

Debbie's Folly

Lisa Robertson

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«La nef des fous», texte quinziesimiste, illustre bien la dynamique textuelle pratiquée par le genre «Folly Literature». Ce récit de voyage, qui remonte aux débuts du genre, se trouve constamment retardé par la description des 112 idiots différents qui peuplent le navire immobilisé. La description – procédé censé être au service du récit – se donne ici une indépendance extravagante qui subvertit le mouvement général du texte. «Les noms de femmes donnés aux navires se dirigent vers la description», annonce la narratrice de Debbie's Folly, un récit de genre «Folly literature» qui marque bien la fin de notre siècle. Ce texte revisite le classisime pour souligner l'importance du genre (sexué) du lecteur ou de la lectrice qui détermine le type de résistance au récit qui est lui-même toujours sexué au départ. Dans les récits épiques classiques, le «gars» raconte ses aventures vécues avec des reines et des sirènes, ces «autres» qui habitent des forêts et des îles luxuriantes et qu'il doit vaincre à chaque fois pour que les différents récits puissent débiter. Mais chaque début épique est aussi une forme de mort ou, à tout le moins, une «nouvelle redondance», car à partir du moment où le héros s'engage dans une nouvelle aventure, il se met lui-même à la merci d'une hôtesse très accueillante et «disponible». Dans Debbie's Folly, la rencontre entre le héros d'un récit classique et d'une figure archétypique à la Circé n'offre aucun espoir audit héros d'être libéré d'une forme d'hospitalité qui finit par l'effacer par sa prise en charge excessive. «Une personne appuyée sur des coussins violets. L'autre, ayant voyagé durant des années pour arriver à cette rencontre où on lui tisse la défaite de façon très adroite. Il est l'invité d'honneur. Son accueillante hôtesse lui procure des coupes d'or, des lyres, un toit d'or préoccupant, des torches, des bijoux, cinquante servantes, cent jeunes pages, des serviettes de table d'une rare qualité, un sofa brodé». D'une façon très similaire, Virgile, déambulant avec une «autorité stylée» parmi «les luxuriantes allées de la pensée» des bibliothèques, y sera évidemment tenté par une séduisante «figurine de rhétorique», une «bergère barbare» qui l'amènera

se coucher sur les étagères des rayonnages le temps d'un petit échange. Debbie's Folly est structuré selon les règles du discours classique : prologue, récit et épilogue. La force performative de son langage figuratif, au niveau des récits secondaires, ou au niveau de sa trame épique, ornemente et suggère ainsi que la narration est l'invitée du langage. Et les fermetures narratives sont faites de façon à ornementer l'illustration de la difficile position du «sujet-dans-le-langage».

“What if intellectual ambitions were only the imaginary inversion of the failure of temporal ambitions.”
– Bourdieu

“I'd like to think of narrative as a folly, a classically styled folly, whose conspicuous inutility might decorate and articulate the idea of the present. Much in the way that the library, at some trouble to justify profligacy, is a folly.”
– Debbie

Proem

Between antiquity and us floats love in the library. I'll import back into antiquity this lexical span, this unfleshed sex, this loosening tear at the mid-afternoon institution. But even a tear refracts the cursive grammar of gender. I'll call it a lens, a wet rhetoric whose long focus gathers the lilies, the roses, the simple daisies from the pleasant grandeur of that Roman walk to offer them to you.

Argument

With what suave domesticity Virgil strolls among the deep shelves of the paternal library. The metric pulse of the catalogue or calendar charts his walk. To narrate an origin as lapidary, as irrevocable, is only to have chosen with a styled authority from the ranked aisles of thought. For if Virgil has taught me anything, it's that authority is just this: a rhetoric or style which has asserted the phantom permanency of a context. Shall we consider that it is here, in this crumbling folly of taxonomy, that rhetoric flicks her blithe kilt, tempts one to slip between the shelves, find a nuanced nook where an exchange can take place? All porcelain shepherdesses lead to Rome. They're figurines of rhetoric. If I met one in the library, why would I not trust the cadenced drape of her skirt? She will

guide me.

Narrative might annotate an ambivalence: I follow this shepherdess because I want her. The rhetoric of our identification is marked or sprigged with decorative passages like an eyelet cloth. I want to give her a frock through which ambivalent identifications will proliferate. The classical lends me a vexed lexicon of techniques or dictions which I turn to make this fresh dress for my barbarous shepherdess.

Virgil recedes into the distance. Debbie tugs at books as loose dresses her cold porcelain clarity so sotto voce it pours like rope. Halfway down the aisle we drift through a languorous gap in the borrowed alphabet into the surprisingly fearless compatibility of the late classical afternoon.

Ships named for women move towards description. They enter narrative as I have entered books. Whose city is this? Over wine-dark lawns swallows perform auguries and further back economy sculpts the harbour. Islands leak like ink into pockets. Dead-good queens flounce with civic tenderness: their unspooled diction drags and flirts. Slick lyric blocks history. Closure ornaments this plight. Narrative is pushing failure. I feel my gender is out there, floating wildly in that harbour.

But thought greets an ornament. Failure or closure structures heroes. From the outside, from a position of threat, from rank forests and islands, sirens or queens could disperse his fated trajectory. A guy tests his story against songs and cushions and feasts so that he may continue to produce beginnings. Each beginning is a cleavage. The bower is a pyre. To be left behind is annihilation, so it seems. But thought greets an ornament.

Debbie: I dreamt a sonnet mapped my lavish sleep
I read the curbs of epic lust's derive
And there, saw myself.

Precocious closure sculpts
Thin difference, thin frock.

I greet an ornament. Hello shepherdess! Lend me a bit of that stuff. That fancy stuff. Dear Virgil, this is how it is.

Glass houses envelope narrative. It's a lenience in conversation. One person leans back on purple cushions. The other, having travelled for years towards this meeting, brocades a cunning failure. He is the honoured guest. His lounging hostess has provided: foaming gold cups,

lyres, fretted roof of gold, torches, jewels, fifty serving maids, a hundred young pages, rare napkins, this embroidered couch. He may speak with fey authority.

I'm observing this scene from outside, the players back-lit by a wealth of lamps. I'm out of my neighbourhood. The air here is perfumed, the gardens ancient and luxuriant. I am compelled to witness this fresh redundancy though I already know the swank and honeyed story.

Peroration

Books and girls are real lacunae, ya. All that we have forgotten about narrative steals back into narrative and watches us with shining eyes. Narrative deletes its centre. A hero's real value lies precisely in the failure of his eschatological ambitions. The transparency of the classical is a gorgeously useless ruse. Somewhere among those flowering transparencies a shepherdess is hidden. Perhaps she's shacking up with Queens. Perhaps she's cataloguing the rhetorics of plush ambivalence. Gentle colleagues, imagine yourselves as Debbie. Then collate these riffs: Dignity's provenance is lax. Proxy twins the bundled ghosts of a fop's apocalypse. Debbie learns the word loveliest, feeds the future to our capsized mouths. There is no outside except the one that, faunal, we make by consignment.

Jeannie Thib

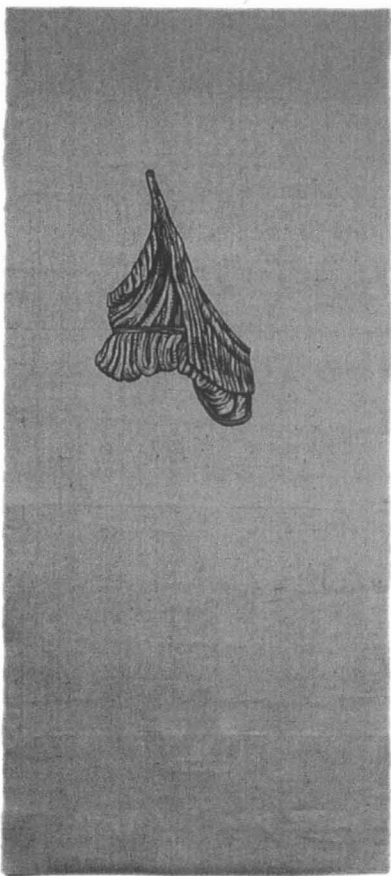
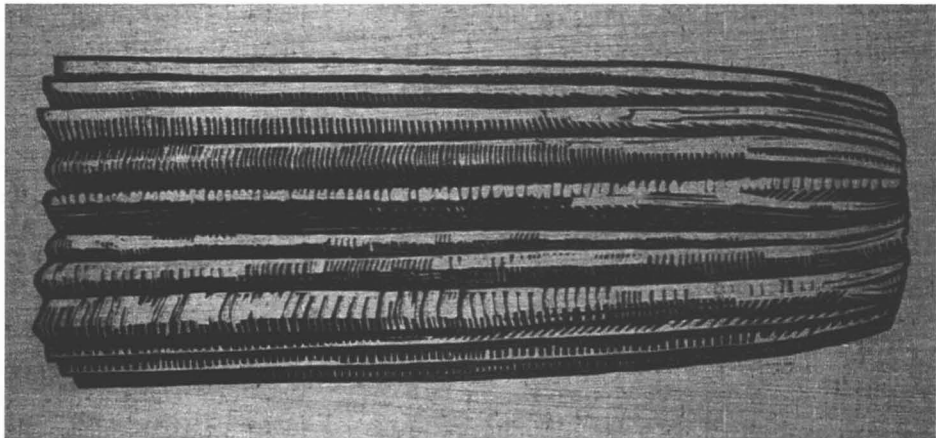


Photo: Cheryl O'Brien

Linocut/burlap, ink, 1995, detail

Vanitas

Photo: Bruce Holland



detail

Photo: Bruce Holland



detail