

Remarks on *THE LESBIAN BODY*

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The Lesbian Body was written in many strange ways. I was confronted with the necessity of writing a book totally lesbian in its theme, its vocabulary, its texture, from the first page to the last, from title page to back cover.

I was located in a double blank. The blank that all writers have to face when they begin a book. The other blank was of a different nature. It was the non-existence of such a book till then. I have never lived a more challenging time. Would I do it? Could I do it? What was it going to be? I am living such a time now.

There were no lesbian books except Sappho; at least that's how I saw it then. (I didn't yet know Djuna Barnes.) Sappho was with Pindar one of the great lyrics poets five centuries before Christ.____

So I started writing fragments in this virgin territory with only Sappho at the horizon. These fragments were lost. They did not work. I remember that in the next step, one of the formal possibilities was to use all of Sappho's work and write around it -- use Sappho as the main text, write around it, in its margins. Later on I saw

another possibility which was to annex Sappho's text and intratextualize it into my work (. . . .) It didn't work because Sappho's poems were too far away, they were referring to a place, a time and characters I didn't know anything about.

Very few verses have been left from one of the greatest poets of all time. The longest fragment we have has often been imitated as a model of lyricism, for example by Louise Labe, a 16th century poet, and by Boileau, a 17th century poet who wrote "Poetical Art." Sappho was able to express passion in very economical terms but with an extreme potency. ("When I see you I become green like grass.") thus evoking the role of organs like the liver and gall bladder in carnal passion; or rather the revulsion of the organs to the extreme point of almost dying under the violence of passion.

Most of the Sapphic fragments include one or two verses -- sometimes only two words. And in these, violence is not expressed or perceptible. On the contrary one can imagine that these persons were evolving in a world devoid of violence. And nowhere can one imagine in these poems that there exists an oppression of women by men. Later Sappho was compared by historians to Plato; and her school

on Lesbos was compared to the Socratic school. She has left us in total mystery. She is an enigma.

If I speak at such length about Sappho's work it's because this idea of taking it as the TEXT, the Bible, THE BOOK and of writing around it is a recurrent idea for me. But it never works. So that I am always left with the blank space of the page, a space I call the literary workshop. I can't insist too much on this space that may at any time become an abyss for all writers, an abyss from which one always takes the risk of not rising.

Trying to find a new form, trying to write about that which doesn't dare to speak its name, trying to write about it forcefully, that was the dilemma I had to face. It so happens that violence was doubly at the nexus and the core of this undertaking. It's necessary to talk about violence in writing because it is always the case with a new form: it threatens and makes violence to the older ones. You work with words, with words that you must charge throughout your text with a new form and therefore with a new meaning. You do it with words that must bring a shock to the readers. If the readers don't feel the shock of words, then your work is not done. That is true for any work of literature you are producing. So from the start there is a violence to the reader. And a good reader could be blasted

in the process -- as I felt when I was on the street reading Tropisms by Nathalie Sarraute for the first time. After that writing and reading were never the same.

The second kind of violence I felt I had to express in that book that as yet had no existence was the violence of passion. The passion that dares not speak its name-- lesbian passion. Now I must say, to explain why my book The Lesbian Body had to be so cryptic and realistic in its expression, that lesbian love in literature existed only as the mildest kind of love--best expressed by the writer Colette--as the association of two beings victimized by men, trying to find together a kind of association. In my literary context Colette was the best known writer. And in this context the two poor women had to help each other--out of compassion -- to pass over the peak of passion--that is, orgasm -- as a sister of charity helps a dying man.

Literature about lesbians started with Baudelaire who invented the term; his book les Fleurs du mal was at one time going to be called THE LESBIANS. Later Verlaine wrote Parallelement. It was a very rich time for lesbianism as a literary paradigm while gay men were hiding their homosexuality under fictive lesbians. Not that I want to blame them; where would I be without them? When I was fifteen they told me everything I needed to know.

So let's go back to my literary workshop where I am with fire between my teeth and still nothing but my blank page. Suddenly giving me a big laugh (for one can laugh even in anguish) two words came in: LESBIAN BODY. Can you realize how hilarious it was for me? That is how the book started to exist: in irony. The body, a word whose gender is masculine in French with the word lesbian qualifying it. In other words "lesbian" by its proximity to body seemed to me to destabilize the general notion of the body. It's a good way for me to make you understand that a writer writes word by word; each word being a material entity as well as a conceptual one. From these two words the whole book THE LESBIAN BODY unraveled. Not in one piece, but little by little as one describes an armour. First the helmet, then the shoulders, then the breast piece etc. Such was my "Lesbian Body," a kind of paradox but not really, a kind of joke but not really, a kind of impossibility but not really.

Anyway because of these two first words, everything that I would say would be transformed. If I used the anatomical vocabulary to design the human body then I would appropriate it for my purpose. The whole vocabulary of the fiction The Lesbian Body is thus derived from a rigid anatomical vocabulary. Thus I acquired a precise set of

words with which to talk about the body without metaphors, staying practical and pragmatic without sentimentality or romanticism.

It fit an old idea I had that the reader should be acquainted in advance with the words the writer would use. On my blank page I could start building. The anatomical vocabulary is only a primary layer in the construction. I have it piercing right through the book, showing thus its instrumentality. From this strict vocabulary I was able to lesbianize the whole map of love as it is known. (My model is Proust in La Recherche du temps perdu -- Remembrance of Things Past.) Then layer after layer I could multiply references to carnal love and they would all mingle to create what I named lesbian passion.

This anatomical vocabulary is cold and distant and I used it as a tool to cut off the mass of texts devoted to love. At the opposite end of the scale there was for me the necessity of textual violence as a metaphor for carnal passion.

The texts I have borrowed and intertextualized, thrown together are from Ovid (the transformations), from Du Bellay, Genet, Baudelaire, Lautreamont, Raymond Rousell, Nathalie Sarraute, from the New Testament, from The Song of Songs, from the Homeric poems etc. I could borrow from

these texts if they were assimilated into the readers mind with violence. These texts could become pliant to my idea of a tension between the "you" and the "I", that is, the protagonists of The Lesbian Body. The whole project is an impassible description of lesbian love; I attempted to leave behind Baudelaire, Lautreamont, and Verlaine.

For what is total ecstasy between two lovers but an exquisite death? A violent act (here in words) that can only be redeemed by an immediate resuscitation. For the great lovers of heterosexual culture (Don Juan, Othello, even Orpheus, the sweet one) are the first a rapist, the second, a murderer and the third, brainless. Now on the contrary, when the lovers of The Lesbian Body kill, they resuscitate. Thus illustrating the sentence from the Bible that love is stronger than death. We are still in irony somehow.

Also I wanted to talk about lesbian love from a carnal point of view where sentiments, abandon, tears, all these social signs could be annexed only from that carnal point of view, a momentary one. Here there are not couplings forever or a reassuring love that can lead the reader to a "being-happy-forever." I am just describing a moment, a state of being that can happen to everyone and that cannot

last. It's not the foundation for a mode of life. It has nothing to do with social life.

Poems are not a representation of real life. And when there is a coincidence between the two, the text of life and the text of the book, there can only be inexplicable flashes as with such verses from Rimbaud that obsess me and still shock me:

Au bois il y a un oiseau
Son chant vous arrete et vous fait rougir

By the wood there's a bird
Its song stops you and makes you blush

For literature is not the reflection of life. Nevertheless there are correspondences between the two orders that make the poem understood by the reader.

As I said in my book The Straight Mind and Other Essays, personal pronouns are part of the subject matter. Sometimes I consider The Lesbian Body as a reverie about the beautiful analysis of the pronouns je and tu by the linguist Emile Benveniste. The bar in my j/e is a sign of excess. A sign that helps to imagine an excess of 'I,' an 'I' exalted in its lesbian passion, an 'I' so powerful

that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and lesbianize the heroes of love, lesbianize the symbols, lesbianize the gods and the goddesses, lesbianize Christ, lesbianize the men and the women. This 'I' and this 'you' are interchangeable. There is no hierarchy between 'I' and 'you' which is its same. Also the 'I' and the 'you' are multiple. One could consider that in each fragment they are different protagonists.

As in Les Guérillères, I used in The Lesbian Body a technique of montage (of editing) like that in a film. All the fragments were spread flat on the ground and organized. The book was constructed according to this principle. The final organization produced an asymmetrical symmetry. By this I mean that each fragment was duplicated with a slightly different form and meaning.

The book is thus formed in two parts. It opens and falls back on itself. One can compare its form to a cajounut, to an almond, to a vulva.