

SUZANNE LAMY taught literature at the CGEP du Vieux-Montreal until her sudden death in 1987. A member of the editorial board of *Spirale*, she wrote extensively about surrealism and feminism. She is well-known for her fiction theory, *d'elle* (1979) and *quand je lit je m'invente* (1984). With Irene Pagès, she edited an anthology of feminist critical texts, *Féminité, subversion, écriture*.

SHERRY SIMON is co-director of *Spirale* and teaches in the French Department at Concordia University. She is currently engaged in research in the history and theory of translation.

Capitalizing: Theory/FICTION THEORY/novel

SUZANNE LAMY (translated by SHERRY SIMON)

IN THE CENTRE and in capitals: FICTION THEORY. For at least two reasons. Because these two words, the subject of this issue of *Tessera*, also describe the majority of feminist texts written in Quebec over the last ten years, texts by Madeleine Gagnon, Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, France Théoret, Louise Dupré, Gail Scott, Louise Cotnoir, Louise Bouchard, Anne-Marie Alonzo, Danielle Fournier, and many others...

Few works in fact have been devoted to theory as such: *L'Échappée des discours de l'oeil* by Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, the texts printed in *Féminité, subversion, écriture* and my own volume *Quand je lis je m'invente* (I'm speaking of books and not articles...) All the same, these books display a sense of freedom not usually found in traditional literary criticism which prefers to analyse and dissect without questioning the choice of corpus or the relationship between reader and text. Perhaps theory did not attract many women because the slightest suggestion of rigidity recalled the confining structures in which they had been so long bound and from which they were just beginning to emerge.

In its first flights, in the enthusiasm and ardour of beginnings, feminist writing was all-encompassing. How could it have agreed upon a critical perspective and method? The mood of the times was one of effervescence, questioning, pleasure in the discovery of self and of others, of self through others. Just the opposite of entrenchment. So much desire and energy going off in so many different directions: how could they be circumscribed? Feminist critics didn't really try to contain them, even though more than one critic may have had the desire to bring more rigour into the discussion out of a desire for clarity and out of a conviction that what has not been theorized remains experiential with not quite the right to exist.

It has been said that feminist critics write *with* rather than *about* the text. For better and for worse: no method guarantees automatic success. This approach gave us texts full of insight and warmth, learnedly fruitful, "texts of complicity", which were important for the first burgeonings of feminist

writing. But now, as Gail Scott notes in her presentation of *Tessera*, the question of fiction/theory is being re-examined.

And though these texts proposed critical readings which were often incomplete and diffuse, they did reveal the stereotypes and images of women in literature and the other arts. So much clearing away took place that filmmakers today would no longer dare present heroines as stupid as those of the genial – and so conventional when it comes to women – Hitchcock. Is it a coincidence that women are the main characters in many of today's movies – in *Vagabond*, in *Police*, in *L'effrontée* and in *Anne Trister*? It's true that two of these four films were made by women, but this is also a sign of the times.

Building on the diverse methods of the new criticism, and particularly on the rich work of Austin and Searle, of pragmatics and research on the act of enunciation, feminist criticism, indispensable still, has all the same not exhausted its possibilities; it has yet to come closer to the texts on their own terrain.

In THEORETICAL FICTION the writer worked on two fronts – on conscious thought and on the imaginary. The woman writer had a sense of herself as feminist because she had made a place for herself as a sexual subject – at last – and because she could analyse her relationship with the dominant language; and she also had a sense of herself as a writer because she could claim her difference as a woman and still identify her specificity and solidarity through fragments of autobiography, anecdotes, scenes of daily life, fantasy and utopia.

It is hardly surprising that women felt and still feel so at ease in FICTION THEORY; the number and quality of texts produced are ample proof of it. But has the vigour of the form not been exhausted? Is there not a need for renewal? Could it be that fiction theory has given its best? It seems that we are going through a period of questioning about our writing and what direction it should take.

Some women writers have already begun to modify their writing practice. After *La Vie en prose* which was all movement, where the sign system itself was the principal interest, Yolande Villemaire chose the linear novel in *La Constellation du cygne*, provocative only in its content: erotic scenes – the infernal union of a Jewish prostitute and a Nazi soldier – perfectly executed as in the best days of the Nouveau Roman.

Monique LaRue never turned her back on the romanesque, either in *La Cohorte fictive* or in *Les Faux-fuyants*. The universe of *La Cohorte fictive* was decidedly feminine, with its fragile and insignificant men, its three generations of women and five daughters, each a diffraction of “the” woman of our time. In spite of the articles of feminist criticism which she wrote for *Spirale*, Monique LaRue was somewhat marginalized by feminist criticism, just as was Solange Lèvesque and her *L'Amour langue morte* in which the difficulties of today's heterosexual couple are cleverly portrayed. Theoretical fiction took up all the critical space; the novel was relegated to

a lower rank in the hierarchy. This critical marginality hardly affected the readership of *La Cohorte fictive* which went through several printings.

The temptation of narrative seems to be coming back in force. Number 37 of the journal *Estuaire* (1986) with the title "The seduction of the romanesque" analyses this renewed attraction. Narrative, privileged space of the imaginary, was frowned upon by feminists because of its links with the traditional novel or with the Nouveau Roman whose most orthodox theoreticians (Ricardou, Robbe-Grillet) eliminated the ambiguous relationship between sign and referent (Nathalie Sarraute and Claude Simon never did) and because narrative seemed incompatible with "*la nouvelle écriture*" (texts like *Paradis* not really being narrative).

Is the novel still treated with suspicion? Probably so and perhaps by those women who are simultaneously fascinated and irritated by it. There was a time – is it past? – when a text which did not explicitly indicate its own reading was considered incorrect. As if Kafka had not already taken that road, exposed the principle of his narrative's organisation, almost of its project, at its very centre. More blurred and diffuse than theoretical fiction, the novel, simultaneously metaphor and metonymy, works its displacements implicitly and deviously, giving its reader the slip, at its best drawing her out of herself, into the wake of the romanesque.

If narrative has nonetheless kept such power of attraction it is to the extent that, when effective, the novel is open to multiple readings, always begun afresh with each generation. Moreover, narrative is not necessarily writing which clings to experience or writing which lays bare the process of writing itself and automatically imposes a deconstruction of language. But this does not mean that narrative must be naïve.

Traditional novels continue to flood the market, to publicly confuse, as if modernism had never existed. To be post-modern, however, is to build on the lessons of modernism. This means, outside of any idea of progress, that one has assimilated certain assumptions of critical thought, like the importance of codes, the impossibility of reaching "reality", the force of desire which makes one write: it means that one is conscious of the many threads and mediations which intervene between the experiences of life and culture on the one hand, and writing on the other. For the writers who build on this awareness – the only ones who are worthy of interest – writing has lost its innocence.

Through the rupture imposed by the genre these writers cross to the full enjoyment of the Other scene. Their writing is not directed towards a goal as in theoretical fiction (in contradiction to "*la nouvelle écriture*" whose mode of engenderment was parthogenesis) but plays with the freedom of refraction and condensation in all objects: in the invention of the most recently born character, the combinations of beings and things, in cultural elements: Alissa's bench, for example, or perhaps Holy Week in Seville or maybe the Arch of Saarinen in Saint Louis... But through my window the flashing pink neon sign of the café Le Pertuis catches my eye and at the

a lower rank in the hierarchy. This critical marginality hardly affected the readership of *La Cohorte fictive* which went through several printings.

The temptation of narrative seems to be coming back in force. Number 37 of the journal *Estuaire* (1986) with the title “The seduction of the romanesque” analyses this renewed attraction. Narrative, privileged space of the imaginary, was frowned upon by feminists because of its links with the traditional novel or with the Nouveau Roman whose most orthodox theoreticians (Ricardou, Robbe-Grillet) eliminated the ambiguous relationship between sign and referent (Nathalie Sarraute and Claude Simon never did) and because narrative seemed incompatible with “*la nouvelle écriture*” (texts like *Paradis* not really being narrative).

Is the novel still treated with suspicion? Probably so and perhaps by those women who are simultaneously fascinated and irritated by it. There was a time – is it past? – when a text which did not explicitly indicate its own reading was considered incorrect. As if Kafka had not already taken that road, exposed the principle of his narrative’s organisation, almost of its project, at its very centre. More blurred and diffuse than theoretical fiction, the novel, simultaneously metaphor and metonymy, works its displacements implicitly and deviously, giving its reader the slip, at its best drawing her out of herself, into the wake of the romanesque.

If narrative has nonetheless kept such power of attraction it is to the extent that, when effective, the novel is open to multiple readings, always begun afresh with each generation. Moreover, narrative is not necessarily writing which clings to experience or writing which lays bare the process of writing itself and automatically imposes a deconstruction of language. But this does not mean that narrative must be naïve.

Traditional novels continue to flood the market, to publicly confuse, as if modernism had never existed. To be post-modern, however, is to build on the lessons of modernism. This means, outside of any idea of progress, that one has assimilated certain assumptions of critical thought, like the importance of codes, the impossibility of reaching “reality”, the force of desire which makes one write: it means that one is conscious of the many threads and mediations which intervene between the experiences of life and culture on the one hand, and writing on the other. For the writers who build on this awareness – the only ones who are worthy of interest – writing has lost its innocence.

Through the rupture imposed by the genre these writers cross to the full enjoyment of the Other scene. Their writing is not directed towards a goal as in theoretical fiction (in contradiction to “*la nouvelle écriture*” whose mode of engenderment was parthogenesis) but plays with the freedom of refraction and condensation in all objects: in the invention of the most recently born character, the combinations of beings and things, in cultural elements: Alissa’s bench, for example, or perhaps Holy Week in Seville or maybe the Arch of Saarinen in Saint Louis... But through my window the flashing pink neon sign of the café Le Pertuis catches my eye and at the

same time I feel your eyes on me, my lovely, fragrant redhead... How I long one May evening to follow this dark avenue lined by the tallest and most beautiful trees which, as the night approaches, opens before me, saying to myself:

Tonight at my desk I'll write the three terms in letters of the same size, keeping in the centre the one I have loved and which I will not give up for anything, because it has been for me spark, stopping place, and new departure, and because its indelible marks continue to produce their effects in me:

THEORY/FICTION THEORY/NOVEL