The New Feminist Criticism

*Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*

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Writing the Body

*Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture féminine*

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France is today the scene of feminisms. The Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF) grows every year, but so do the factions within it: feminist journals carry on bitter debates, a group of women writers boycot a feminist publishing house, French women at conferences in the United States contradict each other’s positions at top volume (Monique Wittig to Hélène Cixous: “Ceci est un scandale!”). But in the realm of theory, the French share a deep critique of the modes through which the West has claimed to discern evidence—or reality—and a suspicion concerning efforts to change the position of women that fail to address the forces in the body, in the unconscious, in the basic structures of culture that are invisible to the empirical eye. Briefly, French feminists in general believe that Western thought has been based on a systematic repression of women’s experience. Thus their assertion of a bedrock female nature makes sense as a point from which to deconstruct language, philosophy, psychoanalysis, the social practices, and the direction of patriarchal culture as we live in and resist it.

This position, the turn to féminité as a challenge to male-centered thinking, has stirred up curiosity and set off resonances among American feminists, who are increasingly open to theory, to philosophical, psychoanalytic, and Marxist critiques of masculinist ways of seeing the world. (Speakers at recent U.S. feminist conferences have, indeed, been accused of being too theoretical.) And it seems to me that it is precisely through theory that some of the positions of the French feminists need to be questioned—as they have been in France since the beginnings of the MLF. My intention, then, is to pose...
some questions about the theoretical consistency and (yes, they can't be repressed!) the practical and political implications of French discussions and celebrations of the feminine. For if one posits that female subjectivity is derived from women's physiology and bodily instincts as it affect sexual experience and the unconscious, both theoretical and practical problems can and do arise.

The four French women I will discuss here—Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig—share a common opponent, masculinist thinking; but they envision different modes of resisting and moving beyond it. Their common ground is an analysis of Western culture as fundamentally oppressive, as phallocentric. "I am the unified, self-controlled center of the universe," man (white, European, and ruling-class) has claimed. "The rest of the world, which I define as the Other, has meaning only in relation to me, as man/father, possessor of the phallus." This claim to centrality has been supported not only by religion and philosophy but also by language. To speak and especially to write from such a position is to appropriate the world, to dominate it through verbal mastery. Symbolic discourse (language, in various contexts) is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else—including women.

How, then, are the institutions and signifying practices (speech, writing, images, myths, and rituals) of such a culture to be resisted? These French women agree that resistance does take place in the form of jouissance, that is, in the direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality, repressed but not obliterated by the Law of the Father. Kristeva stops here; but Irigaray and Cixous go on to emphasize that women, historically limited to being sexual objects for men (virgins or prostitutes, wives or mothers), have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves. If they can do this, and if they can speak about it in the new languages it calls for, they will establish a point of view (a site of différence) from which phallocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory but also in practice. Like Cixous, Wittig has produced a number of textes féminins, but she insists that the theory and practice of féminité must be focused on women among themselves, rather than on their divergence from men or from men's views of them. From a joint attack on phallocentrism, then, these four writers move to various strategies against it.

Julia Kristeva, a founding member of the semiotic-Marxist journal Tel Quel, and the author of several books on avant-garde writers, language, and philosophy, finds in psychoanalysis the concept of the bodily drives that survive cultural pressures toward sublimation and surface in what she calls "semitic discourse": the gestural, rhythmic, prerreferential language of such writers as Joyce, Mallarmé, and Artaud. These men, rather than giving up their blissful infantile fusion with their mothers, their orality and anality, reexperience such jouissances subconsciously and set them into play by constructing texts against the rules and regularities of conventional language. How do women fit into this scheme of semiotic liberation? Indirectly, as mothers, because they are the first love objects from which the child is typically separated and turned away in the course of his initiation into society. In fact, Kristeva sees semiotic discourse as an incestuous challenge to the symbolic order, asserting as it does the writer's return to the pleasures of his preverbal identification with his mother and his refusal to identify with his father and the logic of paternal discourse. Women, for Kristeva, also speak and write as "hysteric," as outsiders to male-dominated discourse, for two reasons: the predominance in them of drives related to anality and childhood, and their marginal position vis-à-vis masculine culture. Their semiotic style is likely to involve repetitive, spasmodic separations from the dominating discourse, which, more often, they are forced to imitate.

Kristeva doubts, however, whether women should aim to work out alternative discourses. She sees certain libidinal potentials in their marginal position, which is (admirably) unlikely to produce a fixed, authority-claiming subject/speaker or language: "In social, sexual and symbolic experiences, being a woman has always provided a means to another end, to becoming something else: a subject-in-the-making, a subject on trial." Rather than formulating a new discourse, women should persist in challenging the discourses that stand: "If women have a role to play...it is only in assuming a negative function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society. Such an attitude places women on the side of the explosion of social codes: with revolutionary movements." In fact, "woman" to Kristeva represents not so much a sex as an attitude, any resistance to conventional culture and language; men, too, have access to the jouissance that opposes phallocentrism:

A feminist practice can only be...at odds with what already exists so that we may say "that's not it" and "that's still not it." By "woman" I mean that which cannot be represented, what is not said, what remains above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. There are certain "men" who are familiar with this phenomenon.

For Luce Irigaray, on the contrary, women have a specificity that distinguishes them sharply from men. A psychoanalyst and former member of l'École freudienne at the University of Paris (Vincennes), she was fired from...
her teaching position in the fall of 1974, three weeks after the publication of her study of the phallocentric bias in Freud. *Speculum de l'autre femme* is this study, a profound and wittily sarcastic demonstration of the ways in which Plato and Freud define woman: as irrational and invisible, as imperfect (castrated) man. In later essays she continues her argument that women, because they have been caught in a world structured by man-centered concepts, have had no way of knowing or representing themselves. But she offers as the starting point for a female self-consciousness the facts of women's bodies and women's sexual pleasure, precisely because they have been so absent or so misrepresented in male discourse. Women, she says, experience a diffuse sexuality arising, for example, from the "two lips" of the vulva, and a multiplicity of libidinal energies that cannot be expressed or understood within the identity-claiming assumptions of phallocentric discourse ("I am a unified, coherent being, and what is significant in the world reflects my male image").

Irigaray argues further that female sexuality explains women's problematic relationship to (masculine) logic and language:

"Woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere... The geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined—in an imaginary [system] centered a bit too much on one and the same.

"She" is infinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious—not to mention her language in which "she" goes off in all directions and in which "he" is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Contradictory words seem a little crazy to the logic of reason, and inaudible for him who listens with ready-made grids, a code prepared in advance. In her statements—at least when she dares to speak out—woman reverts herself constantly.\(^8\)

Irigaray concedes that women's discovery of their autocentric will not, by itself, arrive automatically or enable them to transform the existing order: "For a woman to arrive at the point where she can enjoy her pleasure as a woman, a long detour by the analysis of the various systems that oppress her is certainly necessary."\(^9\) Irigaray herself writes essays using Marxist categories to analyze men's use and exchange of women, and in others she uses female physiology as a source of critical metaphors and counterconcepts (against physics, pornography, Nietzsche's misogyny, myth).\(^10\) Rather than literally. Yet her focus on the physical bases for the difference between male and physical sexuality remains the same: women must recognize and assert their *jouissance* if they are to subvert phallocentric oppression at its deepest levels.

Since 1975, when she founded women's studies at Vincennes, Hélène Cixous has been a spokeswoman for the group Psychanalyse et politique and a prolific writer of texts for their publishing house, Des Femmes. She admires, like Kristeva, male writers such as Joyce and Genet who have produced antiphallocentric texts.\(^11\) But she is convinced that women's unconscious is totally different from men's, and that it is their psychosexual specificity that will empower women to overthrow masculinist ideologies and to create new female discourses. Of her own writing she says, "Je suis là où ça parle" ("I am there where it/id/the female unconscious speaks").\(^12\) She has produced a series of analyses of women's suffering under the laws of male sexuality (the first-person narrative Angst, the play Portrait de Dora, the libretto for the opera *Le Nom d'Oedipe*) and a growing collection of demonstrations of what id-liberated female discourses might be: *La, Ananké, and Illa*. In her recent *Vivre l'orange* (1979), she celebrates the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector for what she sees as a peculiarly female attentiveness to objects, the ability to perceive and represent them in a nurturing rather than dominating way. She believes that this empathetic attentiveness, and the literary modes to which it gives rise, arise from libidinal rather than sociocultural sources: the "typically feminine gesture, not culturally but libidinally, [is] to produce in order to bring about life, pleasure, not in order to accumulate."\(^13\)

Cixous criticizes psychoanalysis for its "thesis of a 'natural' anatomical determination of sexual difference-opposition," focusing on physical drives rather than body parts for her definition of male-female contrasts: "It is at the level of sexual pleasure in my opinion that the difference makes itself most clearly apparent in as far as woman's libidinal economy is neither identifiable by a man nor referring to the masculine economy."\(^14\) In her manifesto for *l'écriture féminine*, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), her comparisons and lyricism suggest that she admires in women a sexuality that is remarkably constant and almost mystically superior to the phallic single-mindedness it transcends.

Though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same regionalization which serves the couple head/generals and which is inscribed only within boundaries. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide.
She goes on immediately, in terms close to Irigaray's, to link women's diffuse sexuality to women's language—written language, in this case:

- Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours. . . . She lets the other language speak—the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death . . . Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible.

The passage ends with her invocation of other bodily drives (*pulsions* in the French) in a continuum with women's self-expression.

- Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood.15

In her theoretical and imaginative writing alike (*La Jeune Née*, 1975, typically combines the two) Cixous insists on the primacy of multiple, specifically female libidinal impulses in women's unconscious and in the writing of the liberatory female discourses of the future.

What Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous do in common, then, is to oppose women's bodily experience (or, in Kristeva's case, women's bodily effect as mothers) to the phallic-symbolic patterns embedded in Western thought. Although Kristeva does not privilege women as the only possessors of prephallicocentric discourse, Irigaray and Cixous go further: if women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men.

For various reasons, this is a powerful argument. We have seen versions of it in the radical feminism of the United States, too. In the French context, it offers an island of hope in the void left by the deconstruction of humanism, which has been revealed as an ideologically suspect invention by men. If men are responsible for the reigning binary system of meaning—identity/other, man/nature, reason/chaos, man/woman—women, relegated to the negative and passive pole of this hierarchy, are not implicated in the creation of its myths. (Certainly, they are no longer impressed by them!) And the immediacy with which the body, the id, *jouissance*, are supposedly experienced promises a clarity of perception and a vitality that can bring down mountains of phallocentric delusion. Finally, to the extent that the female body is seen as a direct source of female writing, a powerful alternative discourse seems possible: to write from the body is to re-create the world.

But *féminité* and *écriture féminine* are problematic as well as powerful concepts. They have been criticized as idealist and essentialist, bound up in the very system they claim to undermine; they have been attacked as theoretically fuzzy and as fatal to constructive political action.16 I think all these objections are worth making. What's more, they must be made if American women are to sift out and use the positive elements in French thinking about *féminité*.

First off, the basic theoretical question: Can the body be a source of self-knowledge? Does female sexuality exist prior to or in spite of social experience? Do women in fact experience their bodies purely or essentially, outside the damaging acculturation so sharply analyzed by women in France and elsewhere? The answer is no, even in terms of the psychoanalytic theory on which many elements in the concept of *féminité* depend. Feminists rereading Freud and Jacques Lacan and feminists doing new research on the construction of sexuality all agree that sexuality is not an innate quality in women or in men; it is developed through the individual's encounters with the nuclear family and with the symbolic systems set into motion by the mother-father pair as the parents themselves carry out socially imposed roles toward the child. Freud, Juliet Mitchell has shown, describes the process through which girls in our society shift their first love for their mothers to a compensatory love for their fathers and develop a sense of their own anatomy as less valued socially than that of boys.17 Nancy Chodorow has documented and theorized the difficulty of this shift and used it to account for the complex affective needs of girls and women.18 To the analysis of the process through which sexual identity is formed Lacan adds the role of the father as bearer of language and culture; he identifies the symbolic value attributed to the phallus as the basis for contrasts and contrasting values that the child incorporates as she attempts to make sense of and fit herself into the phallocentric world. So if early gender identity comes into being in response to patriarchal structures—as, for example, Chodorow, Lacan, and Dorothy Dinnerstein argue19—and if even the unconscious is sexed in accordance with the nuclear family, then there seems to be no essential stratum of sexuality unsaturated with social arrangements and symbolic systems. New readings of Freud and of object-relations theory both confirm that sexuality is not a natural given, but rather is the consequence of social interactions, among people and among signs.

Theoretical work and practical evidence strongly suggest that sexual identity ("I am a woman, I experience my body as sexual in this way") never takes shape in isolation or in a simply physical context. The child becomes male or female in response to the females and males she encounters in her family and to the male and female images she constructs according to her experience—especially her loss of direct access to either parent.20 The desires of the child and of the adult who grows out of the child finally result not from the isolated
of a drive toward gestation, I begin to hear echoes of the coercive glorification of motherhood that has plagued women for centuries. If we define female subjectivity through universal biological/libidinal givens, what happens to the project of changing the world in feminist directions? Further, is women's sexuality so monolithic that a notion of a shared, typical femininity does justice to it? What about variations in class, in race, and in culture among women? What about changes over time in one woman's sexuality (with men, with women, by herself)? How can one libidinal voice—or the two vulval lips so startlingly presented by Irigaray—speak for all women?

The psychoanalytic critique of féminité as a concept that overlooks important psychosocial realities is not the only critique that can be brought against positions like Irigaray's and Cixous's. Other French women have made a strong, materialist attack on what they call néo-féminité, objecting to it as an ideal bound up through symmetrical opposition in the very ideological system feminists want to destroy. (Questions féministes, the journal founded in 1977 with Simone de Beauvoir as titular editor, is a central source for this kind of thinking in France.) Materialist feminists such as Christine Delphy and Colette Guillaumin are suspicious of the logic through which féminité defines men as phallic—solipsistic, aggressive, excessively rational—and then praises women, who, by nature of their contrasting sexuality, are other-oriented, empathetic, multi-imaginative. Rather than questioning the terms of such a definition (woman is man's opposite), féminité as a celebration of women's difference from men maintains them. It reverses the values assigned to each side of the polarity, but it still leaves men as the determining referent, not departing from the male-female opposition, but participating in it.

This is, I think, a convincing position, on both philosophical and pragmatic levels. What we need to do is to move outside that male-centered, binary logic altogether. We need to ask not how Woman is different from Man (though the question of how women differ from what men think they are important). We need to know how women have come to be who they are through history, which is the history of their oppression by men and male-designed institutions. Only through an analysis of the power relationships between men and women, and practices based on that analysis, will we put an end to our oppression—and only then will we discover what women are or can be. More strategically, we need to know whether the assertion of a shared female nature made by féminité can help us in feminist action toward a variety of goals: the possibility of working, or working in marginal or newly defined ways, or of not working in the public world at all; the freedom for a diversity of sexual practices; the right to motherhood, childlessness, or some as yet un theorized participation in reproduction; the affirmation of historically con-

erotic sensitivities of the child's body; these sensitivities are interpreted through the meanings the child attaches to her body through early experience in a sexed world. To take from psychoanalysis the concepts of drive and libido without talking about what happens later to the child's systems of self-perception is to drop out the deepest level at which phallocentric society asserts its power: the sexed family as it imprints itself on the child's sense of herself as a sexed being.

Psychoanalytic theory is not feminist dogma, and feminists have also analyzed the sexist ideologies that confront women past the age of childhood in the family. Not surprisingly, these ideologies make their way into many women's day-to-day experience of their bodies, even in situations that we have designed to be free of male domination. For instance, liberatory practices such as masturbation, lesbianism, and woman-centered medicine coexist with thoroughly phallocentric habits of thought and feeling; they are not liberatory simply because they aspire to be. Some women discover, for example, that their masturbation is accompanied by puzzlingly unenlightened fantasies; contrary to the claims of féminité, women's autoeroticism, at least in these decades, is shot through with images from a phallicly dominated world. Similarly, many lesbians recognize their need to resist roles of domination and submission that bear a grim, even parodic resemblance to heterosexual relationships. Women giving birth may wonder whether the optimistic, even heroic terminology of natural childbirth is not related to the suspect ideal of "taking it like a man." Even in the self-help clinics set up to spare women the sexist bias of the male gynecological establishment, a phallocentric magasin des images may prevail. A counselor at such a clinic, showing a friend of mine her cervix for the first time in a mirror, made a remark (unintentionally, that's the point) that struck us both as far less liberating than it was intended to be: "Big, isn't it? Doesn't it look powerful? As good as a penis any day." All in all, at this point in history, most of us perceive our bodies through a jumpy, contradictory mesh of hoary sexual symbolism and political counterresponse. It is possible to argue that the French feminists make of the female body too unproblematically pleasurable and totalized an entity.

Certainly, women's physiology has important meanings for women in various cultures, and it is essential for us to express those meanings rather than to submit to male definitions—that is, appropriations—of our sexuality. But the female body hardly seems the best site to launch an attack on the forces that have alienated us from what our sexuality might become. For if we argue for an innate, precultural femininity, where does that position (though in content it obviously diverges from masculinist dogma) leave us in relation to earlier theories about women's "nature"? I myself feel highly flattered by Cixous's praise for the nurturant perceptions of women, but when she speaks.
ditioned female values (nurturance, communal rather than individualistic ambitions, insistence on improving the quality of private life), and the exploration of new ones. If we concentrate our energies on opposing a counterview of Woman to the view held by men in the past and the present, what happens to our ability to support the multiplicity of women and the various life possibilities they are fighting for in the future?

In a critique of féminité as praise of women's difference from men, the name of Monique Wittig must be mentioned. Active in the early seventies in the Féministes révolutionnaires and a contributor from the beginning to Questions féministes, Wittig has written four quite different books, which are nonetheless related through her focus on women among themselves: the schoolgirls of L'Oroponax, the tribal sisterhood of Les Guérillères, the passionate couple of Le Corps lesbien, the users of the postphallicentric vocabulary laid out in Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes. Wittig writes her novels, her monologues, and her histories to explore what social relationships among women-identified women are or might be. She writes in mocking takeovers: one entry in Brouillon pour un dictionnaire is "Ainsi parlait Frederika, conte pour enfants" ("Thus Spake Frederika, children's story"), surely one of the least reverent allusions to Friedrich Nietzsche to come out of French critiques of culture. She also invents new settings, such as the ceremonies and festivals of Les Guérillères and Le Corps lesbien, and new modes, such as the feminized epic of Les Guérillères and the lyric dialogue of Le Corps lesbien, to represent what a female/female life—separatist but not isolationist—might be.

As Wittig's talks at recent conferences in the United States show, she is suspicious both of the oppositional thinking that defines woman in terms of man and of the mythical-idealistic strain in certain formulations of féminité. In her argument for a more politically centered understanding of women at the Second Sex Conference in New York (September 1979), she used a Marxist vocabulary which may be more familiar to U.S. feminists than the philosophical and psychoanalytic frameworks in which Irigaray and Cixous work.

It remains... for us to define our oppression in materialist terms, to say that women are a class, which is to say that the category "woman," as well as "man," is a political and economic category, not an eternal one... Our first task... is thoroughly to dissociate "women" (the class within which we fight) and "woman," the myth. For "woman" does not exist for us; it is only an imaginary formation, while "women" is the product of a social relationship.

Colette Guillaumin, arguing along similar lines in Questions féministes, points out that the psychic characteristics praised by advocates of féminité have in fact been determined by the familial and economic roles imposed on women by men. There is nothing liberatory, she insists, in women's claiming as virtues qualities that men have always found convenient. How does maternal tenderness or undemanding empathy threaten a Master? The liberating stance is, rather, the determination to analyze and put an end to the patriarchal structures that have produced those qualities without reference to the needs of women.

I have another political objection to the concept of féminité as a bundle of Everywoman's psychosexual characteristics. It flattens out the lived differences among women. To the extent that each of us responds to a particular tribal, national, racial, or class situation vis-a-vis men, we are in fact separated from one another. As the painful and counterproductive splits along class and racial lines in the American women's movement have shown, we need to understand and respect the diversity in our concrete social situations. A monolithic vision of shared female sexuality, rather than defeating phallocentrism as doctrine and practice, is more likely to blind us to our varied and immediate needs and to the specific struggles we must coordinate in order to meet them. What is the meaning of "two lips" to heterosexual women who want men to recognize their clitoral pleasure—or to African or Middle Eastern women who, as a result of pharaonic clitoridectomy, have neither lips nor clitoris through which to jouir? Does a celebration of the Maternal versus the Patriarchal make the same kind of sense, or any sense, to white, middle-class women who are fighting to maintain the right to abortion, to black and Third World women resisting enforced sterilization, to women in subsistence-farming economies where the livelihood of the family depends on the work of every child who is born and survives? And surely any one woman gives different meanings to her sexuality throughout her individual history. Freedom from sexual expectations and activity may well be what girls in the Western world most need because they are typically sexualized all too soon by media, advertising, peer pressures, and child pornography; women of various ages undergo radical changes in sexual identity and response as they enter relationships with men, with women, or choose celibacy and friendship as alternatives. And it is hard to see how the situations of old women, consigned to sexual inactivity because of their age or, if they are widowed, to unpaid work in others' families or to isolated poverty, can be understood or changed through a concept of jouissance. I wonder again whether one libidinal voice, however nonphallicentrically defined, can speak to the economic and cultural problems of all women.

Hence, I would argue that we need the theoretical depth and polemical
energy of féminité as an alternative idea. But a historically responsive and powerful unity among women will come from our ongoing, shared practice, our experience in and against the material world. As a lens and a partial strategy, féminité and écriture féminine are vital. Certainly, women need to shake off the mistaken and contemptuous attitudes toward their sexuality that permeate Western (and other) cultures and languages at their deepest levels, and working out self-representations that challenge phallocentric discourses is an important part of that ideological struggle. Women have already begun to transform not only the subject matter but also the ways of producing meaning in poetry, fiction, film, and the visual arts. (Indeed, feminist research suggests that the French may have been too hasty in their claim that women are only now beginning to challenge the symbolic order.) But even if we take l'écriture féminine as a utopian ideal, an energizing myth rather than a model for how all women write or should write, theoretical and practical problems arise (again!) from an ideal defined in this way. Can the body be the source of a new discourse? Is it possible, assuming an unmediated and jouissant (or, more likely, a positively reconstructed) sense of one's body, to move from that state of unconscious excitation directly to a written female text?

Madeleine Gagnon says yes, in La Venére à l'écriture, written with Cixous in 1977. Her view is that women, free from the self-limiting economy of male libido (“I will come once and once only, through one organ alone; once it's up and over, that’s it, so I must beware, save up, avoid premature overflow”), have a greater spontaneity and abundance in body and language both:

We have never been the masters of others or of ourselves. We don’t have to confront ourselves in order to free ourselves. We don’t have to keep watch on ourselves, or to set up some other erected self in order to understand ourselves. All we have to do is let the body flow, from the inside; all we have to do is erase . . . whatever may hinder or harm the new forms of writing; we retain whatever fits, whatever suits us. Whereas man confronts himself constantly. He pits himself against and stumbles over his erected self.25

But psychoanalytic theory and social experience both suggest that the leap from body to language is especially difficult for women.26 Lacanian theory holds that a girl’s introduction into language (the symbolic order represented by the father and built on phallic/nonphallic oppositions) is complex, because she cannot identify directly with the positive poles of that order. And in many preliterate and postliterate cultures, taboos against female speech are enforced: injunctions to silence, mockery of women’s chatter or “women’s books” abound. The turn-taking in early consciousness-raising groups in the United States was meant precisely to overcome the verbal hesitancy induced in women by a society in which men had had the first and the last word. Moreover, for women with jobs, husbands or lovers, children, activist political commitments, finding the time and justification to write at all presents an enormous practical and ideological problem.27 We are more likely to write, and to read each other’s writing, if we begin by working against the concrete difficulties and the prejudices surrounding women’s writing than if we simplify and idealize the process by locating writing as a spontaneous outpouring from the body.

Calls for a verbal return to nature seem especially surprising coming from women who are otherwise (and rightly!) suspicious of language as penetrated by phallocentric dogma. True, conventional narrative techniques, as well as grammar and syntax, imply the unified viewpoint and mastery of outer reality that men have claimed for themselves. But literary modes and language itself cannot be the only targets for transformation; the context for women’s discourses needs to be thought through and broadened out. A woman may experience jouissance in a private relationship to her own body, but she writes for others. Who writes? Who reads? Who makes women’s texts available to women? What do women want to read about other women’s experience? To take a stance as a woman poet or novelist is to enter into a role crisscrossed with questions of authority, of audience, of the modes of publication and distribution. I believe that we are more indebted to the “body” of earlier women writers and to feminist publishers and booksellers than to any woman writer’s libidinal body flow. The novelist Christiane Rochefort sums up with amusing directness the conflicting public forces and voices that create the dilemma of the French woman who wants to write:

Well. So here you are now, sitting at your writing table, alone, not allowing anybody anymore to interfere. Are you free?

First, after this long quest, you are swimming in a terrible soup of values—for, to be safe, you had to refuse the so-called female values, which are not female but a social scheme, and to identify with male values, which are not male but an appropriation by men—or an attribution to men—of all human values, mixed up with the anti-values of domination-violence-oppression and the like. In this mixture, where is your real identity?

Second, you are supposed to write in certain forms, preferably: I mean you feel that in certain forms you are not too much seen as a usurper. Novels. Minor poetry, in which
case you will be stigmatized in French by the name of "poetesse": not everybody can afford it . . .

You are supposed, too, to write about certain things: house, children, love. Until recently there was in France a so-called littérature féminine.

Maybe you don’t want to write about, but to write, period. And of course, you don’t want to obey this social order. So, you tend to react against it. It is not easy to be genuine.28

Whatever the difficulties, women are inventing new kinds of writing. But as Irigaray’s erudition and plays with the speaking voice show (as do Cixous’s mischievous puns and citations of languages from Greek through German to Portuguese, and Wittig’s fantastic neologisms and revision of conventional genres), they are doing so deliberately, on a level of feminist theory and literary self-consciousness that goes far beyond the body and the unconscious. That is also how they need to be read. It takes a thoroughly familiar with male figureheads of Western culture to recognize the intertextual games played by all these writers, their work shows that a resistance to culture is always built, at first, of bits and pieces of that culture, however they are disassembled, criticized, and transcended. Responding to l’écriture féminine is no more instinctive than producing new ones. Women’s writing will be more accessible to writers and readers alike if we recognize it as a conscious response to socioliterary realities, rather than accept it as an overflow of one woman’s unmediated communication with her body. Eventually, certainly, the practice of women writers will transform what we can see and understand in a literary text; but even a woman setting out to write about her body will do so against and through her socioliterary mothers, midwives, and sisters. We need to recognize, too, that there is nothing universal about French versions of écriture féminine. The speaking, singing, story-telling, and writing of women in cultures besides that of the Île de France need to be looked at and understood in their social context if we are to fill in an adequate and genuinely empowering picture of women’s creativity.

But I risk, after all this, overstating the case against féminité and écriture féminine, and that would mean a real loss. American feminists can appropriate two important elements, at least, from the French position: the critique of phallocentrism in all the material and ideological forms it has taken, and the call for new representations of women’s consciousness. It is not enough to uncover old heroines or to imagine new ones. Like the French, we need to examine the words, the syntax, the genres, the archaic and elitist attitudes toward language and representation that have limited women’s self-knowledge and expression during the long centuries of patriarchy. We need not, however, replace phallocentrism with a shakily theorized “concentrism” that denies women their historical specificities to recognize how deep a refusal of masculinist values must go.29 If we remember that what women really share is an oppression on all levels, although it affects us each in different ways—if we can translate féminité into a concerted attack not only on language, but also directly upon the sociosexual arrangements that keep us from our own potentials and from each other—then we are on our way to becoming “les jeunes nées” envisioned by French feminisms at their best.

NOTES


2Jouissance is a word rich in connotations. “Pleasure” is the simplest translation. The noun comes from the verb jouir, meaning to enjoy, to revel in without fear of the cost; also, to have an orgasm. See Stephen Heath’s Translator’s Note in Roland Barthes’s Image-Music-Text (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), p. 9. A note to Introduction 3 in New French Feminisms: An Anthology, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), explains feminist connotations of jouissance as follows:

This pleasure, when attributed to a woman, is considered to be of a different order from the pleasure that is represented within the male libidinal economy often described in terms of the capitalist gain and profit motive. Women’s jouissance carries with it the notion of fluidity, diffusion, duration. It is a kind of potlatch in the world of orgasms, a giving, expendable, dispensing of pleasure without concern about ends or closure. (P. 36, n. 8)


Kristeva, “Le Sujet en procès,” in Polylogue, p. 77. See, in the same volume, her discussion of maternity as an experience that breaks down the categories of masculinist
thought, in "Maternité selon Giovanni Bellini," pp. 409–38. She expands her argument about the meanings of maternity for women's creativity in "Un Nouveau Type d'intellectuel: le dissident" and "Hérétique de l'amour," Tel Quel, no. 74 (Fall 1977), pp. 3–8, 30–49. For an explanation of her theory of the semiotic and of Irigaray's concepts of l'écriture féminine, see Josette Féral, "Antigone, or the Irony of the Tribe," Diacritiques 8 (Fall 1978): 2–14.4

3 Oscillation du pouvoir au refus, " interview by Xavière Gauthier in Tel Quel, no. 58 (Summer 1974), trans. in Marks and Courtivron, New French Feminisms, pp. 166–67. This collection of translated excerpts from French feminist writers is likely to be very useful to English-language readers.

4Kristeva, "La Femme, ce n'est jamais ça," interview in Tel Quel, no. 59 (Fall 1974), trans. in New French Feminisms, pp. 154–38. Kristeva has written mainly about male writers, but see her comments on some typically feminine themes in a dozen recent French women writers in "Oscillation," Tel Quel, no. 58 (Summer 1974), pp. 100–2. She comments on certain elements of women's style in her interview with van Rossum-Guyon (see note 3 above), although she derives them from social rather than libidinal sources.


7New French Feminisms, p. 105.

8Irigaray discusses the historical position of women in Marxist terms in Le Marché aux femmes, in Ce Sexe. Her response to Nietzsche are in Amante marina.

9Hélène Cixous' studies of male writers include her doctoral thesis, L'Exil de Joyce ou l'art du remplacement (Paris: Grasset, 1968); Prêmes de personne (sur Hoffman, Kleist, Poe, Joyce) (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974); and introductions to James Joyce and Lewis Carroll for Aubier. Since 1975, all her books have been published by Des Femmes.


