from :-

GYNESIS

Configurations of Woman and Modernity

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"In which sense? In which sense?" Alice asks, vaguely perceiving that it is always in both senses at once, so much so that, for this one time, she remains equal to herself through optical effect.

Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*

PRELIMINARIES

Texts and Contexts

In a discussion of the problems involved when "observing others," Paul de Man mentions in passing that, when we address two cultures, "the distressing question as to who should be exploiting whom is bound to arise."[1]

Most of this book was written in France to be read in the United States, and therefore one cannot be entirely certain either who it is "observing" or who its "others" are. Given that in-between state, I would like to begin by making explicit the book's and my own place of enunciation. This is an essential gesture (even if by now a somewhat common one) because of the specificity of the questions to be addressed, questions involving at least two national cultures (the United States and France), two sexes (male and female), and four discursive codes (most generally, fiction and theory; and more specifically, contemporary approaches to interpretation and feminism).

The questions I ask emerged from my concern with women as speaking and writing subjects, their relationship to language, and how sexual difference operates linguistically in a literary text. I have for the most part expressed this concern at the crossing of three investigations: first, the relationship between "theoretical" and "fictional" discourse and the constitution of particular ideological discursive fields; second, the specificity, if any, of texts written by men and women in Western culture; and, finally,

1. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 10. The context for this remark is provided by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

the differences among contemporary French and American literary practices. These investigations led me to ask the questions explored in this book, questions that need to be addressed by feminists who, while working in the United States, are or will eventually be in dialogue with what is now commonly called "modernity" in France or, more problematically in the United States, "postmodernism"—questions of special urgency for feminist literary and cultural critics.

Here, I shall briefly refer to a few of the most fundamental problems inherent in asking these questions, since such problems will come up time and again throughout this study. These are not in any way purely supplemental remarks, but rather larger questions about how to say "I" or "we" in the right tone of voice. They stem primarily from certain widespread assumptions about "comparativism" and "feminism."

Comparativism is, in itself, a nineteenth-century concept that, in recent years, has been much promoted in the United States and much criticized elsewhere. In the United States, the growth of interdisciplinary and comparative study has allowed us both to analyze the ideological function of isolated disciplines and to open up new areas for a critique of culture. When it also involves the importation and exportation of thought, however, it brings with it new problems: descriptivism, summary, anthologism—a certain analogical logic. Michel Foucault has analyzed this logic at its inception in the classical period: "From now on, every resemblance must be subjected to proof by comparison, that is, it will not be accepted until its identity and the series of its differences have been discovered by means of measurement with a common unit or, more radically, by its position in an order."[2] In order to posit an autonomous object, one compares A to B according to a model. This model can be an "idea," "principle," "politic," or "structure" over which the comparativist has complete control; he is, like God, "above it all." Jacques Derrida has pointed out that this assumption of an ideal that can be *applied* to two objects is also related to classical ideas of translation, where, again, for any text there is an ideal "text" (the text's meaning) that must simply be transported to another text.[3] A close analysis of the comparative spirit in general reveals that this logic of transportation, this separation of identities and differences, can operate not only abstractly, as intellectual, conceptual imperialism, but concretely as well—most notably in the forms of racism and colonialism.[4]

2. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 55.
3. Theories of translation have been a major focus of much of Derrida's work, recently with special reference to Walter Benjamin.
4. See, for example, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

In the case of the American critic observing, reading, and writing another culture, this question of comparativism becomes particularly difficult. Whom are we writing to and for? Those working in contemporary French thought who ponder this problem are immediately immersed in not only a set of different spaces, but at least three different temporalities: the time of French thought (and its massive recent past), the time of importation and exportation of French thought to the United States (about ten years), and the time of America, "so far ahead of France" and yet assuming as fundamental truths certain ideas about the writing and speaking subject, language, and so on that many French writers and theorists have long since rejected.[5]

It must suffice here to remember that reading and writing across cultural boundaries very often produces a strange brand of text which rings totally false in the culture it is "translating." Inevitably? Perhaps. In any case, this problem of text and context—vibrating on the dangerous edge of a transparency theory of language—will be integral to the following dialogue.

This already complex question leads to the second general problem I encountered in beginning this study: the word feminism. As a generic term, "feminism" is semantically tortuous and conceptually hazardous. Generally understood as a "movement from the point of view of, by, and for women," it covers substantial ground and becomes particularly dangerous across borders. In the present case, involving principally France and the United States, any generic description of either French or American feminisms would immediately homogenize, colonialize, and neutralize the specificities of struggles that are often of quite epic proportions. Even the attempt to specify contexts and assumptions, as I am beginning to do here and will continue to do throughout this book, can take on the new, bizarre form of a "white, Western, intellectual woman's burden." Feminist criticism is, by definition, based in very precise political struggles and practices and remains inseparable from them. The "identities and differences" paradigm emphasized in comparative thought becomes even more troubling when we are considering feminist theory and praxis.

The specific intellectual and political stakes of the importation and exportation of feminist theory have come into sharp focus over the past few years with reference to France and the United States. American feminists have, on occasion, accused French women theorists of reverting to "essen-

5. This process is more, or perhaps differently, complicated today I think, at least for American graduate students, particularly those not in foreign language departments, who are thrown into an encyclopedic library on "contemporary thought" whose time of production and consumption is long past.

tialist" definitions of woman, of being hopelessly enamored of "male theoretical structures" (especially philosophical ones), natural definitions of woman, and so on. French women in turn often argue that American academic feminists are blind to the ways in which capitalist, patriarchal ideology governs their thinking; that they are more worried about tenure for their work *on* women than they are about working *with* women to change symbolic structures. The very violence of these mutual accusations not only is symptomatic of the larger political, economic, and intellectual climate in both countries, but also points to a lack of analysis of the relationship between feminist theory and dominant modes of production and exchange.

For example, it is not true that American feminists are insensitive to their relationship to the institution or to larger political problems, but rather that we are perhaps less willing than women theorists in France to open discussion of these problems by questioning certain ideological assumptions: assumptions about the values and practices of the transmission of knowledge, assumptions about efficacy, identity, difference, and representation within Western culture as a culture nourished by images produced and consumed within a capitalist economy. Perhaps one of the most difficult problems facing American feminists is, in fact, how to put into practice, with less political and intellectual naïveté than heretofore, the distinction between "political knowledge" and what we now know to be the mythology of "pure knowledge." One thing French women are reminding us of is that "pure knowledge" does not exist. Our very American tendency to analyze paradigms of possible substitutions through empirical when not ahistorical analysis of all that exists at a particular moment tends to evacuate history in a way incomprehensible to women theorists in Europe; they are, on the contrary, increasingly compelled by the necessity for diachronic analysis.[6] Our Anglo-American empiricist and humanist training, with its lack of emphasis on enunciation—its confusion of the third person (universal statements) with the first person (involving problems of subjectivity)—consistently distracts us from the *politics of enunciation*. Such a neglect can lead to the undesired effect of rendering every object produced—even theories—interchangeable with every other for the purpose of consumption. In fact, one of the major reasons for this

6. We will return quite often to these two basic axes of signification as presented by Saussure (especially in Chapter 3). It is, in fact, the relationships between these two axes, the axes of metaphor and metonymy, that still need to be rethought, and not only at the level of linguistics. For an introduction to their potentialities, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

study was my feeling that women, who have historically filled in as translators of culture, are today, as "international feminists," running the danger of simply translating "woman as concept" from one culture to another. There is, after all, a difference between really attempting to think differently and thinking the Same through the manipulation of difference.

While working in Paris with feminists, theorists, writers, and activists, those of us who were not "French" discovered how precariously we were balanced on the undecidable edge of differences among texts and contexts—experiencing the intensity of their written and spoken, theoretical and political, limits. Those of us who, in addition, have since returned to an English-speaking country to teach and write across the field of contemporary thought in France have become convinced that, beyond strict comparison, the confusions arising from that which is "far away" or "close," that which functions in culture as "image" or "belief," are still much in need of further feminist analysis.

For example, the specific "Parisian atmosphere" in which I wrote this study was one of intellectual crisis: where well-trodden topographies of psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literature had been outworn; where voices of the New Right had gained listeners (redescending into a fertile underground with the victory of the Left); and where "feminism" was going for below cost on the market while major cultural critics were calmly announcing the "historicization" (death) of feminism as a movement.

Within these "contexts," I returned to text(s). Could the two be separated? And how does one situate texts in a context that can never be saturated, whether it is "contemporary" or "historical"?

I am again referring to the very complex problems of *translation*—in the most literal sense of the word as well as in the broader and more difficult meaning of the intercultural exchange of ideas: as mentioned earlier, the specificity of the problems inherent to the import and export of thought.[7] One way to approach these problems is to provide necessary information "about context," ranging from an analysis of cultural production (institutions, the status of the intellectual, and so on) to reports on specific events. To provide information is essential, but in the specific case of contemporary feminist thought, across national borders, this can often amount to nothing more than introducing the category of "woman" into the dominant ideology of informational culture ("the more information, the better"), thereby erasing the most important things women have learned—

7. These are the notes of a "translator" as well—literal sense of the word.

the hard way—about the political. Rethinking a feminist approach to cultural translation involves finding new ways of sustaining what women have come to know through experience without reducing experience only to what we know.[8]

I do not claim to have resolved these problems; but it does seem to me that one way to begin addressing them is to create problematics, not collect and consume them; to put texts into dialogue with each other, not to catalogue and explicate them.

This is what I have attempted to do in what follows. The structure of the questions addressed is almost wholly shaped by recent French theory. But, at the same time, the questions themselves are those of an American feminist hoping to contribute to American feminist theory. That is, neither my "comparativism" nor my feminism is co-relative, counterbalanced, with the same amount of "material" on both sides of a border—national or other. For example, the actual sequence of my original questions went something like this: (1) What are the qualities and qualifiers of this condition called modernity with and by which Western cultural artifacts are increasingly affected? (2) In what ways are contemporary encounters with modernity in France exemplary? (3) What are the implications of this modernity for feminism? (4) For Anglo-American feminism in particular? Hoping to avoid both the dangers of simple comparativism and the silence of non-position, I therefore see this study as an intervention, an inter-presentation, an inter-position of at least four discursive elements: modernity, contemporary French thought, feminism, and Anglo-American feminist theory. But of course, even an intervention, a gesture, runs certain risks, for in attempting this trans-position, I am neither "above it all" nor somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic. But then neither is my reader, no matter how I might have initially idealized her or him.

My guiding principle has been in some ways archaeological: I did not want to outline controversies and opinions, but rather to look at what makes them possible and at how they operate in what I will continue to call certain "contexts"—no matter how problematic the word. This kind of "comparativism" leads to no synthesis, no resolution of tension, no ultimate knowledge. In some ways, I have had to begin by asking some

8. Gayatri Spivak has pointed out well, I think, some of the dangers involved in translating feminism. See "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981). In another mode, see Anna Gibbs et al., "Round and Round the Looking Glass: Responses to [. . .] *New French Feminisms*," *Hecate* 6:2 (1980).

very literal, "empirical" questions and then proceed, not to answer them, but, as we used to say, to think constantly against myself.

Finally, while I tend to privilege "fiction" and its rhetoric, this is not an essay in literary criticism per se. That is partly because "literary criticism" as defined institutionally in the United States has existed in France only sporadically as an autonomous field of inquiry (a certain form of structuralism being a primary example) and feminist literary criticism exists hardly at all.[9] A French essay or book on any given literary fiction, for example, demands from the reader a conceptual and lexical knowledge drawn from many disciplines, most particularly from philosophy. But second, and more important, I am just as concerned with modernity in other fields of knowledge (especially art and music) as in "fiction" and "theory." Here I focus on written texts, but am more concerned about the *process* of (reading and writing) woman than about examining the representation of women in literature. I am looking for the logical or not so logical operations that organize the fictions of "the real world," but am less interested, for the moment, in explicating why that world is represented in such a way, or in prescribing what might be done about it. One of the dangers of such a project is, of course, that one may end up simply psychoanalyzing the present political, critical situation through the use of texts as symptoms. I shall necessarily come back to this later. But if it is true that I tend to read symptomatically (metaphorically), my primary question has always remained metonymical: what can possibly come next?

Feminisms

After the almost unanimous theoretical enthusiasm and political energy of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the French *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (MLF) experienced a series of splits, rivalries, and disappointments that led them to stop, go back, think, read, and write again. In fact, the

9. "Feminist literary criticism can be reduced to the literary references in *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, and to three recent books: *Surréalisme et sexualité* by Xavière Gautier (Gallimard, 1971), *La jeune née* by Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous (10/18, 1975) which is more philosophical than literary, and finally *Les voleuses de langue* by Claudine Herrmann (des Femmes, 1976), the first strictly literary essay. [. . .] These aside, one can say that feminist literary criticism does not exist in France" (Christiane Makward, "La critique féministe . . .," *Revue des sciences humaines* 168 [1977]: 619). My translation. To this short list I would add Marcelle Marini, *Territoires du féminin avec Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), and Anne-Marie Dardigna, *Les châteaux d'Eros* (Paris: Maspero, 1981).

term MLF now legally belongs to only one group in France—"Psychanalyse et Politique." And this group, according to its own literature and public stance, is most definitely opposed to feminism—as are many of the other women theorists, writing in France today, whose names are beginning to circulate in the United States. Who and what, then, do we mean by "feminist"? That word, as I mentioned earlier, poses some serious problems. Not that we would want to end up by demanding a definition of what feminism is and, therefore, of what one must do, say, and be, if one is to acquire that epithet; dictionary meanings are suffocating, to say the least. But if we were to take "feminism" for a moment as referring only to those in France who qualify themselves as feminists in their life and work, our task would be greatly simplified. For example, if I were to talk about feminist theorists in France, I would want to insist on including what might be called the "invisible feminists"—those younger women who are working quietly behind the scenes, in study groups and special seminars, trying to sort out and pick up the pieces left in the wake of the theoretical and practical disputes of the last few years. Or I might invoke the feminists who are attempting to map out some very new and long-awaited directions under Mitterand's administration; or the ones who have left France to work in the United States or at the Université des Femmes in Belgium. But, increasingly, when in the United States one refers to "feminist theories in France" or to "French feminisms," it is not those women one has in mind. The women theorists in France whose work has had or is beginning to have a major impact on *theories of writing and reading,* and who at one level or another are writing about women, at the very least do not call themselves feminists either privately or in their writing, and, at the most, posit themselves and their work as hostile to, or "beyond," feminism as a concept. These are the names we hear in the United States: Hélène Cixous, Sarah Kofman, Julia Kristeva, Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, Michèle Montrelay, among others. The sole exception is Luce Irigaray—a special and complex case, one I shall reserve for close attention at a later date in another place.

I would even go so far as to say that the major new directions in French theory over the past two decades—those articulated by both men and women—have, by and large, posited themselves as profoundly, that is to say conceptually and in *praxis,* anti- and/or post-feminist. Feminism, as a concept, as inherited from the humanist and rationalist eighteenth century, is traditionally about a group of human beings in history whose identity is defined by that history's representation of sexual decidability.

And every term of that definition has been put into question by contemporary French thought.

In this study, one of the things I have tried to accomplish is to clarify the "anti- and/or post-feminism" of contemporary French thinking as exemplary of modernity, without getting overly caught up in explicit value judgments or polemics.[10] And I have done this by concentrating on what I see as the major emphases of that French thought—as explored by the *male* theorists there.

Why focus on the men instead of the women? I do so artificially (with artifice). First, the women theorists in France whose names have been mentioned here are, to one degree or another, in the best French tradition and not unproblematically, direct disciples of those men. That is not meant as a criticism; but those women, like their male colleagues, must not be read as if they were working in isolation—especially in France, where, at least for the American, the tradition of the "school of thought" or the "literary salon" is still exorbitantly strong. Second, the work of these women is, of course, not at all absent from these pages: it is assumed as a primary source. Their work is this text's palimpsest to a very great extent. I took my cues from them, so to speak.[11] Finally, and most important, I have not included their work in any major way here because their rewritings of the men, their repetitions of and dissidence from those men, are exceedingly complex, meriting more attention than one or two chapters could provide. If most of these women reject "feminism" as a viable alternative for women today, or conceive of and practice a "feminism" unrecognizable to the Anglo-American feminist, it is because of the theoretical heritage from within which they are working. That is, although my readings of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, in particular, are evident throughout what follows, I felt it important to begin first with the

10. During the discussion following the presentation of an early version of "Gynesis" at an MLA conference in New York City, a lot of energy was expended over the words "feminist" and "antifeminist." It was almost as if the problems of translation foregrounded here could be resolved if everyone in the room could just come to an *agreement* about what feminism is or is not. The problems with that (primarily Anglo-American) approach to interpretation are, of course, made abundantly clear by many of the French theorists we will be concerned with here. What is important, they might say, is not to decide who is or is not a feminist, but rather to examine how and why feminism may itself be problematic; is itself connected to larger theoretical issues; is not a natural given but a construction like all others. This kind of questioning does not have to be undertaken from a conservative position; it can in fact provide feminism's most radical moments.

11. For example, Luce Irigaray's short discussion of "space" in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), pp. 95–96, more or less generated Chapter 3. (See the translation by Catherine Porter, *This Sex Which Is Not One* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985].)

terms those women, writing in the 1960s and 1970s, also began with: feminism and modernity.

Feminism and/or Modernity?

The questions and problems raised in this book are grounded in a larger hypothesis: that the genuinely "new directions" in contemporary French thought in focus here are, in their "inspiration" and "conclusions," a radical attempt to delimit and think through what, once again, is called "modernity" in France or, more problematically in the United States, "post-modernism." My feeling is that any "detour" of feminism, whatever its place of origin, through contemporary French thought is a voyage into that (as yet still vague) territory of modernity so often avoided, in my opinion, by Anglo-American feminist thought. The generic term "contemporary French theory" designates for me the first group of Western writers after the Frankfurt School to try to come to terms with the threatened collapse of the dialectic and its representations which is modernity. Ultimately, the question I would want to put into circulation here is this: are feminism and modernity oxymoronic in their terms and terminology? If so, how and why? If not, what new ruse of reason has made them appear—especially in France—to be so?

Modernity

I am not certain that the way in which I am using the word "modernity" should or can be defined. But it might be helpful to briefly indicate what I do not mean. For example, while I do not primarily use the term modernity in the sense of the "modern"—as in "the Ancients versus the Moderns," or as used by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Nietzsche—the history of the word cannot help but determine its use here.[12] While the term "avant-garde" is fraught with difficulties of definition, both politically and conceptually, in both the United States and Europe, many of those writers who have been qualified as avant-garde at one point or another since the turn of the century are of interest here as participants in the project of modernity.[13]

12. For a useful discussion, in this vein, of the term "modernity," see, for example, Paul de Man's "Literary History and Literary Modernity" in *Blindness and Insight*, pp. 142–65.

13. See, for example, Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1968).

Finally, modernity should not be confused (as it most often is in the United States) with "modernism"—the generic label commonly attached to the general literary movement of the first half of the twentieth century. With "modernism," however, we are closest, at least in terms of the literary text, to what is of concern.

It is the word "postmodern," as commonly used in the United States, that perhaps most accurately applies to the specific set of writers important here: those writing, self-consciously, from within the (intellectual, scientific, philosophical, literary) *epistemological* crisis specific to the postwar period. To put it simply, they are those writers, whom we may call our "contemporaries," who, in John Barth's caustic formulation, do not try to pretend that the first half of the twentieth century did not happen.

He puts it this way: "It *did* happen: Freud and Einstein and two world wars and the Russian and sexual revolutions and automobiles and airplanes and telephones and radios and movies and urbanization, and now nuclear weaponry and television and microchip technology and the new feminism and the rest, and there's no going back to Tolstoy and Dickens & Co. except on nostalgia trips."[14] While Barth is speaking almost exclusively of "fiction writers," I extend his definition of "the ideal postmodern writer" to theorists as well—to those theorists who have understood the stakes involved in the intensified search for new modes of conceptuality able to account for, and perhaps change, the course of the twentieth century.

Not that all of these words, their various significations, the writers they designate, and so on "add up" to modernity as a problematic. But they do, in their collective emphasis, designate a particular attitude, a certain posture toward thinking about the human and speaking subject, signification, language, writing, etc. that is of direct interest in relationship to feminist thought.

As I have already more than implied, I think the condition of modernity has received the attention it deserves in France. For me, those discourses in France attuned to modernity, across several so-called disciplines (history, philosophy, science, literature, linguistics, psychoanalysis, etc.), are among the few European-American discourses struggling seriously enough either to account for the new texts and contexts of the world as it appears now or else to imagine other worlds whether possible or not. It is in France that intellectuals of two generations (many of them not French, a fact often forgotten in the United States) have rejected, each in her or his own ways,

14. John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment," *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1980, p. 70.

parts or all of the conceptual apparatuses inherited from nineteenth-century Europe. This includes, necessarily, those that are based in movements of human liberation—including, of course, feminism. Why this rejection? The major reason has been cautiously and painstakingly laid out in texts written over the past twenty-five years: our ways of understanding in the West have been and continue to be complicitous with our ways of oppressing. These writers have laid bare the vicious circles of intellectual imperialism and of liberal and humanist ideology. They have elaborated at length how that ideology is based on reified and naturalized categories, or concepts like "experience" and the "natural"; or, in another mode, the Ethical, the Right, the Good, or the True. The clearest way, perhaps, to contain in one word the gesture they have performed on the texts and contexts of humanist ideology is to focus on the word *denaturalization:* they have denaturalized the world that humanism naturalized, a world whose anthro-pology and anthro-centrism no longer make sense. It is a strange new world they have invented, a world that is *unheimlich.* And such strangeness has necessitated speaking and writing in new and strange ways.

Gynesis

These new ways have not surfaced in a void. Over the past century, those master (European) narratives—history, philosophy, religion—which have determined our sense of legitimacy in the West have undergone a series of crises in legitimation. It is widely recognized that legitimacy is part of that judicial domain which, historically, has determined the right to govern, the succession of kings, the link between father and son, the necessary paternal fiction, the ability to decide who is the father—in patriarchal culture. The crises experienced by the major Western narratives have not, therefore, been gender-neutral. They are crises in the narratives invented by men.

Going back to analyze those narratives and their crises has meant going back to the Greek philosophies in which they are grounded and, most particularly, to the originary relationships posited between the *technē* and *physis, time* and *space,* and all the dualistic oppositions that determine our ways of thinking. And rethinking those oppositions has meant, among other things, putting their "obligatory connotations" into discursive circulation, making those connotations explicit in order, one would hope, to put them into question. For example, the *technē* and time have connoted

the male; *physis* and space the female. To think new relationships between the *technē* and *physis,* time and space, and so on, within an atmosphere of crisis, has required backing away from all that has defined and immobilized the possibilities of their relationships in the history of Western philosophy, requestioning the major topics of that philosophy: Man, the Subject, Truth, History, Meaning. At the forefront of this rethinking has been a rejection by and within those narratives of what seem to have been the strongest pillars of their history: Anthropomorphism, Humanism, and Truth. And again, it is in France that, in my opinion, this rethinking has taken its strongest conceptual leaps, as "philosophy," "history," and "literature" have attempted to account for the crisis-in-narrative that is modernity.

In general, this has brought about, within the master narratives in the West, a vast self-exploration, a questioning and turning back upon their own discourse, in an attempt to create a new *space* or *spacing within themselves* for survivals (of different kinds). In France, such rethinking has involved, above all, a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which has been the master narratives' own "nonknowledge," what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other-than-themselves is almost always a "space" of some kind (over which the narrative has lost control), and this space has been coded as *feminine,* as *woman.* It is upon this process that I am insisting in this study: the transformation of woman and the feminine into verbs at the interior of those narratives that are today experiencing a crisis in legitimation.

To designate that process, I have suggested what I hope will be a believable neologism: *gynesis*—the putting into discourse of "woman" as that *process* diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman, and her obligatory, that is, historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking. The object produced by this process is neither a person nor a thing, but a horizon, that toward which the process is tending: a *gynema.* This *gynema* is a reading effect, a woman-in-effect that is never stable and has no identity. Its appearance in a written text is perhaps noticed only by the feminist reader—either when it becomes insistently "feminine" or when women (as defined metaphysically, historically) seem magically to reappear within the discourse. This tear in the fabric produces in the (feminist) reader a state of uncertainty and sometimes of distrust—especially when the faltering narrative in which it is embedded has been articulated by a man from within a nonetheless still-existent discipline. When it appears in women theorists' discourse, it

would seem to be less troubling. The still existent slippages in signification among feminine, woman, women, and what I am calling *gynesis* and *gynema* are dismissed (at least in the United States and increasingly by male feminist critics) as irrelevant *because* it is a woman speaking.

I have tried to introduce here briefly some of the reasons why feminists may not want to qualify, too rapidly, major texts of modernity in the West, especially in France, as necessarily feminist or antifeminist, most particularly when they are texts signed by women. I hope I have begun to convey, as well, how important I think it is for feminist theoreticians in France, England, the United States, and (especially) elsewhere to rethink the history, impact, place for, and possible future directions of contemporary interpretive modes with regard to feminist theory. For if, as I have only begun to suggest, modernity represents a perhaps unavoidable and, in any case, new kind of discursivity on, about, as woman, a valorization and speaking of woman, and if contemporary feminists are going to take modernity and its theorists seriously, then feminist theory must address some new and complex questions—questions that form the matrix of the pages to follow.

Are gynesis and feminism in contradiction, or do they overlap and interact with each other, perhaps even render each other inevitable, in some way? In what sense do certain of the texts of gynesis reintroduce very familiar representations of women in spite of themselves? To what extent is the process designated as feminine by those texts absolutely dependent on those representations? When we posit that process as one incarnated by *women,* are we not falling back into the anthropomorphic (or gynomorphic?) images thinkers of modernity have been trying to disintegrate?

On the other hand, in what ways do some of the major texts in question exceed those familiar representations of women? How do women theorists' texts of gynesis differ from those of male theorists; or French texts of gynesis from American ones? If the gynesis seemingly intrinsic to modernity is but the product of male fantasy, does that necessarily mean it offers no radical tools for women? How might these texts offer new ways of connecting the most radical insights of feminism to the larger questions facing the West as it moves toward a new century?

Most important, if modernity and feminism are not to become mutually exclusive and, at the same time, if feminism is not to compromise the quality of its attention to female stereotyping of whatever kind, what could be new strategies for asking new kinds of questions?

In the first part of this book, "Intersections," I discuss generally the problematization of woman in contemporary thought, and most particularly in contemporary French thought—a problematization directly related to that thought's explorations in modernity. Why, at the end of the twentieth century, has "the feminine" become a wide-ranging area of concern? Why is it used as a metaphor of reading by some of the most influential writers working in France today? How and why this "problematization of woman" poses particular problems for contemporary feminist theory in the United States is the focus of Chapter 2, while Chapters 3 and 4 trace the ways in which the crises associated with modernity have led to this expansive putting into discourse of woman. How do French theorists situate those crises historically, politically, and conceptually? How does what has been diagnosed as the breakdown of the paternal metaphor in Western culture lead these theorists to valorize other metaphors—new metaphors that pose difficult problems for "feminism" as a concept?

In the second section, "Interfacings," I examine in detail three of the major topologies of contemporary French thought and its recent history. I emphasize, in particular, the breakdown of the conscious, Cartesian Subject, the default of Representation, and the demise of Man's Truth.

The third section, "Intertexts," includes close readings of selected texts by Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze—three of the best-known participants in the process of gynesis in France, and writers who have had the most direct influence on both feminist and antifeminist thinking there. I also read *with* these writers several "fictions" they have selected as somehow exemplary of their "theories": Marguerite Duras with Lacan, Maurice Blanchot with Derrida, and Michel Tournier with Deleuze.

In the fourth and final section, "Interferences," I return to the question of "comparativism"—no longer in terms of American feminist questions and French explorations of modernity, but, rather, in terms of how both my questions and those explorations may be grounded in cross-currents of cultural specificity. I do this by looking at several American and French fictional texts written by men—within the context of the questions raised to that point. The writers chosen are exemplary to the extent that their particular imaginative strategies for exploring the "feminine" seem both indicative and representative of the theoretical problem being examined. It was also my concern to select writers who fall somewhere within the "mainstream" of their respective cultural traditions—not because they are widely read, although they may be, but because their writing is self-con-

sciously determined by the conceptual frameworks previously examined.

In some afterwords, I return briefly to the women theorists with whom I began.

One Last Note

Hegel, in the first volume of *The Aesthetics,* tells an anecdote about a fish who reproached his painter for not having given him a soul.[15] The problem is, who was speaking? Was it the *real* fish or the *painted* fish or something in-between? My interventions at the crossroads of modernity and feminism could leave me open to the same kind of reproach on both sides of the Atlantic. This is especially likely since I am not principally interested in painting contexts or texts, representing modernity or feminism, or defining women or woman. Rather, I am foregrounding a new kind of interpretant which has surfaced from the interactions among all of these—a "woman-effect" for which I have offered another name: *gynesis.*

Whatever the risks of this project, I hope that by pointing out the limits, contradictions, and promises of such an interpretant it will open new spaces for women to write in.

15. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Aesthetics,* vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 42.

GYNESIS I

INTERSECTIONS

The set of points which two configurations have in common.

I

The Woman-in-Effect

Woman is the only vase left in which to pour our ideality.
Goethe

Faced with the abundantly heterogeneous theoretical production in France over the past twenty years, those who remain nonetheless fascinated by "the literary substance"[1] cannot help but find it difficult to determine a place from which to speak. That is, of course, unless they choose to remain faithful to a "Belief" or a "School," or—an increasingly common resort—to practice a kind of breathless journalism, documenting the rise and fall of the latest Truth. A vertigo of reading strategies can easily set in, ironically rendering the literary artifact untouchable, solitary. Avoiding this vertigo can lead to repetition and isolation within one particular ideology of the text. Considering its sources out of context (as in "imported"), or from a purely polemical stance, can produce a conservative brand of eclecticism, or political naïveté.

The vertiginous critical condition to which I refer is certainly not foreign to feminist theoreticians. While proceeding from a "belief" (in women's oppression), we are nevertheless, necessarily, caught up in a permanent whirlwind of reading practices within a universe of fiction and theory written, but for a few official exceptions, by men. Not believing in "Truth," we continue to be fascinated by (elaborate) fictions. This is the profound paradox of the feminist speaking in our contemporary culture: she proceeds from a *belief* in a world from which—even the philosophers admit—*Truth* has disappeared. This paradox, it seems to me, can lead to

1. "La chose littéraire" is a term used by Shoshana Felman for that which resists interpretation, whether or not coded as literature. See *La folie et la chose littéraire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978).

(at least) three possible scenarios: a renewed silence, a form of religion (from mysticism to political orthodoxy), or a continual attention—historical, ideological, and affective—to the place from which we speak.[2]

If this is not a uniquely modern set of choices, it is, at least, one of particular urgency as the sense grows that we are rapidly moving into another as yet unclear network of epistemological and textual constraints.

Among the numerous French writers emphasizing the neurotic borders of "Western Thinking" and exploring the possible frontiers of modernity is Jean-Joseph Goux. He has mapped out what he terms "a history of symbolization": the adventures of a certain conception of conception.[3] Let us briefly follow his logic through the historical labyrinth he constructs so that we may arrive more quickly at the "woman" in question here.

Goux's version of history begins with Moses' anger at the worship of the golden calf, a female deity—*mater*—and the Jews' ensuing departure from Egypt with its female icons and hieroglyphic imagination. This literal and figurative departure from Egypt has been transcribed throughout the entire Platonic and Judeo-Christian tradition, according to Goux, and what has emerged from this transcription is *the* founding fantasy: the active negation of the Mother. Since the beginning of Western patriarchal history, "woman" has been but the passive matter to which "Man" could give form through the ever-increasing spiral of abstract universals: God, Money, Phallus—the infinity of substitution. Goux very carefully delineates the symbolic history of this Idealism: a certain relationship to death and desire, a fear of fusion, prohibition of incest with the Mother, the horror of "nothing to see" (castration), the anxiety of presence and absence, the separation of form and content, spirit and matter, value and exchange. Woman—whether incarnated, banned from the Temple, or incarcerated in the Oedipal family—has occupied the space of substitution on the paradigmatic axis of the metaphor.[4]

2. The dominant media in Europe and the United States have predicted (are, in fact, producing) renewed silence on the part of radical feminists, not only in function of current reactionary politics or recuperation, but in terms of the passing of a certain necessity; charges of turning woman into a religion are made regularly against both feminists in the United States and such groups as "Psychoanalysis and Politics" in France. The third alternative, while perhaps idealistic in itself, is both Marxist and a contemporary *topos*.

3. Jean-Joseph Goux, *Economie et symbolique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), and *Les iconoclastes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978).

4. This long history of idealism also includes the birth of the novel, what Lukàcs has described as the literary form of the transcendent homelessness of the idea. See Georg Lukàcs, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), esp. pp. 40–41, 122. See also Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 298.

At the end of the nineteenth century, something clearly happened. The temples and statues began to shake and, in particular, two new sciences were born: dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis.[5] According to Goux, it is no accident that each of these sciences posits three parallel phases. In the case of Marxism: 1) the separation of Man from Nature; 2) Man versus Nature; 3) the interaction of Man with *another* Nature (historical materialism). In the case of Freudianism: 1) separation from the Mother; 2) Man versus Woman; 3) reunion with *another* Woman.[6] Goux then emphasizes the fact that the end points in these systems are remarkably similar; they involve, respectively, a reuniting of form with matter—*materialism* (but only after a long period of *paterialism*) and a new relationship to the feminine[7] (but only after castration). For Goux, history has been the history of Man and men, but now we are entering a new historicity. The End of History, the Death of Man: a true *jouissance*[8] as we move beyond the fear of falling back into the original maternal abyss and move toward a "new access to the feminine." This (re)union with the feminine is the end point of History—u-topia—where all images have been banned, God and his correlate the Subject are dead, money no longer circulates, and the Phallus, as the ultimate metaphor in patriarchal culture, collapses into metonymic indifferentiation.[9] In any case, it would seem to be the beginning of the end of patriarchal history and its result, a situation characterized by Philippe Sollers as that of "Puppet-men, women struck with terror, with respect to the virtual one-woman who reaches toward the loneman seen as god who does not exist."[10]

As with all utopias, this one may—or may not—help us to live now. We might say that what is generally referred to as modernity is precisely

5. The almost simultaneous appearance on the historical scene of the human sciences in general (especially linguistics), cinema and photography, feminism, and so on, raises questions needing special attention.

6. See "Différence des sexes et périple de l'histoire" in *Les iconoclastes*, pp. 191–232. This set of Hegelian structural analogies is, of course, of the most classical kind. But how to separate the dancer from the dance?

7. As most readers of recent French theory in translation know by now, the word "feminine" in French does not have the same pejorative connotations it has come to have in English. It is a generic term used to speak about women in general, and approaches our word "female" when valorized in a contemporary context. This said, because of that context and its history, the word is not always as innocent as it appears.

8. For a discussion of this word, see "Notes on the Translation" in Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 15–16.

9. Goux shows that this is also, in part, the logical end point of Judaic conceptual systems—the inside of the Temple. See, especially, *Les iconoclastes*.

10. Philippe Sollers, "Freud's Hand," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 336.

the acutely interior, unabashedly incestuous exploration of these new female spaces: the perhaps historically unprecedented exploration of the female, differently maternal body.[11] In France, this exploration has settled on the concept of "woman" or "the feminine" as both a metaphor of reading and topography of writing for confronting the breakdown of the paternal metaphor—a tool for declaring war on the Image within the more general twentieth-century iconoclastic imagination. Goux is not alone in his insistence on the necessity to *name* and *rename* what has remained impossible for Man to think, through and beginning with a series of analogies whose common element is "woman."

In fact, it has become increasingly difficult to find a major theoretician in France today who is not concerned in one way or another with "woman," the "feminine," or variations thereof. When the ear and eye first become attuned to this semantic network, it seems that one is not only wandering through an extended isomorphic system but perhaps confronting a gnostic illusion. The "feminine" has become—to use an old expression of Roland Barthes—"a metaphor without brakes."

At the price of selecting here a single exemplum, I propose the following.

In 1978, Jacques Derrida presented a paper in the Columbia University Theory of Literature Seminar.[12] At one point during his presentation, he spoke of Maurice Blanchot's *La folie du jour* as an "invaginated text." There was a barely noticeable ripple of glances among the women present; notes were passed: "Who would speak? From what position? After all, why say anything?" One brave person (a woman) finally asked why Derrida had used the word "invaginated." The response? "I was expecting that question, but *not* from you" (the woman—in real life—is an American feminist working in French theory). That is, the philosopher expected this question from an American feminist, but not from someone familiar with contemporary theories of reading in France. The awaited question did receive an elaborate response: primarily, the neutral etymological origins of the word (from botany). I might add that this question allowed the philosopher to speak for another twenty minutes.

11. I should say *ideological* and *symbolic* exploration, since this exploration has also increased *literally* (in, for example, gynecology, obstetrics, genetics, and psychiatry).

12. The paper has since been published in different form as "Living On" in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1979), pp. 75–176. See also his further discussion of the term "invagination" in Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald, "Choreographies," *Diacritics* 12 (Summer 1982), esp. pp. 70–75. We will come back to "invagination" in Gynesis III.

What are the implications of the fact that the philosopher who has most radically clarified in order to denounce the economy of the symbolic function in Western reason, as well as the analogy of metaphor, can only do so through using this "metaphor of reading"? Is not the use of such "neutral terms" as "hymen" or "invaginated" strangely suggestive of Diderot's "indiscreet jewels," where the "truth" can never come from a woman's mouth but only from her genitals?[13] Is Derrida speaking of the "invaginated text" with a different intention from that of V. S. Pritchett, who has used the same term in a much more traditional way while trying to prove that a certain kind of novel is a "female thing"?[14] How can we talk about intention? And why can the philosophers not resist speaking of "woman"? Would the woman in the audience have had the same reaction if it had been a female proponent of "feminine writing" (*écriture féminine*) speaking of "the invaginated text"? Is it necessary to be a woman in order to speak as a woman? What does it mean to speak *for* woman? As Shoshana Felman has pointed out, isn't that what men have always done?[15]

These are just some of the questions that can lead to an aporia for those women critics attempting to take modernity and its new spaces seriously—especially for those walking the tightropes between French and American theoretical discourse. In France, the rapid putting into discourse of "woman," indeed, the movement toward a "semiosis" of woman, over the past several decades has become problematic in retrospect. It is always a bit of a shock to the feminist theorist when she recognizes that the repeated and infinitely expanded "feminine" in these theoretical systems often has very little, if anything, to do with women. If everyone and everything becomes Woman—as a culture obsessively turns itself inside out—where does that leave women, especially if, in the same atmosphere, feminism is dismissed as anachronistic along with Man and History? In the United States, we continue to import the arguments *pro* and *contra* but rarely attempt to address the terms of the exchange itself. It has thus become a truism to say that the resultant intellectual short-circuits, when not dead ends, are due to irreconcilably different philosophical, psychoanalytic, and literary traditions. But does that mean that, as American feminists, we have to leave the room?

13. On Diderot's jewels, see Jane Gallop, "Snatches of Conversation," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980).

14. V. S. Pritchett is quoted by Michael Danahy in "Le roman est-il chose femelle?" *Poétique* 25 (1976): 89.

15. Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy," *Diacritics* 5 (Winter 1975).

In considering this new semiosis of woman, one is drawn to what would seem to be a—I hesitate to say *common*—concern among the theoreticians of modernity: a search for that which has been "left out," de-emphasized, hidden, or denied articulation within Western systems of knowledge. Gynesis has taken its place in France within a movement away from a concern with identity to a concern with difference, from wholeness to that which is incomplete, from representation to modes of presentation, meta-discourse to fiction, production to operation, and from Universal Truth to a search for new forms of legitimation through para-scientific (when not mathematical) models.[16]

This overall philosophical fascination with what (who) has been left out of Western thinking and writing, as well as with possibilities for a new discursive and social contract, indeed, a new historicity,[17] has been accompanied by an increase in fictional and theoretical writing by women, about women. These parallel and more than interlaced movements inevitably overlap and conflict: work by women theorists (re)joins the overall concern with what and who has been left out of Western thinking; in turn, the larger concern (re)joins "woman" or at least that which has been historically connoted by the word woman. The result has been that "woman" (as well as that which has connoted the female) has been *problematized* in new ways as both concept and identity.[18] In the search for new kinds of legitimation, in the absence of Truth, in anxiety over the decline of paternal authority, and in the midst of spiraling diagnoses of Paranoia, the End of Man and History, "woman" has been set in motion both rhetorically and ideologically.

At the most fundamental level, this interrogation operates: first, metonymically in discourse *about* women; and second, metaphorically in discourse *by, through, as* woman.[19] The problem is that within this ever-

16. The word "legitimation" (which I prefer to its awkward English translation, "legitimatization") is from the Latin *legitimatio*. As mentioned in "Preliminaries" (above), it refers to the *process* of justifying an inheritance (human or otherwise) according to "law," "right," or "common sense." It is most often opposed in French to "natural." Its closest semantic counterpart in current Anglo-American debates might be "authority"—but, in any case, it always involves the question of how to recognize power.

17. See especially, Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979).

18. "Woman" is and has always been, of course, the original problematic object. "The heroine of the masculine imagination is essentially a double figure: the incarnation of contradiction" (Nancy Miller, *The Heroine's Text* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1980], p. 74). This contradiction, however, and its intrinsic polysemia at the level of the signified and referent, seem to have metamorphosed into an undecidable at the level of the signifier itself.

19. See Shoshana Felman's discussion of Foucault and Derrida with regard to Logos and Pathos in *La folie*.

increasing inflation of quotation marks around the word "woman," women as thinking, writing subjects are placed in the position of constantly wondering whether it is a question of women or woman, their written *bodies* or their *written* bodies. To refuse "woman" or the "feminine" as cultural and libidinal constructions (as in "men's femininity") is, ironically, to return to metaphysical—anatomical—definitions of sexual identity. To accept a metaphorization, a semiosis of woman, on the other hand, means risking once again the absence of women as subjects in the struggles of modernity. The attempt to analyze, to separate ideological and cultural determinations of the "feminine" from the "real woman"—seemingly the most logical path for a feminist to follow—may also be the most interminable process, one in which women become not only figuratively but also literally impossible.

It might be objected by those not actively engaged in current debates surrounding feminism and modernity that to consider the problematics of gynesis in this way is simply to fail to distinguish the literal from the figurative;[20] that it is to misunderstand how metaphor and metonymy must inevitably operate;[21] or that it is to imply, once again, some new kind of male conspiracy theory about—that is, against—women.

To the extent that the problematization of woman at the core of gynesis intimately involves rhetoric (metaphor, metonymy, connotation, etc.); given that the sign is always more powerful than the message; and taking into consideration that the majority of writers in question here are men—all of the above objections are to some extent accurate. I am implying that the literal and the figurative are henceforth joined in entirely new ways; that metaphor and metonymy are no longer adequate for describing that union; and that the new fictions and theories of modernity may, in fact, be satisfying a repressed desire in men (and women?) for what may turn out to be a very old and, in any case, very readable plot.[22]

20. As Claudine Herrmann has pointed out, this would not be a new argument to discourage women from speculating on the world. See Claudine Herrmann, *Les voleuses de langue* (Paris: Editions des Femmes, 1976), esp. pp. 13–14.

21. Much has been urgently written about metaphor and metonymy in the last few years. For an introduction to some of the problems involved, see Michel Le Guern, *Sémantique de la métaphore et de la métonymie* (Paris: Larousse, 1973); or, in another vein, Jonathan Culler's helpful article, "The Turns of Metaphor," in *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). Harold Bloom thinks that metaphor and metonymy have become the "shibboleth for weak interpreters" (see Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, p. 11).

22. I am thinking here, in particular, of Roland Barthes's definition of a kind of text that is beyond the univocal and yet not quite "integrally plural" in *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974).

But I am also implying something more than that: that the deeply rhetorical and therefore political adventure of gynesis does not need to return, and may in fact not allow a return, to that plot. The writers in question are women's *compagnons de route,* our intellectual fellow travelers into the twenty-first century. They actually represent only a very small corner of the contemporary theoretical stage, in spite of what the majority would have us believe. The distance between their work and the dominant cultural text we live is immeasurable; in that sense, their work is perhaps comparable only to that of radical feminist theory.

"Woman," as a new rhetorical space, is inseparable from the most radical moments of most contemporary disciplines. To limit ourselves to the general set of writers in focus here, "she" may be found in Lacan's pronouncements on desire; Derrida's internal explorations of writing; Deleuze's work on becoming woman; Jean-François Lyotard's calls for a feminine analytic relation; Jean Baudrillard's work on seduction; Foucault's on madness; Goux's on the new femininity; Barthes's in general; Michel Serres's desire to become Penelope or Ariadne . . . "She" is created from the close explorations of semantic chains whose elements have changed textual as well as conceptual positions, at least in terms of valorization: from time to space, the same to other, paranoia to hysteria, city to labyrinth, mastery to nonmastery, truth to fiction.

As Stephen Heath has put it in his essay on difference, today that which is designated unrepresentable is what is finally the most strongly represented.[23] I would add that, through gynesis, what has always been the most represented—women—while at the same time declared the most unrepresentable (woman) have changed places, have changed spaces in an attempt to move beyond the representations of History towards the utopias of modernity.

> ✡ Women have learned to see women through the eyes of men in literature and through the eyes of women in life.
>
> Claudine Herrmann

We have already begun and will continue to explore how the problematization of woman in contemporary French theory poses particularly vexing problems for the American feminist exploring the new territories of modernity. More attuned than many of her French sisters to the devious history of the "eternal feminine" and "the Images of Women in Fiction,"

23. Stephen Heath, "Difference," *Screen* 19 (Fall 1978): 51–113.

and to the fact that "Woman" is the poet's most constant creation, these American feminists face new versions of the anxiety of influence. Caught between the predominantly American feminist's "know thyself" (your *true* self versus "false images") and the modern discovery that there is no more self to know, she may even feel obliged to opt for one camp over the other. For example, those of us attempting to move away from psychological readings grounded in a transparency theory of language without succumbing to the neutrality of pure formalism may sometimes proceed in a schizophrenic manner reading American Feminist Criticism as background and French Theory as foreground, adopting a kind of "yes, I know characters are not real but . . ." approach to the literary text.

Woman, valorized under the banner of demystification, has become the site of inquiry within a period of profound binary crisis. The tropologies of the feminine presented through gynesis, this new presentation of the irrepresentable, are certainly important elements within the larger critique of classical reasoning. But for those American feminists still sensitive to gender-determined reading, these demystifications and tropologies can prove troubling, particularly when accompanied by violent attacks on "feminism" via critiques of its roots in classical logic.[24] What may be the most widely shared and solid ground for the multiple manifestations of feminist theory—not assuming that the speaker is male—somehow gets lost in the fray; somehow seems undeserving of the wholesale critique feminist theory has received from those supposedly most sympathetic to it, especially in France.

While struggling to find new configurations of desire outside of the logic of substitution, do we not run the danger of (belatedly) developing nothing but the negative of the Great Western Photograph? What philosophical discourse today explores, it has also produced. While women are busy refusing the metaphors trapped in the chains of masculine desire, have the philosophers of modernity found a differently same "woman" for producing new images in what is henceforth "a modern society no longer nourishing itself with beliefs (as before) but with images"?[25] When a man says, "I too am woman," he is sure of himself.[26] Perhaps the inflationary

24. Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard and Cixous, Kofman, Kristeva, Lemoine-Luccioni, and Macciocchi are among the theorists in France who have adopted the most explicitly negative attitudes toward classical feminism.

25. Roland Barthes, *Sollers écrivain* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1979), p. 89. All quotations from original French titles are my translation unless otherwise indicated.

26. See, for example, the discussion of Gerard Manley Hopkins in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 10.

feminocentrism of gynesis—not, historically, the first such symptom of paranoia—has been confronting the breakdown of the paternal metaphor with nothing less than *catachresis*—sometimes metaphor, sometimes metonymy, the only name for that which is unnamable—God—or, perhaps . . . Woman. When we read those who would assert that in order to have a body, one must be female;[27] or, more precisely, "It is impossible to dissociate the questions of art, style, and truth from the question of the woman"[28]—shall we welcome voices announcing a new historicity or must we be careful that, like Helen, we are not left in Egypt with only an image of ourselves transported to Troy as a pretext for war?

How then might the feminist theorist proceed? One of the primary assumptions of this study is that we cannot continue to pursue our investigation of what constitutes sexual difference from within our epistemological legacy. We cannot go back, but the path in front of us is riddled with potentially dangerous detours. Is there a way to avoid taking an exit from signification, the kind of exit reserved only for a funeral procession, a *theôria* back into a u-topian desert, without being forced to pursue a feminism whose teleology is more than compatible with the patriarchal text? What is the potential for articulating new feminist fictions, both theoretical and other, formed by the necessity for women as subjects to remain active in and attentive to the signifying practices of our times?

A feminist critic very concerned with these questions, Elaine Showalter, has, for example, distinguished between those feminists concerned with woman as reader—*feminist critique*—and those concerned with woman as writer—*gynocritique*.[29] According to Showalter, the first continues to analyze the male imagination while the second develops new models based on the female experience.[30] She argues, convincingly I think, that feminists have perhaps tried too long to adapt male critical systems to women's texts. This may be true. But to say this is to assume that the two sexes and their imaginations can somehow be separated—an assumption incompatible, I think, with the major challenges of modernity's fictions. If we all remain divided between the two, it is because they cannot be separated in any culture; this, at the very least, has been reaffirmed by the inevitably mystical when not reactionary nature of some neo-feminist thinking.[31] The complexities of the intrinsically erotic choice of an "object of study" aside, the attempt to posit a new form of catharsis—to purify (women's) writing of male topoi—is a return to the worst extremes of our metaphysical tradition. The elaboration of a feminist strategy of reading and writing reaching through to the other side of and perhaps even beyond that tradition while in dialogue with it is what is most difficult.

27. Michel Leiris, for example, anticipates well neo-feminist slogans.

28. Jacques Derrida, *Spurs/Eperons*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 71. (Derrida repeating the feminist sentence.)

29. Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics," in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 22–41.

30. This emphasis on *female* experience has elsewhere been presented in counterpart to feminine and feminist writing in England by Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) and discussed, if very differently, by Julia Kristeva (in "Women's Time," *Signs* 7:1 [Autumn 1981]) as the sign of a qualitative change in the intonation of the women's movement in France over the past decade. It is perhaps the second term—experience—which is the most problematic, especially in attempts to unravel the differences between Anglo-American and French philosophical traditions.

It is, I think, at the sensitive point of contact between the American and French theoretical stances evoked thus far that some progress might be made or, at least, new kinds of questions asked. This involves thinking through the apparent contradictions between that French and American thinking characterized by the conflict between *woman as process* and *woman as sexual identity*. This is not to imply a one-to-one cultural correspondence. The work being done by theorists, male and female, feminist or not, in both countries is far too rich and multiple to be reduced to the number two and, politically, one often perceives only the most visible (or audible).[32] There are, nevertheless, two very different sets of reading effects being produced in the two countries, each with its own set of debates and limitations.[33] For example, Christiane Makward has written of neo-feminist thought in France, "The theory of femininity is dangerously close to repeating in 'deconstructive' language the traditional assumptions on femininity and female creativity"; while Carolyn Burke has noted that American feminists have perhaps "analyzed the constraints of the social context more avidly than the contradictions within ourselves."[34] Thinking

31. In France, women involved in the group Questions Féministes have used the term "neo-feminism" to designate, specifically, the theories of the group "Psychoanalysis and Politics" (*Psych. et Po.*). Since then, this term has come to mean something close to what Julia Kristeva calls "the second generation" of feminists (in "Women's Time"), although many who would place themselves in that generation are diametrically opposed to *Psych. et Po.* In general, "neo-feminism" refers to thought in which emphasis is placed on isolating the "specifically and uniquely female."

32. We will be returning to the problem of "cultural specificity" explicitly, if briefly, in Gynesis IV.

33. Elaine Marks, in her article "Women and Literature in France," *Signs* 3:4 (Summer 1978) has characterized the American feminist gesture as performing on the *oppression* of *women* and the French gesture on the *repression* of *woman*. This has been a very helpful formulation, but, like all such culturally specific formulations (including my own), it does do injustice; implied here is that oppression in France and repression in the United States are not at issue.

34. See Christiane Makward, "To Be or Not to Be . . . A Feminist Speaker," in *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), and Carolyn Burke, "Rethinking the Maternal," in the same collection (forthcoming in paperback, Rutgers University Press, 1985).

through, cross-culturally, two versions of what we might call "the-woman-in-effect" must necessarily include the process of going back to the postulates in which they are grounded. Some French feminists, for example, continue to criticize the cultural assumptions underlying neo-feminist thought in France, thus bringing them closer to (even if they remain distant from) their American counterparts—and vice versa. But to think both reading effects at the same time has perhaps become possible only recently. The necessary encounter between the two reading effects will not take place here, in the following brief considerations, but it is certain that the encounter cannot take place anywhere else without these considerations.

For the American feminist, there is first the leap of faith into a *post-Freudian,* post-Hegelian, and post-Saussurian movement away from representation and the sign as transcendence; that is, whatever their attitudes toward one another, theorists in France continue to emphasize the effects of the human subject's inscription in culture through language—the recognition, for example, that the signifier "woman" does not necessarily *mean* the biological female in history. "Woman," "the feminine," and so on have come to signify those *processes* that disrupt symbolic structures in the West. On the other hand, there is what critics in France have not ceased to call the American feminist pre-Freudian (pre-Nietzchean, pre-Saussurian, etc.) misreading of description as prescription and our valorization of "natural reality" over "psychic life"—the famous American "refusal of the unconscious," insistence on the "self" and emphasis on language only as a natural, communicative function. For these critics, American feminists are anti-theory and apolitical, anchoring their critical undertakings only in naturalized experience. Some have attempted to mediate these contradictions, for example, by simply bringing the "French Freud" to the attention of American feminists. But, as Jane Gallop has shown, this cannot be done without first embracing "a psychoanalysis that has been returned to its original audacity through an exchange with linguistic theory."[35]

The work before us, then, must address itself to some additional and difficult questions: What exactly is the metaphorization process surrounding the term "woman" in contemporary French theory? While avoiding a certain (primarily American) biologistic psychology, one-to-one correspondence of the sign, as well as the notion of a woman's world as separate cultural space or identity, to what extent can we speak of "woman" *without* referring to the biological female? To what extent has the attempt in France over the past twenty years to bypass the human subject and dialectics led to the return of traditional notions of the "feminine"? That is, given that "woman"—as real or imagined—has always been that which allowed for (male) "contemplation," how can we avoid once again the *absence* of women while we are attempting to think difference differently? Finally, how are the "theories of the feminine" in France useful to those of us working in American feminist theory and in what ways must we go beyond this work in order to mediate and rethink the "Franco-American theoretical gap"?

Jean-François Lyotard, a self-confessed male philosopher, has admitted that what is truly at stake in the contemporary women's movement is the status of metadiscourse itself[36] (echoing women theorists in Europe who have been saying that for years). Lyotard speaks of metadiscourse as a truth-functional discourse—that is, as a discourse which authorizes itself to say what it says as a *truth* that must be understood—and, ultimately, which suggests that there is a lack of truth in the statements of our daily lives. As he has stated, "When a 'feminist' is reproached for confusing the phallus, symbolic operator of meaning, with the penis, empirical sign of sexual difference, it is admitted without discussion that the meta-linguistic order (the symbolic) is distinct from its domain of reference (realities)."[37] What *is* the relationship between metadiscourse—even that which refuses to call itself meta- while remaining truth-functional—as it has developed in France and what we are calling here a primarily American feminist emphasis on the "truth-value" of our everyday experience (which that metadiscourse in France is constantly denying or deferring)?

It is perhaps through a putting into practice of the contra-dictions between (American) feminist thought—a primarily ethical discourse as prescription for action—and a certain (French) discourse—emphasizing linguistic and, therefore, symbolic process—that a neutralization of the question of sexual difference can be avoided. Lyotard points out that this neutralization is the ultimate goal of capitalism: the erasing of differences to increase exchange value. Luce Irigaray speaks of the "*sexual indifference sustaining the truth of all science, the logic of all discourse.*"[38]

35. See Jane Gallop's discussion of Juliet Mitchell in "The Ghost of Lacan," *Diacritics* 5:4 (Winter 1975): 24; reprinted in *The Daughter's Seduction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

36. See his article, "One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles," *Substance* 20 (1978).

37. Ibid., p. 15.

38. Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), p. 67.

The avoidance of the neutralization of sexual difference through a new kind of attention to language involves, above all and first of all, the elaboration of a new theory and practice of the speaking subject. This search for a new speaking subject should not be thought of as a search for new synthesis or transcendence, but as a *strategy*—in the strongest sense of the term, even if that sense has been coded as "male." Only by participating in this elaboration may women remain aware of our position in the signifying chain. We know that we must avoid homologation—the inscription of "woman" into the discursive truth of the dominant order is not subversive to that order. As Lyotard has suggested, however, some women theoreticians may therefore attempt to remain outside of magisterial discourse, rejecting it as phallocentric: but such a position, through its very exteriority, can only reinforce the central position of the discourse of power. The Masters do not care at all about what the slaves *believe* as long as the slaves remain on the exterior of the empire. It is perhaps through what we might call a new French-American Connection, a different conjunction of *ethical* concerns with *process,* that what Marguerite Duras has called "the last theoretical imbecile" may begin to perceive that the question of woman and language is not one of fashion; it involves rather a profound rethinking of both the male and female speaking subjects' relationship to the real, imaginary and symbolic, as well as of the status of metadiscourse itself.

Work by women in France on new theories of the speaking subject and language has assumed the contours of the larger emphasis on language in France over the past few decades, but has provided those emphases with added weight: the recognition that the status of women is determined not only at social and political levels, but by the very logical processes through which meaning is produced. This recognition is very different from those of a certain kind of American feminist attention to "women's language"—based on empirical studies of women's "speech-acts."[39] We might clarify this contrast, even if the clarification is ultimately inaccurate, by saying that these latter, empirical, studies examine language "externally" while the effort in France is to explore signification "internally." For women theorists in France, however else they may disagree, the "human subject," "reality," "identity," and "meaning" are not natural givens that can be enumerated and analyzed, but are rather *logics* produced through language as it constructs and deconstructs representations. For them, the investiga-

39. See, for example, Robin Lakoff, *Language and Women's Place* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), and Mary Ritchie Key, *Male/Female Language* (New York: Scarecrow, 1975).

tion of how biological difference introduces the speaking subject into the play of language reveals sexuality as intrinsic to any theorization of any practice, especially literary practice. Amid much disagreement about how it should be done, there is nevertheless total agreement that there must be a thorough requestioning of our concept of language, of the role of the unconscious, of various conceptions of the speaking subject, and of the symbolic, ideological, and political assumptions underlying the theorization process itself. They see these questions as having the highest priority for feminists, especially for those working in modern theory but who remain wary of its heritage, of even its most radical presuppositions.

One of the most important and primary theoretical relationships being explored in France is, then, that of the relationship between language and the speaking subject. Without the preliminary understanding that this relationship as classically defined is no longer adequate, modernity remains but an abstract idea. We will pursue in detail this problem of the subject in the next section, but it is essential here to remember that any theory of language is based on a conception of the subject which that theory either posits, implies, or denies.[40] Despite the multiple variations in Western theories of language, a common conception of the subject has united them: it has always been a question of some kind of organic identity, a *homo loquens* in history, a subject acquiring its position through cognition. From the Stoics to Descartes and on through even the greater part of the twentieth century, the logic of the subject has based itself upon the practice of the sign, on language as transparence, the neutral agent of representation and communication. This subject has never questioned itself, has never truly doubted itself—it never had an unconscious in any case. It has been master of its discourse, a Man.

As already mentioned, many feminist cultural critics have finally come to see that we cannot pursue our investigation of what constitutes difference (by which I mean, tentatively, sexual difference) within this epistemological legacy of representation and its comfortable conception of the speaking subject and language. Once traditional conceptions of the speaking subject and language have been rejected, however, the real problems begin. One may retreat from those problems: accept on faith that there are male and female subjects, defined existentially; ignore the problem; or replace the human subject by abstract entities. For example, one may emphasize various forms of "involuntarism" where, as Edward Said has put it, the subject has no control, meaning is erased, and only those

40. See works by Julia Kristeva, esp. *Polylogue* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977).

processes anterior to signification are explored.[41] In that way, any consideration of the subject's functioning as social practice may be avoided. There may be, in fact, a complete silence as to the potential for changing symbolic and social structures—an observation that has to disturb any feminist not yet ready to throw out promising (if fledgling) work on the female subject along with the finally dethroned universal (male) Subject. Julia Kristeva has written that this kind of emphasis on involuntarism can lead to a nonproductive redundancy in the interior of the symbolic chamber: the sound of the philosopher's own voice—contemplation adrift.[42] Other new theories of the subject originally seen as promising by many women theorists come to rely on a principle of "anonymity": one posits a society of anonymous, sexually indistinct beings who could, ultimately, only be organized according to a male economy in patriarchal culture. Finally, there is the strategy of simply gendering the traditional cognitive subject as female. This process of "adding" to the subject the attributes of "woman" as produced by Western culture—woman as the involuntary (the unconscious, the unthought, the unsaid) or women as anonymous (non-subjects, without a name)—reminds us, once again, that any theory that does not thoroughly rethink the speaking subject takes the risk of precipitously denying sexual difference altogether.

Edward Said has suggested, in the same article mentioned above, that perhaps the single most important question we must ask ourselves today is: What has kept the Western contract together?[43] Has not one essential component of that contract been a certain conception of "woman"? The demise of the dominant systems of meaning in the West cannot be radically thought through by another added discourse, but only by another kind of speaking and writing. In the meantime, feminists must be careful not to speak *for* women, to become theologians of woman. And this involves neither avoiding theory nor embracing it, but playing it off against itself; placing a violent new thought where the old thought falters and creating new fictions. These fictions must not, on the other hand, be the already overdetermined products of an exclusion model, fictions based only upon that which has been excluded from the empire. We cannot simply turn the Emperor's coat inside out, for in fact he wears no clothes.

41. For a discussion of this notion in reference to the work of Jacques Derrida, see Edward Said, "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions," *Critical Inquiry* 4:4 (Summer 1978).

42. See Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974), pp. 128–34.

43. Said, "The Problem of Textuality," p. 700.

Or, if you prefer, for a culture busy unraveling itself from within an imaginary labyrinth, Ariadne remains just around the corner. But Ariadne, like Truth, was never really there in the first place. To recognize the ways in which we surround ourselves with our fictions is a step toward finding new ways for thinking the organization of sexual difference as grounded in cultural and political reality without positing that reality—man or woman, for example—as somehow preexisting our thought and fictions.

That is, a radical reconceptualization of the speaking subject and language is, in particular, essential to the rethinking of feminism as concept and practice in the late twentieth century. At the same time, the explorations of "woman," with reference to both, in contemporary French thought, are not enough to do so because of the ways in which reality and its fictions have been deemphasized. The (American) feminist in dialogue with (French) contemporary theory may be in a special position to approach this problem by remediating and rethinking the feminist insistence on personal experience as practice with the movement of these theoretical fictions as experience and practice—thus working, potentially, toward a new disposition of the ethical grounded in symbolic process.

A certain definition of feminism may be prey once again to the silence of anachronism. The problem is how to avoid this without losing sight of original feminist priorities: understanding how the feminine operates in culture (as what Meaghan Morris would call "a condition of possibility");[44] the relationship of women writers and theorists as subjects to cultural production; the real political implications bound to the interrelationships among these conceptions, language, and sexual difference. This involves, in particular, a continual attention to how the speaking and writing subject is sexually coded in the writers, critics, and philosophers we turn to for our critical habits. In the case of feminist literary criticism, this might be approached, first, by continuing to explore fictions (whether coded as literature or theory) so as to establish a topology of textual strategies used against the symbolic by both men and women, modalities of foreclosure, particularly today within a culture experiencing a violent ambivalence toward the father; that is, a tropological exploration of the movement and transformation of rhetorical and thematic spaces rather than a topical list of definitions and identities. Then, within the topology, there can be an examination of the promises and limitations of the woman-in-effect as radical strategy of reading and writing for any thought focused

44. Meaghan Morris, "French Feminist Criticism," *Hecate* 5:2 (1979): 64.

on modernity as the exploration of the woman's body. Finally, and only then, we can begin to isolate the marked differences between *men's* and *women's* textual experimentation—as well as to imagine what feminist criticism might be in an era that has been diagnosed as one of "post-representation."

An extremely problematic notion, this "era of post-representation," intrinsically linked to modernity, is, ideally, neither utopian nor apocalyptic. It designates, in fact, for better and worse, an operational, informational, cybernetic culture seen by some as an inevitability (due to modern technology) or, in fact, is dreamt of as a potentially positive rather than destructive force for cultural renovation. In either case, how the process of representation as it has been known is being and will continue to be displaced (and not, as often predicted, disappear) in postmodern culture presents a major problem for feminist theoreticians. More simply put, what might be a "feminist criticism" when it is no longer, strictly speaking, the "representation of women" that is at stake?

The only way we can begin even imagining an answer to that question is to start with the simple recognition that if man and woman exist, they do so only within the symbolic. How individuals, both male and female, exist in the symbolic as well as in sexual difference is determined by language, and by the political; for example, in the form of artistic and theoretical, economic and power, class and sexual systems at any given moment. The denegation of the symbolic function also varies in tone, intensity, and effect according to the total disposition of those systems. In our contemporary culture, oscillating between hysteria (confusion of sexual difference) and paranoia (its reinforcement), all of these systems must be thought together, especially if *women* hope to invent new configurations within which women may act as subjects. The choices we make about that invention are not isolated, but reverberate throughout our definitions of ethics, morality, politics, and feminism. Women cannot be thought of as somehow having been excluded from the symbolic; "woman" cannot be given priority as panacea; nor can the articulation between women and woman go unthought. Any specificity of men's or women's writing remains a question for the present—and the future. In the meantime, the "woman-in-effect" can only be thought beginning with how the monological structures we have inherited are constantly reimposed and rearranged, and (particularly) with how women both mime and reject those structures and even become their most adamant support systems. It is especially urgent today to look at how those systems are being once again rearranged, as we move toward a new economic crisis, a growth of micro-

fascist movements, and a reawakening of the sacred, of old religious teleologies as well as new ones from other worlds we have chosen to ignore. Our deepest feminist beliefs may be swept away by new grids of writing and desire—within which, no doubt, the feminine will remain a metaphor and the maternal a secret, but differently. An understanding of how that metaphor and that secret are currently being displaced or reaffirmed within theocentric structures—by men and women—will enable us, perhaps, to envision a feminist strategy more attentive to the rational violence of an ever-spiraling technocracy.

Women must not become (to displace Michel Foucault's image) that profoundly archaic silhouette—poet and madwoman—who finally took a peek at modernity and then quickly closed the door.

2

Feminist Tracks

The words sung in the next room are unavoidable.
But their passionate intelligence will be studied in you.
John Ashbery, *Fragment*

In Walter Abish's short story "Crossing the Great Void,"[1] Zachary—a deaf young man who, rather predictably, hates his uncle for having an affair with the mother he loves—feels compelled to search for his father, who was declared as missing, many years before, somewhere in the Great North African Desert. That Desert is described as empty and blank, as blank as a white sheet of paper—punctured only by the rhythm of Zachary's mother's high heel shoes clicking across the floor, "[framing] in his mind a succession of shots that puncture his eardrums, that puncture the blank piece of paper in his hand, that puncture the blankness, the vast blankness of all the deserts in the world" (p. 99). Zachary is fascinated by all those deserts—voided of any *image* (except that of his father, which exists only in his mind's eye) and heralding a *silence* to match only that of deafness (in his own ears), a deafness brought about, says the narrator, by "hearing his mother recount the same story over and over again" (p. 103). It is only upon meeting Track—a modern young woman who knows the Dark Continent intimately—that his dream of searching for his lost father becomes "real," is named:

> Since you appear to be so intrigued by North Africa, you'll be interested to know that the map of Blitlu, an oasis in the center of the Great Desert, is tatooed on my back, Track said the next time she came by to pick up her car.

1. Walter Abish, "Crossing the Great Void," in *In the Future Perfect* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 98–113. All further page references in text.

> Your back?
> She had taken him by complete surprise. He was dumbfounded. He was also unprepared for what was to follow that evening at her place. He had no prior experience, no knowledge upon which he could base an appropriate response when hours later, at her house, she unbuttoned her blouse and proceeded to take it off. With the lights off, it was too dark in her bedroom for him to see the map of Blitlu. In addition to your hearing aid you also seem to need glasses, she said matter-of-factly. He was convinced that her remark was devoid of malice. It was not an accusation, but merely a statement of fact. (p. 105)

Zachary proceeds to kill his uncle and set off for (the) Blitlu (on Track's back) to find his father—and to claim his uncle's property, which, he has just learned, is to be found in a place named "Blitlu." He leaves representation, mimesis, maps, and memory behind: "For the first time he could peer into himself and see, so to speak, nothing that might make him feel uneasy [. . .] and, above all, no faces, absolutely no faces, except one that came and went without any prior warning—although he attempted to expunge it from his mind, eliminate all traces of it from his brain, but Track in all her nakedness kept embracing him" (pp. 109–110).

All that Zachary has upon which to base his quest for his missing father is an old book: a book on "deserts," written by a major general in the army, a book entitled *Crossing the Great Void*. But that is not quite all. There is also a small scrap of paper, slipped carefully between the pages of the book, on which Track had always written "up until now correct" directions to Blitlu. There is no way of knowing how correct they are now. Nonetheless, from the last town on the outskirts of the desert, Zachary sets off for the emptiness of the oasis at the center of the desert. An old doorman with a whistle remains behind at the front of the hotel—a man and a whistle, a picture-soundtrack, frozen in the reader's memory as the only existent image of Zachary's father. It is, after all, Zachary's mother who has always possessed his father's image in the photograph, by her bed, of an old man with a whistle. Zachary's father has been framed.

Among all the pathways, roads, tracks, and spaces in Abish's short story, all crisscrossing their ways through false images, illusions, and misconnections, which direction might or should the feminist critic take? At the level of the narrative, she will recognize immediately the guilty mother and the woman introduced into the narrative only to provide an enigma, to keep the hermeneutic machine turning. She might also document a rather obviously acute case of Oedipal anxiety.

But rather than pursue an interpretation at this point, let this almost plot-summary stand simply as an allegory, a surface from which to redepart. But let us now sharpen our focus, concentrate more specifically on literary criticism, rephrase some of the questions raised thus far with regard to possible new intersections for modernity and feminism through explorations in gynesis. *Gynesis:* a new kind of writing on the woman's body, a map of new spaces yet to be explored, with "woman" supplying the only directions, the only images, upon which Postmodern Man feels he can rely.

Annette Kolodny wrote not too long ago that "as yet, no one has formulated any exacting definition of the term 'feminist criticism.'"[2] Like Elaine Showalter (see Chapter 1), she distinguishes between those women who write about "men's books" and those women who write about "women's books."[3] Feminist criticism, within those parameters, is as multiple and heterogeneous as are the "methodologies" available for use. She adds: "[These investigations] have allowed us to better define the portrayal of and attitudes toward female characters in a variety of authors and, where appropriate, helped us to expose the ways in which sexual bias and/or stereotyped formulations of women's roles in society become codified in literary texts."[4] This short statement by Kolodny summarizes well, I think, feminist criticism in its most fundamental gesture: an analysis (and critique) of fictional representations of women (characters) in men's and women's writing.

If the "author" is male, one finds that the female destiny (at least in the novel) rarely deviates from one or two seemingly irreversible, dualistic teleologies: monster and/or angel, she is condemned to death (or sexual mutilation or disappearance) or to happy-ever-after marriage. Her plot is not her own, and the classical feminist critic is at her best when drawing the painful analogies between those written plots and their mimetic counterparts in "real life."[5]

2. Annette Kolodny, "Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Literary Criticism,'" *Critical Inquiry* 2:1 (Fall 1975): 75.

3. She also mentions a third category: "any criticism written by a woman, no matter what the subject" (Kolodny, p. 75), but does not pursue it, implying its inadmissibility to any feminist.

4. Kolodny, "Some Notes," p. 75.

5. Now classical feminist readings of the repetition seemingly inherent to male fictions are those of Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett. Recent books in the United States (e.g., Nancy Miller, *The Heroine's Text*) and in France (e.g., Anne-Marie Dardigna, *Les châteaux d'Eros*, and Claudine Herrmann, *Les voleuses de langue*), while based in this gesture, go beyond it through their use of structuralist and poststructuralist reading strategies.

Increasingly, women feminist readers reach the point where they can no longer read "the men." That is, they begin to find the repetition unbearable. This is true of both kinds of male "fictions"—"fiction" and "criticism." This limit, when reached, is particularly relevant in the case of criticism, however, when one realizes that the majority of male critics (in all of their incarnations) seem not to have read (or taken seriously) what feminist criticism has produced. They continue either to ignore gender or else to incorporate it into an untransformed reading system, with an ironic wink of the eye, a guilty humanistic benevolence, or a bold stroke of "male feminism."[6]

This is perhaps one of the reasons why the focus on women writers (and critics) has given such fresh energy to feminist criticism. The analysis of female literary traditions, of the intersections between texts by women and prevailing literary conventions, and of female revisions of literary movements has changed the face of American literary criticism. Focusing on women writers, feminist critics can leave repetition behind, feel that they are charting an unknown territory which, at the same time, is strangely familiar. This mixture of unfamiliarity and intimate, identificatory reading seems, indeed, to be the key to a new creative feminist reading and writing style.

There is no doubt that this change in focus has produced some of the most important Anglo-American feminist criticism to date.[7] The movement toward defining a female tradition (as a female subculture, counterculture), and elaborating a feminist poetics (as hermeneutic) based on writing by women, has been a steady one. In fact, it may be the only way for feminist criticism per se to advance. For example, Kolodny, in the same article, first—*briefly*—refers to certain precautions that must be taken by the feminist critic looking for a uniquely "feminine mode": the avoidance of the nature/culture aporia (as an "unanswerable question"), the necessity

6. See, for example, Annette Kolodny's response to William Morgan's "feminist" objections to her "separatism": "The Feminist as Literary Critic," *Critical Inquiry* 2:4 (Summer 1976): 821–32.

7. Three of the perhaps best known book-length studies on the possibilities of a female literary tradition include: Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: Women's Press, 1963); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own;* and Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic.* Other widely read studies include: Susan Koppelman Cornillon, *Images of Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1972); Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Jacobus, ed., *Women Writing and Writing about Women;* Patricia M. Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Avon, 1972). There are, of course, many others, as well as countless important article-length studies; as a parallel gesture, anthologies, biographies, and histories of more and lesser-known women writers are increasing.

of asking, first, whether women's writing *is* different from men's before asking *how,* and so on. She then, nevertheless, continues *at length:* "All of these precautions notwithstanding [. . .] I would be less than honest if I suggested that I had not already begun to be able to catalogue clearly demonstrable repetitions of particular thematic concerns, image patterns, and stylistic devices among these authors."[8] The core and interest of the article is a survey of those concerns and of how we might begin to document them in women's texts.[9]

There are, however, at least two important questions that have been elided by this dual option on how to proceed—questions at the heart of what interests us here. Within the framework of these two options (produced by retaining the distinction between "male" and "female" authors), one question concerns what might be called the feminist posture toward our cultural canon. This is not a new question by any means, but it has not been adequately posed and its uncertain status seems to be at the center of some of the most radical disagreements—personal, political, professional—among feminist critical schools. Shulamith Firestone once wrote, "It would take a denial of all cultural tradition for women to produce even a true 'female' art."[10] Is this not so as well of feminist criticism, at least at its foundations? The feminist critic's "material" is all of "Man's History" or, at least, that of Western civilization. When working on "the men," feminists are involved, whether they like it or not, in an anti-culture project. From within this position, it is extremely difficult to avoid extremes: either that of methodically and completely rejecting what we may loosely call our patriarchal heritage (an endless and, sometimes, apolitical position) or that of deciding who are the "good guys" and the "bad guys." When working on "the women," one must ultimately decide either that there is some mysterious transhistorical thread linking them all, or that "some are okay" and "others are not." On the other hand, when the criteria are more largely political or ideological and the sex of the author is ignored (or bracketed), one can rarely avoid the dangers of what one critic has called "the obligatory chapter on the 'woman novelist.'"[11] This approach assumes that a woman writer is not writing as a woman but as a "neuter" within a particular political and historical configuration, but that s(he) is just not ultimately as "important" as the men. She remains in her separate chapter with subcategory status—where she has always been.

Further, to the extent that feminist criticism is confined for the most part to the academy, these variations, while certainly not mutually exclusive, do tend to generate a split between the "radical" critic and the "recuperative" critic. The former attempts to remain radically anti-cultural (a difficult posture to maintain in a literature department), while the latter (most often self-consciously) serves an integrative function, supplementing the "core curriculum" with courses on women writers. One might argue that this split exists to the same extent between any politically radical critical stance and the academic norm. Feminist criticism's relationship to the dominant tradition is certainly not unlike that of, say, Marxist criticism. But it also resides strangely elsewhere in that it is unclear, *when gender is accounted for,* what part of that cultural tradition (including Marxism) one should attempt to use as a "positive pole." Only texts by women? Texts by the "okay men"? Those lending themselves to a certain political reading whether written by men or women?

This conflict between feminist reading and the constantly renewed cultural canon operates most acutely, for the feminist critic, at a personal level. First, there is the woman who has chosen to assume a feminist discourse within the academy after having chosen her "field of knowledge." She would not be working in "literature," "art," etc. if it were not positively valorized in her life and, most often, in her class or social milieu. Her "work" comes into conflict with her "life." Second, although clearly not a separate category, there are an increasing number of women, often younger women, who have developed their interest in "literature" and "feminist theory" coextensively. If they continue in their career, their work ("anti-canon") at some point comes into contradiction with their "job" (teaching the canon). They find themselves in the position of the "naughty daughter": tolerated if they can manage to separate their "work" from their "job" (or teach one course "for women"); dismissed if they refuse to rescue patriarchal culture on a daily basis.

The implications of the feminist critic's relationship to men's writing, women's writings, the canon, the academy, etc.—problems deserving much more attention—become even more complex when the focus of

8. Kolodny, "Some Notes," p. 79.

9. Another helpful article, first published in Germany, addresses many of the same questions: Silvia Bovenschen, "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?" *New German Critique,* no. 10 (Winter 1977): 111–37.

I should also mention here, early on, that it is this side of Anglo-American feminist criticism that has been most fervently attacked in France as being humanistic rather than political. *Humanistic* in that it looks for an unknown "specificity of the woman writer" to be given *expression;* whereas it would be *political* to look at the words "specificity," "woman," "writer," each in the structure of its definition, and work to change that structure. See Stephen Heath's "Difference."

10. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1970), p. 159.

11. Miller, *The Heroine's Text,* p. 154.

one's energies is modernity or, more precisely, contemporary thought reflecting on the postmodern gesture. For a modernity presenting a new kind of discursivity on woman and women, a valorization and speaking of woman through gynesis, the feminist postures so briefly surveyed here become even more highly problematized.

The second question needing attention with regard to the dominant modes of Anglo-American feminist criticism is that of ***address***. If it is more than annoying that men's question, addressed to each other, is still primarily "But what do women want?" it sometimes appears that feminist literary critics have still not asked "What do *we* want?"—and the answers to that question depend a great deal upon those with whom we are in dialogue. The question itself is already overdetermined culturally (woman as the suppliant); but the question remains alive, nonetheless, for the public feminist critic.

This question is related to the polemical or prescriptive problem that Kolodny speaks of in the article with which we began. While I strongly agree that one must not prescribe how or what someone should write, I cannot see how or why a feminist critic would want to or be able to "separate political ideologies from aesthetic judgments" while "[continuing] for some time, to be avowedly 'political'" (nor how she could evaluate Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* as "probably the finest novel to come out of World War II").[12] However one feels about Mailer, what is troubling here is the separation of "ideology" not only from "politics," but from something called "aesthetic judgment" as well. If Kolodny is saying that feminist criticism must have a strategy of evaluation rooted in its own time and history in order to avoid idealization, I agree. But if she is implying that the kind of future answers feminists want can be separated from the kind of questions they ask now, I do not. And the answers will in part depend upon whom we address the questions to. That is, to and for whom are feminist critics writing? Is there a desire for men to start writing "about" woman in a "feminist style"?[13] For them to stop writing about women altogether? Do feminist critics want the male critics to read them? Or do they want just women to do so? It is essential to ask these banal and yet surprisingly unanswerable questions because feminist scholarship has reached something of a double bind, raising numerous

12. Kolodny, "Some Notes," pp. 89–90. I continue to use Kolodny's article here only in an exemplary mode—one that is inevitably unfair to one of our finest feminist critics.

13. The expression "feminist style" is that of Josephine Donovan, "Feminist Style Criticism," in *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon. If this is a goal of feminist criticism, it has been reached.

strategical and political problems as well as contributing to the "disagreements" mentioned earlier. The style of any feminist criticism is radically determined by its addressee. The radical feminist today tends to write only to women; the so-called recuperative feminist may write to women, but wants the male critics to overhear; and she needs for them to like what they overhear. Not only does this raise several "spectres of separatism," as Kolodny puts it,[14] but not thinking about whom one is writing to—as men have always done while writing to themselves—is to assume that one's reader is, once again, neuter or the same. One feminist in France, sensitive to this problematic, has developed an interesting strategy: explicitly writing to, addressing men, knowing that women will overhear the men thinking they understand when they do not. Her letter both does and does not reach its destination.[15] This strategy recognizes, at the very least, that the one writing or reading is always more than just one, writing or reading several texts which are not simply pieces of an autonomous whole. And that brings us back to modernity—and to France.

My reader will no doubt have noticed that the questions raised thus far, within a labyrinth of "men," "women," and "neuters" difficult to sort out, have been based for the most part on Anglo-American feminist concerns. While the translation of French theory into English has begun to produce a promising, hybrid mode of feminist inquiry, especially in film criticism, the distinctions between Anglo-American and French critical modes remain remarkably tenacious. The sex of the author, narrative destinies, images of women, and gender stereotypes continue to be the touchstones of feminist literary criticism as it has developed, most particularly, in the United States. When the feminist critic turns to France, she learns that this bedrock of feminist inquiry has been increasingly and rapidly dislodged: there, in step with what are seen as the most important fictional texts of modernity, the "author" (and his or her intentionalities) has disappeared; the "narrative" has no teleology; "characters" are little more than proper name functions; the "image" as icon must be rendered unrecognizable; and the framework of sexual identity, recognized as intrinsic to all of those structures, is to be dismantled.

We will be looking here at this new kind of inquiry where it intersects with what we are calling the fundamental feminist gesture. Of these intersections, three are particularly relevant.

14. Annette Kolodny, "The Feminist as Literary Critic," p. 821.

15. I refer here to Luce Irigaray.

The first concerns the word "author," and more generally the complex question of the speaking subject as evoked in Chapter 1. Lacanian psychoanalysis and Nietzschean and neo-Heideggerian philosophies in France have torn this concept apart. As Michel Foucault reminds us: "None of this is recent; criticism and philosophy took note of the disappearance—or death—of the author some time ago. But the consequences of their discovery of it have not been sufficiently examined, nor has its impact been accurately measured."[16] First, the "I" and the "we" have been utterly confused; the "I" is several, psychoanalysis has shown; and, further, one of the major ruses of Western metaphysics' violence has been the appropriation of a "we" by an imperialistic if imaginary "I" (a whole individual with an interior and exterior, etc.). The notion of the "self"—so intrinsic to Anglo-American thought—becomes absurd. It is not something called the self that speaks, but language, the unconscious, the textuality of the text. If nothing else, there is only a "splendid unanimity," or a plural and neuter "they." Contemporary fiction is cited as that which enacts this anonymity within a lottery of constantly shifting pronouns.

The assurance of an author's sex within this whirlpool of decentering is problematized beyond recognition. The policing of sexual identity is henceforth seen as complicitous with the appropriations of representation; gender (masculine, feminine) is separate from identity (male, female). The question of whether a "man" or a "woman" wrote a text (a game feminists know well at the level of literary history) becomes nonsensical. A man becomes a woman (*devient femme*) when he writes, or, if not, he does not "write" (in the radical sense of *écriture*) what he writes, or, at least, does not *know* what he's writing. It is only a question of signature—of the name of the father—appropriating and reifying an unlocalizable process that is feminine in its essence . . . "And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an *indifference:* 'What difference does it make who is speaking?'"[17] The feminist's initial incredulity faced with this complex "beyonding" of sexual identity is largely based on common sense (after all, *someone* wrote it). But is it not that very sense (sense "common to all," that is, humanism) that the feminist is attempting to undermine? On the other hand, when you problematize "Man" (as being at the foundations of Western notions of the self) to the extent that French thought has, you are bound to find "woman"—no matter who is speaking—and that most definitely concerns feminist criticism.

16. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" trans. Josué N. Harari, in *Textual Strategies,* ed. Josué Harari (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 143.
17. Ibid., p. 160; my emphasis.

The second major intersection of importance is the status and stakes of representation, where the tools of representation (and of feminist criticism)—narrative, characters—are recognized as existing only at the level of the fantasies that have entrapped us. To analyze endlessly those fantasies is to ask for repetition. It is that process which moves beyond, behind, through these fantasies—the enunciation and disposition of *phantasies*[18]—which must be examined. That "process" is attached to no self, no stable psychological entity, no content. And here again, "theory" is presented in step with a certain kind of contemporary "fiction": "Classical narration camouflages the phantasy by the convention of characters, or by multiple logical justifications, which studies of actantial and narrative functions have examined. [Vladimir Propp, A. J. Greimas, etc.] By liberating itself from these conventions, the modern text lays bare the phantasy as produced by the conflictual state at the interior of the subject of the enunciation; the modern text is even specifically destined to present this conflict as such."[19]

This process, rendered tangible in modern works of art and music as well as in writing, in counterpart to form, melody, identity, has always existed, but has been localized (controlled and effaced) to a high degree in the West, within acceptably "feminized" domains, especially "religion" and "literature." Philosophy, as the traditional guardian of reason, has relegated it, most often pejoratively, to that which is "oriental" or "mystical" as opposed to the "theological." To focus exclusively on that process in the West may be only to valorize a kind of primary narcissism as it is located by modern psychoanalysis within the mother-infant dyad; hence the traditional link, for example, between modernist fiction and conservative politics. But to radically *rethink* that process and liberate it beyond fantasy and its static, predictable forms means rethinking and liberating that which has been relegated to Greek *physis*—allowing it to speak, perhaps even making it speak differently, in new spaces, within entirely new structural configurations. As suggested previously, this project has everything to do with woman and thus with women.

The third intersection, perhaps the most problematic of the three, is the radical requestioning of the status of *fiction* and (intrinsically) of *truth* in contemporary thought. One of the oldest of metaphysical problems, this is the newest and most fundamental problem for modernity. First, in what we have literally called fiction:

18. Here I follow Juliet Mitchell and others in maintaining the distinction in English between "fantasies" (conscious) and "phantasies" (unconscious).
19. Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique,* p. 318.

> The end of Beckett's *Molloy* is often given as an example of the status of truth in fiction: "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining." [(London: John Calder, 1959), p. 176]. These utterances are interpreted as typical examples of the unreality of fiction: *writing* would be the positive form ("It is midnight . . . etc."), *reality,* the negative form ("It was not midnight . . ."). However, the negative form is neither more real nor more true than the positive form; both are discourses that mutually presuppose each other, and their reciprocal negation constitutes a single and same mode of language, that is, a *fiction* that is precisely this nonsynthetic reunion of "is" and "is not," opposing and formulating each other all at the same time, and in this way adding to their dichotomy a third "term," undefined, where the subject in process searches for itself.[20]

Contemporary fiction, watching its own writing, has rendered this "third term" particularly visible.

Of course, this heightened awareness of the fictional process is not limited to what is commonly called fiction; as process, it has infiltrated our daily lives in the West, provoking new kinds of crises in legitimation between discourse and reality. For example, through mass media, the fictions of others are lived as never before, and as the fictional process becomes more pervasive, the temptation to rescue written fiction from the immediately depressing multiple fictions of the modern world becomes stronger. While this represents an overall problem for the contemporary critic, I think it touches upon a particularly personal dilemma for feminists: the need felt to protect our written fictional heritage, now in danger of disappearance within a technological society, while at the same time laying bare the logical, ideological, and historical links between that heritage and patriarchal culture.

What does the foregrounding of the fictional process, the radical questioning of the status of truth and fiction in theory (and fiction), imply for feminist criticism? As mentioned before, the feminist critic is traditionally concerned with the relationship between "fiction" and "reality" (the latter perceived, ultimately, as the truth)—with how the two intersect, mime each other, and reinforce cultural patterns. The "theories" of that reality as written by men do not seem to conform to our own—so they must be fictions? And what then is feminist theory's difference? For example, to treat both the so-called theory and fiction under consideration in this study as fictions is to make a gesture assumed by contemporary thought and is also to conform to the feminist impulse.

20. Ibid., pp. 352–53.

What are the implications for feminist criticism—a criticism that points out the fictions of the male imagination as not conforming, or as conforming too painfully, to the *reality* of women's lives in the world—if "truth" and "reality" are, henceforth, radically and irrevocably problematized? Even more pointedly, we might ask: is all of this another male fiction, or is it a larger process that can begin to free women—and men—from Man's Truth?

More important, perhaps, what is it that so disarms (when it does not anger) traditional feminist criticism faced with these new directions in contemporary thought—beyond the Self, Representation, and Man's Truth? Why do these two modes of inquiry, feminism and postmodernism, prove so resistant to each other at these intersections when their projects are so irresistibly linked? If, as suggested in the last chapter, this contemporary thought finds its equal only in the most radical moments of feminist theory, why are these intersections so difficult to negotiate?

In terms of the work privileged in this study, principally that of Lacan, Derrida, and Deleuze, some possible reasons surface.[21] First, just at the historical moment when feminist criticism has found a clear and increasingly acceptable voice, it must confront and is confronted by a group of writers who, again, are thinking and writing in strange new ways. Radical changes in theoretical understanding have required radical changes in vocabulary and style as well as in conceptualization. Feminist theorists tend to see what is actually that understanding's most radical force—its emphasis on language—as mere rhetorical acrobatics, as a new ruse on the part of Reason.

Second, in the writings of those theorists participating in gynesis, woman may become intrinsic to entire conceptual systems without being "about" women—much less "about" feminism. First, this is the case literally, inasmuch as the texts in question are based almost entirely on *men's* writing and, most important, on fiction written by men. For example, a survey of such disparate but logically related writers as Lacan, Derrida, and Deleuze—or Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva—yields remarkably few references to women writers. (To women, yes; one even finds passing

21. Why these particular writers? They all three deal with woman and women explicitly and therefore openly lend themselves to our questions. Other writers, such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, for example, might have done as well; but in their texts, the signifiers woman and women are a very present absence—much more difficult to excavate. In general, the questions posed here are relevant to any modern text in which there is 1) a desire to increase the signifiable; 2) an explicit problematization of gender; and 3) a pronounced ambivalence toward the mother's body.

remarks on women theorists—Lou Andreas-Salomé, Marie Bonaparte, Melanie Klein—but to women writers, no.) Lacan has much advice for women analysts, but only focuses once on a woman writer (Marguerite Duras)—as having understood his theory (without him).[22] Derrida, to my knowledge, never explicitly mentions a woman writer.[23] Deleuze and Guattari refer to Virginia Woolf as having incorporated the process of what they call "becoming woman" (*le devenir femme*) in her writing—but "not to the same extent" as Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, or Henry Miller.[24]

Women writers are even more implausibly absent from the women theorists' texts. While the specificity of the female subject (and even that of a vague, never-named female *writing subject*) is a major question in many of their texts, women writers are not. Cixous, the leading figure of "Psychanalyse et Politique" and its women's bookstore Des Femmes, is perhaps the foremost theoretician in France on the specificity of "feminine writing" (which does not mean writing by a woman). Yet it is not women writers who are the focus of her work. Her focus is on the male poets (Genet, Hölderlin, Kafka, Kleist, Shakespeare) and on the male theoreticians (Derrida, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Lacan, Nietzsche). Because in the past women have always written "as men," Cixous hardly ever alludes to women writers; one recent exception is her reading and public praise of Clarice Lispector (whose narrative is more "traditional" than one might have expected).[25] Irigaray and Kristeva are uniquely concerned with analyzing the male tradition: from Freud to the philosophers to the avant-garde. The women disciples of all of these theorists do sometimes mention contemporary women writers (Michèle Montrelay mentions Chantal

22. "[Elle] s'avère savoir sans moi ce que j'enseigne." Jacques Lacan, "Hommage à Marguerite Duras," in *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Albatros, 1979).

23. Excluding Marie Bonaparte—essential to Derrida's critique of Lacan in "The Purveyor of Truth," *Yale French Studies* 52 (1975)—I can find only three oblique exceptions to this observation. The exceptions are especially oblique in that *a particular woman* is never named in them. They are: a footnote to "Violence and Metaphysics": "On this subject, let us note in passing that *Totality and Infinity* pushes the respect for dissymmetry so far that it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman." (*Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], pp. 320–21); his references to an article by Barbara Johnson in "Envois" (*La carte postale* [Paris: Flammarion, 1980], pp. 162–64); and his dialogue with Barbara Johnson apropos her paper on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in *Les fins de l'homme*, ed. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (Paris: Galilée, 1981), pp. 75–88.

24. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), esp. pp. 55–60.

25. Cf. Hélène Cixous, "L'approche de Clarice Lispector," *Poétique* 40 (November 1979). The reader might also want to refer to her discussion with Michel Foucault on Marguerite Duras: "A propos de M. D.," *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, no. 89.

Chawaf, Marguerite Duras, and Jeanne Hyvrard),[26] but such references are not in any way central to their theses.

The (very American) kind of empirical categorizing of texts in which I have just indulged is perhaps ultimately not very useful. But this lack of textual reference to women should at least be pointed out, given our "intersections." For the second reason that gynesis is not necessarily about women is more abstract: within traditional categories of thought, women can (have) exist(ed) only as opposed to men. Indeed, women, especially feminists, who continue to think within those categories are, henceforth, seen as being men by many of the theorists mentioned thus far. It is perhaps this particular conclusion that renders the work in question the most suspect for feminist theoreticians, for it explicitely negates their own status as readers.

But there is one final reason for the absence of an alliance between traditional feminism and modernity: the theoretical writing in question does not enjoy a valorized position in the vast majority of French and American critical circles, while feminism, especially as linked to women's studies in the United States, is one of the few viable critical discourses around. Ironically, this situation would seem to be due in part to the "feminine status" of the texts of modernity themselves. These intensive explorations of gynesis, especially by male theorists, have themselves been genderized as feminine and treated accordingly; the connotative threads that make up the actual fabric of gynesis have problematized the gender and hence critical handling of these writers' own texts.

All of the questions presented here hover at the very limits of representability. Can or should feminism be something other than an attention to the *representation* of women (in several senses of the word)? If gynesis as process has most certainly always been marginally at work in the West, especially in religious and literary texts, in what ways are its more visible links to modernity subject to feminist analysis? Is feminist theory as a search for the female self (most characteristic of Anglo-American criticism) in complete contradiction with the, strictly speaking, antifeminist insistence in France on the liberating potentiality of losing the self? Might there be a way to imagine a new kind of feminist hermeneutics able to give up its quest for truth; capable of self-reflection on its own complicity with

26. Michèle Montrelay, *L'ombre et le nom* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977). One feminist critic has devoted a major study to a woman writer: Marini, *Territoires du féminin avec Marguerite Duras*.

inherited systems of representation? If feminism is to remain radical and not become but patchwork for a patriarchal fabric ripped apart by the twentieth century, what kinds of alliances will it be able to form with the most radical modes of thought produced by that century? These are indeed a set of historical intersections.

For Modern Man does seem to be crossing some kind of Great Void. There is a Track to be followed and he has been told that the map to the Oasis is inscribed on her Body. Is it a question, as with the Biblical Zachary, of reconstructing the Empty Temple evoked by Goux[27] as but a prelude to a new Messianic Era? Or does Zachary know that, deaf and blind, his Quest is already historically amiss, and that, always already Oedipalized, he would not recognize the Image of his Father at *any* crossroads? Most important, is Track to accompany him in his quest? If yes, in what way? And if no, where is it that she would like to go instead? What will she ultimately make of this unexpected twist in the patriarchal story? Perhaps . . .

> It was to be the last time he saw her.
> Are you thinking of going back to Blitlu, he asked?
> Can I drop you here . . . I don't want to run into your Uncle, she said.
> My uncle . . . How do you know my uncle?
> He's everybody's uncle, she said, condescendingly.[28]

27. See Chapter 1, above.
28. Abish, "Crossing the Great Void," p. 107.

3

Crises in Legitimation: Crossing the Great Voids

> The legitimate renunciation of a certain style of causality perhaps does not give one the right to renounce all etiological demands.
>
> Jacques Derrida

In *The Postmodern Condition,* Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern as "incredulity with regard to the master narratives."[1] He goes on to say that this lack of belief, this suspicion in the West, is no doubt due to scientific progress, but that—on the other hand—our accelerating scientific progress has already presupposed a lack of belief. According to Lyotard, we cannot possibly know the origin or the historical why of this incredulity, we can only *describe* its present manifestations, the places where it appears most consistently: "to the obsolescence of the master narrative device of legitimation corresponds notably the crisis of metaphysical philosophy, and that of the institution of the university which depends upon it. The narrative function loses its foundations, the great hero, the great perils, the great quests, and the great goal."[2] Lyotard here emphasizes two such places, one literal, the other figurative, each dependent upon the other: the university and the narratives of a certain philosophy. The crisis in legitimation in the West is necessarily a crisis in the status of *knowledge*—traditionally, the ability to decide what is true and just—functions that have remained inseparable up to the present. According to Lyotard, any attempt to attribute this crisis in legitimation to

1. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne,* p. 7.
2. Ibid., pp. 7–8.