

## The Unboring Boring and the New Dream of Stone, or, if literature does politics as literature, what kind of gender politics does the current literature of the boring enact?

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[T]here's a certain kind of unboring boredom that's fascinating, engrossing, transcendent, and downright sexy. And then there's the other kind of boring: let's call it boring boring. Boring boring is a client meeting; boring boring is having to endure someone's self-indulgent poetry reading; boring boring is watching a toddler for an afternoon; boring boring is the seder at Aunt Fanny's. Boring boring is being somewhere we don't want to be; boring boring is doing something we don't want to do. [...] By the 60s and 70s in art circles this type of boredom-boring boring-was often the norm. [...] It's no wonder people bailed out of boredom in the late 70s and early 80s to go into punk rock or expressionistic painting. [...] And then, a few decades later, things changed again: excitement became dull and boring started to look good again. So here we are, ready to be bored once more. But this time, boredom has changed. We've embraced unboring boring, modified boredom, boredom with all the boring parts cut out of it. Reality TV, for example, is a new kind of boredom. [... But o]ur taste for the unboring boring won't last forever. I assume that someday soon it'll go back to boring boring once again, though for reasons and conditions I can't predict at this time (Goldsmith, 68-69).

The philosopher and literary geneologist Jacques Rancière argues that there is a specific link between "politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing," (2004b,10). In fact, literature *qua* literature "does politics" all by itself, for its ways of organizing what can be seen and what can be said are the aesthetic foundations on which politics is necessarily erected. The aim of Ranciere's project is less to change our

ideas about literature *per se*, than to shift our understanding of its *relationship to politics*, which, he argues after Foucault, constantly changes to produce different aesthetico-political "regimes." This project has profound implications for feminist studies of culture, for if every political regime includes gender issues, by Ranciere's reasoning so must every aesthetic. Though Ranciere himself only comments briefly on the gendered aspect of aesthetics-when he links the birth of modern literature to nineteenth century (male) writers' critique of women's reading habits, e.g., Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Balzac's *The Country Parson* (2004b)-his colleague in letters Christine Buci-Glucksmann focuses explicitly on this problem.

In the introduction to "*L'Utopie féminine*,"<sup>1</sup> the second part of her *Baroque Reason*, Buci-Glucksmann argues that the current aesthetic paradigm, in which Art is characterized by the always new that is always the same, is specifically linked to a symbolic redistribution that transforms women into the principle figures through which masculine anxiety deciphers its own 'castration'. This paper draws on the work of both Ranciere and Buci-Glucksmann, to argue that as a contemporary heir to Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Kenneth's Goldsmith's "unboring boring" is supported by the same symbolic order. The point here is not to criticize Goldsmith's work, but simply to argue that, just as we cannot have a classical form of art in a democratic era, so also we don't yet have one free of gender anxiety, however neutral it may appear on the page.

### **Partitions of the Sensible: The Chorus, the Theatre and the Page**

For Ranciere the aesthetic core of politics "should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art" (2004a, 13). It is a delimitation of the senses that determines both what can be seen as art, and what will be accepted as politics. Ranciere calls these delimitations "partitions of the sensible" to highlight the fact that they are neither solely physical nor solely conceptual, but apply to the boundaries where Sense meets the senses in the phenomenon of human intercourse. Partitions of the sensible are *forms of communication and relation* whose main function is to determine the constitution of a community, or the shape of a *polis*. Ranciere's theory is thus essentially an extension of Kant's idea of *a priori* forms to the realm of cultural experience, with a

genealogical or Foucauldian twist, for if the partition of the sensible is the foundation on which the form of a community rests, this partition is neither universal nor ahistorical, but changeable. Ranciere identifies three main partitions linked to three aesthetico-political regimes: the *ethical*, the *representative* or *poetic*, and the *aesthetic*, each of which is based on the dominance of one of Plato's three main modes of making/doing<sup>2</sup>.

For Plato, 'art' as such did not exist. There were simply different ways of making and doing, each of which had different political implications due to the inherent differences in the way they relate bodies to space. Identifying three main forms of making/doing, which Ranciere dubs the "chorus," the "theatre," and the "page," Plato both defines, and ranks, the different ways artistic forms help constitute different kinds of community or *polis*. For Plato, the ideal community can only be constituted when the choral form of making/doing, defined as the "choreographic form of the community that sings and dances its own proper unity" (2004a, 14), with its own proper voice and its own proper body, is taken as the model of society. The catch in Plato's paradigm is that it demands such clarity in the partition of identities and places that each body may have one and *only* one position, apparently always. A carpenter makes furniture and a midwife births babies. Being otherwise engaged, neither of these laborers is in the position to devote themselves to the business of governance. The political analogue of the choral community in Plato's schema is thus a body of persons devoted exclusively to the problems of the state, that is to say, a separate political *class*. Ranciere names the social and aesthetic order built on this paradigm the *ethical regime*, and shows that, in the Platonic schema, it is strictly opposed to the reign of democracy.

The next best, or second worst, artistic mode on which a community may be based in this scheme is known as the "theatrical," even when it is practiced in the mediums of paint and ink. When this mode dominates we have what Ranciere calls the *representative* or *poetic regime*. In the Platonic view, the problem with theatre is that it causes a form of identity-confusion; theatre *splits* people (both actors and spectators) by introducing a glamorous fantasy with which they can identify, thereby overriding their real experience, of being in a particular social space communing with other particular

living bodies. Even more than the poison of the simulacra, in the Platonic ideology of essences the duplicity engendered by theatre is what most endangers the soul. Though theatre has clearly existed throughout the ages, it became the paradigm of the arts in the Renaissance, when theatrical methods of representation were transferred to the page, the canvas and the wall.

The *representative regime* is based on the dual principle of mimesis/poesis, which is not, Ranciere insists, prescriptive, but rather grants artworks, (paintings or writings), the ability to act *as if* they could actually stand in for real events-acts of living speech, or decisive moments of action and meaning. On the mimetic side, classical poetics thus "established a relationship of correspondence between speech and painting, between the sayable and the visible" (2004a, 16), which gave imitation its own specific space. On the poetic side, the *representative regime* is built on the Aristotelian idea that life is a disordered succession of events which are only endowed with meaning when they *are arranged* into plausible causal chains by poets. In this distribution of the sensible meaning is not inherent in the world, but is forged in the Sense given it through its composition into a poetic structure. Within this system not only can high (mimetic) art be distinguished from low (decorative) art, but there is a specific criterion for distinguishing between good (high) art and bad (high) art. This is the criterion of adequation, under which every position in the order of things is deemed to have its own unique character, its own unique style of speech and look. A monologue by one of Shakespeare's fools is thus better art than the words of God as penned by a hack, for what makes the "art" is not the subject matter itself, but the *fit* between the subject and the manner in which this is represented.

In opposition to the ideology that modern Art distinguishes itself by its focus on medium-specificity and (inscriptional) surface, Ranciere argues that the *representative regime* is already possessed by an obsession with surface. However, he argues, this "surface" is not essentially defined as a geometric object, but rather as an *interface*, a space in which the representational "purity" of high art has always been infected by the non-representational "abstractions" of the decorative. The Sistine Chapel and Leonardo's notebooks bear witness to this fact. From this perspective, the modern regime is defined not so much by

its turn towards abstraction, as by the arts' final realization of themselves as *Art* through their complete capitulation to the *lack of distinction* between the figurative and the decorative, and their unification as a singularity through their wholehearted embrace of the infrathin, interfacial nature of their proper space, that is, "the page," which encompasses both painting and writing. Ranciere calls this the *aesthetic regime*, and, as stated, in the Platonic schema, it is strictly identical with the reign of democracy.

For Plato, painting and writing are united by their common use of an inert surface as the ground upon which they stand, the place from which they speak. Even more than theatrical mimesis, Plato hated arts inscribed on a page because he conceived of this surface as a dead thing that "wanders aimlessly" without knowing who to speak to or who not to speak to. In the philosopher's eyes, this futile wandering of inert sign-surfaces destroys every legitimate foundation for the relationship between the effects of language and the positions of bodies in shared space. That is to say, under this aesthetico-political regime, in which Plato saw only dead letters and mute images, there is no adequation between ways of speaking and socio-spatial positioning: anyone may speak to anyone, in any way, from any place, and all utterances have the same (lifeless) value. For Plato, the aesthetic formation built around such inert sign surfaces is strictly identical with the reign of democracy, which is defined in the Platonic schema as a form of community based on illegitimate relations that lead to indefinite partitions of identities. Plato's diatribe against writing was thus essentially driven by his political reaction to the Democracy; his work on aesthetics being just another part of his political campaign to topple what was then a fragile new form of community, and set in its place a form that would more completely embody his ideal *polis*. But democracy has returned, and with it, the indiscriminate, wandering page.

### **The Contradictions of Literature as 'Literature', or Copying as Medicine for the Disease of Literariness and its Politics of Disorder.**

I've transformed from a writer into an information manager, adept at the skills of replicating, organizing, mirroring, archiving, hoarding, storing, reprinting, bootlegging, plundering, and transferring. I've needed to acquire a whole new skill

set: I've become a master typist, an exacting cut-and-paster, and an OCR demon. There's nothing I love more than transcription; I find few things more satisfying than collation (Goldsmith, 68).

Citing Flaubert as an exemplary case, Ranciere argues that the "art" in modern literary practice is demonstrated by the deliberate *lack* of artistry displayed by the writer. Furthermore, this literary lack of literariness is specifically opposed to the "romantic" beautification of life now widely practiced by the masses, especially women. This opposition between Art and non-Art is best exemplified in Flaubert's masterpiece, *Madame Bovary*.

The aim of the writer was to make art invisible. The mistake of Emma Bovary, by contrast, was her will to make art visible, to put art in her life – ornaments in her house, a piano in her parlor, and poetry in her destiny. [On the other hand,] Flaubert would distinguish his art from that of his character by putting art only in his book, and making it invisible. [...] That new kind of mute writing [...] would fit the radical muteness of things, which have neither will nor meaning. [...] The prose of the artist distinguished itself from the prose of everyday life insofar as it was still muter, still more deprived of "poetry" (2004b, 21-22).

Thus is the modern conundrum in which Art both wants to dissolve itself in (a) life (now conceived as 'feminine'), and to radically distinguish itself from it.

Here we arrive at the essence of the *aesthetic regime*, as defined by Ranciere, that, contrary to much contemporary theorizing, Art's muteness and lack of (classical) artistry is not the result of an allegiance to abstraction, medium specificity, or any other "formalist" principle. It is not even essentially determined by the intrathin space of the page in which it first spawned. For Ranciere, the *only* essential quality of (modern, or *aesthetic*) Art is that its form, or mode of being, is divided against itself.

In the aesthetic regime, artistic phenomena are [...] inhabited by a heterogeneous power, *the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself*: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-

knowledge, *logos* identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional, etc.

(2004a: 22-23), [*emphasis added*].

From the earlier *Madame Bovary*, in which the author distinguished his own *aesthetic* aesthetics from the *anaesthetic* aesthetics of (romanticized feminine) everyday life by making his writing even more deprived of poetry, Flaubert moved to a final demonstration of Art's self-alienation in his novelette, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.

Written near the end of his life, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is the story of two copy-clerks who, after quitting their jobs for a life of self improvement through reading, wind up returning to copying when their aspirations turn out to be just another species of romantic fantasy.

Instead of trying to apply the words of the books in real life, they will [now] only copy them. This is good medicine for the disease of literariness and its politics of disorder. But this good medicine is the self-suppression of literature. The novelist himself has nothing more to do than to copy the books that his characters are supposed to copy. In the end he has to undo his plot and blur the boundary separating "art for art's sake" from the prose of the commonplace. When art for art's sake wants to undo its link to the prose of democracy, it has to undo itself (2004b: 22).

Copying their characters copying themselves copying the characters that others writers' wrote, for both Flaubert and Ranciere "the life of literature is the life of this contradiction (2004b: 23). For art to be Art, it must undo itself. Is this not also Goldsmith's claim?

Let me go into more detail about *Day*. I would take a page of the newspaper, start at the upper left hand corner and work my way through, following the articles as they were laid out on the page. If an article, for example, continued on another page, I wouldn't go there. Instead, I would finish retyping the page I was on in full before proceeding to the next one. I allowed myself no creative liberties with the text. The object of the project was to be as uncreative in the process as possible. It was one of the hardest constraints a writer can muster, particularly on a project of this scale; with every keystroke came the temptation to "fudge," "cut-and-

paste," and "skew" the mundane language. But to do so would be to foil my exercise. [...] Everywhere there was a bit of text in the paper, I grabbed it. I made no distinction between editorial and advertising, stock quotes or classified ads. If it could be considered text, I had to have it. Even if there was, say, an ad for a car, I took a magnifying glass and grabbed the text off the license plate (69-70).

But if the dominant rhetorical trope, indeed, the essence of Art itself, in the *aesthetic regime* is the oxymoron, why has this form, and thus the regime, come to the fore in modernity?

### **Christine Buci-Glucksmann and the Feminine as Allegory of the Modern**

Literature is the act of writing that specifically addresses those who should not read (Ranciere, 2004b: 15).

I don't expect you to even read my books cover to cover. It's for that reason I like the idea that you can know each of my books in one sentence. For instance, there's the book of every word I spoke for a week unedited. Or the book of every move my body made over the course of a day [...] Or my most recent book, *Day*, in which I retyped a day's copy of the *New York Times* and published it as a 900 page book. Now you know what I do without ever having to have read a word of it, (Goldsmith, 69).

The *Wikipedia Encyclopedia* defines an oxymoron as "a figure of speech that combines two normally contradictory terms (e.g. "deafening silence")." The root of the word is a Greek term derived from *oxy* meaning "sharp" and *moros* meaning "dull." In other words, an oxymoron is a figure (of speech) in which *difference* collapses. The derived adjective, "oxymoronic," also highlights the appearance of idiocy associated with this disaster. For Buci-Glucksmann the sudden flowering of this contradictory and idiotic trope within the space of writing is linked to a transformation in the symbolic division of gender brought on by the specific nature of the space that arose with the modern industrialized city.

Since Baudelaire, the space of modernized urbanity has been defined by poets as a labyrinth of commodity-fetishes. This fetishized maze, Buci-Glucksmann argues, produces

a modification in the flow of desire, for here the sexual drive meets the way of mankind that does not wish to know. The principal object of desire is now no longer The Woman, but the cessation of desire itself. And this new undesiring desire produces a perpetual anxiety that is the same as the Baudelarian image of life, the one "that knows no development." Here, as Plato well knew, signification is linked to death, the loss of aura, and a nihilistic emptying of meaning and values. Along side the progressive aspect of modern democracy, there is thus a catastrophic shadow based on the power of absence, which inscribes in writing a blank space that masculine desire begins to decipher in the image of the female body. In the modern partition of the sensible the feminine thus becomes visible in an altogether new kind of way, as the ultimate ground on which men decipher/inscribe the catastrophe of their perceived loss of power, meaning and love. This is how the myth of "castration" plays itself out in the modern world. Here, however, the (anti-)hero is not a prince, but a *flaneur*, the wandering poet barely glimpsed in the intoxicated city. And the (m)other is not The Woman, but the ultimate commodity-fetish, whose being frames his gaze, the prostitute.

According to Buci-Glucksmann, this masculine desire, which radically separates eros and love, and deciphers contingency, mortality and man's own "castration" in the feminine form, is not just caused by men's (sense of) loss, but takes this impotency as its ultimate *goal*. Hence the uncreative creativity of Ranciere's *aesthetic regime*. However "post-modern," the unboring boring is simply one more phase in this poetics of impotency, an *anaesthetic* that continuously stages its own disappearance without (its) ever coming.

If Plato and Ranciere are right, and democracy is linked to a singularized Art whose essence is ontologically given in the form of an irresolvable contradiction, and Buci-Glucksmann's account of its arousal is correct, then a literature of the "boring with all the boring taken out" is linked to a symbolic order that places men as itinerant voyeurs, coldly copying the ephemera of a meaning- and creativity-sucking figure they really can't confront, for they always abject it into the feminine form. Buci-Glucksmann calls this the "tragedy of the modern *woman-body*" (1987). Though, unlike Flaubert, Goldsmith does not allegorize women, his aesthetic of the unboring boring has its roots in the same

dialectic state of arrest, the dream of the stone that is always the new and always the same.

## NOTES

Published in English as "Catastrophic Utopia: The Feminine as Allegory of the Modern."

<sup>2</sup>Though one is likely to dominate at any given time, these aesthetico-political regimes are not coincidental with historical epochs, for all three have been in play across the ages.

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