

Book Reviews

Elisabeth Bronfen. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Pp. xvii + 460.

Why is the death of a beautiful woman “the most poetical topic in the world?” Elisabeth Bronfen attempts to answer Poe’s question in a work impressive in depth as well as breadth. A complex (if often jargon-ridden and obtuse) mix of psychoanalysis, deconstruction and semiotics. Bronfen’s approach allows her to examine the intersection of two of Western culture’s ultimate “Others,” death and femininity. The last term in her subtitle, the aesthetic, is, according to Bronfen, a fetishistic substitution for the first two. In other words, man represses his fear of the mysterious, castrating Otherness of death and femininity, and makes art. Recuperation is always imperfect, however, and the new order is inevitably replete with traces of difference and instability, the remnants of death and femininity. A representation of a dead woman, then, as Bronfen construes it, is the ultimate aporia: the unavoidable sign of bodily and textual decomposition.

While each of the book’s four parts analyses a different aspect of the complex relationship between women, death and art, Bronfen’s theories and examples are closely related and “Death—the Epitome of Tropes,” supplies the theoretical framework for understanding the dead woman as the grounds for representation. Even Freud is guilty. Bronfen, who holds no theory sacred, suggests, in fact, that the navel, symbol of the dead—because absent—mother, is more important to psychoanalysis than the phallus. Part II, “The ‘Most’ Poetic Topic,” concerns the violence done to women—rhetorically as well as literally—as they are transformed into art by the men who love them. Another sort of feminine sacrifice emerges in Part III, “Sacrificing Extremity,” in which Bronfen argues that the death of a beautiful woman is necessary to preserve existing cultural norms and values. Part IV, “The Speculated Woman,” is an interesting analysis of ghost and detective stories involving dead women and their uncanny doubles. Bronfen observes that while death and femininity mark the site of hermeneutic quest, the two are “privileged enigmas” which cannot be deciphered, marking the limit of the system of language and grounding human existence. The living dead—ghosts, vampires, doubles—are thus cracks in the illusory sense of order that is life. Bronfen’s conclusion argues that even contemporary women writers cannot escape the specter of the dead woman in art.

While theory provides the backbone to this work, example after example both illustrate and exceed their underpinnings, dissects art, literature, personal letters and folk tales, and compares representations to real people. She peruses Richardson and Rousseau, skims Mary Shelly, both Brontes, Dickens and Wharton, and leaves us with Weldon and Atwood—to name but a few of the mostly canonical authors that are her fodder. In the end, the sheer number of examples she employs is dizzying, but they ensure that even skeptics will not doubt the ubiquitousness of the phenomenon under discussion. The cumulative effect of this piling of evidence, however, is an unfortunate erasure of historical differences. The lack of a chronological arrangement is probably strategic—Bronfen seems to imply, like many theorists of psychoanalysis and deconstruction, that her theories are universal, if not monolithic. Readers curious as to the significant variations in the cultural uses of death and femininity throughout history will be disappointed.

There are greater disappointments at hand, however. While much of Bronfen's work details the often horrifying results that occur when the male artist imposes his will on the real, living bodies of women, there is a troubling tendency in this work to accept the system which dangerously links women and death as necessary and unchangeable. Her pages are crowded with image after image of female suffering and its relationship to representations of femininity as death, but, surprisingly, there is little political edge to her report. In a mode which reminds one of earlier psychanalytic theories which valorized hysteria as an essentially female language, Bronfen holds up suicide as the ultimate form of feminine authorship. Although Bronfen admits that suicide as "a way of getting rid of the oppression connected with the feminine body" might be "self-defeating" (142), she insists that is also a powerful strategy for both writing and (paradoxically) living in a patriarchal culture, for "a woman can gain a subject position only by denying her body" (143). Death and deconstruction seem to be the twin heroes in this scheme, at woman's expense: "the representation of a woman killing herself in order to produce a . . . text can serve as a trope for the relationship of the writing process to death in general" as both, she explains, "presuppose . . . [a] disembodiment or absence of the writing subject" (142). Suicide is thus celebrated as the epitome of the deconstructive act—evidently, a woman who kills herself possesses a true understanding of the politics of a textuality which renders her body negligible. Oddly enough, Bronfen does not seem to desire change, but celebrates the women clever enough to discover this prototypically feminine route to authorship.

If "politics," then, is a term, I would like to see added to the title, so is "race." Adding this to the equation of death and femininity, I believe, would completely reconfigure Bronfen's argument and so cannot be dismissed as merely an add-on category beyond the scope of her argument. The image of the VooDoo Queen, for example, may be the ultimate representation of (white) man's fetishistic fascination with the "blackness"—as well as the femininity—of death. If

Bronfen had examined cases as various as *Heart of Darkness* or the pop film

Angel Heart, she would just begin to scratch the surface of the psychic morass that constitutes the racialization of death.

If this book is disappointing in what it does not do, it is, however, convincing within the terms of its own argument. Bronfen's readings of texts are usually insightful and creative, and she is not afraid to challenge traditional theories. And while it may not be fruitful to dub this a specifically feminist text, it does contribute to the debate, initiated by feminist theorists, over Woman's (and Women's) role within the discourses of deconstruction and psychoanalysis. While there are gaps in her theories, then, she does succeed in revealing what is often too obvious to attract our attention: the uncanny excess of a dead woman.

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Jacques Dupin: Selected Poems. Translated by Paul Auster, Stephen Romer, and David Shapiro. Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University Press, 1992. Pp. 191.

In 1950 Jacques Dupin published his first plaque *Cendrier du voyage*; René Char wrote the preface for the book and André Masson provided the frontispiece. Char introduced readers to Dupin's poems warning both the poet and the public that we would demand a lot from an author who wrote such important first poems. Several decades later, Mary Ann Caws has introduced a new audience to the poetry of Jacques Dupin in translation. Dupin is now a celebrated poet and art critic; he edited, with André du Bouchet and Yves Bonnefoy, the journal *L'Ephémère*, which from 1967 became with *Tel Quel* the most important literary journal in France. Caws informs us that Dupin's poetry demands reciprocity and that it offers in return a sonorous quiet: our participation in the poetic act rescues us from wordiness as from ourselves.

Jacques Dupin: Selected Poems is a bilingual edition of a representative sample of Dupin's poetry: *Lichens* (1958); *Saccades* (1960); *Proximité du murmure* (1967); *Un Récit* (1975); *Histoire de la lumière* (1978); *Bleu et sans nom* (1981); *Une Apparence de soupirail* (1982). The presentation of the selected collections is generally faithful to their original orchestration, that is, their lineation, capitalization, page layout, etc.; however, *Songs of Rescue*, *Une Apparence de soupirail* in translation, is both abridged and numbered (the original French is not). Interestingly enough, the changes in *Songs of Rescue* clarify Dupin's voice for the reader.

It is a well-known fact that French, while rich in metaphors, articulates abstractions best; whereas, English excels in the representation of concrete reality. If French is analytical in nature and tends to interpret reality, then English merely reports it, emphasizing the sensorial unfolding of the observed action. In *Songs of Rescue*, Paul Auster's use of English articulates what Jacques Dupin

knowingly effaces in the French. In keeping with Mary Ann Caws' remarks above, Auster makes us experience the sonorous quiet that Dupin's writing creates. The first text, for example, concretizes our notion of the French adverb *interminablement*; the English adjectives "endless and unbroken" refer us back to a specific object and not just to a gesture. Beyond the structural differences between French and English, which Auster exploits, the translator's use of numbers and his choice of certain texts and not others, points out what is essential in Dupin's use of language.

For Dupin, writing is the oblique repetition of an absent antecedent. Dupin's works are composed in such a way that images, letters, and numbers are mirror-images of themselves, that is, previous textual antecedents are often repeated in reverse order with reversed letters reminiscent of images perceived as inverted when reflected in their source. It is therefore particularly apt that *Songs of Rescue* should be numbered and that it should close the volume, which opens with *Lichens*, a series of nine numbered texts, each in a symbiotic relationship with the next, joined in the seemingly interminable gesture of writing.

What Jacques Dupin tells us in different ways over and over again, and what all the translators hear and repeat in different voices, is the happenstance of creation. Though Dupin writes about the narrow but deep space of meaning, the space that his words measure out for us is open and pregnable, mutable and finally habitable. In *Saccades* and *Proximité du murmure*, two collections that also appeared as *livres d'artiste* illustrated by Miró and Ubac respectively, Dupin explores the relationship between word and image, that is, the inherent conflict between the letter seen as an irreducible image and as a self-effacing means to an expressive end. *Un Récit* works out the three definitions that Genette has designated for the term "récit": *Un Récit* is at once a text, a story, and an act of recounting. *Histoire de la lumière* and *Bleu et sans nom* are about naming the ineffable.

Jacques Dupin: Selected Poems is part of a series of bilingual texts of French poetry from Wake Forest University Press, which also includes selected poems from Philippe Jaccottet and Pierre Reverdy and their respective translations. The poetry of these three writers lends itself to translation as Walter Benjamin understood it in "The Task of the Translator" (1923) insofar as the primary meaning of their poetry cannot be articulated directly. In other words, our understanding of the original poem depends upon finding the intended effect upon our own language, which produces in it the echo of the original. For Benjamin, translation must incorporate the original's mode of signification, which is precisely what Paul Auster, Stephen Romer, and David Shapiro have done in *Jacques Dupin: Selected Poems*. They have insisted on the material aspects of Dupin's language in order to reproduce the essential quality of his poetry and his impossible desire to render presence by means of the written word.

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Carolyn A. Durham. *The Contexture of Feminism: Marie Cardinal and Multicultural Literacy*. University of Illinois Press, 1992. Pp. 302.

I approached Carolyn Durham's book with a mixture of anticipation and trepidation, wondering exactly what the word "contexture" meant and looking forward to her analysis of Marie Cardinal, an author whose works I had read with great interest and whom I had the privilege of meeting when she talked about *Les Mots pour le dire* in San Francisco several years ago. In attempting to convey the richness of the perceptions in this book, I will highlight some of the ideas which I found particularly helpful in facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of Marie Cardinal's works and their place within the context of contemporary feminism.

Durham points to Marie Cardinal as an excellent example of an intercultural author. She was raised in Algeria, has never quite felt at home in France, where she has nonetheless been widely published and read, and is a recently naturalized citizen on Quebec. The leitmotif of the Algerian harvest scene, found in a number of Cardinal's fictional and autobiographical texts, is presented as a female narrator's attempt to deal with her own "contradictory and conflicting commitments to a dominant culture of oppressors and a muted culture of the oppressed." This muted culture includes not only the native Algerians among whom Cardinal grew up and whose language she learned, but also women seeking to find their own separate voice in predominantly male environment.

An important focus of Durham's analysis is the use of repetition by writers such as Cardinal and Marguerite Duras as a way of reflecting the repetitive nature of women's lives. Cardinal's extensive quotation from her own works disorients the reader, Durham notes, by disrupting the reading process and fostering the fusion of life and literature. Repetitive and traditionally female endeavors such as weaving and embroidery are featured activities in such texts as *Le Passé empiété* (*The Blackstitch*).

Despite Cardinal's anguished recollections of her relationship with her mother, Durham finds in her works a subtext which rejects modern society's tendency to magnify maternal guilt and thereby make scapegoats out of mothers. Cardinal's identification of motherhood as a source of woman's oppression places her in the tradition of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, according to Durham, and eventually leads her to a much more sympathetic evaluation of her mother's life than is readily apparent to a casual reader of her works.

Durham perceives Cardinal as waging a war on words which aims at a subversion of the male text. Her *venue à l'écriture* (coming to writing) is portrayed as the real source of her triumph over madness. Durham suggests that grammatical obedience and respect for good (i.e. normative, conventional) writing potentially imprisons us within a dominant discourse and an existing social order that silence women and sees Cardinal's identity as a writer as dependent upon her ability to free herself from the grammatical rules she has

learned so well. She quotes a poignant passage in *Autrement dit* in which Cardinal comments on this very issue: "Speech is an act. Words are objects. Invisible, impalpable, cars wandering in the train of sentences. Men have sealed them hermetically; they have imprisoned women in them. Women must open them up if they wish to exist."

Presenting the couple as the embodiment of the fundamental dualism of Western ideology, Durham interprets the 1978 novel *Une Vie pour deux* as Cardinal's challenge to an illusion of unity left over from a conventional and misleading romanticism. She demonstrates how the initially traditional couple of *Une vie pour deux* gradually evolves toward a mobile relationship for the female character between the self and a multiplicity of others. The 1987 novel *Les Grands Désordres* is subsequently analyzed as an "explicit rejection of heterosexuality and [an] implicit celebration of female bonding through a commonly shared conception of love."

Durham deals with woman as writer and with woman as reader, emphasizing in *Le Passé empiété* the way in which Cardinal intertwines the life of Clytemnestra with that of the embroiderer who is the female protagonist in her novel. This resurrection of Clytemnestra is presented as reflecting a reading process through which women have found in literary characters a vicarious escape from their historical isolation from a supportive female community. The novel also exposes the time-honored association between war and heroism as a sham, Durham points out. It focuses on the avoidable death of an innocent child as a consequence of war, thereby redefining heroism as cowardice and war as a justification for murder in the name of virility.

Durham examines *Les Mots pour le dire* as a case study of Cardinal's seven year psychoanalysis. She notes the author's familiarity with psychoanalytic theory and the extent to which Cardinal's belief in the possibility of a therapeutic cure appears to place her in conflict with Francophone feminists who find in Freudian theory a radical undermining of the self and the individual. The text, however, tends to discredit traditional analytic theory as Cardinal avoids giving voice to the analyst's words and, according to Durham, weaves a "richly subversive narrative [which] names Freudian analysis as the rape of women." The narrative repetition of the life of Cardinal's mother focuses on madness as the key factor in the author's identification with the mother whose revelation of her attempts to abort her was central to the emotional and physical trauma recounted in *Les Mots pour le dire*.

The Bruno Bettelheim commentary composed for the American edition of *Les Mots pour le dire* represents for Durham a writing back into the text of the "signifiers of alienation" which Cardinal has so carefully removed from it, a process which transforms it into a text that conforms to the standard model of the psychoanalytic narrative, "Like Freud in the case of Dora," Durham inveighs, "he imposes his own narrative, even at the cost of incoherence, on what he perceives to be gaps in the woman's text." She attributes Bettelheim's critique to his need to reestablish the authority and competence of the analyst, which have been effectively subverted by Cardinal's text.

Cardinal's work is viewed as a multicultural dialogue which combines "a characteristically Anglophone commitment to feminist consciousness raising and a more typically Francophone exploration of the en-gendering of the unconscious." *The Contexture of Feminism* provides the reader with a privileged insight into the workings of the minds of both Marie Cardinal and Carolyn A. Durham. "Adding Cardinal's voice and my own to those of other feminist readers and writers immediately alters the female tradition, defining an ongoing creative process of cross-cultural collaboration." The book demands a definite effort on the part of the reader, an effort richly rewarded by an opening up of our understanding of Cardinal which in turn leads to new perspectives on feminist narrative.

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Mike Gonzalez and David Treece. *The Gathering of Voices: The Twentieth-Century Poetry of Latin America*. London and New York: Verso, 1992. Pp. 403.

Mike Gonzalez and David Treece have produced a remarkable ambitious and insightful study of Latin American poetry written over the last one hundred years. The title of this work, *The Gathering of Voices*, is especially appropriate given the authors' attempt to convoke such a tremendous diversity of forms of poetic expression. The method of organizing this vast amount of material is clear, though at times verges on the simplistic and material is clear, though at times verges on the simplistic and the schematic. Gonzalez and Treece affirm in their introduction that Latin American poetry "provides a geography of social and political experience" and that their volume is concerned with "the centrality of historical experience in the discussion of poetry." The principle critical conflict that underlies the study is between Octavia Paz's "concept of universality as the sole response to solitude" and what Gonzalez and Treece characterize as "the complex specificity of historical experience" and Latin American poetry's "constant and deepening engagement with the real." Gonzalez and Treece consciously eschewed the creation of a study with "endless lists of schools and groups" and "essays on individual poets" in order to develop their ten chapters on central issues or relationships: "the drama of poetry in its circumstance." From the convergence of literature and history, then, emerges this literary history.

What distinguishes *The Gathering of Voices* from other critical studies with similar ideological approaches is its emphasis on textual analysis. Whether Gonzalez and Treece are discussing the "contradictions of modernity in Latin America" in relation to Darío, the Spanish Civil War as it manifests itself in Vallejo and Neruda, or the poetry associated with revolutionary struggles in Cuba, Nicaragua and El Salvador, there are ample poetic texts in a bilingual

format that form the basis of all analysis. This is quite different from a work such as *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* by John Beverly and Marc Zimmerman, which avoids specific texts like the plague. Nor does *The Gathering of Voices*, in its incorporation of ample fragments of poems, resemble the collage works on Nicaragua and Guatemala assembled in a sometimes disorienting way by Marc Zimmerman. Criticism, in the hands of Gonzalez and Treece, serves to illuminate the poetic text. It is intelligent writing without the obscure jargon that has turned much of contemporary literary criticism into a hermetic club for initiates who use the academic system with all its resources to exploit and shun the producers of literature.

One of the most refreshing characteristics of *The Gathering of Voices* is its attempt to deal with the rich, non-monolithic cultural diversity of Latin America. To this end, four of the book's ten chapters are devoted to twentieth-century Brazilian poetry. Although some readers may find the succinct, synthetic treatment of Hispanic American poets Huidobro, Vallejo, Neruda, Paz and Cardenal overly familiar, the chapters on verse from Brazil offer an appropriately more complete vision of the region's literature and history. Nevertheless, Gonzalez and Treece are careful to avoid misleading comparisons between Brazil and Hispanic America. As they state in the introduction, "While the whole of Latin America (embracing Brazil) shares a historical world system, the specificities of their development have been very different." The material on Brazilian Modernism, Concretismo, and poet-songwriters from the late 1960s Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, and Chico Buarque is especially strong.

The Gathering of Voices reaffirms poetry's immemorial links with song and an oral tradition: Gonzalez and Treece mention the highly-sophisticated lyrics of Chile's Patricio Manns, for example, in the book's introduction and conclusion as a way of reformulating a definition of public and private expression. Although they discuss the importance of the Brazilian Tropicalistas, Violeta Parra and groups such as Inti Illimani from the Chilean New Song movement, they inexplicably overlook Victor Jara, the Cubans Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés as well as the Brazilian Aldir Blanc.

Treece and Gonzalez are aware that the method underlying *The Gathering of Voices* will produce inevitable exclusions. They hope that their study will provoke discussion with regard to the poetry they have chosen to analyze. A work of this kind is bound to raise many questions. If one of the authors' goals is to increase the English-speaking reader's understanding of Latin America's diversity (demonstrated so ably by the inclusion of Brazilian poetry), why not also treat the work of the major Francophone writer Aimé Césaire, or examples of English-speaking Caribbean poets, or some representation of Latin America's indigenous culture that has persisted under precarious conditions into the twentieth century (Chile's Elicura Chihuailaf Nahuelpán, for example, recently published a book of poetry in *mapudunqu*, *Gathering of Voices* has to do with the (mis)representation of women poets. Treece and Gonzalez attempt to address this issue in their introduction. But it is extremely unfair on their part to pay lip

service to feminism in the opening pages of the book and then fail to analyze a single poem by Rosario Castellanos, Nancy Morejón, or Rosario Ferré. They might have tried harder "to explore," in their words, "the body of Latin American poetry in search of resistances to marginality and otherness." Too, they might have argued their own case more effectively by discussing the work of major poets such as Eliseo Diego, Pedro Mir, Roberto Sosa, Antonio Cisneros, and Oscar Hahn, or by doing more than simply mentioning the name and year of birth of one of Latin America's truly great poets, Chilean Gonzalo Rojas.

Although these reservations are far from unimportant, they do not ultimately undermine the invaluable work of Mike Gonzalez and David Treece. *The Gathering of Voices*, with its extensive scope, completely bilingual format, accessible prose and excellent bibliography, will set the standard for the study of Latin American poetry for many years to come.

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D. Emily Hicks. *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text*. Neil Larsen, forward. Minneapolis, Oxford: U of Minnesota P, 1992. Pp. 170.

D. Emily Hicks's *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* addresses the scarcity of strategies of interpretation that promote readings which uncover rather than obscure or distort a text's multiplicity of cultural codes and voices. As Neil Larsen posits in the "Forward," the point of departure for *Border Writing* is "how are we now to think about, produce, and/or consume culture without succumbing either to the tainted universalism embodied in Enlightenment notions of 'civilization' or to the equally suspect particularisms lurking in the notions of 'national culture?'"

Professor of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University, Hicks postulates thinking about culture without nation in order to map the emergence of a poetics of a "postnational, social universalism." The author's focus is Latin America, where the reactionary character of dominant cultural nationalism is often seen as a postcolonial form in which sub- or counter-cultures within such countries as Mexico are excluded or oppressed. This nationalism, if faced with imperialistic encroachment, becomes "progressive" when taken up by a dominated or "dependent" national grouping. In *Border Writing* Hicks provokes the reader to consider a variety of authors' works in terms of strategies and tactics that "contribute to the production of meaning in culturally complex and politically repressive societies," offering a "border" poetics as a mode of entry.

Hicks criticizes the appropriation of Latin American literature for the European/North American dominated canon and the uncritical use of European poststructuralism. She proposes a radical, postnationality move to "smash the

canon altogether" and offers "border writing," which is, according to Hicks, the "functional expression of the self-conscious attitude of a writer juxtaposed between multiple cultures," a "mode of operation." By emphasizing the multiplicity of languages within any single language and choosing a strategy of "translation" rather than representation, border writers are able to ultimately undermine the distinction between original and alien culture.

The strategy permits the border subject a "multidimensional perception and nonsynchronous memory"—the ability to see not just from one side of a border, but from the other side as well. Borders are identified not only as geographic or physical, but as cultural (Mexico City/New York), gender (men/women), and economic (dollar based/other-currency-based societies). Border writing, with a decentered subject and displaced object, "re-presents the cultures of Europe and the United States in their interaction with Latin American culture, rather than as fundamental cultural models' . . . border writers re-present attitudes toward objects as they exist in more than one cultural context." Border writing emphasizes the differences in reference codes between two or more cultures, depicting, "a kind of realism that approaches the experience of border crossers, those who live in a bilingual, bicultural, biconceptual reality."

According to the author, the reception and interpretation of border writing implies the crossing over on the part of the reader into another set of referential codes. Thus the reader, like the writer of border writing, experiences a "deterritorialization." The term "border writing" connotes a perspective that is no longer dominated by nonborder regions, unlike the term "magic realism," popular among North American critics of Latin American literature. Based on the binary opposition of magic/real (emphasizing the "magic"), Hicks notes the "magic realism" denies the larger, broader understanding of the reality that informs Latin American texts. (Although, she points out, "magic realism" serves a market strategy which feeds the North American perception of Latin America as the exotic "Other").

As border writing requires the reader to look in two directions simultaneously, Hicks offers holography as a critical approach. Creating an image from more than one perspective, holography serves as a multidimensional model for visualizing the production of deterritorialized meaning/nonmeaning. Thus, in the same way that one part of a hologram can produce an entire image, border metaphors recreate the whole social order or the whole culture to which they refer. In this manner, Hicks suggests, border writing might be conceived as a framing of certain crucial interactions: nature and technology, traditional culture and technology, humans and nature, popular culture and mass culture, meaning and nonmeaning. Border literacy, or the ability to read border literature, avoids a single perspective (i.e., middle-class Western cultural bias). Because Hicks accepts the connection of the individual to political immediacy (the personal as political) and recognizes that the individual's enunciation takes on a collective value, she proposes the concept of border writing as the possibility of withstanding "future destruction." Whether the reader accepts her aesthetics as a possible

agent for change and psychic healing, or criticizes this aspect of her hypothesis, as does Neil Larsen, as a utopian project, Hicks's concept of a border poetics is provocative and opens a space for the appreciation of contemporary Latin American literature and culture that resists the noncritical application of postmodern, feminist, or poststructuralist approaches that might only continue to appropriate and self-reflect.

Border Writing is divided into six chapters ("García Márquez: Cultural Border Crosser"; "Beyond the Subject: From the Territorialized to the Deterritorialized Text"; "Cortázar: The Task of the Translator"; "That Which Resists: The Code of the Real in Luisa Valenzuela's *como en la guerra*"; "Valenzuela: The Imaginary Body"; "Contemporary Border Writing and Reading: From Aztlán to Nicaragua"). The chapters are preceded by a "Foreword" by Neil Larsen and the author's introduction, "Border Writing as Deterritorialization," which, along with the bibliography, were the most interesting and useful parts of the book. The text is followed by notes and an index.

Hicks compares, contrasts and interacts with a wide variety of cultural, aesthetic, philosophical, linguistic, and semiotic studies. However, in this reader's opinion, at times an already dense reading becomes burdensome without furthering understanding of her hypothesis or its application. Also, her indiscriminate use of such terms as "the Anglo reader," "the North American reader," at times appearing as synonyms, is confusing and annoying. Nonetheless, *Border Writing* offers new perspectives and approaches to texts that will permit readings which reflect the complexity of those subjects and cultural productions whose myriad of referential codes require a border reader—one who can "look in two directions at the same time."

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Robin Régine. *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). Pp. 345.

This is a brave and responsible book: brave, because most commentaries on socialist realism begin either with a simple dismissal or a more clandestine disavowal of the subject at hand; responsible, because Robin grants her subject a significant historical problem, one that productively implicates culture in the revolutionary moment in which it is precipitate. Originally published in French in 1986, before the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the debacle of Tiananmen, and the ignominious demise of the Soviet Union, Robin's *Socialist Realism* now appears as a curious anachronism about an anachronism, but perhaps, as Leon Robel's foreward suggests, it remains "inaugural" because it unconsciously heralds a period of solemn reflection about what was and was not so much of the twentieth century—the socialist experiment.

If socialism now appears a somewhat elusive chimera in contemporary memory then its cultural accompaniments do not thicken the picture. For instance, in a fascinating chapter on the First Soviet Writers' Congress in Moscow, 1934, Robin convincingly argues that socialist realism provides the event with a conceptual will'o'the wisp which operates sometimes as a heroic goal of artistic endeavor and at other times as an iron-clad presupposition (of the tendentious variety), with all the aura of a Stalinist touchstone. Reading Robin's methodical examination on the texts of this Congress, one cannot doubt the seriousness and enthusiasm with which the attendees approached their task: how to define a revolutionary culture apposite with the dynamic social changes unleashed by 1917. But this also leads the reader to wonder aloud about Robin's subtitle: "an impossible aesthetic." Simply put, any aesthetic is governed by a certain impossibility, for if its precepts were to render the artistic somehow transparent they would also effectively negate its own principled opacity. The point is important, because if Robin is correct to bemoan the muddled pronouncements of the Congress precisely because they are caught between assuming the existence of socialist realism and entertaining it as a teleological goal then we may be able to extrapolate from her analysis about how aesthetics work in general rather than assuming that most of the confusion arises from the fact that this cultural endeavor is being pursued by poor old socialists or communist party members. But that is only one of the possible lessons from this well-written book.

One of the basic cultural dilemmas that emerged in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution was how to reconcile revolutionary creativity with received forms and artistic traditions. As Robin notes, this is particularly problematic with realism, a conceptual knot that in part explains the emergence of appeals to socialist realism as "a historically concrete presentation of reality in its revolutionary development" (p.11); not therefore, that old bourgeois realism that mimes the private world of the individualist as a necessary condition of capitalist economic relations. But revolutionary development precedes revolution, as Marx still reminds us, just as the reactionary past continues to haunt the post revolutionary world. Increasingly, then, key figures like Gor'kii, Radek, Bukharin, and Zhdanov are compelled to distance, by definition, socialist realism from its contaminated forbears with the effect that what begins as a plastic concept—as malleable as the revolutionary dynamic—becomes in the space of two or three years a veritable menu for artistic creation. The discursive base, as Robin calls it, becomes closed or monologic. The last term is deliberate, since Robin employs Bakhtinian principles as a way to untie and describe the blind alleys that socialist realism conceives. Indeed, it is wholly appropriate that Robin finds theoretical sustenance in Bakhtin's writing since it was the same cultural aura that produced socialist realism that sent Bakhtin into exile in Kazakhstan (if anything, a little more Bakhtin would have been appreciated, particularly in the chapter on the hero, about which Bakhtin, particularly in his early essays, has

much to say). Even so, this is not the familiar story of Stalinist machination snuffing out the bright flame of revolutionary enthusiasm.

Some of the problems in developing socialist realism (a realistic representation of the real foundations of social change towards socialism) are bound up not just with its party political affiliations, but also its populist base; that is, it is produced by and responds to a burgeoning mass culture for which the revolution (with its literacy campaigns and media dissemination) becomes a crucial catalyst. Typicality, as Robin discusses it, is both an ideological *a priori* of the contemporary political discourse and a response to the flattening out of content in mass cultural forms. Indeed, the primacy of such content was a constitutive feature of the early proletarian writing after 1917 from which socialist realism partially derives. The difference, Robin maintains, is that by the 1930s the primacy of content has itself been usurped by the primacy of the political (party monologism), a “development” which threatens to destabilize, even more than mass culture itself, the internal integrity of the aesthetic around which socialist realism sought to cohere. The solution is not to purge the political from the aesthetic (although many aestheticians believe this to be the case) but to analyze, as concretely as possible, the conditions that warrant a specific constellation of the political and the aesthetic. Perhaps Robin’s critique falls short on this point (how, for instance, does socialist realism look in China compared to its more illustrious Soviet counterpart?) but there are moments in this book (see, for instance, the section on “figures” in socialist realism) where Robin comes very close to untangling what Terry Eagleton calls the “ideology of the aesthetic.”

Robin’s book breaks new ground in several areas: first, by showing that socialist realism, even at its most prescriptive, is as much about specific problems in cultural development as it is about the misguided fixations of socialists; second, by analyzing how certain aspects of content, like the formulaic “hero,” are produced by a reliance on traditional and/or folkloric forms even as they are compromised or transformed by political dictates; third, by actually reading (rather than simply alluding to) the monologic novels at the zenith of socialist realism Robin discovers how even some admittedly turgid narratives contain their own carnivalization, a “writerly” response in the Barthesian sense to a homogenization of content. This is not to assert that Robin has somehow legitimized the experiment that was socialist realism (a point that is far from her thesis as her introduction shows) but with this book one can safely say that stock (primarily Western, but also contemporary Russian) responses to socialist writing will simply not pass muster unless they can show, as Robin does, a more sensitive and critically engaged understanding of the cultural logics at issue. If, as Robin claims, socialist realism failed in part because it did not provide its readers “tools for analyzing the social world,” at least in Robin’s book we now have the tools to explain that failure more adequately.

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Kari Weil. *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992. Pp. 212.

In this recent study of the notion of androgyny from a feminist theoretical viewpoint, Kari Weil is interested in dealing with the question of the usefulness of re-unifying the masculine and the feminine in the collective imaginary representation.

From the introduction on, we are energetically plunged into the diverse aspects which this study encompasses in order to assess what various productions using the concept of androgyny have revealed about the consequences of androgynous behaviors in the representing of women by men. Kari Weil looks at movies, aesthetics, psychology, psychoanalysis, mythology, language and textuality, across time, from the Greeks to the 1990's to assert that "androgyny has often functioned as a conservative, if not a misogynistic, ideal," and to point out its manifestations "in the long and learned tradition of dual-sexed beings that can be traced at least as far back as the writings of Plato and Ovid" (2).

In order to clarify the confusion between the "old dream of symmetry" to which Freud and Lacan subscribe and "the notion of sexual difference that does not arise from masculine sameness" (9), Kari Weil is led to make a distinction between the 'androgyny' and the 'hermaphrodite' because they have "different histories and different psychical effects, having to do primarily with the status of the body" (9).

Desirous to explain why that clarification is needed, she immediately strikes the crucial point of textual production: "At stake in the distinction I make between 'androgyny' and 'hermaphrodite' are two notions of sexual and textual difference" (10). This then enables her to examine Derrida's "*différance*" and to assess post-structuralist theories which have pointed to the exclusion or the relegation to second rank of the feminine by male writers in a metaphysical system which poses binary oppositions between the masculine and the feminine while "defining our origin as one" (11).

Referring to the use of Irigaray's writings and of the hermaphrodite figure, Kari Weil notices that when analyzing literature, post-structuralist and feminist-aware critics "subvert the text's structure of opposition and its use as a paradigm for the creation of meaning and hierarchy . . .," revealing its givens to be constructions of patriarchal ideology and not the results of divine or natural law (11).

Divided into three parts to accommodate this complex analytical process, Kari Weil's seriously documented study sustains its vigorous and audacious, yet meandering and carefully thought out process of refining the basic question turned over and over here: the danger of naïvely preferring the notion of androgynous reunification in order to come to terms with the long-lived opposition and conflictive relationship between the masculine and the feminine.

That is why part one heavily focuses on a theoretical/definition-oriented discussion involving the myths of Aristophanes' androgyny and Ovid's her-

maphrodite, Barthes' *S/Z* and Schlegel's *Lucinde*, as well as post-structuralist deconstruction of the patriarchal dream of symmetry which erases feminine difference.

Part two examines the effect of the androgyne figure throughout history from an aesthetic viewpoint, passing maybe a little too fast over the period of the Renaissance in which the myth was intensely revived, especially in sixteenth century France, where it was used to proclaim new ideals of love that did not fit most women writers' visions. But one quickly understands that Kari Weil's focus is on modern literature, with a particular and keen consideration for Balzac's *Séraphita* and Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, which both show a use of the figure of the androgyne (Balzac) or of the androgyne/hermaphrodite (Gautier) to promote a desire to "retain certain inalienable truths and values in a changing world" (113) in the case of Balzac's mysticism or to show "aspirations to an eternal, ideal beauty" (114) in the case of Gautier's concerns for classical beauty.

Having brushed a pattern of the use of the androgyne figure in masculine literature consistent with age-old ideals of synthesis, Kari Weil then turns to the burning question of the present in the third part, which is the critical reception of the figure of the androgyne in contemporary feminist post-structuralist debates. She acknowledges many American authors who have thrown themselves into these debates, such as Carolyn Heilbrun at the defense of the notion, and the shortcomings of such a viewpoint, Elaine Showalter rejecting the notion along with Adrienne Rich, Toril Moi responding and rejecting both categories of male and female, and others.

Not only does Kari Weil summarize those authors' views, but she takes up again the re-reading of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, to comment on it along with the French feminist and post-modern theorists, Kristéva, Derrida, Cixous, Irigaray. She proceeds to carry out her own analysis of *Orlando* (1928) in which Virginia Woolf "redefines androgyny by reconceptualizing both sexual and textual identity in what appears to be antiessentialist terms" (156). Here, Kari Weil makes one of her strongest statements in concluding that, just as in *Orlando*, "the body is experienced . . . in the language and writing through which it presents itself," so in writing out one's experience in order to challenge its forms, "one must . . . change the forms of writing, not promote faith in its own bodilessness or immediacy" (157).

In an attempt to evaluate the latest writings on the question of androgyny in its relation to sexual/textual difference, Kari Weil turns to Donna Haraway's notion of the Cyborgs—these post-modern, beyond-boundaries creatures which result from technology's elimination of nature "in any pure sense" (161). She finally chooses to welcome Irigaray's "carnal ethics" which she greets as an "end to the trajectory of androgyny we have been following in these pages" (169). Yet, by judging that stance too incomplete, she lucidly indicates what Carolyn Forché has said about the existence of poetry which denounces oppressive regimes and human rights abuse, that at the end of the twentieth century, we have not come to terms with such realities.

Kari Weil's strong essay shows that it is nonetheless necessary to evaluate, assess, and reformulate questions vital to feminist/textual concerns in order to arrive at new understandings. This very serious scholarly book will interest specialists of modern French and Anglo-saxon philosophy and literature who have a stake in the questions of the representation of women and men by both sexes, and in sexual/textual identity.

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