

Critical Territories

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Exploring the Other's Territory

If women's writing rebels, if it bears witness to their exploitation, if it formulates values other than those established by men, how can mainstream criticism — by that I obviously mean criticism orchestrated by men, like the rest of our social and political institutions — how can such criticism review, with complete objectivity, any literary or other work by women without calling itself into question, indeed without doing itself in? One might just as well ask men to set themselves up as the target, to aim and to shoot. Who among them would agree to that? This drawn out metaphor is by no means innocent. It simply sets forth the stakes of the issue raised here. More often than not mainstream criticism, when it deigns to glance at women's writing, scorns, ostracizes or assassinates it. In mainstream criticism there is no, or very little, evidence of, as Madeleine Oullette-Michalska suggests, *an act of liason, an act of reception and intelligence that establishes a relationship of desire with the work undertaken.*

Mainstream criticism refuses to adapt in the face of women's texts, i.e., to approach from an angle or a focal point that is *other*. Its resistance is more virulent and more visible than ever: consider the violent affirmation of *genre* about which it is indignantly clamouring at present. And yet, paradoxically, mainstream criticism applauds a book like Scarpetta's *L'impureté* (Impurity), a book with the intelligence to plunder, to appropriate some of the originality particular to current women's writing: fragmentation, journal-writing, bastardization of genres, shifting of the cultural sphere, its divisions and its definitions. I say paradoxically because this would require mainstream criticism to recognize and support the attempt at change in its current scale of values that grant it certain privileges. Above all it would have to acknowledge the original contribution that women have made to post-modern writing. What man, what critic would agree to that? What man would place any value in women's express-

ion as you would place your faith in someone? What man would grant any credibility to women's affirmations, would bring to light women's complicity which he already sees as a threat? What man would take seriously the attributes all others find insignificant? What man would allow the intellectual, emotional and cultural influence of women on his work as a male, a critic, an intellectual? That would oblige both the man and the critic to see genuine writing in the provocation and the opening represented by women's works. That's why I think it is very much in the interest of mainstream criticism for it to turn a deaf ear to women's writings. Women act as snipers, not only in relation to society but also in relation to writing itself. Women have become visionaries as Rimbaud hoped!!! For the woman who writes questions the patriarchal vision of the world and, if possible, invents a parlance* and a universe from which she will no longer be exiled. That presupposes a **female presence**. Or as Virginia Woolf explains, "someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights. This brings into women's writing an element which is entirely absent from a man's."¹

Fortunately for mainstream criticism not *all* texts by women are jarred by a feminist conscience! Mainstream criticism can sleep in peace, cottonwool dulling its ears! For as France Théoret would say, you need *sharp ears* to hear (above the cacophony of loudspeakers) those delirious, discordant voices that generate f(r)iction in discourse organized, controlled and broadcast by and for men. Who has said anything about subjectivity in all this? What subjectivity? Mine or theirs? No doubt I have once again strayed into the other's territory . . .

From One Territory to Another

Author and critic — that often gives me a sense of double vision and displacement which isn't always comfortable . . . Sometimes I am even awkward in my bearing. But a precarious equilibrium is re-established in the focus I manage to direct onto what really interests me: women, writing. The two reconcile my ways of being, thinking,

*I am using "parlance" in a broad sense of "speech, way of speaking, way of using language" to translate *parole*. E.G.

wanting, experiencing emotions and the world. I feel marvellously at ease when the text in the feminine that I am reviewing brings to light some reflection that involves me and propels me; and when, simultaneously, it stirs up my emotions; or when, as Barthes said, "I feel desired by the text." As a feminist, i.e. a committed woman with an active conscience, first and foremost I take a loving and complicit look at texts written in the feminine. They are barely beginning to make themselves heard. . . . Which is by no means to say that I am their servant. Criticism can do no more than the text allows — I'm convinced of that. But at the opening of thought or the challenge that the text offers me, I can only become excited, experience a rush in my brain and my sex. Strictly speaking it is often a matter of a select writing in which there is pleasure. In which the writing is marked by the body that produced it. Contrary to what some people insist repeatedly, I do not believe in neutral texts nor in neutral criticism. These people have, no doubt, never given any thought to the obvious fact that "speaking is never neutral" as Luce Irigaray has so admirably demonstrated. . . . Strange that her work should pass unnoticed, or just about unnoticed, in psychoanalytic circles as elsewhere. . . . Stranger still that, in contrast to mainstream critics, I am not stricken with schizophrenia in the face of these writings in the feminine which try to change our ways of knowing and perceiving the world; neither surprised nor embarrassed by these writings which devise new senses* or which transgress the generally accepted patriarchal sense. In my critical text I take note of the different strategies that come into play and point them out to readers:

All reading is an intention of images, an intention of spectacle which gives us hope.²

It is in this sense that I tackle the critical work and I believe that this approach is as good as any other. For me it is also a way of giving a sign. Criticism is the extension of writing, its circulation. To critique women's books is to say women exist, think, are taking their place in the city-state: they are cited-stated. They leave their mark. Criticism is a reference, a dictionary, a sandy shore that saves them from sinking into oblivion, one of the worst words/ills* that afflict women and their works. I think of criticism as a strategy to bring

**Les sens* refers not only to "sense" but also to "meaning" and "direction". E.G.

women and their texts into history, literature, the world. For me, to engage in criticism is also a matter of ethics. How many works by male writers would have remained buried if other male authors and critics had not persisted in exhuming them? If they weren't continuing to do so today? So why reproach feminist authors and critics for wanting to exhume their own living-dead?

To practice criticism is also a moral responsibility. People who say otherwise are lying or lack awareness or have a vested interest in perpetrating their belief. How does a work find its way to us? Who attracts our attention? Who includes it in anthologies, literary histories and on the curricula of educational institutions? If a work goes unnoticed, or receives a bad review, it stands little chance of survival and runs the risk, in due course, of disappearing or becoming distorted. From one territory to the other, author and critic, I remain vigilant so as not to be blinded by the effects of fashionability. I continue to be on the lookout for unique and original voices — books written in the feminine pierced by “voices, the same”.

In Enemy Territory or in the Ghetto

In this context speech becomes a way of being in the world without appropriating it. By means of speech women present themselves as subject, as their own referent and through speech recognize themselves and think the world. Speech becomes a mode of emergence, of *co-naissance*/*cognition*,* eruption into the public sphere.

Somewhere there exists a link between a work and its critical environment. If a text is ignored, scorned, assassinated through a slapdash, half-hearted reading, there is good reason to question what the critical environment that has received it is trying to hush up. What it does not want to see paraded in the public forum. What is not in its interest to bring to other's attention.

In a patriarchal context, what value is attached to the word of a woman? What advantage is there in spreading the word, in giving it credit? What desire and what opening of the mind are there in the

*Cotnoir takes advantage of the homonymy of *mots/maux*. E.G.

reading of it? What criteria will be used to review it? Who says writing is neither a social commitment nor a political function? When at the same time others formulate "What is private is political"? And that as women we are all "political prisoners"? Whom are we to believe? Who is disturbed by that? What are the consequences for women's writings? Is it necessary to remain in enemy territory and produce "neutral criticism" or to join up with the feminist ghetto where it is becoming even easier to "eliminate" the difference outright? As for me, I align myself with feminist criticism because it is conscience, commitment and politics. That is not to say that to my mind all texts written by women are *a priori* the best, the most original, the most successful. It simply means that I subject what they produce to a complicit and demanding scrutiny. It also means that I am aware of the presence of a **female being** at the center of this writing and that this can sometimes transfigure it. Finally, it means that I attribute value, credibility and originality to this lucid parlance which accords me head, heart and body. I am merely affirming that I recognize myself more readily in this parlance which re-thinks the world. I am saying that I am touched by this questioning, by the penetrating style of certain voices. I give them the attention and the respect that every work of writing merits, theirs even more so because it inscribes them in a marginality and a solitude that rank them with revolutionaries and rebels. I am saying that with them I take a post-modern position in a critical environment that is hostile to us and that turns a deaf ear to our cries of women alive.

REFERENCES

- ¹Virginia Woolf, "Women and Fiction" in *Granite and Rainbow*, London, Hogarth Press, 1958, p.80.
- ²Nicole Brossard, *La lettre aérienne*, Montreal, Éditions du remue-ménage, 1985, p.154.
- ³Dianne Lamoureux, *Fragments et collages, essai sur le féminisme québécois des années '70*, Montreal, Éditions du remue-ménage, 1986, p. 140.