

THE MARK OF GENDER

1985

I

The mark of gender, according to grammarians, concerns substantives. They talk about it in terms of function. If they question its meaning, they may joke about it, calling gender a "fictive sex." It is thus that English when compared to French has the reputation of being almost genderless, while French passes for a very gendered language. It is true that, strictly speaking, English does not apply the mark of gender to inanimate objects, to things or nonhuman beings. But as far as the categories of the person are concerned, both languages are bearers of gender to the same extent. Both indeed give way to a primitive ontological concept that enforces in language a division of beings into sexes. The "fictive sex" of nouns or their neuter gender are only accidental developments of this first principle and as such they are relatively harmless.

The manifestation of gender that is identical in English and in French takes place in the dimension of the person. It does not concern only grammarians, although it is a lexical manifestation. As an ontological concept that deals with the nature of Being,

along with a whole nebula of other primitive concepts belonging to the same line of thought, gender seems to belong primarily to philosophy. Its *raison d'être* is never questioned in grammar, whose role is to describe forms and functions, not to find a justification for them. It is no longer questioned in philosophy, though, because it belongs to that body of self-evident concepts without which philosophers believe they cannot develop a line of reasoning and which for them go without saying, for they exist prior to any thought, any social order, in nature. So they call gender the lexical delegation of "natural beings," their symbol. Being aware that the notion of gender is not as innocuous as it appears, American feminists use gender as a sociological category, making clear that there is nothing natural about this notion, as sexes have been artificially constructed into political categories — categories of oppression. They have extrapolated the term *gender* from grammar and they tend to superimpose it on the notion of sex. And they are right insofar as gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes and of the domination of women. In the same way as sex, man and woman, gender, as a concept, is instrumental in the political discourse of the social contract as heterosexual.

In modern theory, even in the assumptions of disciplines exclusively concerned with language, one remains within the classical division of the concrete world on the one hand, and the abstract one on the other. Physical or social reality and language are disconnected. Abstraction, symbols, signs do not belong to the real. There is on one side the real, the referent, and on the other side language. It is as though the relation to language were a relation of function only and not one of transformation. There is sometimes a confusion between signified and referent, so that

they are even used indifferently in certain critical works. Or there is a reduction of the signified to a series of messages, with relays of the referent remaining the only support of the meaning. Among linguists, the Russian Bakhtin, a contemporary of the Russian Formalists whose work has at last been translated, is the only one who seems to me to have a strictly materialist approach to language. In sociolinguistics, there are several developments in this direction, mostly among feminists.¹

I say that even abstract philosophical categories act upon the real as social. Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it. For example, the bodies of social actors are fashioned by abstract language as well as by nonabstract language. For there is a plasticity of the real to language: language has a plastic action upon the real. According to Sande Zeig, social gestures are the result of this phenomenon.²

About gender, then, it is not only important to dislodge from grammar and linguistics a sociological category that does not speak its name. It is also very important to consider how gender works in language, how gender works upon language, before considering how it works from there upon its users.

Gender takes place in a category of language that is totally unlike any other and which is called the personal pronoun. Personal pronouns are the only linguistic instances that designate the locutors in discourse and their different and successive situations in relationship to that discourse. As such, they are also the pathways and the means of entrance into language. And it is in this sense — that they represent persons — that they interest us here. It is without justification of any kind, without questioning, that personal pronouns somehow engineer gender all through language, taking it along with them quite naturally, so

to speak, in any kind of talk, parley, or philosophical treatise. And although they are instrumental in activating the notion of gender, they pass unnoticed. Not being gender-marked themselves in their subjective form (except in one case), they can support the notion of gender while they seem to fulfill another function. In principle, pronouns mark the opposition of gender only in the third person and are not gender bearers, *per se*, in the other persons. Thus, it is as though gender does not affect them, is not part of their structure, but only a detail in their associated forms. But, in reality, as soon as there is a locutor in discourse, as soon as there is an 'I,' gender manifests itself. There is a kind of suspension of the grammatical form. A direct interpellation of the locutor occurs. The locutor is called upon in person. The locutor intervenes, in the order of the pronouns, without mediation, in *its proper sex* — that is, when the locutor is a sociological woman. One knows that, in French, with *je* ('I'), one must mark the gender as soon as one uses it in relation to past participles and adjectives. In English, where the same kind of obligation does not exist, a locutor, when a sociological woman, must in one way or another, that is, with a certain number of clauses, make her sex public. For gender is the enforcement of sex in language, working in the same way as the declaration of sex in civil status. Gender is not confined within the third person, and the mention of sex in language is not a treatment reserved for the third person. Sex, under the name of gender, permeates the whole body of language and forces every locutor, if she belongs to the oppressed sex, to proclaim it in her speech, that is, to appear in language under her proper physical form and not under the abstract form, which every male locutor has the unquestioned right to use. The abstract form, the general,

the universal, this is what the so-called masculine gender means, for the class of men have appropriated the universal for themselves. One must understand that men are not born with a faculty for the universal and that women are not reduced at birth to the particular. The universal has been, and is continually, at every moment, appropriated by men. It does not happen by magic, it must be done. It is an act, a criminal act, perpetrated by one class against another. It is an act carried out at the level of concepts, philosophy, politics. And gender by enforcing upon women a particular category represents a measure of domination. Gender is very harmful to women in the exercise of language. But there is more. Gender is ontologically a total impossibility. For when one becomes a locutor, when one says 'I' and, in so doing, reappropriates language as a whole,³ proceeding from oneself alone, with the tremendous power to use all language, it is then and there, according to linguists and philosophers, that the supreme act of subjectivity, the advent of subjectivity into consciousness, occurs. It is when starting to speak that one becomes 'I.' This act — the becoming of *the* subject through the exercise of language and through locution — in order to be real, implies that the locutor be an absolute subject. For a relative subject is inconceivable, a relative subject could not speak at all. I mean that in spite of the harsh law of gender and its enforcement upon women, no woman can say 'I' without being for herself a total subject — that is, ungendered, universal, whole. Or, failing this, she is condemned to what I call parrot speech (slaves echoing their masters' talk). Language as a whole gives everyone the same power of becoming an absolute subject through its exercise. But gender, an element of language, works upon this ontological fact to annul it as far as women are con-

cerned and corresponds to a constant attempt to strip them of the most precious thing for a human being — subjectivity. Gender is an ontological impossibility because it tries to accomplish the division of Being. But Being as being is not divided. God or Man as being are One and whole. So what is this divided Being introduced into language through gender? It is an impossible Being, it is a Being that does not exist, an ontological joke, a conceptual maneuver to wrest from women what belongs to them by right: conceiving of oneself as a total subject through the exercise of language. The result of the imposition of gender, acting as a denial at the very moment when one speaks, is to deprive women of the authority of speech, and to force them to make their entrance in a crablike way, particularizing themselves and apologizing profusely. The result is to deny them any claim to the abstract, philosophical, political discourses that give shape to the social body. Gender then must be destroyed. The possibility of its destruction is given through the very exercise of language. For each time I say 'I,' I reorganize the world from my point of view and through abstraction I lay claim to universality. This fact holds true for every locutor.

II

To destroy the categories of sex in politics and in philosophy, to destroy gender in language (at least to modify its use) is therefore part of my work in writing, as a writer. An important part, since a modification as central as this cannot happen without a transformation of language as a whole. It concerns (touches) words whose meanings and forms are close to, and associated with, gender. But it also concerns (touches) words whose meanings

and forms are the furthest away. For once the dimension of the person, around which all others are organized, is brought into play, nothing is left intact. Words, their disposition, their arrangement, their relation to each other, the whole nebula of their constellations shift, are displaced, engulfed or reoriented, put sideways. And when they reappear, the structural change in language makes them look different. They are hit in their meaning and also in their form. Their music sounds different, their coloration is affected. For what is really in question here is a structural change in language, in its nerves, its framing. But language does not allow itself to be worked upon, without parallel work in philosophy and politics, as well as in economics, because, as women are marked in language by gender, they are marked in society as sex. I said that personal pronouns engineer gender through language, and personal pronouns are, if I may say so, the subject matter of each one of my books — except for *Le Brouillon pour un Dictionnaire des Amantes (Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary)*, written with Sande Zeig. They are the motors for which functioning parts had to be designed, and as such they create the necessity of the form.

The project of *The Opoponax*, my first book, was to work on the subject, the speaking subject, the subject of discourse — subjectivity, generally speaking. I wanted to restore an undivided 'I,' to universalize the point of view of a group condemned to being particular, relegated in language to a subhuman category. I chose childhood as an element of form open to history (it is what a narrative theme is for me), the formation of the ego around language. A massive effort was needed to break the spell of the captured subject. I needed a strong device, something that would immediately be beyond sexes, that the division by sexes would

be powerless against, and that could not be coopted. There is in French, as there is in English, a munificent pronoun that is called the indefinite, which means that it is not marked by gender, a pronoun that you are taught in school to systematically avoid. It is *on* in French — *one* in English. Indeed it is so systematically taught that it should not be used that the translator of *The Opoponax* managed never to use it in English. One must say in the translator's favor that it sounds and looks very heavy in English, but no less so in French.

With this pronoun, that is neither gendered nor numbered, I could locate the characters outside of the social division by sexes and annul it for the duration of the book. In French, the masculine form — so the grammarians say — used when a past participle or an adjective is associated with the subject *on*, is in fact neuter. This incidental question of the neuter is in fact very interesting, for even when it is about terms like *l'homme*, like *Man*, grammarians do not speak of neuter in the same sense as they do for *Good* or *Evil*, but they speak of masculine gender. For they have appropriated *l'homme*, *homo*, whose first meaning is not *male* but *mankind*. For *homo sum*. *Man* as *male* is only a derivative and second meaning.⁴ To come back to *one*, *on*, here is a subject pronoun which is very tractable and accommodating since it can be bent in several directions at the same time. First, as already mentioned, it is indefinite as far as gender is concerned. It can represent a certain number of people successively or all at once — everybody, we, they, I, you, people, a small or a large number of persons — and still stay singular. It lends itself to all kinds of substitutions of persons. In the case of *The Opoponax*, it was a delegate of a whole class of people, of everybody, of a few persons, of I (the 'I' of the main character, the 'I' of the

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narrator, and the 'I' of the reader). *One, on* has been for me the key to the undisturbed use of language, as it is in childhood when words are magic, when words are set bright and colorful in the kaleidoscope of the world, with its many revolutions in the consciousness as one shakes it. *One, on* has been the pathway to the description of the apprenticeship, through words, of everything important to consciousness, apprenticeship in writing being the first, even before the apprenticeship in the use of speech. *One, on*, lends itself to the unique experience of all locutors who, when saying I, can reappropriate the whole language and reorganize the world from their point of view. I did not hide the female characters under male patronyms to make them look more universal, and nevertheless, if I believe what Claude Simon wrote, the attempt at universalization succeeded. He wrote, speaking about what happened to the main character in *The Opoponax*, a little girl: "I see, I breathe, I chew, I feel through her eyes, her mouth, her hands, her skin. . . . I become childhood."⁵

Before speaking of the pronoun which is the axis of *Les Guérillères*, I would like to recall what Marx and Engels said in *The German Ideology* about class interests. They said that each new class that fights for power must, to reach its goal, represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of the society, and that in the philosophical domain this class must give the form of universality to its thought, to present it as the only reasonable one, the only universally valid one.

As for *Les Guérillères*, there is a personal pronoun used very little in French which does not exist in English — the collective plural *elles* (*they* in English) — while *ils* (*they*) often stands for the general: *they say*, meaning *people say*. This general *ils* does

not include *elles*, no more, I suspect, than *they* includes any *she* in its assumption. One could say that it is a pity that in English there is not even a hypothetical plural feminine pronoun to try to make up for the absence of *she* in the general *they*. But what is the good of it, since when it exists it is not used. The rare times that it is, *elles* never stands for the general and is never the bearer of a universal point of view.⁶ An *elles* therefore that would be able to support a universal point of view would be a novelty in literature or elsewhere. In *Les Guérillères*, I try to universalize the point of view of *elles*. The goal of this approach is not to feminize the world but to make the categories of sex obsolete in language. I, therefore, set up *elles* in the text as the absolute subject of the world. To succeed textually, I needed to adopt some very draconian measures, such as to eliminate, at least in the first two parts, *he*, or *they-he*. I wanted to produce a shock for the reader entering a text in which *elles* by its unique presence constitutes an assault, yes, even for female readers. Here again the adoption of a pronoun as my subject matter dictated the form of the book. Although the theme of the text was total war, led by *elles* on *ils*, in order for this new person to take effect, two-thirds of the text had to be totally inhabited, haunted, by *elles*. Word by word, *elles* establishes itself as a sovereign subject. Only then could *il(s)*, *they-he*, appear, reduced and truncated out of language. This *elles* in order to become real also imposed an epic form, where it is not only the complete subject of the world but its conqueror. Another consequence derived from the sovereign presence of *elles* was that the chronological beginning of the narrative — that is, the total war — found itself in the third part of the book, and the textual beginning was in fact the end of the narrative. From there comes the circular form of the book, its

gesta, which the geometrical form of a circle indicates as a *modus operandi*. In English the translator, lacking the lexical equivalent for *elles*, found himself compelled to make a change, which for me destroys the effect of the attempt. When *elles* is turned into *the women* the process of universalization is destroyed. All of a sudden, *elles* stopped being *mankind*. When one says "the women," one connotes a number of individual women, thus transforming the point of view entirely, by particularizing what I intended as a universal. Not only was my undertaking with the collective pronoun *elles* lost, but another word was introduced, the word *women* appearing obsessively throughout the text, and it is one of those gender-marked words mentioned earlier which I never use in French. For me it is the equivalent of *slave*, and, in fact, I have actively opposed its use whenever possible. To patch it up with the use of a *y* or an *i* (as in *womyn* or *wimmin*) does not alter the political reality of the word. If one tries to imagine *nogger* or *niggir*, instead of *nigger*, one may realize the futility of the attempt. It is not that there is no solution to translating *elles*. There is a solution, although it was difficult for me to find at the time. I am aware that the question is a grammatical one, therefore a textual one, and not a question of translation.⁷ The solution for the English translation then is to reappropriate the collective pronoun *they*, which rightfully belongs to the feminine as well as to the masculine gender. *They* is not only a collective pronoun but it also immediately develops a degree of universality which is not immediate with *elles*. Indeed, to obtain it with *elles*, one must produce a work of transformation that involves a whole pageant of other words and that touches the imagination. *They* does not partake of the naturalistic, hysterical

bent that accompanies the feminine gender. *They* helps to go beyond the categories of sex. But *they* can be effective in my design only when it stands by itself, like its French counterpart. Only with the use of *they* will the text regain its strength and strangeness. The fact that the book begins with the end and that the end is the chronological beginning will be textually justified by the unexpected identity of *they*. In the third part, the war section, *they* cannot be shared by the category to be eliminated from the general. In a new version the masculine gender must be more systematically particularized than it is in the actual form of the book. The masculine must not appear under *they* but only under *man*, *he*, *his*, in analogy with what has been done for so long to the feminine gender (*woman*, *she*, *her*). It seems to me that the English solution will take us even a step further in making the categories of sex obsolete in language.

Talking about the key pronoun of *The Lesbian Body* (*Le Corps lesbien*) is a very difficult task for me, and sometimes I have considered this text a reverie about the beautiful analysis of the pronouns *je* and *tu* by the linguist Emile Benveniste. The bar in the *je* of *The Lesbian Body* is a sign of excess. A sign that helps to imagine an excess of 'I,' an 'I' exalted. 'I' has become so powerful in *The Lesbian Body* that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and assault the so-called love, the heroes of love, and lesbianize them, lesbianize the symbols, lesbianize the gods and the goddesses, lesbianize the men and the women. This 'I' can be destroyed in the attempt and resuscitated. Nothing resists this 'I' (or this *tu*, which is its same, its love), which spreads itself in the whole world of the book, like a lava flow that nothing can stop.

To understand my undertaking in this text, one must go back to *The Opoponax*, in which the only appearance of the narrator comes with a *je*, 'I,' located at the end of the book in a small sentence untranslated⁸ in English, a verse of Maurice Scève, in *La Délie*: "*Tant je l'aimais qu'en elle encore je vis*" (I loved her so that in her I live still). This sentence is the key to the text and pours its ultimate light upon the whole of it, demystifying the meaning of the *opoponax* and establishing a lesbian subject as the absolute subject while lesbian love is the absolute love. *On*, the *opoponax*, and the *je*, 'I' of the end have narrow links. They function by relays. First *on* completely coincides with the character Catherine Legrand as well as with the others. Then the *opoponax* appears as a talisman, a sesame to the opening of the world, as a word that compels both words and world to make sense, as a metaphor for the lesbian subject. After the repeated assertions of Catherine Legrand that *I am the opoponax* the narrator can at the end of the book take the relay and affirm in her name: "I loved her so that in her I live still." The chain of permutations from the *on* to the *je*, 'I,' of *The Opoponax* has created a context for the 'I' in *The Lesbian Body*. This understanding both global and particular, both universal and unique, brought from within a perspective given in homosexuality, is the object of some extraordinary pages by Proust.

To close my discussion of the notion of gender in language, I will say that it is a mark unique of its kind, the unique lexical symbol that refers to an oppressed group. No other has left its trace within language to such a degree that to eradicate it would not only modify language at the lexical level but would upset the structure itself and its functioning. Furthermore, it would

change the relations of words at the metaphorical level far beyond the very few concepts and notions that are touched upon by this transformation. It would change the coloration of words in relation to each other and their tonality. It is a transformation that would affect the conceptual-philosophical level and the political one as well as the poetic one.