WHITE WOMAN SPEAKS WITH FORKED TONGUE

Criticism as Autobiography

Nicole Ward Jouve

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London and New York

For my daughter
if she'll have it
With all my love
which she has

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Preface: White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue

No one who writes today can or should forget their race and their gender. The 'I' who has written this book is white: privileged, yes, middle class, yes; and everything it has to say is limited and coloured by unconscious western European assumptions.

Since I chose the title for this book I have come to New England. The place and its history have reawakened an awareness that had been born many years ago, when I was living in western Canada in the midst of a 'Red Power' movement. White man speaks with forked tongue. The colonists my ancestors, who, for the past four centuries, wave upon wave, landed on the shores of the non-European parts of the earth, brought violence and despoliation wherever they went. I belong to the race that has taken a few centuries only to destroy or threaten what it had taken God or nature millions of years to make.[1] Critical writing has grown in the same period. Who knows but that it is tainted with the same greed, the same tendency to exploit and to destroy. Today, in our infinite appetite for exoticism, for the new, we go on gleefully sacking all other cultures to find something exciting to write about.

The white settlers that spread into New England or Canada had two ways of speaking with forked tongue: one was deliberate: they promised one thing and delivered another. Sadly, when they meant well, were not necessarily trying to plunder and steal, they often did worse than when they were just being greedy. The notions of property that their treaties embodied had nothing to do with the Indians' concepts of ownership. The laws of the two peoples were different. The colonists were granted the use of a place; they thought it

meant the right to settle and exploit and enclose the land. The illnesses they brought with their religion wiped out the populations that their settlements hadn't starved out of existence.

Perhaps every white person should affix an authorial health warning to their texts. Something indeed like 'white woman speaks with forked tongue'. It's not because you are aware of a danger, nor because you mean well, that your words or actions do no harm. Hell is paved, etc. Writing is never innocent. White writing is less innocent than any other. As Gayatri Spivak has said, every First World woman's book is typed out on a word processor made cheap by the low-paid labour of a Third World woman. Nathalie Sarraute used to say that the novel was in an 'era of suspicion'. Today, the politics of white interpretation is in an era of far worse suspicion.

There is an appropriate honesty, however, in working on, writing out of, the here and the now. In all its ordinariness and modesty. I am glad on reflection that the essays that follow have such a homely pitch. If we cannot make something out of what we are, out of what we know, how shall we ever cease to colonize others? What else today but whatever wisdom we discover in our own lives do we have to give them?

White. But also woman.

As such, insecure in relation to most of the value systems that regulate culture. Wanting to be both whore and madonna. Both good and bad. Traditional and a rebel. To be a wife-and-mother, and to shake up the establishment. Drawn to the feminist image, still attached to the feminine mystique. Wanting to be loved for both. And in permanent trouble on account of both.

To make matters even more divisive, both French and English.

White woman speaks with forked tongue: this writer writes in two languages, and about literature in two languages.

White woman speaks with forked tongue: this writer wants to find out, through writing, why she writes. She writes fiction as well as criticism. The two seep into each other. She writes as academic, straining towards theory, and as woman. Sometimes she allows everything she is to filter through into

writing, and then she becomes frightened of what she's done, and she pushes it under. And the voice that grapples with reality oozes into the texts that try to be at one remove, the structures that the critical voice has erected.

The essays that follow have emerged from these manifold divisions. Over a period of time, eight years or so, it has become increasingly clear that only by allowing my voice to fork, by letting the autobiographical or the fictional surface into my thinking about something else, somebody else, by diversifying and personalizing the discourse, letting the French interfere with the English, do I ever manage to be at all adequate to the occasion, or true to myself. It seemed a pity that what had developed into a genuine practice, one that had its own logic, and purpose, and could be useful to others also in search of a different voice, a more inclusive and exploratory way of writing about literature or women's issues, should be scattered all over the place. This book is an attempt to put it together.

Forked tongues are, after all, rooted in one throat. And the serpent has ever been the friend of woman . . .

NOTE

1 As the man says in Toni Morrison's *Tar-Baby*.

Acknowledgements

' "Her legs bestrid the Channel": writing in two languages' was first published in Moira Monteith (ed.), *Women Writing: The Challenge to Theory*, Brighton: The Harvester Press and New York: St Martin's Press, 1986. ' "Bliss was it in that dawn . . .": contemporary French women's writing and the Editions des femmes' was published by Manchester University Press in Margaret Atack and Philip Powrie (eds), *Contemporary Women's Writing in France: Feminist Perspectives*, 1990. 'How *The Second Sex* stopped my aunt from watering the horse-chestnuts: Simone de Beauvoir and contemporary feminism' appeared in Elinor Shaffer (ed.), *Comparative Criticism*, vol. 9, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 'Doris Lessing: of mud and other matter – *The Children of Violence* appeared in Jenny Taylor (ed.), *Notebooks, Memoirs, Archives: Reading and Re-Reading Doris Lessing*, London: Routledge, 1982. 'Too short for a book?' was published in Clare Hanson (ed.), *Re-Reading the Short Story*, London: Macmillan, 1989. 'A rook called Joseph: Virginia Woolf' appeared in a French version as 'Une Corneille nommée Joseph' in the review *Europe*, special issue: *Virginia Woolf/Gertrude Stein*, Paris, 1985.

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Introduction: criticism as autobiography

It is odd. There is now a massive and sophisticated body of criticism on autobiography. Autobiography as practice as well as theory. How pervasive it is. How through writing the self is invented, constructed, projected. Or remains poised on the threshold. Yet it never seems to occur to the critics who say such wise things that they themselves, through writing, may be in the process of inventing or projecting their own selves. The critical genre, it seems, makes its adepts feel that they are being miraculously transported on a magic carpet from which they can survey, or peer into, the operations of the rest of humankind, the common herd of writers as it were. They themselves are removed from the obligation of having to bother with the self that writes. They inhabit a secure, objectified, third-person mode that protects them from having to be self-aware.

In the sixties and seventies, the so-called New Continental Criticism launched an attack on the notion that a literary or poetic consciousness is in any way a privileged consciousness. We now know, Paul de Man explained, that literary language is shot through with the same duplicities as everyday language, and that social language, in its turn, sets elaborate rhetorical devices into play so as to avoid naming the 'Unnameable': 'unmediated expression is a philosophical impossibility'. The contemporary contribution to this age-old problem, de Man went on to argue, is that the observing subject of a distant society, for instance, now knows that prior to making any valid statement, he must be as clear as possible about his attitude towards his own. *'He'* (de Man goes on, presumably using he as a universal),

> will soon discover . . . that the only way he can accomplish this self-demystification is by a (comparative) study of his own social self as it engages in the observation of others . . . The observation and interpretation of others is always also a means of leading to the observation of the self; true anthropological knowledge (in the ethnological as well as in the philosophical, Kantian sense of the term) can only become worthy of being called knowledge when this alternating process of mutual interpretation between the two subjects has run its course.[1]

Physician de Man cures himself of the need to swallow his own medicine by arguing that the complexities of the pull between observing and observed subject are such when you enter the areas of politics or psychoanalysis or indeed literature, that the critic has to adopt a combination of rational methodology and critical self-vigilance to save himself from the dizziness that threatens. Why, unlike Barthes, he could not write a *de Man par lui-même*, or, as Philippe Lejeune was to do, alternate between reflection and practice, de Man does not really explain.[2] I think it needs explaining. I agree when he says that the road to knowledge goes through self-knowledge. And that anyone today trying to reflect on others without awareness of the reflecting subject is a new kind of Candide. But then why do contemporary critics, whether they lean towards science or towards philosophy, think that their discipline is the only one in which the subject of the observer, the pull of desire or the relativity principle do not have to be taken into consideration? Are there ways of writing that are not autobiographical in the most complex sense?

I am in the University library in Cambridge. In the Reading Room, waiting for a book on the Lady with Camellias. Someone has put a reservation slip, now four days old, inside a book called *Reading Nozick*. It is a volume of essays, edited by a Jeffrey Paul.[3] I open at the first page. It describes the favourable reception of Nozick's book, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. I read: 'That a treatise extolling the virtues of eighteenth-century individualism and nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism should not have elicited either hostility or silence, is both a puzzling and gratifying phenomenon; puzzling because its

themes run counter to the *Zeitgeist* and gratifying because it is a work of considerable acuity.'

I know nothing about Nozick. Nothing about the editor, the author of this sentence. A picture of him however rises in my mind. A bit pompous: 'extolling'. Confident. Feels he's got the wind in his sails. 1981, mind you: Thatcher's star on the rise, Reagan in the US, monetarism, individualism, liberalism. Socialism is getting routed. But oh, let's not show our hand too clearly, let's pretend it's all happening through the power of good minds, Nozick for one, piercing through the clouds of the welfare state and all the mumbo-jumbo that goes with it. Is Jeffrey one of the old young men, the new philosophers? Pushing their smartly socked feet into the shoes of the old dons. Negatives: 'that Nozick's treatise should not have elicited either hostility or silence' where he could have said 'should have been so well-received'. Binary balances, and in the process of wielding them, he delights in his own capacity for classical elegance, ironic understatement: 'eighteenth-century individualism . . . nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism . . . hostility or silence . . . puzzling and gratifying'. Let's pretend we don't know what we are doing. A kick in the teeth for all that metaphysical foreign stuff, that German neo-Marxist Frankfurt School rubbish: 'counter to the *Zeitgeist*'. An endearing appearance of modesty: we do not gloat over the success of our ideas, we are puzzled. We did not think that the signs of the times were so visible. There's hope yet for the regeneration of the old west. Competition and all that. Dog eat dog. Tough on the misfits. But there you are: society cannot thrive unless its elite, the people with 'acuity', carry the day. The elite are gratified. We are gratified.

The author here is conveying some information about Nozick's ideas and a waxing ideology. Above all, with his elaborate third person, his disguised glee about the rise of the ideas he is 'extolling', and his disappearance into the consensus of the elite, he says a lot about himself. How much more likeable he would be if he were able to say: 'I want to defend property. And privilege. I'm sick of state control, heavy taxation, egalitarianism. It's about time the likes of me went on to the offensive. Let's pick up the discourses that argue for what I want. Look at Nozick. There's the man. Going down well too.' With a bit more self-awareness he would have said:

'Why do I want to defend property, extol privilege? Because I want them both. I don't want the *vulgum pecus* to have a share of the cake they did nothing to make. I want my energies and appetites to be uninhibited.' And with yet a bit more self-questioning: 'Why do I want all this? Is it that the mood is about? That I am successful, but don't reap enough rewards? That I am not successful enough? That my father, my mother, did not give me what I wanted? That I resent being preached at?' And so it would go.

But, you will say, we don't want to know about this man. This impossibly boring confessional stuff. We want to know about Nozick.

Why do you want to know?

Fair enough. Read Nozick. Agree with him. Or with Stuart Hall.

But don't forget to ask yourself why you do agree with whoever it is you find yourself in agreement with.

(Was it that I was in a great library? I suddenly thought of Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, reading piles of books written by men about women and perceiving one thing only in what she read: anger.)

There is, of course, another way to do what the sentence about Nozick did:

> 'I'm talking about you-know-who', Valance explained . . . 'Torture. Maggie the Bitch.' Oh. 'She's radical all right. What she wants – what she actually thinks she can fucking *achieve* – is literally to invent a whole goddamn middle-class in this country. Get rid of the old woolly incompetent buggers from fucking Surrey and Hampshire, and bring in the new. People without background, without history. Hungry people. People who really *want*, and who know that with her, they can bloody well *get* . . . And it's not just the businessmen . . . The intellectuals too. Out with the whole faggotty crew. In with the hungry guys with the wrong education. New professors, new painters, the lot. It's a bloody revolution. Newness coming into this country that's stuffed full of old corpses.'[4]

I'm sure readers have recognized Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic*

Verses. This says the reverse of the Nozick. Hostility to the new ethos is voiced through dramatic irony, almost pastiche. The fiction here functions as criticism. It is also autobiographical, in that through the burlesque enthusiasm of Valance, and the punch-drunk wonder of his interlocutor, Chamcha, one senses the author's distaste for the new greed and the narrator's glee as he smothers the Thatcherite cat with cream. As a text shot through with autobiography, as I would claim that all texts are, the Rushdie fiction is infinitely more cunning and diverse than the overly objective critical piece. It produces a lot of things beside the inevitable account of self. What I want to claim is that to even approximate, or get to look towards the horizon of such richness, criticism must take autobiography into account. Only by daring to make the observing subject part and parcel of what critical observation is about, can criticism sail towards a three-dimensional land.

Thinking is not the management of thought, as alas it is too often taken to mean these days. Thinking means putting everything on the line, taking risks, writerly risks, finding out what the actual odds are, not sheltering behind a pretend and in any case fallacious and transparent objectivity. Only when it actually thinks is criticism ever a form of writing. Only then is it a total commitment to language, the way a good joiner who makes a table will choose the best wood he or she can get, attempt to serve the wood well, use his or her skill to best effect, invest everything, body and knowledge, into what the old *Compagnons* used to call a masterpiece (which could also be a mistresspiece). What Gertrude Stein deplored there was so little of. One may individually succeed or fail. The quality of the attempt is what creates a climate in which thought can thrive. In which the ethos which Rushdie satirizes can properly be challenged.

Not that each writer should splash his or her ego all over the page, like so many liquidized Gremlins. If all criticism became autobiography, it would not only become boring, it would defeat its purpose. Criticism is about the other. Its drive for an objective voice is a search for a consensual voice and an attempt at openness. Let the ego be quiet so that the other can be seen. The drive is also for an absolute. However relativistic, however studded with 'seems' or aware of rival positions the critical discourse may be, it aims at truth – in

the Thomist sense, as the adequation of mind to the thing. Criticism that would be primarily preoccupied with self would be narcissistic, forget about the thing over there.

Then, you will say (and George May has said), why this idolatry for autobiography? Isn't it, as Philippe Lejeune owns it is for him, a disguised desire to write?[5] Why should everyone else do it? There is plenty of the stuff about as it is. Literary criticism in any case is better deployed when it is self-forgetful. Its business is indeed to read between the lines, to detect the personal where it lurks among the other elements at play in the text. Any critic or semiotician worth his or her salt will do it. Take, for instance, Jonathan Raban's recent interpretation of the speech given by the Prime Minister to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh (Saturday 21 May 1988) in his excellent pamphlet *God, Man and Mrs Thatcher*.[6] He pounces on her praise of 'the independence of mind and rigour of thought' of the Scottish people, commenting that 'her account of the foundation of the church of Scotland has a curious doubleness to it, as if, in describing the institution, she was also sketching a thumbnail self-portrait' (pp. 21–2). And he proceeds to read the speech as a piece of hidden, proselytizing autobiography.

And so (you might go on to say), since good criticism detects the autobiographical anyway, why land us in a *Las Meninas* world in which the critic paints himself or herself into a picture full of mirrors reflecting backwards and forwards, the real sitters as chance intruders, the children or ladies-in-waiting or animals or onlookers as the pretend subjects of the painting? If Jonathan Raban were to tell us in his turn why he writes in the way he does about Mrs Thatcher, he would weaken his case, water down his polemic. I would want to suggest that had he been a woman critic he might have chosen to run that risk, and that the result might not necessarily have been weakness. I would also want to add that it is one of the great strengths of some feminist criticism in recent years that it has precisely been prepared to take that risk. But more of this anon. I would also concede that there is truth in the stricture, and that pamphlet or satire may not be the place for soul-searching. (Although I would add that the more powerful satire will come from the writer with the greater self-knowledge, one who has struggled to arrive at strongly held

opinions.) But it is true that when you're on the attack, you're not going to turn confessional.

Indeed, this piece I am writing now, though I do say 'I', is not overly autobiographical, since I want to challenge and persuade. I do know, however, where it comes from: from years in which I failed to reconcile the ability I had developed to say apparently astute things about texts, in imitation or application of various discourses I had picked up, and what (as Woody Allen might say) I was really about, what I thought life was for, what I knew about other people or about myself. If you cannot ever add up, if you cannot say, 'This is what I think and this is why I think it', you are not being a critic. Though I use him for a purpose he would not have liked, I agree with de Man when he claims that criticism is linked with crisis: 'In periods that are not periods of crisis, or in individuals bent upon avoiding crisis at all cost, there can be all sorts of approaches to literature: historical, philological, psychological, etc., but there can be no criticism.'[7]

De Man is arguing for awareness of the universal crisis in language, saying that to avoid becoming aware of it is 'as if historians refused to acknowledge the existence of wars because they threaten to interfere with the serenity that is indispensable to an orderly pursuit of their discipline'. What he said in the late sixties has become true again in the late eighties. I am however arguing almost for the reverse, if on the basis of the same analysis. Not for an awareness of the endlessly mediated condition of language, the impossibility of arriving at subjecthood, but for the need to speak as a subject, and as a subject bent on self-knowledge. We have lost ourselves in the endlessly diffracted light of Deconstruction. I say 'we' meaning all of us, but especially women. For we have been asked to go along with Deconstruction whilst we had not even got to the Construction stage. You must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it, and it strikes me that in the world of today it is very much more difficult to find or create a voice, add up mind and discourse, than to enter the proliferating ways, be they culs-de-sac or roads of excess, that open up from the infinitely evasive subject. So let me be unashamedly unmodish and old-fashioned and quote from the early Lukács, as translated by Ian Fairley:

> we are talking here about the schemata of experience, whose true generality lies concealed at the very heart of experience; any writing that seeks to communicate these schemata must not deny them this experiential depth . . . truly profound subjectivity (which by no means implies surrender to frivolity) demonstrates laws that are genuinely positive and practical in nature.[8]

Or take Gramsci: 'The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date.'[9] Isn't it nice to have some of the Marxists with you (even though they are the eccentric ones, or these are eccentric passages) when you want to argue for the importance of self-knowledge, or rather the quest for self-knowledge, in the writing of criticism? Not only because Marxism has, through some of its practitioners, often been used to excise the self as some culpable excrescence, but because it's good to be reminded that there are good material (physical, economical, historical) reasons for counting it in. These reasons endure. Unless criticism springs out of genuine analyses of the real world, and in its turn affects it (and in the word 'real' I include the self that lives out of and in history as well as writes), then it inhabits the realm of fantasy. It perpetuates a sterile state of fantasy, like cogs that no longer clutch into the dents of a wheel, and turn in the void, mad with their own unimpeded speed.

The mess arising out of *The Satanic Verses* recently has shown how divorced the critical intelligence had become from reality. There has been a vast distance between the violence triggered by the book (evidencing however paradoxically, the power of the Word) and the inability of the countless commentators (with some notable exceptions) to say anything truly apposite.

The cult of the new, in the past twenty years, has been a sign of vitality: it has also done a great deal of harm. The pace of consumption has been too fast, generating panic, the constant need for more, the greed to be stimulated and to absorb and digest and move on. And so, the old and the not-so-old have been drawn upon to fuel the machine. It has often been a theory machine. Often fed from abroad, the Central Europeans, the Russians, the French. The critic has tried to imitate, refute or apply whichever model he or she found most