Women's Studies Int. Quart., 1978, Vol. 1, pp. 241–246
Pergamon Press Ltd. Printed in Great Britain

FEMINISM AND CRITICAL THEORY

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(*Received and accepted September* 1978)

Synopsis—This is a taped transcript of a talk given from notes. I have edited lightly. I wanted to preserve the informality and the bravado. The detail of my present research concerns itself with what I propose here in tentative and broad outline.

My remarks this morning are going to be abstract. I take as my ironic motto John Stuart Mill's sentence: 'A woman seldom runs wild after an abstraction'.[1] I have the dubious distinction of belonging to three marginal critical movements: feminism, marxism, deconstruction—the last a word at which even a feminist audience giggles. From this marginal position, I should like to offer a footnote to what Arlyn Diamond and Carol Neely have talked about before me. When Arlyn Diamond spoke about the need to gain indispensable new insights into literature in general, and thus to analyze the entire nature of its background, or when Carol Neely said we must not only compensate for or justify traditional criticism but transform it, I think to an extent they touched on what I'm going to say.

I cannot speak of feminism in general. I speak of what I do as a woman within the literary critical establishment. My own definition as a woman is very simple: it rests on the word *man* as used in the texts that provide the foundation for the corner of the literary critical establishment that I inhabit. You might say at this point, defining the word *woman* as resting on the word *man* is a reactionary position. Should I not carve out an independent definition for myself as a woman? Here I must repeat some deconstructive lessons learned over the past decade that I often repeat. One, no rigorous definition of anything is ultimately possible, so that if one wants to, one could easily go on deconstructing the opposition between man and woman, and finally show that it is a binary opposition that displaces itself.[2] Therefore, as a deconstructivist I cannot recommend that kind of dichotomy at all. Yet, I feel that definitions are necessary in order to keep on going, to take a stand. The only way that I can see myself as making definitions is a provisional and a polemical one: I construct my definition as a woman not in terms of a woman's putative essence but in terms of words currently in use. 'Man' is such a word in common usage. Not *a* word, but *the* word. I therefore fix my glance upon this word even as I question the enterprise of redefining the premises of any theory.

In the broadest possible sense, most critical theory in my part of the academic establishment (Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas) sees itself as

[1] 'The Subjection of Women', John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, In: Alice S. Rossi, ed. *Essays on Sex Equality*, p. 192. Chicago and London, 1970.

[2] I have presented my understanding of deconstruction in my preface to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, 1976. The following paragraph is a distillation of that position.

that area of the discourse of the human sciences—in America called the humanities—in which the *problem* of the discourse of the human sciences is made available. Thus, for literary critics who work in this current style, literature seems to be the place where the problem of discourse is made most crucially available. Whereas in other kinds of discourses there is a move toward the final truth of a situation, literature displays that the truth of a human situation *is* the itinerary of not being able to find it. In the general discourse of the human sciences, there is a sort of search for solutions, whereas in literary discourse there is a playing out of the problem as the solution, if you like.

The problem of human discourse is seen as articulating itself in the play of, in terms of, three shifting 'concepts': language, world and consciousness. We know no world that is not organized as a language, we operate with no other consciousness but one structured as a language—languages that we cannot possess, for we constitute those languages as well. The category of language, then, embraces the categories of world and consciousness even as it is determined by them. Strictly speaking, since we are questioning the human being's control over the production of language, the figure that will serve us better is writing, for there the absence of the producer and receiver is taken for granted.[3] A safe figure, seemingly outside of the language-(speech)-writing binary, is the text—a weave of knowing and not-knowing which is what knowing is.

The theories of world and consciousness that serve this group best come from Marx and Freud. Obviously the names Marx and Freud stand for a lot of different ways of thinking. The theoreticians of textuality read Marx as a theorist of the world (history and society) as a text of the forces of labor and production, and Freud as a theorist of consciousness ('being' or the psyche) as a text of consciousness and the unconscious. Thus human textuality can be seen not only *as* world and consciousness, *as* the representation of a world in terms of a consciousness playing with other consciousnesses and generating this representation, but also *in* the world and consciousness and *of* the world and consciousness, all implicated in an 'intertextuality'.[4]

I am not, then, speaking about Marxist or psychoanalytic criticism as a kind of reductive enterprise which simply diagnoses the scenario in every book in terms of where it would fit into a Marxist or psychoanalytical canon. To my way of thinking, the discourse of the literary text is part of a general configuration of textuality, a placing forth of the solution as the unavailability of a unified solution to a unified or homogeneous, generating or receiving, consciousness. This unavailability is often not confronted. It is dodged and the problem apparently solved, in terms perhaps of unifying concepts like *man*. There are other unifying concepts, but *man* is the key one.

I could have broached Marx and Freud more easily, but I wanted to say this because, in general, in the literary critical establishment here, those two are seen as reductive models. Now, although non-reductive methods can be produced out of both of them, both Marx and Freud do seem to argue at first glance in terms of a legalistic model of evidence and

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[3] Radical deconstructivists like Paul de Man, Derrida, or the latest Lacan, would suggest that these organizing principles—language, writing, text—might themselves be a way of holding at bay a randomness incongruent with consciousness.

[4] 'Textuality' thus understood does not mean a reduction of the world to linguistic texts, books, or a tradition composed of books, criticism in the narrow sense, and teaching. Edward M. Said makes this mistake when he compares Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault in terms of textuality in 'The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions', *Critical Inquiry*, IV, iv, Summer 1978.

demonstration. They seem to bring forth evidence from the world of man or the consciousness of man, and thus prove certain kinds of truths about world and consciousness. I would risk saying that their descriptions of world and consciousness, society and life, are based on inadequate evidence. So that my task, as I see it—and it really is a huge (and frightening) task—is neither reassessment nor revision but a radical rewriting. I will indicate two items as examples here and then let you worry about the text in general. In Marx, I would like to fix upon the idea of alienation. In Freud, I would like to fix upon the idea of normality and health.

One way of moving into Marxian thought is in terms of the nexus of use-, exchange-, and surplus-value. Marx presents his notion of *use-value* as that which pertains to a thing directly consumed by oneself. Its exchange-value does not relate to its direct fulfillment of a specific need, but is rather assessed in terms of what it can be exchanged for in either labor-power or money. By making her work longer than necessary or by means of labor-saving machinery, in this process of abstracting through exchange, the buyer of the laborer's work gets more (in exchange) than what the worker needs for her subsistence while she makes the thing. This 'more-worth' (in German, literally, *Mehrwert*) is surplus-value.

One could indefinitely allegorize the relationship of woman within this particular triad—use, exchange, and surplus—by suggesting that woman in the traditional social situation produces more than she is getting in terms of her subsistence, and therefore is a continual source of the production of supluses for the man who owns her. Apart from the fact that the production of housework is not strictly organized in the capitalist mode, such an analysis would bring us face-to-face with a paradox. The contemporary woman, when she seeks financial compensation for housework, *seeks* the abstraction of use-value into exchange-value. The Marxian model would make us ask at least two questions: what is the use-value of unremunerated woman's work for husband or family? Is the willing imposition of the wage-structure a curse or a blessing? How should we fight the idea, universally accepted by men, that wages are the only mark of valuable work? (Not, I think, through the slogan 'Housework is beautiful'.) What would be the implications of denying women entry into the existing (capitalistic) economy?[5]

These are important questions, but they do not necessarily broaden Marxian theory from a feminist point of view. For our purposes, the idea of externalization (*Entaüßerung/ Veraüßerung*) or alienation (*Entfremdung*) is of greater interest. Within the capitalist system, the labor process externalizes itself and the laborer or worker as commodities. Upon this idea of the fracturing of the human being's relationship to himself and his work as commodities rests the entire ethical charge of Marx's argument.[6]

I would argue that, in terms of the physical, emotional, legal, custodial, and sentimental situation of the woman's product, the child, this picture of the human relationship to production, labor, and property is incomplete. The possession of a tangible place of production in the womb situates the woman as an agent in any theory of production. Marx's

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[5] Radical feminism can here learn a cautionary lesson from communism's capitulation to capitalism. See, for example, 'Introduction', Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York and London, 1974.

[6] I am not suggesting this by way of the bourgeois cop-out described by Braverman as 'that favorite hobby horse of recent years which has been taken from Marx without the least understanding of its significance, "alienation" '. My interest follows Alfred Schmidt's reminder, which Braverman also quotes, that 'Marx's general abandonment of such terms does not mean that he did not continue to follow theoretically the material conditions designated by them' (Braverman, p. 27, 28).

dialectic of alienation–externalization followed by fetishization is inadequate because one fundamental human relationship to a product and labor is not taken into account.[7]

This does not mean that, if the Marxist account of externalization–alienation were rewritten from a feminist perspective, the special interest of childbirth, childbearing, and childrearing would be inserted. It means that the entire problematic of sexuality would be fully broached, and not merely in terms of overt socio-sexual politics.

Having said this, I would re-emphasize the need to interpret reproduction within a Marxian problematic.

In both so-called matrilineal and patrilineal societies the legal possession of the child is an inalienable fact of the property rights of the man who 'produces' the child.[8] In terms of this legal possession, the common custodial definition, that women are much more capable of taking care of children, might be seen as a reactionary gesture in benevolent disguise. The man retains legal property rights over the product of a woman's body. On each separate occasion, the custodial decision is a sentimental questioning of man's right.

In order not simply to make an exception to man's legal right, or to add a footnote from a feminist perspective to the Marxist text, we must enlarge and correct the theory of production and alienation upon which the Marxist text is based and with which it functions. As I have suggested before, much Marxist feminism works on an analogy with use-value, exchange-value, and surplus-value relationships. Marx's own writings on women and children seek to alleviate their condition in terms of a desexualized labor force.[9] If there were the kind of rewriting that I am proposing, it would be harder to sketch out the rules of economy and social ethics; in fact, to an extent, deconstruction as the questioning of essential definitions would be served if one were to see that in Marx there is a moment of major transgression where rules for humanity and criticism of societies are based on inadequate evidence.[10] Marx's texts, including the *Capital*, presuppose an ethical theory: alienation or externalization of labor must be undone because it undermines the agency of the subject and his work and his property. I would like to propose that the nature and history of alienation, labor, and the production of property is somewhat different from what Marx asks us to believe.

In Freud, as I said, I will focus my attention on the notion of normality and health. My interest is in the Freud who looks at the nature of pain as the deferment of pleasure, especially the later Freud who wrote *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud's spectacular mechanics of imagined pain, anticipated pain, avoided pain write the subject's history and theory and constantly broach the never quite defined concept of normality: anxiety, inhibition, paranoia, schizophrenia, melancholy and so on. I would like to suggest that in the womb, which I describe above as a tangible place of production, there is the possibility—this is so familiar that it seems banal—that pain exists *within* the concepts of normality and productivity. This is something which exists in more than half of the human population. The

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[7] In this connection, notice should be taken of the use of the metaphors of sexuality in *The Capital*.

[8] See Jack Goody, *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*, Cambridge, 1976.

[9] Collected in *Karl Marx on Education, Women, and Children*, New York, 1977.

[10] It is possible to show that in both Marx and Freud, as indeed in all texts, there is a deconstructive impulse which would undermine the rigidity of these rules. (For the argument that a text always already deconstructs itself, see 'The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau,' Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, New York, 1971.)

understanding of pain should not be only as the determinant of abnormality but of normality. Once again we come back to the grave physiological rhythms of reproduction in woman.

If one were to look at the never quite defined concepts of normality and health that run through and are submerged in *all* of Freud's texts, one would have to think the redefinition of the nature of pain. Pain does not operate in the same way in men and in women. And once again, it will become much harder to devise the rules and once again, the interests of deconstruction would be served.

Freud's best-known determinant of femininity is penis-envy. The most crucial text of this argument is the essay on femininity in the *New Introductory Lectures.*[11] There Freud begins to argue that the little girl is a little boy before she discovers sex. As Luce Irigaray and others have shown, Freud seems not to confront the womb.[12] Our mood, since we not only confront but carry the womb, should be corrective. We might chart the itinerary of womb-envy in the production of a theory of consciousness: the idea of the womb as a tangible place of production is avoided both in Marx and in Freud. In Freud the genital stage is preeminently phallic, not clitoral or vaginal. This particular gap in Freud is very significant. The hysteron remains the place which produces only the contemptible text of hysteria. Everywhere there is a non-confrontation of the idea of the womb as a workshop. Our task in rewriting the text of Freud is not so much to declare the idea of penis-envy rejectable, but to substitute the idea of a womb-envy as something that interacts with the idea of penis-envy to define human sexuality and the production of society.

These are some of the general ideas I am working with, the 'grounds' (Freud and Marx being the most useful), the theoretical 'base', which constitute our ideas of the world and consciousness. We might want to ignore them altogether and say that the business of literary criticism is neither your gender nor the theories of revolution or psychoanalysis. Criticism must remain resistively *neuter* and *practical.* That one should not mistake the grounds out of which the ideas of world and consciousness come with the business of the appreciation of the literary text. But if one looks closely, one will see that whether one diagnoses the names or not, there are certain kinds of thoughts out of which the notions of world and consciousness of the most practical critic must come. Part of the feminist enterprise might very well be to provide adequate evidence so that the great male texts that produce these thoughts do not become great adversaries, or models from whom we take our ideas and then revise them or reassess them. These texts must be rewritten so that there is new material for the understanding of literature and the production of literature as it relates to the general production of consciousness and society. After all, the people who *produce* literature, male and female, are also moved by the general ideas of world and consciousness to which perhaps they do not give a name.

Freud and Marx are not the only two people who are culpable in this way. I work with them because they happen to be the two great models in the kind of thinking I do. You can look at de Tocqueville and see that when he always uses the adjective 'universal' to mean male, something goes wrong in the deductions. Choose whom you like (but you should, of course, choose Marx and Freud).

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[11] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud,* James and Alix Strachey (eds), London, Vol. 22.

[12] 'La Tache aveugle d'un vieux rêve de symmétrie', Luce Irigaray, *Speculum: de l'autre femme,* Paris, 1974.

This, then, is the huge and quixotic project of feminist criticism that I want to identify with. If we continue to work in this way, the common currency of the understanding of society will change. I think that kind of change, the coining of new money as it were, is necessary. I certainly believe that such work is supplemented by research into women's writing, research into the conditions of women in the past and so on. But it also seems to me that the kind of work I have outlined would infiltrate into the male academy and redo the terms of our understanding of the context and the substance of literature as part of the human enterprise.