

Examining Critical History Through Theater: Feminist Scholarship of the 1980's and Beyond

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In recent years, prominent feminist scholars in the U.S. have shown an interest in looking back at the development of feminist theory and criticism of the 1970's and eighties. Jane Gallop in her book, *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory*, and Nancy K. Miller in *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* provide two notable examples.¹ As Gallop's study shows, this phenomenon is in part a product of the institutionalization of feminist studies in academia. Critics have felt the need to examine their bases, to work through the tensions between the extra- or anti-institutional orientation of the field—the philosophy present at its origins—and its increasingly more accepted and solid presence in the university system. The contemporary interest in historical exploration may also be part of a search for the (perhaps mythical) unity of those earlier years, a response to the more recent emphasis in feminist theory and criticism upon differences within the community of women. In addition, the growing influence of materialist approaches in feminist studies has meant a greater attention to the historical moment in which the critic and the text are located—including the history which has produced the feminist critical scene of the present. Interest in examining the past indicates a concern with the future directions of feminist studies, as well—the past seen as an indicator of or influence upon what is to come, a background against which to imagine the future.

As part of this looking back it may be helpful to turn to theater, a medium that itself takes place in time—in history. Theater is about transformation in the course of time, the unfolding of the theatrical production intrinsically bound up with consecutive movement and metamorphosis. Through theater, then, I propose to examine a key moment in the recent history of feminist studies, one that foreshadowed and prepared the way for other debates within the field. From the late 1970's into the mid eighties, much feminist critical discussion in the U.S. revolved around the question of French and Anglo-American approaches to the reading of texts—discussion that confirmed the division between the two

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perspectives.² As the eighties progressed, there was some easing of the tension, a questioning of the binary nature of that separation in itself, including a certain interest in establishing a dialogue between the two approaches. I will explore the elements of that division and its implications for the feminist theory and criticism that followed, through a French play contemporary with that critical period: *Louise/Emma*, by Anne Roche and Françoise Chatôt.³ *Louise/Emma* is appropriate to this discussion in part because it depicts an encounter between two women of the countries concerned: the 19th-century French revolutionary Louise Michel and the later American anarchist, Emma Goldman. And, more importantly, aspects of both its written and performance texts link the play to each theoretical perspective; in a sense, *Louise/Emma* "stages" the two views and the developing play between them.

As a prelude to my reading of the play, I will present two articles which reveal aspects of the Franco-American difference: "The Laugh of the Medusa," by Hélène Cixous, and Josephine Donovan's "Toward a Women's Poetics."⁴ In so doing, I do not mean to reduce the thinking of numerous feminist scholars to two essays by two critics. Rather, I have chosen these pieces as focal points for discussing general tendencies within the field, as pertains to debate in the U.S. during and since the 1980's.

Cixous's essay, which presents and works to embody her notion of "écriture féminine," was published in French in 1975 and in its English translation the following year; by the late seventies it had arrived on the American university scene. With its inclusion in Elaine Marks's and Isabelle de Courtivron's influential 1980 volume, *New French Feminisms*, the article became a (perhaps the) definitive representative of French feminist theory in both French and English departments. The writings of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, the two other French feminist scholars most often read by American academics, were discussed in the earlier eighties mainly insofar as they treated the concept of the "feminine." (It is important to point out that, as much as the three thinkers were presented as a kind of united triumvirate, their ideas on the "feminine" and certainly other subjects diverged from one another in a number of respects).

All three critics, developing their thought in the context of deconstruction and psychoanalysis, examined woman in relation to linguistic and other symbolic processes—woman as the repressed, as well as the oppressed element in these structures. Unlike work from the American feminist critical tradition, much of this writing has not consisted of literary criticism *per se*, but of theoretical work spanning linguistics, philosophy and psychoanalysis. It was the grounding of these scholars' thought in existing disciplines—areas dominated by male theorists such as Derrida and Lacan—that constituted one of the most important and most divisive differences between French and American feminist thinkers in the

eighties. When French feminists (notably Cixous and Kristeva) wrote about literature, they concerned themselves not strictly with writing *by* women, as did many Americans, but rather with avant-garde texts by authors of either sex which displayed the characteristics that these critics associated with the "feminine." Seeing women as relegated traditionally to the position of alterity and absence, the unconscious and the body, in relation to the male position of presence and cognition, they identified syntactic or semantic silences, dislocations or profusions in texts as manifestations of the "feminine."

According to Cixous, women's freedom from the system that has created the oppressive dualities of passive/active, body/mind, female/male, would involve the act of writing itself, writing that would realize the forces of the unconscious and break through repressive hierarchical discourse. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," itself a step toward this type of writing, Cixous transformed the frightening and finally silenced creature of ancient legend into a "beautiful, [. . .] laughing" Medusa, a metaphor for the "New Woman" and the action that could liberate her. The Medusa is also a figure through which one may read Cixous's presentation of "écriture féminine." The writhing tendrils of the Medusa's hair correspond to the disruptive strength and abundance of the writing that Cixous described. The combination of male and female manifested in the Medusa—the female being whose head is adorned by phallic forms—demonstrate the author's characterization of the "feminine" and feminine writing as "bisexual," as accepting of the "other." Finally, another medusa, the sea creature, may be viewed as an embodiment of the "feminine" that Cixous presented in her essay. The medusa's connection to both the sea ("la mer") and, through its uterine properties, to the mother's body ("la mère") makes it an appropriate representation of the maternal, nourishing aspects of the feminine and of "écriture féminine."

Beginning in the seventies, feminist criticism of American origins followed a different path. It was mainly concerned with describing a female esthetic in writings by women, an esthetic deriving from the authors'—and readers'—experience as women. Scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Annette Kolodny and Josephine Donovan identified a female culture common to various societies, past and present. This culture was a marginalized one; but, according to American feminist critics (especially Gilbert and Gubar and the many scholars following in their footsteps), it had continually told its story of oppression and anger through subversive literary strategies—strategies that feminist critics then located and deciphered. The work of these critics included the discovery and celebration of women authors whose stories (textual and personal) had formerly been excluded from the masculine-defined literary canon.

In Josephine Donovan's article, "Toward a Women's Poetics," which first appeared in 1984,⁵ the author described in some detail a critical framework for reading texts by women, one grounded in an understanding of "women's ways of seeing," of "women's experience and practice."⁶ She presented basic conditions that have molded women's view of the world. Donovan first named women's position as an oppressed group, one that has internalized its "otherness" and thus been unable to speak itself in a reality constructed by males. She also described the role of women as nurturers, with a respect for life, for that which is different from self. Then the critic discussed women's traditionally domestic existence, with its repetitive, cyclic rhythm and the importance that it accords to the "daily world of concrete realities."⁷ Finally, Donovan presented women as sharing certain physical and psychological experiences. In this context, she cited Nancy Chodorov's view of the girl's psychological development and Carol Gilligan's explanation of a female mode of reasoning: contextual and narrative, rather than the formal, abstract reasoning that she associates with men. Donovan suggested that the structure and content of writing by women be viewed in light of these conditions. As a consequence of her hypothesis, she proposed changes in literary critical methodology—most importantly, the elimination of the idea of aesthetic distance. She criticized the separation of the analyst from the object of the analysis, of literature from its context.

Alongside the strain of cultural feminist thought that Donovan exemplified (an approach characteristic of the late seventies and early eighties) was a growing, more materialist and eventually more prevalent perspective: the call for the recognition of difference among and within individual women.⁸ Teresa deLauretis, for example, in her introduction to *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, stated that "an all-purpose feminist frame of reference does not exist, nor should it ever come prepackaged and ready-made."⁹ She had seen a development in criticism "from the earlier view of woman defined purely by sexual difference (i.e., in relation to man) to the more difficult and complex notion that the female subject is a site of differences; differences that are not only sexual or only racial, economic, or (sub)cultural, but all of these together, and often at odds with one another." ¹⁰ To cite a historian as well (for, as the eighties progressed, there was more and more overlapping of feminist scholarship from various disciplines), Denise Riley also challenged the monolithic nature of the terms "woman" and "women." In her book, *"Am I That Name?": Feminism and the Category of "Women"*, Riley skillfully showed how the definition of "women" has changed in post-Renaissance European history in relation to the development of other concepts, such as "Nature, Class, Reason, [and] Humanity."¹¹ In spite of these differences between the cultural feminist and more materialist points of view,

both may be contrasted with the French concepts of the "feminine" in their emphasis on experience as a determinant of gender and of women's inequality.

This difference stated, there were, however, certain critics from each country who found themselves in various ways in the other "camp" or on the borders between the two. For example, in France, writer Monique Wittig challenged the psychoanalytic view of women and culture with a more materialist one.¹² In the United States, thinkers such as Alice Jardine and Jane Gallop were writing on language, literature and sexuality in dialogue with the work of French theorists.¹³ Terms more appropriate than "American" and "French" may be "social" and "symbolic" (woman as the "difference" grounding the symbolic structure), as suggested by Leslie Rabine.¹⁴ Even within these categories unrestricted by national border there were, of course, variations. Nancy K. Miller, for example, showed the influence of continental theory in her largely social analysis.¹⁵ For the most part, however, the relationship between French and American feminist thought was not an easy one. Articles in Elaine Showalter's collection, *The New Feminist Criticism: Women, Literature and Theory*, published in 1985, showed the long-standing American disapproval of symbolic feminists' reliance upon the theories of men (because such theories are based upon male experience). On this point, for example, Showalter wrote deprecatingly of French feminists' debt to the "white fathers," Lacan and Macherey.¹⁶ An equally frequent criticism coming from many American feminists was—and still is—the charge of essentialism (a judgement shared by Wittig): the idea that the "feminine," in connecting woman with the body and the unconscious, plays dangerously into the "myth of woman" that has oppressed women throughout history. In a related vein, many critics disapproved of French scholars' paucity of reference to lived reality—to everyday experiences that produce and perpetuate sexism.

Many theorists of the symbolic tendency, on the other hand, dissociated themselves from what they saw as American feminist criticism's too superficial social view of feminine being and of the relationship between women and writing. Gallop, for instance, referred to American feminist criticism as "a naïve reduction of literature to an image of the real world."¹⁷ Toril Moi, who positioned herself at a distance from both traditions, criticized American feminism's acceptance of "patriarchal aesthetics"¹⁸: its accentuation of masculine values of "integrity, totality"¹⁹ in its effort to construct a complete women's history and identity, its postulation of a unified, unquestionable author, and in the oneness that it often established between author and character. This tendency may be seen in Donovan's article, for example, in her call for an end to the concept of aesthetic distance. Her appeal to a "personal" viewpoint telescopes reader and character, author and character, suggesting the totalizing approach that Moi described.

In some ways, however, the two perspectives may be seen as complementary ones. Though this interrelatedness was not perceived by most scholars in the first half of the eighties, it laid the groundwork for certain critical intersections to come.²⁰ For example, one may see Donovan's emphasis upon women's everyday experience as offsetting the less concrete character of French theory. The social view, more directly than the symbolic one, potentially permits a consideration of the influence of specific historical moments upon women. Through its insistence upon the importance of "lived reality," it also more easily suggests a recognition of the diversity of race, class, and sexual orientation among women. Similarly, Cixous's investigation of woman as a symbolic, not only literal element of culture—the author's connection of woman with basic processes of representation—expands Donovan's more practical view when read in conjunction with it. The poetic vision that Cixous offered, the image of a laughing woman freed from the bonds of hierarchical discourse, was an inspiring one—one which served just that polemic purpose when it appeared in 1975, part of the newly-born feminist movement in France.

In the context of this complementary relationship, the discussion of theater seems especially appropriate. It is a genre and practice which may permit the meeting and working through of differing critical approaches. For theater is inherently a contestatory scene, a site of conflicting views set in relation to one another (as shown in the dramatic theories of Artaud and Brecht who, each in his own way, exploited the capacity of the theatrical experience to expose and obtain energy from difference). In addition, theater itself displays both "social" and "symbolic" characteristics. First of all, one may consider dramatic creation in relation to the social, to American feminist critical tendencies of the late seventies and eighties. The live bodies on stage suggest the realm of lived experience.²¹ And the temporal unfolding of the theatrical production introduces the dimension of history: it suggests process—the process by which women's identities have been and are constructed, and by which they might be transformed. Theater's dependence upon place as well as time (since the production of a play happens in a particular location) mirrors the importance of context—including physical, intellectual, emotional, economic, and social factors—in the forming of identity.

Theater may also be seen as inherently "feminine" in the French sense. The scenic space is an open, accepting one. It is constantly accessible to the "other," to the unknown: because it is taking place in front of an audience, in the spectators' "real time," the next moment is never totally predictable. Through the rehearsals that precede the performance, too, the play constantly incorporates the "other," the different: new performance elements and, in certain cases, new written text. In addition, theater is the space of the body and of the physical in general, of movement, sound and color. It is active and profuse, a place of

coming together and transformation, where written text and performance text, reality and fiction, actor and role, actors and spectators meet. (In light of this connection between theater and symbolic criticism, it is interesting that Cixous, whom I chose as representative of certain aspects of the French feminist view, spent the eighties writing in large part for the theater. At the same time, her activity may be linked with the social view: she increasingly turned to writing plays based upon historical periods and figures.²²)

The play *Louise/Emma*, in particular, suggests both French and American approaches; in a number of ways, it stages their intersection, functioning as both a source and representation of those theoretical ideas. The play, produced in 1983 at the Théâtre de Recherche de Marseille, was the fruit of a collaboration between writer Anne Roche and actress Françoise Chatôt. Chatôt, fascinated by the lives of the two anarchists²³ and struck by the contemporary resonances of their thought and actions, suggested as a starting point for the script an actual meeting that took place between Michel and Goldman in London in 1895. As its creators wished, *Louise/Emma* is not a realistic recreation of that historical moment, but rather a theatrical presentation of aspects of the women's lives and philosophies.

The encounter between the two characters is set in the lobby of a railway station, where they act out and narrate their experiences.²⁴ Through both words and movements, they debate their points of view on a variety of questions, including love and personal relationships, contraception and sex education, and the role of violence in revolutionary activity. Throughout the play, the authors stress the strong and often difficult link between the personal and the political in the lives of the two characters. This connection is made in part by the constant movement of the action back and forth from personal space (their parental homes, for example) to public areas (a courtroom, prison, a meeting hall). The variation in setting, accomplished with few props and no set changes, also includes jumps from country to country—to Russia and England as well as France and the U.S.—and some movement backward and forward in time. The temporal displacements are always followed by the return to "historical time": Goldman and Michel, the historical figures, in the railroad station, commenting upon their lives after the fact. The successive moments in the play are scenically linked and given a social context by the presence and actions of various "gens du peuple," government officials, and friends and relatives—fifteen parts played by three actors (one woman and two men). The characters include a news boy who weaves in and out of the action on roller skates or a supermarket cart; he functions as a chorus, offering commentary or historical information and often breaking the rhythm or tone of the stage action.

In the course of play, Louise and Emma display their sheer energy and persistence; they also show their solidarity, in spite of—and, importantly, through the discussion of—the differences in experience and philosophy between them. Their tenacity and mutual respect appear already at the beginning of the play and intensify throughout the piece. In the first scene, an aging and tired Louise has her spirits lifted by the arrival of the energetic young Emma; at the end of the scene, Emma places her head in Louise's lap and begins to tell her story. The two characters disagree on political and personal issues in the course of the play, but they always end up coming together, in part because oppositional forces have mounted the same type of attack against them. At the end of the piece, the two return to their original position on stage, Louise cradling Emma's head on her knees. At that point, Emma's death is reported by the news boy and, according to the stage directions, Louise becomes "younger and more serene"; she has again been invigorated, this time through the life stories—both Emma's and her own—that the two have just finished reenacting. The main characters move once more into "historical time," becoming personages whose experiences and ideas have survived their lifetimes and have now been re-presented in the play, *Louise/Emma*.

As the preceding description may suggest, various aspects of the piece can be viewed in relation to American feminist approaches. The presentation of Louise Michel and Emma Goldman as anarchist and feminist heroines brings to mind the social feminist practice of retrieving and revision-ing female historical figures. The preface and afterword of the published work accentuate this aspect of the authors' project: Chatôt begins by explaining her interest in presenting Goldman, largely unknown in France, to the French audience, and in examining the overly-commented Michel from a more current perspective; and the play is followed by an essay on the two anarchists by Daniel Armogathe, a noted French scholar in women's history. *Louise/Emma* also shows women's "lived reality": the authors make an obvious connection between the two characters' status as women and the questions that they discuss, as well as the various experiences of oppression, desire and triumph that they present. The sixth scene, for example, shows Emma, a supporter of women's sexual freedom, to be a victim of the double standard in this area, as she—unlike the men in her group—is condemned for her liberal mores. Later, she and Louise discuss aspects of society that have preventing women from seeing, speaking, and emerging from their strictures: marriage, in which, as Louise states, women exist as mere ornaments or dolls, and the accompanying fact that few viable economic and social alternatives to marriage exist for women; the public's insufficient knowledge of sex and contraception (several speeches in the play describe Emma's educational efforts regarding contraception and abortion); and the reality that the burden of child

rearing falls upon the woman—though both express some sadness at their decisions to forego motherhood. As the presentation of Louise's and Emma's lives and opinions makes clear, it is in fact the characters' (and historical figures') position outside the sphere of "typical women" of their classes and times that permits them to question ideas of what it is "natural" for women to be and do.

In the play, social reality (that of men as well as women, though the preponderance of female characters highlights women's lives) intervenes formally, also, through the regular disruption of theatrical illusion. For example, the roller-skating news boy is an anachronistic presence who breaks dramatic tension as well as temporal realism with his unexpected entries on stage. Also, as mentioned earlier, the main characters move constantly in time and place—from the moment of their encounter in the railway station in 1895, to other moments of their lives in other settings, to a position outside of the time periods and locations represented on stage, as is the case at the end of the play. This dislocation of stage time—the time of illusion—permits the entry of "real time": that of the spectators, of the social.

The transformation of the stage into new places and moments through light, sound and verbal cues is accompanied by other disruptive elements: the open taking on of new roles by the three actors playing multiple parts—thus highlighting their existence as actors²⁵—and the combining of poetic with discursive language in the script. The mixing of different levels of discourse is evident in the fourteenth scene, for example, in which a conversation between Emma and a Russian hospital official, in logical, everyday language, is followed by an image-filled, rythmed monologue: Emma's reflections upon the ironies of her and her two countries' situations. It is 1919 and Emma, having just been exiled for subversive activity from the U.S.—the "land of free," to which her family had emigrated some years earlier—hopes to find true freedom in the new, post-revolution Russia. In the course of her conversation with the hospital official, to whom she offers her help in training nurses, she discovers repressive and hypocritical aspects of the Bolshevik state. Her help is ultimately rejected by the hospital (because she identifies herself as an anarchist rather than a communist) and she is assigned instead to record the history of the revolution throughout the provinces—the revolution whose results she now finds so cruel and disappointing. Emma's monologue brings together the inner contradictions of her two countries ("la libre Amérique / l'Amérique tsariste"; and "la Russie illisible, indéchiffrable / . . . / est-ce une naissance / est-ce une agonie / le sang est le même" ["free America / tsarist America"; and "illegible, undecipherable Russia / . . . / is it a birth / is it a death / the blood is the same"]). The speech also shows Emma's perception of herself as an ineffectual bystander, part of the

past rather than the present and the future: "Et moi / chiffonnière du passé / je crochète dans les poubelles de l'histoire" ["And I / rag-picker of the past / pull out tatters from the trash cans of history"].²⁶

Such disruptions of theatrical illusion in the script create a certain Brechtian distancing; they make the audience aware of the theatrical frame and leave a space during which the spectators may reflect upon the situation before them. The entering of the audience members' collective and individual realities at these points is a process suggestive of the social tendency in feminist criticism.

At the same time, certain of these elements of the play bring to mind the "feminine" space that symbolic approaches describe. The formal intervention of social reality in the text—the breaking of theatrical illusion—may in fact be considered an aspect of the play's symbolic level; for it is part of the acceptance of the "other" that French theories include. In addition to mixing reality with illusion and poetry with logical language,²⁷ the text shows its abundance in its combining of excerpts from historical documents with invented dialogue, and live voices and sounds with recorded ones. Also, narration occurs in conjunction with complementary but not always directly illustrative scenes that are played silently by other characters. In Scene 7, as Louise and Emma discuss (and disagree upon) the question of sexual fidelity and its connection with their revolutionary action, short mimed scenes of everyday activity—a man shining shoes, a beggar going through trash, a person distributing political tracts—take place behind them. In the next scene, as Louise talks about the lack of opportunities for most women outside of marriage (to be manual workers, maids or prostitutes), Emma moves upstage and begins a joyous, sensual dance. This dance may suggest the importance of sexual freedom, the topic that she has just been debating with the more traditional Louise, or be a visualisation of the prostitutes being mentioned at the moment, or perhaps serve to indicate the liberty that women might attain within a different societal organization. The linking of dialogue with separate, contrapuntal movement in these scenes, an aspect of the "feminine" diversity in *Louise/Emma*, also serves to reinforce the link between the personal and the political that the play emphasizes.

In the printed script, the stage directions and the dialogue take on equal importance, rather than the directions being presented as subordinate to the spoken lines: they appear simultaneously on the two sides of the page. Body and physical theatrical means in general thus are given a significant place in *Louise/Emma*. Indeed, movement, lighting and music are intrinsic to the sometimes abrupt changes in scene and tone that characterize the play. The importance of the production's music, in particular, is indicated by the inclusion of composer David Rueff's commentary in the preface to the play. He explains his composition process: to be inspired but not limited by the dialogue and stage

directions (an idea reminiscent of the authors' relationship to their subject matter: their desire that the presentation of Michel's and Goldman's lives be a starting point for their exploration of contemporary questions, not an end in itself). It is clear that *Louise/Emma* works to favor spectacle and sound—the "feminine" physical—over narrative style.

Another important element of the play's profusion is the presentation of the main characters as vital forces whose beliefs, desires and experiences exceed the boundaries of the categories, "anarchist" and "feminist." The play is as much about the characters' love—various kinds of love—as about political attitudes and actions (a trait that American critic Donovan might include under "nurturing" as part of a "woman's way of seeing"): Louise's admiration of and faithfulness to a fellow anarchist, Jules Ferré—along with her ignorance of and seeming aversion to sexual relations; allusions in the text to her possible lesbian tendencies; her request that the youth who wounded her in an assassination attempt be pardoned; Emma's "free love"; and, of course, the love that the two women show for each other and for their fellow revolutionaries. The characters also reveal another aspect of their diversity: certain contradictions between their ideological positions and the practical aspects of their existence. Both compromise themselves to a certain degree in order to financially support themselves and their cause. Emma, in one scene, attempts to prostitute herself for gun money (although, because she is obviously so ill at ease in this role, her potential customer simply donates his money); and Louise publishes novels that, according to the script, are artistically and politically somewhat questionable. A larger contradiction in the characters, between the love that they express for individuals and the fact that cruelty and even killing are part of their revolutionary activity, is never discussed, as such, by Louise and Emma. However, they do debate the amount of violence that each sees to be necessary in her work; and the larger issue, the degree to which one can rationalize harmful acts in the pursuit of laudable goals, becomes one of the important questions of the play.

The mixing of differing elements, the accepting of that which is "other," is thus evident in the play's presentation of two individuals and their often dissimilar—as well as internally various—stories. The characters are women alike in their fundamental anarchism and feminism and in their love and respect for each other; they are different in their individual practice of these "-isms," in their country of origin, their era of greatest political activity and in their sexual mores. The combination of diverse elements, aspects of the symbolic character of *Louise/Emma*, works in tandem with the play's social components: its emphasis upon social context—including sex, class, country, and time period—in determining both the divergencies and the resemblances between the two

characters, and its encouragement of the audience to bring its own realities into dialogue with the play.

The coming together of the two women, one French and one American, mirrors the mingling of symbolic and social aspects of *Louise/Emma*. The simultaneously contestatory and loving relationship of the two characters also provides a model for the meeting of those traditions in feminist thought. As I mentioned earlier, certain U.S. scholars in the later eighties had begun to show an interest in combining the two tendencies. Critics Margaret Homans and Leslie Rabine, for example, were informed by both American and French views in their readings of literary texts; and the Spring, 1988 issue of the journal *Feminist Studies*, in a consideration of deconstruction and feminist criticism, contained articles that began to bridge the gap between the two perspectives.²⁸ But, for the most part, interest had shifted to the more materialist approach discussed earlier, to the recognition of differences among and within individual women. Charges of essentialism were being leveled not only at critics of the French variety but at many of the American approach (such as Donovan) for not taking class, race, sexual preference and history into account in their choice of texts to treat and in their examination of reading and writing processes. (As Gallop has explained in *Around 1981*, this development was the result of challenges by Afro-American feminists to the "high Euro-American" feminist canon in academia.) By the later eighties, American feminist criticism of various sub-ilks—psychoanalytic, deconstructivist, marxist, materialist, etc.—had come to be characterized by heightened self-reflexivity. Scholars were interested in identifying and analyzing the reader's subject position in relation to the text and to surrounding societal discourses, including those which have produced the "category of 'women'."

These developments provoked another concern: how attention to diversity might be balanced with the recognition of women's commonalities. As Nancy K. Miller put it at the end of the decade, "[B]etween the indictment of the feminist universal as a white fiction brought by women of color and the poststructuralist suspicion of a grounded subject, what are the conditions under which as feminists one [. . .] can say 'we'?"²⁹ Though most feminist literary critics interrogating their (and others') processes of analysis would not have claimed a direct link between their work and political action, there was an anxiety—sometimes underlying, in other cases overtly expressed—about how articulation of difference within the group might negatively affect women's possibilities for political agency.³⁰ Critics worked to negotiate between positions of identification and diversity among women, as well as to deal with the still-perceived—and thus still-operant—division between theory and action, academia and the "real world."³¹ Increasingly, critics posited recognition of diversity as a source of power in promoting interests of the group as a whole.³²

The French/American debate in the U.S., then, was largely superseded by the discussion of essentialist/ constructionist views through the later 1980's. With the nasty word, "essentialist"³³ being used to describe American as well as French feminist critics, the French were mentioned less frequently, often simply assumed to be the worst of the "sinners" in this regard. Ironically, the deconstructivist and psychoanalytic thought from which "symbolic" feminists' work had emerged was being (or, according to Gallop, had been) absorbed by the academy, including scholars in women's studies.

However, a certain level of debate on the value of French feminist theory did continue, with discussion mainly of Irigaray and, to a lesser degree, Kristeva.³⁴ In the late eighties and early nineties, Christine Holmlund and Margaret Whitford in their writing on Luce Irigaray, and Diane Fuss in *Essentially Speaking* have all worked to rescue Irigaray for feminist "use," pointing out ways in which her theory may be connected to social concerns.³⁵ Holmlund has seen in *This Sex Which Is Not One* and *Speculum of the Other Woman* reference to lesbian experience, and Whitford regards the scholar's philosophical investigation of conflict as helpful in dealing with the tensions within feminism. Fuss has refuted accusations of essentialism against Irigaray, noting a refusal on the French critic's part to precisely locate, "essentialize" woman, woman's body. Most basically, all three writers have seen a connection between the symbolic—the unconscious—and the social realms; they thus perceive an overall relevance of Irigaray's work to material concerns. These scholars have taken a somewhat defensive tone in their writing in an atmosphere that has continued—though at an abated pace—to produce criticism of French feminists.³⁶

A number of scholars, though, have neither ignored symbolic feminist theory nor continued to discuss its worth; instead, they have incorporated aspects of French views into their own critical framework. The journal, *differences*, begun in 1989 as a forum for combining cultural studies with feminism, shows a significant degree of eclecticism in critical views, with its contributors quite regularly combining aspects of Irigaray's, Cixous's or Kristeva's theory with more materialist perspectives. Among scholars who have shown an interest in French feminist theory, Irigaray again seems to be the favored critic. Anne Herrmann, for example, has worked with elements of Irigaray's thought along with Bakhtin's to examine the writing of Virginia Woolf and Christa Wolf.³⁷ In the opinion of Karen Newman, it is in particular Irigaray's concept of "mimétisme" ("hyperbolic mimicry") that has been "the most congenial import" for Anglo-American feminist critics.³⁸

To some degree, then, the often virulent disagreement between French and American feminist critics of the earlier eighties has resolved itself : a greater

number of American scholars are working in dialogue with rather than against French feminist theory—a possibility indicated by the complementarity of the symbolic and social tendencies in *Louise/Emma*. And, although the acceptance of aspects of French thought into American approaches in recent years does not constitute a major part of the feminist critical scene as a whole, it is indicative of a general spirit of openness in the field.³⁹ This attitude has manifested itself, not only in the interest in exploring and combining diverse critical points of view, but in the greater inclusiveness evident in the material and questions studied by the various disciplines within feminist criticism. Traditional divisions between areas of study have become less distinct. (My review of feminist critical positions in this article moves in and out of specifically *literary* criticism precisely in accordance with this happening.) As Gallop has noted, feminist literary studies have come to include the consideration of gender—of men and "masculinities"—and to encompass elements of culture other than literature: popular writing, film, and other media.⁴⁰ And the questioning of interior and exterior boundaries opens the way for connections with other concerns (including more overtly political ones), for the "construction of empathy" with positions that intersect those of feminists.⁴¹

This movement toward openness, the search for animating engagement with differing approaches was suggested—in some way prefigured—in *Louise/Emma*: in the involvement of one character with the other, in spite of—or perhaps through—their differences in culture and character; and in the presence and mutually enlivening relationship of theatrical elements that can be associated with both the symbolic and social tendencies in feminist scholarship. The Franco-American debate of the early and mid eighties was the beginning of a shifting configuration of contestation and discussion in feminist theory and criticism in the U.S.—discussion in which the French voice has continued to be heard, to articulate and prod the U.S. feminist critical scene into examining itself. For the more recent concern in feminist writings with differences—including the distinction between the present historical moment and those before, as well as those to come—emerges in part from the "différence" with which French feminists have woven their texts. *Louise/Emma* . . . : one may imagine a continuation of the play's title to include other names, from other cultural or philosophical points of view, mirroring the increasing possibilities for multiplicity among and within individual theoretical perspectives.

Notes

1. Jane Gallop, *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1992), and Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991). See also Gallop's collection, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), and Barbara Christian, et al., "Conference Call," *differences* 2,3 (Fall 1990) 52-108.
2. Discussions (from the eighties) of differences between the French and American feminist critical traditions may be found, for example, in the following texts: the introductions to *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1980); Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985); Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, eds., *The Future of Difference* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980); Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Women, Literature and Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1985); and the following journal issues: *Diacritics* (Summer 1982); *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981); *Signs*, 7, 1 (Autumn 1981); *Feminist Studies*, 7, 2 (Summer 1981) and 14, 1 (Spring 1988).
3. Anne Roche and Françoise Chatôt, *Louise/Emma* (Paris, 1983), a one-act play in eighteen scenes. Translations from the play are my own.
4. Hélène Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse," *L'Arc* 61 (1975), 39-54 ("The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. K. Cohen and P. Cohen, *Signs* 1, 4 [Summer 1976], 875-93); and Josephine Donovan, "Toward a Women's Poetics," *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, ed. Shari Benstock (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 98-109.
5. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3, 1-2 (1984).
6. Donovan 98.
7. Donovan 102.
8. See, for example, Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt, eds., *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class, and Race in Literature and Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1985).
9. Teresa de Lauretis, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986).
10. de Lauretis 14.
11. Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?": *Feminism and the Category of "Women"* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) 7.
12. See, for example, the following articles by Wittig in the journal, *Feminist Issues*: "One is Not Born a Woman" 1, 2 (Winter 1981) 45-54; "Point of View: Universal or Particular?" 3,2 (Fall 1983) 63-9; and "The Straight Mind," 1, 1 (Summer 1980) 103-11.
13. For example, see Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985); and Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982) and *Thinking Through the Body*.
14. Leslie Rabine, "No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston," *Signs* 12 (1987) 471-92.
15. See Miller's essay in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* 339-60.
16. Showalter 247.
17. Jane Gallop, "Quand nos lèvres s'écrivent: Irigaray's Body Politic," *Romanic Review* 74 (1983) 77. In addition to Gallop's article, see the introduction to *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, eds. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (New York: Methuen, 1985) and Moi, Part I, 19-88.
18. Moi 69.
19. Moi 66.

20. Gayatri Spivak is a notable exception, a scholar who, since the early eighties, has sensitively worked with both symbolic and social approaches. Spivak has combined deconstruction, French feminist criticism and Marxism in her metacritical commentary and in her reading of literature and culture, as shown in her collection, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

21. The tension between reality and illusion is of course basic to the theatrical experience; the intricacies of this tension have been most intriguingly investigated in recent years by Herbert Blau. (See his explorations of the point at which theater emerges from the real—a point that is never located, always deferred—in, for example, *The Audience* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990].) Questions of representation become more complex in performance art, which, through its often intimate and improvisational atmosphere, even more poignantly puts the social body on the moving line between the "real" and the illusive. For a discussion of feminist performance in this regard, see Jeanne Forte, "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism," *Theatre Journal* 40 (May 1988) 217-35.

22. Her plays in this vein, written for Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil, are *L'Histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, roi du Cambodge* (*The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia*) (Paris, 1985), and *L'Indiade, ou l'Inde de leurs rêves* (*The Indiade, or the India of Their Dreams*) (Paris, 1987), which is based upon the life and times of Mahatma Gandhi. More recently, Cixous produced a new translation of Aeschylus's *The Eumenides* into French for Mnouchkine's cycle of Greek tragedies (with its last presentation in January of 1993). Her latest play, *La Ville parjure ou le Réveil des Erinyes* (*The Perjured City or The Awakening of the Erinyes*) (1994) although open in its setting in place and time ("between 3500 B.C. and 1993"), evokes contemporary political events.

23. Louise Michel (1830-1905), a revolutionary socialist who developed and communicated her ideas through teaching, lecturing and writing, is known mainly for her role in the Commune, the anti-royalist government formed in Paris in 1871. Michel, the daughter of a servant and the son of the family for which her mother worked, was raised and educated by her father's family. She was hired as a teacher in 1866 in Paris. When the Commune was declared, Michel joined its forces. Called "la Vierge rouge de Montmartre," she fought bravely against troops from Versailles; after the brief duration of the revolutionary government, she was court-martialed and deported to New Caledonia for nine years. Following that period, Michel spent three years in prison (1883-86) for urging participants in a hunger march to plunder bakeries. She spoke and wrote on revolutionary themes during the last twenty years of her life, working in both France and England.

Emma Goldman (1869-1940), born to a struggling Jewish merchant family in Lithuania, began her education in anarchism as a factory worker in the U.S. after her emigration at age sixteen. She participated in numerous protests and strikes throughout her life, spending a year in jail for inciting a riot in New York City in 1893. With her longtime friend and political associate, Russian anarchist Alexander Berkman, Goldman published the anarchist magazine, *Mother Earth*. They were both convicted for obstructing the draft during World War I; they were imprisoned for two years and then deported to Russia in 1919. Disappointed with the Bolshevik government, Goldman left Russia in 1921 and spent the rest of her life lecturing and writing in England, Canada, and the U.S. (See Louise Michel, trans. Bullitt Lowry and Elizabeth Ellington Gunter, *The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel* [University, Alabama: U of Alabama P, 1981]; and Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* [New York: A.A. Knopf, 1931].)

24. In the preface to the play, Chatôt writes that the scenographer for the production, Claude Lemaire, chose this setting as "a no man's land par excellence, where anything might happen: private and public encounters, trials, espionnage, arrests, periods of waiting . . . for a train, which might be the train of the failed revolution ('la révolution manquée')" (9). This description stresses the openness and abstract nature of the set, which permits the play's swift movements in time and place. It also

accurately indicates the number of political defeats that the characters experience in the course of the play.

25. Chatôt herself, describing the way in which the actors playing multiple parts constantly change roles, views the players as welcome representatives of "le monde social": "The presence of the actors—the social world—thus often enters into the production . . ." (8).

26. Roche and Chatôt 74.

27. The inclusion of poetic language itself suggests the symbolic view in feminist criticism. Poetry, with its greater appeal to associative than linear thought, connects with the freeing unconscious that Cixous would like women to tap through their writing. This style is evident in her own texts, including "The Laugh of the Medusa."

28. Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), and Leslie Rabine, "No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston," *Signs* 12 (1987) 471-92.

29. Miller, *Getting Personal* 74. Linda Kauffman in the introduction to her book, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), similarly has mentioned feminist literary critics' worries about how poststructuralist "undermin[ing] of referentiality", the "killing" of the author, might "simultaneously undermine[] the female voice" (xix). (She herself, however, sees decentering as way of exposing the "strategies of silencing" that have oppressed women).

30. Diane Fuss, for instance, in her deconstruction of the term, "essentialism"—which she sees as a belief that can be "deployed effectively in the service of both [. . .] progressive and reactionary discourses"—has discussed the "need to retain the notion of women as a class for political purposes" (*Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* [New York: Routledge, 1989] xii, 36).

31. This concern is evident, for instance, in bell hooks's *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics* (Boston: South End P, 1990). In her discussion of the postmodernism and the black movement, she views postmodern culture as capable of creating "gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined by narrow separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of everyday" (31).

32. Riley, for example, argued that "it is compatible to suggest that 'women' don't exist—while maintaining a politics of 'as if they existed'—since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did. So that official suppositions and conservative popular convictions will need to be countered constantly by redefinitions of 'women.' [. . .] [A]n active scepticism about the integrity of the sacred category 'women' would be no merely philosophical doubt to be stifled in the name of effective political action in the world. On the contrary, it would be a condition for the latter" ("*Am I That Name?*" 112-13). De Lauretis, too, has spoken of the necessity of self-critique within feminism, analysis of "our differences and our contradictions" if "feminism is to continue to be a political critique of society" (*Feminist Studies* 8). More recently, Judith Butler has seen "the crisis of identity politics" within feminist criticism and feminism in general as "a political necessity" ("The Force Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe and Discursive Excess," *differences* 2, 2 [Summer 1990] 105-25).

33. Here I should restate Diane Fuss's exception to assuming the negative connotation of the word, "essentialism," in her effort to disengage feminist critical debate from what she termed its "essentialist/ constructionist [. . .] impass" (*Essentially Speaking* 1). De Lauretis also interrogates the term, objecting to "constrain[ing feminism] in terms of essentialism and anti-essentialism even as they no longer serve (but did they ever?) to formulate our questions" ("The Essence of the Triangle, or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain," *differences* 1, 2 (Summer, 1989) 13).

34. Hélène Cixous, on the other hand, seems to have attempted to dissociate herself from the "écriture féminine" label—with some success, although scholars continue to make reference to that aspect of her book written with Catherine Clément, *La Jeune Née* (Paris: Union generale d'editions,

1975). During a question-and-answer session at a 1987 colloquium on her work that I attended in Utrecht, the Netherlands, for example, Cixous declared that she was no longer so interested in the issue of the "feminine," but rather in "humanity." Her drama written on increasingly more historical subjects would bear out this change in focus.

35. Christine Holmlund, "The Lesbian, the Mother, the Heterosexual Lover: Irigaray's Recodings of Difference," *Feminist Studies* 17, 2 (Summer 1991) 283-308; and Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

36. See Nancy Fraser, ed., *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992). In Fraser's volume, the judgement comes out largely against Kristeva's and, to a lesser degree, Irigaray's theory, though it does include a piece by Irigaray.

37. Anne Herrmann, *The Dialogic and Difference: "Another Woman" in Virginia Woolf and Christa Wolf* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

38. In Newman's terms, Irigaray's concept of mimicry "allow[s] the critic to demonstrate how a particular text distorts or italicizes patriarchal ideology and [. . .] thereby denaturalizes it" (45). Karen Newman, "Directing Traffic: Subjects, Objects, and the Politics of Exchange," *differences* 2, 2 (Summer 1990) 41-54.

39. Elaine Marks, in comments written in 1990, has taken a different view of the situation, pointing out what she has seen as doctrinaire tendencies in feminist studies. She describes feminist critics' interest in class, race and sexual orientation as a new "hegemony" that erases the issue of differences within individual women. Marks argues for continued attention to the unconscious as a way of taking this individuality into account, for "restor[ing] ontologies or existential and poetic questions to a central position in women's studies" (p. 74). (Barbara Christian, et al., "Conference Call," *differences* 2, 3 (Fall 1990) 52-108.)

40. Gallop, *Around 1981* 242-3.

41. hooks 27. The entire sentence, taken from her article, "Postmodern Blackness," is as follows: "Radical postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as the base for solidarity and coalition."