Delicious

At River House, where the OLR was produced in the late 1970s, we used to have a Lacan reading group, and Ann would always be there. Decades on, it’s hard to distinguish a one-off memory, now settled into indicative story, from something that really did happen pretty much all the time. But what I remember is this. We would take it in turns to read out a couple of sentences or a paragraph of Lacan from the English translation, and then there would be a pause. A pause when—so it has since come to seem—almost none of the five or six people sitting there thought they had understood a word of it. But a pause at the end of which, as often as not, with a longing and ever-lengthening exhalation, Ann would slowly articulate the single word, delicious. It was a kind of sotto voce exclamation, as if such a thing could also be a pure and concise perfection of critical utterance. Delicious! After that, there was really nothing more to say. Perhaps a nod or a technical query from here or there, and then on with the next bit.

Ann had an almost aesthetic appreciation of all things hard-line theoretical, and she shared or perhaps she initiated the militant OLR dismissal of anything that could be construed as a dilution or distortion of theory. There was a lot of that about at the time, all up for our condescending or exasperated condemnation. At some point I had got hold of a book that had just come out by Rosalind Coward. Coward had all the theoretical credentials—with John Ellis, she had recently written another book that was severely entitled Language and Materialism: Development in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject. But this new one was called Female Desire and was all about issues such as body image and food porn. It had a mainstream trade publisher and a consciously journalistic subtitle, Women’s Sexuality Today. No one could have mistaken it for a treatise on Lacan. It intrigued me because I hadn’t seen anything like this before—a feminist cultural studies book that was written by someone translating theory into a readable language.

I really wanted to show it to Ann, perhaps because there was a rumour that she had gone through a radical feminist phase, with anti-housework banners stuck up on the landing at Warborough. At the same time I couldn’t imagine the Ann I knew endorsing such a frivolous development of theory. And so it was with some trepidation—I think this was at her house—that I took the object out of my bag and handed it to her. She looked at the cover, opened it up, examined the contents page. She asked me what I thought of it. She probably lit another Gauloise. She read a page or two. Then she carefully closed the book and smiled and gave it back to me.

‘Delicious!’

Rachel Bowlby