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Creating “the Second Self” : Performance, Gender, and Authorship

by L. Timmel Duchamp

The construction of the authorial voice, particularly with respect to gender issues, has always interested me. And so the first epigraph of Julie Phillips’ biography of Alice Sheldon, who famously wrote, of course, as James Tiptree Jr. and Racoon Sheldon, piqued my interest: “To learn to write at all, I had to begin by thinking of myself as a sort of fake man.” The epigraph, which quotes a letter Joanna Russ wrote to Tiptree startled me, for it asserts that for Russ, the *sine qua non* of writing was a sort of mental transvestism, even as it implies that eventually Russ no longer needed to think of herself as a fake man to write. I’ll be coming back to this, but for now, I want to continue with Phillips and Sheldon.

Among the many aspects of Sheldon’s life that Phillips discusses is one that lay at the heart of Sheldon’s writing identity and voice: the problem that gender often entails for the woman who writes. Exploring this problem, Phillips attends carefully to the ambivalence toward second-wave feminism revealed in Tiptree’s correspondence with Ursula K. Le Guin in the mid-1970s. LeGuin, Phillips notes, “often used male protagonists in her fiction. Like Tiptree, like Russ early in her career, she may have needed to imagine herself as a man in order to take possession of her creative power.” And like Russ, LeGuin had to struggle to learn how to write as a woman, “not,” as she wrote to Tiptree, “as an ‘honorary man’ as before, and with a freedom that scared me.” Significantly, Russ insisted to Tiptree that “Not being oneself in any way at all exacts its price... The minute one writes about [one’s own experience], you walk head-on into the cruxes of your own life, whatever they are.”

And yet not all women writing sf before or at the onset of the second wave of feminism have found it necessary to write as a man or from a male viewpoint. Carol Emshwiller, Judith Merrill, Kate Wilhelm, and Naomi Mitchison, to name only a few, seem not to have found it so. And some women who began writing during the second wave of feminism also

found it necessary to write as a man (for example, Eileen Gunn). And so one of the many questions Phillips' biography set me to thinking about was why some women writers have found female authorship deeply problematic.

My first, intuitive idea for approaching this question was to focus on the issue of authority and legitimacy. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes of Frances Boldereff (whose combination of brilliance and "gender-martyrdom" resulted in her assuming the role of muse for poet Charles Olson):

Like a number of creative women [in the US] from the 1930s to the 1950s (or even early 1960s), [Boldereff's] relationship to her own powers was charged with her deeply held opinion of the impossibility or compromise of female achievement. At that time intelligent women felt highly exceptional. They hyperidentified with male triumphs, often feeling separate from women or dragged down by contact with women. They felt like traitors to their gender roles, not-women, or escapees; one response was the intensity of their conviction that female gender roles were their tragic fate. (89)

It was in this particular period—the 1930s through the early 1960s—that Sheldon struggled to write as a woman, in a woman's voice. But, Sheldon wrote in her journal:

I find, in all the writings of women, a strange muffled quality, as if the living word, as it left the lips, had been hastily suppressed and another substituted, one which would conform to some pattern imposed from without.... (137-38)

Can we be surprised by this judgment? Yes and no. Yes, because the most dominating influence in Sheldon's life was her mother, a prolific author and a role model for the highly accomplished woman who felt no ambivalence about her own powers. And no, because one aspect of the gendering of literary authority and legitimacy was the widespread questioning of even the exceptional woman writer's achievement. For a powerful effect of literary modernism in the US—driven by professional men determined to reclaim American literature from supposed female domination—was the critical dismissal of "silly lady novelists" *tout court*, in both high and low culture for most of the twentieth century. Phillips notes that Sheldon had such high standards for art that when in her twenties she decided she would never be among the "great" original painters, she quit painting. Could her standards for literature have been any less stringent?

My recollection that Russ had been educated at Yale, where she received a conservative education in “the Greats,” bolstered my sense that the key to the problem lay in contempt for writing by women. Although I didn’t know then that Le Guin attended Radcliffe, I suspected that she, too, had had an elite literary education. It stood to reason, I thought, that Sheldon, Russ, and Le Guin would have internalized the trivialization and contempt for writing that didn’t conform to male norms. The internalization of such norms, I conjectured, was what set them apart from the writers who called freely on the female literary tradition.

But then I chatted first with Eileen Gunn, who also initially wrote “as a man,” and then with Le Guin herself about it. In February, Gunn told me that she believes that the reason she needed to write as a man when she first began writing was because the texts she learned from as a writer were written by men in distinctly male voices. She learned, she said, to produce her writing voice through a sort of mimicry, which is how, she theorizes, all writers learn to find their own voices. In March, Le Guin told me that she’d never had to imagine she was a man when writing, even at the beginning, when most of her characters were male. When I asked her what difference her coming to feminism made in how she wrote—a difference that resulted in her creating many interesting female viewpoint characters and that she herself wrote to Tiptree involved learning to “write like a woman” and not as “an honorary man”—she said that what changed for her was her sense of the *audience* she was writing for. That is to say, instead of writing expressly for boys and men, she began writing for women as well.

Le Guin’s focus on audience indicated an implicit aspect of the act of writing that I’d never given much thought to, viz., that writing is a *performance*. I mean this in two senses. In one sense, the writer performs in a way similar to the way the improvising actor or musician performs. But the act of writing is also a performance in the sense in which gender is a performance.

About twenty years ago, Judith Butler and other gender theorists first conceptualized gender as performative. From the moment a child enters the world, they said, he or she is hailed (or as Althusser would say, “interpellated”) as a boy or a girl and constantly taught the verbal and behavioral habits that will construct who they are in terms of their gender. The first thing everyone wants to know is the baby’s sex. That’s because every smallest bit of speech about or interaction with the baby will be inexorably determined by that information, largely unconsciously. In her early work, Butler made an interesting, vital connection

between gender and the physical, material habits that help determine who a given person is and what s/he can be, and thus expanded the sense in which we understand the body as discursive—i.e., as *speaking*: through its deportment, its conscious and unconscious gestures, its tics and habits, and above all its interpretation by others. Just as the language of words teems with habitual gender implications, inflections, and limitations on what can be said and done, so does the language spoken by the body. The key here is *reiteration*. Gender performativity includes all the many unconscious ways in which we daily enact gender (with all the class, race, age, and other inflections that are intrinsic to gender), over and over and over again, without noticing most of it.

So, to consider the act of writing as a performance, let's first think about what the act of writing—the production of the writer's voice—involves. Usually when we think about the writer's production of her voice in writing, we conceptualize it as a flow of language bubbling up out of the unconscious, breaking the surface of the mind as an enunciation of words that sound inside the writer's head or move her fingers to write or press keys on a keyboard or both at once. As soon as the writer becomes conscious of the words she is producing, she edits them to suit her purposes, both conscious and unconscious. Put this way, it looks like a simple and unmediated process: our imaginations tap the ideas and tropes and forms, and then construct not only stories but also sentences—sentences that bear the texture and style of the writer's own particular voice. And so we might think that a man's or a woman's voice proceeds out of the unconscious, simply and even “naturally.” But what if it is more complicated?

Michel Foucault states explicitly in his famous essay “What Is An Author?” what all conscious writers understand thoroughly:

It is well known that in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, the present indicative tense, nor, for that matter, its signs of localization refer directly to the writer, either to the time when he wrote, or to the specific act of writing; rather, they stand for a “second self” whose similarity to the author is never fixed and undergoes considerable alteration within the course of a single book. It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the “author-function” arises out of their scissions—in the division and distance of the two. One might object that this phenomenon only applies to novels or poetry, to a context of “quasi-discourse,” but, in fact, all discourse that supports this “author-function” is characterized by this plurality of egos. (129-130)

Foucault takes as an example the voice in which a mathematical paper is written. (And of course that voice is more often than not a collaborative effect of several mathematicians.) But as Foucault notes, the voice in which fiction is written is also a production in which an authorial voice is created that is not the writer's personal voice.

In my view, the production of voice involves another, mediating filter between the writer's unconscious and the words she puts on the page when she writes. When Russ told Tiptree that she had to think of herself as a sort of fake man, she was in effect talking about writing as the performance of a role. I wonder what Tiptree thought of that? Or Sheldon, for that matter? Consider Jeff Smith's 1978 description of his and his wife Ann's first meeting with Sheldon:

While we were there, she was Tiptree often, the raconteur telling stories with little or no provocation, the speculator running with ideas to logical, illogical and evocative conclusions. Sometimes (particularly when she and her husband clattered around the kitchen fixing dinner) she was Racoon, the rather dotty retired schoolteacher supposedly in Wisconsin. These were unconscious—whenever she thought about who she was, she was Alice Sheldon, the one who doesn't write science fiction. (Phillips, 366)

Because the performance of a role is unconscious does not make it any less of a performance in the sense in which gender theorists describe gender as performative. Alice Sheldon's performance of Tiptree and Racoon obviously ran deep, so deep that she could slip into those roles when she was not writing without even noticing that she was doing it. (It might even have been the case that the reason she slipped in and out of the roles when interacting with Jeff Smith was because having been previously known to him in only those roles, his very presence and speech evoked her sense of playing to the audiences for which she had the habit of playing the roles of Tiptree and Racoon.) But then, unlike Joanna Russ imagining herself as "a sort of fake man," Sheldon developed full-blown personas with histories and then while in role interacted socially with a huge number of friends and acquaintances by mail.

Is it possible that the writing voice can *only* be produced through the performance of a role? Although certain aspects of writing become more and more conscious to the writer the longer s/he writes, other aspects become less and less visible because reiteration has made them second-nature. But if we look closely at what the writer does when writing while bearing in mind what Foucault reminds us is the case—that the voice that speaks in

sentences through words is a “second self” that is not identical to the writer’s own self—we can’t help but conclude that writing is the performance of a role, directed always at an audience (that may or may not be the writer’s “ideal reader”), that may or may not be gendered, and that the gender of the “second self” need not be the same as the writer’s own gender.

In an essay titled “Old Body Not Writing” Le Guin talks about how it’s not enough to “sit and think hard, forcefully, powerfully, and make up interesting people and interesting situations.” What is needed to make the story happen, she says, is “the physical side of storytelling,” which occurs when she finds in her “mind and body an imaginary person whom I could embody myself in, with whom I could identify strongly, deeply, bodily.” The experience is like falling in love, she says. And significantly, this “embodying” is not a matter of becoming the character.

I still find embodying or identifying most intense when the character is a man—when the body is absolutely not my own. That reach or leap across gender has an inherent excitement in it (which is probably why it is like falling in love). My identification with women characters such as Tenar or Virginia or Dragonfly is different. There is an even more sexual aspect to it, but not genital sexuality. Deeper. In the middle of my body, where you center from in t’ai chi, where the chi is. That is where my women live in me. (285)

So the writer sits down at her (or his) desk. With the words they produce comes a voice, the voice that is the “second self” that Foucault talks about. In a sense, the words *are* the voice. And the voice is addressing an audience that the writer may or may not be conscious of. By “embodiment” Le Guin signifies her imaginative engagement with the viewpoint character she is producing through her voice. Although the writer, unlike the actor, creates the story, the writer resembles an actor to the extent that s/he embodies the viewpoint character through the voice that then becomes a “second self” in the way that the actor’s performance of a character embodies that character for an audience. “Embodiment” is not, I repeat, *becoming* the character, but imaginatively engaging with it in a boundary-violating way: just as one does when “falling in love.”

Judging by Jeff Smith’s account, Sheldon apparently embodied the roles of James Tiptree Jr. and Racoon Sheldon, but such embodiment functioned at an additional remove than does Le Guin’s embodying of her characters. It would seem that it was Tiptree and

Racoona, not Alice Sheldon, who produced the performing voice and its “second self,” and that each of them produced a distinctly different voice and “second self” embodying distinctly different characters. Significantly, Tiptree began writing before Sheldon began to struggle with the surging second wave of feminism; whereas Racoona’s stories are very much engaged with the issues Sheldon felt so ambivalent about.

A contrasting case to consider is that of Willa Cather as described by Russ in her essay “To Write ‘Like a Woman’: Transformations of Identity in the Work of Willa Cather.” Russ notes that as an adolescent, Cather wore her hair cut “shorter than most boys,” played male roles in amateur theatricals, had a “masculine” voice, signed herself “William Cather,” and “made her entire elementary Greek class laugh when she first appeared in the college classroom because she looked like a boy from the waist up but was skirted from the waist down.” Cather’s most passionate relationships were with women, and Russ argues that Cather was a lesbian. Her novels typically featured male protagonists hopelessly in love with a woman with whom they could never enjoy a complete sexual relationship. Cather has been criticized by a number of women writers and critics (of her day and ours) for her “masquerade,” that is, for adopting a male viewpoint in her fiction. She herself remarked in 1921 to a reviewer that she “always felt it presumptuous and silly for a woman to write about a male character.” But as Russ writes, “If Willa Cather was masquerading, it was a masquerade she returned to again and again, despite her own belief, spoken if not felt, that such a masquerade was silly and presumptuous” (151) Russ’s point is that adopting a male viewpoint was the only way Cather could write about the love she felt for women. Moreover, Cather’s male protagonists feel and behave not as real men would do, but as a woman passing as a man would feel and behave. Russ suggests that if one were to “translate” the situations Cather writes about into situations in which a lesbian is in love with a heterosexual woman, the fiction makes clearer sense. “Masquerade” is obviously not the same as embodiment of a role, but it is a variety of performance, one that is likely far more conscious than embodiment of a role is. And so Russ concludes that in creating male protagonists, Cather was not writing as a man, but as a woman in masquerade, simply because that was the only way in which she could write about the feelings and situations that most interested her.

To return to the question I posed at the beginning: why have some women sf writers found writing “as a woman” deeply problematic while others have not? If writing, like gender, is a performance, often unconscious, directed at an audience often unspecified, but,

unlike gender, the performance that is writing produces not a presentation of one's self but rather a voice that constitutes a "second self," then in every case a writer will do what she finds necessary to achieve a plausible, credible performance for the audience she conceives of. In Sheldon's case, when she invented Tiptree she did not believe that a woman's voice could credibly speak truth, and she apparently did not believe that she could perform a male voice without first creating Tiptree to perform that voice for her. Later, she could not conceive of Tiptree producing the voice that she invented Racoon Sheldon to perform. In Le Guin's case, she ceased to write as "an honorary male" when her sense of audience expanded to include women: when she felt interpellated by women readers, she responded by writing instead "as a woman." In Gunn's case, she wrote "as a man" after several years working as an advertising copywriter—until she attended the Clarion Writers Workshop, where she made the political decision to write "as a woman." She then rigorously trained herself to it until she could do it without constant consciousness of the "artificiality" in creating a female voice. According to Gunn, the "second self" Foucault speaks of is indeed a performance: writing is necessarily "artificial" to the extent that it is a deliberate production of narrative.

I could see vanishing shreds of Tiptree whirling through the suburban air, evaporating under the impact of a chatty, if erratic McLean matron....I don't know if Jeff perceived that Tiptree was hiding somewhere underneath and slightly to the left of the matron, but I could feel it... (Alice Sheldon in a letter to Ursula K. Le Guin following her meeting with Jeff Smith in 1977) (Phillips, 366)

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