

Putting Up Fences in the Garden

Audrey Thomas talks to Eleanor Wachtel

Il faudrait délimiter le jardin

En réponse aux questions posées par Wachtel, Thomas exprime son inquiétude vis-à-vis de l'emphase mise actuellement sur la déconstruction, l'étymologie, le style anti-narratif et la façon dont certaines auteures féministes cherchent à renverser la langue patriarcale et à réinventer la langue. Ce faisant, elle explique son propre rapport (subversif) avec la langue et l'amour qu'elle voue à celle-ci et dit que 'nous parlons du fond du coeur et on nous comprendra. Ce que nous faisons, c'est aborder les sujets interdits. Voilà finalement la manière de vaincre l'utilisation patriarcale de la langue'.

Eleanor Wachtel: An artist recently told me that in order to 'access' money from the arts funding bodies, it was necessary to couch your application in jargon which included 'deconstruction,' 're-visioning,' 'discourse,' 'text,' and all the other buzz words.

Audrey Thomas: Do you understand what those words mean?

EW: In talking to her further, it seemed to mean simply playing around with form, which I think can certainly be a legitimate aim in art. But the detritus of the French linguists and psychoanalysts, which has been imported via North American academics, has percolated down to the artists and they have adopted their words.

AT: Is she saying she has to use those words on the application?

EW: Yes. And even the language 'to access the grants' –

AT: That really scares me. What we're doing is setting up more and more barriers. It's like when my mother used to say, 'Don't make those awful faces because your face will stick that way.' Because if you set up that kind of language even in order to apply for a grant, even if you did it in fun, thinking that was the only way you'd get the money and

you know in your heart, you're laughing and throwing up at the same time at having to do this, you might stick that way. If you start to think in those jargony ways, you're going to stick like that.

EW: The feminist argument is that it's necessary to go back to language because it's such a fundamental way of framing our thinking. If women are going to try to change perceptions, or change the world, or whatever, then we have to go back to the basic tools, which are words.

AT: It's certainly true that you frame people's thinking by the kind of language that you use. But maybe we ought to think about the kinds of frames. If you make your frames abstract and, if suitable at all, more appropriate for the psychology lab, then you're cutting off your nose to spite your face. Surely one of the things that women had going for them is their practical use of language.

EW: You've been interested in etymology in your writing, and you have played with it overtly –

AT: Without knowing that I was one of 'those.' (Laughs) A closet deconstructionist.

EW: Maybe that's what you are: a latent deconstructionist. But what drew you to it?

AT: An inadvertent deconstructionist. That's what I should call my place on Galiano Island: Inn Advertent.

EW: What drew you to the language and how does that differ from what is being done now?

AT: I think it started a long time ago with me. It started when I realized that people didn't say what they meant. That started when I was very small. We've talked about that. [See *Room of One's Own*, Vol. 10, nos. 3 and 4, March 1986] I would listen to adult conversations and watch people and realize that they weren't saying what they meant. And then, taking Anglo-Saxon and Middle English when I was 17, and being interested in the roots of words and finding out so few straight Anglo-Saxon words have carried through without modification. And finding delightful things. One of them is picnic, which sounds so playful and modern but is a very old old word [from Old French *piquer*, to pick at or peck + *nique*, a trifle].

EW: Sometimes the meaning reverses itself.

AT: Yes, meaning changes. I've always been interested in what things mean in other languages. Sharon [Thesen] and I just stopped at the garden shop and I bought some daisies. We call them Livingstone daisies and in France, they're called 'daisies in a cage.' Immediately, I

start to wonder why that is. And I love things like that – or that morning glories are called ‘belle du jour.’

EW: How does that interest in the meanings of words and their origins differ –

AT: I didn’t see it as political. I suppose someone could say I was naïve. But I saw it as personal. In fact, I was surprised that people would publish my stories where I do play around that way. I’m talking about the ‘60s. Then a book like *Blown Figures*, which came out in 1974, I didn’t know other people were doing this; it was something I wanted to do. Saying ‘he hit her cold-bloodedly five times’ is a personal joke because I know that sang-froid and cinq fois sound the same. I’m not trying to make any particular statement about language, except that if it’s a living language, it’s not dead. I understand in a gender-oriented language like French why the French female writers are more concerned with re-inventing the language.

EW: Because they keep bumping into it.

AT: When you get the feminine for kindergarten teacher and no feminine for professor, it’s very clear within the language how society works.

EW: But you don’t think it translates into English?

AT: No and you can push it to a ludicrous extreme so that you defeat yourself. For example, some feminists use the word matron instead of patron to indicate people who’ve given donations. Are they so unaware of the derogatory sense of that word?

EW: They’re trying to reclaim the word.

AT: There are words that can’t be reclaimed – like matron and mistress – that we should just shovel under the ground somewhere. I think they’re probably biodegradable. They’re bio-degrading.

EW: Why do you think the slash and the parenthesis have become so popular?

AT: I think finding words within words is always – or since Joyce and before – a wonderful thing to do. I get students to do it. Seeing the harm in pharmacy. I like it where you see the connection: the dent in accident. They are unconscious in a way. The harm isn’t there etymologically. It’s a kind of playfulness. When you take it seriously and try to make it into a political platform, then I get worried because you can get some really bad writing that’s merely politically correct. Often they’re wrenching language and it has a kind of boomerang effect to me.

EW: Can language be used at all for feminist political purpose? Is there any utility in feminist writers going back to language?

AT: All we have is language. It's all we have to talk to one another, except for signing and gesture. I think it's okay, but we can waste too much time trying to re-invent a language. You can re-invent a language and have nothing to say. It seems to me much more important to get out there and say something, rather than get too caught up in abstract notions or in a party line, a party sentence, or a party paragraph.

EW: I'm reminded of T.S. Eliot's line: 'I gotta use words when I talk to you.'

AT: And you do; you can't get away from it. But I don't think there's much point in spending all your time rewriting the English language. You can bring new words into the language; you can play with it.

EW: Mary Daly uses a lot of neologisms. Do you feel comfortable with that?

AT: I don't know what a neologism is. I guess I don't. (Laughter)

EW: Neo-logism, new word, coining new words, such as gyn-ecology.

AT: Does it make anyone feel any better?

EW: We're stuck in patriarchy, using the language of patriarchy, living the assumptions of patriarchy, so everything has to be an act of protest and change and pushing of boundaries.

AT: Certainly we have to do that. For example, it's shocking that women have to declare their marital status when they give their name. I think Ms. is a good idea, though it has an ugly sound. It's an abbreviation without a word, which is interesting. Whereas Miss is an abbreviation for mistress and so is Mrs.

EW: Maybe it's better to be an abbreviation without a word than to keep coming back to mistress. Given that we live within patriarchy and we've got to use words when we talk to each other, then what do we do with those words?

AT: We speak from the heart and we will be understood. And what we do is talk about forbidden subjects. That's the way in the end to defeat the patriarchal use of language. Talk about subjects that interest us, that may not interest men. I think we're falling into a scholarly trap because most male writers, curiously enough, are academics and they like this kind of language because, for one thing, it's useful at conferences. Last year, a man at the University of Edinburgh wrote a

paper on me and he brought it over to show me. I said, 'Why are you complicating something that's essentially simple?' And he said, 'They wouldn't allow me to give my paper unless I couched it in those terms.' I think it does me a disservice as a writer. I don't talk in those terms. I try and talk in accessible language. If I use foreign words, I try to explain it in the story so no one is caught wondering. I want to have it there because I want people to read my stuff – I don't just want academics to read my stuff.

EW: Why does it bother you to be taken up as a deconstructionist, given that you have some obvious symptoms – playing with language etymologically and playing with form and narrative voice.

AT: And three, I'm a woman.

EW: So what bothers you about it?

AT: Because when I listen to people give papers on me, it's like the old lady in the rhyme: 'Lord, this is none of I.' I don't know what they're talking about. They're removing my accessibility.

EW: What about the old adage never trust a writer; writers don't know what they're doing.

AT: I know what I'm doing. They turn it into a garden that has nothing but Latin labels and you can't speak Latin.

EW: You mean someone's walking through your prose and putting Latin labels on.

AT: Exactly. Putting Martian labels on. Also, sure, as a writer, you don't always see image patterns that you're working with – sometimes until two or three years afterwards. But what I resent is being made into an intellectual writer. Because I'm not.

EW: What's an intellectual? Someone who works in the realm of ideas.

AT: That's right. And I don't think I work in the realm of ideas.

EW: What then – feeling?

AT: Yes.

EW: But you use language in a particular –

AT: Because I'm good at it. I know how to have fun with it. But I incorporate that into very real conversation. For example, take a story like 'Crossing the Rubicon.' The title refers to Caesar, but it doesn't really matter if you know that. She does say in the narrative – 'the ides of March' and explains 'beware, beware, Caesar was killed.' And there's a lot of playing with language in that story, French as well as English. She's walking down the street in Montreal and sees 'pain

doré' in the window and she thinks 'golden pain,' but of course it's French toast. But that's all explained within the story. It's not like trying to show off how smart I am. It's that when people are in a heightened state and they see in the window 'pain doré' or something like that, for a minute it's going to mean the wrong thing. Ordinary people do that kind of thing. I try and incorporate it into the story so that it makes sense to the ordinary readers too.

EW: That leads us to a parallel subject of the relationship between writer and reader, and the idea of the reader as writer.

AT: Does that mean that the writer has no control over the material and the reader is supposed to tell the writer what they meant?

EW: In an earlier issue of *Tessera*, Kathy Mezei quotes Barthes on the death of the writer. Barthes dismissed the readable and praised the unreadable. 'The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.'

AT: What does that mean? If it means that we do expect more of contemporary literature than curling up comfortably where the author tells us exactly what to feel, like Thackery, that's alright. But that's all I can think that it might mean.

EW: What do you think of as your relationship to your reader?

AT: I write what I want to write and I hope that there's someone out there who wants to read it or listen to it.

EW: You spoke the other day about the responsibility of the writer.

AT: The responsibility of the writer is to write and to write well, and not to fob that responsibility onto the reader. You have to write well. That's a moral imperative. One of things I'm scared of is the bad writing going on under the aegis of some kind of feminist polemic that I don't understand. You can't just hack up any old word and put fences around part of it – I see these little gardens, curved fences, you're edging the word like you edge a border. You have to think harder about why you're doing that or what you're trying to do.

It makes me uneasy because if we are trying to play with language and we do it badly, then nobody's going to pay any attention. You've got to do it well. You have to know what you're doing.

EW: How do you know what you're doing?

AT: It's your responsibility to be clear – not the reader's to try to figure out what you're trying to say.

EW: How do you approach a book as a reader?

AT: I want to be excited by the book. I want to see some kind of

passionate involvement. I don't think anyone should write a book about something they don't feel they HAVE to write about. Passionate intensity rather than some cerebral working out of academic theory about how language works, or doesn't work. I really do consider myself a feminist, but I get very upset about anybody telling me how to write, or anybody taking my stuff and complicating it for the purposes of academic papers delivered in interesting countries.

EW: I don't think anyone is telling you how to write.

AT: I think it's intimidating for young writers.

EW: To me, it's a new school and people who mistrust it or feel uneasy are put on the defensive – the literary equivalent of the Luddite, who is not happy to go along with what's new.

AT: I remember when I started reading Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute – 20 years ago. Very exciting. But you know, Robbe-Grillet always had a narrative line. *Jealousy* is a brilliant novel because what he does is take the pauses and hesitations you can use when you realize you don't have to write a complete sentence. And you don't even have to identify the narrator, it can be a 'you.' And he creates this wonderful example of paranoia. I was very excited by that stuff because it seemed to me that they were saying you don't have to write in traditional sentences.

EW: That brings us into a third area, which is narrative. Is narrative too easy, too seductive?

AT: Listen to the way we talk. We tell stories to one another. We're not changing our speech patterns. Guess what happened to me today? Oh, I meant to tell you what happened to a friend of mine. I don't see how we can get away from narrative. And what do we mean by too easy? Isn't this the academic thing again? What we're really saying by 'too easy' is that everybody might understand it.

EW: Perhaps too seductive or too lulling, which masks how we're manipulated as readers. What if people want to break with narrative?

AT: I think Browning's 'The Ring and the Book' is more interesting than some of the more contemporary things. Where you have a murder and then you have several people discussing it from their points of view and you are unsure, you are edgy. That's a break with a single narrative line.

EW: Like [the Japanese movie] 'Rashamon.'

AT: I don't want the form to be made more important than the content. I need the story. I see us getting more and more rarified, super-

intellectual, talking like we all should be wearing white coats. I don't want to know how I do what I do, and I don't want to be put into any critical box either. Writers can write in different ways without that elaborate construct.

EW: Do you read Nicole Brossard?

AT: Yes, the French women writers seem to have a better grasp of what all this is about. I think she's a very exciting writer. So is Louky Bersianik. But they would be exciting writers whatever. They don't really need that philosophical back-up group.