

FEMINIST EXPLORATIONS: LIFE UNDER PATRIARCHY

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Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms. An Anthology*, Amherst: the University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, pp. 279.

New French Feminisms embodies a long awaited attempt to introduce to the English-speaking world the spirit of the current French feminist endeavours. It is an assembly of poems, essays, sentences and fragments meandering over its chosen terrain — the analysis of women's oppression, and the way to liberation. The pieces reiterate and condemn, conflict with and support, one another. It should not come as a surprise that the editors, Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, have made no attempt to make a logical *tour de force*, to present a unified (and thus simplified) statement; in short, to recapitulate a phallogentric intellect. The collection is presented as a literary *jouissance*,¹ a fact that is explicitly acknowledged.

Women's *jouissance* carries with it the notion of fluidity, diffusion, duration. It is a kind of potlatch in the world of orgasms, a giving, expending, dispensing of pleasure without concern about ends or closure. One can easily see how the same imagery could be used to describe women's writing. (P. 36)

Words — weighted and self-important — are not used to encode, label and then reconstruct in some new manageable form, so that all that was alien has been appropriated and poses no more threat to the phallic sovereignty. Instead this book is a summation of surprises — words liberating, evoking, tiptoeing respectfully — an exploration of the gaps and *lacunae* that are covered over by the Symbolic order.

The various and disparate writings in the volume become multi-tentacled explorations that probe the hidden corners of women's lives; a woman's fear to speak in public, the silent speech of the hysterical symptom, the joy of pregnancy. It is in such subterranean moments that the fragmented specters of an undescribed, unelucidated female discourse are evoked. Unelucidated

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because they constitute the very *lacunae* where a masculine language and order differentiates itself. The pleasures, the sensations and experiences that are female are only to be discerned in the gaps of discourse. In language and in history they are invisible and inaudible, conspicuous in their absence.

Freud, and Lacan following him, have given testimony to the symbolic place of women. They have written the *mythology* of our discourse. They have laid bare for all to see that woman is the one without, the one that must accommodate and pay homage to the phallus. She is constituted as a mutilated subject in the name of that omnipresent signifier — the phallus (God, the Absent Father). Let there be no further pretense of the sexual neutrality of the social discourse, no denial that this discourse is predicated ontologically at the very moment when masculine authority intrudes.

What does it mean for a sexed human being to live in a phallogocentrically ordered universe?² *New French Feminisms* contains analyses and strategies that can be viewed in the light of this question. While the analyses differ, and the strategies conflict, it is the nature of the problematic given voice to, that makes the text a valuable contribution to both the feminist movement and to the field of psychoanalytic theory. It has fallen to feminism to disentangle, explore and elucidate the very structures and practices of patriarchy. In the realm of academic discourse, the frequent use of the term patriarchy has only served to naturalize it, to make it an everyday word that no one need any longer define — one more instance of the insidiousness of language. “The challenging of this solidarity of logocentrism and phallogocentrism,” Hélène Cixous writes:

has today become insistent enough — the bringing to light of the fate which has been imposed upon woman, of her burial — to threaten the stability of the masculine edifice which passed itself off as eternal-natural; by bringing forth from the world of femininity reflections, hypotheses which are necessarily ruinous for the bastion which still holds the authority. (P. 92)

New French Feminisms offers a tentative but definite attempt to wrest language from the realm of the “natural,” to claim the Symbolic as an object of investigation. In so doing the book relocates these once immutable structures to the domain of the *man-made*, a domain susceptible to the forces of change.

Herein lies the “newness” of the French feminists — a newness that signifies a break with the past, recapitulating Freud’s rupturing of the “I.” It is a break that Courtivron and Marks liken to a fourth narcissistic wound (following the “decenterings” of Copernicus, Darwin and Freud), a dethroning of the phallus as the prime signifier in the Symbolic order. The new feminists do not hesitate to defile the phallic. They write about the male preoccupation with

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erection, and the size of the penis, their fear of death and their narcissistic quests for immortality. In fact it is this very feminist *negativity* that becomes a revolutionary weapon, a weapon that elicits what is ordinarily repressed.

With the channelling of feminist activity towards the realm of culture, writing is designated as a revolutionary tool. As women find their tongues, speak their own discourse, they infiltrate and shatter the phallogentric chain:

If, however, "replete" words (*mots pleins*) belong to men, how can women speak "otherwise," unless, perhaps, we can make audible that which agitates within us, suffers silently in the holes of discourse, in the unsaid, or in the non-sense. ". . . [Women] say, the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated. Whatever they have not laid hands on, whatever they have not pounced on like many-eyed birds of prey, does not appear in the language you speak." (Xavière Gauthier, P. 163)³

Over and over in the text comes the exhortion: Write! Write as women. Write for women. Succumb neither to the flowers and frills of "feminine" writing (writing in the image sculpted by male desire), nor to the power offered by ignoring your sex and writing like a man. But this brave admonition disguises the full spectrum of possibilities — a spectrum that, to the credit of the editors, is well represented in this collection.

There are writers (most notably Luce Irigaray) who see the path to liberation in the recapturing of that which is essentially female. They celebrate the dark, the Anti-Logos, the diffuse differentness of female experience. In her attempt to chronicle female desire, Irigaray abandons the voyeuristic analysis that permeates male endeavours (is it not the sight of the mother's missing penis that initiates all the mischief?). She speaks of an autoerotism that does not need anything other than itself to be full. "A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is two lips which embrace continually" (p. 100). Irigaray gives testimony to a sexuality that is denied by the male gaze (for it sees only a scarred absence) and repressed by a male desire which seeks to create a passive receptacle for its own satisfaction. Freedom lies in the expression of the female imaginary. Woman must speak her bodily pleasures, give voice to the somatic speech that is hysteria. For the advocates of difference it is the witch — uncivilized and in communion with nature, rapturously dancing her freedom on the moors — who signifies liberation.

The celebration of difference is a controversial mode of political practice. It too eerily echoes the very reasoning of a patriarchal ideology that excludes

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women because they are “naturally” and “essentially” different. This criticism is made in the *New French Feminisms* by both the orthodox left for whom class and not patriarchy is the central problem, and by feminists who link the struggle against patriarchy with the demise of capitalism. However, the veracity of this criticism offers no alternative practices that are specifically feminist. Julia Kristeva aptly characterizes the feminist dilemma;

Women who write are brought, at their own pace and in their own way, to see sexual differentiation as interior to the praxis of every subject. There are two extremes in their writing experiences: the first tends to valorize phallic dominance, associated with the privileged father-daughter relationship, which gives rise to the tendency toward mastery, science, philosophy, professorships, etc. This virilization of women makes of her, ideally, a typical militant who can, in fact, become a veritable striking force in the social revolution. . . . [T]his doesn't at all justify any dogmatic interpretations that call for “happy sexuality” because it's taken over by society. — On the other hand, we flee everything considered “phallic” to find refuge in the valorization of a silent underwater body, thus abdicating any entry into history. (P. 166)

What remains for Kristeva is a negativity — the positive praxis of negativity. The turning of feminist attention towards the disruption of social codes, the disruption of the phallogcentrically ordered Symbolic. What is new in French feminism is the broadening of the scope of feminist activity. A broadening, not a shifting. For there is no dispute over the absolute necessity for the feminist movement's involvement in the battle for free abortion, safety from rape, contraception (a major issue in primarily Catholic France) and the concrete issues that affect the day-to-day lives of women.

There is a contentiousness that emanates from this text, one that is amplified with translation into American political and intellectual discourse, where the language of Lacan, Barthes and Derrida cannot be easily inserted. *New French Feminisms* is particularly vulnerable to criticism, and it is necessary and inevitable that such criticism be made (would it be too audacious to liken criticism to resistance and to then interpret it as a defense against that fourth narcissistic coup to the phallus?). The argument is easily made that there is nothing new about the *New French Feminisms*, with its theories of difference and its glorification of that which is feminine. Such theories have appeared periodically and worse still have been associated with politically limited practices — either radical (usually homosexual) sexual segregation or conservatism.

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It would be possible to justify the endeavours of the French feminists as therapeutic, to posit that the very process of translating that which is neurotic, i.e. privately suffered, into a public realm where it need not bear the burden of madness, is in itself liberating. But this is a secondary gain, an inadvertent advantage in the face of what I believe to be new about *New French Feminisms*, and that is the positing of *hysteria as the royal road to Patriarchy*. Precisely as the dream lurks behind the realm of consciousness, and *like a symptom* carries both the mark of desire and the taboo against its expression, so does hysteria. And femininity in general, for what is femininity other than a mild, nonpathological dose of hysteria? Picture the sensitive, passive heroine, lost to the world of obsessional detail, a stranger to science and technology, as she dwells in her dreams of true love. The hysterical discourse lurks beneath the Symbolic carrying its desire and also the repression of it, and like any symptom it alleviates the anxiety of contradiction.

Just as consciousness never of itself reveals its secrets, which are only unearthed in its cracks — the joke, the dream, the symptom, the slip — so it cannot be expected of the Patriarchal order of language and the Symbolic to render its underpinnings for examination. It is only the cracks that afford such privileged information, and the discourse of the female is one of its cracks. This is not simply to say that the sexuality of women needs more scrutiny and documentation. What must be understood is the relationship between the documentors, observers, categorizers and their object. As with the serene opacity of the psychoanalyst, his desire obscured, so their voyeurism is also unremarked while the hysteric is stripped bare.

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Notes

1. Sexual rapture, bliss.
2. It was not through lack of theoretical expertise that Freud could never deal satisfactorily with that age old question; what is it that a woman desires? Rather there is no place in the social order that he helped unveil for female desire to be revealed.
3. Xavière Gauthier, "Is There Such a Thing As Women's Writing?" *NFF*, p. 163. She quotes Monique Wittig in *Les Guérillères*.