

'Dream About Writing': I am lying in bed, the sheet folded down rather sloppily over the mattress. And this was embarrassing because I was giving a public reading about passion from the bed – by myself. Reading looking straight ahead. And the audience was sitting to my left in three oblique rows of chairs. Looking not at me, on the right, but also looking straight ahead (from their oblique angle), as I, lying in bed, read.

Montréal: It's dark. Walking down l'Esplanade-by-the-park, it feels indiscreet spying on the writer I was then. That old angel monument's visible in the distance. Light seeps from the spacious corrugated glass-brick public washroom façade at the end of the walk. Part of a mayor's project for making a Marie-Antoinette hamlet out of Olmsted's mountain. People nod on benches. Cop car drives up. I keep, for the moment, to the residential [referential] side. Briskly, I walk. Toward the cinema with the best popcorn in the city. For a hit of nostalgia: old Cassavetes. Black Orpheus. La Dolce Vita. Past the gorgeous dwellings, former consuls', downgraded to residences of city councillors [one, anti-vice, shot by a limping man in a raccoon coat police called 'a foreigner'], immigrant families, artists. Trying to glimpse between the cracks in the curtains. A youth in a pillbox passes, trotting even faster. Later, spying the youth in the pillbox in the light of the popcorn machine, I see he's the son of the old man who stuck out

his tongue as I stared past his wrought-iron fence, attaching an eschatological name to my person. I trot, feeling [retrospectively] like a miso-coated salmon.

It is this '*later*' I want to talk about:

I was a journalist. '*Then.*' Sentencing, over the fear of being poisoned 'in relation to the mother' [as Freud said of paranoia]. Amassing outfits, bylines, accoutrements of success to stave off the threat of a life like hers. Simultaneously executing patterns of conspiracy in my world of small subjects, women, would-be intellectuals, working-class upstarts. Tentatively, I was practicing growing angry at what they were, the information merchants, and who I risked becoming, her ghost. Taking off and trying on prostheses in the cheap lights of old department stores.

I dreaded mornings *after*.

Coming into work at a local daily newspaper – my typewriter faced that of a kindly elder court reporter. Thirteen calls this morning, he informed me sadly. Thirteen calls furious at my taunting article on the 'McGill-Français' demo, featuring commerce students carolling O Canada, well back on the sidewalk. Thirteen outraged members of the English community thinking the city belonged to them. I wanted to fuck with their aura, with that which does not strut about with a label describing what it is. All the same, I was writing careful tight phrases, miming information's racket. Those basic hundred words. Censoring the vernacular, words like class, cunnilingus, capitalist; likewise repressed: 'Some Points about the FLQ Manifesto*.' How phrases went together in precise little columns also seemed inhibitive ... structuring. I wanted to mock them in sentences like single grins with lips pasted back [Lisa Robertson].

Simultaneously wanting to write phrases that performed Mallarméan gestures.

The context – bathed in the tender backlight of *later* – encouraged it: a first poetry reading, la Nuit de la Poésie against the War Measures Act [the legislator had suspended all civil rights]. Impressing on fresh adolescent spirits in the dark recesses of the Eglise/Théâtre Gesù a link, possibly indelible, between writing and subversion. People spoke at real risk of being imprisoned. The singer Louise Forestier, pregnant, in braids [a nice touch], stood on the stage, patting the baby in her stomach and singing ‘Ferme-la et prends ta bière [Shut-up and drink your beer].’ While round that old angel monument by the mountain, cops’ horses scattered conga players, waterpipes, skinny loiterers. Recently, walking into a tearoom in Montréal’s Quartier Latin, I thought I saw those same skinny youth *again*: apparently eating only carrots and smoking something in waterpipes, conjuring in their spareness the empathy and complicity I tendentiously conjugating with *then*. [You still think you’re thirty, a lover complained recently]. It is the artist’s task, Ernst Bloch states in Utopia, to bring now-time into line or focus with like historical moments when thought’s not emptied out, a turning point. When time has lost its thickness. Talent may be only knowing how to grasp a vector when our lives flow along it.

Dear R, who are the age I was ... earlier: The air is empty. The grass, where we walked, is empty. And the space across the bay where the Twin Towers stood. Nostalgia for how things were before. Not so great if you care to remember said Nakila at the Brooklyn Women’s Salon. Dear R, I say, playing the older writer walking, arms folded over black raincoat, head bent to the side, a writer must (in the sense of surely) know what impetus causes her

to write this way instead of that. Must (surely) be aware of the risk of foregrounding her by her inscription in the system she opposes when she chooses to write not a line but a sentence. I like that you ask: 'What is the writer's responsibility?' Though I want to say: 'Be careful.' Or: 'Risk.' I like that you are interested in narrative as call and response, linked to address. That for you, in your writing, address is not about the is nor the will-be but the could, keeping both narrator and narrative conditional.

Meanwhile [Memory being the solicitous trollop she is]: Back in that late-seventies pseudo-revolutionary Wonderland, increasingly medially framed as Québécois spaghetti western, due to the crime rates, *meanwhile*, in a two-storey flat high on a Quartier-Latin promontory called Terrasse Saint-Denis, two musicians [one franco, one anglo], two writers [one franco, one anglo], one visual artist [anglo], one guy in a navy beret from the suburbs [franco], read the Surrealist Manifestos and felt latent content mattered, chain-smoking and analyzing our dreams, or going round the city putting up mad broadsheets. THEY would always win the information war. Soundtrack: traffic, splashing behind a small paneless window cut in the kitchen wall to ventilate the tub, and one day a SHOT, when a man sticks an automatic out the garret window opposite and kills another walking down the sidewalk.

Left for the left ...

But what impetus, exactly, gave 'story' the rush of something new: these written ghosts of subjects, fragile substantives, compiled from public text, experience, and facing the world obliquely? Memory can't resist proffering, in answer, one last dream for analysis: the [above] *Dream About Writing*. Which, thus

prodigiously deconstructed, yields a trace of abjection [*lying, sloppily, in bed*], a whiff of betrayal [*three + oblique*]. Precisely those elements that trope the vaguely comic autobiographical conjunction of semiotics, semantics, gossip, what she now thinks of as prose; ‘experimental’ inasmuch as implying failure to represent the universal, linked to class, gender, sometimes race, but also to the pleasure of sounding out, a kin to poetry. Sometimes she watches, regretfully, as her little tales float, textured, suggestive, by the averted eyes of certain poets she admires. Who, along with lovers of more conventional fiction, persist in reading ‘experimental’ prose for content or ‘voice’ alone. As if a subject redistributed across hazardous abutments, torqued by inner syntax in dissonance with outer, or the reverse, can be absorbed as passively as a drugstore novel. Our group would have laughed even *then* at the poster a young poet, two blocks up, has on the wall of his borrowed room. Citing a famous novelist saying every sentence has a truth waiting at the end. Manifest truth maybe, we’d have mouthed, red lips insulting.

Recently [plus ça change]:

Some French-language ESL students, reading these stories, smile at what they call ‘the repression.’ In bed with her bathing suit on???. They also smile at those incontinent raspberries blooming on the snow [another dream, I’m afraid]. Was she New Age? Influenced by the cinema? The mid-career writer, on her platform, tries to explain how *Wild Strawberries*, seen at seventeen in a repertory cinema, made her feel so free she floated out, past trashcans, toward a future of broken narratives. Why? they smile again. Because we wanted difference, we wanted everything. Here the twenty-year-old heads from Ville Brossard,

Kenya, Hong Kong, Stockholm and Chicoutimi nod. And because we wanted everything, adds the writer quickly, we totaled Marxism + surrealism + new theories about the death of the western subject into the equation. While a plethora of identity issues screamed in the background. On streets called Rachel, Marie-Anne, Jeanne-Mance, cafés were full of feminists discussing language, and the eruption of the anteriority of language within it, the latter identified with Mother [Kristeva]. We wanted to circumvent *logos*. Without somehow abandoning a towering lucidity. Some of us were also seeking to locate, semiotically, the unique sounds of a French-dominant multi-linguistic city.

Dear R: Walking in Prospect Park, green light glinting off shiny grassblades, the gleaming hole in the distant Manhattan skyline, which only the familiar – I guess I mean any global citizen with access to a screen – recognize as absence: you ask the same questions I often ask myself. Re: relationship to reader. Re: the alleged superiority of poetry for allowing singularity of perception, bringing focus to bear directly on words and the sounds of them. And relations between. I love the hugeness of your desire for reaching the highest point of expressivity in art and life [Maiakovsky]. Do not certain conjunctures foster this kind of raw energy required for pure invention? Skating between modes and limitations. Less acknowledged: what I am learning from you ...

Yet, albeit, at the same time, furthermore:

She wanted to touch Her with her statements. Notwithstanding the faint whiff of complicity with dominance connected with speaking assertively. Was ‘to sentence’ a border issue? Controlling?

Paranoid in its insistence on contiguity. T'was a journalist, cigarette on lip, bad liver, sensitive crinkled face, who'd told her: 'A sentence starting with *To tell the truth* is unreliable, discombobulated, corrected.' Was not any sentence such? She wanted to turn them into lines of flight, translating provisionally, and yes, naturally *belatedly*, the drift of experience. Hopefully her perpetual avant-garde urge to underscore, again and again, that contiguity between making art and life, would not grow rigid. [Here, she gets an image of paper handcuffs and – sex.] But we live in chaos. Is not a tendency to endlessly interpret, to graft 'sense' onto 'nonsense,' both attribual to paranoia – and sensible? It amuses her to think that Freud's case of female paranoia ['Essay Running Counter to the Psychoanalytic Theory of Paranoia'] momentarily derailed his whole paranoid system. Implying, as it did, that his female client's fear of being poisoned appeared to originate less in Mother than in her social context. But ... can a bride in a wedding NOT embrace the family? Only *later*. Still she wants to write prose. Why should only Poetry [be] ... about the way language works (rhythms and sounds and syntax – musical rather than pictorial values) as much as it is about a given subject [Ann Lauterbach]. Me too, I wanted to create meanings at multiple sorts of intersections.

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It's April again. On the radio they're saying a chunk of Antarctica, the size of PEI, is collapsing into icebergs. A CBC journalist chirps about the advantages of global warming – for gardeners. Much extended growing seasons. Of course the bugs will get a foothold. Bug oils advised. Feeling weird, I turn it off. If dread seems part of who we are, maybe to recount is to launch reasoned if defensive resistance. Camped up with lipstick. Like women during war.

Outside a pair of sparrows fornicate on a bough. Turn the radio on again. An astrologist beams to the story-teller in me that there's a bigger plan at work. Look forward with hope. Tanks roll into Hebron. France votes right; *then* marches left. You never know, bubbles the astrologer, what lies around the corner.

I veer off l'Esplanade, still in the dark, onto the walk that bifurcates the park. Toward the public washrooms. That old angel monument visible in the distance. A woman approaches, holding a black umbrella blindly before her. A homeless man with his cart full of plastic bags bikes by, holding high a bouquet of florist-wrapped flowers. Such instants, innocent almost, are where stories begin, breathing in and exhaling ... not the single breath of a single genius, Breton's mythic poet having been dumped, thanks to language feminists and others, for more collective and material notions of aleatory writing. Walking I am thinking how Mayan poetry was considered a parallel translation of what the Gods said: only some words grasped and interpreted, implying the rest. These stories, though not on the whole set in Montréal, could not have been written without being ensconced at the time of writing in the intense, effervescent political and writerly debates taking place in late seventies and eighties here. Evolving, over time, into a random method of collecting public and private text, including electronic, that I am still trying to coax into prose.

And that brings us again to the impetus that determines choices. I address this last to those who call *Spare Parts* 'Gail's book of poetry.' Also, to Michael, George and others who began writing wonderful experimental prose, so inspiring, then shifted to participation in the construction of the last twenty years of Canada's strong canon. I find it odd that a critical field of radical poetics has grown out of that era, but little in the way of an interpretative milieu for experimental prose – by which I mean prose

that redistributes notions of subjectivity, time, through investive layering of narrative and language. The lack of encouragement of prose that can also be read denotatively [i.e., is layered, allusive, metonymical] has resulted in a remarkable reduction of reading possibilities in Canada. Such work suffers from lack of critical attention to the way language, thought, operate, in favour of its often torqued narrative. Recently, the *Globe and Mail* went so far as to say such writing does not exist. No visible writing about Montréal in English has existed since Leonard Cohen and Irving Layton, until the present. In a country where so much of life takes place on the cusp of difference, you'd think the space would exist, even be welcomed, for the kind of intra-genus performance that takes place when alterity meets.

These are the young stories of a writer already suspicious of looking back. The fact that my early attempts [notably 'Tall Cowboys,' 'Withdrawal' and 'Petty Thievery'] lean on dreams and solitary automatic writing, on characters who seem more like figurations, a little campy, is linked to an already impossible-to-avoid sense that 'telling' itself is not transparent. 'Telling' could only be telescoped from some fragile angle, an angle itself obviously wanting – motivated by a faint paranoia linked to the porosity of the subject. Contrarily, inner and outer syntax contained sufficient identity issues to render irresistible the playing off of formal investigation against the junk food of nostalgia, notably its media version, popular culture. I remain a writer who feels at her best in intense dialogue with the present, who thinks of a writing subject as being elided by material conditions and awareness, pressed on by time, flight, context – an approach I suppose some might call 'rhizomatic.' Which, in 1981, when these stories were published, was in the air as a concept, albeit conjuring, predominantly, buttons of gathered roots under the brown surfaces of lily

ponds in stagnant back waters of the polluted Castor River flowing through the opening pastoral 'Climbing the Coiled Oak.' Its protagonist's faux-rural innocence [with her bottle of Magic Lite] embarrasses me a little [I was an airforce brat]. From 'Ottawa' on I was better able to apply the constraint of mocking the sound of print journalism that became the intent of this project. Each subsequent book-length narrative work has been framed by some formal limitation, though not applied rigidly, aimed at avoiding what I loathe most in writing: sentimentality. I only hope that the substantial audience currently emerging for experimental poetry will open a door to the possibility of more denotative reading of non-transparent narrative. A sentence, after all, is a device, like any other.