

Nathalie Stephens

from
Notebook of Discord

*

To write is to give one's word. To give one's word (to the other). To make a gift (of oneself) to speech. **Until speech gives in. Is given.** To give in to speech would thus be both an act of generosity and a capitulation. To take it would be to take responsibility for it. To assume that which, of speech, extracts and imposes (its law).

*

Speech : on the verge of tears.

*

If I give my word (if I put my hand to the fire), I understand that I am inconveniencing others. The indignant young man who accuses me of making books that are undone (for him, lacking *resolution*), accuses me in sum of having given him my word. He does not want to have to assume this responsibility. He does not want for the text to do anything to him other than that which he believes it already to be. A foregone conclusion. In other possible words, consolation is necessarily nailed to accusation (like Abraham to his son, and to his mean little god, to his sin). One never leaves the other. Speech strangles writing. Writing is that thing that leaves the body despite – perhaps even because of – strangulation. **No doubt, yes, because of strangulation.** “Si tu parles tu meurs, si tu ne parles pas tu meurs, alors parle et meurs.” (Tahar Djaout. *If you speak you die, if you do not speak you die, so speak and die.*)

*

Accusation and adoration. Had he not existed I would have invented him anyway. I would have found a way to invent him so that he would have stopped threatening to exist.

*

“Art is wretched, cynical, stupid, helpless, confusing – a mirror-image of our own spiritual impoverishment...” (Gerhard Richter) I open the red recycled paper notebook, with its inconsequential title. This notebook, which was once a book, and serves in 2004 to retain that which overflows from some of my reading. I turn the page and fall upon this, the last sentence that I could be bothered to copy down that day before plunging into Lippard’s book on Eva Hesse: “Consolations are sold: all shades of superstition, puffed-up little ideologies, the stupidest lies.” I am in Montréal now. I found the Richter in a painter’s studio in Chicago in 2004 while I was convalescing in Toronto. The question of the book of consolation was only just beginning to (im)pose itself. In anticipation, I was seeking to undo myself from it; I was already accusing its absence.

*

I am convinced that I am on the verge of crossing paths with him. On the street, exiting the métro, out front of my place. Here, wherever, whenever. I think it in my dreams, since they announce this encounter incessantly, this encounter that I don’t want and from another point of view I don’t care about at all. The first time I did want it, that encounter. All of us, we all awaited it for fourteen years at least. Since before my birth and that of my sister. Which explains in part that it was also catastrophic. It was very simply the advent. The advent of the son and the brother. The advent of a repressed violence that was exploding, that needed to explode once and for all. Now I know that I am probably the one who is inventing it. That without this, I would have invented him anyway. On the doorstep, I invent the door, and the place that declares itself.

*

“On the contrary, we have perhaps always been strangers one to the other and this is what makes these encounters possible, again and again.”

*

Freedom does not exist outside of the constraints imposed by the fragility of the body. It is precisely through this fragility that freedom passes.

*

May 26 2008: “It would have been necessary for me to write you in French directly. To trust this gesture, this desire of mine to meet you in that language, as we would meet at the foot of a hill, at the entrance of a subway station, or walking somewhere, simply. It is possible that I am mourning this all the time, mourning not being able to meet you there, to meet several people for whom French will always be an inaccessible space, and it is that space, encounter in that space, that I am mourning. For I know that even in translation, interpretation, I am not able to say the thing that is being said, to transmit it appropriately, and that I too incohere at the very place where the conversion takes place, at the moment at which I undo the thing from one language to do it up in another. It is not the language that is lost, but me. I lose myself at the place at which the crossover is undone – defeated.”

*

“I mean to say that it’s me, it’s me that I’m mourning, and French.”

*

A syncope in the blood. A language that is unfamiliar to me.

*

Enough poetry and novels. Those resolutely surveyed territories. Those paralysed spaces surrounded by smugness, which eradicate themselves as they are erected. Speak to me instead of what eludes genre, what eludes situation, what, of myself, I don't recognise, that morcellated language thrown to the wind, that bruised body without destination, which lands somewhere over there, far from the noise of manifestations. Who has not yet understood that the risk, there, of the nation – of territorialisation – is also that of literary, littoral, plottings.

*

It lasted roughly six months. You presented yourself to me, inescapably. Entirely embodied. Body in excess. All-body. It was one of the first things that I noticed, that held my attention. I was detained by your corporeality. You required of me a presence and I understood that that presence depended upon you. From that moment, I began every day to take pictures of myself, in order to convince myself that I existed outside of your gaze. Outside of the gaze that I directed at you. Infinitely deported, displaced, projected, in the *je* of the other, in the *je* that I was usurping at the expense of an already destabilised capacity to say (to myself) the thing, there, me. That I existed once and for all. Those photographs don't resemble me at all, or else yes, but always with sufficient deformation such that the question of resemblance must be posed, with the gaze, there, detached, detaching.

*

Correction: grieving French, grieving that which French cannot – does not – want.

*

What I retain most of all from a Ionesco or a Joseph Beuys is

very much their individualism. Their distrust of the collective. Of that form called crowd – whether constituted or not – which unleashes without regard for the consequences. I admit that I have difficulty distinguishing between the crowds of Pamplona running the bulls or pilgrims piously climbing a mountain, their knees in shreds, all question some same thing that escapes them; or even some militia mobilised to lay down the law, a law. Always the law of an other.

*

The smell of coffee burns my eyes.

*

*This text exists in French as Carnet de désaccords,
Montréal, Le Quartanier, 2009.*