

Elizabeth Russell, ed. 2006: *Loving against the Odds: Women's Writing in English in a European Context*. European Connections 22. Bern: Peter Lang. 221 pp. ISBN 978-3-03910-732-2

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For over eight years the editors of European Connections have published studies in Comparative Literature in response to the increasing demand for cross-cultural approaches to literary texts, which – according to Peter Collier, the series editor – can no longer be studied in isolation from their cultural or formal context. Women's writing has become one of these areas calling for interdisciplinary investigation, as critical, national and generic definitions have proved elusive when dealing with the complex experiences of female authorship and readership. In this light, the volume under review (the third within the series devoted to European intertextuality in women's writing in English) acknowledges the existence of a European network of women's writing, which, echoing Arachne's web as a model for a feminist poetics, has articulated a plural female voice often repressed through history.<sup>1</sup> And that must be the reason why the topos of the 'web' – in its different variations like 'network', 'fabric', 'cobweb', 'tissue', 'embroidery', 'tapestry', 'texture' or 'threads' – is repeatedly invoked by the authors of these articles, in their common attempt at adopting what Nancy Miller calls a "critical positioning which reads *against* the weave of indifferentiation to discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity" (1986: 272).

Intertextuality, the collection's declared rubric, is effectively achieved at all levels. Although the focus of the articles is texts written in English, their influence, as Elizabeth Russell admits, has "travelled in all directions...through connections and links, solidarities and common problems affecting women" (11). And it is not surprising that, in line with this intertextual spirit, the authors have tried to establish a (more or less) successful dialogue between the English tradition and other national and cultural contexts such as Portugal, Hungary, Italy, Spain, France, Germany and Canada. In a similar vein, the diversity of genres, formats and styles explored throughout the volume seems to expand the conventional definition of *literary text* by including letters, biography, theatre productions or newspaper articles.

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<sup>1</sup> The myth of Arachne has been frequently appropriated by feminist discourse to convey women's re-envisioning of patriarchal cultural patterns. In 'Arachnologies', Nancy Miller's playful account of Ovid's myth, Pallas Athena's illustrations reproduce the patriarchal narratives of authority and power whereas Arachne's illustrations articulate feminocentric protest in showing scenes that contradict the goddess's glorious fables of Olympian history and focus instead on arbitrary crime and abuse of women. In such a context, the weaver's web becomes a powerful metaphor for aesthetic and political subversion which has been endorsed by many female authors.

Given this variety of materials, the main editorial difficulty derives from the attempted organization of these fifteen contributions on disparate subjects (though falling mostly within the broad area of women's writing in English) in a coherent way. Aware of this problem, the volume's editor proposes a solution that, though well argued, is not entirely convincing, as she groups the articles into three sections: 'Loving against the Odds', dealing with female articulation of love and desire, which, as Catherine Belsey states, are inextricably linked to both narrative (after all, most stories in Western literature are love stories) and femininity (we should not forget that women were the first readers of eighteenth century sentimental novels, despised as 'feminine', irrational and overemotional) (1994: ix); 'The Brontës', a section exploring the textual and thematic parallels with the Brontës canon, because, as Russell claims, "[a] book on loving against the odds would not be complete without a mention of the Brontës", whose characters have loved "against the odds of poverty, ill health, and even death" (15); and 'Writing against the Odds', including a group of essays concerning women writing against the official discourse of a male-centered genre such as theatre, which, it seems to me, is somewhat tenuously related to the general theme running through the volume and made explicit in its very title: love, women in love, and/or women writing about love.

The first section is therefore the one exhibiting a tighter cohesion both among the different contributions and in relation to the volume's subject matter. To a great extent, the eight essays included here seem to be inspired by the idea that love is inevitably an intertextual experience, always "allusive, derivative and citational", as Belsey suggests (1994: 81), thus aligning herself with a postmodern view that demystifies love and desire as solipsistic phenomena to inscribe them within cultural frameworks. In this critical light, Stephen Kern, for instance, explores in *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns* the literary pedigree of love, and affirms that "novels offer the most direct source for past ways of loving" (1992: 2), much in line with other historical accounts of love and desire like the already mentioned *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Belsey 1994) and Mitchell and Osland's *Representing Women and Female Desire from Arcadia to Jane Eyre* (2005). Even Roland Barthes's classic *Fragments of a Lover's Discourse* (1990), depicting, in a typically structuralist fashion, a universal and anonymous lover, a simulated model offering the reader an empty discursive site, draws evidence mainly from literature, as is reflected in the many references to Proust, Goethe, Nietzsche, Gide, Balzac or Flaubert annotated in the margins of the different entries.

Taking into account this earlier criticism, the selection of texts analysed in this section illustrates that representations of female love change over time and place and their historical continuity or discontinuity reflect the malleability of love as an artistic subject matter. Annamaria Lamarra's 'Love and Be Damned: New Perspectives in Seventeenth Century Literature by Women' is devoted to the works of Aphra Behn, Madame de La Fayette, Mademoiselle de Scudery and other French *précieuses* writing stories of daring and sensual female love where women transgress the social and cultural boundaries of normative femininity. These authors anticipate the modern subjectivity of the *Bildungsroman* by introducing a female point of view in literature and thus inscribing themselves in the great project of women's sentimental education – a further manifestation of intertextuality, considering that "it is not life that provides

models for the life we live, but books” (21). Julia Salmerón examines in ‘Barely Saved from Drowning’ the love triangle Leonora Carrington-Max Ernst-Peggy Guggenheim through a comparative analysis of the protagonists’ memoirs, letters and short stories. But it is through a detailed observation of Carrington’s tormented writing that Salmerón gives us a better glimpse of the terrible experience of the mental breakdown which followed her splitting with Max Ernst. Starting from “a mood of fear, sadness and loss” (33), Carrington gradually descended into the abyss of abjection, which, according to Julia Kristeva (surprisingly missing here), enacts at the bodily level a sort of purge of the most troubling aspects of the self, and would thus explain the writer’s abundant use of excreta, decay, and other images of the grotesque body (1982: 3). The experience of separation, illness and physical deterioration is also explored by Valerie Sanders in her analysis of Katherine Mansfield’s love letters to John M. Murry written during her convalescence in France in 1918. In her anguished epistles and in three short stories produced during the same period, she articulates an erotic (and at some points, fetishistic) self in which reality – through the physicality of food and bodily symptoms – and fantasy converge to confront her own emotional landscape of isolation and foreignness.

Foreignness is the thematic motif underlying three other essays in this first section. Elizabeth Russell’s article is a brilliant exercise on intertextuality as she discusses the importance of the postmodern city as the locus of love and desire, and depicts the urban architecture interacting with the complexities of the human psyche. She takes the comparative endeavour to the realm of cross-cultural relations in contemporary Europe, as the novels she selects (Lucía Etxebarria’s *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* and Cauvery Madhavan’s *The Uncoupling*) feature expatriate citizens trying to find their way through a maze of differences, translations and encounters, but ultimately perceiving desire “as a language which is universally intertextual, connecting bodies, attracting people, transmitting intimacies between self and other, between self and things, self and the city” (64). Ana Zamorano chooses three authors (Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefussis) reading and rewriting one another in their fictions and weaving what she calls “the fabric of the lesbian European intertext of the period” (77). Very aptly, Zamorano borrows her title ‘I Love You is Always a Quotation’ from Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992), a novel which openly addresses the dilemmas of narrating a romance, once we admit that the entire language of love is so overused that it is almost impossible to write anything about the experience without falling back on the unavoidable clichés. So, the question (both in Winterson’s novel and in Zamorano’s article) is less love than the problems associated with describing it in narrative form. If this article explores an ultimate form of linguistic alienation, Jozefina Komporaly’s expands the notion of foreignness to the realms of gender and national identity. In ‘Transcending Boundaries’ she compares lesbian writing in English and Hungarian Modernism, and after examining the fiction of Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall and Margit Kaffka, she concludes that, beyond their differing literary choices, the experience of sexual transgression and exile is a common perception for the three authors, who “[i]nscrubbing the androgynous and the homosexual figure into a cross-cultural environment ...

deliberately disrupt the canon of national representation ... and successfully plead for the legitimization of fluid identities” (103).

The blurring of identities is the thematic and structural motif underlying Jeanette Winterson's *The Powerbook* according to Julie Ellam's critical reading of the novel, a story of virtual love where lovers meet over cyberspace, along the shifting dimensions of a multiple reality. Assuming the poststructuralist notion of desire as that which is essentially constituted by a lack or absence, Ellam analyses the characters' journeys through space and time, reaching always for what cannot be found, and wonders whether love is still possible in a scenario (the World Wide Web) that celebrates the fluid, decentered subject, one where the 'you' and 'I', lover and beloved, reader and writer, are made up of each other.<sup>2</sup> In 'Love, Pleasure and Old Age in English and Spanish Literature', M. Socorro Suárez challenges the conventional association of desire with youth, beauty and health, by focusing on the fictional work of Doris Lessing, William Trevor and Marina Mayoral. These authors address what Simone de Beauvoir termed the 'forbidden subject', as they handle the effects of time passing on the mature woman's self-conception in a culture where women are so often judged on their physical appearance. Suárez's study is an interesting contribution to this recent critical field that focuses on the cultural meanings associated with age, ageing, generations, retirement and identity.

The section 'The Brontës' highlights the impact of the Haworth sisters on different generations of women writing within Europe, who have created, as Russell claims, "a common agenda for women's rights which crossed all kinds of boundaries" (16). Drawing on the idea of a female literary subculture explored by Anglo-American feminist critics such as Ellen Moers (*Literary Women: The Great Writers*, 1976), Elaine Showalter (*A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers from Brontë to Lessing*, 1977) or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 1979) the authors of these four articles seem to devote their attention to the re-appropriation of the Brontës's novels in different national and cultural contexts. Though the concept of a universal female identity articulated by the aforementioned early feminists has been long contested for proposing an essentialist and exclusionary view of women (see Toril Moi's [1985] *Sexual/Textual Politics* and Mary Jacobus's [1986] *Reading Woman*) and has proved itself no longer sustainable in the light of poststructuralist theories, for many women writing and reading in the last two centuries the belief in a common situation of female subordination and exclusion helped to create strong bonds among female author, female character and female reader (usually ignoring the complexity and deception inherent to textuality). This is the case of the Portuguese women's novels analysed in

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<sup>2</sup> The intertwining of reader and writer is perceived by most critics as Winterson's commitment to the postmodernist practice of questioning and eliding dichotomies, but Helene Staveley also sees in this aspect a feminist reversal of the patriarchal poetics: "In androcentric texts, terms like these could signal a victor-victim relationship of possession and consumption, but here the writing 'I' and the reading 'you' are equally possessing and possessed, consuming and consumed. By extension neither reader nor writer holds ultimate control over the text, which consequently remains a text in process" (2004: 126.).

Margarida Esteves's article, where she explores the influence of Charlotte Brontë's novels in raising political consciousness about women's rights and "in the consolidation of female identity through romance ... a genre notably aimed at a feminine audience" (141-42). As the archetypal proto-feminist *Bildungsroman* which has acquired a quasi-mythical status, Esteves values in *Jane Eyre* not only the love story, but the potentialities of romance in the (re)shaping of a female subjectivity, thus emphasizing the well-known association between sentimentality and femininity. In a similar vein, Márta Minier explores in 'Living and (Re)Writing Against the Odds' the reception and assimilation of the Brontës in the Hungarian canon, although she selects a rather non-canonical work as the object of her study. The play *Brontë-k* by Csaba Schlachtovsky and Zsolt Györei is a metatheatrical adaptation of the Brontës's life and works endowed with the revisionary spirit inherent to all re-writings, one that fills in the gaps and illuminates the dark areas in the original. The unusual and complex gender behaviour of the characters (through cross-dressing or incest, among other unorthodox practices) thus becomes an ironic comment on Victorian ideas about sexuality, family and respectability. The same goes for the play's historical parallels with Hungary's national past, which the contemporary audience is invited to revise in a new and demystifying light.

Patsy Stoneman re-examines the poststructuralist notion of the 'Death of the Author' and claims that the very concept of intertextuality should not exclude the autobiographical narratives from the multi-dimensional space of the text. She argues that, far from being a ghettoistic and reductionary category, authorial experience is often illuminating in our interpretation of a given work and the historical conditions in which it was produced. Such is the case for Charlotte Brontë's criticism where biographical reading is vital to an understanding of her fictional heroes (many of them inspired by her own love affair with M.Heger) and the ideological implications of her works (like the clash between English-speaking and French-speaking cultures, perceived during her own stay in Brussels). Stoneman's is one of the many attempts made by feminists to reconcile the postmodernist erasure of the speaking/creative/individual subject with their desire to rescue women authors and vindicate a female signature. Eleonora Federici's 'An Inner Landscape of Obsessions: Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*, *Changing Heaven* and *The Underpainter*' is the last article concerning the contemporary rewriting of the Brontës, although, it has to be said, one wonders whether it really falls within the volume's declared Europeanness, considering Urquhart is a genuinely Canadian writer, who, Federici admits almost apologetically, "recognizes the European inheritance" (153). That said, this is an interesting study on the echoes of the Brontë heritage, which in Urquhart's fiction is re-shaped as a new landscape infused with the national symbolism of Canadian obsessions: nature obsession, weather obsession, art obsession, identity obsession. As it is the case in most postcolonial contexts, the invocation of the European inheritance – through the intertextual references to an imperial fatherly (or rather, 'motherly') text – is felt both as a tribute and as a 'burden', and cannot be fully assimilated into this new and different geography.

While the aforementioned essays duly fulfill the promise of the book (expressed in the editorial introduction and in the back cover summary) the last section falls short of that promise, as the three articles fail to address the question of love and its articulation

in women's writing. Eva Thienpont's essay is a comprehensive account of the official reluctance to stage women's works in England, the Netherlands and the German speaking countries at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first decades of the twentieth century. This hostility was also reflected in the difficulties actresses had to face in the male-dominated world of the theatre, as Francesca Rayner illustrates in 'Putting on the Destined Livery: Actresses Play Isabella', where she analyses the intricacies of two Portuguese productions of *Measure for Measure* (in 1977 and 1997) by offering a behind-the-scenes examination of their social and political circumstances. This 'writing against the odds' of the Shakespearean canon and of the theatre as a patriarchal institution constituted a challenge and an excellent occasion for Portuguese actresses to redefine certain female roles in the light of contemporary issues.

The last article in the volume does not really deal with the theatre, as it focuses on Elizabeth von Armin's novel *The Enchanted April* (1922), though it has recently inspired a major film and a Broadway play, a story that deconstructs the image of Italy as the idyllic garden, a long-sustained myth in the British cultural Imaginary. By insinuating the sombre presence of Fascism, Claudia Capancioni suggests, von Armin aligns herself with other more politically committed female writers such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Winifred Holtby who held an explicitly feminist point of view of the Italian conflict in their denunciation of the Fascist ideal of womanhood based on domesticity and subordination.

All in all, though the final essays seem to stand somehow apart, this is an engaging book where most articles reveal the passion that most feminist critics bring to the study of literature while maintaining a scholarly and serious approach. The articles – all of them solidly grounded on primary sources – invite a re-thinking of connections and cross-cultural relations and the whole volume is no doubt a rich resource and a stimulus for further investigations on European women's writing. The authors' ability to transfer ideas from context to context generates a satisfying intellectual exchange and is definitely one of the major strengths of this volume. As for the central subject matter, although it is true that 'love is always a quotation', this collection shows, with its rich variety of discourses and perspectives, that when it comes to love, there cannot be any scripted formula. Ranging from heterosexual to same-sex or triangular relationships, dealing with female desire in relation to ageing, sickness and even virtual reality, these articles offer a rewarding intertextual experience which resists closure, because it stays restlessly open to further links and associations, just as "desire remains finally un-inscribed, in excess of its own performance" (Belsey 1994: 209).

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Received 14 July 2008

Accepted 4 December 2008

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