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review essay

Forging a National Women's Writing — Elizabeth Grosz

Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Eds.) *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, Edmonton, Alberta: Longspoon/Newest, 1986, 427pp.

There are a number of striking similarities shared by Australian and Canadian cultural self-images. Both countries have been colonised by British imperialism and subsumed within the structure of the commonwealth; both exist in the shadow of larger, English-speaking superpowers and define themselves in oppositions to the United States or England; both are struggling to develop forms of self-definition which, on the one hand, acknowledge the colonial history out of which they are formed; and on the other, attempt to overcome this history by affirming some kind of self-sufficiency (which may lurch into jingoistic, patriotic and patriarchal nationalism). Both countries are only recently developing an awareness of and pride in their multicultural composition as countries with existing, oppressed aboriginal peoples, as well as a large influx of migrants since the Second World War. Positioned as middle powers relative to the superpowers and the Third World, they exhibit similar liberal attitudes and a wide range of political activism and conservatism.

It is thus not surprising that there are many similarities in the work of feminists in Canada and Australia. Each country has acquired whatever perilous national identity it has through mythic formulations of a wilderness to be tamed, an outback to be explored, a raw, rugged land to be occupied through human (read: male) resourcefulness, guts and determination. Each is the product of a harsh geography overlaid by a colonialist history: a site where the tensions between geographical specificity and historical alignments with other nations (Mother-lands) are played out. This resolutely masculine 'pioneering spirit' has been contested in various more or less effective ways since colonisation. This has become the object of concerted and organised challenge by women only since the late 1960s.

Feminist theoretical and literary endeavours have achieved some remarkable results during the last twenty-five years or so. Yet in Australia and Canada, the work of feminists is described as 'Australian' or 'Canadian' only with great difficulty. There is a diffusion and subtlety of their 'national characters' in opposition to what could be defined as 'British feminism(s)', 'American feminism(s)' or 'French feminism(s)' (in spite of the great diversity of feminist

positions these terms encompass). There are still relatively clear-cut styles, questions and methods that mark feminist writing as American, British or French. In Canada and Australia, feminists have had the benefit of access to these various 'national' feminisms, and have been able to participate in their debates, conferences and publications; but we also have the advantage of a healthy (if at times frustrating) distance, which facilitates criticism and productive, distinctive uses of this work. Rather than being simply defined by and paying necessary homage to the imperialist centres of learning - the United States, Great Britain and France - Canada and Australia are on their cultural borders: sharing many interests but not slavishly following developments there. A kind of cultural cringe has downgraded the independence and originality provided by distance, seeing it as backwardness, and ignoring its productivity and original political and theoretical contributions.

In a sense, then, Canada and Australia may act as distorting mirrors for each other's achievements - distorting insofar as Canada is not homogeneous with Australia, having its own distinctive history and geography - yet still a mirror insofar as resemblances between the two countries can be readily identified. A distorting mirror need not be distrusted; on the contrary, as long as one knows what kinds of distortion are liable to be produced, it may help to highlight features that are normally not recognised in a veridical image produced by a flat, non-distorting mirror. In this very loose sense, this collection of Canadian women's writing may serve to reflect and highlight key issues involved in Australian feminist writing.

A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing is a huge and impressive collective of feminist literary theory and criticism which claims to be 'representative of feminist criticism and women's writing in Canada' (p. ix). It brings together a number of Canada's best-known feminist writers, playwrights and critics. Comprised of 38 essays, diary entries, narratives, traditional literary criticisms and deconstructive textual analyses, written mainly by women (though there are a few men also), the collection may well be representative of the variety of literary theory, criticism and practice in Canada. But perhaps more striking than the plurality of positions is a surprising sameness of emblems, privileged authors and conceptual terminology shared by many of the writers in the collection. This leads one to suspect that the collection is representative, not of Canadian feminism in general, but of particular feminisms.

The collection's title provides clear hints about its contents. The first part, *A Mazing Space*, has resonances with Mary Daly's *Gynecology*, a project for establishing a new language for women by reclaiming and reanimating words stolen by men, an etymology of female subordination within masculine discourse, and its reversal through the affirmation of women's bodies, perspectives and interests. Unfortunately, Daly's word-plays seem today rather worn and 'corny', perhaps a little too calculated and wilful to be effective. The second part, *Writing Canadian Women Writing* again echoes the title of a text by another Mary, Mary Jacobus's *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, a collection of papers on

Victorian and Romantic fiction. *A Mazing Space* designates the befuddling, autonomous space women are attempting to occupy, the labyrinthine maze women needed to defend themselves from patriarchal discourses - a space specifically articulated in a careful analysis of the deconstruction of received notions of space in the writings of Nicole Brossard by Louise Forsyth in her paper. The subtitle, however, is more honest, if less succinct. The collection is perhaps most interesting in its bringing together of feminist writers who, in this context, are not writing fiction so much as criticism. Although the border between criticism and fiction is always perilous, the contributors to this volume have, with one exception (the first paper in the collection, by Sarah Murphy) remained more within a critical rather than a fictional domain.

The book is most exciting in its positioning of writers, poets and novelists as theorists and critics of the writings of other women. Louky Bersianik, Barbara Godard, Louise Cotnoir, France Théoret, Gail Scott and Sharon Thesen are all respected writers, generally producing 'literature': here they are placed in the position of critics - a position by no means alien to many of them - where they analyse the writings of their predecessors, contemporaries and colleagues. The essays thus discuss not only the form and contents of texts written by women, but the more general project of 'feminine writing', writing by women as women, in which each is a participant as well as observer.

The book is loosely divided into a number of sections, (although these are not named as such) and are only suggested by means of spacing. Among the themes discussed in these sections are: the place of autobiography in women's writing (Kristjana Gunnars, Helen M. Buss, Janice Williamson); nineteenth-century women's travel journals, diaries and publications (Marni L. Stanley, Bina Friewald); writing/oral history in migrant and 'native' women's texts (Barbara Godard, Kristjana Gunnars, Laurie Ricou); Québécoise feminist writing (Linda Hutcheon, Louise Dupré, Théoret, Gail Scott); feminist theatre, poetry and performance (Pauline Butling, Louise Cotnoir, Dianne Bessai, Claire Harris); modernism and post-modernism in feminist writing (Louise Dupré, Aritha van Herk, Linda Hutcheon, Sarah Harasym); feminism and representations of the wilderness (Heather Murray, Bina Friewald), and the relations between feminist theory and feminist writing (Sharon Thesen, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Shirley Neuman). Between them, these provide a overview of the issues, debates and concerns articulated in the works of English and French-speaking Canadian feminists in the 1980s.

In spite of these obviously diverse 'topics' and interests, the papers have a common commitment to a series of shared theoretical and political frameworks: most striking is the commitment to speaking/writing the female body and sexuality. If language and culture can in general be described as patriarchal and male-dominated, then it is not language in itself that provides women with the basis for a self-representation and autonomy. It is only if the specificities of the female body can inscribe themselves in and be inscribed by language that a disruption of patriarchal norms becomes possible. The text as a whole seems to

be dedicated to the exploration of new theoretical narrative structures and poetical forms by which inscriptions of and by the female body are more easily facilitated. The hegemony of the masculine domination of genres, norms, critical evaluations and writing ideals is, on the one hand, seriously challenged by virtually all the contributors; and, on the other, the rich resourcefulness and subversive potential of women's bodies, pleasures and sexualities is affirmed and explored. Given a comparable book written by Australian feminist writers and theorists, it would be surprising, to say the least, if such a broad agreement were possible: there seem too many ideological conflicts, conflicts between so-called 'radical', marxist and socialist, and liberal feminists for even this common denominator to emerge. The virtual absence of strong marxist and socialist perspectives is, in this context, the most unrepresentative feature of the book's depiction of Canadian feminisms.

The book explores central issues raised by feminist interventions into the production and evaluation of literature, issues explored in a number of key texts, in the 1970s - Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Showalter's *A Literature of their Own*, and others. If the canons of literature and the hierarchies of the Great texts of literary history have been male-created and male-defined - indeed, if language has thus far served male interests - what place does this give women, women autonomously defined, for expression and representation? If women are to refuse the silence imposed on them as women within patriarchy - not castrated but voiceless, headless, tongueless (as claimed in Sarah Murphy's contribution) - then how are they to speak? Clearly, this means not just transforming the 'content' of discursive representations, making women the active heroines instead of passive victims and props for male fantasy in fiction, not just role-reversals which rely on the existing categories and devices of male representations (although this may be a necessary starting point). It also entails questioning both the textual and formal devices and presumptions embedded in (male) literary practices; and the criteria of assessment involved in formulating the norms and scales of evaluation by which some texts are chosen out of all those produced to represent 'greatness', 'mastery' or 'literary perfection' - the benchmarks by which all literary production is assessed. To create a writing appropriate for women (as writers and readers), feminist literary practice and theory has explored the transformation of content, form and interpretation without necessarily coming to definitive specifications and counter-norms of what feminist writing should be. At most, it has explored what it *could* be.

The articles in this collection explore the canons of literary greatness in reading texts by forgotten women or women who have been left out of the history of literature - women such as Anna Jameson, who wrote letters, diary fragments, short pieces from a highly developed consciousness of the oppression of women; Susanna Moodie, who wrote a journal of her travels in the wilderness (perhaps best known through Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*), to women 'authors' whose mode is oral rather than written, performative and ritualistic rather than repeatable. In the case of the transmission of oral history,

not only have the confines of literature been vastly extended, but other modes of documentation than the written must also now be included within the field of the literary (this is made very clear in Barbara Godard's discussion of the oral histories of Indian women). Along with the works produced by black and migrant women, which are either co-opted as wholly feminist, or recuperated as nationalist and 'ethnic' but rarely recognised as an intersection of race, sex and class, the writings of French Canadian women have been subordinated to the norms of a white, English-speaking male ideal. The papers in the book also re-examine the ways in which established conventions governing the representations of love between the sexes, or love between women, can be traversed so that different perspectives are possible. The transgressive texts of the lesbian poets, Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland, together with the experimental writings of Nicole Brossard ('perhaps the most radical writer in Canada right now' (p.32)), Louky Bersianik, Audrey Thomas, Alice Munro and others, however, challenge not only the contents but the forms embedded in conventional narratives by fracturing, traversing, questioning the familiar space, time, characters, plots and literary conventions governing mainstream or valorised patriarchal texts.

Others focus more on the ways in which developments within feminist and postmodern theory have influenced literary productions of women in Canada, examining the influences of Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva, Derrida, Barthes and Foucault, among others. The general movement of 'deconstruction' seems disproportionately influential in this collection, relative to comparable collections of work by British or American Feminists. This may be the effect of the power of French theory on French-speaking Canadians, but given their prevalence in the work of English-speaking Canadians as well as the apparent sensitivity of most of the English-speaking feminists to the issue of Anglo-cultural domination, these French writers are extremely well-represented in this text. The final 'section' of the book (consisting of the last six or seven papers) is more theoretical and general in its orientation, exploring the general terrain of Canadian writing rather than focussing on a particular text (as most of the papers in the collection do). For an Australian unfamiliar with a number of the writers discussed in the earlier sections, I found this to be the most relevant part of the book, one which challenged my ideas most directly. For those more familiar with the texts referred to and analysed by the bulk of the papers, this later section may appear overly theoretical and 'philosophical'; it is this section which, I suspect, speaks most directly to those interested in comparing and contrasting feminisms developed in Canada with those in Australia.

For me, the one major problem with the book, apart from the unevenness of contributions - difficult to avoid in a collection as large as this one - is its inward orientation. By this, I do not mean its self-consciously Canadian or feminist stand; on the contrary, the exploration of Canada's 'garrison mentality' (a description of Northrope Frye's), the critique of its masculinism and the search for feminist alternatives is one of the most rewarding elements of the book. By 'inward' here I mean a textual self-enclosure. There is a common tendency in the book,

especially in those papers which analyse particular texts. to begin the paper with some theoretical or philosophical reflections, and to as it were 'apply' them to the text in question, drawing the reader into the text. I would have preferred instead to see the drawing out of theoretical issues rather than their imposition, the use of texts to raise questions - textual, sexual, political, national - rather than to pose feminist writings as the expression or illustration of theoretical issues. This is not, of course, peculiar to the work of Canadian feminists - it is rampant in the field of male literary theory, and in other feminist literary collections; but in the context of a book as fresh and dynamic as this, it is something of a disappointment to find that the theory/practice opposition, although questioned in some papers, nevertheless goes largely unproblematised. This is not to claim that theory should have no place in women's writing; quite the opposite. Theory cannot and should not be avoided: yet, if it is not in principle distinct from (literary) practice, it cannot be imposed on literary practice, nor exert a hierarchical privilege over it.

Here, Canadian feminist writing may reflect a similar problem in some of the work of Australian feminists, particularly within the field of literary theory and criticism. The evaluation of a national literature of Australia, a literature distinctively Australian yet not bound to a set of norms and ideals of white, masculine 'neutrality', a literary history cognisant of women's contributions, needs to find the right balance between theoretical and methodological considerations. Considerations raised by the 'importation' of what is often considered 'foreign' theory - particularly 'French theory' - needs to be balanced against the careful, open reading of appropriate Australian texts, whether these are written by men or women. The direct encounter with a text untrammelled by the interposition of theory is an impossibility. But also the mere application of theory derived in a different context and imposed on texts must also be avoided. Finding the balance between theory and writing, between patriarchal texts and women's silencing, between a distinctive, differential national writing, and a writing of nationalism, remains the challenge faced by feminists in both countries.