

Women Poets: The Speaking *E*

by

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Vite, les signes. Avez-vous bien
mis votre sexe ce matin?
Hélène Cixous

The linguistic determinism of the Romance languages, with its systematic disclosure of the speaker's sexual identity through gender-agreement of adjectives and participles, exerts a more direct constraint on the 'personal' modes of writing, autobiography and lyric poetry, than is the case with the novel or theatre. The novelistic or dramatic *je*, whether narrator or character, is immediately severed from the person of the author, to whom it does not refer. Inversely, the autobiographic *je* posits a relation of identity among narrator, character and author – a purely illusory identity, to be sure, but one grounded in the acknowledgement of a certain responsibility.¹ The lyric *je*, cut loose from its referential moorings to the writing subject and yet answerable to that subject across its various disguises, puts the split between authorial person and voice to the test. Indeed, by exploring the fluid and uneven boundaries of the split between person and voice, the lyric *je* works to define it.

In poetry written by men, this fragmented split – the lyric *je*'s otherness – need not be marked by grammatical gender, which remains uniformly masculine: in the emblematic words of Nerval, 'Je suis le ténébreux, le veuf, l'inconsolé'. Despite the feminine symbols – star, Melancholia, flower, queen, siren, saint, fairy – that proliferate throughout the remainder of his sonnet and mark the poet with the 'baiser rouge' of femininity, the slippage of identity signified by the accumulation of feminine figures is framed within a solid quadrangle of masculine models: 'Suis-je Amour ou Phébus? ... Lusignan ou Biron?'² For all the vacillation of the self structured by the poem, and for all the ambivalence of the poet's voice, *grammatically*, the poetic *je* remains well short of the line of sexual difference: 'Et j'ai deux fois traversé l'Aquéron: / Modulant tout à tour sur la lyre d'Orphée / Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée.' The song that issues forth from the lyre, saint's sighs and fairy's cries, is thus enigmatically ascribed to the red kingdom of the feminine, while the singer, Orpheus, vanquisher of death, is masculine.

When male poets invent female voices, they construct a coherent fiction, in which grammatical gender is reinforced by conventional signs of femininity. Thus, in *La Jeune Parque*, the feminine figuration of 'la conscience consciente'³ involves a

recourse to traditional imagery: 'gorge de miel', 'genoux polis', 'bras si doux'.⁴ 'The feeling of the body' which, among other mental impulses, Valéry wishes to figure, is presented from an external perspective, in accordance with conventional representations of the female body: '[...] Et vous, beaux fruits d'amour, / Les dieux m'ont-ils formé ce maternel contour / Et ces bords sinueux, ces plis et ces calices, / Pour que la vie embrasse un autel de délices [...].'⁵ The feminine *je* is a theatrical voice; however close it may be to the poet's adventure, it remains self-circumscribed, bound up in the recognizable codes of feminine identity. In fact, it is precisely the closed, fixed character of the representational system articulating these codes that enables Mallarmé to render his own fictional female voice, Herodiade, as the symbol of an implacably alienated consciousness. Her solipsistic horror of external contact, her fierce desire for self-containment, can be read as the paradoxical situation of a subject projecting upon herself, from within, the petrifying gaze of an ambient culture.

The same does not apply to poetry written by women. The poetic *je*, separated from self in the song, becomes not *elle* but *il*. The most celebrated of the *trobairitz*, the Comtesse de Die, makes the following declaration in the second stanza of the *canço* 'J'ai été en cruelle douleur':

Je voudrais tant mon chevalier tenir un soir entre mes bras nu et qu'il
se trouve comblé
que je lui serve de coussin je suis plus amoureuse de lui que jamais
Floris de Blanchefleur
je lui donne mon coeur mon amour mon sens mes yeux et ma vie⁶

The two terms of the comparison, 'je suis plus amoureuse de lui / que jamais Floris de Blanchefleur,' invert the respective positions of subject and object of desire, in a curious sexual chiasmus. As Jacques Roubaud, whose modern French translation I cite, suggests, 'il semble bien [...] que la situation imaginaire de la *trobairitz* qui parle en sa chanson pour l'amour de son "chevalier" soit transposition de celle du troubadour, et non celle d'une dame parlant à un troubadour; la *trobairitz*, comme le troubadour, se place dans la position du chant, du chanteur dans le chant: de même que le troubadour aime sa dame-seigneur, "sidons", la Comtesse de Die dit aimer son chevalier plus que "Floris n'aima Blanchefleur", pas le contraire.⁷ Within the comparison, as in the fiction it conjures forth (the story of Floire and Blanchefleur), the lyric *je* is structurally masculine. Throughout the rest of the poem, however, *je* is strongly marked by the feminine, in the terms that qualify it in rhyme position, 'trahida', 'vestida', 'abellida', and by the verb of will in the poet's closing proclamation of desire: 'de far tout so qu'eu volria' ('to do all that I would want'). This same scheme – rhymes ending in *a* and inverted comparison – recurs in another poem by the Comtesse de Die, and can thus hardly be interpreted as accidental.⁸ Admittedly, it is significant that the

sexual chiasmus occurs in a rhetorical figure – that is to say, as Roubaud points out, in a context clearly designated as poetic, at the moment when the poet's roots in tradition are affirmed. But contrary to Roubaud's claim, the Comtesse de Die's inversion is not symmetrical to the double gender contained in the appellation *midons*, 'ma seigneur,' which the troubadour uses to designate his lady. The androgynous *midons* destabilizes the gender not of the speaker, as does the Comtesse de Die's comparison, but rather the gender of the person addressed; it models the love after the feudal relation, without calling into question the subject's gender identity. Just as Nerval and Apollinaire do later, the Comtesse de Die utilizes figurative inversion in order to inscribe herself into her song. But whereas for Nerval and Apollinaire the gender of the lyric *je* remains immune from the sexual ambivalence that permeates their poetry, in the Comtesse de Die's work inversion effects a split between the subject of poetic speech and the subject of desire – whose feminine gender, repeatedly asserted in rhyme position, governs the poem's overall construction nonetheless. By means of this gendered split within the poem, the question of poetic subjectivity is, by a woman, written into the beginnings of the lyric tradition.

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The instability that, at the dawn of Western lyricism, the *trobairitz* introduces in her poetic self-designation by means of grammatical gender, is echoed by certain contemporary women poets whose works I propose to consider here. The object of my study, however, is not cross-gendering as *metaphor* – the perspective adopted by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their analysis of modern poetry written in English – but rather as a *linguistic tool*.⁹ Whereas in English the gender of the first and second persons must be expressed by means of semantics rather than grammar (since agent names, adjectives and attributives are epicene words), the distinction between masculine and feminine is, in the words of Marina Yaguello, 'au fondement même de la langue française.'¹⁰ By playing with that distinction, the poet acts on the very fabric of language. This is not, however, a question of an 'écriture féminine.' In the works of the poets upon whom I shall focus, Andrée Chedid, Jacqueline Risset and Marie-Claire Bancquart, the grammatical modulation of the poetic *je* is not linked to a celebratory inscription of the female body, nor to essentially 'female' modes of writing that might issue from it. On the contrary, their playful gender-inflection of the poetic *je* also entails playing off this physiological determinant, in order to vary the distance separating subject and body, as well as subject and name or social identity. Rather than proselytizing sexual difference, then, these poets exploit an essential constraint of the French language in a particular fashion, in order to open up what might be called, to borrow Hélène Cixous's phrase, 'un espace pour une indécision de la subjectivité'.¹¹

The male poet makes his gender agreements masculine without a second thought. In automatic grammatical harmony with himself, he may, with the same unproblematic gender mark, effect his own illocutionary erasure, posit himself as a representative of humankind, or affirm his virile individuality. The grammatical masculine, in all its multivalence, is for him a given. For women poets, on the other hand, the mark of the feminine is inescapable, unless they manage to avoid all qualification of the poetic voice using adjectives or participles – a tactic easily sustainable for the length of a single poem, but which would require acrobatic finesse if attempted throughout a volume or an entire *oeuvre*. Whatever their choice of grammatical gender, it assumes significance, whereas for male poets the use of the masculine goes without saying. The use of the feminine immediately implies, precisely, *agreement* between voice and signature, and seems to determine the relation between the poetic *je* and the biographical subject, even before the question is raised. Hence the recurrent critical debates over the existence of a 'women's poetry', as well as the virtually inevitable *ad feminam* readings which poetry, far more than the novel or theater, seems to invite. Inversely but symmetrically, the exclusive use of the masculine gender, automatically conflated with the neuter/universal, seems to anticipate the poetic text, foreclosing the question of the subject – which the poem nonetheless reformulates again and again.

Far from viewing the possibility of a choice of poetic gender (agreement or disguise) as a double bind, as Suzanne Juhasz does,¹² followed by Gilbert and Gubar, I instead see it as a linguistic resource which, for cultural reasons, has been largely unavailable to male poets, but which is a characteristic trait of modern poetry written by women. Juhasz's conception of the constricting double bind is based on certain assumptions common in psychosociologically-based feminist criticism: namely, that the writing of poetry requires (or aims to produce) an 'integrated self', and that poetry is meant (or attempts) to provide a direct and faithful report of lived experience, whereas, within literary tradition itself, *woman* and *poet* are incompatible terms, their conjunction yielding the vaguely pejorative *poetess*. But if, on the contrary, one sees modern lyric poetry as intrinsically skeptical of the integrated subject and of direct reportage, the double bind in question can instead be viewed as a means to liberation.¹³ Whereas Nerval and Apollinaire translate the self's instability into a slide from one fantasmatic figure to the next, and yet maintain the poetic *je*'s masculine gender, women poets, licensed by language and culture to move between grammatical genders, can exploit this mobility, in order to dislocate cultural stereotypes of gender at the level of language itself.

The essential mainspring of gender-mobility is the letter *E*. The predominant vowel in the French language and the sign of the feminine, *E* is also, in the words of Marina Yaguello, 'par nature évanescant et instable, toujours prêt à disparaître dans la

prononciation'.¹⁴ It is this propensity to be dropped from pronunciation that casts the mute *E* in such a prominent role in French prosody. As the poet Jacques Réda writes, 'inexistant ou faible ou facultatif et nomade dans le parlé, cet E muet me semble être en définitive le ressort du rythme poétique, rabattant toute prétention individualiste du mot à sa propre accentuation, au profit de cet autre intégral qu'est le vers.'¹⁵ Although Réda, in the title to his study, 'Le grand muet,' endows the vowel with an incongruous virility, *E* is inseparable from the feminine, as Georges Perec's lipogrammatic novel, *Les Revenantes*, attests, along with the following verses (among many others) by Apollinaire:

Cette femme était si belle
Qu'elle me faisait peur¹⁶

With the exception of the *i* of 'si' (which corresponds graphically but not phonetically to the *i* in 'était' and 'faisait'), these two final lines of the poem '1909' are entirely built around phonetic or graphic variations on a single vowel, *E*. It is the mute *E* that endows particular prosodic presence upon the feminine pronoun that is reiterated in the run-on rhyme *belle / Qu'elle*. The two lines, respectively seven and six syllables in length, follow five alexandrines; this context compels us to read them as two hemistiches, so that the final *e* of 'Cette' vanishes, while the final *e* of 'Qu'elle', on the contrary, counts, prolonging the first syllable of the line which is, exceptionally, accented. This produces an effect that Réda calls 'l'antique hystérique-sacerdotal', corresponding to the awe inspired by beauty.

The choice of gender implicit in the presence/absence of the *E* thus engages the lyric subject not only in the system of language, but also in the system of prosody and in poetic tradition. Critical readings of women poets tend to be informed by what might be termed an 'upstream' perspective, concerned with tracing thematic currents back to their biographical source. In contrast, shifting the emphasis to grammatical gender enables us to practice a 'downstream' reading, focused on detecting the particular linguistic and poetic practices that create subtle but, I believe, significant undulations in the textual flow. By way of illustration, I now propose briefly to sound out selected passages from the works of three poets who exploit the *E* in diverse ways, to define the place of the poetic subject.



I shall begin with the exemplary opening poem in Jacqueline Risset's *Sept passages de la vie d'une femme*, published in 1985.¹⁷ The promise of autobiography seemingly constituted by the collection's title, the author's name, and her photograph on the back cover is belied on the very same page by the programmatic statement, 'il faut qu'il y ait coupure pour qu'il y ait le chant'. Before it is even opened, the book thus proposes the notion of breaches in identity, between the socially-constituted subject and the poetic subject formed by the texts. The poem, cited below in its entirety, is entitled 'Screen-memory':

assise dans la masse du jardin les branches pressent de toutes parts la
chaleur enfonce dans le sable ce qui se prépare est plus grand que tout
ce qui est arrivé jusqu'ici la gaucherie même des membres y aide on ne
sait pas encore bien courir et la torpeur nous fige

l'énorme sorte de sphère en mouvement, invisible
(mais elle est de la couleur des feuilles) doit passer elle passe tout se
plie sur son passage mais les feuilles se redressent à mesure c'est encore
autre chose qu'on attend Sans pouvoir bouger mais tout correspond et
communique à l'intérieur de l'ensemble on ne désire pas bouger
puisque cela arrive et on en fait partie Assis par terre dans le sable avec
le jardin qui presse tout autour¹⁸

In the interval between the first adjective, 'assise', and the final one, 'Assis', the text shifts from the feminine to a masculine whose number – singular or plural – is unknown. The body of the poem, slipping from *on* to *nous* and back to *on*, maintains final uncertainty about the identity of the perceiving subject. Does this shift express neutrality, or rather community of experience: *on* or *nous*? The poem's movement runs counter to the laws of psychology, which hold that the child's sexual identity is gradually defined over the course of its development. Here, in contrast, experience is presented as a progress backwards, to a point beyond sexual differentiation – an anonymous sinking in to the surrounding world. Transformation is signalled solely by the grammatical alternation *assise/assis*. The screen-memory fills the distance between the little girl, captured as in a photograph, and the indeterminate being (masculine or neuter, singular or plural) surrounded by the pressure and the promise of the world, or, to borrow Andrée Chédid's expression, 'l'étreinte du jardin'. The passage, and the multivalent uncertainty in which it culminates, are exclusively expressed by means of the vowel *E*, its eclipse capturing the movement of memory and the subject's entry into the world.

Signifying *passage* merely by its oscillation between presence and absence, the *E* necessarily informs our reading of the six other texts that comprise the first group of poems, *Sept passages de la vie d'une femme*, from which the title of the

collection as a whole is taken. Neither the first-person subject nor the dual relation ('*tu, je te petite prise*'¹⁹) figures in these prose poems; rather, Risset favors a focalization that is more diffused, scattered out among *elle, nous, me, vous*, and various neuter forms. At stake is the position of the subject – of experience, memory, writing – in relation to both the scenes that the seven passages are meant to capture, and the act of writing that produces them: 'jusqu'à: tous les moyens sont derrière vous ne sachant plus A un regard – m'expose.'²⁰ However, in the seventh poem, entitled 'Enigme', *je* appears, speaking in 'une voix qui excède tout, dans le fond, là-bas'. The power of this originary voice is then manifested in a series of action verbs whose subject remains an unknown entity: 'vous mes objets Je vous remue dans ma bouche mes jolis cailloux Je vous repose peureux sur la rive où il fait froid.' Initially figured by coldness, the absence from which the voice emanates explodes at the surface of discourse, through the mediation of the verb *être*: 'depuis cette blessure que j'ai et que je suis Alors enfin, mes douceurs, je suis douce, je vous porte Je t'aime, regard terrifié qui a compris enfin, la haine.'²¹ Although the identity of the speaking *je* remains an enigma to the end, one cannot help but link the eruption of a feminine *state*, signalled by the adjective 'douce', to the fantasmatic mutilation represented by the female genitalia, and to the terror and hatred they generate, like the gaping mouth of the decapitated Medusa. Whether this horrifying 'douceur' originates in enigma or absence (the enigma of absence), and whether the wound is the source of subjectivity or song (subjectivity as inscribed in the song), the use of the feminine figure necessarily superimposes sex and gender, so that the seventh *passage*, although allegorized, is still that of a woman. From *assise* to *douce*, the elliptical presence of the *E* punctuates change, from the child's experience of physical plenitude, to the woman poet's acknowledgement of the separation wrought by language. The feminine *E* enables the poet to affirm sexual identity (and therefore personhood), even as it drains the voice of 'personal' attributes.

The 'excessive' *E* represents, then, an extraordinary economy of means. Absent or present, it *signifies*, in poetry signed by a woman. In the work of poets such as Edith Boissonnas or Andrée Chédid, who use a grammatically masculine poetic voice in order to separate the poetic from the biographical and to distinguish the poet from the woman, the intrusion of the feminine constitutes a rupture of the implicit norms of writing, marking a change in the status of the *je* forged by the poem. The two poems by Andrée Chédid entitled 'Je' in *Textes pour un poème 1949-1970* are cast in interrogative structures.²² *Je* is the object of a process of questioning that provides its own answer:

En ta part de terre
 En ta frange de temps
 Dans la ruche des mots
 Au lacis des pensées

Où es-tu,
 Qui nommes l'univers
 Et qui n'es point nommé?

Qui es-tu,
 En qui l'instant coule ses racines
 Et l'infini son reflet?²³

Je is a subject that speech divides, and yet situates familiarly in space, time, language and thought. The masculine participle 'nommé' agrees with the anonymous yet brilliant figure of the poet depicted in the text. The device of questioning the identity of the *je* 'qui n'[est] point nommé' serves to celebrate the power of the *tu* who names, the poet. The more indeterminate the speaker's identity is, the more the poetic speech is charged with latent significance. The question of the speaking person is thus seamlessly integrated into the grand tradition of the praise of poetry, so strongly present in Andrée Chedid's work. However, the words circumscribing the place of the poet – 'part', 'frange', 'ruche', 'lakis', 'racine', 'reflet' – are all suggestive of a locale that is nearby, domestic and concrete, rather than the expansive terrain of a poetry that aspires to transcendence. Prosody conspires to maintain the poet within the everyday community, due to the poem's metric instability: the mute *Es* cause the verses to hesitate between five and six syllables, depending on their metric context. Thus in the first stanza, where the initial line consists of five syllables and the last line six, the intervening lines oscillate between even and odd syllable counts, depending upon whether the mute *E* is pronounced or elided. This oscillation, in conjunction with the match between meter and syntax, maintains Andrée Chedid's free verse on the borderline between traditional prosody and plain speech, 'au présent':

Avec ce qui est là
 J'édifie mon langage

Et les mots me délivrent
 Des souffles de l'après.

Je ne parle qu'au présent
 Mais toutes les voies sont miennes,
 Eventail souterrain
 Dont je devine l'accès.

J'ai vécu chaque parole
 Avant qu'elle ne soit dite.

J'ai traversé chaque mot
 Avant d'être traversé [...]²⁴

To speak only in the present is to abjure the ambitions of epic, visionary or metaphysical poetry, and the great poetic roles: Hugo, Rimbaud, Claudel. But this restriction of the field, as it focuses lyric poetry in the here and now, situates the poet spider-like in the center of the web of language, where s/he becomes the necessary mediator, the converter of instants into words. The repetition of the masculine participle 'traversé' ('J'ai traversé chaque mot / Avant d'être traversé') underscores the reciprocal, active/passive exchange between language and poet. As in the preceding poem, the verses hesitate between six and seven syllables; the resulting rhythmic indecision mitigates the assurance of the tone. Moreover, inasmuch as 'speaking-in-the-present' is characteristic of the language of womanly domesticity, the emphatic restriction, 'Je ne parle que ...' may be read as a counter-poetics, a mandate for the conversion of culturally imposed limits into a secret source of strength. The expression 'éventail souterrain', in which an object used by women and connoting surface and lightness is associated with the antithetical notion of obscurely ramifying depths, seems to me emblematic of the complex equilibrium that Chedid's writing aims to establish between the center, where the poet, like a linguistic pointsman, is grammatically marked as masculine, and the dispersed margins where her poetry finds its figures.

When the poetic *je* is marked as feminine, the margins dominate. Such is the case in Chedid's poem, 'La fissure', published in 1950:

J'entends le froissement des mains de vieilles
 La fissure grise des pierres
 Les voix qui se séparent
 Je suis étrangère à cette Ville
 Ah! s'il n'y avait l'histoire que je me dis!²⁵

With the exception of 'froissement', all the substantives in this poem on disjunction are feminine in gender; they reverberate throughout, inevitably, with the unexpected gender of the poetic *je*, the 'étrangère'. Metrically, the poem plays on the alternation of lines of various even syllable counts – decasyllable, octosyllable, hemistich and final dodecasyllable – so that the mute *Es* must be counted. The lyric caesura in the decasyllabic line, 'Je suis étrangère / à cette Ville', prevents elision in prevowel position of the final *e* of 'étrangère', the word that reveals the status of the subject; the syncopation produced by the hiatus serves to prolong and heighten its accented syllable ('étrangère'), thereby emphasizing the gender of the speaking subject. Separated from a world that is both divided and threatened by the disintegrating force of death ('[I]es mains de vieilles'), and, in terms of grammatical gender, slightly dissonant even from

itself, the feminine voice finds recourse not in poetry, but in fiction: 'Ah! s'il n'y avait l'histoire que je me dis!' This compensatory and solipsistic narration is antipodal to the celebration of community which Chedid's poetry marks grammatically as masculine plural.

One might be led to assume that the shift in gender in this poem, and in a handful of others in the collection where a feminine *je* appears, would signal an increase in autobiographic content. Actually, however, in each of these poems the feminine is used to designate not so much a person as a *figure* – foreigner, servant, old woman, suffering lover or Ophelia²⁶ – which, since it is essentially relational, defies translation into the masculine-neuter. The feminine *je* is defined relative to another term (the City, absence, feminine community, male friend, death), thus constituting a lateral relation within the poem, rather than a vertical link to the referential subject. This structural function of linguistic gender is clearly manifested in the poem entitled 'Oui', where the implicit figure of Ophelia, and the acceptance of death that figure signifies, are sustained exclusively by means of the feminine:

Parée de fraîches étoiles
 Je glisserai dans la mort,
 Eau lointaine qui m'espérait
 Tandis que j'étais autre.
 Plus rien à effacer,
 Plus jamais de retour,
 Plus rien à ajouter,
 Mais ce *oui* enfin vécu
 En ce nôtre qui n'est plus nôtre
 Après l'amande éclatée²⁷

From this future perfect perspective, the present subject imagines herself as the bygone other of her own life, just as Western culture represents its intimate forms of otherness – madness and death – in the figure of Ophelia, abandoned to the currents. The use of the feminine in the poem points toward a presumed bond between the poetic *je* and the referential subject, whereas through the figure of Ophelia, it leads toward a radically altered state: from the perspective of death, the mobile and particularized identity of the living appears as a form of consummate alterity that is, finally, neutral (in the epicene adjective 'autre'). In the final metaphor, 'Après l'amande éclatée', sex and gender – femaleness and the feminine – are conflated and allied with death. The *E* thus transfers the difference it marks, from the subject's body ('parée') to death, which destroys that body ('éclatée'). In the course of this transferential operation, the poetic *je* encounters the plural *nous* of common destiny, 'ce oui enfin vécu / en ce nôtre qui n'est plus nôtre'. Thus, the feminine functions as a discreet shuttle in the tight

interweave of threads, between the individual and the collective, the desire to live and the acceptance of death.

In Chedid's ethical poetry, the feminine thus does not designate a unitary, biographical self which would be camouflaged if the grammatical masculine were used. Rather, it serves to conjure up a variety of figurative selves, into which the polarizing function of the poet seems to retreat, allowing the common experiences of separation, old age, and death to emerge.

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Marie-Claire Bancquart radicalizes this plurality. Her poetic *je* is not only feminine, but also named, and self-consciously a poet. By way of example, I shall take the poem 'Tentée', published in *Opportunité des oiseaux* in 1986:²⁸

Je Marie-Claire eut beau nier au nom des reliures
des musiques
du mal pris pour survivre aux humbles poulaillers.

C'est ma bête
mal portante
qui déchire mon corps.

Eboueurs célestes
caillant sur l'homme
rejoins sur l'homme
pissant
claquant
sur l'homme

ce mot comportant moi la femme
par la communauté de l'obscur de la mort
crachés dans notre chair à tous

Eboueurs célestes
vous jetez la terre aux balayures de l'univers.

Et l'herbe
rejoint le chien sans mémoire.

'Je Marie-Claire' defines herself in terms of a poetic decision ('au nom des reliures / des musiques'), against the vicissitudes of the body; her explicit desire to belong to the

universe of books involves adding to it her own name, 'in the name', precisely, of literature. But when Ronsard announces the same ambition, taking the same gamble on poetic survival of old age and death, he does not refer to himself as 'Pierre': 'Ronsard me célébrait du temps que j'étais belle.' The given name is admittedly a social designation, but it remains a private one. 'Marie-Claire' is not the name of an author, but rather that of a character, or that of the title of Marguerite Audoux's famous novel (not to mention the women's magazine that borrowed it). Overly familiar – in contrast, for example, to the exotic 'Rachilde' – it will not suffice as a means of establishing the poet in literature: rather, it establishes her in femininity. In a movement not fundamentally different from that of Jacqueline Risset's 'Screen-memory', but which is here made explicit, the private, feminine *je* is no sooner posited than the text begins to work to deparicularize and decenter it: 'humbles poulaillers', 'bête mal portante', and 'éboueurs célestes' project the suffering subject outside of self, into a shared, polymorphous pain, 'claquant sur l'homme'. Meanwhile, the generalizing term 'l'homme', mentioned almost as if in passing, is corrected and recentered around the subject: 'ce mot comportant moi la femme'. This serrating movement between the individual and the collectivity, very characteristic of Bancquart's poetry, is expressed in terms of friction between grammatical genders: tempted ('tentée') by the brotherhood of 'literature', with its promise of immortality bound between the book's covers, the poet's suffering body pulls her back into 'la communauté de l'obscur de la mort' – the supreme and opposite temptation of absolute oblivion, where 'l'herbe / rejoint le chien sans mémoire'. The silent *E* of the title encapsulates this tension.

The passage from the feminine *je* to the universal *nous* ('notre chair à tous') thus allows Bancquart to express the movement of the acceptance of death, just as in Chedid's work. But whereas Chedid uses the feminine in order to evoke certain established cultural figures (such as Ophelia, for instance, and the pathos of impending doom she symbolizes), while making the poet-wordsmith masculine, Bancquart insistently qualifies poetic activity in the feminine:

Je séparerai
Le bleu du feu

Je réveillerais le seigle et la prune
Dans l'eau de vie

L'oeuf
je le dégagerais des pâtes

Je serais ménagère à dé pétrir
Pour défaire l'homme en ses origines d'écume
Rêver les lames

De ses branchies
Persiennes plus claires au monde

Un corps qui baignerait

Une maison-monde.²⁹

Bancquart's feminine, in opposition to Chedid's, works doubly against the grain of culture. Her housewife breaks down cultural products, eau de vie and pasta, into their original components, wheat, plum, and egg – which are also, of course, cultural products, but which are anterior in the chain of production and thus closer to the physical world as well as to mythical origins, emblemized by the egg. Moreover, the activity of 'unkneading' ('dépétrissage') runs counter to the traditionally feminine tasks of assembling, integrating. However, this process of de-domestication, far from indicating a repudiation of the feminine, turns in upon itself in an involuted structure, where interior and exterior, contained and container, culture and nature are made to coincide, in the figure of the 'maison-monde.' It operates through a triadic analogy (sea = amniotic fluid = house / fish = fetus = body), itself invaginated and dominated by the idea of gestation, in which the generic notion of 'man' is homologically enveloped. In this structure, simultaneously that of the poem and that of the poetic model it proposes, the feminine as figure corrects the grammatical 'error' of the generalized masculine, in order to announce the aspiration to a poetry that would be both domestic and cosmic – an ambition close to that of Francis Ponge, although, of course, Ponge's poetic ambition translates quite differently into a thematics of ostentatious virility.

While Bancquart presents her ambition toward a universal poetry as an envelopment in the feminine, she marks the intimate activity of memory and desire by effecting a collision between genders. Such is the case in the poem 'Mémoire d'abolie', placed exactly at the center of the collection of the same name:

Pour remonter la fibre de mémoire, allumer les mots qui font mal,
appareiller en contre-corps, naviguer à l'estime,
la douleur et le cri arraisonnés en vrac,
c'est toujours le départ.
Rêve:
se flibuster
se canonner
se couler à la fin, trop heureux d'être absentée des
rôles par une opération purement personnelle³⁰

The division of the lyric subject is, remarkably, bound up in the juxtaposition of the masculine-neuter 'heureux' with the feminine 'absentée', around the verb 'être'. The

particularizing mark of the feminine inflects precisely the two adjectives in the poem, 'abolie' and 'absentée', that signify the inverse of particularity: annihilation. The feminine erupts into a context marked as violently masculine, by not only grammatical gender but also the extended metaphor of the battle at sea. Additionally, the impersonal character of the infinitive and adjective in 'se couler à la fin, trop heureux', is negated by the adverb 'trop', indicating a strong affective investment. The final phrase, 'une opération purement personnelle', picks up the feminine in the title by positing an absolutely private subjectivity. The clash between genders thus conveys consciousness's relentless struggle against itself, the wrenching tension between the will to remember and the desire for nothingness, between individuality and neutrality. The subject's abolition and affirmation are mutually dependent, and it is clearly the play on grammatical gender that enables the poet to express the imbrication of the two.

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As in the writings of Beckett or Sarraute, that which is most intensely personal is, by virtue of its very intensity, cut off from the subject as person. The body, province of a violence that forces the particular into an extreme neutrality, is our most intimate stranger. Its pain and pleasure activate and abolish the sexual difference grounded in it, as well as the specificity of the subject engaged in self-exploration through it. To write from the body thus does not entail analogical correspondence between grammatical gender and the (physiological or social) sex of the writing subject, in either the act of writing or the resulting text. Rather, it implies a strategic dissociation of sex and grammatical gender, so that the obscure links between body and poem may be refigured. Bancquart's 'maison-monde' no more originates in her sex than her memory of gunfire does, just as the 'encre opaline' Ponge uses to trace *le Soleil placé en abîme* no more flows from his own sex than does his *objet*.³¹ But whereas Bancquart's poetic *je* can figure as a buccaneer, Ponge's *je* can only use the expression 'putain rousse' in reference to his *other*, the sun. Grammatical dualism, even as it compels women poets to choose between genders in each act of poetic self-designation, opens up to their imagination an entire range of subject positions, access to which tends to be occluded for male poets by virtue of their very 'masculinity'.³² In this sense, the mobile, polymorphous sexuality that Luce Irigaray attributes to the female body might be less attached to that body than detached from *any* attribution. It might then become the prerogative of any writing ready to claim it.

(Translated by Gwendolyn Wells)

Notes

1. Rather than the promise of truthfulness, it seems to me that it is the narrator's assumption of the dual roles of author and character that forms the basis of the 'autobiographical pact' analyzed by Philippe Lejeune (*Le Pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Seuil, 1975).
2. Gérard de Nerval. 'El Desdichado', *Les Chimères*, in *OEuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. La Pléiade, 1952, p.29.
3. Paul Valéry. Letter to Aimé Laffont, September 1922. Cited in *OEuvres*, Vol. I, Paris, Gallimard, coll. La Pléiade, 1957, p.1626n.
4. Paul Valéry. *La Jeune Parque*, in *Poésies*, *ibid.*, pp.99, 100, 103.
5. *Ibid.*, pp.103-104.
6. *Les Troubadours. Anthologie bilingue*. Edited, and with introduction and modern French translation by Jacques Roubaud. Paris, Seghers, 1971, pp.310-111.
7. *Ibid.*, p.303.
8. *Ibid.*, pp.308-309.
9. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2, *Sexchanges*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.
10. Marina Yaguello. *Le Sexe des mots*, Paris, Belfond, 1989, p.11.
11. Hélène Cixous. *La Venue à l'écriture*, Paris, Union Générale d'Éditions, 1977, p.33.
12. Suzanne Juhasz. *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition*, New York, Harper and Row, 1976.
13. For a critique of the illusion of transparency underlying numerous feminist readings of women poets, see Margaret Homans. *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980.
14. Marina Yaguello. *Histoire de Lettres*, Paris, Seuil, 1990, pp.26-27.

15. Jacques Réda. *Le Grand Muet I*, in *Celle qui vient à pas légers*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1985, p.63.
16. Guillaume Apollinaire. '1909,' in *Alcools, OEuvres poétiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1956, p.139.
17. Jacqueline Risset. *Sept passages de la vie d'une femme*, Paris, Flammarion, 1985.
18. 'Screen-memory,' *ibid.*, p.9.
19. 'Des pays étranges,' *ibid.*, p.12.
20. 'Dorothéa bleu du ciel,' *ibid.*, p.13.
21. 'Enigme,' *ibid.*, p.15.
22. Andrée Chedid. *Textes pour un poème, 1949-1970*, Paris, Flammarion, 1987.
23. 'Je,' *ibid.*, p.263.
24. 'Je ne parle qu'au présent,' *ibid.*, p.192.
25. 'La fissure,' *ibid.*, p.51.
26. *Ibid.*, in, respectively, 'Solitude' (p.38), 'Chanson pour demain' (p.169), 'Un mal aux cent royaumes' (p.172), and 'Oui' (p.198).
27. 'Oui,' *ibid.*, p.198.
28. Marie-Claire Bancquart. 'Tentée,' in *Opportunité des oiseaux*, Paris, Belfond, 1986, p.50.
29. Marie-Claire Bancquart. 'Voeu,' in *Mémoire d'abolie*, Paris, Belfond, 1978, p.46.
30. 'Mémoire d'abolie,' *ibid.*, p.99.
31. Francis Ponge. *Le Soleil placé en abîme*, in *Pièces*, Paris, Gallimard, 1962, p.165.
32. This is obviously a *tendency* rather than a law of lyric poetry. All forms of fiction are, in principle, freely available to all people, even if ideology and the social constraints that weigh heavily on writing, publication and reading in fact restrict this freedom, sometimes radically. The novel and theater, since the author is conventionally dissociated from novelistic and theatrical fictions, offer a greater degree of mobility than lyric poetry which, precisely, calls this dissociation into question.