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

Pamela McCallum

In the 1970's and 1980's the second wave of feminist theory in France has reproblematized 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). 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 féminité 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
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 phallocentric 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
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." 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 untrammeled 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” 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.”

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 contiguity. They touch (upon). And when they wander too far from this nearness, she stops and begins again from ‘zero’: her body-sex organ.” 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).”

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 *feminité* 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."

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 independant, autonomous self is a perfunctory dismissal (Trigaray'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.' 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 *passe* 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 women'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." 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
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 biologicist 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 féminité 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.\textsuperscript{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 revaluation, to assess previous work and to suggest new strategies for approaching feminist discourse theory.

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.


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.


Department of English
University of Calgary
WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? 
FEMINIST READINGS OF WOOLF*

Toril Moi

On a brief survey, the answer to the question posed in the title of this paper would seem to be: quite a few feminist critics. It is not of course surprising that many male critics have found Woolf a frivolous bohemian and negligible Bloomsbury aesthete, but the rejection of the great feminist writer by so many of her Anglo-American feminist daughters requires further explanation. A distinguished feminist critic like Elaine Showalter for example, signals her subtle swerve away from Woolf by taking over yet changing Woolf's title. Under Showalter's pen A Room of One's Own becomes A Literature of Their Own, as if she wished to indicate her problematic distance to the tradition of women writers she lovingly uncovers in her book.

In this paper I will first examine some negative feminist responses to Woolf, particularly as exemplified in Elaine Showalter's long, closely argued chapter on Woolf in A Literature of Their Own. Then I will indicate some points towards a different, more positive feminist reading of Woolf, before finally summing up the salient features of the feminist response to Woolf's writings.

The Rejection of Woolf

Elaine Showalter devotes most of her chapter on Woolf to a survey of Woolf's biography and a discussion of A Room of One's Own. The title of her chapter, "Virginia Woolf and the flight into androgyny", is indicative of her treatment of Woolf's texts. She sets out to prove that for Woolf the concept of androgyny was a "myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness

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* Part I from Sexual/Textual/Politics. Feminist Literary Theory Methuen (Forthcoming).
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and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition" (264). For Showalter, Woolf's greatest sin against feminism is that "even in the moment of expressing feminist conflict, Woolf wanted to transcend it. Her wish for experience was really a wish to forget experience" (282). Showalter sees Woolf's insistence on the androgynous nature of the great writer as a flight away from a "troubled feminism" (282) and locates the moment of this flight in Room.

Showalter starts her discussion of this essay by stating that:

What is most striking about the book textually and structurally is its strenuous charm, its playfulness, its conversational surface... The techniques of Room are like those of Woolf's fiction, particularly Orlando, which she was writing at the same time: repetition, exaggeration, parody, whimsy, and multiple viewpoint. On the other hand, despite its illusions of spontaneity and intimacy, A Room of One's Own is an extremely impersonal and defensive book.

(282)

Showalter here gives the impression that Woolf's use of "repetition, exaggeration, parody, whimsy and multiple viewpoint" in Room only contributes to creating an impression of "strenuous charm", and therefore somehow distracts attention from the message Woolf wants to put forward in the essay. She then goes on to object to the "impersonality" of Room, an impersonality which springs from the fact that Woolf's use of many different personae to voice the narrative "I" results in frequently recurring shifts and changes of subject position, leaving the critic no single unified position but a multiplicity of perspectives to grapple with. Furthermore, Woolf refuses to reveal her own experience fully and clearly, but insists on disguising or parodying it in the text, obliging Showalter to point out for us that "Fernham" really is Newnham College, that "Oxbridge" really is Cambridge and so on.

The steadily shifting and multiple perspectives built up through these techniques evidently exasperate Showalter, who ends up declaring that: "The entire book is teasing, sly, elusive in this way; Woolf plays with her audience, refusing to be entirely serious, denying any earnest or subversive intention" (284). For Showalter, the only way a feminist can read Room properly is by remaining "detached from its narrative strategies" (285); and if she manages to do so, she will see that Room is in no way a particularly liberating text:

If one can see A Room of One's Own as a document in the literary history of female aestheticism, and remain detached from its narrative strategies, the concepts of androgyyny and the private room are neither as liberating nor as obvious as they first appear. They have a darker side that is the sphere of the exile and the eunuch.

(285)
For Showalter, Woolf's writing continually escapes the critic's perspective, always refusing to be pinned down to one unifying angle of vision. This elusiveness is then interpreted as a denial of authentic feminist states of mind, namely the "angry and alienated ones" (287), and as a commitment to the Bloomsbury ideal of the "separation of politics and art" (288). This separation is evident, Showalter thinks, in the fact that Woolf "avoided describing her own experience" (294). Since this avoidance makes it impossible for Woolf to produce really committed feminist work, Showalter naturally concludes that Three Guineas as well as Room fail abysmally as feminist essays.

My own view is that "remaining detached from the narrative strategies" of Room is equivalent to not reading it at all, and that Showalter's impatient reactions to the essay are motivated much more by its formal and stylistic features than by the ideas she extrapolates as its content. But in order to argue this point more thoroughly, it is necessary first to take a closer look at the theoretical assumptions about the relationship between aesthetics and politics which can be detected in Showalter's chapter.

Showalter's theoretical framework is never made explicit in A Literature of Their Own. From what we have seen so far, however, it would be reasonable to assume that she believes that texts should reflect the writer's experience, and that the more authentic the experience is felt to be by the reader, the better the text. Woolf's essays fail to transmit any direct experience to the reader, according to Showalter largely because Woolf did not as an upper-class woman have the necessary negative experience to qualify as a good feminist writer. Showalter implicitly defines effective feminist writing as work which offers a powerful expression of personal experience in a social framework. According to this definition, Woolf's essays can't be very political either. Showalter's position on this point in fact strongly favours the form of writing commonly known as critical or bourgeois realism, precluding any real recognition of the value of Virginia Woolf's modernism. It is not a coincidence that the only major literary theoretician Showalter alludes to in her chapter on Woolf is the Marxist critic Georg Lukács (296). Given that Showalter herself can hardly be accused of Marxist leanings, this alliance might strike some readers as curious. But Lukács was the great champion of the realist novel, which he saw as the supreme culmination of the narrative form. For Lukács, the great realists, like Balzac or Tolstoy, succeeded in representing the totality of human life in its social context, thus representing the fundamental truth of history: the "unbroken upward evolution of mankind" (Lukács 3). Proclaiming himself a "proletarian humanist", he states that "the object of proletarian humanism is to reconstruct the complete human personality and free it from the distortion and dismemberment to which it has been subjected in class society" (5). Lukács reads the great classical tradition in art as the attempt to uphold this ideal of the total human being even under historical conditions which prevent its realization outside art.

In art the necessary degree of objectivity in the representation of the human subject, both as a private individual and as a public citizen, can only be attained through the representation of types. Lukács states that the type is "a peculiar
synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations" (6). He then goes on to make the point that "true great realism" is superior to all other art forms:

True great realism thus depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. Measured by this criterion, artistic trends determined by either exclusive introspection or exclusive extraversion equally impoverish and distort reality. Thus realism means a three-dimensionality, an all-roundness, that endows with independent life characters and human relationships.

Given this view of art, it follows that for Lukács any art which exclusively represents "the division of the complete human personality into a public and a private sector" contribute to the "mutilation of the essence of man" (9). It is easy to see that precisely this point of Lukács aesthetics would have great appeal to many feminists. The lack of a totalizing representation of both the private and the working life of women is, for instance, Patricia Stubbs's main complaint against all novels written both by men and women in the period between 1880 and 1920, and Stubbs echoes Showalter's objection to Woolf's fiction when she states that in Woolf "there is no coherent attempt to create new models, new images of women" and that "this failure to carry her feminism through into her novels seems to stem, at least in part, from her aesthetic theories" (231). But the demand for new, realistic images of women takes it for granted that feminist writers should want to use the form of the realist novel in the first place. Thus both Stubbs and Showalter object to what they see as Woolf's tendency to wrap everything in a "haze of subjective perceptions" (Stubbs 231), thus perilously echoing Lukács' Stalinist views of the "reactionary" nature of modernist writing.

Modernism, Lukács held, signified an extreme form of the fragmented, subjectivist, individualist psychologism typical of the oppressed and exploited human being living under capitalism. For him, futurism as well as surrealism, Joyce as well as Proust, were decadent and reactionary descendants of the great anti-humanist, Nietzsche, and their art therefore lent itself to exploitation by fascism. Only through a strong and committed belief in the values of humanism could art become an efficient weapon in the struggle against fascism. It was this emphasis on a humanist, totalizing aesthetics which led Lukács to proclaim as late as 1938 that the great writers of the first part of the 20th century would undoubtedly turn out to be Anatole France, Romain Rolland and Thomas and Heinrich Mann.

Showalter is not of course, like Lukács, a proletarian humanist. Even so, there is detectable within her literary criticism a strong, unquestioned belief in the values, not of proletarian humanism, but of traditional bourgeois humanism of the liberal-individualist kind. Where Lukács sees the harmonious development of the "whole person" as stunted and frustrated by the inhuman
social conditions imposed by capitalism, Showalter examines the oppression of women's potential by the relentless sexism of patriarchal society. It is certainly true that Lukács nowhere seems to show any interest in the specific problems of women's difficulties in developing as whole and harmonious human beings under patriarchy — no doubt he assumed that once communism had been constructed, everybody, including women, would become free beings. But it is equally true that Showalter in her criticism takes no interest in the necessities of combatting capitalism and fascism. Her insistence on the need for political art is limited to the struggle against sexism. Thus she gives Virginia woolf no credit whatsoever for having elaborated a highly original theory of the relations between sexism and fascism in Three Guineas: nor does she seem to approve of Woolf's attempts to link feminism to pacifism in the same essay, of which she merely comments that:

*Three Guineas* rings false. Its language, all too frequently, is empty sloganeering and cliché; the stylistic tricks of repetition, exaggeration, and rhetorical question, so amusing in *A Room of One's Own*, become irritating and hysterical.

(295)

Showalter's humanist individualism surfaces clearly enough when she first rejects Woolf for being too subjective, too passive and for wanting to flee her female gender identity by embracing the idea of androgyny, and then goes on to reproach Doris Lessing for merging the "feminine ego" into a greater collective consciousness in her later books (311). Both writers are similarly flawed: both have in different ways rejected the fundamental need for the individual to adopt a unified, whole and integrated self-identity. Both Woolf and Lessing radically undermine the notion of the unitary self, the central concept of individualist humanism and one thus crucial to Showalter's feminism.

The Lukácsian line implicitly defended by Stubbs and Showalter holds that politics is a matter of the right content being represented in the correct realist form. Virginia Woolf is unsuccessful in Stubbs's eyes because she fails to give a "truthful picture of women", a picture which would include equal emphasis on the private and the public. Showalter for her part deprecates Woolf's lack of sensitivity to "the ways in which [female experience] had made [women] strong" (285). Implicit in such critical comments is the assumption that good feminist fiction would present truthful images of strong women with which the reader may identify. Indeed it is this which Marcia Holly recommends in an article entitled "Consciousness and Authenticity: Towards a Feminist Aesthetic". According to Holly, the new feminist aesthetic must move "away from formalist criticism and insist that we judge by standards of authenticity" (40). Holly, again quoting Lukács, also argues that as feminists:

We are searching for a truly revolutionary art. The content of a given piece need not be feminist, of course, for that piece to be
humanist, and therefore revolutionary. Revolutionary art is that which roots out the essentials about the human condition rather than perpetuating false ideologies.

For Holly, this kind of universalising humanist aesthetic leads straight to a search for the representation of strong, powerful women in literature, a search reminiscent of The Soviet Writers' Congress' demand for socialist realism in 1934. Instead of strong, happy tractor drivers and factory workers, we are presumably to demand strong, happy women tractor drivers from now on. More seriously, Holly makes explicit one of the fundamental requirements of the kind of realism both she, Stubbs and Showalter seem to favour. She states that "Realism first of all demands a consistent (noncontradictory) perception of those issues (emotions, motivations, conflicts) to which the work has been limited" (42). We are in other words again confronted with Showalter's demand for a unitary vision, with her exasperation at Woolf's use of multiple and shifting viewpoints, with her text; the argument has come full circle.

Rescuing Woolf for Feminist Politics:
Some Points Towards an Alternative Reading

So far we have been discussing various aspects of the crypto-Lukácsian perspective implicit in much contemporary feminist criticism. The major disadvantage of this approach is surely the fact that it proves itself incapable of appropriating for feminism the work of the greatest British woman writer of this century, despite the fact that Woolf not only was a novelist of considerable genius but a declared feminist and dedicated reader of other women's writings. It is surely arguable that if feminist critics can't come up with a positive political and critical appreciation of Woolf's writing, the fault may lie with their critical and theoretical perspectives, rather than with Woolf's texts. But do feminists have an alternative to this negative way of reading Woolf? Here I must embarrassedly admit that I have found no critical text at all which takes up this challenge. There are however some partial, minor attempts at a more positive appraisal of her work, and I will refer to these in this section of my paper. But my main concern here is to indicate some elements of a theoretical approach which will allow us to accomplish the urgent task at hand: the task of rescuing Virginia Woolf for feminist politics.

Showalter wants the literary text to yield the reader a certain security, a firm perspective from which to judge the world. Woolf, on the other hand, seems to practise what we might now call a "deconstructive" form of writing, one which engages and exposes the duplicitous nature of discourse. In her own textual practice, Woolf exposes the way in which language refuses to be pinned down to an underlying essential meaning. If the French philosopher Jacques Derrida is right, language is structured as an endless deferral of meaning, and any search for or belief in essential and absolutely stable meaning, must therefore be considered metaphysical. There is no final element, no fundamental unit, no
transcendental signifier, which is meaningful in itself and thus escapes the ceaseless interplay of deferral and difference. The free play of signifiers will never yield a final, unified meaning which in turn might explain all the others. It is in the light of such textual and linguistic theory that we can read Woolf's playful shifts and changes of perspective in both her fiction and in Room as something rather more than a wilful desire to irritate the serious-minded feminist critic. Through her conscious exploitation of the sportive, sensual nature of language, Woolf rejects the metaphysical essentialism which forms the basis of patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the Father or the phallus as its transcendental signifier.

But Woolf does more than practise a non-essentialist form of writing. She also reveals a deeply sceptical attitude to the classical concept of an essential human identity. For what can this self-identical identity be if all meaning is a ceaseless play of difference, if absence and not presence is the foundation of meaning? The concept of identity is also challenged by psychoanalytic theory, which Woolf undoubtedly knew. The Hogarth Press published the first English translations of Freud's central works, and when Freud arrived in London in 1939 Virginia Woolf went to see him. Freud, we are intriguingly informed, gave her a narcissus. For Woolf as for Freud, the unconscious drives and desires constantly exert pressure on our conscious thoughts and actions. For the psychoanalyst the human subject is a complex entity, of which the conscious mind is only a small part. Once one has accepted this view of the subject, however, it becomes impossible to argue that even our conscious wishes and feelings originate within a unified self, since we can have no knowledge of the possibly unlimited unconscious processes which shape our conscious thought. Conscious thought, then, must be seen as the overdetermined manifestation of a multiplicity of structures which intersect to produce that unstable constellation the liberal humanists call the "self". These structures encompass not only unconscious sexual desires, and unconscious fears and phobias, but also conflicting material, social, political and ideological factors of which we are equally unaware. It is this highly complex network of conflicting structures, the anti-humanist would argue, which produce the subject and its experiences, rather than the other way round. This does not of course render individuals' experiences in any sense illusory or insignificant, but it does mean that such experiences cannot be understood other than through the study of their multiple determinants — determinants of which conscious thought is only one, and a potentially treacherous one at that. If the same approach is taken to the literary text, if follows that the search for a unified individual identity (or gender identity) or indeed "textual identity" in the literary work must be seen as a highly reductive and selective approach to literature.

This, then, is what I meant when I said that to follow Showalter and "remain detached from the narrative strategies" of the text is equivalent to not reading it at all. For it is only through a careful examination of the detailed strategies of the text on all its levels that we will be able to uncover some of the conflicting and contradictory elements which contribute to make it precisely this text, with precisely these words and this configuration. The humanist desire for unity of
vision or thought (or as Holly puts it, for a "noncontradictory perception of the world") is, in other words, a demand for a sharply reductive reading of the literary text, a reading which, not least in the case of an experimental writer like Woolf, can have little hope of grasping the central problems posed by her kind of textual production. A "noncontradictory perception of the world", for Lukács' great Marxist opponent Bertolt Brecht, is precisely a reactionary one.

The French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva has argued that the modernist poetry of Lautréamont, Mallarmé and others constitute a "revolutionary" form of writing. The modernist poem, with its abrupt shifts, ellipses, breaks and apparent lack of logical construction is a kind of writing in which the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defences of conventional social meaning. Since Kristeva sees such meaning as the structure which sustains the whole of the symbolic order — that is, all human social and cultural institutions — the breakdown of symbolic language in modernist poetry comes to prefigure for her a total social revolution. For Kristeva, that is to say, there is a specific practice of writing which in itself is revolutionary, analogous to sexual and political transformation, and which by its very existence testifies to the possibility of breaking down the symbolic order from the inside. One might argue in this light that Woolf's refusal to commit herself in her essays to a so-called rational or logical form of writing, free from fictional techniques, indicates a similar break with symbolic language, as of course do many of the techniques she deploys in her novels.

Kristeva also argues that many women will be able to let what she calls the "spasmodic force" of the unconscious disrupt their language because of their stronger links with the pre-oedipal mother-figure. But if these unconscious pulsations should take over the subject entirely, the subject will fall back into pre-oedipal or imaginary chaos and develop some form of mental illness. The subject whose language lets such forces disrupt the symbolic order is in other words also the subject who runs the greater risk of lapsing into madness. Seen in this context, Woolf's own periodic attacks of mental illness can be linked both to her textual strategies and to her feminism. For the symbolic order is a patriarchal order, ruled by the Law of the Father, and any subject who tries to disrupt it, who lets unconscious forces slip through the symbolic repression, puts him- or herself in a position of revolt against this regime. Woolf herself suffered patriarchal oppression particularly acutely at the hands of the psychiatric establishment, and Mrs. Dalloway contains not only a splendidly satirical attack on that profession (as represented by Sir William Bradshaw), but also a brilliantly perspicacious representation of a mind which succumbs to "imaginary" chaos in the character of Septimus Smith. Indeed Septimus can be seen as the negative parallel to Clarissa Dalloway, who herself steers clear of the threatening gulf of madness only at the price of repressing her passions and desires, becoming a cold but brilliant woman highly admired in patriarchal society. In this way Woolf discloses the dangers of the invasion of the unconscious pulsions as well as the price paid by the subject who successfully preserves her sanity, thus maintaining a precarious balance between an overestimation of so-called "feminine" madness, and a too precipitate rejection of the values of the symbolic order.
It is evident that for Kristeva it is not the biological sex of a person, but the subject position he or she takes up, which determines their place within the patriarchal order. Her views on feminist politics reflect this refusal of biologism and essentialism. The feminist struggle, she argues, must be seen historically and politically as a three-tiered one, which can be schematically summarized as follows:

2. Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. Radical feminism. Femininity extolled.
3. (And this is Kristeva’s own position.) Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical.

The third position is one which has deconstructed the opposition between masculinity and femininity, and therefore necessarily challenge the very notion of identity. Kristeva writes:

In the third attitude, which I strongly advocate — which I imagine? — the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to metaphysics. What can “identity”, even “Sexual identity”, mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?

(“Women’s Time”, 33-34)

The relationship between the second and the third positions here requires some comment. If the defence of the third position implies a total rejection of stage two (which I do not think it does), this would be a grievous political error. For it still remains politically essential for feminists to defend women as women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression which precisely despises women as women. But an “undeconstructed” form of “stage two” feminism, unaware of the metaphysical nature of gender-identities, runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism by uncritically taking over the very metaphysical categories set up by patriarchy in order to keep women in their place, despite attempts to attach new feminist values to these old categories. An adoption of Kristeva’s “deconstructed” form of feminism therefore in one sense leaves everything as it was — our positions in the political struggle have not changed — but in another sense it radically transforms our awareness of the nature of that struggle.

Here, I feel, Kristeva’s feminism echoes the position taken up by Virginia Woolf some sixty years earlier. Read from this perspective, To the Lighthouse illustrates the destructive nature of a metaphysical belief in strong, immutably fixed gender identities — as represented by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay — whereas Lily Briscoe (an artist) represents the subject who deconstructs this opposition, perceives its pernicious influence in society, and tries as far as possible in a still
rigidly patriarchal order to live as her own woman, without regard for the crippling definitions of sexual identity to which society would have her conform. It is in this context that we must situate Woolf's crucial concept of androgyny. This is not, as Showalter argues, a flight from fixed gender identities, but a recognition of their falsifying metaphysical nature. Far from fleeing fixed gender identities because she fears them, Woolf rejects them because she has seen them for what they are. She has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity. For Woolf to have thought her feminism in these terms, intuitively rather than theoretically to be sure, is nothing less than astonishing.

In her fascinating book *Towards Androgyny*, published in 1973, Carolyn Heilbrun sets out her own definition of androgyny in very similar terms when she describes it as a concept of an "unbounded and hence fundamentally indefinable nature" (xi). When she later finds it necessary to distinguish androgyny from feminism, and therefore implicitly defines Woolf as a non-feminist, I believe this distinction to be based on the belief that only the first two stages of Kristeva's three-tiered struggle could "count" as being feminist. She does for example admit that in present-day society it might be difficult to separate the defenders of androgyny from feminists, "because of the power men now hold, and because of the political weakness of women" (xvi-xvii), but refuses to draw the conclusion that feminists can in fact desire androgyny. As opposed to Heilbrun here, I would stress with Kristeva that a theory which demands the deconstruction of sexual identity as we can find it in Woolf's essays and novels, must obviously be seen as feminist. In Woolf's case the question is rather whether or not her astonishingly advanced understanding of the objectives of feminism in practice prevented her from taking up a progressive political position in the feminist struggles of her day. In the light of *Three Guineas* (and of *A Room of One's own*) I would answer no to this question. It seems to me that the Woolf of *Three Guineas* shows an acute awareness of the dangers of both liberal and radical feminism (Kristeva's positions 1 and 2), and argues instead for a "stage three" position, but despite her objections, she comes down in the end quite firmly in favour of women's right to financial independence, education and to entry into the professions — all central issues for feminists of the 1920s and '30s.

Nancy Topping Bazin sees Woolf's concept of androgyny as the union of masculinity and femininity — precisely the opposite, in fact, of seeing it as the deconstruction of the duality. For Bazin, masculinity and femininity are concepts which in Woolf retain their full, essentialist charge of meaning. She therefore argues that Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* must be read as just as feminine as Mrs. Ramsay, and that the androgynous solution of the novel consists in a balance of the masculine and the feminine “approach to truth” (138). Herbert Marder, on the other hand, presses in his *Feminism and Art* the trite and traditional case that Mrs. Ramsay must be seen as an androgynous ideal in herself: "Mrs. Ramsay as wife, mother, hostess, is the androgynous artist in life, creating with the whole of her being" (128). Heilbrun rightly rejects such a reading when she claims that:

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It is only in groping our way through the clouds of sentiment and misplaced biographical information that we are able to discover Mrs. Ramsay, far from androgynous and complete, to be as one-sided and life-denying as her husband.

(155)

The many critics who with Marder read Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Dalloway as Woolf's ideal of femininity are thus either betraying their vestigial sexism — the sexes are fundamentally different and should stay that way — or their adherence to what Kristeva would call a "stage two" feminism: women are different from men and it is time they began praising the superiority of their sex. These are both, I believe, misreadings of Woolf's texts, as when Kate Millett writes that:

Virginia Woolf glorified two housewives, Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, recorded the suicidal misery of Rhoda in *The Waves* without ever explaining its causes, and was argumentative yet somehow unsuccessful, perhaps because unconvinced, in conveying the frustrations of the woman artist in *Lily Briscoe*.

(139-40)

So far, then, the combination of Derridean and Kristevan theory seems to hold considerable promise for future feminist readings of Woolf. But it is important to be aware of the political limitations of Kristeva's arguments. Marxist critics of Kristeva have pointed out that though her views on the politics of the subject constitute an important contribution to revolutionary theory, her belief that the revolution within the subject somehow prefigures a later social revolution is in materialist terms quite untenable. The strength of Kristevan theory lies in its emphasis on the politics of language as a material and social structure, but it takes little or no account of other conflicting ideological and material structures which must be part of any total social transformation. Her revolutionary politics therefore tend to lapse into a subjectivist anarchism on the social level. Even so, her theories of the "revolutionary" nature of certain writing practices cannot be rejected without loss. She has given an account of the possibilities as well as the risks run by the revolutionary subject, insights of crucial importance to Marxist and feminist political theory. The "solution" to Kristeva's problem lies not in a speedy return to Lukács, but in an integration and transvaluation of her ideas within a larger feminist theory of ideology.

Since Woolf's writings come so close to Kristeva's position in many respects, it is not surprising that they also bear traces of the same political weaknesses, notably the tendency to individualist anarchism. The proposal for the "Outsider's Society" in *Three Guineas* is a notable example. But Woolf does in fact devote a great deal of attention to the material and ideological structures of oppression in, for example, her essays on women writers, and only a closer examination of all of her texts would enable us to draw any conclusions as to how far she can be accused of subjectivist politics.
A Marxist-feminist critic like Michèle Barrett has stressed the materialist aspect of Woolf's politics. In her introduction to her edition of *Virginia Woolf Women & Writing*, she argues that:

Virginia Woolf's critical essays offer us an unparalleled account of the development of women's writing, perceptive discussion of her predecessors and contemporaries, and a pertinent insistence on the material conditions which have structured women's consciousness.

(36)

However, Barrett considers Woolf only as an essayist and critic, and seems to take the view that when it comes to her fiction, Woolf's aesthetic theory, particularly the concept of an androgynous art, "continually resists the implications of the materialist position she advances in *A Room of One's Own*" (22). A Kristevaan approach to Woolf, as I have argued, would refuse to accept this binary opposition of aesthetics on the one hand and politics on the other, locating the politics of Woolf's writing precisely in her textual practice. That practice is of course much more marked in the novels than in most of the essays.

There is another group of feminist critics, centred around Jane Marcus, who consistently argue for a radical reading of Woolf's work without recourse to either Marxist or post-structuralist theory. Jane Marcus claims Woolf as a "guerrilla fighter in a Victorian skirt" (1), and sees in her a champion of both socialism and feminism. However, if we read Marcus' article "Thinking Back Through our Mothers", it soon becomes clear that it is exceptionally difficult to argue this case convincingly without any kind of explicit theoretical framework. Her article opens with the following paragraph:

Writing, for Virginia Woolf, was a revolutionary act. Her alienation from British patriarchal culture and its capitalist and imperialist forms and values, was so intense that she was filled with terror and determination as she wrote. A guerrilla fighter in a Victorian skirt, she trembled with fear as she prepared her attacks, her raids on the enemy.

(1)

Are we to believe that there is a causal link between the first and the following sentences — that writing was a revolutionary act for Woolf because she could be seen to tremble as she wrote? Or should the passage be read as an extended metaphor, as an image of the fears of any woman writing under patriarchy? In this case, it no longer tells us anything in particular about Woolf's specific writing practices. Or again, perhaps the first sentence is the claim which the following sentences are to corroborate? If this is the case, the argument also fails. For Marcus is here unproblematically involving biographical evidence to sustain her thesis about the nature of Woolf's writing. The reader is to be convinced by appeals to historical and biographical circumstances rather than
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to the texts. But does it really matter whether or not Woolf was in the habit of trembling at her desk? Surely what matters is what she wrote? This kind of argument is common in Marcus' article, as witness her extensive discussion of the alleged parallels between Woolf and the German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin ("Both Woolf and Benjamin chose suicide rather than exile before the tyranny of fascism." (7)). But surely Benjamin's suicide at the Spanish frontier, where as an exiled German Jew fleeing the Nazi occupation of France he feared being handed over to the Gestapo, must be considered in a rather different light from Woolf's suicide in her own back garden in unoccupied England, however political we wish her private life to be? Marcus' biographical analogies strive to establish Woolf as a remarkable individual, and in doing so fall back into a historical-biographical criticism of the kind much in vogue before the American New Critics entered the scene in the 1930s. Her combination of radical feminism with this traditionalist critical method is perhaps indicative of a certain theoretical and methodological confusion in the field of feminist criticism.

Conclusion

We have seen that current Anglo-American feminist criticism tends to read Woolf through traditional aesthetic categories, relying largely on a liberal humanist version of the Lukácsian aesthetics against which Brecht so effectively polemised. The anti-humanist reading I have advocated as yielding a better understanding of the political nature of Woolf's aesthetics has yet to be written. The only study of Woolf to have integrated some of the theoretical advances of poststructuralist thought is written by a man, Perry Meisel, and though it is by no means an antifeminist or even an unfeminist work, it is nevertheless primarily concerned with the influence on Woolf of Walter Pater. Meisel is the only critic of my acquaintance to have grasped the radically deconstructed character of Woolf's texts:

With "difference" the reigning principle in Woolf as well as Pater, there can be no natural or inherent characteristics of any kind, even between the sexes, because all character, all language, even the language of sexuality, emerges by means of a difference from itself.

(234)

Meisel also shrewdly points out that this principle of difference makes it impossible to select any one of Woolf's works as more representative, as more essentially "Woolfian" than any other, since the notable divergence among her texts "forbids us to believe any moment in Woolf's career to be more conclusive than another" (242). It is a mistake Meisel concludes, to "insist on the coherence of self and author in the face of a discourse that dislocates or decentres them both, that skews the very categories to which our remarks properly refer" (242).
TORIL MOI

The paradoxical conclusion of our investigations into the feminist reception of Woolf is therefore that she has yet to be properly welcomed and acclaimed by her feminist daughters in England and America. To date she has either been rejected by them as insufficiently feminist, or praised on grounds which seem to exclude the fiction. By their more or less unwitting subscription to the humanist aesthetic categories which have traditionally belonged to the male academic hierarchy, feminist critics have seriously undermined the impact of their challenge to that very institution. The only difference between a feminist and a non-feminist critic in this tradition then becomes the formal political perspective of the critic. The feminist critic thus unwittingly puts herself in a position from which it becomes impossible to read Virginia Woolf as the progressive, feminist writer of genius she undoubtedly was. A feminist criticism which will do both justice and homage to its great mother and sister: this, surely should be our goal.

Notes

1. At this point Showalter quotes Q.D. Leavis' "cruelly accurate Scrutiny review" (295) with approbation.

2. Anna Coombes's reading of The Waves shows a true Lukácsian distaste for the fragmented and subjective web of modernism, as when she writes that "My problem in writing this paper has been to attempt to politicize a discourse which obstinate [sic] seeks to exclude the political and the historical, and, where this is no longer possible, then tries to aestheticize glibly what it cannot "realistically" incorporate" (238).

3. The term "Anglo-American" as used in this paper must be taken as an indication of a specific approach to literature, not as an empirical description of the individual critic's birthplace. The British critic Gillian Beer, in her essay "Beyond Determinism: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf" raises the same kind of objections to Showalter's reading of Woolf as I have done in this paper. In a forthcoming essay: Subject and Object and the Nature of Reality: Hume and Elegy in To the Lighthouse, Beer develops this approach in a more philosophical context.

4. For an introduction to Derrida's thought and to other forms of deconstruction, see Norris.

5. My presentation of Kristeva's position here is based on her Révolution.

6. One feminist critic, Barbara Hill Rigney, has tried to show that in Mrs. Dalloway "madness becomes a kind of refuge for the self rather than its loss" (52). This argument finds little support in the text and seems to depend more on the critic's desire to preserve her Laingian categories than on a responsive reading of Woolf's text.

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In “Free Women”, the novel within a novel in Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, Tommy, a young man suffering from an identity crisis, accuses Anna, a writer suffering from a writer’s block, of dishonesty for keeping four notebooks instead of one.

‘After all, you take your stand on something, don’t you? Yes you do — you despise people like my father, who limit themselves. But you limit yourself too. For the same reason. You’re afraid. You’re being irresponsible.’ He made this final judgement the pouting, deliberate mouth smiling with satisfaction. Anna realized that this was what he had come to say. This was the point they had been working towards all evening.¹

Shortly afterwards, Tommy shoots himself. He does not die — he is blinded, and this produces a surprising change in him. His mother observes:

He’s happy for the first time in his life . . . he’s all in one piece for the first time in his life.’ Molly gasped in horror at her own words, hearing what she had said: *all in one piece*, and matching them against the truth of that mutilation.²

Lessing underscores the irony further. In Tommy’s story, blindness and mutilation do not, as one might expect, signify castration. Instead they become
the preconditions for attaining phallic power. By blinding himself, Tommy escapes the influence of the women who nurtured him, and qualifies himself to succeed his father as "husband" to his father's alcoholic wife and as head of his corporate empire.

The moral of this story has not been lost on feminist critics. Definition — being all in one piece — equals phallogocentric delusion. The female text like the female body is irreducibly plural. And so should feminist criticism be. As Annette Kolodny put it: "Our task is to initiate nothing less than a playful pluralism responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive of none." This playful pluralism is appropriate "not simply as a description of what already exists but, more importantly, as the only critical stance consistent with the current status [segmented and variously focused] of the larger women's movement."³

Although Kolodny's argument for pluralism has been highly influential, there are dissenting voices. In her review of feminist literary criticism, Cheri Register writes:

If we are to retain control over the migratory pattern of the monster we have created, we need to capture her and put a tracking device on her. We should take frequent readings on the basic issues: With what questions is feminist literary criticism concerned? What do we really want to know? What use will we make of this knowledge? What makes it literary criticism?⁴

More recently, Elaine Showalter explicitly disputes Kolodny's argument for pluralism:

In spite of her brilliant arguments, Kolodny nonetheless fails to convince me that feminist criticism must altogether abandon the hope of 'establishing some basic conceptual model.' If we see our critical job as interpretation and reinterpretation, we must be content with pluralism as our critical stance. But if we wish to ask questions about the process and the contexts of writing, if we genuinely wish to define ourselves to the uninintiated, we cannot rule out the prospect of theoretical consensus at this early stage.⁵

Register could not have chosen a more distressing metaphor, nor one which is more revealing. Her portrayal of feminist criticism as a wild creature in danger of growing to monstrous proportions and of straying out of control, and of theory as a "tracking device" verifies our worst suspicions about the desire for a comprehensive theory — namely, its complicity with the logic of domination. If
this is what a comprehensive theory entails, I would rather endorse Kolodny's
playful pluralism.

In the above-cited article, Showalter proposes what at first glance seems to
be a sensible compromise between Kolodny's and Register's positions. While
granting that the activity of feminist readers ("feminist critique") is necessarily
pluralistic, she argues that it is possible to develop a basic conceptual model for
the study of the work of women writers ("gynocritics"). Her argument, however,
is not really convincing. I think it makes sense to distinguish between feminist
criticism of female texts (call this gynocritics), and feminist criticism of male
texts (feminist critique). But I do not see why the former should be more or less
pluralistic than the latter. Besides, if a basic conceptual framework could be
developed for the study of women writers, surely a corresponding framework
could be developed that would make sense of the activity of women readers.
The same difference — linguistic, biological, psychological or cultural — should
operate in both.

Before we go further, let us clarify the problem. When we speak of theory, we
could be thinking of one of three kinds.

1. A feminist theory about a specific subject matter — e.g. American
literature, 19th and 20th century British fiction, images of women in literature,
the female imagination, the feminine consciousness, the female or feminist
aesthetic, the implication of literary conventions, the relationship between
literature and life, and so on.

2. A basic conceptual model or methodology, a "grammar" that would
descriptively and/or prescriptively codify feminist critical practice.

3. A comprehensive framework that will represent criticism as a coherent
critical enterprise.

Theory 1 is hardly problematical. A cursory survey of feminist criticism will
reveal many such theories. Feminist discussions of theory are blocked by the
confusion of Theory 2 and Theory 3. What we really want is Theory 3, but we are
led by the prevailing "commonsense" to conflate this with Theory 2; hence, the
talk of tracking devices, manifestos, solid systems, dogmas, party lines, and
uniform, rigid methodologies.

As much as I disagree with Register and Showalter, I share their discontent
with pluralism. It is worth noting that even Kolodny's advocacy of pluralism is
far from unequivocal. She supplements her model with a "shared ideology" that
"manifests its power by ordering the sum of our actions."6 The desire for a
comprehensive theory of feminist criticism persists in spite of the obstacles that
block its realization. It would be rash to write this off as a manifestation of
phallologocentric nostalgia.

The Golden Notebook offers another, more difficult, moral than the one noted
above. Although the aftermath of the scene cited earlier reveals Tommy's bad
faith, his charge — that by adopting a pluralistic strategy Anna is actually
limiting herself — is eventually vindicated. Anna abandons the four notebooks
to "put all of herself" in the golden notebook. This marks "the end fragmentation
— the triumph of a second theme, which is that of unity."7 Although it is
tempting to think that this statement carries the central "message" of Lessing's
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novel, in fact it only puts us on the track of a moral which is not immediately accessible, for it is found not in any statement in the text (or even in Lessing's introduction), but in the "wordless statement" provided by the shape of the novel. The odd arrangement of the text affirms neither the sufficiency of a pluralistic model of reality nor the feasibility of a seamless unity. Instead, it suggests a third alternative: a model that represents a coherence, as interrelatedness, one that does not cancel diversity, but on the contrary is articulated through the play of different moments.

The structure of The Golden Notebook suggests that we need not be bound by the customary association of coherence with systematic consistency and uniformity. While it would be worse than useless to codify feminist criticism, it is not beyond us to strive for what we really need, namely, Theory 3 — specifically, a conceptual model that will allow us to make sense of feminist criticism as a whole, to see it not as an ad hoc collection of concerns and strategies, but as a segmented, variously focused, yet coherent and genuinely collective enterprise.

II

Of course we are not starting with a clean slate. Anyone proposing a definition of feminist criticism is obliged to refer to the work done in the last decade and a half. To keep this project manageable, I will focus my remarks on three representative works, works by Showalter, by Fetterly and by Gilbert and Gubar, which I will assume to be familiar to most feminist critics. I will use these works to illustrate both the diversity and the interrelatedness of the strategies and concerns of feminist criticism, and to develop a model that will adequately represent the structure of the whole enterprise.

A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing, by Elaine Showalter, is feminist scholarship at its best. It provides a wealth of information, and it corrects the misimpressions created by androcentric scholarship. Above all, Showalter provides a much needed antidote to the image of the woman writer as a "singular anomaly." She restores the "links in the chain that bound one generation to the next," and she tells the story, not so much of writing as an individual achievement, but as a production process — a collective engagement with the culture industry. What emerges is a picture of a multitude of women (a threatening mob, some thought) — diligent, energetic, resourceful, undaunted by tremendous disadvantages — struggling to overcome their historical circumstances, seizing and making opportunities to educate themselves, to achieve economic independance, and to write their own stories — in short, to claim their right to be authors rather than merely objects of literature. While it is difficult to claim that the four or five or ten "great" women novelists of the last two centuries deserve to be taken as a separate literary tradition, the multitude uncovered by Showalter's research suggests at least a prima facie case for the existence of such a tradition.

Showalter's book is theoretically significant, however, because she does not rest on this prima facie case. She recognizes that to make good the claim that the
works of women constitute a separate tradition, she must articulate the cultural and literary consequences of sex. Showalter advances the thesis that women "have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society, and been unified by values, conventions, experiences and behaviour impinging on each individual." Furthermore, she stresses the ambiguous character of this female subculture. Certainly it is dominated, and therefore "custodial," constituted by "a set of opinions, prejudices, tastes and values prescribed for a subordinate group to perpetuate its subordinate status." But not wholly so. The female subculture is an authentic culture to the extent that it is also a "thriving and positive entity," the expression not only of accommodations to domination, but also, of "enduring values" — of authentic human needs and aspirations, of the drive for self-realization and community in spite of inimical historical circumstances.

To say that the literature written by women is an "ideational" manifestation of a subculture is to indicate its affinity with other "minority" literature (e.g. Black literature vis-à-vis American literature, or the fledgling American literature vis-à-vis English literature). A sub-literature is defined by three characteristics. First, it derives from a shared experiential base or "habit of living." For women in Victorian England, this centered around the events of the female sexual life cycle which had to be increasingly secretive and ritualized. Second, it signifies a more or less covert solidarity among the individuals forming the subculture. According to Showalter, women novelists in the nineteenth-century had an awareness of each other that often amounted to a "genteel conspiracy." Finally, a sub-literature is defined by its problematic relationship to the hegemonic culture, and its history is the history of strategic approaches to this relationship. Showalter distinguishes three phases in the female literary tradition: a prolonged feminine, imitative phase (1840-1880), characterized by the internalization of prevailing social and aesthetic norms; then a feminist phase (1880-1920) of explicit protest against these norms and of advocacy of minority rights; and finally a female phase (1920-present) of self-discovery, characterized by a relatively autonomous "search for identity."¹⁰

The theoretical import of Showalter's thesis that literature written by women is the manifestation of a subculture transcends its usefulness in interpreting and organizing the data produced by her research on British novelists. It gives theoretical expression to our intuition that "a special female self-awareness" distinguishes the literature written by women from that written by men. It represents a crucial step towards "establishing a more reliable critical vocabulary and a more accurate and systematic literary history for women writers."¹¹

The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach To American Fiction, by Judith Fetterley, is concerned with literature, in this case American literature, written by men. She explicitly states her basic premises: "literature is political," and "American literature is male."¹² In other words, the dominant American literature functions as an instrument of masculine sexual politics. Fetterley's book is reminiscent of the criticism of works by men — notably in Kate Millett's Sexual Politics and in numerous studies of sexist stereotypes and images of women — that dominated the first years of feminist criticism.¹³ However,
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Fetterley adopts a novel approach to the masculine text. She is concerned not with isolated components of the text (e.g., male and female images), but with its overall narrative strategy and with the way this structures the response of the reader. Fetterley argues that "as readers, teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny." This process of "emasculating" does not impart virile power to women, but on the contrary, it doubles the experience of powerlessness.

To be excluded from literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness — not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequences of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male — to be universal, to be American — is to be not female.

Thus, American literature — and androcentric literature in general — induces a differential experience in male and female readers. For the male reader the text mediates the reciprocal realization of the individual and the universal; it confirms his status as the essential subject — his (generic) manhood. Female readers are not barred from this process. Literature is all the more efficient as an instrument of sexual politics because it does not leave women alone. It does not allow them to seek refuge in their difference, but entices them into complicity with a process that turns that difference into otherness without reciprocity.

If literature is political, then, Fetterley concludes, feminist criticism must be counterpolitical: "the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader," whose goal is to disrupt the process of emasculation in order "to make available to consciousness that which has been largely left unconscious, and thus to change our understanding of these fictions, our relation to them, and their effect on us." The theory of reading which is barely sketched in Fetterley's book indicates a necessary supplement to the sort of feminist criticism exemplified by A Literature of Their Own. It extends the idea of a female literary subculture to include not only women writers, but also women readers. At the same time, it reminds us of the power of the dominant tradition, and of the need to undermine its authority.

The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar returns our attention to the literature written by women. At one level, this work seems to conform to the conventions of normal practical criticism. It applies the method of "close reading" to certain exemplary texts in order to demonstrate the recurrent patterns that characterize the work of women:
Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors — along with obsessive diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia.\(^{18}\)

However, Gilbert and Gubar depart from conventional criticism in that their analysis is directed toward the elaboration of a “feminist poetics.” They regard the texts they examine as “touchstones” for understanding the dynamics of female literary response to male assertion and coercion.\(^{19}\) In Part I of their book, Gilbert and Gubar elaborate a theory of female literary response which has been inspired in part by Harold Bloom’s theory of the “anxiety of influence.” They begin with a provocative demonstration that the “patriarchal poetics” governing the dominant tradition is rooted in the conception of the pen as a metaphorical penis.

In patriarchal Western culture...the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen’s power, like his penis’s power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim, as...‘an increaser and thus a founder.’

Hence, the author/father is the owner/possessor not only of his text and his reader’s attention, but also of “those figures, scenes, and events — those brainchildren — he has both incarnated in black and white and ‘bound’ in cloth and leather.”\(^{20}\)

Then follows the obvious question. “What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are... overtly and covertly patriarchal?” What would be her relationship to her predecessors? Gilbert and Gubar argue that Bloom’s theory of Oedipal combat between an emerging “strong” writer and the reigning patriarch does not apply to women writers. Although the authority of the reigning patriarch inhibits and forestalls the “coming of age” of a new male writer, it nevertheless affirms his potential authorship. A woman’s situation is more difficult because she has to contend not only with the authority of the reigning patriarch, but with an entire literary tradition that decrees (or insinuates) that to be a writer is to be not female. Instead of the “anxiety of influence” found by Bloom in male authors, the woman writer experiences the “anxiety of authorship” — “a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a precursor,’ the act of writing will isolate and destroy her.”\(^{21}\)

This literature written by women is marked (and marred) by this anxiety of authorship and by strategies they employ to overcome it. Gilbert and Gubar brilliantly document the most significant of these strategies. They show that the works of great women writers are palimpsestic: “the surface designs conceal or obscure deep, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning.
FEMINIST CRITICISM

Thus these writers manage the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal authority.22

The relationship of women writers to their female predecessors is no less complicated. Overlaid upon the “anxiety of authorship” is a longing for a female precursor, “who far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by her example that revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.”23 The problem is that the literature written by women is marked by “disease”, by the anxiety of authorship that afflicts their authors. Disappointed with the ambiguous accomplishments of actual women, women writers often displace the longed-for female precursor onto a mythical woman (Mary Shelley’s Cumaen Sybil or Virginia Woolf’s Judith Shakespeare) or onto a lost “mother country” where women could “live aloud.” This mythic origin, whether imagined as motherland or mother, allows the legitimation of female authorship to the extent that it allows the conception of writing as a project of reconstruction and recovery.

Let us take stock. At first sight the three works just discussed appear to validate the pluralistic conception of feminist criticism. Each represents a different point of entry into feminist discourse. Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar examine literature by women; Fetterley, literature by men. The first two works privilege the activity of writing, the third, the activity of reading. Showalter adopts a sociological approach emphasizing the collective (or “mass”) character of the female tradition, and the social relations underlying literary production. Fetterley and Gilbert and Gubar, on the other hand, adopt a psychological orientation that emphasizes the individual character of reading and writing and employs the technique of close reading of individual masterpieces.

Furthermore, these three works display different — indeed contradictory — attitudes toward literature. Fetterley adopts an antagonistic posture, which is in marked contrast to the friendly attitude assumed by Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar. Fetterley’s approach emphasizes the objective aspect (the thingness, the otherness) of the text. Subjectivity belongs to the reader. The text is a structure — a “practico-inert” — designed to trap the subjectivity of the female reader and to turn it against itself. Accordingly, the task of the feminist critic is to disrupt this process, to de-sediment, dis-man-tle, what has become “second nature.” By contrast, for Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar, literature is the expression of the self-consciousness, the subjectivity of women. The text is the residue of human praxis, and feminist criticism is a recuperative activity.

Needless to say, differences multiply rapidly as soon as we extend our attention to all the critical works and positions associated with feminist criticism. For example, the “empiricist” approach of Anglo-American feminism clashes with the deconstructive approach inspired by French post-structuralism. The privileged position given by Elaine Showalter to the study of women’s writing conflicts with the reader-oriented perspective of Jane Tompkins, Jean Kennard and Elizabeth Flynn.24 Some of us think that we should stress the common humanity (or androgyny) of women and men, while others think that we should focus on sexual difference. The singular focus on sexual
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difference is opposed by socialist-feminists like Jane Marcus. Even among those who have no problem with privileging sexual difference, there is disagreement about how this is to be situated — within the framework of biology, psychology, linguistics, history or cultural anthropology? The archetypal approach of Annis Pratt is at odds with feminist approaches that emphasize the historicity of literature. The recent work of Nina Auerbach contradicts the early studies of images of women in literature. And certainly it could be pointed out — and often is — that “woman” is an abstraction that obscures crucial differences among women — specifically race, class, national origin and sexual preference.

This is only a partial list of current points of contention. Surely, there is no shortage of controversy within feminist criticism. And yet, for all this, the impression remains that these diverse and contradictory works and positions belong together. And so we are thrown back to our initial question: can we specify the principle of coherence of feminist criticism without compromising its irreducible plurality? I claim that the answer is yes — provided we adopt the appropriate model of coherence. I suggest we think of feminist criticism as a conversation — as having the coherence of a conversation.

The model of conversation has considerable intuitive appeal. A conversation does not have the objectionable rigidity of an “ideology” or a “solid system”. Its coherence does not depend on logical consistency. We know that people can differ wildly and still go on talking. At the same time, conversation has an advantage over the pluralistic models that picture feminist criticism as an umbrella covering a variety of interests and concerns, or an interpretive community made up of several sub-communities. The problem with pluralistic models is their tendency towards progressive atomization. They have no way of representing the interrelatedness of the parts. The model of conversation retains the plurality, and adds interrelatedness.

On the other hand, the model of conversation may not seem promising, precisely because it is so commonsensical. It sounds as if I am proposing that we regard feminist criticism as nothing more than “clever chat about our favorite things.” Surely this can’t count as a definition. If the model of conversation is to be useful, we must develop it further. We need to specify the structure and characteristics of the feminist critical conversation. However, for now let me emphasize that invoking the model of conversation signifies a crucial transition. We have shifted our focus from finding a definition of feminist criticism that reflects its diversity to developing a model that allows us to understand how feminist criticism hangs together in spite of internal conflicts and contradictions.

III

To gain some perspective on the model of conversation, it is helpful to consider the work of the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, a Frankfurt School critical theorist. He is especially illuminating to feminists, because he gives discourse a central role in revolutionary praxis. According to Habermas,
political movements have three functions: theory formation, the organization of the process of enlightenment, and the organization of the conduct of political action. On the first level, the aim is true statements; on the second, authentic insights; on the third, prudent decisions.30

Each of these functions requires a different model of communicative interaction. At the level of theory formation, the model is scientific discourse, the formation and argumentative testing of hypotheses. Here, ideally, the participants in the discussion have a symmetrical relationship. Each is as able as the other to know what she wants and to speak her mind cogently, and each has an equal chance to participate in the discussion. In this way the process of theory formation is cleared of all internal and external constraints, and is made subject only to the “unforced force of the better argument.”

At the level of the process of enlightenment, the appropriate model is the therapeutic discourse of psychoanalysis. This model presupposes an asymmetrical relationship. It assumes that the “patient” or member of the “target group” (e.g., an unenlightened worker) is unable to meet the conditions for genuine dialogue. The aim of the interaction is to remove the barriers (ignorance, “false consciousness”, self-deception), and to make symmetrical interaction possible. In spite of the asymmetrical relationship between the “bearers” and the “objects” of enlightenment, Habermas carefully explains that the process cannot succeed through force, deception or manipulation. The analyst can only serve as a guide. Authentic insight can only come when the truth of the analysis is confirmed by the self-reflection of the analysand. The “patient” must be the agent of her own enlightenment.

At the level of the conduct of political action, risky decisions concerning strategic action in concrete circumstances can only be justified by a consensus attained in practical discourse among the participants. Like theoretical discourse, practical discourse requires a symmetrical relationship. Each participant is the best judge of what risks she is willing to take and with what expectations. “There can be no theory which assures from the outset a world-historical mission in return for potential sacrifice . . . a political struggle can be legitimately conducted only under the condition that all decisions of consequence depend on the practical discussion of the participants. Here too, and especially here, there is no privileged access to truth.”31

Habermas’ analysis of political movements is based on a Marxist paradigm. Nevertheless, it has obvious applications to feminism. The feminist movement exhibits the three functions he describes: theory formation, the process of enlightenment (consciousness-raising), and the selection of strategies for political action. For the sake of convenience, let us set aside the third function, so that we may concentrate on the two that are most germane to feminist criticism: theory formation and consciousness-raising.

Ideally, feminist theoretical discourse satisfies the symmetry requirement. However, a crucial departure from Habermas’s model occurs at the level of the process of enlightenment. The analytic dialogue adopted by Habermas assumes a confused and troubled patient who is guided into self-knowledge by a trained and knowledgeable analyst. At first glance, this resembles feminist pedagogical
and outreach work, since of necessity these involve asymmetrical relationships. But feminists have a more basic model for the process of enlightenment, namely, the collaborative and reciprocal consciousness-raising to which many of us trace our understanding of our situation as women in patriarchal society. In the feminist consciousness-raising groups that abounded in the 1970s, much attention was devoted to the structure of the process, and in particular, to the elimination of hierarchical relationships. No one was allowed to dominate the conversation; positions of leadership were rotated; everyone became analyst and analysand in turn. Although the consciousness-raising discourse may be said to be therapeutic, it is more comparable to the symmetrical discourse of peer-counseling than to the asymmetrical discourse of psychoanalysis.

It is also significant that although enlightenment was certainly one of the goals of a consciousness-raising group, it was not the only one. Women examined their experiences in order to understand their situation in patriarchy, and to overcome the ideological and psychological structures that bind them to oppressive institutions. However, consciousness-raising was also a process that combined individual self-recovery with the creation of group solidarity. With the support of others, each participant learned to find her own voice, to validate her own experience, and at the same time, to recognize herself in the experiences and aspirations of other women. Ideally, a feminist consciousness-raising group not only promoted the attainment of authentic insights into one’s life and into the situation of women in general; it also provided its members with the concrete experience of political and affective bonding with other women.

The collaborative, symmetrical and affective relationships characteristic of feminist consciousness-raising groups strongly influence the structure of pedagogical and outreach activities, so that in spite of residual asymmetry, even these activities do not fit the psychoanalytic model. In women’s studies courses, for example, much thought is given to organizing the course so as to counteract the traditional teacher-student hierarchy, and to approximate, as much as possible, the collaborative and egalitarian spirit of feminist consciousness-raising. Thus, the preferred pedagogical strategy is often small group discussions to encourage the participation of even the shyest student. Moreover, the teacher’s experience is frequently as much the object of analysis as that of her students. By her openness and willingness to offer up her experience for analysis (within prudential limits, of course), she provides her students with a “role-model” that can inspire and guide their own consciousness-raising.

The difference in the organization of the process of enlightenment is rooted in a fundamental difference between the Marxist and the feminist projects. According to Marxist theory, the working class is the proper agent of revolutionary change. Marxist theory — presumed to be the expression of the class consciousness of workers — has been produced in general by people who have been spared the lot of the proletariat. To complicate the situation further, the actual consciousness of workers often contradicts the class consciousness imputed to them by Marxist theory from an analysis of their role in the production process. Hence, the split between the “bearers” and the “objects” of enlight-
Enmment. Happily, the women's movement is not burdened by such a split. Feminist critics and theorists, like almost all feminists, are women struggling to liberate themselves from their oppression. Theory formation occurs from within the oppressed group (albeit within one of its more privileged segments). Thus, feminist theory is objectively and subjectively grounded in the experience of living as a woman in patriarchal society.

One consequence of the identity of subject-object in feminism is the symmetrical structure of consciousness-raising. Another consequence is that the processes of theory formation and enlightenment are more intimately related in feminism than they are in Habermas' model. In feminism, theory formation is a vehicle for consciousness-raising and vice versa. This close association is especially true in feminist criticism, and this shapes the modes of interaction—the pragmatic infrastructure—underlying the conversation. First of all, my model assumes the "universal symmetry requirement" of Habermas' model for theoretical discourse. Feminist criticism is a discourse among equals. Secondly, the conversation is oriented toward individual and collective enlightenment, toward the attainment of authentic insight into the experience and interests of women. Finally, feminist criticism possesses a characteristic that is slighted by Habermas' description of the functions of discourse within political movements. It is a medium for the realization of sisterhood—the political and affective bonding among women.

IV

We are now in a position to elaborate the definition of feminist criticism as a conversation. We have already noted that feminist criticism is rife with controversy. However, this should not blind us to the existence of something that might be called a "shared perspective"—a background consensus, more or less, concerning certain general theses. For example, feminist critics agree that, whatever else it might be, the dominant literary and critical tradition is androcentric, and as such it has functioned as an instrument of sexual politics. Similarly, that the literature written by women is, in some way related to—"reflects," "expresses," "bears the traces of"—their situation within patriarchy. We can list other such theses. In addition, feminist criticism is marked by certain characteristic themes. For example, the theme of woman as other in patriarchal culture, the theme of female bonding, the theme of the quest for an autonomous self, the theme of madness as the figure for the psychic condition of women in patriarchy, and at the same time as the figure for the moment of enlightenment. It is important to stress that in formulating the shared perspective of feminist criticism, the point is not to advance precise statements that rigorously determine the domain and the rules of feminist critical discourse. The coherence of a conversation does not depend on precise or uniform agreement, only on the possibility of reciprocal comprehension.
It should also be noted that conversation is a dynamic process. Each speaker refers to her predecessors. She takes up an idea, a problem, or an argument suggested by previous speakers, and in turn sets the stage for her successors. A *Literature of Their Own* and *The Resisting Reader* supplement each other. The first represents the strand of feminist criticism that Showalter calls gynocritics, the other the strand she calls feminist critique. One assumes the other, and together they span the relatively autonomous subculture of women writers and readers. *The Madwoman in the Attic* builds on preceding studies of women writers, specifically the work of Elaine Showalter and Ellen Moers: Gilbert and Gubar's psycho-history elaborates Showalter's contention that the female tradition is marked by its problematic relationship to the dominant culture. The anxiety of authorship is "in many ways the germ of a dis-ease, at any rate, a disaffection, a disturbance, a distrust that spreads like a stain throughout the style and structure of most literature written by women, especially...throughout literature by women writers before the twentieth century."33

*The Madwoman in the Attic* also follows up Fetterley's ideas about the politics of reading. To be a writer, one must first be a reader, and in the work of women writers we can discern the strategies they employ to resist the debilitating effect of reading texts that decree (or insinuate) that to be a writer is to be not female. There is no reason for the conversation to stop here. We can go on to explore the possibilities of studying literature by women from the point of view of the relationship they form with their readers, and the way in which they differentially inscribe prospective male and female readers. In turn, such studies will open up further topics of conversation.

Now we come to a very important point. The model of conversation has the advantage of representing a conception of coherence that does not preclude diversity and disagreement. The participants in a conversation may introduce different concerns, and they may contradict each other without destroying its continuity. Instead, the opposition can be played out — one approach can shed light on the other, and the conflict can provide topics for further conversation. The dynamic of the conversation, in other words, is constituted by two modes of interaction: contradiction as well as recuperation. One mode conditions — constrains and promotes — the other. This observation in turn suggests a revision of the initial conception of the unifying principle of the conversation. The background consensus described earlier must be supplemented by an ensemble of contradictions. I would even argue that subjectively the ensemble of contradictions is more basic than the background consensus, that we speak of a "shared perspective" or "ideology" not so much because we hold the same beliefs but because we feel the pressure of the same problems.

Let us briefly illustrate one of the contradictions in the ensemble. In *A Literature of Their Own* Showalter calls the object of her study, "the female tradition." On the face of it, this seems to be a perfectly reasonable label, consistent with her decision to be exhaustive rather than selective. Moreover, "the female tradition" contrasts well with the "feminine phase" of imitation and accommodation, and the "feminist phase" of politically conscious opposition. Difficulties arise, however, when we see that the third phase of the "female
tradition" is the "female phase" of relatively autonomous self-discovery. Here, the positive connotation of "female" is inconsistent with the neutrality of the earlier usage. The problem is further complicated by the contradiction between the positive connotation indicated by the association of "female phase" with self-discovery and the negative evaluation suggested by Showalter's actual discussion of this phase. The conclusion of her discussion of Virginia Woolf, for example, is that "the ultimate room of one's own is the grave."34

The name of the third phase is both predictable (what else could follow "feminine" and "feminist"?) and disconcerting. The difficulties it entails throws into question the appropriateness of the entire system of nomenclature. It is easy to point out other difficulties. The sequence "feminine", "feminist", "female" implies closure. What names, consistent with this sequence, can we give to the phases preceding the "feminine" and following the "female"?

Readers are likely to be disturbed by the awkwardness of this nomenclature. But feminist readers will recognize it a problem that all of us have encountered — our own indecision as to what to name the cultural productions of women, as well as our sensitivity to the significance of the choice. Although Showalter's nomenclature leads her into difficulties, there is a sense in which it is appropriate: the literature (and for that matter the criticism) written by women is marked by the working out of the contradictory significations of "feminine," "feminist" and "female." In other words, feminist discourse is the working out of our ambivalence toward womanhood, our need to overcome and at the same time to affirm experiences and values bound up in the "feminine" and the "female."

It is beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate fully the ensemble of contradictions that unify feminist criticism.35 However, we are in a position to make some formal observations. If feminist criticism is informed by an ensemble of contradictions, then it follows that any consensus is necessarily equivocal, and contingent on the present state of the conversation. The ensemble of contradictions serves as a critical ground for the undoing of any prevailing agreement and of the reconstruction of another. This does not mean, however, that the ensemble itself is fixed. For example, the contradictory significance of "feminist," "feminine," and "female" did not become problematic until we began (implicitly or explicitly) to conceive of women as constituting a relatively autonomous subculture, and of our experience as something more than the experience of victimization. Feminist criticism is shaped by the dialectical interaction of a background consensus and an ensemble of contradictions. Neither of these is fixed. One serves as the ground for the elaboration and revision of the other.

To round off this essay, let me briefly address two issues brought to the fore by my definition of feminist criticism as a conversation. The first has to do with the relevance of this definition to the entire feminist project. Clearly, the model
of conversation can be extended into a definition of feminism. Let me stress
again the advantage of using the model of conversation. It allows us to break the
customary association of coherence with consistency, uniformity and fixity —
with a "solid system" or a "rigid ideology" — and from the prescriptive spirit and
the impulse toward mastery implicit in these. The model of conversation has
the advantage of representing both the *unity in diversity* and the *dynamism* of
feminism. It allows us to see our work not as an *ad hoc* collection of concerns and
strategies, but as a coherent and genuinely collective project. Moreover, it does
so without glossing over or forcibly resolving intramural conflicts.

The second issue refers to the relationship of feminist criticism to literary
criticism, and by implication, of feminism to the non-feminist establishment. It
appears that the model of conversation applies as well to the entire discipline of
literary criticism. Indeed, of all disciplines, literary criticism best approximates
Richard Rorty's idea of a hermeneutic project consisting of various discourses
conversing with each other. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that conversa-
tions feminists have with non-feminists are different from those they have
with each other. For example, it is clear to feminists that the literary and critical
canon is androcentric and founded on the exclusion of the female perspective.
Most non-feminist critics, on the other hand, believe that the canon represents
universal values that have withstood "the test of time", and are frequently
annoyed with feminist criticism's persistent and, in their view, wrong-headed
"gendrification" of literature. At the same time, they are likely to miss the point
of problems that feminists consider crucial. Non-feminists are likely, for
example, to regard Elaine Showalter's awkward juggling of "feminine", "female",
and "feminist" as a simple mistake.

It is also important to emphasize that the conversation between feminists
and the non-feminist mainstream conform neither to Habermas' model for
theory formation nor to his model for the process of enlightenment. "While this
is good enough on its own turf," writes the editor of a prestigious journal to a
feminist critic, "it fails to address key issues in the current critical debate." In
other words, in order to be admitted into the conversation, feminist must fit their
discourse into the categories set by non-feminist discourse, and they must do so
without reciprocity. Most non-feminist critics do not feel obliged to inform
themselves of the work of feminist critics, much less to respond cogently to the
issues they raise. The pressure of non-feminist categories on feminist discourse
follows from the asymmetrical distribution of power which generally exists
between its practitioners. This asymmetry violates the key condition, which
according to Habermas, assures that theory formation will be governed only by
the "unforced force of the better argument." At the same time, although an
important goal of feminism is to enlighten others, its discourse with the
mainstream does not fit the psychoanalytic model proposed by Habermas
because the unenlightened party (from the feminist point of view) is also in
possession of the instruments of power, and specifically, of the means for
producing and regulating knowledge. The full elaboration of the structure of the
conversation between feminists and the establishment is a very complicated
project. For now, let me say simply that the interactions constituting this
relationship involves a substantial "strategic" component — i.e. the sort of non-discursive political struggle suggested by two alternative metaphors for feminist criticism: "dancing through the minefield" and "storming the toolshed." 37

Department of English
University of New Hampshire

Notes

I would like to thank Nelly Furman who read and commented on an earlier version of this essay, and David Schweickart, who saw it through all the stages of its development.

2. Ibid., p. 378:
10. Ibid., pp. 11-15.
11. Ibid., p. 8.
15. Ibid., p. xiii.
16. This, of course, is Simone de Beauvoir's famous definition of the condition of woman in patriarchal society (The Second Sex, trans. H.M. Parshley [New York: Modern Library, 1958]).
19. Ibid., p. xii.
20. Ibid., pp. 6-7.
21. Ibid., pp. 48-49.
22. Ibid., p. 73.
23. Ibid., p. 49.


28. The model of conversation is perhaps more plausible at the moment, given the current interest in The Dialogic Imagination by Mikhail Bakhtin (ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press [Slavic Series, No. 1 ], 1981), and in Richard Rorty's suggestion that we abandon the epistemological project of commensuration in favor of regarding the "relations between various discourses as strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites speakers, but where hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts" (Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979 ], p. 318). It is important to stress that the project of "edification" which defines Rorty's conversation lacks the critical edge that is crucial to feminist discourse by virtue of its grounding in the project of liberation.


31. Ibid., p. 34.

32. Habermas insists that failure to preserve the autonomy of the three functions of political groups (theory formation, the organization of the process of enlightenment, and organization of the conduct of political struggle) would compromise the emancipatory intention. Habermas is concerned about the fact that in the tradition of the European working-class movement, all three functions have been assigned to the party organization. The specific target of his remarks is Georg Lukacs' theory of the party, which in Habermas's view subordinates both theory formation and the process of enlightenment to the exigencies of party organization. Of course, the women's movement does not have a party structure. Its radically decentralized character undermines the force of Habermas's reservations.

33. Gilbert and Gubar, p. 511.

34. Showalter, p. 297.

35. I could add other contradictions: the disciplinary requirements of literary criticism versus the demands of feminist praxis; aesthetic versus political concerns; the political versus the personal; integration versus separation; and so on. The point, however, is not to formulate as complete and as precise a list as possible, but to understand the structure of the enterprise and to see in what way feminist criticism constitutes a coherent critical community.

36. See note 28.

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.
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.*

For her, language is not performative. The gender markers it encodes assign to woman "negative semantic space." 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," 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. 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..."
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. Language has become problematic for Atwood, 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.”

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”. 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 women? 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 subject — these questions are now being raised by
feminist critics who are reflecting aloud on what it means to read as a woman.\textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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."\textsuperscript{16} Re-visionist, it questions the adequacy of existing conceptual structures.

In advocating sexual difference which is Otherness itself,\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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-
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
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." 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. 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 Millett'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
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. Various 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.


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
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*, 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 de-centres 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. 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
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" 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* where we enter a futuristic world of women. Russ' *The Female Man* reveals the same distancing function at work, recentring occuring through the creation of alternate worlds, new fictions to disrupt those that have defined us.
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. 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.

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 Gagnon in a return to an origin of sensations and gesture that precedes codification in language. Like Atwood in Surfacing, she locates this new language in the hieroglyphs of the native people, as she does in Lueur. 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. 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.” It is very much an Otherworld journey, occurring in the “Unfield/Ourfield/Outfield”, “confronting old molds/models of question-asking.”

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.
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. Others again, like Suzanne Lamy, 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 polysemeamility, 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 decentring 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
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, 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. Of the two types of distortion, the Utopian is potentially the more flexible in its accommodation of divergences.

For a critical theory that calls itself "revisionary", questioning conceptual structures and "rethinking thinking," by advancing the personal, the emotional as a counterpoint, 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 exerizes 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, 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-
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.

Department of English
York University

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).


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."


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.


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 enterred 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."


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.


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.


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.


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 psycholanalytic 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.”
40. Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972). See also my “Dream of a Common Language: Theories of Language in Atwood and Brossard.”
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 Gottlieb and Wendt 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 Larrain, 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 Letexte 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.

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