

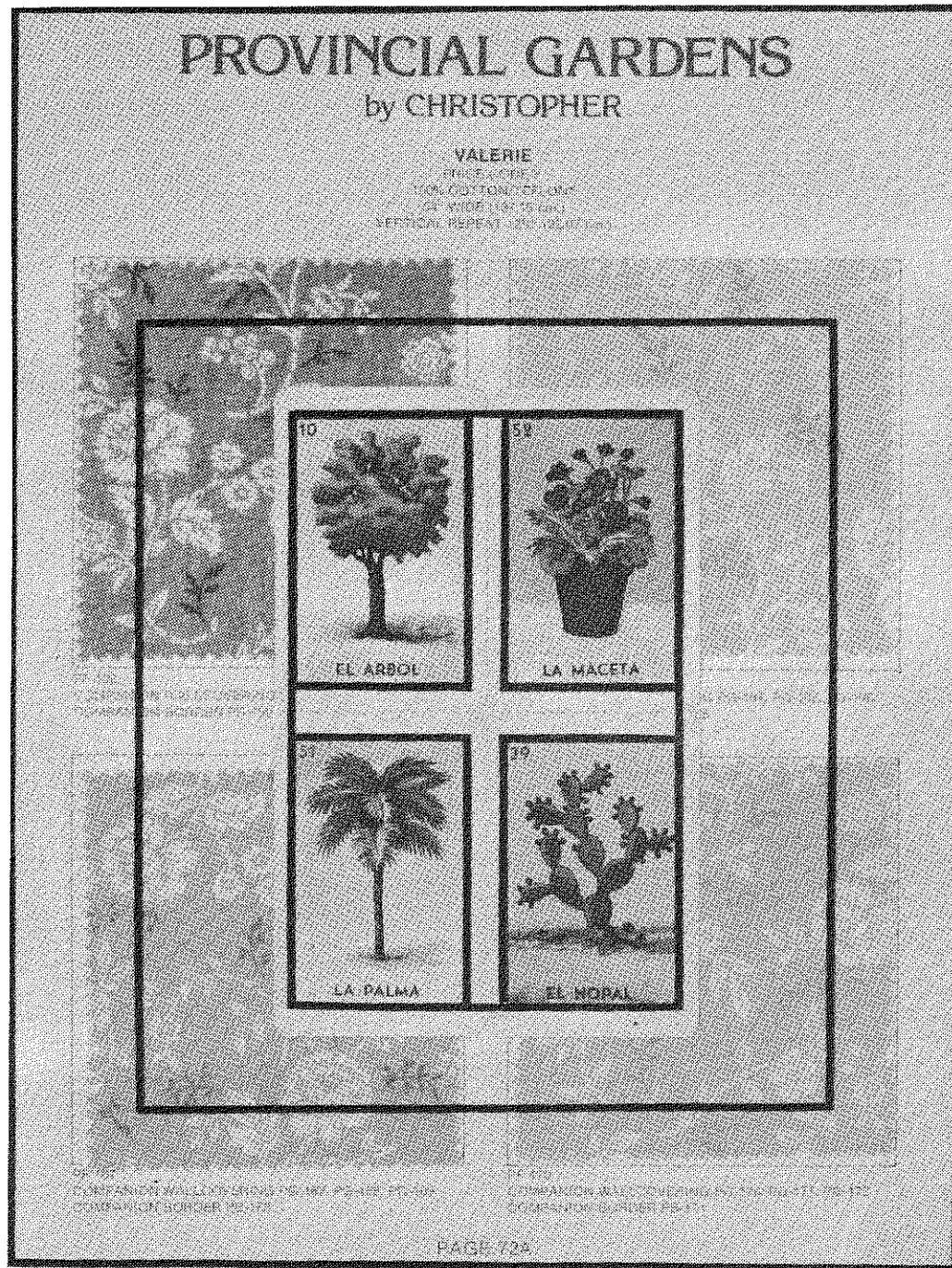
WHEN ♦ THESE ♦ LIPS ♦

BRENDA LONGFELLOW

hat I'd like to do here is make a very general and strategic incursion into what has been packaged in North America as "New French Feminism". As very little of the "old" has ever made it to these shores, the project of contextualizing this body of theoretical work (represented most prominently by writers Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Michèle Montrelay) in relation to the evolution, struggles and schisms of the French feminist movement is a difficult if not near impossible task.¹ The work thus arrives with all the intoxicating and seductive flavour of the latest intellectual fashion from Paris and, like all imports, suffers a certain damage in the trans-atlantic crossing due to the intermittent and fragmentary nature of the translations. Beginning with the first of these, which trickled into North America in the late seventies in special issues of *Signs*, *Diacritics*, *Ideology and Consciousness*, and in the anthology *New French Feminism* which appeared in 1980², the work has been read with equal amounts of derision and wild enthusiasm. With the translation and publication of Luce Irigaray's *Speculum* and *Ce Sexe Qui N'en a pas Un* last year by Cornell University Press, Catherine Clement's and Hélène Cixous's *La Jeune Né*³ this year by the University of Minnesota's series on "The Theory and History of Literature", and with the continuing publication of the work of Julia Kristeva⁴, the theoretical terrain has been substantially fleshed out for the Anglo reader, allowing for a more rigorous appraisal.

Mapping the Difference

Apart from its continental origins and ostensible "newness", what distinguishes French Feminism from the tradition of North American feminism is its particular theoretical intent and object. While North American feminism was and is rooted in socio-political struggles around issues such as equal pay, professional recognition, abortion and the development of social services, the object of French Feminism is marked by the investigation of the cultural constriction of female psychology and its symbolic realizations within the order of language and representation. French Feminism thus shares, with much of the post-structuralist project, the insight that we are spoken by language, that our identities, our very psyches and experience of sexuality, are pre-determined by ideological values carried and reproduced within language. As concerns the struggle for social change, what marks French Feminism is the insistence that the transformation of social relations is primordially dependent on a profound re-thinking and re-working of existing relations of representation and language.



This determination of language as the principal field of struggle is not, however, contingent on a denial that women are in a situation of specific exploitation with respect to economic relations of exchange and production. What it is dependent on is a recognition that the exploitation of women as objects of economic exchange is complemented and reinforced by a symbolic economy in which "woman" is objectified as a means of exchange between men and positioned as the silent support of patriarchal fantasy and desire. To thus insist on interrogating discourse and symbolic relations, however, is to place the issue of form at the forefront of any political agenda. "In order for women to be able to make themselves heard, a 'radical' evolution in our way of conceptualizing and managing the political realm is required."⁵

One of the dangers in any categorization of difference, however, is its tendency to lapse into simplistic oppositions such as theory versus practice, an opposition which disguises the much more profound realignment of those terms within French Feminist writing. Nor can one easily position the Anglo American feminist movement by its wholesale rejection of theory for the kinds of theorizations developed under the aegis of "the personal is political". Indeed, the insistence on the experiential often overlaps with many of the considerations of French Feminism. One clear difference though, has to do with the French Feminist appropriation and re-reading of psychoanalysis as the theoretical touchstone of all investigations, an appropriation which opens feminist investigation to the field of desire, subjectivity and the unconscious in their mutually determining relation with language.

SPEAK ♦ TOGETHER ♦ ♦ ♦

The Paradox of Difference

Given the nature of its investigation, French Feminism is immediately confronted with the question and the paradox that lie at the heart of any feminist theoretical problematic. How, do we begin to challenge and alter relations of meaning while still caught within the language of patriarchy? That is, given the fact that "woman", within patriarchal systems of representation, is everywhere signified, written and read as fantasmatic cause and support of male desire and everywhere negated and repressed as speaking subject, how do we discover a space for female desire, for a discourse where women are producers of their own meaning?

According to Irigaray, women within patriarchal culture are caught in a catch-22 dilemma which determines that if "woman" should choose to accede to the position of desiring subject, she has two options: either she adorns herself in the feathered accoutrements of femininity, playing with this masquerade as either a fetish; or she becomes a transvestite - a phallic woman - and adopts "masculine" systems of language. In either case, she disappropriates herself from her relation to other women and to her own experience. But to speak of disappropriation is already to assume the existence of a register of female experience that is not completely contained or summed up by the masquerades through which women exist in patriarchal culture. "If she

can play that role so well," writes Irigaray, "if it does not kill her, quite, it is because she keeps something in reserve with respect to this function. Because she still subsists, otherwise elsewhere than there where she mimes so well what is asked of her."⁶

And it is, in the theorization of this "difference", this space of otherness where the woman discovers her own authenticity, that all the fun and controversy begins. If, as Irigaray writes, "the exploitation of the matter that has been sexualized female is so integral a part of our sociocultural horizon that there is no way to interpret it except within this horizon",⁷ then how to theorize this difference without repeating the patriarchal logic which already dumps otherness on the woman, already positions her as exterior to culture, on the side of irrationality, the flesh, God and the unconscious? How to forge a collective voice, construct new representations that could authenticate women's experience without lapsing back into the old models, the old gestures, the circular movement by which resistance is undermined and returned as the same, as the mirror image of the status quo?

For French Feminism, the theorization of the "reserve", this difference of women which exceeds patriarchal constructions has evolved through a consideration of woman's auto-erotic relation to her own body and her relation to the body of the mother. To focus on the body, however, is to enter into a very tricky and potentially dangerous area given that the force and weight of established connotations attached to the representation of woman's body problematize any notion of a simple return to the "real" or "natural" body of the woman. Indeed, it is precisely this concept of the "natural" which has been patriarchy's strongest line of defence -- a rationalization of the subordination of women given in terms of a biological or anatomical cause.

What I think has to be immediately forwarded in defence of the French Feminists is the particular context which frames their consideration of female corporeal experience. In the first place, these considerations are elaborated in relation to a trenchant criticism of the mind/body dualism of western philosophy (and the post-structuralist enterprise) which results in the massive repression of the body and, in particular, the maternal body. Secondly, the theorization of the female body has to be considered -- not in relation to any kind of "scientific" effort to determine empirical identity -- but as a utopian, affirmative and, above all, political gesture.

By and large, the Anglo response to the French Feminist endeavour, as exemplified in the writings of the *m/f* collective, Stephen Heath, Monique Plaza, Jacqueline Rose, among others, has been a forceful rejection of the radical effectivity of French Feminist theory, claiming that such work is based on a simple inversion of phallogocentric terms. According to this critique, French Feminist strategies result in an implicit collaboration with "essentialism" which situates "woman" in the realm of the pre-discursive and defines her specificity in terms of a non-mediated relation to the body. Heath, for example, argues that Irigaray consistently runs "the feminine back into an anatomically mimetic expression of the body", "a point of resistance . . . that is also a point of oppression".⁸ Beverly Brown and Parveen Adams concur, arguing that for them, the French Feminist's positing of a pre-Oedipal polymorphous sexuality is, in effect "the positing of sexuality as an impossible origin, a state of nature, as simply the eternal presence of sexuality at all".⁹

Provincial Gardens by Shirley Yanover



It seems to me that the consistent blind spot of these critiques has been their attribution of an imaginary unity to texts which resist -- at all levels -- being placed in any singular position. Written on the margins of poetry and fiction, what marks these texts is their radical play with ambiguity and their consistent deconstruction of the concepts of 'truth' and 'identity'. The referencing of the female body, therefore, cannot simply be extrapolated as a singular political prescription, but has to be situated in the context of these texts' massive interrogation of the epistemological precepts which have historically determined our culture's production of knowledge.

Writing Difference

The dimensions of what constitutes feminine specificity vary in the texts of French Feminism. Kristeva conceptualizes a primordial feminine imaginary that is constituted for woman by the impossibility of effecting any psychic separation from the body of the mother. Irigaray theorizes an isomorphic relation between genital configurations and discourse -- the two lips of woman's vulva touching each other in a continuous act of autoeroticism -- evoking for her a feminine discourse characterized by plurality and fluidity. What is consistent is the extent to which these theorizations are oriented around the possibility of a specifically feminine practice of writing.

Écriture féminine, in fact, is given as the terrain -- above all -- on which the specificity, the difference of "woman" is constituted. It is only through the textual practice of writing that the woman gives birth to herself; through fiction, as Cixous claims, that the woman can project her future possibility in the *non-encore là*.

One cannot, as Irigaray observes, predict the content of woman's consciousness; "the female all", as she terms it, "will come. . . But you can't anticipate it, predict or fit it into a program. This 'all' can't be schematized or mastered."¹⁰ The writing of the female imaginary is never given in terms of a radical content, as a new origin of subjectivity or difference. The point, Irigaray insists, is not to make the feminine, the mark of sexual difference, but to *practice* this difference: "what other mode of reading, of writing, of interpretation, of affirmation could be mine - as woman?"¹¹ Difference, then, is not a matter of some eternal essence but, as Cixous writes, of "economic differentials": "That is why I always write with my eyes closed."¹² For Irigaray, it is the essence of "le proche", tactility, and non-separation which is postulated as an alternative to the dominant specular economy grounded in the subject object dichotomy of western thought. As such, this difference is only intelligible through language, as a transgressive and transformative practice of *écriture* which works through and against the fixed propositions of phallogocentric discourse and the subjects it supports.

Imploding Impasses, or Notes on a Possible Escape from Circular Logic

Certainly, none of the writers of French Feminism would disagree with the "anti-essentialist" claim that the identity of "woman" is constructed in language and culture. Irigaray's reading of speculative philosophy in *Speculum* -- from Plato through Hegel, Freud and Marx -- is precisely intended to illuminate how the western philosophical tradition has consistently produced and positioned "woman" as the primordial "Other", as the silent support and mirror which reflects back to man his own fantasies of being. Where the difference emerges is in the double-sided nature of the French Feminist critique which insists that the strategy of social transformation must be thought -- most critically -- in relation to a positive and affirmative gesture. "I try to go through masculine imaginary, to interpret how it has reduced us to silence, to muteness or to mimesis", writes Irigaray, "and I attempt, starting from that point and at the same time, to rediscover a possible space for the feminine imaginary".¹⁴



"How to forge a collective voice, construct new representations that could authenticate women's experience without lapsing back into the old models, the old gestures...?"

Effusive, on the side of excess, spending and exuberance, *écriture féminine* ruptures the economy of use value, of representation and the distinction it supports between origin and copy. "What is produced", Kristeva writes, "is something other than knowledge. . . [it is] the very place where the social code is destroyed and renewed".¹³ It is the place where the practice of writing traces nothing but copies, simulacra, the movement of writing itself, where language is returned to its materiality, to its relation to the body through insistence on rhythm, intonation, puns, alliterations etc.

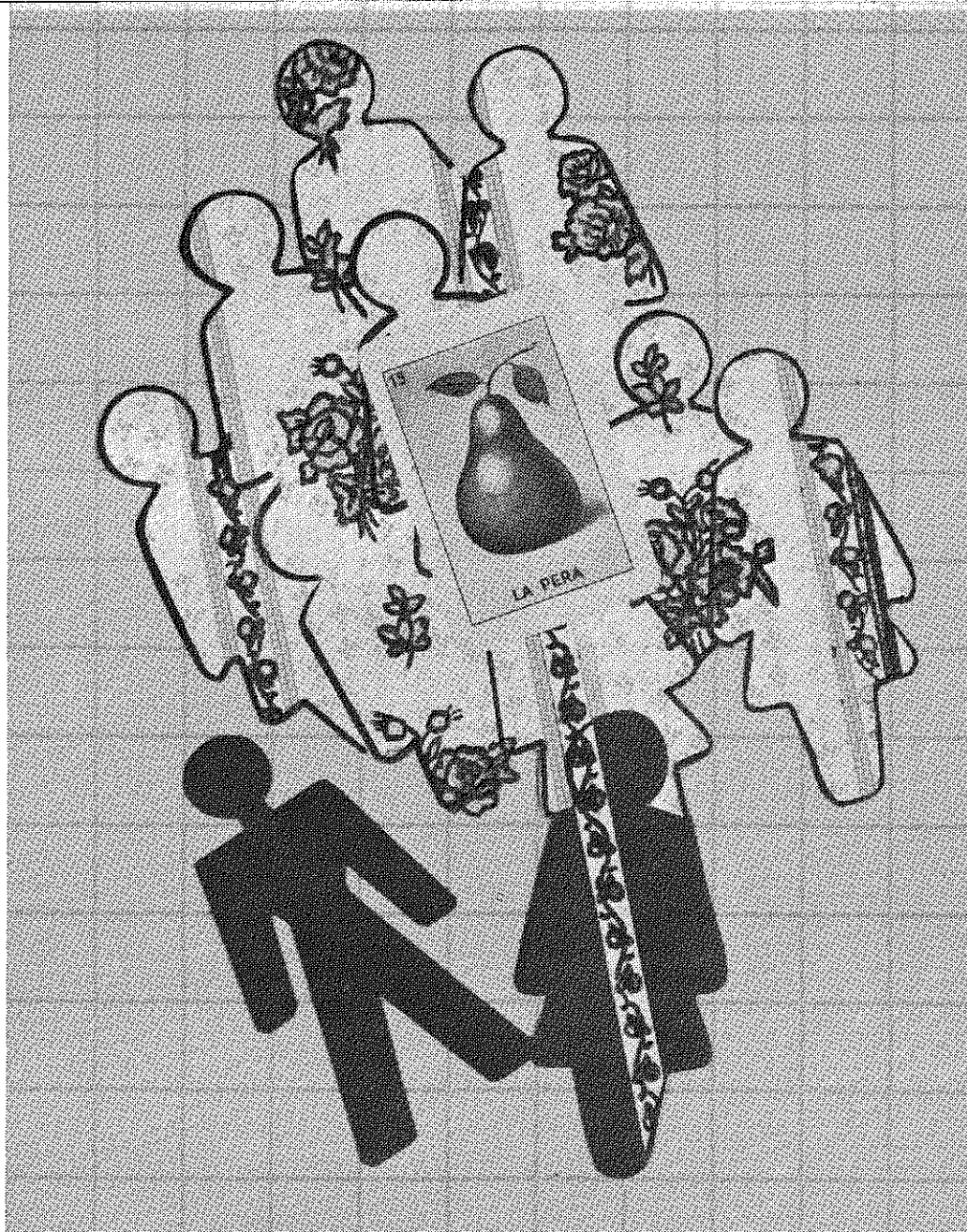


One of the problems of the anti-essentialist position is that within the context of its own logic any strategy of social transformation is necessarily limited to that of negation -- the appropriation and deconstruction of existing patriarchal values and definitions. Within that context, however, the female subject remains precisely nowhere. Locked into the determinations of an order in which there are no limits, no outside, she exists only in the space between signs, radically exterior to any given meaning system.

One of the ways out of this theoretical impasse is to reformulate the debate around the possibility of alternative feminist discourse in terms of the politics which inspire the French Feminist texts which chart new and potentially "dangerous" areas of theoretical investigation. While the theory and practice of *écriture féminine* interrogates the structure and concepts of representation, its mode is not simply one of negation or of formal hermetic abstraction where the text refers to nothing but itself.

These texts have a thesis, an object and an abiding point of view which has to do with the desire to trace what has been repressed in the history of phallogocentric culture -- the specificity and *jouissance* of woman.

If "difference" continues to inform the practice and theorization of *écriture féminine*, it is a difference understood as political identification and approach: the choice to remain, as Cixous writes, on the side of and from the point of view of women. "I am not of the neither-one-nor-the-other. I am rather on the side of *with*, in spite of all the difficulties and confusions this may bring about."¹⁵ It is perhaps in this sense that we can begin to understand "difference" as a utopian threshold, an imaginary horizon that can only be approached through a writing that situates itself as a fictional incarnation of a future possibility. Viewed from that perspective, I would argue that while French Feminism may veer close to "essentialism", the imaginative and theoretical rewards of posing the possibility of an existence for women beyond the consistently naturalized assumptions of phallogocentric discourse, may, clearly, be more than worth the risk.



1. Alice Jardine's *Gynesis/Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) represents a belated and to my mind somewhat problematical endeavour to place "New French Feminism" in the historical context of the major topologies of French "modernist" (post-structuralist) thought. What transpires, however, is a prolonged exegesis of the men: Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze et al., who represented as the spiritual and intellectual fathers of these "new" feminist daughters.
2. *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1976); vol. 3, no. 4 (1978); vol. 6, no. 1 (1980); vol. 7, no. 1 (1981); *Diacritics*, (June 1977); *Ideology and Consciousness*, vol. 1 (1977); *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).
3. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). See Pat Elliot's review in this issue of *borderlines*.
4. Notably, *Desire in Language*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), and *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
5. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 127
6. Irigaray, *This Sex*, p. 152
7. *Ibid*, p. 171
8. Stephen Heath, "On Difference", *Screen*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1978), p. 75.
9. Beverly Brown and Parveen Adams, "The Female Body and Feminist Politics", *m/f*, no. 3, p. 39.
10. Luce Irigaray, "When Our Lips Speak Together", trans. Carolyn Burke, *Signs*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1980), p. 75.
11. Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe Qui N'en Est Pas Un* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit), p. 154, my translation.
12. Hélène Cixous, "Interview" In *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, Verena Andermatt Conley (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 146.
13. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (London: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 132.
14. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe*, p. 159.
15. Cixous, "Interview", p. 150-51.

Brenda Longfellow is a writer and filmmaker currently teaching at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.