

L'Amèr or the Exploding Chapter: Nicole Brossard at the Site of Feminist Deconstruction*

Barbard Godard
York University

“That necessary violence responds to a violence that was no less necessary.... If I distinguish the text from the book, I shall say that the destruction of the book, as it is now underway in all domains denudes the surface of the text.”¹

“The distrust of the stereotype (linked to the bliss of the new world or the untenable discourse) is a principle of absolute instability which respects nothing (no content, no choice).... Another bliss (other edges): it consists in de-politicizing what is apparently political, and in politicizing what apparently is not.”²

“How to speak to get out of their partitionings, squarings off, distinctions, oppositions.... How to unchain ourselves from their terms, free ourselves from their categories, divest ourselves of their names? Disengage ourselves *alive* from their conceptions?”³

“They (a new generation of women) are attempting a revolt which they see as a

resurrection but which society as a whole understands as murder. This attempt can lead us to a not less and sometimes more, deadly violence. Or to a cultural innovation. Probably to both at once.”⁴

“The Disintegrating Chapter,” the subtitle of Brossard’s theoretical fiction, *L’Amèr*, points to the effect this unauthorized communal feminist text has in dissolving the authority of a male tradition of the book. For it denounces the economics of proprietorship on which authorship is based, exposing the violence of both economic and literary codes of exchange which are based on an appropriation of matter. These are to be replaced by maternal values of interdependence and multiplicity.

It is difficult to write about Nicole Brossard’s work for it reaches into the unnamed, weaving itself around a series of communicative events. Unique moments, these are produced by the “exuberant cortex,” the “ardent centre” which expands in vertiginous movement through the fission of its energy. A mobile text and thus difficult to apprehend, *L’Amèr* is also a para-

doxical one, involving a return to origins and a negation of this generating source, written to resist the mother from within the circle of her embrace. As such, the text invites new critical approaches which can stretch with the dance of its atoms and contradictions. One might, as Louise Forsyth has done,⁵ make of the critical text an amorous one, a dialogue in the language of the original text, to avoid the trap of meta-criticism, or in a similar spirit articulate a glossary of key Brossardian words as Suzanne Lamy has done.⁶ My approach to Brossard will be somewhat different in that I wish to expose the *cutting* edge of Brossard's vision, her effort to break in order to remake, the curative surgery (p.48) she has undertaken to perform on tropes and language wherein we order our perceptions of reality. In doing so I shall use the language of Brossard's major sources, those theoreticians quoted in epigraph, in an effort to elucidate the epistemological impact of her texts in a feminist context. And here I take my lead from Brossard's own clue as to the initial matrix of the text in the word "différé" to advance a differential analysis still within the linguistic frame of her text but eschewing paraphrase.

For there is no denying *L'Amèr* is a violent book. It is a session of Wendo, of self-defence against the violences of patriarchal discourse. "C'est le combat. Le livre." ("It is combat. The book.")⁷ announce the opening sentences and Brossard's aim, to denounce this ideology⁸ that controls the way in which meaning is produced, is punctuated by the leitmotiv "dérive" (un-moored, p.34), "délire" (un-read, p.51), "défigure" (disfigure, p.61) and "dé-faire" (un-do, defeat, p.61). The protagonist is described as "a fuse and political" (p.68) who will shatter the book from within, hence "the disintegrating chapter" of the subtitle.

This violence done to form finds a corresponding physical manifestation. Chapters are abolished in favour of five moments; the first of these "L'Amèr"—which means anti-mother, mo-

ther articulated the silent "e" abolished, bitter, love, sea—commences with a primal act of violence, matricide, which is also a suicide: "J'ai tué le ventre" ("I've killed the womb" p.11). This is the protagonist's rejoinder to compulsory motherhood, a response to the institutional violence which would valorize woman only in her role as symbolic mother, only in her dependence upon man. The suicide of a fictive self is a salutary first step toward authentic self-hood. As presently constituted, woman's position in society must be arrived at through initiation to the dominant male. Brossard describes this relationship in terms of violence done to women. Coitus, encoding the supine position of women in society, is described in terms of battle: "alors fuse mitraille des entrailles" ("from guts bullets jet out" p.93), "un coup de blanc" (which means both "a jet of white" and "a white blow" p.13) or as nuclear "fall-out" ("A me polir un oeuf contre le muscle lourd d'un mâle tout lourd des *retombées* de son savoir" p.92). A series of images conveys the physical violence of these power relationships ordained by the penis/weapon ranging from the surgeon's knife cutting a child from the womb to the same knife amputating a cancerous breast.

Even more pervasive than this dismemberment of the female body is the aggression of the male eye through which he appropriates, fragments, and reifies women. As subject, he looks at women to classify his understanding of them and projects his desire onto them as objects. Brossard describes these acts of perception in terms of rape in the section "L'Acte violent de l'oeil au mauve"—this "mauve" alluding to *Les hanches mauves*, a book on sado-masochism by Yves Gabriel Brunet—where "le regard saisit" the woman, "apprehends" her, "perception" implying "capture," taking. Like many other women writers from Quebec, Brossard is exposing the implacable violence—separation, castration—constituting the symbolic order from which women feel their affective lives or condition as social beings are brutally excluded, ignored by existing discourse or power. For

them, the social order is experienced as sacrificial, a contract which they are affirming they have been forced to assume against their will, the violence of their exacted submission being experienced as rape (“écran propre à justifier *de fait* le viol” p.15) or imprisonment (“fils barbelés,” “barbed wire” p.16).

Brossard’s text aims to change this situation by breaking into the symbolic order to open it up to the female experience, that is to an active experience of otherness or difference which will overthrow the patriarchal monopoly with its “mastery” over the production of meaning. *L’Amèr* introduced the free play of signifiers to escape the tyranny of the one by dint of multiplication. In so doing it breaks the rules of grammars, linguistic and literary ones as well as social and economic. Brossard has a Nietzschean sense of language in which concept and figure work to repress differences, central among these being sexual difference which, in the words of Irigaray, is Difference itself. Brossard originally planned to title her book *En differé* or *Dans le differé*⁹ to underline her project of exploring *different* or *deferred meaning*. By examining what they suspend or suppress in society, woman, she hopes to expose the excessive metaphors of the dominant males, just as Foucault’s differential analysis of insanity exposes the excesses of rationality. In the book, this suspension of meaning has been made concrete. “Fictional theory: words will have served only in the ultimate embrace. The first word lips *and* saliva sticky on the breasts. Theory begins when the breast or the child moves away. Strategic wound or suspended meaning” (p.6). The Brossardian text is located in that space between the breast and the child, the narrative revealing itself as the reproduction of the species and the theoretical text about its own processes of production, moving back and forth from mother to against mother. Through its ungrammaticality, its breaking of the rules, *L’Amèr* would effect a radical critique of the “phallogocentrism” of male discourse. As this term and the other familiar feminist word “phal-

locrat” suggest, these codes intersect vertically in the text around the issue of centre or authority which is metaphorically represented by the ego in psychology, the father in the family, God in religion, the logos in philosophy, the penis in sexual politics. A brief enumeration of these figures overtoppled (and their corresponding codes shattered) will illuminate the nature of Brossard’s “sexual” revolution.

1. Social Codes

Brossard engages in a critique of social organization under patriarchy by reflecting on the figure, womb, along with its homonyms, tomb and room. Under the Fathers, according to Brossard, woman is matter/mater, reduced to the body. Women’s participation in society is limited to that of reproduction. Her womb is thus not her own but occupied by the penis first, then the child, a process experienced as a radical splitting of the self and doubling of the body. “L’espèce, de corps meurtris” (“The species, from murdered bodies” p.26), writes Brossard, underlining the paradoxical destruction of birth. Only by becoming a symbolic mother (p.19) or a whore can a woman participate in the social order, only by submitting herself to a male fiction of her which reduces her to her bodily functions. “In appropriating for himself the entire symbolic domain, that is to say a vision, man has affirmed himself by laying hands on all the modes of energetic production of the human body (brain, uterus, vagina, arms, legs, mouth, tongue). Inasmuch as it is fragmented, woman’s body, woman cannot broach the global vision of man” (p.19). Woman thus obtains no profit from her participation in the symbolic order which, under the patriarchy, is a monopolistic one. Her children, who are her profit, are not exchangeable. Moreover, the patriarchal mothers sitting on the bench with their products, children, have been rendered mute (p.24). “Stuck in matter and on their children” (p.19), they cannot separate from a presumed state of nature and constitute the signs and syntax of language that is introduced

with an articulated network of differences referring to objects separated from a subject. Not able to separate from the breast and produce theory, they remain objects.

To cease to be a mother is to break out of this order of reproduction, a break which the protagonist effects by killing her womb and writing it. She kills the symbolic mother, mouthless and all womb for reproduction, which is a male phantasm of her. In this way, she becomes different from herself, separation and coexistence of the self and another — nature, consciousness, and speech. And she writes herself into language, into history through her new product, the book, which retains a connection with the old maternal order of the breast and of touch as opposed to the paternal order of the word (pp. 31-2) through the very materiality of this book which she produces. She now has a “room of her own.”

2. Economic Codes

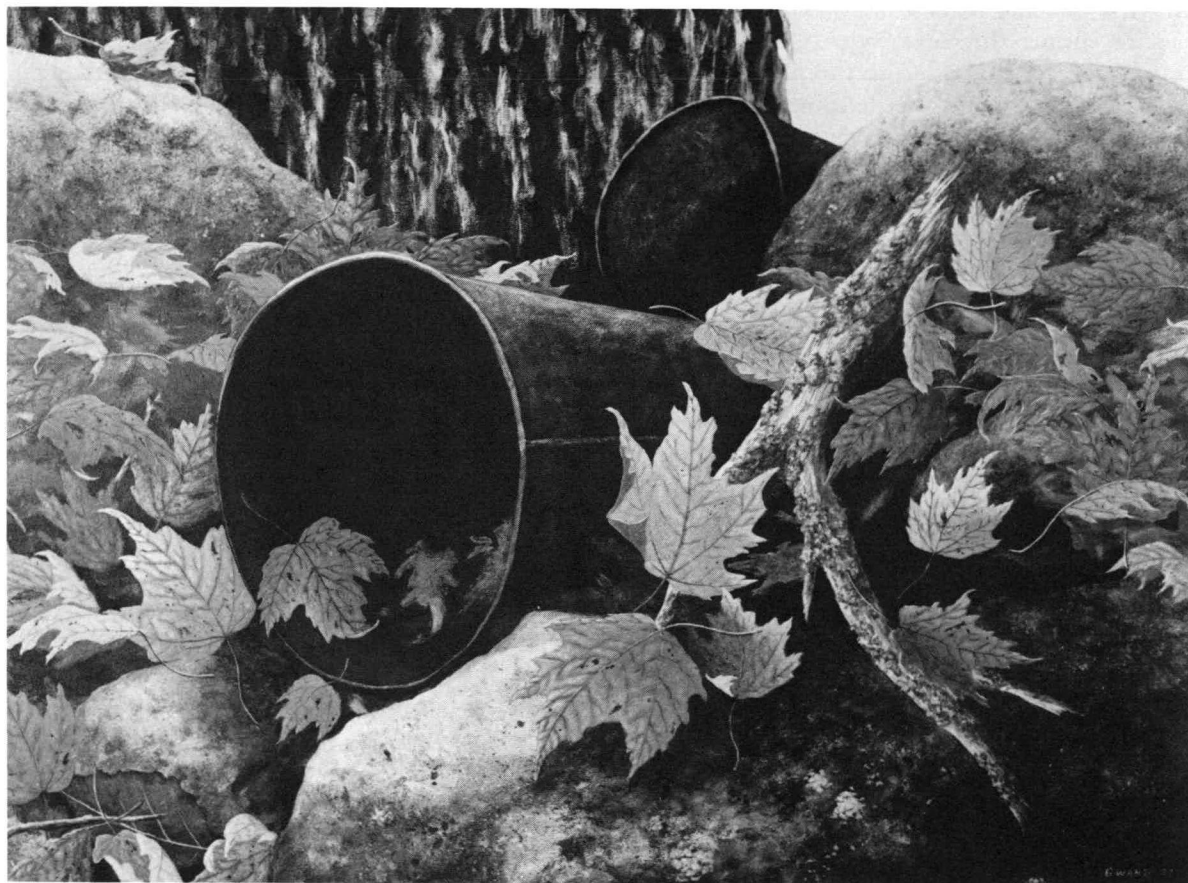
Brossard's vision of society, as we have seen, is shaped by a Marxist analysis of the position of women in society and the hegemony of ideology, those myths of representation through which individuals are reconciled to their social positions. Male/female relationships are equated to the dominator/dominated positions of the capitalist and the proletariat. Women's destruction of their reproductive capacity has affinities with the Luddite attack on machinery, with a telling difference, however, in that they create a new order. For the woman, the white page becomes a symbolic womb in replacement of the real one, a “cortex” (p.57) or “body/text.” Through this creation of a symbolic order, through her writing of a book, the protagonist creates a product that leaves the domestic enclosure to circulate in the marketplace. The woman can earn profit from this product and has wrested control over her body/text.

3. Biological Codes

“En toutes lettres JE SUIS STERILE” (“in all letters I AM STERILE” p.45) announces the protagonist, entering the wor(l)d of men. When the womb is killed, the separation effected between Mother and Nature leads to the disruption of the biological processes of reproduction. No longer will the trajectory of the species continue unimpeded. The resulting “dissolution of forms, like an end of the world played out on the stage of the flat belly” (p.25) makes woman a biological aberration, a grotesque, as she seeks out new modes of locomotion in order to circulate. Her uterus is now carried beside her like a knapsack (p.25). For, in exchanging her womb for a book, the protagonist has externalized it, made it portable. Although this rejection of her biological function would seem to make the protagonist an imitation male standing outside and against nature, this new woman-as-subject is expressed in tandem with a different immersion in nature explored in the fourth section, “Vegetation,” where the evolutionary process is experienced inversely. Here “in the middle of the grass dream of the letter in the beginning ‘river woman with dog's teeth,’” (p.78) the protagonist “proceeds *civilized* among the vegetation” (p.79) moulting (p.45) and mutating to create a new species of woman who is civilized *because* of her body, her senses. Her very inseparability from nature makes her literate: “versatile miscible tongue with the noise salt skin to convince you before the patriarchy that the mouth stirs with an I — it's civilized I am making me literate but body like the sea” (p.83). The play on the word “tongue” (‘langue’ in French also means language) allows her to write the body. The flesh is made word, not the word made flesh.

4. Historical Codes

The paradoxical movement of evolution sketched in by this rupture of biological norms is at the heart of the dislocation of history effected by *L'Amèr*. As reproduction ceases, the teleo-



A Season Past, 1977
20" x 24" acrylic on masonite
Gertrude Ward, (Fredericton, N.B.)

logical impulse of history is subverted, the trajectory of the species no longer moving in linear fashion from generation to generation through the murdered bodies of women, but opening to include women — mothers and daughters, every woman a daughter — in their varied interrelationships in what constitutes a cyclical vision. Brossard situates her text between the shifting perspectives, simultaneously experienced, of herself as mother and as daughter, the three women bound in a single embrace. History becomes herstory. Story becomes word (of woman's body). As Brossard's puns on the word "histoire" — meaning both history and story — make clear, that linear vision has been a male fiction which has alienated women from their true selves, which are shifting and mobile in a spiral that continually turns back on itself. Her 'story,' like the new women's history, is also a spiral construct. The temporal sequence of Brossard's fiction rejects the formal concepts of beginning, middle and end and is structured around five moments. It also paradoxically synthesizes futurist science-fiction images of the new woman with the archaic great mother whose statue, toppled to the ground, has taken root, shooting up sprouts. Utopian vision, fusing past and future, against *history*.

5. Legal Codes

As they exist, laws concerning male/female relationships reflect the power relationships of dominator/dominated. In matrimony, the hands "are given in marriage" (p.81), the woman offered up to the fragmentation of her body as the male appropriates her means of production for his profit. This dismemberment is recognized legally. She has no name, no legal identity except that conferred on her by her husband whose name she bears. Moreover, she becomes his dependent or chattel (*chatelaine*), a minor under his tutelage. "L'insensé de la mise en tutelle" ("the senselessness of being put into tutelage" p.81) writes Brossard. But in killing her womb and writing it, the woman inscribes

her signature, asserts her name. "In the City, traces, leave the stakes, *nicole*, without erasure" (p.95).

Moreover, in the very identification of woman and girl implied in the legal equation of women and minors lies the seed for subverting this order. The phrase "A côté d'elle, posée comme une fille, une femme" ("Beside her posed like a girl, a woman" p.25) underlines the shifting perspective of the protagonist, now mother, now daughter. A conscious return to her girlhood opens on to a time before menstruation when her body was her own. No menstruation, as the protagonist writes, is "dérèglement," "irregularizing, cataclysm of forms" (p.32). It also brings to the surface the nature of the relationships between mother and daughter, based on touch, and opposed to those of father and child dependent upon the litigating word. Remembering this "difference" (p.34), how she dreamed about writing on her mother's tombstone in a separation from the body, she generates literary activity. "Comme une oeuvre d'art: alphabet calligraphique de mon enfance. Ce *dessein* d'enfant." ("Like a work of art: calligraphic alphabet of my childhood. Child's *de-sign*" p.34). By becoming a child again, she can create words, for she has not yet become the muted feminine womb. Her creativity is dependent on this willed matricide/suicide, on this separation from the breast ("dessein"). Here, too, the way backward is the way forward.

6. Logical Codes

At the heart of Brossard's rupture of rules is her subversion of the rules of logic. As she writes: "(Ideological). We are entering on a time when the logic of identity is visible coming into being: homoindividual" (p.43). In the third section entitled "The State of Difference" she develops a grammar of difference to oppose the principle of identity which, in the form of self-consistency, is one of our rules of logic. The protagonist, in becoming a girl carnally linked to her mother,

introduces the figure of two women embracing and with it the *endless* pleasure of lesbian love. Not only does this disrupt further the social codes of matrimony and motherhood but, more centrally, those of logic. For the female body, no longer single but doubled or multiplied, challenges the foundations of identity, unitary authority on which the discourse of patriarchy has been based, principle which has excluded women (p.37). This interlacing of women's bodies and voices confuses the categories of identity and difference, of self and other ("même" and "autre")¹⁰ central to Western philosophy. Following in the path of de Beauvoir, who showed that males had appropriated "the self" and assigned "the other" to women, and of Luce Irigaray and Jacques Derrida, who have attacked the centrality of the logos in Western metaphysics, Brossard argues for a plurality of centres. The lesbian couple is "the ultimate contradiction" (p.34), unthinkable, logically preposterous because it confuses the categories of similarity and difference. This confusion is developed in a series of complex puns and paradoxes. This "different" woman who is "identical" to herself, synthesized with herself as "difference itself" is one part of a "differential equation," "dérivées" (derivative and adrift) in a "polysemous dream" (p.35). She is thus totally inconsistent, disrupting the rationality of philosophy. These women lovers also undermine any attempt at a singular meaning or Truth, their resemblance involving repetition and their paradoxes implying oscillation, both creating deferral of meaning. ("The difference is that I can't live in deferral" (p.35). The contact with the woman's breast is maintained, the body of the mother is still present, but in a different manner, since separation from the symbolic mother has occurred and words are being produced weaving a text, though contact with the real mother's body is maintained. "Whether ink or saliva" (p.39). This new woman is paradoxically both mother and father to herself and her text, reproducing it materially and producing it theoretically. "Word by word to replace the hand to hand" (p.21). The double-

ness and movement of this *singular* being makes this personage difficult to apprehend and forces an exit from the confining fixed gaze through which males apprehend "lait femmes" ("milk women," "the women" p.59).

7. Representational Codes

This explosion of the fixed images effected by the orgasmic lesbian text — "The shattering of differences like an entrance into fiction. An active orgasmic bliss of rupture" (p.38) which disrupts reproduction — also subverts codes of representation and figuration. The fixity of the male gaze — Narcissus looking with the mirror of his eye, reflecting the single meaning of his experience on which his ideology of difference is based, his fictional reproduction — has been a violent act of "défiguration" ("disfigurement" p.61). Women's experience has been entirely defined for them by the figure of symbolic mother he has created for them. These abstractions have defaced women, the mother goddess has been thrown down, villified. Women have been represented as "Corriveaus" — witches — or mutilated by ogres in children's tales (pp.74,71, 61). Just as the killing of the womb breaking women's bond to the reproduction of matter dislocates a whole constellation of tropes and myths, which have been key to the literary representation of women — mother nature, sea mother, life and death force, as underlined by the puns of the title — so too the multiple lesbian figure "breaks the contract binding her to figuration, to representation" (p.60). Rather than playing out the roles of her fictive and fictional self, located in the exclusive stage of the male eye, in the section "Act of the Eye," the lesbian lover moves into the eye to explore the sensations of vision from many different angles — inner vision, second sight, that of the rolled-up eye, delirious, of the weeping eye blinded by a curtain of water, — all animated by the passionate centre of her experience. This is to feel from within what it is to catch the vital form of the female. Mimesis ceases. Through an active exploration

of what it is to *make sense* using all the senses at one's disposition — touch, taste, voice — the lesbian lover offers a plurality of impressions and meanings. "Tonight, I am going over in my head the foam and my mouth so that both share in nourishing the meaning we found it there again stronger than the wind the sensation of the bees exhorting us in the garden" (p.52). The emphasis is on the process of production of meaning, which may take many forms for different readers working from these generating sensations.

In the text, the language of the senses is associated with the activity of the eye and both are intermingled with the language of ideas. Repeated phrases underline the materiality of words. "Matter and words" (p.20); "The idea: form a body" (p.45). These emphasize a concern for the phenomenal body and the phenomenology of the acts of writing and reading foregrounded in the self-reflexive, metafictional phrases in the text. "The true finding of one's subject matter. Properly speaking, become materialistic" (p.21). This concreteness dissolves in a flow of sensation the fictions and figures by which men have defined and confined women, keeping the text open and suspending meaning. "The figure is unrecognizable at high speed. Intense unreadable" (p.59). "The figure is real like a political intent to submit to the plural before one's eyes, or singularly to power." This double figure, real, stands in marked contrast to the "realistic figure...the most submissive of all. Quite simply she agrees" (p.59). Production, process, precludes reproduction, mimesis. When the terms "original/reproduction" (p.36) are inverted, the woman's text becomes exploratory, innovative.

The concreteness also disrupts our notions of inside and outside, of fiction and reality by blurring the boundaries between them. As Brossard writes: "Fiction/reality. We confound there the body and the City. Grammar of compound-words."¹¹ Significantly throughout *L'Amèr*, she plays on the word "réellité" (p.66) — both "real-

ity" and "about her" — to underline the fact that women's fictions are based on the realities of women's lives, not on male fictions of these lives which have hitherto been ideologically imposed. Throughout the book an effort has been made to light up the private lives of women, to find words for their sensations, to write another, a different reality. Male fictions must be exploded to let in female reality, thus implicitly overturning the whole concept of fictionality, notably the representation of reality.¹² In the final section, "Fictions," the "political fiction" is a story intercepted, taken over, by the "private fiction," the one experienced by the body, giving birth to a daughter.

8. Literary Codes

In tandem with her deconstruction of symbolic and social orders, Brossard explodes the Book with its connotations of the book of truth to weave, instead, from the fragments or words, from their phonemes or morphemes, a text. As we have seen, many of the conventions of fiction have disintegrated. Character, and the entire concept of characterization, has been defaced, decapitated, doubled, negated — shown to be tropes with no basis in reality. Fictions. Feminist doubling replying to masculine dismemberment. Brossard's characters, no longer psychologically motivated beings, explore this tension. Partly logical constructs of similarity and difference as we have seen partly real people — Nicole Brossard, her mother, her daughter, her woman lover — the characters¹³ participate in the transgressing of boundaries between fiction and reality. The paradoxes thus engendered are especially active when, near the conclusion, Brossard leaves her mark in the city, as she has indeed done by signing this book, writing "nicole, sans rature" (p.95) emphasizing her reality in this book as its creator and as its protagonist. Because she is not "under erasure," she actually exists.

This dissolution of character implies an absence of plot, of narrative line. As we have seen,

the book moves both forwards and backwards around the fragmentary phrase or word, especially around the matrix "L'amèr" ("La mère, matrix and materialist" p.24) whose sounds generate many other words in "free association" (p.39). The chapter disintegrates as episodic development is replaced by a collage of sensations, anecdotes, quotations, meditations, dislocating our concepts of genre. Just as *L'Amèr* is no book, no fiction, but a text composed of words, a melange of manifesto and autobiography, of poem and philosophical treatise, so too has it lost an author and become a proverbial Spanish Inn housing many authors. The multiplicity of female bodies, which decentres the concept of being, finds amplification in the multiplicity of female voices, which subvert the concept of authority. This is an unauthored text, unauthorized, an exemplum of feminist intertextuality, a text generated from many other texts in a female lineage, as the meditations on texts by writers such as Virginia Woolf and Colette in the section "Act of the Eye" illustrate. With its loving allusions, shared vocabulary and plagiarisms, the communal feminist text denounces the economics of proprietorship on which authorship is based, undermining the violence of both economic and literary codes of exchange which are based on an appropriation of matter. In their place is advocated multiplicity, sharing, cooperation.

Just as a female tradition is established symbolically, it is also developed materially. Perhaps the greatest subversion of literariness we encounter in *L'Amèr* is its disruption of the fiction of the book. No abstraction, but a physical reality it is and Brossard underlines its materiality as an object through a series of carefully maintained double meanings that evoke the acts of writing and reading materially. "A text. It's as though obliged to coincide in my eyes. In my mouth, under my eyes it gives me an effect of paper it is written just the same there is a woman's body in my eyes, the subject" (p.76). Here subject ambiguously refers both to the "I"

behind the eyes and to "the woman's body," subject matter. The book is not revealed truth, but is constructed from paper, a fact Brossard also draws to our attention in a comment on the acid eating through the paper (p.34), or the "rustling of the paper" (p.64) reminding us of its perishability. So too she foregrounds its raw state through the work effected on the blank page to transform it into text. "The amazons break their arrows on the blank page" (p.93) writes Brossard and follows this line with three-quarters of a page of white. While they are writing the inconceivable, the unthinkable, the unheard of, these women are actively engaged in that white space where they are making physical gestures. The penis/pen equation is blocked by the amazonian arrows, the lover's hand on the breast (p.21) instead of the child's mouth. "Either ink or saliva" (p.39) fluids flow, words run out from the openings of the body, the text. Female desire resists closure.¹⁴

It is also turned aside by passages linking the act of writing to house work (washing dishes p.39), childcare and lovemaking — "Orgasm and labour as two slopes of the same entity" (p.11) — which remind us of the material conditions in which women's writing is produced and of the vast amount of physical labour which has often bound them to literary silence. "My mother is drinking her beer. She is writing while I wait for her to give me a cookie" (p.12). "Mummy is close by writing my lu lay" (p.17).

This metaphorical penis is also turned aside by the activity demanded of the reader turning those white pages, reading time having taken into account this physical gesture by graphically giving it its place. The act of reading is changed by this materiality. This is no readable book for easy consumption. The reader is not passively awaiting the writer's words but must go forward to meet them, for the book demands our participation as co-creators. We must *make* its sense. The text is perpetually made and unmade. The refusal of the authority of the signified means

rejecting the status of defined object in favour of the dynamics of becoming. This implies a privileging the freedom of process rather than the permanence of product. Meaning is deferred and different as the reader actively works on the contradictions and confronts the gaps. That there will be a multiplicity of readings, each reader approaching the text with her own history, is a strategy actively advanced by the text.

The hesitating fragments of sentences, snippets of story, fleeting sensations of the text are aligned at the margin, placed in condensed lines (which obviate their dispersed references) high on the page like a poem to be considered simultaneously. The vast white spaces surrounding them allow for the turning of the page as well as for the reading of the word. Silence is valued equally with words, meaning being created in the gap which allows for our interpretive attempt. Linear patterns of reading fiction are destroyed here as they are by the poetic techniques of repetition, intratextual and intertextual allusion which emphasize the verticality of reading, doubling the text, sending us backwards as well as forwards in it. As well, Brossard makes use of a variety of printing techniques to unfold the words before us in a spectacle — italics, capitals, slanted lettering — to underline the coincidence between the signifier book and the object we have in our hands. The process of foregrounding the materiality of the acts of writing and reading, whereby we make sense, amplifies the resonance of the implications of the interface of fiction and reality, as well as it does that of a single meaning shattered by the manifold senses. In these practices, Brossard approaches the deconstructionist poetics of dada, stopping short, however, of the total evacuation of meaning from the sign that concrete poets have effected.

9. Linguistic Codes

It is on the level of language that Brossard's readers must first exercise themselves to *make* sense since the "breakdown" occurs also on the

level of grammar. Male gender as norm is one of our fundamental rules of grammar, one which, as early as 1973, Brossard decided to break when she wrote "Une grammaire ayant pour règle: le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin doit être transgressée."¹⁵ In *L'Amèr* that silent "e" of the feminine gender does the unheard of, speaks itself. Brossard uses italics to draw our attention to this form of the feminine ("l'autre" p.45) or removes it in the title *L'Amèr* () as indication of the mutation taking place toward a neutral grammar where the power of the patriarchy will no longer mark sexual differences in hierarchical terms. She also doubles the "l" on words ending in "el" to overthrow the masculine norm, creating such neologisms as "maternell" (p.72) and "homoindividuell" (p.43).

Likewise conventions governing syntax are called into question by Brossard's frequent ellipses and her habit of using participial phrases instead of sentences, phrases frequently aligned paratactically with no connectives between them, their only point of contact being the agreements of gender and number which confusingly often refer equally to two or more terms (from p.76). Subversion continues on the lexical order with the creation of neologisms such as "la mourriture" (p.83) joining death to nurture and putrefaction, or "ravage" (p.83) — puns as well — and with evident irony the introduction of foreign languages such as English ("ghost town" p.53) or Japanese ("Obibos" masturbation p.44), procedures which emphasize the inadequacies of the existing language to express female realities. Significantly, the introduction of English underlines the double authority of colonialist discourse and patriarchal discourse and multiplies the implications of this attempt to free the subjected word.

Such a project underlines the double sense of deconstruction oscillating between demolition and emergence, continually foregrounding the tropes and processes through which meaning is generated. This is most notable in the double

entendres, puns, "casse-textes" (puzzles and text breakers) which are Brossard's chief stylistic feature and which we have seen are keys to her opening of the text, puns such as *L'Amèr* being at the heart of its paradoxes. These have become markers of feminist decoding, finding echoes in the "spinning" and "gyn/ecology" of Mary Daly. By underlining the multiplicity of meanings in each word, freeing them from their clichés and customs, by looking at language as the deaf look at people speaking, Brossard blows up all bridges towards the referent in terms of language and being, the eye/I being displaced from its position of mastery. When one underlines, the excess of meaning overflows. Form destroys formalism as illusion has destroyed illusionism. Decomposition takes place through anamorphose, development through aberration, parody.

In the fault which this opens up between the serious and the comic is established the plurality of perspective necessary for the opening and liberation of meaning. Hereby is inserted that ludic aspect which, according to Nietzsche, frees us from a false systematized reading and an appropriation of what is called truth. Staying within decentralizing paradox, Brossard's work is situated in a state of hesitation oscillating between several possible meanings where language resists our efforts to take from it a single tyrannical meaning. Freed from the polarities which called it into being, sexual difference finds there a zone of activity. Here too is lodged the feminist project of exploding the dominant system of representation. By carefully mining all our comfortable conventions and rules governing social and literary grammars, Brossard's *L'Amèr* does violence to our perception of reality in an effort to radically renew it. As she says, "In fact it's always what I've been seeking through my texts: to produce an effect, derangement, unsettling. Any displacement in face of reality (including that of words) always leads to greater lucidity, more consciousness, and it is in this way that I try to sow the seeds of doubt."¹⁶

NOTES

- Part of this paper was read at the joint conference of the American Association of Canadian Studies and the Canadian Association of American Studies on "Violence in North America," Toronto, October 23, 1982.
- 1. Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 18.
- 2. Roland Barthes. *The Pleasure of The Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), pp. 43,44.
- 3. Luce Irigaray. *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*. (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 211 (my translation).
- 4. Julia Kristeva. "Women's Time" in *Signs*, 7,1 (1981), p. 25.
- 5. Louise Forsyth. "Regards, Reflets, Reflux, Reflexions — exploration de l'oeuvre de Nicole Brossard," in *La nouvelle barre du jour*, (November, 1982), pp. 118-119.
- 6. Suzanne Lamy. "Glossaire pour Nicole" in *La nouvelle barre du jour*, (November, 1982), pp.63-70.
- 7. Nicole Brossard. *L'Amèr ou le chapitre effrité*. (Montreal: Quinze, 1977), p. 1. All further references are to this edition and will be quoted in the text. English quotations are from my translation of the book *These Our Mothers: or the disintegrating chapter*. (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1983).
- 8. André Roy. "La fiction vive: entretien avec Nicole Brossard sur sa prose," *JCF*, 25-26 (1979), p. 34. "I wonder if in some manner I haven't put on trial the clichés attributed to fiction or of what in most books of fiction is called Novel" (my translation).
- 9. *Ibid.*, p. 36. This concept has its origins in the linguistic model underpinning contemporary French thought. De Saussure pointed out the centrality of differential analysis in establishing meaning between the phonemes s and z, principles picked up by structuralism.
- 10. In French "meme" and "autre" refer to both these concepts which are phrased differently in English. This coincidence of terms allows Brossard to develop her argument simultaneously on both the level of sexuality and logic. Difference is "illogical," "irrational," in both domains.
- 11. Nicole Brossard. *French Kiss*. (Montreal: Editions du Jour, 1974), p. 60. (my translation).
- 12. In the interview with André Roy *op.cit.*, p. 33, Brossard says: "There is also the emotion which is the link between the fictional and the real one; it serves as a connection between fiction and reality. Currently my field of exploration is in the frontier between the fictional and the real between the unconscious and the conscious in the midst of which there is a space filled with letters which will become words" (my translation). Brossard's fictions are located in this space between.
- 13. The crossing out of the words to indicate their paradoxical state of self and not self was a favourite device of Nietzsche picked up by Derrida. Louky Bersianik has used it in "Noi me tangere." Brossard alludes to this "erasure" in Derridean terms on p. 95.
- 14. In the interview with André Roy, Brossard said: "The sexes of man and woman can be represented in writing. The man is the phallus, the penis, so a straight line. In men's writing there are two types: one, a traditional, linear, writing, it's an erection, "magistral" one might say, and the second the erection of sons in revolt, which is full of cuts, of errors. It's the broken line of contemporary texts. Then there are the writings of women which come forward as another intention of life, a different form, a conceptual alternative...(characterized by its) 'energy' (p. 38) its 'curve,' 'circle' and 'spiral.'"