

Theorizing Fiction Theory

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It occurs to me that since I like some of Barbara's comments on the un-mediated body and Gail's on text, how about extracting some of these — also Daphne's and mine from earlier and current responses, and compiling them into a commentary to accompany Barbara's introduction to the issue — a sort of dialogue?

KM, March 18, 1986

There is the problem that English-Canadian and Québec would-be participants in *Tessera* often have a lack of knowledge about what each is doing in theory, in fiction.

DM, December 12, 1985

Last week I saw Cheryl Sourkes about her photographs. She brought along some extraordinary ones to show me. One that would do very well for a cover. It has the text of *Mary Had a Little Lamb* fading into a spiral with fragments of words from theory on the other wing of the triptych: a perfect illustration of our theme. She also had a sequence of seven images which worked on text and letters, mostly texts dealing with Lacanian theory, in French, about the construction of the self, especially the construction of the female self. This might form a "narrative critical sequence" —visually. Or one for a cover.

BG, December 13, 1985

In soliciting the Québec texts, I began to realize there has been a slippage in meaning (or at least in the practice of) *fiction theory*. Younger women writers (I mean younger than Nicole Brossard who really invented the term) like novelist Geneviève Letarte or poet Anne-Marie Alonzo are not

discussing theory directly in their texts. You will even see, I think, in the future writing by some writers of Brossard's generation, something of a swing towards fiction where the theory is *entendu* rather than directly engaged. This is partly because here, the theoretical discussion has done its work to a certain extent: i.e. it has altered the relationship of the feminine subject (in the text) to language —, by affirming the *otherness* of her voice. As one contributor put it: "The theory has been assimilated into the form. So the permission exists (i.e. women have given themselves permission) here for an ongoing troubled and challenging relationship to discourse in the text, which can of course operate on many levels other than that of direct theoretical discussion — although the theoretical awareness (which happens in and through the writing) is a necessary prerequisite. The existence of this permission currently represents, I believe, an important difference between writing in the feminine in Québec and in English-Canada.

GS, March 12, 1985

I also wonder if some women writers are trying too hard to write like they think they should — just tossing out a thought; after all we don't want prescriptive or formulaic writing either.

KM, December 16, 1985

There is a slippage occurring in a number of essays in the same direction towards the unmediated body. Some texts keep insisting on the mind/body blur of fiction/theory and not on the blur of genres, the dismantling of codes, of textual politics. That is, there is an implication that one can experience the body and write about bodily experience as something lived directly whereas the body is always mediated by culture. The body is coded — a social text. And language — also heavily coded — is the means through which this experience is being communicated. Feminist biology is concerned with laying

Fiction theory: Nicole Brossard uses "fiction" negatively in *L'Amèr* to imply that fictions or constructs created by the patriarchy and compliant women in which women are made into objects. But her "fiction théorique" is something else — the text as both fiction and theory — a theory working its way through syntax, language and even narrative of a female as subject, a fiction in which theory is woven into the texture of

the creation, eliminating or trying to, distinctions between genres, between prose, essay, poetry, between fiction and theory. KM

bare the codes through which the female bodily experience has been constructed, and feminist writers are also trying to subvert the codes that have governed the re-presentation of this body in literature. The only bodies in question in the literary act are the writer's body holding the pen which makes the marks on the page and the reader's body turning the pages in her hand and perceiving the black marks with her eye. The materiality of the text — the white pages stamped with ink and bound between a cardboard cover — is the literary body under examination. The slippage towards the unmediated body brings with it the danger of nominalism, of an essential feminism that would embrace a direct relationship between word and thing and so ignore the lesson of modernism about the impossibility of language ever representing reality, a concept on which fiction/theory builds. (See Nemeth's essay, "Present or Re-present?") The introduction of the unmediated body heralds the appearance of naïve narrative not fiction/theory. See Suzanne Lamy's discussion of this problem in "Capitalising: theory/FICTION THEORY/novel" where innocent novels are contrasted to self-reflexive theoretical fictions.

BG, February 12, 1986

Suzanne Lamy's text underscores the changes that have been taking place in "fiction theory", or as it is called in French: *fiction théorique* or *théoretique* (both terms are used in French). By the way, in French, the emphasis is on fiction, not theory. That is, the noun in French is *fiction*, the adjective *théorique* is what qualifies it.

Already in the last issue I wanted to say something in the liminaire about the differences existing in Québec and Canada among women writers on the subject of writing in the feminine. This time I think the texts themselves are going to force us to be more clear (I almost said "honest" — because I feel we've been sloughing over this somewhat.) For starters, the concept of *fiction-théorique* in Québec is ten years old. This, as I already said and as Lamy also says, has given it time to affect writing without any longer being continually visible on the surface.

Secondly, on the subject of criticism, I've noticed a tendency on the part of some English-Canadian critics to try to fit a great variety of works by women into the grid of post-modern feminist writing whether they belong there (or indeed want to belong there) or not. An essay we recently received on Anne Hébert comes to mind. I think the grid we are talking about

fiction theory: a corrective lens which helps us see *through* the fiction we've been conditioned to take for the real, fictions which have not only constructed woman's "place" in patriarchal society but have constructed the very "nature" of woman (always that which has been). fiction *theory* deconstructs these fictions while *fiction* theory, conscious of itself as fiction, offers a new angle on the "real", one that looks from inside out rather than outside in (the difference between woman as subject and woman as object). this is not to say that fiction theory is busy constructing a new ideology, a new "line" —indeed (in-action) suspicious of correct lines, of claims to a pre-emptive real, it enters a field where the "seer" not only writes it like she sees it but says where she is seeing from — and with whom (now) and for whom (soon to be). this is where *vision* in that other sense enters in, that which is also and could be. fictions that focus our becoming (real). grounded in an analysis of the actual (theory). DM

implies an awareness on both a language and political level that is clear in the text. Although, even as I say this, I realize my reading of work is from a very québécois perspective, and the same work read, say, from a western or northern perspective, for example, may produce a very different impression. Still, the tandems FICTION/POLITICAL AWARENESS/LANGUAGE-WRITING are key, and if we don't keep our terms straight, the lack of rigour will only land us in total confusion.

The relative newness of the debate in English-Canada has certain advantages as well as the disadvantage of having started considerably later. One of my most exciting discoveries in doing *Tessera* in fact what I am learning personally about the interesting new directions writing in the feminine is starting to take in English Canada.

GS, February 19, 1986

I like Gail's comments on fiction theory, especially since in French, English too, fiction is first, perhaps the point is that *théorique* is the adjective — modifying, explaining, affecting the fiction... and her piece works well because it is both fiction and theory, raising good questions about the relation between fiction (and its different forms —essay, novel, autobiography, etc.) and theory, and the notion of the relation between fiction (theory) and the real which others, Lamy, e.g., raise covertly or textually.

Although Gail's piece gives me new hope, I do think that fragmented texts obsessed with subject (and subjectivity) expressed in word play, word definition, obscurity and difficulty are at a dead end, and begin to sound the same. I get tired of bodies, menstruation, and child birth (especially as sexual pleasure)—that's why Yolande Villemaire's last novel, *Constellation de la cygne*, tells a story (though I abhor its subject — Jews, Nazis in France during the 40s — it's exploitative and pornographic.)

KM, March 18, 1986

It seems to me that a preoccupation with "story" *within* a feminist investigation of framing and narratology, of how that story got to be "the" story, is one of the arenas of fiction-theory, moving back and forth between prose (which tends to focus on larger areas of telling like "plot," "character," "structure") and poetry (which zooms in on language and what language, on the micro-level, is saying) seems to be indicative of what we're after for this issue. Plus all the polarities — quest and stasis, self and other, fiction and fact — constantly slipping those dichotomized terms in and out of each other — a "telling" telling. Surely that "telling" quality is exactly what fiction theory works to uncover in the very fictions it works with.

I'm very conscious as i write this of how much i'm responding through the filter of my own writing interests, which i suppose is inescapable for each of us, whether it's writing interests or critical interests. One responds strongly to what one recognizes, after all. And that brings me to the big

Fiction theory: a narrative, usually self-mirroring, which exposes, defamiliarizes and/or subverts the fictional and gender codes determining the re-presentation of women in literature and in this way contributes to feminist theory. This narrative works upon the codes of language (syntax, grammar, gender-coded diction, etc.), of the self (construction of the subject, self/other, drives, etc.), of fiction (characterization, subject, matter, plots, closure, etc.), of social discourse (male /female relations, historical formations, hierarchies, hegemonies) in such a way as to provide a critique and /or subvert the dominant traditions that within a patriarchal society have resulted in a de-formed representation of women. All the while it focuses on what language is saying and interweaves a story. It defies categories and explodes genres. BG

question about how to speak, editorially, of the difference between Quebec & English-Canada in contemporary feminist writing —

i think it's much more a real difference in the development, a difference of real concerns. the ongoing discourse is different & each writer naturally writes *into* that discourse, certainly, the elision of the fictional & the real is a big concern in the discourse in English-Canada, with an ongoing attempt to reverse or deconstruct the two. the theoretical is more problematic, especially for women writers (perhaps because it is critical, in all senses?). except for a few key figures, like Atwood and Webb, the "critical" has been kept separate from the "creative," as if one might taint the other — which is a misunderstanding of just how critical the critical is. i mean here that intersection of philosophy, politics, poetics, etc. which, whether acknowledged or not, determines any writer's stance to the world she finds herself in.

DM, March 21, 1986

... it seems strange to me to talk about the scene now being post-feminist and not into fiction theory in Quebec while English-Canadian literature is. There is not really a gap between the two literatures. There are many women writers in English Canada who are working the fictional-real edge not fiction-theory though the authors in question are feminists.

Fiction/theory: fiction that contains within it a feminist examination, even self-consciousness, regarding the material of the text, the language. So that one writes in it (the language), through it, even losing oneself in it, but always with an awareness (leading to discoveries one willingly shares with the reader) about the state of this context/syntax. G.S.

However, in this issue we are privileging some of the writers and critics who are writing fiction-theory. Everything depends on the cuts and selections made. We could just as easily have presented a different picture of the Quebec scene if we had chosen different writers. I see the division as fields of possibilities in which one area or another may be prominent at a particular moment, largely because of the critical focus the literary institution directs on it. This is where the gap exists, in the criticism and in the critical values being advanced. The example we could cite of this is the reception of Daphne's work and that of innumerable other avant-garde women writers. It's not that nothing has been written in English but that the institution has ignored it...

As I see it, Brossard's practice in *L'Amèr* (*These Our Mothers*) is at an extreme in presenting feminist theory and fiction intermingled. Many women's fictions which remain more within the framework of traditional narrative nonetheless defamiliarize and make

strange many of the fictions which govern women's lives and especially the conventions which these fictions impose on the novel as genre... (Money is one of these fictions, another is the free play of the market place, or the value of self development, the symbols and myths that bind our society together.) This is why I see the debate in a number of papers as central to the argument of fiction theory, showing the *disruptive* nature of women's fictions — e.g. Verduyn. I do not share the view that only very recent writers are doing this sort of deconstructive work. I think that careful readings of many women's texts from the past show the way they problematize the fictional order on which gender roles are based. The monetary system is a fiction generally accepted by our society and not highly problematic, according to Brossard: it becomes so in the heroine's plot in a narrative which is the marriage plot where men's money matters enormously to eighteenth-century women because, in selecting a husband, they choose a life for themselves. This points to the different relationships men and women have to money in the symbolic order... Women's resistance to plots goes back a long way, in fact it is one of the perennial elements in women's writing, introducing the subversion of categories, the undecidability that is a major characteristic of fiction theory *à la Brossard*. What a careful feminist criticism must do is to point out the resistance to plots and the subversion that occur in forerunner texts, the ways in which women have strained within the straightjackets of the concepts of woman and self in narrative, and consequently how the very concept of character became problematic in women's writing even before Gertrude Stein and the feminist-modernist project of fiction/theory. I think we should encourage contributions about the way resistance to the discourse on woman dominant in our society is exhibited in writers like Frances Brooke or Anna Jameson or Marion Engel.

BG, March 27, 1986