

The Postmodern Turn as a Linguistic Turn in Women's Experimental Writing

Eleonora Ravizza

Abstract:

Kornelia Freitag's contribution to the study of women's experimental writing investigates how contemporary American women poets have developed a critique of culture and representation that is strictly related to postmodern theory. After sketching a general overview of the development and reception of women's experimental poetry from the '60s to the present, Freitag concentrates on the poetry of Rosemary Waldrop, Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe. The three poets, whose work is analysed through accurate close-readings, are presented in the light of their interventions in the deconstruction of three normative discourses: philosophy, genre theory and history.

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The term "Women's Experimental Poetry" refers to a corpus of literary works which has so far been marginalized, if not ignored, not only by the general public, but also by critics. Firstly, women's experiments with poetry, except for a few isolated cases, have only reluctantly been accepted in the mostly male-dominated domain of experimental poetry; secondly, experimental poetry has rarely attracted the attention of the theorist of postmodernism. Yet, in her convincing study, Kornelia Freitag explores the enormous potential of women's experimental writing and presents it as a precious contribution to the cultural critique put forward by both language poetry and postmodernist theory. Throughout her monograph, Freitag demonstrates that, while women experimental poets' anti-mimetic modes of writing challenge the limits of language and representations, their critical attitude toward gender discourse also grants them a privileged position to re-examine critically many naturalized concepts in Western thought.

The premise that the postmodern cultural turn reflected in women's experimental poetry is above all a linguistic turn calls for a deductive structure which avoids excessive abstraction. As a consequence, Freitag chose to develop the theoretical issues raised by women poets in the second part of the monograph, where she deals with the close analysis of poems by Rosemary Waldrop, Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe. In the first part of the book (Introduction and Chapter One), she concentrates instead on the development of the genre, from the first approaches of feminist theory and experimental poetry to the creation of a canon, and from the initial rejection to the critical recognition of women's experimental poetry as a specific field of poetic practice.

The work of the German-born poet Rosemary Waldrop, who chose to write in English after moving to the USA, is widely discussed and analysed in Chapter Two. The analysis accounts for the conception of language emerging from her poems, a conception that is very close to Foucault's theories as expressed in *The Order of Things* or to Judith Butler's idea that words produce the effect that they name by reiterative and citational practice. Freitag shows how Waldrop's poetry challenges the limits of language and representation, thus also challenging the limits of the self, of gender and of memory.

Chapter Three is devoted to Lyn Hejinian, a poet whose work questions the boundaries between poetry and other literary genres, such as biography or autobiography, travelogue, correspondence and diary writing. Hejinian's poetic manipulation of techniques traditionally related to the above-mentioned genres is discussed by Freitag as a technique that allows the poet to disappoint the reader's expectations and therefore to illuminate the preconceptions that condition those genres. Also, since the poetry of Hejinian explores the role of literary genres as a way of fashioning the self, their deconstruction is read as a reconceptualization of cultural modes of self-fashioning.

In the last chapter, Freitag introduces the work of Susan Howe, a poet who criticises the claim of cultural discourses such as history and historiography to be objective accounts by giving a poetic counter-interpretation of texts that take real or imaginary history as their theme. Here Freitag discusses how Howe, in order to deconstruct the idea of an abstract historical truth as foundation of traditional historiography, combines feminism and postcolonial theory with postmodern anti-foundationalist criticism.

In conclusion, Freitag's monograph on Cultural Criticism in Women's Experimental Writing can be regarded as a precious contribution to the study of a literary genre that has not so far attracted too much attention from scholars. Although the structure of the three last chapters - in which the author does not provide a general theoretical framework for her textual analysis, but rather deduces the theory from them - makes it difficult to get a unifying overview of the poet's work and of the literary genre in general, the book does offer the reader many challenging and stimulating subjects for reflection. The aim of investigating how three contemporary American women poets have developed a critique of culture and representation that is strictly related to postmodern theory is fully achieved. Extremely positive aspects of the book are that it does not claim to be exhaustive and that Freitag does not regard poems only as sterile linguistic experiments or as mirrors of particular theories. On the contrary, she shows how they actively interact with cultural discourses, not excluding the relevance of personal experience to the production of texts.