Bronwyn Davies

THE CUTTING EDGE OF LITERARY CRITICISM

Jamming the Machinery. Contemporary Australian Women's Writing, Alison Bartlett. Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Canberra, 1998 Pages: 1–263. ISBN 0 9587121 2 3. $29.95

Alison Bartlett has produced a provocative and important study of the meeting between literary theory (in particular French feminist literary theory) and the writing and ideas of a group of seven Australian fiction writers. Bartlett is curious about the relationship between writers and those who theorise and write about the texts they produce. She quotes Cixous's view that "writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned)" (Cixous, in Bartlett, 1998, p. 1). But actually I do not think Cixous had in mind the kind of questioning Australian critics, and in particular feminist critics, subject writers to. Cixous's interest is in the questioning that is productive of the emergence of answers in her writing that she could not have imagined before she began writing. Elsewhere she writes:

> One must play language quick and true like an honest musician, not leap over a single word-beat. Find the slowness inside the speed. ...
>
> A book writes itself quickly. How long did it take you to write this book? There is a long time and a short time. Add my whole life.
>
> There is gestation and giving birth. The book is written at full speed when it is ready. I have always given birth quickly and without pain—at full term. A detachment. Maturity.
>
> But beforehand, where is it, that which will come into the world, how does it prepare itself? I do not feel it. *The womb is all the world.* The child is made from all sides. Throughout months, years. It is not me, it is at the crossing of my thinking body and the flux of living events that the thing is secreted. *I will only be the door and the spokesperson supplying words. The linguistic receptor. The scribe.*
>
> There comes the time of imminence. A desire to write rises in my body and comes to occupy my heart. Everything beats faster. The entire body readies itself. I say to my daughter: "I feel like writing." Thirst cannot be refused or rejected. I do not say: "I have an idea." I have no idea what this book will be. But very quickly scenes, sentences press forth and scarcely have I noted down twenty pages or so when I discover not the content but the direction, the ways and the song of the book.
>
> (Cixous, 1998, 144–5, *my ital*)

For Cixous, as for the writers interviewed and written about in this book, the act of writing is not produced according to a recipe for how texts should be

written according to a preconceived ideological requirement, nor in relation to an intended "message" about the ways in which gender should be done according to the latest feminist theorising. Yet this, it would seem is often how they are reviewed, as if it is the critics' task to measure writers up against an ideology which the critic believes should have informed the writing. In doing so, critics behave as if they and the author had entered a contract with the theorists and the writers are not keeping to their part of the contract. But what the writers here make clear is that they are not party to such contracts. And that such criticism is inappropriate. These writers write the body, that is, they write from the living material of their bodies, they secrete the words on to the page. In such a process they cannot write the body many critics want to find, because it is not an ideological object their body secretes. What they do write is fantastic in its capacity to enable us to see more clearly the detail of embodied existence—details that our own writing and speaking skills may make it difficult for us to see, to feel, to recognise. Writing from the body is a gift, a gift of knowing, for example, what it is to be a woman in all its ghastly detail in a patriarchal society. Such a gift of knowing may give those of us involved in trying to bring about change, the insights we need for working more insightfully through our own bodies and in relation to other bodies. It may unhook us from unwanted perceptions and storylines, from unwanted outworn images and phrases. But unless it sets out specifically to write Utopia, it cannot be expected to answer the puzzle of what we will become once we are no longer subjects within a patriarchal context. No matter how much we, or the critics, might desire such knowledge, it is not the responsibility of those who write from the body to produce such answers, nor is it the right of critics to hound them for not doing so.

So what do the writers say about the critics? They talk (and write) about terror, about the conflict between knowing what the critics want and why, but knowing at the same time that the creative act of writing cannot produce to the orders of the critics. They write about their own struggle to produce writing free of moral judgement. They talk about the ways in which writers move places before the critics get there, but are not recognised as doing so. They talk about the arbitrary nature of what the critics write and say. They talk about wanting to turn the tables, about becoming the expert critic who speaks authoritatively about her own work. They speak with tolerance, but also with impatience about the critics' power to label their work, and in light of those (often incorrect) labels to give or withhold approval.

Sue Woolfe: Mmm. Well, I read bits of critique in the academy with horror. No terror is the word. Terror. Because I don't fit in. I often read articles by critics who suggest that we should be writing about such and such, for example about women

who are victorious, and we shouldn't be thinking about the struggle. And I think yes, this is right. But when I'm alone with myself and my writing what emerges—what *has* to emerge—is what I feel most deeply about. That probably comes from a pretty painful source. But that's what I *must* write. I am speechless when I think about what I should do. I agree there are things that desperately need to be done, particularly in women's writing. The fact is, I can only do what I can do. And, that's the reason for my terror (17).

Davida Allen: SUBVERSIVE??? FEMINIST??? I tend to shy away from these words, as firstly I do not understand their current meaning ... and also, I simply had a story to tell, and still have stories I want to tell ... and images I want to paint ... and they arrive out of my own angst ...
Obviously you and anyone else INTERESTED IN THE FEMINIST DEBATES, HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO HAVE YOUR OWN SPECIALIZED OPINION ... BECAUSE THE WORK IS IN THE AUDIENCE DOMAIN ... I have no control once I let it be born ... But I struggle with the fear of how to say something without it's carrying a moral judgement.!!!!! (246)

Fiona Place: I know there are a few feminists that got really angry at me that I had a male protagonist, like the doctor should have been a woman. And I say to them, "Well look life is more complex than that." It's not as simple as wanting it to be completely and utterly some feminist statement (85).

Susan Hawthorne: I think that writers of fiction and poetry and the like have contributed a lot to the development of critical theory because it's the writers who actually do it before the critics realise it's been done ... I think that writers actually contribute a lot more to it than they're given credit for (226-7)

Sue Woolfe: I feel criticism is quite arbitrary (18).

Ania Walwicz: I do my work. The way it is perceived is not up to me. I can't stop anyone from perceiving it whichever way they like. The multicultural aspect, well that's a fair enough argument. At the same time I didn't deal with my work in terms of the *avant garde* ... I'm not representing multicultural

> views. I myself should be an expert on my work. Interestingly enough, a writer is never seen as an expert on their work. Someone else has to approve of them, talk about them. I should turn the tables. Professor Walwicz speaks about herself! Why not? (189)

Bartlett begins her book with a set of questions:

> Do the subjects of women's creative writing coincide with the concerns of feminist theories?
> Can the theories be applied to contemporary novels?
> Do they work?
> Do the novels include theoretical issues—purposefully?
> And how might the practices of women writers reflect back on or interrogate the work of theorists?

In answering these questions she does not directly address the problems raised in the talk of the writers about their relationship with critics. Rather she attempts to engage in a better practice in which she interviews the writers, consulting them as authorities, in which she refrains from dismissing their work for not doing what it does not set out to do, and in which she wonders in carefully reflexive fashion, just what are the possible relations between bodies of theory and creative writing. She takes the lead from the authors, she places an edited form of the interviews with them at the end of the book, and she consults them about what she has written. In other words she addresses the ethics of critical practice in a way which is urgently called for. The painful relationship between (often) arrogant and ill-informed critics and vulnerable writers is, in my view, one which is well overdue for close examination. University ethics committees do not require literary scholars to examine the ethics of their practices because they are not "experimenting with human subjects." Yet their effects can be much more devastating on individual lives and on their creative capacity than many a "human experiment."

There is a profoundly important question about authority that is reworked in this book. And although the book is more a text which works towards a new set of practices and insights, rather than a text which defines what the basis of that new relationship should be, it is difficult to read this book without hearing the authors speak, and hearing the problem which the book sets out to address against the grain of current practices. Janette Turner Hospital asked in an interview with Selina Samuels "Who decides what is margin and what is text? Who decides where the borders of the homeland run? Absences and silences are potent. It is the eloquent margins which frame the official history of the land" (Samuels, 1998, iv). Critics would do well to hear such questions, and to extend

them to include such questions as "who decides what a writer is and is not doing, and should and should not be doing?" and "on what basis and with what outcomes do I make the authoritative claims that I do?"

The body of this book provides an interesting format for writing about fictional texts. It is made up of the interviews with each author, a fascinating chapter on each author, in each case interleaving her own spoken words with her written words and using these to develop an often fascinating analysis of the interface between the French poststructuralist feminist theorists and the texts that Bartlett chooses for her analysis. Probably the most delightful and innovative sections of this book, however, are the reflective interludes where Bartlett discusses "reading bodies" and "writing desire." These interludes provide both interesting insights and an innovative method for writing theory.

This is an important book, and it is a pleasure to read. It should be compulsory reading for all critics and all would-be-critics. Rather than detail for you the theoretical topics that are picked up and analysed in relation to each of the seven writers (Ania Walwicz, Margaret Coombs, Fiona Place, Inez Baranay, Susan Hawthorne, Sue Woolfe, and Davida Allen) I urge you to read it for yourself, to experience the kind of practice Bartlett is exploring here.

Works Consulted

Cixous, H. *Stigmata. Escaping Texts.* London: Routledge, 1998

Samuels, S., ed. *Janette Turner Hospital.* Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, University of London and The British Australian Studies Association: London, 1998.