REVIEW ESSAY

Sally Munt

Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions

edited by Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow

Onlywomen Press: London 1992 ISBN 0906500 40 0 £8.95 Pbk

Lesbian and Gay Writing

edited by Mark Lilly, Macmillan Press: Basingstoke, 1990.

ISBN 9 780333 475 010 £9.99 Pbk

The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969–1989

Bonnie Zimmerman, Onlywomen Press: London 1992

ISBN 0906500 42 7 £7.95 Pbk

Teaching courses in lesbian culture over the past five years, I've become frustratedly aware of how proliferating but disparate and difficult to pin down most of the critical material is. Tracking down the elusive pieces of literary criticism is tantamount to lesbian detecting: articles appear and disappear, and information on their whereabouts depends on having friends in the know. There are signs, however, that the field is cohering into a discrete discipline; 1990 produced two anthologies, the imported *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, edited by Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow, and homegrown British *Lesbian and Gay Writing*, edited by Mark Lilly. Two recent bibliographic references, *Out On the Shelves*, produced by British librarians in the wake of Section 28, and New Zealander Miriam Saphira's *New Lesbian Literature 1980–88*, suggest there is also a fictional canon to collect.

Galvanized in part by the repressive legislation of the 1980s (soon to be followed by more of the same, no doubt), British and North American lesbian and gay activism has provoked a self-reflective growth in cultural theory. The new decade will see its maturity and expansion – already two English universities have held conferences: 'The Future for Lesbian and Gay Studies' (Essex), and 'Questions of Homosexuality' (London).

However, it is appropriate that the first book-length genre study

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should be written by Bonnie Zimmerman, whose article 'What has never been: an overview of lesbian feminist literary criticism', now ten years old, has stood, with Catherine Stimpson's 'Zero degree deviancy: the lesbian novel in English' (both 1981) as a reference point for much subsequent work. Each has also borne the overdetermined responsibility of being the token article straight academics may have heard of, and even quote from. Barbara Smith's article 'Towards a black feminist criticism' (1970) has also served this purpose.

Zimmerman's new book, *The Safe Sea of Women*, winner of a 1990 LAMBDA literary award, is an overview from an undetached critic; she writes 'not as an outsider looking in, but as an insider looking around' (xvii). It is her own felt relation to these texts which makes the book such an engaging read. Its ideal reader, 'a composite figure who is a feminist academic and a lesbian activist', is also part of this textual community; someone, like me, for whom the fiction has had personal, historical repercussions. By addressing such a reader, the text drew me in, in a way literary theory usually does not.

Lesbians share a highly literary subculture, certain novels are linchpins of individual and corporate lives; they are points of reference, (w)rites of passage. Zimmerman avoids universalizing clichés by self-consciously positioning herself as a critic with a specific culture and history. The integrity of the book results from the considered awareness which combines a scholarly, literary aesthetic with a lesbian-feminist consciousness. When examining these fictionalized 'myths of origins', she extrapolates from the texts a manifestation of the Lesbian Nation, a conceptual utopia and shared culture which so far has largely been the creation of white Western women. The image has a literary home in Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* and *Lesbian Peoples*, but other legacies from gay life before Stonewall, 1960s counterculture, radical feminism, and intertextual literary symbols inform the vision. Zimmerman describes how lesbians tend to look back to an imaginary golden age 'when we lived free and proud in our own separate territory'. This desire locates itself in a metaphorical island, which is surrounded by a safe sea of women.

The author observes how lesbian community exists more happily in literature and myth than in real life, and she goes on to show how the romantic mecca must be splintered by difference. The exclusivity of Lesbos is challenged by a politics of diverse identities, to be replaced by a cosmopolitan archipelago – comprising Carriacou, Jamaica, Calafia, Aztlan, Moab and others. She writes:

By avoiding difference the lesbian community becomes a microcosm of the dominant culture, and our transforming myths come back to haunt us. If we predicate 'sameness' and 'unity' upon the culture, values, and beliefs of only one group of women, and these women (no matter how self-defined as outlaws) belong to the dominant culture, Lesbian Nation becomes an imperialist nation.

Drawing from her analysis of texts from 1969–89, Zimmerman suggests

that, on the whole, the fiction of the 1970s posited a universal lesbian type, or 'core identity', whereas the fiction of the 1980s began to disenfranchise this essentialism.¹ Taking on the poststructuralist resort to a fragmented self, she challenges this image's appropriateness, asking 'Is this holistic self nevertheless *necessary* to subjects who have been denied [a] unified identity?'. Using the concept of a *multivalent* self – one that permits combination, interaction and change – she extrapolates from Lorde's *Zami* an idea of selfhood which is neither essentialist nor nostalgic, but

fluid, shimmering, and mobile, because it is a self whose 'place [is] the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference'. (*Zami*: 226)

Lesbian fiction expresses four dimensions within a myth of origins: the lesbian self, the lesbian couple, the lesbian community, and community and difference. These divisions have been progressive and developmental – although latterly, Zimmerman notes, visions of the Lesbian Nation are weaker and more diffuse, as fiction becomes more individualistic and idiosyncratic. It is as though 'the center of Lesbian Nation no longer holds'. While the book ends on a note of reflective retreat, the author also contends that this movement of self-criticism is characteristic of lesbian culture, 'our fiction continually sets up a version of reality and then pulls it down again'. *The Safe Sea of Women* is not intended to be 'the' authoritative version of the genre of lesbian fiction, but it is the most distinctly articulate and expressive deciphering of the field.

Lesbian and Gay Writing has been published as one of the 'Insights' series, developing a range of resource books on contemporary cultural criticism. These anthologies are for the lay or busy reader who wants short, sharp bites of meaning rather than the slowly developmental satisfaction gained from a nine-course dinner, or monograph. Snacking tends to be vaguely unfulfilling however, thus this collection is not for those hungry for the definitive lesbian/gay critical hermeneutic. (It would be largely indigestible for those liberal left lecturers longing for the one-week lesbian/gay angle for inclusion on literary theory option courses.)

This book is impressionistically polyphonic, resisting the idea that lesbian/gay writing emanates from a single viewpoint. Conversely, this may also be perceived as a lack: there is no explanation as to why these discrete subcultures should have a common aesthetic. There are common themes however, supporting the impetus for a set of problematics around parody, displacing gender, hetero-critique, interrogation of identity and voice, and alienation. Against these innovative themes is set the conventional backdrop of Literature, coldly felt by those outside that cosy canon.

If I sound defensive, then perhaps the book's intended audience could be borne in mind, i.e., those academics and students wishing to embrace 'neglected literary and cultural areas' (series introduction). It

is the purpose of reviews to concoct summary judgements of any given text, and in reviewing this book it is indeed this flavour of rehabilitation, of truth established, which provides its *raison d'être*. This self-justifying cautiousness of British criticism contrasts with the enterprising, celebratory, evangelistic tenor of its American counterpart.

In the half of the book shared by the lesbian contributors, with the exception of Caroline Halliday's essay on 'Contemporary lesbian erotic poetry', the emphasis is on historical material. Susan Crecy's short essay on Ivy Compton-Burnett, 'Family as nightmare', is a literary extrapolation of her covert lesbianism, her novels constitute 'one of the most far-reaching onslaughts in the history of literature on heterosexuality's most revered institution[s]'. This essay just falls short of replicating the stereotype of the embittered homosexual. Lyndie Brimstone's essay is a copious and comprehensive guide to Maureen Duffy's writing, not before time. Diane Hamer's piece on Ann Bannon's pulp romances of the 1950s is tightly argued and likely to win the prize for the 'chapter-most-likely-to-be-illegally-photocopied'. She argues that Bannon's refusal to settle on any definitive cause for lesbianism situates the reader in self-conscious exploration:

Bannon's writing more often than not describes *positions* around which desire is organised, in which the roles themselves can be put on or taken off as easily as clothes.

This essay, by exploring desire and sexual identity as historical entities, rather endorses the view that when it comes to developing critiques of sexuality, we got there first.

Caroline Halliday's romp through erotic poetry is another copious overview, replete with queerly quixotic little quotes for those quietly quivering moments when lifting belly. My favourites were Marilyn Hacker's

I almost came in my new herringbones
in the Via degli Alfani, just
imagining your socks off

and Halliday's own

Pubic flesh crusts against yours small fat
flesh creeps close to tangents that deny
give way, cool burning lines dagger across
me, slide into your small soft throated
arsehole, touching lines of silver flesh.

Most poems revert to natural metaphors, myself I prefer the literal. In contrast to her own poem above, the article is paradoxically coy, often referring to the 'shock value' of the texts, and privileging romantic types of sex. The author asks whether lesbian poetry allows us to investigate

difficult feelings; I wished she'd been more forthright within her own piece, but we return to the limitations inscribed in the book's intended audience.

Finally, Gillian Spraggs' 'Exiled to home: the poetry of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland' is a little gem. Spraggs's style achieves the balance between descriptive narrative and interpretative criticism, leading the reader seductively into a sympathetic identification with Warner/Ackland's unacknowledged creative partnership. The 1982 edition of Warner's *Collected Poems* omitted any contribution from the volume *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, love poems from each woman to the other. Claire Harman's recent introduction to Warner's 1936 novel, *Summer Will Show*, reprinted by Virago in 1987, is equally reticent. This connects me in a neatly circumfluous fashion back to Mark Lilly's Introduction, an apologia for lesbian/gay writing which rests on its historical obscurity, and its concomitant and now necessary uncovering. I am reminded of the 'Dorset Scene' course I did as an undergraduate in Weymouth. Every Friday afternoon we would walk the landscape with our lecturer ebulliently extolling the landmarks of the literati. When passing the cottage shared by both lovers in East Chaldon, only Warner was mentioned. Valentine Ackland, a writer in her own right, was, like Warner's lesbianism, cast into literary incognita. It's a model for this volume's existence.

Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions took me weeks to read; with twenty-two original chapters running to nearly four hundred pages, and a hardback price of fifty-six dollars, I felt like a tentative *ingénue*, odyssey-bound. Onlywomen Press is publishing a much cheaper British edition. Increasingly, I became convinced that things are bigger and better Over There. The strengths of this volume owe a lot to the fact that Lesbian Studies started in North America in 1977 (according to Catherine Stimpson) and, having become relatively established during the 1980s, can now be both canonized and critiqued in the 1990s. A most delightful sense of diversity diffuses this collection: three parts, 'Writers and Their Work', 'Lesbian Encodings, Decodings', and 'Lesbian Themes, Sources', contain essentialist and social-constructionist approaches, realistic and experimental styles of writing, historical and contemporary contexts, and investigations of the author/text/reader as sites of intrigue.

An ensuing and insinuating aspect of these speculations caused this reader at least to interrogate that slippery term 'lesbian'. Indeed, as a critical category, 'lesbian' got more and more complex and circuitous as I read on. 'Is lesbianism a metaphor?', asks Catherine Stimpson,

For 'lesbianism' might signify a critique of heterosexuality; a cry for the abolition of the binary oppositions of modern sexuality; a demand for the release of women's self-named desires; a demand that such release might itself be a sign of a rebellious, subtle, raucous textuality. 'Lesbianism' might represent a space in which we shape and reshape our psychosexual identities, in which we are metamorphic creatures.

Lesbian literary theory like this offers us the lesbian-as-sign, both as an absence (in the textual gaps and spaces into which a lesbian reading can slide, for example in Bonnie Zimmerman's essay on George Eliot), or a presence, as a radical signifier, rupturing the phallogentric subject (as Namascar Shaktini claims in her chapter on Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*).

In engaging with contemporary theories such as 'deconstruction', lesbian literary theory can interface with the conceptual elite of Western criticism; without wishing to impugn this theoretical creativity, however, I want to express a (cavilling?) concern, i.e., what has all this got to do with us Naiad fans, drooling for generic romance number 42? Isn't this kind of uncritical consumption just a trifle *conventional* at times? Sometimes I want my reading to be the very opposite of an intellectual challenge. There still seems to be a dichotomy between theory and experience, and even theory and activism. Going on a Section 25 or 28 march, reading some pink pulp, and discoursing on the dialectic of deferred desire in Nicole Brossard do require different hats.

It now seems a given that a decade of identity politics has mobilized and positively affirmed lesbian lifestyle and culture as radically oppositional to dominant forms of gender and sexuality. Drawing this model over criticism suggests that lesbian writing, or literary theory, will *inevitably* undermine/disarm its target institution, Literature. Most of this new work is self-consciously aware of its pioneering status and is careful to problematize, rather than pronounce. Hence what interests me is these critics' engagement with questions like: how accurately can the term 'radical' be applied to lesbian textuality, how does this relate to lesbian identity, and how can this be distinct from any other oppositional, interpretative strategy? And there's more . . .

Notes

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- 1 Recently Diana Fuss (1990) has argued that essentialist types of identity are responses by subcultures to external oppression, in which case, if the fiction of the 1980s has in part rejected these structures, it may suggest a feeling of greater freedom, in conflict with the prevailing consensus regarding the decade's political disillusionment.

References

- FUSS, Diana (1990) *Essentially Speaking* London: Routledge.
 LORDE, Audre (1982) *Zami* London: Sheba Feminist Publishers.