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Bodies of Words: Feminism and Fictocriticism - explanation and demonstration

There's a strange forgetfulness around the term fictocriticism as it's used in Australia now - for fictocriticism made its appearance here in the writing (mostly non-academic) of women very well aware of those strange, exciting and provocative texts emanating first of all from France and then later from Canada from the late seventies onward - most influential were Helene Cixous' manifesto 'The Laugh of the Medusa' and her polemical essay 'Castration or Decapitation', Luce Irigaray's first two books and in particular the collection of essays *This Sex Which Is Not One*. In Australia, an awareness of this writing was manifest soon after in the work of a number of writers in *Frictions*, published by Sybylla Press in 1982 & edited by myself & Alison Tilson - one of the first collections of Australian women's (fiction) writing edited from a feminist perspective (and still trying to figure out exactly what that meant). I would cite in this context the contributions of Sneja Gunew, Wendy Morgan, Kerry Goldsworthy & myself most obviously - but also, less obviously, Anna Couani & Kathleen Mary Fallon. Meaghan Morris' very critical reading of *écriture féminine* which appeared in *Hecate* in 1978 was crucial, and the influence of Marion Campbell's first novel, *Lines of Flight* (1985) is incalculable. Much of this writing blends essay and fiction, shifts suddenly between fiction and poetry, makes use of indeterminate forms like the prose poem, and also of lists, fables, clichés - all manner of literary detritus. It can be characterised, in Susan Stewart's terms, as

'...a kind of hysterical writing - a writing moving not simply from position to position, but between positions as well; a writing refusing and incapable of "an ordered account"...' (4)

And it began to make its way into the universities, initially through women's studies courses, and then through the advent of courses in 'creative writing'. Most recently it has manifested in philosophy, history, anthropology, as a topic in special issues of journals like *Westerly* and at conferences, and most significantly in the so-called 'autobiographical turn' of cultural studies. And it's in relation to this peculiarly problematic construction that we'd do well to recall, along with Meaghan Morris, that the anecdote is not necessarily a confessional genre in any straightforward sense, but functions to orient or more properly to produce a particular pragmatics, providing a model of narrative point.

It follows from this that fictocriticism was never a genre that was One. And still isn't. Not so much a genre as an accident, even a hit and run - or perhaps precisely a hit and run guerilla action, tactical rather than strategic. A precise intervention into a specific situation, fictocriticism is not iterable, surprise being of the essence, and no two impasses in writing or debate are ever exactly the same. Fictocriticism therefore does not illustrate an already existing argument, does not simply formulate philosophy (or anything else) in fictional terms. It is not translation or transposition: it says something which can't be said in any other way: because it is not reducible to propositional content. It is, in essence, performative, a meta-discourse in which the strategies of the telling are part of the point of the tale. It is a mode of writing which pays particular attention to questions of address, even as it knows, with Barthes, that 'one does not write for the other':

to know that these things I am going to write will never cause me to be loved by the one I love (the other), to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely there where you are not, this is the beginning of writing.
(A Lover's Discourse)

Yes. But writing is haunted by narrative, and here questions of address return, though complicated by detours of various kinds. 'To whom this writing then?' asks the narrator in J.M. Coetzee's *The Age of Iron*. 'The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me':

First there is a face. It seems to float, profile upwards, in front of me. An incision runs from the temple almost to the top of the head. The edges of the wound are held apart by a knife and fork. This is what I see when I try to peer inside.

The room is stark. The walls, I think, are cement and the ceiling is high. Light from the small window high up on the northern side falls into the centre of the room illuminating the bare coffee table between the single chair and the low couch. The shadow, diffuse here, thickens at the edges of the room, climbs the walls. We, you and me, are absent. But there is food on the table and something alive in the air we might breathe towards each other across the table, the air that carries our words and sighs and strange silences in an atmosphere somehow clarified so that the very room itself seems subtly transformed. You could say it's an intimate space:

Between you and me...

Between you and me, between the devil and the deep blue sea, the frying pan and the fire, a rock and a hard place,

Buckley's or none... It's neither here nor there. In these exchanges equivalence of any kind, let alone value for money,

is impossible to measure. It's possible we're dealing in illegal substances. There's a traffic taking place and I need to know: is this a one way street?

WRONG WAY GO BACK

It happens sometimes suddenly: my currency is non-negotiable and all languages are foreign.

Every story is an inside story, you say. I'm still waiting for you to tell me yours.

Uncertain of what a story is or whether I can tell one, I begin to speak anyhow, hesitantly, pausing and then taking up again from another place. I can see you are puzzled, but you're reluctant to interrupt. Perhaps, you think, this has its own logic. But perhaps I should do more to entertain you. It occurs to me my story lacks character - or perhaps it simply lacks characters. You've come to expect these tokens of exchange between us. I'll see what I can do.

'Once upon a time there was a snowstorm in a foreign country.'

Here I pause. Fairy tales were never my genre. I try again.

'We flock into the Place de la Bastille as silent as the snow that thickens around us.'

(The first person is always so much more compelling. Your sceptical look demands it when I try to objectify events, to give them an exemplary or allegorical status by taking refuge in another voice. I can see you're a little unnerved by my use of the plural. You feel compromised, perhaps, by the prospect of an enforced complicity in who knows what crazy scheme. But that's your look out. If I worry about you I'll never be able to go on.)

'The sky fills with a whirl of white and the old stone square is overrun by a breathing mass of bodies. It is as if heaven and earth have converged about the Prince as he enters in an open car. He stands on the back seat, brandishing a pistol in the shape of a pen to show that this time he will take no risks. His armed guard has spread through the crowd like a cold wind. Suddenly the Prince straightens his arm and shoots at a distant spot in the swirling sky. Terror rises in the crowd. Some cheer, however, approving this necessary measure against terrorists. As the cheering gathers force shots ring out faster and faster. Groans and shouts can be heard everywhere, but no one falls to the ground. Suddenly the Prince winces and doubles over, clutching his pen to his chest. Help me! he cries, help me get rid of people!'

Characters, the man on *Open Learning* says, add the elements of conflict and complication. A story about one character tends towards the allegorical, towards parable, perhaps, especially if it is brief. A plurality of characters may render the strategy less transparent. Characters can serve as decoys, tending towards the shady, blocking the glow from the light of reason. A writing without characters could scorch the page. But I'm not ready to burn my bridges yet. I'll try another genre to tempt your appetite, a nocturnal tale of mystery and adventure:

Foucault's treasure

At the foot of a mountainous agglomeration of smooth-surfaced rocks, sleeps the mega-theorist. He does not wake at our arrival. The woman who has brought me to this place on the excuse of a fishing trip points up at the top of the mountain to a huge Mount Rushmore-like carving of Foucault's skull, and that, she says, is to be my goal. I begin to climb. It's a long and arduous ascent but when I arrive at the top I find that the skull is hollow and I can climb inside. In the centre of this empty space stands an enormous chest: I prise it open and out pours a cascade of gold coins, sparkling jewels and precious stones. People have spent years looking for this. I wake up thinking that the stones may be worth a fortune, but stones is all they are.

So, you say, fishing for brainfood you find only indigestible stones in the petrified brain of the university. I knew you'd be more at home in this genre - night-writing - but I say nothing because, as everyone knows, you can't speak with a stone in your mouth.

On the other hand, perhaps Annie Dillard is right, and you can teach a stone to talk. Probably preferable to putting the lot in the pockets of your overcoat and walking into the river like Virginia Woolf.

But perhaps the best I can do for now is to compromise, and, like Beckett's Molloy, recycle my stones endlessly between pockets and mouth, sucking what I can from them as I go along.

When I deliver them to you the stories (which had felt long and rambling and somehow beside the point) seem to sort themselves out. I have been worried about a certain lack of action - everything takes place by displacement - but when I confide this to you in a low tone you say, gravely, but that is the story, isn't it?

It's only words, I say. It's all secondhand, borrowed, stolen. That's the real story. A crime novel, complete with buried bodies. And to explain what I mean I tell you this:

Out of the past comes the smell of burning, burning bridges and the charred remains of manuscripts. Bodies of work, and bodies whose langorous legs had lately encircled her waist. Too many rivers to cross, too many steamy nights when she'd burned and tossed, the heat snaking through the jungle, the jaguars sliding from the kerb. There's no going back now. Only on and on into who knows what new wasteland, what desert of desire, what burning sands.

Ah, once the world was young and verdant: she had grown old on the banks of the Swan and under Canning Bridge she lay down and wept.

For so many months now she has shut out all sight and sound, knows the space of writing as if by smell, as she knows the lover roasting her slowly over a bed of coals. The keyboard taps out a nightclub rhythm: either, or else, either, or else. Writing is done with the knock at the door, the gun at her head, the knife at her throat, as if the threat of the cut opens the wound through which the rivers of clichés can run. This is what writing is: the strict discipline of the flood of clichés. Their assembling and marshalling. She licks them into shape. Their strategic deployment. She flirts and finesses. Their feverish disposition. They are highly excitable. They rise one after another in her throat, taking peristaltic leaps onto the screen where she joins them end to end, line to line, and regards them suspiciously: a land bridge of dominoes over which alien forces might pour.

And at this very moment the corrugated cat rises and stalks obliquely over the keyboard, his cold nose sliding past her ear before he leaps and crash lands by the goldfish bowl, beginning the slurp slurping that makes her stomach turn, churning up the clichés, bringing everything to the boil.

The everyday means eating it up, forcing it down, swallowing words, a lump in her throat and a stone in her stomach. Writing is regurgitation, throwing up. These are bulimarexic binaries, alternating currents. This was bliss. Off and on. That was life. On and off.

She is a light globe. Too hot to handle. It will take the rest of the world and a lifetime to change her.

Between now and then a lot can happen. And happen it does on those nights when she is skunk as a drunk in some girl's bed a long while after the final payment falls due. Like the stock market, she lives by faith, by rumour, by word of mouth. A crisis of confidence could force a collapse. The future foreclosed like a bank loan. She's putting her money - what's left of it - where her mouth is, right behind Baudelaire's, in 'the immense depth of thought in vulgar sayings, holes dug by generations of ants.' Writing on the smell of a shoestring strung out across this abyss - and she even has to borrow that.

Hey you, yes you, I'm talking to you

She was onto a good thing and she was going to stick to it.

She was a wild one, a couple of kangaroos out of control in the top paddock, a screw loose - they'd have to round up the posse to hose her down. They all knew there was no smoke without fire and she had been fanning the flames, cooking up trouble, keeping things on the boil.

They wanted her to make a break for it, head her off at the pass, call a halt right there and put their foot down. There would be tears before bed-time. It was the way of the world, the real thing, the genuine article. It would all come out in the wash. They would take her to the cleaners. She would make a clean breast of it and they would make her an example.

Meanwhile back at the ranch, the mob was wild, they were baying for blood, they wanted law and order, they wanted to let off steam, have their say, express themselves: speak English, get a life, get out of here. Go back to where you came from. This was clearing the air, sorting the sheep from the goats. She had pulled the wool over their eyes and they had gone like lambs to the slaughter. It was a red rag to a bull. It was no good crying over spilt milk. A leopard won't change his spots and you can't teach an old dog new tricks. An ostrich puts its head in the sand. Hopes it will all blow over. He keeps his hands clean, has his cake and eats it too. She had other fish to fry, irons in the fire, fingers in the pie. She put her finger on the pulse and pressed the buttons. She put the hard word on him. She jumped the gun, went ballistic, off the air. She let the cat out of the bag. She put the hard word on him. It was a smear and some mud would stick. A nod's as good as a wink to a blind horse. It was a sure thing, a going concern, a real winner. They drove it around the block for a bit then jumped ship at the next port. She'd taken them for a ride. It's a dog eat dog world. And that's where they'd gone. They'd gone to the dogs. Just between you and me.

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Notes and Debate

Rosslyn Prosser's review [Vol 3 No 1 April 99](#)

Moya Costello Letter on the Prose Poem Vol 6 No 2 October 2002

Moya Costello *'Irrigorous Uncertainties': Writing, Politics and Pedagogy* Vol 9 No 1 April 2005

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