

French Feminism

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A new critical concern?

We would like here to present some features of a critical literary awareness that began to be manifest amongst French writers in the post war period. This particularly relates to the coming of age amongst women, and their increasingly critical perspective on prevalent cultural attitudes. The application here applies not only to the contemporary scene, but also to features of society over the whole course of human history. The writers of this sort of new wave treat of how women write in actuality, but also of how they might write, potentially. Relationships would be transformed, and so would the equilibrium between males and females. A feature of this wave is that the authors seek to involve the total personality, body and mind together. It involves specifically the position of gender in creativity. What part do women play here, driven by their specific situation and consciousness, and what role might they assume, fulfilling a potential that is undoubtedly there? One of the features of the contemporary scene in French letters is the growing prominence of women writers who dwell on the quintessential character of writing by women, composing their own work through their own specific experience, aspirations and modulations. The pinpointing of this specificity involves an investigation into the nature of feminine language, its source in the social status of the female, and the historical relationship of the two sexes, and the political alignment within the social and historical context. Inevitably, all this has changed perceptibly and even dramatically over the last fifty years or so. And in the course of this time frame, the roles have shifted a great deal in the Western world. Women writers in France have particularly been a driving force in probing the usages and seeking a description of the situation as it currently pertains, as well as whatever lies behind those usages, historically and unconsciously. There is also inevitably a critical thrust behind the analysis, as well as a programme. This however is extremely complex, and takes on divergent forms, as the analysis varies so markedly as between one author and another, even within the radical feminist camp itself.

Simone de Beauvoir

The iconic figure from whose work French feminism in the post-war era derives is the writer philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). It was she who articulated in greatest detail and most accurately the anger of the modern woman in the face of long standing historical positioning of the respective roles of the two sexes. That, in her view, men were regarded and indeed acted as the master sex is indicated by the very title

of her major work, *Le deuxième sexe*.¹ There is not an equal balance and mutually agreed distribution of functions, but a kind of master/slave relationship.

In the first volume, she sets out her objective as the correction of misapprehensions in relation to the definition of the subject, which, put in its boldest form, can be summed up as putting the question: what is a woman? Traditionally, woman is seen merely in relation to man, i.e. a person of male gender, the negative of man in this sense. On the other hand, man is defined as the generality of human, and is not seen necessarily in terms of a specified gender. Man is the norm; woman is the other.² She spells this out from the outset at the beginning of the second volume of her major work: 'La destinée que la société propose traditionnellement à la femme c'est le mariage.'³ She is aware of the considerable changes in the status of the married woman over the previous decades in Western societies. However, Only in the 18th.century, she says, did some notable male thinkers, such as John Stuart Mill and Diderot, argue for the full humanity of women. But these were exceptional cases. What she would like to investigate here is how the present situation has been reached.. For example, the word "female" itself is a pejorative term, confining to prefixed limits, and submitting women to a subservient role, not allowing them as independent individuals, to glorify in their sexuality. And the institution of marriage is still viewed quite differently by the two sexes. For the woman, marriage is the central event of her life, beyond career and material achievement, whereas for the man, this is certainly not the case. The woman is still man dependent. De Beauvoir asserts this despite her awareness of variant historical and geographical circumstances. Although she accepts that the two sexes are interdependent, they are unevenly balanced in terms of influence and power. The woman is generally the passive object, reliant on the good graces of the male subject and the pressures of a male led society. It is she who is given to the man. She, for example, is not as free as he is to take a lover. She can only acquire a modicum of such free action by being married: '...si elle voulait prendre un amant, il fallait d'abord qu'elle se mariât.' (17) The unmarried woman is seen as incomplete, seeking the final touch of completion at the hands of a male.

What de Beauvoir seeks in reparation of an ongoing and difficult imbalance is mutuality, leading to genuine equality. She quotes Marx in his search for a model of true fraternity for the whole of society in an ideal relationship between man and woman. She would search for liberty through the resolution of natural differences, which would lead to what she understands as Marxian fraternity: 'C'est au sein du monde donné qu'il appartient à l'homme de faire triompher la règle de la liberté; pour remporter cette suprême victoire il est entre autres nécessaire que par-delà leurs différenciations naturelles, hommes et femmes affirment sans équivoque leur fraternité.' (504). It is with this hope based on a reorientation of gender positioning that de Beauvoir closes this massive opus. The whole book is in effect a portrait of a world in which the population is divided into two sexes of approximately equal number, who are approximately level in ability, talent and aspiration, who are nevertheless grossly disparate in achievement, influence and control. This to the extent that the name of the one sex, man (l'homme) stands in for humanity altogether. Clearly, this is unjust, and must be corrected. If things were to turn out this way, with the achievement of the aspiration as envisaged, there could come about a world with a built in framework of genuine liberty and fraternity.

The later work

This is exemplified in the radical work, theoretical and fictional of such as Hélène Cixous (1937-), In her extended essay, *Le Troisième Corps*⁴, for example, she describes a situation of the woman, entwined with the other;. Her knowledge such as it is, is the knowledge of terror, as well as the experience of eternity. In her novel, *Souffles*⁵, the narrator is totally involved with her lover, and can tolerate no-one other than him: ‘...il n’y a pas d’autre pénis que ton pénis ce qui ne l’empêche pas tandis que je le tête, d’étinceler dans mon con...’ (16) This sensation would continue ‘...au moment où je le vois, brandi au dessus de moi, prêt à s’abattre sur ma poitrine.’ Yearns for something beyond the physical, but ‘...à ses sources... je veux rompre les vrais liens...’ (69) She moves from first to third person: ‘...sa main vient se poser sur ma fesse; il met sa main sur ma fesse, allonge le bras pour m’êtreindre les flancs, à ma stupefaction’ (72) As we see, the language is totally uninhibited; the female rejoices in her own, separate and legitimated experience of sexuality. Love is her life, the source of her actual breathing capacity: ‘C’est là que je le retrouve, l’amour mon souffle, qui naturellement m’enveloppe et me rythme.’ (104) My flower opens out. This can also exist between women: ‘Entre deux rives d’une femme et entre d’une même nature, et entre deux femmes d’un même amour...’ (211) To whom does one reveal the secret; not to me, but to love (215). There is a longing for what is always evasive. Her final sentence: ‘...pour aller voir encore plus loin plus près...’ (223).

She combines the genres of fiction and analysis of feeling in the novel, *La fiancée juive de la tentation*.⁶ Paris, 1995. which is a speech addressed to love in both first and third person. The female speaker is besotted with her male addressee: ‘la jouissance de ma jouissance étrangère. On ne peut pas rêver plus pénétrant.’ (60). She feels that she has been “blinded” and “deafened” by her obsession. (11). The language in which she expresses her feelings is explosive: ‘...mon doux ami, tel que tu fais jadis dans nos premières amours, je reconnus tes lèvres avides de jeune homme et moi aussi j’avais mes lèvres farouches...’ (11). She also reduces herself to being his plaything and subject, totally at his disposal, like a mouse to a cat: Je suis ta souris, chat divin.’ (15) I But then they conduct separate marriages: ‘Back to the third person account:’... ils ne se mariaient pas simultanément, on allait se marier, séparément, elle seule avec lui sur elle...’ (156) But she also seeks freedom, presumably from the coils of passion. The book concludes with the rediscovery, on the part of the “protagonist”, with her mother, who, it seems, has come back to her after a prolonged absence: ‘Alors elle m’est revenue. Un beau matin que je n’en y... pas, parce que j’avais fait tant patience et allégeance, parce que je ne comptais plus les chances ni les souffrances, soudain elle s’est trouvée là, où je ne la cherchais pas. Dans le classeur sur l’étagère, qu’elle n’avait pas quitté, elle était là. J’ai reçu mon visa pour la deuxième fois.’

The book, *Portrait du soleil*.⁷ was published twice over a period of 26 years, also gives us the feeling procedure of the protagonist, conveying a blind love followed by a more sober assessment in objective terms: ‘...nous ne sommes plus aveugles, nous sommes les inconnus, les plus heureux de l’univers, entre Loi et Nécessité.’ (82) But there is a contradiction to the earlier assessment of sobriety: ‘Nous avons été un

instant foudroyés, les plus perdus des inconnus.’ (83) He indeed is the sun. But the total enslavement to the sun who is her beloved, also confirms her being as a woman: ‘...je suis une femme parce que j’ai grand désir de toi.’ (176) She merges the identities of sun and her man: ‘Lui. Le soleil.’ (181)

Luce Irigaray (1932-), in her ecstatic work, *Être deux*.⁸ also finds the individuality of her protagonist in the perception of the loved one as being separate and therefore, on a deep level, unknowable: ‘N’est-ce parce que je sais que tu es?’ (23) This is also an address, I to Thou. She asks whether it is not the fact of being the unknown that allows them to be two, separate, although love is ‘...semblable à une flamme, à une écume, monte alors vers le Seigneur la consommation de soi.’ (27) They are together but separate: ‘Là où nous sommes contraints à la fusion, découvrir l’écart.’ (32)

Irigaray works towards a theory of ‘écriture féminine’, which would offset what she sees as the phallogocentrism of history, which has placed the male at the center as a universal referent. This would restore the balance, and serve as a welcome corrective, also reflecting reality..

In *J’aime à toi*.⁹ Grasset. Paris, 1992. she enters the debate around sexual differentiation, so close to her heart. The discussion was conducted under the title: ‘L’Europe des nouveaux droits’ in Boulogne, 30 May 1989. The title of her book here itself indicates the space perceived between ‘me’ and ‘you’, between the man and the woman, ‘There is an insertion of a preposition, and she says ‘...je ne connaîtrai jamais de manière absolue.’ What the author describes as ‘la différence sexuelle’, is a given. Women and men are different, separate; they have different needs, and inhabit different spaces. So both must be considered separately. The objective to be taken up explicitly is the place that love occupies within this framework, of necessity taking account of the space separating the pair. Hegel, in his great work, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, cap. vi; argues that the basic situation that we find is that there is a lack of ethical relationship between the sexes, that within the “work” of love, the couple are in opposition, and this generally tends to favour the male: ‘le désir sexué, masculin, doit devenir désir pour soi, en tant qu’homme, et pour l’autre; la femme.’ (55) To be universal the male must also become a man: ‘Mais appartenir à un genre, représente un universel qui existe avant moi. Je dois l’accomplir dans mon destin particulier.’ (72) Men are restricted by a patriarchal mythology, as though they have their origin in in gender only, the male. He must become a man. On the other hand, women are aware that they derive from two sexes. (73)

All descriptions of civilization are adapted to the masculine subject. But, we hold, argues the author, there is a need of both. Now what is needed is not the typically masculine notion of mastery (maîtrise) over the natural world, but spiritual harmony with it. (80) It is within the power of woman to find the path of mediation between the sexes, respectful of the difference between them. The most universal quest should be for the “I” to become “we”.

Women have to discover their own identity, an identity not formed, secondarily, by relationship to men: ‘Nous restons dans l’horizon où l’homme est le modèle du genre humain, il y a des femmes empiriques ou des entités naturelles sans identité propre.’

(111) A distinction may be perceived between masculine and feminine use of language. The feminine is more interactive, personal. The masculine: ‘...il y a souvent, me semble-t-il, une perte d’individuation. (147). As far as verb tenses are concerned, men use the preterite more, whereas women opt more for the present and future (148). Men: ‘...les hommes utilisent le langage pour designer la réalité ou produire et établir leurs vérités plus que pour communiquer entre eux.’ (159) Men tend to move towards the universal, the indirect. Thus the formula, “j’aime à toi” rather than “je t’aime”. The difference lies in the indirection: ‘Le “à” est la garantie de l’indirection’, the sign of there being two separate parties. (171) “I” and “you” can become “we”, but not as a collective (162). We have an obligation to become, to grow into our sex, ‘...devenir son genre constitue aussi le moyen du retour à soi.’ (167) We can accept our physiological makeup, but our identity is our to construct. (168) “Je suis née femme, mais je dois encore devenir cette femme que je suis par nature.’ (168) The two sexes cannot share the same intentionality, but they can both adopt a stance which renders these intentionalities compatible. This is in fact ‘...construire une politique de la différence.’ (176) The objective should be to connect ‘...les paroles à la vie’, and to establish the necessary “liens” (189) The paradox is that is just the difference recognized that can draw the two sexes together. Irigaray’s interpretation of what the virgin Mary represents is equality between man and woman: ‘le logos devient dialogique’ (192); both sexes are ‘...sujets de genres différents’ (197). They must abandon the impersonal “on” in order to meet up with a real person. This can be achieved by faithfulness to one’s own, which then takes on meeting the other as a perceived reality. The masculine and feminine are very different, but they complement each other in our given reality. However, the reality of the difference does not impose a restriction on each. The perception of the total, the universal, is accessible by virtue of that universal being present within us all, if only we reach out to the other’s separateness and authentic nature..

Not only women

The search for a reoriented balance has not been confined to female writers, as we see in the case of Roland Barthes (1915-1980). As a male, Barthes self evidently adopts a different perspective, and does not dwell on the historical imbalance between the sexes. In any case, his primary concern is the book, the text, and the relation of the source of the satisfaction that it can render in terms of erotic sense. In *Le Plaisir du Texte*¹⁰, he tries to discover the source of the pleasure, and the distinction between “plaisir” and “jouissance”. Specific to Modernity is a duality: ‘...un moyen d’évaluer les oeuvres de la modernité: leur valeur venant de leur duplicité.’ (14) The erotic lies in the place where the clothing ends: ‘L’endroit le plus érotique d’un corps n’est-il pas là où le vêtement baille?’ (17) What is the location of that pleasure? ‘Le plaisir du texte, c’est le moment où mon corps va suivre ses propres idées – car mon corps n’a pas les mêmes idées que moi.’ (27) Plaisir is on the surface: ‘le plaisir est dicible, la jouissance ne l’est pas.’ (31). Quotes Lacan: ‘...la jouissance est interdite à qui parle, comme tel, ou encore qu’elle ne puisse être dite, qu’en entre les lignes.’ (32) The character of jouissance: ‘...texte impossible...hors plaisir, hors critique, sauf être atteint par autre texte de

jouissance.’ (33) Furthermore, it contains ‘...la perte abrupte de la socialité...’ (54). There are extreme depths and a secret life. Language necessarily derives from another time, so it has to be fought. (55) What is its significance? ‘C’est le sens en ce qu’il est produit sensuellement. (82) Interpretation, as a process, constitutes ‘...la place de la jouissance.’ (83) Behind, there is total bodily expression that builds ‘...une esthétique du plaisir textuel.’ (88) The last words of the book: ‘...ça jouit.’ (89) Barthes does not explicitly locate this “jouissance” exclusively in the feminine domain. But his line of argument moves very close to what some of the authors locate as the female domain.

A peculiarly female domain?

This question has arisen by for example, Diana Holmes, in her work, *French Women’s Writing, 1848-1994*¹¹, writes that what she calls *Écriture féminine* (feminine writing), a term coined by Cixous, indicates the specific nature of women’s writing. However, the aspiration to equality implies marketing approach. There is a different rhythm, circular rather than linear, says Cixous. This line is taken even further, placing the feminist argument on a sacral plane, by Annie Leclerc (1940-2006), in her work, *Parole de Femme*.¹² Love is our religion, but there is no church, and it has to be conducted one to another. This is a plaint against the domination, by control of the “word” of women by men. Women have to find their own voice, and this voice now has to be invented. Hitherto, men have taken control, and what is known as the “world” is on fact the world of men: ‘Le monde est la parole de l’homme. L’homme est la parole du monde.’ (9) The word for “man”, “homme” with a lower case h, pretends to assume the place of “Man”, Homme, with a capital initial letter, assuming the role of humanity as a whole. But, says Leclerc, this is wholly mistaken, as the word for “man” as used by the male is indeed delimited to the male sex. Unfortunately, human history has fallen in with this adopted assumption, and now women have to find their own language, and, by making it their own, also embrace the whole of humanity. The woman has been complicit in this very specific and different form of domination, and it is this area of cooperation with the man that has too often disguised the reality of this domination/submission. Were it not for this complicity, this domination could never have taken place, and so it is that the author can address her female readership in a plea for them all to discover their authentic being, and voice it unambiguously. The author argues that the sexes, through their own bodies and acquires attitudes, become different from each other. Little girls, unlike little boys, are sexless in nature. For physiological reasons, as their own sex is out of sight and beneath the surface, girls develop in the direction of sexual awareness later than do boys, and then they discover it negatively and with repugnance. (63) Puberty and sexual awareness are not greeted by them with at the process of maturation. The author then moves from this generalization to her own experience of this process. Her first sexual encounter was, for herself, dreadful (literally, full of dread), and could be imaged as a cow going to the slaughter, accepting it as inevitable, as she had no power to withstand it. He dares to move from this piece of autobiography to a generalizing observation: ‘Si je m’amusais à faire de la psychologie différentielle des homes et des femmes, c’est d’abord ça que je dirais, les femmes sont de mauvaise

humeur.' Women have this 'bad mood' (mauvaise humeur) because inwardly they feel hostility towards the outside world, as though they have been robbed of happiness: '...les hommes nous ont vole: le bonheur.' (77). Leclerc develops the theme in a later work, *Hommes et femmes*¹³, where she writes in the first person, that love fails through fault of the other not herself. She seeks an ;'entrée dans l'amour'. And 'Je donnerai lieu à l'amour.' (7) She is totally obsessed with the subject. She declares '...la gloire de féminine' (13), of which the basis is 'jouissance' (14), the term already adopted for this higher form of a more rounded pleasure. The feminine affirms the masculine, and that is the source of male hostility. The feminine derives from a source independent of power, not death; it is nearest to life. Eros is the source of all ecstatic promise and also despair: 'C'est Eros j'en suis sûre, qui a crié par la bouche des femmes.' (20) She reacts to de Beauvoir's rejection of female sexuality, to which the latter attributes the root of female servitude. Here, love is the basis for access to God (24). The difference '...ouvre par chacun d'eux, chacune d'eux, l'espace merveilleux du désir.' (25) The author has to make it clear that women are in a different position from other subordinate groups, ethnic, racial, colonized, disabled or whatever. They differ in that they seem to be complicit in their relative status. It is precisely this fact that gives solace to the male, and can justify his stance as well as his own sense of rectitude in this regard.: 'Il se sent dénué de responsabilité dans cette affaire puisque c'est elle qui s'est soumise.' (41) She becomes a partner in what is after all a duet. But there remains an unequal balance in the couple. It is she who has been sacrifice to the man, and it is she who is servile and subsidiary, self abnegating and relatively silent. She also has to be young and beautiful, not in order to comply with her own picture of self and to satisfy her own authentic needs and thrust, but in order to give the man his pleasure and to act out his perceived needs. (45) The author would propose an alternative value system, derived from her own being, and it is this that she must excavate. This value system is based on another scale altogether: '...d'autres valeurs que les siennes.' (48) The value system of the male is based on satisfying his drives. Her value system though would not be based on dividing up the world, but rather on a search for wholeness, truth, and acceptance of a totality. The world according to men is not a half truth; it is not a truth at all. The function of the woman is to seek wholeness.

Chantal Chawaf (1943-) plays with the merging of functions in her quasi autobiographical novel, *L'ombre*¹⁴. This is told primarily from the point of view of Jennifer, 25,, though in the third person. She is studying Russian in Baltimore under her tutor Dr. Wörther, and makes extensive reference to Dostoievski. The setting is early 90s. She is in the process of breaking up from her fiancé, Hans. The principal image, central to the text and that sets mood, is the shade, l'ombre: 'L'ombre exerçait sur lui une attraction inexplicable.' (39) Politics cannot be excluded from literature, some students hold, though their tutor argues that Dostoievski's position is polyphonic. The mood is set by the silence of the "shade".(102). That is the depression that settles over her, and the question asked is whether the inter personal rupture is a form of death. The prose tries to capture this feeling. Jennifer's friend Judy moves her away from this, pleading that '...nous avons la vie devant nous.' (124) She now prays to the life instinct (instinct

de vie). It is: 'la vie retrouvant les mots' (127). The word will redeem! The closing words: '...la vie ne pouvait pas mourir.' (128).

But not only are the genres merged, with fact and fiction obliquely intertwined, but her view of mind and body are also inextricably linked and mutually interdependent. Michaël Bishop in a preface to a study of Chawaf's work, writes: 'l'oeuvre de Chantal Chawaf persiste à creuser avec vigueur et génie la logique pulsionnelle de nos corps, les complexes ambiguïtés de nos psyches, les options qui restent face aux contraintes qui pèsent.'¹⁵ Chawaf is a prolific writer who seeks to take the pulse of the unconscious as much as the conscious. (9) Interestingly, she also sees herself as breaking ranks with the predominant feminist thrust in search of a universalist ethic: 'Mon écriture vit avec ma vie, elle vit de ma vie, donc elle évolue sans cesse.'¹⁶ She is determined not to isolate her writing from her whole life, as well as to merge the conscious into the unconscious, and her body into her mind.

The flight that she takes from a spiritual detachment is illustrated by Chawaf's semi fantastic fictional reverie, *Le soleil et la terre*.¹⁷ This work is set with a freely reconstructed ancient Assyrian setting as background chorus, told in the first person by a passionate woman. The quotations used, as from Assyrian annals, fill in a historical gap to the contemporary Middle Eastern life as lived by the narrator heroine. She, as is the case with the other main character, is given no name, and the plot, such as it is, is subsidiary to the tone. It luxuriates in the joy of rich colour, described design, pattern of erotic life as contrasted with the violence of the world outside, whose king's annals are quoted. The murder, thus the death beyond makes a vivid contrast with the force within, and the landscape itself merges with the contact between the bodies and the substance substitutes. There is a detached description of the varieties of intense erotic joy. The plot itself sinks into ecstasy: 'Sa chaleur faisait fondre des morceaux de soleil, s'emparait de mes fruits, il se liquéfait sur moi, il rallongeait les nuits, je m'ouvrais au feu liquide qui se formait de mon corps mêlé au sien.' (34) The title of the book indicates its attachment to nature, to the external world as well as to its sensual delight, and thence, to the world within of the narrator. This is all hungrily erotic, and also envelops and subsumes the desires of the partner. Pain and pleasure jostle against each other, and they alternate almost imperceptibly, though necessarily. Her lover's pleasure is so painful for her ("me"), but that was his urgent need. (31). She saw her role as satisfying that need, and that was part of her own pressure on herself.. The whole book is a soliloquy to ecstasy, self absorbed, but also shared and joint. She reaches into the innermost recesses of herself by the imaginative effort of reaching out into the passion of the other too. The extended, undulating sentences employed in the book match the vibrancy and strength of the feeling sought. She contrasts man-made culture, knowledge and rational science, with love, tenderness, and sensibility, all of these emotions leading to abandonment. (103) The often abhorred feeling of jealousy is here recognized in her own demands for the total possession of her lover. (104) So uncharacteristic of the stereotype of the feminist, the heroine here plays the part of the female passively waiting to be taken by the all powerful, thrusting male. (109) It is the sheer physical,

from whatever may be the source, that nourishes. This source achieves its purposes in the physical manifestation of its power. She addresses her man as the spring of her life: '...cette ultime nourriture du tu es.' (117) We have here the most extreme expression of abasement on the part of a woman, accepting the overweening attraction and domination of the man, and her acceptance of it. This sort of passion is matched by her delight in the physical contact with her little girl, by the touch of the child: '...j'ai besoin de la toucher.' (169) We conclude with the source of light, indicated from the outset, the light of the sun. The heart lights up, as, to develop her point of comparison, the earth is lit up by the day. That is where the sun emerges.

Towards the masculine stance

For an alternative posture deriving from a radical feminist writer, also a declared lesbian, we have Monique Wittig (1935-2003) in her novel, *Les guérillères*.¹⁸ The principal character is the grammatical third person, known as 'on', i.e. a neutral and unnamed other. The women here are in an ecstatic daze, drugged, reminiscent of *The Bacchae* by Euripides. The ceremonies revolve around the death of Adèle Dorge. Now they want to break with the past: 'Elles disent qu'il faut alors cesser d'exalter les vulves. Elles disent qu'elles doivent rompre le dernier lien qui les rattache à une culture morte. Elles disent que tout symbole qui exalte le corps fragmenté et temporaire, doit disparaître.' (102) War is raging with the army of men. Time will come when revenge will be taken; man has invented 'your' history: 'Mais le temps vient où tu peux écraser le serpent sous ton pied, le temps vient où tu peux crier, dressée, pleine d'ardeur et de courage, le paradis est à l'ombre des épées.' (159) The war ends in liberty for the women; '...nous entonnâmes alors la marche funèbre, un air lent, mélancolique et pourtant triomphant.' (208). This is the culmination and conclusion of the book.

Wittig had been one of the founders of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes*, and on August 26, 1970, she put flowers under the Arc de Triomphe to honour the wife of the Unknown Soldier, this symbolic action was considered to be the founding event of French feminism.¹⁹ But she also denied the existence of a specific and restricted women's literature, saying that the word 'woman' only has meaning in heterosexual systems of thought...Lesbians are not women. (1978).²⁰ So, despite the fact that the characters in her work are female, she, as a declared Lesbian, does not see them as a separate sex, but as people. She was the kind of feminist who sought to abolish gender categories.

The Shift

Commentary changes the nature of its concerns and the manner of its address as it follows in the wake of larger historical patterns. The position of the relationship between the sexes has moved as has the emancipation of women in so many areas, the change in the nature of employment, educational opportunity, and the distribution of family responsibility. So great has been the transformation over a half century or so, from the second half of the twentieth century that it would indeed be surprising if the nature of discourse on the matter of female writing had not also seen a considerable shift.

A feature of interest in this literature is the combination of genres to the extent that we sometimes find it hard to make the distinction between fiction and essay, between the writer addressing the reader in her own voice and the creation of characters and situations beyond herself. This seems to be an authorial device, both letting us into the recesses of her thinking and feeling world, and the supposed exploration of the other.

A large issue dividing the feminists both synchronically and diachronically is whether women should be seeking to be the equal of men and thus making a bid against the historical injustice of their unfair status, so lowly and predictable, and those who would rather stake out a distinctive position. This latter asserts the difference between the genders, thus raising the distinctive character of feminism, We have seen here a range of approaches, both of which assert the need for a corrective, whether in the direction of liberation according to a masculinising model, or in the apparently opposite path.

Portraying the condition of women as a subordinated species is basically problematic. They clearly do not constitute a minority, so they have the potential power of their numbers. There has also been, on the whole, no overt attempt at suppression by the collective body of men. So we are not dealing here with the common notion of oppression. Women also do not, in the majority, express widespread discontent with their lowly status. So there must have been collusion, whether explicit or implicit. Now there are basically two possible directions for the women's movement. Both accept the essential division between man and woman. Who after all could fail to do just that? But one possible path can lead to the aspiration towards blurring the distinction, in political, social, economic and cultural terms. In an overall sense, this is the demand for equality, which seems natural, self-evident and reasonable. The other path leads to an assertion and even a glorification of the distinction determined by nature, and then demanding a new and specifically feminine tone, a woman's voice. This would imply an alternative life for the gender as a whole, and then for all humanity too, which, in this view, would also lead to an improved relationship between the sexes, and a resolution of mutuality. All streams of Feminism not only recognize the essential division that has come about in their specificity as women, but also that there has been a deep historical injustice, which needs to be made good. Of course, this injustice, which has roots deep in the story of human experience, continues into the present, although it may take on a different form. But the way in which this might be repaired is still problematic. It can be either achieved, or maybe facilitated, either by an attempt at rapprochement, or by further separation. This could lead even to a situation in which women create and then narrate their own distinctive stories, without necessary reference to the other (the first?) sex.

Notes and References

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