



'sophie



lola

lemire

tostevin

Cover of *'sophie*, Lola Lemire Tostevin. Coach House Press, Toronto, 1988.

READING AFTER THE (WRITING) FACT

LOLA LEMIRE TOSTEVIN

Le regard allégorique qui est un regard en profondeur transforme les choses et les oeuvres par une écriture émotionnelle . . . L'ambiguïté, la multiplicité des significations est le trait fondamental de l'allégorie.

Walter Benjamin

For her presentation, Jane Gallop, the first speaker of the Public Access series of lectures exploring the interdisciplinary aspects of discourses on the body, read the introductory chapter of a new book she was launching, *Thinking Through The Body*. The cover of the book is a close-up of a child in the process of being born. Only the head has been expelled from the vagina, the face of the baby, covered in mucous and blood, faces the camera which was aimed between the mother's legs. It is a powerful photograph, reminiscent of all that is natural, primordial, and it struck me how different it was from the cover of my most recent collection of poems *'sophie*, which bears a photograph of a fifteenth century painting, *Allegory for Music* by Hans Baldung Grien. The stark difference between the two covers reminded me of the trajectory between woman represented as mother, or Madonna, and woman represented as art object, or Venus, which Julia Kristeva discusses in *Desire in Language* when she refers to Bellini's paintings of the Madonna and Venus as "the sublimation of a totalizing power, pushed to the limits of representability . . . the ultimate language of a *jouissance* at the far limits of repression, whence bodies, identities, and signs are begotten".¹

'Trajectory' and 'representation' are two concepts central to my writing. 'Trajectory' defined as the curve which a body describes in space as it travels through the air, and 'representation' defined as artistic likeness, picture, model, the action or fact of a person or thing standing for another person or thing. With so much being written about women's bodies these days it often seems as if we, as if our bodies, were being thrown into the air to see what

configurations each one will adopt in its fall. Personally, I, as I'm sure many women, could well do without another Fall. It was after all because of the mythical Eve that the gates of Eden were closed and 'woman' became known as "the Devil's door", the cause for the fall of all mankind. This myth has not only served to perpetuate prejudice against women, kept both men and women firmly planted in their proper Adam and Eve slots, it has also robbed women of the spiral the body describes as it travels its trajectory from one representation to another. It has robbed us of our process as we define ourselves through representation.

The covers of both Gallop's and my book are photographs. All mass produced covers that bear images are, of course, photographs, reproductions. In Gallop's case, it is a reproduction of a human being in the process of reproducing, of becoming a mother, while in my case, it is a reproduction of a reproduction of an original painting, an allegory for music, announcing the process of becoming a book. While Gallop's cover could initially be associated with all that is originary and natural, an 'invaginated text' that turns itself inside out and is reminiscent of the Nietzschean "mother (as) the faceless, unfigurable figure of a *figurante* (which) creates a place for all the figures by losing herself in the background, like an anonymous persona",² and implies that 'truth' can never come from a mother's mouth but only from her womb and genitals, one can't overlook the wonderful title of Gallop's book, *Thinking Through the Body*. The image, the body, is mediated by the infinite-verb of its title. Gallop's body-text is not simply reducible to a biological or sexual locus, it is mediated by thought. She dares think the body through as well as think through the body, and blurs the binary oppositional lines between the natural, the biological which is too often associated exclusively with the female, and the intellect, the cultural which is too often associated exclusively with the male.

The cover of my book, on the other hand, is aesthetic, reflecting the austere precision of fifteenth and sixteenth century art. Why did I use a sixteenth century painting by a man, an allegory for music, to introduce my book? Isn't this painting just another example of woman as muse, forever left outside the creative hub while serving as source of inspiration to man who plays the tune? When I came upon this magnificent painting at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, I was in the process of reading everything I could by and on Walter Benjamin. I was fascinated by his concept of the allegorical as originary fragment as opposed to the classical notion of the symbolic which, according to Julia Kristeva, implies a language and culture fixed within grammatical and social constraints that are bound by paternal law. Benjamin's reflections celebrate the basic characteristic of allegory as ambiguous, capable of yielding multiple meanings, a richness of extravagance, a *jouissance*, to use one of Kristeva's favourite terms. Where concepts of 'nature' and 'originary', according to the old rule of metaphysics,

are bound by law, the allegory is indirect, circuitous in its figurative representation. The voice of allegory is, in its very notion of multiplicity, a polyphonic voice. Where Gallop's image of the body is mediated through thinking, the image on my cover, an allegory for music, is that of thought mediated, made visible, by the body. Allegory is the apparition of an idea. The spirit made flesh.

I accepted to speak here tonight primarily as a writer, a maker of poems and fictions, and not as a theoretician, although I acknowledge a great debt to theory. It has helped me flesh out my thought around the scrawny skeleton of my art, the art of language. Etymologically, theory, *theoria*, derives its meaning from *thea*, seeing, and *bora*, care, attention, so that their fusion implies a careful seeing, an ability to see beyond coverings, beyond appearances. As Teresa de Lauretis points out in *Technologies of Gender*, theory is that part of discourse which seeks to account for a particular object of knowledge. It constructs that object in a field of meaning that helps to pave the passage from a symbolic system to individual perception, from object to subject, from cultural representation to self-representation, in whatever form, genre, or style that may be.

As I observe the trajectory of women throughout the history of Western Art, from the idealized image of the mother to the idealized image of the Venus, which both prefigured, prescribed the destinies of women within the economy of Western representation, I try to imagine, as a writer, my entry into allegorical existence. I try to imagine a trajectory which I can appropriate for my own inscription. The concept of 'woman' whether it is represented as mother, muse, or art object, is constructed through representation, her subjectivity established through images. The representation however, need not be fixed in its meaning but should derive its significance from an ongoing and ever changing cultural and historical chain. If, according to Benjamin, allegories are like fragments of dreams through which we remember our historical traces, they are also the centre of our imaginary traces, our poetic appearances. "L'allégorie offre à l'interprétation sa propre ambivalence incontournable".³ However, one should never be deceived by appearances. Even the naked body is only a surface, an image, a mask:

do not be deceived by appearances
I am not a woman I am a poem
feminized by my parts femoral
to carry my own weight ephemeral
to move in and out the space marked
by your absence

do not be deceived by appearances'
I am not a woman I am speech
inserted into the narrow sense
of our difference a gap to gasp
meaning arouse mutual resonance
and if you close me I will fold upon
myself press to both sides of the
page if you open me I will unfold
and for a while the appendages of
your eye will be a limb a breast
blond hair arranged in a row at
the edge of your lid

do not be deceived by appearances
I am not a woman I am words
on the prowl prose to ransack
the fiction the vision drawn to
scale laid down by law

*et je laisse rôder à travers la parole
la mémoire de mon corps*

do not be deceived by appearances
 I am not a woman I am a sequence
 dismembered each organ fastened
 to a verb the mouth to speak
 the ear to hear the eye to see
 saw to and fro the contours of my
 topic the red raw of lips that
 spread to read mine the voice
 that travels the long curves and
 turns of the poem's socket as it
 locks it to bear in mind
 do not be deceived by appearances
 I am not a woman I am a woman
 a space in space
et au sein du vide
autre chose s'annonce

at the heart of absence something
 calls cradles as each word
 subtracts and each silence adds
 to the place where the sign
 takes time to sigh
 space prescribes gesture
 the vacant course
 a recourse
 for the mind to wing it

Baudelaire's bird?
 Mallarmé's Leda?
 fluttering
 towards the gazeless stare

the verb to hold
 held in suspense⁴

During the discussion period that followed Gallop's talk, a member of the audience asked Gallop if by "body" she meant "representation of the body" and she answered that she was not sure except she thought she meant "desire".

Traditionally, art has been located in the archaic definition of desire, the experience of some originary loss and the impossible retrieval of that loss. In the last few years however, much writing has attempted to displace that archaic definition by another: desire as impulse, as beat that liberates writing from its metaphysical, historical and psychoanalytical treatment. Women are tired of looking into a mirror and seeing nothing. They have come to the realization that although language is not a mirror and will not retrieve loss, its presence gives them joy, *jouissance*. I can't speak, will not speak for other women, but I know that for myself it's no longer possible to write from a concept of absence, of loss, nor is it possible to write within the frame of conceptual opposition inscribed within our dominant cultural discourse.

Other than the joy that writing gives me, I don't know what I want to achieve when writing, what trace, what configurations I can fashion as I travel my trajectory. I do know that it isn't enough for me to displace the Law of the Father, or what has been defined as phallogocentricity, with the Law of the Mother, or vulvalogocentricity, since that would keep me within the boundaries of conceptual opposition. Various images blur the lines between the roles I strive to represent. I am a mother, but that is not the locus of my identity. I am a writer, but hopefully, not at the expense of my being a mother or a teacher or a lover. I am a teacher only because I am a writer. I love theory because it informs my writing and vice versa. I don't know where I'm heading as I continually toss myself into the air, but as one of my favorite writers and mentor, bpNichol taught me, I trust the words to take me to what place I don't know:

listening to Lady Day you forget about lyrics hear
 the mystery of voice trace in time a space between
 the lines one note above one note below the melody
 flowers beyond measure too marvellous for words give
 me more and more and then some

on a postcard photograph on my desk gardenias
 stick out from the side of her head like antennas
 no sound must have gone past her

this morning I placed a bunch of gardenias by my
 typewriter looking for the same intoxicating scent
 that must have hovered about her scent of jasmine
 jazz that mines the slow unfurling of delicate petals
 beating time into unknown space

listening to Billie you forget about words sweet
 strains don't explain you know what it means

beyond my window a bird is tracing against the sky
 the mystery of flight as near as words I move closer
 to you⁵

As I've already stated, the cover of my book is the representation of a body, a representation that moves beyond the literal, just as the book's language moves beyond the linguistic order of the symbolic towards musical allegory; "dans le cycle sans fin des métamorphoses, le son naturel tend à la musique. . ."⁶ In the endless cycle of metamorphoses, natural sound tends towards rhythm, cadence, music. It is between this music, between the rhythm of poetry and signification, that a book acquires its shape, its configuration, a body of poems, body as book, book as corpus, a becoming in poetry, "the birth of a molecular woman in music, the birth of a molecular sonority in a woman";⁷ where all becoming begins and passes through the becoming of her own representation. The book knows itself to be book and its title, '*sophie* seeks, through a small stroke of a pen, to leave a mark, an apostrophe which, for a short while suspends the other's presence. An allegory resembles an apostrophe in that it suspends one presence and replaces it with another. For a short while "Phil" will disappear from *philosophie* and leave '*sophie* to her knowledge, her music, her desire.

,

I write because I can't sing I am the book exiled
 from my voice in search of a melody but like the woman
 who is blind because her eyes are filled with seeing
 and like the woman who is deaf because her ears are
 filled with hearing I am mute because my voice is filled
 with words and unlike music I can only be understood
 and not heard

as *These Our Mothers* have said we cannot hide
from ourselves the fictional character of the first A
but neither can I hide the love and the endurance
of that fiction I write the letter *a* as my ancestral
cry, cry of the *anima* a vociferous bird from Patagonia
whose beak is a remedy for those whose words fall out
of their mouth too early or too late

I echo the bird's song with eloquence oracular mood
of the loon invent music to the measure of its breath
but because I am word it will never be heard

,

harmony doesn't exist before the lyre
the village wizard said as she placed

seven pebbles

on my tongue and sealed my mouth
with moss from a dead woman's skull

anointed me with weapon salve
to cure the wound through that which caused it

seventh daughter of a seventh daughter
she understood the ancient art of alchemy

that extracts from stones a substance
reducible to its most perfect form

seven letters

that put to the mouth the sounding
and O how that sound surrenders

,

in spite of being tone deaf
the song was a ruse to please

from the utterance that came
they perceived a sound

that moved them
and they were frightened

“but the Incantatrix speaks
tongues” the Zealots said

so they swam the witch
and the witch sank as proof

of her innocence but then I
would have drowned in water

held in the palm
of your open cupped hand

,

once the word was invented it was just a matter of
time before we all set out to find the real thing
and like the omnipotent being that brings itself into
existence you walked in stood your post ceased to be
a figment of my imagination

what did you change from? which game? whose power
of enchantment grew out of whose chimera?

your lion's head
the body of a goat
a dragon's tail
your face a fable

your phrases tracing shackles around my thin shin bones

when it's a matter of getting to the point to the
 source you outrun me curious courser swift as the
 arrow you follow while I crawl at the tortuous pace
 of the crooked foot tortoise in search of the sound
 your arrow makes when it reaches then wrenches from
 the real thing⁸

The original *Song of Songs* from the Old Testament is fundamental to the amorous discourse by virtue of the staging-by-voice of a woman as the active subject of the amorous enunciation. I have no doubt that the Old Testament was written by men, nevertheless *Song of Songs* is the one evocation where a woman is sovereign, or at least she is presented as equal to her beloved and just as I appropriated Baldung Grien's image to cover my book, myself, I appropriated *Song of Songs* and reconstituted the text through my own staging-by-voice, my own amorous discourse. Love, sexuality unwound from the mouth, the body, between music and signification, to produce an aesthetic discourse. The "I" of the text is a being of language calling on itself to represent itself in an Eden of language.

1

I was at your side then
 remember?
 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

2

love's liturgy

Mozart on the tape deck winding
a voiceless *Lied*
song of the disowned

strummed over and over
a fear of no love that only love
can sire

where is my consort from the city of Marib
who always hung out by the moon of Almaqah
his hair a flock of sheep?

where will we fold at noon he and I
this other woman of frankincense
was I queen Sheba or Shulamite

holy whore from the wilderness?
myrrh between my breasts
blackroot of spikenard in my hair

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

3

had we been friends we could keep meeting
like this by the stairs keep whispering
in the voice of turtles (your hand on my thigh
a cunning)

had we been brother and sister
a seal upon our lips our words
would quench

had we been lovers
would I in your eyes . . .

but when you say love me
as thyself I can only answer
not yet not yet

4

a palm of carnelian
a cuff of fine silver
a mouth of far away

these were the gifts
of an anniversary

every marriage finds its image
in a song but if we can't
find the way to one another
young goats from the far east
will come to guide us

and should you not show up
by Friday the hahhuru bird
will nest in our bed
will avouch you dead
its words always self-fulfilling

5

I sleep
while my heart walks

your voice knocks
keeper of my walls

your hand in me I open
Shir-ba-Shirim

6

canticum canticorum
a little cant
a little cum
where only the wet phrase
holds an element of truth
mouth roofed by your soft
mouths off a ricochet
of bilabial syllables
accelerates its triangular ligament
to let you ride
to let you ride my little
red little red riding hood

7

in everything that came to us unspoken held us at a distance
 made us reach until the reaching paved the way towards
 the assurance that we belong to everything that spoke to us
 unspoken drew us into each instant that moved us into saying
 each saying moving into everything that came to us unspoken
 back and forth back and forth into saying

the connective tissue we hadn't counted on darkness
 when the eyes give no sense of who we are or where
 except for memory inside the palm that makes of touch
 the test and brings back everything that came to us unspoken

8

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 for⁹

NOTES

1. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* Trans. Gora, Jardine & Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 269.
2. Jacques Derrida, "All Ears: Nietzsche's Otobiography" trans. Avital Ronell. *Yale French Studies*, 63 (1982), 250.
3. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La raison baroque de Baudelaire à Benjamin* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1984), 69.
4. Lola Lemire Tostevin, *Double Standards* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1985), unpaginated.
5. Lola Lemire Tostevin, *'sophie* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1988), 9.
6. Buci-Glucksmann, 70.
7. Alice A. Jardine, *GYNESIS Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 214.
8. Tostevin, *'sophie* 10-14.
9. Tostevin, *'sophie* 67-74.