

Deflections (1985)

Though the word sometimes has rather melodramatic associations, I probably have to say that for several years now I have been living the life of an expatriate. Borders crossed in a car overloaded with baggage, marriage to a foreigner, long waits in immigration offices, an adoptive language which still resists me and in which I become tangled up, impatient, exasperated, or which I take pleasure speaking, surprised at being able, with such ease, suddenly to say things in a different way. With great circumspection, but also an insistence that only I can observe from one occasion to the next, people ask me if I contemplate returning to Quebec, as though someday I ought to resume my rightful place there. Yet there is an excitement and a misery in the feeling of being displaced that I would not want to give up. Besides, the past doesn't have so many rights, as I'm often tempted to declare out loud, at the risk of shocking; and it has already found other ways of laying claim to me.

In the turn my life has taken, precipitated by a chance meeting and not the result of well thought out decisions, long-cherished dreams, the project of writing coincided with that of leaving. And as I underwent the daily experience of feeling decentered, I began the exploration of the self upon which the novelist embarks more or less deliberately in a work of fiction, in the same way that one might abandon herself in all innocence or good cheer to the certain prospect of madness.

Once in Manhattan, I began speaking my novels under my breath as I worked in the din of a closed room. Because it is not in the silence of my retreat, as they say, but in its uproar that I write.

Enticed by the signs of a culture that was sometimes familiar, sometimes absolutely impossible to assimilate, I would be either driven to despair or merely irritated, horrified or amused by the excesses that agitate and color the picture of America but especially, and differently, the picture of New York, that move it as Gide says a picture is a space to be moved – I was subject to a sort of fascination. The concentration demanded by writing – head bowed, hands on the keyboard, tea cold –, the painstaking introspection and analysis, were followed by incredible distractions, like so many abductions, or kidnappings, deflections of the self.

But while this sort of takeover became a constant condition in my life, experienced as a suspension of action as well as an expansion of my being, I discovered in my writing the power of deviation, interruption, unavoidable diversion.

This was probably what I was pointing to in the epigraph to my second novel, *Petites Violences*, where I proposed that "The essential is also what takes place beside us, as if it were outside of us."

Because any withdrawal, any peaceful acknowledgment of myself as a seamless and compact entity became first difficult, then impossible, I resisted, when I wrote, confining the subject of fiction,

limiting what might seem to be his consciousness, closing the story against what was peripheral to it and threatened its coherence, I made distraction into a narrative device, I began to have an inkling of the pleasures of digression.

As in the case of that man. The man I referred to, in a notebook, as "the Sensuous Subway Madman".

Until now he could have appeared in any of my fictional writings where his character would have been felt to be incidental – definitely a whim of the author's. As perceived by the subject of the narrative, as contained in the field of this subject's consciousness, he could have represented the effect, on him, of the extraneous or the accidental and thus partake of the very texture of literary discourse, which at its best finds its center by wandering.

He had remained on his feet despite the empty seats lining both sides of the subway car. His legs flexed now and then as though on the crests of little waves, he just barely leaned the heaviness of his body against one of the free-standing poles and fortunately this was enough to hold him up, keep him from losing his balance. He was rather plump, without nerves nor muscles, his white softness likely to collapse in on itself, his flesh like a fresh, heavy dough, his skin gleaming with sweat and for good reason, there was so much agitation in him, so many needs, and his restless hand that skimmed rapidly from his mouth to his sex in an insistent to-and-fro motion, bunched his clothes up or tugged them down, catching in their folds, fluttered over his face then turned his wet lip down onto his chin, followed the line of his neck and descended his torso, finally reversed to explore casually the roundness of his belly and brush like a wing against the crotch of his shapeless pants where his sex floated free, so many ardently desired sensations so many wants, and his hand going back up again, touching his mouth without resting there then lingering on his skull, groping in his thin hair and snarling the oily blond stalks, twisting the locks or pulling at them, and his eyes not settling on anything, flitting from one side to the other like fish so quick that they don't trouble even the calmest water as they scatter, and yet always coming back to the same point, coming back to graze over this one person who was observing him, who, unlike the other passengers, was not pretending to ignore him, but who, realizing that she had aroused too much interest in him, soon felt overcome by a confused and unreasoned fear, threatened by this body so deranged, so crazed, by this overflow of uncontrolled gestures, of desires which would normally have been contained in the neutral, impassive attitude of the subway rider, for at this moment only the unimportant detail, the contingent fact touched her, for it impressed her more than the event she knew she was experiencing, she who was awaited elsewhere and who a moment before had already seen herself falling backwards onto a bed laughing.

Yes – as in the case of that man, exactly.

On the one hand, the subjective development of the fictional text, where the story does not exist, so to speak, outside the consciousness of the characters or, as in my third novel, *Amandes et*

melon, where the characters themselves become the story. On the other hand, the halt of the narrative flow and the moments of absorption, concentration on the objective world or on the Other, who, seen from the outside, sometimes exists only through his posture, his way of being there, of occupying the detail of a description, moments of apparent distraction when, in the opened space of an instant, in the verticality of a sensation, the consciousness of a subject unfolds, and with it the fictional reality.

Thus, in a literature of private life, more difficult to practice in Québec at the time of the nationalist mobilization, a literature conforming to the long romantic tradition in which the individual cannot triumph unless his uncertainties triumph also, I found myself talking about intimate things, the little events that are often experienced with the same intensity of emotion as the great upheavals, conscious of the privilege of being able to express the "inessential". For, always falling somewhere outside of truth and falsehood, it bore witness to the fact that the limits of the subject are unclear by incessantly displacing them, by confusing the distinctions between what does and does not constitute an event, between what reaches one's consciousness and what evades it, what takes on meaning and what absurdly, hopelessly, does not. What was more, this "inessential" made it possible to celebrate the materiality of life, to testify to a knowledge of it shared as much by the body as the mind, by carrying reflection over to the center of sensation. In short, it helped counter idealistic or moral visions.

Now, it was not long before I became convinced that literature was an account of the inessential, in fact I have never been as convinced as while writing *Amandes et melon*. Thinking of the language of authority, of patent fact, of shock effect, I would even suggest that it is what makes literature historically and socially necessary to us. Isn't literature one of the few discourses, if not the only one, that repudiates itself when it yields to the seduction and power of generalities, when it tackles head-on the so-called fundamental questions or when, because of its assurance and convictions, it loses the sense of human fragility?

It may be going only a step farther to claim that in our modern societies the fictional text functions at its best as the narrative of "minor selves". By "minor selves", I mean characters who first of all represent nothing and no one, who in the literality of the text are not the interchangeable vehicles of some allegorical signification, even if they do not entirely preclude such an interpretation. Explored in the narrative text or quite simply – compassionately – observed, they are neither models nor conveyers of certainties and most often seem off center, that is, not quite themselves, or beside themselves in the same sense that we say "besides the question".

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In New York, I also felt the effects of this decentering in my relation to language, in the part of daily and private experience that is informed by words, though not only there. In a rather cramped and

crowded supermarket, behind stacks of cartons waiting to be unloaded, a tall, thin black woman whose rounded back draws the rest of her body into an almost perfect arch, hides in order to drink a can of Coke before going up to the check-out counter. In the street, an old woman with the untidily made up cheeks, the overly red cheeks of someone who can no longer see a thing, holds eight minuscule dogs on a leash and follows them obediently at an oblique angle, as though it were they causing her to lean forward like that, dangerously off balance.

I notice them. I don't belong to this culture. This place. I turn around to watch them. What is surprising, saddening, or pleasantly ridiculous about these two strangers, causes me not the sort of stupid embarrassment one sometimes feels at one's own people but the uneasiness one feels at recognizing in another person one's own indigence, physical decline, or inoffensive eccentricity.

I am in the United States, but for all I know I could be in Poland or India. For it seems to me that in New York I will not stop looking at things and people with a stranger's eyes – always rather painfully alert to what is human. For it seems to me that when, over these last few years, my fiction writing went from the first to the third person, these stranger's eyes in some way slipped into it.

Yet it wasn't only the point of view of the narration and thus of the description, the commentary, that apparently changed. The words themselves began to move, because on the one hand, French became almost exclusively a written language for me, and on the other hand, the daily practice of English forced me out of my habits and made me distrustful of my surest linguistic intuitions.

In my isolation I found a different rhythm for French, when I read things over to myself so faintly that I heard only the crests and the troughs of the sentence; I ventured to dislodge or eliminate the commas that chopped up the breath of the oral text – and that professional editors would later scrupulously restore wherever the grammar required it; and I even attached a new accent to the sounds, as though by mumbling the written line I invariably smoothed out its curve.

Less and less troubled by the gap between written language and spoken language, so considerable in the social class and the period in which I grew up, yet still somewhat inhibited by the uncertainties bequeathed to me by the speech of my childhood as it quickly so quickly it seems to me took on an antiquated, obsolete quality, I began to allow myself certain audacities, oh nice, quiet ones, I mean ones that weren't in the least intended to shatter the prose. Thus I was tempted to force, to draw out the signification of the words just a little a little more, to restore the lost meanings they continued spelling out in every letter, to juxtapose familiar expressions quite freely with so-called rare or literary ones... Writing in French and almost always speaking in English, I stopped distrusting the written language since, after all, it was all I had, stopped fearing that it would seem affected and betray me, and my background, and my history, that it would seem to generate an artificial imaginary world or be annoyingly overburdened

with the intonations, the echoes of another culture. The child from the Villeray neighborhood who would say "icitt" instead of the standard "ici" had now quite simply appropriated the code of writing. Of course I would sometimes not be able to think of the words I needed, in either French or English, but profiting from these temporary confusions I soon saw, in the space between the concepts of the two languages, in the lack of correspondence or coincidence in their expressions, the possibility of new images.

Writing in New York in front of my window as others live in Québec in front of their televisions – each of us having his or her own outlook on the United States –, it sometimes seemed to me that I had begun to feel, to an extreme degree and of my own free will, the permanent disorientation and the resistance of the French-speaking subject in North America. Especially since my mother tongue was no longer the language of love for me and since, as is well known, one's private life, the life of the kitchen and the bedroom, is generally the last stronghold of differences for displaced people. Tender and caressing words, words for gentle jokes, surprising quarrels quickly cleared up, passionate avowals, the desire to die immediately if not by inches please – all this was said, took place, in English. Because a love story is a fiction in its own way, sustained by words, and because writing unfolds in that space where, as in love relations, the Other and the "I", the reader and the writer by turns think they are seizing the other even as the other seizes them, it was not long before I sensed that my texts and my private life were developing like parallel fictions, written or lived twice rather than once.

And what if the author, caught in an unremitting two-way translation process, ended up one day being so incessantly distracted from one version and then from the other that she couldn't tell any longer what the original could have been like?...

Yet if it is possible that the fictional text, like the fictional character on another level, "at its best finds its center by wandering," by letting itself be distracted, or deflected from its own story, if it is possible that it finds its justification in the discreet or systematic practice of deviation, in the departure from a linear path that would always only link same to same, this may well be true of the author too.

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