

# No Tongue in Cheek:

## Recent Work by English Canadian Poets Daphne Marlatt, Lola Lemire Tostevin and Margaret Atwood

by Christl Verduyn

Recent works by new and by established women writers in English Canada<sup>1</sup> attribute special significance to a striking recurrent motif: the tongue. For Daphne Marlatt in *Touch to My Tongue*,<sup>2</sup> Lola Lemire Tostevin in *Colour of Her Speech*<sup>3</sup> and Margaret Atwood in *Murder in the Dark*,<sup>4</sup> the tongue motif is central to one or both of at least two constructs of meaning. On the one hand, the tongue is linked to language and speech and sets the stage for a poetic exploration of language from a feminist perspective. Marlatt, Tostevin and Atwood all engage in a "musing with mothertongue,"<sup>5</sup> which reveals language to be one among various other male-oriented systems of expression or organization which they question. On the other hand, the tongue, organ of gustatory pleasure, is instrumental in the expression of sexual pleasure from woman's perspective. In both instances, the writing is serious in its commitment to articulating a female and feminist perspective. There is no tongue in cheek in these urgent expressions of women's view/s of life's experiences.

The link between tongue and language and speech is especially well developed in Lola Lemire Tostevin's *Colour of Her Speech*. Tostevin's francophone origins allow her to conduct her particular exploration of language by playing on the French word *langue*, meaning both language and tongue. Francophone and feminist concerns arise simultaneously around the recurrent question of bilingualism. In Tostevin's work, bilingualism has both the traditional meaning of speaking two languages — French and English — and the new meaning feminists have ascribed the term when referring to how women, when they learn to speak, essentially learn a second language — patriarchal language, that is, language

as it has evolved to express man's vision and experience of "reality:"

*"french is no longer  
my mother tongue" she says*

*"neither is english" he says*

*"well what is"  
"fucking" he says*

*so when people inquired  
as to her first language  
she replied "fuckinese"*

*"about poetry  
keep it nameless" he says  
"an author is inconsequential  
to a good piece of art"*

*tongueless fucking in the dark*

*taking the light  
the naming*

The reduction of self/expression — both as speaker and writer and as a woman and/or a non anglophone — is tantamount to the removal of one's tongue, as Tostevin suggests in a subsequent poem:

*to remove the whole  
of the tongue the mouth  
is widely opened  
with a gag the organ  
transfixed with silk  
the glossus divided  
with a pair of scissors  
écraseurs or crushers  
the base cut through  
by a series of short snips*

*as it becomes easier  
to pull the tongue  
well out of the mouth  
each vessel is dealt with  
as soon as divided  
the remaining undivided*

*portion of the organ  
seized with forceps  
and lifted from the cavity*

*in cases where only one side  
of the tongue  
needs to be eliminated  
the operation is modified  
by splitting the tongue  
down the centre  
the affected half removed  
through the neck  
through a semilunar incision  
along the lower jaw  
extending backward to the hyoid bone  
the tongue can then be reached  
through the floor of the mouth  
and removed with the crushers*

*the main objection to this operation  
is that the larynx  
and all the muscles in the area  
are divided  
preventing normal breathing*

Tostevin's chillingly clinical description of a tongue amputation is paralleled by Atwood's "Simmering" in *Murder in the Dark*. In this text, a reversal of men's and women's roles — men into the kitchen and women out to the workplace — does not, as might be hoped, lead to liberation from debilitating gender roles, but rather to the frightening amputation of women's tongues:

*...It was pointed out to the women, who  
by this time did not go into the kitchens  
at all on pain of being thought unfeminine,  
that chef after all means chief and  
that Mixmasters were common but no  
one had ever heard of a Mixmistress.  
Psychology articles began to appear in  
the magazines on the origin of women's  
kitchen envy and how it could be cured.  
Amputation of the tongue was recom-  
mended, and, as you know, became a*

widespread practice in the more advanced nations. If Nature had meant women to cook, it was said, God would have made carving knives round and with holes in them.

Tostevin's and Atwood's visions of the removal of a woman's or women's tongue/s signals the urgency of considering a number of questions of importance to feminists. A primary concern is that of "difference," a concept emanating from the theoretical writings of French feminists like Julia Kristeva, whom both Tostevin and Marlatt cite.<sup>6</sup> The term communicates the notion of the "feminine"/woman as *different* from the masculine/man, viewed as the norm, rather than as Opposite or Other, that is, abnormal. For Tostevin, the notion of difference arises in the two areas of concern to her — francophone and female identity — as the following two poems suggest:

*once  
the mouth  
stood empty*

*it was easy  
to introduce  
your difference  
.....*

*which part  
of the body  
speaks (or the sensation of  
)*

*which beat  
which breath yields the form by  
which*

*it all comes about*

*we said: the body  
is a poem  
of coordinated parts*

*we said: one  
is so dependent  
upon the other so united  
we can speak now  
of penetration  
we said: language*

*is opposed  
to all that*

*listen to us eye  
to eye too  
close to catch*

*you said: let's see  
how deep down your throat I can thrust*

*it stopped  
there*

*it takes  
a different tongue  
to penetrate  
a different depth*

The mouth is seen here, and in Marlatt's and Atwood's work elsewhere, as a point of vulnerability. But it is also the site of resistance. The mouth houses the tongue whose link to speech and language gives it the potential to function as an instrument of resistance — voiced refusal. Like other contemporary feminist writers, Tostevin, Marlatt and Atwood see language as a viable means of changing a reality whose patriarchal structures they contest. Such a change can be initiated by a process of undoing the language of patriarchy, by unlearning social conditioning, by unspeaking:

*the Unspeaking  
the Unbinding of Umbilicals*

*ba be bi bo  
"déparler"  
décomposer  
sa langue  
da de di do*

.....

*"tu déparles"  
my mother says  
je déparle*

yes

I unspeak

To unspeak — undo, unlearn woman's conditioning as timid user of language or other male-oriented systems of expression and organization of life — is a concern all three writers share. In Tostevin's poetry, this concern is further represented by the occasional use of the French prefix "de," a technique Québec writer Nicole Brossard has used most effectively in her work to communicate the need to destructure patriarchy and introduce women's perspectives.

An important dimension of the new perspective is woman's, not man's, expression of woman's corporeal existence. Woman's body figures prominently in this and other feminist writing where it is linked to language. In a reciprocal relationship, language serves to name aspects of female corpo(reality) that have not, or rarely, been named, while the body is, for various women writers, the possible source of a woman's language — what Tostevin terms "femspeak" in *Colour of Her Speech*:

*femspeak  
jargon  
gutural voiceless  
sound*

*slang  
language*

*originating with  
nomads  
thieves  
whores  
gypsies*

*in Québec we say  
argot  
argoter to cut  
a dead branch  
the semantic cut*

*woman's cunt  
cant  
rant  
rent  
breach deep*

*and wide  
femspeak  
woman's span*

Saying the unsaid or writing the unwritten about women's experience/s of their bodies, *naming*, in a woman's language that is linked to the body, (corpo)reality as women experience it, constitutes a challenge to patriarchy. This is a challenge in which the tongue is instrumental, and not solely by way of its link to language and speech. It assumes an extended role which Daphne Marlatt has played out in her *Touch to My Tongue*.

In *Touch to My Tongue*, the tongue motif serves in the expression of woman's sexual pleasure and desire:

*...my tongue burrows in, whose wild  
flesh opens wet, tongue seeks its nest,  
amative and nurturing (here i am you)  
lips work towards undoing...*

The tongue is again involved in undoing — again the undoing of patriarchy. The mere expression of woman's sexual pleasure issues a challenge to a tradition wherein male pleasure has primacy. But the undoing is even greater when the sexual pleasure is that of two women in love:

*a kiwi at four a.m. among the sheets  
green slice of cool going down easy on  
the tongue extended with desire for you  
and you in me it isn't us we suck those  
other lips tongue flesh wet wall that  
gives and gives...*

*there is fern and frost, a gathering of  
small birds melting song in the under-  
brush, close, your hair as it falls gold  
over your shoulder over your naked,  
dearly known skin — its smell, its an-  
swering touch to my tongue.*

In many instances, the extended role of the tongue is simply superimposed on its role as link to speech and language:

*...letting the yearning play it out, play-  
ing it over, every haystack, every pass-*

ing hill, that tongue our bodies utter, woman tongue, speaking in and of and for each other.

The link between language and body and tongue is made explicit in Marlatt's "musing with mothertongue," which concludes *Touch to My Tongue*. Marlatt places language at the "beginning" and describes it as "a living body which we enter at birth:" "that body of language we speak, our mothertongue, it bears us as we are born in it, into cognition." Like Tostevin, Marlatt envisions a new, woman's language, one that "returns us to the body, a woman's body and the largely unverballed, presemantic, postlexical field it knows." The tongue is a key motif in the vision of a new language with which to express "reality" in women's terms. For Marlatt, the new perspective definitely includes "a link with the body's physicality... language and tongue... a part of speech and a part of the body... the mouth with which we also eat and make love." It includes "the mutuality her body shares... the turning herself inside out in love when she is both sucking mouth and hot gush on her lover's tongue."

In Atwood's *Murder in the Dark*, the new perspective is the vision provided by the "third eye" — significantly "the eye of

the body." While everybody has one, "there are some who resent the third eye:"

*They would have it removed, if they could. They feel it as a parasite, squatting in the centre of the forehead, feeding on the brain. To them, the third eye shows only the worst scenery... But someone has to see these things. They exist. Try not to resist the third eye: it knows what it's doing. Leave it alone and it will show you that this truth is not the only truth.*

Where Atwood's exploration of woman's experience of language, body, difference and reality leads to the third eye, in Tostevin's *Colour of Her Speech*, "grafted tongue/is seeing eye/now." It "wags and guides / its own keen sense / to speak the lookout / for the other half." The motion set into effect by the seeing tongue and the speaking eye/I leads to "between / the way I speak / the way I spoke."

Tostevin, Marlatt and Atwood are among other women writing in English Canada and Québec today who are engaged in creating new meaning(fulness) by using the familiar in new ways or presenting it from a new — feminist — angle. The tongue motif is a particularly rich one in this regard as it extends women's linguistic and sexual expression

through writing.

<sup>1</sup> In Québec as well, but this presentation concentrates on works in English.

<sup>2</sup> Edmonton: Longspoon, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Toronto: Coach House, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Toronto: Coach House, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> From Marlatt's *Touch to My Tongue*, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> "...it is through colours that the subject escapes its alienation within a code" (Julia Kristeva). Quoted by Tostevin in *Colour of Her Speech*: "Julia Kristeva says: 'If it is true every national language has its own dream language and unconscious, then each of the sexes — a division so much more archaic and fundamental than the one into languages — would have its own unconscious wherein the biological and social program of the species would be ciphered in confrontation with language, exposed to its influence, but independent from it' (*Desire in Language*, p. 241). Quoted by Marlatt, *Touch to My Tongue*, p. 48.

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