

## COLOUR AND LINE TO WORD: THE WRITING OF JANINE BURKE.

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The work of Art mirrors itself upon the surface of our consciousness. However, its image extends beyond, to vanish from the surface without a trace when the sensation has subsided (Kandinsky, 17).

Images as both the description of real paintings and the visual depiction of characters' inner and outer landscapes, recur often in the novels of Janine Burke. As in Wassily Kandinsky's quote, for Burke's female protagonists, images extend beyond the surface of their consciousness, yet leave a trace, a sign which opens onto another realm, that of language. Roland Barthes — who in *L'empire des signes* questions: "Où commence l'écriture? Où commence la peinture?" [Where does writing begin? Where does painting begin?] (Barthes, 32) — maintains that "le signe est une fracture qui ne s'ouvre jamais que sur le visage d'un autre signe" [the sign is a fracture which never opens but on the face of another sign] (66). This view seems to be pervasive in Burke's novels, where the lines drawn by a brushstroke or sketched by the eye produce and become themselves a breach which spreads on the fabric of a male codified language. To the women portrayed by Burke, this language appears at times to be devoid of meaning. As Lily claims in *Speaking*, "all the walls [are] diaries" (44), pages which have been already written and thus might turn into palimpsests on which Burke's female characters wish to re-write their stories, so as to fill the breach with new and meaningful words.

In Burke's fiction, writing is an act of voicing women's subjectivity. Previous to that comes the process of drawing, figured as a more instinctual practice. By tracing on paper the deformed bodies which dwell in her inner sphere, Kate — again in *Speaking* — struggles to disentangle herself from her role of suburban wife and mother and attempts to claim her existence as woman artist: "Drawing engendered a variety of sensations though as she drew she had no consciousness; like sleep she sank into it. Drawing was an exercise; identity became the act of making a mark on the page" (136). Thus, for Burke, drawing and painting are represented as being the first stage in gaining insight into women's inner world, in their endeavour to outline shapes which exist in their mind and which, once created by means of the artist's tools, come into being and ask for recognition. Figures might pre-exist in the female mind as a concretion of indistinct lines, as twisted bodies which push at the door of women's imagination in order to come to light and "scream" their being-in-the-world — a scream which, for the female protagonist of *Second Sight*, stirs like "a small head with a yawning mouth stuck in [her] throat" (21), and which, as in Edvard Munch's painting, can erupt in the foreground with all the silent horror of its pain. In *Speaking*

When [Pook] shook off the lid, a sheaf of rolled drawings fell out. They were drawn in charcoal, coated but with a fixative so they were not smudged but pristine. This find confounded her. The drawings were of figures, distorted, squat, ugly figures. Some had horns, some were running, some had

enormous, crudely sketched genitals. Holding them, she looks up at the joy of the Matisse. These maddened figures resounded like screams. Could they be Lily's? (22)

The drawings created by Kate call to mind Joy Hester's art and the expressionistic mode she employed in outlining her *Gethsemane, Faces and Love Series*, those "hallucinatory masks of terror, passion and love delivered in black and white", whose abstract quality, as Burke herself has remarked in her introduction to *Dear Sun — The Letters of Joy Hester and Sunday Reed*, is "the essence of expression, feeling at its most concentrated" (21).

Letting one's eyes glide along the contours of objects is a way of reading the world; trying to reproduce its multifarious forms with crayons and brushstrokes is a way of appropriating it; and eventually, shaping figures and landscapes according to one's inner vision is a way of mapping one's own place and articulating one's own voice, as Kate does in *Speaking*<sup>1</sup>. Reading the world implies the act of seeing, which, as Henry Matisse put it,

c'est déjà une opération créatrice, et qui exige un effort. [...] L'effort nécessaire pour s'en dégager exige une sorte de courage: et ce courage est indispensable à l'artiste qui doit voir toutes choses comme s'il les voyait pour la première fois: il faut voir toute la vie comme lorsqu'on était enfant; et la perte de cette possibilité vous enlève celle de vous exprimer de façon originale, c'est-à-dire personnelle.

[it is already a creating process, and which requires an effort. [...] The necessary effort to disentangle oneself from it requires a sort of courage: and this courage is indispensable to the artist who must see things as if he saw them for the first time: one must see life as one did as a child; and the loss of this possibility removes from you that of expressing yourself in an original way, that is in a personal way] (321).

In *Speaking*, seeing is the first step which Kate holds as being necessary in the creative process. As in a surrealistic portrayal, her eyes expand, like those in Joy Hester's drawings, where the eye becomes the "carrier of meaning" (Burke, 21).

The world grows wider as her eyes grow bigger. They are pools under the moon. Shining water under the sun. Orbs, spinning worlds themselves. She is just this, just these eyes. Cyclops. Blink, blink. Eyes coming out of her head like aureoles. The eyes are solid, acting in the gap of language. When she closes her mouth and opens her eyes the splits seem to close, too. Sight is the price of speech. Eye for I (229).

Stephen Heath has remarked that "In discussion of a specifically feminine writing [...] the emphasis is on the voice as against the look: in women's texts, writes Montrelay, 'no contour is traced on which the eye could rest'" (83). For Burke, voice is a pivotal issue, as I will try to illustrate later. Yet, as emerges from her prose fiction, seeing is prior to speaking, and it constitutes a motif which cannot be neglected in the process of women's consciousness-raising. Burke's female

characters understand the importance of filtering things through their own eyes as an attempt to remove the constructs which they have inherited from patriarchal culture. In this way, they acquire their own vision, from which they begin to shape and eventually voice their subjectivity both as artists and as women. In *Second Sight*, the protagonist, significantly named Lucida, comes to terms with her *malaise* as she realizes that she cannot rely on somebody else's eyes<sup>2</sup>. Lucida perceives the images created by others as lacking a pattern, like the painting hung on the walls of the Art Gallery in Sydney, whose "surfaces [...] could not contain their meaning but hung in the vibrating air" (40).

Burke's protagonists are witnesses to the intertwining colours and lines of the real and painted worlds, and realize the necessity of gaining a discerning eye in order to re-arrange and re-appropriate patterns which they do not feel as being part of their female experience. Burke's female protagonists wish to enter the picture as authors, even at the cost of a painful creative process, like the one undertaken by Carmen in *Company of Images*. She keeps painting her black canvases within which she feels trapped and which she is not able to articulate either with colours or with words: "The paintings would not allow any exterior, any way out. All was inside" (144).

It is from this kind of solipsistic interiority that the women depicted by Burke attempt to disentangle themselves so as to articulate their experience and bring to light their patterns. It is from this stage, by simply marking a point with a pencil, that they break the silence and start voicing their subjectivity. This process is corroborated by Kandinsky's theory:

[Thus] we look upon the geometric point as the ultimate and most singular union of silence and speech.

The geometric point has, therefore, been given its material form, in the first instance, in writing. It belongs to language and signifies silence.

In the flow of speech, the point symbolizes interruption, non-existence (negative element), and at the same time it forms a bridge from one existence to another (positive element). In writing, this constitutes its inner significance (25).

It is in the coincidence of this point, which can be marked on the page by both the brushstroke and the pen, that visual and verbal languages come together to utter the inner visions of Burke's female characters. It is from this almost imperceptible point on the paper that the articulation of one's inner world begins, as Kandinsky suggests<sup>3</sup>.

The images created by Burke's female characters are formed by the points of their inner experience, by their memories, recollections and desires, as Lily realizes by looking at Kate's drawings<sup>4</sup>. It is women's inner light which surfaces and imbues the work of art with a distinctive mark, as the one asserted by Matisse (105). I have drawn on Kandinsky and Matisse's modernist theories which deal with the artist's subjectivity since it seems to me that in her fiction, Burke appropriates their aesthetics and moves further to frame it within a postmodern

gendered discourse.

In *Speaking*, at the risk of feeling relegated to her private space like "the mad woman in the attic kept company by big wild paintings and drawings" (165), Kate struggles to bring her art to light, and not as a dilettante, as she is considered by her husband Fred. Kate's is a struggle to affirm her identity as artist (157). Reality itself needs to be grasped through an act of re-appropriation; to the "curiosity to touch the world with the eyes" (11), which has been with Carmen since she was a little girl, must be added an act of creation through which colours and lines lose their illusory character and become corporeal. Women's eyes must see things with a new boldness and freshness which have lain for long in their innermost sphere. Theirs should not be like Lethe's way of seeing, an automatic sight which coincides with the camera itself (28-9), and which to Lucida appears as a way of producing barren images which lose their soul to the mechanical process of clicking and printing, as she perceives the photos of Lethe's exhibition.

The process of creation requires a rigorous and at times painful effort, the struggle with ones' vision — and with one's soul — often stands for the impossibility of grasping and coming to terms with the external reality. This is what happens to Carmen throughout *Company of Images*, where she cannot find a meaning for her black canvases, which she realizes are lifeless and cannot convey her inner visions:

[S]he would sit with them, hopelessly, as evening fell. They drank up the remaining light and, because their darkness was greater than the darkness surrounding them, they appeared to grow. Their surfaces were scarred from her attempts to introducing signs of life. [...] She ran her hands over them, wondering how to fall through the invisible barrier that kept her from their meaning. [...] Most disturbing was the paintings' emptiness. Like death, she supposed. An endlessness of loss (144-5).

Within a postmodern context, Burke shares with other women writers — Australian and non — the endeavour to explore and come to terms with women's identity. Through a reconciliation with women's inner sphere, freed from social patriarchal patterns, she seeks to achieve a construction of women's subjectivity — an issue which marks the difference between feminism's and postmodernism's concerns. As Patricia Waugh has argued:

The practice of consciousness-raising, which aimed precisely at the forging of an individual and collective sense of identity and subjecthood in these terms, epitomizes the distance separating feminism from postmodernism. Postmodernism expresses nostalgia for but loss of belief in the concept of the human subject as an agent effectively intervening in history, through its fragmentation of discourses, language games, and decentring of subjectivity. Feminism seeks a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women which has hitherto been denied them by the dominant culture (9).

For Burke's female characters, the coming to terms with their internal sphere

coincides with the work of art. For Burke, reading one's soul is like the gradual deciphering of a painting: from a tapestry of lines and colours which at first sight appear unreadable, the viewer/artist gets closer to the picture and with a more attentive eye, tries to discern more definite patterns which have a *sens accompli*. From this stage, the process of creation begins: through the shaping of meaningful images, Burke's female protagonists come to the definition of their subjectivity —as occurs to the artist Marguerite at the end of *Company of Images*:

The last image, before her mind went out to meet the universe, was of the self-portrait that won the travelling scholarship. She was finally reconciled to that girl who was prepared to put on a stupid hat and a prinking expression to meet her destiny. It was not a younger but a continuing self: fresh, not innocent, but ready (254).

Then what does a female image mean? What are its distinctive features? How, if ever, can it be conveyed by meaningful words? Is it possible to find a point of coincidence between the visual and the verbal? This seems to have been one of the preoccupations of Australian women artists such as Norah Simpson, Grace Cossington Smith, Thea Proctor, Margaret Preston, Dorrit Black and Grace Crowley, who, as Burke has remarked in her book, *Australian Women Artists 1840-1940*, "were instrumental in introducing post-impressionism and its antecedent avant-garde styles into Australia through their painting, print-making, teaching and writing" (37). Perhaps the most symptomatic example of this phenomenon was Joy Hester, who was both a painter and a poet. As Burke suggests in her introduction to *Joy Hester*:

[Her poems] were an intrinsic part of her creative expression. This is best understood when it is realised that for her first solo exhibition in February, 1950, she tacked hand-written poems on the wall near the drawings. They were not meant as crude 'illustrations' of the drawings but verbal complements, extensions of the visual ideas expressed by the images (5).

The desire to find adequate words to convey images both real and painted is a constant preoccupation for Burke's female characters. This is translated into Carmen's thoughts, in which she wonders: "What kind of gift were words and images? How fond, or true? How lasting? But that was the whole point, wasn't it?" (207). Giving shape to both outer and inner visions and to words through painting and writing are two parts of the same process, that of finding an expression appropriate to utter women's identity. In *Speaking*, this occurs when Kate, for the first time, finds herself talking to James Locke about her works, and realizes that both her endeavour to become an artist and her drawings — which had remained unspoken and hidden in the meanderings of her innermost world — are finally being voiced (250). As Paul Valéry argues, "ce que nous appelons une 'Œuvre d'art' est le résultat d'une action dont le but *fini* est de provoquer chez quelqu'un des développements *infinis*" [what we call a "Work of art" is the result of an action whose *finite* aim is that of provoking in someone some *infinite* developments] (205). It is from here then, that a further stage in women's voicing of their identity takes place, a process which Kate, already as a little girl,

understood at an intuitive level, when “[S]he preferred her mother to read so she was free to draw as she heard the story. And the story became pictures and then she told it back again into words” (139). A translation of images into words is thus necessary, a verbal utterance which confers meaning and establishes a relationship between the signified and the signifier, between the viewer and the object perceived<sup>5</sup>. Words give shape to things and memories, and written words are the final stage in the search for identity of Burke’s female protagonists<sup>6</sup>. What is also relevant to women is finding a voice adequate to express their female subjectivity. As Burke writes in *Speaking*, in one of her many passages on words:

[The women] push silence to the perimeter so it is squashed, flattened, straightened out. Silence is not their province, it is the furthest edge of their territory. There are new words, words made from old words, reconstituted, recovered, salvaged language, the history of survivors. It is also the language of gesture, of sing that exists in a democracy of expression. It is located inside language, they are building it (101).

Burke’s women realize the importance of building their own language, a motif which recalls one of the main preoccupations in the literature of Christa Wolf and Ingeborg Bachmann, who have been very much concerned with the creation of a new language able to convey women’s distinctive experience and subjectivity. For them, this is a creation which coincides also with the search for a new truth and morality. As Bachmann once claimed in an interview: “Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden, die unserer eigenen Bewußtseinslage und dieser veränderten Welt entsprechen” [we must find true sentences, which convey the state of our own consciousness and this changed world] (19). This implies a persistent and arduous struggle, since “[women’s] language is fragile”, “it becomes a tower of Babel and the one language becomes many, overlapping, interrupting, accusing” (101).

However, in Burke’s novels, women keep struggling with and for words, in order to make their perceptions of the world more vivid, to accomplish a meaning which reveals their inner visions. During her journey in Tuscany, Lucida walks into a landscape which she first sees as “an ideal museum painted by Botticelli” (85), and which she gradually appropriates by transforming this classic picture into her own image. The winding roads, the mauve, orange and green hills of the Tuscan countryside which Lucida renders with photographic precision at the beginning of her stay, are imbued later in the narration with hues and overtones suggesting a marked sensuality which mirrors the awakening —both physical and intellectual— of Burke’s protagonist (105). It is here that Lucida acquires her ‘second sight’ and realizes that she must tell the story of Lydia O’Shea’s life in a “new kind of writing, another way of telling Lydia’s tale which, after all, was [Lucida’s] story, too” (109). The search for a new language, for a new feminine voice has been at the core of feminist modern and postmodern theories. As Alice Jardine has remarked:

The differences between those female-written and the male-written texts of modernity I have predominantly evoked [...] are not in their “content”. [...] Those differences are in their enunciation; in their modes of discourse; in their twisting of female obligatory connotations; in their haste or refusal to

use the pronouns "I" and "we"; in their degree of willingness to gender those pronouns as female; [...] in the degree of their desire, indeed, to privilege women as subjects of modernity (104).

In her novels, Burke clearly wishes to depict women as the privileged subjects of modernity, as the authors of art and writing, as the ones who re-tell their stories and history which have been neglected for so long within the patriarchal society. As in the poem by W.B. Yeats which Burke quotes in *Lullaby*, where the poet writes: "All the words that I utter,/All the words that I write,/Must spread out their wings untiring,/And never cease in their flight" (272), the voice created by Burke's female protagonists is part of an incessant effort to make their identity resonate both within and outside themselves. It is no accident that in most of her novels, Burke has her female protagonists endlessly writing and re-writing their stories. As Michel Foucault, whom Burke quotes in the epilogue of *Speaking*, claims: "Sheherazade's story is a desperate inversion of murder: it is the effort, throughout all those nights, to exclude death from the circle of existence" (319). In the same way, Burke's female protagonists keep writing their stories to prevent their eclipse from the circle of creation.

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## Endnotes

1. "Her hand and her eye moved together in a smooth, unquestioning motion. She liked the shapes of things and the way the earth shone with puddles after rain and the bits of sky that poked through the trees and clouds caught on mountains far away. She saw how noise became an object: the black cat's purring was his fat belly, the cow's mournful mooing was in his eyes and his gooey mouth, the bird outside her window was its song. She drew this, too. She chased monsters from corners by drawing them and, when the cat died, she drew him back to life" (139).
2. "I did not need Lethe's eyes: I watched him. No longer with the intensity that reduces a body to tissue, atoms, stuff of life. No longer the gaze that saturates each gesture with meaning. No more the shocked, untrusting eyes seeking affirmation from the sight of others" (50).
3. "Just as an explorer penetrates deeply into new and unknown lands, one makes discoveries in the everyday life and the erstwhile mute surroundings begin to speak a language which becomes increasingly clear. In this way, the lifeless signs turn into living symbols and the dead is revived" (28).
4. "The drawings sent to Lily were a gift and a game, entertainment for the faraway friend, amusement for herself. They were tokens of affection though Lily read them as messages to decipher; she called them maps of battlefields which is accurate if melodramatic. Kate's drawings were shorthand autobiographies but sharp with the distance from which art is marked from life, not saturated with the infinitesimal detail of verisimilitude" (151).
5. In *Company of Images*, Carmen takes pleasure in the view of images which are scattered against a background as in an abstract canvas (10-11). Yet she realizes that the space which she tries to paint is ungraspable, the blackness she glings to is something she cannot come to terms with, either with her brushstrokes or with her words, and perhaps it stands for the dark gap which is left by language.
6. As Lily claims in *Speaking*, "[w]riting these words gives form, makes real for the first time, what has been shapeless and hidden" (10).