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BREAKING THE SILENCE:

Protest in the Feminist Fiction  
of Two New Zealand Writers

A thesis presented in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in Sociology at  
Massey University

Lynley Jane Cvitanovich

1984

Everything is speechless when we do not  
recognise its speech.

Edith Searle Grossmann:

A Knight of the Holy Ghost,

1907.

## ABSTRACT

The thesis is concerned with the work of two feminist writers. The conceptual tools of a socialist feminist critique are applied to the selected fiction of Edith Grossmann and Jean Devanny. Grossmann's novels were written in the late 1890's and early 1900's. Devanny's New Zealand novels were written in the late 1920's and early 1930's. The major aim of the thesis is to illustrate that the protest fiction of Grossmann and Devanny is inextricably linked to the realities of life for women, in the period within which they were writing. In contrast to traditional literary criticism, and to Marxist aesthetics applied in isolation, it sees the need to develop an understanding of the specific problems of women within capitalist patriarchy. The attempted synthesis of radical feminist and aspects of Marxist analysis points toward such a progressive development.

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## INTRODUCTION

The thesis focuses upon the selected fiction of Edith Searle Grossmann and Jean Devanny. The novels chosen for analysis are Grossmann's In Revolt (1893) and its sequel A Knight of the Holy Ghost (1907), and Devanny's The Butcher Shop (1926) and Dawn Beloved (1928). The feminist consciousness, which fuels the fiction of both writers, determines their selection for inclusion in this study. Edith Grossmann lived and wrote during the first wave of feminist organisation, in the emergent New Zealand society, in the late eighteenth hundreds and the first decade of this century. Jean Devanny lived and wrote during the five years leading up to the depression, and later in the Australia of the nineteen thirties and forties. Her feminist consciousness was shaped during a period when feminist politics and organisation were a thing of a swiftly disappearing past.

Grossmann struggled to make sense of the female experience from within the confines of a broadly based feminist movement. Produced during an unprecedented period of feminist activism in this country, her fiction reflects the same concerns informing that movement. From the feminist critique of a male dominated

social order springs Grossmann's impetus for didacticism. Devanny however, had no such mass based feminist support or incentive to fuel a parallel inclination toward didacticism in her fiction. Her feminist polemics are shaped by different forces. Her political motivation arose from her involvement within a male dominated radical tradition, that of Marxist socialism.

In an age which desired, above all else, security and stability (Roberts, 1981, 8), Devanny's recognition of the oppression upon which such stability must be built is remarkable. Her fiction reflects the struggle both to articulate the specificity of women's oppression, within the existing social order, and to visualise the alternative for women offered by an alternative male dominated left. Lacking feminist support structures, on any organised level, Devanny was largely alone in her attempts to evaluate the range of male determined ideals concerning the 'proper' place of women.

The shaping of the feminist consciousness of each writer is a central concern in the thesis. Both Grossmann and Devanny are 'lost' or minor writers in the landscape of New Zealand literature. Their work, often assumed to be lacking in imaginative vision and in literary value, has tended to be forgotten. The thesis argues however, that the work of Grossmann and Devanny needs to be assessed by different criteria than those of the traditional literary criticism to which it has previously

been subjected. Existing literary standards are called into question and the value of the work of the two writers to the contemporary feminist movement considered. If it is agreed that women, and women as writers, have often been devalued in this society then we need a different set of criteria with which to assess their works and lives.

Works of fiction are not produced within a vacuum. Rather they carry with them the flavour of the social world within which they are produced. The fiction of Grossmann and Devanny is, in this sense, considered inseparable from the lives of women of the period. The feminist polemic, central to the work of both writers, overlays the struggle to understand and change women's lives. This is a concern that continues to motivate contemporary feminism. It is upon these earlier feminist visions and struggles that the present movement is built. In order to see the feminist movement as a continuing and growing force there is a need to uncover the links forged between women from generation to generation. Through doing so there emerges the realisation that the silence of women has not been total. Across the years women have spoken out, alone or in groups, against their oppression.

While the fiction of Grossmann and Devanny is the fiction of protest, this protest is circumscribed by the material and ideological realities of women's lives. Their breaking of the silence does not always take the form of protest. Rather, the

two also inadvertently reinforce dominant ideologies by registering their misdirected support. Breaking the silence is a tentative and alien exercise for these feminist writers. Invariably they either protest, acquiesce or support the oppressive realities of women's lives in a fashion that often appears unpredictable and contradictory.

The uncovering of messages so despatched has a new and important meaning when those messages are deciphered, or unscrambled, with the tools developed within contemporary feminism. It is the tools of socialist feminism, a critical approach aimed at understanding the totality of the female experience and pushing for revolutionary change, that are here brought to bear on the quest for discovery. Only through the lens of this approach, I shall argue, can the lives of women, and women writing about women, at the turn of the century and in the twenties be fully appreciated. Thus the seeming complexities of the fiction of Grossmann, and of Devanny, are brought into focus. The confusing, and often contradictory, message they offer can best be pieced together through the use of such an approach. Feminist fiction, female lives and herstory assume different proportions when abstracted from a perception and evaluation dominated by male interests. It is these interests which have conspired to silence women and against which Grossmann and Devanny were amongst the first New Zealand women to openly contest.

The novels included for analysis in the thesis were selected on the basis of their political concerns. Edith Grossmann's In Revolt and A Knight of the Holy Ghost are more consciously concerned with feminist polemics than are either of her other two novels. Jean Devanny's The Butcher Shop and Dawn Beloved are explicitly concerned with the oppression of women within capitalist society. Devanny published a total of sixteen novels. Of these only seven can be claimed for New Zealand literature, the remainder being both written and set outside this country. The two novels chosen for analysis are representative of her New Zealand fiction. They deal with those issues and ideas which were to be articulated, in a variety of ways, within all her later works of fiction.

The format of the thesis is straight forward. In Chapter I the central concerns of a feminist literary criticism are outlined. Before exploring the relationship of feminist literary criticism to the women's liberation movement itself, I overview the varieties of feminist enquiry and praxis. Socialist feminism is introduced as an approach intended to combine the analytical power and revolutionary strategy of Marxism with the feminist sensitivity to the most subtle nuances of female oppression. The inadequacies of alternative theoretical understandings of women's oppression are seen to also impinge upon their 'radical' approaches to literary criticism. Thus the advantages of a socialist feminist approach are seen as contributing to the progressive development of this field of enquiry. At the

conclusion of the chapter I briefly sum up what I see as being the focus and direction of a socialist feminist literary critique.

Chapter II is the first of four chapters which involve the application of a socialist feminist literary critique. These applied studies follow a similar, though not identical, format. There is no rigid structuring and each chapter explores theoretical, literary and historical material as the need arises. In Chapter II In Revolt, Edith Searle Grossmann's second published novel, is discussed. I seek to understand and interpret the novel in the light of the conservative feminist tradition to which it belongs. Chapter III concerns the sequel to In Revolt. In turning to A Knight of the Holy Ghost ground work for analysis laid in the previous chapter provides an entry into discussion. The novel is essentially part of the same tradition despite the fourteen years separating it from its predecessor.

In Chapters IV and V I turn to the work of Jean Devanny. The feminist politics informing her novels are those of Marxist feminism. Fundamentally opposed to the conservative tradition of Grossmann, Devanny's feminism paradoxically reflects striking similarities to that of Grossmann. I attempt to use the conceptual tools of socialist feminism to unravel such seeming contradictions. Chapter IV deals with Devanny's third published novel, Dawn Beloved. Chapter V deals with her originally banned

first novel The Butcher Shop. The chronological inconsistencies in the order of these dealings is confronted in Chapter IV. In Dawn Beloved Devanny's ideas are more clearly presented providing a suitable entry into understanding the complexities of her work.

Finally I sum up why the work of Grossmann and Devanny has been ignored and the possible value in its rehabilitation and critical consideration. A socialist feminist approach, it is suggested, provides suitable answers for both problems. I conclude that the work of the two writers has a value beyond that measured by traditional standards of literary criticism. Inextricably linked to the reality of women's lives within a specific period their fiction provides an entry into understanding the ordering of those lives. Refracted through the lens of socialist feminism that understanding helps shape strategy for change.

The enforced silencing of women is challenged by Grossmann and Devanny and their struggle to voice the concerns of women is not unlike that faced by contemporary feminists. Spokeswomen for generations of others, conscious and unconscious of the nature of their oppression, Grossmann and Devanny articulate grievances traditionally left unspoken. That their voices have been raised and now go unheard, their message distorted, appropriated or misunderstood, stands as evidence of the struggle women have confronted in attempting to break the silence.