

Gynesis

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Source: *Diacritics*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Cherchez la Femme Feminist Critique/Feminine Text (Summer, 1982), pp. 54-65

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464680>

Accessed: 11-05-2020 17:03 UTC

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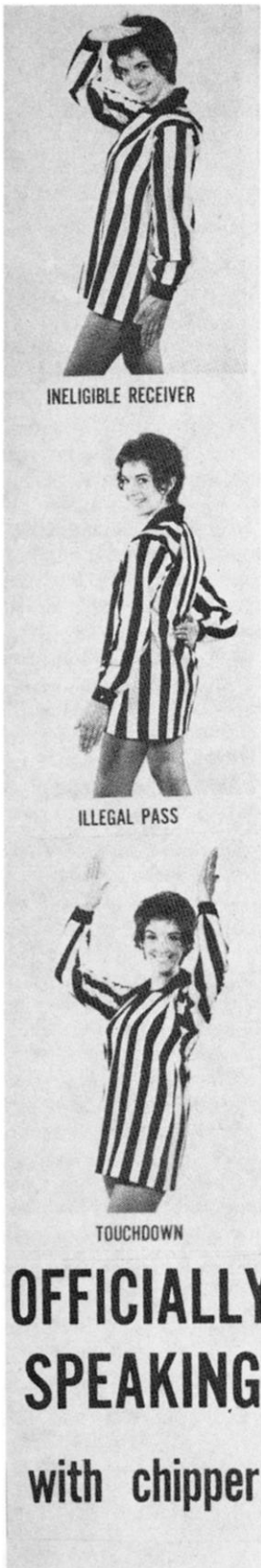


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GYNESIS¹

ALICE JARDINE



In a discussion of the problems involved when “observing others,” Paul de Man mentions in passing that, when addressing two cultures, “the distressing question as to who should be exploiting whom is bound to arise.”

In Paris, after almost three years of working closely with feminists and others, I am no longer sure either whom I am “observing,” or who my “others” are. Given that inbetween state, I would like to begin with the title of the MLA Special Session for which this paper was originally written: “New Directions in Feminist Critical Theories in France and the Francophone World.”²

I will be sharing with you here some of my reflections on theories developed in France (I should say in Paris) over the past two decades. That much is clear. But the words “new directions,” “feminist,” and “critical” pose a problem for me. First, it is unclear that there are any “new directions” in French feminist thought right now – for *feminists in France* at least. After the outburst of theoretical enthusiasm and energy during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, the French *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (MLF) experienced a series of splits, rivalries, and disappointments which have led them to stop, go back, think, read, and write again. In fact, the term “MLF” now legally belongs to only one group in France – “Psychoanalysis and Politics.” And this group, according to its own literature and public stance, is most definitely opposed to feminism – as are many of the other women theorists, writing in France today, whose names are beginning to circulate in the United States. Who, then, do we mean by “feminist”? That word, too, poses a serious problem. Not that we would want to end up by demanding a definition of what feminism is and, therefore, of what one must do, say, and be, if one is to acquire that epithet; dictionary meanings are suffocating, to say the least. But if we were to take “feminism” for a moment as referring only to those in France who qualify themselves as feminists in their life and work, our task would be greatly simplified. For example, if I were to talk about feminist theorists in France, I would want to insist on what might be called the “invisible feminists,” those younger women as yet not “famous” who are working quietly behind the scenes, in study groups and special seminars, trying to sort out and pick up the pieces left in the wake of the both theoretical and practical disputes of the last few years. Or I might invoke the feminists who are attempting to map out some very new and long awaited directions under Mitterand’s government; or the ones who have left France to work at the Université des Femmes in Belgium, or in the United States. But, increasingly, when in the United States one refers to “feminist theories in France” or to “French

¹What follows is extracted from a longer study that I am in the process of completing: *Gynesis: Woman in the Contemporary Imagination*.

²My thanks to Marguerite LeClézio for inviting me to present this paper at the 1981 MLA.

feminisms," it is not those women one has in mind. Perhaps this is because they are not, or are not primarily, working in feminist critical or literary theory, whereas theory is currently a locus of interest for American feminism. Feminist (literary) criticism, as such, does not really exist as a genre in France. To my knowledge, only three books published in France over the past few years could be categorized as feminist literary criticism: Anne-Marie Dardigna's *Les châteaux d'éros*, Claudine Herrmann's *Les voleuses de langue*, and Marcelle Marini's *Les territoires du féminin avec Marguerite Duras*.³ Other women theorists whose work has had or is beginning to have a major impact on theories of reading, and who at one level or another are writing about women, at the very least do not qualify themselves either privately or in their writing as feminists and, at the most, identify themselves and their work as hostile to, or "beyond," feminism as a concept. Hélène Cixous, Sarah Kofman, Julia Kristeva, Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, for instance, belong to this group and their names are heard in the United States.⁴

I would even go so far as to say that the major new directions in French theory over the past two decades – whether articulated by men or women – posit themselves as profoundly, that is to say conceptually and in praxis, anti-feminist. That does not mean that they should be rejected or ignored by feminists. On the contrary.

But it does mean that those American feminists, including myself, whose reading habits have been deeply changed by contemporary French thought must remain attentive to what are, ultimately, some very complex problems of translation – in the most literal sense of the word as well as in its broader and more difficult sense, as the inter-cultural exchange of ideas: the specific problems inherent to the importation and exportation of thought.⁵

What follows may be seen as a gesture towards thinking through some of those problems. First I will attempt to clarify what I mean by the "anti-feminism" of contemporary French thought and, in so doing, explicate my own title. Then I will complicate things further by outlining briefly what I see as the three major topographies of that French thought – as explored by the male theorists there. Why insist on "the men" instead of "the women"? Because all of the women theorists in France whose names I have mentioned are, to one degree or another, in the best French tradition and not unproblematically, direct disciples of those men. That is not meant as a criticism, but, at the same time, those women cannot be read as if they were working in isolation – especially in France where the tradition of the "school of thought" or the "literary salon" is still strong. I should also mention that the questions and problems I am raising are grounded in a hypothesis that the "new directions" in contemporary French thought are, in their "inspiration" and "conclusions," an attempt to delimit and think through what is now loosely called "modernity" or, more problematically in the United States, "post-modernism." My feeling is that any "detour" of feminism through contemporary French thought is a voyage into that as yet still vague territory of *modernity* completely avoided, in my opinion, by Anglo-American feminist thought. The generic term "contemporary French theory" designates for me the first group of writers after the Frankfurt School to try to come to terms with the (threatened?) collapse of the dialectic and its representations which *is* modernity. Ultimately, the question I would want to put into circulation here would be this: are feminism and modernity oxymoronic in their terms and terminology? If so, how and why? If not, what new ruse of reason has made them appear – at least in France – to be so?

Not long ago, Annette Kolodny wrote that "As yet, no one has formulated any exacting definition of the term 'feminist criticism'" ["Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Criticism'" in

³Claudine Herrmann, *Les voleuses de langue* (Paris: des Femmes, 1976); Anne-Marie Dardigna, *Les châteaux d'éros* (Paris: Maspero, 1980); and Marcelle Marini, *Territoires du féminin avec Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977).

⁴Luce Irigaray is a special case, one we will not be able to discuss in this essay, but will reserve for close attention at a later date.

⁵During the discussion following my presentation of this paper at the MLA, there was a lot of energy expended over the words "feminist" and "anti-feminist." It was almost as if the problems of translation addressed here could be resolved if everyone in the room could just come to an agreement about what feminism is – or is not. The problems with that (primarily Anglo-American) approach to interpretation are, of course, made abundantly clear by many of the French theorists mentioned here. What is important, they might say, is not to decide who is or isn't a feminist, but, rather, to examine how and why feminism – as both word and concept – may itself be problematic.

Critical Inquiry, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn 1975), p. 75]. Like Elaine Showalter, she distinguishes between those women who write about “men’s books” and those who write about “women’s books.” (Kolodny also mentions a third category – “any criticism written by a woman, no matter what the subject,” – but she does not pursue it, implying its inadmissibility to any feminist.) Feminist criticism, within those parameters, is as multiple and heterogeneous as the “methodologies” available for use. She adds: “[These investigations] have allowed us to better define the portrayal of and attitudes toward female characters in a variety of authors and, where appropriate, helped us to expose the ways in which sexual bias and/or stereotyped formulations of women’s roles in society become codified in literary texts” [p. 75]. This short statement by Kolodny summarizes well, I think, feminist criticism in its most fundamental gesture: an analysis (and critique) of fictional representations of women (characters) in men’s and women’s writing.

If the author is male, one finds that the female destiny (at least in the novel) rarely deviates from one or two seemingly irreversible, dualistic teleologies: monster and/or angel, she is condemned to death (or sexual mutilation or disappearance) and/or to happy-ever-after marriage. Her plot is not her own and the feminist critic is at her best when drawing the painful analogies between those written plots and their mimetic counterparts in “real life.”

Increasingly, women feminist readers reach the point where they can no longer read “the men.” That is, they begin to find the repetition unbearable. This is true of both kinds of male fictions – “fiction” and “criticism.” This limit, when reached, is particularly relevant in the case of criticism, however, when one realizes that the majority of male critics (in all of their incarnations) seem not to have read (or taken seriously) what feminist criticism has produced. They continue either to ignore gender or else to incorporate it into an untransformed reading system, with an ironic wink of the eye, a guilty humanistic benevolence, or a bold stroke of “male feminism.”

This is perhaps one of the reasons why the focus on women writers (and critics) has given such fresh energy to feminist criticism: focusing on women writers, feminist critics can leave this repetition behind, feel that they are charting an unknown territory which, at the same time, is strangely familiar. This mixture of unfamiliarity and intimate, identificatory reading seems, indeed, to be the key to a new creative feminist style. This change in focus has, at the very least and undoubtedly, produced some of the most important feminist criticism to date.

Let this stand, then, as a brief outline of primarily Anglo-American feminist concerns: the sex of the author, narrative destinies, images of women, and gender stereotypes, are the touchstones of feminist literary criticism as it has developed, most particularly, in the United States.

When one turns to France, however, one learns that this bedrock of feminist inquiry has been dislodged: there, in step with what are seen as the most important fictional texts of modernity, the “author” (and his or her intentionalities) has disappeared; the “narrative” has no teleology; “characters” are little more than proper name functions; the “image” as icon must be rendered unrecognizable; and the framework of sexual identity, recognized as intrinsic to all of those structures, is to be dismantled.

We will be looking here at this new kind of inquiry where it intersects with what I am calling the fundamental feminist gesture. Of these intersections, there are three that seem to me particularly relevant.

The first concerns the word, “author,” and more generally, the problem of the speaking subject. Lacanian psychoanalysis, Nietzschean and neo-Heideggerian philosophies in France, have shaken this concept apart. As Michel Foucault reminds us, “None of this is recent: criticism and philosophy took note of the disappearance – or death – of the author some time ago. But the consequences of their discovery of it have not been sufficiently examined, nor has its impact been accurately measured” [“What is an Author?,” trans. Josué V. Harari, in *Textual Strategies* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 143]. First, the “I” and the “we” have been utterly confused: the “I” is several, psychoanalysis has shown; and, further, one of the major ruses of Western metaphysics’ violence has been the appropriation of a “we” by an imperialistic if imaginary “I” (whole individual with an interior and exterior, etc.) The notion of the “Self” – so intrinsic to Anglo-American thought – becomes absurd. It is not something called the “Self” which speaks, but language, the uncon-



scious, the textuality of the text. If nothing else, there is only a “splendid anonymity” or a plural and neuter “they.” Contemporary fiction enacts this anonymity within a lottery of constantly shifting pronouns.

The assurance of an author’s sex within this whirlpool of de-centering is problematized beyond recognition. The “policing of sexual identity” is henceforth seen as being complicitous with the appropriations of representation; gender (masculine, feminine) is separate from identity (female, male). The question of whether a “man” or “woman” wrote a text (a game feminists know well at the level of literary history) becomes nonsensical. A man becomes a woman [*devient femme*] when he writes, or, if not, he does not “write” (in the radical sense of *écriture*) what he writes, or, at least, does not know what he’s writing. . . . No-one writes. “And behind all of these questions we hear hardly anything but the stirring of an *indifference*: ‘What difference does it make who is speaking?’” [p. 160, my emphasis]. The feminist’s initial incredulity faced with this complex “beyonding” of sexual identity is largely based on *common sense* (after all, *someone* wrote it?!). But is it not that very *sense* (“common to all,” i.e. humanism) that the feminist is attempting to undermine? On the other hand, when you problematize “Man” (as being at the foundations of Western notions of the Self) to the extent that French thought has, you’re bound to find “Woman” – no matter who’s speaking – and *that* most definitely concerns feminist criticism.

The second major intersection of importance here is the status and stakes of representations, where the tools of representation (and of feminist criticism) – narrative, characters – are recognized as existing only at the level of the fantasies which have entrapped us. To endlessly analyze those fantasies is to ask for repetition. It is the *process* which moves beyond/behind/through those fantasies – the enunciation and disposition of phantasies⁶ – which must be examined. That “process” is attached to no self, no stable psychological entity, no content. And, here again, “theory” is presented as in step with a certain kind of contemporary “fiction.”

The third intersection, and the most problematic for me personally, is the radical French questioning of the status of fiction and, intrinsically, of the status of truth. One of the oldest metaphysical problems, this is the newest and most fundamental problem for modernity. What does the radical questioning of the status of truth and/or fictions in theory (and fiction) in France imply for feminist criticism? The feminist critic is concerned about the relationship between “fiction” and “reality” (truth) – with how the two interact, mime each other, and reinforce cultural patterns.

These “new directions” – beyond the “Self,” “the Dialectics of Representation,” and beyond (Man’s) “Truth” – have not emerged in a void. Over the past century, those master (European) narratives – history, religion – which have determined our sense of legitimacy in the West have undergone a series of crises in legitimation. Legitimacy is part of that judicial domain which, historically, has determined the right to govern, the succession of kings, the

⁶Here I maintain the distinction in English between “fantasies” (conscious) and “phantasies” (unconscious).

link between the father and son, the necessary paternal fiction, the ability to decide who is the father – in patriarchal culture. The crises experienced by the major Western narratives have not, therefore, been gender-neutral. They are crises in the narratives invented by men.

To go back and try to analyze those narratives and their crises means going back to the Greek philosophies in which they are grounded and, most particularly, to the originary relationships posited between the *technè* and *physis*, *time* and *space*, and all the dualistic couples which determine our ways of thinking. And rethinking those dualistic couples means, among other things, putting their “obligatory connotations” into discursive circulation, making those connotations explicit in order, one hopes, to put them into question. For example, the *technè* and time have always connoted the male; *physis* and space the female. To think new relationships between the *technè* and *physis*, *time* and *space*, within an atmosphere of crisis, requires a backing away from all that has defined their relationships in the history of Western philosophy, a questioning of the major topics of that philosophy: Man, the Subject, Truth, History, Meaning. At the forefront of this rethinking is a rejection by/within those narratives of what seem to have been the strongest pillars of their history: Anthropomorphism, Humanism, and Truth. And again, it is in France where, in my opinion, this rethinking has taken its strongest conceptual leaps, as “philosophy,” “history,” and “literature” attempt to account for the crisis-in-narrative which is modernity.

In France, such rethinking has involved, above all, a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which has been the master narratives’ own “non-knowledge,” what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other than themselves is almost always a “space” of some kind, over which the narrative has lost control, a *space coded as feminine*. To designate that process, I have suggested a new name, what I hope to be a believable neologism: *gynesis* – the putting into discourse of “woman” as that process beyond the Cartesian Subject, the Dialectics of Representation, or Man’s Truth. The object produced by this process is neither a person nor a thing, but a horizon, that towards which the process is tending: a *gynema*. This *gynema* is a reading effect, a woman-in-effect, never stable, without identity. Its appearance in a written text is perhaps noticed only by the woman (feminist) reader – either at the point where it becomes insistently “feminine” or where women (as defined metaphysically, historically) seem magically to reappear within the discourse. The feminist reader’s eye comes to a halt at this tear in the fabric, producing a state of uncertainty and sometimes of distrust – especially when the faltering narrative in which it is embedded has been articulated by a man from within a nonetheless still-existent-discipline. When it appears in women theorists’ discourse, it would seem to be less troubling. The still existent slippages in signification among feminine/woman/women and what we are calling *gynesis* and *gynema* are dismissed as “unimportant” because it is a woman speaking.

What I mean by the “anti-feminism” of contemporary French thought may now seem clearer. For feminism, as a concept, as inherited from the humanist and rationalist eighteenth century, is traditionally about a group of human beings in history whose identity is defined by that history’s representation of sexual decidability. And every term of that definition has been put into question by contemporary French thought. In the writings of those French theorists participating in *gynesis*, “woman” may become intrinsic to entire conceptual systems, without being “about” women – much less “about” feminism.

First, this is the case, literally, insofar as contemporary thought in France is based almost entirely on men’s writing and, most importantly, on fiction written by men. For example, a survey of such disparate writers as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze – or Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva – yields remarkably few references to women writers. (To women, yes; one even finds passing remarks on women theorists – Lou Andreas Salomé, Marie Bonaparte, Melanie Klein – but to women writers, no.) Lacan has much advice for women analysts, but only focuses once on a woman writer (Marguerite Duras) – as having understood his theory! [Jacques Lacan, “Hommage à Marguerite Duras,” recently reprinted in *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Albatros, 1979).] Derrida, to my knowledge, never explicitly mentions a woman writer.⁷ Deleuze and Guattari refer to Virginia Woolf as

⁷Excluding Marie Bonaparte – essential to Derrida’s critique of Lacan in *Le facteur de la vérité* – I can find only three oblique exceptions to this observation. Oblique in that a particular woman is never named in any of the three references: a footnote to “Violence et métaphysique” in *L’écriture et la*

having incorporated the process of what they call *le devenir femme* in her writing – but “not to the same extent” as Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, or Henry Miller [Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), pp. 55–60].

The leading figure of “Psychoanalysis and Politics” and its women’s bookstore *Des Femmes*, Cixous is perhaps the foremost theoretician in France on the specificity of “feminine writing” (which does *not* mean written by a woman). Yet it is not women writers who are the focus of her work. Her focus is on the male poets (Genet, Hölderlin, Kafka, Kleist, Shakespeare) and on the male theoreticians (Derrida, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Lacan, Nietzsche). Because in the past women have always written “as men,” Cixous hardly ever alludes to women writers; one recent exception has been her reading and public praise of Clarisse Lispector, whose narrative is more “traditional” than one might have expected.⁸ Irigaray and Kristeva are uniquely concerned with analyzing the male tradition: from Freud to the philosophers to the avant-garde. The kind of empirical text-picking I have just indulged in is perhaps ultimately not very useful. But this textual lack of reference should at least be pointed out given our “intersections.” For the second reason that *gynesis* is not necessarily “about” women is more abstract: women can (have) exist(ed) only as opposed to men within traditional categories of thought. Indeed, women (especially feminists) who continue to think within those categories are, henceforth, seen as being men. . . .

Let me now again briefly enumerate these three intersections, this time emphasizing the “sources” of *gynesis*, so that we may begin to see more closely why this accusation is made. Then I will discuss one male theorist who has had a profound influence on both feminist and anti-feminist thinking in France: Jacques Lacan. I will be emphasizing his work, in such a brief way, less as written by the man named Lacan than as read by a new generation of men and women theorists in France.

*The Speaking Subject: The Positivities of Alienation*⁹

The “Other” has been the major preoccupation of French thought for the last fifty years. In the United States, at least until very recently, that term has most often evoked Sartrean phenomenology and the inevitability of inter-subjective warfare. But while Americans were busy reading Sartre, French intellectuals were re-reading Heidegger and Nietzsche, becoming obsessed with Mallarmé, and the texts of such writers as Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, and re-questioning Hegel’s master/slave dialectic as elaborated in Kojève’s reading. These rereadings and the theoretical outburst of what is loosely called “structuralist theory” interlocked unevenly, but progressed together steadily towards a radical redefinition of “alterity” which directly refuted that of Sartre. The phenomenological “Self” and “Other” came to be seen as belonging with all of those Cartesian models of rational and scientific knowledge where “certainty” is located in the Ego – as “predator of the Other.” And it is this Ego, no matter what its sex or ideological position, that came to be seen as responsible for our modern technological nightmare. It is also this Ego that the fictions of modernity (Artaud, Joyce, Mallarmé, Beckett) have been seen as attempting to explode. The result of this recognition has been an accelerating exploration of Man’s Non-Coincidence-With-Himself through new theories of alterity. And parallel to this retreat of the All-Too-Human-Subject (both male and female), there has been a re-genderization of the space where alterity is to be re-explored in language. The space “outside of” the conscious subject has always connoted the feminine in the history of Western thought – and any movement into alterity is a move-

différence (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 228; his references to an article by Barbara Johnson in “Envois” *La carte postale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), pp. 162–164; and his dialogue with Barbara Johnson à propos of her paper on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in *Les fins de l’homme* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), pp. 75–88.

⁸See Hélène Cixous, “l’Approche de Clarisse Lispector” in *Poétique*, No. 40 (1979). The reader might also want to refer to her brief interview with Michel Foucault on Marguerite Duras: “A propos de Marguerite Duras: in *Cahiers Renaud Barrault*, No. 89.

⁹I am aware of the scandalous nature of using these “old words” – “positivities” and “alienation” – to qualify a general philosophical movement intent on abolishing both positivism and phenomenological theories of alienation (Entäusserung in Hegel). I am not sure whether the fact that these two words seem best to qualify a “certain teleology” of contemporary French thought is due to an extreme case of paléonymie (c.f. Derrida, *Marges, La Dissémination and Positions*) or whether the fact of such a general emphasis could seem obvious only to the feminist reader.

ment into that female space; any attempt to give a place to that alterity within discourse involves a *mise en discours de la femme*. If an autonomous “I” or “he” can no longer exist then only an anonymous “she” will be seen to – as Heidegger might say – ex-sist.

Thinking the Unrepresentable: The Displacement of Difference

Representation is the condition that confirms the possibility of an imitation (mimesis) based on the dichotomy of presence and absence, the dichotomies of dialectical thinking (negativity). Representation, mimesis, and the dialectic are inseparable; they designate together a way of thinking as old as the West, a way of thinking which French thought, through German philosophy, has been attempting to re-think since the turn of the century. Between 1930–1960, the dialectic (and its modes of representation), as elaborated by the neo-Hegelians and redefined by the phenomenologists, was the major focus of French intellectuals and represented a major hope for reconstructing the world. An understanding of negativity – either as represented by the “Idealist” or as redefined by the “Marxist” – would bring about the possibility of building a general science of contradiction. But there soon surfaced in France a movement towards redefining the functions of mediation elaborated by traditional Hegelians and Marxists, as well as a quickening sense of urgency about looking again at the relationship between those two systems of thought. That movement, which



came into its full maturity after 1968, still pursues its quest for a conceptuality which would be non-dialectical, non-representational, and non-mimetic.

The deconstruction of the dialectic in France is, for our purposes here, where the process of *gyne*sis becomes the clearest. For to de-structure or attempt to subvert the dialectic is to put the function of mediation into question. Lacan was the first to displace, slightly, the mediator in patriarchal culture – the father – from “reality” to the “symbolic,” as well as the first to reconceptualize and re-emphasize new spaces “exceeding” the dialectic, twisting the dialectic into a knot. The philosophers-after-Lacan, especially Derrida, Deleuze, and Lyotard, were to displace mediation even further. The *Aufhebung*, recognized as mediating between Culture and Nature, Difference and Identity, is also seen as that which fundamentally defines Male and Female through hierarchization. Those philosophers will, therefore, in their radical displacement of mediation, set about a total reconceptualization of difference (beyond contradiction), self-consciously throwing both sexes into a metonymic confusion of gender. And, as with the demise of the Cartesian Ego, that which is “beyond the Father,” – overflowing the dialectics of representation, unrepresentable – will be gendered as feminine.

The Demise of Experience: Fiction as Stranger than Truth?

Disarmed of the cogito and the dialectic, lost in a maze of delegitimized narratives, any question of “Truth” in/for modernity can only be a tentative one. It will therefore only con-

cern us here to the extent that a certain definition of truth, based in an experience of reality, is intrinsic to feminism as a hermeneutic. That is, the notion that women's truth-in-experience-and-reality is and has always been different from men's and has consequently been devalued and always already delegitimized in patriarchal culture. And that if men are experiencing that delegitimation today, it can only be a positive step towards demystifying the politics of male sexuality. . . .

The major battle, in the wake of Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, has been to unravel the illusion that there exists a universal truth which can be proven by any so-called universal experience and/or logic. Truth, therefore, can equal neither "experience" nor "reality" as those words have been traditionally understood; and therefore any discourse basing itself in either one is, in truth, an age-old fiction.

Henceforth, the theorists of/in modernity will begin a search for the potential spaces of a "truth" which would be neither true nor false; for a "truth" which would be *in-vrai-semblable*. For *vraisemblance* is the code word of our metaphysical heritage.¹⁰ "Truth" can thus only be thought through that which subverts it. The true must be thought strangely, outside of the metaphysical categories of opposition – or between them.

This approach involves, first and foremost, a relinquishing of mastery – indeed, a valorization of non-mastery. Secondly, the *true*, to be isolated in those processes anterior to, or in some cases, beyond the Truth as produced by the *Technè*, is that which can never be seen, which never presents itself as such but rather captures, points, withdraws, hides itself in its veils: and that true is "woman" – the "non-truth" or "partial true" of Truth. Or, for others, "woman" is precisely that element which disturbs even *that* presupposition (Truth as castrated).

Whatever the strange intricacies of these new wanderings through the demise of Truth-In-Experience, "woman" is that element most *discursively present*. Julia Kristeva has called this new element a *vréal* [*La Folle vérité*, p. 11] – a kind of "she-truth."

This "she-truth" has been put into discourse in new ways in France – hence the *gynesis* whose potential spaces I have had to outline so schematically here. The demise of the Subject, of the Dialectic, and of Truth has left thinkers-in-modernity with a void which they are vaguely aware must be spoken differently, and strangely. As "woman." Or *gynema* . . .

* * *

Among Cartesian orphans, Lacan is one of the best known explorers of the spatial contours of *gynesis*. In his Seminar XX, entitled *Encore*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), he elaborates, elaborately, how and why "woman" is that which escapes any form of universal logic, how and why "woman is not All." That is, he shows how, as opposed to Universal Man (the Self of Humanist thought), "woman" may be seen as the anti-universal *par excellence*. Woman is not All; she is excluded by the nature of words and things. There is something *chez elle* which "escapes" discourse.

But Lacan does not stop there. For if woman is not All, she nevertheless has access to what he calls a "supplementary *jouissance*" – beyond Man, beyond the Phallus. This "extra *jouissance*" is a substance, different from but not unrelated to "the quite expansive substance, complement of the other" described as "modern space": a "pure space, just as one says pure spirit" [p. 25]. Most importantly, this *substance jouissante* is of the order of the infinite; it cannot be understood consciously, dialectically, or in terms of Man's Truth – for it is what we have always called "God . . ."

"Feminine *jouissance*" will, therefore, be posited as the ultimate limit to any discourse articulated by Man. It is, however, only the first of a series of such limits, which, through metonymy, will all be gendered as feminine. For example, the limit of any discourse for Lacan is also the "true." Truth (capital T) can/could only exist as long as there is/was a belief in Universal Woman. The "true," like woman, is not All. And this "true," *inter-dit*, located as it is between words, between-the-lines, provides an access to what is perhaps the most important discursive limit for Lacan: the Real.

¹⁰From a psychoanalytical perspective, Jean-Michel Ribettes has maintained that it is also particularly male, belonging as it does to an *obsessional* rather than *hysterical* economy. c.f.: "Le phallus (*Vrai/semblant/vraisemblance* du texte *obsessionnel*)" in *La folle vérité*, ed. Julia Kristeva (Paris: Seuil, 1979), pp. 116–170.

The Real must be treated carefully. For not to treat it carefully is to misjudge the force of Lacan's twisting of the dialectic and to return to a nineteenth century Freud through the back door. In Lacanian literature, the Real has no ontological foundation. It "is" neither Reality, nor History, nor a Text. The Real designates that which is categorically unrepresentable, non-human, at the limits of the known; it is emptiness, the scream, the "zero-point" of death, the proximity of feminine *jouissance*.

Further, the Real – like "feminine *jouissance*" and like the "true" – is *imprévisible*. Unseen and unforeseeable, it surges out of the unconscious, as terrifying as any God no matter what name the latter carries.

Is the unconscious, then, going to be gendered as being as feminine as the other limits of the symbolic which it seems to hold in store for us? Yes. Woman as Other is "in relationship to what can be said of the unconscious, radically the Other, [. . .] that which has to do with this Other" [p. 75].

But if Man's unconscious is "woman," what about women's unconscious? Here we arrive inevitably at a question addressed to Lacan by a feminist, Luce Irigaray's "scandalous question": is woman the unconscious, or does she have one?¹¹ Lacan will reply: "Both" – but only with regard to the male subject. Irigaray will not be satisfied with that answer. But other women analysts will begin with this supposition in their attempt to define the "female subject" – at the coordinates of writing by men and feminine *jouissance*.

It is no accident that those analysts will confront that question through "literature." For is the modern question put to the literary text not the same as that asked about woman? Is literature our unconscious or does it have one? Lacan will again answer: "both." It has one to the extent that it does not know what it is saying. It is our unconscious to the extent that it is the space of literarity itself: *lalangue*, as the "cloud of language [which] makes [up] writing" [Lacan, p. 109]. Writing is that letter which escapes discourse as its "effect," just as *lalangue* is that which "is at the service of completely other things than communication" [p. 126]. Like the unconscious, the written text is a *savoir faire* with *lalangue* [p. 127].

This succession of feminine spaces is enough to make the woman reader dizzy. Is writing then going to be gendered as being as feminine as "feminine *jouissance*," the "true," the "Real," and the "unconscious"? Here Lacan stops. Beyond the realm of intersubjectivity, for Lacan, there can be no understanding. Lacan will call a halt to his feminine metonymy faced with literature itself – except to the extent that *lalangue* is necessarily maternal and that the "letter" always has what he calls a "feminizing effect" [c.f. "Littérature" in *Littérature*, No. 3, 1971]. In spite of Lacan's irritating paternalism, we must not forget that he consistently shied away from going beyond his own early warning that "the images and symbols *chez la femme* can never be separated from the images and symbols *de la femme*" [Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 728]. If "woman" in his thought designates that which subverts the Subject, Representation, and Truth, it is because "she" does so in the history of Western thought. To assert that is perhaps to uncritically continue it. In any case, psychoanalysis alone can go no further than that recognition without rephenomenologizing its original conception. The next link in the feminine chain will be left to Lacan's Others.

One of those is Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni.¹² She begins with Lacan's barring of universal woman (the woman): woman is not All. Woman is divided, partitioned; that is her specificity. Further, that this division-in-herself marks woman's specificity means that alienation is fundamental to her being-in-the-world (rather than merely fundamental to culture). For Lemoine-Luccioni – and this is the core of her argument – it is only this intrinsic partitioning in/of woman that is capable of explaining what we have known about women from the beginning of time. Hers is an extreme Lacanian case of "The man will always . . . the woman will always" as Stephen Heath points out ["Difference" in *Screen*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Autumn 1978)]. This division-in-herself explains woman's narcissism [*Partage des femmes*, p. 35]; why she can't create, "even as a painter" [p. 165]; why it is men who are the philosophers and poets "We've known that since Dante" [p. 10]. It, in fact, explains everything – from woman's

¹¹c.f. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974) and *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977).

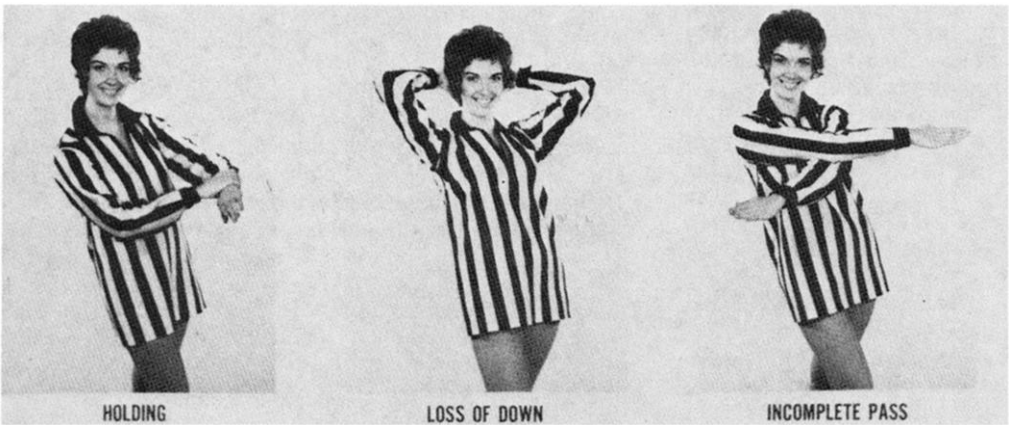
¹²c.f. Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, *Partage des femmes* (Paris: Seuil, 1976) and *Le rêve du cosmonaute* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

lack of talent for mathematics [p. 80] to her perennial modesty: "It is not in the nature of woman to expose herself" [p. 70].

In her second book, *Le rêve du cosmonaute*, Lemoine-Luccioni goes even further. There, she insists on how women in fact incarnate Lacan's woman-spaces. Women exist within his "feminine *jouissance*" [*Le rêve du cosmonaute*, p. 49]; they attain the Real "more surely" than men [p. 61]. It is, above all, women who engender *lalangue* upon which the symbolic order is founded and upon which it will always depend.

Within this context, it comes as no surprise that feminism is denounced by Lemoine-Luccioni as a danger to the social contract itself. For if "woman" were to disappear, "so too would the symptom of man, as Lacan says. And with no more symptom, no more language, and therefore no more man either" [p. 10]. The only hope, therefore, is for women to revindicate, not their right to a discourse or to a look of their own, but rather to their difference-as-not-all.

What then would be women's place in the world? If women incarnate "woman" as the problem of identity, the discontinuity of the social contract, the symptom of Man, then "why not count on them to assume the irreducible difference that resists unification, since woman is there, and the sexual difference is there as well, and since woman alone can be the figure of division?" [p. 182]. Saving the world would seem to be up to women . . .



Another woman analyst, Michèle Montrelay, while sharing the curious logical mixture of pessimism and optimism apparent in Lemoine-Luccioni, is less dogmatically Lacanian [Michèle Montrelay, *L'ombre et le nom* (Paris: Minuit, 1977)]. Her analysis, while remaining strictly loyal to the Lacanian doxa, does not fall into the same anthropological commonplaces as does that of Lemoine-Luccioni. This is in part because she is not primarily writing about women, but about something called "femininity." But it is also because she is closer to the literary text than Lemoine-Luccioni. Montrelay would seem to want to render Lacan's "woman" incarnate in a different way. Her "woman" is not partitioned, divided, in the world, but rather the locus of a "primary imaginary" dedicated to "feminine *jouissance*." And women are not necessarily closer to this primary imaginary than men. In fact, "Women's books [only] speak of this 'feminine' imaginary which men – poets, among others – possess" [p. 155]. According to Montrelay, it is the male poets, not women, who have provided us with an access to that imaginary – through writing.

Here is where Montrelay completes Lacan's feminine metonymy more thoroughly than Lemoine-Luccioni: "feminine *jouissance* can be understood as writing [. . .] this *jouissance* and the literary text (which is also written like an orgasm produced within discourse) are the effect of the same murder of the signifier [. . .] Is it not for this reason that, with Bataille, Jarry, Jabès, writing portrays itself as the *jouissance* of a woman?" [pp. 80–81].

The list of male writers continues throughout Montrelay's book. Women, writing, "do not leave this feminine substance on the page" – as men do. In any case, it would seem encouraging that woman writers are gradually becoming "less feminist." For, ultimately,

Montrelay shares the same apocalyptic sentiment as Lemoine-Luccioni. Somehow humanity must avoid the inevitable trauma of doing away with “woman” as man’s symptom – if we are to avoid bringing the social order, the order of language, crashing down.

Here we have reached a point where, if space permitted, we would want to 1. trace the trajectory of Lacan’s “woman spaces” as unfolded by other male French theorists, even by those most overtly opposed to Lacanian analysis; and 2. follow how other women theorists, whatever their posture towards analysis, have, in varying degrees and from different political stances, insistently posited that women somehow incarnate those spaces. For example, if we were to return for a moment to the notion of writing-as-feminine, we would most certainly want to treat, at length, the work of the foremost theoretician of *écriture* in France: Jacques Derrida.¹³ For there, Lacan’s “feminine *jouissance*” (as not all, in excess, invisible, half-said), as “supplement,” will be found to be intrinsic to a new, non-human, de-naturalized body: not that of woman, but of the text as *écriture*.

For Derrida and his disciples, the questions of how women might accede to subjecthood, write surviving texts, or acquire a signature of their own are the wrong questions – eminently phallogocentric questions.

Rather, woman must be released from her metaphysical bondage and it is writing, as the locus of the “feminine operation,” that can and does subvert the history of that metaphysics. The attributes of writing are the attributes of “woman” – that which disturbs the Subject, the Dialectic, and Truth is feminine in its essence.

We would also want to look at the ways in which women theorists of *écriture*, like those of Lacan’s “feminine *jouissance*,” have not hesitated to incarnate Derrida’s “feminine operation” by/in women, if in very different ways. Hélène Cixous names Derrida’s “writing-as-feminine-locus-and-operation”: *l’écriture féminine*.¹⁴ And she goes on to posit that if “feminine writing” does not require the signature of a woman, women, today, nonetheless, do have a privileged access to it. For Sarah Kofman,¹⁵ women already incarnate Derrida’s “feminine operation” (as undecidability, oscillation), an operation that will eventually put an end to all metaphysical oppositions, including that of men/women, and move towards a generalized feminine *jouissance*.

For these women, feminism is hopelessly anachronistic, grounded in a (male) metaphysical logic which modernity has already begun to overthrow.

* * *

I have tried to outline here some of the reasons why we might not want to qualify the “new directions” in contemporary French thought as feminist and, most especially, as feminist only when and because they are being developed by women. At the same time, I feel that French thought can be an extremely important interlocutor for what we call feminist literary criticism in the United States. For if, as I have only been able to suggest here, modernity represents a new kind of discursivity on/about/as woman (and women), a valorization and/or speaking of “woman”; and if we, as American feminists, are going to take modernity and its theorists seriously; then feminist criticism has some new and complex questions to address itself to.

Are *gynesis* and feminism in contradiction, or do they overlap and participate with each other in some way? In what ways might the texts of *gynesis* be reintroducing certain very familiar representations of women “in spite of themselves”? That is, to what extent is that process designated as feminine absolutely dependent on those representations? Might it be that to posit that process – beyond the Subject, the Dialectics of Representation, and Man’s Truth – as a process incarnated by women is to fall back into the very anthropomorphic (or gynomorphic?) images that the thinkers of modernity are trying to disintegrate?

¹³For Derrida’s most extensive presentation of writing as “feminine operation,” see his *Eperons: les styles de Nietzsche* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978). It has been translated into English as *Spurs in the quadrilingual edition* (Venice: Corbo e Fiore, 1976).

¹⁴Cixous’ most extensive developments of *écriture féminine* as a concept have been in her seminars in Paris. But glimpses of the concept’s debt to Derrida’s work may be found, most particularly, in her “*Le sexe ou la tête?*” *Les cahiers du GRIF 13* (October 1976).

¹⁵c.f., in particular, Sarah Kofman’s “*Ça cloche*” in *Les fins de l’homme*, op. cit. pp. 89–116.

Most importantly, if modernity and feminism are not to become mutually exclusive – and, at the same time, if feminism is not to compromise the quality of its attention to female stereotyping of whatever kind – what will be our strategy for asking those questions, and others?

New directions indeed. . .

