

NICOLE BROSSARD / A Noise of Universe¹

Trans. Robert Majzels and Erín Moure

“You know that beautiful things cannot stand description.”
—Gustave Flaubert, *Letters 1830–1857*, trans. Francis Steegmuller

already we have begun again
in terms of breathing to evoke
entangled voices
in the midst of vowels
foreign found within oneself one vague morning

against a backdrop of narration
tell me if you recognize
the fire that spills over
by instinct its eccentricity
in our ancient veins
of humanity, and the blood

¹ From “*Oriana Ossilk* TAKE 2.” An earlier text entitled “*Oriana Ossilk*” appeared in French and in English translation by Dawn Cornelio in *Contemporary French & Francophone Studies* 15, 5 (December 2011): 647–653. “*A Noise of Universe*” is the second section of a novel-in-progress called *Oriana Ossilk*; this section will appear in French in fall 2013 in a book dedicated to Nicole Brossard, edited by Janine Ricouart and Roseanna Dufault.

RE: How is it?

Here's what happens: zap morphing true *noir*, but here again we must begin over because of the anxiety of *forms and other formats*, yes my little canary, even writers who've flown the coop, hidden behind pseudonyms, heteronyms, or beneath a tree smelling of beer and fruit, even these say they want to begin again knowing that their face and sometimes their whole body is charged with an energy that on winter days, when ice slows the blood in our veins, we call bare or cosmic concept, a concept that easily shunts off into the distance anyone who has ever inhaled the odour of ink and tenderness, but also of war and volcanoes. And remember, the odour will vary depending on what you read and on the suffering in you astonished at the universe.

DE/SCRIBE

I was about to order an espresso when Oriana Ossilk crossed the white expanse of the Sagamore Hotel's grand salon. Outside the sun was sprinkling.

Lately Oriana Ossilk could appear at any moment in one or another of my texts and, for me, there was no longer any question of obeying any kind of chronology, even if it were the gorgeous fruit of fiction. Similarly, it seemed pointless to reflect on her my subject as though I'd only lived in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The truth was I'd developed a strange passion for Oriana Ossilk, for her name, yes, but also for the human intrigue she represents to me. Behind her name there is a story, behind the story there is what we are becoming and cry out to the planet. A woman alone on the seashore in North America. There's nothing extravagant in that, and yet her presence and name were enough to nourish in me an obsession to de/scribe as if in order to continue to write, to want to write, it was imperative that I grasp the process that allows me with written words to simultaneously dismantle and reconstitute objects, scenes, landscapes and feelings by giving them the vivacity of an inner life, which is to say an emotion in the intimacy of its narrative form.

It also happens that the minute I attempt a description I'm so alone in the midst of words that I have to return to places that I don't recall having committed to memory.

In the time it took to cross the expanse of the Sagamore Hotel's white salon, Oriana Ossilk was swallowed up in her own transparency.

4descriptions

They have put an old chest of drawers in my room, it was bought from a junk dealer and is made of dark wood, with a thick slab of black marble on top, a strong smell of must and mould emanates from its open drawers, they contain several enormous, hardbound volumes covered in black paper with yellowish marbling. . . . *Childhood*, Nathalie Sarraute, trans. Barbara Wright

Along the forest there are large ochre shadows on the wheat, beneath the trees there are big dark spots that look like ink blots, there are ultramarines that fall on the strips of forest that you see at the bottom of the sky, beyond you can't see anything because it's the horizon, but anyway you can see very well that the earth is round because the line that divides the transparent blue of the sky from the ultramarine of the forest makes a dark and unmistakable curve. *The Opoponax*, Monique Wittig, trans. Helen Weaver

There were only two portraits, they were in the dining hall; one, her father, in uniform, standing beside a table, his plumed hat in his hand, his hand on the hilt of a sword, his spurred heels lost in the deep pile of a rug. The other, her mother, seated on a garden bench dressed in hunter-green, a little mannish hat tilted to one side. *The Passion*, Djuna Barnes

A shawl is a hat and hurt and a red balloon and an under coat and a sizer a sizer of talks. A shawl is a wedding, a piece of wax a little build. A shawl. *Tender Buttons*, Gertrude Stein

one week later

I set the novel and a notebook down on the table.

The book was full of sudden descriptions that as soon as they appeared gave the impression that they were about to self-destruct thus rendering enigmatic each of the novels of Oriana Ossilk. As for the easy and joyful images, I didn't think I had the power to translate them properly. Also I let them run free in my mind like little woolly lambs by the sea. And I was forced to admit that the rhythm of my breathing was now altered, sped up, intensified. That lasted awhile, then I turned into a Sumerian numeral or Iroise Sea.

I reframed the night in our chests
I also noticed Ossilk had added
a bit of lighting and silence
a few books and ripe fruit
so that memory entwines memory
curves of breath and alphabet
these things slow in us free and stunning

An overview of the centuries. A tightening in the chest.
Things that are easy, a siesta, a cocktail. Variety in our time so as not
to die too quickly. Writing and repose do not go together. Of course,
we can occasionally bring them both into a room, a bed, on
a terrace, before a landscape that burns within us suddenly
silence and our precious words that yield on every side as though
under the effect of a natural catastrophe.

Stretched out on the grass of the hotel garden, Oriana Ossilk listens
closely to the stridulation of the cicadas. It's like in a
novel, she thinks. She's still in shock from the sound
poems she heard yesterday when the poet Hugo Fleuve seemed
to want to structure meaning, his work, and his existence with sounds
that brutally ruined in each listener the tentative will to live
and think normally. Hugo Fleuve's *Quantified Self* was full-
blown in his lungs, his throat and mouth. Ossilk felt a touch of doubt.
Was it necessary to measure the night in each of us? How far back could we go
in the dark and calculate how the belly? How the breath?

language oscillates yet again the present snatches it away
and always I recompose the landscape
a few new leaps in the imaginary
or if you prefer, lakes, pine woods and palm groves
their perfume on the napes of women
everything that might resemble centuries
cheek to cheek life's wager
in the midst of infinities why
pupils satellites in memory
a scuffed noise of universe and of sobs

Where did I get this sudden need to de/scribe. Had the world changed so much that it was necessary to recompose it while walking in the unspeakable, gaze turned toward the present as though the present had the power to crush the other tenses, to isolate us in its magnetic field and thus pretend to help us live. Could de/scribing teach me something about reality, I who'd always sought to get away from it as much as one can keep reality at bay. Now here was reality summoning me, in a seaside hotel whose whiteness blinded me. Tables, sofas, chairs, dishes, centerpieces, all were a white of extreme presence. Oriana Ossilk easily reappeared everywhere.

The question of identity that demands descriptions by the thousands and of abstraction that erases them was bound to arise. I had no idea the torment they would cause nor the joy they would afford me for in de/scribing I'd seek out the thousand nuances that explode the flat time of a reality already named. De/scribing would allow me to fool around with the obvious. De/scribing, I might never again possess certainty. Only a desire for vigilant presence without respite.

I was about to board an airplane. In a few hours I'd be in a novel by Oriana Ossilk, crossing the vast garden that leads from the Sagamore Hotel to the sea.

Flagrant violation of recent world
I put my joy in caress to work
between thoughts, trembling, the minute just before
everything that under your blouse
fine particles of integral presence.

I also noticed how each morning
Oriana Ossilk is left on her own
solitary with her vocabulary
by the sea, in her hotel room
or walking in town.

We felt the coming storm. Life was swallowed up in
thinking, wind and light.

We felt the coming storm.

Democracy, the destiny of each of us
and other combinations of words would soon
bite into our everyday of flesh and of melancholy.

I slept well. I was awakened by children's voices and whispers; and a sound loop of powerful waves. Then the cycle of sounds began again. I had never seen the sea, and that was something I'd never told anyone. I'd read everything there was to read about the sea. I had to because I thought that my inexperience of the sea led others to think I was incapable of understanding life and the whole range of sensations and feelings essential to a lust for life. I have very little memory of water. A long time ago, I saw children running on the beach of a large lake north of Montréal. Girls my age were holding hands and their speed, varying in tempo, left the impression that some of them were fading away into time without it ever being possible to catch up to them just as in fiction.

A temporal cape of invisibility rendered my childhood completely undetectable, because my childhood was no longer couched in time but in space. Here it was now here with us as it melted into the strangeness of a single self caught up in the time of descriptions.

I first became interested in Oriana Ossiik's novels because she offered the sea to the reader the way others offer a sumptuous feast to their women friends. The sea was a horizon and Ossiik insisted in every paragraph on the energy emanating from it in the form of sounds striking the ear like ultrasonics capable of fragmenting our organs and our thoughts thus creating those mists of fresh water she needed in order to dream.

against a backdrop of narration
poems are *problématiques*
they swallow the sleekest thoughts and the others
take leave in the rigours of dangerous fervour
theory of free hearts
here we lose the word night, there we taste darkness
with fears tweets and caresses that make us smile
and stir up *la poétique*,

it all rolls toward our eardrums
it all departs once more invisible
an inch from infinity
already we've begun again