

SUSAN RUDY DORSCHT is a Ph.D. candidate in English at York University in Toronto where she is writing on the interrelations between contemporary continental literary theory, feminist theory, and the writing of Canadian women and men. She acknowledges the support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship in the writing of her article on Audrey Thomas.

# On Blowing Figures... and Bleeding: Poststructuralist Feminism and the “Writing” of Audrey Thomas

SUSAN RUDY DORSCHT

“Do you know only one story?” asked the rats (Thomas, *Blown Figures*, 313).

I’m in words, made of words, others’ words (Beckett, 386).

Harry took Jane on one knee, Isobel on the other.

“Listen,” he said, “I’ll teach you a little story.”

“The night was dark and stormy

the rain came down in

torrents

The king said unto Antonio, ‘Antonio, tell

us a tale.’

Antonio began as follows:

‘The night was dark and

stormy

The rain came down in

torrents’

The king said unto Antonio, ‘Antonio, tell

us a tale.’

Antonio began as follows....”

(epigraph to Thomas, *Songs My Mother Taught Me*).

It has become almost a commonplace among poststructuralists to say that subjectivity is a product of discourse. "I" speaks "in words" and is "made of words, others' words," and that, Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault would agree, is all it is. Not often recognized, however, are the implications of this theory of subjectivity for feminist theory and practice. If the speaking self is a construct, the assumption, so prevalent among consciousness-raising feminists/feminisms, that the female "I" can be privileged as the (only) author/ity of/for "female" experience, is seriously undermined. Moreover, poststructuralist theories of subjectivity suggest that the category "woman writer" or "female author" is, like the self, a "certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, or recomposition of fiction" (Foucault, 159).

Most critical reaction — ostensibly "feminist" and otherwise — to the writing of Audrey Thomas has assumed there can be a direct and "natural" relation between the written self (the "I" of Isobel, Rachel, Miranda, Alice which appears in the discourse of the text) and the self who writes (the self who signs "I" am Audrey Thomas). In 1970 Anthony Boxill concluded, for example, "in spite of the basic dissimilarity between characters... one always has the feeling that Audrey Thomas' fiction is substantially autobiographical" (116). On the cover of *Intertidal Life* (1984) Alice Munro assumes there is a transparent relation between language and female experience when she writes "this is what women are like... beyond all the fashionable definitions."

In a recent issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* Anne Archer works hard to assure us that "the marked similarities among her female protagonists (many of whom are called Isobel) as well as the clearly autobiographical element suggest that Thomas' one story concerns the growth of the author herself" (215). But how, in the light of poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, can we insist on the autonomy of the author "herself"? What theory of language does feminist literary theory seek to work within and out of? Language as the transparent representation of apparently "real," essential categories like "man" and "woman"? Or as ideologically constituted and constituting and therefore changeable? Can we mix poststructuralist theory with feminist literary theory to make each of them "stronger, richer, wiser, better" (Gallop, 4)?

Elizabeth Bruss's recent work on making and unmaking autobiography in film offers a reading of the relation of self to writing that dismantles common/sensical assumptions about the relation of language to "the" world. Bruss writes, "the structure of autobiography... echoes and reinforces a structure already implicit in our language, a structure that is also (not accidentally) very like what we usually take to be the structure of self-consciousness" (301). While mimetic fiction (like the "stories" women tell in consciousness-raising sessions) argues, problematically enough, that

“this text is about life,” the auto/bio/graphical text (which purports to be a transparent writing of the biological self) argues that it *is* life:

in autobiography, the logically distinct roles of author, narrator, and protagonist are conjoined, with the same individual occupying a position both in the context, the associated “scene of writing,” and within the text itself (Bruss, 300).

While autobiography assumes and reinforces a common-sense relation between language and the world by asserting that there is a speaking subject present to tell her “true” story in a meaningful language, that writing which we say is “by” Audrey Thomas continually speaks “other”wise: “I lie / You lie / Come love lie / Beside me lie / Your lies / Beside me” (Thomas, *Mrs. Blood* 172). If “I” write “I” lie, where/which is “the” true self? The signifier “I” can offer only a place of instability and shift to the signified “self” who seeks to speak the truth. As Lacan would maintain, there is no self without the discourse of the other, signified by “all of these absences and dependencies which have to be barred in order for meaning to take place” (Easthope, 37). Since the “I” speaks in/at this moment of loss by/through which the “self” is located, the self, like the text, exists as/at this site/sight/cite of textual re/production: “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think” (Lacan, 166).

In those texts which we say are by Audrey Thomas, the “I” speaks, not as a unified presence which seeks to tell *a* story, but as an absence created, implicated, and dislocated by/at the cite of linguistic play, at the crossroads of many discourses:

I MUST BE GROWING SMALL AGAIN (Thomas, *Blown Figures*, 88).

BE TALLER Increase your height Details free (Thomas, *Blown Figures*, 87).

O DEAR, WHAT NONSENSE I'M TALKING (Thomas, *Blown Figures*, 93).

Much of Thomas' writing points to the ways we speak as/with/out of/in fragments, ellipses, puns: “Give us this day our barely dead” (Thomas, *Mrs. Blood* 171), “Sometimes I wake up frightened in the middle of my mind” (Thomas, *Mrs. Blood*, 193). Self, word, text, each are self and other, each are subject of/to shift:

cild, child. My cild was killed. My child was chilled. (Thomas, *Blown Figures*, 82).

“Dear Isobel, Having a swell time, Your friend, I” (Thomas, *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, 27).

Marriage Mirage (Thomas, *Blown Figures*, 446).

The poststructuralist anxiety of a self recognizing its alienation from itself in language is present in Mrs. Blood/Thing’s cry at the end of “her” story/ies: “I am not what I am” (218).

In *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island* the difference between the “I” who writes and the “I” re/presented in the discourse is a sexual difference: “My name is Munchmeyer and this is my story” (3). The first page continues:

So I am Munchmeyer, doomed man, but doomed to a marriage which must have been made in hell, and all I did was misunderstand the symbols (3).

Like Isobel/Rachel/Alice in Thomas’ “other” stories, Munchmeyer continues to try, nonetheless, to mis/understand “his” identity through the symbols because they are the only things “he” has: “And I am husband of Martha ... reluctant husband (housebound/husband). I stop and look it up in Skeat: from Old Norse, *husbondi*, ‘the master of the house, the good man.’ (The first I am not, the second neither.)” (3-4).

Because Munchmeyer’s text is written in the form of a diary, it appeals to the conventions of autobiography. But the “I” speaks, not a narrative of his life, but of the production of autobiographical narrative:

And I write this as though it were a novel, in which I play the role of narrator because... diaries scare me. From myself to myself – a kind of schizoid thing... Diaries are for people who need to prove to themselves they really exist (5).

“Life” cannot be captured in language anyway “Munchmeyer” realizes, even “if you’re completely honest... at least I think I’m being honest... if you have a heart attack or get knocked down by a car... somebody’s going to get that diary and read it”(6). The “I” who might have been able to explain “his” words/Word will not always be present to guarantee meaning.

As Munchmeyer’s meditation on the relation of diary to narrative points out, in writing, the “intention” of the “author” is lost. Misunderstanding and misreading are necessary in fact, even when I read my own writing, because my “I” is not “my” “I” – it can never refer directly to “me.” “I” exist(s)

as something “other” than my “self” when I speak or write. Because the cover of *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island* assures us that the words which follow are “by Audrey Thomas,” we tend to distance the confessional rhetoric of Munchmeyer’s “narrative.” We “know” this is not Munchmeyer’s story, and because it is not a woman’s story, we believe it is not Thomas’ “own.” But why do we want to believe Isobel’s stories can represent Thomas’ apparently intimately-detailed, often bloody, “life” experience?

Part II of *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island* begins with Miranda Archer. “Ostensibly the least... Isobel-like of Thomas’ narrators” (Archer, 217), Miranda assumes (significantly) the position of author. “She” writes an introduction which includes a specific place (Vancouver B.C.) and date (1971). As all pieces of prefatory writing do, this introduction creates the illusion of authority and identity for Miranda: “That is how Fred and I came to Magdalena and I began to keep a diary and why we met Prospero, all of which this book is all about” (93). Although the “I” that speaks in this passage tells us that “she” is a novelist, in the first diary entry we read: “I didn’t think about the novel at all” (94). We soon learn (through not so subtle references to knitting needles) that the novel she is not thinking about is the Munchmeyer story we have just read. The “I” that said “I am Munchmeyer” in Part I is therefore at a double remove from the “author.” All Thomas can and does say is “I am Audrey Thomas writing I am Audrey Thomas writing I am Miranda Archer writing I am Munchmeyer;” each “I” speaks and is spoken by language.

The “I” is a site/sight/cite of sexual difference as well then: “I am a woman writing I am a woman writing I am a man.” The difference between the “I” who intends meaning and the “I” who says (in the discourse of the text) “I am a man” points out not only the ways the shifting “I” never fully represents the self who speaks, but also that the “I” shifts, quite *indifferently*, across the binary opposition man/woman. With H el ene Cixous then, the split self in this piece of writing asks the linguistically suggestive question “*Where is she?*” (Cixous, 90). Like the writing of Luce Irigaray, Thomas’ writing suggests that “‘She’ is indefinitely other in herself” (Irigaray, 103).

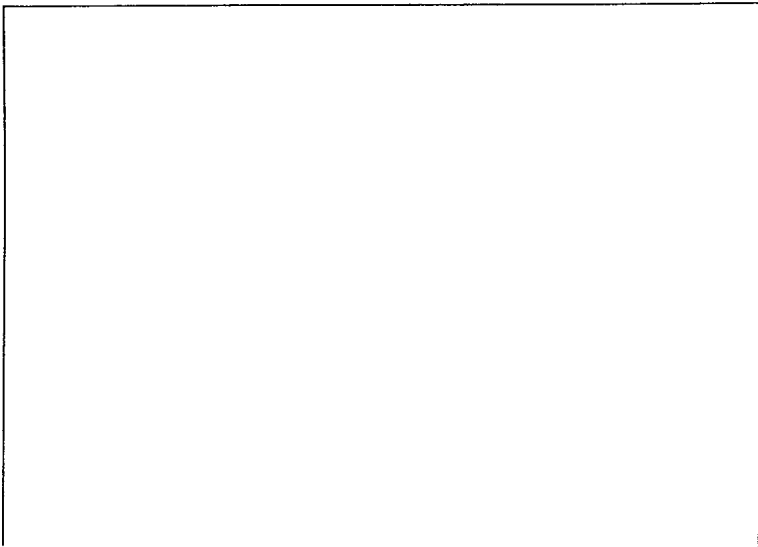
Like much French feminist writing in fact, Thomas’ is marked by characteristics it would seek to negate – by its blank pages, “holes of discourse” (Gauthier, 163), in the unsaid, or in nonsense. But a piece of writing like *Blown Figures*, with its juxtaposition of pictures, comic strips, letters, nursery rhymes, definitions, ads, says that every text, every self – not simply those “women” write or appropriate – is a “weaving together of what has already been produced elsewhere in discontinuous form; every subject, every author, every self, is the articulation of an intersubjectivity structured within and around the discourses available to it at any moment in time” (Sprinker, 342).

Barbara Godard notes that one of Thomas’ most common metaphors

for the problematic nature of language is travelling in foreign countries, “adrift on the cross-cultural confusions and the multiple meanings of words” (111). In *Blown Figures* and *Mrs. Blood* the “foreign” countries include “bits” of Africa (letters to the lovelorn from African newspapers, African name-change notices), the unconscious (presented as dreams, jokes, puns), as well as scraps of the “real” world (in/through/as newspaper clippings, comics, ads, recipes) that we, in the twentieth century, all inhabit and are inhabited by. The “universe,” like “AL MAFROKA, the dis-united, the divided land” (*Blown Figures*, 100), is a fragmented, disjointed text. Isobel’s story is one of otherness in a very important sense then: written out of others’ words, the writing reminds us that all “our” words are others’ words, all our selves are “other.”

Thomas’ writing suggests that not only in “literature” (a category which this anti-genre, anti-sentence, anti-form writing devalues), but in the “world,” men and women are thrown, not into an intense awareness of self, but into the infinite play of discourse(s). We may peruse the illustrated advertisements in *Blown Figures*, for example, or find ourselves staring at a page that is blank but for the following instruction:

“THINK OF SOMETHING GOD’S BOOK TELLS YOU TO DO.  
THEN, IN THIS SPACE, DRAW YOURSELF DOING IT.”



(Thomas, *Blown Figures*, 120).

If we must, we can interpret the nursery rhymes: Higglety, pigglety, my fat hen, / She lays eggs for gentlemen” (Thomas, *Blown Figures*, 249), or just

turn the book sideways to see the words “a lot,” “a little,” “passionately,” “not at all” literally thrown at random across a blank page (Thomas, *Blown Figures*, 451). There is no sense of authorial or “self” control here among these “blowing figures.” The speaking self is discontinuous, fictitious, under erasure, or just plain absent. If anxiety arises for the reader, it is because the writing forces us to recognize that language takes us (literally!) quite for granted:

Just as each statement is a product of its linguistic positioning within a pre-established code of significance, our ways of articulating ourselves, our desires, our fears, and our actions originate not solely in an individual sense of self, but in the social ideologies by which we speak and live (Russell, 191).

As the narrator in *Blown Figures* tellingly says, or doesn't say, “Isobel doesn't live, you know, she exists” (232). It is language which speaks, not “Isobel.”

A central insight that poststructuralist theories of subjectivity can bring to feminism and to a reading of Thomas' writing is that the “terrible gap between men and women,” as Thomas often speaks of it, is precisely the gap created out of the binary, linguistic opposition man/woman. But as Saussure has shown, language depends on difference. “Woman” too is a sign, not an essence; “hence whatever meaning that word happens to have does not inhere in it ‘naturally’ but is conferred upon it by the society which uses it” (Ruthven, 37). If meaning is not fixed, the opposition man/woman, self/other, I/you are subjects to and of change. Neither self nor “author” is the origin of meaning or a single, unified presence. “I” is both self and other, plenitude and lack, “male” and “female” and speaks at the points of intersection of many discourses. In speaking, the “I” assumes many places within the signifying system and takes on many meanings. If difference is understood as this difference within subjectivity we can recognize that there are any number of places from which to speak, any number of ways of being for each “I”. These places exist at the borders of sexual difference, outside the oppositions male/female or self/other which have been the only subject op/positions offered by a phallogocentric metaphysics of presence.

Like the new French feminist writing, Thomas' most experimental work is already poststructuralist in that it calls for a rereading of the ways we understand this relation between language and what we call our “selves.” Because we speak as subjects within and subject to language only from a place and with a voice that is inevitably “other,” rereading the concept of selfhood — which Thomas' work strongly suggests we should do — is a part of an important critique of the liberal humanist notion that we are all born “naturally” women or men, with all of the characteristics those

socially and ideologically constructed subject positions always already imply. the relation that has existed between men and women is not a "natural" one. The possibility of a new relation exists precisely because human-sexual relations are intertextual. Thomas' writing speaks for women, and by that I mean for men and/as women (always already in speaking) when it says, with H el ene Cixous, that

everything is word, everything is only word... we must grab culture by the word, as it seizes us in its word, in its language... Indeed as soon as we are born into language and language speaks us... (qtd. in Stanton, 73).

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