

Published in *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism*, eds Amanda Nettelbeck and Heather Kerr, (Perth: University of Western Australia Press) pp 33- 52

THE GIFT

by Anna Gibbs

It's no use at all

A personal appearance, a manner, a tone of voice, all tied together with my name, this thread making for them a single roof over the house where I was born. The ribbon knotted all around me. Certain names charm and bewitch, others confer prestige and honour when they become well-known. Mine burnt. I had not chosen this mark of violence separating me forever from the houses on the quays, this sign and surety of legal and economic relationships which once entered into remain always unfinished. I had no wish to receive gifts from the feasts of others or to incur any debt or obligation to anyone. What disaster if one is unable to repay such cunning magnanimity! I was unable to sit without disgust before the consumption of ceremonial food or to swallow the idea of belonging at the table. The portion reserved for me would distort my mouth and nostrils into an ugly shape in which I could no longer recognize myself. I suffered from agorophobia and a pathological shrinking from public ritual. This state of mind was accompanied by a stiffening of pride, a show of disdain which held me independent and isolated at the very doors of a dwelling I could not neither leave nor comfortably inhabit.

I was a quaking, echoing garret that shivered at every passing exchange. It looked uninhabited but the slightest breath brought forth such unspeakably sordid figures out of the black shadows that I let myself sink back down into a recess of sham wood panels. No light, no air. I would breathe the unceasing poison of unhappy memories. I was hungry and still refused the spoonful of dust proffered between friends. I was near death, yet did not die. I was only half alive, sluggish in mind and body, ₁ profoundly melancholy.

Any attempt to write was utterly forsaken, any manuscript given away or destroyed.

And then I forgot about it.

Money's short!

Other more common and vulgar pursuits - work such as you do in nightmares - drew me out every morning into the streets, a morbid thing, unworthy of company. Obligations and expectations appalled me. Tormentors were cheerful and kindly in a sort of horrible office gloom. They uttered no threats, but I hid in my corner, bitterly absorbed in a ritual of refusal. Any association or partnership filled me with dread. The obligation to repay economic, ritual and sexual services, courtesy and hospitality - such a variety of traps! - was precisely the mark of enslavement. Any desire is avenged and punished by its fulfilment. The eyes of other human beings have crushed and stifled many souls. The habit of eating chalk and coal in voluntary seclusion in my small, dark study seemed agreeable, a show of resentment disgust did not deter. The principles of progress up the social ladder were as natural and attractive to me as those of a bullfight. Money was coming in. That was all.

I was wrong

After all, no one is free to refuse a terrifying gift. I picked it up. O wonder of wonders! The face and hands, the potent ear: ideas and soft surfaces, curves and modes of expression, how sentiments and persons are mingled in the fitting. Diligently, with complete indifference, the movement of the needle sews together the traces of love and the laborious, exhausting tears, pleasures and the gravest guilt. For I was taken up by a seamstress as the life was ebbing from me and the draughts crept over the creaking boards towards the niche where I had set out the persistent, absurd hope to which I clung against the bitter weather. It seemed the best thing to hide it and I kept a harsh grip on my mouth, making no move to end such self-denial. But the habit of silence had failed of its purpose. My ceaseless craving to be anonymous - a name, as I have said, signifying disdained or suspect obligation - was as grievous to me as vomiting. I was hungry for a word, a movement, a living being .

A new ribbon

An ordinary exchange was the vehicle of a momentous encounter. It is true that at first I could say nothing. I lay stiff and attentive. She accepted my silence, my oddly restrained behaviour, my white face and tired limbs. She listened to my short, agitated breathing and to the listless pulse beating in the lodging of my stiffened, aching ribs. Her eyes searched me with an invitation to enumerate everything private, secret, indeed, forbidden. 'Now tell me, tell me...', she would say. And I: 'You've come to fetch me? I am trying so hard. Help me a little!' I was losing strength, full of reticence and shame. Despair or a wild fear is born, seeds and takes root, spreads. Everything speaks; that back..., that left leg..., that neck... Yet I could not. Gradually her questions, so alive with feeling, aroused in me a taste for survival. Her way of speaking of so evil an illness was soothing in itself, filled with supreme balm, as light and soft as down. 'If you look into yourself, you can see tragic landscapes,' she said. But I have never been able to cry. Was I afraid of blood, loud screams, a sudden shriek?

We made our own little private picture of the secret talismans and traces of weeping kept in a large box and decorated with little carved wreathes and ornate garlands. Terror gradually subsiding, I told her a hundred more tales of my exhaustion and my sickness. And embroidered and woven into them - by a thread, a hair - was a daily leitmotif, a theme suffused with unfailing fantasy so secret I was afraid it may be taken from me by some magic, by surprise or force. So, veiled and impenetrable, I chattered on in a half-dream, a half-light, a vagueness filled with murky allusions as though I must hide the truth for the sake of the precious objects, the food and the feasts hoarded and kept in the cupboards that dwell in the mind. Nor could I make her think me hateful, face rejection, a denial. She was watching me, scanning my face. A look out of her keen wide eyes could see through walls. She would have nothing of reluctance. I was not able to deceive her. Deeply affected by her laughing tenderness and with the utmost care, I placed my soul in the palm of her hand, entrusting it to her as into some frail nest. This was an adventure so serious that it was in itself the source of my deepest fear.

The ritual is very long and repeated many times. It would be many years before I got safely to the time when a sunny window opened and I grew warm in an air of ease and generosity.

Figures, figures...

I knew myself so little. I was a book that should be written. She was holding the pencil. I spoke in a low voice, recounting my impressions after some confused dream in which faces and eyes, figures animal and human - a crocodile, a man - haunted me and my worldly goods were in ruin, the money gone, the furniture sold and it seemed quite natural to go about with an empty purse. She wrote in an open account book - a fine formula of the interior - allowing nothing, nothing to escape. The ledger was closely written and maps were drawn of the great expeditions in the dilapidated armchair, the many tales of ceremonies and dances, the jokes and injuries, the memories being charmed from their hiding places. 'Now we possess myths and a preliminary description, various metaphors - I have made a note of all this and these details are interesting, but what they mean exactly needs further research,' she said disinterestedly and modestly in a voice implying simultaneous intimacy and distance. 'Our present remarks are only provisional,' she went on. But I was desirous of some definite facts, objects of prestige to authorize us in our voyage, a supply of tools and weapons against the gathering spirits for I had just recovered from the ceaseless rounds of a long and desperate war and soon the moment would come when I would be alone again with the company of my spirits. I looked forward with dread to the return of their unspeakably sordid visits and their atrocious, ritual destruction of all objects value and, saying no word, I feigned drowsiness.

I was like something that is wounded or in a cast, and is compelled to lie shivering in the isolated islands of half-sleep where death seems the virtuous attorney, deflating the purely ceremonial value of exchange and affection. Social life was truly no more than a series of formalities, a pretence of passion, dried and put back in the copper sarcophagus. To strengthen the case, the walls themselves talked to me in the legal language of economic life. Such oiled and polished arguments represent the cause of the very things which one has refused. The wish to cry like a large black stone in my hollow belly. Tears of this kind do not translate into words and such gifts - gifts so heavy they cannot be refused - can only bind the recipient to despair. Am I not right to keep to my bastion, ruining all prestations of hospitality? Weak with fever, as weary as a vampire, I waited and pined for the night. I wanted to die, but it was the thought of living that stabbed to the heart.

Hideous rank

'It is not entirely wrong to speak of the question of the name and all its homonyms and synonyms, but the subject with which we are concerned here is belonging,' murmured the entrancing voice of my seamstress. She was telling the truth. I glanced uncertainly at account books bound in black cloth - these precious objects and tokens of wealth which proclaim the money market, sale proper and fixed price for the preparation of marriage and funeral feasts. The community gloats in a grotesque fashion over these transactions like dogs which come to sniff at heaps of yellowing clothes on any pretext. Marriage! A man and a woman each having a name, a personality, a past, given up, sold and ceded, freedom and autonomy lost forever, the two lovers conjured away. Chocolate, chestnuts, walnuts and quantities of liquid, weighed and coined money - these are enough to disguise a human being utterly. The trading of these goods - the circulation of persons and rights - is the object of a cult.

Destruction is very often sacrificial, but the part of the couple in the contract of permanent possession, economic, moral and legal obligation is real, and strenuously sought after by means of dream and dark enchantment. The magical nature of the objects offered are not indifferent things. And privileges are also endowed, given only on condition that one day children will be returned. These precious family articles constitute the principal piece in the game of the gift and the return. They are conceived in the sagging springs of the bed, mere coins to count, to amass, to hoard, to trade or barter. Ornaments, weapons and utensils, the valuable family property is used on behalf of, or transmitted to a third person on a silver spade. A useless sacrifice to an illusion of invincibility! For this creditor too will become a debtor in every way similar to those about him, solemnly bearing his gift, paying proper regard to rank, eventually admitting defeat before the inevitable funeral.

A gift, a loan, an object sold and an object bought

The nature of the contract signed for cutting and stitching is in the first instance economic. But having found and bought, one can never say whether what one receives is either what was transmitted or what was wanted. In this type of economy material and moral life are in debt to each other. You exchange money for thorough training, for services rendered in a single hour. I call that work. And yet one can pay for some one to listen, but never precisely for what is heard, for what can be received and returned. The element of the individual, the magical power of the person, is always of the nature of a gift, a luxury for which we have found no system of accounting.

So, quivering, I sought skin blankets and she gave me warm interpretations. I begged for food - spun sugar, sweets, a moulded almond pudding. Instead she gave me eating utensils. 'Spoons are essential', she said, 'but knives and forks are the lucky charms of the tribe'. And with a joke of this kind she gave me back my fondness for laughter. The free humour in such unexpected correspondence is often disconcerting. Equivalence in such exchanges is impossible to estimate with conscious precision. Barter in its familiar form is unknown there, and the most tenacious bargaining will produce no sunny accommodations. One makes a deposit, one gives a mandate, one grants a trust. The words themselves are tokens for what is confided. The communion and alliance they establish go beyond linguistic boundaries. A voice pierces the skin, quick to find and wound or comfort the sensitive spot. The tone of it is confounded with speech and this alarming penetration makes for the lasting influence of what is exchanged, as if such actions were opportunities for the transfer of spirit.

Moreover in these transactions things of importance - solicitory gifts which cannot simply be called objects - are loaned and returned restored or transformed. Their presentation is a request which cannot be refused, and makes an obligation which must be met. Childish implements - a tooth which does not bite - are made into stone axes and boars' teeth, superstitious fears into pressing and precise directions, a blank page into puns and satirical acrostics, oddities and conjectures into freakish truths, the worst into the not-so-bad, and so on. All these things are given and received on credit and their acceptance is a pledge to collaboration in a partnership in which beliefs and expectations, recollections and memories, tales and fables never stop circulating.

Such trading is well known for creating large surpluses. In this complex phenomenon, energies that can never be exhausted animate a perpetual state of effervescence. Passion of a sudden and savage nature and memory of an archaic type are embroidered symbolically and collectively into a fabric of imagery, a thing of delicate fantasy. Affect in the fallen body, confused pain in the rippling play of muscles, anguish that seems to turn the very bones to water, are translated into the more defined emotion of merciful words. These embellishments in the nomenclature of feeling multiply the names of experience and fill the naked page with writing. Expenditure of uneasy love always produces a munificent return, and an ever increasing range of exchange leaves the transaction - an affair bound in time and space - always unfinished, ever interrupted.

An hour later she calls 'Eleven o'clock!'
'We might stop at this point,' she says.

So little romance? In war, gambling, hunting and love, one is constrained to expend everything one possesses. The risk may be worth taking, the perils are virtually unlimited. Nothing could be more dangerous than these enterprises. On the other hand, boredom can kill.

And once the notion of magical efficacy vanishes, it is hard to say just how far our own expeditions might take us.

I have never been able to forget

Meanwhile documents and commentaries glistened under the lamp in the study with a sort of glorified imperial point of view that caught the light and occupied the chairs, their many defensive convexities looming huge in the strange gloom. And, clear and fantastic, the figure of a shadow on the wall, features somewhat sophisticated and academic, endowed with a powerful personality. An excellent scholar, or a black, emphatic bird of prey? In fact some middle-aged man sat with solemnity at a table under the circle of light shed by the lamp, mopping his brow as though celebrating the attractions of exaggerated modesty. Or perhaps his formidable task bored him, so although his voice was sharp, brief and to the point, everything was conceived as if his writing were to be huddled unwanted in a box of cardboard files in the margins of the institution, never having known a wider distribution nor a desire to receive anything back, erudition being its own reward.

Pains are taken by whomsoever has taken part in the ritual of the institution to make these most solemn statements on custom into an august truth held in the fibres of the will. The magical legacy of the doctrine is transmitted to other generations so that the result of the act which has been accomplished leads to the evolution of a cycle of prestations and counter-prestations. Names and status are given to ageing men to whom youth renders ritual and honorific service. The famous Book, the immense masterpiece, is reread again and again. Young scholars are to abstain from chattering and asking questions. The circumstances establish competition, rivalry, show and a desire for the acquisition of a title, even at the cost of the humiliation of others. 'Show your credentials!' is the deeply mortifying and constant cry. Vast amounts borrowed without altering from the book are a guarantee both of the value of concepts attached to it and of the worth of the influential individuals who are their owners. The order of debt emerges formally and clearly from the copybooks of those of inferior rank and it is obligatory, it is expected, that all borrowings will be repaid with interest. This etiquette appeases the creditor and explains both the need to fulfil a prescribed task that burns without interruption in the mental globe of the very young, and the taboo which surrounds independent invention.

After long contact with the authors of the ceremonies described I was already proficient at the game that

comes from tired habit and which robs a

manuscript of its name and individuality by avoiding the eccentricities of unfaithful detail. Customs of the kind we are discussing are dangerous to talk of in these terms, and current theory tends towards the renunciation of consuming sensual audacity, but I had been overwhelmed by a strange incapacity for abstraction. I was hesitating, a case of that paralysis, that sudden kind of doze that destroyed judgement, resisted chronic haste and demolished grim fortitude. I was a decapitated woman. Catastrophe! At once I was avoided as if I were the plague, punished in the extreme, ousted and dispossessed.

It was a relief to get away.

I might make something of it...

Later what I had seen in the manuscripts of the institution changed its meaning. From another angle we may sometimes see something we are not told. A collapse of the will may shift the subject and the wild ventures stirring in the folds of the formal discourses will begin to make the effects of their action and power felt. Strange and no less puzzling are the inconspicuous and unforgettable puns which perform amazingly deft acrobatics in the writing, invoking such strangely light and quick associations that to follow them was like falling without a glimpse of window frames or other material objects to grasp. Trying to decipher them the curious reader soon becomes pale and a little breathless. Fatigue excited me. The spells woven by the flood of letters amazed and enchanted me. Out of the narrow circle of strict forms of exchange, they were canoes on sea journeys, great maritime expeditions over the threshold of our present knowledge into a drift of open air. I had at last known intoxication, a guilty rapture which was vast, powerful and yet still no more than a prelude to my new life at the writing table.

The next day I indulged in the manufacture of writing composed with a pair of scissors or a whalebone knife, ready-made words and phrases cut out one by one from the books of several other authors and glued by hand onto a large sea-green surface acquired at a local paper shop, covered with black satinette and dove-coloured shot silk, edged with lace and bound with mohair braid. Consideration of the method reveals a procedure which bites, severs and liberates. Regulated by the vicissitudes of play and impulse, accomplished with almost magical celerity, yet worked out as elaborately as ritual potlatch, these exchanges between unconscious partners, complete strangers to each other, astonished and seduced me. This reciprocal creditor-debtor relationship between authors made miraculous and irremediable metamorphoses, puns and hoaxes. The thrilling idea of seeing leagues, abysses, discoveries in every detail consumed me entirely. I was dazzled with the notion of lending, how only a single word completely separated from its field and placed in close proximity to others contracts a marriage with them. Inherent unsociability gives way to a feigned alliance that cuts across the geographical and familial boundaries of books. Letters intermarry and the ensuing editions are like pernicious adolescents, caricatured yet recognizable portraits of members of the family, or ignorant, awkward inhabitants of the wrong body. Thus close and conjugal allies make

irreverent parodies of fathers, brothers, mothers. Other equally impossible partnerships produce hostilities and rivalry, motives which animate an exchange of threats and abuse, a struggle, a sudden war of property in writing. What can happen, does happen. Letters cut off and used just as they are, agile as always, full of wrestling, quarrelsome antagonism, come also to compromise, to bargain - much as one makes a treaty in a manner at once interested and characterized by constant give-and-take. Purchase and sale, borrow and lend, these transactions make return with interest, inspiring others until a curious series of writings with all the openings of an anthill grows in a rather grotesque fashion to be laid out on the big table like a great inconvenient monster shrouded in a coarse linen, neglected by its creators, unfinished, unnecessary, perhaps to be disappointed in his yearnings for life.

The product of exchanges of vocabulary, words incorporated like a noxious remedy into the patient expanse of another body - it must be acknowledged that this is a forbidden writing, even in a time imbued with modern ideas. Nothing will rid me of this conviction. To multiply so-many already well-filled pages by involuntary marriage is actually to commit not only an act of the most ferocious violence, but also the subtlest of crimes.

Haunted writing

I wrote like a visionary, a sorcerer, a soul possessed, in an unbroken state of extreme urgency, conscious only of the scratched out words, the sprawled manuscripts, the great power of such consumption and destruction. Trances possess one, override everything. The doctrine of experience often scarcely touches them. But such work also has its ascetic side, requiring the temper of a china repairer and rather less playfulness. All the more delicate shades, the subtleties, secret allusions that were suggested, half concealed in the roses on the porcelain, needed a technique - which I was acquiring - more orderly and methodical, of a rather finicking nature. These antithetical operations derive from the same source.

A state of excitement seizes the invariable coolness of minute calculations. I was addicted to this licentious intoxication. The careless convenience of champagne and opium had seemed a most singular form of vice, all that I could possibly have desired in my weariness. That I could ever have indulged in them - lifeless and colourless goods that had left me in the depths of bodily misery after ritual consumption at plays and concerts. These might have been mortuary ceremonies, a bit hilarious, for I was apparently gay and laughed easily, but the laugh, thin and grating, was no more than an exaggerated attempt to wipe out everything, to remedy the regular and obligatory formalities of services performed for little return, the exhaustion of alienation, the simple terror of the next day. Now pleasure lay in knowing how to wait to insert a word, to conceal the traces of its passage, to save up crumbs, to reglue. Asserting myself very little in public, I had nevertheless overcome my complete inability to act in the solitude of that private life befitting a scribe.

Yet there is always a moment, plainly and fatally symbolic, soaked in fear and a sense of being stared at by eyes - cold and indifferent, or blinding, thankless, greedy - which gave no sign of compassion. Time has to pass before the memory of communion between two courtyards can be forgotten so as to be expressed again in an embrace between the words which the contract of hard-working chance unites. Desire! What it is to have known that astonishing state - exhilarating, comforting, invoking the indefinite glimmer of recognition, awakening the green pleasure of being and all the forms of absurd courage required by joy.

So little anguish? Yes, yes, I assure you, you can believe me. For now, written in the margins of other authors are the signs of my own existence, the letters I freely wrote without hope of reply to an unknown woman, perhaps now dead? Not yet living? Still, memory - if this is not too brutal a name for something one cannot analyse - bequeaths me a curling wave of feeling, a sense of a breathing presence, a lit face close to mine... I wrote to a woman capable of reading anonymous books hidden in grey traceries of lace among the rocks of classical writings. All the things I could say aloud to no one I entrusted to a terribly delapidated copy of European folklore, exposing to her there between the short, rhymed fables, the thoughts and feelings I feared studying myself in the too bright light of the blank page. Almost every secret flight whispered to her of the truth that shaped itself within me. It was at the same time property and a possession, a pledge and a gift.

At any rate, something better than mere silence.

AFTERWARD

This work is a cut up piece - but not one that makes use of the randomness that so enchanted André Breton and the surrealists, William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, or John Cage. Or at least, the random combination of pieces of text excised from their original contexts and redistributed on a cutting board is only a stage in the process of this production, one that effects a liberating break from the context that still hovers about it like an inextinguishable shadow against as well as with which I aim to write. For this writing deliberately stages a collaboration between Marcel Mauss¹, the anthropologist of the gift, and Colette², the writer of fiction whose signature actually conceals four figures essential to her literary production. Colette was constrained to write by her husband, M Willy, who kept a stable of ghost writers whose work he commissioned, edited, signed, and sold. Held under lock and key until she produced the requisite number of words a day, Colette discovered a kind of muse in her mother, Sido, who had always opposed her marriage, and a strange distorted double of her husband in her father, Captain Colette, whose name she eventually takes as her signature at Willy's behest: for M Willy is completed paralysed in front of the blank page, and on the death of Captain Colette his daughter discovers that the huge linen-bound volumes in his study whose spines bear a range of impressive, handwritten titles, are all blank - his 'imaginary works', as Colette calls them. In my enforced collaboration between the work signed 'Colette' and that signed 'Mauss', the psychoanalytic exchange comes to figure as as the emblem of an encounter which enables production, or of the series of sometimes unacknowledged transactions with others that are the condition of possibility of writing, that comprise its secret economy. Hence the importance to me of the concepts of exchange, expenditure, and excess in Mauss' work, and the question 'what is a gift in an economy of exchange?' which both animates and - at least to a reader of better attuned to the resonance of fiction than to the significance of academic debates in the discipline of cultural anthropology - haunts it.

¹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (London: Routledge, 1988).

² Colette, 'Wedding Day', 'Monsieur Willy', and 'Literary Apprenticeship: "Claudine"' from *Earthly Paradise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

I wanted the formulations of Mauss, and especially Colette, to remain recognizable in my work, so that, for example, the facilitating role my narrator's seamstress plays in her writing would both recall the role of Sido in Colette's and would, perhaps, be able to suggest something about the nature of its efficacy. I wanted to generate irony by transferring certain of Willy's reported remarks to my paralysed narrator, and so on. The source texts are meant to be forgotten only in so far as this enables their rediscovery. To compose a cut up is both to ghost and be ghosted by other writers. The cut up is a haunted writing³, with the difference that it admits its debt to its progenitors, progenitors it must nevertheless destroy in order to come into being itself. The violence of the cut is real, and the source of a guilty pleasure.

But there is also in cut up work a compelling desire *not* to cut up / off the source texts, not to interrupt their continual reassuring murmur, nor to truncate their most resonant formulations. Plagiarism, that other source of guilty pleasure, really is (also) an act of homage. On a number of occasions in the course of composing this text I was compelled to wonder at what point the investment in, even perhaps the fetishisation of the source texts, would give way to the desire, or the necessity, to begin to write... Then at certain moments I found myself writing several consecutive sentences without any reference at all to the messy arrangement of sheared off pieces of print that covered the desk in front me. These rushes of articulation usually followed long periods of being stuck in which I would survey the field of available phrases over and over again without being able to make a choice between them, to determine which way, out of the infinite number of ways open to me, to go. I knew the stock of options well by this stage (for they seem inevitably to select themselves down to a more determinable number by some less than conscious process) and from the moment the first decision was made, subsequent ones seemed to follow from it with incredible ease. One might expect that the further one proceeded with a venture of this kind, the more difficult things would become, precisely because the constraints on each subsequent choice of direction would be multiplied. At the beginning, by contrast, the whole field is open and everything is possible. And yet this is not the way things were. It seemed, paradoxically, that the more constrained I became, the freer I actually was, and this was not simply because

³ The term is Avital Ronell's. For a fascinating explication of the economy of indebted writing, see her book *Dictations: on haunted writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

once the first decision had been taken the rest automatically followed. Rather, I had rediscovered for myself one of the founding insights of the Oulipo⁴: describing the procedures of Raymond Roussel, Michel Leiris writes that 'His voluntary submission to a complicated and difficult rule was accompanied, as a corollary, by a distraction regarding all the rest, leading to a raising of the censure, the latter being far better skirted by this means than by a process such as automatic writing...'⁵

Moreover the restriction of my sources to two texts from which to draw represented the imposition of a constraint recalling Willy's on Colette. In a series of essays on Colette that was inspirational for me, Mary Lydon analyses the freedom accorded to Colette by her desire 'to fulfil a prescribed task' (literally to fill pages of school copybooks with beautiful handwriting), an activity, as Lydon points out, so reminiscent of the homework described by Nathalie Sarraute: 'the imposition that for the eager student is pure pleasure, an invitation to play, to take risks, to discover and exploit the rules of the game that is learning - in a word, the perfect excuse for writing.'⁶ Here it pleased me to imprison myself as Willy imprisoned Colette, and to play both roles: that of Colette the writer who doesn't yet know she can write, forced to produce in spite of herself, and that of Willy the jailer - and the stealer of words, the thief of copyright. And so, like Lydon's Colette, to find a way to fulfil a wish of my own through apparent conformity to an arbitrary, if not entirely external imposition. It's possible to say all kinds of things if one's words are not really one's own.

Being constrained to make use of a relatively restricted vocabulary had another striking effect on my own composition, one which I had in fact observed before when doing previous work of this kind but which became even more evident on this occasion because the part of the vocabulary borrowed from Mauss was both readily identifiable and very limited. The necessary repetition of certain terms

⁴ A contraction of the phrase 'ouvroir de littérature potentielle', meaning 'workshop of potential literature' - or, in one of its literal meanings, a sewing circle of potential literature. This group consisted of writers such as Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, Georges Perec, Jacques Roubaud, Harry Mathews and others interested in the exploitation of old constraints (the sonnet, the lipogram, etc) and the invention of new ones with which to generate writing.

⁵ Cited in Michel Bénabou, 'Rule and Constraint', in Motte, ed, Oulipo: a primer of potential literature (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) p43.

⁶ Nathalie Sarraute, Childhood, cited in Mary Lydon, 'Homework' in Skirting the Issue: essays in literary theory (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) p9.

and phrases in his work increased the probability of a high degree of similar repetition in my own, and I found that I was using the same terms over and over but trying to force them to play different roles, to mean different things, to make different metaphors in different contexts. But there was also a certain leakage in meaning between contexts so that particular words seemed to accrue a greater density as the composition progressed and their appearance at one point in the text would seem to recall previous appearances. This made for a far greater degree of thematic coherence than I had necessarily anticipated, but it also indicated the extent to which a certain wilfulness had taken over my own writing. There was a limit to how far I was allowing myself to be guided into new invention by the source texts, a threshold past which I was guiding them, translating, in effect, foreign vocabularies and slices of syntax into the already-known of the 'what I wanted to say'. But then again, I couldn't specify except at very particular junctures what exactly this 'what I wanted to say' was, and whatever it was, it was in any case reciprocally transformed by having to be compressed into the relatively limited repertoire of alien forms allowed it by the source texts. Composition of this kind, which limits itself to a palate of two immediate source texts from which to draw, might suggest marriage and the production of off-spring as a metaphor for the outcome of the exchange engineered between them, but it may also suggest the compromise formation in a sense close to Freud's as he recapitulates the process of dream production:

...in my work on the *Interpretation of Dreams* I have shown the part played by the process of condensation in the origin of the so-called manifest contents of the dream from the latent thoughts of the dream. Any similarity of objects or of word-presentations between two elements of unconscious material is taken as a cause for the formation of a third, which is a composite or compromise formation.⁷

So, through the process of constructing a compromise between two bodies of material which I had been able to forget by destroying them, the 'what I wanted to say' became slowly recognizable to me as what would be recognizable to a (certain kind of) reader - in other words, I was searching for ways to conform to a code, the code of a corpus of familiar writings in contemporary Theory. On the other hand, perhaps it was only the operation of collage/montage, the dimension

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939) p52-53.

of quotation/repetition already proper to it, that enabled me to allow myself to reconstruct or perhaps just repeat some of what are now the banalities of Theory, banalities which have nonetheless become absorbed into my own sense of the felt truth of the experience of writing. But I was hopeful that their re-emergence as truisms here would work as a kind of humour. After all, the whole operation of the cut up calls forth a commentary of this kind, for what else is it but a literal enactment - a practical demonstration - of contemporary understandings of the nature of textual production as inevitably a kind of rewriting, as in John Frow's delightful enumeration of the possibilities: 'Texts are made out of cultural and ideological norms; out of the conventions of genre; out of styles and idioms embedded in the language; out of connotations and collocative sets; out of clichés, formulae or proverbs; and out of other texts.'⁸

Here again, the choice of Colette as a source has a special significance, for in the story of her literary apprenticeship she constantly displaces the skills essential to her own writing onto those essential to her survival in the domestic milieu created and dominated by Willy⁹. The cut up too is a domestic art, requiring hours of manual labour - it is first of all a manufacture *by hand*, and in my composition the art of the analyst is also figured as domestic, material. But such an art might as easily be thought of as a form of writing, as inscription on a foreign body, if not a passive one, at least if the figure of the analyst is normatively masculine. For as Françoise Meltzer points out, domestic and by extension manual labour have historically been signs of lack of originality and above all of femininity; the masculine writing economy is characterised by a lack of manual labour, of which the blank pages of Willy and, paradigmatically, Mallarmé are the sign, pointing to writing as an original, and rarefied activity of the mind having nothing to do with the repetitive quotidian nature of *work*.¹⁰

There were other moments when the 'what I wanted say' was even less determinate. The peculiar working of repetition in the writing sometimes made me feel that there was a force or energy driving the composition, trying to push it in certain directions, that nevertheless refused or was unable to show itself

⁸ John Frow, 'Intertextuality and Ontology' in Worton and Still, eds, *Intertextuality: theories and practices* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991) p45.

⁹ cf Lydon op cit p22

¹⁰ Françoise Meltzer, *Hot Property: the stakes and claims of literary originality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p99-101

explicitly. This is the aspect of writing in which we can really speak of discovery. Here there are no maps. We make them up as we go along, sometimes a little in advance of the terrain we are traversing, sometimes a little behind. This is when things are going well. At other times the working of repetition seems to translate a feeling of something repeatedly stalling, something trying to get started, trying to go somewhere, but meeting a resistance, failing. At these times it may not be clear at all just what kind of combustion the sputtering sparks could possibly ignite.

There are other texts haunting this composition besides the two source texts and the work of Mary Lydon and Françoise Meltzer on Colette and the questions of authorship, of what it means to write, posed by this name. These other texts are not easy to specify, since they are numerous and mostly forgotten, so their action is indirect, but among them must count Gerald Murnane's work, particularly his novel Inland, and his more recent story 'In Far Fields' in which students of writing figure as the narrator's readers¹¹. Also Patricia Duncker's novel Hallucinating Foucault, the story of a young (male, ostensibly heterosexual) academic who becomes the English reader - and eventually the lover - of a French novelist (also male) whose first reader, Foucault, had died in mid-dialogue, sending the novelist mad¹². At stake in all these texts is the question of the reader, and the role played by the imaginary reader, who may or may not correspond with any 'real' figure, in the economy of writing. Perhaps ultimately it is this reader whose countenance, real or imagined, consciously present or absent or completely unconscious, facilitates or forestalls altogether the practice of writing.

Anna Gibbs

University of Western Sydney

¹¹ Gerald Murnane, Inland (Sydney: Picador, 1989), and 'In far Fields', in Emerald Blue (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1995)

¹² Patricia Duncker, Hallucinating Foucault (London: Serpent's Tail, 1996).

