythical Persephone represents the woman who must renounce her (divine) feminine genealogy (Demeter, her mother) and social relations with women if she is to pass the threshold of adulthood. The passage from a matrilineal to a patrilineal culture (one that Irigaray discerns in Homer's rendition of the myth in his Hymn to Demeter) not only anticipates the absence of women's relationships from the civil and religious milieu; according to Irigaray, it also begins to efface female relations in general from the social sphere, from culture, language and even history, from the narratives of our social functioning. In this light, the myth comes to represent the prohibition and sacrifice of the mother-daughter bond, which remains nonetheless the underlying structure of societal and symbolic organization. In Brandt's words, maternity becomes "unspeakable, unconscious, associated with death" (Wild 6).¹⁰

The myth may well exemplify an androcentric order's maddening regulation and destruction of female intersubjectivity, but it also points to a positive, or at least necessary, component of social relations. The fact that Demeter and Persephone must separate for part of the year introduces the vital necessity of differentiation (i.e. of daughter from mother). Their story

⁹ In Homer's Hymn to Demeter, the reason for Persephone's abduction by Hades and her cruel separation from Demeter lies in the affairs of state, as Persephone's fate is played out among male gods. Zeus, Kore-Persephone's father, gives her in marriage to Hades who nonetheless abducts, rapes and poisons her, confining her to the dark pit of his infernal world. Irigaray interprets Zeus' actions as a sacrificing of his daughter's virginity to the establishment, executed in order to ensure his reign over all the gods of Olympia, even those of the lower world (Thinking 100-112). Zeus has not only used his daughter but deprived Demeter and Persephone of one another. In her inconsolable grief, the earth-mother will turn her back on the Olympians, sterilizing the earth until Zeus is forced to negotiate Persephone's release. Yet even after her reunion with Demeter, Persephone remains banished from her family for part of the year, having served as a pawn in contracts drawn "between men-god" (Irigaray, Thinking 111), her freedom and body violated, her womanhood almost completely denied of the bond shared with her mother.

¹⁰ In Homer's Hymn to Demeter, we are thus left with mere traces of Demeter's "desire for her deep-girt daughter" (Hymn 201, 304), of Kore-Persephone's own "lamenting" (20) and "desire [pothos]for her mother" (Hymn 344). The translation is by Helene P. Foley in "The Mother/Daughter Romance" 131. According to Foley, the word, pothos, contains sexual connotations such as the child's homeostatic relation with the mother. Perhaps Foley would then be right to argue that, from a Freudian point of view, Homer "undoes the girl's oedipal crisis, by authorizing and permitting her original passion for the mother" (131) or, at least, allowing her expression of this rapture.

also introduces this necessity into the mother-daughter relation's embodied remnant of the "corps-à-corps," which must include the positive, social dialectic of same and other, of closeness and of distancing, in order to be discussed at all in terms of a relational ethics. As in Daphne Marlatt's long poem, Touch to my Tongue, the interchangeability of Brandt's speaker as mother and as daughter is striking, entailing a re-conception of self and other, and insisting on this idea of differentiation.¹¹ The poet-speaker will become "mother" and "not mother," embracing a doubleness that entails her acceptance of the tensions and contradictions constituting her ethical relation to the (female) other, to a same, as an other, and to herself.

In reaction to what Brandt calls this "mother-denying, mother-blaming culture" (in Patterson 23), Mother, Not Mother asks, "how will we ever / change the old murder / plot of daughters / & their mothers?" (44).¹² Brandt's speaker here still finds herself, somewhat like the earlier Diana, "motherless" as well as "grieving" and also resenting this loss (35). In the

¹¹ In this 1984 long poem, Touch to My Tongue, Daphne Marlatt writes the characters of Demeter and Persephone directly into her text, transcribing the separation, loss and recovery of the mother-daughter narrative into a lesbian context. Marlatt's Demeter and Persephone are represented simultaneously as lovers, mothers, daughters and sisters, their reciprocity coming to the fore in almost every section of the text. In Marlatt's re-visioning of the myth, the (lesbian) goddesses manage to escape the violent, possessive and phallogocentric order of a modernized (and ironized) Hades figure, "the latest technician in a long line of measurers" (Touch 26). They inhabit "that other, lowlying, moist and undefined, hidden ground, wild and running everywhere along the outer edges" (Touch 27), as the claim to this alternate space 'finds' "the child provoked, invoked, lost daughter, other mother and lover" (Touch 27). In its close ties to Brossard's own feminist experiments, Marlatt's text reveals its poststructuralist (especially Kristeva) influences as it indicates what it considers to be an excess that always spills out of our linguistic, cultural and social structures. The maternal, as an already linguistic and social space, generates Marlatt's conception of language as matrix. It is this "mothertongue" that is proposed in the poem's closing essay (which has since been cited by many feminist writers and critics). As Kore-Persephone rises ("speaks" her way up) from under the earth, she (re)joins Demeter who is figured at once as mother, sister and lover, sameness and difference intertwined and respected. In a poem, "And Over Every Land and Sea" from She Tries her Tongue, her Silence Softly Breaks, Marlene Nourbese Philip also rewrites the mother-daughter myth, using quotations from The Metamorphoses (and thus the Latin versions of Demeter and Persephone, Ceres and Proserpine). Here mother and daughter are separated by emigration but only find one another again in the sensuous dream sequence, "Dream-Skins" (32-34).

¹² Derived from Marianne Hirsch's critical study of women's narratives, this "old murder / plot" harks back to Hirsch's treatment of the mother-daughter relationship "as story—as narrative representation of social and subjective reality and of literary convention" (Hirsch 10), a "plot" which Hirsch illustrates through Greek mythological mother-daughter stories (Clytemnestra and Electra, Demeter and Persephone).

desperate, reconciliatory attempt described in Questions i asked my mother, we are still the furthest from a mother-daughter ethics, even when Diana in turn likens herself to Kore-Persephone, travelling between earth and the underworld. In one poem's allusion to the myth, the daughter is trapped between the old plot (here the mother's siding with the father) and her present condition of trying to "climb" back to Demeter, the "ancient" and "powerful goddess" (Questions 51) imagined with her girlhood friends. Yet the attempt to reconnect with a lost female genealogy, expressed in relation to mythical and cyclical time, fails miserably:

trying to climb to you here
 in the present i keep slipping
 back you can't make anything
 disappear all the horizontal
 theories in the world can't
 make the distance between us
 less round the direction toward
 you less up & down i look at
 my hand in the water trailing

 . . . now every
 thought of you drops like a
 stone every remembered desire
 whispers death (56)

The vertical "slipping" of the lines themselves (as the enjambed second line shows) formally enacts Persephone's slide back into the underworld, a kind of avalanche of maternal memories ending in "death" rather than rejuvenation. Here, the life-cycle usually symbolized by Persephone's return to Demeter is painfully inverted, keeping them apart. In other words, the cycle (the "round distance" between them) is not initiated by the daughter's return to Demeter but by the "distance" that no linear or "horizontal" narrative can deny.

In Mother, Not Mother, the “not mother” becomes what Brandt expresses as “the dark side of mothering, the rage between daughter & [sic] mother, the betrayal between them, much of which is an internalizing and replaying of the old ‘blame the mother’ routine’ ” (in Patterson 24). The poet-speaker thus expresses her paralysis in the face of her “own abandonment” (34), unable, again like Diana or the entrapped Persephone, to “cry for my mother,” the mother “who won’t forgive me / for refusing her comfort, / insisting on my separate, / inconsolable pain” (34). In turn, a very earth-bound and disconnected Demeter feeds, clothes and shelters her children daily, “mothering the goddamn fucking world,” wondering “why she can’t put down simply, / i am the mother, / & leave it like that” (9). Both filled with their own “mother hurt,” mother and daughter are “recognizing each other / at a distance, too late, / full of misunderstanding, / as always” and, like Demeter and Persephone, “out of reach” (45), separated by the old, ingrained plot.

Along with Kristeva and Irigaray, Brandt finds cause for the personal and social trauma of “absent mothers” and “failure of fathers” (Mother 10) in the cultural presence of particular maternal images. In order to “unearth” the lost tie of Demeter and Persephone, for the daughter to write in turn, “i am the mother” (9), the poet-speaker finds that she must work through absolute representations that work to arrest women in conceptions of bodiless or spiritual figuration. These are the representations that negate desire as well as the complexities which constitute motherhood and have determined the mother-daughter relationship. Indeed, the poet-speaker reacts to the “perfect mother” (15), the totality invested in Christianity’s “mary mother mary” (61); she reacts to the suppression of the mother as bearer of female desire, and the reduction of maternity to a mere biological function that disallows “the fact that the mother is other” and that she “experiences jouissance and bears children” (Kristeva, “About” 146).

Brandt’s poems anticipate a more archaic and sexualized mother-goddess who will occupy the core of Jerusalem, Beloved, under her many names, identities and narrative sources (Greek, Hebrew and North American). Far from (or not yet) figuring as a nostalgic or impossible ideal, Brandt’s Demeter is triple-faced, capable of incorporating various versions or “the three phases” of

female experience (Guiley 417).¹³ The mother as triad is important to Brandt's disruption of cultural representations of maternity. Her speaker simultaneously adopts the qualities of Kore-Persephone, those of the nourishing earth-goddess (the character of Demeter herself), and the dark, malicious attributes of the "purple-hooded Madonna" (22) (Virgin, Mother, Crone); as a mother, she is also full of imperfections, terrors and physicality, since she is "only a woman" (20).¹⁴ A joyful Demeter may see her own image in her "baby's eyes" and herself as "a goddess, the source, / the very planet" (19). Yet it is an abandoned, embittered daughter who finds the mother's face "fierce, & hungry, & full / of greed," hidden under her "benevolent" countenance (22). Again, it is a very earthly mother who becomes a "middle-aged woman" (19), with "wrinkled skin" (19), or a "half mother, / half not mother. / bewildered by time / & place" (19), her "blood screaming" (21) at the thought of her "lost children" given to "the rough world" (20).

As the darker elements and contradictions of motherhood are exposed, the speaker is also exceeding the limitations of binary opposites, of the bad mother versus the holy-perfect mother. Such dichotomies are relegated to a "shadow," an unreliable "half-memory" (47), a fantasy imbedded in psychoanalysis: "not-mother, / the world is big, / & full of tigers. / i have felt / the teeth of some, / & they were sharp. / (like yours) / . . . / until you're only a / shadow-mother, / not-mother, / a half-memory, / a yawn" (46-47). This "half not mother" as well as the daughter's resentment, "misunderstanding" and "mother hurt" (45) are shown to have stemmed from

¹³ Guiley indicates that these "three phases" are "related to phases of the moon," particularly relevant in terms of the name "Diana" inscribed in Questions i asked my mother: "The virgin, or new moon is Artemis/Diana, the huntress, the wild and free woman who belongs to no man. The mother, or full moon, is the matron, the nurturer at her peak of fecundity and sexuality; she is Selene, Demeter, Ishtar, Isis, Queen Maeve. The crone, or waning and dark moon, is the old woman past menopause, the hag, the Wise Woman, the keeper of the mysteries of death, the destroyer to whom all life must return in death. In this aspect, she is frequently represented as Hecate, a triple goddess in herself, and sometimes as Kali" (417).

¹⁴ In fact, in earlier myths Demeter represents the trinity of "Virgin, Mother and Crone" (Walker 218). Her "virgin form" (Walker 514) has even been called Kore, which also means daughter, entailing the ancient Greeks' association of Demeter with the Goddess of the Underworld, Persephone (Walker 218). This idea of a trinity and of interchangeable identities can be further expanded with Walker's indication that temples bearing other variations on Kore's name, such as the shrine named Kermario, combine "the pagan Virgin with the Goddess Mari, who was sometimes her daughter, her mother, or herself, like Kali embodied in Kel-Mari" (514).

unrealistic expectations imposed on motherhood, from the very reduction and limitation of the maternal to an all-encompassing, natural and instinctual function. The “not-mother” may be the mother who fails to defend, comfort and support her daughter, to save her from an underworld which also alludes to “the old terrible God” (52) as well as a father’s abuse and control over the “Word” (52). Recalling Freudian theory, the “not-mother” may be a representative of the inferior sex, whom the daughter hates and verbally abuses: “the same body, / the same face. / i hate you, i hate you” (54). Yet as Brandt indicates, the “not mother” also connotes Sara Ruddick’s notion of “the intentionality of ‘maternal thinking’ ” (in Patterson 23), as opposed to the assumption that maternal care — the “give, give, give, give of it” (12)— “is somehow instinctual and automatic” (in Patterson 23). Discordant with any relational model, such assumptions entail the anger, sense of failure and blame that fuel the “murder-plot” in Brandt’s text and the uneasy relationship between mother and daughter, as well as the speaker’s own relations to both.

In rejecting polar attributes, the poems begin to project a fuller, more complex and heterogeneous representation of maternity. As Brandt’s poet-speaker will assume the identity of the mother, of the “half not-mother” who resists a fixed, failing or impossible ideal of motherhood, her position in the text proves to be unstable. This oscillation between the roles of daughter and mother refuses a unified, unchanging and consistent speaking position. As in Diana’s own rebellion, it is through a violent rejection of Christian dogma that the daughter-speaker recalls her religious background, and begins to articulate her desire for the earth-mother, mourning the primary wound/womb: “today i spit out God & Jesus / for the last time” (61). “God & Jesus” are no longer the creators and embodiments of the Logos but are superseded by the life-giving nourishment of the earth-mother or Demeter’s milk. By emphasizing the maternal as a possible model for a relational ethics, the (forbidden) relation to the mother, supposedly repressed by the language which we come to know and speak, becomes nonetheless a generative component of the mothertongue deployed in the poem. Here, it generates the poetic imagery that exhibits the urgency of the subject’s ‘need’: “i needed milk, i needed / your white hot breasts / pressed against my mouth, / a woman’s arms around, / my head / the tree in my bedroom / has been sprouting

leaves, the vines on my sheets / are bearing fruit" (61). One could say that the daughter seeks to recall and reclaim as well as inscribe the "corps-à-corps" as an already linguistic and constitutive component of the speaking female subject, "enlarging the boundaries of the intelligible and the socializable," as Kristeva might propose ("À partir" 500).

In order to re-write the female (m)other, the speaker also inscribes herself as the earthly and spiritual mother, the very "mère jouissante" (an orgasmic mother). Poetic language becomes embedded with what Brandt calls the "unspoken, unspeakable, explosive energy being channelled, received into words" (in Patterson 32), with an element of (m)otherness at both a textual and subjective level.¹⁵ Once the vehicle of pain and infelicity, poetic language yields to "the great dark rush of mothering, / the pleasure in it" (Mother 12). Now under the guise of the desiring, earthly mother-goddess, the poet-speaker expresses a deep, lush pleasure in her own pregnant body: "my huge floating belly, my nipples / big, dark, swollen / with milk, leaking desire, / golden, liquid" (17). Kristeva's own description of "a flow of unending germinations, an eternal cosmos" ("Stabat" 185), issued by the other (the child) within, provides another possible intertext.

The use of water imagery invokes an open, plural subjectivity, as the expecting mother in Brandt's poems expresses, through rhythmical enumerations, a hyperbolic desire, huge and ocean-like. An "oceanic bliss" is experienced under her lover's touch, as she experiences an intersubjective connection with the other (the child within her): "erotic trembling, oceanic bliss. / smacking, sucking, stroking / my sunlit prow, big with child" (Mother 17). The physical as well as intellectual sense of integrity and pleasure comes through an assonant and alliterated language that becomes itself a "matrix," the speaker having married her "brain" to her "womb," her writing

¹⁵ Referring directly to Kristeva's theory of language, Brandt has expressed her own desire "to speak across the conscious/unconscious divide, to heal the mind/body split, & [sic] to make language come truly alive, & aware of itself, as sound, rhythm, image, line, echo, spacing, & even silence" (in Patterson 27). Here Brandt harkens back to Kristeva's famous formulation of the semiotic chora. In brief, the chora is analogous to both the Freudian notion of the drives inhabiting the child's body in the symbiotic space shared with the mother in the early stages of infancy and to Lacan's appropriation of symbiosis as the Real. Yet, according to Kristeva, even in symbiosis the semiotic is already in the process of becoming a signifier or an irreducible component of language, of the symbolic order. The examination of Mouré's and Tostevin's deconstructive and more overt Kristevan poetics in part 3 will further expand on this theory, which posits the maternal body as a social site of language and intersubjectivity.

to her body: “it was then, dear reader, / my brain sank into my womb” (17). The “jouissance” in this poem is never simply maternal or simply feminine (as in female sexual pleasure). Like its title, the collection of poems invokes a “jouissance” which is “mother” and “not mother,” irreducible to either category. Desire is bodily, intellectual and spiritual, and liberating enough to be celebrated with a sense of humour and pride: “my body was a ship. & i / sailed the seas / of downtown Toronto in it, / sails billowing, / full of wind, spirit breath, / baby’s breath” (16).

The text redresses the “murder plot” of mothers and daughters by inscribing this ‘unsaid’ or unrecorded aspect of maternity and of the mother-child dyad itself. In doing so, the poet-speaker has begun to generate her own mother-narrative, imagining a maternal desire through a heightened awareness of “skin” and “womb” (14), and even with a new version of Mary’s “annunciation”:

you felt it in December
as annunciation,

the birth that would change
the world,

the wonder of new bones
& skin inside you,

fluttering, miraculously,
in your womb. (14)

The poem also addresses this “bitter” event (14) because of Christianity’s hold on maternal representation, that is to say, “the sacrifice of the mother, / in absentia” (14), in veneration of “the martyrdom of the god” (14). Yet the “wonder of new bones” also evokes Irigaray’s appropriation of Descartes’ concept of “wonder,” the primary passion in Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference, which she connects to the particularity of female desire and the ethical potentiality of the mother-

child/daughter bond. As chapter 1 explained, Irigaray's theory of wonder as this primary passion intervenes in what has been conceived (by psychoanalysis and philosophy) as homeostasis, or the undifferentiated symbiosis of the "corps-à-corps." In Brandt's collection, it is not only the otherness of the "miracle child" and "dazzling wonder" (80) that appears to the mother, but also the woman-mother who, in turn, appears to the child: "Not the eternal feminine of images or representation(s). But a woman-mother who keeps on unfolding herself outwardly while enveloping us" (Irigaray, *Ethics* 81).

As the lines cited above suggest, the inscription of the female, maternal body in language represents what Brandt in turn calls an "opening" of the "body to the presence of a new being, in giving birth" (in Patterson 32). In Kristeva's similar terms, it becomes a process of opening the self to the other, a "reaching out to the other, the ethical" ("Stabat" 182). The mothering motif in Brandt's poetry transforms into this kind of "birth-giving between women" (43), pushing towards "knowing the dark / intimately / you" (37). It expresses the wonder in recognizing the other woman/girl as both same and different, as "intimate" (seen, close) and "dark" (unseen, distanced), again the founding principles of Ricoeur's ethical notion of similitude. In other words, the daughter/mother speaker articulates what Kristeva finds as the need "to differentiate between same beings—as being face to face," recalling Lévinas' insistence on the particularities of the other for the realization of her own "feminine ethics" ("Stabat" 185). Instead of an assimilation of the other (the child or mother) to a self-sameness, to an objectification on the part of the knowing and (Lacanian) speaking subject, Brandt too proposes a knowledge and caress, in both body and mind, without the annihilation of self or of other.

It is the poem at the end of the collection which provides the most forceful image of a mother-daughter ethics. The speaker poses again and, quite deliberately, as Persephone. She addresses Demeter directly, meshing with her without collapsing her identity into her own:

how long i've listened
to your cry

in my flesh, singing
me home.

.....

air, my mouth fills
with pleasure,

knowing the earth
deeply, recognizing

myself in you,
perfumed, & trembling

without fear. (75)

This “birth-giving” opens the poetic narrative to “another story” (43) that (re)connects Demeter and Persephone to the air and to the earth, where they are both newly “deep rooted” (75). It is Kore-Persephone whom the text explicitly recalls, with “the taste of earth” in her “mouth, / legs crashing through dirt,” crying “mother” (65), and Demeter, suddenly “here” in the underground, as “the universe splits open / with a crash, like lightning” (65), holding and being held by her daughter, reviving the earth: “& the earth is alive . . .” (65).

In the mythological allusion of Mother, Not Mother, the universe has split open, the boundary set up by a patriarchal God has been transgressed, the earth is revived, and Kore-Persephone and Demeter are restored to one another, “trembling” though “without fear” (75). The renewed tie between mother and daughter generates not only a more corporeal and sensuous poetic tongue in Brandt’s work, but also the heterogeneous subjectivity of the one uttering it through the fragmented, shifting ‘i.’ The speaking subject is traversed and even renewed by an element of (m)otherness, holding and being held, as Demeter or Kore-Persephone, re-playing either role for herself at different points of her poetically narrated life: “& now you carry her / so strangely, on

your back, / . . . / the reversals in everything” (59). In short, the writing ‘i’ has posed herself as doubled, assuming the position of both mother and daughter and transcribing an ethics of solicitude through this countergenealogy and, potentially, through relationships between women: “& i am you, mother, sister” (65), as “the world” becomes “a woman” (65). The speaker slips between “the worlds i am” (27), negotiating the tensions evoked by the title of the collection, as mother and daughter find each other again to become “like lovers” (55).

As Demeter’s earth is revived by the solicitude among women, it is also anticipated by Diana’s own address to her sister in Questions i asked my mother. Here, in the poem that follows the speaker’s Persephone-like (and failed) attempt at ‘climbing to’ Demeter “in the present” (56), the stifling, rigid house of the Father does nonetheless momentarily transform into the mother’s garden: “oh sister of mine whose name begins / with roses let there be room in this / mother’s house for many mansions let’s / make paths in this garden for two” (57). In this “garden for two,” the hand-in-hand (like the “corps-à-corps” and face-to-face) redefines sameness through its particularities; female otherness also corresponds to similitude, upon which is premised the intersubjectivity embodied by the changing identities of Brandt’s poet-speaker in Mother Not Mother. The shifting positions of Brandt’s speaker recall what both Irigaray and Kristeva argue at different points (and to different degrees) in their work: that, if love between women is to be established, women must love themselves as (potential) mothers. As Irigaray suggests: “Innerness, self-intimacy, for a woman, can be established or re-established only through the mother-daughter, daughter-mother relationship which woman re-plays for herself” (Ethics 68). It is indeed this love of same, which “can open to the other without loss of self or of the other in the bottomlessness of an abyss” (Ethics 69), that provides the premise of a “female ethics” (Ethics 108).

In the two works examined, some poems’ strategic use of mythology’s metaphorical richness and useful resonances serve the ends of this feminist revisionism and countergenealogy. Brandt’s “domestications” of myth (Purkiss 451) allows for a selective focus regulated by a poetic practice in which the relevance of myth rests in its existence as a cultural (sometimes shared)

narrative. It is always subject to interpretation, and then used as a powerful tool (rather than a truth in and of itself) for illustrating the various and difficult aspects of relations between real mothers and daughters, the social function of maternalism, and the dialectical components of female selfhood. However, in the more overtly religious and personal poems of Jerusalem, Beloved, allusions to female-centred mythologies—particularly as a form of gynocratic history—work both for and against an ethics of differentiation. When Brandt's use of mythology begins to suggest a universal, trans-historical truth about women and men, a truth supposedly underlying the myth in question, how can female relations possibly be configured on new symbolic (rather than naturalistic or universalist) grounds? It is again chapter 8 that will deal with this problem.

Chapter 4

France Théoret: Hysterical Gestures

In their Introduction to Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities, Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy propose a notion of maternalism inherent in Brossard's lesbian ethics and Brandt's "not mother": "a potential relationship rooted in female physicality" rather than "biologically predetermined and central to all women's lives" (3, emphasis added). In much of France Théoret's poetic-prose, female physicality certainly figures as a site of cultural determination, especially of the negative alterity historically allotted to women. Yet it is still through the body that Théoret stages her aggressive attack on and displacement of social, cultural, mythical and religious constructions which she portrays as patriarchal and phallogocentric, oppressive and destructive. As in Brossard's and Brandt's texts, Théoret's speaker inscribes herself as the subject of her own discourse through the very act of telling her story and displaying a painful awareness of her constitution as a "negative other" — here, as the daughter in a working-class, Catholic household in pre-Quiet Revolution Québec. Yet, from the early texts of Bloody Mary to the more recent prose-poetry, Théoret's writing adopts a very different tone from Brossard's. The writing does not promise a sudden break from the inherited socio-linguistic paradigm as does L'amèr's explosive beginning. Rather, Théoret's speaker's relation to language is almost constantly one of ambivalence. For Brossard and Brandt, "écrire" or "stealing the family words" are indispensable weapons in the attack on patriarchy. For Théoret, however, writing is a difficult, at times impossible process, facing both the inadequacies and possibilities of the symbolic (or social) order of language. As Karen Gould observes, Théoret's poetry presents "a convulsive mixture of pessimism and hope, anguish and exhilaration, at the prospect of linguistic revolt" (204) and, I would add, at the prospect of female selfhood.

It is this very ambivalence that this chapter eventually sets within the framework of a kind of literary hysteria, which will be loosely defined here as a "false performance" or self-conscious mimicry undertaken by the female speaker. Implicitly in Bloody Mary and more explicitly in Une voix pour Odile, hysteria—or, more specifically, hysterical mimicry—serves as a strategy of

subversion and transgression. In Bloody Mary, the daughter's masochistic, self-degrading and chaotic internalization of the Law of the Father, as well as her rebellion against the patriarchal mother, are read in terms of a hysteric's verbal mimicry of the order that ails her. In Une voix pour Odile, hysteria is directly inscribed in the text as a strategy of productive transgression, which opens up the possibility of a female ethics, once again premised on the notion of the maternal other. Although I agree with Gould that Théoret does not valorize feminine hysteria in itself (nor do Irigaray or Cixous for that matter), I disagree with Gould's dismissal of overt references to theory in Une voix pour Odile, even though she is right that there is a much less academic tone in Théoret's work in comparison to other Québécois feminists (for instance, Brossard and Louky Bersianik). The multiple fragments constituting Théoret's poetic prose reveal that, in her appropriation of Cixous' Medusa figure, Théoret does not so much revisit mythology itself as re-deploy the hysterical feminine which has, in fact, been associated with the Medusa (by Freud as well as Cixous).¹

Forming the Feminine

In Bloody Mary, Une voix pour Odile and Nécessairement putain, an array of poetic personas is assumed by a female speaker who often assumes the daughter's position, as opposed to the shifting identities of mother and daughter examined so far. In her ascribed daughterly role, Théoret's speaker is at once submissive and enraged, as she internalizes but also rebels against the symbolic order that has barred her from her own specificity—what Irigaray and Brossard call her sameness. Bloody Mary, Odile's hysterical niece, the tired bar maid, the "vieille petite fille," and the raped, sterile, pregnant and prostituted daughter form this array of female personas who speak their "negative difference," just as they perform the very ideas, images, and myths and embody the signs that determine and contaminate them physically, emotionally and symbolically:

¹ As in my readings of Brossard and Brandt in the previous two chapters, my reading of Théoret draws both from her textually avowed influences (Cixous, Irigaray, Freud and Lacan) and from these same sources (as my intertexts) in order to illustrate my argument about Théoret's writing within the framework of hysteria.

Je suis autre, éclatement, morceaux de journées, images du corps ou représentation toujours gardée présente. Je suis le manque, me vois et me vis ainsi travaillée par des voix qui m'assaillent, polluée par toutes les idées, images, mythes que la société se fait de toutes les femmes, et par conséquent, de moi. Ces idées, images, mythes sont des signes.

(Voix 59)

The processes and effects of internalization (“je suis le manque”) are also a form of surveillance on the part of the self (“me vois”) and the other (“des voix qui m'assaillent”). In Nécessairement putain, the authoritative father's words are confirmed by the female subject's repetition: “Tu as toujours voulu le viol et je dis oui j'ai toujours voulu le viol” (99). But as in the speaker's own description of herself as “lack” in the passage above, the effect is two fold. If it demonstrates the subject's compliance with the violence of her own oppression, it also starkly exposes this oppression, and implicitly denounces it through the daughter's answer which mimics—and thus subverts—the father's ludicrous belief.

In the very first lines of Bloody Mary, the speaker pronounces her own death sentence: “Le regard du dedans furieusement tue” (23). To follow one Freudian topos, this “regard” recalls the menace of the “furiously” hyper-moral superego described in The Ego and the Id. According to Freud, effecting the repression of those oedipal desires is the job of the super-ego which “arises . . . from an identification with the father taken as a model” (54) or the obstacle against the mother, and which finds its outlet in religion, morality and social sense which are acquired and internalized. In Lacanian terms, the “regard du dedans” functions indeed as a kind of surveillance by the Other (here, the symbolic), by the internalized gaze that is taught to see only lack from the mirror stage onward. The syntactical arrangement of the adverb “furieusement” emphasizes the confined space in which the speaker positions herself, in which she reads and writes herself in this fiction theory. “Marquée à la place de l'objet” (23) and rendered ghost-like, the speaker is desired for what she is not (not male), performing this very (non)role: “Je n'ai pas de visage. Je ne ressens pas. D'une fois l'autre en miroir oublié: l'entre-deux l'espoir d'être désirée” (23). In Patricia Smart's words, Théoret draws a “femme-objet solitaire modelée par les représentations

culturelles” (Écrire 298), a mere reflection of the other.

In the poetic-prose of Une voix pour Odile, a similar logic of sameness (or, more specifically, “le mode de la castration”) is seen to annul female difference and reduce it to itself, “annulant même ce qu’elle pouvait générer de différence” (64). The speaker describes her “corps féminin” as a male projection where there is “du pareil au même” (17) and which is “à garder regarder jusqu’à mort” (17). In the father’s house, “ça sent la mort” and “la rigidité” (10). Bloody Mary deliberately alludes to the Lacanian “Autre” (the symbolic) as a phallic “desert,” “si rigide” (40) that Mary describes herself as crippled by it, “percluse toute blanche” (23); another speaker of Théoret’s even has “l’air comme ça de n’avoir pas d’histoire de me regarder dans la glace” (Voix 11). Ultimately, the subject suffers from what Cixous might call “an antinarcissism,” a “narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven’t got,” and finally, “the infamous logic of antilove” (“Laugh” 248). For Théoret’s speaker, the feeblest attempt at self-love all too easily backfires: “Il est de ces mots impossibles comme dire aime-toi qui font détourner la bonne parole contre qui la dit” (Nécessairement 150).

The daughter speaking in Théoret’s texts is “enfermée dans la maison du père pour naïvement croire que ça porterait ses fruits . . .” (Nécessairement 127). Unlike Brandt’s young Diana who at least feels her mother’s absence through her very (unsatisfactory) presence, this speaker often fails even to mention a maternal figure in her life. The female models that are made available to her appear to be inadequate in their prescribed and static roles: “les modèles féminins se répartissaient en trois: la mère mariée, la religieuse et le déchet de la société, la célibataire appelée par tous et par elle-même bien souvent, la vieille fille” (Voix 51). Early attempts at retracing a woman’s untold history do not feature the speaker’s mother but an aunt named Odile who dies in menopause. In Odile, the speaker merely finds “une espèce de folle de s’être laissée faire quinze enfants” (12), and from her nothing has been learned: “Odile, tu m’as rien appris. Odile, tu m’écoeures. Les filles d’Odile n’ont eu peur que d’elle. Du modèle. Tout cela a fait une belle gagne d’hystériques” (12). In Nécessairement putain, when the mother does briefly appear in the text, she merely repeats clichés to her daughter, “qu’une femme sans un homme n’est rien”

(148).

As she accepts her castration and internalizes only too well patriarchal definitions of her body and difference, the daughter speaking in these texts reaches what could be called an impasse. Despite her internalization of the father's words and gaze, the speaker seems to fail in what Freud considers as the development of femininity as she fails to convert successfully to the demands of heterosexuality. Like the hysteric, she muddles this supposedly normal passage from the mother to an attachment to the paternal object, and then to the final choice of a male object of desire ("Femininity" 22: 118-119). According to Freud, it is the inversion of Oedipus and thus the channelled desire for the mother that foreclose this transition to the father, carrying indeed the "aetiology of hysteria" ("Female" 21: 227).² Such an inversion indeed breaks through Théoret's poetic narratives. In other words, it is as the frigid, sterile, even monstrous hysteric that the speaker also performs her daughterly role, pushing it to its extremes.

In terms of Freud's theory of hysteria, the female subject may not have so completely abandoned the maternal relation, even though she portrays herself as successfully subjected to oedipal demands. But it is Irigaray's interpretation of hysteria, as both the consequence and refusal of a compulsory heterosexuality, that is an even more useful intertext at this point of my reading. The speaker's refusal of heterosexual desire and her self-proclaimed frigidity, sterility and monstrosity give the strategy of mimicry new meaning, recalling Irigaray's notion of hysterical mimicry—a mimicry of femininity in its most extreme, constructed manifestations. Irigaray points out that, in the absence of the woman's possession of her own sexuality, of her auto-eroticism,

² In "Female Sexuality," Freud describes the female pre-oedipal phase of attachment to the mother as "intimately related to the aetiology of hysteria" (21: 227). Elsewhere, he also treats hysteria under the banner of frigidity, that is to say, as the renunciation of heterosexuality or unsuccessful transfer of the (girl's) love object to the father. In "Femininity," Freud discusses that, in his research into "infantile sexual traumas," most of his women patients avowed to having "been seduced by their father" (22: 120). However, "driven to recognize in the end that these reports were untrue and so came to understand that hysterical symptoms are derived from phantasies" (such as seduction on the mother's part), he connects once again hysteria to the female pre-Oedipus (22: 120). My concern with hysteria as it relates to Théoret's text is limited to this modality (interruption of the development of femininity as Freud would represent it). Generally it does not deal with the cases and symptoms of analysis reported by Freud and published with Breuer in Studies on Hysteria.

“Hysteria is all she has left” (Speculum 71); hysteria results from “a suspension . . . of her primal instincts, [where] she will do ‘as’ she is asked” (and more), and the excess in this “hysterical miming will be the little girl’s or the woman’s effort to save her sexuality from total repression and destruction” (Speculum 72). Having firmly grounded itself within the symbolic paradigm governed by the Law and gaze of the Father, Théoret’s text presents its first gestures of disruption well within the confines that it laments. Whereas L’amèr’s critique of phallogentrism quickly anticipates its notion of alternative socialization (a civilizing, social “corps-à-corps”), and Brandt’s irony attacks sectarian discourse through unexpected incongruities, Théoret’s text presents “a parody of the expected” (Grosz, Sexual 135). While the speaker is shown in her efforts to cope with the demands imposed by the father, she is also shown to exceed these demands by performing the underlying fantasies projected onto her. She acts out to extremes what is expected of her, unsettling the symbolic order simply “by throwing back to it what it cannot accept about its own operations” (Grosz, Sexual 138).³

Performing the Feminine

Doubling as “elle” during her own process of self-surveillance, the speaking subject also diagnoses her own hysteria: “Elle est hystérique: masochiste, culpabilisée et peut-être du même coup morte de peur” (Voix 66). In Bloody Mary, the “scène papa maman” (23) alludes to the oedipal scenario in which the traces of a “corps-à-corps” seem all but effaced in the speaker’s regurgitations of a paternal voice of authority. While L’amèr also mimics the violence done to the other, the speaker of Bloody Mary is far more congruent with the hysteric as she turns that violence upon herself. She thus assumes the various feminine forms constituted by cultural, social and religious imaginations. Speaking of and through an ignoble and odious body, Bloody Mary pronounces herself, just as she performs, as a “fille maudite” (23) and “masse infâme” (24). Again, in the Freudian sense that civilisation is the sublimation of the drives (related to the dyad

³ This is also how Grosz interprets Irigaray’s own style of writing (as a form of hysterical mimicry). Later I shall deal more directly with this idea by considering Théoret’s deployment of hysteria in and as a poetic language in the feminine.

with the maternal body), of the “*mère dans la vie vécue qui n’a pas d’importance*” (23), it is Bloody Mary’s coded, imagined anatomy (her morphology) that fuels her hysterical performance as the un-civil and, at times, threatening daughter.

Hers is a body that bleeds, suffers, serves, yet also threatens to devour and consume if it is not properly controlled and regulated. She is a “drink,” a Bloody Mary to be bought, “swallowed” and digested (Bayard 187). Echoing *L’amèr*, she is the feminine (mother nature, the unconscious) that must be consumed by the order of the same, by man out of fear that her body would suck him back into a primitive anti-social space: “*Tu me manges. Je me mange et ne me manque pas. L’enfermée à double tour des manifestations: la scène papa maman marque à l’os la peau surtout. Je suis épinglée pin up cravachées des creuses paroles du père . . .*” (23). In her direct link to nature or as Mother Nature, she is both Eros and Thanatos, giving birth and threatening death at the same time. From her name are ironically emitted those signs under which she is “pinned” and venerated:

*Y s’y mettra à boire et à manger à toi Bloody Mary Holy Mary. Full top pincée pognée.
Bloody Mary Holy Mary Crunchy Mary. Monument à la gloire du fils. Quelle loi pourrait
saluer la fille: à qui appartient ce gage contre ordre mamifamilial. Transgresser pour le fils.
Régresser pour elle. Marcher in speculum specula. La marche en dedans les yeux chavirés
la peau retournée sur elle-même. (24)*

Théoret’s title and character incorporate a number of referents. They allude to England’s sixteenth-century Catholic Queen, Mary I, infamous for the persecution of non-complying Protestants. Moreover, like other Catholic girls in Québec who, according to tradition, inherit Mary as their first or second middle-name, Bloody Mary recalls in vulgarized form the Holy Virgin Mother. Like her, the speaker finds herself ill-defined and frozen between an uncertain deity, in submission to the male God, and the physical reality of her unmentionable, cursed (“bloody”) blood. As the reflection of man’s power over nature, she represents that which the social order cannot allow and must restrict in fabricating the feminine.

Throughout Théoret’s early writing, feminine figures are “stuck in nature” (Oliver, *Family*

54) and appear in a domestic space of childbirth and maternal care for which they are destined (“Les filles c’est fait pour laver des couches” [31]). However, their monstrous forms also begin to rise and speak through the poetic prose. In Bloody Mary, a female beast emerges from the “place du non-lieu” to which she has been relegated, again mimicking the “désordre des traits” she has been made to ‘inherit’: “Trop de peau. Gonflements. Le coeur gros. Je n’aurai jamais pitié” (23). Incorporating the fantasy of the devouring, castrating feminine, “bouche partout, avaleuse et sexe vide” (Nécessairement 150), she incorporates an inverted reflection of the consumption to which she herself is submitted. The conglomeration of representations amounts to a monstrous “mollesse humaine” (Voix 32), a “Mollesse d’obéir et de se conformer, des oui de la tête vide” (Voix 32), and to a form that is finally “informe,” “masse morte” (Bloody 25) or “difforme” (Nécessairement 87). Yet it is also this monstrosity that will finally serve in her own removal from those “ideological ruts.”

Representative of the “masse infâme nommée Bloody Mary” (24) and of those aggressive death-drives of a castrating, all-encompassing mother-nature, the feminine threatens havoc and brings on “la diarrhée du temps qui n’avance ni ne recule” (24). Perhaps this is the apocalyptic end to the under-riding Christian context of Théoret’s text. Bloody Mary travels in a “forêt, dédale, labyrinthe” and “lieu mental” (24) because she is the channel for what lurks in the male unconscious. Projected back onto her are the taboos and marks of her body, of “le sang la tache” (24). Evocative of Irigaray’s hysteric, Bloody Mary also embodies death; she is dead because she has no existence to call her own, but she also threatens, just as she upholds, the civil order belonging to the son:

Pour OEdipe [sic] aux pieds enflés un berger royal. Pour Bloody Mary dehors dedans le rouge sur toutes surfaces. . . .

Bloody Mary est morte. Sans berger ni roi. Il n’y a pas d’histoire pour elle. Il y a ses taches tous les vingt-huit jours. Informe au sein de la forêt masse morte qui se plote sans arrêt. Ventre d’une femme chaude de sang qui pisse et se coagule en sa chair. Yeux rivés dans ça. Pas de trou. Il n’y en eut jamais. Se protoplasme la masse molle glu en

mouvement. C'est tellement l'amibe ça primaire dure à rejeter le fils à regret la fille pour que le mouvement mare rouge se prolonge." (24-25)⁴

The female body presents itself as menstrual, biologically destined for reproduction, never constituted in its own pleasures, submitted to the cultural gaze that has reduced it to this "paquet de sang coagulé" (24). Mary's blood spills throughout the text, remindful of Eve's sinful transgression, of her so-called biological destiny, and of a threatening, monstrous female sexuality. Blood here is also congealing or already clotted, anticipating the paralysis and sterility that will be articulated throughout parts of Une voix pour Odile and Nécessairement putain.

If, as we shall soon see, maternalism does figure as a crucial component of Théoret's representation of (the daughter's) selfhood, there is still a distinct "non-maternity" that lurks in these poetic narratives, to borrow Pierre Nepveu's term (Préface 11). This "non-maternity" is directly in line with the frigidity of Théoret's hysteric who is incapable of successfully converting pre-oedipal pleasures (attachment to the mother) to heterosexuality, and thereby refuses to conform to it (Grosz, Sexual 134). Moreover, this refusal of maternity—the role of motherhood—is not yet represented by Théoret as the conscious choice of a self-defining subject. Faced with inadequate, incomplete, polar models of feminine and maternal representations, the speaker actually embraces even as she performs the script of her own sexual, reproductive and emotional frigidity. In other words, hysterical mimicry does not yet promise transgression but, at least through its reproductions, exposes the inadequacy of these choices and thus subverts them. From the monstrous and sterile sexuality of Bloody Mary to "une vieille petite fille au sourire fatigué" (Nécessairement 91) and the mother "enchaînée dans la reproduction complète du modèle" (Voix 52), female sexuality again is shown to lack a premise or outlet for its constitution outside strictly androcentric parameters. Later in Vertiges, it is precisely a positive, corporeal and loving model

⁴ In view of Théoret's allusion to the Electra myth in her novel, Nous parlerons comme on écrit, her speaker has been analyzed in "la position d'Électre" by Smart (Écrire 238) and also by Gould (Writing 220; 230-243). The deployment of hysteria could also suggest the allusion to the Electra complex that uses the classical myth as a metaphor to account for the constitution of femininity, but which Freud finally rejects for its too close analogy to the Oedipus complex in males (a complex that the female never completely resolves, according to Freud; see "Femininity" 22: 129).

that Théoret's speaker finds herself lacking. "[I]l y a une femme," she writes, "qui ne peut pas devenir mère car elle se sait habitée par la mauvaise mère qu'est-ce cela sinon la violence vue du manque au corps" (65). What is rendered feminine and/or maternal is still associated with a male unconscious, where dwells this "engendreuse de mort-vivants" (Voix 10), the (m)other of the self-same, the embodiment of death, aggressive drives, castration, consumption, lack; for the speaker, it is the "lieu indicible, inamovible d'où je viens" (Nécessairement 89).

Refusing to define herself on the basis of a maternal role or destiny, the speaker defines herself merely according to the negative of this role: "Je suis celle qui n'a jamais donné naissance . . ." (Nécessairement 121). It is not an alternative desire that is expressed in the place of this "non-maternity." Rather the statement plays with the interiorized desire for motherhood which here is simply reversed, giving way to sterility and frigidity:

Si le mimétisme joue un rôle capital dans l'éducation, j'ai sûrement intériorisé le désir obligé et calqué d'être mère. Si je peux prendre ça pour un désir, j'affirme ne rien savoir du désir. Désir, mimétisme et obligation, ça ne fait pas l'affaire. La ressemblance avec la parole du père, précisément, est trop évidente. Passerai-je des jours et des jours à nier une révolte intérieure pesante au point de stériliser tout rapport au monde, et devenue synonyme de toute pensée personnelle? (Entre 77)

In Nécessairement putain, the insistence is again on a non-maternal speaker who is only body and no-body, that is to say, who is reduced yet again to a reproductive function that she rejects and substitutes with sterility rather than some other form of desire. The speaker is confined to her bed and describes the endless cycle of her days, "au jour le jour le discontinu, les actes qui ne passent pas à l'acte . . ." (91), as she monitors her own body's cycles, the possibility of motherhood only "une grossesse imaginée" (87), a "douceur mortelle du ventre chaud en gestation" (88). What she does finally bear is "l'accouchement de la vieille petite fille" (123), of her own sterile self, with the possibility "qu'elle va coudre les lèvres du sexe" (91). Again, the speaker affirms her own negation ("je n'existe pas et je ne vis pas et c'est séparé"); yet she also wonders, "quand aurai-je le droit à la vie d'exister conforme à l'image que je me fais de la vie d'exister?" (126).

In the poem, “Noeud,” the repetitive use of “elle” (rather than the general prevalence of the first-person speaker) again re-enforces the notion of surveillance and objectification of the woman-subject by an outside looker (the Other in the Lacanian sense). The “elle” also signifies the process of writing itself, of “l’écriture.” The “knot” of the female form, enclosed upon itself, indicates what Théoret’s speaker often refers to as the locked, inaccessible and alien site of language. There does not seem to be any other “langage possible” for “elle,” “tournée sur l’anal d’un corps qui dans l’ensemble se perçoit difforme . . .” (Nécessairement 87). As the negation of female alterity in Bloody Mary and Nécessairement putain constantly reminds us, language, the order of writing, is the symbolic order of the self-same, invested with the primacy of the male form: the phallus, the signifier of lack around which desire gravitates. The Logos and the phallus, when privileged as transcendental signifiers (as they are in the Freudian and Lacanian constitution of sexual difference), thus constitute the same system: phallogocentrism. To borrow from Irigaray, “It is not that [the hysteric] lacks some ‘master signifier’ or that none is imposed upon her, but rather that access to a signifying economy, to the coining of signifiers, is difficult or even impossible for her because she remains an outsider, herself (a) subject to their norms. She borrows signifiers but cannot make her mark, or re-mark upon them” (Speculum 71). Centred around the figure of the knife that comes to represent Bloody Mary’s pen as well as potential weapon, Théoret’s hysterical subject perceives the act of writing as something that simply does not occur: “Trop proche du journal. Trop proche des réminiscences. J’ai toujours envie d’écrire. Toujours envie de hurler. Au lieu de tenir un crayon, je tiens un poignard parfois un pieu, ça n’écrit pas” (33). Hence, “La phrase arrêtée au soupir. Le demi-mot. Le même. La honte” (29), a fear of words expressed as physical pain: “ça serre au ventre . . . rugueuse torture pour les yeux muette de terreur mon corps non mes phrases oh! je déparle oh!” (39).

The hysteric’s mimicry of a discourse that constantly negates her reflects the kind of fluctuation that marks Théoret’s writing: its oscillation between what it negates and what it affirms, what it mourns and what it recovers, its own paralysis and refusals, as well as the avowed “non-maternity” and the trace of maternalism that also underlies the hysteric’s textual gestures. As

Louise Dupré argues, such is the “leurre” of Théoret’s text, the gap between its saying and its doing, of a writing that lies about its inabilities to renew a damaged female subject who, nonetheless, is open to constant redefinition (Stratégies 39). In Une voix pour Odile, this gap lies between the two “gouffres où je m’agite” (49). It is the site of the speaker’s struggle in and with the Logos that has constituted her. This struggle, then, is analogous to the double manifestation of the hysteric’s own internalization and refusal (or defiance) of the Law through the very inflation of its regulations of her femininity. After all, the paradox of Bloody Mary is its literary status as the poet-speaker’s journal about that which prevents her from writing it, as Théoret’s speaker sets out to emasculate this order with Bloody Mary’s knife.

So the journal does exist and this “muette” is beginning to “déparler” in Bloody Mary, anticipating the subversive gestures of an “écriture au féminin” and of the narrative dedicated to Odile. Théoret’s speaker still fears the sound of her own dumb stuttering that may not follow the rules of logic or grammar, “la terreur, à chaque fois, que ça sorte tout de travers” (Voix 30). Yet Bloody Mary’s own struggle for voice, and the potential reversals and displacement brought on by this voice, anticipate the un-earthing of another kind of language and another form of difference:

les phrases s’inversent les mots viennent par derrière commencer par la fin défaire bout
pour bout le discours comme si c’était possible les phrases commencent par la fin comme
s’il y avait trou comme il y a un trou dans mon corps à partir duquel je pourrais retourner
bout pour bout ma peau par l’envers rouge j’imagine rugueuse torture pour les yeux . . .
de la tête et du cul du cul à la tête de la tête au cul une traversée des mots (39).

The passage quoted above describes the process of doing what elsewhere is prescribed as the necessity of “saisir la place du monstre” (Nécessairement 109), that is to say, of re-deploying the feminine: namely, otherness, still portrayed under the banner of monstrosity and hysteria. Recalling Hélène Cixous’ own description of “écriture féminine” in her famous 1975 article, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” writing becomes a matter of not simply borrowing, as Irigaray suggests in Speculum, but of stealing or appropriating. Cixous advises women “not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to ‘fly.’ Flying is woman’s

gesture—flying in language and making it fly” (“Laugh” 258). If, according to some parts of the cultural imagination, the feminine is the site of the repressed, of the unconscious, of nature’s threat to civilisation, of the monstrous castrating and consuming mother, the feminine will also manifest itself not only as the excess that cannot be completely contained, but also as the excess that can erupt in the symbolic order.

Transforming the Feminine

In Une voix pour Odile, the speaker’s hysterical body represents itself in a linguistic zone which, in a sense, is a protoerogenous or “hysterogenic zone” (Grosz, Sexual 134). The relationship between language and hysteria in Théoret’s text could be considered in terms of the classic hysteric’s gesture of transferring sexual drives onto some other zone (usually constituting her symptoms).⁵ In other words, language becomes a manifestation and a “cure” of the speaker’s hysterical symptoms, in her “marche somptueuse et annulante de la parole et de l’acte hystériques” (Voix 67). “Déparler” is her main strategy of transgression, accomplished through a “lutte du dedans dehors relié à la chaleur du corps féminin” (15). It is this struggle that is transferred onto language: “Le langage viendra avec” (15). A “délire féminin, c’est l’impensé” (11), and the hysteric’s body is no longer only malformed, castrated, sick, or bleeding from its wound (and empty womb) across the pages. It is screaming and, in fact, laughing. The body is writing and being delirious, crying “contre toutes normes annulantes du corps” (16); “Que ça passe, l’agi, le bruit, l’écho d’une voix absoute de la vérité” (24).⁶ As considered earlier, Théoret’s speaker

⁵ In her interpretation of Freud’s hysterical case study of Dora, Grosz explains how the “hysteric refuses heterosexual passivity and the sexual compliance with social norms by transferring sexual intensity and meaning onto her symptoms” (Sexual 134)—her paralyzed limbs, blindness, speechlessness. I am applying this kind of transfer to the way Théoret’s poet-speaker’s adopts language itself. Advocating madness as its way of access to speech, Théoret’s “hysterical text” may also recall feminist readings of Breuer’s treatment of “Anna O.” (or Bertha Pappenheim) through her own “talking cure,” or her own forging of an idiolect. As Lori Saint-Martin argues: “Toutes ces stratégies—la traduction, le charabia et la pantomime—relèvent du sémiotique et du corporel, dans une tentative de retour à la mère” (Contrevoix 213). See also Diane Hunter.

⁶ This subversion of the logos, of “la vérité” invested in the transcendental signifier (like the phallus), comes close to what Grosz observes as Irigaray’s own mimicry as the major strategy of her engagement with Western philosophy, a writing style “based on masquerade, semblance,

reveals the trauma of her constitution in a phallogocentric economy. Hers evokes the hysteric's trauma after "an unsolicited attack by an other" (Grosz, Sexual 137), by the order of sameness depicted throughout these texts. Yet, the subversion at work emerges from more than the hysteric's refusal to conform to a compulsory heterosexuality and maternity. As a "false performance" by a self-conscious speaker, hysteria is directly inscribed in Une voix pour Odile, and aims at formulating the subject's positive difference, modelled upon a female (m)otherness. It will be Cixous' "écriture féminine," in its most frenzied moments, that inspires the postulation of this model.

In Une voix pour Odile, the female body not only performs its "script," but also redeploys to re-constructive ends its given feminine traits—its so-called castration and emptiness, monstrosity and dreadful fatality. Anticipated by the hysteric's strategies of refusal, the body gains a conscience and begins to reinterpret itself by inverting and transgressing old forms, and by the same token inscribing its own specificity. A re-connection with the mothertongue occurs again in this inversion of the oedipal complex, this time geared towards a displacement rather than just a refusal or denouncement. Hysteria moves from simply refusing the Law of the father to becoming an actual channel for the inscription of the maternal and the feminine newly derived. The hysteric is cured, as it were, of her subversive, though still painful, mimicry of the symbolic system. In other words, hysteria becomes productive. In the confusion of her "délire féminin" (11), with her "lourdeur folle" (59), "éclat de rire sauvage" and "rire très haut" (67-68), the "hystérique est dangereuse" because of her "pulsions réactionnaires" (67). These are the aggressive drives that usually the hysteric cannot successfully repress and through which "le langage viendra" (15). In a timeless apocalypse recalling Bloody Mary's impending revenge, this speaker has Bloody Mary's "yeux rouges" (27), as the text again inscribes a female form incarnating the broken remnants of

mimesis, artifice and seduction" and (unlike the real hysteric) a self-conscious "excessive mimicry" (Sexual 138) of what Irigaray calls "philosophical mastery" (This Sex 149). For Irigaray, it is "necessary to deploy other languages—without forgetting their own debt to philosophical language—and even to accept the condition of silence, of aphasia as a symptom—hystorico-hysterical, hysteric-historical—so that something of the feminine as the limit of the philosophical might finally be heard" (This Sex 150).

too many ill-fitting representations. A “masse” and a “fouillis” are associated with the subject who mimics but also begins to re-interpret her encoded monstrosity as potentially disruptive and transgressive, “ses yeux ses narines sa bouche d’une obstruction affolante” (28).

Mimicry of feminine hyperboles (monstrosity, the unconscious) extends to a re-deployment of these same terms. Conversely, an inscribed hysteria fuels the transgression of impending paralysis or frigidity in Théoret’s text. The “BUZZ énorme [qui] emplît le cerveau les yeux la bouche” (Voix 27) entails the reclamation of the mother through language and as language. With an “énorme rire” (27) and “envie de vivre” (24), the speaker re-imagines her fragmented and silenced female genealogy, “Ma grand-mère, ma mère et moi” (24), beyond the ancestral “knot” inherited from a sad history of self-degradation passed down to Odile’s daughters. Having renounced her prescribed sexuality and “negative difference” (her “normal femininity”), Théoret’s speaker recalls “la mère hystérique” (25). There she finds the explosion of the Gorgon Medusa’s laugh, the monstrous warrior queen who, according to some versions of the myth which Théoret seems to draw on, was also an unwed mother (Smith 92): “Encore l’énorme rire de la Méduse monte du ventre au cerveau” (27). Nécessairement putain in turn inscribes this surging forth of Medusa’s daughter (again, the speaker), who has found her way back to a female genealogy in Une voix pour Odile; the speaker indeed declares herself “pas humaine,” a “je” who is not alone, “pas seule quand je parle où que je sois” (Nécessairement 112). As opposed to the always solitary “masse infâme nommée Bloody Mary” (24), the raging and laughing “masse” of Une voix pour Odile encounters this other woman, a hysterical mother who is not, despite her mythological history, spreading death by turning men into stone, but who is laughing, wise and powerful.⁷ She

⁷ Greek variants on Medusa connect her to Perseus who, in one story, kills and decapitates the Gorgon Medusa (with her hair made of snakes) to free his mother Danaë from a king (King Polydektes) smitten by her, and then offers Medusa’s head to Athena who wears it on the breast of her robe as a magical symbol (Smith 71-72). Another variant tells the story of the beautiful Libyan Queen Medusa, raped by the god Poseidon in Athena’s Temple and avenged by Athena who, enraged, turns Medusa into an ugly hag, whose gaze turns men into stone (Smith 71; Walker 629). As the unmarried “warrior queen,” Medusa is also the defender of her community against invasions led by Perseus (Smith 92); she is a war figure derived from her earlier African roots and connected to or conflated with Athena through her name (called Ath-enna or Athene by North Africans [Walker 629]). It is, of course, the decapitated (i.e. castrated), serpent-goddess (i.e. phallic/castrated mother) who captures Freud’s attention in “Medusa’s Head.” She is both phallic

is Cixous' famous Medusa and, Cixous writes: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" ("Laugh" 255). According to Cixous, in this subversive and desiring (m)other there is "the ebullient, infinite woman" who is "surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives," accusing "herself of being a monster" ("Laugh 246). Recalling Cixous' gynocentric version, Medusa is textually inscribed in the hysterogenic zone of Théoret's speaker, and serves as yet another model for the re-interpretation of the feminine.⁸ In her serpentine glory, Medusa's monstrosity and even her connection to Freud's castrating mother are no longer strictly projections of a male phallic imagination or of Théoret's mimicry of this imagination. Rather, Medusa's monstrosity becomes the symbol of the feminine's own disruptive potentiality, and thereby its specificity, in a phallogocentric order.

In a strategic inversion of the Logos aimed at the appropriation of the Medusa's subversive laughter, the opposition that keep father/mother or culture/nature in their hierarchical relationships is undone. Cixous contemplates an "écriture féminine" which transgresses the censoring of a female similitude. This "écriture" is thus associated with a redefinition of the "corps-à-corps" with the other woman, the "first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman" ("Laugh" 251). In this de-censored rapport with the mother is "that force which produces/is produced by the other—in particular, the other woman" ("Laugh" 252). It is here that we may find a model or "metaphor" for a relational ethics. The same woman is always already other, again recalling Ricoeur's notion of similitude. Like the Medusa, the female subject can be conceived on terms other than phallic ones:

In her, matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-

and castrated because her head of serpents is both the penis and its absence; they are the "mitigation of the horror, for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of the horror" (18: 273); "stiff" as stone, the male is aroused by the sight of this confirmation of his own possession (18: 273).

⁸ Cixous likely re-connects the Medusa to her gynocentric elements, the Medusa having become a powerful symbol of rage, aggressiveness and survival for contemporary feminists (Caputi 431).

daughter. You might object, ‘What about she who is the hysterical offspring of a bad mother?’ Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was ‘born’ to her. (“Laugh” 252)

The speaker of Une voix pour Odile is in turn the “hysterical offspring” of a line of so-called “bad mothers,” of a female genealogy that reveals itself through different fragments of the text. Although she again recalls her mother speaking banal clichés about marriage and respectability, the speaker still recalls the suppressed history of Odile, a “tante ouvrière” (25) who, under the still prevalent power of the clergy in post-World War II Québec, has born fifteen children. An almost forgotten grandmother “aux traits indiens” also appears in the text and even the nuns of heady schooldays, branded as “les vieilles filles religieuses” (25), are part of the female ancestry reclaimed by the speaker:

Ma grand-mère, ma mère et moi. Je ne me rappelle plus d’Odile. Elle est pourtant là sur la photo en longue robe noire assise sur la berceuse. C’est un jour d’été ensoleillé un de ces jours d’envie de vivre. Je n’avais pas deux ans lorsqu’Odile est morte. Elle disparue [sic] il y a la voix à inventer l’écho de la voix le rappel de la voix qui se noie. Eaux de naissance. J’y remonterai, j’y viendrai au travers la mère hystérique, la tante ouvrière et même les vieilles filles religieuses. Ma mère me chuchotait souvent: — Épouse un anglais. Ils ont de belles manières. À l’ouest de l’avenue du Parc promène-toi, y a des gentleman. J’y remonterai, j’y viendrai aux traits indiens de ma grand-mère et aux manières de gentleman des anglais. (24-25)

As in “La végétation” and Mother, Not Mother, the ascent through a female line, described above as “eaux de naissance” or the female womb itself, is not a nostalgic return to some lost origin. It is a kind of trek across an ill-narrated or suppressed history, mostly represented by Odile who is indeed “the central enigma of [Théoret’s] book because of what the narrator does not know

about her, because of her disappearance, her absence, her erasure from the narrator's own life and from history . . ." (Gould, Writing 215). This female ancestry is layered with the negative legacies of "civilizing mothers" who may not be so wise and may constitute yet another anti-maternal fragment of Théoret's writing. Yet the "envie de vivre" that initiates this revision of the past on the mother's side becomes an "envie de vivre dans mon corps" (50). The "voix à inventer" delineates a linguistic (m)otherness, what Cixous describes above as "the locus for the other," the "langue d'une autre langue" (56) emerging from the inversion and displacements of the Logos. As mentioned earlier, in some passages the poet-speaker mourns her "imbécillité fondamentale" as she struggles for voice: "Je me regarde écrire comme je me suis toujours regardée vivre. Sans narrateur autre" (46). Yet in the same work, she also establishes her place in language through the other: "Tout rapport aux autres comporte un arrêt de mort. Glisser entre les mots, insister sur les espaces réservés . . ." (55). In this slippage between words and in these de-censoring acts through the laughter and hysterics of a daughter of Medusa's, it thus becomes possible for the speaker to forge a site within the symbolic order of writing for her own subjectivity and the indispensable interconnection of "Je, langue, mère" (13).

"Le sang" is a text in Une voix pour Odile where the constant interplay between the excessive mimicry of stereotypical feminine characteristics and their overthrow allows Théoret's poet-speaker to write through the body. Here, she inscribes the 'unspoken' of a body that has been censored or reduced to maternity which, once again, the text refuses but also allows itself to inscribe at a textual level, as a poetic "germination" (48). Through an "envie de crier" or the hysteric's "dérapage" (49), the desire for a female corporeality, expressed and experienced on its own terms and in its own specificity, manifests itself. Phrases such as "je quête le sang," "Je veux voir mon sang," "Je veux le sang" (49) articulate the desire for what is taboo or a monstrous "secret" (49): "Avide de voir mon sang. Me soulager à le sentir là. Je veux le sang. Que ça puisse couler! Que je sois débarrassée de la rage liée à mon attente. L'infernal fait sans cesse retour, image vivante, gueule, monstre sans dent, bavoir horrible, double face d'un désert au monde. Je crie, je larme, je bave à l'intérieur" (49). The blood that does finally come is not that of

Bloody Mary's physical deterioration and hysterical trauma, but a "happy blood" from which the subject gives herself new life: "Le sang heureux me fait renaître. Envie de vivre dans mon corps" (50). It is the "magic blood that could create and destroy life" (Walker 629), perhaps passed down by Medusa whose African mythological variation recognizes a power and magic to her blood.⁹ On the one hand, the anxiety about a possible pregnancy expressed at the start of Théoret's text (in "le sang qui ne veut pas venir") is yet another refusal of maternity. On the other hand, maternalism is still retained, one could say, in this "happy blood," in so far as it recalls Cixous' notion of a "gestation drive" which is "just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood" ("Laugh" 261). Having transgressed the destructive "regard du dedans," this text suggests a new interiority, a desire to live and write through the body. In the following text, the speaking subject inscribes herself through her positive difference, cured, perhaps, of her desperate though productive recourse to hysterical mimicry: "je me vie étrangère . . ." (51).

The "droit à la vie" imagined in Nécessairement putain does not prompt the explicit depiction of an ethical intersubjectivity with the real mother, as in Brossard's and Brandt's writing. Nonetheless, a revolt does take place, a rekindling of the maternal is indeed staged, and an ethics of self and other does manage to break the thick patriarchal membrane that envelops the speaker throughout these early texts. Even the possibility of motherhood itself is weighed by Théoret's speaker, that is to say, if "devenir mère n'était plus nécessairement une fatalité," but rather, "l'ordre du désir" (Entre 78). It is this possibility that is hinted at briefly in the poetic prose itself: "J'enfle et je suis grosse de deux ou trois minutes et ça s'interdit, se vide, s'expire dans le grand souffle, la main d'un dieu quelque part" (Voix 75). Once again it is mainly within the very texture of language that the paralyzed, sterile and sick female body transforms its destructive internalization into a hysterical revolt, and then re-connects with the mother as a "pre-symbolic"

⁹ According to Walker, in her earlier mythological incarnations Medusa was "the serpent-goddess of the Libyan Amazons" whose face, surrounded by snakes, "was an ancient, widely recognized symbol of divine female wisdom, and equally of the 'wise blood' that supposedly gave women their divine powers" (629). The Medusa would also have been veiled, because of her magic, menstrual blood that could turn a man into stone, according to primitive folk belief (629).

language. At this “fine pointe d’une non-pensée” (74), “folie,” “hystérie” and “rires” function as the deconstructively hysterical gestures that have opened wide “les contradictions, insolemment, de toutes parts” (72) and uncovered a “langue d’une autre langue” (56), a “langue maternelle” (56):

À la lettre. Une langue à retrouver que je suis sûre de ne pas retrouver. J’ai changé de langue dans la même langue mais pas tout à fait changé dans une faille, une mémoire qu’on retrace. Je ne cherche pas mon identité, je cherche à faire bouger l’apparis le corrigé le renié le désapparis le perdu retrouvé ressassé qui fuit s’engage se retourne une poursuite un passage une passade. Je, langue, mère. (13)

In her collection of essays, Entre raison et déraison, this process of writing and becoming through the “langue” of the maternal “corps-à-corps” is described as “relier dans la langue d’antériorité, le rythme pulsionnel, ce qui a été nommé folie, je retrace l’ordre maternel” (102). In this direct play on Kristeva’s idea of the semiotic and in the very act of “inscrire la pulsion” lies the reclamation of a “lieu and place à la mère, sans qu’elle la prenne toute [a condition that is surely underlined by those moments of maternal rejection throughout Théoret’s writing] mais sans qu’elle la prenne encore une fois de façon morcelée” (103). Théoret’s writing inscribes the maternal as a kind of textual pregnancy or, more forcefully, as a (m)othertongue, and as the hysteric’s re-deployment of femininity through the disruptive and re-interpreted elements incarnated by the Medusa. The poet-speaker’s language “au féminin” itself is what is modelled on the positive dialectic of a same other, of similitude. “Je, langue, mère” is therefore also a powerful rendition of Théoret’s poetics as a textual ethics, where the (m)other remains the condition and precedent of selfhood and of writing in the feminine.

In one of the last texts of Une voix pour Odile, the poet-speaker posits herself as a “théâtre” of voices (75), earlier a “théâtre de toutes les voix” (55). Yet the “théâtre” now in question is not the hysteric’s inability to be understood or to speak clearly. It is made up of “l’humour et le rire” (75) discovered through the laughing Medusa first posited by Cixous’ “écriture féminine.” No longer singularly pressed under the weight of the patriarchal words and the bodily script she is given to perform, the speaker can receive the other’s call (here, her female others’ call) that will not

consist of an unsolicited attack on her being or on her difference: “Les étrangères m’appellent” (75). Writing through the body, or “écrire le corps de qui écrit” (28) is to be in relation to what always already exceeds the self, what Cixous calls “the more-than-me” (*Coming* 44) (or “the more-than-self,” “le plus-que-moi” [*La venue* 49]). Théoret’s text describes the act of writing as the force of a “trace” (64). This is the trace of (m)otherness exhibited by the Medusa’s laugh and internalized by the poet-speaker; it is a similitude that constitutes not a unitary identity but figures in the constant accession to selfhood. Once again, Théoret’s “je” displaces her speaking position to “elle,” not only to survey herself more closely, but also to convey her positive fragmentation and difference. She is “elle je me tu” (75) all at once, having emerged from the internalized violence upon her self that “je me tu” recalls. She experiences herself as “étrangère” (51, 57), “pour m’excentrer” (56), and is no longer subject to “la différence à vivre dans la négativité” (52). Moreover, if “femmes devenues sujets fera éclater les vieilles structures” (52) it is “grâce à d’autres femmes” (59), as writing in the feminine is indeed premised on the (m)other woman.

To recall the words of Daly and Reddy, it is as “a potential relationship rooted in female physicality” that maternalism exists in Théoret’s poetic writing. Considering that her speakers refuse to adopt a maternal identity for themselves, it is maternalism—and not motherhood itself—that her text comes to embrace. Finally, the fact that the move towards the acquisition of selfhood occurs through the trope of illness (hysteria) perhaps re-enforces the paradoxical nature of Théoret’s feminist writing. Théoret’s female enunciator, a determined and self-determining subject, fluctuates between the codes of a learned and internalized language and those other, passionate, at times hysterical, maternal and feminine zones of her speech. In chapter 7, an analysis of subjectivity in Théoret’s poetry and novels will tackle further the paradoxical nature of her feminism, considering how the idea of a relational ethics is perhaps not always sustainable.

Part 3

(Un)Reasoning the Logos: Mouré and Tostevin

As demonstrated through the poetic works examined so far, feminist renditions of maternalism as a potential ethical model have resulted from critiques of socio-linguistic paradigms. As we shall see, Erin Mouré and Lola Lemire Tostevin in turn recognize a “first [female] other” (Benjamin 31) in their conceptions of a textual alterity, that is to say, of a language of difference that is derived mainly from Derrida’s deconstructive philosophy and Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic chora. Their philosophical approach requires a look at the way feminist discourse in general (and these poets in particular) treat “the” tradition of Western philosophy. This question is crucial to any theoretical investigation of a feminist ethics concerned with difference, here in particular, since Mouré and Tostevin directly challenge aspects of Western metaphysics (and moral philosophy), including Cartesian and Enlightenment thinking, as well as nineteenth-century and modern liberal humanism. In the manner of Derrida and Kristeva, this challenge becomes a renegotiation of founded notions of reason, truth and individualism that are steeped in exclusionary polarisations of difference (in logocentricism). As in poststructuralist theorists’ relationship with the great philosophers of metaphysics, the relationship of feminism with a humanist tradition is one of similarities and differences.

Among others, Canadian feminist ethicists Susan Sherwin and Sheila Mason Mullet recognize these convergences and divergences. As Sherwin points out, if ethics in general is a study “concerned with value questions about human conduct” (3), the notion of universal moral theory, detached from the concern about “specific circumstances” and conducted “through the purely abstract process of reason” (5), is certainly challenged by feminism (as well as postmodernism and poststructuralism). As we shall see, two of Mouré’s poems challenge the assumed abstract neutrality of Kant’s deontology, where impartial agents of moral value act and rule for the good of the majority. This universalized model is seen to assume the interchangeability of people in so far as elements of difference (gender, race, class) among persons are discarded, as are the particularities of human relationships (Sherwin 12-13). Within the terms of a feminist

ethics, individuals are not independent agents with rights stemming from “an abstract reasoning of morality” (Sherwin 14). Rather, as I have been suggesting in looking at the sexual and social mother in the work of Brossard, Brandt and Théoret, a feminist ethics requires what Sherwin again calls “models of human interaction that parallel the rich complexity of actual human relationships . . .” (15). Such models correspond to Mullet’s notion of “relational thinking,” a process of re-thinking dichotomous thought, power relations and social patterns, where “classifications as absolute truths having universal significance and relevance” (85) would be challenged.

Although it will not end there, my analysis considers this challenge as it is presented in Mouré’s and Tostevin’s work. It is thus necessary to note here that feminism’s relationship to humanism is not always clear-cut (as it can appear to be in some of these poets’ works); nor should or can it articulate itself only in terms of divergences, as the last two chapters of this study will show, and as some American feminist theorists have recently argued. Pauline Johnson is right in pointing out that to flatten out humanism to mean simply mastery, absolutism, exclusion and subjection fails to provide an accurate version of feminism’s inadvertent and potential relations to humanist values. Rather, it might be more accurate to consider what Johnson calls the “double-sided character of feminism’s relationship with modern humanism,” in light of those inherited emancipatory ideals (self-identity, individual uniqueness) (ix) which can serve feminist goals in terms other than binding arguments about universality.¹ According to Claudia Moscovici, feminist and postmodern portrayals of humanism have, at times, misrepresented those philosophical texts held as the grand examples of humanist master-narratives. Moscovici’s particular concern is for the depiction (mostly on the part of Lyotard and Derrida) of French Enlightenment thinking (Rousseau’s and Diderot’s). And she extends her discussion to what she finds as the need for “more nuanced, historicized and positive modes” (1) of critique of the masculine, neutral and

¹ Johnson argues, for example, that nineteenth-century English Romanticism has been “vital” in feminism’s “commitment to a conception of human diversity and difference” (66).

universal subject, as well as its redefinitions of subjectivity.² However, as Moscovici attests, if an examination of these philosophers' own tropes of dissimulation indicate that Lyotard's postmodern narratives may not have been the first in undermining universalist discourse, it still reveals that universalist modes of social and sexual identity have prevailed in the humanist tradition over other more fragmentary ones (21).

The articulation of maternalism and, by extension, of female subjectivity in ethical terms fundamentally implies both challenges to and appropriations of the language of humanist values and truths. Although the next two chapters will focus on Mouré's and Tostevin's challenges to exclusionary models, their inscription of a linguistic (m)otherness, beyond and irreducible to the binary categories of logocentrism, will anticipate notions still resonant with humanist constructs: selfhood and (a relational) autonomy, which will be further examined in part 4. It is partly at the confluence of Lévinas' trace and Derrida's différance that I situate the feminist appropriation of deconstruction by Mouré and Tostevin. Although I reserve the issue of deconstruction's compatibility with feminism for chapter 7, the specificity of Mouré's and Tostevin's appropriations must be noted, especially since their deconstructive poetics and their renditions of maternalism are intimately connected. This specificity is apparent in the double appropriation at work in their deconstructive poetics, that is to say, of their treatment of Derrida's notion of différance and the influence of Kristeva's notion of the semiotic chora on their work.³ Here, in these introductory remarks, I want to unpack these theoretical notions, for they will be intrinsic to the arguments in the next two chapters.

There is indeed a double (and intertwined) primacy that poststructuralist theorists like

² For example, what Moscovici finds as Lyotard's not always persuasive opposition of Enlightenment and postmodern narratives (of homology and paralogy) is complicated by some of the heterogeneous narratives she finds in Rousseau's and Diderot's dissimulations of their own (otherwise upheld) metaphysics of presence and origins. Johnson in turn looks to the often "anti-dogmatic spirit" of the eighteenth century (26), warning against viewing the Enlightenment's history as a "one-sided epistemology" (27).

³ In the context of Canadian poetry written in English, the specifically feminist deconstructive poetics of Mouré and Tostevin intersect with similar textual explorations in language poetics (such as Steve McCaffery's postmodern work briefly examined in this study's introduction).

Derrida and Kristeva have discerned in Lévinasian ethics: the primacy of alterity and the primacy of language. To borrow from Derrida, both are always already inherent in the subject.⁴ According to Lévinas, the other in and of language is “an unrepresentable trace, the way of the infinite”; it is “the trace of infinity” and “of what is inordinate” (*Otherwise* 116-117). “The trace in which a face is ordered is not reducible to a sign,” writes Lévinas (*Otherwise* 121). In “The Transcendence of Words,” he again dwells on a basic alterity as both underlying and motivating language, and posits the notion of erasure (or “biffure”), the play of absence and presence which will be crucial to Mouré’s and Tostevin’s poetics of (m)otherness.

As a number of critics have pointed out, Derrida’s famous notion of différance recalls and incorporates Lévinas’ notion of the trace, denoting the irreducibility of the other and the difference that inhabits language itself. Différance also derives from Ferdinand de Saussure’s notion of the arbitrary relationship of the signifier and the signified (which constitute the sign), and their differential aspect (as they are defined only in terms of their difference from other signifiers and signifieds). In other words, the rejection of the essence of the (transcendental) signifier (the Logos) means it has no meaning in and of itself, outside the chain of signs (of language). This rejection is one of Derrida’s starting points in challenging ideas of origin and meaning, of logocentrism, and it is adopted by both Mouré and Tostevin. Logic, rather than perceived as being foundational, is viewed as constructed and rooted in the Saussurian notion of phonetic and linguistic difference, that is, a play of differences, of signifieds which always refer to other

⁴ In language, Lévinas differentiates the saying from the said, an “excess of meaning that overflows any statement, and the impossibility of ever completely reducing the saying to the said” (Chanter 196). The saying, the other of the said, is always in retreat of the said, which the saying needs nonetheless: the saying is irreducible to fixed meaning (the said), just as the other is irreducible to the subject, but nonetheless a component of that subject. In a way, Lévinas seems to posit a kind of “inédit” or “unsaid” that nonetheless leaves its trace in the “dit” or the “said.” In *Otherwise than Being*, what Lévinas also calls the “signifyingness of signification” is rendered analogous to “incommensurability with consciousness, which becomes a trace of the who knows where . . .” (100); this “irreducible to consciousness” or “something foreign” (101) denotes again that which delays the ego’s full expression in language: “the ascendancy of the other is exercised upon the same to the point of interrupting it, leaving it speechless” (101) and “undoing the logos” (102). As Sean Hand synthesizes: “the saying and the said, the act of expression and the thing expressed are never correlative . . . since in the saying there is always the trace of alterity that goes beyond anything that can be measured in terms of its thought content” (“Transcendence” 144).

signifieds. Différance refers to this “systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing [“espacement”] by which elements relate to each other” (Derrida, Positions 27) in the signifying process. This “espacement” suggests the lack of origin as “the condition of thought and experience” (Spivak, Preface xvii) as well as the provisional aspect of textual authority. As a “third term,” différance hovers as an excess or remainder, over the binary categories (such as same vs. other) which, Derrida finds, constructs logocentric thought. In dismantling the concept of origin and authority in Of Grammatology, Derrida recalls Lévinasian terms to posit the trace as that which is “retaining the other as other in the same” (62), the always already there as denoting an irreducible difference that “effaces so-called conscious subjectivity, its logos, and its theological attributes” (84).⁵

As we shall see, Mouré and Tostevin are influenced not only by Derridian theory but also by Kristevan thought, and the relation of these two theorists is clear. The definition of Kristeva's complex notion of the semiotic in turn recalls not only Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, but Derrida's own conceptualization of différance. As mentioned beforehand, the semiotic is based in the Freudian notion of the drives which inhabit the child's body in the symbiotic space shared with the mother in the early stages of infancy, where the semiotic is not yet a signifier (yet is already in the process of becoming one). In Revolution in Poetic Language, Kristeva associates the semiotic with Plato's notion of the all-encompassing, nourishing maternal chora, orienting the drives around the mother's body. As one of the modalities of the signifying process which constitutes language, the semiotic denotes those irreducible elements that can erupt in the symbolic order of language. The “revolution” of poetic language occurs when the enunciator allows the jouissance of semiotic motion or a trans-symbolic jouissance to disrupt the symbolic through a series of ruptures, contradictions and breaks, invoking the generative dimensions of language. The genotext refers to this semiotic process exceeding the symbolic (the phenotext) which “obeys rules

⁵ Although Derrida does not set out to discern an ethics of difference in the way that Lévinas' certainly does, it is no less interesting to consider that, in response to Derrida's reading of him in “The Violence of Metaphysics,” Lévinas views Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysical tradition as “an attempt at ethical Saying” (Bernasconi and Critchley xiv).

of communication” (87). Kristeva’s “revolution” conceives of the interaction between the semiotic and the symbolic (between genotext and phenotext) as a possible dialectic, through which transgression, subversion and renewal emerge—an affirmative deconstructive gesture, to be sure.

For Kristeva and, most importantly, for Mouré and Tostevin, a notion like the genotext—and the maternal chora—does not assume an origin. Rather, it figures as a non-origin. To recall Derrida, the semiotic is another version of the trace of alterity that is always already there, a trace of what is dormant in discourse. The genotext denotes (paradoxically so) the non-origin of a pre-linguistic writing, a pre-linguistic that is already language: a “rhythm” linked to the maternal body, but which is already consisting of first articulations or of echolalia deriving, that is to say, from within language itself. Kristeva does not attempt to recuperate an origin, for the semiotic chora itself is not seen as the source of the symbolic; nor is it simply its opposite. Kristeva argues that, even in the symbiotic stage, the semiotic (and thus the “corps-à-corps” with the mother) is already regulated by familial and social structures. In other words, there is always already an anticipation of the symbolic within the semiotic, just as the semiotic becomes integral to the symbolic. There is “an ‘outside’ that is in fact internal to each closed set” (Revolution 14), Kristeva explains in her Preface, defying binary thought patterns in the theory of these two components, as well as undoing the traditional opposition of nature and culture, an opposition that has already been traced back to Lacan.

Just as Mouré and Tostevin will be seen to open their deconstructive poetics to an ethics imbedded in their representations of maternalism, Kristeva theorizes the semiotic chora in terms of a trace, clearly inspired by certain elements of Derrida’s grammatology (and Lévinas’ ethical theory). In certain passages of Revolution in Poetic Language, she directly relates her objective to Derrida’s own grammatological procedure, to the elements of trace, gram, différance, or supplement. In trying to define the possibility of meaning through the workings of a language motivated by difference, she cites Derrida and opens up her semiology to an ethical philosophy that bears the strong influence of Lévinas’ own “first philosophy”: “without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear” (Of

Grammatology, qtd. in Revolution 141).⁶ The semiotic posits a theory of alterity which operates within language and the subject, and which is interruptive, eruptive, bringing about “the revolution of différance” (Revolution 144).⁷ As the next two chapters will show, this connection between Kristeva’s semiotic and Derrida’s grammatology is implicitly inscribed in Mouré’s work and more explicitly explored in Tostevin’s formulations of excess, of a maternal excess, which posits a relational ethics. We shall see how Mouré and Tostevin situate in language a maternal other—a possible premise for the subject’s constitution in language, and thus in relation to a “same other.”

⁶ This radical alterity within, yet non-assimilable to, the same is the trace that marks a certain anteriority as the heterogeneity of différance and of the semiotic. It is “the movement whose veiling produces metaphysics or, more accurately, metaphysics is a trace unknown to itself [qui s’ignore]” (Revolution 143)—a trace of differences. Like the semiotic which is always already there, anticipated in a social and potentially ethical order, Derrida’s trace has always already “become”: “it is conceived of as a delay [retard] that comes before, a (pre)condition, a possibility, becoming and become, a movement preceding the sign, logos, the subject . . .” (Revolution 142).

⁷ As for the active, operative and revolutionary aspects of différance and the semiotic, a point of distinction between the two theorists must be made. Kristeva’s appropriation of both the Hegelian process of negativity and the Freudian notion of the drives, as well as her own correlation of these concepts with différance, enables the drawing of the parallel between her semiotics and Derridian grammatology. Otherwise, Kristeva argues, différance might just continue to delay the heterogeneity in which it operates (Revolution 145).

Chapter 5

Erin Mouré: Leaking Memory

In an essay, “Poetry, Memory and the Polis,” Erin Mouré describes the Law of “‘the same’” as “the norm” of social organization (203), the “anesthesia of our memories”; it is “the force that pulls us toward the centre, centripetal. To make us forget, or repress, or define in terms acceptable to the order” (202). By Law, Mouré refers to “the laws of representation, meaning, codification” (202) of the civic order or the “Polis.” Borrowed from Kristeva, the “Polis” corresponds to a symbolic order of logocentric and heterocentric thinking, a “binary thinking, hierarchical thinking. Thinking to the end. The tyranny of the a priori category. The way the mind knows itself” (202).¹ In some of her writing, Mouré draws directly on deconstructive philosophy’s critique of Enlightenment thought and liberal humanism. She sets out to displace humanist assumptions of self, of other and of language—what she considers as androcentric guidelines through which “the mind knows itself.” This chapter will first explore Mouré’s feminist appropriation of Derridian deconstruction in Furious and her own attack on the Enlightenment (or Kantian) investment in “pure reason.” The supplementary structure of Furious itself will display its deliberate allusions to Derrida’s play with the idea of excess in Western philosophy. Then, this notion of excess will be related to Mouré’s evocations of the trace of a maternal memory, which is shown to underlie language as a form of textual otherness. Just as the direct influence of Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic chora can be detected in Mouré’s essays, it can also be perceived in her poems, although the maternal metaphors will here be treated as (reader-oriented) intertexts rather than as the poet’s deliberate or direct appropriation of Kristevan theory.² In short, Derrida’s

¹ In “Psychoanalysis and the Polis,” Kristeva discusses the two forms of psychoanalytical and political interpretation, drawing on the Greek etymological meaning of political as “‘popular’ (politikos) discourse, or discourse for and of the citizens (polites) of the city-state (polis)” (Moi, Kristeva 301).

² As it remains ambiguous whether Mouré’s poems recall deliberately Kristevan theory, I am treating her poems of maternalism in relation to the theory (as well as to Irigaray’s philosophy)—thus in terms of a “hermeneutic mode” of intertextuality. It is, however, important to keep in mind that Mouré’s essays do draw directly from Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic. So far, in this study, some examples of direct theoretical appropriations or textual recall have been

différance, the unacknowledged excess of sign play, and Kristeva's semiotic, the trace of a linguistic (m)otherness, both resonate in Mouré's theme of a submerged, potentially subversive, and regenerative memory. Within the feminist and lesbian context of her work (which, in turn, will be related back to Irigaray's female ethics), Mouré's concern lies with the omission, "forgetfulness" or excess of women's desires, subjectivities and differences within dominant systems of logic and social exchange. One question to pose will be anticipated in the present chapter and treated in a later one: Does Mouré always foreground and sustain a relational intersubjectivity, which is premised here upon maternal memory?

Exceeding the Order

In Furious, "The Acts" is a series of numbered footnotes used to supplement some of the poems and represent the feminist meditations of a speaker who can, once again, be called a poet-speaker. One major concern is a Derridian philosophical scrutiny of logocentrism: "It isn't that to change the weight and force of English will necessarily make women's speaking possible. But to move the force in any language, create a slippage, even for a moment . . . to decentre the 'thing,' unmask the relation . . ." (Furious 98). In the paragraph preceding this statement, the poet-speaker specifies that the "thing" in question is a language "that supports easily the hegemony of 'singleness,' 'individual power,' 'phallus.' Its thingness before its motion" (98). This footnote signals a scepticism about universalized notions of truth, knowledge and power which found this "hegemony," in turn understood as a phallogocentric order. As a work of feminist deconstruction, Furious deliberately alludes to aspects of Derrida's own critique of metaphysics, as found in Of Grammatology. In brief, Derrida links what he considers to be the metaphysics of transcendentality, closure and authority to the logocentrism of Western philosophy; he challenges "the belief that the first and last things are the Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind . . . the self-presence of full self-consciousness" (Spivak, Preface lxviii). Accordingly, Mouré's text

found in L'amèr's adoption of Irigaray's ethical notion of a "même différence," in Théoret's inscription of Cixous' feminist reclaiming of the Medusa figure and, as the next chapter will show, in Tostevin's adoption of Kristeva's "génotexte" in her own book, Gyno-Text.

underlines its own attempts at transgressing totalizing categories: "I am tired of the same old interrelated logic of the signs that we insist upon as if it were true" (86).

The three poems titled "Pure Reason" challenge exclusive modes of thought, what Sheila Mason Mullet calls an "exclusive philosophy" which she associates with Kantian thought. According to Mullet, this philosophy has historically corresponded to logocentric forms of thought and moral reflection partly resulting in the exclusion of women from the spheres of (civil) subjectivity and reason. Mullet detects these forms in Kant's moral philosophy which, she argues, is "replicated in many other philosophical systems" or dominant discourses (74). The poems, "Pure Reason: Science" and "Pure Reason: Femininity," set out to denounce the a priori inherent in Kant's notion of "pure reason," where morality stems from a social contract binding rational men, whose behaviour is dictated by some universal law and notion of the common good. As Moscovici explains, "Only 'rational agents' " are capable of "impartial ethical decisions" within Kant's model (35). Only they "are capable of properly ethical actions and can be regarded as equal in moral status. Because not all human beings are granted equivalent moral status (by either Kant or Rousseau), not everyone is entitled to participate in formulating or even adhering to so-called universal ethical laws, the laws of reason" (Moscovici 35). The modern context of Mouré's poems may seem different from Kant's own preoccupation with moral duty and "pure reason" but, as we shall see, it is not.

Furious explores the hegemonic forces inherent in Kant's notion of the common good. The collection juxtaposes these forces with scientific claims to objectivity and with sexual politics, as both are shown to function on denigration and "systemic exclusion" (Mullet 70). In Mouré's "Pure Reason" poems, impartial and impersonal reason, objectivity and claims to higher authority become analogous to Kant's universalist paradigms as well as capitalist commodity fetishism and, by extension, the objectification of women and regulation of sexual difference. In the first poem, animals figure as scientific objects of laboratory experiments geared toward consumer demand: "The day the animals came on the radio, fed-up, the electrodes in their hands / beaming, small tubes leading into their brains where chemicals enter, / & the bubbling light from that, the

experiment / of science” (21); “their small chests” are “cut open where the wires are,” as they reply “to science that is hurting them for diet soft drinks” (21). The second poem offers an echoing parody of this experiment, articulating women’s cultural representation precisely in terms of commodity fetishes. The laboratory becomes a kind of surreal, speculative and technocratic hell where women are subjected to a similar scrutiny:

The day the women came on the radio, fed-up, electrodes in their purses
 beaming, small tubes leading into their brains where doctors enter,
 the bubbling light from that, neuron balance, the de/pression
 of their inner houses

 . . . their soft chests
 torn open where the pin-ups were. . . . (24)

Whereas the wires are inserted into the animals’ bodies to detect the effects of consumer products, the doctors “enter” women’s minds and bodies, diagnosing “their inner houses” that are inhabited by Western culture’s fixation on the (re)production of women’s bodies, printed and sold as sexual objects or “pin-ups.” Absurd on a surface level, the parallels drawn by the two poems stress quite explicitly how claims to impartiality, the universal law of reason and an unspecified common good can justify the sacrifice of some for the benefit of others. Indeed, not every creature is granted the same status in this universalizability and these efforts toward the fulfilment of “our . . . fantasy” (21).

Kant’s feminist critics often indicate how his contractarian ethics and general maxims annul specific, phenomenological or personal experience, as the rational principle entails the practice of impartiality, objectivity and universalizability. Through their suspicion of the assumed impartiality of the rational agents (here scientists, investors, psychiatrists, obstetricians), Mouré’s poems in turn expose a “universalist/impersonalist tradition” (Urban Walker 168) of scientific, economic or

moral knowledge, which suppresses or seeks to correct phenomenology.³ The conclusions drawn by morality and, by extension, the “pure reason” of science and of those deciding what consumer fantasies constitute, depend on the kind of phenomenological suppression underlined in Mouré’s own poems. Both the animals and the women “voice” their scepticism toward the impersonal and assimilative “reason” of higher authorities, which would deny them their own experiences or right to exist on their own terms: “As if you could dream like we dream . . .” (21, 24). Whereas Kant’s moral philosophy drew on his “effort to replace the dwindling authority of religious faith with the faith in the exercise of reason” (Moscovici 33), Mouré actually conflates the master discourses of science, capitalism and medicine with a patriarchal religious imperialism. In the parallels drawn by “Pure Reason: Femininity,” the radioactive light “shines” a “fine beam into the cells of animal brains” (21) as “the light of the soft cock under the black robe” also “shines” a “fine beam into the cells of women’s brains” (24). Overlaid with the irony of its parallel and of the adjectives “soft” and “fine” used to describe the invasive act, the poem conveys the indoctrination by (and imperial powers of) the black robed Jesuit. The priest joins in the abuse of power and disrespect for life in the name of an established truth or good. The other is subjected to the will of the powerful and the knowing.

Mouré’s challenge of exclusionary paradigms extends to what Dennis Denisoff observes as her “interrogation of the power politics of language” (114) and, as we shall see, to her inscription of a maternal/female other in language. The deconstruction of language is the main strategy of subversion in *Furious*, especially in its analysis of the concept of “pure reason” itself. The crucial aspect of the two “Pure Reason” poems is not only the exposure of the forces of power underlying logocentric thought but also the deconstruction of these very notions. Following Derrida’s approach, Mouré’s own deconstruction in Act 3 entails both a reversal and a displacement of the

³ That is to say, reason or knowledge corrects what the nineteenth-century moral philosopher Henry Sidwick considered as “scattered intuitions” (Urban Walker 169), as those “uncertainties and discrepancies” (Sidwick, qtd. in Urban Walker 169) within “moral judgement” which undermined the forces of reason, objectivity and power (Urban Walker 169).

meaning of “pure reason” itself.⁴ The speaker begins by differentiating “pure reason” from “logic,” which “is just something imposed upon reason. It’s one kind of connectedness, that creates points of conjunction and reference that may not be true, & may not have helped us much as human beings in the end (and certainly not as women)” (87). Yet as something “UNreasonable” (87), both in its traditionally moral and political sense and in the new sense it acquires here, “pure reason” moves away from the a priori and closer to the phenomenological. In other words, it is now associated with those previously dismissed “scattered intuitions,” those “inner houses” repressed by the dominant discourses, as explored in “Pure Reason: Femininity.”

In the two poems, “sensory reception” and “dreaming” (21, 24) already undermine the impartial, objective control exerted on them. In “The Acts,” this “UNreasonable” notion figures as the “uncontrollable space, at the edge” (87). Claimed, by the poet-speaker, to be “beyond all logic, and beyond the signs” (87), this rewritten notion of “pure reason” has freed itself from its referent and become slippery. In other words, “pure reason” becomes what Derrida calls the “irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept’ ” (Positions 42), a textual/notional alterity that prevents “an exhaustive and closed formalization of it” (Positions 45). In the Act’s own supplementary notion of it, “pure reason” is no longer the moral philosopher’s vehicle toward fixed universalizability, but remains in deferral of closure, exceeding its own signified. Thus like différance, “pure reason” exceeds reason itself, since “it can’t be itself reasoned or it wouldn’t be pure reason” (Furious 87). In fact, “pure reason” (again like différance) is that subversive undercurrent traversing the two logocentric assumptions underscoring the “Pure Reason” poems: “Intelligibility, and Cause too” (87). From the deconstruction of dualist thinking emerge other possibilities in language, such as the excess and “leak” (87)—the alterity of poetic language—that “pure reason” is used to typify. As “The Acts” reveal, to “unmask the relation” is to indicate how the binaries of traditional logic and reason are not in any way foundational or irreversible; they are not steeped in truth. Rather, they are constructed and rooted in phonetic and linguistic difference. Derrida’s notion of différance

⁴ Stephen Scobie suggests that “The Acts” could be a play on “The Acts” of The New Testament, “which follows and supplements the ‘pure reason’ of the Gospels” (81).

conveys this process of deferring or differing between sounds of words and signifieds, in “a field” which “is in effect that of play” (Writing 289) where, in Mouré’s words, “the signs are moving” (90).⁵

A poem that explores the ideas of play and excess is “Ocean Poem.” It also anticipates Mouré’s conception of alterity in female, and relational, terms. “Ocean Poem” is not supplemented by “The Acts” but contains six footnotes in its own body, and I cite the poem here in full:⁶

I am the one who lies, slowly, closer
to your arm.
I insinuate.
The trip trip of the rain into wet earth &
the traffic noise.
This kind of a hush¹, she said.
Lifting her arms over her head so gently
in a gesture of, longing.
We are all innocent beings with our bathtubs² & literary
pure enforcement.

⁵ As mentioned before, “The Acts” adopt Derrida’s idea of textual supplement, placing the “supplement at the source” (Of Grammatology 304) and revealing their desire to defy textual, philosophical or poetic origin, closure and authority. What is named “inter-text” (85) in Act 1 is exemplified in Mouré’s own book of poems, since Furious deconstructs itself from within through its intricate web of notes, allusions, additions, corrections, and revisions. It plays dense, theoretical language off against concrete, surrealist, often “inconclusive” imagery (Scobie 74), showing how poetry and theory can enrich one another. Rather than merely reader-oriented, Mouré’s “inter-text” involves the poet-speaker’s own self-conscious use and repetition of her “own and others’ earlier texts” (85), which include the philosophy of Kant and the deconstruction of Derrida. What Derrida calls “a network of textual referral to other texts” (Positions 33) becomes, for Mouré’s speaker, the task of “Pulling the old poems thru [sic] the new, making the old lines a thread thru [sic] the eye of the words I am sewing” (85). This textual “sewing” enables the text’s surplus of “Sound & sense” (85), a surplus that is conveyed by the sentence’s alliterative echoes and typographical variations (“a thread thru the eye”). As Scobie observes, “None of the poems in Furious can really stand on its own: they all need to be sewn into the greater fabric, itself unfinished” (73).

⁶ The other poems in Furious that are supplemented in “The Acts” have their titles footnoted in the Table of Contents rather than in the body of the work itself.

I don't know if there's any difference between men & women³
is just a lie.⁴

The word human being has stood for men
until now.

Until now.

When she puts her arm down, in innocence,⁵
I'll show her.⁶

¹There's a kind of a hush, all over the world, tonight

All over the world, you can hear the sound of lovers in love.

—Herman's Hermits, 1966

²Places to get clean. Large, enamel, clumsy. "Bathtub gin."

³The poets who say this believe that the standard of poetic excellence is just excellent & not male.

⁴This should not be done in any poem, accusing someone of lying.

⁵In no sense.

⁶Read "shore." This is an ocean poem. (48)

The tone of this poem hovers between earnestness and irony, as the theme hovers between love and dishonesty, promise and threat. To quote Scobie again, it is "an uneasy poem, somewhere between love lyric and social satire" (70). This kind of strain appears in the lyrics by "Herman's Hermits" included in the first note. The use of a pop song could partly undermine the seriousness of the woman's words. Yet it still effectively echoes her "longing" and apparent hesitation, her gentleness and "innocence" of which, nonetheless, the reader cannot be certain, as the comma in the eighth line ("in a gesture of, longing") disrupts logical succession and suspends the meaning of her gesture. The song obviously offers a powerful resonance to this poem which is on the verge

of promising a new love (“this kind of a hush, she said”) and a certain rectification of injustices: “until now” the universal concept of “human being” has excluded women, but no more, the speaker seems to suggest by repeating the “Until now.” However, can or should we even trust this poet-speaker? In a kind of self-dialogue about literary convention, aesthetic judgment and sexual difference, the verb “to lie” comes up in the main text and again in the fourth footnote. The so-called “hush” becomes discordant with the “traffic noise” in the fifth line, the rejet of an enjambment that completes the sentence but again disrupts syllogistic flow.

In the opening lines, the speaker physically “lies” close to the other woman’s body. The indecisiveness of her “insinuation” causes an ellipsis that exemplifies how the reader is prevented from deduction and closure, and also presents the complex pun, “in-sin-you-ate,”⁷ perhaps in reference to the potential and forbidden relation of the women. And again, the speaker herself may also be telling “lies” in this poem. In the eleventh line, she casts doubt on the discursive relevance of gender, a “doubtful doubt” however, considering the convoluted syntax of the sentence that continues in the next line. In the third footnote, she criticizes poets (here like herself) who hold illusions about a gender-neutral “standard of poetic excellence,” and she has already partly undermined her own doubt about the relevance sexual difference, calling such a negation “just a lie.” Yet, in the fourth footnote, the speaker is apparently advocating free speech (or the right to lie), ironically, through a censoring of those who would accuse others of lying, warning that “this should not be done in any poem, accusing someone of lying.” These semantic inconsistencies and formal disruptions undercut authority, preventing closure with every supplementary comment or line. Even the implicit critique of “literary / pure enforcement” is itself undercut by the fact that Mouré is reproducing a kind of academic practice through her constant use of annotation and reflection about the effect of supplementary fragment structures. However, these notes are neither academic nor literary in tone. They convey and combine pop culture, free association of thought, reproachful and ironic statements, and partial homologies. The prose in the footnotes both shapes and disrupts the form of the poem, already disrupted by its double entendres, line breaks,

⁷ I am indebted to Ted Chamberlin for this insight.

convoluted and incomplete ideas, and the explicit explanation of its suggestive word play which, in a way, is then robbed of whatever subtlety can go into punning.

The irony that either undercuts or reinforces the speaker's and the other woman's statements serves to emphasize the element of indecisiveness that pervades and (de)structures the entire work. The self-ironizing of the third and fourth footnotes and even the revealed punning in the fifth and sixth are self-conscious preventions of any final interpretation of the main text, which in turn deals with the uncertain, but potential, relationship of the two women figuring in the poem. The puns made obvious in the last two footnotes again emphasize the interchange of the "Sound & sense" (85) of words that exceed any stable signification but take part in this interwoven poetic structure called "inter-text" (85) in Act 1. Rewritten as "in no sense," the "Innocence" suggests a "new sense," in a similar manner that "pure reason" adopts a new "UNreasonable" meaning in Act 3. The phonetic and typographical links between an "ocean poem" as a "notion poem," and the displacement of the slightly threatening vow "I'll show her" with the more lyrical mention of "shore," display how these signifiers exceed one another's meanings through semantic deferral. They are also shown to depend on the various meanings they bring to one another, once thrown into the poem's own field of substitutions.

Yet another dilemma could present itself to Mouré's reader. Although the structure of Furious attempts to live up to the idea of an unfinished fabric, does "Ocean Poem" really free itself from "Intelligibility" and "Cause," as "pure reason" is claimed to have done in "The Acts"? As in many other poems in the collections, "Ocean Poem" is, to some extent, "intelligible," demonstrating perhaps that the redeployment of "pure reason" "beyond all logic" cannot always be sustained. Constituting the major strategies of "Ocean Poem" are indeed the play of logic against counter-logic, and it is this very play that produces the indecisiveness in the poem. Is this where Mouré's writing does not always respond to its own poetics as it is unpacked by "The Acts"? On the whole, however, Mouré's supplement of signs and her poem's playfulness do postpone the reader's conclusions about the poet-speaker's beliefs, her earnestness, and even about the fulfilment of the women's relationship. Perhaps as all poetry does, it underlines the inadequacy of

signification yet also reveals its potentiality. Most importantly, "Ocean Poem" transforms this inadequacy into an excess, into a kind of motion and disruptive emergence of new spaces or "senses," where the other tentatively begins to show it/herself.

Mothing Excess

The "Glossaries," "Sites," "Footnotes," "Corrections" and ironically inconclusive "Codas" in Mouré's poetic works after Furious continue to foreground an idea of structural (formal) and textual (semantic) excess. And it is through this continued exploration of excess that Mouré begins to postulate a maternal other and an ethics of alterity. As the speaker of WSW (West South West) observes, "The questioning of the poem is an uncovering of fragments already there . . ." (115); it is a questioning of the supplement that, in Derrida's terms, is always already there, playing between the absence of its origin (already) and the presence of its trace (always there). In much of Mouré's writing, the poetic act of uncovering such "fragments" takes on the form of uncovering memory, often conveyed as a suppressed, maternal element of the psyche and associated with desire. Mouré's notion of memory remains far from a nostalgic look to the past or essential truth about human formation. Rather, it is always already a sign and a construct of language; it is mediated by history, represented by a subject-in-process, and sexually specific. In "Watching the Watchword," Mouré writes that women have much at stake in the deconstruction of "the singular controlled voice" (4) of epistemological foundations that reveal a yearning for presence (for the coherent, self-controlling, whole individual), and where the danger of effacing difference always threatens. After deconstruction, it becomes necessary to theorize women's voices as dialogic or polyvocal, "more relational than constitutive of a univocal meaning or self" in link with others' "voices and bodies" (3). This relation to the other is one of desire in Mouré's poetry, anticipated by the suspended meanings of "Ocean Poem" and, as we shall see below, premised on maternalism.

In "Poetry, Memory and the Polis," Mouré's articulation of memory borrows from the "revolution of différance" proposed by Kristeva, which the poet considers "intelligible but not in

this organization, this order” (202). Mouré suggests that “the sounds of words” are traces of memory in the poems, “a resistance to anaesthesia of our memories: not hearing sounds” (“Poetry” 202). Again, the relationship between the heterogeneity produced by the “sounds of words” (Saussure’s difference as différance), and the (re)discovery of an “other” language (the semiotic) that would redefine “intelligibility,” reveals itself as a crucial component of this feminist poetics. Mouré’s conception of memory is a complex one. It encompasses the excess of textual play which indicates a hole or lack in “this order” of language where the inscription of female (textual and subjective) alterity becomes possible. As Act 11 of Furious argues, to cause “a fissure through which we can leak out from the ‘real’ that is sewn into us” allows women “to utter what could not be uttered in the previous structure. Where we have not been represented, except through Dominant (in this case, patriarchal) speaking, which even we speak, even we women” (95). Here Mouré again weaves, quite deliberately it seems, into her conception of memory the main characteristic of the semiotic chora as the subversion of “rationality that has always privileged reason, order, unity and lucidity, and that it has done so by silencing and excluding the irrationality, chaos and fragmentation that has come to represent femininity” (Moi, Sexual/Textual 160).

As argued previously, the excess or alterity incarnated by différance is invoked by the notion of “pure reason” in “The Acts” and the textual indecisiveness of “Ocean Poem.” Although less directly engaged with the theories of Derrida or Kristeva, the poem “Seebe” (in WSW) likens a “blastular memory” to an “incredible spillage” and “the spaces between words where time leaks out” (81). This image of the blastula links memory both to linguistic excess and to the maternal body. Its embryonic quality may recall Kristeva’s semiotic chora, submerged in the symbolic order yet potentially transgressive of ordinary sense, placed on the edge of that “‘something else’” or “some other ‘it’” of signification (Mouré, in Billings 42). In Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love, a short poem, “The Calf,” also represents memory as an excess over and beyond the “sensible” world of ordinary sense: “. . . tongues held down at the back / with straps of muscle, core, blood” still form the “collation of memory. / Inaudible when still” (22). The corporeal, brutal and almost

inordinate imagery of “straps,” “muscle” and “blood,” blended with the indefinite and abstract notion of “inaudible” memory, calls for the articulation of women’s desires and the inscription of the body in writing, of the speaking and ‘audible’ body. In fact, it is the bleeding body itself that conveys the potential dismantling of the “sensible” in this poem—through the recurring image of “impossible leakage,” as well as the repressed urge of “letting the blood out, into the air” (22).⁸

In the earlier collection, Domestic Fuel (1985), Mouré’s concern with latent desire and a submerged female memory is made to correspond to a notion of maternalism. The poem “Blindness” develops a peculiar association of pain with fish, extending the pain to that of suppressing desire.⁹ In this poem, female desire is relegated to ocean floors (102) and compared to the “flatfish,” “held up, thawed, cut into slices / across the body . . .” (102), an image that is suggestive of the impact of the consumer economy in Furious. More significantly, the fish imagery extends to a maternal metaphor:

Some of our desires are known only on the floor
of oceans, the nets dragged thru,
a light beyond colour we can’t imagine, where we live now,
people of the surface,
whose foetuses still bear gills for a few days
& lose them, our kinship,

⁸ The physical pain conveyed in the body-language of “The Calf” is linked to this difficulty or the “great sadness” expressed by the reported speaker. Already encountered in Théoret’s own bleeding figure, Bloody Mary, who agonized over the inaccessibility of her own speech, the pain involved in gaining access to speech and writing comes through Mouré’s often surreal use of animal imagery: the laboratory rats in “Pure Reason: Science,” the animal embryo of “Seebe”’s “blastular memory” (WSW 81), and the bleeding “calf with two hearts” and “A few seconds of life” (Sheepish 22) remaining. In Furious, the poet-speaker of “Salt: Condition” describes her own tongue as a “small wriggling animal”: “in the dream / it was my tongue, I had torn it out / by accident, it was loosely rooted” (71). In the earlier work, Domestic Fuel, pain (domestic violence, sexual oppression and female silence) certainly suffuses the poems, while “The expression of longing, / in & among / the collapse of social systems” (78) still remains a possibility.

⁹ In an interview, Mouré draws the connection between the fish in her work and a “psychic pain” that she is trying to convey in her poetry. Fish, she suggests, are “a metaphor or paradigm for pain that’s difficult to express. Using the fish as a paradigm enables me to externalize something that is internal” (in Billings 38).

the water inside women,
 water where we form & grow.

The halibut frozen whole, a sheet of memory

.....

our body is water &
 the fish burn in it like fuel. (102)

In a slight play on theories of evolution, Mouré draws attention to the “kinship” of human “foetuses” with “gills” or fish gut. The “oceans” are metaphorically transformed into uterine spaces—“the water inside women” where humans “form and grow” as bodies of “water” (102). Most importantly to Mouré’s theme of maternal memory, this is where the “fish” reside as “a sheet of memory.” One could relate this “sheet” to the linguistic record of a uterine but culturally “castrated” “fleshly logic” (Brennan 224), the child’s relation to the mother’s body which, Kristeva argues, is always already mediated by history, culture and language.¹⁰ These lines convey an (unsuccessfully) repressed or hidden memory, associated with speech and a “loose & admitted” desire once “ashamed of the shape our bodies took” (103), the trace of that (m)other element still unseen by the “people of the surface.” Like the potential relationship of the two women in “Ocean Poem,” memory and desire are “oceanic” despite the “blindness” to it, remindful of the “oceanic

¹⁰ In *The Interpretation of Flesh*, Brennan takes up Freud’s theory of psychical energy (the drives) and sets out to discard his assumption that, at the level of the drives, the subject is energetically self-contained. In other words, for Brennan the bodily drives are not contained within the boundaries of one body or subject. Rather, they involve social exchange, intersubjective workings, a “fleshly logic” that is uterine and has been culturally “castrated” (224). Brennan argues for the relation between the psychical, the social and the physical, and their impact on the constitution of masculinity and femininity. Her notion of the “physicality of ideas” (4) (drawn from readings of Spinoza and Merleau-Ponty) supports Kristeva’s own attempt at treating the “non-reductionist nature of certain physical effects” (Brennan 4)—particularly those affecting sexual difference. Here, “no amicable divorce between biological sex and constructed sexual identity” (224) can exist, as the structures of language are already operating within the material body.

bliss” figuring in Brandt’s Demeter figure (Mother 17).¹¹ In a way, “Blindness” begins to express the inexpressible, anticipating the absent presence of a female other (the mother), since the poem stages a metaphorical re-connection with the maternal body through and as a realm of language, a “fleshly” code.

More precisely—and in keeping with the role of maternalism in postulating a female ethics—a kind of “cultural debt to women’s maternity” (Grosz, Sexual 179) also figures in Mouré’s inscription of memory and of a lesbian (also very Brossardian) “loving ethics” (Irigaray, Ethics 104). It is also possible to bring together Irigaray’s and Kristeva’s theories on the maternal in this reading, since both posit a same-other dialectic that is also the premise of Mouré’s relational ethics. As discussed in chapter 1, Kristeva’s and Irigaray’s dismantling of Lacan’s dichotomous rendition of the pre-oedipal (the nature/culture binary) posits the “corps-à-corps” as always already discursive and “sexed.” For instance, Irigaray’s articulation of the unconscious proposes that “the girl has a sexualized body different from the boy’s well before the genital stage” (This Sex 142)—perhaps leading to Mouré’s statement about the “shure” existence of the “female imaginary” in Furious. When she posits the body as always already (socially) gendered within the “pre-

¹¹ Another possible intertext for this poem is Irigaray’s essay, “The Mechanics of Fluids,” where the “feminine” figures not as a newly imposed logic or truth, but as a disruptive excess, analogous (like the semiotic) to Derrida’s différance. Irigaray treats the effacement of corporeality (or what she chooses to call “fluidity”) from Western discourse in relation to the hierarchical privileging of sameness, phallogocentrism, and “solidity” or “a mechanics of solids alone” (This Sex 107). “Solidity” is related to Lacan’s paternal metaphor that substitutes the “corps-à-corps,” a metaphor that appears to be invoked by the “surface” in Mouré’s poem or the visual she seeks to exceed with the motivation of difference in her writing (“Poetry” 202). In Lacan’s logic of metaphor, one object (the maternal body, the “object a,” the feminine economy of “fluids”) is substituted for another (the Law, sight, the phallogocentric economy of “solids”). As an alternative to this “corked” fluidity, Irigaray “proposes uncorking” the “object a” and letting bodily fluids and metonymy flow in her text (Oliver, Womanizing 169). Because “fluids” operate here according to a logic of metonymy, they can “be associated, touch each other, but can never be completely substituted for each other” (Oliver, Womanizing 169). As in the undecided relationship of the women in “Ocean Poem,” human relations are therefore not necessarily dependant on a fixed subject and fixed object position, for each ‘other’ is irreducible, free flowing, shifting and metonymic. Although still silent “under oceans,” “the deep water” (Domestic 103) or the Irigarayan “fluids” of women’s bodies in contact with each other are anticipated in Mouré’s poem. Not only is the opposition of body/intellect dissolved as the repressed or “blind side” of the body is finally “facing the brain” (103), but a feminine specificity is already rendered to these ocean-floor desires, anticipating the certainty (and Irigarayan contention) expressed in the final Act of Furious: “The female imaginary exists, you are shure [sic] of it . . .” (100).

genital” stage, Irigaray’s alternate model not only refuses to make sexual difference “a correlative of ‘genitality’ ” (This Sex 142), but it also allows “for a daughter to situate herself with respect to her mother,” to recognize her mother’s sex and her own as specific through language (This Sex 143). This description of female relations also extends to Kristeva’s rendition of the “civilizing mother,” where the re-definition of sameness, with respect to difference, arises from the re-defined relation to the mother, or to “that which primevally and necessarily has conceived, given birth, nourished, warmed” (Irigaray, Ethics 97). Yet, as Irigaray argues and as Brandt also demonstrates in her work, there is a “whole history of philosophy” and culture that wrongly supposes the “undifferentiated attraction to the archaic, as love of that [the same] which does not and will not know itself as different” (Ethics 97). The mother (or what Irigaray calls here the “maternal-feminine”) “serves forever and for free, unknown, forgotten”: “This sameness is the maternal-feminine which has been assimilated before any perception of difference” (Ethics 98). As opposed to this pricelessness, Irigaray proposes a “debt” owed to the mother, one that must be paid for the possibility of “a loving ethics.”

How, then, is this notion of “debt” relevant to Mouré’s preoccupation with memory? In the opening poem, “The Runner,” Mouré again invokes the fluid, maternal memory of a woman’s “breast . . . full of remembered water,” which struggles with “the amnesia of the chest” (9). As the “blastular memory” of “Seebe” indicates, the remembrance of natural landscapes in WSW is indeed intrinsically linked to psychic, female landscapes. In “Site: The Cord,” the female ethics proposed by Irigaray, and the intricacies between language and the chora drawn by Kristeva, both resonate in the poet-speaker’s expressed “gratitude of that cord”: “To bear the memory of that cord, severed, listening to the red / end of it. Source of sound! That bleating! / Bleating of the cut cord!” (27). The semantic play between vocal “cord” and umbilical “cord” conveys the interiority of “the body,” yet also “tying it to the civic entity” (27)—to the always already symbolic order of sounds and language, to the maternal posited in terms of alterity (as a same other) rather than an undifferentiated sameness. However, in these lines, gratitude is still giving way to nostalgia, the repetitive use of the word “bleating” perhaps showing how easy it is to fall short of this necessary

differentiation. The plaintive, wavering cry conveyed by the “bleating” seems to mourn rather than accept the severed “corps-à-corps”—that is, before it can recognize only the remnants of its traces in speech, “the art of the cord” invoked by the poet-speaker: “I too remember the cord out of my centre!” (27).

In the poem that follows, “Site: The Method,” this “severance” (29), which caused the “bleating” in the previous poem, is re-assessed. It becomes both a “cut necessity” (29) (such as the inherent mediation of the “corps-à-corps,” perhaps an aural pun on “cord”), and the mark of its memory. That is to say, both the maternal severance and the maternal tie must exist for the sake of speech; both an identification with and a differentiation from the maternal become possible, indicating what Benjamin calls “the double-sidedness of intersubjectivity” (7). The “site” of the differentiated maternal body is “the cord of the voice” (29) that makes “speech possible” (29). As Mouré’s poem weaves the suggestive umbilical “cord” (again, a kind of “fleshly” memory) into its contemplation of the vocal cord, the maternal chora ‘infiltrates’ parts of the body, and the speaking or “bleating” body takes form in the poem. Unlike the merciless invasion of wires into the bodies objectified in the two “Pure Reason” poems, here the body is finally connected to and disconnected from this primordial “cord” running through it (“. . . its entry into / the system . . .” [27]). After her slip into a longing for fusion with the first woman, the speaker of Mouré’s poems still manages to constitute herself through a differentiated mother (a cord/“corps” severed and remembered, the play of absence and presence of the semiotic chora).

A passage in “The Jewel” also conveys the trace of a maternal tongue through a surge of the poet-speaker’s personal recollections. The entire poem’s self-conscious and repeated attempts at drawing the sensuous image of a woman wearing red seems at first incommensurable with the speaker’s memories of her parents and her dreams of western landscapes. However, these memories do suggest the various elements that suffuse a “physical memory” in which “the body knows itself” (16). The ellipses between and within the various accounts in the poem prevent any logical connection between them, yet they also mime the strain present in the drawing of this female image, which seems plagued by the speaker’s past denial of her own sexuality. Having

once ordered herself to “put away your genitals / Gently,” she recollects a time of “Self-hatred, self-pity, fear of the body, separation from the mother” (19), in the midst of attempting to write the woman in red into her text. Yet the speaker has also already drawn her own picture earlier in the poem: “My eyes with their fine wrinkles, my eyes the eyes of my mother, / my tongue a bit of her knitting, where it came from, / her womb” (16). It is this acknowledgment of her mother’s tongue, “knitted” into her own, which emphasizes the mother-daughter relation’s irrevocable role in the acts of female speech and writing. It is, in fact, what allows the speaker to get beyond a difficult past and the ensuing “Aphasia” that she describes (19). In an address to her “readers,” the poet-speaker avows her “love” and promises a “kiss” and a way out of current psycho-social conflicts, blending intellect and emotion, word and eroticism in her address which recalls the “art of the cord”: “My readers, I will be able to kiss you. The dryness of my lips. I warn you. What we are given to understand. What we are given. Begs the question. One question. So I can kiss you. The words kiss & question unconnected until now” (19). Also recalling (with “until now”) the redress hinted at in “Ocean Poem,” the poet-speaker outlines her own erotic poetics, which are woven into Mouré’s inscriptions of the other—as the textual alterity recovered in Furious, as the uterine memory conveyed in “Blindness,” as a same-other, or loved, female other, inscribed (at times with difficulty) in WSW.

In WSW’s love poem, “This Dance,” roots “Deep in the earth” and “glacial pebble” (94) represent the primordial realm of maternal sameness, “The replacement of original place” (94). The corporeal rootedness is also vocal, since it consists “of the female sighing” which, Mouré writes, “some cannot imagine” (94). In an implied refusal to immolate the mother for the sake of culture or to have her “swallowed up in the law of the father” (Irigaray, Sexes 18), the acknowledgement of an Irigarayan “love of same” follows: “Because of birth, / we are descended from our mother’s body / & no other place” (94). Once again connected to the body’s “remembered water” (95) in “The Glow,” maternalism functions as a constitutive element of female subjectivity and intersubjectivity, rather than as a necessarily repressed, asocial or archaic component of the unconscious. In another poem, “The Act,” the maternal is constitutive of other

social relations and other bodily experiences: “Because of the most incredible water, / our bodies are inscriptive, a marking so torrential / . . . / . . . we are / stunning, naked, entwined” (96).

Mouré has associated what she calls a “pre-linguistic memory” (“Poetry” 206) with a kind of pre- or non-paternal instance, with “those gaps in language where maternal non-sense is” (“Poetry” 206). She writes that “the memory of the mother . . . is unrepresentable without its trace in words, in writing. . . . We have to question those traces in our writing, through the writing itself” (Poetry” 206). The processes of memory as trace and textual transgression, and the inscription of a “first female other” in ethical terms are interwoven in Mouré’s writing, and they culminate in a prose-poem entitled, “The Beauty of Furs,” and in its supplement, “The Beauty of Furs: A Site Glossary” (both in WSW). The first poem recounts “lunch with the girls,” triggering the speaker’s memory of her mother’s muskrat coat: “when she wore it & you grabbed her too hard by the arm, fur came out. Eileen fifteen years older than me, starts to laugh, & puts her hand on my shoulder, laughing. . . . in our house there was a beaver coat like that Eileen said, then suddenly we are crying, crying for those fur coats & the pride of our mothers, our mothers’ pride, smell of the coat at church on Sunday, smell of the river, & us so small, our hair wet, kneeling in that smell of fur beside our mothers” (68). As Susan Rudy Dorscht observes, the “Site Glossary” of this poem tries to recount “ce qui n’a pas été dit ouvertement dans le premier texte” (60). It changes the narrative voice from “I” to a generic “you” and “we,” and this supplementary “glossary,” Dorscht argues, addresses again the potential reader (60), and is more explicitly feminist-oriented.

Since the prose form of both poems is not the format regularly adopted by Mouré (who usually writes in short verse lines), perhaps it is also drawing attention to its literary influences, its own “sewing” (Furious 85) of Québécois “écritures au féminin”—such as Gail Scott’s novel, Heroine, or the “poésies-en-prose” of Théoret’s Une voix pour Odile:

Later you realize it is a poem about being born, the smell of the fur is your mother birthing you & your hair is wet not slicked back but from the wetness of womb, the fur coat the hugest fur of your mother the cunt of your mother from which you have emerged & you

cower in this smell. The fur coat the sex of women reduced to decoration, & the womb the place of birth becomes the church in which you are standing, the womb reduced to decoration, where women are decoration. . . . The church now the place of birth & rebirth, they say redemption, everyone knows what this signifies and the mother is trying to pay attention, all the mothers, my mother, & we are children, I am children [sic], a child with wet hair cowlick slicked down perfect, no humiliation, the site still charged with the smell of the river, the coat smell of the river, smell of the birth canal, caught in the drown-set is to be stopped from being born, is to be clenched in the water unable to breathe or see the night sky. . . . I could be born now, but cannot, can I, because we are inside this hugest womb which has already denied us, in which we are decoration, in which men wear dresses & do the cooking, & the slicked hair is not the wet hair of birth but the hair of decoration, as if I could be born now, I am born, my snout warm smelling the wet earth of my mother's fur (WSW 69)

The effacement of the mother's body, here by the patriarchal religious establishment, is countered by the speaker's language, one that is speaking the body instead of substituting for it the still powerful rhetoric of "redemption," sin and punishment ("everyone knows what this signifies"). The supplementary quality of the text and its re-invocation of elements from the first poem expand its meaning. For example, the speaker's childhood memory of having been "caught in the drown set" of a river, her "breath snuffled for years" (68), translates, in "The Site Glossary," into her speechlessness and sense of being "caught" in this Catholic church. The church is ironically represented as "the place of birth" and "hugest womb" of all, "reduced to decoration," where "smell of the birth canal" is paralyzing, where "we" (women) have been "denied, in which we are decoration." With each paratactic phrase, the details of the speaker's memory become metonymical. In other words, they escalate into (or are substituted by) the corporeality of birth: "the coat smell of the river" in the speaker's memory thus entails the "smell of the birth canal."

The patriarchal immolation of the mother as a provider of life and language is ironically conveyed through the Catholic priests in surplices, deflated as men wearing dresses and doing the

food preparation (“women’s work”) at Communion. In her resistance to the official doctrine of “redemption,” the difficulty of which is expressed through the variations on the verb “can” (“I could be born now, but cannot, can I” [emphasis added]), the poet-speaker re-enacts her own physical birth. Her “mother’s fur” takes on a supplementary meaning in the “Site Glossary,” and the speaker reclaims another “place of birth” in relation to the “womb” of the woman-mother. The womb becomes the “site” of the poem itself in the last two lines, where the sceptical phrase, “as if I could be born now” (that is to say in the Church, emphasis added), is followed by the affirmative description of “I am born, my snout warm smelling the wet earth of my mother’s fur” (emphasis added). Through a kind of perversion and reappropriation of the language of Catholicism, “the place” of a sinner’s “birth & rebirth” becomes the textual “site” of the speaker’s own re-birth, on other terms. She re-creates and inscribes the prohibited female body and her own identification with the mother’s sexual body, “the hugest fur,” the “cunt of your mother,” the “corps-à-corps” serving as her vehicle of subversion and linguistic claiming.¹² The speaker re-situates herself in relation to her mother, recognizing through language the specificity of both the maternal body and her own, in this transformed and opened “site” of the prose-poem’s generic liminality.

In this rejuvenation of the “corps-à-corps” also lies a form of lesbian desire, which Mouré will depict through visual images of bodily, motional and intellectual encounters with the female other. In “Betty,” traces of the “corps-à-corps,” conveyed through the fur and water metaphors in WSW, also appear in the touching hands of the two women:

O darkness & the empty moons, women
speaking light words into the cups of each other’s fingers.

.....

¹² Translator Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood discusses her own encounter with the word “cunt” as it appears in Gail Scott’s novel, Heroine. Scott’s narrator wonders “about the smell of cunt” (qtd. in Harwood 213) when lost at night with her friend Marie, a passage that is probably invoked in Mouré’s poem as well. Lotbinière-Harwood observes that “cunt” was actually a synonym for “woman” before it was relegated to the level of vulgar language in the fifteenth century. Unlike some anglophone feminists who, according to Lotbinière-Harwood, would like to see the word effaced from the English vocabulary, Mouré and Scott are ready to take the “risk” of recuperating it in the context of a vocabulary in the feminine (Lotbinière-Harwood 213).

strange sprung words leaking
 into our sentences. (Furious 78)

As the speaker expresses her desire “to speak sexually”—not of “male love”—but rather of “physical knowing” (79), the poem seems to recall deliberately (like Brossard’s “*même différence*”) the female intersubjectivity of Irigaray’s “When Our Lips Speak Together.” The phallogocentric hold on sexuality, love and desire (the “one thing” as “male love” [“Betty” 79]) gives way to a hitherto dormant and ambiguous polysemy (“strange sprung words leaking”). The “O” that opens the poem and recurs in the sound and sight of “empty moons,” is a graphic inscription of the open mouths of these women’s “strange . . . words,” the resonant “s” in the last two lines conveying the excess of sound and new speech. They utter the “O” of a first sound or phoneme, a trace of “maternal nonsense” (“Poetry” 206)—perhaps even an alternative “pure reason”? Their words are directly linked to the loving and loved female body of the women (the “O” of the cervix) who hover at the end of that first line, before the enjambment, in the empty moon’s “light,” where words are touched by fingers, connected to the body.

Brossard’s own insistence on a “*même différence*” in the lesbian text of L’amèr appears in Mouré’s evocation of lesbian love, as it does in the notion of “resemblance” and female specificity in Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love: “The physical resemblance of her arm to / the rest of my body, / where it has touched, trembling or / so sure of itself. / Herself” (32). Finally, in WSW’s “Excess,” the maternal trace in language and in the subject’s love of same (of a same other) are shown to be inter-connected. The mother appears in what the female lovers “are”: “we walk near each other, wearing / the flecked distance of her womb” (109). In a sense, this small patch of maternal light is intrinsic to Mouré’s poetics of (m)otherness as well as the way the female subjects of her poems “always already are” (109) and can potentially become. Yet, what still needs to be examined is whether this notion of “resemblance” in Mouré’s poetry is always so resonant with a relational ethics—lesbian or otherwise—which also requires differentiation. Along with the conflicts also detected in Brossard’s and Brandt’s work, this question will be considered more thoroughly in the last chapter.

Chapter 6

Lola Lemire Tostevin: Speaking the (M)Other

Even though they adopt different formal strategies or focus on different renditions of maternalism, the feminist writings examined so far have expressed their awareness of the suppression of difference under the Logos. They have connected logocentrism either to the psycho-sexual forces of language and subjectivity (Brossard, Théoret), to the patriarchal God of the Judaic-Christian monotheistic tradition (Brandt), or to Enlightenment philosophy's investment in "pure reason" (Mouré). Moreover, as Shirley Neuman argues and as the previous chapters have sought to demonstrate, "There is no particular body inscribed in these feminist writers' texts but rather many bodies: mothering bodies, erotic bodies. The mothering body appears in many rhetorical shapes" ("Importing" 400).¹ In the case of Lola Lemire Tostevin, an irreducible excess, unsuccessfully repressed in the service of the Sacred Word as Law, plays a major role in her writing. Once again, a feminist appropriation of Derridian theory allows the poet to formulate a poetics in the feminine, throughout an oeuvre that foregrounds Derrida's idea of a "residue irreducible to the dominant force organizing the hierarchy that we may refer to, in brief, as logocentric" (Limited 21), and also as monotheistic and phallogocentric. In fact, some of Tostevin's poems' direct appropriations and allusions to aspects of Derridian philosophy are central to her inscription of textual otherness in relation to maternalism which, I shall argue, also extends to (and models) a relational ethics.²

As this chapter will argue, Tostevin's long poem, Gyno-Text, successfully posits (in its direct invocation of Kristevan theory as well) the maternal as a model of ethical exchange. To comprehend Tostevin's distinct way of presenting this model requires a closer look at her approach

¹ Neuman refers mainly to Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt and Lola Lemire Tostevin, but her observation applies to my own grouping of Brossard, Brandt, Théoret, Mouré and Tostevin.

² Tostevin's feminist relation with/confrontation of Derrida's discourse (in 'sophie') will be explored in chapter 7, in light of that chapter's concern with female subjectivity and the ethics of intersubjectivity.

to language, which is certainly complex and, as I shall show, two-fold. Upon placing Tostevin in a group of writers who offer versions of maternalism through potentially ethical terms, the questions to explore are two. How does Tostevin's representation of a French mothertongue (in a cultural allegory) work at the level of her theoretical (that is to say, feminist-deconstructive) conveyance of language? And, as we explored in Mouré's work, what is the effect of a deconstructive poetics (Tostevin's invocation of différance as textual alterity) on a feminist rendition of maternalism? We shall see how a particular notion of alterity at the root of a relational ethics emerges from the allegory of the French mothertongue that denotes the other side of logocentric structures; it emerges too from Tostevin's affirmative deconstructive gestures that defy the linearity and closure of phallogocentric knowledge. And, finally, an ethics of alterity will be seen to figure in Tostevin's invocation of Kristeva's semiotic chora through the birth-metaphor of Gyno Text.³

Speaking Two

A double discursivity figures throughout Tostevin's works of poetry and prose.⁴ Her exploration of this doubleness or an unsuccessfully suppressed difference, of a "language prior to language" (Frog Moon 70), ranges from its relation to Christian dogma and logocentric thought to the tensions of the French and English languages in a Canadian bicultural context. This context is

³ I continue to use Marlatt's spelling for the "mothertongue" even in terms of Tostevin's concern with the colonization of language, for Tostevin's French mothertongue also represents the underlying component of another tongue (English). Once again, textual alterity will be related to the maternal body—the "corps-à-corps"—as a social and potentially ethical site of intersubjectivity, and as the interplay of same and other which Derrida's notion of trace or différance also postulates.

⁴ I borrow the terms, "double discursivity" and "doubled discourse," from Neuman's article on Canadian feminist writing, "Importing Difference." Neuman's usage of the term denotes the feminist writer's "only recourse" in light of the dominant male discourse which she cannot renounce: this "recourse is to foreground one's difference from the dominant discourse while speaking that discourse," producing this "double discursivity" or "double discourse" (402). Neuman also terms Tostevin's concern with the French subject dominated by the English language as a "ready allegory for the undoing of women as subjects in discourse" (403). My use of the term allegory in connection to the French mothertongue expands on Neuman's commentary, and argues that the mothertongue also functions as an allegory for Derridean différance and the Kristevan semiotic.

particularly prevalent in the work of Tostevin, who was born into a minority community of francophones in Timmins, Northern Ontario. At a more theoretical level, the doubled discourse of her writing is also inscribed in order to subvert the ordinary order of speech (the symbolic realm, in Lacanian terms) which determines the subject of that speech. These different levels of concern in Tostevin's poetry collections and essays are intrinsically related to her feminist critique of phallogocentric thought and discursive traditions that can become the source of their own dissemination. This notion of discursive doubleness generates, beyond doubleness itself, a poetics of heterogeneity and process that is characteristic not only of Tostevin's work but also, we shall see, of the same two French theoreticians she directly invokes: Derrida and Kristeva.

The influence of poststructuralist critiques of logocentric binary thinking is central to Tostevin's work. It emphasizes the suppressed component of what Tostevin denounces as metaphysical conceptions of truth, meaning and order, gendered male because of their relation to power and (sexual) privilege. More specifically, these conceptions emerge from monologic discourses that are steeped in inherited Enlightenment thought and liberal humanism and which, as Moscovici argues, still underline or even "structure the sexual and political organization of contemporary democratic societies" (21). The emphasis on a doubled discourse in Tostevin's writing opens onto a cultural allegory that surfaces everywhere in her oeuvre, that is to say, to the generative "residue" of the French mothertongue in the learning, writing and living of English. As will be shown, this experience of living between (rather than within) two languages, and the feeling of alienation experienced in the face of such doubleness, extends to Tostevin's ironic depiction of the marginalization of women within a so-called universal, gender-neutral discourse. It is particularly Tostevin's cultural allegory of the mothertongue, as we shall see, which illustrates that the presence or unity sought through language always eludes the subject, opening her to the textual operations of (m)otherness.

According to Tostevin, notions of origin, closure and universal truths, central to the metaphysics upheld by Western moral philosophy, are not so much to be dismissed, but challenged and transgressed: "I don't believe in the absolute authority of roots or origins. I'm

more interested in displacing that authority—I don't know what originary meaning is. Definite definition?" (Subject 64). Tostevin indicates here, as elsewhere in her prose and poetry, that she writes against what she rather loosely outlines as the metaphysics of traditional Western philosophy. She seeks to undo logocentric meaning by considering the (sometimes agonizing) dualities which constitute what most feminists consider as a masculine, patriarchal and phallogocentric tradition of thought and culture. Considering the direct influence of Derridean deconstruction on her feminist poetics, it is likely that Tostevin bases her understanding of metaphysics on Derrida's critique of self-presence, of the belief in the root cause of an original, universal essence (the Sign, the Divine Word or Mind), and of the assumption of order and transcendence.⁵

The claim to universality (the unitary, conscious, transcendental subject) is not, Tostevin postulates, a neutral one. Rather, its centripetal forces and grounding principles are rooted in binary oppositions and, as Tostevin remarks, "in this age of Transcendence" these are "patterns as old as original sins" (Color).⁶ As Mouré's feminist appropriation of Derridian theory demonstrates, these universals are erected through the operation of hierarchical opposition, in which one term is privileged at the cost of suppressing the other. In sophie's own critique of logocentrism, these are the dichotomies addressed by Tostevin's poet-speaker: "one wonders

⁵ It seems apt to note here again that recent feminist examinations of humanism's legacy in Enlightenment, Romantic and liberal humanist thought have undertaken a much more qualified and careful look at what is increasingly discussed as postmodernism's and/or feminism's "ruptures and continuities" with humanism (Moscovici 8), or feminism's "double-sided character" in its response to modern humanism, in relation to their articulations of self-identity, self-determination, specificity and difference (Johnson ix). Moscovici's feminist re-reading of Rousseau and Diderot are particularly interesting, drawing attention both to their maintenance of Enlightenment notions of identity and ethics (sexual and political) and to their dissimulations of these very models. For example, diverging connotations about nature, culture and state in Rousseau's writing are assumed (by Derrida) to be unconscious whereas they are assumed (by Moscovici) to be intentional (13). The main point to recall in the context of Tostevin's (and the four other poets') treatments of this wide-ranging, if at times ill-defined, notion of "humanism" is that not all models of rationality, of citizenship and identity, even of sexual difference, were as decided and stabilized as they were in most of Descartes's or Kant's philosophical discourses (Moscovici 21).

⁶ Tostevin's poetry collections, Color of Her Speech, Double Standards and Gyno Text, are not paginated; quotations from these works will simply be followed by the abbreviated title in parenthesis.

about the infinite numbers of possible / worlds . . .” (32); yet she only finds a God who has reduced “all that’s best” to Himself and “all that’s worst” to what is not “Him”: “. . . and God / being Good claims a surplus of good in this best / of all possible worlds so the worst could never be / held against Him . . .” (32). Through these lines’ ironic conveyance of the indoctrinating and circular logic of Christianity’s arguments for the existence of a benign, all-powerful, all-forgiving God, the ultimate and infallible answer is “Him” as ‘He’ appears in Double Standards: “The Holy Transcendental Signifier.”

Accordingly, knowledge (and language, the Logos) cannot be reduced to universality or some final authority. As Mouré’s evocation of an “exclusive philosophy” shows in the “Pure Reason” poems, logocentrism appears as a process of exclusions, thankfully not always successful, since it contains an irreducible difference that can break the hold on knowledge, the sign, the Word, sophie’s concept of the male “God” or “Him.” As the poet-speaker of Double Standards attests, there is “the other side / of almost everything.” Writing (Tostevin here refers to Cixous’ “écriture féminine”) can stress “dynamic movement that exceeds the linguistic system of suppressed differences” (Subject 31). Tostevin seems to direct all of her work towards this difference “that exceeds” and that is analogous to the double discursivity emerging from her exploration of cultural identity and language. In both poetry collections, Color of Her Speech and Double Standards, a powerful sense of ‘in-betweenness’ surfaces time and again, coupled with the difficult but eventual acceptance of the irresolvability of paradoxes.

For a speaker who inscribes herself as a French-Canadian woman writing in English, writing is “to speak two.” This double-speak seeks to counter a universal, monologic view of language, be it the purity of the unifying national tongue or the linguistic (symbolic) structure that human beings inhabit. In Double Standards, the field of play which constitutes writing is expressed as “your word / against mine,” indicating an impossible access to truth or precise, closed meaning, “which can’t be named,” “understood” or fixed. Language has the capacity to disseminate itself and make “visible / something other / than itself,” as it does in Color of her Speech: “unconceals / implicates / between two / . . . / a poem / between / the way I speak / the

way I spoke.” The poem suggests the powerful sense of a double discursivity of an enunciator caught within a system of logocentric opposites, and in the reality of living between two cultures in the anglophone province of Ontario, between the two subjective states of “the way I speak” English and “the way I spoke” French.⁷

“[E]ncoded,” Shirley Neuman indicates, “as bilingualism, as the perilous movement between two languages” (402), Tostevin’s discursive doubleness unfolds through the cultural allegory of her French mothertongue, and opens onto a poetics of alterity. French is absent, in so far as it is assimilated or colonized by the “mastertongue,” English (Neuman 402). But it is also present, we shall see, as a multiple and irreducible force traversing the speaking subject. Described as “slow seepage” in the opening poem of Color of Her Speech, the loss of the mothertongue is felt like a trickle-down effect. The poem presents a kind of count-down, a process of “diglossia” (in which “one language . . . is valorized at the expense” of another, often in a colonial setting [Söderlind 10]), as words are filtered through the adopted language:

4 words french

1 word english

slow seepage

slow seepage

⁷ The cultural allegory of the French mothertongue is taken a long way in Tostevin’s work. In her essays, Tostevin draws on Walter Benjamin’s notion of allegory, not only for the doubleness or two levels of signification inherent in the allegorical, but also for the multiplicity that Benjamin attributes to allegory itself: “L’ambiguïté, la multiplicité des significations est le trait fondamental de l’allégorie” (Benjamin, qtd. in Subject 105). Although referring to the musical allegory that she uses in sophie, Tostevin’s reference to Benjamin’s notion also intimates the allegorical import of her own representations and invocations of the French mothertongue, since “allegories are like fragments of dreams through which we remember our historical traces . . .” (Subject 108). As Mouré’s recurring theme of maternal memory makes clear, these traces that lead into the always already do not consist of some nostalgic return to an unaffected past or previous state of being. Rather, “the allegory is indirect, circuitous in its figurative representation. The voice of allegory is, in its very notion of multiplicity, a polyphonic voice” (Subject 107). In Tostevin’s poetry, the mothertongue itself contains the play of absence and presence; it is an other speaking, as discerned in the Greek word, allégoria (Concise Oxford).

3 words french

2 words english

rattling off

or running at the mouth

2 words french

3 words english

speak white

.....

'tu déparles'

my mother says

je déparle

yes

I unspeak

In this poem, Tostevin draws on Québécoise Michèle Lalonde's famous 1974 "poème-affiche," "Speak White," where the colonization not only of the French language but also of the French worker by the English master are represented through this similar notion of unspeaking or "déparler." English weaves itself into Lalonde's verses with a biting irony that designates the colonized's vulnerable, under-privileged position and de-territorialization. The French tongue is "undone" or decomposed, "la source renversée," writes Tostevin in the following poem, yet "the course unlaid" by the imposition of the other national tongue. Yet Lalonde's concern for the national language of Québec is different from Tostevin's treatment of Franco-Ontarian assimilation. What drives much of Tostevin's writing is a sense of guilt which, despite her tone of self-

justification in some of her essays, is not easily done away with.⁸ Although “diglossia,” or “déparler” and “rattling off” within the “colonizer’s” language, does entail a sense of alienation in Tostevin’s speaker, the mothertongue still transforms into a “diversity and strength” (Subject 17). Tostevin introduces not only French words or passages (most often italicized) but entire French poems in her English works. What this bilingual strategy points to is the notion that the “unity—the presence—we seek through language,” be it a cultural or psychical unity, “always eludes us” (Subject 31-32), an observation that also stems from Tostevin’s reading of Derrida and Kristeva.

In Strangers to Ourselves, Kristeva discusses the “matricidal anguish” (9) of the foreigner alienated from the mothertongue, caught between two languages and faced with his/her own otherness. The “resonances” of the mothertongue can even render the individual speechless, Kristeva writes, “cut off from the body’s nocturnal memory”; it is “that language of the past that withers without ever leaving you” (15). In Color of Her Speech, this “Unspeaking” is precisely a kind of “Unbinding of Umbilicals,” intimating the daughter’s separation both from the maternal tongue and the maternal body. Even though “déparler” can lead to a kind of despondent babble (“décomposer / sa langue / da de di do”), “what’s lost” to the master tongue still “lasts.” If Michèle Lalonde evokes the Anglo capitalist’s exploitation of the French worker in terms of a selling of souls (“c’est une langue riche / pour acheter / mais pour se vendre / mais pour se vendre à perte d’âme / mais pour se vendre” [390]), Tostevin compares the French mothertongue itself to a prostitute, ravaged by its own Canadianisms or ‘impurities,’ having surrendered her body to the luxury of the master speech, to a “grafting of tongues” (Subject 99), leaving her daughter

⁸ In reading some of the essays in Subject to Criticism, one cannot help but feel it is Lola Lemire Tostevin who has subjected herself to her own harsh criticism, which she counters with passages of self-justification. Her sense of ‘paralysis’ in the face of her own commitment to her mothertongue and her ease with writing in English appear as the greater source of this anguish. To this “dilemma that had paralysed [her] for years,” Tostevin responds: “To some, the French I write is pretentious and not ‘French Canadian’: to others, the French I speak is flawed and not ‘good enough.’ Under such circumstances it was easier for me to write in English, although it was never entirely a matter of choice: English eventually chose me. . . . In spite of the fact that some people have, on a few occasions, suggested that I speak ‘the imperialist language of the colonizer,’ the fact that I have claimed English as my own has been liberating To have done otherwise would have relegated me to silence” (17).

motherless: “presque j’ai perdu la langue au pays étranger / fille de langue pute fille de langue mal aimée / que jamais je n’arrivais à faire parler” (*‘sophie* 56). Although the metaphor expresses the frustrating aspect of assimilation, a resistance to this “grafting” is also implicit in the poem. The opening word “presque” indicates an avoided peril and the repetition of “langue” emphasizes its central importance.

Although Kristeva argues that the “grafted tongues” can leave the foreigner feeling alienated or exiled, she presents the idea (familiar to Kristeva’s readers) of the artist or poet (or patient of psychoanalytic therapy) capable of welding the first tongue to the second. In such an attempt toward a “synthesis,” “the polyphonic mastery of writing” is shown to consist of “ceaselessly doing and undoing a jigsaw puzzle piece by piece” (*Strangers* 33). Similarly, cultural and linguistic doubleness, or the historical though elusive trace of that other component of speech, function as generative forces in Tostevin’s writing. By taking literal hold of a whole string of clichés, the speaker of *Double Standards* makes this connection between her mothertongue and the polyphonic momentum of her (English) speech: “excuse my french / I often lose the thread / and would lose heart as well / if it didn’t leap into my mouth.” In most instances, what Tostevin at times evokes as silences, gaps and insufficiencies of language are evocative of a fundamental difference inhabiting the symbolic realm, the social acquisition of language and the problem of cultural identity.

The experience of “living between voices, between languages, between stories, whether they be French, English, personal, social, linear, fragmentary” (*Subject* 99), is transposed to the feminist concerns that predominate in Tostevin’s oeuvre. Through a reflection on gendered language Tostevin indeed tackles discursive difference, from which will ensue her inscription of a maternal other. The title of *Double Standards* echoes the marginalization of women’s speech within patriarchal culture, “often degraded as meaningless gossip” (Williamson 100), which Tostevin also demonstrates in *Color of Her Speech* by invoking the biases that language engenders. Here, Tostevin conveys again her cultural allegory, seizes one art critic’s depreciation of

(Judy Chicago's) feminism as "femspeak" and playfully compares it to Québécois "argot."⁹ Slang is in turn reinvested within the terms of a feminist claiming of language that recalls Mouré's strategy in "The Beauty of Furs," "the semantic cut / cunt / woman's cant" figured as this "femspeak / woman's span." As Janice Williamson observes, this "semantic cut" of Québécois "joual," as "woman's cant / rant / rent" (Color), evokes "a series of linguistic signs that echo one another, deferring meaning in order to reread and reinscribe the pejorative language used to describe women" (100).¹⁰ The "mother / tongue" itself is wandering, divided from itself, formally by the line break. Yet the mothertongue is still "retracing / retrieving / à la source / à la dérive / adrift" (Color) since it is left over, just as the suppressed component of logocentrism, of universal (and national) tongues, is retraceable or re-presented and can subvert the Logos.

As observed at the beginning of this chapter, Tostevin's poetry emphasizes the struggles of the bilingual subject from a minority and, some might argue, colonized community. The poetry also explores those tensions that dwell within the socio-linguistic (or symbolic) order. Again, the French mothertongue and the theme of assimilation function as allegories for the trace of an other, the 'unsaid' (and, we shall see, maternal) component of speech. The short, almost spasmodic

⁹ In her ironic treatment of art critic Robert Hughes and his criticism of sculptor Judy Chicago for her conveyance of feminist "jargon" or "femspeak," Tostevin proposes that Hughes' aversion to a feminist representation of the female body (or simply to the female body) is re-enforced by his statement printed later in the Globe and Mail, where he expresses his appreciation for Joan Miró's surrealism, where "... 'you fixate / on the first thing you see / and that's mom ...'," writes Hughes (qtd. in Tostevin), served with Tostevin's ironic reply: "of course / and mom doesn't have a cunt especially if she's male surrealist / whose work has been described / as 'emblematic ... biomorphic abstraction ... / amorphous shapes floating in ambiguous space ...' / menspeak?" Hughes' "menspeak" and appreciation of those bodiless, "ambiguous spaces" lead him to discard Chicago's work (reduced to "femspeak") as he privileges his love of "amorphous" abstraction.

¹⁰ In his chapter on Tostevin's Color of her Speech, McCaffery identifies the ambivalence of "semantic loss and productional recovery" (91) in "the atopia" or "non-place" evoked by the text's dividedness on gender and culture lines. Yet it is this ambivalence, McCaffery argues, that is the "real issue" of Tostevin's language poetics, and not the feminist recuperation of speech, body and place which I consider as the ultimate concerns of her work. Harking back to this study's introduction, herein lies the difference between McCaffery's language (postmodern) poetics/criticism and my own (and perhaps Tostevin's) feminist agenda. The relationship of postmodernism and the feminism, if necessary and potentially fruitful, seems to remain on shaky ground (despite McCaffery's own feminist sensibilities in his critical writing) when it comes to politics.

lines of one poem counter the flow of memory with the difficulty of keeping the mothertongue alive: “fleuve / flows back / to vague / memory” (Color). The play on the word vague (the ‘wave’ of this memory), the alliterative echo of “flow” and “fleuve,” and memory’s ambiguous inconclusiveness can recall Derrida’s sense of the trace, of that which “has been effaced or subtracted beforehand, but which has nevertheless left behind a mark, a signature which is retracted in that very thing from which it is withdrawn” (Spurs 39). Like Tostevin’s French mothertongue which is already “une langue pute” (sophie 56), contorted by active cultural agents, un-pure and always un-original, the unsaid or the “thick undercurrent” (Double) of linguistic structures is always already there. Directly borrowing from Derrida’s own (logical) defiance of the logic of origins, Tostevin posits a textual alterity; like the French mothertongue, it is “what can’t be said / can’t be reached / in the right sense” (Double). The “languor” of that un-reachable element transforms into a “langue d’or” (Double), a “langue” that is priceless indeed, for it contains that which is “autrement dit” (Double).

If pondered with some anguish in parts of her work, the “reminiscence” of this “langue” is conceived by Tostevin as a “generativity.” If I may in turn evoke Derrida’s understanding of this word, this “generativity” is “liberated, grafted onto a ‘new’ concept of writing that corresponds to what has always resisted the prior organization of forces,” what has always constituted “the residue irreducible to the dominant force” of logocentrism (Limited 21). Double Standards even conveys typographically such a “residue” or textual “other.” Alterity is “strident” as that which “strips” the “meaning,” making new “sense(sssssssssss)” and breaking “the spell”, that broken spell of the signified’s hold over the signifier, allowing a surplus of sound and ‘senses.’ At times viewed as a “double blank” or “something more,” “the other hovers” as an “hors-texte”: “at best marginal / an apostrophe in mid-air.” Yet this “hors-texte” is paradoxically always textual and material, considering Tostevin’s appropriation here of the Derridian mark (the “apostrophe in mid-air”). According to Derrida, it is the trace of otherness that structures the sign itself; the trace is “the part played by the radically other within the structure of difference that is the sign” (Spivak, Preface xvii). Gyno-Text and Double Standards, we shall see further, explore the difference of the

sign, always in the hope for renewal or the potential force of that mark. As I have already pointed out, Derrida's notion of différance is invoked in some of Tostevin's poems as a mothertongue. This mothertongue also figures as the "body gossip," another kind of 'tongue' (the semiotic) that "loiters within" Tostevin's poetry (Double). As we shall see, maternalism figures as a linguistic and potentially ethical space, containing the play of sameness and otherness that characterizes both language and subjectivity.

(Re)Mothering Text

"Re," the final and highly paratactic prose-poem of Double Standards, discloses the doubleness of Tostevin's work on language as both a cultural concern and a feminist-deconstructive exploration. As a self-reflexive and theoretical poem, it discloses its own processes of feminist dissimulation (its own self-reading) as well as Tostevin's interest in another kind of maternal tongue. Again, the act of recollecting a (cultural and linguistic) past entails a Derridian-influenced investigation of the possible motility and multi-layered quality of language. In the following passage, speech and writing overlap through the use of parataxis. While some of the blank spaces between units indicate the natural pause between breaths in ordinary speaking, the speaker's "parole" also gains meaning from the typographical spacing on the written page:

writing as reading (the past) would only be writing
 without breathing a word while writing as rereading
 doubles back to recall to hear again the resonance as
 re tears from the rest reenters the mouth with quick
 motions of tongue rolls liquid trills laps one
 syllable to the next

Here, "re" makes its way along the lines, leaping onto various signifiers. The writing that rereads itself is the writing that never stops but "doubles back" and hears the resonances that might have been left behind or suppressed by the settling of the Logos.

Earlier in the collection, French still had the ability to "leap" in the poet-speaker's mouth,

signalling the instability of her language and, here, the musicality of speech that manages to “resonate” through writing. The speaking tongue that makes “trills” also has a double meaning. It invokes the rapid alternation of musical notes but also the pronunciation of the letter ‘r’ through a vibration of the tongue, characteristic of a Franco-Ontarian accent that “rolls” the letter ‘r’ on the tip of the tongue. In the poem’s third stanza, the speaker changes to French and describes a
 “. . . douleur cuisante de remords qui mordent à / pleines dents entre les cuisses douleur d’une lecture / qui risque sa propre décomposition . . .,” insisting again on her two levels of concern. On the one hand, the shift of “cuisante” and “remords” into “mordent . . . entre les cuisses” reveals the pain of the francophone writing in the other tongue that threatens her assimilation, and suggests the pain of her own decomposition of words. On the other hand, the “re” of deconstruction tears through words, biting language in such “lingual positions” and from “dormant to mordant,” the language ‘undone’ (comme une pute) but moving “vers une écriture / qui se recompose.”

Tostevin inscribes a maternal otherness in her text as she sets the ‘unfolding’ and ‘refolding’ of the writing process against the “erection” of one meaning. What she represents as phallocentrism “yields” or “relents” to those more flexible, permeable and “softer contours” of a text whose own authority, limits and certainty are broken:

rereading reverses to resist resists to reverse the
 movement along the curve of return as the well-turned
 phrase turns on herself to retrace her steps reorient
 and continue in a different voice difference because she
 begs to differ what bears repeating the peat of roots
 and moss the peculiar reek that rots into a new turf new
 realms that open the fold of reply unfold refold the
 erection that yields to softer contours relents to edge’s
 touch delays to stay within the threshold of the unthought

Tostevin’s thus feminized/maternalized text suggests a kind of earthly descent into a realm similar to Brossard’s “végétation” in L’amèr, a realm of nature that is nonetheless linguistically and

musically coded. The “peat of roots and moss” is derived from the resonant act of “repeating,” opening onto the “new realms that open the fold or reply.” The “ré” that rides the text as a musical note oscillates within the Logos and disturbs its so-called stability or authority. Running “up and down / the diatonic scale of C,” “ré” sounds “the beat” as a “beating hollow,” which “allows the verb ‘to write’ to reverberate,” both with speech and with music.

Tostevin’s affirmative deconstructive gestures are epitomized by the mark of “re,” which is the prefix of a majority of words in her text and which also functions as the supplement that postpones decidable meaning. Deconstruction is affirmative because it relates to the “closed book reopened” to “a different” (or feminist) “point of view.” Referentiality, the “point de repère,” is literally translated as a “refathering” that turns into a “remothering” of “the text in transit,” revealing “the false logos of monologic speech” which, for Tostevin, is also a phallogocentric speech. Instead of a “texte rejeté,” Tostevin’s re-sentencing of the text uncovers a textual irreducibility, promising to turn “the erotic sequence” of sentences “into the consequential climax of the writer over and over” (Double). The textual jouissance recalls the earlier “peels of laughter” that “howl in the hollow” of a text that momentarily invokes the strategic laughter of Cixous’ Medusa. “Re” sets in motion a writing that “releases / all its senses to give old words new lease” (Double), seeking to perturb this phallogocentric structure and attain the regeneration that the poetic and “re-mothering” work, Gyno Text, gives rise to.

A book of thirty-seven poems (or pages) enacting “the thirty-seven weeks of pregnancy” (Butling 100), Gyno Text is a long-poem that derives its title and content from Kristeva’s notion of the “génotexte.” The “géno” indicates the maternal metaphor that Kristeva employs in her theory of a semiotic component of the sign which, as Mouré’s deployment and here Tostevin’s direct appropriation of these concepts show, can be considered in correlation with différance. Of particular interest to Tostevin’s Gyno Text is Kristeva’s notion of those semiotic eruptions in (poetic) language. Closely related to the maternal body by Kristeva, the semiotic or genotext renders this body as a site of linguistic acquisition and, from my viewpoint, as a site of a potentially relational ethics. Again, language is not viewed as fixed or transparent but as

heterogenous, for the sign can no longer be seen as univocal but is shown to be open and polysemic: both rhythm and structure, both semiotic and symbolic.

By using the metaphor of motherhood in the structuring of her book and by making her own text a matrix for the play of words, Tostevin explores this idea of genotext as yet another driving component of textuality. Moreover, she directly links this component to the maternal body itself. Tostevin works with the notion that Kristeva's genotext (or semiotic chora) denotes (paradoxically so) the non-origin of a pre-linguistic writing, a pre-linguistic that is already language: a "rhythm" linking to the body but already consisting of "first / articulations" (Tostevin, Gyno), deriving, that is to say, within language itself. Here, textual (m)otherness figures as an underlying component of language (and subjectivity), and it is invested with a feminist interpretation of the maternal body. Tostevin's work exemplifies feminism's ethical use of deconstruction, the instance, that is to say, "when feminist criticism [here meshed with the poetics itself] tries to destabilize itself while attempting to remain an ethical discourse, or in some cases, to become one" (Martindale 54). At this point of my analysis, it is the text's attempt at becoming an ethical discourse that is the primary focus. For, it is once again the maternal that is posed as a model of ethical exchange in Gyno Text.

Like Brossard's postulation of a civilizing nature, Tostevin's own inscription of the maternal body, always already mediated as a space of signification, collapses the duality between the social and the biological. It is at the threshold of nature and culture that the maternal body inscribes itself in the long poem, the site of which is the uterine space of the pregnant, speaking body and its gestating other. Like the "remothering text" of "re," the "mothering body" of Gyno Text comprises a sequence of words that enact the multiple and open relations between signifiers and their signifieds, where a maternal, sexual pleasure can be inserted (Neuman, "Importing" 402). In the afterword, Tostevin indeed gives a feminist definition of maternalism by relating it directly to the realm of signification: "These small poems are not about the mystification or sacred calling of motherhood defined as duty or end-in-itself but as source of generative creative power and strength. Not about generation as chronology but as signifying space, both corporeal and

mental.”

The first page of Gyno Text reveals the poem’s search for “a / different / tongue,” an engagement within (and not outside) the symbolic, as Tostevin’s own “gyno text” continues to draw directly from the Derridian mark of difference:

a
 different
 tongue
 to
 pen
 a
 trait

le
trait
d’union

The play on the broken syllables of “penetrate” suggests a rupture in and appropriation of the phallogocentric order of language. The “trait d’union” indicates the irrevocable engagement with (and always within) this symbolic realm, the hyphen representing both a barrier and a link between the “gyno” and the “text” at hand. The broken though still phallogocentric order of writing, associated here with “penning” “a / trait,” also suggests the residue, the trace that is the (absent) root of any sign, the trace contained within “pen / a / trait” itself. The “trait” is that of a pre-discursive tongue (again rendered analogous to the French mothertongue re-invoked in “trait / d’union”), of the other that is always already constituting the layered model of language.

Tostevin’s poem self-consciously enacts both the functioning of différance and of the semiotic chora, the “code” made “indelible” (Gyno). As Pamela Butling points out: “Tostevin places each word in an echo chamber, or incubator, or womb (to use the birth metaphor) where the

words expand in several directions; where they change functions . . .” (“In Soluble” 104), where meaning is deferred as well as pluralized, and “the sound flows (overflows) into different combinations . . .” (105). The process of disseminating or even dismembering the body of textuality opens onto the “instinctual dyads” that compose Kristeva’s own genotext, which “leaves its mark on symbolization” (Revolution 87):

dismembered
 shape
 in
 soluble
 space
 so
 splendidly
 suspended (Gyno)

The semiotic gamut invoked through Tostevin’s use of alliteration accents the sibilant component of a language motivated by the surplus of sound, which accumulates with each short line. Yet the vertical alignment of words on the page also results in the (graphic) rupture of their flow, the gaps between them perhaps indicating the “solubility” and slipperiness of language itself. Language is dissolvable in so far as the maternal “traits” of Tostevin’s gyno-text give birth to this other tongue; it is motivated by a textual alterity which must always remain “suspended” if it is to remain irreducible and in deferral. This “soluble space” (a Derridian *espacement*?) “so splendidly suspended” figures simultaneously as the suspension and the generation of meaning, continually “forming and dissolving” into a maternal metaphor (Butling 101). This process is irreducible even to the “pen” that seeks to make its mark and “tugs / the / lingual / hinge” (Gyno).

To say that Tostevin’s Gyno Text generates meaning as it defers it is not enough. Not only is the maternal metaphor striking in this text but the economy of linguistic difference, characteristic of writing in the feminine, also comes into play. The self-conscious exploration of the germinal aspect of signification gives way to a maternal body and pleasure, directly linked to a “conceptual /

space” (Gyno). The maternal body is expelled from the phallogocentric privileging of reproductive function, rendered instead always already a (subversive) constituent of the symbolic order. To borrow again from Derrida’s notion of the double deconstructive gesture, Tostevin’s poem attempts both “a reversal of the classical opposition [male / female; phallus / vulva] and a general displacement of the system” (Limited 21). “It is on that condition alone,” Derrida adds, “that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticizes. . .” (Limited 21). If the maternal chora is privileged over the paternal symbolic and, ultimately, the body is privileged over the rational, these terms are not only reversed but displaced from their binary structure: the mind/body, semiotic/symbolic oppositions conflate and open onto a heterogeneous discourse, onto the “conceptual space” of the maternal body itself. The hyphen that links the gyno and the text recalls the affirmation in “re” that “le texte repoussé n’est pas un texte rejeté” (Double). Rather, it is “formed in relief by pressing” and “repressing” an “other side” to “recover the reserved space” or “the reign of foreign” (Double)—in order to displace the phallus, the Logos, and “pen” a (female and maternal) difference. This difference thus moves “out of O / into / the / narrow / bare / but / for / this / foreign / marrow” (Gyno Text): the mother moves out of her negative or abjected status in the symbolic order, and into Tostevin’s “narrow” line breaks which suspend normal syntax and anticipate a “foreignness.” The exposed “bare / but[t]” is perhaps analogous to the risk of exposing the maternal body, that is to say, to the dangerous appeal of representing what is, according to Lacan, un-representable, pre- or asocial, and antagonistic to the social order.

As in “re,” the difference that is penned in this pregnant site is a sexual difference exceeding the system of its suppression. The text’s espacements surge forth as a “pregnant” space of process and renewal, inscribing the female body within this open gap:

pregnant

pause

as

conceptual

space

interval

between

inner

outer

folds

By writing “through / the / cervix” which is also the text itself, Tostevin inscribes the maternal as a poetic site that foregrounds alterity. Once linear thought is shown to be indented (through the verticality of one-word-lines), and once the symbolic enters fully into its dialectical relationship with the semiotic, the trace of what has been effaced or subtracted is inscribed through this textual unfolding.¹¹

Along with language, it is the foetus that is moving through this “conceptual” cavity, an “embryo / rolled / in / a / scroll” in the maternal text itself. However, unlike the other four poets of this study, Tostevin inscribes the maternal outside the specific depiction of a mother-daughter relation, as the foetus’ sex remains unspecified in Gyno-Text, (yet nonetheless “shows its sex” in the womb, just not to the reader). This is not to say that sexual difference is really inconsequential in Tostevin’s work. It reigns, we have seen, in her inscription of the desiring, socializing mother in this poem. Perhaps Tostevin’s less specifically gendered model of intersubjectivity, set in-utero (like none of the other poets’ works), ensures its openness to the possibilities of its applications

¹¹ As a process of unfolding, Gyno-Text could also be alluding to Derrida’s notion of inter-closing endings and textual “invagination” (“Choreographies” 75), related to what he presents elsewhere as a hymenal text (“Living On” 165-166). In his reading of Blanchot, Derrida uses the hymen as a figure of “inner edge” and “outer edge” (“Living On” 98) to illustrate the layered composition of language. In “Choreographies,” Derrida’s feminine formulation of a philosophical refusal of closure comes close to his critique of (Lacan’s) phallogocentric discourse or phallogocentrism and, more generally, his critique of the mastery of Western metaphysical thought. Yet, Tostevin’s pregnant text is perhaps not so compatible with Derrida’s own hymenal, virgin text. His text stages the “sexual union forever deferred” of the “seed” of meaning that “scatters” around the hymen “rather than inseminates” or penetrates the text (Spivak, Preface lxvi). Tostevin’s own feminine formulation may resist mastery but her notion of textual alterity also extends to the sexual, irreducible otherness of the mother.

ex-utero, that is to say, to the various social relationships that her later work will, in fact, consider (male lover-female beloved / mother-daughter). What is most striking about the poem is its rendition of both mother and child, in the narrowness and intimacy of the “corps-à-corps,” inscribed in the “reign” of their alterity, their connection as vital as bone “marrow.” The maternal body itself provides a model for the interrelation of other and same, held in this textual womb where the homophonic mirroring of “sens” and “sang” are played off one another as signifieds, since both words “prennent / corps / prêtent / l’oreille / au / texte / qui / s’organise.” In Tostevin’s “corps-texte,” mother and child dwell in a uterine site of assonant echoing, the wondrous-like sound of “o” recurring throughout. This realm of first utterances again reminds us of Brennan’s notion of the uterine, “fleshly” memory, where intersubjective psychic forces are already coded, where there is law before the Law (Oliver, Womanizing 185): “body’s / first / articulations” or the semiotic mark, “uterine / tatoo / your / indelible / code” (Gyno Text).

Through the operations of différance and of the semiotic in her text, Tostevin inscribes the dialectic of same and other, as she does through the representation of the “corps-à-corps” as a social space of language. Again, this dialectic is essential for an ethical conception of (inter)subjectivity. The inscription of the female, pregnant, sexed and desiring body as a poetic site of assonances and of the other’s first articulations posits intersubjectivity within the dyad, shown to be a triad (to borrow again from Oliver), since language always already mediates it. Crucial to this intersubjectivity is a conception of maternalism that does not deny or forbid its others, that is to say, its sexuality, creativity, intellectual fervour and relation to the other within (Tostevin, Subject 90). Strangely enough, it is Tostevin’s work which, to my mind, foregrounds this conception most explicitly despite the lack of a mother-daughter model per se in her writing. In the maternal, conceptual and uterine space of Tostevin’s gestation poem, the body is written “toward the other” as “a body encompassing a mind, an intellect” is striving “toward freeing itself from its historical and socio-symbolic contract—a contract that kept ‘woman’ at the uterine centre of reproduction—empty uterus with no positive value other than what it receives from its relationship to its opposite” (Subject 35). The bodily and poetic site of Gyno Text transforms this

“uterine centre of reproduction” into one of language, where the other is not necessarily the hostile opposite or the undifferentiated same, where the child (either male or female) and the mother can dwell in differentiation. What Neuman calls “the merging and the marking of their boundaries” (“Importing” 400) is conveyed by both the mother’s and the child’s release on the final page (and in the final stage of gestation), signalled by “vagin / vagir / enfin.” The V-marks and the triangle that contains the title on Tostevin’s cover typographically and linguistically inscribe the woman’s body in the text. In these last lines, creativity, voice (“vagir” as cry) and corporeality are joined without being collapsed into one another, and with “enfin” the female subject expresses her own irreducibility to and delivery from her maternal body.

What the early works and especially Gyno Text anticipate is the inscription of a subjectivity of difference in later works. The subject is never whole in the symbiotic stage with the mother who is, herself, inscribed as a desiring, speaking subject in gestation. Again, the drawn V on the book’s cover emphasizes the process of textual indentation: “V / notch / of I / dentity”; the dent, depression or hollow are created by the poet’s textual ‘blows’ “until / all / that’s / left / is / cleft,” a fissure. It is this “rupture” that is cause for renewal. Rupture gives way to “une syntaxe” in ’sophie, a syntax “qui se veut peau sur laquelle se trace un / autre sens (une sensation) / . . . / où s’inscrit l’au-delà d’une langue tout en insérant / de nouveaux fragments oreilles neuves pour une musique / nouvelle” (53). Like Kristeva’s own insistence on the split subject of a precarious and double discursivity, the ‘i’ of “I / dentity” is a dent, jagged and fissured by the genotext. The semiotic process, like the functioning of différance, shows how the subject is divided from herself, in deferral, and constituted by this very division. Tostevin’s work in turn demonstrates how the irruption of the motility (Kristeva) or of the trace (Derrida) threatens the unity of the subject, for the subject is constituted by language, its radical otherness, “its never-fully-to-be-recognized-ness” (Spivak, Preface xlv).

In short, Tostevin’s feminist and ethical re-conception of maternalism (as the French mothertongue and textual [m]otherness) is directly connected to and in fact accomplished through her deconstructive poetics. Yet the question of female subjectivity itself, which is central to

Tostevin's feminist work, is worth further attention. This question is not without its complexities and ambivalences in Tostevin's poetry and prose, especially in their formulations of an ethical relation to the male other. What is a female subject? What is a 'woman' even? Tostevin treats these issues and often refuses to offer any simple resolution. These difficulties are precisely what bring her work in close alliance to Théoret's struggle with the question of subjectivity. It is to the paradox driving the work of both these writers that I turn in the next chapter.

Part 4

Loving the Other: Théoret, Tostevin, Brandt, Mouré, and Brossard

In the context of a feminist ethics, it is only logical that inscriptions of female selfhood include representations of intersubjective relations which, in the end, are the ultimate concern of a relational ethics. To recall chapter 1, what I call a relational ethics is synonymous with an ethics of recognition—of recognizing the otherness of the other—and thus with an ethics of intersubjectivity. In other words, we cannot speak of recognition without the ethical conditions of intersubjectivity; nor can we speak of ethical intersubjectivity without recognition. I shall thus continue to refer interchangeably to a relational ethics, an ethics of recognition, and an ethics of intersubjectivity. At this point in my analysis, the question to ask is this: How do the terms that apply to the subject's constitution in language (in relation to the speaking, desiring, socializing mother) also apply to representations of other intersubjective relations?

Although evoking and, at times, re-invoking the maternal as their initial model of a relational ethics, the texts that will be examined in the next two chapters also treat other relationships: the dynamics of relating to another man or woman again demand a careful balance between sameness and difference, between identification and differentiation, which, as we have seen, affect the very conceptual foundation of selfhood itself. In other words, subjectivity cannot be thought of abstracted from intersubjectivity, from the other's effect. It is also here that certain fissures in the writers' presentations of a relational ethics will become more evident. As I consider in the final two chapters, Théoret, Tostevin, Brandt, Mouré and Brossard do attempt to put the theory (of a relational ethics) into practice. Yet the proposed model cannot always hold or constantly be upheld, specifically, in the treatment of female specificity and autonomy, love and friendship, and spirituality.

The first chapter of this study claimed that subjectivity was the main factor at stake in ethical philosophy, from Lévinas' radical departures from metaphysical ontology and Ricoeur's relational ethics, to Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference. Subjectivity is still at stake in these last chapters, especially in the sense that Ricoeur renders selfhood as a generator and a product of

ethics, of intersubjectivity itself. The next chapter on Tostevin and Théoret will be particularly attentive to feminism's often problematic relationship both to humanist ontology and its deconstruction by poststructuralism—which, in the context of Théoret's work, will be related back to the specific manifestations of Québécois "modernité," and in Tostevin's poetry, to the theories of Derrida (or, to recall the language poetics examined in this study's introduction, to postmodernism). To a different extent and in different ways, a double bind results from the tensions between the female subject's dependence on the other and the felt necessity for autonomy. Yet, conceptual collapse is prevented, as we shall see, by a nuanced ethical conception of the self, much more easily rendered by Tostevin's re-thinking of the female subject than Théoret's agonizing hesitation that almost (but not completely) makes the ethical relation an impossible goal. In fact, the double-sidedness of Théoret's and Tostevin's discourses on the specificity of female subjectivity relates directly to an ethics of recognition which, according to Jessica Benjamin, "preserves and transforms [autonomy] as a pole of the necessary tension of independence/dependence between subjects, of differentiation" (22).

In close relation to the doubleness examined in chapter 7, the final chapter will consider certain religious, if not mystical, and at times essentialist, reversions to transcendental conceptions of the self and the other. We shall see that the female subject represented by Brandt, Mouré and Brossard is not always irrevocably "in the world" with others, even though the kind of ethics formulated in this study insists on this immersion as a crucial component. What happens to intersubjectivity, to the very idea of selfhood, when the subject assumes an original integrity, longs for escape, or threatens to eclipse the other with her desire for spiritual salvation? Are ensuing suggestions of utopian exclusivity, lesbian separatism and even transcendence compatible with a constructionist perspective that posits the (social, cultural, historical) "situatedness" of any subject, that posits the primacy of the other to the self? Let us turn to the doubleness of feminist theorizing which Théoret, Tostevin, Brandt, Mouré and Brossard all manifest, in one way or another, in their writing.

Chapter 7

In Half-Cogito: France Théoret and Lola Lemire Tostevin

To contemplate France Théoret's treatment of female subjectivity is to place oneself in a space of oscillation and its resulting antinomies. Théoret's feminism pronounces itself against the individualism in humanist ontology, then unveils the necessity of "une autre idée de l'individualité" (Entre 111), still using the language of traditional liberal thought. On the one hand, the speaking subject surmounts her subservience to the established power structure that oppresses her by unveiling its truth claims as constructed and arbitrary, and also experiences a disenchantment about any ideal of (male or female) autonomous self-determination. On the other hand, in an effort to inscribe a female speaker as the subject of her own discourse, Théoret seems to retain certain liberal ideals of autonomy.

To contemplate Lola Lemire Tostevin's treatment of female subjectivity is to place oneself in a similar space of vacillation. Yet it would seem that Tostevin is less divided, the discord in her proclamations less pronounced. The struggle against traditional ontology is countered by the necessary affirmation of a female subjectivity. The tension between "a crisis of identity" (Subject 209) and the need for female specificity appears as already reconciled or, at the very least, on the verge of reconciliation by the opening words of Tostevin's texts. But Théoret's Nous parlerons comme on écrit opens thus: "Lorsque passe la mort, je dis présente" (9). The speaking 'I' inscribes a living death in this sentence, a discursive dissolution and existential disintegration that will only slowly be interrupted by an alternative perspective of selfhood. Similarly, the speaking "I" of Tostevin's 'sophie' identifies herself as a "book exiled" from her "voice" (10), yet this first poem of the collection is already contemplating "the mystery of voice trace in time a space between / the lines . . ." (9), in response to Billie Holliday's music. Unlike the pessimism weighing on Théoret's opening sentence, Tostevin's poem promises the speaker's revival through the intertwined relations of music, speech and writing, which will be negotiated through a complex engagement with philosophy's traditional treatment of love and the feminine.

Despite (or because of) the subversion of humanism in their work, the position of a female

subject in language remains a central concern to both Théoret and Tostevin. They share and foreground a profound dissatisfaction not only with humanist discourses of the subject but also with poststructuralist notions which were partly inaugurated, to recall the introduction, in Théoret's work by Québécois "modernité," and in Tostevin's writing by the postmodern poetics of language theory and Tish. Although they formulate and, even more so, mitigate their discomfort in different ways, the prevalence of their double-sided treatment of subjectivity places Théoret and Tostevin together in this chapter. Ricoeur's contemplation of the "anticogito" (see chapter 1) is what is at stake for both these feminist writers. As we shall see, it is what manages (at some points more than others in the writing) to reconcile autonomous, ontological sameness with the dissolution of its primacy. In fact, an ethics of intersubjectivity requires independence from and dependence on the other, within and between subjects.¹ The (re)constitution of maternal, female genealogies will once again generate inscriptions of alterity, which are crucial to the formulation of female selfhood (an ethics of the self) and the ensuing address to either the male or female other, to loving the other in the half-cogito. It is, in fact, in this address that Tostevin and Théoret will reveal the major differences in their poetics "of" the other, that is to say, in their representations of an ethical exchange with an other.

Reclaiming . . . Antigone?²

As chapter 4 argued by looking at Théoret's early work and its deployment of the concept of hysteria, her decentered subject is one of contradiction, self-consciously putting the notion of

¹ As noted earlier, I understand an ethics of intersubjectivity as denoting the "intersection between two subjectivities, the interplay between two different subjective worlds" (Benjamin 29), which is also a condition for selfhood. This is not to suggest a normative or coercive relational theory (that we all born innately ethical), but it is to suggest its possibility which presupposes too the possibility of its failure. I shall expand on this last point in the conclusion.

² My subtitle derives from Patricia Smart's own title for her chapter on France Théoret, "Appropriier Électre," included in Écrire dans la maison du père. My intention is not to discount Smart's observations about Théoret's interest in Electra's failure to resist the Law of the father but to consider what seems to be the even more relevant figure of Antigone (whom Smart acknowledges as well [322]), this unlikely 'heroine' of Théoret's theory and practice of writing in the feminine.

identity in crisis and experiencing that crisis both as an impasse and as an empowering strategy. This paradoxical approach to the destabilized subject recurs in Nous parlerons comme on écrit, another early text by Théoret that comprises narrative fragments and thoughts on writing. The first-person narrator is at times the anonymous protagonist “elle,” whose name (Louise Valois) and personal history are not disclosed before the book’s middle chapter (if, indeed, it is the same character figuring throughout the novel). If such a linking is even permitted, this novel is very much a poet’s novel. As already illustrated, female speakers in Théoret’s early poems recall a range of characters derived from myth or religion, often giving the poetry the allure of narrative and fiction, of dramatic monologue and theatre (Dupré, Stratégies 45). This new turn to prose itself, an autobiographical, fictional and theoretical prose, still adopts a fragmentary poetic-prose style, fraught with ellipses and syntactical modifications. The narrative is often interrupted by the cadences of the spoken word, as the novel’s title itself indicates. Théoret’s own thoughts about the relation of prose to poetry are especially apt in describing this novel, where the “dynamique du récit est analogue à celle de la poésie. Si partant d’un mot ou d’une expression, le poème condense la pensée, le récit, lui, déploie, multiplie, élargit, précise l’angle de vision” (Entre 114-115).

Nous parlerons comme on écrit certainly enlarges the “angle of vision” of the earlier poetic texts. As in many of the poems, the distanced, self-surveying “elle” still oscillates with the more personal, fragmented “je.” It is particularly this first-person narrator who orchestrates her own dissolution, refusing the ontology which has excluded her from its androcentric design: “Je suis annulée parce que je saisis approximativement, je ne serai pas admise là où ça se joue sur la maîtrise” (71). In many ways, the decentered subject of this text is a direct product of the “modernité”-influenced aesthetic traversing it: “Je me coupe constamment dans la pensée. Je nais de l’effondrement. . . . Naître de soi-même est impossible. Ou alors, comment réinventer seule?” (16). The narrator “speaks” (just as she is constituted by) the linguistic, psychoanalytical and feminist theories that render her a decentered subject. In other words, a theoretical dissolution of the Cartesian cogito generates the fiction, and the text is thus certainly in keeping with the experimental poetics of Québécois “modernité.” Refusing ontological claims and (un)naming

herself “Ninon,” the speaker of one chapter attends to her own internal crisis with a note of despair: “J’y entre droite et je dis que j’assiste infiniment blessée à ma destruction” (63).

Perhaps more than in any other text by Théoret, this dissolution is intensified by the narrative, for it is expressed alongside a profound dissatisfaction on the part of the narrator—echoing, perhaps, the author’s own discontent with her colleagues at La barre du jour in the sixties.³ This ontological destruction, no less a “saccage” that leaves her speaker “Brisée” (64), is a kind of “unlearning” of what Théoret posits as notions of unitary identity: “je désapprends ce que je n’ai pas pu apprendre avec précision ou exactement, sans le filtre que je suis” (64). Although it lingers in this process of “unlearning” for a longer period than the fractured subject of Tostevin’s own writing (as we shall see below), this ensuing “anticogito” is momentary. As Théoret attests in Entre raison et déraison: “Je cherche à faire advenir dans l’écriture le contraire d’une identité fixe et masquée. Cette identité étale ce qui est déjà fragmenté, malgré cela je ne serai plus absente à moi-même, tout aussi friable et peu assurée, je serai si j’écris” (108). In order to surpass the angst akin to the subject’s decentering, feminism re-encounters the language of humanism in Théoret’s new turn to prose, offering a way out of the aporia that seems to result from the narrator’s own “sacage.” Although “je serai si j’écris” invokes the presence claimed by a Cartesian self, this presence remains a textual effect and, above all, a transient one. In other words, the conditions for this state of being are clear, for the subject remains an effect of language, a product of writing.

As we have seen, Une voix pour Odile seeks to open “grandes les contradictions” (56) involved in inscribing a subject who resists the dangerous fixity of an identity claim: “Je ne me suis pas vécue excentrée pour retourner vers je ne sais quelle source” (Voix 64). Refusing an “unité du je identité du je un je central” (Vertiges 63), yet obsessed with the place of this “je” in language (as its repetition here indicates), Théoret’s writing in the feminine continues, throughout

³ France Théoret recalls the “formalisme” of La barre du jour as a phase where “il ne fallait pas être une femme. Si on était une femme, on faisait entrer quelque chose de l’ordre de l’existence dans l’écriture et cela, était sémantiser l’écriture, revenir à la représentation. Il fallait, justement, fuir la représentation. Cela ne devait pas avoir lieu en aucune manière” (in Bonenfant, “Le fantasme” 89).

the eighties, to “result in a chronic ontological angst” (Gould, Writing 214). Théoret’s style of writing (poetic and fictional) even increases in its “lisibilité” over the years, a “lisibilité” that supposedly pushed the texts of Québécois “modernité” (in this case poetic “formalisme”) into postmodernism, as I considered in my introduction. As Théoret proposes in her essays, her writing practice necessarily “ordonne le délire” (Entre 36). Without this conciliation, Théoret observes, there would be no possibility of writing or of a writing subject (Entre 36) or, as we shall see, of intersubjectivity.

Earlier we saw that feminist reassessments of rather totalizing critiques of humanism often insist on the double-sided relation of feminism to ideals of autonomy and emancipation (Johnson xi), from Descartes’ classical ontology to the liberal humanism of J. S. Mill. As Pauline Johnson argues, “Each time a feminist theory raises . . . the unique and rightful diversity of feminine selves, it speaks in the language of humanist values” (134). The direction of Théoret’s work on subjectivity and writing moves to this necessary acknowledgement of a paradigm’s inevitable infiltration into its counter-discourse, however exclusive or totalizing the paradigm may appear in itself. In this sense, Théoret’s writing reveals once again its paradoxical spirit, especially in the early eighties. Seemingly tireless in its fragmenting of the subject of language, it also re-invokes the notion of identity (as self-totality or integrity)—admitted, however, only through metaphors of mobility and liminality. Hence, the porous “marcheuse” of one prose-poem, “La marche,” is suspended between definitions, rhizomatic rather than rooted: “prendrait racine partout et n’en prend aucune” (Nécessairement 116):

Elle est là peut-être lorsqu’elle déploie vive toute sa richesse dehors. Elle est là comme, toujours comme, en tant que, voulant dire, s’arrêtant sur qui est là et s’ouvre extérieure d’un rêve retourné, elle se prête généreuse, elle s’offre globale, elle dépasse, elle émerge, elle signifie sans alourdir, elle présente, elle ne se raréfie d’aucune substance, elle éclaire, elle entraîne et réunit, elle voulant que ça soit et ça se fait, elle inclut, elle transparait, elle par ce qu’elle allume sans contraindre, elle fardée ou non, elle au départ et à l’arrivée des choses, elle marche et ça se voit. Elle est d’une beauté sans régularité. Elle nuance toutes

les gammes, elle prête à confusion. . . . (115)

The over-use of conjunctions in “elle est là comme, toujours comme, en tant que” (115) syntactically delays the very act of description that constitutes this passage, allowing the figure to defy the reductive and often essentializing process of comparison. Although the passage does describe the “marcheuse,” the details are conditional, partially disclosed (“elle est là peut-être,” “elle prête à confusion”), at times contradictory, and insistent on her multiplicity: “elle s’offre globale, elle dépasse”; “elle fardée ou non,” “au départ et à l’arrivée.” “La marche” provides a good example of the tensions inherent in Théoret’s inscription of subjectivity, again in relation to the writing process itself. Published in 1980, the poem stands as the culmination of Théoret’s theoretical and poetic treatment of female alterity up to that date. As Dupré demonstrates, writing and subjectivity collapse in the poem’s repetitive use of the pronoun “elle” (Stratégies 56). According to Théoret, they both constitute “une tension constante entre raison et déraison” (Entre 114), a tension between the subject’s coherent expression in language and the heterogeneity that is inherent in and exceeds any subject.⁴ The subject, like Théoret’s “marcheuse,” dwells within a space of process that contains the oppositional terms of her “différence liée à la singularité” (Entre 113). In Entre raison et déraison, it is perhaps thus less surprising to read about “le risque d’une nouvelle globalité/souveraineté du sujet parlant” (96), the risk in what Johnson calls “feminism as radical humanism.” This notion of female selfhood also conveys Ricoeur’s theory, in so far as “Celui-là [le sujet] devra ouvertement garder en mémoire que le morcellement est partout, qu’il n’y a pas de centre, et néanmoins survivre” (Entre 96). Like Ricoeur, who posits the necessity of “an equal distance from the apology of the cogito and from its overthrow” (Oneself 4), Théoret proposes a version of female subjectivity that can begin to inscribe not its fixity or essence, but its own becoming, always through language: “Prendre la parole quand on est femme . . . c’est devenir” (Entre 108).

⁴ Throughout these essays, Théoret’s frame of reference is psychoanalysis, particularly Kristevan theory which posits this same tension (between the symbolic and the semiotic) in the subject-in-process. See chapter 3 (on Brandt) and all of part 3 for a more extensive explanation of Kristeva’s theory.

Théoret thus mitigates her dissatisfaction with the project of “modernité” through a formulation of subjectivity that recalls and also directly derives its terms from ethical philosophy, risking indeed a new “globalité.” By the late eighties, the “nouvelles formes de la subjectivité” (Entre 91) that her work considers are, for the most part, premised on the “interrelation, connexion avec d’autres” (Entre 107-108). As Théoret reveals in the even more recent, autobiographical account of her own coming to writing, Journal pour mémoire, alterity, particularly Lévinas’ notion of radical difference, remains instrumental in her reconciliation of the discordance of an ontologically-sounding female subject, of “la totalité de l’être” to which “l’écriture . . . s’adresse” (Entre 94), and a textual practice resistant of ontology itself, “un projet qui reproduit la fragmentation” (Entre 94): “À l’époque, les défaillances de ma volonté qui ont éveillé le sentiment de culpabilité m’ont orientée vers le refus de la conception du sujet tel qu’il est défini par l’ontologie classique. Beaucoup plus tard, à la lecture d’Emmanuel Lévinas, j’ai saisi que le moi est intimement en relation avec autrui” (Journal 224). Here, Théoret’s positing of the other’s irreducibility to and primacy over the self founds her conception of (inter)subjectivity. In the 1992 long poem, Étrangeté, l’étreinte, the speaking-subject does not undergo a Bloody Mary’s desperate performance of her father’s code or even “Ninon”’s existential dissolution in order to arrive at an alternative subject position. Throughout this later poem, Théoret’s own poetic “étreinte” of alterity in the self strongly recalls Ricoeur’s reconciliation of radical otherness (derived from Lévinas) with his own concern for ontological sameness. The poem is entirely devoted to contemplating the primacy of the other that Lévinas in turn postulates for the subject, as Théoret genders the other as female.⁵

The qualified notion of sameness, incarnated by “l’autre femme” in the poem, construes the poet-speaker’s sexual specificity outside androcentric terms, generating an autonomous self-representation beyond the circularity of a unitary ‘I.’ “L’étrangeté,” Théoret’s word for alterity,

⁵ Although it is Lévinas who is directly invoked elsewhere in Théoret’s prose and seems particularly to inform a later collection, the poetry’s concern with female similitude easily lends itself to readings that consider Ricoeur’s and Irigaray’s philosophies of alterity that are in turn indebted to Lévinas’ writing. (See chapter 1 for a longer discussion on how these philosophers relate to one another, even if inadvertently, as do Ricoeur and Irigaray.)

“appartient à l’autre femme qui est moi autrement” (Étrangeté 17). Evoking Irigaray’s notion of “love of same, within the same” as “a form of innerness that can open to the other without loss of self or of the other” (Ethics 69), Théoret’s “femme étrange” (22) affirms herself through her relation to the other: “L’étrangeté est ce qui me précède et ce qui me suis, elle est la ferveur de l’espèce humaine” (55). “Modernité”’s erasure of the subject gives way to Théoret’s formulation of the irreducibility of otherness in the same. As in Kristeva’s notion of poetic language’s “unsettling process of meaning and subject” (Desire 125), “étrangeté” generates rather than hinders the becoming of Théoret’s own speaker, who expresses “Ni regret, ni amertume, ni désarroi” (9) in the face of what must always exceed her ontological status: “L’autre femme porte l’écho, le différé, l’excès nommé effraction” (101); “Je ne parviens plus à dire la négation” (24). Like the subject of “La marche,” this speaker is also mobile; she moves “vers l’étrangeté” (17), “Elle chemine . . .” (96), “elle va simplement” (98). And she embodies once again writing in the feminine’s privileging of multiplicity and paradox: “Elle a la maturité des genres mêlés . . .” (96). These “mouvements contradictoires” (15) are where, in terms of this Lévinasian embrace of alterity, “The psyche is the other in the same . . .” (Otherwise 112). Without annihilating the other in the desire for self-presence, Théoret re-instates her new version of “totalité” (14) (of a female selfhood): “En elle, sens et non-sens vont se côtoyer” (15).

If ethics “is a response to the recognition of the primacy of alterity over identity,” as Elizabeth Grosz suggests (Sexual xvii), and if “le moi” is “intimement en relation avec autrui” in Théoret’s long poem, this ‘other’ is nonetheless not always so easy to decipher in her work. In fact, Théoret’s “embrace” of the ethical self is somewhat prone to breakdown. And one of these breakdowns occurs in Théoret’s theme of solitude which she configures in terms of solipsism, both in early and more recent texts. If the double sides of selfhood rest at the heart of much feminist theorizing, Théoret’s solitary speakers carry traces of solipsism which intensify this doubleness in her work. This is an almost idealized solipsism, despite Théoret’s avowed resolve against ever defining “identité” as “une affirmation pleine et entière, un solipsisme” (Entre 108). Although the text posits a “tranquillité agissante” (21) of female similitude and the resounding

declaration, “je ne suis pas neutre” (36), certain parts of Étrangeté, l'étreinte fall short of the ethical embrace professed in the juxtaposition in its title. Perhaps this is where the autonomy retained from humanist discourse connotes more than simply the language of the old adopted paradigm?

For instance, caught in the “pudeur extrême” (94) of the sexual specificity otherwise insisted upon, the speaker is momentarily “rappelée par la neutralité” (37) of a Heideggerian-like form of Being (or Dasein): “Je m'épuise, le neutre promet la récompense, l'acquiescement, la paix déficiente chèrement acquise. Le point mort réside dans ma langue, une conquête contre les ravages” (39).⁶ Neutrality promises a kind of anonymous peacefulness or false “quiétude” (39), and also recalls the uninterrupted (and rather Cartesian-like) sameness of this “neutral” ego: “Le miroir renvoie la même silhouette inerte, il n'offre aucune contrainte” (38). Recalling Théoret's solitary “marcheuse” who finds peace in an existence “mal définie” in the earlier poem, “La marche,” (Dupré, Stratégies 51), we might also wonder at the fact that she has no other “raison d'exister que sa propre existence”: “elle marche pour marcher, elle existe pour exister” (Nécessairement 116). In view of the neutral ‘ownness’ or self-containment evoked by this description geared towards an autonomous self-representation, what Dupré finds as the figure's ethical aspect (here understood mostly in terms of political and moral agency) could be called into question. How is agency possible if the figure's only reason and manner of existing is herself—her (ontological) sameness?

A more peculiar component of Théoret's work related to this theme is the recurring presence of Antigone, this motherless, self-reliant, tragic heroine, “une grande figure au féminin” (Journal 194) in the fiction, poetry and journal entries. Théoret's female subjects are often alone in their resolve to act according to their own conscience—alone, that is to say, like Antigone. Yet, Antigone dies for what is precisely a form of moral agency. In Sophocles' tragedy (which Théoret draws upon), Antigone meets her tragic end because of her resolve to give her brother a proper burial against Kreon's orders. Théoret celebrates Antigone who is “solitaire” (194) in the pursuit

⁶ Differentiated, in The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic, from its traditionally ontological (and humanist) egoism, Dasein (Being in and of itself) is construed by Heidegger as a “neutrality” which “also indicates that Dasein is neither of the two sexes” (136).

of her own path to action, as she goes against man's law of interdiction and believes in her own judgement (Journal 194-195).⁷ Like many of Théoret's poetic characters, she is an outlaw, opposing Kreon's logic and exceeding the social order in place. Antigone is a difficult figure to interpret, and her presence in Théoret's writing even more so. With considerable ambivalence, Irigaray also writes about Antigone. She seems both dissatisfied with this female representative of a sacrifice dedicated to the brother's glory (Sexes 111), and attracted to her challenge of male authority and Antigone's claim to her own right to worship, love and speech (Sexes 119-120). Irigaray suggests that readers not dismiss Antigone's actions as simply "respect for her father's family, fear of the gods of the underworld, or obedience to order in a state that forbids her any ethical action of her own" (Ethics 108). Perhaps, Irigaray writes elsewhere, Antigone acts out of "the blood bonds with her mother" (Sexes 2). In Sophocles' Antigone, the heroine does acknowledge the mother along with the father by remembering Polyneices as her "blood": "father, mother, the same as mine" (628-629), calling on her "obligations owed to the mother's blood, the blood shared by the brother and sister in the family" (Sexes 2), obligations for which she must be cast out.⁸

⁷ Antigone acts according to divine law, or what she interprets as the gods' creed that Polyneices receive a proper burial, even though Polyneices is considered a traitor by Kreon (human law), who orders that his body be left in the open space to be eaten by vultures.

⁸ This blood, however, is an incestuous blood since it belongs to their mother Jocasta who unknowingly marries her own son Oedipus. According to Hegel's famous reading of Sophocles' Antigone in Phenomenology of Mind, it is because Antigone is under this curse that her act cannot be fully ethical which, in Hegel's sense, would demand that the act be self-consciously played out and recognized by the player. Although she acts ethically in the familial realm (which, for Hegel, in itself limits the ethical importance of Antigone's action since family is the antithesis of the state), she cannot be conscious of an act that is guided by unconscious forces, by destiny. As a woman within Hegel's binary paradigm, Antigone cannot be conscious of her ethical act since she is confined to the "natural ethical community" (468) of the family. The family [where Hegel also situates divine, individual and feminine law against male, human and universal law of the polis] is the "inner indwelling principle of sociality operating in an unconscious way, [and it] stands opposed to its own actuality when explicitly conscious; as the basis of the actuality of a nation, it stands in contrast to the nation itself; as the immediate ethical existence, it stands over against the ethical order which shapes and preserves itself by work for universal ends . . ." (468). See Chanter, "Looking at Hegel's Antigone through Irigaray's Speculum," Ethics of Eros 80-126. In a conference paper given at the University of Toronto in 1997, Judith Butler argues that Antigone's agency and "deed" work to destabilize normative (as well as Lacanian and Hegelian) versions of gender and kinship.

Although she shares Irigaray's discomfort with Antigone's sacrifice of her own life to duty, Théoret attempts to think about Antigone without identifying her through her male relations (Journal 195) or, as Irigaray and even Hegel attempt to do, her female relations. It is her solitude, her resourcefulness, her independence, her virginity, and her transgression that seem to constitute this "grandeur au féminin." Sophocles' Antigone certainly appears alone in her struggle, estranged from her sister Ismene after the opening scene of the play, from her "own, only sister" (2). She is deprived of her loved ones: her intended husband, the promise of children; she even laments the gods' abandonment of her as she is led to her encasement in the rocks. According to Théoret, "La figure d'Antigone demeurait isolée, une jeune fille vierge, la figure vierge et trop sage dans sa rationalité, en somme, une figure qui n'est pas aimable. Son intellectualité et sa morale en font un personnage respecté, non pas aimé" (Journal 194). There is a familiar echoing here of Théoret's previous representations of the wise old "petite fille" who, reappearing in Nous parlerons comme on écrit, retreats "dans ma coquille, peau de petite fille trop étroite" (103). But more problematically, Théoret's invocation of Antigone seems to promote an autonomy that approaches the self-absorption of her "marcheuse," the solipsism which forgets that the subject is "interrelation, connexion avec d'autres," at the very least for Antigone, with her brother.

Notably, it is a stand that remains far from utopian. What Théoret's analysis ultimately demonstrates is that the proper conditions, some other 'laws' that would recognize the specific rights and political roles of women, are needed if women's ethical actions and transgressions are to have serious consequences in the present social order.⁹ Antigone's ethical life is quickly smothered by a cruel living death that she shortens with her suicide, and it is Antigone's fate that

⁹ In Nous parlerons comme on écrit, it is again Antigone's voice that one hears in the speaker's rendition of her own "Kindertotenlied" (as in Gustav Mahler's song for dead children). Antigone's song is dedicated to her unborn children. The tragic heroine is still deprived of her own right to live and to be a mother as well as an acting female subject: "Mes enfants qui n'êtes pas nés vous ne verrez jamais le jour car déjà devant le tombeau je ne pouvais faire éclater cette fureur qui était mienne et ainsi, le mort est resté assez vif pour que vous ne naissiez jamais. J'ai trop vénéré, trop sacrifié à la fidélité, et votre étoile ne paraîtra pas" (133). This is perhaps one of the most emotional moments in Théoret's writing, recalling both the "sterile" girl's rejection of motherhood in earlier texts and the entrapment that face her female speakers or the women in their lives.

Théoret is even more attentive to. This encased death, which puts an end to Antigone's actions, remains, Théoret claims, what has marked her most profoundly (Journal 194). The horror of "Antigone jetée vivante au tombeau" (Nous 91), the tragic outcome of female resistance to the established order, haunts the fictional narrator of Théoret's early novel as it continues to haunt the autobiographical 'I' of Journal pour mémoire: "Aucune analyse symbolique ou psychologique ne me délivrerait des cauchemars où parmi les supplices, le fait d'être enterrée vivante est revenu des années durant. J'associe le refus du sens commun au supplice. Antigone est emmurée pour avoir osé son propre jugement" (196).

Yet beyond the rather solipsistic self-reliance that Théoret projects onto Antigone, Étrangeté, l'étreinte reclaims Antigone as a "femme étrange" — true, perhaps, to the writing's spirit of vacillation. The linking of Antigone to the "femme étrange" is a particularly interesting reappropriation of the mythical figure, as it dislodges Antigone, still admired for the "courage de son imaginaire" (14), from a unitary self-determination otherwise celebrated by the author herself. Inscribed as a model of female solicitude, the "femme étrange" of this poem cannot be closed upon herself as she "becomes" autonomous only "grâce à d'autres figures" (Étrangeté 15) and not from some given, strictly internal source. Yet this link gives rise to another set of questions: what are these "autres figures" at this point in the long poem? Figures of friendship, figures of sexual love, the "énigmes" of women-(m)others invoked elsewhere by the speaker (39)? Does the text call for a renewed form of feminist sorority, as imagined in Journal pour mémoire (23)? It is not always clear how and to what extent Théoret's female speaker constitutes herself on the premise of radical otherness. It will be an even bumpier pathway into Théoret's fictional and poetic representations of male-female and mother-daughter relationships, as the last part of this chapter will demonstrate. But it is safe to say that Théoret's speakers and figures, including Antigone, manage to step beyond those solutions that may offer the "quiétude" of an easy, unqualified remedy, an anonymous neutrality or the quiet repose of solipsism where the other cannot exist and, even less so, interrupt the self-same. If it momentarily strays from its purpose of "l'étreinte" of the other, Théoret's work does posit the embrace of alterity as a necessary intervention into its own impasses

or reversions to individualism. In this sense, Théoret's ethics interrupts her subject's collapse into an unsatisfactory erasure of self and her retreat into a closed solipsism. Similarly, Tostevin also reveals a doubleness in her treatment of female subjectivity, to which I now want to turn. The last two sections will then draw on Tostevin's and Théoret's reconciliations of autonomy and dependence. They will examine Tostevin's own heterosexual, "carnal ethics," whereas a relational ethics can be located in Théoret's representation of female exchange.

(N)Ought to Be?

Tostevin's 'poststructuralist' poetry demonstrates that the question of subjectivity can present a number of problems for women writers. In Subject to Criticism, Tostevin discusses the conflict arising when "a woman writer is no longer willing to perpetuate the image of some stereotypical 'other,' and she is no longer satisfied with simply unmasking traditional ideological constructs . . ." (208). Echoing the ontological concerns related by the narrator of Nous parlerons comme on écrit, Tostevin asks: "Where universal 'man' faces, more than ever, a crisis of identity within the humanities, 'woman' has to accommodate non-identity. How is she to invent herself within this radical absence of certainty?" (209). Tostevin formulates her own rapport with this crisis of identity and begins to express the limitations of "radical absence" from a feminist perspective. More particularly, if the word "woman" is but a sign which differs from itself within the process of signification, it is nonetheless the word "woman" that designates the female speaker of discourse. Like Théoret's narrator, this subject needs to posit herself as a speaking subject (rather than a spoken object), without, however, reverting to modes of traditionally ontological, essentialist or a-historical notions of identity.

In Double Standards, the sequence of poems that opens with the warning, "do not be deceived by appearances / I am not a woman . . .," indicates a refusal to locate a determined essence of "woman," a stance Tostevin shares with most of the theorists invoked in her work. For instance, Derrida contends that "There is no such thing as a woman, as a truth in itself of woman in itself" (Spurs 101), a notion that Cixous echoes: "She does not exist, she can not-be . . .," in light

of “his [man’s] torment, his desire to be (at) the origin” (Newly 39).¹⁰ Yet, although avoiding the dangers of simple reversal which would inevitably lead “into the same old apparatus” of self-presence and phallogocentrism (Derrida, Spurs 61), these refusals to define “woman” can still conflict with feminist aspirations to inscribe a woman-subject of her own discourse. In Spivak’s words, the speculations “about a woman’s discourse by way of the negative . . . launched by mainstream French anti-humanism” (and especially deconstruction) are not always sufficient (Other 145), especially for the kind of voice (a voice coded as female) that Tostevin seeks for her poetic speaker.¹¹

On the one hand, one could argue that Derrida’s notion of the (non)name of “woman” does not represent the situation or place of “real women” but functions, rather, as a counter-narrative to phallogocentric discourse. As “truth’s abyss” and “non-truth” (119), “woman” in Derrida’s Spurs occupies the same place as différance, made analogous to the indeterminacy of “espacement.” She

¹⁰ For Kristeva, “la femme, ce n’est jamais ça” (“woman can never be defined”), “a woman cannot ‘be,’ ” for “woman” does not belong and must not be reduced to the metaphysical nomenclature of ‘being’: “In ‘woman,’ I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies” (Kristeva, “Woman” 137).

¹¹ The compatibility with and usefulness of deconstruction for feminism have been a point of debate in contemporary feminist thought for some time in North America, especially since the 1979 English-French version of Éperons/Spurs. In general terms, Derrida’s basic premise that metaphysical structures of thought can be shown to deconstruct themselves has served feminism’s critique of androcentric language and dichotomous thinking patterns. Deconstruction, Grosz notes, has demonstrated how “no system, method, or discourse can be as all-encompassing, singular, and monolithic as it represents itself” (“Ontology” 116); Grosz also observes that such a system is “inherently open to its own undoing, its own deconstruction” (“Ontology” 116). “Resistance, too,” she adds, “cannot be conceived as simply outside or beyond dominant regimes but is conditioned and made possible by them” (“Ontology” 116). As feminism must acknowledge its complicity with patriarchy, that it is implicated and part of the structures it seeks to subvert and transgress, an “assertion of complicity, while certainly not the claim of a conscious collusion, is nonetheless the refusal of a space beyond or outside, the refusal of the fantasy of a position safe or insulated from what it criticizes and disdains” (Grosz, “Ontology” 117). Yet Derrida’s Spurs, if anti-phallogocentric, has also been perceived as anti-feminist, and certainly Derrida does criticize feminists in the way Nietzsche viewed any search for “the truth of woman” (51) as a falling-back into metaphysical presuppositions. Yet Derrida’s criticism is directed at an early (seventies) feminism’s tendency to essentialize “woman” and its refusal to put itself into question. With the various feminist perspectives manifesting themselves through art, literary theory and political thought, perhaps it is an all too encompassing and general criticism for today’s standards. Of course this “dates Spurs,” Jane Gallop warns, and moreover: “To read Derrida as if he were writing outside of history would not only put him in the position of timeless master but also in the same gesture render him obsolete” (“‘Women’ ” 134).

is the limit of self-adequate theories, disqualifying the name of man that marks phallogocentric philosophy. One might even believe Derrida when he insists that his feminine metaphors of invagination and hymen do not relate “properly to the woman” or “‘a representation of woman’ ” (“Choreographies” 75) (or her body). For Derrida, the mark of “woman” is the mark of indecisiveness: “Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth” (Spurs 51). On the other hand, is there not a need for “woman” to acquire some kind of name of her own, the name of her own textual effect, and some acknowledgement of her body in the discourse which she serves to debunk in the (masculine) deconstructive mode? Or are the feminists and the deconstructionists even talking about the same notion of “woman”? In a way, Grosz begins to address this dilemma by pointing out that, in the final analysis, “woman” is “also a name (albeit an ‘improper’ one) for women” (Sexual 36). Derrida’s “abyssal” metaphors of the feminine may thus merit the suspicion of “those who are female” and who have a very different relation to the word than do men (Grosz, Sexual 36). The insistence on the feminine metaphor as indecisiveness “may well, depending on who one is and the position from which one speaks, effectively silence women” (Grosz, Sexual 36). If “woman” is nothing but a name, a non-name at that, what remains of her in terms of ethical agency?

Despite her seeming complicity in appropriating Derridian feminine metaphors, Tostevin renders with irony her own suspicions in a prose-section of 'sophie. Published in the late eighties, this collection is perhaps a more lucid and certainly more direct critique of Derridian deconstruction than is implied in the earlier works’ appropriations of Derrida. In reviewing the seminar which Derrida offered in Toronto in 1987, Tostevin informs her reader that the women in the class were to “remain seminally divided” (45).¹² What follows a female student’s question on the absence of women from Derrida’s material begins to underline the ambiguous position in which women (and

¹² In her correspondence with Smaro Kamboureli between 1986-1988 entitled, “Women of Letters,” Tostevin expresses her frustration with Derrida’s seminar and other courses offered during the 1987 International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies (ISISSS). “Women of Letters” is included in Subject to Criticism, and a selection of four of these letters appeared in the issue, “Dialogue, conversation, une écriture à deux,” of Tessera 5 (September 1988): 13-26.

feminists) can find themselves in relation to his philosophy: “[Derrida] says that perhaps the best way to answer that question is to suppress it. This of course is the perfect answer and the woman never shows up again but another woman claims that he is the greatest mind of the 20th [sic] century so most of us hang on” (45). Tostevin’s irony discloses what she later calls the “sacred power of a master’s words” (46), implying that perhaps Derrida’s deconstruction (through the feminization) of a phallogocentric tradition implicitly remains a male philosophical venture. In the seminar, Tostevin decides to speak and address the parallel between Derrida’s notion of the absence of God and the absence of “woman,” as both may be viewed as nothing but a name, an absence that serves “man”’s quest for origins. Although Derrida reportedly shrugs his shoulders at Tostevin’s observation and elicits “another laugh” with an “emphatic ‘yes’ ” (47), the poet does continue to derive “a name” for “woman” (47), which will be crucial to her representation of heterosexual intersubjectivity. Despite the warnings in *Spurs* about the “ ‘essentializing fetishes’ ” inherent in the “nominalization of the feminine” (Gallop, “ ‘Women’ ” 132), Tostevin prepares to risk a name for “woman.” Unconvinced that “woman’s name” even shares the playful status enjoyed by the name of God in Derrida’s work (He is an absent presence; she is merely the mark of absence), Tostevin will attempt to get beyond the mark of undecidability. She will give “woman” her own name, which is already inscribed in the collection’s title, ’sophie.

The critique of Derrida’s potentially neglectful discourse of “woman” does not set out to reject the deconstructionist disruption of phallogocentric texts, which Tostevin certainly deploys in most of her own works. Nor does it reject his insistence on the irreducibility of sexual difference in general. Tostevin is also deriving from Derrida the notion that “the I, in order to define itself, assert itself, has to deny so many elements of itself it can only differ from nothing by the smallest possible margin” (’sophie 47). She continues: “The smallest possible sign. An apostrophe. Between nothing, between woman spoken, and a woman speaking in her name, there can only be the metaphor of the I, which like any other metaphor cancels. The sensory figure becomes imperceptible, obliterated, her presence suspended. She is nothing but a name” (’sophie 47). This ‘I’ is, in fact, the subject of différance, an effect of language and of the différance that inhabits it:

“I am not a woman I am words / on the prowl prose to ransack / the fiction . . .” (Double). Here, the subject is “an effect of différance” (Derrida, Positions 28) and “constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral . . .” (Positions 29). In contrast to the purity of self-presence, Tostevin’s ‘I’ objects (to) itself, figured as a topic, an instance in language: “how easily I misleads / when I falls from disguise” (Double).

Yet, partly echoing Théoret’s strategy, this “in becoming space” is the place of another double gesture on the part of the poet: first, a place of denial of identity and second, a place of reconstitution, of a subject’s in-becoming through the recognition of the otherness that always exceeds the self-same. Tostevin’s language does not allow for the humanist tone of Théoret’s positing of a “globalité nouvelle.” But it does risk the formulation of female subjectivity beyond repressive or normative terms, and beyond strictly poststructuralist terms as well, that is to say, beyond the impending “anticogito”: “. . . I invents / a fiction native / to her female heart” (Double). If “woman” does not exist, “there has to be something of her” anyway, Cixous suggests (Newly 39), even if it is a new form of subjectivity that is “dispersed and differential” (Spivak, Other 145)—even though identity is constantly put into question. And as Jane Flax argues, “the incorporation of ‘woman’ qua embodied, desiring, and concrete as differentiated being(s) within culture, language, ruling, or thinking on our own terms” (424), is indispensable for the construction of a female subject of language. It is Tostevin’s inscription of a subject “qua embodied” that will ensure the recognition of her sexual specificity and the respect for her sexual difference, irreducible to and always differing from universal “man”: “et je laisse rôder à travers la parole / la mémoire de mon corps” (Double). As Danny O’Quinn observes, in Tostevin’s writing there is no “simple distinction between historical or corporeal and textual ‘woman’ ” (as there appears to be in Derrida’s metaphor of “woman”), because the “‘I’ exists somewhere in between, at once connected to the body and the text . . .” (38).

By appropriating Derrida’s notion of the subject of différance, Tostevin seeks further in her own gestures of deconstructive writing for a female speaker who can inscribe her desire, her body, even if it is “by the smallest possible margin” (sophie 43):

But even an apostrophe in addressing absence turns that absence into presence. 'sophie. Name of a woman, title of a book. On its own, a title has no meaning, which must be very uncomfortable for philosophers in search of meaning, but a title is at least a promise. Lives up to its promise by giving voice to words in which a figure is inscribed. Assumes a mouth, an eye, an ear, a face, the animated figure no longer separate from the fiction. No longer spoken she becomes at odds with what's been said. She is what she is. (47-48)

The tensions delineated in the above passage are the tensions that inform Tostevin's treatment of female subjectivity in 'sophie. As Jane Gallop argues, "Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question" (Daughter's xii). Similarly, in 'sophie, "she [the poet-speaker] writes to make a name for herself / then loses it in the writing" (23). The speaking 'I' finds herself caught "between writing as body" and "writing as erasure of the body" (22). However, perhaps cheating a bit, she hangs on to the "apostrophe" of a momentary (and necessary) presence, transforming it into process, into the mark of becoming rather than absence: "she should be writing a poem in which she situates herself / in terms of a desire that passes on through writing / but each time she begins to write she feels she has to reinvent / the world . . ." ('sophie 22). There is no "fixed / point" ('sophie 22) for this inscription, but there is a specific inscription (beyond just the mark of indeterminacy) in language nonetheless. And it is this specificity, this autonomy, that will determine her representation of the female subject in relation to the male lover.

Tostevin's work explores this notion of in-betweenness in order to inscribe a subject in movement, in process, "where all becoming begins and passes through the becoming of her own representation" (Subject 113). As in Gyno Text, the speaker seeks "through a small stroke of a pen, to leave a mark, an apostrophe" (Subject 113), signalling (to Derrida perhaps?) her place/name in discourse as well as the specificity of her embodied voice. If, in Double Standards, the speaker suspends herself in order to write herself out of the cultural construct of "woman," it is not to ultimately deny or negate herself but to re-affirm subjectivity on other terms—those terms inherent in selfhood. Unlike Théoret's novel where the narrator struggles with the "anticogito" as she hesitates in reconstituting herself at all, there is no delay between the two movements in

Tostevin's writing. In her response to Derrida, Tostevin almost immediately posits a female specificity, again appropriating his terms to her own ends. "She is what she is," the closing statement of Tostevin's direct response to Derrida, still appropriates the philosopher's rendition of Cartesian doubt that posits God as an absent presence. "No longer spoken" (by Derrida and others), "she" voices herself "at odds with what's been said" (48).

The poetic sequence that recites the name of "woman" in Double Standards also moves beyond its own deconstructive gestures without rendering "woman" an essential truth (a presence outside the text):

do not be deceived by appearances
 I am not a woman I am a woman
 a space in space

au sein du vide

autre chose s'annonce

.....

to the place where the sign
 takes time to sigh

The other, this "autre chose," intervenes in the empty space of absence that has been unmasked in the metaphysical name of "woman." As with Théoret's poet-speaker, alterity interrupts the assumption of sameness or essential uniqueness that the declaration, "I am a woman," always risks. The presence of this textual "woman" does not alienate the other and, most importantly here, the special deconstructive mark of "woman" does not disallow the inscription of a specificity. As in Théoret's work, Tostevin's speaker follows a trajectory analogous to the version of subjectivity proposed by Lévinas and reformulated by Ricoeur: the subject is "emptying itself of its being, turning itself inside out" (Lévinas, Otherwise 117), so that the female "I" can 'be' without alienating the other or the same (her specific, autonomous difference). The female 'I' will thus be capable of agency: of recognizing the (male) other and, in turn, demanding recognition.

Yet, this renegotiation of female subjectivity in ethical terms is where the general similarity between Théoret's and Tostevin's writing ends. As we shall see, the affirmation of sexual specificity indeed generates the amorous discourse invoked by many of the poems of 'sophie'. This discourse successfully, although perhaps not always convincingly, posits what Théoret's text does not so readily achieve: a fruitful exchange between the sexes. The influence of Lévinas and Irigaray on Tostevin's thinking is especially revealed when she writes: "A writer's perception of her own embodied subjectivity should allow her to grasp, or even conceive, an/other's consciousness in its embodiment, whether it be a woman or a man" (Subject 202). Beyond its interventions in a postmodernist erasure of the subject, 'sophie's inscription of an embodied, female subjectivity moves into the contemplation of an ethics that will recognize and negotiate the autonomy of each sex or, in Irigaray's terms, the specificity that makes an ethics of sexual difference possible. I shall demonstrate how this ethics is rendered possible by Tostevin, and then turn to Théoret's own renditions of intersubjectivity which do not always meet the terms of 'sophie's ethical exchange. In fact, intersubjectivity remains much more problematic in Théoret's work, despite the ethical philosophy that imbues her poetry and fiction, and perhaps in keeping with the tensions that constitute her oeuvre as a whole.

Of Brides and Muses

In Tostevin's title, 'sophie', the apostrophe, lower case and name not only indicate the suppression of women from the annals of history and philosophy but also the various objectifications, in this case, idealizations, of the feminine. With the name, 'sophie', Tostevin partly recalls Sophia, the great Gnostic Goddess of divine wisdom, often identified as the Lord's counterpart, queen, and even mother (Walker 951).¹³ In turn, patriarchal religions often render

¹³ An earlier Hellenist Judaism recounts stories of King Solomon's Sophia/Wisdom (Taussig 264), who also appears in the Holy Bible's Book of Proverbs (Walker 952), in Job's parable of God's search for her (Taussig 264), and in Kings' stories about Solomon. Elevated by "Jewish 'Wisdom' literature" or adored by Gnosticism (Walker 952), the cults of Sophia give way, like those of most female paragons, to her objectification, as even royal images can make her "less an agent and more the object of the sage's search" (Taussig 265).

Sophia the object of male possession and desire, the bride or source of inspiration of the sage/philosopher/God/king, the sophie (Greek for knowledge) towards which he directs his philo (Greek for love). Appearing next to the title 'sophie is a rendition of Hans Baldung Grien's sixteenth-century painting of the muse, Musik—muses representing yet again a (ninefold) Goddess of inspiration (Walker 701). Tostevin's Musik is no longer draped as she is in Grien's painting but is "quite literally unveiled" (O'Quinn 44). The cover's suggestive analogies and its tampering with Grien's classical painting introduce 'sophie's main objective, which is to extricate "woman" from the patriarchal rut that projects her as a source either of inspiration or of destruction, a female figure who must either be elevated and acquired, or suppressed and scorned. As the poet's romantic object of inspiration, this muse or Sophia/Wisdom is acting out of character before we even venture into the poems. Naked, Musik holds a book or score in her hand, and she is an agent, for she is reading, receiving knowledge rather than merely inspiring it. Tostevin's naked bride-like muse also recalls Adam's once beloved but defiant Eve, whose own association with forbidden knowledge has expelled humanity from Eden. As the Genesis myth blames Eve for the harms that befall the world, her connection to the elevated Sophia is not as contradictory as it may seem. Sophia too is scorned by God in Proverbs 9, where the worship of female wisdom is to be replaced by "the fear of the LORD [sic]" (9.10), while Sophia's "guests" are led "in the depths of hell" (9.18). In the last poem of Tostevin's collection, we will see Eve's own female genealogy invoked through her pre-Judaeo-Christian archetype, Kore-Persephone. Both are figures of death, and both are brought to their doom through their respective tasting of a forbidden fruit.

Since these mythologies present such female figures in their relationships to kings, male sages, poets or lovers, Tostevin also deploys them within the heterosexual, potentially ethical and amorous discourse of her poems. As Tostevin suggests elsewhere, phil/o (the male lover/love) and sophie (the female beloved/wisdom and knowledge) cannot remain in their respective roles, keeping by extension "men and women firmly planted in their proper Adam and Eve slots" (Subject 106). But the renegotiation of these roles demands the renegotiation of sexual relations which is far from an easily accomplished task, as an examination of Théoret's treatment of male-

female relationships will reveal. As the separation of philo from sophie already anticipates, the poetic rendition of heterosexual love has its treacherous moments:

how did my desire come to wear your face flesh
of your flesh bone of your bone how eerily we
resemble your angel spinning on the sharp point
of your needle keeping time to the deathwatch beat

I live your death you die my life I live your death
you die my life ah ecstasy . . . is what Eros
that little fat kid always flying beyond the realm
of reason would have you believe . . . (13)

The repetition of the personal and possessive pronouns “you” and “your” in the first stanza overshadows the lyrical effect of balance and interchange in the second stanza. Moreover, the lovers’ or marriage vows (“ ’till death do us part,” “flesh of your flesh bone of your bone”) in the first stanza are quickly undermined by the irony in the second line (“ah ecstasy”) of the second stanza. Founded on the absorption of the “I” into the face and flesh of the “you,” (of Lady Wisdom breathing her female spirit into Solomon or God), the relationship gives way to the eerie resemblance of one lover to the other. The speaker is “wearing” the face of the other, far from standing engaged in Lévinas’ face-to-face, the prototype of an ethical relation that posits the other’s irreducibility to the same.

Yet to recall my first chapter, here perhaps the poem does, after all, invoke the face’s expression of its mortality which summons the self’s responsibility for the other in Lévinas’ “Ethics as First Philosophy” (83). This responsibility, however, is borne only by the speaker, for it is only she who “lives” the other’s death. Eros figures as a mere “little fat kid” who thinks he knows the meaning of ecstasy. Although he may be a figure “beyond reason,” the amorousness he inspires here reverts into a very specific kind of reason: Cartesian reason, stemming from the

certainty of the cogito ergo sum.¹⁴ According to its metaphysical history, this Ego loves and is loved (by God, a [self]image of the Ego), similar to the beloved “I” who finds her existence only in the certainty of the other’s (self)love: “wishing the very act of naming will prove the very / act of loving to be true thinking you love / therefore I am” (13). If the poem already “postulates a subject whose being is defined not only by thought but also by love” (43), as O’Quinn argues, and Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” is at least interrupted by the other’s loving (“thinking you love”), a little more is needed for the actual recognition of the other outside the logic of the same, a logic that is repeated here. The poem is still rendering (and writing against) a disembodied love that is subordinated to thought and thus sustains the binary of mind and body. It still posits a thinking, loving (acting) subject who holds in view a (passive) ‘I’ being loved. The speaker does not forge her own position in this discourse as an autonomous subject, but finds her existence on the certainty that she is loved by the loving subject “you.” If she acts at all, it is in sparking the other’s thinking, as Sophia provides for the sage’s knowledge and the muses inspire the poet’s genius: “thinking you love / therefore I am.”

A number of poems in 'sophie convey a male subject’s narcissistic demand for love, a covenant that entails the silencing of the beloved: “in my mid-sentence you lean / brush your lips against / that space the past alive / in our own flesh the words / unspoken once again you’ve / sealed them with a kiss” (30). Or, in response to a demand that recalls Christian marriage vows, the speaker warns: “but when you say love me / as thyself I can only answer / not yet not yet” (69). It is this very impasse that leads to the separation of philo from sophie, of the male lover/seeker (Phil) from the female beloved/object, indicating the necessity “. . . que l’amour et le philosophe / se représentent autrement” (56). As elsewhere in Tostevin’s work, language or the poem’s act of saying (“comment te dire” [58]) directly affects the question of subjectivity and the otherness that resides in both. As the poet-speaker positions herself “dans l’écoute d’une grammaire” (56) to begin recomposing the terms of the amorous relation, grammar itself remains at

¹⁴ O’Quinn offers an interesting reading of this poem through Kristeva’s writing about the history of Christian love which, she argues in Tales of Love, “yields to the subject of cogito ergo sum” (297).

stake in the re-inscription of the beloved beyond the exclusivity of the acting lover and the confining passivity of the “aimée”: “afin de recomposer l’amant(e) l’aimé(e)” (56). Otherwise, the act of love is painfully limited to what Irigaray denounces as “that transitive fashion whereby the man loves the woman, one accomplishing the act of love to which the other submits, already in the past tense, in the passive” (“Questions” 185). The past/passive tense of the “aimé(e)” is reinforced by the passive voice adopted by the speaker’s questioning: “. . . et pourtant la question / reste fondamentale qui a désavoué mon corps? qui / l’a métaphorisé? / le toi pensant au moi pensé?” (55). Reduced to a representational order that shapes the other’s body according to the observer’s self-image, the beloved’s body can be rendered to mere metaphor (for the lover’s love of God, of wisdom, of pleasure, of self). The other represents that which is passive, acted upon as the object of the same. In light of the heterosexual context of Tostevin’s poems, here there is no “place of irreducible non-substitutability” which Irigaray argues can “exist within sexual difference” (“Questions” 185), that is to say, when both male and female are apprehended in and of themselves, in a subject to subject relationship.¹⁵

In the last part of sophie, a more balanced intersubjectivity does begin to convey, perhaps a bit hastily, an ethical love relation. Through the appropriation of the Old Testament Song of Songs or Song of Solomon, Tostevin’s speaker moves from a failing amorous relation to a more fulfilling one.¹⁶ As some feminist thinkers argue, the Song of Songs celebrates the complex marriage of two lovers from different traditions (supposedly Solomon and his black queen [Walker 949]), presenting a rare instance in the Bible where a woman figures as the enunciator of an

¹⁵ As Tostevin works against Cartesian certainty in her reconstitution of the lover and beloved, her conveyance of “amant/e” and “aimé/e” recalls Irigaray’s own reworking of these terms—especially in her critique of Lévinas’ treatment of the feminine, as considered in chapter 1.

¹⁶ Tostevin’s use of sacred text suggests the influence of bp nichol on her work. In nichol’s “Book of Common Prayer,” “Sons & Divinations,” “Imperfection: A Prophecy,” “The Grace of the Moment” and “A Book of Hours” which constitute The Martyrology, Tostevin finds “a sense of the sacred” that “is not based in inviolable doctrine but in a sense of amplified reality, an infiniteness connected to the world in language and which often assumes the proportion of . . . ‘magic’ ” (Subject 141).

amorous discourse.¹⁷ In her “Questions to Emmanuel Lévinas,” Irigaray observes that the Song “bears the trace of the woman as lover [l’amante]”; even though the lovers are separated, “already compelled to shun each other, to flee each other, to separate” (179), the female lover “remains a subject in the act of love” (188). In Tales of Love, Kristeva also observes that “the enunciation of the Song of Songs is very specifically individualized, assumed by autonomous, free subjects who, as such, appear for the first time in the world’s amatory literature” (86). Tostevin’s own Song of Songs adopts the same eight-sequence pattern found in the biblical version, yet the pattern of the lovers’ relationship is reversed. In the biblical Song, the narrative shifts between the union and separation of the lovers, while the first two sequences are entirely devoted to their rejoicing in the corporeality of their union (“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine” [1.2], “our bed is green” [1.16]); the lovers rejoice, despite the complexity of their union and the impending difficulties arising from their different traditions: “I am black, but comely . . .” (1.5); “my mother’s children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept” (1.6). As the biblical Song celebrates the lovers’ nuptials set in a sensuous garden of “pleasant fruits” (4.13), “Spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices” (4.14), the text also shifts to the lovers’ painful separation, described especially from the point of view of the female speaker: “I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone. . . . I called him, but he gave me no answer” (5.6).

Although recalling the sensuous images from the biblical version, Tostevin’s own love liturgy opens with the lovers’ rift:

I was at your side then
remember?

¹⁷ According to Irigaray, the Song bears the influence of a period of goddess worship (characteristic of the Sumerian culture), where liturgies celebrating sacred unions were supposedly common. See, for instance, Wolkstein and Kramer in Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth. Irigaray refers her reader back to Kramer’s work in her “Questions to Emmanuel Lévinas” (179). Dated approximately 1765 BC, stories about the fertility goddess Inanna and her mortal lover Dumuzi were written in Sumerian but also much earlier in “pictographic script” (Furlong 16).

your name and mine soft
unctuous fragrance our mouth drew

into your chamber
the upright love
philo kiss kiss

but now I am blue black
as a cloud before the sun
and our bed is never green (67)

Reminiscing over the fecund nuptials as they are described in the first sequence of the biblical Song, Tostevin's terse version takes a brooding turn in the third stanza, evoking depression, domestic violence ("I am blue black") and a listless sexual relationship that contrasts with the green bed of the biblical lovers. In the second sequence, Tostevin's speaker is already "disowned," not only because she has been abandoned by her lover, but also because she is estranged from her mother, from the female genealogy acknowledged by the biblical speaker who, in turn, dreams in vain of bringing Solomon to her "mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me" (3.4). Recalling the thousand years of Arabian matriarchy when Allah, before the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, would have been part of the female trinity that included Kore (Walker 51), Tostevin's own speaker's recounts: "it's been a thousand and one nights / since I went home to Moon Mother Bilqis / my lips a thin red thread / a thousand and one nights / wooing wisdom / speaking to myself / I am sick of love" (68). In the biblical Song, the statement, "I am sick of love" (2.5), expresses the overwhelming plenty of the biblical lover (who is amply complimented by her lover for her lips "like a thread of scarlet" [4.3]). But here, it expresses the speaker's disgust with her love-affair and her impending solitude. Most of all, it expresses the loss of her matrilineal history, as the poem incorporates the Koran's version of Solomon's reign on the throne which he would have stolen from the Goddess-queen Bilqis (Walker 947).

Tostevin eventually inscribes a compelling eroticism far removed from the disembodied “ecstasy” conveyed in the earlier poems of 'sophie.¹⁸ Yet, we are left to wonder whether the dissatisfied speaker implies that she has followed a pathway similar to the one outlined by Irigaray in her own formulation of a “carnal ethics” between the sexes, where a “covenant” becomes possible: “It takes two to love. To know how to separate and how to come back together” (Ethics 71). Has Tostevin’s speaker thus learned “how to separate” from her lover in order to move so swiftly into the final and celebratory sequence of her Song? The fundamental problems (the implication of violence and depression, the subjection of the beloved to an overpowering lover’s desire, the entailing sacrifices and loss) that plague the relationship are almost too readily, and easily, left behind. Nonetheless, adopting the “comely” speech (4.3) of the biblical female lover as her own, the poet-speaker privileges the play with signifiers that pairs the sacred with the carnal (“canticum canticorum / a little cant / a little cum” [72]). The lines, “mouth roofed by your soft / mouths off a ricochet / of bilabial syllables” (72), convey a carnal knowledge (philo and sophie) of the “the wet phrase” (72) enunciating this sexual union and affecting the discourse of love.

Again, the “phil,” the etymology of which denotes “not only . . . having a strong affinity for something or someone” but also “friendship, love, even embracing” (Subject 186), is reintroduced in this rather sudden turn in the poem, which now insists on the embrace and reciprocity of the lovers. Again, what has prompted the absent lover, or any other lover, to return so utterly transformed in order to allow this embrace? These questions do not demand narrative continuity but perhaps an indication from Tostevin’s poem as to how the heterosexual relationship transforms itself so compellingly to evoke this relational ethics. The lovers now figure as autonomous subjects in 'sophie’s amorous tale, as the female subject claims to have learned to

¹⁸ Tostevin’s own poem in fact reverses the pattern followed in the Biblical Song, which proceeds with the female lover’s yearning for the king’s (supposedly King Solomon’s) return. By the eighth sequence, there is further loss in view for the next generation, when the “little sister” will somehow need some form of confinement (8.8-8.9). Unlike her female predecessor who can proclaim, “My beloved is mine, and I am his” (2.16), this “little sister” will require protection once she is “spoken for” (8.8) and introduced to the world of courtship and marriage. Even the female speaker’s earlier declaration of equal interchange with her lover has lapsed into an oath of fidelity that seems to work only one way: “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is toward me” (7.10).

speak her desire and inscribe her body in the depiction of their union.

According to Irigaray, in this relationship “would lie the way out from the fall” (“Questions” 186). It is precisely an Eden beyond carnal innocence, an organic, weedy and rainy paradise, that closes Tostevin’s seductive, though perhaps not entirely convincing, last sequence:

the muse has learned to write

words fall gently in this weed and rain filled garden

their intimate touch awaken the measure of an extended

hand from which is offered another apple un appel une pomme

a poem the gold red rind of a rhyme a rimmon a garnet

the bony pulp of a pomegranate the acid taste of crimson the

sensuous pleasure of seeds that speak to the tip of the tongue

the curving stem of knotted rootstock the nodding flowers of

Solomon’s seal it is all here in song in this weed and rain

filled garden (where voice is the site) its body distinct

from the metaphor so I can love you now that I am no longer

spoken for (74)

This is not Adam’s or Yahweh’s Eden, nor the Eden where Eve is born from Adam’s rib. Here, Tostevin’s speaker brings Solomon into her mother’s fertile garden, to the mother who can only be yearned for by the displaced female lover near the end of the biblical Song (8.2), the mother-Goddess whom the biblical Solomon once worshipped (1 Kings 11.5). Tostevin’s final poem unites the various figures assumed by the speaker in 'sophie as they now allow a discourse of philo back into their representations. No longer the object of Solomon’s search, Sophia/Wisdom “has learned to write”; the inspirational Muse/Musik represents herself and her love “in song”; Eve extends her famous offer of knowledge to Adam; Kore-Persephone is recalled from the underworld, tasting the forbidden fruit of the pomegranate which once separated from her own earth-mother, Demeter.

Through the play of différance that causes the “extra [linguistic] expenditure” of apple/appe, pomme/poem (O’Quinn 46-47), Tostevin adopts once again the bilingual strategy of earlier poems. This Eve offers “another apple,” that is to say, another, unforbidden knowledge that incorporates the love of the other, on the condition that she too be recognized as an autonomous subject in the amorous relation. Having temporarily suspended the overwhelming and assimilative demands of the male desiring other, the speaker now calls him back into the poem and to herself; to borrow from Lévinas, she summons the other in a relation in which both subjects will be irreplaceable (Otherwise 114). In Tostevin’s poem, “another apple” (as opposed to the forbidden apple from the tree of knowledge) is extended—another kind of knowledge that can also be carnal is composed of “sensuous pleasure,” of “un appel” of the other in the offer of “une pomme / a poem.” In this displacement of “the famous signifier” apple that has divided the sexes (Subject 33), the call / “appel” of the other offers a “poem,” a carnal poetics where the specificity of each sex can inscribe itself. The internal rhyme of the text’s word play gives way to the “rimmon,” the Hebrew for pomegranate which, in the biblical Song, symbolizes the female sex (Walker 948) (“I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate” [8.2]). Although “the acid taste” may convey the violence inherent in the Persephone-Hades story (O’Quinn 47), this reminder gives way to the “sensual pleasure of seeds,” male fertility embraced and also celebrated. In body, in desire, in knowledge, the muse is now writing her own amorous poems, having freed herself from the confines of cultural objectification. This “woman” is free to love and to be loved as and by the other. As her “body” is “distinct” from the metaphors of androcentric discourse, she writes her own homophonic body-text.

In the poem that begins, “espaces vers vers où / vers quoi?”, the free verse or line figures as a physical “lieu” that opens onto (“vers”) the other in erotic terms: “cette rupture qui donne lieu à une syntaxe / qui se veut peau sur laquelle se trace un / autre sens (une sensation)” (53). As the incantatory (or musical) mode informs Tostevin’s open-form or “espace vers” in her Song of Songs, the final prose-poem welds poetic attributes (use of enjambment and enumeration) with the

prosaic quality of the declarative sentence closing the poem.¹⁹ The eight sequences of Tostevin's liturgy move toward this poetic "lieu" of a "musique nouvelle" (53), and it is indeed Sophia, the muse or Musik, who "has learned to write" by the end of the sequence (74). Elsewhere, Tostevin remarks that love can be "unwound from the mouth, the body," a discourse of love that she allies to the overlapping of speech, music and writing: "Love, sexuality unwound from the mouth, the body, between music and signification, to produce an aesthetic discourse" (Subject 116). As Tostevin's biblical borrowing indicates, her own sequence is, after all, a "song," and the cover of the book does convey the Goddess supposedly responsible for the "seven-tone musical scale" (Walker 701).

Elsewhere in the collection, the play on the musical note "mi" opens onto the French for 'mid' or 'middle,' while also sounding the English pronoun "me." Through this play, the female subject begins to inscribe her own becoming. Risking a kind of half-cogito that enables ethical recognition in 'sophie, she opens herself to the multiplicity of language:

mi-dire half thought half song when the passive voice of I am
spoken barely utters a kind of midspeak that speaks the part
the art of the half spoken that opens wide the middle ground

demi-pensée demi-chanson intonation d'une voix
lorsqu'elle se réduit à l'essentiel s'en va au-delà d'elle
pour mieux s'entendre entre versions entre amours entre
philosophies.

.....
je mi-dis donc je suis (57)

¹⁹ Tostevin's adoption of the incantatory mode in the open form of her poems can be seen to mark an interesting continuation of the earliest free verse poems of the English tradition. These open forms supposedly borrowed incantatory elements and proclaimed themselves as poetic descendants of cadences found, no less, in parts of the Old Testament. In his essay on "Versification," Jon Stallworthy makes this point with reference to a 1760 poem by Christopher Smart and to William Blake's Prophetic Books (872).

More convincingly, perhaps, than the “bride” who has seemingly transgressed all limitations in the Song of Songs, the writing/speaking “je” here inhabits a discursive space of in-betweenness that stems from the doubleness of discourse with which I opened my discussion of Tostevin’s poetry in chapter 6. She places herself in-between (cultural and personal) versions of herself, between the different generic uses of her prose-lyricism, within the “‘song speech’ ” anticipated by the musical note “mi” coupled with “dire” (O’Quinn 43), and within a constant linguistic duality, a midspeak delineating the difference that constitutes both language and subjectivity. Recalling Théoret’s own “fiable” subject who in turn dares the statement, “je serai si j’écis” (Entre 108), Tostevin’s speaker can “oser mi-dire” (and “me dire”) that “je mi-dis donc je suis” (57): I am because “I” or self is only “half” of the equation, pre-conditioned by the other, just as writing and speech, or writing and music, constitute this “demi-chanson” of a poem.

Much more so than Théoret’s poet-speaker who concedes to the language of humanism (a new “globalité”), Tostevin’s writing “je” continues to foreground a constantly deferring identity that, nevertheless, leaves its trace within the interval of midi, “entre versions entre amours” and, particularly pertinent to Tostevin’s theoretical poetic texts, “entre philosophies” (’sophie 57). As Tostevin writes, this represented and reconstructed female subjectivity “need not be fixed in its meaning but should derive its significance from an ongoing and ever-changing cultural and historical chain” which invokes the speaker’s multiplicity as well as her cultural, sexual and personal specificity (Subject 108). In ’sophie, subjectivity also derives its significance from a mythological chain, which in turn re-inscribes a positive female genealogy. In other words, Tostevin’s poetics redeploys those female archetypes that plague the amorous discourses of the mythologies that constitute the West’s collective memory, reconstructing (rather than retrieving) a female genealogy for her speaker.

Thus, without adopting the language of humanism that seems to become crucial to Théoret’s concern with female self-inscription, Tostevin’s half-cogito can again recall Ricoeur’s own resistance to the “anticogito,” for her speaker must leave “sa marque mais autrement” (’sophie 60) in a language and literary form always in flux, open to the cadences of the other, of music, and

of speech. Within a heterogeneous order of language, a heterogeneous notion of self culminates in the unearthing of the differences that cross all text, all subjects, of the alterity that must found all ethical relations between and within the sexes, constructed in and of themselves, that is to say, both as active voices and in their respective genealogies. Although the “muse” in 'sophie's Song of Song does not manage to demonstrate how both she and her lover indeed become autonomous and equal subjects in the amatory discourse, Tostevin's female subject is most often deviant, “painstakingly” tracing her “marks” (Subject 209) in the “espaces vers” of (poetic) language, in “the empty spaces between places” (Subject 74) which are also sites of interaction with the other, with cultures, with languages, with literary forms, and with one's own and the other's alterity. Such is the multiple, desiring and in-becoming subject or “continually changing self” (Subject 75) claimed by Tostevin's work.

A Tumultuous Ethics

If Théoret's work shares with Tostevin's poems a concern with male-female relationships, it remains rather alien to the fecund embrace projected by Tostevin's renewal of a heterosexual covenant. Journal pour mémoire addresses the rift that remains almost constant in Théoret's representations of heterosexual love. Yet this rift between the sexes is also seen to be culturally inscribed (“une inscription sociale” [12]), and thus subject to change but not, it seems, in Théoret's own poetry or fiction. Although it still marks Théoret's resistance to traditional generic boundaries, the “autobio-historical-fiction” of L'Homme qui peignait Staline (Gould, “Autobiographical” 84) shows a remarkable difference in Théoret's writing by the end of the eighties. The fragmentary, personal style of a struggling female speaker is replaced with narratives that have, for the most part, unity and chronological coherence, and that adopt a third-person, at times omniscient, point of view. In L'Homme qui peignait Staline, the focus is no longer on a writing subject but rather on fictional characters, often (though not always) named and well situated in their economic and social contexts.

The novella that bears the book's title places the protagonists, Louise and Mathieu, in

Montréal during the seventies. It parodies their intellectual milieu of avant-garde art, Marxist ideology and institutional resistance, and the politics of social change geared towards class, sex and race equality. Far from Tostevin's mythological reconstructions that bear upon the ethics proposed in 'sophie, there is no heterosexual equilibrium that prevails in Théoret's story. Recalling her own student milieu in which the forces of "modernité" suffused much of Québec's arts and letters, the setting of the story is ironic almost from the start. Intellectual emancipation gives way to male domination, the tediousness of domesticity, and an all-too stereotypical and failing marriage. A visual artist, Mathieu creates avant-garde experiments and idealizations of the working-class ("Ils se découvraient des antécédents ouvriers par leur père . . ." [75-76]) that transform into power-driven, self-deceiving, patriarchal and exclusive ideologies.²⁰ Having painfully acquired her independence from familial duty through her resolution to pursue university studies in a strange urban setting, Louise finds her "plaisir solitaire d'inventer son existence" (21) quickly receding under the effect of Mathieu's self-deceiving artistic pursuits and political ideals. For instance, unable to identify with the masculinized aesthetics represented in the surrealist poems of Max Jacob that Mathieu adamantly recommends, Louise would rather feign her ignorance than express her discomfort with Jacob's misogynist projections of "'la femme' " as "'un oiseau avec ses qualités, avec tous ses défauts' ": "Elle camoufle son opinion, reportant sa désolation sur son inculture" (41). At the end of the novella, Mathieu's ideals merely subside into propaganda and a politics of domination, represented in the life-size mural of Stalin that he has been commissioned to paint, a far cry from the "forme anonyme" (56) he privileges as an experimental artist: "Il expie la raison du plus fort, lui qui n'aspirait qu'à cela: avoir raison" (79).

The worn pattern of sexual domination into which Mathieu's and Louise' marriage disintegrates does not, however, originate in Théoret's work with the adoption of the fictional form. The final poem of Vertiges, perhaps Théoret's most dense, enigmatic and formally non-

²⁰ Again, the novella's critique is not without its correlations to challenges (which Théoret also posed) to the poetic practices of "modernité" ("formalisme") in sixties' and seventies' Québec. Namely, the possible re-insertion of authority through the fixation on and almost sacred status of "le texte" became a critical issue.

sequential piece of prose-poetry, offers the erotically charged encounter on a “Plage nocturne,” which ends on the sour note of the male lover’s expression of his own self-love: “Lorsqu’il lui a dit je t’aime, a-t-elle entendu je m’aime?” (80). Yet, heterosexual love is not completely devoid of all hope in Théoret’s writing. Set in Québec during the thirties, Théoret’s most recent novel, Laurence, does depict a short-lasting though compelling love affair between equal partners. The end of Étrangeté, l’étreinte also calls for relations between men and women beyond a tautological “dialectique” (105), placing the “femme étrange” in a possible, ethical exchange with her male other: “Cet homme est son contemporain” (107). Yet if Laurence may indicate a new turn in Théoret’s representation of heterosexual love (within the most linear, traditional novel form she has published so far), these positive renditions remain rare in the whole of her work.

More prevalent in both Nous parlerons comme on écrit and the more recent L’homme qui peignait Staline are female intersubjective relations. Théoret’s attempt at forging a female ethics recalls the question of maternalism discussed earlier in this study, for these relations are fuelled by memories of mothers as tellers of stories, as interlocutors. Unlike most of Théoret’s renditions of heterosexual love, her representations of female relations convey once again, or at least begin to, the reconciliation of sameness and otherness as well as autonomy and dependence. Just as a maternal space was unveiled in language by the hysterical speaker of Une voix pour Odile, a world of women’s words—particularly mothers’ personal histories—occupies these fictions. The mother still figures as the giver of language and she does propose at least the possibility of female ethical exchange. Yet if maternal models of “telling” do figure in Théoret’s writing, they do so both positively and negatively; the mothers themselves are full of complexity and nuances, but hardly metaphorically or mythically invoked in the texts after Une voix pour Odile.

In the fiction, maternal characters are firmly grounded in their conditions of domestic subservience; boredom, disgust and revolt are, for the most part, suppressed in their everyday lives but still constitute the substratum of the stories they tell. Théoret’s maternal characters are indeed ambivalent in her attempt to reinterpret the mother: “Faire émerger la femme de la mère” (Journal 36). Often the mere remitter of patriarchal power-relations (of the “lois” they carry in the

father's name), Louise Valois' mother (in Nous parlerons comme on écrit) also expresses her profound discontent with these same relations: "Elle m'a appris à parler et tout de suite mis dans la bouche l'honneur des pères. . . . Elle me dit, voix de confidences, les hommes sont tous des cochons" (37). Similarly in the story, "Onze ans," a mother convenes her eldest daughter in the middle of the night to expound on her past and present sorrows, which amount to a "réquisitoire contre le père" (L'homme 123). Not really of much use to the daughters in these texts, such disclosed anti-male sentiments fail in offering any alternative versions of sexual relations. Yet in a segment of Nous parlerons comme on écrit entitled "Une histoire dans la boule verte," conflicts of selfhood and writing that plague the text are mitigated by the invocation of the mother's speech. It is this speech that provides a way out of the authoritarian "silences des pères" and into a woman-centred dimension of language: "Elle est entrée tête brute dans les silences des pères, elle est sortie sur les mots maternels. Elle vire en rond. Elle opère main précise, une échappée. Se construit ci-devant la lettre, les mots viendront" (87).

Two seemingly unconnected events occur in this segment and anticipate Théoret's treatment of a female relational ethics in later works: the mother's self-performed abortion and the daughter's discovery of letter writing— "Le rythme d'une correspondance. L'échange. Un réseau de paroles. Bien à elle" (78). The contemplation of writing in the feminine (a writing "bien à elle") acknowledges a maternal linguistic "debt," while the daughter still carries the memory of her mother's painful history, having witnessed the consequences of her desperation and limited choices in the face of an unwanted pregnancy. Beyond the notion of a maternal dimension underlying the paternal symbolic Law (which Théoret derives mainly from psychoanalysis and still invokes in this text), these "mots maternels" are also those of a momentarily crazed woman who once offered her daughter a glimpse at the dead foetus. Horrified, Louise adamantly refuses but also regrets "de n'avoir pas voulu participer à l'existence d'une femme" (84). But if she fails to participate in it, she at least recognizes, and records in this story, her mother's existence outside the maternal role which, in that moment, Madame Valois has chosen to abdicate physically.

The daughter's acknowledgement of her mother as an other, irreducible to the rut of

domestic and reproductive functions in which she is otherwise stuck, is more forcefully apparent in the stories of L'homme qui peignait Staline. Théoret continues to foreground what Gould calls a "retrieval of women's history" in this work, as well as a "genesis of a mother-daughter dialogue" ("Autobiographical" 85) seen in the woman's disclosure of her discontent to her confused daughter in "Onze ans." This story also gives an account of the daughter's love for her mother, an unspoken love since she must only express love for God, under a Catholic code of propriety: "On avait trop de pudeur pour parler d'amour et, plus encore, pour en manifester quotidiennement les signes visibles. La fille se tenait donc à une certaine distance de sa mère. Son attachement pouvait tenir lieu de l'amour dont personne ne parlait, sauf à l'école, de manière hiératique, l'amour de Dieu et du prochain" (120). Although the prescribed distance between parent and child prevents an intimacy between mother and daughter, the daughter can still appreciate her mother's "charme indéfinissable" (125), "unique beauté" and "imagination fertile" (120). As the daughter yearns for "un lien avec l'imagination fertile de la mère et non pas une ressemblance qui ferait d'elle une copie conforme dépourvue d'originalité" (121), the ethical terms ("lien" versus "copie conforme") that would govern a mother-daughter relation are, at least, posited.

In Nous parlerons comme on écrit, the mother-daughter link (however limited) is pivotal to the daughter's own coming to writing and to her subsequent relationships. By exploring the epistolary genre, the narrator claims her right to self-expression which, in fact, stems from her mother's own desire to tell her story, to recount her past, and to have a female interlocutor (her daughter) as a witness of her experiences ("veux-tu voir le fétus?"). "Du moins, elle parle. Avec elle, j'apprends des mots" (39), concedes Louise Valois despite her mother's inconsistent statements about men and marriage. The narrator conveys this world of female telling as a "boule verte," the symbol for the reconstructed memories that compose her mother's stored "histoires" (66) which, in French, can mean both stories and histories. This "boule verte" represents the "Matière amassée" (63) of events that become history as they are reconstituted in language, rolling along the generational chains in so far as they are offered to the daughter as an "autre noeud" (121), an "époque" (67) rendered through personal history-making. After all, writes the narrator,

“Les femmes bougent par des femmes liées à elles. Toutes les nuances deviennent possibles . . . ,” especially in the attempt to reclaim “l’histoire, une possibilité de créer du sens qui est généré à même le mouvement” (121)—the “mouvement” of writing itself.

Writing as well as reading translate into “an act of love” in Théoret’s text (Gould, Writing 241), a kind of ethical responsibility which the narrator formulates in opposition to a biblical moral code founded on the fear of retaliation or Godly punishment: “On a aimé si chacun devenait le gardien de son frère. Chantage. Transaction. J’écris pour qu’on s’aime dans la mobilité les uns des autres en dehors de toute surveillance et de toute punition” (Nous 74-75). Elsewhere, Théoret almost echoes her narrator by claiming that writing seeks a “rapport à l’autre” or “l’altérité dans la communication.”²¹ In Une voix pour Odile, it is through the very act of writing, and within the very texture of language, that the female speaker transforms her destructive internalization into a hysterical revolt, re-connecting with the maternal other through language. In the novel, it is also through the very act of writing to an other that Théoret’s narrator both asserts her presence as a subject of discourse and ponders over a woman-to-woman ethics. In various segments of Nous parlerons comme on écrit, the protagonist depicts her friendship with an anglophone woman in the terms that anticipate the rendition of “l’autre femme” as a process of differentiation in Étrangeté, l’étreinte: “Elle aime ce qui n’est pas elle et j’aime ce qui n’est pas moi. J’aime ce qui diffracte avec précision et peut rejaillir autrement” (Nous 21).²² In their readings of famous women writers, the anglophone friend remains as passionate about Colette as the narrator is taken with the work of Virginia Woolf. Held by the written word, the bond between the two women also echoes Louise Valois’ epistolary exchange with a childhood friend named Lise-Anne. An invitation to the other (as reader and writer), Théoret’s representation of letter writing functions indeed as “a metaphor for writing in the feminine itself” in which the process of reading is so often inscribed,

²¹ in Gérald Gaudet, qtd. in Smart, Écrire 306.

²² This is one of the autobiographical elements of Théoret’s novel as the relationship is loosely based on her own friendship with anglo-Québécois writer Gail Scott. In the novel, the notion that this friendship between a “francophone d’origine catholique” and an “anglophone d’origine protestante” might represent “les deux solitudes réunis” or “De quoi avoir les larmes aux yeux” (20) is dismissed as a sentimental and irrelevant cliché.

“insofar as the letter constitutes a transgressive act of linguistic address to another woman, which in turn invites yet another woman-centred address” (Gould, Writing 239).

For Louise Valois, “to speak as we write” is to transform in writing the “customer-centered” and “impoverished” speech that surrounds her at her father’s bar and in her working-class context (Gould, Writing 239). Moreover, it constitutes the oath taken by Louise Valois and her schoolgirl friend: “Elles avaient décidé, nous parlerons comme on écrit” (92). In keeping with the tensions constituting the narrator’s struggle with self-expression, the promise of friendship yields to disappointment in the face of the other’s absence. Despite the novel’s retrieval of female genealogies through story-telling, the speaker still doubts her own success in being heard by any audience: “J’écris en pensant à qui ne me lira probablement jamais” (121). Contrary to Tostevin’s own edenic and organic setting in her “Song of Songs,” Théoret’s narrator walks in the city in the last part of the book, searching for her friend as her own call for the other remains unanswered. It appears that this particular muse has not quite yet learned to write a new covenant, that is to say, without a sense of interdiction: “Je te cherche, amie étrangère, un désir très vif que tu entendes. Pourtant, n’est-ce pas encore et encore pris dans ma gorge?” (162).

As the solitary walker at the end of Théoret’s novel searches for “l’amie” who may or may not be waiting, the text concludes on their missed meeting: “L’amie m’attend, ne m’attend pas et je marche” (164); “Il n’y a pas de rencontre” (174). It is, in fact, the figure of Antigone who comes back to haunt the text, yet an Antigone who does at least carry the “voix de la mémoire” (174), “les voix” of her mother’s telling. As in the earlier story about Louise Valois’ tackling of the epistolary genre, the narrator remembers “la mère” in this vain search for her friend: “Les mères surparent, les pères absents marmonnent ou rechignent. . . . leurs mots tournent, la langue même les écrase. Elles parlent en dehors d’elles, malgré elles. . . . Sans elles un silence opiniâtre et revanchard aurait régné” (162). Once again, the inconsequential qualities of the mothers’ words are weighed against the generative element of their gift of speech as civilizing mothers who have, in the end, offered both physical and linguistic nourishment: “Elles ont l’air d’ignorer leur folle entreprise de transmettre et de donner sans fin la parole en même temps que le lait (162); “Elles parlent d’avant le

langage . . ." (163). In this text, Théoret's Antigone-figure refuses a tragic destiny of encasement or the passive surrender contemplated elsewhere in Théoret's future and still oscillatory writing: "Oui, l'amie aurait dû y être. Les voix de la mémoire réclament l'immobilité depuis le commencement. Même si je suis seule, on n'aura pas ma peau" (174]). She refuses her own solitary confinement, but solitude reigns in the other's absence, which is only partly overturned by these "voix de la mémoire."

It is, then, to a later poetic work, La fiction de l'ange, that we must turn in order to discover the representation of a successful intersubjective exchange, that is to say, a formulation of friendship that manages to apply the ethical terms invested in Théoret's uneasy inscriptions of selfhood. In Étrangeté, l'étreinte, the speaker posits alterity as the best component of herself, almost a kind of female ego-ideal towards which, according to Irigaray, the subject can constantly aspire in her becoming.²³ This "supreme form of an alterity" becomes a prerequisite for a fruitful relation to the other, a loving in "wonder," and in the interplay of identification and differentiation: "L'étrangeté en moi est la meilleure part. Et l'amour, une capacité d'être étonnée" (57). The series of short prose-poems that constitutes La fiction de l'ange recount the speaker's transformation into an angel. This "devenir ange" (15) presents an allegory (signalled by the "fiction" in the title) for the notion of the "other" in "being": the contemplation of the "ange" in the "être" of "la femme étrange" figuring in Étrangeté, l'étreinte, which can be used as a creative intertext in reading these poems. In her novel Frog Moon, Tostevin's narrator also pauses over this linguistic play of

²³ This notion of an ego-ideal is derived from Grosz's commentary on Irigaray's conception of "Women's god(s)" (159). In Sexual Subversions, Grosz explains the role of "God" in Irigaray's writing as "a projection or perfection of the (sexed) subject—a kind of ego-ideal specific to the concrete subject" (159). It should be noted that Grosz's notion of an ego-ideal, which the next chapter will return to, differs from Freud's theory of the super-ego as heir of the Oedipus complex in The Ego and the Id. His super-ego denotes the higher human nature (in the religious, ethical and social sense) acquired out of the father-complex (19: 34-35); later Freud notes that because this complex is never totally dissolved in women (since they lack fear of castration), they possess a lower ethical capacity ("Some Psychical" 19: 257-258). But the denomination of an ego-ideal in Grosz's reading does follow from Freud's notion that the super-ego is formed out of the id, or in Irigaray's case, the corps-à-corps with the mother which can be seen to model rather than threaten a social intersubjectivity. Although I am not reading Théoret specifically in light of the "sensible divine," as the next chapter will set out to do in relation to Brandt and Mouré, I am suggesting that this ethical ideal—of a "supreme form of an alterity" (Grosz, Sexual 160) that institutes love of the other—does prevail in Théoret's latest poetry.

“l’être-ange,” which she then associates to “l’étrange” or strangeness (217), the foreignness inherent to her own cultural identity of living between languages, between past and present forces, the main concern of the book.

Théoret’s own “être-ange” figures much more in relation to a female ethics. The text plays with religious and literary traditions’ representations of angelic features, retaining their usual association with liminality but rejecting their so-called androgyny and incorporeality. Going against its usual promise of sexual neutrality or confusion, Théoret’s “ange” asserts her sexual specificity: “Nous sommes femmes, nous le voulons ainsi. Contre l’anonymat et l’absurde neutralité. . . . Transcender les sexes, un refus de nous-mêmes” (28). The “nous” in this citation does not signal an ambiguous sorority addressed to all women, although the dream of reaching women across the lines of class, race and ethnicity does filter into the projected “amnesty” of “la dominante et la dominée” (50). The “nous” signals the friendship that is not quite sustained in Nous parlerons comme on écrit, but here lies at the core of the speaker’s embrace of the “ange” in her “être.” As in Ricoeur’s ethical theory, it is friendship that models solicitude in this text, as similitude substitutes the reversion to the same. In similitude, Ricoeur has argued, “the esteem of the other as a oneself and the esteem of oneself as an other” become interdependent (Oneself 194). It is this kind of esteem that is shown to found the friendship described in La fiction de l’ange. The relation rests partly on the necessity of differentiation—on the recognition of the autonomy of both subjects. Théoret insists upon this recognition through the equilibrium evoked by her syntax, “Radicalement toi, radicalement moi” (21), as well as the careful words denoting a qualified identification: “Elle est un peu moi et je suis un peu elle, nous le savons toutes les deux, nous ne nous le disons pas” (16).

In light of this rendered female solicitude, the “ange” of Théoret’s poem also evokes Irigaray’s own complex metaphor of the angel in An Ethics of Sexual Difference. Irigaray’s angel is yet another third term or intermediary that she finds crucial to any passage or relation to the other (the other sex, as it is in Irigaray’s treatment of the angel). In her description of a female ethics, Irigaray proposes the image of a threshold to suggest the openness which her angel ultimately

represents, this threshold in turn signifying the autonomy and irreducibility of each subject, that which must always remain “partway open” (149) and thus partway closed in any ethical exchange: “The sameness of women, among women, would always occur from and within openness, expansion. Generation. Threshold” (115). Yet unlike Irigaray’s theory that attends to the different sexes as well as a homosexual context, this balance of careful identification and distanciation remains missing from Théoret’s representations of heterosexual love, as her fiction is most apt in demonstrating. But in Théoret’s metaphor of the “ange,” alterity is indeed a kind of threshold that conditions the relation to the female other, which Théoret relates through the familiar oscillation of affirmation and negation: “Par moments, j’étais toi en pleine fusion et je n’étais pas toi non plus, je le savais, tu l’as toujours su. J’épousais ton langage sans jamais être capable de le répéter” (22). As in her other reconciliatory texts, Théoret renders a heterogeneous (inter)subjectivity inhabited by the “tensions excessives” (19) of a reintegrated subject who is nonetheless in process, here living a supreme relation to an other, exceeding any claim or tendency towards a surrendering fixity. However, as though echoing the solitary, self-willed subject figuring in Théoret’s other texts, the speaker again insists on a “solitude démesurée” (52), in contradistinction to the collection as a whole. But this “solitude” is more definitively interrupted by the other’s call, here an “ange au visage de femme” (54), a face, an angel bringing forth the message that, at least in this text, “l’amitié est souveraine” (54). This “amitié” is enabled precisely by the subject’s étreinte of her être’s own “devenir ange,” where the other always precedes the same, disabling any form of solipsism.

In the end, though, this unhesitating and fulfilled “amitié” presented in La fiction de l’ange is almost as rare an occurrence in Théoret’s writing as a positive rendition of heterosexual love. The formulations of selfhood and love in Tostevin’s and Théoret’s writing should, perhaps, be contrasted rather than compared too closely. Although, in general terms, these writers share what many critics have considered as feminism’s duplicitous relation to postmodern theories of the subject, they write their way out of conceptual difficulties in remarkably different ways. While

questioning the place left for the woman-subject in discourses that posit fragmentation and indeterminacy as the alternatives to metaphysical identity claims, Tostevin reintegrates the terms of deconstruction within her own renewal of a female speaking subject as “the teller of her own stories” (Frog 217). Formulating a similar questioning, Théoret increasingly steps away from the theories of “modernité.” As she contemplates the humanist language of the notion of an integral female selfhood, she certainly sets herself apart from Tostevin’s sustained Derridian terminology and, at times, offers some rather essentialist renditions of female autonomy. Yet, if certain representations of subjectivity and relations between and among the sexes fall short of the ethical theory that otherwise informs the writing, Théoret still manages to posit a “supreme form of an alterity” that figures in her recent poetry’s rendition of female friendship.

The question remains whether Tostevin’s heterosexualized or Théoret’s feminized representations of ethical relations can extend beyond their own sexual and potentially exclusive specificities. Is the seeming exclusivity of heterosexual love or of female friendship a necessary risk that goes into applying any ideal, to which an ethics always amounts to? Or must heterosexual and female love necessarily be considered exclusive in the first place? To return to my earlier argument about a mother-daughter model, perhaps the promising relationships presented by these texts should be viewed as models, and only as models. These provide certain terms of recognition that, in the end, can and must extend beyond their specific contexts and beyond the problems of sexual difference.

Chapter 8

Perfecting the Other: Di Brandt, Erin Mouré and Nicole Brossard

Although intersubjectivity, the relationship of one subject to another, could be called the locus of any ethics, in the texts under study it is not always a satisfying one. This chapter examines expanded formulations of love and spiritual renewal, issues related to intersubjectivity which, in turn, is modelled by the figurations of maternalism in other works by Brandt and earlier publications by Mouré and Brossard. Among the works to be examined are Di Brandt's Agnes in the Sky and Jerusalem, Beloved, which offer some of her most emotional and spiritual writing. The lyrical quality of these collections may appear as an odd choice for comparison with two of the most 'cerebral' and at times stylistically impenetrable feminist writers in Canada, Erin Mouré and Nicole Brossard. Yet the three writers discussed in this final chapter do sometimes echo one another in their religious, amorous and/or essentialist reversions to, as well as transcendental conceptions of, the self and the other. Once again, these conceptions can present an ethics of intersubjectivity but they can also entail its breakdown. Is this where the feminist version of those postmodernist refusals of essence, fixity and closure meets with female-oriented, even mystical longings for presence, perfection and grace? If so, is an ethics of intersubjectivity sustained, or sustainable, in the works of Brandt, Mouré and Brossard?

I begin with Brandt where I left off in chapter 3, thus with the commemoration of mythologies and the religious language inherited from her Mennonite code. From Brandt's mythological revisioning and lyrical longing for salvation stems a religious response to nature, the (m)other and the lover. On the one hand, this longing can become escapist, or to put it more positively, transcendental, and results from the speaker's idealization of the loved other. On the other hand, some of Brandt's poems also lend themselves to the concept of a non-essentialist ("sensible") wholeness, which evokes Irigaray's notion of "a sensible transcendental" (Ethics 129). A religious response to the other woman also underlies Mouré's different project of exploring the limits of given linguistic structures (syntax and grammar). On the whole, Mouré remains within the boundaries of the text and of her own scientific imagery, most apparent in

Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love's "Visible Spectrum." Yet her work does reveal a yearning for a perfect other that is not so dissimilar to Brandt's poems of spiritual renewal, as Mouré's inscribed longing can threaten to eclipse the other and revert to the self-same. The related contradictions that entail some of the weaknesses of Brossard's feminism will occupy the third part of this chapter, as a certain mysticism also underlies her poetry and prose. As Brossard attempts to posit an ethics of female intersubjectivity, her work both confirms and contradicts what she asserts in her own, at times essentialist, theories of sexuality and writing. She even contradicts her own constructionist stance on female (inter)subjectivity with the promotion of a lesbian "elsewhereness" and untouchability. This ideal does not so much risk (as in Brandt and Mouré) to eclipse the female other, but does place lesbian intersubjectivity in an impossible, indeed implausible, utopian space, somewhat echoing Brandt's poetic invocations of escapism and Mouré's idealizations of the other.

Di Brandt: "old mother smell"

In chapter 3 we saw that religion and myth are both tampered with and reinstated by Brandt's own poetic 'plots' of mother-daughter relationships. It is a much more distinctly metaphysical concern for personal salvation that permeates Agnes in the Sky and Jerusalem, Beloved. In an interview, Brandt discusses her "violation" of "the metaphysics in language" in Questions i asked my mother, expressing her desire to "sustain a religious vision of the world" yet also to revise it in radical ways: "Todorov said that literature kills off the metaphysics in language, and I feel that all the time because there was a great, very beautiful power in the metaphysics for me. Another part of me feels that it's very important to climb out of it because it was a very definitive, authoritarian, and constricting language" (in Williamson, "The sadness" 37). But does Brandt always manage "to climb out" of metaphysics? The struggle with a religious heritage certainly informs the blending of past and present in Brandt's poetry, as well as the domestication of myth pursued in the two collections examined in chapter 3. However, in Agnes in the Sky and Jerusalem, Beloved, religious struggle sometimes subsides into a much less restricted and qualified response to the other, which figures either as nature, cosmic mother, self, or lover. Otherwise, a

sense of personal salvation, attained mainly through human connections, pervades the collections. In Agnes in the Sky, the repeated use of the generic or self-designating “you” shows the other’s essential role in the subject’s healing process. It is also reinforced in the use of enjambment, which formally represents a kind of stretching towards salvation as it is longed for by the poet-speaker: “who was it that carried / you pushed you to dying / second birth who found you / gasping dangling like a / hooked fish who flipped / you back into freshwater / who saved you” (52).

The opening poem signals what Brandt calls the “transformative” quality of Agnes in the Sky, which follows the earlier deconstructionist poems of Questions i asked my mother. The use of the conjunctions “so,” “after all” and the repeated symbol “&” mark not only a kind of resolution for the “lost” speaker but also her transition into a renewed state:

so this is the world & here i am
 after all in the middle of it one of
 the many broken hearted so far
 across the centuries away from
 home living each day for what it
 may bring without sorrow or pity
 for the lost kingdom face to the wind
 this time mother please don't take
 away my pain let's just say it is
 mine & this is the world & here i am
 in it hidden amazed among the trees
 one of the many lost & found if you
 can believe it across all this space
 & i think i can say this from so far
 away that i love you i love you (2)

The poem rejects the nostalgia for “the lost kingdom” derived from a Christian ideal of salvation

(the bodiless, eternal soul's return to the paternal Creator). It conveys an immanent "sense of connectedness with everything," a pantheistic feeling that is similar to the one expressed in Mother, Not Mother, where "there is holiness / in everything" (70). However, the poem also retains some sense of the Christian ideal of a promised salvation. There appears to be a rather passive experience in this condition of being "one of the many lost & found." Has the speaker been called back to some previous, harmonious state?

Yet the poem's appeal still lies in the speaker's differentiation with the natural order, which is invoked as "the world" of "wind" and "trees." Her response to the "world" is particularly interesting in terms of the dialectic of same and other that is the foundation of Brandt's formulations of intersubjectivity elsewhere. The speaker confronts the otherness of nature that remains exterior, unknowable, to the self; the 'i' "in it" resists a lyrical, desolate or solipsistic experience of nature. Although the speaker is among "the many broken hearted," her "pain" is not projected onto nature for the effect of poetic fallacy. She is "hidden" and "amazed among the trees" with an astonishment or "wonder" for the other, a "wonder" that gives way "to the perpetual newness of the self, the other, the world" (Irigaray, Ethics 82). According to Brandt, nature's "much larger network of relationships" is also the stage of human connections (in Patterson 23), here a re-connection with the mother. As Brandt suggests, this stage is where the "i" depends "on the intersubjectivity of beings (even non human ones), [rather] than on individuality" (in Patterson 22).

The speaker's religious response to the natural world later invokes a cosmic mother, "the old mother smell" in "roots grass flowers leaves" (Agnes 16). Recalling Sumerian or prehistorical female divinities usually associated with fertility and agriculture (Furlong 4), Brandt's cosmic mother is immersed in "the earth" which is also "firm under" her "feet" (Agnes 16), in the concrete specificity of human space and time; she affirms the human that knows "eternity in" its "bones" (Agnes 47). The sections that follow a long poem on the Intifada in Jerusalem, Beloved relate this experience of a divine (m)other in terms different from monotheistic representations,

revealing again Brandt's interest in addressing cultural immolations of the mother.¹ Against the monotheistic and paternal authority suggested "in the Name of the Father the Name of the Father / the Name of the Father / taming the mother blood in us, the moon magic" (60), Jerusalem, Beloved offers a myriad of female deities. The "mother, queen of heaven, Most Beloved" (47) represents a strong affirmation of the female body and an immanent figure of salvation, rectifying the alienation of daughters and mothers: ". . . our mother, coming / back for us, reaching out her arms, her hot / woman's love burning through each trembling / cell, calling out to us, her dark liquid lullaby / flowing through us . . ." (47). The Sumerian goddess "Ishtar" and the more archaic, sevenfold, celestial grouping of the Oceanic "Pleiades" (56) figure as emanations of moon-goddesses (Walker 803). Calling upon Native American women's myth-making, Brandt also includes in her incantation a "Spider Woman" or "Grandmother, reaching out her arms, to us, again, / among trees, her deep, wise wrinkling, here, here, / we are still here" (60). Known, in Paula Gunn Allen's words, as a "thought" resulting "in physical manifestation of phenomena" (qtd. in Caputi 426), this Grandmother Spider Woman implies "the web" of "interconnection and interdependency of all life" (Caputi 432), as the poet-speaker's response to "the world" intimates in Agnes in the Sky. Finally the "wise woman," "zionist" and "crone"—the third component of the triple goddess with a Jewish heritage—"will not leave" a war-torn Jerusalem (71) or recede from history.

Brandt's feminist mythologizing or "gynergetic symbolization" (Caputi 428) strikes me as quite different from her redeployment of mother-daughter relations in Mother, Not Mother. There, these relations were considered products of "the culture and language which represses" them (Purkiss 448), allowing Brandt to reappropriate the myths of Demeter and Persephone to posit a female ethics. But it seems that her more recent work's invocations of gynocratic prehistory could be treading on dangerous ground. One possible effect of these appeals to female divinities is the

¹ As noted in the previous chapter, a number of feminist biblical scholars have demonstrated that, despite the exclusivity of the paternal Hebrew God, the Bible reveals traces of subcultural forms of worship addressing female forms of deity, which would have combined both fertility and sexuality (Brenner 56). For instance, the discrepancies caused by the appearance of a "queen of heaven" in the Book of Jeremiah (44.19) would indicate the subcultural trends of goddess worship that Tostevin explores in sophie.

nostalgic pre-supposition of an original, integral, organic, and perhaps recoverable female past. Elsewhere, Brandt indeed proposes a space and time in which women of the present are “to become whole again, as women, daughters & mothers, letting go of old scripts, & boundaries. . . .” Hence, in Brandt’s view, they “can hear each other again” (in Patterson 38). Are not Brandt’s poems usually rewriting the “old scripts” rather than trying to simply transcend them as she is suggesting here?

However, there is another way to conceptualize Brandt’s promotion of female “wholeness”—that is to say, to conceptualize it out of its essentialist suggestions of finality and origin. Indeed, some of Brandt’s poetry can lend to readings of this idea of “wholeness” in terms of Irigaray’s notion of a subject’s self-representation. For Irigaray, “wholeness” may well imply a “perfection of subjectivity” (Sexes 63) but this perfection is not finite. Rather, it applies to the unending process of becoming: to “fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being” (Sexes 61). Brandt’s poems may allow this kind of reading, as most of her writing transgresses the kind of nostalgia detected in some of her gynocratic appeals. Moreover, rather than suggesting that women and men deify themselves or aspire to “a transcendent entity that exists outside becoming” (Sexes 63), Irigaray does suggest the following: “To posit a gender, a God is necessary . . .” (Sexes 61). What this means is that gender or, for instance, a female gender must be constructed on the basis of “an ideal that would be her goal or path in becoming”; “God” is but a “model” or an “other of her own that she can become” (Sexes 63-64), as the ontological terms of other and same continue to be reworked in Irigaray’s thinking.

Readers of Irigaray’s text must understand “God” through Feuerbach, a crucial influence on her own notion of divinity. “God is the mirror of man,” Feuerbach states in The Essence of Christianity (63). According to Irigaray (here inspired by Feuerbach), God can thus be imagined by a man or woman “not fated to remain a slave to the logic of the essence of man” (Sexes 67). As Grosz observes, the Irigarayan God “is a form of alterity affirming the human”; God is “the perfection, the ideal, end or goal of an infinite becoming” (Sexual 152-153). In Irigaray’s theory of sexual self-representation (always a theory of ethical intersubjectivity), this “infinite” or “God”

is “the potential for growth and fulfilment” (Sexes 69), which requires the capacity to love a same other (“an other of her own”); God can be “made flesh as a woman” through “the mother and the daughter, and in their relationships” (71). In other words, if a female subject (Irigaray’s topic in the end) is to postulate her own specific horizon of becoming (to imagine a God of her own) rather than fix for herself an immutable objective (Sexes 67), an “ego ideal specific to the concrete subject” (Grosz, Sexual 159) requires some sense of a woman’s own sexual genealogy.

To recall the poems of Mother, Not Mother, the poet-speaker’s own becoming in relation to the mother is expressed as “the worlds i am” (27). She both reconnects with and, at other times, occupies Demeter’s position. Her own ‘rebirth’ and that of the world around her are, in fact, sparked by an ego-ideal—the ideal of a same other: “& i am you, mother, sister / & the earth is alive, & made / of fire” (65). Jerusalem, Beloved presents a similar kind of spiritual revival through the recognition of mothers and daughters, of “the queer reversal” of mothers who are “carried” in their “daughters’ bellies” (64). Although these daughters are revealed to be Eve’s unfortunate daughters, their celebration of the biblical mother’s transgression presents another “queer reversal” of the Genesis “script,” as they dance around “a tree with heavy branches” and “fruit” (65). They create their own “maze” as their own locus of becoming, and they sing “the names of their children & mothers, weaving a / chain with their singing [or a genealogy] through the maze of time” (65).

In Agnes in the Sky, Irigaray’s idea of a female ego-ideal is even more powerfully conveyed. Recounting the difficult excavation of her memories of child abuse, the speaker’s healing process is completed through a spiritual, female apparition. The fleeting composites of this apparition are re-enforced by the use of caesura within the lines themselves, the use of blank spaces a rare occurrence in Brandt’s usually accelerated and breathless rhythm: “. . . & i’m smiling smiling full of / light & over my shoulder i see her the watcher / her beautiful calm face her radiance her deep / eyes & suddenly i see that she is me & the / moment i see this the moment i know myself she / is gone & i feel an opening in my chest i’m / finding myself again in the healed heart . . .” (14). This dramatic appearance presents an ambiguous figure. She

is both exterior to the speaker (“over my shoulder i see her”) and interior, as this other is also a self-image (“i see that she is me”) offering sudden though fleeting signs of self-affirmation and grace. Moreover, the last part of the poem describes this same moment as one of love-making between two women. The radiant “watcher” could now be the lover, also a mother figure “cradling” the speaker as well as a “fairy godmother” (15)—yet another version of grace that descends upon the favoured recipient. Whether the other is incarnated in the self or outside it as mother, lover or fairy godmother, the poem represents a religious, though immanent, experience of salvation, brought upon by the unfixed (because so imprecise) and multiple ego-ideal of a divine woman-saviour.

Recalling the speaker’s interchangeability with the mother in Mother, Not Mother, the process of “becoming” is also represented through the speaker’s physical union with the earth-mother in Jerusalem, Beloved, a transformation expressed through the use of enumeration and present participles:

there is only this lake, these waves,
 these trees, this shade, this wind, & i, am growing tree
 roots, becoming gnarled, twisting among rocks,
 reaching for fire, am becoming water, rock, gravel,
 melting into earth, my brown skin opening, sighing,
 trembling, licked by wind (67)

In this physical communion with the earth, the speaker’s transformation is a process that remains “‘sensible’ ” or “still in the world of the senses” (Irigaray, Ethics 82), in so far as it portrays a kind of indwelling, an immanent and never completed “becoming.” Here, the subject ‘i’ seems far from that of Descartes’ cogito whose essential and integral existence is ultimately affirmed by the external, transcendent source that is God (as we have seen in chapter 1). In the speaker’s accession to this earthly spiritual condition, “there is only” water, trees, wind, earth, rocks. Whereas the Cartesian “I” is present unto himself and affirmed by the supreme Being, Brandt’s lower case “i” eventually disappears from the page and partly dissipates into “water,” “melting into earth.” The subject does not transcend the material realm. She does not reach some fixed, integral

state. Her transformation is continuous, as the use of present participles throughout the passage indicates.

To recall Lévinas' sense of infinity or God, as briefly examined in chapter 1, immanence dwells in one's encounter with the other (in intersubjectivity), which in turn dissolves the ontological totality of the subject. In another poem's direct invocation of the ancients' Elysian mysteries, which honoured the Demeter and Kore-Persephone myth of absence and renewal, Brandt's religious language merges with her use of natural imagery. The love poem is set in a kind of "heaven" (43), suggesting a spiritual event that involves a sensual experience of the other: "this is it! i've found it at last! nirvana, the Elysian / fields, heaven" (43). The four elements (water of the "banks / of the Saskatchewan," earth of the "grass rustling," air of "dry wind" and the "fire" of autumnal colours [43]) compose the site of the poem's new "heaven," which is both a theological and a sexual realm. The speaker will not settle for loving a "spirit on the wind" (43). She seeks a bodily, sexual union that is in itself described as a divine experience ("heaven exploding") in the desiring lesbian bodies of Demeter and Persephone now figured as lovers: ". . . i want flesh, skin, wet tongue against wet / tongue, belly, all the miles between us rolled up into / here & now, heaven exploding in our honeyed / mouths . . ." (43).²

On one level, Brandt's poetry emulates the Irigarayan idea of a "sensible transcendental that comes into being through us" (Ethics 129), an immanence realized "here and now — in and through the body" (Ethics 148). On another level, some of her poetry still reveals ambiguous contradictions in its momentary reversions to an ideal of bodiless transcendentalism. Thus, if matter and spirit meld in this religious vision of self-growth and communion with the other, the speaker's desire for what she "wants" to become is not always tied to an earth avowed as "my home, my body, my mother" (32). In the same collection, the speaker may also "want to be wild" as well as "unworded, like the wind, blowing through the bare / branches . . ."; she may "want to learn to fly" with her "own wings," "branching, feathering out, the sea down below, / roads and

² Once again, Brandt conveys the Demeter and Persephone myth in a way that recalls Marlatt's lesbian version in Touch to my Tongue.

houses disappearing, the air sharp & clear” (58). Although still evoking a natural element (air), this state of being “unworded,” of “disappearing,” oddly denies the matter and corporeality insisted upon in other poems. It conveys a sort of longing that far surpasses the “sensible” transformation of the poet-speaker’s communion with the earth. In fact, it suggests the rather prelapsarian, untouchable, transcendent condition of “wholeness” that Brandt imagines in the interview by Patterson. Thus despite their sensuality and their often contemporary settings, some poems relate an experience of the other that does not always suggest immanence or earthly self-transformation. The section of Jerusalem, Beloved that conveys a new lesbian relationship continues to advocate a flight or fall through air, an evanescent “floating above clouds,” the speaker “feathered, against crashing” (35).

However, in a later poem, love “between women” is a “mother love” (38) that grounds the speaker in her concrete and present reality. This poem seems to consciously reject the escapism suggested by the language of earlier passages: “. . . feet / touching ground, not floating away, not falling, into / black space, unprotected, shelterless— / the house standing solid . . .” (38). In fact, this adamant insistence on the grounded and the material, on “not floating, not falling,” signals the section’s own struggle with the tendency toward what here is rejected as a formulaic religious form of evasion obtained through grace—the grace of ‘falling in love.’ Yet perhaps because of its idealization of lesbian love, the poem that follows reverts once again to an escapist formula of salvation. It is the lover who provides an “opening,” a “wild” kind of “travel in space, each time we kiss”; here, “everything in me is reborn” as well as “baptized, burnished, golden” (39). But the focus has shifted from a previous poem where the encounter with the other is described as a sensual, physical field of productive ‘work’ and spiritual renewal: “first moment, pure energy bursting into blossom, / flame, the world starting over, again, in the / beginning . . .” (37). This love of self and other, as “pure energy” renewing the world, evokes more directly Irigaray’s notion of the divine produced by the space or “interval” between two subjects. Accordingly, the divine, “In and among us” (Irigaray, Ethics 82), is the mark of the subject who is other than what he or she was before the encounter with the other, thus signalling the subject’s becoming. Perhaps the

spiritual renewal avowed in Brandt's poems is more convincingly and richly conveyed when the speaker insists on her desire for a "fresh" "sting of the real, the liquid spirit of you & me" (37). Here she manages to retain the language of metaphysics, still blending opposites ("liquid" and "spirit") but not escaping into space. She is "burnished" or completed, while solidly standing on the ground rather than floating above it.

In fairness to Brandt's work, let us end with Agnes in the Sky, where the soundness of selfhood (which, once again, must always be pre-mediated by the other) remains connected to the here and now. For Irigaray, a subject's response to the other, the "perpetual newness" that she projects for "the self, the other, the world" (Ethics 82) in her rendition of the ethical encounter, retains a religious dimension. More precisely, it retains a notion of God as the "parousia" of the unknowable which must always mediate human exchange. In Brandt's work, this response is pushed even further into that religious dimension as it involves a spiritual, though again "sensible," form of grace. In one poem's rendition of sexually differentiated subjects, a "new place" of intersubjectivity is "imagined" as an open, relational space of renewal. It is "imagined" on other ground than "father ground," but in a realm that is not the "elsewhereness" of an indefinite, utopian space:

since we cannot meet on father ground
 our father's land as sister & brother ever
 let's imagine a new place between us
 slightly suspended in air but yet touching
 earth an old tree house full of weather

 crossing the river to greet you i will lay
 my old weapons down & wait if you are
 there with me under the harvest moon
 we will look in each other's eyes without
 speaking our hands will shake & the great

wooden door will begin creaking open at
last since we cannot meet (28)

The poem opens and closes with the negation of this imagined meeting, signalling the difficulty—but not the impossibility—of shedding a long history that has opposed new terms of sexual exchange. In the poem, this history is once again represented in the patriarchal, biblical heritage that sets up sexual opposition: the “father ground” which the “new place” between subjects cannot completely erase but can only renegotiate.

This “place” of encounter is “slightly suspended in air but yet touching / earth an old tree house . . .,” which in turn recalls the Genesis myth of Adam and Eve. In fact, the qualified reunion echoes Brandt’s poetic depictions of mothers and daughters who are reconnected but often only at a distance. Mother and daughter are forcibly “together & alone” (*Agnes* 49), and only after resolving painful estrangements and negotiating difficult compromises. One daughter-speaker asks herself: “what do you want from her in this / last hour or is it something you / should give . . .” (*Agnes* 32). If the male and female subjects in the poem cited above move from the “father land” to a more fertile space (symbolized by “the harvest moon”), the renewal is conditional, uncertain, with the speaker signalling “if” he is “there” rather than suggesting a definitive event. The circularity of the poem itself reinforces the initial difficulty of this new relation. The speaker’s gentle peace offering remains a bit uncertain, but more convincing for all that. It is mediated and “slightly suspended,” unstable, vulnerable and open to change, as any ethical relation is bound to remain. In sum, if Brandt’s poems sometimes reveal a longing for bodiless flight into transcendence, most of her writing foregrounds the importance of being “in the world,” which makes the terms of ethical human exchange perhaps more difficult, but certainly renders them more nuanced and plausible.

Erin Mouré: “semaphoric splendour”

Through a poetic style of suspended meaning, broken or incomplete syntax, repetition, parataxis and semantic obscurity, Mouré also offers a number of poems that can still be considered

spiritual in theme or message. For the most part, Mouré's work obviously differs from Brandt's lyrical, if at times contradictory, expressions of spiritual transformation, her use of natural imagery, and her testimonies of personal transfigurations in "the world." Yet as in Brandt's poetry, we shall see how the religious dimension of Mouré's writing can both represent and fall short of a relational ethics. This double tendency even appears in Mouré's theoretical explorations of language and in the Christian "sign system" that some poems redeploy (Glickman 136). As Susan Glickman argues, this very system can be found in many of Mouré's earlier collections of poems that contain such titles as "Epiphany" (in Empire, York Street), "Sanctus" and "Beatitude" (in Wanted Alive), "Angelus Domini," "Speaking in Tongues" and "Adoration" (in Domestic Fuel). But in the more theoretical approaches to language as the ones undertaken in Furious, can we also detect a poet-speaker's uncertain and sometimes desperate metaphysical longing, a religious longing for grace, divine assistance or presence? What is the effect of this longing on Mouré's "lesbian ethics"?

Following Mouré's reappropriation of "pure reason" and denunciation of metaphysical notions of truth or purity in the prose section of Furious entitled "The Acts," the first statement of "Thrushes" can come as a bit of a surprise: "To get back to that purity. The woman and the 'I forget' of her shoulders. My friend, voice, hand a stutter at the edge of. What is" (99). The poem (also Act 15) supplements the earlier poems titled "Three Versions," which ponder over the undecidable meaning of one poetic image of a bird. Although meaning is deferred by the fragmented statements at the start of "Thrushes," one may wonder whether the poem's hesitant proclamation of "that purity" is a result of the problem playfully raised in "Three Versions": of the poet writing "without discipline" (75, 76, 77). Is the poet going back on her own (deconstructive) word in "Thrushes"? Though a deconstructionist in Furious, Mouré is no iconoclast. As a potential though unfixed symbol in "Three Versions," the bird reappears in the new poem, identified as a "thrush." The Christian analogy also becomes obvious as it conveys a Holy Spirit, which the speaker seems to venerate: "Oh name of bird" (99). She even calls upon the bird to relieve her pain and the grief she causes another: "Do I have you beside me, bird, me who is so

small, the seeds I have gnawed ache inside of me, do I have you beside me, bird. Take the cup of wine away from me, so I won't fill it again. Take away the telephone number of my friend I am hurting" (99). In these lines the syntax is conventionally linear, the tone certainly lyrical, and the prayer-like request casts the bird in a strengthening, perhaps divine role of intervention. As Glickman notes, Mouré's "poem gestures towards openness" or at least is an utterance that the lack of final punctuation renders ongoing (134). The last image is of the bird's "soft throat smaller than my / hand, flit, spotted, / out of which, the warble" (99). As the gentle trilling manner of the bird's singing conveys the "babble" of Hopkins' own "caged skylark," akin to the ecstatic, "pure expression of delighted being . . . a language incomprehensible to humans" (Glickman 135) (a religious "speaking in tongues"), Mouré's ending is perhaps not so inconclusive.³ The bird's "warble" substitutes for the speaker's earlier "stutter" at some unknown "edge" of "what is." This "warble," if exceeding ordinary language, still posits a resolution which brings thematic closure to the poem. It is the answer to the poet-speaker's call for grace, for the transcendence suggested by the word "flit" ("my / hand, flit, spotted, / out of which, the warble").⁴

Has then Mouré "written" this poem "with" or indeed "without discipline" (75, 76, 77)? Perhaps the question asks too little, since her work displays the more complex tendency of exceeding its own theoretical paradigms, of not always doing what it self-consciously avows. At times, the writing even adopts what it otherwise rejects: "the desire for lyric" which, according to Mouré, will "shut down & modify the excessible" (WSW 111). In fact, the lyrical quality of "Thrushes" is an anomaly in terms of the other Acts. In chapter 5, we saw how some of Mouré's feminist deconstructive statements are not necessarily put into effect in the playful although generally conventional syntax of "Ocean Poem," especially in their challenge of "pure reason."

³ "Why, hear him, hear him babble and drop him down to his nest, / But his own nest, wild nest, no prison" ("The Caged Skylark," qtd. in Glickman 135).

⁴ As she does with many of her poems, Mouré rewrites "Thrushes" in West South West (WSW), the collection that follows Furious. The poems are similar until the last few lines which leave the idea of the spiritual bird and opt for the everyday setting of a restaurant, ending with the speaker's reunion with the hurt friend. Although "she thinks" (13) is the last, un-punctuated statement of the poem, syllogistic flow is withheld and the poem appears much less resolved than the "warble" that seems to replace the speaker's stutter and closes the first version in Furious.

Here, we begin to see where some of her poetic invocations of the other (the other woman) contain the religious overtones of “Thrushes.” Mouré’s is a poetics that avows, represents, but also contradicts its own rejections of thematic resolution, certainty and metaphysical longing. Like Brandt’s love poems, Mouré’s representations of a lesbian relational ethics reveal a religious overtone of immanent redemption, displaying indeed a “reverent sensuality that can pray” (Glickman 136). Search Procedures (probably Mouré’s most difficult collection) contains this kind of reverence, adopting the fragmented and incomplete syntax that opens “Thrushes.” Although the effect is often one of semantic inconclusiveness, some of the poems also suggest allegory—that is to say, in the limited sense of layered, underlying meanings. For instance, the last lines of a short, vastly spaced poem entitled “Loons” progress through paratactic descriptions of wet tree tops after a rainstorm, to end with female figures ascribed a liminal, angelic quality: “Night spilling into the street the party of women talking easeful we / join walking our wings are” (5). Another advocates “the space between” two women that causes “a parabolic splendour” (15). Is it a spiritual lesson, a truth, that underlies this suggestive reference to parabola, this juxtaposition of two women separated by “the space between,” by this threshold of spiritual “splendour”?

The poem with an afterthought of a title, “(Some Wishes),” broaches the question of female (intersubjective) becoming in a way similar to Brandt’s work. Though the writing reverts to a more linear syntax, it still uses a meandering logic that manages to break out of its own circularity and suggest the potential of an endless process of growth:

To insist upon what we are becoming

To become what we insist upon

To wear gilt wings & be known in correspondence as “completely normal”

.....

To be recalled as a woman of “warm hands”

To insist upon what we are beholding

To behold what we insist upon: (70)

As the mark anticipating what is about to follow, the colon at the end of the poem signals that this process of “becoming” is ongoing, the end-result simply not there to be fixed. To recall Irigaray’s “horizon,” this “becoming” is not a pre-ordained objective. The potentiality of “becoming” seems to rely on the specificity of values that women of a particular community must establish for themselves, that which “we insist upon,” the involved participants implied in the pronoun “we.” Yet, the angelic status suggested by the “gilt wings” of the women seems to surpass the idea of an ego-ideal. It may also exceed Irigaray’s insistence on women’s needs for their own set of values, and for setting their own becoming (their own “God”) as irreducible to an androcentric logic of the selfsame. The “wings” or shoulders of women and lovers appear in this poem, as they do in the earlier poem and title “Wingtips,” almost mythologizing (partly angel-ifying?) the women’s “becoming” and “beholding.” Here, they possess the godlike substance of the gold-coloured “gilt” of angelic wings, also analogous to the female other’s face which, earlier in the book, figures as an object of worship: “A tabernacle gleam / Light from it” (12).

Almost in contradistinction to this passionate praise of the venerable other, Mouré’s writing does display some scepticism in relation to Search Procedures’ attempt at myth-making. In “Tales of the Sumerians,” this suspicion is directed at the poem’s own propositions. Here, the “personhood” related to the “gods in us”—the a-priori—is undermined by the theme of everyday uses of a worn and commercial language (“Words for oil are nothing to us, we know them / Words for trade . . .”). Language is seen to oppress or manipulate for gain rather than to enlighten: “our alphabet / The incubus,” used for the laborious act of “clambering upward” (87). Unlike Brandt’s or Tostevin’s revivals of Sumerian goddess mythology, Mouré’s invocation of pre-history is a rather listless one, suspicious of itself. The question that arises is not really posed but remains incomplete (with the question mark withheld): “Or are we Sumerian at some point” (87). Although the question is followed with a remembrance of “cuneiform” impressed onto “damp clay” (87), a postmodern scepticism still pervades the poem: about the past, about history’s accuracy and factuality, and about the truths that some may want to excavate from myth but, in the end, cannot. If these Sumerian “tales” present a kind of summoning of female ancestry or the “gods in

us,” it is a very uncertain summoning, “only a small ancestral waking” (87). The poem then shifts to describe a photograph of the speaker’s personal emigrant ancestor, her “key to all stories” (87). Yet, ironically, the picture is “stony silent” (87), revealing only the “syncope of narration” (87)—that is, only the presence of losses and omissions within the narrations of the past.

However, more positive renditions of a potentially redemptive condition for female intersubjectivity do prevail in Mouré’s work. In WSW’s “Order, or Red Ends,” parataxis is used to evoke a spiritual threshold. This threshold is the product of the sensual interchange of two lovers, of the “interval of exchange,” to recall again Irigaray, which would be the place of a “loving ethics” (Ethics 104):

If the order is not certain. The woman in the red cape
lighting a cigarette.

The red end of the cigarette.

What is known, known,
guides us, our tentative hands.

At night, I dream my mouth deep into your body, my hands.

We are looking at each other.

There is a door between us. Our hands touch.

Open. (98)

At work in this short poem are both a resistance to syllogism, reinforcing the uncertain aspect of this “order,” and an emphasis on contradiction. Knowledge “guides” but only tentatively; the complete union that is dreamed of contrasts with the “door” that separates the speaker from the other; and although touching hands physically limit the space between two people, the poem ends with the simple utterance, “Open,” after the blank spacing on the page. The relation again recalls the oscillation of same and other (of identification and differentiation) reinvested in a female ethics. In this interval, the subject both touches and retreats from the other, their union partly realized and partly undone by the “Open” though potentially mediating “door between.” However, the presence

of the “dream” can complicate this reading. The “dream” seems to suggest a different kind of union, a fusion and even an in-difference, the speaker almost drowning, going “deep into” the other, and thus transcending the autonomy of the other through this welding of “mouth” and “hands” and the other’s “body.” Is this erotic image one of exchange, openness and co-habitation? Or does it suggest a kind of in-habitation, a loss of self, a desire that risks effacing the other’s alterity?

Lesbian love remains central both to Mouré’s poetics, as outlined in “The Acts” and as seen in even more overt religious responses to the other. Setting aside these religious aspects of Mouré’s poetry for a moment, one poem in Furious that sets up the terms for a relational ethics, and that actually does what its own supplementary entries avow, is “Rolling Motion.” In one of the poem’s footnotes (Act 10), the attempt “to move the force in language from the noun/verb centre” anticipates a later contemplation of the preposition as the mark of relation: “As if the preposition is the woman’s sign because it is relational” (Furious 97). Logocentricism, which Mouré earlier describes as “thingness before its motion” (98), is now undermined by the “motion of the utterance” (94); the stasis of “the Name” is subjected to the motion of signs (94). In a previous note, the speaker proposes: “Even for a moment. To break the vertical hold. To empower the preposition to signify and utter motion, the motion of the utterance, and thereby Name. The Motion before the Name” (94). The poem, supplemented by these footnotes, indeed renders a continuum of repetition, as the “rolling motion” of prepositions connects and constantly re-positions a set of erotic images:

Your face in my neck &
 arms dwelling upward face
 in my soft leg open
 lifted upward airborne soft
 face into under into rolling
 over every upward motion
 rolling open over our

Face in my neck again over
 turning risen touch billows
 my mouth open enter
 dwelling upward face
 in your soft leg open
 lifted upward airborne soft
 face into under into motion
 over every upward open
 rolling open over your
 Face in my neck again
 & arms (35)

The preposition figures as a kind of rhizomatic force, “the force which moves towards. Not towards anything, but just towards” (Scobie 74). It functions as what Mouré elsewhere calls the “kind of rolling rhythm you can get with pushing, making prepositions stand in for other parts of speech . . .” (in Cooke 36-37). The relation of “your” and “my,” pushed onwards and accelerated by the overuse of prepositions, becomes multidirectional (“into under into,” “over every upward open”). Intersubjectivity is in constant production, exalted by this prepositional “embrace” or textual mobility, by “Motion before the Name” and “a continual relation” (Furious 95). In its state of syntactical repetition, the move towards the other is similar to the spiral metaphor we shall find in Brossard’s work. In other words, repetition involves a return to the same but never as before. As Mouré indicates elsewhere, there can be a crossing of “the boundary” between people, “from me to you & back” (Sheepish 44), content with only a partial access to the other.

This idea of relational motion extends to the idea of a relational poetics, or the textual ethics presented by Mouré’s poetry. In the poetic manifesto that composes “The Acts,” “saying” is motivated by an “embrace, before the utterance” (88), by the other who precedes the statement, who is a veritable condition for subjectivity. This embrace before utterance puts at “risk” (91) the self-controlling, unitary “I.” In “The Acts,” the speaker outlines this “risk” as the price of a

relational ethics, which the prepositional style of “Rolling Motion” has put into effect: “To have one’s existence affirmed by others. Or, put oneself at risk forever (a panic at the cell’s edge). Or is it affirmation, first, that makes the risk possible? To bear it. This risk of, kissing her. The embrace first, then the utterance” (91).

Yet, Mouré’s own relational ethics sometimes also puts itself at risk. Through their suggestions of in-habitation and idealized or even deified women, “Order, Red Ends” and certain parts of Search Procedures may reveal more than the exteriority of the other. The embrace of the other woman is not always steered by a balanced, mediated interchange in Mouré’s poetry. The other is almost always posited by Mouré, but it does not always maintain its alterity, that to say, in the ethical sense of maintaining its singularity or specificity as other. This part of “Unfurled & Dressy” (in Furious) represents lesbian love in a language that comes to suggest a kind of synthesis:

It is your voice which I am speaking over & over
 because I like to hear you
 inside my mouth
 where I can touch our futures with my tongue
 & throw down my names & embrace you
 & forget which one of us I am
 Frontally speaking
 Frontally speaking (51)

It is interesting to note the difficulty presented by the footnote that supplements this poem. The speaker expresses her desire or, rather, she imposes on her reader the authority of her own intent, which is “to write these things like Unfurled & Dressy that can’t be torn apart by anybody, anywhere, or in the university. I want the overall sound to be one of making sense, but I don’t want the inside of the poem to make sense of anything. People who are making sense are just making me laugh, is all” (92). The “defensive stance” in this kind of warding off remark has certainly proven irritating to Rhea Tregobov in her review of Mouré’s work in Arc. Perhaps

Mouré's observation hits close enough to home to make me, university critic, feel a bit anxious. But I cannot help but find a sense in Mouré's poem, and a troubling if ambiguous one (even at the risk of being laughed at). On the one hand, the forgetting of self, of "which one of us I am," may reaffirm the dissolution of identity or of "names" in the line above ("& throw down my names"). On the other hand, this dissolution/un-differentiation of self into other suggests more than a partial access to the other. It eclipses, in fact, the possibility of radical alterity. Although the 'frontal' position of this speaker may limit her view and access to the other, this eclipsing of the other into the self (or vice versa, as the poem suggests) results in the very idea of un-differentiation, which is inherent in the ontological totality that Mouré otherwise rejects.

Returning now to those poems in Furious that inscribe lesbian love through Christian iconography and a religious code of sacredness, we can decipher a spiritual longing similar to the one expressed in "Thrushes." In "Hooked," the other woman addressed in the following lines appears to the speaker: "light of late afternoon makes your eyes / shine from any direction, / as in those old paintings of saints / whose eyes follow the viewer" (46). This is a luminous, idealized, almost mystical figure, revered for her "loveliness" and "the small saintedness of [her] body" (46). "Rose" is even more overt in its longing for spiritual presence. The speaker's allusion to the Christian Virgin Mary, mother of Christ, and the speaker's call to her are quite in keeping with those of the many Virgin cults, pleadings that often result from a sinner's despair or suffering: ". . . the howl. / O lady of the blessed flowers, / our lady of suicide . . ." (37). The incantatory 'O' also anticipates the pleading and repenting overtones of the following confessions: "I too have asked Christ to be my mother," and "I too am female am not truthful am not am not" (37).⁵ "The Acts" then posit this notion of a female transcendental Other (an other who, like the speaker, "too is female"), with the "resurrection of the woman's body" which is said to be "of Kore" (91). With the obvious punning on the mythological Kore, a 'core' and "corps" (or bodily) importance is invested in a divine-like Other in Furious: the "lady," "Christ" him/herself as "mother," the

⁵ And we could perhaps think here of Allen Ginsberg's own poetic manifesto, "Howl," which he insists is a religious utterance, "an 'Affirmation' by individual experience of god . . ." (qtd. in Prothero 8).

“lovely” and “saintly” lover, and here Kore-Persephone.

These yearnings for a specifically female God still remain far from a Cartesian affirmation of the transcending cogito. Nor do they seek the exclusive, esoteric revelation of the Father or Mother. Rather, in the context of these love poems, the supreme other is immanent and consciously presented as fictitious or mythological, entailing the loss of ego, the “am not am not” of the dissolving “I.” Yet, this disappearance from the surface of the page may also evoke mystical experience. After all, the play of invisibility and visibility (appearance and disappearance) often constitutes the experience of the mystic. And in some (Christian) mysticism, the lost self is transfigured into a new form or unity, indeed through the absorption of the self into the (divine) Other. In fact, it is this kind of absorption that “Rose” implies in the lines, “To covet. / At least, this: covet” (37). The act of coveting may simply imply to desire intensely, as the poem ends with two women kissing. But “to covet” can also mean to desire something that belongs to an other. In light of the poem’s longing for a maternal Christ’s assistance, this act of coveting seems to present another instance of the poetry’s fall into in-differentiation—with the mother, the Other, the lover.

In the twelve segments of “Visible Spectrum,” religious language meshes with the terminology of physics, again in relation to an onlooking subject and the apparition of the other. Here, Mouré’s work displays its affinity with Brossard’s metaphors of space-time, or blending of literary and scientific imagery. As her notion of the spiralling letter will (at least in theory) demonstrate, Brossard advocates that “toute vision est en soi mathématique de l’espace imaginaire” (*Amantes* 78). If linked to its Latin root “specere” (look, image, apparition), Mouré’s imaginary “spectrum” is a kind of after-image, an ocular product that results from the distribution and exertion of energy or light on a body. Also “characteristic of a body or substance when emitting or absorbing energy” (*Concise Oxford*), the “spectrum” presents a play of interiority and exteriority. It is an event involving the observer and the observed, imparting as well a relational ethics:

O trinity, blue of viable memory, the eye-
 beam wonderfully open to absorb the limited light
 of which it is capable,

or to enact this light,
 to be then what this light is made of,
 a blue muscle poised under the skin,
 a skin raised up to the surface of the body,
 organ of the surface, itself without speech
 but with terrible longing
 the seam between inside & outside
 by which
 pressure is brought to bear upon the organism

reflected this evening
 in the dull light of civic beauty:

blue

2

In such a territory we found ourselves. The visible
 spectrum. In which we saw for the first time
 the light of the other, the curious crown of light
 inhabiting the other, released by talk &
 hesitation, non-talk, released by
 silent looking. (33)

The poem begins with what is now a familiar, incantatory use of the "O," projecting a "trinity." This three-dimensional image possesses Christian and mythological iconic qualities, while it also evokes the three primary colours of the spectrum. Yet, with its exclamation, "O trinity," the text pauses at the comma, and the image becomes increasingly enigmatic with each additional line. In fact, the use of commas and periods, short lines, and enjambments renders the poem at once

descriptive and mysterious in tone.

The spectrum here is emitted by the viewer's gaze: ". . . the eye- / beam wonderfully open. . . ." It is emitted by the viewer who yearns for "civic beauty" in the second stanza. The poem not only posits a personal revitalization but a socio-political one as well, even though the "dullness" of the light may make us wonder whether much faith is invested in the possibility of such "civic beauty." The "territory" of the spectrum includes a "we" (suggestive of an intersubjectivity), but the spectrum reveals only "the light of the other." Access to the other is mediated by this cast of light or, in Baudrillard's terms, by the effect of simulacrum. As the light or sound wave exerts its pressure "brought to bear upon" the body or "organism," alterity is posited; alterity (the otherness of the other) is maintained, as the other is only partially viewed. Once again the first passion of wonder also mediates the viewer's access to the other ("wonderfully open"), unknown in this "curious light." Indeed, in a following sequence, the seer "can't foresee" the other but only experience the other for what is only partially available and always already mediated (35).

As the opening utterance, "O trinity," intimates, this simulacrum is also the site of a spiritual event. In the distribution of energy, in this play of visible light, the other later appears as an embodied and superb figure of veneration:

What we yearn for
 What we yearn for, here also
 in the midst of "these sounds,"
 the visible light created by the sounds
 at the stuttered edges of the body

"oh, the body"

our semaphoric splendour, this surface, skin
 border of signs

we can't speak of,
 by which we mean what we say
 "haloed" (37)

Iconicity is now self-consciously transposed to the field of writing, the poem itself acting as a spectrum of the other's body ("this surface," "border of signs"), of its "skin" in the light. If the other figures as a superb, almost mystical apparition ("oh the body," "haloed"), the other is still contained within the play of language (marked, signalled, "semaphoric"): "stuttered" and indeed at the "border of signs / we can't speak of, / by which we mean what we say." There is also a suggestion of the esoteric language of mystical *jouissance* implied in this "stuttered," non-referential "babble," recalling the "speaking in tongues" or the "warble" from "Thrushes," a "longing" that is "without speech." Or, to recall Derrida's influence, perhaps this is the excess inherent in "any re-presentation," inherent in any form of *écriture* (Scobie 78). Evoking the play of absence and presence in Derridian theory, this ecstasy may well remain subject to the implied absence of the other as well as her presence—"visible and invisible spectra" (35), the "presence" of this "impossible convergence" (37)—yet also true to the mystical apparition's oscillation between visibility and invisibility.

As suggested earlier, the other is distributed in fragments in the spectrum; the spectrum thus cannot serve as a nostalgic vehicle towards regaining a lost unity. Perhaps. But is there really only light at play here, only the mediating forces of representation at work in Mouré's poem? What is this "curious crown of light" that is "inhabiting the other, released by talk" and by "hesitation"? Certain flashes of nostalgia do seem to emit from the spectral light, as they do elsewhere in Mouré's dealings with the maternal dyad (see chapter 5 and the reading of "The Cord"). It is precisely this kind of nostalgia that the fourth sequence reveals:

let enter the visible stream of light.
 The spectrum of individual longing
 by which we are called to the present tense,
 all of us

articulating the first loss of the mother,
 primary loss,
 by which we have learned to lose everything
 by which we have become reckless
 & prepare to lose “even ourselves” (34)

In this “stream of light” will in turn appear the self, “visible to the other, our other, the craved one,” also “the external representative of loss” (36, emphasis added). Rather than modelling a social relation between mother and child, the “corps-à-corps” with the mother seems reduced to this (rather Lacanian) “primary loss” imbedded in language—imbedded, then, in this very apparition. What is being “craved”? Is there a hidden, “primary” reality lying behind the spectrum’s screen, waiting to reveal itself? Is there an esoteric language after all to be regained rather than derived through Mouré’s usual interrogations of power, politics and the very structures of language?

These questions address what is, in the context of a feminist relational ethics, the sometimes reverse effect of religious language and sentiment. The scientific undertaking of “Visible Spectrum” is no exception to this tendency. In view of the tone of prayer, reverence and nostalgia with which this “craved” other is longed for, the other even acquires a sacrosanct status. Once again, it is the idealization of an other that begins to tip the balance of a relational interchange, which will still be suggested in the eleventh sequence. Like the bodies of the subjects in the poetic spectrum, the spectrum’s light is “‘haloed’ ” (37). And like the “curious crown” of the other, this “haloed light” (38) suggests the other’s glorification. Yet, the sense of sacredness that pervades the poem and, especially, its invocation of the phenomenal world (the prairies), also recalls Brandt’s poetic enmeshment in the vast natural and human network. But this world is not to be transcended, as it tends to be in Jerusalem, Beloved. Mouré’s depiction reads: “The cut grain from which we have risen / the grey light from which we have risen / the bird branch from which we are rising” (37). By bringing texture (“cut grain”) and sight (“grey light”) together, the tangible and the visible are not held as opposite but placed alongside one another. The grain will later

evoke the tenderness of skin's texture, the tenderness between the two subjects painted by Mouré's own pen and its own "grain" of colour. Referring to Lorca's "o how the wheat is tender," the eleventh sequence reads: "' & all grain is Lorcan grain.' / All grain is the wheaten field with its jagged seam of / red poppy, / by which we recognize visibly the cry of the other. / All wheat is tender. / All wheat is this tender" (38).

If the "wheat" is "this tender" and a tentative symbol of ethical response, it is again somewhat sacred. In the last sequence, the wheat too is "haloed": "The grain edge of that haloed field. / The grain edge of the skin where the light / has stuttered & we saw our silence / Those things we could not speak / in the public field of light . . ." (38). The set of associations is powerful. First, it recalls the luminous trinity of the other projected onto the page or screen in the first sequence. Second, it insists on the safeguarded, inviolable sacredness of the "haloed field"—of the tender grain, of the tender intersubjective exchange between viewer and viewed. Because so inviolable and so inadmissible "in the public field," there seems to be an exclusivity suggested here, a new authority perhaps, an image impervious to the kind of criticism which Mouré has a tendency to want to ward off. How immanent, and how "civic," can the notion of untouchability be? The projection of this luminous Other, her field of salvation, her God, may well be a product of the "terrible longing" expressed at the start of the poem—of the idealizer's own needs, desires and attempts at filling her "loss." At the most, such idealization may be risking the eclipse of the irreducibility (and multiplicity) of alterity by fixing it in a sacred role.

Despite the idealization that partly undermines the ethics of intersubjectivity in Mouré's poem, what is longed for is still a relational exchange. As the title of the collection, Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love, suggests, this relation requires a "civic" recognition, which the shifting positions of viewing subject and viewed object within the spectrum do successfully model:

Now you see me.

Now you, too, see me.

Touching you, she said, my accent trembles.

Touching the river of our hands. The cut grain.

The visible stream of light. Proof of the spectrum. (38)

Perhaps these lines correspond to the “form of human contingency” that Dennis Denisoff associates with Mouré’s feminist project as he draws a connection with Charles Taylor’s own notion of ethics as a “civic humanism”: “people’s willing acknowledgement of their interdependence and their longings for each other—emotional, sexual, and otherwise” (Denisoff 119). Not merely the viewing, projecting subject, the speaker too finds herself “visible to her, responsive” (36, 37) and “responsible” for the other (37). These lines do present an ethical (and political) potentiality within the confines of representation, as “proof of the spectrum.” But in the end, representation must always involve the very “public field” that is transcended in “Visible Spectrum.” It is in this field that daily social relations must be played out, in which they must be tackled if they are to offer a glimpse at this “civic beauty.”

Nicole Brossard: “zones d’accueil”

As the essays of La lettre aérienne demonstrate, Brossard also uses scientific imagery in her work’s sensual address to the other. Symbols such as the spiral, the hologram, “vertige” and the aerial letter constitute what Dupré calls a “science des mots” (Stratégies 101). Through her poetic, fictional and prose texts, Brossard sets out to propose a “projet de haute technologie sensuelle” (Lettre 45). The many levels of meaning which can be associated with the word “aerial” already reveal a poetics that privileges process, mobility, plurality, and also suggests spirituality and vision. In the “vertige précurseur d’une vision aérienne” and “la nécessaire volonté de recommencer” (43), Brossard proposes a text which “ne fige jamais” (64). The “letter,” which is “aerial,” denotes the instability of language and also the ideas of communication and correspondence. As in Brandt’s and Mouré’s poetry, intersubjectivity is a constant component of Brossard’s work, from the maternalism treated in L’amèr to the lesbian ethics in that same text (see chapter 2). The “lettre aérienne” itself conveys the rupture of (linguistic) surfaces through its motility: the “jouissance” of a text seeking its own excess, the irreducible rootedness and depths of

language. It is also generative of a three-dimensional or holographic vision of writing (and subjectivity), a “spirale d’écriture” that posits a voluminous body always in movement, its process infinite: “que je recommence à chaque spire de la spirale pour éprouver autrement le sens des mots, le dictionnaire inclus dans l’éventail des poses inédites que peuvent prendre les corps qui ont mémoire, peau, cortex, colère et tendresse” (56).

This, of course, is what Brossard’s essays and some of her poems avow, but it is not always what they perform. Often woven into the creative process itself, the theory insists on the materiality of the text, the constructedness of represented bodies, and the spiralling motion of intersubjectivity and writing which posits the self as a textual effect of the other. Yet, some texts can be seen to reveal the opposite of this constructionist perspective. But first, how does the theory of aerial writing articulate the process of writing as an ethics? For Brossard, the text must constantly be moving towards the other, just as it is always generated by the other. It must open onto new meanings and posit new relations. These in turn require new interpretations that move towards the limits of what is known, towards what is “unknowable”—towards alterity itself.⁶ As outlined in *La lettre aérienne*, Brossard seeks to go beyond what she calls “modernité” (or Québécois “formalisme”), to transform the excess, the “unsaid” or “inédit” uncovered in the field of the play of language, and to open this radical otherness to “les effets au féminin” (48). If the Québécois formalist text focussed on the circle of self-referential language (as argued in the introduction), Brossard’s feminist text seeks to transform this circle into a spiral of “ouverture” and polysemy, inscribing the “jouissance” of the lesbian body. One intertext for Brossard’s conceptualization of writing in the feminine has been Roland Barthes’ notion of the “text of bliss,” which he presents in *The Pleasure of the Text*.⁷ Yet, for Brossard, “jouissance” is no longer

⁶ See in particular Winfried Siemerling’s excellent study of Brossard’s writing in *Discoveries of the Other*.

⁷ *The Pleasure of the Text* presents at least one of Barthes’ theories of the text. Here, the site of this “jouissance” or “bliss” seems to rest on the “edges” (10) of language, where reader and/or writer can approximate the overflow in language through the violation of its conventions and rules, ideologies or doxa. The text of bliss, writes Barthes, “imposes a state of loss” and “discomforts, unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (14). In contrast, the

untenable or “unspeakable, inter-dicted,” as it is for Barthes (Pleasure 21). Rather, Brossard’s own textual “jouissance” provides new female representations. The textual/sexual eruption is where the “cortext,” the “corps à texte,” occurs (Lettre 61). It is where the distinctions between mind and body, intellect and sensuality and, once again, the negative dialectic of same and other, are renegotiated:

Si je désire une femme, si une femme me désire, c’est qu’il y a du commencement à l’écriture. C’est que le mot s’est mis à sourdre, à jaillir, à nous décaser de notre isolement. Nous faisons plus que nous côtoyer. Nous dirigeons du projet entre nous. Nous existons dans une autre différence, mais sans l’étrangeté, sans la fascination morbide. . . . ‘Si je jouis,’ c’est que je renverse quelque chose de mon équilibre, du rôle qui m’ennôle.

(Lettre 19)

Where love and writing are shown to be fully enmeshed is in the 1980 collection, Amantes. This series of love poems and prose texts describes itself as an “exercice de l’excès au féminin” (101), advocating a spiralling form of writing and its effect of “vertigo.” The neologistic title of Amantes marks a logical continuation with the ethical project undertaken in the other work also titled with a (graphic) neologism, L’amèr. As the “participe présent substantif” of “amer,” the word “amant” is also the ancient form of “aimer” (Petit Robert). According to Brossard, love is in itself the crucial factor of any theory of writing: “Éros est à l’oeuvre dans toutes les écritures”

traditionally structured and closed text of pleasure “comes from culture and does not break with it, and is linked to a comfortable practice of reading” (Pleasure 14). The binary that Barthes sets up here is not unlike the dichotomy that appears in S/Z, where he makes the distinction between the readerly (“lisible”) and the writerly (“scriptible”). The readerly text is like the text of pleasure: it is the structured, unitary text catering to traditional habits of reading. The writerly text is comparable to the text of bliss: it is a writing “before the infinite play of the word (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” (S/Z 5). In The Pleasure of the Text, Barthes compares the “edges” — the site of textual “jouissance” — to “the most erotic portion of the body where the garment gapes?” (9). The body, the “jouissance” of the body, serves as metaphor for the delight writer and reader obtain from a form of writing that contains this element of disturbance, this erotic aesthetics of rupture. And it is when placed on this edge of jouissance, Barthes writes, that “the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text” (22). In an evocation of this Barthesian text of “jouissance,” the speaker of L’amèr writes: “‘si je jouis’, une intersection dans le texte, son fragment essentiel . . . moi qui cherche dans la dépense la totalité jouissive des fragments désirants” (83).

(Lettre 62). In the 1989 collection, Installations, writing is still “une affaire d’amour parsemée de symboles” (45); the poet-speaker is once again “intimement parlante” (45). If the relation to the other was modelled on the positive dialectic of a “même différence,” enacted by the mother-daughter relation in L’amèr, Amantes posits the recognition of the other woman by fore-grounding the correspondence between two lovers: “je cherche en te lisant à me déplacer constamment dans tes mots, pour les voir sous tous leurs angles, pour y trouver des zones d’accueil : m’y lover, my love” (18). Insisting here on her status as a textual effect (and an effect of the other), the speaking subject does not search for a new identity or even a momentary fixity, as Tostevin’s speaker at one point concedes. Rather she seeks a “reception,” a “zone” of exchange, a relational ethics. Recalling Mouré’s own prepositional aesthetic in “Rolling Motion,” Brossard’s “je” speaks “par l’écrit à un autre sujet” (Lettre 23). She is preceded and ontologically destabilized by the other. In a “spin dans les corps,” in a “lesbian spiral,” the ontological self is replaced by “l’identité basculée dans le ravissement” (Amantes 38).

The choice of words in this last line is revealing in terms of Brossard’s general approach to the lesbian ethics introduced in chapter 2, but also in its reversions to a certain ideal of ontological “wholeness.” In the (ungrammatical) “spirale lesbiennes,” the plural form of “lesbiennes” draws attention to the idea of multiplicity invested in the interchange that a single spiral tries to represent. The same occurs in Le sens apparent: “l’inédit circule, circule, produisant des émanations comme il en est aux portes d’une voie initiatique. s’enroulent, s’enlacent dans des bras doux par de beaux bras, arcs de cercles au féminin . . . la spirale du mot répétée jamais comme avant, recommencée mais comme un prolongement dans l’eau . . .” (15). Repeated, the same but never as before: such is the ascending motion of a subject and writing always in process, their mobility generated by their own excess, by the alterity (“l’inédit”) that constitutes them and that opens onto the Barthesian limit. But beyond this limit, Amantes also suggests a “ravisement.” It suggests the idea of mystical transcendence, of supreme happiness beyond “identité,” perhaps a yearning for unity beyond textual “excitation.” Part of one poem indeed reads: “. . . (tout est si concret, / la jouissance comme un processus qui mène / à l’intégrale : point de fragments) / dans la fertile

démarche des amantes” (34). The spiritual dimension of the “spin dans les corps” (38) may already be evident in Brossard’s poetic evocations of intersubjectivity. But here, the motion of the “amantes” in the spiral transforms ordinary vision into the troubled, almost mystical vision and amazement of an “éblouissement,” a renewed ‘integrity,’ where “le vertige de convention fait place à l’éblouissement” (83). In “l’espace plein de miroitements,” in a “vertige inédit,” the speaker pronounces herself as “éblouie/tentée/et/ravie” (83).

Brossard’s “science des mots” thus reveals itself to be partly composed of a more traditional vision of language (Dupré, Stratégies 102) and of self. It is this “classical” component of a poetry so “résolument moderne” (Lettre 45) that recalls the paradoxical representations offered by Brandt and Mouré, as well as the doubleness of Théoret’s and Tostevin’s treatments of subjectivity. Dupré indeed argues that traditionalism rests at the heart of Brossardian innovation, just as mysticism traverses her scientific imagery (Stratégies 85). Amantes’ contemplation of the intricacies of desire and representation is no exception to this doubleness. On the one hand, the prose sections are fairly clear in their exposé of the interchange between the two women writers. They insist on the speaking subject’s instability, motion and openness to the loved other: “je cherche ici à écrire je en explorant tous les mécanismes qui servent à distraire ce je (permanent et inexploré) car tu as bien vu dans ton texte de projet que rien ne s’écrit de l’identité sans cette motivation-mobile comme l’on dit d’un sens aux aguets ou d’un sens bousculé, renversé sur lui-même” (18). On the other hand, some of the poems of Amantes are far less clear or syntactically logical in their flow. Certain poetic strategies like the use of enjambment produce much semantic ambiguity and, by extension, plurality: “. . . les yeux / de rupture et tournure ont des phrases / amoureuses qui s’adressent (lettres) / à celles dont les courbes scintillent” (39). These lines foreground both the motion of language and the glorious vision of the lovers’ “courbes” that scintillate, recalling the poet-speaker’s mystical “ravisement” in the preceding poem. Although the syntax of these four lines maintains a grammatical logic, the line breaks entail different possibilities of signification. As the sentences (“phrases”) are qualified by the adjective, “amoureuses,” the latter also becomes a noun and the subject of the third line: “amoureuses qui

s'adressent (lettres) / à celles. . . ." The parenthesized "lettres" (the epistolary genre, or the alphabet) interrupt the "amoureuses" to reinstate "phrases" or language as the grammatical subject of this sentence. This syntactical ambiguity is important because of the questions it raises. Is it language that is projecting its own luminous curves, its own possibilities in this field of "rupture and tournure?" Or is it the "amoureuses" who in turn project some celestial, scintillating and given state of being? Perhaps both the (aerial) "lettres" and the "amoureuses" are responsible for the beauty suggested at the end of the line. Perhaps there is no possible distinction between them, if eros is indeed at work in all writing and in all subjects.

It is the thematic motif of the spiral that pervades Brossard's work, especially in La lettre aérienne. Not only does it become a symbol of female intersubjectivity, but the spiral also functions as a vehicle towards an utopian, if not implausible, future. According to Brossard, these spirals are supposedly the ultimate symbol of a "culture au féminin," encompassing the "différences issues" from women rather than "les différences issues du sens patriarcal" (98). In her rendition of patriarchy as a self-enclosed circle, Brossard continues to evoke the ontological dialectic of sameness and difference, opting to interrupt the reversion to what she perceives as a male norm regulating gender constructions. Suggesting that women need a "culture qui nous ressemble" (98)—hence "l'émergence d'une culture au féminin" (98) that is the title this particular essay—Brossard also posits the symbol of the spiral to "briser l'homme comme universel" and "rompre le cercle de la féminité" (96) as well as the "paramètres patriarcaux" (97). The spiralling motion produces a "sens excité" (95) rather than the flatness of logocentrism. A textual ethics constitutes itself through the interchange of same and other, and as we have already seen in Mouré's "spectrum," through the introduction of the other—"une autre femme" (Lettre 116).

The spiral is also an accurate metaphor for the "retour" of the past in Brossard work (Dupré, Stratégies 129). The glorious exchange with the other implied in the "ravisement" and "éblouissement" in Amantes opens onto Brossard's recourse to the myth of the threatening, warrior and goddess-worshipping tribes of the "amazones" (62). As Dupré argues, this invocation of ancient myth renders temporality as a spiralling form, since the link re-established between past

and future explodes linearity to suggest an eternal time (Stratégies 129). Before addressing some of the problems that plague Brossard's representation of the amazon lesbian, it is important to note that Brossard's own gestures of "gynergetic symbolization" (Caputi 428) do, for the most part, exhibit a constructionist outlook. Again like Mouré's "spectrum," Brossard's re-constructions of subjectivity borrow from science the technique of projecting into space a tri-dimensional feminist representation: "Il m'arrive donc de m'imaginer hologramme, réelle, virtuelle, tridimensionnelle dans la nécessité d'une lumière cohérente" (Lettre 83). Despite the mystical presence implied in this "rapprochement entre le visible et l'invisible" (Lettre 144), it is the very terms or metaphors employed, Brossard insists, that directly effect possible representations: "D'ici là et maintenant, le corps se transforme ainsi que les métaphores qui, tout en l'ornant, l'immobilisent aussi" (Lettre 82). If Brossard's "amazones" conjure up a goddess-like, or at the very least, mythical form of female power and self-sufficiency, the amazonian figure is also an effect of the ethics of female recognition. By extension, the amazon too is a textual effect, since this recognition (to recall once again Lévinas) is tied to, mediated and made possible by language, and for Brossard, by a manipulation of words: "La fréquentation des femmes par les femmes est une image en soi qui m'impressionne parce qu'elle m'informe et qu'elle m'inspire. Elle est étroitement liée à la production et à la création du sens et de l'image de la femme que j'invente en me projetant, en projetant mon identité dans l'espace" (Lettre 118).

Invoking what her speaker calls the "contexte du déjà inscrit de la fluorescence de nos corps" in Picture Theory (167), Brossard seems to echo Irigaray's insistence on female specificity for new forms of representation: "Ce que nous sommes et ce que nous serons dépend essentiellement de notre aptitude à produire des images stimulantes de nous, des images qui littéralement nous excitent" (Lettre 120). Again, if utopian, Brossard's conceptualizations of new forms of (inter)subjectivity are nevertheless bound to "le texte," perhaps, as Dupré argues, the ultimate truth for Brossard (Stratégies 86): "Le lieu du texte est devenu le dépositaire du corps, du sexe . . . de la rupture et de la théorie qu'il génère et qui le régénère" (Lettre 45). Always already inscribed, "longtemps figé (saisi) dans la glace du système d'interprétation et de fantasmes que le

sexe patriarcal n'a cessé de renouveler . . ." (Lettre 61), Brossard's idea of "le corps féminin" accedes to new definitions in its "rapprochement à d'autres corps de femme" (Lettre 61). This identification is posed in terms of a relational ethics, "cette matière à penser qui me sert d'inscription dans l'espace historique auquel j'appartiens" (Lettre 62). It rejects the negative dialectic of Lacan's misrecognition, as L'amèr's "acte de l'oeil" revealed in chapter 2. Brossard's notion of "femme," a word that all of her writing foregrounds, is also steeped in a constructionist perspective. Warning, as L'amèr does in practice, against a theory that recalls biological destiny (Lettre 94), Brossard seems adamant about reappropriating the signifier, woman, and redeploing its meanings: "L'origine n'est pas la mère, mais le sens que je donne aux mots et à l'origine, je suis une femme" (Lettre 97).

"Femme," then, is historically inscribed, preceded by the other, steeped in a constructionist theory of language. So what do we make of the following statement: "Amazones et lesbiennes sont les seules femmes à ne pas avoir été inventées par l'Homme. En cela, ce sont des figures utopiques et maudites. Figures interdites d'accès . . ." (Lettre 134)? Here, Brossard perhaps tries to insist on the need to transgress the implied androcentric norms in the constructions of the self in the history of Western thought. Knowing her ideological position, this should be no surprise. But that she ascribes an exclusivity, an untouchability, to her own redefinition is an odd and even dangerous turn in her utopian theory. Contrary to what most of the essays propose in La lettre aérienne, here Brossard's assumption of the lesbian's "elsewhereness" begins to justify the kind of "ontological priority" that Annamaria Jagose accuses Brossard of associating with the "the lesbian body" (3). Is the amazon assumed to be prior to "the repressive mechanisms of power" (3) in this attempt "to theorize a perfect lesbian space, system, or economy that is altogether elsewhere" (Jagose 2)?⁸

No doubt Brossard's statement underlines the utopian element that traverses all of her

⁸ In her Introduction to Lesbian Utopics, Jagose charges (a bit hastily) Wittig, Irigaray and Kristeva with this fault, and in her reading of La lettre aérienne argues that the same priority is assumed in its "extradiscursive" renditions of lesbianism (47).

work. Yet here, her lesbian utopia recalls the “elsewhereness” of utopia’s classical definition⁹ as well as more modern adaptations that underline its possibly archaic, if not its nostalgic, elements.¹⁰ Unlike the mother who figures as the site of contested meanings in *L’amèr*, Brossard’s lesbian appears to be “prohibited by patriarchy yet nevertheless existing somehow beyond its bounds . . . wholly beyond patriarchal comprehension and consequently always already transgressive” (Jagose 22). This rendition of “the” lesbian’s ontological pre-status is particularly at odds with what Brossard otherwise insists is the discursiveness of any representation, of any new figuration: “C’est en effet dans ce lieu (la fiction), là où le sens ordinaire est continuellement déçu, déjoué, contourné, défait et trompé par la façon (la manière de dire), que l’épreuve du sens peut véritablement avoir lieu. . . . Sujet fabuleux, sujet opérant, tel est le propos qui prend forme en notre présence dans l’écriture” (*Lettre* 138-139). But Brossard also writes: “La lesbienne invalide les dogmes patriarcaux. La lesbienne crée espace et temps; elle est toujours d’un autre temps” (*Lettre* 108-109). Such claims to an “hors-temps” hardly make sense in relation to the Brossardian fiction theory’s usual engagement with and within the symbolic order (as we have seen in *L’amèr*). And they reveal the temptations of exclusivity that afflict Brossard’s lesbian theory. Such statements contradict Brossard’s own active engagements with the cultural paradigms that transfix women in reductive biological roles, that posit notions of subjectivity whose binary foundations exclude and disallow alterity. They also contradict Brossard’s own ethical configuration of lesbian intersubjectivity as an effect of language, of the re-defined dialectic of same and other which pervades her appropriations of encoded myths and cultural narratives.

⁹ According to Thomas More’s 1516 *Utopia*, the utopian space is “a state of independence with respect to the culture surrounding it,” delineating “a position free from institutions and existing laws,” or “a separate space that benefits from its external, independent position” (qtd. in Jagose 2).

¹⁰ In *L’esprit de l’utopie et le principe espérance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), Ernst Bloch proposes that utopia is “animée par le pathos de l’être, jadis dédié à un ordre du monde, et même de l’au-delà, que l’on croyait déjà entièrement parachevé dans une existence réussie. Mais ce pathos-ci s’affirme comme celui du non-encore-être et de l’espérance du Souverain Bien qu’il contient” (qtd. in Dupré, *Stratégies* 152). According to Dupré, this definition of an “archaic integrity” informs Paul Chamberland’s poetry as it does Brossard’s amazon figure (*Stratégies* 152).

Perhaps it is La lettre aérienne's monolithic definition (or lack of definition) for the male norm, for "l'Homme," that prompts Jagose to accuse Brossard of falling into an essentialist argument. In "Synchronie," Brossard imagines the symbolic upheaval of feminist writing as creating a future of "inédites métaphores" (82). Of course, Brossard argues, there will be different metaphors in "l'an 2000" than in 1982, the time of Brossard's essay (82). Brossard also states that feminist writing will remain both in present and future "ce qui de mémoire d'homme ne s'était jamais conçu" (82). Again, Brossard's observation of the absence of proper female representations in the long history of androcentric metaphysics is hardly deniable. But what is at times the unquestioned, and therefore re-enforced, fixity ascribed to this "mémoire patriarcale" seems to counter her own attempts at destabilizing given, and so-called official, notions of subjectivity and signification, "le territoire imaginaire à partir duquel nos idées prennent appui et élan . . . sillonné de toutes parts par des slogans théologiques et philosophiques . . ." (80); this "territoire imaginaire," Brossard insists, is based "sur la seule subjectivité masculine" (81). One may wonder how, "en l'an 2000," this "mémoire d'homme" may itself also have changed. Is "la seule subjectivité masculine" really as coherent and monolithic a force as Brossard tends to represent it? After all, patriarchal domination is certainly a notion that must be qualified not only by class, culture and generational forces, but also by time, place, and historical context. To follow Brossard's projections, an interval of eighteen years would certainly be subject to these forces. Rather than deriving a female symbol as co-extensive with the power structure it defies (as she does with the notion of difference which is made to derive and differ from traditional ontology in L'amèr), Brossard posits the lesbian as a symbol of a different, utopian time and space. "The" lesbian is the forbidden and exclusionary symbol set up against this monolithic force of power and oppression.

It is perhaps the mystical aspect of Brossard's mythologizing that suggests the utopian exclusivity or "elsewhereness" which begins to ring false or at least essentialist. Here, we can recall the theological tone that infuses Brossard's manipulation of different codes:

j'ai succombé à la vision claire
 des végétations et des événements
 matinales, dans les privilèges de la lumière
 car le corps authentique échine de feu
 a montré sa langue telle qu'elle
 alors était tangible et tango
 très vif pour les yeux/ du dedans. (Amantes 69)

In this surrender to the light, suggested both by “succombé” and “échine” (which can mean to subject oneself), the “je” is once again constituted by a passion (the “feu” of this light). It also presents a “corps authentique” or what Dupré calls the “corps mystique” of Brossard’s lesbian figure (Stratégies 135). However, if the vision is transcendental, it is also informed by the rhythm of dance, of corporeality (“tangible”), and thus by the material body and the material world. But the poem is hopeful in its own “privilèges de lumière,” revealing a sort of spiritual enlightenment suggested by this ultimate (again, transcendental?) vision: “la vision claire” of a speaking body (“car le corps . . . / a montré sa langue telle quelle”).

Although a study of it must remain beyond the scope of this volume, Le désert mauve represents light in a similar way. Light plays a fundamental role in a young adolescent’s quest for an utopian “ailleurs tourné vers l’impensable” (40), a kind of mystical, even archaic “vision” of “elsewhereness” in which “la beauté” is “avant la réalité” (40). In short, she is prompted by her desire to cause “la réalité” to bend “du côté de la lumière” (14). A utopian discourse underlies the novel’s multi-layered narrative. It also includes the contradictory female figurations and projections of lesbian intersubjectivity of Brossard’s theory—its constructionism versus its essentialism, and the breakdown of its ethical perspective that we have begun to examine here.¹¹

¹¹ The novel’s dystopian elements undercut Brossard’s feminist idealizations, and finally provide a kind of (self-)warning which, in turn, reinstates an ethical vision. Indeed, it is such a conciliation that can be detected in the novel, in which a community of women represents both the potentialities and the limitations of Brossard’s lesbian utopia. The novel’s representation of the processes of reading, interpreting and translating a woman’s book about a brutal murder begins to surmount the contradictions, as well as the destructive forces, cutting across the main narrative. One section of the novel, “Un livre à traduire,” contains an account of a translator’s (Maude

This takes us back to the essentialist charges that Brossard at times deservedly attracts. Paradoxically, claims to exclusivity and the gynesoteric mythologizing of “the” lesbian (in the spiral) continue to figure in Brossard’s works, as some parts confirm this presupposed status of “elsewhereness” while others refuse it. Often, intersubjectivity is located where Brossard most often insists it must be located: in the text, and within its double constituents of reading and writing (the letters in Amantes, for instance). Perhaps, then, like Brandt’s “father-ground” and Mouré’s “public field of light,” the text’s ethical vision (whether religious, mystical, or utopian) is limited by the very means of its realization—by the symbolic exigencies and the very conditions of a relational ethics. Moreover, along with Théoret’s reversion to solipsism throughout her writing career and Tostevin’s diffusion of the conflicts within the heterosexual covenant of sophie, Brossard, Brandt and Mouré show how a text can be blinded by its own best intentions. As I have started to argue with reference to Benjamin’s psychoanalytical work, the notion of breakdown must be included within a relational theory, if only to render it an authentic possibility rather than a normative or merely utopian one. Yet, in light of this fourth part of my analysis, the argument may be pushed further. Not only do self-contradictions on the writers’ parts show the unavoidable limitations of an ethics within an imperfect world of human exchange, but they also reveal the limitations of writings in the feminine themselves. Here, it is an immanent and social ethics that can serve to detect, as well as warn against, the idealization, escapism and perspective of exclusivity that devalue certain feminist envisionings of female becoming.

Laures’) process of translating the narrative authored by a woman named Laure Angstelle. Maude Laures finds herself caught within the contradictions that constitute Laure Angstelle’s desert and her own task of translating the text’s “intention, peut-être du bonheur, peut-être de la nostalgie ou de quelque autre sentiment qui pourrait, à un moment donné d’une vie, se confondre à ce point avec la joie que telle on la dit goût d’éternité” (159). In other words, Maude Laures not only faces the task of translating Laure Angstelle’s utopias and a text that contains the “inexhaustibility” and “foreignness of the other mind,” as H.G. Gadamer proposes in his philosophy of hermeneutics (101). She must also confront and reconcile the “réalité” that cuts across Laure Angstelle’s narrative. In the final analysis, Maude Laures interrupts the utopian spiral of a lesbian existence that idealizes itself—through the utopia of Le désert mauve and as we have seen in the mysticism of Amantes—to reveal its more multi-directional capacities. The “elsewhereness” to which the Brossardian spiral aspires does seem called back to the intercrossing of language and the forces of power and discourse in Le désert mauve.

Finally, the tensions that constitute Brandt's, Mouré's and Brossard's works produce a number of effects. They challenge most attempts at a definite reading, reveal troubling utopian ideals, or posit contradictions that may, in fact, strengthen the work itself. If the blending of the old and the new may be a necessary and often defining practice of feminist and postmodernist texts, naive idealism usually is not. However, if a certain degree of idealism is inescapably intrinsic to any ethical theory, the advocacy of escapism can and should be avoided. These, of course, are large claims and do not apply to all three writers in the same way, nor in every text all of the time. They must not take away either from the fact that these women do demonstrate their devotion to the here and now (Brandt), a healthy scepticism about recalling an unrecoverable past (Mouré), or the inescapable parameters of a symbolic order (Brossard). Yet, once again, certain discrepancies between what the text avows and actually does arise in some of these works, revealing, perhaps, what certain ethically conceived feminist visions can and cannot accomplish.

Conclusion

Towards AnOther Feminist Ethics

Why the (M)Other?

As postmodern- or poststructuralist-influenced feminists, the five writers examined in this study recognize the determining role of the socio-symbolic order in the construction of (inter)subjectivities. Yet, if this symbolic order were to be deemed only and utterly androcentric, patriarchal, or hierarchically dichotomous, how would it even be possible to transgress the paradigm of sameness, the binary logic that has held difference in a subjected position? In view of the malleability of any construct (however difficult it may be to undermine it), Brossard, Brandt, Théoret, Mouré and Tostevin manage to demonstrate that human subjects and social relations do not have to remain in the service of the same. In this context, I understand the “same” as self-sameness, as it relates to individualism, egocentrism, logocentrism and phallogentrism. The maternal configurations, which I have traced especially in the earlier texts by the five writers in question, are revealing in this challenge of hierarchical constructs. In whatever form we think of her, the mother has traditionally been second to the Law of the Father and associated with the chaos and a-sociability of nature. She too figures as a construct, the necessary other reduced and controlled for the erection of a higher authority and structure: language, the Law, the social.

The writings in the feminine examined here ponder important possibilities which, I argue, are the crux of their feminist contributions to a relational ethics, where the recognition of the other’s specificity is not only a component but a condition. What if the mother, and not just the father, were to be viewed as a giver of language, a giver who speaks, loves, hates, desires, who is irreducibly other but, for the daughter and the son, also a same, the first body, the first source, and a social model of intersubjective and linguistic exchange? What would be the consequences of this proposed maternal model on earlier and later relations to the other, and on the subject who is, after all, an effect of language? What if the ethical were no longer simply the result of the reasoned discourse of a chosen few, but an implicit possibility for each of us since it is an implicit possibility for others? If it is such questions that Brossard, Brandt, Théoret, Mouré and Tostevin attempt to

answer, they sometimes do so successfully and, at times, less so.

Today, it is perhaps safe to assume that patriarchy is no longer the only acceptable structure of social organization. Yet, not all battles have been won, as many women writers continue to offer alternatives to this structure. I have traced these alternatives in particular representations of maternalism, female alterity, and relational exchanges in which the specificity of difference—among which figure various (re)constructions of sexual difference—must not only be tolerated but its impact recognized. It is here that the five writers' major contributions to a feminist ethics can be seen. Hence, Brossard's "même difference" serves as the model of her lesbian intersubjectivity. Brandt's mother-daughter "plots" are renegotiated beyond demand and suffocation. Théoret discovers a female countergenealogy through her hysteric's linguistic reconnection with the "pre-oedipal" mother. Mouré's deconstruction of logocentrism 'remembers' a maternal trace constituting her lesbian subjects. Tostevin's unassimilable, though "un-pure," mothertongue plays out the dialectic of same and other in speech, in subjectivity, and in the pregnant body itself.

At certain moments in my textual analyses, I have indicated where the writers self-consciously present some of the conflicting aspects of their maternal configurations. The bellicose aggression on the maternal womb in Brossard's fiction theory, the refusal of maternity in Théoret's earlier poems, and the appeal to an undifferentiated maternal same in Mouré's poetry come to mind. As we have also seen, the strategies employed to posit ethical (re)visions of maternalism—as well as maternal and/or female alterity—are not always uncontentious. Brossard's metaphor of matricide should again be recalled. Moreover, if an ethical model (that is, the terms for a relational ethics, an ethics of intersubjectivity) is set up through these revisions of the maternal, the development as well as the extension of this model has, at moments, proven to be problematic. As we have seen throughout this study, identification with and differentiation from the other (in this case the mother) is pivotal in the theory of a female ethics, reflecting the "double-sidedness of intersubjectivity" (Benjamin 7). However, this balance is not always achieved, particularly in Théoret's work where ontological destruction tempts on one side, and essentialist

solipsism on the other. A doubleness particular to this female ethics thus lies in the tension between postmodern and feminist distinctions between the subject and the unified, coherent, self-completing individual (as well as the continuity of a certain autonomous, humanist notion of subjectivity). But as ethicists such as Ricoeur and Benjamin, and feminist writers such as Théoret and Tostevin have stressed, the very capacity of recognizing—of identifying, while also differentiating from—the other as well as “feeling the impact of the other” (Benjamin 13) demands a careful balance between the instability and coherence of subjectivity—a balance, we have seen, that is not always achieved.

The tension between self-reliance and the destabilizing effect of alterity therefore does not only constitute what is at times the difficult relationship of feminism to postmodernism, as we considered briefly in the introduction and explored in the analysis of Tostevin’s challenge to Derrida. This tension is also at the core of an ethics of the other and of a relational version of subjectivity (as selfhood). Yet, the preceding chapter has considered where feminist idealism, which has been shown to underlie some of Brandt’s, Mouré’s and Brossard’s addresses to the loved female other, can undermine the projected intersubjective exchange among women. Connected to an original or lost state of unity and/or utopian “elsewhereness,” a female intersubjectivity is perhaps relegated to an attractive realm of utopian perfection, but also to the much less promising realm of somewhere beyond the here and now, threatening the impossibility of its realization. But if all idealism were to be discounted, would not the theory of ethics presented in this study also be forced to suffer the same criticism? In fact, would a theory of mutual recognition even be possible to develop? The idealism that is criticized in these last two chapters is one that leads to normative and essentialist conclusions about innate truths associated with women and men, about innate abilities to transgress what Brossard considers the “fictions” of androcentrism.

As Benjamin says of idealism, “mutual recognition is meaningful as an ideal only when it is understood as the basis for struggle and negotiation of conflict, when its impossibility and the striving to attain it are adequately included in the concept” (23). The objective in presenting

Canadian and Québécois works as representatives of a feminist ethics, as well as the wider applicability of this ethics, is to propose the “material possibility” of ethical exchange (Benjamin 20), not its predetermined realization. Indeed, “the concept of mutual recognition should include the notion of breakdown . . .” (Benjamin 22), and such moments of breakdown have been detected in this study despite a text’s best intentions. But as indicated above, ethical breakdown is also self-consciously represented by the writers: the impossible demands imposed on the mother in Brandt’s poetry, the failures and imperfections of Théoret’s female intersubjectivities, the treacherous relation with the male other in Tostevin’s own “Song of Songs.” As the maternal model and the mother-daughter relationship seek to represent, it is “the capacity for recognition” (Benjamin 23) that social development can render, not the innate, irresistible ability of this capacity, and definitely not the certainty of its outcome. In the end, it is above all the (conscious and unconscious) double-sidedness of these texts—the tension between autonomous self-retreat and openness to the other, between identification with a same and differentiation with an other—that illustrates a veritable, rather than normative, ethical possibility.

Migrating Ethics

As Lori Saint-Martin outlines in her recent “essais de critique au féminin” in Contrevoix, some of the major features of writings in the feminine are the self-conscious concern with the impact of maternalism on female subjectivity, and the affirmation of female alterity through explorations of language, literary form and symbolic structures. Characterized by their defiance of closure, mastery, generic boundaries, and concerns with the body and the drives (Saint-Martin 18), these writings may find a counterpart in postmodern literature, but distinguish themselves with their “métaphores spécifiques” (Saint-Martin 18), as this study’s introduction also argued. A recurring metaphor is indeed the mother and the mother-daughter relationship, which marks in part the specificity of these theory-inspired, experimental, female-oriented poems, novels and essays. But to recall again the introduction, a different picture of feminist writing in English Canada and Québec could have been drawn. The critical focus could have fallen instead on feminist writers

Margaret Atwood, Audrey Thomas, Lorna Crozier or Pauline Jiles, for whom “theory” is not so much at play in their creative processes. As well, a new generation of more personal and lyrical “écritures au féminin” could have been deciphered in works by Élise Turcotte, Francine Noël, Anne Dandurand or Hélène Dorion.¹

In the anglophone context, a major distinction of writings in the feminine (such as those of Mouré, Brandt, Tostevin, Marlatt, Nourbese Phillip, Kamboureli, Scott or Diamond) from other women’s writing lies in the self-conscious presentation of the text itself as a feminist text, which attempts to present a feminist aesthetic, integrating or weaving into its form feminist and other language theory. Again, it is what I have formulated as a female ethics, often stemming from the mother-daughter relationship or other intersubjectivities, which is shown to condition female subjectivity and, to some extent, the practice of writing itself. In terms of the literary history of “écritures au féminin,” the Québécois context reveals a somewhat different scenario, where more continuity (not be conflated with homogeneity) has been detected in women’s literature, which (unlike the anglophone context) critics often gather under a looser notion of “écritures au féminin.” However, distinctions between first generation radical feminism and more recent women’s texts have been drawn, although the latter indeed still sometimes fall under the rubric of “écritures au féminin”—the plural form neatly emphasizing the reality.

The radical, generic mixing undertaken by earlier feminist writers has appeared much less frequently in the last fifteen years in Québec.² If certain generic traditions like linear narrative and

¹ Lisette Girouard and Nicole Brossard argue that the eighties are characterized by two new generations of women poets. The first generation constitutes writers born around 1949 and continuing the feminist, experimental and intertextual project of first-generation Brossard, Théoret, Gagnon, Bersianik—they include here Anne-Marie Alonzo, Germaine Beaulieu, Louise Cotnoir, Denise Desautels, Louise Desjardins, Louise Dupré, Jocelyne Félix, Célyne Fortin, Ghislaine Pesant, Julie Stanton (23). The second generation to appear in the eighties (thus the ‘third’ generation of feminist writing) would be formed by Marie Bélisle, Hélène Dorion, Marthe Jalbert, D. Kimm, Marie-Christine Larocque, Rachel Leclerc, Nadine Ltaif, Hélène Monette, Élise Turcotte, Louise Warren, Bianca Coté, Hélène Boissé, Diane Cardinal and Patricia Lamontagne. “Feminine intertextuality” has become sporadic here, Girouard and Brossard claim along with Saint-Martin, but concerns still pivot around love, the quotidian, childhood (24).

² This, of course, is not to deny formal preoccupations and innovations in contemporary Québécois literature. To use women’s literature as a brief (and by far exhaustive) example, we could think of recent texts by Carole Massé, Francine Noël and Nicole Houde (Saint-Martin,

poetic lyricism were treated with suspicion and abandoned by earlier “écritures au féminin,” we can say that, generally, personal verse and more traditional prose forms have resurfaced in women’s writing. The brief, though bustling and pivotal years for feminist writing in Québec was (more or less) between 1975-1980, the eighties marking a more intimate, “readable,” personal and quiet turn in women’s writing (Saint-Martin, Contrevoix 236). Hence we can recall the difference between Théoret’s early prose-poetry and her later turn to the novella in L’homme qui peignait Staline, or her ‘quieter’ long poems, Étrangeté, l’étreinte and La fiction de l’ange. Perhaps anglophone feminists demonstrate a closer alliance to this return of more identifiable (though not necessarily conventional practice of) literary forms (namely free verse, the long poem, the novel, the essay), than they do to the defiance and even the rejection of all generic delimitation by earlier Québécois feminists. But it is Brossard’s more recent comment about those she identifies as “postmodern women” that seems more relevant to the comparative context here. Indeed, both anglophone and francophone feminists appear to exhibit the “need” for “all genres at the same time”:

women will link narrative fragments, poetical prose, autobiographical passages, and poetry in the same piece of writing. Because women’s experience is marginalized in life as well as in literature, women’s subjectivity needs all genres at the same time. The way we re-route words to our own experience opens up entire zones of unknown dimensions of reality. (in Williamson, “Before” 64)³

As feminist critics of Québécois literature increasingly observe, newer writers (poets and novelists), including Ying Cheng, Gloria Escomel, Patricia Lamontagne, Danielle Roger, Nadine Ltaif, Mona Latif Ghattas and Line McMurray, hardly appropriate or even make mention of a feminist discourse in their work (with the exception of Escomel), prompting Lettres québécoises to question whether “écriture au féminin” still exists in 1998. On a less defeatist note, Saint-Martin

Contrevoix 241).

³ Moreover, as the introduction to this study explored, differences between the two feminist literatures can be measured in terms of impact in critical and creative production, as well as in terms of periodization. Even though for writings in the feminine there may “not really [be] a gap between the two [national] literatures,” the gap does exist in the degree of impact and thus of “the critical focus the literary institution directs on it” (Godard, “Theorizing” 11).

suggests the term, “metafeminist,” to characterize texts perhaps no longer concerned with “la quête d’une écriture spécifiquement féminine, d’un langage-femme,” but still preoccupied with questions derived from feminism, such as the relation of history, literature, mythology and psychoanalysis to the feminine, the mother-daughter relationship, and relations between women, or between men and women (241). Although the suggestion of a “metafeminism” is interesting and may deserve further reflection, it may also present a problem. We might accept Brossard’s later novels (such as Le désert mauve), along with other recent women’s works (like Élise Turcotte’s Le bruit des choses vivantes), as “metafeminist” texts, and reserve the term “feminist” for a work such as L’amèr (Saint-Martin, Contrevoix 240). Yet we might also still need to further distinguish between the experimental forms of Brossard’s novels, and the gentle rendition of mother-daughter love in the rather traditional form of Le bruit des choses vivantes, or even Théoret’s latest turn to a full-fledged realism in Laurence.

Somewhat arbitrary, as any literary encapsulation tends to be, such mixed delineations of breaks and continuities are not so readily achievable in the anglophone context of feminist poetry. However, perhaps one exception might be Tostevin, who has migrated toward a form of realist fiction with Frog Moon and whose poetry seems to have taken a more lyrical (“metafeminist”?) turn after Double Standards. It would be more difficult, however, to trace the same change in Brandt, whose lyricism may have increased in the latest collection but is in no way a novelty to her readers, while Mouré’s exploration of form and language in the recent Search Procedures has hardly made her writing more “readable.” Yet, it would be impossible to deny that there have been changes in anglophone feminist writings since Tostevin’s 1982, Gyno-Text. In English Canada too we have seen the arrival of a rich, cultural plurality of women writers onto the Canadian literary scene in the eighties. Lillian Allen, Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, Nourbese Phillip, Kristjana Gunnars, Leila Sujir, Sky Lee, Beth Brant, Marie Annharte Baker could, possibly, be thought of in terms of “metafeminism.” Inflected by race and ethnicity issues, perhaps this is an even more directly political “metafeminism” than what Saint-Martin has in mind.

With a wider or indeed “metafeminist” consideration of anglophone and francophone

writings by women, the ethical horizon of feminist literature would certainly expand. No doubt, a feminist theory of ethical recognition would be further complicated by writings in which approaches to form, language and gender are informed by issues of race or ethnicity, and of national and cultural exile, memory and identity. In this context, the legacy of some Canadian, American and European feminisms would maybe appear too exclusive, colour-blind, or class-biased, while these other feminist outlooks would add to the “specificity” that constitutes a feminist ethics of alterity. Perhaps five more writers can be anticipated for a new comparative study, considering the diverse treatments of history, memory, ethnicity, race, writing and form, mother-daughter stories, female ancestry, or lesbian intersubjectivity in the poetry and/or fiction of Dionne Brand, Kristjana Gunnars, Leila Sujir, Ying Chen and Nadine Ltaif. The possibilities, limitations and conflicts in deriving a wider female and relational ethics would reveal themselves in new and different forms. The works of these five writers could certainly expand the notion of writings in the feminine, revealing a multiplicity of specificities and a variety of novel configurations of otherness in women’s texts. But that would be another study.

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