POSTMODERNISM, POSTSTRUCTURALISM, AND FEMINISM

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A cause de l'arrivée de certaines formes littéraires dites postmodernistes, on est en train de revaloriser les méthodologies critiques qui sont traditionnellement utilisées dans les études littéraires. Le féminisme a joué un rôle décisif dans le défi qu'a lancé le structuralisme contemporain aux présuppositions du discours dominant de l'humanisme libéral. Des critiques tels que Catherine Belsey, Teresa de Laurentis, et Kaja Silverman (pour n'en mentionner que quelques uns) ont essayé d'unir ensemble le féminisme, la sémiotique, la psychanalise, et l'étude de la littérature et du film pour en créer une perspective tout à fait nouvelle et provocatrice. Les écrivains féminins au Canada comme ailleurs sont en train d'explorer – bien que ce soit d'une manière toute autre – ce même territoire, à savoir la notion du sujet individuel, féminin ou bien masculin.

Despite my title, it would perhaps be wise to begin with what I shall *not* attempt. For instance, there seems little sense in trying to present yet another survey of feminist literary theory. Many fine ones exist that outline all the exciting range of varieties that lie between the extremes of European abstract speculation and North American empirical politics. Likewise, there is little cause to offer yet another survey of feminist literary criticism of individual texts, though the range of possibilities for discussion there is equally great and equally tempting: it runs the gamut from studies of the representations of women and of feminine narrative destinies to investigations of authorial en-gender-ing. I will not even pretend to document, much less correct, the now recognized absenting of woman from both literature and the critical canon; nor will I be able to offer any alternate system. To end my list of what I will not do, let me mention the recent anti-feminist social and political theories that are starting to emerge in France and elsewhere.

What I do hope to do is offer an idea, based on my own research and teaching, of the impact feminism has had on both literary and critical history through its problematizing of a number of what I now think of, not as sacred COWS, but as sacred BULLS, in my particular area of study.

If we define literary theory as the relatively new discipline within literary studies that takes as its task the examining of the underlying assumptions of the practice of literature and criticism, then it is not hard to imagine how feminism might have provoked some serious reexamination of *what* we read, and of *how* we read, as well as of what we "canonize," as the now common expression has it, within our institutions. In much the same fashion, feminism has influenced, in a major way, the manner in which writers, both male and female, write about human relations and about contemporary society. My other major interest is in the impact which feminism has had on one particular area which had previously appeared to be totally impervious to the very *need* for any consideration of gender: that is, the field of semiotics, the study of the signifying systems that operate in our culture. Today, many of us feel that we cannot study *how* we make meaning without considering *who* makes meaning – that is, without considering the *gendered* subject of discourse.

Obviously, behind my selection of these three concerns, there is a premise – for every cultural or literary period there exists a definable "poetics," an overt or implied articulation of the way we organize our culture and our knowledge *about* our culture. Therefore, the poetics of what is now being called "postmodernism" is one that we should be able to posit for both the literature and the theory and criticism of the present. What I see as one important component of this poetics is an interrogation of the relation between "reality" and art, between history and ideology, on the one hand, and literature or fiction, on the other. I believe that the mutual representation and questioning of these two ontologically different entities has led to a challenging of what we could broadly define as our prevalent liberal humanist notion of Truth as based on reason and on such eternal universals as common sense. And this is where feminism has had its greatest impact: today, for many people – even some literary critics – "reality" and literature both can no longer be considered apart from their various mediating determinations: class, time, place, and now, gender.

I have personally been forced to come to terms with these issues because I find myself directly implicated in an overt act of canon-formation these days. I am involved in writing the chapter on the Novel from 1972-1984 for the fourth volume of the *Literary History of Canada*, one of the major reference works in Canadian literary studies. Reading the novels is one thing, but I have discovered, as I begin to conceive of drafting the long chapter, that there are a few general questions that I have to answer before I can begin. Some are easier than others: for instance, how to order the vast corpus? Should I do it by author? I've decided that I can't do this, for a number of ideological reasons which I will not go into here. And so I have chosen to organize the chapter around *types* of novels that have appeared in those years. But this leads to my second and more difficult question: *which* novels? There is none of the usual comfortable temporal distancing that literary historians normally depend upon to help them decide what will stand the test of time (that is, what, in fact, has managed to last). In other words, I am being asked to construct – consciously – a canon of contemporary Canadian fiction. Merely to mention a novel might well guarantee, to some extent, its canonization.

In literary theory today, the problem of the existence and constitution of a literary canon is a major concern. And it is feminist criticism that, in large part, has made it so. What it has shown us is that the canon

(what has lasted, what we still read) tends to privilege texts that work within already accepted strategies and ideologies. And this is, of course, why we now have to reexamine the neglected works by women in the past. For Canadians in particular, though, the canon is also a rather sensitive issue, especially since the now infamous 1978 Calgary Conference where professors and publishers produced a list of the 100 Best Canadian Novels. We have had good reason in Canada, then, to be suspicious of the normative power of the canon over teachers, scholars, publishers, and, of course, readers. We probably all should be nervous about reifying and fetishizing our literary works. After all, can *you* say, beyond all doubt, what constitutes a classic? And who is to decide?

These are the questions that feminism has played a large part in raising in my own mind as I have been struggling with this chapter. I realize that the *Literary History of Canada* clearly has the customary curatorial function – to preserve the cultural grammar, if you like. But I cannot deny that, in Canada, it also has a constitutive function – it creates and forms our culture as well as recording it. One of the possible ways to come to terms with this particular function, I have decided, is to be as self-conscious and overt about it as I can, on the one hand, and on the other, to try to put my interpretation and analysis within a number of contexts. Any canon reflects the discourses out of which it derives, and those discourses are social, cultural and ideological, as much as they are literary.

One of the most important contexts – for me as literary historian and for the writers whose works I am analyzing – is, undoubtedly, that of the sixties. Most of the novelists now writing were formed, intellectually and ideologically, in the sixties, the years that marked both the rise of a new kind of political engagement and the beginnings of the women's movement as a generally recognized force. These were also the years of Canadian cultural nationalism that saw the birth of a real literary community in Canada. New presses proliferated; Canadians actually began to "read Canadian." One of the results of this has been that new voices began to be heard in our literature, and the voices of women were among the loudest and clearest.

I have to admit that the range of tones has been wide: from angry catalogues of complaints to strident preaching to sober (or comic) investigations of male/female

'Faces at the Conference' – Frieda Forman

relationships and of the everyday life of women. It's all there, and not at all surprisingly. With the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties came novels about gender confusion and sexual identity. And, we finally began to hear what it felt like to be female and growing up in repressive small town Canada. In other words, we began to see the variations that a woman novelist could play on the traditionally male themes and genres. For example, the Canadian wilderness novel took on a new dimension when domesticated by women: we got the cottage or cabin novel (*Abra, Bear, Surfacing, The Diviners, Intertidal Life*). The male picaresque form moved from being "on the road" to the domestic setting, once again. But this time, as in Marian Engel's *Lunatic Villas*, the traditional episodic adventures of the picaresque rogue are perpetrated, not by, but *upon* a woman – as a series of rogues invades her house and her life.

And, in the last fifteen years, we have also begun to see the specifically female experience of coming of age in new versions of the classic *Bildungsroman* by Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas, and many, many others. The growth of the female artist, the feminist version of the *Künstlerroman,* has also offered new variants of an old form. Male novelists today cannot seem to avoid the connection of creation (both sexual or biological and literary) with death (I am thinking here of the latest novels of Rudy Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch and Clark Blaise); but women novelists have offered a new and different equation: their female characters' creativity (as mothers and as writers) has linked together sexuality and birth.

From a somewhat different point of view, I have come to see how parody, in contemporary literature in general, has become a favourite ironic mode adopted by the marginalized in society. My guess is that it allows them to speak *to* a culture, from *within* that culture, without being entirely coopted by it. It produces the necessary critical distance. And Canadian women have used parody in radical ways. Some have used it to democratize the highbrow/lowbrow culture distinctions operative in our canon, as I think Atwood does in her parodic play with the "costume gothic" in *Lady Oracle*. Others (Susan Swan, Heather Robertson) have used parody to challenge the very boundaries of literary genres, as, of course, Virginia Woolf had done earlier in her fictional biography *Orlando*.

I argued earlier, though, that a poetics must account for the theory as well as the practice of literature at any given time, and in my particular field of interest – semiotics and post-structuralism – the impact of feminism has been equally strong and equally obvious. At the risk of drastically oversimplifying, let me define post-

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structuralism as a general term that has been used to describe contemporary critical approaches which, on the one hand, were made possible by Saussure's radical structuralist rethinking of the nature of language, but which, on the other hand, now see the limitations of reducing language to only system, the dangers of ignoring the social and ideological contexts which structuralism (if not Saussure himself) had excluded from linguistic consideration. What has evolved out of post-structuralism is a concerted attack on the underlying assumptions of our dominant liberal humanist culture's study of "Man." The quotation marks are my overt signal of where feminism came in here. Feminism shares with post-structuralism a concern for power: its manifestations, its appropriation, its positioning, its consequences, and its language. Both reject rigid totalizing theories that rely on system over experience. Both challenge binary oppositions that in fact embody a secret hierarchy (such as, male/female). Both investigate the possibilities of working at the borders, on the margins, decentering texts and readers, removing their traditional anchors: God, the father, the state, reason, order, Man.

In trying to solve the perhaps insoluble question of an effective feminist practice, feminists have challenged humanism's very preconceptions and conditions of possibility. In other words, I'd like to argue today that feminism has pushed post-structuralism in a direction that it could not and would not otherwise have gone. Post-structuralism has indeed contested the universality of the concept of Man that underpins all of Western philosophy, arguing that humanism is not a means to universal truths about Man, but that it is an ideology. It is not an unchanging set of eternal values, but the result of a particular configuration of historical, geographical, and class conditions. What feminism added, of course, was gender. What feminists noticed was that to problematize Man was not neccessarily to discover Woman. Most of us find this out through personal experience: I know it took me years to figure out why I, as a woman and as the daughter of working class Italian immigrants, had a totally different concept of my role as student and teacher than did most of my male colleagues – both the traditional humanists and the radical post-structuralists.

Recent feminist criticism has, then, added the crucial item of gender to the post-structuralist challenge to the nature and identity of human subjectivity. This involves a deliberate subversion of Descartes' dictum of "I think, therefore I am," where thinking or consciousness is the guarantee of identity. What structuralism suggested was that the new definition of the subject be "I speak, therefore I am," that language be seen as what allows or enables subjectivity. We assert our identity in saying (and in being able to say) "I" in a speaking (or discursive) situation. To speak of the "subject" in post-structuralism, then, is not the same as to speak of the "individual." There is both a semantic and an ideological distinction here. The term "individual" has connotations arising from Renaissance humanism's focus on "Man" as a timeless human essence. The individual in this context is a free and conscious agent, autonomous and coherent. It is a concept based on consciousness or reason. It does not, therefore, make room for the irrational – that was relegated to the domain of the mad and the female. What today's challenge to the "subject," on the contrary, suggests is that this model of male Cartesian rationality is only *posing* as universal and timeless; that, in fact, it is historically and culturally determined, that it ignores (to its discredit) the realms it excludes: the unconscious and woman – as well as history.

By calling our attention to these humanist suppressions (or repressions), post-structuralism has joined forces with feminism both in contesting the notion of the coherent, autonomous subject that has buttressed Western philosophy for centuries and in laying bare the strategies of power and production in our society and in our literature. I am thinking in particular of books like Kaja Silverman's *The Subject of Semiotics*[1] and, especially, Teresa de Lauretis's evocatively entitled: *Alice Doesn't*.[2] Both have turned to recent developments in psychoanalysis in order to study the nature of semiotic signifying and, for both, the question of sexual difference cannot be separated from that of how we signify, how we make meaning. De Lauretis argues that both men and women are constructed as social beings, as the point of articulation of ideological formations. In other words – and this is perhaps what is new – for the semiotician too, there must always be a material connection to historical and social contexts. She feels strongly that an expanded version of semiotics can offer a way to study the resistance to and the contradictions within all systems of power.

The engaging title of the book, *Alice Doesn't*, is meant to evoke for us any number of female Alices, but specifically Lewis Carroll's, whose tale is intended as a parable suggesting the situation and adventure of critical feminism (p.2). The filmic echo is meant to suggest woman's usual role in narrative: the object of male desire, awaiting the arrival of Oedipus. In her words: "What if, once he reached his destination, he found that Alice didn't live there anymore?" (p. 153). The title is also both a way of acknowledging what she calls "the unqualified opposition of feminism to existing social relations, its refusal of given definitions and cultural values," but also a way of affirming "the political and personal ties of shared experience that join women in the movement and are the condition of feminist work, theory and practice" (p. vii).

De Lauretis makes what I think is a crucial distinction for feminist theory: that between womAN and womEN. By womAN, she means a fictional construct distilled from the major discourses dominant in Western cultures: from criticism, literature, science, the law, and so on. By womEN, on the other hand, she means the real historical beings who, while defined by these discourses, are materially present and must, therefore, also be dealt with. The complex relationship between womEN as historical subjects and the notion of womAN as produced by our dominant culture is central to contemporary feminism. As a predominantly male phenomenon, post-structuralism has questioned, dispersed, and fragmented

the notion of the coherent humanist subject, the origin of meaning and action. But for women, the whole question of subjective agency cannot be ignored. As Nancy Miller has been arguing for years now,[3] for women to deny the entire notion of the subject would be to foreclose the whole question of female identity. Women do not have the same relation to issues such as identity, origin, production, and the institution as men do. The *cogito* means something different for women who have traditionally been denied identity through Cartesian rationality. In other words, the whole question of the nature of subjectivity must be rethought for and by women; it cannot simply, in the name of post-structuralism, be challenged and let disappear.

There is, of course, a danger here. We must be very careful that, in fighting the universalization of something called Man, we don't just substitute something called Woman. But I do not really think this is a serious danger. After all, feminist theory grew out of the women's movement, out of actual praxis. When I hear post-structuralists (usually male) cry out for the need for theory to be based in experience and practice, I join many other women in wondering why they have not noticed that such an ideal already exists: in feminism. For example, Edward Said states:

> *Criticism cannot assume that its province is merely the text, not even the great literary text. It must see itself, with other discourses, inhabiting a much contested cultural space, in which what has counted in the continuity and transmission of knowledge has been the signifier as an event that has left lasting traces upon the human subject.*[4]

He argues for criticism and theory to take their proper, their responsible place in historical and political life.

To *his* credit, however, Terry Eagleton does see that the women's movement has been an important area where such cultural and political action have indeed come together, just as Said desires:

> *It is in the nature of feminist politics that signs and images, written and dramatized experience, should be of especial significance. Discourse in all its forms is an obvious concern for feminists, either as places where women's oppression can be deciphered, or as places where it can be challenged. In any politics which puts identity and relationship centrally at stake, renewing attention to lived experience and the discourse of the body, culture does not need to argue its way to political relevance.*[5]

Both of these men argue for the need for literary critics to demarginalize themselves, to come out of the safe ivory tower of New Critical or Leavisite textual analysis that humanism made our abode. Many of us feel the same way today, and for us, feminism has been, I think, the single most influential force in this new outwardly directed motivation. I do not at all mean to denigrate the enormous influence of Michel Foucault or any other major post-structuralist theorist. I do want to suggest, however, that we must be careful to decide if post-structuralists are being influenced by feminism or whether they are appropriating the discourse of feminism for their own purposes.

In either case, the dangers should not paralyze us. Those of us who teach literature have been shown a way out of that self-marginalized position as the instillers of sensitivity to the beauties of the text, the text as something separate from the world outside it. And many of us want to follow the new path offered us. Unlike much literary theory, feminist discourse began and continues as a reflection of practice and, de Lauretis argues, only exists as such in conjunction with practice. One becomes a woman through the experience of sexuality, and therefore the so-called pragmatic social issues of North American feminism (pornography, rape, etc.) are really also political and epistemological ones. In works like *Alice Doesn't*, the new emphasis for feminism is not on negativity, on what women are *not*, but rather on "historically conscious negation" of cultural values, of current definitions, and of the usual terms in which questions of theory are posed. De Lauretis feels that semiotics offers the most useful model (once modified, of course), mainly because of its central notion of "semiosis," of the mutual overdetermination of meaning, perception, and experience in the making of "sense" in the act of signifying (p. 184). This is certainly one way to work out the relations between the gendered subject and social reality in terms of the potential to modify consciousness, which, of course, is the precondition of any social change.

If there is a poetics of postmodernism, and I think there inevitably is one, then both the literature and the criticism of today have been profoundly marked by feminism and will continue to be so. What is most exciting for me is to see how all of the traditional contexts – from humanism to structuralism – have had to come to terms with the issues raised by feminist theory and practice, or else falter and perhaps pass away – the price of their failure. The final word should go to Teresa de Lauretis, for she represents for me and for many, one of the important new voices in contemporary theory, voices that now offer a radically new way of opening up possibilities – intellectual and political – for literary and cultural studies. She argues that the new specificity of feminist work is to be found:

> *not in femininity as a privileged nearness to nature, the body, or the unconscious, an essence which inheres in women but to which males too now lay a claim; not in a female tradition simply understood as private, marginal and yet intact, outside history but fully there to be discovered or recovered; not, finally, in the chinks and cracks of masculinity, the fissures of male identity or the repressed of phallic discourse; but rather in that political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women* (p. 186).

[1](New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[2](Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[3]See "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and her Fictions," *Diacritics*, 12 (1982), 48-53; and most recently, in her talk at McMaster University's Symposium on Feminist Criticism and Theory, "Ethic of Authority: 'Oubliez les professeurs,'" 21 March 1985.

[4]*The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 225.

[5]*Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 215.

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