

REDRAWING THE CIRCLE POWER, POETICS, LANGUAGE.¹

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My subject is ideology and language which I shall approach through women's writing and feminist literary criticism.

There are many who challenge the conjunction of the label of a political movement — feminism² — and an aesthetic artifact — literature. They would insist on the autonomy of the work of art, of its freedom from the “shackles” of ideology that would reduce it to mere rhetoric and undermine its aesthetic qualities. Others — and I would include myself among them — concur with Roland Barthes when he writes that “It is virtually impossible to deal with literary creation without postulating the existence of a relation between the work and something besides the work.”³ Feminist criticism makes this “something else” explicit and reveals its substructure of theories, assumptions and values — implicit in any critical theory. By exposing them deliberately, we can face the methodological implications of the assumptions underpinning this feminist discourse. After all, every theory of language implies a whole philosophy of history: every form of practice implies and presupposes a form of theory whose denial is a mask. The silence of this mask, and not ideology, continues Barthes, is “the capital sin in criticism.” Feminist criticism would argue that silence has also been the capital sin of patriarchal ideology which has consistently denied the fact of sexual difference in the name of a centre, of a principle of identity. Homogeneity, objectivity are the values used to support aesthetic judgments of “good” or “beautiful.” Feminist criticism aims to unmask this objectivity by insisting that all judgments are context-bound, and that sex and gender are important factors in establishing this context. This is because of the systematic repression and appropriation of women over the centuries in our western society.

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In *Power Politics*, Margaret Atwood offers a cynical view of the relationship between power and language, symptomatic of her position as woman.

We hear nothing these days
from the ones in power

Why talk when you are a shoulder
or a vault

Why talk when you are
helmeted with numbers

Firsts have many forms;
a fist knows what it can do
without the nuisance of speaking:
it grabs and smashes.

From those inside or under
words gush like toothpaste.

Language, the fist
proclaims by squeezing
is for the weak only.⁴

For her, language is not performative. The gender markers it encodes assign to woman "negative semantic space."⁵ This lack of faith in the signifying potentials of language is a problem for a poet. Atwood's position contrasts markedly with Shelley's belief in the power of the word when he proclaimed that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,"⁶ male poets, at least. Here Shelley was following Plato's recognition of the force of language, though inverting the aim of the argument. For Plato banished poets from his republic because their power threatened to subvert its established order. Plato also excluded women from full participation in politics and intellectual activity because their private household speech lacked form and could not be considered truth. Like poetry, mere opinion did not appeal to the mind, site of all he thought best in human activity.⁷ With Plato originates the segregation of women's speech in the private sphere away from the seat of government and formal utterances, a separation that has led to power over the former, as Atwood's poem reminds us.

The power of language is reiterated in another strand of the Western tradition. Words become worlds when God speaks. Creation is linked to the oral utterance which becomes fiat in its written form, the books of the law. A "new testament" is necessary when a revolution in belief occurs, when the word is recreated, is "made flesh" and translated into action. Here the word is mediated through the passive female body which reproduces a male divinity rather than producing words. Mary, like Plato's women is silent, "pondering all these things

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in her heart." Forgotten are the days when god was a woman, when Inanna, queen of heaven, by power of her decrees, enters and becomes queen of the netherworld, bringing forth from there the tablets and styluses to record the written word.⁸ Language has become problematic for Atwood,⁹ because of the activity of the word in the extreme mode of God's invasion of the other. Backed by greater physical force — the fist "grabs and smashes" — power has been exercised *over* women. Atwood's poem invites us to see the individual feminine text in terms of the dialogue of conflicting social classes, that is as the opposed, marginalized voice confronting the hegemonic class. By clearly exploring this confrontation, Atwood becomes conscious of the problem of authority. It is an issue which she must face, if she herself is to become an author, an "authority."

Although a pressing issue for women writers, it is essential for all women to raise questions about the nature of language and power. Sheila Rowbotham summarizes the issue:

(Language) is one of the instruments of domination . . . It speaks only for (the) world (of the oppressors), from their point of view. Ultimately a revolutionary movement has to break the hold of the dominant group over theory, it has to structure its own connections. Language is part of the political and ideological power of rulers . . . We can't just occupy existing words. We have to change the meanings of words even before we take them over."¹⁰

Women's long silence, or ineffectual speech, may be an advantage here in constituting a challenge to present economic and political systems in feminists' denunciation of the appropriating subject and of rigid subject/object boundaries. But there is still an inherent paradox in this. How can one be an object, be constructed by that ruling discourse and still constitute an opposition to it, be outside enough to mark an alternative? If outside, how can one be heard at all? But the creation of new worlds in words is the essence of writing, which seeks always to question the cliché or convention, to deconstruct figures of rhetoric or reading. By following the paths of women writers, I would suggest, we shall discover how they are claiming the prerogative of naming so that we can begin to see and live afresh. We shall find some of the "fiction which (would) make us real".¹¹ These selves-in-becoming-in-words redraw the circle for us, shift the relationships of centre and periphery, of authoritative word and marginal silence.

How to write as a woman? This is a question women writers have been asking for some time, indeed it is the only question they *must* ask, the precondition of their finding a voice at all in which to speak, or they remain spoken in the words of men. Phrased variously as: how to write at all if one is a woman confronted with a literary institution which would silence her, and how to write the difference explicit in her sexuality into the text when her very femaleness signals her status as object not subject¹² — these questions are now being raised by

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feminist critics who are reflecting aloud on what it means to *read* as a woman.¹³ What is the implication of this difference in terms of our talking or writing about the work of women (or, for that matter, men) writers? If one engages in a different and differential reading of women's writing, what impact does this have on the practice of literary criticism, an activity carried out within the circles of academic and literary institutions?

As has been argued by Dorothy Smith, these institutions have been controlled by men and consequently women have been "excluded from the production of thought, images and symbols" in which their experience has been ordered. Perpetuating its forms, symbols and words in a circle of male experience that excludes females,¹⁴ knowledge is not objective and neutral, contrary to what we have been told in the scientific spirit of our age and the myth of the academy. In an initial dislocation of this myth, feminists show knowledge to be subjectively and ideologically biased, not objective, for it reflects male experience primarily. Literary criticism is clearly within the perimeter of the circle, an activity of academics extending the circle of patriarchal power — the circle of members "who count for one another" governed, as Smith says, by the "stag effect". But the focus of literary criticism on language and symbols, its work in elucidating meaning and its practice of producing new metaphors offer the means through which such a break could be made in the circle. Feminist criticism takes advantage of such an opening by basing a reading practice and a critical theory on a theory of sexual difference. Such an attempt has far reaching implications, for it addresses itself not only to the position of mastery held by scientific discourse (that is language which is culturally encoded, through which meaning and sense is conferred on reality), but to philosophy, the discourse of discourse, and to the logic of discourse itself.¹⁵ Rejecting scientism with its valorization of objectivity, the project of feminist criticism is epistemological. While feminist practice of criticism is an exercise in the unmasking and displacing of alienating structures produced by criticism, as thinking, feminism "rethinks thinking itself."¹⁶ Re-visionist, it questions the adequacy of existing conceptual structures.

In advocating sexual difference which is Otherness itself,¹⁷ feminism challenges the foundations of discourse, namely its centre, the concept of a single or absolute subject, returning to itself as subject, serving as guarantor of its own meaningfulness — the concept of God in Christian theology, the Logos in philosophy, the phallus in psychoanalysis, etc. This absolute subject acts in a totalitarian manner as the focal point of identification whereby individuals are organized into subsidiary subjects, socially formed subjects of consciousness who identify themselves with a process whose meaning is conferred by the absolute subject.¹⁸ Individuals are reconciled to their social positions in these processes through myths of representation, that is, through ideology. The characteristic of ideology is its absoluteness: discourse becomes synonymous with power over. Ideologies are, however, "fictions" and "figures" and may be challenged by other "fictions" or by exposing their figurative nature.¹⁹ With their present male God, and Phallus as Prime Signifier, these systems of representation exclude the female. She cannot be constituted as subject and conse-

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quently, as de Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex*, remains an object, the Other for a male subject, paired in a situation in which there is no reciprocity, no possibility of inversion. The hierarchical conception of difference that de Beauvoir works with leaves woman stranded on the periphery of the male circle returning unto itself as centre. To enable the emergence of the female, feminism must break out of this circle by exploring other concepts of difference. For what is becoming clear is that difference may be conceived of in several separate logical constructs which effectively change our perceptions of power relationships. What has been most common is the hierarchical concept in which, one side of a binary pair is privileged: difference is represented as present/absent as in competitive/non-competitive. As de Beauvoir points out, it is this model that has subsumed a second logical set of differences, at least when it is a question of male/female. This second set could well be thought of in terms of one extreme/another extreme as in competitive/cooperative. Irigaray is advocating such a shift when she argues for difference as a positive value, and not as absence or lack. A third position could also be adopted, and it is the one I shall advocate. Here difference is represented as an indefinite series of items, as in competitive/cooperative/solitary.²⁰

In confronting its father discipline, feminist criticism discloses the most basic assumptions of its thinking. On this question of difference, feminists challenge the power relationships inherent in the prevalent formulation of difference as presence/absence even as they argue for the other two models of difference which valorize all the variables. Consequently, they often seem to be speaking in paradoxes, negating even while they are advancing new values, in the very same word and breath. For feminist critics are engaged in a vigorous border traffic between this world defined for them and the world they aim to bring into being, a world defined by them. Their project is to be cartographers of new realms. Like cultural nationalists, they reject the map made for them by denying their difference is marginal or peripheral. Placing the point of the compass on the circumference where they are, they redraw the circle. They suggest that alternate forms of strength and relationship have existed all along on women's terms or among women. They seek in women's consciousness an autonomous origin of knowledge. Their aim coincides with the efforts of women writers to open new dimensions of space to allow women free access without hindrance or hesitancy through geographical and political spaces, disrupting the imaginary forms through which ideology is represented to individuals. As Louise Forsyth writes: "the feminist critic has necessarily had to participate in the struggle of beginning to clear these dimensions of space in order to create appropriate conditions for the writing of her own text. The role she has to play in the collective project is of considerable urgency in assuring poets and novelists have a public, someone with whom they share images and in whose direction they can write."²¹ As well as this primary function of explicating women's texts and identifying the "different" or marginal forms, symbols and words, to form an interpretive community of readers who will be able to understand women's writing, women critics are remapping the terrain of critical theory. This new criticism deconstructs patriarchal monotheism by introducing variety and

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multiplicity in thought and expression, by being resolutely eclectic and interdisciplinary in nature, thus attacking the very monocentrism on which power (presence) is founded. Moreover, the realignment of boundaries through expansion and blurring continues in a fusion of style and content. This new feminist literary criticism would not be a meta-language like patriarchal discourse, but would remain open, a practice characterized by its empathy and respect for the text, asking of it only those questions which it asks of itself. Consequently, this criticism would be an assimilated reading, an intertextuality in which through shared characters, quotations or languages, the reader is intimately touched by the other's text. The critical act is re-creation, extending life to the original text, breaking down the boundaries between creative writing and criticism.²² "Texts circulate and remain open, like a friend's voice,"²³ fluid, in a spirit of extension and translation. Transformed from passive to active, encircled no longer, women circulate.

That this making it new is simultaneously subversion and celebration is demonstrated in the ways women writers and critics rethink the literary space in order to allow their work to circulate and thus to escape the exclusion of discourse. This has taken three basic forms, roughly analogous to the three logical models of difference: 1) dislodging the centre, through the subversion of fixed hierarchies by defamiliarization or distancing; 2) new circles, the creation of a world upside down, through inversion or an active decentering within a double circle; 3) spiralling out, as when the circle is completely broken as a new concept of the subject comes into being. As Mary Daly describes this, the fixed perimeter of the circle becomes mobile as "Radical feminist consciousness spirals in all directions, dis-covering the past, creating/*dis-closing* the present future."²⁴ This punning and spinning of metaphors, as we shall see, is not just "icing on the cake" but cognitive activity central to the forging of new (conceptual) worlds. It is also word *play*, and free wheeling play, as Jacques Erhmann reminds us, is "articulation, *opening*" through language, its ludic function holding out the goals of true culture and civilization.²⁵

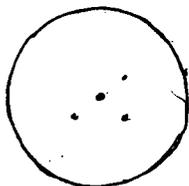
Dislodging the centre

The circle itself is duality, containing the contradiction of a still, fixed centre and a moving, infinite circumference. Moreover, its inner and outer areas effectively present us with an image of negative and positive space, of absence and presence. This dualism is forgotten when all focus is on the centre. Through a process of defamiliarization, feminists draw attention to the fact that women have been excluded from the circle. They do this by foregrounding the fact of male *domination*. Naming the oppressor has not been an easy task, for one of the semantic rules of language is that of male-as-norm.²⁶ Indeed, in women's writing the awareness of the constrictions concomitant with the feminine condition has often been limited to just that — a general sense of alienation and malaise whose cause is not directly identifiable. A study of the language of Virginia Woolf reveals this feature of her writing. Her favoured syntactic patterning is the passive, a structure ideally suited to expressing the causative agent in women's

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oppression, an agent Woolf chooses not to name. Instead, she uses the truncated passive in sentences like the following from *A Room of One's Own*: ". . . a woman *was not encouraged* to be an artist. On the contrary, she *was snubbed, slapped, lectured and exhorted*."²⁷ Women readers may well complete her phrase with the missing words "by the male critics", and thus weave even more densely the web of hidden assumptions shared with her implied female readers, but Woolf has not challenged these critics' dominancy directly and leaves them with a general impression of feminine passivity. Nonetheless, her statements cast a haze over the centre of the circle for readers who share her hidden agenda, for no longer can they apply the definition of artist equitably to males and females. There now appear to be differences in accession to this activity, for Woolf has shown women must overcome greater obstacles. Her work has effected a shift in the meaning of the word artist, at least for females. It has acquired a certain strangeness.

The "images of women" criticism that has dominated North American feminist literary criticism, at least until very recently, has been responsible for such a displacement of meaning and defamiliarization. Aiming to show the warped, distorted and objectified status of women in fiction, their fictionalized selves being the representations of the dominating patriarchal ideology, this criticism provides us with a list of passive victims, failed women heroes, so many stories of the divided self which Lorraine McNullen has told us.²⁸ In its other face, when such feminist criticism ceases to be expressive and becomes aggressive, it denounces the oppressor, following in the mode of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1971) which conclusively demonstrated the misogyny at the heart of the modern literary pantheon. The Great Tradition is not great because of its universality, but because of the hegemony its ideology extends. In fact, it is less than whole, excluding as it does the female presence. Working still within the dominant literary institutions, critics like Mary Ellman (*Thinking About Women*, 1968) and Margaret Atwood ("Paradoxes and Dilemmas: the Woman as Writer", 1975) outline the double standard at work in literature as in life, denouncing the "phallic" criticism and writing which has led to the marginalization of women on the literary scene, doing so in such a way as to introduce the possibility of mobility and multiplicity of the centre. But their focus remains the male tradition: the great tradition is implicitly honoured by yet other critical studies of its activities. We have yet to discover the meaning of women's writing and it remains veiled and muffled.



New circles

We might conceive of another area of female writing and feminist criticism as a double circle, the circle expanded to a double foci as in the ellipse or in the

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helix. The figure of the ellipse is an excellent one for our purposes because it respects the concept of two separate centres combining to form one object. It obliges us to talk and think in terms of unequal relationships instead of matching qualities or quantities, forcing everything into a homogeneous mould. Our definition begins with there being more than one term. Variouslly the two foci may move closer, reactions to any point on the circumference then becoming equal or they may separate as the centres of two independent though intersecting circles, each obeying its own laws, no point on the circumference of the one having any necessary relation to the other circle. Still, they remain within a single figure, and thus express an intentionality of unity which the term sexual *difference* would call into question.²⁹

A more appropriate figure might be the double helix, with its two centres spiralling around each other, intersecting and diverging in turn. As described by Jim Watson, the geneticist who discovered DNA, this figure came to him when he abandoned the concept of like-to-like bonding within the molecule. Consequently, he discovered the secret of life in the *double* form. With its duality of generating centres, this figure has been suggested as an appropriate one for comparative studies of Canadian literatures,³⁰ for it can account for similarities and describe the absence of such convergences. And for feminists interested in the question of sexual differences (as opposed to *women's* studies) it provides an appropriate model for breaking free from the circle in a thorough decentring.



James D. Watson. *The Double Helix: a Personal Account of the Discovery of DNA*. (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 210.

Such an approach would invite us to explore the differences between men's and women's use of language, for instance. In this way, Dian McGuiness has suggested that men use language in an object-oriented way for naming, while women use language contextually to explore the emotions and meanings of other human beings in a given situation. She traces these differing functions back historically and biologically to the primate phase. In the present, she observes men and women functioning at cross purposes, in the conference setting where males define and women perform in dramatic interaction with the audience.³¹

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These figures are helpful in exploring the literary use of language, especially the use of metaphor in men's and women's writing, an approach that illuminates the degree to which men's and women's perceptions of reality differ. Metaphorical systems encapsulate a group's heritage and trace its psychological and historical development. New metaphors are new phenomena, calling forth, containing and stylizing our experience. New metaphors imply cognitive developments and provide ways of disrupting the symbolic systems through which ideology is represented to the individual. A brief look at the differential use made by men and women of a fundamental metaphor of Canadian society and literature will illustrate how in men's and women's lives there are two stories, two differing perceptions of the same reality.

The land-as-woman metaphor is central to North American society. It opposes male possession and aggressive reduction of the Other to female discovery of an integrated, inviolate self, power *over* versus *empowerment*. Among the metaphor's most common forms, as Annette Kolodny has pointed out in *The Lay of the Land*,³² is the topos of the violation of the land, its virginity taken in acts of aggression and control by plough or railway. This exploitation of the land is something North American women novelists denounce. In an inversion of the metaphor that decentres it, they offer a counter view of the male drive for possession which they believe ends tragically in dispossession through abstraction or self-annihilation. In the work of the American writer Willa Cather, this possession is contrasted with the view of the land as sentient but impersonal being whose otherness is to be respected, not violated, in ecological harmony, as I have shown elsewhere.³³ Translated into Canadian terms in *Wild Geese* by Martha Ostenso, this counterview is reinforced by a direct denunciation of the patriarchal drive for possession when Judith throws the hatchet to behead Caleb-Holfernes on behalf of all violated women. Judith then inverts the metaphor by wrestling her lover Sven to the ground, overturning the struggle to possess women and the land. In French Canada, women writers' refusal to use this key metaphor of expansion led to an opposing metaphor. Gabrielle Roy's pioneer women dislike the "naked prairie" and assert their own presence as creative centre in a pioneering activity which would make of the wilderness a home. For her ability to create people, feed and clothe them in the wilderness, for the "homemaking capacities", the Grandmother in *La route d'Altamont* is called a god. "My Almighty Grandmother", is the title of Christine's story, a title that underlines the alternate theory of origins in loving concern rather than in the violent rape of the plough.

Illustrating variously the closeness and the distance of the foci or double centres, these two metaphorical complexes foreground the activity of many women writers as border traffic. It could also be termed double talk, for while seeming to use the symbols of the dominant society, these writers do so only to question them by putting forth alternate models of perception and speaking. My approach in discussing them is illustrative of much feminist criticism in adopting a comparative position as initial starting point but focussing attention on the lesser known of the centres, that of the female perspective. Most of us, like the writers, are straddling two worlds, the world of the academy and a world

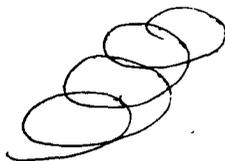
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of our own and if we would be heard in both, if we would remain within the academy to decentre it, we must communicate with it, sending our messages in forms it can interpret even as we try to find a vocabulary adequate for our experience, becoming bilingual translators in the process.

There are dangers, however, in defining against, in expressing our difference always in ambivalent language. We risk remaining locked in the embrace of a binary world where dualism is only an illusion of difference, because it is conceived of always as a hierarchical construct. In defining ourselves within the frames of reference chosen by men we risk losing any sense of ourselves as subjects. In order to find ourselves, we must move outside of the critical space altogether to find meaning in what has previously been empty space.

Spiralling out

Feminist strategies to produce plurality have found support in phenomenological practices of dynamic empathetic reading which are also open in the interrogation of their own processes. Central to the feminist critic's endeavour is an attempt to reflect and clarify "lived experience" as a meaningful activity, meaning being created in the dialectical movement of bringing to explicit foreground what is only potentially and latently present. The word is rediscovered in the self in an act of *creative* intentionality. The critical act involves both a decentring of the text and a recentring through an appropriation of it into one's own consciousness. It is here that "the voices of friends in dialogue" circulate, for the critic is close to the woman writer who has preceded her outside the circle.



This world defined by and for females with reference only to themselves is an Utopian one for, as yet, it has only a shadowy existence. However, it is increasingly being asserted by feminist scholars that women's culture has a specificity. "Women form a speech community", we read, "with language skills and attitudes of our own as well as those shared by the wider speech community." Gossip is a specific type of women's language or genderlect, "a language of intimacy"³⁴ arising from the solidarity and identity of women as members of a social group with a pool of common experience, a language that circulates orally, outside the circle of male experience, uncoded and savage, in a cultural wilderness. Frequently this hidden world is unhidden in works of fabulation such as Gilman's *Herland*³⁵ where we enter a futuristic world of women. Russ' *The Female Man*³⁶ reveals the same distancing function at work, recentring occurring through the creation of alternate worlds, new fictions to disrupt those that have defined us.

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In language itself we find another Utopia. It is in and through language that we define and categorize areas of difference and similarity that in turn allow us to comprehend the world around us.³⁷ But what a challenge it is to invent language! Writers ransack the dictionary to find adequate definitions as Audrey Thomas does, only to rewrite the dictionary from the perspective of her own experience when its inadequacy is demonstrated, as happens in *Real Mothers* where, in answer to a question from her father as to who strangers are, the girl replies "mostly men". This answer takes into account the realities of power politics in female sexuality, experience which makes itself clear here in a new, contextual definition of a word. Similarly, Alice Munro seeks an adequate vehicle to express her character's experience in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Like Thomas, she questions clichés and conventions, her writing calling itself into question in a perpetual process of becoming. She too offers new definitions for words based on female physiological realities.

That very word *pleasure* had changed for me; I used to think it a mild sort of word, indicating a rather low-key self-indulgence; now it seemed explosive, the two vowels in the first syllable spurting up like fireworks, ending on the plateau of the last syllable, its dreamy purr.³⁸

Reflection on the material meaning of the word, on its concrete sounds, is stimulated by an effort to articulate the sensations of female orgasm.

Munro's is just one attempt to invent a language that is not oppressive but expresses women's realities. The women writers of Quebec are attempting to write the sexual body in the text in an enterprise aimed at the establishment of a new symbolism. "My body is words," writes Madeleine Gagnon³⁹ in a return to an origin of sensations and gesture that precedes codification in language. Like Atwood in *Surfacing*,⁴⁰ she locates this new language in the hieroglyphs of the native people, as she does in *Lueur*.⁴¹ But language itself can constitute the origin, as Nicole Brossard is showing, writing towards "l'Alphabet l'origine" in deconstructive plays on words. She also creates new words in an effort to shape a new language for women.⁴² Here her practice joins the punning neologisms of Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology*, the title of which is, in her words, "a way of wrenching back some wordpower."⁴³ It is very much an Otherworld journey, occurring in the "Unfield/Ourfield/Outfield", "confronting old molds/models of question-asking."⁴⁴

This spinning, like those orgasms described by Munro, wells up from a savage world in a volcanic eruption, languages of origins rather than coded discourse. In this lies their potential for breaking the texts in the puzzles they pose for a reader, as they break conventions. Contradictions are introduced, thus threatening the continuity of ego, the position of coherence, into which ideology fixes the subject. Continued deferral of meaning in such processes assures that this is a radical decentering. The new focus on all-female world moves us into a new space.

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Critics following writers into this ever-mobile spiral have taken several routes in their effort to define the world from a female centre. They have redefined the literary canon to include genres in which women have made an important contribution — private forms of writing such as diaries, letters and oral ones too. In the Canadian context, this leads to the discussion of the oral life history of Pitseolak, an Eskimo artist, or to the consideration of an Indian woman's creation myth. The native woman has often served as metaphor for women's marginalization in Canadian literature, a figure who must be embraced before creation can begin. Criticism inclusive of these minority figures might aptly be said to have taken to the woods, to have listened to the call of the wild.

Yet other critics have set off into this women's wilderness to recapture a lost all-female world in a reexamination of the relationship of mother and daughter, devalued in present society where the fact that God was once a woman is a carefully maintained secret.⁴⁵ Others again, like Suzanne Lamy,⁴⁶ have adopted a subjective, fluid, circulating friend's voice in works which, embodying personal appreciations of women's books, quotations from them, reflections on one's personal life, blur the boundaries between manifesto, fiction, poetry, criticism. Attempting to become the author and creating a commonwealth of literary participants, these women move toward shared spaces between reader and writer. Here feminist engagement is framed in emotional as well as intellectual terms as an act of love between women. The spiral moves from a new centre as the work on language creates polysemanticity, opening the language as well as the forms and genres, to multiplicity, to movement.

Here is the cutting edge of our vision, a recognition of difference as several equal variables, positively valued. For without such an attempt to create third or fourth terms, to bring into being a more radical difference, the decentering of the patriarchal world is in jeopardy. For the subject at the centre of a binary pair tends to reobjectify all that comes within its embrace, fixed as it is by ideology to this position in relation to discourse. Moreover, it may prove an easier task to dislodge the ruling centre and to push it into the double helix from the mobile position of the spiral, whose movement will force a corresponding movement at the centre, than it would be from the fixed position of object on the periphery of the circle. Nonetheless, both attempts are necessary, and all three concepts of difference have a place in feminist criticism. To focus on the fact of domination, to shift that centre through the naming and denunciation of the nature of oppression, is as central a part of the work of the feminist critic as is the pursuit of radical difference. Together these activities offer some of the most serious creative play presently available. The power of such play to set new worlds in motion is by now, I hope, clear. Let us join our voices with those of the poets.

Epilogue

This essay is grounded in paradoxes, not the least of which is the tension between its rhetorical and expressive functions, as it both denounces the logical

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principles which have lead to women's supposed literary silence and through the poetic appeal of its metaphors invites you to respond to identifying with this muffled voice. This in turn rests on the foundation of a paradox at the heart of contemporary feminism, in the very understanding of ideology. In a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing, feminists denounce the ideology of patriarchy, ideology here being understood to have a negative meaning, being a form of false consciousness that disturbs the understanding of social reality, and call into question the cognitive value of ideas affected by ideology. Simultaneously, however, they are advancing an ideology with a positive meaning, being the expression of the world-view of a class. The opinions, theories and attitudes formed to defend and promote its interests are more frequently called ideologies,⁴⁷ the introduction of the plural here underlining the possibility of choice and a clearer apprehension of reality. This paradox may be further explored through a distinction between ideological thought and Utopian thought. Both are distortions, but whereas ideological thought fails to take account of new realities in a situation by concealing them, thinking of them in categories which are inappropriate, Utopian thought transcends the present and is oriented towards the future and, should it pass into conduct, shatters the prevailing order of things. The feminism I have described is of this Utopian mode. A quest for reality would avoid either pole of these distortions. But our knowledge of reality is enriched when it assimilates divergent perspectives of groups experiencing social reality differently.⁴⁸ Of the two types of distortion, the Utopian is potentially the more flexible in its accomodation of divergences.

For a critical theory that calls itself "revisionary", questioning conceptual structures and "rethinking thinking," by advancing the personal, the emotional as a conterpoint, my essay is paradoxically conventional. It offers few rough edges or breaks for the reader to latch onto, is in no way disjointed or autobiographical. The lyric potential of its central metaphor is subverted by the order and control the circle exercizes in rhetorically structuring the paper. Consequently, its ringing tones work to convince you rather than inviting you to question established procedures. In other words, it sounds like a party line, the tendentiousness of the feminist argument working to restrict the range of meanings potentially available in the text. It is thus characterized by some degree of closure, at the very time it argues against this feature of dominant language to the extent that such a language embodies a hierarchy of meanings and implies a subjection to meaning. Posing the issue of feminist cultural practice in this way opens once more the question of a feminine as opposed to a feminist text. This feminine text or "open text" is the dialogic text, or the text in spiral, which according to Nicole Brossard,⁴⁹ subverts the linear logic of patriarchal ideology. By way of moving us towards that heterogeneous text, I am openly addressing you, the reader, and explicating this paradox for you in order to subvert its appropriating power over you. Also, I am opening other frames, shifting the perspectives, enfolding that statement within a vaster ensemble wherein its assumptions, the nature of this particular "critical wager" are more clearly revealed, its contradictions articulated. This consciousness of self-

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consciousness is a way of ensuring that we do not become fixed into a representation by ideology. In such perpetual undercutting of positions, our focus is on the process of production of meaning. An illusion of opening is created by this recursive paradigm.

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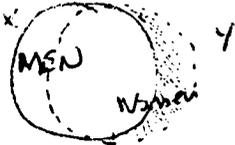
Notes

1. In critical texts, the usual mode of intertextuality is quotation. In this text, I have made use of allusion. The texts I am working with range from French feminist theory, Quebec literary practice and theory and general anglo-american feminist criticism. For a more detailed working out of the relationships between these differing groups, see my forthcoming "Mapmaking: A survey of Feminist Criticism," in *Critical Difference: Feminist Approaches to the Writing of Canadian and Quebec Women* (Downsview: ECW, 1984). Here I am weaving them all together. Thanks to Daphne Read for her dialogue.
2. Before turning to the question of critical theory we might well pause a moment to consider the issue of feminism. What we mean by the term undoubtedly varies. Generally, feminism is a movement and in so far as some of its followers have engaged in philosophical analysis it also gives rise to theory. In that it articulates the opinions and attitudes formed within a group in order to defend and promote its interests, feminism is the expression of the world-view of that social group, that is an ideology. Intrinsic to feminism is women's sense of grievance, an awareness of oppression, an awareness that women suffer systematic social injustice because of their sex. This awareness depends on a belief in and commitment to the ideal of equality. Under this broad umbrella are to be found a variety of feminisms, differing in their analysis of the grounds for female oppression, of what constitutes the locus of reality for the female. Does oppression originate in social conventions and legal systems which can be changed by reforming the laws and educating the young to overcome gender bias? Or is the oppression biological in origin, rooted in sex differences and eternally immutable? Is the oppression privatized, psychological, its genesis in the basic impulses and instincts of the Oedipal phase important for the separation, the difference, that forms the subject, developmental process from which females — undifferentiated from their mothers, from nature — are excluded? Does this exclusion then perpetuate itself in the symbolic systems and language of our culture, or do these systems and this language "speak" us out of them, because they have been formed and perpetuated in male institutions? Or is this oppression grounded in the material conditions of our economic system where capitalism has appropriated woman's labour whether inside or outside the home, reified her, made her a commodity?
The replies to this question about the Real have given rise to the various current streams of feminism which have taken divergent courses. One has confronted the issue of dominance, seeking for women the rights and privileges normally held by men in society. This has been the tactic of both liberal reformers with their call for Equal Rights and Marxists with their subordination of women's struggle to the broader class struggle against capitalism. An opposing stream of radical feminism, socialist feminists and lesbian feminists, has sought for women a special status which would be equally valued. Attempting to define the specificity of women, they emphasize the fact of difference. For a Canadian version of this latter see Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn's *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1983).
3. Roland Barthes, "History of Literature ?" in *On Racine*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), p. 163

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4. Margaret Atwood, *Power Politics* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 31.
5. Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 19.
6. Percy B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (1821).
7. Plato, *The Republic*.
8. Samuel N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Rev. ed. New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 93 and 95, also Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Janovich, 1976).
9. While it is a heavy burden to place on a single Atwood poem, to develop my thesis on her view of power politics, this doesn't distort her view of language. Generally, she is suspicious of the word and locates truth or meaning in gesture not word. I have been working at greater length on this subject in "Dream of a Common Language: Atwood and Brossard."
10. Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 32-33.
11. Margaret Laurence in Kroetsch, et. al., *Creation* (Toronto: New press, 1979), p. 63. It is also a phrase of Nicole Brossard's found in *These Our Mothers* (Toronto: Coach House, 1983), *L'Amèr* (Montreal: Quinze, 1975).
12. I am picking up here on the controversial issue of the female subject which follows from Jacques Lacan's suggestion that discourse is a grammar of the self. The self or subject is split into a "je" or "ça" both participating in the production of discourse. While "je" produces discourse, "ça" speaking makes a latent signified perceptible through metaphor and results in the discovery of signification. Lacan's insistence on the primacy of the Oedipal complex in the split of the subject, in the development of the possibility of differential analysis, has seemingly excluded women from the production of discourse. (*Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1970) French feminists such as Luce Irigaray have attacked this primacy of the phallus as signifier, "phallogocentrism", and suggested other modes of female differentiation on which to found a grammar of the self. Irigaray images a female doubling in the two lips speaking, lips of the mouth or of the vagina in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 26. She advocates a serial concept of difference rather than a binary one that results in hierarchies. Julia Kristeva offers another model in the female body doubling and splitting in pregnancy. ("Women's Time," trans. by Alice Jardine, *Signs*, 7, 1 (Autumn 1981), pp. 13-35). Nicole Brossard offers another version in *These Our Mothers* (Toronto, 1983) in the separation of the child from the mother's breast.
13. See for example Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). Also Lorraine Weir, "Towards a Feminist Hermeneutic," forthcoming in *Critical Difference: Feminist Approaches to the Writing of Canadian and Quebec Women*. (Downsview: ECW, 1984).
14. Dorothy Smith, "An Analysis of Ideological Structures: How Women Are Excluded: Considerations for Academic Women," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 12 (November 1975), p. 353. The circle metaphor is from Smith as well as from an unpublished talk by Nicole Brossard. The applications of it, however, are my own. Smith goes on to say: "the universe of ideas, images and themes — the symbolic modes which are the general currency of thought — have been either produced by men or controlled by them. In so far as women's work and experience has entered into it, it has been on terms decided by men and because it has been approved by men." Women have access and participate in the educational and literary institutions as marginals. "Their training and education ensure that at every level of competence and leadership there will be a place for them which is inferior and subordinate to the positions of men."
15. Luce Irigaray, "Pouvoir du discours: subordination du féminin," in *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 65-82.
16. Myra Jehlen, "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism," (*Signs*, 1981) quoted by Louise Forsyth, "The Fusion of Reflexive Writing and Theoretical Reflection: Nicole Brossard and Feminist Criticism in Quebec." Unpublished paper, 1981, p. 2.

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17. This is again a summary of Irigaray's position on difference. For a more extended discussion of the divergence between Irigaray and de Beauvoir, see my article "My (M)Other, My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hébert," *ECW*, 26 (1983), pp. 13-44, and below.
 18. These ideas have been developed by Althusser as described by Tony Bennett in *Formalism and Marxism* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 116.
 19. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.
 20. This paper was originally read to the Literary Theory Group of ACUTE at the Learned Societies, Vancouver, 1983. In revising it for publication I discovered an article which effectively categorized the differing concepts of difference I was working and I have borrowed this formulation from it. Judith K. Gardiner, "Power, Desire and Difference: Comment on Essays from *Signs*' Special Issues on Feminist Theory," *Signs*, 8, 4(Summer 1983), p. 736.
 21. Forsyth, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 1-2.
 22. This text is an attempt to do so, alluding as it does to many works of art. The succeeding lines are a paraphrase of Nicole Brossard.
 23. Louise Forsyth, "La critique au féminin: vers de nouveaux lieux communs." *Parlons-en/Speaking Together* (Montreal: Simone de Beauvoir Institute, June 2, 1980), My translation.
 24. Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: the Meta Ethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 56.
 25. Jacques Ehrmann, "Homo Ludens Revisited," in *Game, Play, Literature* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 38 and 53.
 26. Dale Spender, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.
 27. Christine Salem, "On Naming the Oppressor: What Woolf Avoids Saying in *A Room of One's Own*". *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 3, 2/3 (1980), pp. 209-218.
 28. Lorraine McMullen, "The Divided Self," *Atlantis*, 5, 2 (Spring 1980), pp. 52-67.
 29. Although I had not seen it when I first wrote this, this description of a model for conceptualizing sex differences is similar to that developed by Elaine Showalter in her essay "Criticism in the Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry*, 8, 2(Winter 1981), p. 200.
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30. Philip Stratford, "Canada's Two Literatures: A Search for Emblems," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 6, 2 (Spring 1979), pp. 131-138.
 31. Course on the Semiotics of Sex Differences given by Dian McGuiness of Stanford University at the International Semiotics Summer Institute. University of Toronto, June 1982.
 32. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975.
 33. Barbara Godard, "The View from Below: the Female Novel of the Land." Paper read at Intersections. Lincoln Nebraska, March 1982. (forthcoming in a book I am writing on language and Canadian women's writing.)
 34. Deborah Jones, "Gossip: Notes on Women's Oral Culture." *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 3, 2/3 (1980), p. 194.

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35. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1915, rpt. New York: Pantheon, 1979).
36. Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (New York: Bantam, 1975).
37. With respect to this question, Elaine Showalter has articulated another position in her article "Criticism in the Wilderness." Working both with American socio-linguistic descriptive material and French semiotic theory with respect to woman as sign, as well as philosophical theories on the relationship between language and action, I have stressed the primacy of *language* in sexual difference. This is especially relevant for the question of literary theory which is focused on difference expressed in the word. Showalter briefly describes four different groundings for female difference, biology, language, psyche and culture, in ascending order of comprehensiveness, arguing that "a theory of culture incorporates ideas about woman's body, language, and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur." (p. 197) However, this analysis is based on a superficial understanding of French psychoanalytic structuralism and especially a mis-reading of the primacy of language in the framing of symbolic systems. Hence I would underline this sentence of mine, "it is through language that we define and categorize areas of difference and similarity."
38. Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: New American Library, 1971), p. 181. See also my discussion of this in "Heirs of the Living Body: Alice Munro and the Question of a Female Aesthetic," Read at Munro conference, Waterloo, March 1982. Forthcoming with proceedings.
39. Madeleine Gagnon, "Mon corps dans l'écriture," in Gagnon, Cixous, Clément, *La venue à l'écriture* (Paris: 10/18, 1977), p. 63.
40. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972). See also my "Dream of a Common Language: Theories of Language in Atwood and Brossard."
41. Madeleine Gagnon. *Lueur* (Montreal: VLB, 1979).
42. Nicole Brossard, "La tête qu'elle fait," *La Barre du jour*, 56-7 (1977), p. 91. On this question see my chapter "Vers une poétique féministe: La nouvelle barre du jour," in *Subversion Féminité. Écriture* (Montreal: Éditions Remue Ménage, 1983) and "The Exploding Chapter: Nicole Brossard at the Site of Feminist Deconstruction, *Atlantis*, forthcoming fall 1983).
43. Mary Daly, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.
44. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
45. For example, Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner, eds. *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (New York: Ungar, 1980) and Lois Gotlieb and Wendy Keitner, "Daughters and Mothers in Four Recent Canadian Novels," *Sphinx*, 1, 4 (Summer 1975).
46. Suzanne Lamy, *d'elles* (Montreal: L'Hexagone, 1979)
47. This analysis is based on the work of Jorge Larraín, *The Concept of Ideology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), Chapter 1.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
49. Nicole Brossard, *Amantes* (Montreal: Quinze, 1980) This is a feminist elaboration on Kristeva's discussion of the ideologem and the bounded text in *Le texte du roman* (Paris, La Hague: Mouton, 1970). Kristeva's definition of the feminine text as a radically signifying practice is also echoed here. A text may embody or produce the poetic to the degree that it brings to the fore the processes by which it constructs its own meanings. A text is constituted as poetic in relation to its reading. Any text may qualify as poetic, as radical signifying practice, or as feminine only in the relationships it poses between itself and its readers.