

On the Dark Side of Write

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What is the current situation of feminist criticism? At first, this seems a simple question. However, it quickly becomes apparent that it cannot be easily answered. And this creates a certain uneasiness, because, in 1987, it is difficult to know just where we women stand in relation to the triple problem of feminism, writing and criticism.

First of all, take feminism. We are part of a generation of militant women. We are used to making demands, demonstrating, and pushing our point of view and our rights, no matter what the cost. But we are now going through a period in which our demands have been appropriated by government organisations: feminism has been bureaucratized and many of yesterday's militants have now become professionals in the cause of women's rights. The movement has been preempted by different levels of government and has slipped out of our hands. In the media, the image of the "yuppie" feminist has replaced the militant feminist of the 1970's. Certain women are even talking about *post-feminism*. This term may be questionable, in my opinion, but it does indicate a certain confusion.

As far as writing is concerned, it has lost steam. The terrain is not as favourable to enthusiastic reactions. Not many books engender the kind of fervour surrounding the publication of *Pour les femmes et tous les autres* by Madeleine Gagnon (1974), of *l'Eugélonne* by Louky Bersianik (1976), of *l'Amer* by Nicole Brossard (1977) or of *Une voix pour Odile* by France Théoret (1978). Some, men and women, are saying in veiled terms that women's writing is just droning on, that it is groping in the dark and that its books are not saying anything new or approaching issues in any fresh or original way. Women are still, of course, reading the works of Québec women authors but the books find more success with the critics than in the hearts of their readers. In the 70s, it seemed that every newly published book was essential. Today, perhaps we have become blasé, thinking that we have read them all. . .

Is feminist criticism partly responsible for this state of affairs? How do feminist critics receive books? How do they read them? Once again it must be admitted that such questions cannot be resolved so simply.

For in Québec, many women writers have also practised criticism: France Théoret, Gail Scott, Suzanne Lamy, Anne-Marie Alonzo, Louise Cotnoir, Danielle Fournier, Louise de Gonzague, Monique Larue, Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, to name only a few. So it could be said that feminist writing and criticism have developed together, in dialectic fashion. Some of the feminist critics have become writers; some feminist writers have turned toward critical modes of thought.

In that sense, the Montreal magazine *Spirale* became a place to develop reflections on feminist issues, thanks to the presence of Gail Scott and France Théoret among the founders of the review, and of Suzanne Lamy later on. In September, 1980, it presented an interesting file called "Women and Criticism," which brought up the difficulties encountered in the criticism of women's texts, difficulties which are still real today. The following reflection was introduced:

In our particular context, women's writing gives rise to certain problems. This is exactly what our title, *Women and Criticism*, takes into account. From the time that works by women began to proliferate in unprecedented numbers, the necessity for a critical structure began to be felt. Very rapidly, differences, as well as priorities, appeared among women, even if we take into account the expansion of their output and the feeling of urgency, in a still developing field of criticism, which is attempting a different approach to the relationship between women and culture.¹

This entire statement could be repeated in 1987, for women's writing continues *to pose problems*. How should they be discussed? Enthusiastically, in order to counteract our present tendency to disillusionment? But is it possible for critics to like everything that women produce? Do they not have their own tastes and "temperaments"? Then, too, the quality of each work has to be considered. You cannot call a piece of writing "inspired" when you do not like it. Intellectual honesty, a "sense of honour" (Adrienne Rich) plays a role here.

In short, we find ourselves at the heart of a problematic that each woman attempts to solve in her own way. Some choose to criticise only those books they find interesting; others elect to do reviews or commentaries from which value judgements are excluded; finally, still others prefer to abandon journalistic criticism in order to devote themselves to academic analyses that are wider in scope, thus allowing them a more illuminating, more subtle point of view.

It is not easy to get a proper perspective of the attitude one should have. At the moment, there are two tendencies: *subjective* (complicit) *criticism*, which ventures to work *with* the text, from *inside*, usually by reading it from a subjective and mimetic perspective, and *objective* (distanced) *criticism*, which attempts to do an interpretive reading *on* the work, by bringing out its strong points and weaknesses in a less personal way.

At the moment, there are several reasons for choosing subjective or complicit criticism. Enthusiasm for women's books, as already indicated, is not at its peak. In that sense, it becomes important to make these writings available, thus giving women readers the opportunity of coming into contact with them and the taste to know them. This very defensible concept seems to me to be the one promoted by the review *Arcade*.

In other respects, criticism must assume the role of a guide for women writers by imposing a certain form of judgment on their work. For example, as a poet, I like to be told if what I am doing works, if there are any lacunae in my collections of poetry, if I am making progress or just marking time. Obviously, it is hard to "swallow" negative criticism, but the essential fact remains that an outside opinion can be beneficial if it is the result of honest reflection. The magazine *Spirale* currently chooses to follow this path.

However, for me, these two critical attitudes do not appear irreconcilable. There might be ground for bringing them together by creating a combined subjective and objective criticism that tries to adhere to the text while adopting a more "objective" point of view, remaining both interior and exterior in an inbetween state of complicity and reflection, of comprehension — in the etymological sense of the word, of "taking with one" — and of analysis, of feeling and rationality. In short, of working in that frontier zone where certainties, like doubts, are shaped and broken, where the deep stakes of the feminine and of writing are.

For criticism will have a primordial role to play in the future, not only to bring works of fiction into the limelight, but also to allow theory to progress. Since the feminist movement has gone from the street up into government offices, research on women's issues does not stir up as much enthusiasm. Now, there are many fewer books available as significant as Luce Irigaray's *Spéculum* (1974) or *les Voleuses de langue* by Claudine Herrmann (1976) or Michèle Montrelay's *l'Ombre et le nom* (1977). Feminist criticism could open up new paths for

feminist theory by promoting more reading of fiction. Indeed, fiction, both *within* and *outside* of ideology (Meschonnic), is capable of destabilizing theoretical enquiry and, by standing as it were in the vanguard, of leading it onwards. Poetry, novels, short stories and plays etc., led theory back to the level of the individual; they are a constant reminder of the fact that there can be no one model that will explain everything.

That, then, is an area that criticism should explore: the linking of the singularity of personal writings to the plurality assumed by theorisation; the initiation of a creative dialogue with a text in order to reveal the subjectivity that motivates it; the pinpointing of the exact point where woman as *I* encounters the feminist *we* and also where they do not meet, but diverge. And we have come to a time in the history of women when it is absolutely necessary to hear the *I*.

For feminist theory will evolve if we are able to talk femininity while also being aware of the differences between women. In the 70's, feminism was recognized as a *movement* rather than as an actual ideology because it knew how to accept diversity. And I feel that the plurality of women's texts has been an intrinsic part of that reality.

Since the electronic media are now offering a more and more standardized picture of a feminist, it becomes essential to read works of fiction properly. These writings display a mode of speech that has not yet become *knowledge* but apprenticeship: they short-circuit conventional ideas and *a priori* mass-media information. In this sense, subjective/objective criticism could "think out" its own path and could retrace its steps through contact with these works. Since it too is in a situation of apprenticeship, it would be able to question its own basic principles, it would accept self-reexamination in the light of textual unorthodoxy and would in turn "disturb" the textuality. In other words, it would behave in such a way that, somewhere between the fictional language and the critical discourse, an undelimited, unconfined area would emerge where the language of a fully self-aware freedom might be heard.

Actually, the main problem is one of practice:

How can we read and how can we "criticize" or "rationalize" without trying to "cure"? How can we *make sense* out of something without *killing* it? In other words, how is it possible to separate the critical project from its therapeutic projection?

[. . .]

The onus is on women, at the present time, to become reborn and to *re-learn to speak*: to speak in ways other than by and for a structure of masculine meaning.²

We must, then, make sure that a reading does not impose a *meaning* or a minimalizing *centre* on any text of fiction. But what guarantee is there against making mistakes? Only by finding assurance in doubt, by working on the dark side of write, by constantly revising our own principles. Criticism, like fiction, must become *exploration*. It must take shape beyond the bounds of accepted modes of thought, certainty and authority. It must generate itself as in a utopia, that is to say, in a coming new relationship with language, as if the presuppositions of Reason, Misogyny and Knowledge were already dead.

In order to step into this labyrinth, we must, of necessity, make a *statement of faith*. But above all, the conditions necessary for undertaking such a journey must be present. What Gail Scott maintained in the file "Women and Criticism" still holds true today:

No "normal" conditions exist for women to write. So one cannot talk about the problem of feminist criticism without asking "under what conditions?" As for writing "in the feminine," so too, criticism going by the same name quickly brings us back to daily life.³

How can we embark upon a true feminist criticism when there are fewer places for such reflection? When women, writers for the most part, have only just enough time and energy to devote themselves to creation, the act of criticism comes in second place. When grants are lacking? But the problem has perhaps even wider implications: how can we maintain and develop any intellectual life at a time when the population is glued to television and knowledge is reduced to a common denominator?

¹"Les femmes et la critique," présentation du dossier *Spirale*, no. 11, septembre, 1980, p. 8.

²Shoshana Felman, *La folie et la chose littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, coll. "Pierres vives," 1978, pp. 154-55.

³Gail Scott, "A l'ombre, les jeunes filles," in "Les femmes et la critique," *loc. cit.*, p. 8.