

**“It’s not power, it’s sex:”
Jeanette Winterson’s *Power Book* and
Nicole Brossard’s *Baroque d’Aube***

Helene Staveley
Memorial University of Newfoundland

BOTH JEANETTE WINTERSON AND NICOLE BROSSARD play seriously with reading and sex in their texts. Querying arbitrary distinctions like those between reality and fiction, theory and narrative, the authentic and the artificial, texts by Winterson and Brossard interrogate distinctions between writing and reading as well. In particular, Winterson’s *Power-Book* (2000) and Brossard’s *Baroque d’aube* (1995; trans. 1997) reverse the conventional relationship between writer and reader. Where sex and seduction are invoked as analogies for the writer-text-reader relationship, especially within metafiction, the writer is often constructed as a seducer who exercises her skills and wiles to bring her target, the reader, to the point of willing surrender. But by re-casting their model-*reader* figures as their seducers—not their writer-protagonists—Winterson and Brossard invert the relationship and privilege the reader’s role in the production of texts. Both *The PowerBook* and *Baroque d’aube* are constructed as texts-in-process that are shaped and moulded by the desires of seducing model-readers. Winterson’s writing “I” composes romantic stories online for her lover, a married woman; one of Brossard’s two writer-protagonists tries to replenish the ocean’s literary significance at the request of her fan. In each case it is the interests of a seducing reader that directs the parameters of

the embedded fictions. This reader is no longer a somewhat gullible person whose submission to a stronger will brings her to relinquish arbitrary notions of “virtue” or value, of fact, reality and credibility. She is already predisposed towards suspending her disbelief and willing to embrace fiction as fact in what she recognizes as a necessary precondition of the narrative process. In *Winterson and Brossard* it is the reader figure, not the writer, who takes the initiative in the process of constructing a text. Her engagement in this process helps produce an ontologically disparate narrative whose intersecting realities swell and pulsate, promising to burst the bounds of the fictional and flood the terrain of the actual.

To identify reader as seducer and writer as seducee inverts conventional constructions of agency and passivity, production and consumption, femininity and masculinity, and of the sexual experience that is the ubiquitous analogy for all of these and more. As such, *Winterson and Brossard* engage in a project with which feminists have been perhaps especially engaged: the questioning of a thought-process that erects arbitrary binaries and dichotomies. On one side, both the seducer and the seduced are women; on the other, the relative aggressiveness of the writer and reader figures is reversed. This revisitation of well-trodden territory also revisits the feminist project of theorizing sexuality. In the 1970s and '80s, theorists including Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous distinguished female sexuality from male sexuality, constructing women's erogenous zones as multitudinous and shifting and women's orgasm as relating to a uniquely female economy of inexhaustible giving. Both of these positions pit “feminine” multiplicity and excess against what they see as a more restrictive phallogocentric pattern of arousal, tumescence, friction and release or a rigid masculine “debit versus credit” economy.¹ While this provides an alternative to the phallogocentric equivalence between the pattern of male genital climax and plot resolution by making room for alternative points of bliss, it remains an essentializing alternative because it reinforces distinctions between the genders while sidestepping what is held in common.

Jean Baudrillard's *Seduction* (1979; trans. 1990) reinstates these problems by distinguishing the seducer's practices and pleasures from the seductress's and the male's resistances and vulnerabilities from the female's. Yet it also establishes common ground between male and female pleasure. He cites a passage by Vincent Descombes:

1 Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous are among these feminists; Roland Barthes, Peter Brooks, and Robert Scholes are some of their masculinist counterparts.

HELENE STAVELEY is currently completing her Ph.D. dissertation in the Department of English Language and Literature at Memorial University, where she is writing on texts by contemporary Canadian women. Her previous publications include a study of female sexuality in George Eliot as expressed through fairy-tale motifs, and a consideration of narrative strategies employed by David Macfarlane in *The Danger Tree*.

What seduces is not some feminine wile, but the fact that it is directed at you. It is seductive to be seduced, and consequently, it is being seduced that is seductive. In other words, the being seduced finds himself in the person seducing. What the person seduced sees in the one who seduces him, the unique object of his fascination, is his own seductive, charming self. (Descombes, *L'Inconscient Malgré Lui*; qtd. in Baudrillard, 68)

Seduction is a viscerally compelling experience for both participants because it affirms and validates individual subjectivities whether or not that subjectivity is a temporary disguise assumed by the seducer. Baudrillard contends that the seducer identifies in the seducee signs of vulnerability and of attraction, then incorporates those signs into her own image and reflects them back to the writer. Once the projected vulnerability, sensual attraction and desire of both parties is “harmonized” by being telegraphed by the seducee and reflected back by the seducer, all that remains is for the seducer to fan the flames of the desire that seems to have sprung up so spontaneously. Baudrillard formulates the actual sexual experience as anticlimactic because the exchange that has seemed to be about affection and validation is actually about power for both participants.

The only truly orgasmic moment for Baudrillard’s seducer is the moment of her target’s mental surrender. This presumes that the sexual experience is always already agonistic, founded on a competitive economy of triumph and defeat, victor and victim, shallow consumer and vapid product. In “Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death” Elizabeth Grosz (1995) reconfigures these power politics that underlie physical sexuality. In her construction, the physical proximity and sensual contact of consensual sex are appealing and even addictive experiences whether or not the adrenalin rush of competition is involved.

Libidinal desire, the carnal caress, desire as corporeal intensification ... is an interchange with an other whose surface intersects its own. It is opened up, in spite of itself, to the other, not as passive respondent but as co-animated, for the other’s convulsions, spasms, joyous or painful encounters engender or contaminate bodily regions that are apparently unsusceptible. It is in this sense that we make love to worlds: the universe of an other is that which opens us up to and produces our own intensities; we are placed in a force field of intensities that we can only abandon with libidinal loss and in which we

are enervated to become active and willing agents (or better, agencies). (290)

Orgasm becomes an experience wherein the “borders” of the subject “blur, seep, liquefy, so that, for a while at least, it is no longer clear where one organ, body, or subject stops and another begins” (290). Narrative can similarly be constructed as a charged node of interaction between narrator and narratee or as the dynamic encounter between writer and reader. Narrative here resembles the charged node of orgasmic interaction in that both are connected to the experience of mutual permeability. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) Grosz works toward a framework that accommodates both the “interior dimensions of subjectivity” and “the surface corporeal exposures of the subject to social inscription” (188), positing “a model which insists on (at least) two surfaces which cannot be collapsed into one and which do not always harmoniously blend with and support each other; a model where the join, the interaction of the two surfaces is always a question of power” (189). Resembling a Möbius strip, this model is powerful because it “has the advantage of showing that there can be a relation between two ‘things’—mind and body—which presumes neither their identity nor their radical disjunction, a model which shows that while there are disparate ‘things’ being related, they have the capacity to twist one into the other” (209–210).

In the case of the text-sex analogy, narrative has the potential to twist its disparate narrators and narratees into one another, to vex power’s binaries—dominance-submission, oppression-resistance, victor-victim—by presenting them as distinct but still indistinguishable. This is heightened in Winterson and Brossard by the eroticized narrative encounter that diverts agonistic negotiations for power. Here the limens of subjectivity are overstimulated and distended until distinctions between controller and controlled, seducer and seduced, reader and writer, consumer and producer evaporate in the onrush of *jouissance*. Some possible textual experiences that promote the “seeping together” of reading and writing subjects could include: an intensification of ideas or images to the point of overdetermination within a text; felicitous but unforeseen links between disparate ontological levels within a narrative; or what Roland Barthes calls the sensation of being read by the text. Readerly orgasm blurs together reading subject and writing subject, consumer and producer, seducer and seduced.

Partly a reader can be said to seduce simply by reading a text—by selecting one title from among many that promise to satisfy her readerly appetites. The reader desires to find herself or her needs adequately rep-

Readerly
orgasm blurs
together
reading subject
and writing
subject,
consumer
and producer,
seducer and
seduced.

resented in a world outside her own consciousness, and by supplying an appreciative audience for the writer, the seducing reader recodes as an “attraction” the writer’s answering vulnerability, already suggested by the fact that her text is available to be read. When she is being seduced by her reader, the writer is brought to recognize that she has the power to fulfil a particular need for resolution between related ways of thinking. This is apprehended as quasi-sexual in part because of the escalating tension of unknowables (which characters will fail or succeed? will the plot twist? which systems of imagery will inflect the fiction most interestingly?). The writer-seducer also has the power to validate the magnetic seducing reader whose openly desiring gaze has already refigured her in her own eyes, transforming weakness into strength.² The yearning, feigned or otherwise, that the reader-seducer expresses for her target seems to give the writer-seducer the power to interpolate her into a different order. It remains the seducer’s choice, however, to accept or reject the seducee’s interpolating call, to read herself in the terms offered by the writer.

Winterson’s *PowerBook* conflates these issues of sex and seduction with issues of production and consumption by using Iserian model-readers and -writers who are involved sexually with each other. The model-reader figure in Winterson’s *PowerBook* is the married woman whose affair with “I” the writer provides the underlying premise for the novel. “You” the reader is consistently represented as the seducer. The novel opens above a store called Verde’s, a *topos* whose connection to the imagination is suggested by its stock of costumes and disguises (3); this is where the writing “I” constructs her narratives on her computer. Like any shy wallflower at Prince Charming’s ball, the writing “I” waits passively for the first few pages for “you” the reader to enter and initiate the relationship. As the narrative progresses through a number of different diegetic levels, it becomes clear that “you” the reader has already taken the initiative in the “real world” as well as in the cyberworld where the two interact. At the first meeting between “you” and “I” in Paris, “you” makes the first personal confession of weakness by explaining her fear of surprise (33–4), introduces the topic of sex, and initiates then escalates physical contact (35 ff.). In what she later characterizes as begging (108), “you” actively pleads for sexual interaction. “Come to bed with me.” / “Now?” [“I” asks]. / “Yes now. It’s all I can offer. It’s all I can ask” (55). “You” makes her need for sexual interaction clear

2 Anne McMillan (1988) notes that the main power held by the sexually-embattled heroine of Gothic romance is the power of her transforming gaze. This gaze sees beneath the sinister Byronic hero’s ambiguous exterior to the good man underneath who is waiting to be redeemed by the heroine.

and suggests that “I” is the only person who can fill this need, even though “you” has another ready alternative in the form of her husband.

In the framing narrative, which is set above Verde’s at night near a computer and which details on-line communication between the pair, “you” the reader-seducer guides the course of both the framing and embedded narrative/s by granting and withholding approval from the writing “I.” “You” even specifies which narrative form she wants, requesting a romance instead of the bawdy and picaresque fabliau about Ali and the tulips that the writing “I” has produced (25–26). The writing “I” complies, producing a courtly romance about Lancelot and Guinevere (67–74), a Gothic romance about Paolo and Francesca (123–29), an historical romance about mountaineer George Mallory and his beloved Mount Everest (149–52), and the quasi- autobiographical romance about the orphan raised in the Muck Midden (137–46; 193–96). Separated physically from “you” the reader-seducer, the writing “I” consistently seeks approval and validation from “you,” shaping the embedded love narratives to please “you”—and to remind “you” of the passion “you” aroused.

The embedded narratives in Winterson’s *PowerBook* play with the interdependence of lovers. The text’s model lovers, “you” and “I,” reader and writer, are made up of each other, distinct but inseparable. Kim Middleton Meyer writes about Winterson’s construction of loving pairs: “No longer an object to be controlled, [the love object] here has agency and can affect as well as be affected by the narrator;” “in her own right” she is “materially attached and yet conceptually whole” (219). In one embedded romance the writing “I” writes herself as Lancelot and “you,” the reader, as Guinevere. Yet as the following passage indicates, any distinctions between the lovers quickly form a basis for further interdependence until the two reflect each other:

Your marrow is in my bones. My blood is in your veins. Your cock is in my cunt. My breasts weigh under your dress. My fighting arm is sinew’d to your shoulder. Your tiny feet stand my ground. In full armour I am wearing nothing but your shift, and when you plait your hair you wind it round my head. Your eyes are green. Mine are brown. When I see through your green eyes, I see the meadows bright with grass. When you creep behind my retina, you see the flick of trout in the reeds of the lake.

I can hold you up with one hand, but you can balance me on your fingertips....

I am not wounded unless you wound me.

I am not strong unless you are my strength. (69–70)

In androcentric texts, terms like these could signal a victor-victim relationship of possession and consumption, but here the writing “I” and the reading “you” are equally possessing and possessed, consuming and consumed. By extension neither reader nor writer holds ultimate control over the text, which consequently remains a text in process, to adapt Linda Hutcheon’s phrase: a text whose content is polyvalent because it remains in flux, and whose “meaning” will thus always escape a definitive reading.

The intertwining of reader and writer in *The PowerBook* foregrounds Winterson’s postmodernist practice of questioning and eliding dichotomies. The elisions begin early as the lovers, identified mainly by the pronouns *I*, *you* and *she*, remain nameless except for obvious pseudonyms: Lancelot, Guinevere, Paolo, Francesca. Even physical descriptions are minimal, confined mostly to hair style and taste in clothing. Similar techniques are used in popular romances to let readers easily “enter” the character of the protagonist or, as Janice Radway (1984) writes, “to project themselves into the story, to become the heroine, and thus to share her surprise and slowly awakening pleasure at being so closely watched by someone who finds her valuable and worthy of love” (568–69). Romance readers, Radway asserts, vicariously experience the heroine’s “success at drawing the hero’s attention to herself, at establishing herself as the object of his concern and the recipient of his care” (582). The process is anything but random or ingenuous. Radway’s romance readers have very rigid reading tastes but return repeatedly to writers who produce texts that model fictional worlds they can like. Readers endorse such worlds emotionally, but also financially by paying the purchase price. Purportedly responding to the emotional endorsement, writers respond to this and facilitate further reader endorsement by restricting characterization to a very few traits that readers see as desirable in romance heroines and heroes (565; 576–77). Apparently based on such indefinables as taste and the quality of emotional response, the process masks itself as a “natural” or “intuitive” one, even a point of vulnerability, but clearly can also be seen as sheer calculation. As Baudrillard writes, “*To seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion*. It is to be taken in by one’s own illusion and move in an enchanted world” (69; Baudrillard’s italics).

Winterson’s minimal delineation of character, then, seems calculated to foreground the responsiveness of the writing “I” to the seductive attentions of the reader; it helps to ease the reader’s “entry” into the fictional world from the actual world, or to produce the illusion that the boundaries of the fictional world are permeable and have expanded to embrace the

reader. This is intensified by the illusion that the model writer is directly addressing the actual reader through direct addresses such as: “Undress. / Take off your clothes. Take off your body. Hang them up behind the door. Tonight we go deeper than disguise” (4). The intense proximity or even intimacy of reader-seducer and writer-seducee within the fictional world generates desire. While the minimalist characterization in *The PowerBook* is so extreme that it parodies such Harlequin romance conventions, the parodic tone itself foregrounds and intensifies the empathy between reader, character and writer that is one of the foundations of romance narratives (Radway 569).

Early on in *The PowerBook*, “you” the reader says she prefers structures without cladding, like the Eiffel tower; she tries to live without cladding in her work, her life and her body (34–5). Cladding, then, accentuates boundaries and disparities while it disguises foundations. In contrast, open structures seem accessible and honest, displaying an undisguised congruity of design and function. A parallel commitment to a life free of shell and ornament is what the seduced writing “I” comes to value in “you” the reader and in herself:

In your face, in your body, as you walk and lie down and eat and read, you have become the lineaments of love. When I touch you I touch something deeper than you. This touches something in me otherwise too sunk to ever recover. (188)

Sex expands the terms of love:

Sex between women is mirror geography. The subtlety of its secret—utterly the same, utterly different. You are a looking-glass world. You are the hidden place that opens to me on the other side of the glass. I touch your smooth surface and then my fingers sink through to the other side. You are what the mirror reflects and invents. (174)

The reader provides for the writer access to both similarity and alterity; but those “exquisite attributes of variation” (214) can produce an illusion of friction, a tension that yearns for release.

Winterson’s *PowerBook* employs this blurring as part of its overt narrative strategy, as suggested by the Lancelot/Guinevere passage explored earlier. The text’s embedded romances conflate coition and narrative climax after the male narrative paradigm, because each ends in loss or death shortly after desire is consummated. Yet they also work toward simulating multiple successive orgasms in part through structural and linguistic rep-

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etition. Since the narrative structure intertwines levels and experiences by echoing structures, names, motifs and linguistic patterns, the interconnecting surfaces of the ontologies are easily recognizable. As the tensile surfaces of the ontologies expand and contract with the ebb and flow of each other's resonances, they seem to achieve a kind of cosmic textual orgasm. Additionally, all levels of the narrative are infused with eroticism simultaneously, so that the various fictional worlds are characterized as electrically sexually aware—individually and collectively.

Another case in point, the intricately enfolding structure of Brossard's *Baroque d'aube* is as erotically energized as that of the *PowerBook*. The opening narrative frame, "Hotel Rafale," begins with a replete Cybil Noland lying between the legs of her lover, La Sixtine, before beginning a new round of love-making. The scene charges with erotic energy both characters and every activity they undertake inside or outside the bedroom. Walking through city streets, playing tango music, drinking wine and everything else the lovers do remains suggestive even when echoed by other characters in other textual levels. Now erotically overdetermined, these activities help make arcs and folds of the narrative structure while they bring with them their erotic charge.

Erotic "awareness" within a text can be amplified by mutually caressing, recursive narrative folds and superimpositions that model sexual desire.³ Susan Knutson claims in *Narrative in the Feminine* (2000) that Brossard's characters meet their own needs independently of an androcentric economy. Like Sappho's community of women on Lesbos, Brossard's women engage communally in learning and idea-sharing in order to increase the group's understanding (Knutson 115–21). In this way they bond together and strengthen each other to counteract a poisonous patriarchy, and where erotic interaction occurs it generally amplifies this strength. Within this project of continual growth, it is understood that no single meeting of the community members will produce "the ultimate epiphany"; the community's idea-sharing is a process that will grow organically and indefinitely. Brossard's project is to cause actual change in the thought processes of her readers; she hopes "to produce or change consciousness" (Knutson 130) in those who read her texts by stimulating their cortical functions. Her triptych structures, her construction of characters who experience change through interacting sexually and socially with women, and her

3 The thought is suggested by Alice A. Parker, who describes *Baroque d'aube* as the most emphatically "invaginated" of Brossard's texts. Following Derrida, she describes textual invagination as a term that "refer[s] to structures that enfold, re-fold, and superimpose themselves" (234 n. 16).

graphically erotic *scènes blanches* are all techniques that are central to this process. Brossard's textually holographic representations of woman in the process of changing emulate "the interaction of wave fronts [that] produces awareness, intention, emotion, motivation, and desire—all Brossardian motifs" (Knutson 131). By constructing her ficto-theoretical narratives on principles that model the permeability, even malleability of reality and fiction, Brossard works toward generating concrete, positive change within the mind of the reader—a change which her reader-seducer has already desired to achieve through the writer-seducer, as indicated by her willingness to begin and finish reading the narrative.

Like her earlier texts, *Picture Theory* and *Désert Mauve*, Brossard's *Baroque d'aube* divides easily into the three parts of a triptych structure. The first segment, "Hotel Rafale," is about Cybil Noland and her sexual and romantic relationship with La Sixtine. The second segment holds three chapters called "Rimouski," "Buenos Aires," and "Le futur *dark*" (English and italics in original). This frame of the triptych comprises the most substantial and "complete-seeming" ontology. It constructs a second Cybil Noland who is pursued by her fan, Occident des Rives, who wants her to produce a text about the ocean with CGI artist Irène Mage. The third frame of the triptych, "Un seul corps pour comparer," contains no proper names at all but follows a virtually archetypal publicity tour for a writer and translator, both nameless, and an untitled text. This writer, who may or may not be the ambiguous "Hyde Park woman" who has appeared to both Cybils (23–6, 42, 111, 181),⁴ keeps the journal of the tour which becomes *Baroque d'aube's* third and final frame.

4 The Hyde Park woman, like Winterson's lovers, has a bare minimum of identifying characteristics and experiences which makes her an exceptionally enigmatic figure. She has a red raincoat and an apartment in London that overlooks Hyde Park, which holds one or two books by Beckett, and which is where she writes; she also visits the British Museum where she purchases the Beckett books. On page 90, she seems simply to be another embedded fictional character because Irène describes encountering her in a passage of a book written by the second Cybil some years ago. But the writing "I" who writes the journal about the publicity tour in "Un seul corps pour comparer" concretely recalls the view of Hyde Park and the visit to the museum as being within her own experience (221, 255), not shared vicariously through the medium of a narrative. She is also differentiated from the Cybil of the embedded narrative who is a Montréalaise; her publisher provides a hotel room for her in Montreal; presumably this would not be necessary if she actually lived in Montreal. As such, she grows organically into an autonomous character from seeds planted in two quasi-fictional ontologies, so that she seems to be the closest thing to an "actual" hologram that this narrative offers. This helps explain the almost obsessive attention that attends her abrupt appearances and disappearances.

The fictionality of each third of the triptych is impacted by the other thirds in succession. “Hotel Rafale,” the opening frame, adheres to basic novelistic conventions like verisimilitude and linear progression, so that both its truth-value and its fictionality seem commensurate with those of any other fiction. In the second frame, embedded-Cybil insistently constructs both La Sixtine and framing-Cybil⁵ as characters in a narrative she is producing. “Hotel Rafale” now seems to be a fragment of a novel written by this second Cybil; accordingly, its truth-value seems to diminish while its fictionality increases. The triptych’s third frame, the publicity tour for the Hyde Park writer and her translator, codes the writing “I” or Hyde Park woman as more real or “actual” than both (fictional) Cybils. Her narrative follows the form of excerpts from a private journal, recording subjective impressions with little attempt to accommodate a reader outside herself. The reality effect of a narrative written in journal form is exceptionally pronounced because journals generally seem less mediated by aesthetic concerns than are literary narratives, apparently abjuring formal literary conventions like plot, characterization, setting, imagery. In Brossard’s text the reality effect of “Un seul corps pour comparer” trumps the “realities” of both preceding narratives. Viewed retrospectively from the standpoint of “Un seul corps pour comparer” the comparative status of the fragmentary “Hotel Rafale” as fictional or actual artefact becomes indifferent, even irrelevant while the more finished and elaborate second frame about the voyage with Irène and Occident seems almost exaggeratedly artificial. It is now possible to read the triptych’s centre frame as a novel within a

- 5 Identifying the two Cybil Nolands as embedded-Cybil and framing-Cybil may be a somewhat awkward expedient but it is necessary. If the figures are not distinguished from one another, it can seem that embedded-Cybil somehow “is” framing-Cybil when this is far from true. The two Cybils are very different characters with different experiences; they are commensurate only in their name and their passion for La Sixtine. Framing-Cybil is written to be sexually open: her sex scene is explicit, suggesting she has nothing to hide even from other ontological levels. She seems confident: she does not feel the need to secure La Sixtine’s affections by relating her life story. She is constructed as mature, possibly wise, and possibly the initiator of the relationship with La Sixtine (this last is not detailed within the text, but Irène’s characterization closely resembles framing-Cybil’s, and Irène does take the initiative with embedded-Cybil). In contrast, embedded-Cybil is sexually reticent: even her non-sexual fantasies can be repressed and anxious, especially where fish and oceans are involved, and her erotic encounters with Irène are never represented on the page. She seems suspicious of others, especially Occident, and continually requires explanations and reassurance; and she tends to react to the presence and actions of others rather than taking the initiative. Further, embedded-Cybil is embedded into the dystopic frame of the triptych.

novel: one fiction embedded whole and complete between two halves of a framing “real-world” (or *realer-world*) narrative, a technique Brossard has already employed in *Le Désert Mauve* (1987). The interpenetration of ontologies is intricately sensual, suggesting worlds that enfold, caress and embrace each other in a relationship predicated on mutual compromise, and recalling both the *scène blanche* between framing-Cybil and La Sixtine in the opening pages of the narrative and Grosz’s image of orgasmically intersecting worlds.

Like Winterson’s *PowerBook*, Brossard’s *Baroque d’aube* holds model writers and readers. There are multiple model writers. One or possibly both of the two Cybil Nolands write;⁶ there are two different Nicole Brossards, one who writes *Baroque d’aube* and one who, as an author admired by Cybil (124–27), is fictionalized within the text; and there are the nebulous unnamed writer figures known as the “Hyde Park woman” and/or the “Covent Garden woman” (it is not clear whether or not they are the same character). These different writer-women become increasingly indistinct until it is difficult to tell which one is writing the other, and indeed the distinction becomes more immaterial each time one writer thinks of the other and blurs the boundaries between their fictional spheres—both the ones they write and the ones they inhabit. It matters more that women collectively are re-thinking and re-writing the world than that any single woman should either take responsibility or receive credit. The proliferation of writer-figures strains the boundaries between “fictional” and “actual,” vexing the construction of any reality effect and suggesting that actual concrete change can be catalyzed within a fiction. The seducing reader may indeed have died as reality and reconstituted herself as illusion, but Brossard’s liminal and holographic narrative offers her a means of rebirth as a new kind of person in a new kind of reality.

Far outnumbered by writers, the most easily identifiable model reader in *Baroque d’aube* is Occident Des Rives. She neither writes, illustrates or designs the book, but like the reading public whose reading interests, cash outlay and mere existence are crucial to literary production, she does provide the parameters, the funding and the means of executing the project. Interestingly, when Occident is inspired by Cybil’s name to discourse on the five sibyls of Classical times, she observes that “[t]outes tiennent un livre—la main, sauf la sybille de Delphes ... dont la main se referme sur la partie enroulée d’un papyrus” (140). Occident constructs the sibyls as

6 Framing-Cybil is never identified concretely as a writer, but Brossard privileges writing women so strongly and consistently that it seems safer to assume that she is than otherwise.

Their worlds
rub against each
other, produc-
ing interpretive
jouissance at
unexpected
times in
unusual places
as motifs,
discursive
threads,
characters,
actions, and
insights echo
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holding books that are apparently complete volumes to be read rather than manuscripts to be written, making the sibyls readers more than writers, that is, interpreters and communicators of signs and portents. Because she prioritizes the reading function, Occident's description suggests how she might read herself: as a powerful oracle capable of deciphering mysterious messages and passing them on. As model reader Occident herself is magnetic, dictatorial, and enigmatic, staying largely in the background until her death moves her to the forefront. Almost immediately after her death, Brossard's text moves out of the realm of the fictive altogether and into "Un seul corps pour comparer" whose ontology throws off conventions of fictionality to mimic a less mediated actuality.

Meanwhile, erotic interaction is strangely suppressed in the embedded narrative. Writer embedded-Cybil and reader Occident do not have an affair at all, and while Cybil and Irène do engage erotically with each other once each at Rimouski, at Buenos Aires, and on board the "Symbole," these encounters unfold off-page. The erotic resonance that builds up around framing-Cybil and La Sixtine in "Hotel Rafale" seems to have a stronger impact on embedded-Cybil than her affair with Irène. Her preoccupation with her "character" La Sixtine gradually outstrips her anxiety about the literary conventions she thinks she has violated by importing a character with her own name into her text (55–6, 62).⁷ Eventually both Cybils seem equally in love with the fictional musician regardless of the incommensurability of fictional and actual worlds, so that the text's erotic charge undulates among both fictionalized and quasi-actual versions of writer, reader, musician and illustrator figures. Their worlds rub against each other, producing interpretive jouissance at unexpected times in unusual places as motifs, discursive threads, characters, actions, and insights echo from plane to plane.

7 The problem of importing an "actual world" name into a fictional world does preoccupy embedded-Cybil considerably, but the paradox seems to balance itself in "Buenos Aires." Embedded-Cybil is in a cemetery near the tomb of Eva Peron when she notices the approach of "*les deux femmes*" (113; italics in original). The two approaching women are not concretely identified at this point, but the use of italics suggests that embedded-Cybil experiences heightened anxiety or excitement at their proximity. The geographic setting has already been outlined, of course, in "Hotel Rafale," where La Sixtine tells framing-Cybil about her visit to the same cemetery with the admiral's wife (34-5); thus the italics seem to refer to the fact that "*les deux femmes*" both are and are not the young musician and her friend. The fictional world and the actual world seem to "haunt" or invade each other. This accentuates the arbitrariness of the borders that separate the two worlds and models how easily they interpenetrate each other, which is entirely consistent with Brossard's larger project of effecting change in the actual world through the texts that she writes.

What Brossard works towards in her narrative structure is echoed by her model readers and writers. In the narrative embedded in the centre of the triptych, embedded-Cybil Noland is immersed in producing a number of texts when Occident approaches her. Concerned that the ocean has lost its literal and figurative value, Occident hopes that the collaboration between writer embedded-Cybil and illustrator Irène will help change received ideas about the ocean and replenish its earlier rich levels of significance. They correspond by letter, and Cybil, enchanted with the style and content of Occident's letters, "se laissait courtiser" (59). Occident discusses representations of the ocean by Verne, Melville, Conrad, da Vinci, and Cousteau, seductively implying that Cybil's book will "fit" into that company.⁸ She clinches the seduction by offering Cybil "la latitude de vos désirs.... [J]e veux des émotions, votre intensité" (59).

But ironically the ship, called "Symbol," is a phallocracy: the ship is crewed by men, access to the ocean is mediated by men, and even forceful Occident finds it politic to defer to the men. Embedded-Cybil and Irène are virtually imprisoned for the first five days on board, since the newly tyrannical Occident, whose demeanour until now had seemed courting or seductive, restricts them to the library to study male-authored texts and movies about the ocean (135–36). Later, Cybil and Irène experience immersion in the ocean only through an instructional virtual reality program on diving produced by three men, the brothers Demers. Despite being surrounded by it, Cybil and Irène can only access the actual ocean from the deck, which seems to controvert the reason for the voyage. Although Irène takes to the technology easily, Cybil feels disconcertingly, frighteningly overstimulated by the experience of realities superimposing themselves on each other, and her mounting ambivalence toward the project intensifies (174–75). The frustration she experiences at these severe restrictions does, however, bring Cybil the vivid dreams that fuel her writing, which Occident asserts was part of her plan all along:

8 These writers are all white men who can be read as espousing the imperialist, or at least androcentric, values of a bygone era. I read this as contributing to the dystopic bent of this narrative. It is virtually impossible to discern Occident's agenda: does she wish to reinscribe on the public consciousness the figure of the ocean as devouring mother or seductive killer that prevailed in Early Modern culture? Or would she be willing to consider a more neutral or even gynocentric revision of that significance? She dies before the question even rises to the surface of the text, let alone becomes resolved. Neither do Irène and Cybil take up the question to any great extent, leaving the issue troublingly, dystopically open.

Si rêver signifie être là sans y être, convenez que je vous ai fait rêver au-delà de toute espérance.... Il ne m'appartient pas de libérer en vous les forces obscures que vous retiennent au quai. Je n'ai jamais mis en cause votre liberté d'expression.... Une artiste doit savoir faire de feu de tout bois y compris du bois mort que entrave la venue des pensées. (189)

By voicing her intention to nudge her writer-seducer toward unfamiliar levels of courage and resourcefulness, and towards new ways of reading and writing the world, Occident begins to utter an idea that is affirmed by the wider universe when a siren figure called “La Voix”—composed of writer Cybil, illustrator Irène and reader Occident—appears and urges Cybil to produce a cosmically female text by blending disparate unknowns:

Tu écriras ce livre, au milieu de la nuit, mêlant ton ombre aux ténèbres, liant les morts et les vivants, tous les mots nécessaires et le trop vaste du désir.... Tu iras toutes les chercher ces voix dont tu entends les hautes et les basses, la mélodée, le modulé de l'angoisse et de la peur, les cris de joie et de plaisir, les chuchotements énigmatiques, le murmure amoureux au matin clair.... Ton oreille tu appuieras sur la bouche de femmes à la voix forte et coléreuse sans craindre la verdure et la gravité de leurs propos.... Tu embrasseras Occident sur son malheur de balafre rose, frissonnant avec elle dans la mémoire du temps. Tu garderas l'équilibre au-dessus de l'abîme et de l'eau, vivras dans ton vertige. (190–91)

By conjoining the figures of the writer, the artist and the reader, “La Voix” bodies forth their inescapable interdependence. Evoking the interacting ontologies of the orgasmic narrative, this intensely sensual description conjures its addressee, Cybil, not only to engage with a multiplicity of worlds but to inhabit her own vertigo, to relinquish her accustomed boundaries and embrace the dizzying disequilibrium of other actualities.

Because Occident, along with Irène and La Sixtine, is named specifically by the Voice, the seducing reader seems integral to this cosmic project. But mere hours later the asthmatic Occident dies aboard the “Le Symbole,” ironically unable to breathe the sea air, and while she later regrets it (198), Cybil permits the men to exclude her from the death-scene (195–96). Merging the end of the tale with its beginning, Cybil describes her stay at a hotel and her efforts to write the text demanded of her by Occident and the Voice, an activity that receives her intense concentration and hard work. The hotel itself is ornate but empty and offers no

meaningful interaction with other guests. Anti-climax, disappointment and futility attend the end of “Le futur *dark*.” Cybil is deprived of access not only to the seducing reader, but also to the artist, the ocean, “La Voix,” and the many worlds they hold. While the triptych’s framing narratives and fictional worlds hover at the limens of Cybil’s embedded world, the gaps they offer to fill are not those that Cybil experiences; for the moment even the writing seems unpromising, and the prospect of another seducing reader seems remote.

Embedded at the heart of *Baroque d’aube* and woven through with ambivalence, this tale seems exceptionally dystopic even for Brossard, who has used dystopic figures to counterpoint utopic potential. In Brossard sex often functions as a metaphor for total commitment, openness, and loving support, a communication that is beyond language, but even sexuality seems exceptionally subdued here. Sexual interaction does not seem to be an occasion for joyous sharing at the core of the triptych because it remains implicit, occurring strictly off-page between Cybil and Irène in Rimouski, in Buenos Aires, and on board “Le Symbole.” Nevertheless Cybil’s status as a fictional product and the reader’s role as a consumer remain able to energize each other. Pronouns that are multivalent rather than restrictive promote this reciprocal dynamic through a linguistic chiasmus. The Cybil who makes the ocean voyage is usually written in the third person feminine, but like Winterson’s two lovers she cycles through the first and second persons as well. “I” is both Cybil and the reader, “you” is both Cybil and the reader; the reader is as “responsible” for the text’s dystopic bent as character/narrator/writer, and experiences the blurring of boundaries between fictionality and actuality as intensely as does Cybil.

Although Brossard has been described as determinedly utopic, she does employ dystopic figures to foreground forces that undermine and diminish women’s strength, and in *Baroque d’aube*, Brossard constructs a dystopia—a novel about “le volcan de violence qui déferle dans les villes” (23). Describing this violence requires words that “font tourner l’estomac, font tourner la tête du côté de la souffrance, du côté des êtres et de leur descendance avide de vengeance” (24). Brossard codes this dystopic fictional world as a possible but *non*-actual world—a situation that can still be resisted—by confining it to the 150-page core. The more optimistic framing narratives suggest alternatives by foregrounding the communication, intellectual contact, and loving emotions shared among framing-Cybil and La Sixtine in “Hotel Rafale,” and by the writing “I” and those who experience the touch of her texts in “Un seul corps pour comparer.”

Translators in
Brossard
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alchemists of
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The closing segment, “Un seul corps pour comparer,” is in the voice of the nameless journal writer who is on a publicity tour with her nameless translator. Translators in Brossard resemble alchemists of language whose twinned expertise in reading and writing grants them unique positions within the text (see Knutson). This translator admires the writing “I”’s way of using

un flou holographique pour aviver l'impression de présence et d'étrangeté. Et soudain l'illusion que vous donnez de pouvoir. Toucher, caresser peut-être.... Pourtant chaque fois qu'on soupçonne une absence, un vide, ils se transforment en grenades d'énergie. Oh! oui vous m'avez surprise. (213)

The writing “I” muses:

Oh! oui m'est resté dans la tête comme une expression de joie, une sorte d'empressement à guetter le plaisir brut de la vie....
Oh! oui entre ses lèvres m'a fait retrouver un plaisir ancien. Comme à l'époque une série de petites ruades au bas du ventre et le monde se met à prendre des proportions harmonieuses, des allures gaies. (213)

An involuntary expression of pleasure, of ecstatic assent, “Oh oui” is mutually recognized by seducer and seducee as the performative sign of orgasm reached. “Oh oui” confirms that their caresses have blended the reading/seducing with the writing/seduced subject, conferring presence, strangeness, power, energy.

In Winterson’s *PowerBook* and Brossard’s *Baroque d’aube*, the planes of narrative operate as super-sensitized and dynamic liminal sites that offer means of transposing and thereby blending dichotomized subjectivities. During erotic interaction, the skins of lovers can seem less to limit where one lover begins and the other ends than to elide the differences between one body’s sensations and the other’s. This makes of both skins a single liminal Möbius-strip, sensitively responding to external stimuli with inner electricity, merging “the other” into “the same.” Winterson’s *PowerBook* ends on a bittersweet note of nostalgia, a wistful and impossible desire that this blending could extend beyond the duration of the erotic encounter. Through the medium of hologrammatic narrative, Brossard’s *Baroque d’aube* works toward making this ability to blend a more permanent quality by effecting a cortical change in the seductive reader; the dystopic embedded narrative emphasizes that there is a profound need for change in the way that subjectivities interact. These texts suggest that

as long as distinctions arise between victor and victim, producer and consumer, reader and writer, actuality and fictionality, seducer and seducee, the only power is the power to oppress; but when these dichotomies seep together the blending itself becomes a dynamic power to effect change. Winterson's writing "I" declares:

In this space which is inside you and inside me I ask for no rights or territories. There are no frontiers or controls. The usual channels do not exist. This is the orderly anarchic space that no one can dictate, though everyone tries. This is a country without a ruler. I am free to come and go as I please....

Most of us try to turn this into power. We're too scared to do anything else.

But it isn't power. It's sex. (175)

Winterson and Brossard work toward removing both literary production and seduction from that realm of power politics which constructs the writer as victor and the reader as victim of the seduction process, and reshape both as catalyzed and catalyzing agents of change. Freed from the power to oppress, text and sex do not patronize, limit. Instead they provide options to repressive ideologies; they open channels of communication; they constellate, transmute, energize. The reader's seductive eye recognizes and nourishes the writer who can refigure her way of reading the world, who can expand the ability of her "skin" to accommodate other subjectivities that complement and extend her perception of the world she inhabits. If, as Occident contends, "les artistes transforment les blocs de fiction en courants de pensée" (83), then it is up to readers to complete the transmutation from fiction to thought to reality.

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