

Auther¹

by Nicole Brossard

translated by Anne-Marie Wheeler

How appropriate that the end of the twentieth-century should coincide with civilization's passing from a culture of writing to one of information technology. This situation undoubtedly forces us to acknowledge our fears and anxieties, our scientific achievements, indeed reality itself which, once mediated, reappears in such a spectacular form that we attribute mythical powers to it. *Fin de siècle*: a date, an anniversary. We celebrate, a touch of nostalgia in our gaze, we make a few resolutions: life goes on. But we're not even on the same page!

This *fin de siècle* undoubtedly gives us an unparalleled perspective on history. We can map the planet as a whole, our genes, and simulated images of our amazed faces, interactive and curious to comprehend the bloody passions with which our supposed humanity has familiarized us. *Fin de siècle*, now what! Most of our faults are still intact and our instincts barely touched by new technologies. The number of methodical or pathological bastards has not diminished. Eighty per cent of the earth's women are the property of men and summoned to produce heirs.

In fact, I have the impression that we are increasingly resembling that crustacean, the hermit crab, who captures a different object in each of his eyes. With one slow eye we see the old world of books and paintings, of hourglasses, compasses and shipwrecks, of conquests and of humanism; with the other we observe, in the time it takes to swallow a magic potion, the fleeting images of dream and identity that we trace in the Web while desperately in search of real time. We are constantly bypassing the present. We are corpus callosum with a view on each hemisphere. While the ancient reader's finger carefully traced each word on the page that would

carry him elsewhere in an imaginary space both near and distant, our fingertips make strange loops of the infinite. With minimalist gestures, we constantly pass from a minor present to a major present. At the speed of an instant we repress the carnal evidence of shit, sweat, urine and blood.

For my part, I admit, yes, at one point, I believed literature was threatened by this slow, rational slide that allows us to imagine civilization's passage from the written word to the electronic image. My last novel *Baroque d'aube* (1995)² bears witness to the unpleasant feeling of living too much present in the form of a double time. I surprise myself at having come to think there was too much present, as I have always believed that only the present can properly honour sensual and mental intelligence. The same goes for writing; I have always said I write to engage sensations, surprises that only language can activate. While others worked on memoirs and testimonies, I have always held to the side of the "here and now," of the sentence. It is highly likely that over a long period of time when nothing has changed, perception can bring renewal. However, at a time when there is no longer a center of gravity, each sensation leads only to another, stronger, sharper perception. I think that literature, as the privileged means to accede to the knowledge of the invisible (the secret heart of things, the world's un-avowable, unthought) is threatened not by disappearance but by disuse. The "deferred" presupposed by the act of writing is increasingly insufferable. Too slow, too vague, too static in a world where **perception** replaces emotion, concentration replaces conscience, in a world where the image has become the perfected object of the idea that the Greek word married to *eidos* (vision). To formulate an idea is henceforth to format an image.

Just as there are visual environments and sonorous rhythms that favour certain states of mind and behaviours, speed is beneficial to certain mental operations and hinders others. Until

very recently, writing (and consequently literature) has been valued in the transmission of knowledge, memory and emotion, because it was the only way we had of representing the mysterious workings of the mind. Now the computer and the monitor, the first sources of information when entering a virtual environment, allow us to take shortcuts in representation, memorization and perception. “I” am no longer an other, but all other, hypertextual.

In fact, if the fragment announced the end of a linear reading of the world, the shortcut will undoubtedly signal our intelligence, traced in order to arrive as quickly as possible at information, at perception. Our consciousness will be in the very fact of knowing how to take the best shortcuts. However, literature is the opposite of the shortcut, except maybe for the poem, which relies on a quick grasp of facts that are simultaneously precise, and fluid and that we always believe to be true because of the resulting intensity of our grasp.

Troubling *fin de siècle*, certainly, for one who was raised as a humanist and practices an art that abhors superficiality, speed, an art that remains profoundly moral, that is to say attentive to human life in its small and great struggles to signify beyond reproduction. An art that incites one to rummage through the dictionary, history and the faint distant memory recalling the childhood of the senses. In effect, an art rendered naïve by science and the stalemate that fiction and reality have been disputing through centuries of mythologies and writing. That said, I can't imagine losing the pleasure of words, the desire to create a presence in and solidarity with language. I continue to write, however literature is valued, because there are objects of thought and emotion that can only exist when conceived in language. Producing and consuming these objects (a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, a book, a work) gives me pleasure. Writing is for me a source of fascination revealing what we are not and yet are trying to become.

I doubt the next twenty-five years will do much better than the last thirty for the woman, the feminist, the Québécoise, the lesbian, the francophone writer that I will have been between 1943 and 2000 and some... Contraception, freedom of speech, sexual liberation as well as the dream of an independent, prosperous and French Québec will have taken us to unimagined heights. I often say that few generations of women in history will have enjoyed life as much as mine has, that is to say we have done and said what we wanted in the name of dignity, creation and pleasure. Of course, luck of the draw, it required being born in North America, white, and from the middle class, with a dream to change the world, punch enormous holes in the patriarchy and, ironically, make a “quiet” revolution. Needless to say that whatever the twenty-first century may offer us, it will only have meaning if we put an end to the enslavement of women and their descendents.

Le futur will be swallowed by the future. I do not know what the function of the symbolic will be when the sea, light, night and death will have been cloned just because we can. I do not know if being needed by others will still be in style or whether it will simply become an ancient form of the verb “to create”.

Notes

¹ Final translation of “Écrivaine” by Nicole Brossard.

² Published in Patricia Claxton’s English translation as *Baroque at Dawn* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997).