The Différance of l'écriture féminine

Difference has not always been a cause for women to celebrate. The literary establishment has long stigmatized women's writing as divorced from male or what some consider universal experience by calling it "feminine literature." This habit of treating books by women as if they were women, the "intellectual measuring of busts and hips" in Mary Ellmann's words,[1] is an attitude feminist scholars have sought to dispel by confronting the issue of gender difference.

The American critic, Elaine Showalter, for example, has documented the possible cultural determinants of women's writing and has suggested that British women writers do indeed have a literary tradition of their own. The reasons for women's different and often troubled literary production has been variously explained by American scholars in terms of inadequate education, the demands of a predominantly male press, the intensive social conditioning and the different life experiences of women. In the same moment that restrictions are cited, however, the development of a woman's voice in literary history is made clear. Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing is one significant work among several historical and cultural studies.[2] The psychodynamics of women's literary production has also become an important issue in American circles, especially with the publication of Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.[3] Despite fifteen years of feminist scholarship, however, American critics have yet to establish a coherent theoretical formulation of woman's difference. Many American feminists,

quite unlike the French, have preferred to remain aloof from theory and thus open to the examination of private experience. Such a critical perspective purposefully locates itself outside the "minefields," to employ Annette Kolodny's interesting expression.[4]

On another shore, one feminist discourse has aligned itself with the radical social theories of literature and criticism grouped under the name of Post-Structuralism. French feminist theory on women's specificity with regard to writing and language, known as l'écriture féminine, explores the feminine imagination with the purpose of displacing unconscious mechanisms that have limited women's conception of self. As Elaine Marks has suggested, a significant différence of l'écriture féminine is its emphasis on the repression rather than the oppression of women and the active commitment to practice a writing which here and now liberates the unconscious.[5]

Past and present struggles in the social sphere are not ignored by French feminists, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, but the first step toward social change is, in their opinion, a new language, a new text, a new vision. Unlike American empiricists and the French militant, Simone de Beauvoir, those in the camp of l'écriture féminine believe that ultimately language structures our thought and our action. As Luce Irigaray has put it: "Si nous continuons à nous parler le même langage, nous allons reproduire la même histoire ... mêmes discussions, mêmes disputes, mêmes drames."[6]

The metaphorical language of l'écriture féminine is a différance I would suggest is vital to the Post-Structuralist project as well as to American feminists' concerns. The method of the theorists, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, is indeed closely tied to that of Derrida. The French feminists' conception of a "feminine textual body," which unabashedly reveals its "sext," is inscribed in the play of language and meaning, in ecstatic, unbounded textual jouissance.[7] This opening of the text to forbidden play recalls Derrida's provocative use of différance, a graphic difference, an unexpected intervention, in short, a gross spelling error, which in its contradiction of sign as presence, "questions the limit which has always constrained us, which still constrains us--as inhabitants of a language and a system of thought--to formulate the meaning of Being in general as presence, or absence, in the categories of being or beingness (ousia)."[8] Likewise, the writing of feminine desire by Cixous and Irigaray is designed to question repressive structures in our thought and writing, with the difference that phallocentric rather than simply logocentric representations are challenged. As I highlight the thoughts and strategies of psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray and novelist Hélène Cixous, I hope to suggest that l'écriture féminine is a particularly effective means of demystifying certain structures of Western discourse, one that goes beyond Derrida's technique, and is as such useful to feminists.

The texts of Cixous and Irigaray are at once theory and literature. The theory of women's writing takes its form in the suggestive play of words, metaphors, and structures. That is, women are called to write in texts which themselves

embody and allegorically convey the "method." Like Derrida, Irigaray and Cixous also explore the implications of ontological concepts which haunt Western discourse; the assumptions specifically engendered in psychoanalytic discourse form the critical context of l'écriture féminine. It is the "specula(riza)tion" of woman, the marking of woman with masculine logos, which both Cixous and Irigaray call into question.[9] Again, like Derrida's, the critique is not overt. The revolt against the old order is not a coup d'état. Rather, the woman-text mimes familiar psychoanalytic images, reinscribed in a feminine sign system wherein they seem disjointed, inappropriate, and are thereby discredited.

For example, the chapter entitled "La 'Mécanique' des fluides" in Irigaray's Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un engages the reader in a comparison of the properties of fluids and the properties of matter.[10] In this veiled critique of Jacques Lacan and his transcendental signifier, Irigaray does not once mention Lacan's name, though it is clear that she is discussing the undesirable implications of his signifying system. The master's power is quietly displaced in this manner--his authority is cited only in footnotes. By declining to present rhetorical arguments meant to "knock down" the opposing position, Irigaray allows the feminine theme of fluidity to play itself out in the imagination of her reader. In this way, she does not effect a phallic "prise de pouvoir." She furthermore confronts in a most effective manner the monolithic symbols which inhabit our collective unconscious. After all, does not Lacan's phallus, intended to symbolize the Law of the Father, merely re-present male myths of power and authority? Does it not echo

other unitary images of power--the kingly sceptor or the staff of Moses empowered to part the Red Sea?

Irigaray and Cixous place their exploration of feminine identity within a critique of Lacan and Freud precisely because psychoanalytic theory takes up cultural assumptions and reinscribes woman as the mirror of man. Human relations have long been conceptualized in terms of specular action. This concept is implicit in ontological discourse from Plato to Sartre.[11] It is interesting to note that Lacan was greatly influenced by Hegel's description of self-consciousness, an operation in which other must become object:

> Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come out of itself. This has a two-fold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an other being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self.[12]

Deconstructionists have suggested that the conceptual and linguistic ordering which inhabits our myth and philosophical systems reduces all relationships to a specular two-term system. Western discourse organizes thought in language groupings such as active/passive, white/black, logos/pathos. While these binary oppositions are

thought to express two equal conceptual components, they actually form hierarchized oppositions implying superior/inferior. The "meaning" of the inferior term is co-opted in this sort of formulation. In other words, pathos is defined as lack of reason, night as lack of day, and woman, in psychoanalytic discourse, as the lack of male form or substance. The coupling of words to produce meaning, then, is a destructive mirroring process wherein one concept is effectively negated by the primary value-charged term. Conceptual ordering of this nature is reinforced by our tendency to assign presence to the Word.

Cixous and Irigaray have linked the hierarchical coupling of words to our most fundamental concept of couple--male/female.[13] The feminine is non-existent in our discourse, as in our cultural text, because feminine characteristics are linked through language with more "meaningful" masculine signs. As a result, women have had to self-conceptualize in Adam's garden, a realm where all life forms were assigned man's logos long before woman entered the scene. Is this not perhaps one of the reasons that women's expression has historically been troubled?

To fly ("voler") from the prison house of language requires the theft of masculine symbols, of metaphors which constrict women's and men's imaginations.[14] Like Mary Daly's "Fall into Freedom" described in Beyond God the Father, the goal of l'écriture féminine is to disorient the masculine symbol system we have invested with the truth of mimesis.[15] Cixous and Irigaray's texts go further than Mary Daly's, however. The

disruption of masculine order is described in the very fabric of the feminine textual body. Hélène Cixous, in "Le Rire de la Méduse," figuratively defines the French feminist project while alluding to a preferred feminine discursive structure:

> Voler, c'est le geste de la femme, voler dans la langue, la faire voler ... Ce n'est pas un hasard si "voler" se joue entre deux vols, jouissant de l'un et l'autre et déroutant les agents du sens. Ce n'est pas un hasard: la femme tient de l'oiseau et du voleur comme le voleur tient de la femme et de l'oiseau: illes passent, illes filent, illes jouissent de brouiller l'ordre de l'espace, de le désorienter, de changer de place les meubles, les choses, les valeurs, de faire des casses, de vider les structures, de chambouler le propre.[16]

Luce Irigaray in Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un questions the relationship of the phallus to meaning within the context of woman's subjectivity. She refuses to accept the feminine image in psychoanalysis, and, by defining feminine sexual identity in terms of jouissance ("orgasm"/"play") rather than anatomy, she employs Lacan's technique to her benefit; for, speaking feminine desire disconnects the play of phallus and logos. In Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un, Irigaray displaces the superior value of the

phallus by alluding to man's insufficiency, to the fact that he requires an instrument for auto-affection. The always touching, always in touch female genitalia are a striking feminist symbol in contrast to the exclusionary signifying system of the phallus: "Sans intervention ni manipulation particulière, déjà tu es femme. Sans recours nécessaire à un dehors, déjà l'autre t'affecte. Inséparable de toi. Tu es toujours et partout, altérée ... "[17] The reason for exploring the "continent noir" of feminine desire is here indicated in the fullness of its symbolic import. In the feminine libidinal economy there is no self and other, no appropriation of difference. Two entities are inextricably linked in an exchange which has no beginning and no end. Irigaray's text is meant to help the reader conceptualize a discourse which does not operate by specular (destructive) action. Such a view of feminine sexuality establishes the woman's identity outside the masculine libidinal economy wherein sameness precludes feminine possibilities. Irigaray rejoices in the notion of an alternative text: women writing in such a manner remove themselves from binary systems of representation, for: "... notre jouissance est suspendue dans leur économie. Où être vierge revient à n'être pas encore marquée par et pour eux. Pas encore femme par et pour eux. Pas encore empreinte de leur sexe, leur langage. Pas encore pénétrée, possédée, d'eux."[18]

Hélène Cixous's Vivre l'orange also gives form to feminine symbols of plenitude--namely the orange and the rose. Her alternatively rapturous, erotic and rhetorical text describes her encounter with Clarice, the radiant woman force moving and motivating her récit. Cixous describes her

transformational experience in which she learns to write "other-wise":

> De très loin, de l'extérieur de mon histoire, une voix est venue recueillir la dernière larme. Sauver l'orange. Elle m'a mis le mot à l'oreille ... Elle a remis l'orange dans les mains désertes de mon écriture, et avec ses accents d'oranger elle a frotté les yeux de mon écriture qui étaient arides et couverts d'une taie de papier.[19]

Hélène Cixous's ecstatic and highly metaphorical style, not adequately communicated by quotations, invites the joyful participation of the reader in the writing and living of feminine difference.

An important difference/différance of l'écriture féminine is, then, its metaphor of movement and nonclosure, and its formulation of a new text named feminine. I say "named" feminine because realistically, the feminine textual body is a metaphor in and of itself. It is intended to invoke a new imaginative experience. It refers to a symbolic system in which the concepts of multiplicity and simultaneity may coexist, where interaction is characterized by loving contact rather than division and exclusion at the point of a rod. Interestingly enough, the metaphor of feminine jouissance corresponds precisely to Derrida's concept of différance.

In her description of how women should practice writing, Luce Irigaray inscribes the movement of différance without having to employ Derrida's terminology:

> Nous n'avons pas besoin de définitif ... La vérité est nécessaire à ceux qui se sont tant éloignés de leur corps qu'ils l'ont oublié ... Comment te parler? Demeurant dans le flux, sans jamais le figer. Le glacer. Comment faire passer dans les mots ce courant? Multiple. Sans causes, sens, qualités simples. Et pourtant, indécomposable. Ces mouvements que le parcours d'un point d'origine à une fin ne décrit pas. Ces fleuves, sans mer unique et définitive. Ces rivières, sans rives persistantes. Ce corps sans bord arrêtés. Cette mobilité, sans cesse ... Tant tout cela reste étrange à qui prétend se fonder sur du solide.[20]

Irigaray also portrays the movement of différance in a very personal context. Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre is a daughter's plaint to her mother.[21] The old drama of self/other and the absorption of identity is discussed here in terms of grief. The daughter longs for and vainly evokes an ideal relationship where self-effacement and mastery are not the norms.

I would suggest in summary that Derrida's abstract word play is rendered more comprehensible by the writing of feminine desire. The feminine as disrupter of order and force for change is not an uncommon historical metaphor. Natalie Zemon Davis, in Society and Culture in Early Modern France, has explained the historical precedent of men assuming feminine garb when rioting in the streets:

> The female persona was only one of several folk disguises assumed by males for riots in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it was quite popular and widespread .... In part, the black face and female dress were a practical concealment, and readily at hand in households rarely filled with fancy wardrobes. More important however, were the mixed ways in which the female persona authorized resistance. On the one hand, the disguise freed men from full responsibility for their deeds .... On the other hand, the males drew upon the sexual power and energy of the unruly woman and on her license (which they had long assumed at carnival and games)--to promote fertility, to defend the community's interests and standards, and to tell the truth about unjust rule.[22]

Post-Structuralist critics, I suggest, may indeed want to don the feminine garb, for the "woman-text" of l'écriture féminine goes beyond feminine constructions--it lends to the theory of Derrida a viable metaphor of différance. Likewise, American feminist critics may find the Post-Structuralist attire fitting, for it addresses questions of being and meaning central to an understanding of woman's place in literature and society.

Joy Simpson-Zinn

The University of Kansas

Notes

[1]Mary Ellmann, Thinking About Women (London: Virago, 1979), p. 29.

[2]A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

[3]Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

[4]Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," Feminist Studies, 6 (Spring 1980), 1-25.

[5]Elaine Marks, "Women and Literature in France," Signs, 3, no. 4 (Summer 1978), 836.

[6]Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1977), p. 205.

> "If we continue to speak to each other in the same language, we will reproduce the same history ... the same discussions, the same disputes, the same dramas."
> (Translation mine)

[7]"Sext" is a term employed by Hélène Cixous in "Le Rire de la Méduse" to suggest the shocking quality of l'écriture féminine and its deliberate attempt to replace feminine lack with plenitude.

[8]Derrida, "Différance," Marges de la Philosophie (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972). Translated by Alan Bass as Margins of Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 10.

[9]The term specula(riza)tion signifies both the speculation behind ontological discourse and the fact that the mind of woman is not simply imprinted by the justified world, as Locke would have it; it is the logos of man that imprints the tabula rasa. See Irigaray, Speculum de l'autre femme (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1974).

[10]Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un, chap. "La 'Mécanique' des fluides," pp. 105-16.

[11]For a discussion of Plato's discourse in particular, see Luce Irigaray, Speculum de l'autre femme.

[12]G.W.F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 111. For an analysis of Hegel's influence see Interpreting Lacan, Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan, eds., vol. 6 of Psychiatry and the Humanities (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 77-88.

[13]Hélène Cixous effectively describes the role of the feminine in binary oppositions in "Sorties," in La Jeune Née (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1975).

[14]"Voler" defines the concept of l'écriture féminine for Hélène Cixous. See "Le Rire de la Méduse," L'Arc, 61 (1975), 39-54.

[15]Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

[16]"Le Rire de la Méduse," p. 49.

"Flying is women's gesture--
flying in language and making

it fly ... It is no accident that voler has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They (illes) go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down." (Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., New French Feminisms. An Anthology [New York: Schocken Books, 1981], p. 258.)

[17]Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un, p. 210.

"Without any particular intervention or manipulation, already you are a woman. Without necessary recourse to an outside, already the other affects you. Inseparable from you. You are always and everywhere altered." (Translation mine)

[18]Ibid., p. 211.

> "Our play, our orgasm is suspended in their economy. Wherein being a virgin is to not yet be marked by and for them. Not yet a woman by and for them. Not yet imprinted by their sex, their language. Not yet penetrated, possessed, by them." (Translation mine)

[19] Vivre l'orange. To live the orange (Paris: des femmes, 1979), p. 15.

> "From far away, from outside of my history, a voice came to collect the last tear. To save the orange. She put the word in my ear ... She put the orange back into the deserted hands of my writing, and with her orange-colored accents she rubbed the eyes of my writing which were arid and covered with white films." (Bi-lingual edition cited above)

[20] Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un, pp. 213-14.

> "We do not need the definitive ... . The truth is necessary for those who are so far removed from their body that they have forgotton it ... . How to speak to you? Dwelling in the flow, without ever

arresting it. Freezing it. How to make this current flow into words? Multiple. Without causes, sense, simple qualities. And nevertheless indivisible. These movements which cannot be described on the way from a point of departure to an end. These rivers without a single and definite sea to which to run. These streams without forever confining banks. This body without fixed shores. This mobility, endless ... . All this remains foreign to those who pretend to establish themselves in that which is solid." (Translation mine)

[21]Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre (Paris: Edition de Minuit, 1979).

[22]Society and Culture in Early Modern France (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 149-50.

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