FICTOCRITICISM, THE 'DOUBTFUL CATEGORY' AND 'THE SPACE BETWEEN'

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I speak at this conference because of my work with Amanda Nettelbeck on a collection called 'The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism'. In other regards I take myself to be precisely an embodiment of what Paul Carter, referring to fictocriticism at this conference, called a 'doubtful category': my work is concerned with Early Modern cultural studies but I have begun to employ fictocritical gestures such as double-voicing to resist assimilation to the unmarked voice of the Anglo-American Academy. I'm going to return to these politics after sketching out some thoughts about that 'doubtful' 'space between'.

One of the things I've noticed while reading about fictocritical practice is a slipperiness of vocabulary around the opposition which is alleged to be no longer an opposition. So we read of something called fiction (never defined) and its once-were-Others—commentary, criticism, analysis, theory (often dwelt on at some length, but even within the same essay allowed to stand for each other). It's my impression that some of the writing I've looked at for our collection continues to rely on the recognition of a difference, however murkily defined, between two stances: perhaps I'd just want to call them theory and performance. Similarly, I suspect that this is a symptom of an unwillingness to give up what we could call the 'depth' model, something said to have disappeared in postmodern writing. In other words, for some of the contributors theory *grounds* performance.

In postmodernism, the privileging of 'depth' is understood to have been replaced by the fascination of 'surfaces', this circumstance allegedly making it difficult for any practice of cultural criticism to establish a distinctive discursive space for itself. Some might recognise in this a parallel with the unwillingness to define something called fictocriticism. The problem has been put by Noel King: how can [cultural criticism] work critical acts of differentiation in the face of the collapse of hitherto available forms of differentiation? ('Occasional Doubts' 20; 'My Life Without Steve' 270). As King points out, the two key terms, fictocriticism (Jameson) and the paraliterary (Krauss), name a kind of writing that is said to deliberately blur the distinction between literature and literary-critical commentary ('My Life Without Steve' 270).

This alleged collapsing of differences may be said to rule out what Ian Hunter has described as the post-Romantic critical enterprise: a critical apparatus can no longer be brought to bear on the text, or stand in some relation of exteriority to it ('Occasional Doubts' 11). For Hunter, the act of writing criticism and the object written about together form part of a single device. The 'critical occasion' becomes the performance of a particular ritualistic 'practice of the self' (11). The text is regarded as 'a device or armature within particular conducts of life and practices of the self' (15); and here we seem to encounter the critic as cyborg (Haraway but also, perhaps Porush). The exemplary practitioner is of course Roland Barthes. Barthes

produces a kind of cyborg writing which takes place 'somewhere in among/between criticism, autobiography and fiction' (20). Like the cyborg's oxymoronic fleshly metal (for example) this kind of writing 'is not decisively any one thing' (20).

Ian Hunter replaces criticism as an epistemological exercise with a description of some of the practices that incorporate particular texts as devices within specific ethical exercises. Now King makes the claim that this is *different* from the paraliterary or fictocritical. Looking at the texts offered so far in our quest to gather a collection of Australian women's fictocriticism, I am struck by the possibility that Hunter's model, rather than sitting in some opposition to the project, actually describes the protocols some of our potential contributors wish to regard as fictocritical. Characteristic postures include crossing the boundaries of academic disciplines and fiction; structuring the work around a number of subject positions; dwelling on the 'I' of writing and what Probyn has called the 'problem' of autobiography in cultural studies; working on the contradictions between theories of subjectivity and the experience of everyday life. These issues are not primarily a postmodern 'fascination with surfaces', their doubts are not strictly epistemological. If anything they are notably ethical/performative doubts. It looks to me as if the fictocritical performance, writing as performativity, is being understood as a particular ritualistic practice of a 'self' and that the text is being regarded as a device or armature within particular conducts of life and practices of that self.

Above all, some of the fictocritical writing I have looked at for this collection insists on the place of 'theory'. This, it seems to me, is regarded as a guarantee of the necessary self-consciousness for the project of 'writing'. We don't have to look further than handbooks of literary theory to be reassured that theory is an essential innoculation against innocence and its antibodies help students 'to contemplate exactly what it is that they are doing and to reflect upon the nature of the discipline and its practices' (Hawthorn ix). Theory seems to act as the carrier for reflexivity. The text incorporates it, embodies it. This corporeality, writing the body, the body of writing, paradoxically marks the *consciousness* that some postmodern critical vocabularies assign to texts. It has been suggested that these vocabularies are symptomatic of postmodernism's incomplete business, indeed, of its failure to arrive (McHoul and Lucy 303). Certainly it returns us to a 'depth model', if only via the half-buried metaphorics (pun intended) of consciousness/interiority/invisible 'mind'. I think there is a slippage here between self-consciousness and consciousness, but might it slide a little further: from consciousness to conscience? 'Ethical' would then be understood as a doubling effect: as both practice or habitus *and* as a principled stance; this does seem to be a feature of the politics these Australian women's fictocritical texts enact. So some of our contributors employ theory as the mark of textual self-consciousness, mindfulness inhabiting the body of writing? Is theory an armature, the toughstuff that gives consciousness, even, can we say, an ethical/principled imperative to the fleshly 'ficto' part? Is theory a prosthetic device? Does the text with a mind of its own no longer bother to hail us? Or is self-consciousness/'theory', the 'mind' in the text, a paradoxical cue for us not to look for something 'in' it but, in Hunter's model, to 'do something else with it' ('Occasional Doubts' 24)?

This is the kind of question I have been asking of the materials gathered for collaborative interdisciplinary work on Early Modern female courtiership (our case study is Lucy, Countess of Bedford). For us, the disciplinary boundaries are alive and kicking. My colleague, Helen Payne (a postgraduate student in the Department of History at Adelaide University) writes from within an empiricist tradition while my work engages with self-fashioning and resistance not from the perspective of the Anglo-American dominant New Historicisms, but from alongside, between, within, cultural studies and postcolonial theory as it is articulated in the Australian academy: because we share no methodology we have chosen to write sections independently. This double-voicing, making visible our points of contest and agreement, emerged from a pedagogic imperative: the need to ask how interdisciplinarity might enable 'doing something' else with these materials, exploring a variety of narrative and theoretical modes. In particular I want to think about locatedness (in both its geographic and discursive senses) and to work through the implications of marking my voice in particularly 'local'

ways. I recognise something of my location in Meaghan Morris's formulation: 'There are networks of circulation,...and the space—local, national, international—where one is acting at any given time is criss-crossed by all those networks, each of them constructing 'spaces' differently' (Morris 77).

My being 'doubtful', 'doubled', as at once engaged in some hopelessly vestigial colonialist discourse (Early Modern British studies) and as a (probably) 'illegitimate' voice marked by a discursive location 'South' of the Anglo-American 'North' (but see Mead, and Wilson and Dirlik) is mirrored by the double-voiced text in which Helen Payne's practice clashes with mine. Helen works to produce an object of knowledge and I worry about what to do with it, here, now, 'the performance of the text on the spot' (Morris 77). The double-voiced text enacts a number of uneasy relationships (for example, text and commentary, student and teacher). Helen's work, as I noted, is written from within an empiricist tradition, albeit with revisionist tendencies. My work attempts to imagine the implications of my resistance to the unmarked voice that characterises much literary critical activity. Neither of these stances should be claimed as liberatory; self-fashioning and resistance, in whichever ways we have understood those terms, promise nothing 'intrinsically emancipatory' (D. Carter 298, 299). Our work remains discomforted by its doubleness, its contradictory trajectories, but we have wanted to make visible the contribution of the student which might otherwise be relegated to a (gracious) footnote, to foreground the differences that we might be expected to smooth over and to leave both our voices marked by the provisionality that is a symptom of being 'on the edge' of interdisciplinary work as much as it may be said to characterise a fictocritical strategy ('My Life Without Steve' 271).

As a model for writing texts, this double-voicing is perhaps far from ideal, but it signals a resistance to forms which insist on the last word, the magisterial statement, preferring to make visible our differing investments in possibly incompatible disciplinary models. Having decided lately that this practice has produced an instance of that 'doubtful category' fictocriticism, it is nevertheless a fictocriticism which frankly requires a geometry of borders, boundaries, regimens of disciplinary protocols in order to produce a doubtful 'space between'. In this I would inflect the notion of the fictocritical away from the idea of '"critical" interventions which belong to literature while deforming its limits' (Derrida Qtd in 'My life Without Steve' 270). Instead, the fictocritical gestures I detect in this practice of self-fashioning and resistance are firmly contained by and thus dependent upon their institutional, specifically their pedagogical context. Rather than claim that this work enacts something novel, I would suggest that it simply pays attention to and makes visible what is necessarily effaced in the process of writing the academic essay. It is not a practice which claims to explode limits in an apocalyptic epistemic break. I regard its purposes as more local and provisional. One such purpose, for the student of Early Modern culture, is to resist the amnesiac tendencies of contemporary theory, a necessary forgetting which enables its claims to a kind of universalism, its presumed ability to 'ground' critical practices, for instance. Imagining a 'located', Early Modern cultural studies seems enabled by fictocritical gestures. For me, those gestures are particularly interesting for their modest capacity to make interventions in a pedagogic context. That is not their only interest, but it credits fictocritical writing with being more than the practice of one who has not read Montaigne (Wark) and allows me to embrace the notion of the 'doubtful category' in the service of a (probably) critical pedagogy (Luke and Gore).

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