

Rebecca Clouse

Genre Bending with Cixous

(from the University of Iowa *Craft, Critique, Culture* conference, Fall 2000)

Cixous: "Flying is woman's gesture—flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything by flying; we've lived in flights, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It's no accident that *voler* has a double meaning [to fly, to steal], that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense....

What woman hasn't flown/stolen? Who hasn't crumbled, held up to ridicule, the bar of separation? Who hasn't inscribed with her body the differential, punctured the system of couples and opposition?" (258).

What woman among us? I remember the last time—wasn't that fun when I held up to ridicule the bar of separation; what a hoot that was last time I punctured the system of couples and opposition with my body. I've seen these words quoted a number of times without any accompanying worry about what they might suggest practically. My work on vertical metaphors suggests that flying in language looks, in practice, like taking license, then taking more to bend categories like genre, to strain protocols, to play in the fields of prose or verse.

Let Genre Bending stand for flying in writing. Let several genres be in question and let them be temporarily resistant to the protocol pressures exerted by the context of an academic conference. Let there be no risk in bending genres at the moment and let not the requirements of any card catalog trouble the critic as she Gets High with Vertical Metaphors in a document referred to as *Upwords*:

This study represents an attempt to come to an understanding about the relations among three apparently divergent groups of texts—*some faculty of mind (call it Intuition) said, "These go together," but another faculty of mind (call it Doubt) said, "I doubt it." Intuition said it could 'sense' the interconnections but Doubt, skeptical regarding Intuition's 'sense' of things, required a demonstration. Compliant to a degree, Intuition asserted that since a medieval mystic climbs a ladder of perfection, since a person diagnosed by the psychiatric establishment with a dissociative disorder claims to float on the ceiling, since in late 20th century novels,*

characters fly, “these all meet because they all go vertical.” Doubt found this answer to be unsatisfactory, since it consisted of three items and a spatial generalization. “But it’s a start!” said Intuition; “hardly,” Doubt rejoined, adding that it didn’t care for Intuition’s method of exposition. Intuition wanted to know what was wrong with its method. Since the conversation threatened to break down before it had really begun, another faculty of mind (call it Method) stepped in. “Your ‘method’, Intuition, looks like this: induction rather than deduction, exploration rather than argumentation, description and narration rather than prescription and obvious rhetoric. You prefer to tell stories that have ideas in them. You privilege questions over answers, suspect that the obvious is really complicated, believe that knowing how to use something doesn’t mean you understand what it is.”

Intuition said that all sounded pretty good but Doubt said it sounded like it was going to take forever. “Funny you should say that,” interjected Intuition, “since one of the ideas has to do with time, so bide yours, and let me begin.”

Doubt the staller said okay but only under two conditions and these are what they were: that Method, more trustworthy, should do most of the explaining, and that an introduction should come first to justify the request for time. Intuition was abashed at being so distrusted but gave a little on the first condition, saying “Method can do some jobs.” As for condition number two, it gave a chirpy ‘okay’ and began its introduction:

Assertion (A) On the first page it is best to begin at the top.

Assertion (B) I made that up.

Here are two assertions that introduce the matter and method of this study. By beginning with two assertions, I suggest that the dominant method of reasoning in the study is inductive rather than deductive. I will add other items that will complicate what I will have to say about the assertions, then—“Foul!” cried Doubt, “That’s no introduction. Give me a thesis statement.” Intuition sputtered, “Intuition doesn’t do thesis statements.” Doubt said, “You’d better let Method take over.” “But it’s my project,” claimed jealous Intuition. “Hey!” said Doubt, “We’ll never get anywhere!” “Will too,” said Intuition. “Will not” said Doubt. “Will too” “Will not” “Will too” “Will not” “This is not a fruitful exchange,” assessed Method, launching into an introduction:

We will begin with basics, at the bottom (so to speak)—“Hey! That ‘so to speak’ isn’t Method’s! No sneaking Intuition with sotto voce’s!” Intuition smugly apologized because Doubt hadn’t got it; “I said ‘so to speak’,” continued Intuition, “because the study is precisely a question of bottom and top.” Doubt didn’t wish to appear dense, but asserted the need to maintain protocol: “Let Method tell then; no tricks, no stage asides, no parenthetical statements—” Method, hearing this, anticipated difficulties:

“Parenthetical statements are necessary for qualification,” it said. “And because we are talking largely about words, a few puns (of which Intuition made ‘bottom’ one above) may slip in even from me.” Doubt harumphed and spliced a comma. “Tell me the basic stuff already, I’m getting tired of this conversation.”

“Then I shall begin,” said Method. “I shall isolate the subject matter in space and time, identify the three things that Intuition says go together, and describe the hypotheses that have emerged from Intuition’s project. Since Intuition has already supplied two assertions, I shall discuss them in both referential and metaphorical terms; this will require a brief foray into the history of language and usage, from which I shall draw some inferences, and then I shall return to the hypotheses for elaboration. I shall be logical, although my logic will be in tension with the whole project because my logic is reasonable and Intuition’s logic is metaphorical.”

Doubt agreed that this was a desirable procedure then sardonically asked for a clue about subject matter. “Haven’t you been listening?” challenged Intuition. “Give me one word,” said economical Doubt. “You want one word?” said Intuition, “I’ll give you one word. Up.”

“Up,” said Doubt, “Your study is about Up.”

“That’s right,” said merry Intuition, “Isn’t that fun?” “What’s so fun about Up?” “Oh my,” said Intuition, a little obsessed with its one word, “Up is amazing: wait up, come up, uproar, clean up, up in the air, head in the clouds, hearts soaring, people flying, getting high, reach the top, climb the ladder up to altitude on the vertical till you reach some serious height or call it elevation—uplift, levitate, ascent, high moral purpose, rising, raising, move up, blow up, show up, break up, screw up—”

“Shut up,” said Doubt.

Intuition said, “Yes, shut up, too, and clam up, upset, flying high, up, up and away to aerial points of view, waking up, standing up—”

“I mean Shut Up!” Doubt said. Offended Intuition riposted with “Up yours.” Cool Method admonished there was no need to be vulgar. Sotto voce, Intuition mumbled “vulgar, common, low on a vertical scale, plebeian, coarse, earthy, chthonic,—” as Method launched into an introduction:

This study focuses on the linguistic translations of cognitive representations of the vertical dimension described within the limits of Euclidean geometry’s construction of the space-time continuum in Western literature and Western experience. This study is not a comprehensive treatise. The majority of primary literary texts under consideration emerge from three discursive formations shot through by a common pattern of figures. Those discursive formations are (1) Contemporary accounts of mental illness, specifically, dissociative disorders, (2) Western medieval texts on mystical experience, (3)

Postmodern literature in which machine-free human flying is a dominant element. Texts have been drawn from these discursive formations based on their deployment of figures of vertical mobility.

This study is concerned chiefly with a set of figures, images, and metaphors. It is exploratory, with an eye trained first at flying and its corollary dimension as a literary and verbal phenomenon, and second on the literary and verbal conditions whose effect is flying, or whose effect is figured as vertical mobility. My investigations suggest this hypothesis: Figures of vertical mobility in a text occur not in isolation but in the context of a specific and dynamic figural set.

This set consists of figures of fragmentation, enclosure and temporal stasis. Together with vertical mobility, fragmentation, enclosure, and temporal stasis are names for image schemas that sponsor literary figures. The ultimate figure of the image schema of vertical mobility is flying; from the image schema of fragmentation issues the figure of bodily dismemberment, from enclosure issues the figure of the tomb (the body, too, may be figured as a prison or a grave), from temporal stasis issues the frozen time-piece, chronological rupture, a break in continuity. The image schemas issue in figural patterns whose dynamic effect is to enlist and express the image schema of vertical mobility. Each of the three divergent discursive formations shelters this dynamic figural set, or figural formation.

It is a further hypothesis of this study that this figural formation is dependent on the textual representation of a problematic in the relation between the body and the mind. A rift in personal or corporeal integrity occurs; figuration ascribes positive or negative value to the rift—positive valuation indexes the rift as liberational while negative valuation indexes it as oppressive. At stake are the subjective boundaries of consciousness and of its corporeal habitation, which may be indexed as permeable, and as permeable, vulnerable to (in the negative valuation) or capable of (in the positive valuation) conflation with a second subjectivity. The permeability of—“Hey! What is this?”

“The Introduction,” said Method.

“Well, tone it down already!” cried Doubt, “Who do you think you’re talking to anyway?” Intuition’s ears were always trained to certain frequencies. “Tone it down, hmmm. Method, don’t talk so loud, for shame.” “That’s not what I mean!” cried Doubt. “What do you mean?” asked Method calmly. “What’s with all this high falutation?” Intuition controlled its glee. “Doubt might be referring to diction. Elevated diction?” Doubt made a noise like assent. “High words, even? Up Words?” Intuition pressed its point.

“I get it already, but come on.”

“Look,” said stern Method. “Some of the ideas in here are complicated.” “I can do complicated,” said Doubt “but does complicated

have to mean high words?" Method, not wishing to offend, asserted gently, "Sometimes it does, but I will try to keep the high words at a minimum. The idea you suggested does not need high words, however."

"Hey! Ideas are your job." Method, also protective of the division of labor, submitted that Doubt had implied an idea: "You assumed a vertical scale of value, power and measurement when you said tone it down, as did Intuition with elevated diction," said Method. "Elevated diction assumes levels of rhetoric mapped on a vertical scale in which higher is more difficult, and lower is easier—the higher the word, the fewer comprehend. A higher word is like an aristocrat."

"More like a snob," said Doubt. "Like you, now," asserted Intuition. "Hey! I'm no snob; I'm against snobbery." "You're an anti-intellectual snob, though," said Intuition, "You are anti-high-words, so you are anti-elevated-style, so just maybe you are anti-intellectual, which makes you a low-style snob ascribing higher value to practices that reverse social and rhetorical conventions regarding specialized venues for specialized more abstract and higher theoretical language that refers to the invisible rather than the visible. Is 'up' more value, more complex? or is 'up' more value, simpler, more unity?"

"I am not a snob."

"You're an anti-intellectual snob," asserted Intuition, "but I'm not saying that's a bad thing."

"I'm leaving if you're going to call names," said Doubt, but Method asked everyone to calm down—

"Calm down? What's up that we should calm down?"

"Tempers!" said Method. "Tempers. Calm down, reduce the heat, lower the number of degrees. If Doubt prefers pedestrian to airborne, vulgar to elevated, mundane to lofty, concrete to abstract, we will attempt to abide by that preference."

Yes, Doubt responded, sense, plain and simple.

"We will continue then, in a more pedestrian, vulgar, mundane, and concrete style," said Method. "We will descend from the high rhetoric of abstractions to lowly concretes, from the invisible to the visible. We will go to Intuition's assertions, since they are very concrete and deliver us over to visible things."

"But hey, if they're my assertions, why can't I talk about them?" lamented Intuition. Doubt, muttering that it was not a snob, was somewhat mollified by the promise of the concrete and asked Intuition if it could be very concrete. Intuition asserted that it could be as concrete as two words. Having already encountered Intuition's One Word, Doubt glowered and began to nurse a grudge. Intuition sensed as much and said it would forego its discussion of 'Assertion (A) On the first page it is best to begin at the top' because the question of vertical scales of power, value, and measurement had already been broached as had its converse, so Intuition

said it would begin with 'Assertion (B) I made that up' but—"Hey! You made what up?"

Method, since Doubt had a point, interpreted: "Doubt is asking for a referent for 'that'." Intuition protested that that wasn't the first thing. "Well what is the first thing, then?" said Doubt.

"The basics, at the bottom, so to speak," said Intuition.

Method interjected, "Then you're doing first is at the bottom not first is at the top."

"That's because," as though through gritted teeth Intuition said, "First is at the bottom in order even if first is at the top in value, and because, to put it plainly, simply, and in a pedestrian manner that can be understood by inverse rhetorical snobs, I am doing first is at the bottom in order so that I can make things up."

Doubt barked, "You're making all of this up?"

"Of course," said Intuition, "But what you don't know because you won't let me get started is that making something up isn't always the same from Chaucer all the way to Catch-22."

"You're being oblique and ridiculous," said Doubt.

"Well just let me start already!" Method stepped in like a stage director: "Intuition will now begin please." "Okay," said Intuition with satisfaction, "I am ready, but I will not supply an antecedent for 'that' at this specific moment because whether or how Assertion (B) refers is part of my introduction."

Doubt pouted out a "Fine" as Intuition launched into an introduction:

(B) I made that up. Here is an assertion with both an overt and covert vertical dimension. There's 'up' right at the end of the sentence. What is it doing there? It isn't acting like an adverb or a preposition; it's acting like part of the verb (it is a verb particle) betraying the Germanic roots of English. Why does make need up? What does this overt up have to do with vertical scales of power, value and measurement? This is the covert part. An earlier interlocutor implied "I made that up" meant I invented something; granted, it can be a way of saying I lied, or, given an antecedent, it can be a response to a question. Mom: What about the bed? Me: I made that up fresh with the new flannel sheets."

"Intuition does not make up beds," asserted Doubt. "You have your antecedent," said Intuition, "I did not promise a historical referent; 'that' refers grammatically. I will continue."

Maybe the literal use of making up the bed, which is a restoring of order, can lead to a question about other figurative uses: Does the making up that is invention also have to do with restoring order? or with restoration more generally?

“I made that up” is a childhood sentence. Here’s a variation that looks like childish redundancy: “I made that up out of my head.” Now the physical seat of invention has been named—the head—and it is at the top. Does invention come out of the head like a thought balloon in a comic strip? Maybe, if “out of” refers to an exit. Does this sentence betray a perception or an experience that somehow the head is permeable so that fiction leaps forth from it, in the direction that is out from the location of the head, which is usually up? Maybe, but “out of” could also refer implicitly to a substance used to produce what is made up, gray matter, used instrumentally, or to thoughts and feelings as material. Picturing “I made that up” as fiction coming out of a head that is perceived to be permeable doesn’t really solve the problem of why make needs up, however.

“Maybe, Maybe, Maybe.” Doubt, who did not follow Intuition’s lead happily, told it not to indulge in speculations. Method, who anticipated fruits from Intuition’s speculations, urged it to continue, but advised it have recourse to an authority. Intuition gladly complied, for an authority would help to ground the discussion in concretes.

Since my purpose at this conference is to enact a bit of genre-bending rather than to introduce my dissertation, I’ll spare you the next fifteen pages of conversation among the allegorical constructs who eventually unmask my proper self, the writer, and ask how I expect to compensate readers for the lack of traditional structure, overt argument, footnotes, thesis statements, topic sentences —. My hopeful answer is Pleasure, sometimes Hard Pleasure (Clarice Lispector’s ambition becomes my own). What a fine thing it would be if the pleasure of doing it turns over and into the pleasure of reading it, changes into a dear reader’s pleasure.

Rebecca Clouse has been endorsed recently as a candidate for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Last fall she lost her second parakeet to careless flying in the face of a pet dog.