

**LOST BETWEEN THE WORD – STRUCTURES OF POST-STRUCTURE
IN THE FICTIONS OF ALISON BUNDY, JANE UNRUE AND THALIA FIELD**

SUMMARY

This thesis is the first academic study to juxtapose close-readings of selected texts by the three contemporary American writers, Alison Bundy, Jane Unrue and Thalia Field, who all write fictions of fragment, displacement and inconclusion. They portray language as uncontrollable and overwhelming. The medium of their constructions defeats and supplements itself, and as a consequence, however rich, beguiling or strangely alluring, their stories emerge as stories of break-down, confusion and annulment. Their narrators lose their way in them. These themes place the primary texts of this thesis within a chiefly post-structuralist and deconstructive framework. And the major theoretical voices supplementing the readings of them are writers like Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and Michel de Certeau. All of these theorists gravitate toward displacement, inconclusion and paradox.

The first author I discuss is Alison Bundy. I demonstrate how all of her books – *A Bad Business* (1985), *Tale of a Good Cook* (1992) and *DunceCap* (1998) – portray characters succumbing to language and to their own narratives. Alison Bundy writes reluctant main characters who resist playing the part their narrators seem to have set out for them, and who refuse to behave according to the sets of logic brought into play around them. She describes violent characters who displace and overturn their own narrators, and who wrench the narrative reins from them. Bundy writes stories of stories which scare and affect their own narrators. Speakers become nervous by telling stories of nervous persons. In other words, stories being told contaminate the narrators telling them – as the teller becomes the told.

Also, absences in Bundy's tales manifest themselves as sickening presence – as negations cause characters to fall ill. Negations remain markers of absence and yet still clearly manifest. Bundy tells stories of characters who are lured astray, and brought to explore and thus perpetuate the patterns of illogic which haunt them at the outset of their stories. A Bundy character wants to escape his own story, because he is “so ugly it pained him to look in the mirror” (*DunceCap* 75). Another clings to his story, despite his very ungrateful position in it, as his life depends on it. He only *is*, if he acts according to the title of his story. Forests,

darkness and other hidden gravities threaten to pull Bundy's narrative course astray. Speaking is risking yourself. Articulation is proliferation. Explanation is complication. More often than not, things seem primarily to make sense to themselves. Competing logics dismantle and supplement conventional hierarchies of relations and significance. A father cuts off his own son's hand to punish him for leaving home. Bundy's narrative universe presents only little disruption in the areas of syntax and grammar, but massively challenges and distorts conventional patterns of logic and cohesion. Her stories are disturbingly unpredictable, and one must allow for thorough supplementation both of one's expectations and one's conventions, in general, to thoroughly appreciate them. Thus, at the same time, Bundy's stories both depend on and render peculiarly obsolete the institution of convention.

Jane Unrue's *The House* (2000) is a text of uncertainty. It is even uncertain whether one should consider it to be one text, or rather a collection of several different ones. And whether one regards the collection as one text or many, there remains an uncertain relation between the individual pieces within it. However, most importantly, in a tracing of the various articulations of motifs of uncertainty in Unrue's text(s), it is striking that her collection is narrated by a most uncertain voice – a voice which is very much at a loss in its own story. What makes this textual perdition additionally significant is the fact that the narrator seems lost against her own will. Unrue's narrator is thoroughly frustrated by the surprising unruliness of the medium she is trying to command, and manifestly anxious in the face of it. She loses overview of her story, fails to keep her house in place, and sees its structure and contours change and supplement themselves. Her house even doubles at one point, and she finds herself in a confusing oscillation between the two elusive mirror constructs. In other words, Unrue's speaking voice not only loses overview of her own story. Indeed, she loses herself in it. The categories of narrative authority and autonomy are thoroughly dismantled.

First and foremost, an unusual degree of repetition leads the reader of Unrue's *The House* to consider its individual pieces of text as one (in)coherent whole. So, too, with their strikingly limited range of subject spaces, objects and matters – chairs, tables, trees, lakes, doors and rooms. The same things reappear time and again. The individual pieces in Unrue's collection even quote each other directly. In other words, a peculiar reluctant narrative stuttering seems to haunt the boxes of supplementing domesticity brought into play in Unrue's text. Its individual pieces emerge as frustrated attempts to articulate the same thing – a stable house, a controllable space of textual domesticity. The pieces comprised by Unrue's

The House explore a confusing and unusual anagram narrative in which similar narrative fragments are reshuffled in different ways in each new piece.

Much as in Alison Bundy's writing, the articulatory process features very prominently in Unrue's narrative setting – sometimes even threatening to overshadow the supposed, intended articulatory result itself. *The House* is very much characterized by narrative considerations and thoughts on the process and circumstances of text. And, again, articulation reveals itself as a hazardous business. Speaking is being spoken. On several occasions, the narrator of Unrue's text reveals a clear sense of apprehension in the face of neighboring textualities threatening to diffuse the already so fragile narrative focus of her own articulatory exercises. Articulation itself is constantly threatening to run out of hand and diffuse itself. And neighbor texts constitute powerful, diffusing gravitations.

In my discussion of Thalia Field's narrative spaces, I articulate a close-reading of three of the texts in Field's collection *Point and Line* from 2000. "Walking" is the most fragmented of them and obviously thematizes displacement and disorientation. It is grammatically, syntactically, temporally and typographically displaced. However, as opposed to the two other Field texts under discussion, "Walking" is not a text articulated by an anxious narrative voice. Rather, the narrator of "Walking" seems to revel in the seeming unpredictability of her text – unpredictability the like of which disturbs the speaking voice of Unrue's *The House*, for example. For "Walking" most obviously portrays articulation as constantly changing processes of association – processes which are themselves altered by their own movement, which propel themselves forward, and which diffuse themselves along the way, moving in different directions. Articulation is movement, narrative is pedestrian. Story is a dialogue between stops and steps, between limitations, points and transgressions. Narrative walks.

Although "A ∴ I" seems quieter in its immediate appearance than "Walking", it, too, clearly explores and thematizes displacement. It articulates a peculiar dialogue between what appears to be a therapist voice and a patient voice. But the implied passivity of the *patient* (as opposed to *agent*) narrator is soon dismantled, as she floods the therapy space with competing narratives and parallel layers. "A ∴ I" is a text of the articulatory and signifiatory potential of silence, of absence. For although silence is somehow marginalized by the text, displaced beside the supposedly spoken points of it, the narrator's silent associations in fact constitute the elusive core of "A ∴ I". The text even articulates a reversal of the very distinction of

absence and presence, in that its silences emerge as thoroughly verbal, and its speech confusingly quiet. Like articulation, dialogue is presented as characterized by conflict and tension. Dialogue is about defense and attack. And “A ∴ I” is a text of silent articulation and of narrative defense, superposition and annulment.

Thalia Field’s “Seven Veils” is defined by a peculiar conflict between the rigid and intricate sestina-like structure of its clusters of text on the one hand, and its elusive, forever transforming main character, Sal, on the other – a character who seems an elusive embodiment of change. She constitutes a disruptive fly in the ointment of structure, completion and closure. Her various guises, as well as the chapters which articulate them, suggest cyclicity, too. Sal seems to track a development from a big bang of text, articulation and narrative to a dissolution into light. She morphs and trajects through “Comets”, “Species”, “Margins”, “Tongues”, “Dummies”, “How-To’s” and “Colors” – the seven sections of her text.

The bulk of this thesis is made up of ahistoric close-readings and discussions, but in the chapter “Cousins and Echoes” I consider Bundy’s, Unrue’s and Field’s texts from the point of view of canon and convention. This chapter supplements the general outlook of this thesis, introducing the narratives and governing principles of extra-textual diachronicity, epochism, history, causality, chronology etc. The discussions comprising this thesis look to various neighboring theoretical texts, which continue to haunt, contaminate, push and pull its primary texts in several different directions. However, “Cousins end Echoes” looks to their cousins in literature. And the many kinships listed in the chapter of canon and convention testify to a striking degree of kinship and similarity existing between Bundy’s, Unrue’s and Field’s textual spaces on the one hand, and those of Gertrude Stein, Robert Walser, Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, T. S. Eliot, Nathalie Sarraute, Louis Zukofsky, Samuel Beckett, John Cage, Michel Butor, Robert Creeley and Rosmarie Waldrop on the other. The latter very much reveal the versatility of the many motifs in play in the former. They are all thematically close, tonally close, syntactically close, even phonetically close to each other. They all revel in the depiction and investigation of the themes of narrative repetition, displacement, frustration, anxiety, uncertainty, instability and proliferation. And to a greater or lesser extent, they all emphasize and give voice to the supplementary tale of articulation meandering through them – a parallel narrative voice of articulatory self-awareness. This thesis claims that such a strain of narrative is to be found in every text – even in texts whose speaking voices are

desperate in their attempts to maintain monologue and unambiguity. Each in their own way, these cousins are all drawn towards the unruliness of articulation, the precariousness of narrative and the fragility of voice.

The introduction to this thesis lists a range of baffled questions raised by its primary texts, and it formulates five concepts which these texts all thematize and explore. They are all texts of proliferation, displacement, creation, articulation and annulment. In the realm and register of text and narrative, proliferation refers to processes of articulatory reproduction. Proliferation describes language in growth – most often beyond the immediate narrative control of its speaker. Proliferation is representational explosion, in which lists, repetitions, patterns of rhythm or rhyme, or fragments of seeming illogic combine to spawn unruly trajectories of association.

Displacement also very much haunts the primary texts of this thesis – and again, more often than not, it does so against the wish of the narrative voices trying to keep their stories in place. Displacement testifies to unreliable, competing patterns of textual gravitation, which push and pull the narratives meandering through them in different directions. Articulation itself seems to activate these unpredictable force fields, and thus writes its own defeat and disorientation. And throughout these texts, characters find themselves at a loss, in the dark. As described above, even explanation is complication.

In these texts, articulation is not only displacement, articulation is creation, as well. These are thoroughly creative narratives, with characters speaking radical changes in the textual spaces around them into being, just by saying so. However, again, the system of distribution of these elusive powers of articulatory creation remains elusive and unpredictable. It, too, seems governed by and at the mercy of competing, unpredictable textual gravities. Creators are created, too.

More than anything else, however, as is obvious from these summarizing remarks, the texts by Alison Bundy, Jane Unrue and Thalia Field are narratives of articulation. Their stories explore the mythology surrounding the process of articulation, they investigate the narrative and textual consequences of articulation, and they widen the definition of it – so that silence, movement and space all become areas and disciplines of articulation. These texts are very much allegories of narration. Again, articulation is creation. Characters fight for the command of voice. They battle over the rights of monologue. They explore various guises of

narrative frustration and the impediments of story. They long for labels and definitions, and they speak, read, ask, doubt and question their way through their stories.

A peculiar atmosphere of paradox and inconclusion hovers over the narrative spaces of Alison Bundy, Jane Unrue and Thalia Field. Stories fade out beside the point, detectives conclude their stories with questions, explanations complicate matters further, and stories forget themselves and change direction, on a whim, it seems. Conventions of narrative are explicitly both addressed and annulled. Characters emerge as the same, only different. Texts quote themselves. Sentence objects hijack subject voices and narrative authority. And narrators seek to preempt the theorization and abstraction awaiting them at the supposed conclusion of their texts, by summarizing, abstracting and prescribing themselves. Narrators often seem to want to both tell their story and theorize it, simultaneously. And as a consequence, they see themselves flanked, frightened, contaminated and swamped by parallel levels of awareness and textuality and therefore gravitate accordingly – beside the point. Suddenly, the realm of theory becomes a source of inspiration.

The concluding chapter of this thesis revisits the main themes and motifs as discussed over the previous chapters. It also addresses the immediate paradox haunting any attempt to conclude anything on the basis of texts which so overtly thematize inconclusion and displacement. However, despite this paradox, it proceeds to summarize the chief characterizing features of each of the three primary writers and rearticulates the five concepts as listed in the introduction and ferreted out by the individual close-readings. And it also responds to the baffled opening questions listed in the introduction. Finally, it rearticulates the key concepts from a narrative point of view. In other words, it reads them, considers their implications for and reverberations through their surroundings – the reader, the reading, the world, the text. It tells the story of proliferation as break-down, displacement as frustration, creation as variation, articulation as exercise and annulment as stories in theory. It addresses the fact that these texts constitute flies in the ointment of literary convention and tradition.