



Maitre de Flemalle (1410–1440), *L'annonciation* (detail).

CORPS D'ÉNERGIE

RITUELS D'ÉCRITURE

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

Those who are familiar with my work know that one of the most recurrent words in my writing is the word *body*. This word is usually accompanied by the words *writing* and *text*. The expression *Le cortex exubérant* illustrates the reason for this. For me the body is a metaphor for energy, intensity, desire, pleasure, memory and awareness. In fact, it is my way of saying that what interests me in the body is the circulation of energy and the way the body provides through our senses a network of associations out of which we create our mental environment, out of which we imagine far beyond what we in fact see, feel, smell, hear or taste. It is through this network of associations that we claim new sensations, that we dream backwards, in accelerated or in slow motion, that we zoom in on sexual fantasies, that we discover unexpected angles of thought.

I have always said that writing is energy taking shape in language. Sexual, libidinal, mental and spiritual energies are always setting for us the irresistible need to declare things, to make new propositions, to look for solutions which can unknot social patterns of violence and death, to explore unknown territories of the mind, to search for one's identity, to fill the gap between real and unreal. In other words, energy is the motivation, the impulse, to write; just as desire motivates or impels renewed energy to write. Energy has to go out, has to come in.

The body is its channel. But the body claims to be more than a channel: it thinks strategies to regularize the flow of energy. The body alone cannot process all energy, it needs language to process energy into social meaning. Amongst the uses that we make of language, there is a privileged one which is called "creative writing". It is in this sense that I say writing is shaping figures and meanings within the merry-go-round of energy that traverses us. Filtered by language, this energy finds a rhythm, becomes a voice, transforms itself into images and metaphors. Energy too weak keeps you silent, energy too intense makes noise instead of meaning, even though silence and noise can eventually be interpreted as an historical momentum.

Sexual, libidinal, mental and spiritual energies provided with a *motive* and/or an *object of desire* engage us in a creative dimension. When those energies synchronize they offer a very privileged moment to a writer, that most of the time we call "inspiration". Those energies can work alone or in couples. Sexual energy produces a lot of images and scenes. Libidinal energy creates projects and goals to achieve. Mental energy provides the sharpness for abstraction. Spiritual energy links us to a global environment. However, these energies can also stagnate or drive you crazy if they don't meet their object of desire or organize in such a way that they can at least dream or figure out their object of desire.

Here I would like to make a distinction between the motive and the object of desire. The motive, no matter the situation, is like an eternal return in the work of a creator. The motive is roots, flesh and skin. It is *incontournable*. It is inscribed within us as a first and ultimate memory. It is carnal knowledge. All good writers have a strong motive. The motive is most of the time hidden in the core of a work, hidden yet recurrent as a theme. It seems to me that a motive (a good reason and a pattern) is a personal existential question which makes one endlessly repeat: Why or how come? It is a three-dimensional question consequent to a synergetic moment, this moment being either traumatic or ecstatic. But with the synergetic moment gone, we are left with a three-dimensional question, a question to which we can only respond with a two-dimensional answer, henceforth a partial one which obliges us to repeat the question and to try another answer. We answer in two dimensions because we think in a chronological way, one word at a time, one word after the other while the body experiences life in a synchronic way. Writing, we have to make choices, to separate things, naming is separation. Dreams are three-dimensional but we forget about them or cannot understand them. Metaphors help us to answer our question:

meaning ————— image
sensation

As for the object of desire, it is probably always the same one mediated by the different people with whom we fall in love, by books we cannot recover from, by situations to which we respond passionately. To me, a good writer, or a good painter, always repeats the same motive, the same question, the same statement in all her or his production. Think of Kandinsky, Rothko, Betty Goodwin. A great creator is always driven by a motive as a fairly good creator has to rely on the object of desire. If the object isn't there, then nothing happens but sweat.

It is well known that people give and take energy to and from one another; that blame, insult and humiliation take away energy; that praise, love and respect multiply energy. The principle is very simple but when applied to men and women and the way they are positioned with regard to language and common patriarchal values, we cannot avoid questioning the cultural field of language which provides us with energy or deprives us of it. What I call the cultural field of language is made of male sexual and psychic energies transformed through centuries of written fiction into a standard for imagination, a frame of references, patterns of analysis, networks of meaning, rhetoric of body and soul. Digging in that field can be for a creative woman a mental health hazard. So given that situation, I would like to talk about different rituals that somehow have to be performed by a woman in order to exist in language.

Writing is a wager of presence in the semantic, imaginary and symbolic space. It prepares the advent of sense, and renders compatible the dreams and utopias that are grafted to our desires, giving them baroque forms, tragic or smiling forms. But above all writing produces a signifying presence in the body of the language, a language, let us say, that does not easily welcome the desiring lucidity of the woman subject. For language does not know anything about women, or we should say rather that it only knows the clamorous lies that generations of misogynous, sexist phalocrats have repeated to it. In fact, we know that patriarchal language discredits, marginalizes, constitutes the feminine as inferior, when it takes us into account; but most of the time, language makes women nonexistent, obliging us to perform *rituals of presence* which exhaust the most vulnerable, while electrifying the most audacious among us. Thus to write *I am a woman* is full of consequences. The work on re/presentation and appearances draws us into a trajectory which goes from fear to desire, from aphasia to memory, from fragmentation to integrity, from humiliation to dignity, from alienation to consciousness, from auto-censure to transgression. This work on appearance, this putting into form of the singular and plural emotions that traverse us like a sequence of truth is essentially ritualistic. These rituals together form a trajectory, like the momentum of energy.

By ritual I mean a whole series of gestures or postures performed for the purpose of obtaining a result. I would say that a ritual is always programmed, but of course, when we write, we forget the interior programming, and dare to use a word that astonishes us, for, in writing, we always have a certain lead on our thoughts. In fact, I am using the metaphor of ritual to describe what seems recurrent to me in the psychological and linguistic gestures that are ours when, as women, feminists or lesbians, we have to confront censure, anger, but also that joyous enthusiasm that overcomes us when we manage to identify the inner certitudes that inhabit us.

Let us say that there are two major categories of ritual: ritual with a mask that applies to the story, the novella, the novel and the essay, to all writing in prose; and ritual without a mask that particularly concerns poetry. But in one category like the other, there are different practices of ritual: ritual with trembling, ritual with shock, ritual with sliding and ritual with breath. These are the rituals I want to talk about because they transform our relationship to writing and to reality.

RITUAL WITH TREMBLING

Here it is the whole body that concentrates intensely in order to remember childhood and to untie the knots that have formed in its throat. The body hears a voice, an incessant voice that murmurs a few words in a familiar manner. The voice is like a sonorous calendar installed in a landscape or a decor, sometimes a big kitchen, sometimes a bedroom, sometimes a path, a city or a garden. The woman who writes, who wants to write, hears the voice, sees the inner landscape, knows the hour and the place of the event where something in her life began, stopped; but all this for the moment remains still unspeakable. Then the image comes back, insists, strikes the temple hard, crosses the body like a bolt of lightning. Then the body begins to tremble, the voice trembles, the image itself doubles, is transformed, becomes unrecognizable, while like an inversion in the heart of the emotion, the inner voice becomes suddenly comprehensible.

Once the ritual has begun to take shape you cannot stop it, you cannot retreat. From then on the words flow. Certain words agglomerate in little descriptive and narrative islets, others stretch out endlessly into long sentences, others remain suspended, uncertain, at the horizon of thought. But all this time, the body trembles, will tremble one more hour, the whole night, sometimes for whole years so the words will continue to flow as if their appearance depended on the trembling. She who desired nothing, who did not dare to desire, has now submitted totally to the great urgency to give a sense to the voice that grows in her.

This is what I call the ritual with trembling, a ritual that permits us at once to exorcise fear, to make the first stories burst forth, and to make the body and thought available for new emotions.

RITUAL WITH SHOCK

The necessity of this ritual comes only with the consciousness that words are made of a complex texture, of a succession of semantic layers under which we sleep, suffocate or cry. But the necessity of the ritual with shock is especially linked to a discomfort, a profound dissatisfaction, a revolt against the monolithic patriarchal sense which seems to shatter fervour, aspirations, memory and women's identity. In your head words crash into each other: the word, woman, is thrown against Man, the word insanity against reason, the word passivity against violence, the word intuition against logic. Ritual with shock translates a conflict of values, repeatedly bumping into the binary, antagonistic and hierarchical structure of misogyny and patriarchal sense.

When a woman invests a word with all her anger, energy, determination, imagination, this word crashes violently into the same word, the one invested with masculine experience. The shock that follows has the effect of making the word burst: certain words lose a letter, others see their letters reform in a different order. Thus image becomes magic: *white, light; gain, pain; reason, season; ease, sea; mild, wild; require* is transformed into *desire*. Other words are so shattered they are no longer recognizable. Thus the word *regard* can change into *vision*, *woman* into *lesbian*, *love* into *identity*.

Ritual with shock is the most violent and risky of the rituals, for the risk is great that one could wound oneself. In fact ritual with shock engenders necessarily a work of deconstruction. It momentarily fragments sense, and it is particularly this stage that is risky because then one could believe that nothing but our energy makes sense any longer. In fact, this is the case until words again sketch signifiers into which we can invest a signified.

RITUAL WITH SLIDING

We know that the life of a language is infinitely greater in what it connotes than in what it denotes. The life of a language is made of semantic and metaphoric circuits that are deployed around words and that give them either a negative or positive meaning. In fact, each word produces an odour, a perfume, a tempo. Each word has an aura. Further, we can say that all work of representation develops around this aura, that an imaginative and cognitive approach is worked out in the area of the aura.

Ritual with sliding is a ritual that demands great concentration, for its function is to displace slightly but sufficiently the semantic aura of words in such a way that they produce an unforeseeable resonance without alteration in the signifier. In general, this ritual is only practiced by those who have lived through the ritual with shock, because the knowledge acquired in confrontation is indispensable for that henceforth required by concentration. If you were to project this ritual visually, you would have to imagine rare gestures, unedited poses, an alarming intensity that transforms the tenses of verbs; you would have to imagine the body in the most fascinating of slow motions. It is a ritual that demands a great sense of equilibrium, for it presumes that numerous forces working simultaneously converge. These forces can be named: desire, sensation, emotion, idea, knowledge, consciousness, memory. The energy charge they contain can be called tension, concentration, or attention. This ritual consists particularly in concentrating sufficiently long on words (their sonority, their orthography, their usual sense, their potential polysemy, their etymology) in order to seize all the nuances and potentiality, to do this until the forces that work in us stage a scene that is absolutely unpredictable. For the function of the ritual with sliding is not to produce sense but to produce an effect. The effect is such that it conducts sense well beyond the signified. Then all the words can become the never ending theater of a series of apparitions where she who writes displaces imperceptibly but *radically* the order of the world.

It often happens that a woman in love with another woman has recourse to this ritual. And when we witness the transformation of the aura of words. I think here of words like sleep, skin, vertigo, desire, memory, etc.

RITUAL WITH BREATH

I would say that this ritual is the most closely related to poetry. Its most certain effect is to multiply energy by modulating it to the rhythm most appropriate to thought in the body. In this ritual the entire voice works very hard to find its just tonality. Nothing is more difficult than to find the right tone. In fact, it is rare that our voice is perfectly attuned. Most of the time we speak too high or too low, too fast or too slow, masking what we are really dealing with in our mind. Ritual with breath has as its goal to adjust the voice, to distance parasitical sounds, to accord our mental and psychological time to cosmic time.

There is music that we carry within us, music made of silences and harmony, privileged moments that only come upon us when our availability is total. The ritual with breath is practiced in solitude with the sound of our respiration as its only companion. It is ritual in which our humility is at its greatest, and, paradoxically, our passion ultimate.

To summarize, we could say that the ritual with trembling lets us exist, that the ritual with shock liberates linguistic space to dream and to be, that the ritual with sliding textures reality with a new sense, and that ritual with breath gives us a (sonorous) field of vision.

Trembling, shocks, sliding, breathing. When you write you know for sure that you cannot leave the body aside (even though you can stay awake for long hours, forget to eat, forget the cold or the heat). Moreover, I would say that the body is working twice as hard when you follow your thoughts. The body does not like to be the battlefield of contradictions you go through, it might not like the showers of images you impose on it. It can resist the scenes you describe. Or it can be so excited by what you envision that it makes you lose your concentration. Yes, the body responds: you shiver, you cry, your sex gets wet, you feel dizzy, your stomach is upset, you feel strong, suddenly you are exhausted, suddenly you want to celebrate. Why? After all it is just words. What is this thing which makes us without respite before the inner necessity that incites us to exorcise the nightmares, to trace our dreams and utopias, to put colour and sense into the most unexpected angles of desire, to weave into the language links so strong and yet tenuous that sometimes we no longer dare stir for fear and for joy. But we know that words are not just words. They are like little devices spread throughout our body and we don't know how and why they suddenly start to blow our mind, or when they will trigger in us pain or pleasure.

In conclusion, I would like to say that a good part of my life has gone into writing and it probably will continue to be so. Voyage without end, writing is what always comes back to seek me out in order to distance death and stupidity, fear and violence. Writing never lets me forget that if life has a meaning, somewhere it is in what we invent with our lives, with the aura of several words which, within us, form sequences of truth. I have always thought that the word beauty is related to the word desire. There are words, which, like the body, are irreducible: To write *I am a woman* is full of consequences.