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## Subject to Instability

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## Subject to Instability

### Abstract

For Plantier, language constitutes reality and is male dominated. Readers of texts, she says, are at a disadvantage because the author imposes a logic that we must accept in order to understand the text. The discourses shaping our social reality have the same effect. Plantier has struggled against individual voices, discourses, and the very fabric of language informed by these discourses. "Subject to Instability" examines the impact on her generic evolution of a changing sense of self, of who her interlocutors are, and of those for whom she is speaking. I argue that her increasing attempt to juggle many different voices destabilizes her "monologic," poetical voice, resulting in a blurring of generic boundaries and eventually the abandonment of poetry. Recognizing that our entry into language is a form of alienation also unsettles Plantier because it undermines the very identity that allows her to speak for others. She concludes that each woman needs to become a Subject in her own right, but she continues to struggle against dominant discourses, modeling "resisting reader" strategies. If she can no longer practice "monologic steadfastness," this does not deter her from attempting to dismantle patriarchal language and striving to make her voice prevail over others.

### Keywords

Plantier, language, reality, social reality, self, interlocutors, dominant discourses, male dominated discourses, women, patriarchal language

## Subject to Instability

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“D’où est-ce que je parle? À quoi, à qui?” ‘Whence do I speak? To what, to whom?’ (323) the poet Thérèse Plantier asks in her first collection of essays, *Le Discours du mâle: logos spermaticos* (*Male Discourse: Logos Spermaticos*) (1979).<sup>1</sup> What provokes such an avowal of an unsettled site of subjectivity and of uncertainty about interlocutionary partners? And what is the relationship between Plantier’s questions and the crossing or blurring of generic boundaries in her works? Or, in other words, to what extent are Plantier’s poetic voice and the generic boundaries of her works subject to instability? In order to answer both Plantier’s questions and my own, I touch on six volumes of poetry and two collections of essays, works spanning two decades (1963-1983).<sup>2</sup> I consider them in chronological order because I would like to focus on the evolution of her thought over time. I draw on Bakhtin’s distinctions between the monologic and dialogic styles (used in *The Dialogic Imagination* to characterize the differences between poetry and the novel) in order to study the possible relationships among three aspects of Plantier’s writings: her changing sense of self, her move away from poetry to the essay, and the impact on her work of her increasing desire to give voice to women.

Plantier states that, when presented with a text, the reader cannot negotiate with the writer and is therefore subjected to a monologue. When dealing with an author, “one accepts to dialogue with him in his own language, even if only to refute him” (DM 190). Many feminists have pointed out that language

is imbued with derogatory “texts” relegating women to positions of silence and submission, and any spokesperson for women therefore has to contend with these “texts.”<sup>3</sup> In this article, I focus on Plantier’s attempts to dialogue with various “languages”: “languages” of individual authors, of male-dominated poetry and literature, the “language” of her cultural inheritance in general, and finally, the very tool she is forced to use, language itself. As stated, I shall study the expression of this struggle as it manifests itself in her practice of the genres of poetry and the essay.

We commonly accord the lyric voice a unity, diffracted in the novel by the presence of a multitude of characters and voices. In Bakhtin’s terms the lyric voice is therefore “monologic” (286). There are features of Plantier’s work that Bakhtin would consider as inherently dialogic (her propensity for irony, parody and polemical statements). I would argue that Plantier, who devotes most of her career (1963-1978) to poetry, nevertheless manages to maintain what Bakhtin calls a “single-personed hegemony” (297) over language in her early works. But starting with *C’est moi Diégo (It is me Diego)* (1971), an explicit “double-voicedness” emerges. Can this be attributed to her attempt to speak *for* and *of* women, and how does she integrate and/or resist heteroglossia?

In *Chemins d’eau (Waterways)* (1963) she attacks the complacency of male poets. Her exclusion from the world of male poetic privilege leaves her “ahurie” ‘dumbfounded’:

ils croient avoir taillé une fois pour toutes  
 aux mots leurs chasubles leurs douillettes leurs mitres  
 ils croient aux mots papopontificaux

they believe they have cut out once and for all  
 for words their chasubles their overcoats their mitres  
 they believe in the papopontifical words. (CE 59)

She challenges the sacred status conferred on words by men. Her condemnation of the pompousness of the male poets through the barbarization of “pontifical” suggests that the following prediction may come true: “à partir de la femme sera l’univers embrasé / à partir des mots” ‘starting with women will the

universe be set ablaze / starting with words' (CE 63). Plantier's challenging of cultural institutions assumed many forms throughout her career; one form is her commitment to anamnesis as she articulates it in her next work, *Mémoires inférieurs* (*Inferior Memoirs*) (1966).

In "La Double," an italicized prose poem which serves as a preface to *Mémoires inférieurs*, the lyric I is in search of traces of the unwritten history of women: "tu as pénétré de tes seins la glaise qui en conservera empreinte et souvenir" 'you have penetrated with your breasts the clay which will conserve its imprint and its memory' (127). Having evoked these marks made by the body for want of access to writing, she swears never to forget (the) woman:

de l'avenir et du passé j'ai tressé une corde dont je te lie à mes  
genoux pour ne pouvoir désormais avancer sans te traîner,  
ensanglantée, mon double!

from the future and from the past I have twisted a rope with  
which I tie you to my knees so that from now on I can no longer  
move forward without dragging you along, bloodied, my double!  
(MI 128)

Her double, rather than being individualized, represents the part of herself which she shares with members of her sex. She vows to give a voice to women. But this double's identity becomes diffracted by her own inability to define "woman" as well as by her ambivalent feelings towards certain women. The terms she uses to designate herself and women in general are problematic:

Jadis lorsque j'étais femme  
.....  
j'étais possesseuse d'un Dictionnaire Larousse premier  
choix  
je voulus mourir pour renaître hors de l'Eva  
.....  
ô pauvre femme que j'étais  
misogyne

Formerly when I was a woman  
.....

I owned a top rate Larousse dictionary  
 I wanted to die in order to be reborn outside of the  
 Eva

.....  
 o what a miserable woman I was  
 misogynous. (MI 152)

The barbarism in the untranslatable “possesseuse” pokes fun at markers of gender and constitutes an act of transgression against the biased authority of the dictionary. Paradoxically, she calls herself a woman when referring to a time when she was trying to dissociate herself from Eve and her descendents. “Désormais” ‘From now on,’ she tells us, “je suis nègre” ‘I am Negro’ (MI 152). In *Discours du mâle*, she restates that she would choose to be “une négresse considérée comme noire” ‘a Negress considered as black’ and adds: “Je serai noire entièrement, non pas en mon pays, mais sur la terre entière que couvre ma féminité” ‘I will be completely black, not in my country, but in the whole world covered by my femininity’(DM 150). Blackness apparently serves to evoke the epitome of oppression. However, as the feminine form “négresse” makes clear, she cannot escape the mark of gender.

Plantier does not easily identify with other women because she is a poet, with a poet’s privileged relationship to language. In the poem “Quel autre?” ‘Which other?’ she evokes a woman who, unlike herself, kept silent as a result of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have called the “anxiety of authorship” (45). The deictic “cette” ‘this’ does not detract from the woman’s representative role:

l’avez-vous rencontrée  
 cette femme?  
 votre langage  
 elle l’aurait parlé  
 si elle avait deux mille ans  
 .....  
 face à la littérature  
 elle n’aurait jamais osé prononcer  
 je  
 pas plus qu’une bête  
 moins qu’un chien

have you met her  
 this woman?  
 your language  
 she would have spoken it  
 if she were two thousand years old  
 .....  
 confronted with literature  
 she would never have dared utter  
 I  
 no more than an animal  
 less than a dog. (MI 190)

She takes issue with the exclusion from artistic expression of women who for centuries have been the objects rather than the subjects of literary discourse. Her status as poet makes it possible for her to address her male interlocutor(s) but it also sets her apart from other women. She continues to speak about women, as in the preface to *C'est moi Diégo* (1971) where she capitalizes "Femme" (8), thus referring to women as a category. "Woman" is she who,

soumise en servante aux travaux ménagères et au nettoyage des enfants, . . . n'a pu connaître de la pensée, dans la mesure où cette dernière dépend des mots, qu'un chapitre si restreint que l'univers y était amputé à quatre-vingt-quinze pour cent.

subjected like a servant to housework and to keeping children clean, . . . could know of thought, to the extent that it depends on words, only such a restricted chapter that in it the universe was reduced by ninety-five percent. (D 8)

But being a housebound drudge was not Plantier's own fate. Despite the fact that her aim is to call our sympathetic attention to those who have no voice to speak for themselves, such women not only remain the *objects* of her discourse, they are subject to ridicule, as the tone suggests: "Ecoutez-les, regardez-les, les ménagères, les midinettes . . ." 'Listen to them, look at them, the housewives, the shopgirls . . .' (D 8). She comments on their situation by evoking George Orwell's dystopic novel *1984* which demonstrates how a language such as Newspeak can be used to suppress unorthodox thoughts and concepts. But, Orwell,

“homme seulement, . . . n’a pas songé à se demander si pareil assassinat mental n’a pas déjà été perpétré au cours de l’Histoire” ‘a mere man, . . . did not think to ask himself whether such a mental assassination had not already been perpetrated in the course of History’ (D 9). The miracle, she claims, is that despite phallogocratic brainwashing “certaines femmes” ‘certain women’ never doubted themselves. How does she, one of these exceptions, give voice to the unfortunate women who were unable to escape this cruel fate?

Rather than letting the “ménagères” and the “midinettes” speak, in her next volume, we get to hear the words of men. Heteroglossia exposes their prejudices and thereby constitutes a denunciation of the “Patriarche[s] du Verbe” ‘Patriarch[s] of the Verb’ (D 20). In *C’est moi Diégo*, the lyric I is displaced by the numerous other male voices: Diégo speaks in the first poem; the financial “saigneur” (with an “a” as Plantier spells “lord” in *Provence ma haine* [*Provence My Hatred*]) speaks in “Rêveries capitalistes dans le Rome-Calais” ‘Capitalist Reveries in Rome-Calais’; and then there is the modern day man who speaks in the language of the “Masculinisme effréné du mâle moderne” ‘Frantic Masculinism of the Modern Male’ (D 71-72). Does this undermine the monologic poetic voice? For Bakhtin the polemical, the parodic, and the ironic styles are the most marked manifestation of a dialogized style (274) and are therefore antithetical to poetic style. Although these modes have been present in Plantier’s work from the beginning, the heteroglossia created by the explicit citing of others’ speech points to a different kind of dialogism which foreshadows future shifts in genre. The emerging generic instability of *C’est moi Diégo* is pursued in her next work, *Jusqu’à ce que l’enfer gèle* (*Until Hell Freezes Over*) (1974).

Jean Rousselot draws attention to Plantier’s tendency to assume other voices in his preface to *Jusqu’à ce que l’enfer gèle* by calling it a “liasse épaisse de prosopopées” ‘thick file of prosopopeia.’ But there is a force which counters this heteroglossia. In the poem “Préménstruelle prosopopée à procédés préjudiciables” ‘Premenstrual Prosopopeia with





VIRILE

as I am my daddy familias used to say  
we had great fun at home  
my mom in all the nooks and crannies  
hoping for the return of the familias on a spree  
gone for the moment running after skirts  
but he'll be back in his familias

VIRILE

.....  
must not miss out he would say  
especially when it's raining  
must make babies for his sister-in-law  
and nine sisters for me  
in order to get the medal  
bal  
the victory is not ver but real  
on this planet of  
democrats pissocrats. (JEG 60-61)

The repetition of "familias" evokes the juridical entity under Roman Law and reminds us that there are still remnants of the unrivaled power of the master of the household in our day. The use of "papa" rather than the Latin "pater," in addition to emphasizing the innocence of the child, is another way of pointing out that this is a contemporary reality, not an obsolete practice relegated to a distant past. The multiplicity of voices is subordinated to Plantier's characteristically acerbic tone ("pissocrates") at the end of the poem. Can this ultimate predominance of the lyric I's voice be seen as an attempt to maintain or regain "monologic steadfastness" (286)? Does it thereby conform to Bakhtin's perception that heteroglossia is irreconcilable with poetic style?

Plantier's increased attention to formal experimentation (for example the capitalization of "viril" and the dislocation of the word "verbale" in the previous poem), will manifest itself in the coexistence of different genres in *La Loi du silence* (*The Law of Silence*) (1975). She initially wanted to use the title "L'Antilocus" for this volume because "je ne le reconnaissais guère comme une émanation du Moi où je suis logée" 'I hardly recognized it as a product of the I where I am lodged' (LS 7). She also talks of the Other who speaks in her place and of "un dire

dont l'intention m'échappe" 'a statement whose intention escapes me' (LS 7). She reiterates the multiplicity of voices to be found in this work: "J'ai voulu être fidèle aux instants d'un personnage habité par mille personnages, d'un langage habité par mille langages" 'I wanted to be faithful to the instants of a character inhabited by a thousand characters, of a language inhabited by a thousand languages.' This desire to be true to many voices explains her choice of juxtaposing prose and poetry, often with related themes. She nevertheless insists that she remains the "Leader of the Orchestra." Moreover, the polyphony and her avowed inability to identify herself as the site of emanation of the words are contradicted in several instances. The displacement of her "moi" by the other voices is accompanied by personal stories that put her back in the center. She recounts how a young man brought her a manuscript dedicated to "Thérèse Plantier" and she follows this anecdote with the statement "plus je me suis mariée, plus je suis devenue Thérèse Plantier" 'the more I got married, the more I became Thérèse Plantier' (LS 16). Later she will again evoke her own name: "Reprends-toi Thérèse, cesse de te torturer pour ce manuscrit perdu" 'Pull yourself together Thérèse, stop torturing yourself because of this lost manuscript.' (LS 26). She also tells us explicitly: "L'histoire mon histoire que je raconte est outrageusement personnelle" 'The story my story that I am telling is outrageously personal' (LS 50), highlighting her awareness of the transgressive quality of her text. In addition to the juxtaposition of these autobiographical elements with other voices, Plantier also mixes prose and poetry, thereby rendering her text subversive because it questions generic distinctions. And she attacks the one institution in France which, through its power to consecrate literary works and its mission to protect the purity of the French language, has traditionally guarded against just such subversive practices and barbarisms: the Académie Française. She embeds vulgarities in the name of this hallowed institution, calling it "l'Académie Francacaise" (LS 39).

In her last volume of poetry, *La Portentule* (*Portentula*) (1978), she includes love poems addressed to women, women's

names appear more frequently, and several poems, each telling the story of an individual woman, bring to light an aspect of the condition of women in general. At one point, she demonstrates how a woman can be reduced to the antagonistic interpretations of others if she does not speak her own reality:

Elle n'avait jamais rien lu  
disaient-ils  
.....  
elle n'avait pas assez lu disaient-ils  
elle n'a jamais pensé qu'à son cul  
disaient-ils eux les prêtres et les  
bureauphallorhizocrates

She had never read anything  
said they  
.....  
she had not read enough they'd say  
she never thought about anything but her ass  
said they they the priests and the  
bureauphallorhizocrats  
(P 13-14)

Plantier, speaking again for a woman effectively silenced, discredits the men with a denunciatory neologism. But while giving voice to these women, she undergoes a crisis in her relationship to language. The alienation experienced when assuming the position of the linguistic shifter "I" is explored in "Pronominalement" 'Pronominally' (P 96-97):

je ne m'appartiens pas  
je suis un effet de conscience  
désorienté  
.....  
par le je du je je suis hors je  
plus je parle plus je m'oublie  
quelle est cette vérité en émoi  
qui par moi a mis tant de temps à se connaître?

I don't belong to myself  
I am a product of consciousness  
disoriented

through the I of the I I am outside I  
 the more I speak the more I forget myself  
 what is this truth in turmoil  
 which through me has taken so long to know itself?  
 (P 96-97)

The obsessive repetition of “je” and the echoing of “moi” in the word “émoi” places Plantier very much at the center of “Pronominalement,” a poem which nevertheless signals a radical questioning of her expressive medium, and it is perhaps significant that *La Portentule* is her last volume of poetry.

In *Discours du mâle: logos spermaticos* (1979), her first volume of essays, Plantier tends to address herself directly to women and attempts to demystify philosophical discourse—“le discours professoral logique et critique” ‘the logical and critical professorial discourse’ (244) which she feels men reserve for themselves—by claiming it for herself. She critiques works chosen from a variety of disciplines ranging from linguistics to philosophy and, when quoting, frequently includes parenthetical interjections followed by her initials, thereby disrupting their monologic imperative while claiming the reactions for herself. She becomes a model “resisting reader” for women and urges them to make themselves heard.<sup>4</sup>

She overcomes the alienating effect of language described in “Pronominalement” by insisting that it does not leave us impotent because “le signifiant constitue le sujet et que c’est en parlant que nous avons enfin l’occasion de nous faufiler dans ce sujet” ‘the signifier constitutes the subject and it is by speaking that we finally have the opportunity to worm ourselves into this subject’ (DM 202). Just as men have created the category “women” through their “volonté de puissance” ‘will for power’ (DM 317) and have stigmatized it, Plantier tells us that women have to *decide* consciously what the content of the term “woman” is to be by taking up the pen, by raising their voices: “nous déclarer Sujet. C’est une position politique” ‘declare ourselves Subject. It’s a political stance’ (DM 325). She acknowledges that lack of unanimity among women can undermine efforts to demonstrate that the cultural and economic system is “un

carrousel de mythes, une machine à décerveler, un écrabouilleur” ‘a carousel of myths, a debrainer, a squasher’ (DM 238) that needs to be “détraqué” ‘put out of order’ (DM 238). But Plantier cannot resolve these tensions for groups or other individuals. Ultimately, she posits, each woman has to become a subject in her own right and speak in her own voice (“À vos postes, mesdames!” ‘To your posts, ladies!’ [DM 274-5]).

Nevertheless this conclusion—that each individual woman needs to speak in her own voice—does not yet satisfy her concern about the relationship between “je” and the person using the pronoun. Foucault’s “What is an Author?” justifies some of Plantier’s fears. He states that we no longer ask what an author has “revealed of his most profound self in his language.” We ask instead: “What are the modes of existence of this discourse?” or “Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?,” i.e. “What matter who’s speaking?” (138). Nancy Miller responds, in “The Text’s Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions,” that it matters very much who is speaking “to women who have lost and still routinely lose their proper name in marriage, and whose signature . . . has not been worth the paper it was written on.” (53) So, despite the realization that when one speaks one is also spoken and that there is no true presence in language, Plantier cannot overcome the idea that “[c]e ‘je’ devient le point absolu de référence, devient l’inexplicable unifiant” ‘[t]his “I” becomes the absolute point of reference, becomes the inexplicable unifier’ (DM 315). Even if writing is “une suite de gestes” ‘a series of gestures,’ she insists that “tous ces gestes prennent appui sur la créature mortelle que je suis . . .” ‘all these gestures rest on the mortal creature that I am . . .’ (DM 322). It is not easy to give up one’s voice when one has waited so long before making it heard. And this is why, even in the essay, a form that claims a degree of universality through the inclusion of social and cultural comment, Plantier keeps reminding her readers who she is, albeit mostly in the form of prolepses, as in these examples taken from *Provence ma haine* (1983): “Quant à toi, Thérèse Plantier, la ferme!” ‘As for you, Thérèse Plantier, shut up!’ (PH 102) and “Pas d’exclamation intempestive! Écrivain Thérèse Plantier, restez objectif!” No untimely exclamation! Writer Thérèse

Plantier, remain objective!' (PH 113). Through these mock self-admonishings, she is of course also undercutting the supposed objectivity of the essay.

Plantier believes that language both expresses cultural values and informs them, and therefore she experiences language as constitutive of reality and male dominated. She is always conscious of the battles she is fighting whenever she speaks or writes. But we can trace over time the subjective and generic instability that arises from the tensions between the monologic tendencies of poetic style, as defined by Bakhtin, and her changing sense of self which is influenced by two factors: her desire to speak for other women and her ambivalent attitude toward language. The unitary voice of her early poetry gradually gives way to forms of expression that displace this voice, i.e. that acknowledge the dialogic imperative. This awareness of other (antagonistic, male) voices grows as she strives to give a voice to women. "D'où est-ce que je parle? À qui, à quoi?" 'Whence do I speak? To what, to whom?' (DM 323) can now be seen as a moment of doubt concerning not only our relationship to language, but also the possibility of speaking to and for others, factors that undermine our sense of identity and unicity. It appears that Plantier's obsession with introducing her own name into texts constitutes an attempt to counter the diffractive forces of dialogism. Her works as sites of subjectivity reveal the tensions inherent in recognizing the immutable presence of a plethora of other voices and discourses while nevertheless trying to resist them, since they almost invariably reflect male privilege. Plantier understands that we cannot overcome dialogism, forced as we always are to react to or anticipate other voices, but she makes every attempt to have her voice, both as an individual and as a *porte-parole* for women, prevail over others.

### Notes

1. All translations are my own.
2. Born in 1911, Plantier was already in her fifties when her work was first published. An independent, militant feminist poet, she is prone to



controversial statements, such as her comment that the publishing house Des femmes is controlled by a group of extremist lesbians. Initially she endorsed surrealism as the only viable form of revolutionary expression able to subvert art as a vehicle of bourgeois thinking. In their article "Poetry" in *The Feminist Encyclopedia of French Literature*, Monica L. Wright and Nancy Sloan Goldberg characterize her work thus: "Thérèse Plantier's poetry approaches surrealism, but its unique qualities and individualism resist classification." (421) It has not been established when she in fact wrote either the poetry or the prose. In order of appearance, the volumes of poetry are: *Chemins d'eau* (CE)(1963), *Mémoires inférieurs* (MI)(1966), *C'est moi Diégo* (D)(1971), *Jusqu'à ce que l'enfer gèle* (JEG)(1974), *La Loi du silence* (LS)(1975), *La Portentule* (P)(1978), and the collections of essays are: *Discours du mâle: loges spermaticos* (DM)(1979) and *Provence ma haine* (PH)(1983). Much of the subject matter of her first collection of essays, which appears only a year after her last volume of poetry, mirrors questions raised in her poetry, suggesting that she practiced the two genres simultaneously. In her preface to *The Defiant Muse: French Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Domna Stanton outlines the difficulties faced by women trying to enter into the male-dominated world of poetry. Although Plantier acknowledges these obstacles, she seems to believe that women experience an even greater lack of legitimacy when it comes to other forms of learned discourse; her essays investigate questions of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and the like. In "Petit essai sur l'essai au féminin," Lise Gauvin makes a similar claim about female Quebecois essayists. This question merits a study of its own.

3. See, among others, *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, edited by Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker and Nelly Furman; Deborah Cameron's *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* as well as the volume she edited *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*; C. Kaplan's article "Language and Gender" in *Papers on Patriarchy*; Marina Yaguello's *Les Mots et les femmes: Essai d'approche socio-linguistique de la condition féminine*; and Dale Spender's *Man Made Language*.

4. In her preface to *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, Judith Fetterley cites Adrienne Rich's famous appeal in favor of the need for "re-vision" and goes on to say that "what we read affects us—drenches us, to use Rich's language, in its assumptions, and that to avoid drowning in its drench of assumptions we must learn to re-read" (viii). In her introduction, she insists that "the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women but the immasculatation of



women by men" since we are taught "to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values" (xx). "Clearly, then," she concludes, "the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us" (xxii). Rich's article, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" appeared in *College English* in 1972; Fetterley and Plantier express similar views in the late 1970s.

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