



Marie Maclean

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MARIE MACLEAN EXCELLED IN SO MANY different areas of living and of learning that it is difficult to grasp the gamut of her interests or the range of her graceful personality. People who know her as an authority on folk narrative or science fiction were sometimes astonished to learn that her institutional field was modern French literature and theory. She was equally familiar with the classics, and with modern literature in German and English (contemporary Australian writing being a passion of hers). An influential feminist critic with a wide audience in Australia and abroad, she had also worked on a notorious idealiser of women, Alain-Fournier, and a painfully misogynistic poet, Charles Baudelaire. With her husband, the distinguished Germanist Hector Maclean, she shared a deep interest in theatre and a passion for performance, which nourished one of her major books.

Even as a critic, she made a practice of creative methodological and theoretical fusion. Her first book demonstrated the compatibility of the (pseudo-)objective methods of literary structuralism with the subjectivism of the French *nouvelle critique*. Her second was a product of three-way fusion: inspired readings of Baudelaire prose poems blend with narrative theory with theory of performance in a way that renews all three fields. Marie's crowning critical achievement was a book that combines versions of both 'women's' and 'gender' feminism, psychoanalytic and deconstructive theory, a highly personal analysis of autobiography as a genre, and a theory of oppositionality that derives in part from the work of Gilles Deleuze. None of this is what is sometimes politely called eclecticism, but critical thought at full stretch.

Somewhat in the manner of Ginger Rogers, who did everything that Fred Astaire did, but backwards in high heels, Marie achieved a brilliant academic career from an institutional position that was for a long time restricted to a half-time appointment, and after having spent many years raising a family. Far from regretting those years as lost, she found that her family gave her increasing joy as time passed: but to those joys she came to add the pleasures of academic collegiality and scholarly friendship. Although she was a somewhat private person at heart, networking, as it is called, was in her blood, and she practised it wholeheartedly as a form of knowledge production in its own right. She formed chains of friends across the world, and according to feminist, theoretical, narratological and generic (science fiction, folklore, theatre) affinities.

When at the last—after having refused to allow cancer to prevent her from making a long research trip to Paris—she was obliged to recognise that travel had become impossible, she turned to the pleasures of electronic conversation. Of the Internet she wrote: “I’m not young or old, sick or well, pretty or plain. I’m just me, or rather a different me on each list. It’s a whole new existence, where I can say anything I like and make terrific new friends.”

Travel, then—whether as actual voyaging or as an intellectual and personal style of easy self-displacement—was a theme of her life. Born (in London) in 1928 to a mother who herself loved to move, she spent her earliest years between Australia, England and France, settling in Melbourne only when the events of 1939 put Europe out of range. Of those unsettled years, Marie spoke with understandable ambivalence in later life. Having completed her secondary education at Melbourne Girls’ Grammar School, she went on to earn her bachelor’s degree at the University of Melbourne in 1948, with First Class Combined Honours in French and Latin and the Final Honours Prize in French. She was thus a member of the extraordinary group of scholars who owed their initial training in literary exegesis to A R Chisholm, an influence that remained visible in the precision and insight of her critical readings, although she did not follow her mentor in the paths of close reading and commentary.

Marie Maclean next pursued postgraduate study in France and Germany, adopting as her research field French literature of the early twentieth century, with special attention to Alain-Fournier, Cocteau and Giraudoux. During the 1960s, she began part-time tutoring, first at the University of Melbourne and from 1965 at Monash University, which became her institutional home. In 1973 she was appointed half-time Senior Tutor in French and began to climb through the ranks of Lecturer and Senior Lecturer, until in 1989, as the author of two important books of criticism, she became a full-time Associate Professor, sharing her duties between Romance Languages and Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. Although illness forced her retirement in 1993, she continued as Senior Research Fellow and Consultant to work actively with colleagues and especially to supervise her many, and beloved, postgraduate students until only a few weeks before her death.

It will be evident that her research career was grounded in lengthy teaching experience. Less evident, perhaps, is the degree to which her

critical work and her life as an educator were mutually supportive. As a teacher she taught brilliant and often innovative courses on an extraordinarily wide range of topics—French literature, critical theory and semiotics, the folk tale, ‘speculative’ literature. But it was research she lived for. Her career as a scholar was launched when her MA thesis on Alain-Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes* was published as *Le Jeu supreme: Structure et thèmes dans Le Grand Meaulnes*. This book has remained a standard reference. Marie would have liked to entitle it *Le Cercle magique*, a phrase that referred to the thematics, not so much of the ludic as of the ‘illuded’ in Alain-Fournier’s novel, but that can be seen in retrospect to have signalled also an affinity on Marie’s part with the ‘imminent’ approach to texts and the somewhat ‘illuded’ practices of reading then being introduced into France by the ‘Geneva School’ critics and the practitioners of *nouvelle critique* championed by Barthes. About this time my own quarter-century dialogue with Marie Mclean and her work began as a mutually supportive effort on each of our parts to break free of the ‘magic circle’ and to move toward critical practices less complicitous with Barthesian readerly pleasure and more productive, for good or for ill, of critical knowledge.

That move was clearly demonstrated in Marie’s case—in the extraordinarily accomplished performance of criticism as an enlightening practice that was, in 1988, *Narrative as Performance: The Baudelairean Experiment*, published by Routledge. Baudelaire’s texts were taken here as test cases for a lucid theory of narrative (including written narrative) as telling and of telling as performance, a theory in which one can see emerging a concept of ‘excluded’ reading that was to develop fruitfully, in Marie’s later work, into a complex vision of the ways in which excludedness can be turned to positive, if oppositional, account. But it was in *The Name of the Mother: Writing Illegitimacy* (Routledge, 1994) that Marie’s thinking about exclusion came to its astonishing fruition.

This is a book about autobiographical writing by male and female authors in France, from the Revolution to the present, who sought to turn the stigma of illegitimacy into a positive option, the option of ‘delegitimation’, understood as an *assumption* of illegitimacy predicated on a turn to the ‘name of the mother’ in lieu of submission to the law of the father. It contains ground-breaking studies of rebellious and/or revolutionary women (Olympe de Gouges, George Sand, Flore Tristan, Louise Michel) alongside equally illuminating accounts of marginalised

and/or self-marginalising male writers from Stendhal and Baudelaire to Sartre, Genet and Derrida. It is thus a volume not only of unusually resourceful criticism but of the most exceptional conceptual, critical and chronological range.

Acknowledgment of her work was precious to her, and in the last years the signs of its impact began to multiply in the promotion at Monash, her election to the Academy in 1992, and an invitation by the journal *New Literary History* to become an Advisory Editor. To her delight, she received a warm, thoughtful and appreciative letter from Jacques Derrida, who derived stimulus from *The Name of the Mother*.

She then faced the termination of her life, not of course with equanimity but with a kind of matter-of-fact stoicism and exemplary courage. She worked right up to the end, reading and (in the broadest sense) teaching, and pressing her PhD students to make haste as she herself had made haste to research and write *The Name of the Mother* during what the acknowledgements page of that book refers to as 'some pretty bad times'. Having finished her book, she did not rest but went on to write a review article on Peter Carey, a friendly assessment of my own work (a last contribution to our dialogue), and—one of her most accomplished pieces of writing—an essay on the Amphitruon theme that brings fathers, and in particular the practice of social fathering, back into her critical purview. I do not try to say here what we have lost in losing her, but only to suggest a little, and to celebrate, what it was that she brought us.

Ross Chambers