

Suzanne Moore on a voice that won't die away

Nerve Endings

Why do people hate Kathy Acker so much? To judge by some of the vitriolic reviews she has been getting recently for her latest novel **In Memoriam To Identity** (*Pandora* £12.95), it is simply because the woman has got a cheek.

How dare she come over here with her fancy literary theory and pernicious post-modernism and pretend to be a great avant-garde artist? How dare she try so hard? Here in Britain we like writers to write what we already know in a way that we can know it even more. That's good writing. If writers must start mucking about with the muddle of language itself then we'd prefer them to be men.

The fact that women may have more actual reason to break down the prison walls of 'good literature', 'the bourgeois novel' or 'patriarchal language' doesn't seem to come into it. Leave it to the boys. Male critics like Anita Brookner. They can even appreciate Maya Angelou or any feminist who simply replicates structures they already understand.

OK, so I'm being crude; but the criticisms that are thrown at Acker are cruder. Her cutting up and reworking of other texts has all been done before, they say, and better. Which of course is the point. She will keep writing about sex. So does Martin Amis. But worst of all she wears her heart and her theory on

her sleeve.

In Acker's work the theory lies uncomfortably naked on the surface of the text. And that's kind of embarrassing because we are used to excavating an author's hidden meaning. Even the title of her latest work gives it away - *In Memoriam To Identity*.

This being Acker, we know that secure, centred identity, that fiction that we live by, will be shattered, that her characters won't be 'proper' characters but fragmented beings whose only real sense of self comes from what they are not, from pain and from sex. Rimbaud, Airplane and Capitol are figures of loss. But most of all they are survivors. They survive the rapes, the sex shows, their childhood rejection. Only their bodies tell the truth.

It's not easy to read. As always with Acker's work, she shows that she can write wonderfully. And that she can write appallingly. From profundity to profanity, from the beautiful to the banal, the hysterical pull of the prose to speak only of itself is wearing. This heretical desire not to represent, not to centralise meaning, is what makes Acker so valuable and so irritating. As the literary establishment are so keen to point out, she is not Burroughs or Beckett. The implication being that only writers of this calibre are allowed to experiment in this way.

But you have only to read her short story Humility in



the collection **The Seven Cardinal Virtues** (edited by Alison Fell, *Serpent's Tail* £7.99) to realise her worth. Here in the context of stories by six other women writers, her work stands out not just as courageous experimentation but as absolutely essential. It's not that there is anything wrong with the other stories by established writers like Michele Roberts and Zoe Fairbairns. They are the very thing that the middle-brow literary establishment raves about: 'the well-crafted short story'. Enjoyable and forgettable.

Acker's piece, one of the best things she has ever written, is a deceptively simple tale about a writer who is accused of plagiarism. It is a deconstructionist's manifesto that is as funny as it is provocative. The writer advised to 'find her own voice' rebels. She doesn't want to be the author as god, she doesn't want to force language to be uni-directional, to present a

single viewpoint. Instead she wants to 'be left alone to play', which is why she uses a text by Harold Robbins in her work.

Of course it's tempting to read this as the *real* Kathy Acker's voice, her *real* experience, because for all the tricks, all the technique, we are still desperate to find the origin of the text. Barthes's famous 'death of the author' still only works inside the pages of a book. Outside, the cult of the author is ever stronger.

Indeed, Acker is both victim and benefactor of this. Her intense romanticism about both art and artists only adds to it. The irony is, of course, that she has found some kind of voice whether she wants to own it or not. And she will insist on using it in that very shrine devoted to men who are in love with the sound of their own voices - the literary avant-garde. Never mind the novels, feel the nerve.