

Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels by Kathy Acker. Pantheon, 1992.

Reviewed by David Foster Wallace

I'm hoping that for anybody who tries to evaluate and articulate the valuable qualities of the fiction s/he likes to read, some authors present the thorny problem of possessing value without displaying much quality. For me, at least, there are certain fiction writers I feel like I have to admit are literarily important but whose stuff I don't think is very good. How can this be? Do you have this problem, sometimes? If so, can you account for the discrepancy between importance and apparent low quality without ending up at a grim disjunction whereby either you're a hypocrite and a literary camp-follower or you're a Philistine who just can't appreciate certain worthwhile kinds of stories? For me, it's no escape to say it's just a matter of vibrating sympathetically with one school of fiction and not with another; I run into this problem with U.S. authors who are as wildly different from each other as Robert Coover, Gore Vidal, Joyce Carol Oates, Norman Mailer, Joseph McElroy, and Kathy Acker.

Portrait of an Eye comprises Kathy Acker's first three novels from the early 1970s, all short, all terribly abstract, and all first self-published in limited editions that earned Ms. Acker a reputation among the outerest fringes of the Greenwich Village and Bay Area avant-gardes, a reputation she cannily, Robert Frostishly nurtured by expatriating herself to England, establishing herself in London as the major literary voice of a Punk movement with which she had real affinities. Her very high profile as an Angry American on the London art scene led to the Picador/Grove publications in the 1980s of her four big novels: Marxist-feminist reworkings of *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote* in '83 and '86, *Blood and Guts in High School* in '84, and *Empire of the Senseless* in '88. Back in the States, she's now literarily important enough for Pantheon to collect and reissue her earliest productions, "together for the first time for a larger audience" [back jacket].

Pantheon has done both Ms. Acker and a larger audience an ambivalent favor, here. The book's novels are *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*, *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining*, and *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*. All of them are at once critically pretty interesting and artistically pretty crummy and actually no fun at all to read. *Tarantula* opens with "*Intention: I become a murderess by repeating in words the lives of other murderesses*," and then proceeds to juxtapose bits of faked historical autobiography from oppressed, repressed, horny women who end up murdering men, with snippets of actual autobiography from an oppressed, repressed, horny Kathy Acker who seems to get relentlessly victimized by men. *Nymphomaniac* is about a hornily repressed androgynous woman who's victimized and oppressed by a congenitally evil androgynous guy—who's pronominated throughout the thing as "she"—until she (?) eventually kills her (?) in a scene that's plagiarized verbatim from the last page of Poe's "William Wilson," and they're both sent to prison. *Lautrec* is about Lautrec as a horny, oppressed, deformed woman who's abused and rejected by several unpleasant people of indeterminate name and gender, all of whom are confusingly involved in a sex-killing that nobody seems to care about. I've made these novels sound just as comprehensible and interesting as I could.

Among the reasons Ms. Acker is indisputably important to contemporary U.S. literature is that she was employing postmodern fictional techniques long before most American writers understood "post-" as anything more than a cereal concern. She is certainly the first bona fide female U.S. postmodernist, and the first American writer to see the implications of European poststructuralism (Foucault, Barthes, Baudrillard, Deleuze) for the creation of a radically feminist fictional texts. Among the stuff she was up to before any other U.S. woman: questioning aesthetic hierarchies by incorporating materials from popular culture in self-consciously "serious" fiction; questioning the linearity of narrative time by disdaining the cause-and-effect sequences of realist fiction; questioning the notions of fixed identity and static sexuality by undermining the unity and gender of the narrative subject; questioning

the notion or originality by rewriting or outright "appropriating" the words of other writers; promulgating a Derridian, feminist-friendly "metaphysics of absence by portraying characters as passive objects instead of active agents; and exploiting the poststructural triad of political power, sexuality and language by making all her main characters oppressed, repressed, horny women whose narrative utterances fight a holding action against erasure by a malignant, phallogentric, capitalistic Society. Ms. Acker's especially and deservedly important now because now the U.S. Academy has a working post-structuralist terminology that lets critics publish impressive-sounding lists of po-mo strategies like the list just *supra*.

My trouble with Ms. Acker is that the same intensely theoretical aim and ground of her work that lets contemporary critics knock themselves out writing long panegyrics to like her "deconstruction of the phallo-capitalist logos" also empties that work of all but the most abstract and cerebral resonance. Since it's the easiest to unpack, *Tarantula* will be my example. *Tarantula's* entire interest for the reader lies in the theoretical justifications for its form. In this novel, theme is replaced by strategy, and an involvement with the characters is here replaced with a solicited interest in what the author herself is up to. (It's maybe interesting that Acker's books, all of which have impressive Mapplethorpe photos of Acker striking poses on the covers, are every bit as narcissistic as those of a Mailer who simply must be Acker's arch-foe.) In sum, *Tarantula* is less a fiction than a theory-vector, pointing not at an imagined world but at certain rarified critical conceptions of political and literary identity. Just as *Nymphomaniac* and *Lautrec* point like hunting dogs at Foucault's doctrine of sexual fascism and Deleuze and Guattari's (Acker should have to hand over 15% of every royalty-dollar to the authors of *Anti-Oedipus*: Deleuze and Guattari are all over her stuff like white on rice) notion of "n sexes" or "androgyny in the molecular unconscious," so *Tarantula* is clearly a fictional half-gainer off the Laing-MacMurray springboards of "schizophrenic disintegration and "the decentralized "I" ("I," at 400+ appearances, is Acker's favorite word in *Portrait of an Eye*, far out-distancing the 2nd and 3rd place "fuck" and "cunt," which appear 211 and 136 times respectively.)

The intellectual twist at *Tarantula's* heart is slick. R.D. Laing, back in 1960-something, developed the thesis that schizophrenia is to be located existentially in the enforced diffraction of the ego, thus that both true *Dasein* and social adjustment depend on the development of an integrated self, a "centralized I" Acker, taking as self-evident the fact that phallogentric Society schizophrenizes women by denying them both subjectivity and active sexual expression, seeks to demonstrate and dramatize a Laingian psychosis by systematically working to decentralize (I simply refuse to say "deconstruct") the narrative's subject, "Subject" here is a double-entendre. She both bifurcates the novel's plot and dis-integrates the "I" of the novel's narrative voice. She constructs a series of false autobiographies of historically real women who are about as different from Acker as any women could be—meek, demure, passive 18th- and 19th-Century ladies who are pushed and pushed by Society until they snap and kill people in hideous ways—and juxtaposes them with contextless bits of actual (and you're supposed to know it's actual because it's so petty and banal) Kathy Acker autobio. The point—exclusively theoretical—is that to be female in a phallogentric Society is to be existentially vivisectioned, bodi- and voice-less, with all the rage and anxiety and free-floating Continental guilt attendant on that state.

Tarantula's political point is ably *demonstrated*—i.e., made baldly obvious, assuming you're willing to go check out Laing's *The Divided Self*—but it is inadequately *dramatized*, because in voluntarily sacrificing any univocal representation of character, relation or plot, Acker also sacrifices any quality of *story* that would allow the pathetic conflicts of the subjects to be felt or even comprehended by the reader. I'm sure some really cutting-edge Ph.D. dissertations could be written about *Tarantula*, but the poor old regular reader ends up having to endure stuff like:

I'll show them. This time I'll revenge myself. I tell my gardener to ask the Lanagans to lend me two dollars. My gardener's thinking of killing me I ask the Lanagans myself for the two

bucks they don't have any money they're starving I know exactly what's happening. (I dream I return to New York I'm going to miss an important meeting of radicals in the middle of St. Mark's Place I sit in an uptown apartment stare out a window of course I miss the meeting I wander into the church when it's empty night.) (p.8)

which is intellectually confusing in a way that can be resolved by reading Laing and David Cooper and Gilles Deleuze, but is artistically cold and dead and arbitrary in a way you really can't resolve at all.

Maybe a reader's numb spanked distant confusion is just the effect Ms. Acker is after. An interview with her, published in the *Mississippi Review* last year, not only contains some hilariously pretentious questions about the three novels that compose *Portrait of an Eye*; it's got some disingenuous but illuminating responses:

INTERVIEWER: Those early books like *Tarantula* and *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac* seem like they're using some of this semiotic slippage of textual transformations to literalize the notion that identity is unfixed...

ACKER: I honestly did not understand why I was doing what I was doing. I knew I was very angry. I knew I didn't want any centralized meaning... [and] my way to escape that male, centralized meaning was to keep my interest in writing as purely conceptual as I could. So I wasn't interested in "saying" anything in my work. The only thing I could use my works to say is "I don't want to say things!" I couldn't say anything beyond that. I didn't give a damn if one character was another or not—I couldn't even remember who my characters *were!* And I couldn't understand why anyone would read me. I honestly thought I was writing the most unreadable stuff around.

Maybe I'm best off claiming that Ms. Acker's three early novels are valuable for academic critics but low-quality for readers who like fiction that makes some attempt to communicate, or mean, or live. W/r/t the important-writer-but-crummy-writing problem *Ms. Acker* presents, it may be that it's the conundrum's implications for academic criticism itself that turn out to be grim. *Caveat emptor* all around.