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Finding a Way Between: The Theory and Practice of Ross Chambers

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the work of Ross Chambers is that he expresses powerful ideas with delicacy. Chambers's theory is subtle and elegant. Amidst the voices at the extremes, he tries to find a middle way. This path between is not Aristotle's, but one that combines narrative with social commitment. Chambers's understanding of the intricacies of narrative serves him well when he casts his eye on ways to bring about a mediation between those in the halls of power and those beyond them. For Chambers, we are all of the margins and centre, and the politics of mediation is also a politics of invitation. The rules and moves of narrative may help to give us a flexibility, a way of going between the solid gates of traditional thought, custom or prejudice. The stakes are too high not to find a place where we are other to ourselves, not to imagine and enact a politics of possibility and civility. Chambers challenges us to think of an ever-expanding community in which we are conscious of the differences within ourselves and between people and of how that differentiation enriches our lives individually and communally. He does not say that mediation and invitation are simple and easy but he implies that to ignore them is to lose too much.

From his early work on Gérard de Nerval, through his explorations of narrative and narrative theory, to his discussions of minority and gay literatures, Chambers has pursued a community between cultures (Chambers 1969, 1979, 1984, 1987, 1991, 1994). Through the apparently impartial and systematic world of poetics and narrative, Chambers has questioned notions of division between centre and margin, between stable and unstable views of the self or subject. The mad vision of the poet, the movements of go-betweens and mediators, and the leisurely loitering of gay strollers have been the subject of his scrutiny, his theory of how the world and literature read each other on the site of the reader. Chambers's invitation into a state of being in which we have room to manoeuvre is seductive to those of us who are not convinced that choosing sides and sticking to dogma is the road to happiness, civility or wisdom. Mediation is a hope for and a means of survival. Paradoxically, through irony, Chambers calls attention to the seduction of seduction, that is by exploring the gap between the ways words draw us in and the critical distance we must maintain to know about that pleasure and its dangers. We are always a step ahead and behind where we might

want to be, depending on our penchant for pastoral nostalgia and utopian longing.

But our story and situation is in the pleasure or desire (Foucault and Barthes offer different senses here) of the present, that fleeting moment in life and fiction where we are neither past nor future and are both. Whether the narrative pleasure of the story or history is a longing or a fulfillment, it engages us at a personal and political level. 1968 falls between the unity of structuralism and the disunity of post-structuralism, between poetics and rhetoric, in a contention between philosophy and history. The unmoved mover meets the speaker who moves in an opposition between universals and particulars. For those immersed in French culture, like Ross Chambers, 1968 is a great year of revolutionary change. A similar revolution in 1968-69 occurs in North America. Between failed revolution and reactionary backlash in the wake of 1968, another position emerges that represents discontent with the grand narratives of history and the great systems of philosophy and theory: that is oppositionality. It "appears as a way of thinking a politics of change without destructive social confrontations that reverse power relations rather than modify them, and independently of the end-directed narratives that seem to legitimate violence" (Chambers 1991, xii).

With his characteristically generosity, Chambers sees affinities between his own work and that of Michel de Certeau and Jean-François Lyotard. But Chambers finds what he calls his Northwest Passage (a metaphor dear to someone, like me, who studies John Cabot, Martin Frobisher and others) by translating Lyotard's mediation into his own, that is, between discourse as an appropriation and shifts in desire producing change (xiii). Chambers distinguishes oppositionality, which challenges the legitimacy of a system from within, from resistance, which seeks to overturn the system through counterpower. The oppositional shows complicity with the system but violence reproduces the structure of the system it overcomes (xv). He engages and translates Foucault on power. Another translation is Chambers's assimilation of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, especially their contribution that desire is not, as Freud thought, something that reality represses, but something that produces the real. For them, the desire for power represses desire (xv-xvii). Chambers ironically claims that he is a sheep assimilating the ideas of lions as he reverses Paul Valéry's predatory metaphor.

Reading, for Chambers, is "an oppositional practice productive of change," counter-repression and self-education (xvii). Discursive irony and discursive power seem to play a cat and mouse game with each other, but we cannot be sure whether the mouse is not sometimes pursuing the cat. Reading is of the system and is both for and against it. Chambers sets up a both / and rather than an either / or view of the workings of narrative, reading and power. The system produces changes that make power and liberty (xvii-xviii). As Chambers himself realizes, his study of narrative leads him from textual authority to social power. Authority often wishes to cloak or ignore the underpinnings of its social power, what might be called its ideology or governing mythology, while reading, being

oppositional, cannot escape being part of that power, but calls attention to the practice of reading that produces authority and the social power that goes with it (xviii). Oppositionality should not be confused with reversing binary oppositions. In Chambers's theory this reversal is resistance. In my own work, which owes something to Chambers and oppositional theorists, I have chosen "alternative theory" as a term because it is something that alternates between the authority of the system and the rhetoric that it produces and that it tries to oppose. This alternative theory is of and against the otherness ("alter") it proclaims. Each of the essays in this issue builds on Chambers's important work on narrative and oppositionality. His intricate and lucid assimilation or translation of French theory into his own passage between the power blocks (or blocks of ice) has helped many a weary traveller looking for Truth, Theory, or, simply, Cathay. After gazing so far in the horizon, they look into the strangeness and otherness of text and culture and often discover unexpected subjects, states and stories.

There is no way in a brief space, either in this Introduction or in this special issue, that the work of a critic and theorist as fertile and diverse as Ross Chambers can be characterized. I have limited my remarks to an important moment in Chambers's work, the Preface to *Room for Maneuver* (1991), but, as he explains, the thinking for that book began during the 1970s and it took a decade to write. No writer should be judged by one book, so while the contributors to this special issue will return to this key work, they wander on their own paths as readers of the signs, but readers familiar with much of Chambers's writing. A response to that oeuvre follows. It is a celebration, but one that engages Chambers's ideas, rather than accepts them blindly. This kind of engagement means that for most of the contributors, Chambers's theory enables them to take their topics in productive new directions. Their reading of Chambers is enabling, and in a world full of passages, physical and verbal, not to mention forked paths, any kind of comprehension of the laws and powers that govern us as interpreting and interpreted people in interpretative communities is welcome.

In "Many Hearts Will Understand Me: Ross Chambers, Nerval and Rhizomatic Criticism," Marie Maclean says that Chambers views "criticism as a communion of minds and a dialogue between a family of friends" and not as a battle-ground. She implies that from studying Nerval he learned about community based on alterity. In Chambers's last three books, Maclean observes, he shows parallels to the rhizomatic criticism of Deleuze and Guattari, or connected heterogeneity. Nerval's "I am the other" and Rimbaud's "I is the other" form a background to Chamber's explorations of identity. What attracts Chambers to Nerval is how from a position of alienation and powerlessness he could communicate otherness to his readers. Maclean maintains that in *Story and Situation* (1984), *Room for Maneuver* and *Loiterature* (forthcoming), Chambers

also leads readers on a journey into otherness. Reading and friendship constitute the rhizomes of theory.

Reading is also the focus of Michael Worton's essay, "Labyrinths of Desire and Loitering (into) Literature: On Reading Theory — and Loïc Chotard's *Tiers Monde*." Worton asks why people bother with reading fiction when there is no direct economic return. He finds in *Room for Maneuver* an important inquiry into the nature of reading. In this work and elsewhere Chambers suspends value judgements and considers mainstream and marginal texts. Chambers, according to Worton, sees reading as a politicization of the everyday and the aesthetic and provides a useful view of opposition, which admits that reading is duplicitous. This idea that reading is a technology of the self that denies the self is especially helpful in reading gay texts like Chotard's *Tier Monde*. The "Note" to this novel is in the tradition that Chambers calls "loiterature," which is a disorderly, deferring and disgressive genre that opposes dominant forms of literature in which the writer performs the failure of writing as a critique of the aesthetic sublime and systems of knowledge (see Chambers 1993). In fact, the whole of Chotard's text illustrates this genre. It calls into question the relation between theory and fiction, literature and reading.

If Room For Maneuver were a country, then its inhabitants would be infiltrators. That is the premise of Mireille Rosello's "The Infiltrator Who Came From the Inside: Making Room in Closed Systems," but she qualifies and complicates that supposition throughout. Rosello takes the notion of the double agent in the utopian space of Chambers's theory and thinks what might be made of that figure in terms of the world. There is little room to manoeuvre in countries. There may be no outside power, as Chambers maintains in *Room*, but being powerless and on the outside is, in Rosello's view, "a very real form of suffering." It may sometimes be effective to adopt the perspective of the marginal or diverse, but at other times it is not. In France during the 1990s, for instance, anti-racist views of difference are sometimes appropriated for arguments against immigration, that it weakens the host culture and immigrant culture alike. The ironies of infiltration have their exclusionary dangers, but Rosello has some hope that infiltrators will share an understanding, "even if that does not mean inventing a new community."

In "*Larvatus Prodeo*: The Concept of Desire in the Literary Criticism of Ross Chambers," Laurence M. Porter sees the goal of Chambers's literary criticism as changing the world. Porter centres his analysis on desire in Chambers. Structures of power govern desire in a social context by proposing an image of the Other in their own interests, a telos of our becoming. According to Porter, Chambers wishes to change the generation of 1968 by studying the generation of 1848. There is a social construction to desire as the self seeks its goal. In Chambers's theory desire may unveil itself as a move away from apparent privation or the wish of transcendence; it may be conscious or unconscious, active or passive,

mediated or direct. Paradoxically, for Chambers, literature is both inside and outside society. Porter is interested in the relation between seduction and commitment in Chambers's work. Chambers attempts to demystify desire used for political control while advocating desire as opposition to allow those out of power to manoeuvre. Irony and paradox inform Chambers's understanding of commitment and seduction, for the first term can lead to self-mystification and the second to mystification of the Other. Chambers's optimism lies in his view that change, the kind desire can enact, will more often improve matters than not.

The relation of writing and reading, opposition and resistance, terror and terrorism, concerns Robert Rawdon Wilson in "Graffiti Become Terror: The Idea of Resistance." In discussing terrorism, after setting the scene with the case of the Squamish 5 in Canada, Wilson finds play in Chambers's theory of opposition and resistance, especially in elaborating on the place of opposition as the prison and graffiti. They are a means of writing back as an act of freedom. Wilson takes Chambers's view of graffiti as potentially oppositional and extends it to tattoos, which Wilson calls personal graffiti, and whose force he explores in Martin Scorsese's film *Cape Fear*. Violence, Wilson suggests, needs to be reconsidered in terms of oppositionality. He says that as different as resistance and opposition seem, there are border cases between them that collapse the distinction when these terms are considered in view of belief-systems rather than of means. As the case of the Squamish 5 demonstrates, Wilson argues, resistance may seek expression in an oppositional way.

In "Framing the Frame: Maupassant's 'La Chevelure'" Gale MacLaughlan and Ian Reid focus on Ross Chambers's idea that strategies and figures embedded in a narrative produce modes of communication that imply models or animodels of reading. Framing is an apt metaphor for interpretative control that Chambers discusses in *Story and Situation*, and Guy de Maupassant's "La Chevelure" (1884) is a good illustration of that principle because of its frame-narrative and its doubling of the act of reading. For MacLaughlan and Reid, readers should frame the frame and realize its ideological power. Maupassant's story stages a reading of a journal that stresses textual production and reception. MacLaughlan and Reid see the braided hair as a figure of imaginative excess, something that invites interpretation in the core story. This essay, then, extends Chambers's work in this field of scholarship by focusing on a powerful instance of a re-enactment of the doubling nature of interpretation.

Anne Freedman's "...you know, the enunciation..." looks at Chambers's view of critical discourse as a social act, something first stated in the foreword to *Meaning and Meaningfulness* (1979). By considering Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991), Freedman sees its relation to Chambers's thoughts on strategies of reading. Freedman observes similarities between Duras's and Chambers's views on narrative and asks whether the one's autobiographical writings differ significantly from the nineteenth-century art story that the other

favours. What happens when genre becomes the focus of reading is a key question for Freadman. She uses Duras's text to answer this question, which Chambers's work on narration has helped to raise. Freadman wonders whether, for Chambers, genre is secondary to the ideology of art (see Suleiman, especially ch. 5). Is genre personal choice or does art transcend the determination of genre? In Freadman's view, Chambers restores the connection of poetic genres to the worldly praxis of rhetoric, which has important implications for philosophical truth. It is an old story that Freadman proposes but with a new ending, not without loss, recognition, and restoration along the way.

Mediation, which relates to go-betweens and scapegoats, is the aspect of Chambers's theory that I elaborate in "Mediation in the Exchange Between Europeans and Native Americans in the Early Modern Period." If sixteenth-century writers, like Las Casas and Montaigne, set out alternatives to stereotyping, as Chambers also does, then why not try to find out more about mediation between Europeans and Natives in relation to the modern and post-modern go-betweens and scapegoats Chambers discusses? At various times between 1492 and 1700, the Spanish, French, and English and the Natives in the Americas engaged in mediation that was ambivalent, was held under suspicion, and was a sign of hope. By examining those who crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries between European and Native, I have tried to explore the process of mediation. Chambers's theory of mediation has been a great spur to further thought on the topic, which constitutes part of comparative literature and history.

In "For Love and Theory: An Ofrenda," Ali Behdad and Laura Elisa Pérez consider the relation between the amatory and the theoretical in terms of the work of Ross Chambers. They think of community as a bond against power, the self as other. Behdad and Pérez use the metaphor of the altar to present an offering on the altar or other. The mediatory relation of the parasite, who is considered as noise, the role of melancholy, the singular manoeuvres of opposition are other important aspects of Chambers's theory that they engage. They ask an important question which arises from the politics of invitation in the face of exclusion that Chambers envisages: "How does one then imagine a politics of hope that works against our contemporary form of critical spleen?" Finally, they see opposition and resistance as two modes of contestation of power, and they hope for some ways of using positive "lateral affiliations" between them to resist dominant power effectively and without containment. In this hope they wish not to utter a last word: there is no sense being cynical about the the Cynic Diogenes's refusal.

In addition, this special issue includes a bibliography of Ross Chambers's work.¹ From the contributions to the issue, it is possible to see the way Ross Chambers enables others to explore a great variety of texts and to think about the

difficult but crucial relation between narrative and politics. What is apparently the private sphere of desire in language becomes a public gesture. The middle way seems to be between despair and hope, a will, to use the Renaissance English, which includes desire and determination, to individual freedom in a world apparently already determined. Chambers does not assume an easy optimism or individualism or an implacable pessimistic determinism but examines the difficult maze they form together. His room to manoeuvre is an intricate means to under-stand that we as writers and readers and citizens are of and against power. We are part of the problem and the provisional answer to it. The hope in Chambers, what may be called his utopian element, is that we are not condemned to repeat the abuses of power if we are careful and care enough. A community might arise that would not scapegoat those who seem different but explore those differences, discovering, perhaps for the first time, that we are all different from ourselves. Then the history of an expanding consciousness might not be a bad joke staring down the barrel of a gun but more, at last, a party of humanity, a celebration not without its difficulties but a recognition worth holding on to. There is work to be done even in celebration, but, still, the *eiron* must never forget to smile.

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MARIE MACLEAN

Many Hearts Will Understand Me: Ross Chambers, Nerval and Rhizomatic Criticism

There is a certain tradition which regards criticism as a battle-ground on which victories are won and struggles lost, while the victor becomes the authority in the field. There is another tradition which sees criticism as a communion of minds and a dialogue between a family of friends. Ross Chambers has espoused the latter view of his critical task ever since his early work on Gérard de Nerval. One feels that Chambers came to Nerval as a postgraduate student in search of a research topic and found himself one of the "many hearts,"¹ those who begin as readers and end as converts. And it is a long conversion. Putting aside one's prejudices to understand Nerval's worlds of madness, of dreams, of radical alterity is not easy. Yet nothing is imposed. As readers slip into the narratee position, they find they have become the champions of a cause. Nerval's construction of his narratees as a network of friends, of his writing as a speaking in many tongues, and of his texts as part of a vast intercultural enterprise, is so germane to Chambers's own mindset that we may read the evolution of his criticism in that light (Chambers 1987, 1991, 1995).

The result seems to me, particularly in Chambers's three latest books, to correspond so exactly to the model of the rhizome, to use the term favoured by Deleuze and Guattari,² that I want to explore the parallels. The ideal in this model is work which, like Chambers's, is original and yet contributes to a constantly shifting configuration of linked equals. Rhizomatic criticism works on "Principes de connexion et d'hétérogénéité: n'importe quel point d'un rhizome peut-être connecté avec n'importe quel autre, et doit l'être" ("Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome may be connected with any other and should be"; Deleuze and Guattari 13). It is to be contrasted with "genealogical" criticism,³ one which stresses strict lines of descent, hierarchies

- 1 "Bien des coeurs me comprendront" is from *Sylvie* (Nerval 624). All translations from Nerval are my own.
- 2 I am using the chapter "Rhizome" in Deleuze and Guattari. All translations are my own.
- 3 Cf. Irigaray's analysis of the patriarchal model.