

NEW FEMINIST READINGS: WOMAN AS *ECRITURE* OR WOMAN AS OTHER ?

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In the 1970's and 1980's the second wave of feminist theory in France has reproblemated the presuppositions tacitly underlying Simone de Beauvoir's influential *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir's initial construct of an autonomous subject or ego has been overtaken by the decentered subject of Barthesian *jouissance*, Derridian deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Foucault's genealogies of institutions and the 'philosophers of desire' (Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari).¹ True enough, the decentering, the dispersal of personal identity has had a liberating effect on a feminist writing hampered by the false symmetries of instrumental reason. And not only that: the interpretation of *feminité* in terms of an endless flux of sensations has facilitated a new energetic kind of feminist text-production. But in all this woman's subjectivity would seem to lose the self-conscious reflection that de Beauvoir and the existential/phenomenological tradition granted it. If an erotics of the text is privileged over a critical consciousness, it is hardly surprising that the female 'subject' is rewritten or recoded as a conductor of unexpected sexual or libidinal energy. In this framework, a corporeally based textual aesthetic rather than a historically situated self-consciousness is employed to grasp the oppression of women. We can see this feminist strategy at work in the writings of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. To such a list might be added the recent texts of Michele Montrelay and Sarah Kofman.

What these various critical idioms suggest is something like this: problematizing the subject, or more accurately, undermining the logical unity of male identity, raises the question of a uniquely new feminine discourse. For to the degree that the illusion of patriarchal man as a reflective rational consciousness dissolves woman as the repressed corporeal body can escape the

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metaphysical closure of phallogocentric (Irigaray's word) identity. Just as the sovereignty of the substantial ego is taken as the source of a thoroughly rationalistic male discourse, its subversion is also the source of an authentic female utterance which stems from the untamed desire of woman's libido. Fundamental in this context is the claim that the indefinite and heterogeneous quality of such feminist texts underscores their emancipation from the false transparency of male enunciation. Considerations of this sort elicit a punning and *préciosité* with words such as *jouissance* and *jouir* to impart indeterminacy and mutability (Monique Wittig's *Les guérillères* to cite an obvious example). Here the interminable play of signifiers refuses to be arrested and transmuted into a premature fixity of meaning. Deploying the post-structuralist motifs of indeterminacy, ellipses, the dissolution of the ego, feminist discourse theorists laud the heterogeneity and dispersal inscribed in the peculiarities of feminine texts.

The post-structuralist critique of binary oppositions, for instance, is taken up in Irigaray's attack on the static antitheses of Western philosophy. If you believe, argues Irigaray, that woman is circumscribed by the sterile logic of phallogocentric ideology, then she is caught up in a binary opposition which serves to confirm the privileged position of a dominant term — man — by excluding a subordinate one — woman. In the binary mythology of logocentric discourse the crucial function of conscious signifying belongs to the male and the corporeal female can never be anything other than a signified. Only the strictly rational male has at his disposal the capacity to enunciate proper meaning. Unable to signify itself, libidinal femininity is reduced to the appendage — the spare rib — of the hypertrophied masculine signifier. It has no legitimacy apart from the privileged place of the rational male subject in the phallogocentric hierarchy, or, to use for the moment the terms of Cixous, "in philosophy, woman is always on the side of passivity."²

The point is not simply that in phallogocentrism the male gains greater and greater predominance over the female. The point is rather that the male/female binary axis generates a whole series of global antitheses: mind/body, head/heart, logos/pathos, activity/passivity, culture/nature. This is the context in which Irigaray and Cixous' enterprise coincides with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Freud's mapping of the unconscious and Lacan's decentering of the subject allow renewed access to the repressed libidinal intensities which subvert the conventionally received binary code. The strong emphasis on instinctual turbulence leads to a reversal of meanings, unsettling the comfortable binary simplifications of phallogocentrism. Exactly the same inversion of priorities is the case with Irigaray and Cixous whose psychoanalytic orientations finds its ultimate ground in the feminine libido. Such celebrations of the female unconscious rearticulate the question of what woman is as a question of what female sexuality, or woman's *jouissance*, is. The new feminine components of multiplicity and flux which characterize *text-jouissance* now overshadow the logic of unity synonymous with the sovereign male subject. Cixous, for instance, describes her innovative feminine discourse as follows: "To write. An act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman

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to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasure, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal."³ Carried through consistently, *féminité* in this formula means woman's body as *écriture*. To valorize the mutable female unconscious over the rationalized ego is to project a new bodily code for the writing and interpretation of *féminité*. This fantasy of untrammelled sexuality strives to undermine the closed masculine signifying conventions in the deterritorialized flux of its erotic energy.

We may therefore say, as Rachel Bowlby has acutely observed, that "an equation of WOMAN=BODY=UNCONSCIOUSNESS=TEXT is more or less explicit"⁴ in new French feminist theory. The exceptional importance of this equation is obvious when the following quotations are considered: "Women's desire most likely does not speak the same language as man's desire, and it probably has been covered over by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks" (Irigaray); "Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve — discourse" (Cixous); "In women's writing, language seems to be seen from a foreign land; . . . from an asymbolic, spastic body." (Kristeva). Thus it is not insignificant that French feminist theory's use of biologically-based terms such as 'body' or 'desire' underpins their quest for a distinctively feminine discourse. Unlike the male who is estranged from himself in overly intellectualized thought forms, the woman's body is a text, "shot through with streams of songs."⁵

Much of this *text-jouissance* foregrounds a highly accentuated erotics of language. In describing woman's rapturous textual impulse all the French feminist discourse theorists lay particular stress on multiple and discontinuous metaphors of sexual desire. Irigaray writes of the capricious sensory intensities and elementary life forces in woman's diction: "For when 'she' says something, it is already no longer identical to what she means. Moreover, her statements are never identical to anything. Their distinguishing feature is one of contingency. They touch (upon). And when they wander too far from this nearness, she stops and begins again from 'zero': her body-sex organ."⁶ The same observation holds for Cixous who relies on the vibrant sensuality of sexual metaphors to put into question the false fixity of male conceptual symbols. In a similar way, Kristeva's pulsating, uprooted and extended erotic metaphors could be said to play a prominent role in the dismantling of the solidified male Symbolic Order. Indeed, just like the impetuous decoded desire of her counterparts, her textual pleasure becomes co-terminus with orgasm: "This signification renewed, 'infinitized' by the rhythm in a text, this precisely is (sexual) pleasure (*la jouissance*)."⁷

Must we assume, then, that women's emancipation is to be conceived primarily in terms of the rediscovery of her body? What about woman's relationship to the male Other inherent in the existential/historical situation which she inhabits? To claim that the Freudian unconscious opens up a different corporeal space for the autonomy of woman's *écriture* is wholly valid. But it is both invalid and a theoretical *cul de sac* to make women's oppression equivalent with

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'male' and 'phallic'. Indeed, it would not be difficult to show that an uncritical enthusiasm for *féminité* passes imperceptibly into essentialism and biological determinism — a paean to the vitalistic exaltation of the eternalized physical body. Such an inquiry would seek to establish that the historical and social subtext (otherness, alterity of woman, her dependent status in the family, her subordinate economic/political condition, her cultural marginality) contributes not a little to women's oppression. As Simone de Beauvoir reminds us, "Woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself."⁸

That de Beauvoir's insights into women's alienation through others remain open to debate I believe to be true; but it seems to me that the post-structuralist polemic against her notion of the independent, autonomous self is a perfunctory dismissal (Irigaray's 'comedy of the Other') which too hastily eliminates the complexities of *The Second Sex*. A critical reconsideration of her theoretical formulation of 'woman as Other' is impossible here: it is enough to say that she refers to the way in which for the man woman becomes "the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other."⁹ Vis-à-vis the sovereign male she discovers herself to be alienated Other (or, in post-structuralist terms, the decentered self) who has no capacities and who simultaneously has been reduced to a position of inferiority. In envisaging the 'constitution' of woman as subject or conscious being de Beauvoir argues that it derives from the female's project to supersede the boundaries of her restricted situation as defined by the male Other. Briefly expressed, woman's subjectivity or self-consciousness (in the original, now seemingly *passé* sense) takes shape in active gestures to transcend a specific 'given' that is to be understood as passivity, immanence and alienation. Often, to be sure, such a theoretical starting point has been misread to imply the implausible fiction of the free and autonomous individual ego that informs the dominant ideological sign-system. But for de Beauvoir woman's intentional acts are responses which she invents within her determinate situation (psychic-family or socio-economic).

This conception of the irreducibility of the Other lays the groundwork for de Beauvoir's interpretive model of male-female relationships. In keeping with Hegel's master-slave dialectic, she argues that the existence of the male Other reorients woman's activities in the direction of a struggle with the sovereign male ego. As she notes, "we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed — he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the Other, the inessential, the object."¹⁰ Obviously, this should not be taken to imply (even acknowledging the importance which de Beauvoir assigns to the woman's body) that such relations are to be analysed in physical-biological, or for that matter, transhistorical, terms. On the contrary, the disclosure of a woman's consciousness in her relationship with the world emerges from frighteningly real situational determinations. For the experience of the irreducibility of the Other sets up two basic responses which characterize male-female relations: first, the

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sovereign male consciousness opposes the freedom of the female Other, relegating her to the margins of patriarchal society; second, the subjugated or objectified female discovers her own autonomy and begins the process of converting her subservient status into the raised consciousness of an independent woman. She affirms herself as an autonomous being via the mediation of the male Other, both in his objectifying attitude and in her tenacious struggle against it. Yet in a sexist and misogynist society women's advances are blocked by the pressures of an intractable social context. It is on this level that Otherness is "not simply an idealist relationship . . . it is a power relationship, based also on scarcity."¹¹ Here, instead of a textually fervent biologicistic mysticism, de Beauvoir provides some heuristically valuable formal elements for rendering the concrete difficulties of women. Thus the extraordinary stress on a 'coefficient of adversity' retrieves the significance of objective historical and social forces. It is striking, too, that she never appeals to a structurally identical and transtemporal cover-concept of male domination. In spite of the often repeated criticisms that a hypostatized dialectic of self and Other is posited to account for male-female relations, her temporal and differentiating categories consider women's oppression (and its future supersession) to be intimately connected with the specificity of lived socio-historical situations.

One further point deserves consideration. Superficially, of course, it might seem that alterity has strong affinities with the notion of difference used by French feminist discourse theorists. In fact, however, the theory of difference suffers from intrinsic weaknesses which threaten to neutralize its critical content. Elsewhere de Beauvoir remarks that women's oppression "is not only difference; it implies at the same time an inferiority."¹² To postulate, as the new French feminisms do, that difference describes real sexual difference has a definite moment of truth. But to say that male-female relations are primarily constituted by anatomical difference is not to perceive the temporal and existential coordinates of *feminité* as *otherness*. This is no simple question of physical biology, but instead a fundamental existential and historical problem. To quote de Beauvoir again:

It would be an error to make of it [the body] a value and to think that the feminine body gives you a new vision of the world . . . The women who share this belief fall again into the irrational, into mysticism, into a sense of the cosmic. They play into the hands of men who will be better able to oppress them, to remove them from knowledge and power. The eternal feminine is a lie, because nature plays an infinitesimal role in the development of a human being. We are social beings. Because I do not think that woman is naturally inferior to man, I do not think either that she is naturally superior to him.¹³

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In their special emphasis on woman as *écriture* French feminist discourse theorists would seem to lapse into a modified version of biological essentialism and inadvertently foster a mystical rebirth of the "eternal feminine." Notwithstanding the provocative Dionysian spontaneity that imbues the prose-poems of *text-jouissance*, the new textual aesthetic has a tendency towards an uncritical and non-problematic gynomorphic naturalism. This gets very near to what Habermas has referred to as an archaic neo-conservatism in French post-structuralist writing.¹⁴

The question for feminist theory, then, is how to retrieve and develop what is valuable in the new French feminisms without falling back into an essentialist biologism. The articles which follow are intended to begin this reevaluation, to assess previous work and to suggest new strategies for approaching feminist discourse theory.

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Notes

1. See for important recent critical discussions of post-structuralism Peter Dews, "The *Nouvelle Philosophie* and Foucault", *Economy and Society* 8, no. 2 (1979), 125-76 and "Power and Subjectivity in Foucault" *New Left Review* 144 (March-April 1984), 72-95; Manfred Frank, "The World as Will and Representation: Deleuze and Guattari's Critique of Capitalism as Schizo-Analysis and Schizo-Discourse," *Telos* 57 (Fall 1983), 166-76.
2. Hélène Cixous, "Sorties" in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 91.
3. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" in *New French Feminisms*, p. 250.
4. Rachel Bowlby, "The Feminine Female," *Social Text* 7 (spring-summer 1983), 63.
5. *New French Feminisms*, pp. 101, 256, 166 and 252, respectively.
6. Luce Irigaray, "Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un", *New French Feminisms*, p. 103.
7. Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation du 'pouvoir' au 'refus'" *New French Feminisms*, p. 165.
8. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 806.
9. *The Second Sex*, xix.
10. *The Second Sex*, xx. See for further commentary on the master/slave relation in Hegelian dialectic, Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 153-7 and George Armstrong Kelly, *Idealism, Politics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 333-341.
11. Margaret Simons and Jessica Benjamin, "Simone de Beauvoir: An Interview," *Feminist Studies*, 5 (1979), p. 345.
12. de Beauvoir, *New French Feminisms*, p. 152.
13. *New French Feminisms*, 153.
14. See his "Modernity versus Postmodernity" *New German Critique* 22 (winter 1981), 3-14.