

## Lynne Tillman: Declaration of Disinclinations

Prominent among the obstacles to my peace of mind, as person, writer, thinker, is thinking about stuff I don't want to. I would prefer not to, as Bartleby said, think about being a woman writer or being a woman. I've done that since I was ten, and read Norman Mailer's essay on "lady novelists." It was not pretty.

Because of involuntary membership in this minority, I am regularly asked about the ramifications of being one. Women have less power than males, less influence, less wealth, less control of our lives, crucially, sexual reproduction, less intellectual cred, etc. The weaker, stupider sex. How do I feel about it? Not great.

Sometimes women love their subjugation, believe they are weaker, and want to have their weakness appreciated. We/they have rationales, have been acculturated, or indoctrinated. There is also pleasure in, or because of, being dominated, and in denial and degradation. Freud and others have theorized about these issues and more. Oh, what do women want? Boring.

The term "woman" is a construction. The French know well that Simone DeBeauvoir wrote, way back in the 1940s, in *The Second Sex*, "Woman is not born, she is made."

So, presumably, she can be unmade. If I write "woman can be unmade," what is your first association? "A man can be unmade," does it have the same association? What

about the taste in the mouth, where the tongue hits against the teeth to produce, or the lips press together to form, those words? A man can be unmade. A woman can be unmade.

The birth control pill dramatically, sometimes ecstatically revamped sexual activity, or let's say, the amount of sexual activity happening outside of marital bonds, and supposedly sexual freedom arrived. Now "freedom" is a big word, and I'm uncertain that it is, for a woman, entirely contingent upon not becoming pregnant. Freedom from reproduction, the pill brought that; but sexual freedom, that big concept, exists inside a social order, inside culture, which includes language. Women's sexual behavior is named, with words that carry earlier attitudes.

Language is layered, words contain histories of usage, denotations, connotations, and one meaning fights to dominate another, to command the first definition in the dictionary. But any perusal of etymologies in the OED shows how long a word travels until it changes meaning, and yet the older meanings still cling to the words' coat-tails.

I like the theoretical ideal of neutrality, of non-hierarchical thinking. I'd like to be a writer, a person, but I am not. None of this naming is my choice. I'm a woman, "still" or I'm "only a woman." "A good, bad woman, a silly, frivolous woman, an intelligent woman, a sweet woman, a harridan, bitch, whore, a fishmonger, gossipy woman. A woman writer."

What is "a woman writer"? Does "woman" cancel or negate "writer"? Create a

different form of writer? Or does “woman” as an adjective utterly change the noun “writer”? “Man writer”? Not used. “Male writer,” rarely employed. Are there “man books” being read in “man caves?”

OK, I declare: I’m a woman who writes, a person who writes. But how am I read?

These topics and questions frustrate me. I have talked about being made a woman almost all my life. (I work to unmake or at least question every aspect of myself.) It is part of my consciousness and unconsciousness. (I’ll spare you my dreams.) I have recognized the inequities between men and women; I have read about, and experienced, some of the insults women suffer. When I was a teenager, I told “a man psychologist” that I wanted to be a poet. Surprised, he asked, “But wouldn’t you rather bake a cake than write a poem?” No kidding, you can’t make this stuff up.

I continue to think about what I don’t want to, because incredibly to me it is still important. Prejudices and inhibitions are ugly and important. They deform minds and limit imaginations. These limits are also faced by gay writers, black writers, non-white or ethnic writers, writers in diasporas of all kinds. Minorities are required to define themselves, to write about their “condition” as if it were a disease. To explain a marginality they did not want or construct, asked to be and write what is expected to have been their experience. “The other’s experience.” To reproduce comfortable notions of themselves as others, in which differences between and among them are forgotten and ignored. Because there is no recognition of “their” humanity, their individuality, “I”

always represents a group.

Minorities are born into their categories, and expected to write literary set pieces, to be well-made others. Use this language, not that, this setting not that. It all seems “to come naturally.” But there is little that is natural.

A man writes of sex, a woman does, but it’s different. Of course, it’s said, a man is a man, a woman is a woman. Their experiences are different. Whose are more important? And what happens to their writing in a hierarchy? How is it judged? How is the language perceived? There are insidious, obvious, and subtle effects within this gendered cosmos.

John Updike and JD Salinger wrote novels about families, relationships, love affairs. Jonathan Franzen and other men are doing it now, too. They might be “women novelists.” These men write about domesticity, and isn’t it a woman’s realm, and doesn’t this make anyone who enters there a woman novelist? No, no. Because when a man does it, it’s different. A man is a construction too, though, and he can be unmade.

I don’t expect an easy liberation from or within our language; but I do believe that because language is the bedrock of culture, when and if things change, it will be in large part because language usage changes, along with shifts in attitude, over time, which live inside words, and we writers can be effective in how we twist our language. How we court it, cajole it, how we bend it to our will.... This requires consciousness, and an analysis of one’s position inside language, that is, inside culture.

The Hopi Indians say: “Any place can be the center of the world.” Each of us

writes from and lives in the center. I am not an essentialist, in any form. For one, I don't think there's a women's language, l'écriture feminine. I don't write "from my body." I write with a body. I write and think in the English language, its meanings activated by gendered writers and readers. If a transgendered writer or reader can change this, I'll be happy. I support this need for changed attitudes about gender, for breaking out of the gender box. I'm not sure that gender itself gets changed by changing genders, by changing bodies, because to choose one rather than the other implies that gender offers a secure position, an essentially different one. But the pressure the transgender movement has put on all of us gendered characters has already caused our language, our culture, to change.

I believe: All individuals everywhere should have as much choice in life as possible. The sad truth is, and continues to be: One knows choice only by recognizing the lack of it, and also that we have freedoms or opportunities we don't recognize.