

from OBSERVING THE CANOPY

by JACKIE CLARK

It's all in What You Bring to the Door: Kafka, Derrida, Cixous and the WE that Waits

*The main thing [...] is that it's he, he himself, who considers himself a mouse; nobody else asks him to, and that is the important point. -Dostoevsky*

I stand as a woman before the law seeking to gain admittance to a world of fascination and dread, a world that lies beyond the door where I can participate and exist as myself. As Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, "...the human species is forever in a state of change, forever becoming," (Beauvoir 37) giving way to the realization that just as there can be no beginning, there too can be no end. The truth meaning, then, that there is no end to woman, as a term, as a definition, that "it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end." (Butler 43) In order to actualize this opening-up of woman, one must, I must, first look to the Law, Kafka's Law and the door, to figure out what it is that has given me the impression that I must wait for permission to enter.

Naively as the man from the country in Kafka's parable, WE<sup>1</sup> arrive at the door of the Law to be told that WE cannot be admitted at the moment. Interestingly enough, the door is not closed but "stands open as *usual*." [my emphasis] (Kafka 3) The "usual" is interesting in that it signifies the common trait of the door always remaining open<sup>2</sup>. As with the man who now stands within permissible distance of the door, WE stand on the threshold of the Law, only to be scoffed at by the impudent doorkeeper when we stoop down for a closer look. He says, "If you are so strongly tempted, try to get in without my

---

<sup>1</sup> read women, even better read woman

<sup>2</sup>read as accessible

permission. But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall, keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other. And the sight of the third man is already more than even I can stand." (Kafka 3) If the doorkeeper might have stopped after "without my permission" then maybe the man, maybe the WE, would have said okay and gone ahead anyway. But the insinuation of weakness, of failure, of *his* own uncertainty causes us (the man and WE) to think twice. Even though "the Law, [the doorkeeper]thinks, should be accessible to every man<sup>3</sup> and at all times," (Kafka 3) he lets himself forget what he thought and thanks the doorkeeper for providing him with a stool with which to wait upon. As Derrida notes in his critical essay "Devant La Loi", "he decides to put off deciding, he decides not to decide, he delays and adjourns in waiting. But waiting for what? For 'permission to enter', as it is expressed. Surely you have noticed that such permission had never been refused him." (Derrida 136) But this non-refusal has directly resulted in a pause--a moment of uneasiness where WE<sup>4</sup> are uncertain about our decision to come to the Law at all, a moment where we believe that this is a mistake and that we should just pack it up and go home, having no business coming at all. As Helene Cixous notes in *A Newly Born Woman*, "Nothing keeps the poor fellow from entering. Except everything: the doorkeeper, the way he looks, his black beard, the door the fact of it being open; the fact that nothing keeps him from entering the law, except what the law is, except that it is what it is. And waiting." (Cixous 101) In fact, this very waiting to enter the door proves to be the point of the parable.

Amidst the uncertainty and fear experienced by the man and WE, the fact is forgotten that there is a door and other doors that stand open. The Law intangibly becomes an elusive cloud unable to be marked, previously unanticipated by the man and in trying to understand this abstraction the Law asserts the identity of being forbidden. But this, as Derrida cleverly understands, "does not mean that it forbids, but that it is itself forbidden, a

---

<sup>3</sup> read woman

<sup>4</sup> read I

forbidden place. It interdicts and contradicts itself by placing the man in his own contradiction: one cannot reach the law, and in order to have a rapport of respect with it, *one must not- one must not* have a rapport to the law, but *must disrupt the relation.*" (Derrida 141) This paradox of the requirements for rapport with the Law is what causes the man as well as WE to sit and scratch our heads. In order to be in good standing with the Law, it is expected that we don't stand before it. We can never even be forbidden from the law because it in itself is already forbidden to us. But it is never so defined as to say that to be forbidden is forbidden. The only truth that the man and WE can wrap our fingers around is the "not at this moment". What would happen if we were to uncover this paradox and find that we have been lodged in a place of continual deferral similar to that of gender which Judith Butler describes in *Gender Trouble* as "a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time." (Butler 22) Gender here is understood to be "inscri[ptions] on anatomically differentiated bodies where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law." (Butler 13) Understanding gender to be incomplete, ever incompleteable, one can see the difficulty that WE are presented with standing before the law. Being left to an "inexorable cultural law", WE never have the chance to realize anything new about our gender and the roles that we play because the Law doesn't change unless it is made to. The law doesn't admit unless it is forced to.

How are WE to gain admittance to the Law when WE are not even sure who WE are? In this sense not only do WE present an incomplete to the Law but to a certain extent WE present a fiction. This fiction rings true of being the product of the aforementioned cultural law, which is none other than the elusive cloud which hovers over the heads of WE at the door. "What is deferred forever till death", as stated by Derrida "is entry into the law itself, which is nothing other than that which dictates the delay." (Derrida 141) Quite a mess it is that WE find ourselves in. If we are deferred "forever till death" entry to the law by the law itself, how are WE ever to come to gender, which is

a requirement to gain access to the Law for women, if that too is deferred by the very thing we are seeking to be undeferred from? Where Derrida leaves his argument is that "the man comes to his end without reaching his end. The entrance is destined for and awaits him alone; he arrives there but cannot arrive at entering; he cannot arrive at arriving." (Derrida 144) The candle is extinguished before it burns through its wax. There is no chance of relighting its fire, WE having used the last match to keep warm before the law. What is of particular interest in Derrida's concluding thoughts on "Before the Law" is his use of the present participle in conjunction with the verb 'arrive'. This is of considerable importance in relation to the process of being as well as the process of writing, which will be discussed later.

The *-ing* is the process, the interaction with the world that WE hope to result from us coming to this door. But as retold by Cixous,

A woman is before the door of the law. And the bearded watchman- his beard so pointed, so threatening- warns her not to go through. Not to go, not to enjoy. And by looking toward, and looking in, and feeling herself looked at without knowing where the L—'s look is coming from, she gets it to come, she believes she sees a glimmer radiating, which is the little flame that the constant flow of her gaze keeps burning in emptiness, in nothing. But from always being looked at without seeing, she pales, she shrinks, she grows old. She is diminished. She sees no more.  
(Cixous 103)

And this bleakness is already scripted by our relationship, or lack there of, to the Law. Our relationship to the law is locked in when we accept the stool, when we decide that it is better to keep our noses clean and wait until our number is called. Because what happens is that the man learns a terrible truth at the end of the parable, which is that "no one but [him] could gain admittance though [the] door, since [the] door was intended for [him]." (Kafka

4) At that moment when all other questions have been exhausted, the door is finally shut with the man, the WE, having never moved any further than we had upon our initial arrival. He, WE, will die there alone without being able to tell others what is finally understood. Cixous elaborates upon this by saying,

No one will have been there to learn from the dying man, from the dead man, what he began to think maybe at the last second: that the law isn't within, it has no place, it has no place other than the gullible man's body that comes to rot in the L—, and the L— has only existed to the extent that it appears before what he doesn't see it is behind, around, before, *inside him* that it is nothing without him. (Cixous 102)

And so it is. The power of the Law is nothing more than our belief in the power of the Law. Here we are standing outside of it being pelted by giant storms of hail, falling prey to open black skies which send rain down upon our heads and all the while WE needed to just step through and say thank-you for the stool but no thanks I would prefer to go inside now, I will deal with the third doorkeeper with gnarled yellow teeth when I get there.

To put this "arrive at arriving" idea as stated by Derrida into context with gender then we need to understand that "[if] gender is something that one becomes- but can never be- then gender is itself a kind of becoming activity, and that gender ought not be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or an incessant and repeated action of some sort." (Butler 143) Gender should not be understood as having its roots deeply embedded in the blueprints of life. Its "incessant and repeated action" is no more than a reinforced phantom, much like the phantom of the Law, the abstract Law that only exists because we allow it to. While the reasons of the constructs of gender are many, too many to cite here, the point becomes first and foremost to understand that *it is constructed*, that there is no way that a woman should be, that there is no way that a man should be for that matter. What is important

to keep in mind is “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, [and] that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.” (Butler 33) Expressions of gender are just that, they are just performative expressions which are composed only of their outcomes. The results of gender, the things that we have come to expect of gender, such as lady-like manners and how it is a man’s job to kill any bugs that are found in the house, are the very things that we performatively create. While Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” gives way to a critical analysis of the deferment of gender as well as our ‘admittance’ (or lack thereof) into the Law, there is another way of looking at the parable that can be of equal importance.

In relation to feminism, “Before the Law” brings up this idea of retreating to a time before Law existed in order to find the true identity of woman. It is supposed by some that when the Law was engendered, it buried the inherent nature of women leaving us in a constant state of retracing our steps in circles, fighting over what traits can make it to the before-the-law list and what ones can not. To quote Judith Butler,

The postulation of the ‘before’ within feminist theory becomes politically problematic when it constrains the future to materialize an idealized notion of the past or when it supports, even inadvertently, the reification of a perpetual sphere of the authentic feminine. This recourse to an original or genuine femininity is a nostalgic and parochial ideal that refuses the contemporary demand to formulate construction. (Butler 47)

In other words, we will never be able to open up the possibilities awaiting woman, awaiting WE, if we are continually attempting to reestablish some idealized figment of imagination. In fact, this belief in a natural state of woman does more damage. By denying the social construction that has solidified our images of gender in favor of an exemplary matriarchical

foundation, we are paying heed instead to a closed system that will never actualize itself.

To suggest that the characteristics that once existed as woman have been lost through the development of Law and other cultural apparatus' gives way to a type of thinking that is against either the possibilities that exist outside that paradigm or ones that share the same ontological existence. A true notion of woman leads to a false identification and "every identification, precisely because it has a phantasm as its ideal, is bound to fail." (Butler 70) To create an image of what woman once was or what woman should again be draws a line, which gender as a whole will never be able to cross. To do so would automatically cut us off from entering the Law because once again we would be approaching the Law under some false pretext.

Either way that you look at the Law, the recurring theme that we see is the importance of what you bring to the Law and whether or not you are aware of it. There is no reason to stand outside of the Law, waiting for permission to enter, unless you yourself are waiting for permission. Unless you are waiting for someone to validate your standing before the law, your desire for admittance. The same goes for the figment of 'natural woman' that was lost after the Law and language became *the* societal dialogue. Because what happens if you don't find yourself possessing those 'natural woman' traits and yet you are still very much a woman? You see the problem in perceiving womanhood or femininity in that way. The only thing to do is take stock on what you have inside of you and when you bring it to the Law admit that you are not sure at all about what you are doing but you are doing it anyway. As Cixous says, "Now, I- woman am going to blow up the Law: an explosion henceforth possible and ineluctable; let it be done, right now, in language." (Cixous 1461)

## Writing Past the Door

*Writing for the 'ing'-Lee Ann Brown*

Delmore Schwartz claims *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* that it is a “necessity that the artist find[s] the adequate subject and the adequate medium for his own powers”, (Schwartz *Dreams* 29) meaning that the artist must construct a means by which to communicate either their exuberance or their disdain with this life. In his essay “What Is Art?” Leo Tolstoy likens art to communication by saying, “Art like speech is a means of communication and therefore of progress, that is, of the movement of humanity forwards toward perfection.” (Tolstoy 472) While the magnanimity of that statement is hardly achieved (now hear me out before you go calling me a pessimist) through our contemporary art, it is not because we lack the ambition or the heart. We are inherently flawed, and the fact that we are still striving for something that we will never attain is saying a lot. Though the first premise of Tolstoy’s definition of art remains inaccessible to us, his second premise is very much alive in contemporary art and is the very thriving ambition that pushes us to know more for that matter. Tolstoy claims,

Art renders accessible to men of the latest generations all the feelings experienced by their predecessors and also those felt by their best and foremost contemporaries. And as the evolutions of knowledge proceeds by truer and more necessary knowledge dislodging and replacing what was mistaken and unnecessary, so the evolution of feeling proceeds by means of art—feelings less kind and less necessary for the well-being of mankind being replaced by others kinder and more needful for that end. (Tolstoy 472)

In this sense art involves all those participating (through any medium) in a global conversation, very much akin to Marshall McLuhan’s idea of a global village. And for those of us that want to be a part of this conversation, that

want to leave behind a piece of our own interpretation and continuation of the conversation, we must come to terms with a way for our ideas to be expressed.

According to Rita Felski in her book *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, "Art has the power to be uncanny and unsettling, to estrange us from the everyday and challenge our routine assumptions." (Felski 182) While art has the means to make powerful dents in the framework, it is nothing without the artist. It is nothing without the personal that first observes and creates and then transcends to the universal. The problem with being an artist, which I quickly realized while doing this project (well, before that even) is that "creativity does not necessarily come with its own built in courage, wisdom." (Di Prima 213) No matter what art it is you practice, it is a craft that needs patience and discipline from you.

After many years of throwing stones, the craft that I have come to is writing, writing poetry. It is my means of joining *the* conversation. Without belaboring too much on the obvious, poetry is a way of writing that doesn't have to obey any of the conventional writing rules. Right now in this essay I am supposed to follow through with my thesis statement. Wait. What is my thesis statement, anyway. I have to provide contextual support and round out my ideas with a nice conclusive paragraph. In poetry I don't have to tell you anything, or I can tell you everything. It can be up front or it can be hard to understand. Most of the time we (and by that I mean I) gauge poetry on the EMOTION, on the feeling a certain image conjures up, on how easily the subject can be substituted with that of ourselves. This is generally hard for women because the subject usually isn't actualized. WE have to be able to actualize ourselves in order to commit it to paper.

So, women become poets in order to create a subject for themselves by way of their experiences and interpretations of the world. But as Alicia Ostriker notes in her book *Stealing the Language: the Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, "the poet who attempts to explore female experience is

dismissed as self-absorbed, private, escapist, non-universal." (Ostriker 6) As if it weren't hard enough to arrive at the place of writing without getting put down about it. To write "like a woman" was at one point the worst possible critique that I could get about my writing. I tried not to write "like a woman" (whatever that means). I tried not to give any indication that the speaker in the poem was a woman. I tried to not be girl-like and I was embarrassed when I was. And because of this embarrassment, this embarrassment of being a woman "I [...] said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed." (Cixous Laugh 1454) And all the while that little voice in my head said "Why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you." (Cixous Laugh 1455) At the time though, I didn't think that I could feel different about myself in relation to the world. But persistently and gratefully the voice has come back. It now says, "Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you." (Cixous Laugh 1455)

Beauvior states in *The Second Sex* "poetry is supposed to catch what exists beyond the prose of everyday." (Beauvior 205) People who write poems, good poems, not only have an unbelievable sense of the beauty, even if it is a somewhat bitter beauty at times, but an indefatigable sense of language and concept as well. Because of this indefatigability "there is only one reason to write poems: the only reason to write poems is for the sake of the activity of the whole being which one enjoys when one writes poems. This is the only justification." (Schwartz Dreams 60) We write for the process. We write for the opportunity to be someone new, to be someone different than who we already are. More over "no poet is ever sure that he has written an important work," (Schwartz Dreams 60) so our self-consciousness at that moment of commitment doesn't matter. As long as there is a love at the moment when your hand is sliding across the paper, smudging the ink and taking it to the skin, it doesn't matter. Because it is you. Whoever you are. There you are looking back at you and reflections like that are hard to come by. As Cixous so confidently and easily puts it, "I want to become a woman I can love." (Cixous Newly 78) I want to become a woman that I can love. I do this by working

through me. I do this by writing me. It has been said that, "At the core of the women's poetry movement is the quest for autonomous self-definition." (Ostriker 59) For me this is true. I want to keep becoming what I am. But before this can be done I have to go through the process of discovering what I am. Only the problem is that once a definition is defined it does not get to remain that way. Every time I look to language, I am looking at it differently. I am looking to it for a different purpose. Language is autonomous to me during the instances that I use it. During the instances that I am using words, they are mine; they are being used to describe the projections that I see passing by everyday as if on screen. This may be the only time that I get to assert any control over anything. Moments of "autonomous self-definition" etched out through my writing helps me to make sense of time and its passing. Cixous prophetically states in *The Newly Born Woman*,

Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me- the other that I am and am not, that I don't know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live- that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me, who? A feminine one, a masculine one, some? Some unknown, which is indeed what gives me the desire to know and from which all life soars. (Cixous Newly 86)

Writing helps us overcome the fear of arriving at the door. The poems that we may write help us to arrive at the door faster with a greater sense of self, and it is at this moment that the poems help us to transcend to the state of WE. I am not just me anymore at that moment. I am you. And we are women but sometimes we are men, and one isn't more characteristic of us than the other. It is because of this ambiguity that women prove that it is "useless to [try to] trap [...] [us] into giving an exact definition of what [...] [we] mean, to make [...] [us] repeat [...] [ourselves] so [...] [our] meaning will be clear." (Irigaray 1470) Women are not clear, and if we are for a minute through our poetry and our language, it is because those extensions of ourselves die when they reach the

page. We will have already discovered a new way to use language by the time we finish the poem. Each new poem that we begin brings us closer not only to Tolstoy's idea of perfection but closer to a sense of ourselves that we have yet to discover.