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Why I Read: Review of *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* by Barbara Johnson

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Meryl Altman

Why I Read

(on Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* [Harvard UP, 2003])

Who'd be a literary critic? The philosophers throw us out of the republic with the poets and other swampy-minded womanish types; but the poets don't really want to hang out with us, either ("your writing is so *dry*"). No one ever confuses the literary critic with a liberating god or an unacknowledged legislator of society, and nobody is intimidated by our flashing eyes and untidy hair. Meet a guy at a party and he goes all shy and awkward, thinking you're about to correct his grammar and criticize him for watching television instead of reading Great Books; go to another kind of party, and a member of the Board of Trustees is worried that you are *encouraging* people to watch too much television by teaching "cultural studies" instead of Shakespeare; and either way, fathers everywhere (from millionaires to working-class) still want to know "what is my kid ever going to do with that?" Social scientists call us unsystematic. People no more politically efficacious than we are call us ivory-tower elitists... and at the moment, I can't even fill out this "faculty development" form which asks me to explain the "objectives and procedures" of my work, because after a quarter-century of obsessive self-reflexivity on the topic *I don't know what my objectives and procedures are*. How can this have happened?

Barbara Johnson's newest book, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Harvard, 2003) doesn't explicitly undertake to help me fill out my form, nor does she advance a grand plan to save the world by reconfiguring the humanities (or vice versa). There is no shortage of books and articles that *do* attempt those tasks, in tones agonized, magisterial, and/or sly; the jeremiads about the death of feminist criticism continue to proliferate, and to be answered, and to be asked again. (Could the mania for "where have we been, where are we going" in intellectual circles be unconnected to the mania for assessment and the constant demands for targets, plans, outcome goals, etc. that have totally transformed the academy in the last few decades?) In contrast, *Mother Tongues* presents eight semi-detached, almost occasional, readings of classic texts and contexts (Baudelaire, Benjamin, Plath, de Man, Lowell, with side-glances to Sappho, Plato, Mallarmé, Sexton, Kafka, Freud...) and is more like a "novel in stories" than a solid commodity mono-object or a sustained rant. But unlike the overviews, it makes the case for going on with what we do.

As a critic, Johnson's voice is lyric rather than epic—"rien qui pèse et rien qui pose"—and slender bridges loop in surprising ways from one

essay to another and also back to her previous work. As a daughter of deconstruction (though far from a dutiful one), she aims to disable patriarchal mystifications without simultaneously disabling *herself*. Much of *Mother Tongues* seems written under the sign of Walter Benjamin's joint commitment to aesthetics and integrity: what can we learn from Benjamin about a critical method that will hit the middle place between text and world and leave both free?

Johnson's basic method has always been to slip into a text and read the pants off of it, and often to put two texts side-by-side and let them read the pants off of each other, somehow leaving us at the end with more rather than with less. Here, for instance, she puts Baudelaire next to Plath—not the first couple you'd think of—by starting from how critics have read and misread their relationships with their mothers, with language, with money, with the possibilities of human intimacy. (Can there possibly be anything new to see about Sylvia Plath? Yes.) Deconstruction can, it is true, become a kind of predictable “plug and chug” procedure at the end of which meaning disappears up its own ... navel, a way of despair about the possibility of human communication that nonetheless keeps grinding and writing after it has proven how useless those activities are. But it does not have to be that. As she once said, it is important not “to confuse undecidability with meaninglessness” (*Wake of Deconstruction* 90). Long ago she wrote that “Literary criticism as such can perhaps be called the art of rereading” (*Critical Difference* 4); the rereadings in *Mother Tongues* sent me back happily to revisit and explore the primary texts (a good sign, I feel), but I also found myself retracing Johnson's own steps over the years. It's an instructive path.

Oddly enough, the shape of Johnson's early career was a bit like Adrienne Rich's. Johnson's first English book, *The Critical Difference* (1980), technically brilliant and deeply erudite, was highly praised by conventional authorities, but did not express a specifically feminist (or for that matter, feminine) subject position, or did so only in cryptic ways. I can remember copying out the opening of a piece on Mallarmé's *Nénu Phar blanc*:

If human beings were not divided into two biological sexes, there would probably be no need for literature. And if literature could truly say what the relations between the sexes are, we would doubtless not need much of it, either.

But the virtuoso reading that followed somehow avoided naming the manifest epistemological violence done to the woman in/by the poem. Seemingly one could discuss “sexual difference” without drawing any sort of feminist conclusion. Johnson's association with deconstruction was further consolidated when her translation of Derrida's *Disseminations* appeared in the following year.

Then, with *World of Difference* (1987) came a moment of self-criticism and rebirth, from a position of acquired confidence and professional strength. (The equivalent step for Rich was *Snapshots of A Daughter-in-Law*, though this was of course much earlier.) Answering the question, "Is the Yale School a male school," Johnson identified a "pattern of female effacement," and ended with a witty self-critique:

I have chosen to focus on *The Critical Difference* by Barbara Johnson. What happens when one raises Mary Jacobus's question: "Is there a woman in this text?" The answer is rather surprising. For no book produced by the Yale school seems to have excluded women as effectively as *The Critical Difference* (39).

World of Difference addressed that, mainly by shifting its canon. "While *The Critical Difference* seemed to say 'Here is a text; let me read it' the present volume adds 'Why am I reading *this* text ...'" (3). Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Shelley joined Mallarmé and Poe, and issues like abortion and identity were foregrounded. But this is a gentler conversion story than Rich's. Johnson also says, in "Gender and the Yale School," "I must be careful not to bite off more of the hand that feeds me than I can chew," and the deconstructive *method* does not change much when turned to a feminist purpose. For instance, "Rigorous Unreliability" uses de Man's theory against itself to identify one of his own blind spots about gender (in his reading of Rousseau).

Deconstruction, or possibly common sense, seems also to have enabled Johnson herself to avoid the blind spot of identity politics; she maintained an acute sense of the impossibility of assigning an "inside" and an "outside" to textuality:

...to "include" or "claim an identity they taught me to despise" is by no means a simple operation. If identities are lost through acts of experience, they are also acquired thereby, and the restoration of what has been denied cannot be accomplished through simple affirmation (4).

Working through identity politics seems to lead back to undecidability, but with a questioning of purpose linked to awareness of audience. So what happens in Act Three, and Act Four? What has happened to that once-quarrelsome couple, feminism and "theory," now that both have more than reached middle age?

From the vantage point of 2005, "theory" (whether understood narrowly as referring to deconstruction, or more broadly) now seems neither especially suspect nor especially sexy. The "theory war" is over. Feminism, too, has lost the tang of risk: it's no longer dangerous to one's career prospects to say that Virginia Woolf liked women or that H.D. wrote good long poems. And yet we are not saved; we do not agree what work is good, what wasted; we defend ourselves, endlessly; we wring our

hands. In particular, continuing border skirmishes about “difficulty” may be carrying on the theory war by other means.

The second chapter of *Mother Tongues*, called “l’Esthétique du Mal,” began life as a contribution to *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. That volume in turn began life as a response to the Bad Writing Contest sponsored by *Philosophy and Literature*, which Judith Butler “won.” Edited by Jonathan Culler, it engages the best energies of some extremely smart people, most of whom end up defending, if not difficulty, at least complexity, while giving more or less quarter along the way to those who have asked for more light.

At first, it looks like Barbara Johnson’s approach was simply not to do the assignment. Rather than leap into “where are we going, where have we been” mode, she talks about Anne Sexton and “bad taste,” about “*le mal*” in Baudelaire as a historical and gendered category:

...the rise of the bourgeoisie in France was particularly gender-divided: women stood for virtue, men for badness of every sort. So much so that Baudelaire could exemplify his badness through lesbianism, but could disqualify women completely as readers of his book (28).

And, while moral panic and textual opacity are often associated (especially by those who are panicking), they can be distinguished analytically, she says. “Something of Baudelaire’s badness is lost, I think, when it is translated by Mallarmé into obscurity alone” (28). Along the way she also replies to the criticisms directly (“The real mystery is why ‘I don’t understand it’ should condemn the *author* rather than the reader” [30]), and her response to mudslinging about “political correctness” is characteristically aphoristic:

What has been called “political correctness” is something I would prefer to call “double consciousness”—the knowledge that one is viewed, not just viewing.

She also enacts the claim that complex readings are valuable by doing some. “Actually taking seriously the works being read has to become transformative eventually” (38).

But the fact is—and perhaps Johnson, like other commentators, would agree—I just can’t make myself believe that “difficulty” is really the issue. Many of the contributions to the “Difficult” book left me wanting to say, not “this is too hard,” but “this is too *meta*.” For example, Robyn Wiegman’s piece, called “Feminism’s Broken English,” argues for the value of post-structuralist, discourse-based approaches to gender against those who, like Lynne Segal, would call for a re-emphasis on social science methods as affirming a greater connection to “real world” (non-academic) “concrete political struggles.” I agree with Wiegman’s position, at least in part; and her article is not especially challenging to read. But it is rendered utterly arid by an absence of examples, by a failure to engage with texts except glancingly. Those she does cite are other overviews of overviews

of what the discipline might or might not be doing ... in the absence of any sense of critical *practice* operating in the article itself, one has a feeling of hopelessness, that all that is going on is turf-battles, institutional gatekeeping, careers.

But what if it's not a question of style or vocabulary so much as of *tone*? There is a kind of demanding article that says, "no entry without Hegel" (fair enough) and there is another kind that reads more simply "fuck off, pipsqueak." Perhaps this is why Gayatri Spivak makes so many readers angry, in spite of the undeniable value of her work. How to account for my feeling that the purpose or intention of a critical text is sometimes to put me in the wrong, almost before I have begun to read it? If this feeling has its origin in me, it is my private embarrassment, and I ought to set about solving it as quietly as possible. But if the feeling originates with the text, the question becomes murkier: did I, then, feel I had the right to expect something different, something more gracious perhaps? And if so, why? If the writer is too busy to tell me what "telepoesis" means, well, there are other ways I can figure it out. But it would only have taken her a minute, and it took me a whole day.

Maybe this is about teaching. De Man famously wrote in *his* defense of difficulty, "The Resistance to Theory," that "it is better to fail at teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true" (4). There are teachers who open doors (by many accounts, de Man himself was one of them) and teachers who slam them: and the same is true of texts. Anger breeds anger, as Woolf showed; contempt breeds contempt—of which the Bad Writing Contest itself was a prime and cynical example, it must be said. I don't always agree with Johnson's readings, but I always hear her writing as trying to teach me something, to show me something in a text I hadn't seen and then send me back into the library, where I can find out more and decide for myself.

Johnson's essay also manages to avoid the tone of injured vanity that runs through about half of the collection, from people who ought to be beyond being hurt as they are certainly beyond being harmed. Perhaps the discipline's conventions set up what Foucault calls the need to claim the "speaker's benefit," and what Johnson herself, in one of her best essays, nails as "muteness envy." Or it may really be sadder.

In *Mother Tongues* Johnson returns to a position she describes as embarrassingly close to "art for art's sake." Close-reading, careful attention to complexity, acquaintance with ideas that cannot be summarized in a soundbyte: none of this can be assumed to make anyone free. But what discourse *can*? Johnson has put this most bluntly in an interview. "Terry Eagleton says things like, 'Undecidability won't tell us what to do about the boat people.' But just saying *that* won't, either" (*Wake of Deconstruction* 84). She words it more carefully in *Mother Tongues*:

While you are parsing a sentence, analyzing a metaphor, or smiling over a meaning entirely produced by the magic of rhyme, you are not paying attention to what is going on in the world. The question I would like to ask is whether *not* paying attention to it automatically keeps you there.... It is a grandiose fantasy of omnipotence to fear that by forgetting reality, a person might damage reality. (3)

In other words, "the distance between theory and practice is always greater in practice than it is in theory." Faced with this, we could remember that Auden's "poetry makes nothing happen" was less a descriptive statement about the world than a prolegomena for his own future post-political work, expressing his desire not to make anything that could be used as propaganda; or Benjamin's search, as Gerhard Richter describes it, for a style that would make his writing be "unusable" by the Nazis. Johnson suggests that Paul de Man might have had his fill of politically engaged criticism as a result of his engagement with it during the war.

But does the question of politically engaged criticism include *feminist* criticism, and if so, how?

Mother Tongues opens with an obscenity trial, with the reminder that *Madame Bovary* and *les Fleurs du Mal* were prosecuted for obscenity in the same year. Johnson suggests that Pinard, who served as prosecutor both times, was an unusually astute *literary critic*: Baudelaire's rather lame, though probably sincere, "defense" that the "mal" was there only to be criticized in the interest of social hygiene, is less convincing (especially to a deconstructionist) than Pinard's insistence that the harmful trace of what was revealed, even if then cancelled, would have lingering effects. So good reading leads to bad (that is, anti-Poet) law.

But there's a further irony Johnson doesn't discuss. There is a kind of feminist criticism which is not all that far from the genre of the indictment or arraignment—"lui faire son procès"—and in fact feminists critics are described as, *excoriated* as, the unacknowledged or "self-appointed" legislators of the world, for always putting texts and people on trial. Andrea Dworkin's death brings back the question: were we too much like that or not enough? Whether Dworkin's work had a positive impact on feminism is debatable. But I strongly suspect that the *fear* of being Andrea Dworkin, the fear of being seen as "an Andrea Dworkin," has had a negative effect on the relevance and clarity of feminist literary and cultural criticism. "You don't want to get yourself known as a troublemaker, as somewhat who's *difficult*"—in a rather different application of that term. "You'll never get anywhere if you don't stop saying these things," as a former department chair once observed to yours truly.

He was probably right. But where was the anywhere we wished to get? Because early feminist work is another counterexample (along with fascism) to the statement that literary criticism makes nothing happen. Kate Millett's first book, *Sexual Politics*, was actually a *dissertation*, but

women who would never in a million years have read *Mimesis* read it. The same was true of Rich's *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, and (on a smaller scale) Carolyn Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life*. These books and others like them changed their readers forever, in ways that changed the world.

It's not that I don't see why some of my students and even a few of my colleagues find the intrusion of feminist criticisms into other parts of life kind of a "buzzkill." Still, it seems important to maintain the right and the ability to act as whistleblowers in the culture industry, spies in the house of the fathers. Being insiders ought to help with this, not hinder. *World of Difference* was an important moment, as was Alice Jardine's *Gynesis* (which might be crudely summarized, "what do you mean 'Woman,' French man?"). One might call this the revenge of the referent. 1970s and 1980s-style feminist criticism had two basic gestures: asking that new voices be included and valued, and pointing out things (usually power relations) that were already there and had not been noticed. Both gestures reformulated issues of representationality. (And notice that both could be done equally well on either side of the "theory/not theory" divide.)

The problem is, what do you say *after* that? How to continue, how to move on from a political form of criticism once the problems (theoretical or political) it was designed to address have been solved. This is particularly tricky when (as with feminism) the problems have in fact largely *not* been solved. Forms of woman-hating have evolved that are resistant to the antibiotics developed on an earlier generation, as Susan Fraiman shows very cogently in *Cool Men and the Second Sex*.

From the beginning, Barbara Johnson has tackled misogyny obliquely rather than head-on. There are advantages to not being in the place where the enemy thinks you are—"oh, her again, we know what she's going to say." By the time the emphatic thumb of authority comes down, *one is already elsewhere*.

* * *

If feminist self-representation is in a quandary, lesbian representation is even more so. Even to speak of lesbian feminist criticism in the age of queer might seem anachronistic; and Barbara Johnson is not usually "packaged" as a "lesbian critic" anyhow. But what might we see if we looked?

"Lesbian Spectacles" appeared in an anthology called *Media Spectacles* (it's also in *The Feminist Difference*). Here Johnson describes her "intention to push myself to try something I had never done before; to read explicitly as a lesbian." Johnson discovers that her "inner lesbometer" finds *Passing* less erotic than *Sula*, *The Accused* more erotic than *Thelma and Louise*, and ends by asking whether this means her unconscious, or perhaps the Unconscious generally, has a kind of a paradoxical structure. "The project of making my own erotic unconscious participate in my reading process, far from guaranteeing some sort of radical or liberating breakthrough, brings me face to face with the political incorrectness of

my own fantasy life" (163). It's a very elegant essay, and I think the sting of it is that reading by means of straightforward identity politics doesn't particularly *add* much, though now we know a bit more about Barbara Johnson: it isn't that she is hiding anything, but that she finds other ways of reading ultimately more satisfying.

I wonder though whether one has to identify "lesbian reading" only with the unconscious, and with individual desire. For instance, "lesbian" might denote not a fixed essence nor a specific set of conscious/unconscious "experiences" but an epistemological position, a take on the world, a different set of investments, a different angle. Johnson seems to implicitly recognize this in *Mother Tongues*, where "the lesbian question" arises first because of prohibitions: the prosecution of *Les Fleurs du Mal* and its "vindication" by a further trial in 1949 on the grounds that it was art, not life.

So in 1949, Baudelaire was rehabilitated. But lesbianism was thereby doubly condemned. If it was real, it was awful; if it was symbolic, it wasn't real...The possibility that real lesbianism could be idealized would have to wait another twenty years. And when it did become thinkable, it would not take Baudelaire with it. (11)

Johnson also raises the lesbian question within the woman question. Why is woman a terrifying creature, is a lesbian more or less terrifying than (for example) a mother, and is the lesbian terrifying because she is too much, or not enough, of a woman? Johnson uses the term "lesbian" rather than queer, except in her very interesting discussion of Sylvia Plath. And there, she attempts to discern what the word meant to *Plath* by deploying traditional philological and historical methods, that is, looking at all the places where it occurs and understanding them in context; doing the same for Woolf, whose diaries Plath was reading ... Johnson does not pretend to have finished finding out what it might mean or include by doing so, but she has rendered simplistic bad readings impossible.

Perhaps what Johnson says elsewhere about deconstruction, that it is important not to confuse undecidability with meaninglessness, is true of lesbian identity as well? I think she has pulled off the big trick, which is to give some specific concreteness to lesbian representation without trapping it inside an airless identity politics where very little new can be said. Instead, she shows that just as translation means coming to terms with the foreignness of all languages, sex is a means of coming to terms with the separateness of the other (what Mallarmé in *his* lesbian poem called "*ce mal d'être deux*"); fundamentally the gender of the other person is less relevant than one might, in the flush of youth, have thought. That's the good news. The bad news is that if what one is hoping for is to be perfectly heard, perfectly understood (and isn't that what every writer or lover is hoping for) one is by definition always already out of luck.

* * *

But here I am, months later, still sitting in front of an un-filled-out-form ...Why is it so hard to say what “method” is? Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that the two biggest methodological sins in our calendar—the “heresy of paraphrase” and the intentional fallacy—are not only unavoidable, but are actually also the basic methodological tools without which we cannot operate, without which our practice is utterly paralyzed. Once feminism is added to the picture, here’s one more: the injunction not to speak in the place of the other, not to speak for other people: crucial to avoid, but precisely what literary critics, like translators, do. Cultural studies adds a taboo on questions of “taste,” which again no one can hope to avoid for long. Do we name these things taboo because we are inevitably tempted by them? No wonder we always end up in bad faith, feeling guilty, wanting to be scientists or poets or anything but what we are.

And no wonder the students are confused.

Gayatri Spivak, too, has called for a return to close reading as a way of moving toward forms of multiculturalism that would not simply be tourism, forms of Area Studies that would not further “develop” post-war cultural colonialism once sponsored by the CIA. What she calls for—detailed, specific, respectful, patient attention to texts—she does not often herself *do*: but it doesn’t necessarily mean she’s *wrong*. There is a kind of methodological honor that is not consequentialist, a kind of belief in empiricism—“look at the page”—that doesn’t ask “what good or ill will this or that interpretation of what x means do the world,” or “how should I read this poem to advance my career,” but that says, “let’s see what it can mean.” Almost a deliberate refusal to justify means by ends which, as I said above, one can read as principled or as cowardly.

Have I done justice to *Mother Tongues* by telling you fairly what is in it? Has Johnson done justice to de Man, de Man to Benjamin, Benjamin to Baudelaire? What do we mean by “justice” when we say this, why do we use these legal words? It is not method, though, that is guilty or innocent. Procedural justice is a step toward justice, but cannot guarantee justice if the evidence is corrupted, if the starting points are wrong. Justice—the good reading—is the goal at which we aim. Surely no one could claim that it describes the condition in which we live. Perhaps that’s why literary criticism is still, after all, necessary.

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