Critical Response

I

Writing and Sexual Difference:
The Difference Within

Jane Gallop

The Winter 1981 issue of Critical Inquiry (vol. 8, no. 2) is entitled Writing and Sexual Difference and is guest edited by Elizabeth Abel. Her introduction concludes thus: "In addition to refining our mythologies of difference, this moment of feminist inquiry allows new figures to provide a different and enabling mythology" (p. 178). In "this moment," winter 1981, Critical Inquiry has become "feminist inquiry," and the momentary substitution of terms—"feminist" for "critical"—allows new figures (the guest editor, for example) to provide a different and enabling mythology.

The word "mythology" might remind us that, in the same issue, Nina Auerbach celebrates how the poet H. D. aimed "to metamorphose the woman's selfhood into an infinitely shifting myth" (p. 298). Later in the issue, Judith Kegan Gardiner—whose work is very close to Abel's!—writes that "the woman writer uses her text . . . as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition" (p. 357). According to Gardiner, the autobiographical critical essay is one manifestation of the tendency in women's writing to "blur the public and private," a tendency which stems from the "continual crossing of self and other" that is peculiar to female psychology (p. 355).

My reading of the "autobiographical" component in Abel's editor-

1. This can be deduced from evidence internal to the issue. Elaine Showalter says that Abel applies Nancy Chodorow's theory to contemporary women's novels (see "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," pp. 196–97). This is essentially what Gardiner does in her contribution to the issue. Not only is the work of these two women close, but they work on the closeness between women.
ship might lay it open to accusations of self-indulgence if it were not that, with a "continual crossing of self and other," it becomes quite difficult to pin down the self that is being indulged. In other words, there is an alien presence within Abel's text which makes it impossible for her to "use" it as Gardiner suggests a woman does. Just as Abel and Gardiner, following Nancy Chodorow, see the woman's self as inextricably mixed up with the identity of another woman (the mother), so too the alien presence within Abel's moment is the text of another woman. The other woman's name is Barbara Johnson. A quotation from Johnson's book *The Critical Difference* appears as the epigraph to the editor's introduction. If the substitution of "feminist" for "critical" allows an en-Abel-ing, the epigraph already occasions a return of the dethroned term "critical."

There is one other mention of Johnson and *Critical Difference* in the issue. Mary Jacobus describes a "love language between two women" as "a language of desire whose object . . . is that internal (in)difference which, in another context, Barbara Johnson calls 'not a difference between . . . but a difference within. Far from constituting the text's unique identity, it is that which subverts the very idea of identity' " (pp. 220–21). Writing about this internal difference, Jacobus enacts it. Johnson's words, although within Jacobus' text, remain marked as different, marked as belonging to "another context." In its position as epigraph, *The Critical Difference* functions precisely as such a dis-Abel-ing "difference within" the entire issue.

The beginning of the epigraph promises to repeat a commonplace about literature and sex: "If human beings were not divided into two biological sexes, there would probably be no need for literature. And if literature could truly say what the relations between the sexes are, we would doubtless not need much of it then, either." At this point, Abel elides part of Johnson's text, and on the other side of the elision we encounter a quite startling formulation which reverses the terms of the expected truism: "It is not the life of sexuality that literature cannot capture; it is literature that inhabits the very heart of what makes sexuality problematic for us speaking animals." Sexual difference is a mystery; literature is concerned with that mystery. The reader expects another

[2] It is, of course, not literally autobiographical but rather auto-graphical, a writing of the self. Nor do I mean to suggest that Abel consciously intends to write her name into the new mythology. What I wish to get at through this play on words is what we might call the text's unconscious. My hope is that attention to such marginal yet symptomatic moments might uncover some powerful, but not explicitly thematized, forces in the text.

---

*Jane Gallop*, associate professor of French at Miami University, is the author of *Intersections: A Reading of Sade with Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski* and *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. She is currently at work on a book on Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits*.
rendition of the refrain that literature is unable to “capture” the mystery of sex, but instead Johnson claims that literature is already at the heart of what constitutes sex as enigma. Literature could be called the difference within sexuality.

This is very puzzling, very hard to understand. Abel says nothing in the introduction to explain it, and nothing in the issue explicitly serves to assimilate this internal difference. But because of it, from the very first page, Writing and Sexual Difference (the title) becomes troubling. Does “sexual difference” mean the difference between the sexes or the difference within sex? Are “sexual difference” and “writing” two distinct domains which intersect, or is writing interior to sexual difference?

Johnson’s puzzling remark could best be explained by recourse to Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to Jacques Lacan, desire springs from the fact that the articulated demand always necessarily exceeds the instinctual needs one might wish to communicate. The common view of language—that which underwrites the expected refrain about literature’s inadequacy to capture sex—is that language is inadequate to express human needs. But according to Lacan, language is not only adequate but overabundant: it presents a surplus. In a formulation closer to Johnson’s, Jean Laplanche, another French psychoanalyst, writes that sexual excitation is an “alien internal entity” and that this entity is precisely “parental fantasies and above all maternal fantasies.” If we understand fantasies as a form of literature, then sexual excitation, for Laplanche, is the alien internal presence of literature.

My attempt to explain Johnson’s provocative remark is far from satisfactory, but even this cursory gesture demonstrates that any assimilation of these words necessitates a foray into “another context.” My concern here, however, is not with what the epigraph might mean in the context of Johnson’s book but rather with its effect within the bounds of the Winter 1981 issue of Critical Inquiry. Earlier, via Chodorow, I compared The Critical Difference within the “feminist inquiry” to the mother internal to the daughter’s self; now I would construe it as a maternal fantasy, an unassimilated internal difference which, like sex itself, creates a tension, an instability, a subversion of identity, threatening, for example, the identity “feminist.”

In the introduction Abel writes, “The analysis of female talent grappling with a male tradition translates sexual difference into literary differences” (p. 174). Literary difference is a “translation” of sexual difference which is, by implication, an original. This suggests the standard model in which sexuality is prior to literature, whereas the epigraph enigmatically implies that literature is already operative within

sexuality. But “translation” is also a potentially resonant term in the network of disabling internal alterity which I am here attempting to trace.

Although Johnson is mentioned only twice in the issue, her name does make one other appearance between its covers. In the pages of advertising at the end of the journal, in the ad for Critical Inquiry’s own publisher, the University of Chicago Press, we read that Johnson has translated Jacques Derrida’s Dissemination. From the biographical notes on the contributors, we learn that the issue includes another translator of Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Moreover, Spivak’s contribution is itself a translation.

Spivak translates the Bengali story “Draupadi,” written by Mahasveta Devi. Within the issue, the story occasions some uncertainty about the authority of original over translation: both in the table of contents and in the running heads, Spivak’s name appears in the position of author. The editor’s introduction, as we have seen, links the priority of original over translation with the anteriority of sexuality to literature. Not only does “Draupadi” call into question the authority of the original, it also raises the question of what is sexuality, or what is the body, outside of or anterior to literature.

Abel writes that “the fragmented female body shifts from metaphor to fact. ‘Draupadi’ lays bare the physical violence sublimated in metaphors of textual production” (p. 177). “From metaphor to fact”: it looks like the Bengali story is going to take the journal from literature to life, to the real body, the real world, outside of rhetoric. This shift from metaphor to fact is in fact, however, a shift from nonfiction to fiction. “Draupadi” is the only piece of fiction in the issue; so when Abel says we switch from metaphor to fact, we must take “fact” as a metaphor.

Abel writes “the fragmented female body,” but Draupadi (the heroine of the story) is not literally fragmented but rather mutilated. The metaphorical use of “fragmented” serves to link the story with Nancy J. Vickers’ article on the Petrarchan tradition of fragmentary descriptions of the female body. According to Vickers, Petrarch’s rhetorical fragmentation of Laura’s body reverses the classical myth of the literal fragmentation of Actaeon as punishment for his view of Diana’s naked body. One could say that “Draupadi” reverses the reversal: the naked female body, albeit mutilated, has once again the power to threaten the male.

Although Abel presents the story as a break with the rest of the volume, a shift “from West to East, . . . from implicit to explicit political perspective” (p. 177), she also sutures this break. Moreover, she links the Bengali story to probably the most traditional criticism in the volume, a study of variations on a classical myth in Renaissance poetry. Petrarch and Ovid might be said to represent the mainstream of our Western tradition, and yet they are linked to this gesture outside. Rather than
simply dismissing this link as an imperialistic appropriation, might we not also see this resemblance between the exotic other and the very heart of the same as another manifestation of the difference within?

Continuing my analysis of Abel's statement about "Draupadi," I read the phrase “'Draupadi' lays bare the physical violence” as a piece of black humor when I recall that in the story the heroine, after being multiply raped and mutilated, tears up her clothes and refuses to cover her mangled, bleeding body. She literally “lays bare the physical violence,” which then reminds us that Abel is not using the phrase literally but figuratively. Abel's sentence implies that metaphor is a “cloth” veiling physical violence and that to expose violence demands that we tear the metaphor, render it inoperative, as Draupadi does her “cloth.” Yet in order to speak this violent literalization, she necessarily has recourse to metaphor. In fact, the play on “Draupadi” as title and Draupadi as character allows us to see Draupadi's defiant exhibition after her rape as an allegory or a metaphor for reading, for a certain kind of ideological criticism.

At the very moment when she would proclaim the shift from metaphor to fact, the feminist critic cannot help but produce metaphors. I say “the feminist critic,” rather than “Abel” because this is a moment that recurs in various texts of this issue, the moment when, in reaching for some nonrhetorical body, some referential body to ground sexual difference outside of writing, the critic produces a rhetorical use of the body as metaphor for the nonrhetorical.

At the beginning of her article on the lesbian novel, Catharine R. Stimpson states that her “definition of the lesbian . . . will be conservative and severely literal.” We are prepared for the nonrhetorical, a shift from literary metaphor to sexual fact. It turns out that the “severely literal” is the domain of the body: “She is a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying. Of course a lesbian is more than her body, more than her flesh, but lesbianism partakes of the body, partakes of the flesh” (p. 364). Although the phrase “finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying” is vague and does not necessarily denote any specific activity, Stimpson is somewhat apologetic about her restriction of the lesbian to the body: “of course she is more” but . . . Yet we have been warned that she will be “conservative” and severe, that we might not find her definition gratifying.

“Partakes of the body, partakes of the flesh” is still quite vague. She needs to go on and make it clear what she does and does not mean: “That carnality distinguishes it from gestures of political sympathy with homosexuals and from affectionate friendships in which women enjoy each other, support each other, and commingle a sense of identity and well-being. Lesbianism represents a commitment of skin, blood, breast, and bone” (p. 364). She is quite specific about what she does not mean. Political sympathy and affectionate friendships are excluded from the
literal definition, however severe we might find that exclusion. They are only figuratively or symbolically lesbian. Literal lesbianism is “a commitment of skin, blood, breast, and bone.” Actually Stimpson writes that “lesbianism represents” this commitment, that is, lesbianism symbolizes it. The literal definition turns out to give a figurative sense of lesbianism. Moreover, what it symbolizes is “a commitment of skin, blood, breast, and bone”; that is, it symbolizes something that is already rhetorical. Are any of these literally committed? How, and to what or to whom? Not only is the list highly alliterative but each of the terms has a long history of metaphorical use. She does not include more shocking, more severely unliterary terms such as kidney or even clitoris. Despite her proclamation of severe literality, her definition ultimately remains within the rhetorical tradition for designating the body. This implicit contradiction has potentially far-reaching implications for an article that, on the one hand, decires a tradition of oppression that has kept the lesbian from directly and explicitly “naming her experience” and yet finally regrets that the lesbian and feminist press is ignorant of literary traditions and rejects novels that are too literary.

Elaine Showalter has other sorts of problems with the metaphor of the body. She writes: “While feminist criticism rejects the attribution of literal biological inferiority, some theorists seem to have accepted the metaphorical implications of female biological difference in writing.” Again the literal and the metaphoric body are at stake. A question from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s Madwoman in the Attic seems a point of focus for Showalter’s discomfort: “If the pen is a metaphorical penis, from what organ can females generate texts?” (p. 187).

Showalter gives a derisive, dismissive answer to the question: “critics . . . like myself . . . might reply that women generate texts from the brain or that the word-processor of the near future, with its compactly coded microchips, its inputs and outputs, is a metaphorical womb” (p. 187). But the dismissal does not work; the question returns to haunt her text, appearing in two nervously jocular parentheses: “(If to write is metaphorically to give birth, from what organ can males generate texts?)”; “(could this [the bladder] be the organ from which females generate texts?)” (pp. 188, 194). I submit that the persistence of this question bespeaks a difficulty in accepting the body as metaphor, a demand that metaphors of the body be read literally. This difficulty with bodily metaphors has various important implications. For example, although she recognizes that Lacanian psychoanalysis uses castration as a “total metaphor” for the subject’s relation to language, she misconstrues it as only referring to the female subject, thereby assuming that “castration” even as metaphor must still refer to the literal lack of male organs (p. 194).

An example of some sort of trouble around literal and metaphoric bodies might be found in almost any of the articles in Writing and Sexual
Difference. I would say that the metaphoricity of the body, what appears in this context as the inescapable metaphoricity of the body, comes close to Johnson’s statement that literature inhabits the very heart of sexuality. At the moment when Stimpson, for example, would separate the sexual life from literature and turn to the purely flesh, she willy-nilly produces more literature.

Yet must we then conclude that the literal body, the real world, is no concern of the critic, that everything is metaphor or rhetoric or literature? This bodes ill for feminist criticism or indeed any nonformalist criticism. It seems to argue for apolitical criticism which has historically been politically conservative.

Abel suggests that we read formalistic differences as translations of sexual difference. Translation, like metaphor, is imbued with the difference within, for it is never simply itself but must represent another text and thus includes another within its identity. Not only is literature at the heart of sexual difference, but sexual difference is at the heart of literature as the absent original to which the translation must refer. I would accept the statement that literature is a translation of sexuality if I could add that we have no direct access to the original, that the best we ever have available is a good translation. Perhaps that is the purport of Spivak’s name in the place for the author.

Abel endorses Spivak’s contribution to the issue as not only an explicit difference within but an unsettling one: “With this story the volume shifts from West to East, from criticism to fiction, from implicit to explicit political perspective. . . . Our interpretative strategies should be shaken by Draupadi” (pp. 177–78). Yet what is perhaps most unsettling about this text is not the shift from metaphor to fact but rather that the switch to an explicit political perspective corresponds to a switch from nonfiction to fiction.

I have identified two alien internal presences in Writing and Sexual Difference: one explicitly recognized and celebrated as foreign and unsettling, the other pursuing her subversive effect in silence. They would seem to be not only at opposite ends of the volume but also at opposite ends of a spectrum. “Draupadi” is literature; the epigraph, not even criticism but rarefied theory. The Bengali story is explicitly political, not just feminist but Third World revolutionary; Johnson’s statements find their context in the most esoteric achievements of First World thought and would seem to deny feminism and other real-world concerns in favor of a formalistic concern with literature. Yet there might be, despite their blatant opposition, some similarity between these poles, like red and violet on the color spectrum.

The epigraph and the final entry (“Draupadi”) could be said to represent the two allegiances between which “this moment of feminist inquiry” is torn: the literary and the political. Abel writes in her introduction that “concern with textual conventions dispels one litany of
familiar accusations: reductiveness, dogmatism, insensitivity to literary values. . . Such sophisticated reading . . . may also generate a litany of new accusations: that textuality is simply a return to formalism; that feminist critics have betrayed [their] political commitments” (p. 174). The repeated phrase “litany of accusations” is the tip-off that the feminist critic’s relations to these two stern authorities are structurally the same. Like the child whose two parents have differing values, she is caught in a balancing act, trying to stave off disapproval on two fronts.

Although Showalter suggests that we choose political commitment and stop trying to please the “white fathers” of literary criticism, she also presents a model of the girl’s necessary balancing act: “If a man’s text . . . is fathered, then a woman’s text is not only mothered but parented; it confronts both maternal and paternal precursors and must deal with the problems and advantages of both lines of inheritance” (p. 203). In our culture, we have a singular identity, one name, the name of the father. For the purpose of consolidating an identity, one-half of our parentage is denied.

That one is the child of two parents is another way of formulating the difference within. The feminist critic in her inheritance from both feminism and criticism lives the at once enabling and disabling tension of a difference within. We write in sexual difference. That is the critical difference in feminist inquiry.