Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism

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I shall not begin, as I probably should, by offering to define my terms. Instead, I shall acknowledge that I have brought together three concepts admitted on all sides to be well-nigh indefinable. Or, if they are definable, they are so only by reference to a particular thinker's usage (Lyotard's or Huyssens' or Baudrillard's of 'postmodernism', Heidegger's or Wolf's or Foucault's of 'humanism', De Beauvoir's or Kristeva's or Wittig's of 'feminism', etc. – and this is to speak only in the French or German of the last fifty years...). Yet we know, too, even as we recognise our reliance on this more specific anchorage of terms, that the concepts of 'postmodernism', 'humanism' and 'feminism' also embrace the sum of these more particular discourses – and that a large part of their usefulness lies in this generality of reference. So I shall not begin with further definitions, but with an appeal to intuition: an appeal to that vague sense which I am assuming anyone at all interested in reading a piece such as this will already have of these terms.

For the point of their conjunction, really, is to signal a problem, and a problem which I *shall* here attempt to make as explicit as possible. Postmodernist argument (or the argument of 'modernity' as others have wanted to call it[1]) has issued a number of challenges: to the idea that we can continue to think, write and speak of our culture as representing a continuous development and progress; to the idea that humanity is proceeding towards a telos of 'emancipation' and 'self-realisation'; to the idea that we can invoke any universal subjectivity in speaking about the human condition. Lyotard has argued, for example, that neither of the two major forms of *grands recits* ('grand narratives') by which in the past we have legitimated the quest for knowledge can any longer perform that function. Neither the instrumental narrative of emancipation which justifies science and technology by reference to the poverty and injustice they must eventually eliminate, nor the purist defence of knowledge accumulation as something inherently beneficial, can any longer command the belief essential to warding off scepticism about the purpose and value of the techno-sciences. With this scepticism has gone a loss of confidence in the whole idea of human 'progress' viewed as a process more or less contemporaneous with Western-style 'civilisation', and a calling into question of the emancipatory themes so central to the liberal, scientific and Marxist/socialist discourses of the nineteenth century.

This loss of credulity is in turn associated with the collapse of 'humanism'. There are two aspects to this collapse, both of them registered in much of the writing, theoretical and literary, of recent times. Firstly (though this aspect of the critique of humanism was launched by the humanist Karl Marx, and continued within a tradition of socialist-humanist thinking), there is an acknowledgement of the partial and excluding quality of the supposedly universal 'we' of much humanist discourse. Secondly, and partly as a consequence of this exposure of liberal hypocrisies and the ethnocentricity of Western humanism, there has been a refusal of the 'we' which lurks in the unifying discourse of the dialectic: a rejection of all attempts to find a sameness in otherness. Instead, we have been witness to a theoretical celebration of difference, a resistance to all synthesising discourse, an assertion of an indefinite and multiplying plurality of particulars and specificities.

Insistence on the specificity of 'woman' or the 'feminine' has by no means been confined to the latter wave of criticism. An initial feminist 'deconstruction' of the humanist subject was made as long ago as 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft in her demand for women to be included within the entitlements claimed by the 'rights of Man'. But it is only in comparatively recent times that feminists have gone beyond an exposure of the maleness of the supposedly universal subject invoked by humanist rhetoric, to denounce the 'masculinism' of humanism as such. Whereas, in the past, the call of feminist critiques of liberal humanism was for women to be recognised as 'equal' subjects of that discourse, equally entitled to the 'rights' which were claimed for 'all men',[2] today what is more at issue is the maleness of the subject place to which these earlier feminists were staking their claim. Today, there is a whole body of feminist writing which would shy away from an 'equality' which welcomed women (at last) as human subjects on a par with men. For this 'human' subject, it is argued, must always bear the traces of the patriarchal ordering which has been more or less coextensive with the 'human' condition as such: a patriarchal culture in the light of whose biassed and supposedly 'masculine' values (of rationality, symbolic capacity, control over nature) the 'human' is at the 'beginning' of 'culture' defined in opposition to the 'animal', and the discourse of 'humanism' itself first given currency. And so conceived, 'feminism' and 'humanism' would appear to aspire to incompatible goals, for 'feminism' is the quest for the registration and realisation (though quite in what language and cultural modes it is difficult to say ...) of feminine 'difference': of that ineffable 'otherness' or negation of human culture and its symbolic order (and gender system) *which is not the human* as this human is spoken to in humanism. Humanism, inversely, according to this way of thinking, is the discourse which believes or wishes or pretends that there is no such difference.

But humanism is also, we might note in passing, the

discourse which likes to think it can take back into the fold of the human all those who conceive of themselves as excluded. Or perhaps it would be better to describe it as the discourse which would say to all those who feel themselves excluded, or who prefer to exempt themselves from its sentimentality, that even in their exclusion or exemption they are within the fold; for resistance or indignation, they too are human, and humanism can embrace all opposition, difference and disdain for it. To say this is only to point out that there are *many* humanist discourses contesting each other's collectivities and claiming that theirs alone is truly universal. Thus it is in the name of a more universal humanism that Sartre delivers his 'anti-humanist' fulminations against bourgeois humanism. And thus it is, more generally, that religious conflicts, political battles, such as those between liberals and socialists, or even the philosophical oppositions between dialectic and anti-dialectic, can be viewed as 'humanist' sparrings for the right to represent the human race, its meaning and destiny.

I shall return to these points at a later stage, particularly as they affect the ultimate incompatibility of a feminist and a humanist outlook. Here, for the time being, let us stay with the arguments of the so-called 'difference' feminists: with those who, in varying ways, have questioned any ultimate compatibility. Two of the more prominent voices here are those of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. To these one might very tentatively add the name of Julia Kristeva: very tentatively, because she herself has forcefully criticized 'difference' feminisms, and is opposed to all theoretical moves which tend to an essentialism of 'femininity', and hence to a 'denegation of the symbolic' and removal of the 'feminine' from the order of language.[3] On the other hand, her own position is very equivocal. For, insofar as she is concerned to forestall any discourse on femininity which implies the 'ineffability' of the 'feminine' at the level of the symbolic, and to remind us that if the 'feminine' exists it only does so within the order of meaning and signification, she is herself implicitly invoking a feminine 'otherness'. The anxiety to check this 'silencing' of the 'feminine' is itself premised on a notion of the latter as a transgression and disrupting element within the prevailing code of the Symbolic. The 'existential crisis' of the 'feminine' as so conceived lies in the fact that it can only be spoken to within the existing order of language but is also that whose existence is denied or occluded by the very terms of that language. In other words, insofar as Kristeva relies on a Lacanian framework, her argument is constantly pulled towards acceptance of an equivalence between the 'masculine' and the Symbolic, whose effect, willy-nilly, is to cast the 'feminine' in the role of 'otherness' or 'difference' to the cultural order.

The resulting tensions have if anything been made more acute by recent developments in Kristeva's arguments wherein she has associated this feminine 'negativity' with a more positively accented pre-linguistic sensuality which she refers to as the 'semiotic', and that in turn with the 'maternal'. It is true that this 'semiotic' is not theorised literally as 'outside language' or inevitably deprived of cultural expression. For Kristeva finds it manifest not only in women's writing, but in the works of Joyce, Laurtemont, Mallarmé and a number of other male modernist writers. (Indeed, she has suggested that modernism should be viewed as a cultural movement of restitution or realisation of the feminine semiotic, though this is certainly a controversial interpretation).[4] But the association of the feminine semiotic with a pre-oedipal eroticism characteristic of the mother-infant relationship, and the suggestion that the maternal activities of gestation and nurturance break with conceptions of self and other, subject and object, which are of the essence of masculine logic, surely comes dangerously close to a differentiation of the feminine in terms of maternal function – precisely the essentialism which Kristeva has warned feminism against espousing and professes herself to wish to avoid.[5]

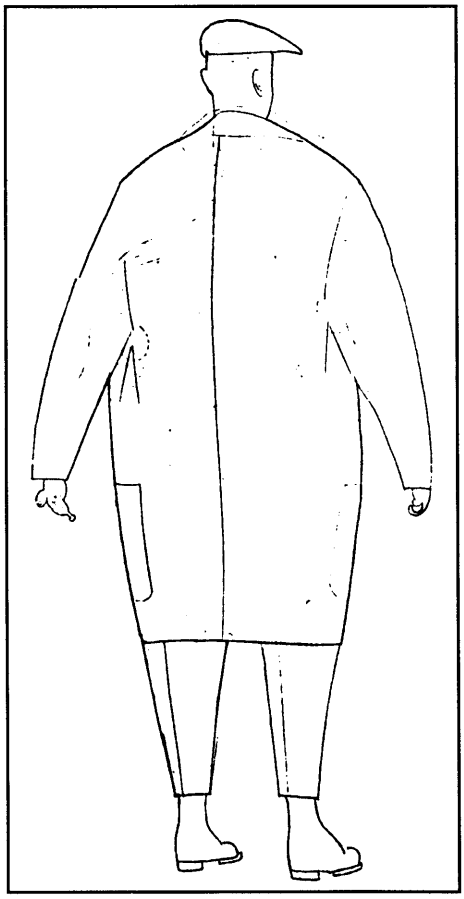
Irigaray and Cixous, on the other hand, have rejected the Lacanian eternalisation of the cultural 'negativity' of women; but their challenge, nonetheless, to the supposed inevitability of masculine preeminence relies on an invocation of feminine difference which would seem to offer no better outlet from a phallocentric universe. For the difference in question refers us to the difference in the female body and body experience in a manner which arguably reintroduces the masculine Symbolic identification of sexuality with genitality,[6] and essentializes the maternal function (particularly so in the case of Cixous' inflated celebrations of the plenitude, richness and fecundity of the feminine body). As has been

pointed out in respect of Kristeva's appeal to the maternal,[7] this tends to an elision of symbolic and empirical features which is theoretically confusing: after all, if feminine difference is being defined in terms of maternal function, then many actual, empiricial, women are going to find themselves cast out from femininity insofar as they are not mothers nor intending to become so. At the same time, the association of the feminine with the maternal or with the feminine body is deeply problematic for many feminists who see in this precisely the male cultural signification which they are attempting to contest, and which, they would argue, has been the justification for a quite unreasonable and unfair domestication of women and a very damaging social and economic division of labour from the point of view of female self-fulfilment and self-expression.

In a more general way, we must surely also contest the reductionism of the argument found in different forms in both

Irigaray's and Cixous' theories of the feminine (in Irigaray's advocacy of '*parler femme*' and Cixous' notion of *écriture feminine* as speaking to a kind of feminine unconscious) that language, whether spoken or written, directly mirrors physical morphology. It is a radical misunderstanding of the nature of signs to suppose that the two lips of the vulva or breast milk or menstrual blood are 'represented' in contiguous statements or in the unencodable libidinal gushings of a feminine prose *in any but a purely metaphorical sense*. But if we treat the supposed representation as purely metaphorical, then 'feminine writing' is being defined in terms of a certain image or metaphor of itself, and we end up with a purely tautological argument.

Again, the whole association within the writings of Cixous and Irigaray of feminine subjectivity with the prelinguistic and pre-conceptual, with that which has no meaning and cannot be spoken in (male) culture, comes very close to



reproducing the male-female dichotomies of traditional epistemology and moral argument – for which woman is 'intuitive', 'natural', 'immanent' – and 'silent' – and man is 'rational', 'cultural', transcendent' – and 'vocal'. The only difference is that the supposedly feminine characteristics will have been accorded a positive charge – and given the recurrent romanticisation and idolization of the feminine within the masculine cultural order itself, even that may not prove a very major shift.

At any rate, the important point would seem to be that where the appeal to difference is made, it tends to an essentialism of the female physique and function which reproduces rather than surpasses the traditional male-female divide and leaves 'woman' once again reduced to her body – and to silence – rather than figuring as a culturally shaped, culturally complex, evolving, rational, engaged and noisy opposition. The total disengagement of the feminine in the position of Cixous and Irigaray,[8] the complete severance of any masculine-feminine cultural intercourse, removes this opposition to the point where one might say there was no longer any feminist critique of patriarchy but only a self-absorption in the feminine.

On the other hand, if difference is not given this kind of anchorage in the feminine body and function, it is not clear why there is any reason, once set on the path of difference, for feminism to call a halt. In other words, if one disallows the feminine universal of a common bodily essence, then the commitment to difference ought to mvove into a deconstruction of feminine difference itself. Having exposed the 'masculinism' of humanism in the name of feminine difference, one must surely go on, by the same logic, to expose the generalising and abstract (and quasi-humanist) appeal to feminine difference in the name of the plurality of concrete differences between women (in their nationality, race, class, age, occupation, sexuality, parenthood status, health, and so on...). For on this argument 'woman' can no more be allowed to stand for all woman than can 'man' be allowed to stand for all members of the human species. The way then, of course, lies open to an extreme particularism in which all pretensions to speak (quasi-humanistically) in general for this or that grouping, or to offer an abstract and representative discourse on behalf of such putative groups, must give way to a hyper-individualism.[9] From this standpoint, any appeal to a collectivity would appear to be illegitimate – yet another case of 'logocentric imperialism', to use the inflated rhetoric of post-structuralism.

But at this point, one is bound to feel that feminism as theory has pulled the rug from under feminism as politics. For politics is essentially a group affair, based on the idea of making 'common cause', and feminism, like any other politics, has always implied a banding together, a movement based on the solidarity and sisterhood of women, who are linked by perhaps very little else than their *sameness* and 'common cause' as women. If this sameness itself is challenged on the grounds that there is no 'presence' of womanhood, nothing that the term 'woman' immediately expresses, and nothing instantiated concretely except particular women in particular situations, then the idea of a political community build around women – the central aspiration of the early feminist movement – collapses. I say the 'idea', for women do still come together in all sorts of groups for feminist purposes, and will doubtless continue to do so for a good while to come even if their doing so transgresses some Derridean conceptual rulings. But *theoretically*, the logic of difference tends to subvert the concept of a feminine political community of 'women' as it does of the more traditional political communities of class, Party, Trade Union, etc. And theory does, of course, in the end get into practice, and maybe has already begun to do so; one already senses that feminism as a campaigning movement is yielding to feminism as discourse (and to discourse of an increasingly heterogeneous kind).

In the face of this dispersion, with its return from solidarity to individualism, it is difficult not to feel that feminism itself has lost its hold, or at any rate that much contemporary theory of the feminine is returning us full circle to those many isolated, and 'silent', women from which it started – and for whom it came to represent, precisely, a 'common voice'. It is a *renversement*, moreover, which leaves feminism exposed to the temptations of what are arguably deeply nostalgic and conservative currents of post-modernist thinking. It would seem quite complicit, for example, with the distaste for anything smacking of a militant feminist politics implicit in Baudrillard's suggestion that it is our very resis-

tance to reactivating traditional feminine charms which is pre-empting cultural renewal. 'Only by the power of seduction does woman master the symbolic universe', he tells us,[10] in a piece of rhetorical blandishment redolent with nostalgia for the good old days when men ruled and women cajoled. It is true that it is not officially as an ideologue of patriarchal culture that Baudrillard offers this Rousseauian advice. On the contrary, he would seduce us back into seduction with the altogether more respectable end, so he claims, of taking us beyond all sociality, sentimentality and sexuality.[11] But it is interesting, all the same, that it remains out of place for woman directly to contest the father's authority, and that our cultural duty requires us still to have recourse to the subtler arts of cajolery: to beguile the phallus round. By such means, so Baudrillard tempts us to think, women will readily contrive to wrap the symbolic order around her charming little finger.[12]

This kind of sophistry, in truth, is not very tempting and probably unimportant. But I think in a general way it is fair to claim that the same logic of 'difference' which ends up subverting the project of feminine emancipation by denying the validity of any political community in whose name it could be pursued also deprives feminist argument of recourse against such retrograde post-structuralist idealism.

In introducing the term 'emancipation', one opens the way to consideration of another aspect of the problem of the relations between feminism, humanism and postmodernism. For if the building of political collectivities becomes problematic in the light of anti-humanist critique, this also reflects a reluctance of these critiques 'to speak on behalf of' others: to say, in short, what others – in this case women – want. In other words, the observance of the logic of difference has also made feminist theorists reluctant utopians. This caution in speaking for others' desires is understandable against a background of so much claimed knowledge of the 'alienation' and 'true needs' of others (especially of that notorious 'universal subject' of humanity, the proletariat). It is a needed corrective to the enforced collectivizations of interests and needs which have been given theoretical legitimation in the past. But again, the thinking which motivated this healthy resistance to glib pronouncements of solidarity and struggle has also in recent argument developed a momentum which begins to undermine the possibility of speaking of any kind of political collective and agreement at all. Foucault, for example, has denounced any totalising attempt in theory (any attempt, that is, to offer general diagnoses and general remedies for the ills of society) as 'totalitarian'. Even Habermas, who is hardly a Stalinist in theory, and who argues no more than that people should be allowed to discover the truth of their interests in the free discussions of his 'ideal communication situation', has been denounced by Lyotard for aspiring to a consensus.[13]

In other words, the drift of such arguments would seem to rule out any holistic analysis of societies (any analysis of the kind that allows us to define them as 'capitalist' or 'patriarchal' or 'totalitarian'), together with the radically transformative projects which such analyses tend to recommend. Indeed, as Isaac Balbus has argued in his defence of object-relations feminism against Foucauldian logic, if we accept the claim that any continuous history or

longue durée accounting is posturing as 'True' (and therefore dominating) discourse, then feminism itself becomes a form of totalitarianism. The very idea of a centuries-old subordination of women explicable by reference to trans-historical patriarchal structures becomes deeply problematic from the standpoint of the 'postmodernist' rejection of truth and scientific knowledge and of the continuities they posit. If all that we once called knowledge or theory is now mythopoeic 'narrative', then the narrative of male oppression is itself but one more myth of Knowledge generated in response to a 'Will to Power'. And, by the same token, 'progress' out of oppression becomes a meaningless aspiration.[14]

My primary aim in this survey has been to diagnose a problem rather than prescribe its remedy. It is true, however, that, insofar as I have presented both the 'maternal' feminism of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous, and the more radical deconstruction of the 'feminine' invited by the logic of difference, as 'problematic' for the project of female emancipation, I have implied the need for some alternative course. Indeed, at times I have gone much further, suggesting that both positions are inherently conservative: either difference is essentialized in a way which simply celebrates the 'feminine' other of dominant culture without disturbing the hold of the latter; or the critique is taken to a point where the 'feminine' and its political and cultural agents in the women's movement and feminist art and literature no longer exist in the sense of having any recognisable common content and set of aspirations. These implications of my argument, however, stand in need of more elaboration than I have given them and admit of certain qualifications which I have not yet considered. In conclusion, then, I would pursue the charge of political conservatism a little further, offering some arguments both in defence but also in mitigation of it.

I have already indicated my main reason for thinking that 'maternal' feminism and *écriture féminine* are open to this charge. But my objection is not only to the fact that the emphasis on the distinctiveness of the female body and its reproductive and erotic experience comes so close to reinforcing patriarchal conceptions of gender difference. I would also argue that, despite its avant-gardist pretensions, the style in which this feminism is couched is disquietingly confirming of traditional assumptions about the 'nature' of feminine thought and writing. The dearth of irony; the fulsome self-congratulation; the resistance to objectivity; the sentimentalisation of love and friendship and the tendency always to reduce these relations to their sexual aspect: to focus on the 'erotic' conceived as an amorphous, all-engulfing, tactile, radically unintellectual form of experience; the over-blown poetics and arbitrary recourse to metaphor (which so often lack the hardness of crystalline meaning as if exactitude itself must be

avoided as inherently 'male' ...): all this, which is offered in the name of allowing 'woman' to discover her 'voice', itself voices those very conceptions of female self-hood and self-affection which I believe are obstacles to cultural liberation. And the reason I find them obstacles is not simply because they so directly lend themselves to a patriarchically constructed ideology of femininity and its modes of self-expression, but because the ideology is, like all ideologies, at best partial in its representation and therefore illegitimately generalising of a certain specific form of understanding. Moreover, when this understanding relates so directly to images of self-hood and subjectivity, it is peculiarly offensive and arrogant – to the point, in fact, of operating a kind of theft of subjectivity or betrayal of all those who fail to recognise themselves in the mirror it offers. At the same time, because ideologies of their nature are always fractured reflections of society, exploded in the very moment which reveals their ideological status, those who cling to them and reinforce their decaying hold are also always marginalising their own discourse: ensuring that it cannot be taken seriously in the world at large.

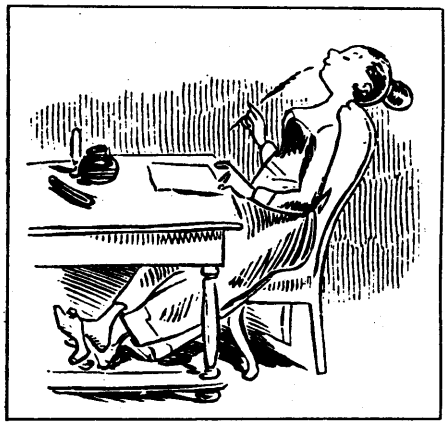
In response to this it will be said, perhaps, that the neutrality of my own presentation of the issue is misleading since 'the world at large' is essentially a 'male' world, and for women to reject eulogies of the 'feminine' on the grounds that this guarantees a shrugging off of their importance, is itself to be complicit with a culture which has consistently treated reproduction and nurturing activities as of secondary importance to traditional 'male' pursuits. If to be 'taken seriously' women must speak and act 'like men', are not those who do so lending themselves to these standard cultural norms and thus equally open to the charge of quietism?

The premise of all such objections, however, is a simplistic acceptance of the equation between masculinity and culture (or the 'Symbolic'); and this premise is itself conservative because it rules out the identification of 'masculine' with 'maternal' activity which I would argue must be an important part of the aspiration of all those wanting a revaluation of cultural norms. To put the point crudely, and more empirically, it is only when men are enabled to identify themselves as nurturers (among other things) and women as other things (as well as nurturers) that nurturing will cease to be signified as 'feminine'. But it is precisely this transformability of cultural codings and norms which is ruled out by a theory premised upon the permanence of their existing meanings. What is wrong with 'maternal' feminism is not that it celebrates a hitherto derided femininity, but that it seems to rule out aforehand as 'masculinist recuperation' any general cultural revaluation of it.

Associated with this preempting of any confusion of traditional cultural gender codings is an overly rigid and stereotypic conception of what it is to act and speak 'like a man'. For, in the last analysis, it is only if we assume that 'acting like a man' is of its nature to act in a conservative and self-defensive manner that the admonition not to do so retains its critical force. But the self-defeating nature of this assumption is revealed rather clearly if we consider that the very designation of the 'cultural' or 'symbolic' as patriarchal implicitly admits that subversion, disruption, the continual challenging of received wisdoms (for that is what culture is, or at any rate includes) is the outcome of 'male' speech and action. In other words, if everything that is 'cultural' is 'masculine' then 'masculinity' itself ceases to retain any distinctive meaning, and we are deprived of any means of discriminating between cultural modes which serve the maintenance of patriarchy and cultural modes which tend to subvert it.

These points bear on the lesser confidence I feel in pressing the charge of 'conservatism' against the other direction of post-structuralist feminism: against the position which would pursue the logic of difference to its ultimate conclusion in the dispersion of any essential conception of the 'feminine'. For it might seem to follow from this that we should welcome this collapse of 'femininity' as a progressive rather than a retrograde development. Ought we not to approve it as a break from feminist theories and strategies which, in focussing always on feminine gender and the distinctive experiences of women, have helped to reconfirm the binary system? Such a feminism, if it can be called such, would be directed towards the realisation of the 'in-difference' advocated by Derrida, who has been suggesting that feminists should give up 'feminine difference' as the first strategic move in the dissolution of the 'phallologocentric'.

This definitely seems a more attractive and progressive policy. But it, too, is not without its problems and particular tendencies to conservatism. In the first place, Derrida's recommendation to give up describing the specifically female subject in favour of 'in-differentiation' is inherently self-subverting since it must invoke the gender difference it invites us to ignore. In this sense, as Linda Kintz has argued, it is 'posed from the very terrain of the binary oppositions he warns against'.[15] The injunction, in other words, for women to be 'in-different': neither to speak 'as a woman' nor to speak 'like a man' (for both in their differing ways reinforce phal-



locracy, or at any rate do not disturb it) can arguably only be offered from a male subject place since it depends on presenting women as 'other': it depends on the assumption, for example, that woman is 'imitating' even if she speaks 'like a man'. You have not to be a man in order to do it, just as in nineteenth-century India you had not to be English in order to be Anglicized.[16] The issues here are complex and I shall not pursue them further here. Suffice it to say that there is indeed a distinction to be drawn between gender-blind and gender indifferent positions, and that Derrida's advice may be delivered from a position which has not sufficiently discriminated between the two. (I acknowledge, however, that a 'Derridean' response to these kinds of objection might simply be to point out that any 'Derridean' strategy will of its nature contain these elements of self-subversion).

In any case, a more important difficulty with the strategy of 'in-difference' is that it recommends changes at the level of discourse and consciousness rather than at the level of material – economic and social – circumstance, and like all such recommendations is open to the charge that it is politically conservative because it is too little dialectical. Because it refuses to discriminate between 'world' and 'text', between

the 'material' and the 'discursive', it follows that it has no theoretical purchase on the interdependence and mutual conditioning between the two. Of course, these arguments themselves can have no purchase on a position which eschews the metaphysical vocabulary of materialism and idealism. There is simply here no common discourse, and all that one can do is to charge post-structuralist 'idealism' with lacking the conceptual apparatus for marking important distinctions between different areas or modalities of social life. Adopting this critical position, however, I would argue that there are many material circumstances firmly in place which tend to the disadvantaging of women and whose correction is not obviously going to be achieved simply by a revaluation of theory on the part of a post-structuralising feminist elite. In fact there are some concrete and universal dimensions of women's lives which seem relatively unaffected by the transformation of consciousness already achieved by the women's movement. To give one example: despite the indisputable gains of feminist theory and action, the fact remains that women live in fear of men and men do not live in fear of women. When I say 'live in fear' of men, I do not mean that we live our lives in a continual and conscious anxiety, or that we think an attack on our persons is very likely (it isn't statistically and we are rational enough to accept it). I mean that women live in a kind of alertness to the possibility of attack and must to some degree organize their lives in order to minimize its threat. In particular, I think, this has constraints from which men are free on our capacity to enjoy solitude. As a woman, one's reaction to the sight of a male stranger approaching on a lonely road or country walk is utterly different from one's reaction to the approach of a female stranger. In the former case there is a frisson of anxiety quite absent in the latter. This anxiety, of course, is almost always confounded by the man's perfectly friendly behaviour, but the damage to the relations between the sexes has already been done – and done not by the individual man and woman but by their culture. This female fear and the constraints it places on what women can do – particularly in the way of spending time on their own – has, of course, its negative consequences for men too, most of whom doubtless deplore its impact on their own capacities for spontaneous relations with women. (Thus, for example, the male stranger has to think twice about smiling at the passing woman, exchanging the time of day with her, etc., for fear he will either alarm her or be misinterpreted in his intentions...). But the situation all the same is not symmetrical: resentment or regret is not as disabling as fear; and importantly it does not affect the man's capacity to go about on his own.

This, then, is one example of the kind of thing I have in mind in speaking of 'material circumstances' which have been relatively unaffected by changes at a discursive and 'Symbolic' level. They are circumstances which relate to conditions which are experienced by both sexes, and in the most general sense therefore culturally universal. But they are conditions which are differently experienced simply in virtue of which sex you happen to be, and in that sense they are universally differentiated between the sexes: *all* men and *all* women are subject to them *differently*. It is this sex-specific but universal quality of certain conditions of general experience which justifies and gives meaning to collective gender categories. To put the point in specifically feminist terms, there are conditions of existence common to all women which the policy of in-difference – with its recommendation not to focus on *female* experience – is resistant to registering in theory and therefore unlikely to correct in practice.

The implication of these rather open-ended remarks, I think, is that feminism should proceed on two rather contrary lines: it should be constantly moving towards 'in-difference' in its critique of essentialising and ghettoising modes of feminist argument; but at the same time it should also insist on retaining the gender-specific but universal categories of 'woman' or 'female experience' on the grounds that this is essential to identifying and transforming all those circumstances of women's lives which the pervasion of a more feminist consciousness has left relatively unaffected. In short, feminism should be both 'humanist' and 'feminist' – for the paradox of post-structuralising collapse of the 'feminine' and the move to 'in-difference' is that it reintroduces – though in the disguised form of an aspiration to no-gender – something not entirely dissimilar from the old humanistic goal of sexual parity and reconciliation. And, while one can welcome the reintroduction of the goal, it may still require some of the scepticism which inspired its original deconstruction.

Notes

1 Thus Alice Jardine, Gynesis: *Configurations of Women and Modernity*, Ithaca and London, 1985, see especially pp. 22–24; cf. Barbara Creed, 'From here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism', *Screen*, no. 28, 2, Spring 1987.

2 Though there was a definite class bias in much of the early liberal discussion of such rights: 'all men' being conceived often ehough as having practical extension only to all males in possession of a certain property and concomitant social status.

3 See J. Kristeva, 'Women's Time' (first published as 'Le Temps des Femmes' in 33/44: *Cahiers de recherche de sciences des textes et documents*, 5 (Winger 1979)) in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, pp. 187–213; cf. 'Il n'y a pas de maître à language', *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 1979, cit. Toril Moi (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 11.

4 See the discussion by Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, London, 1986, pp. 44–62.

5 For a sense of this development in Kristeva's thinking, see the excerpts from *About Chinese Women* (1974); Stabat Mater' (1977); 'The True-Real' (1979); and 'Women's Time' (1979) included in Toril Moi (ed.), *op. cit.* Cf. also the discussions of Kristeva in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, London, Methuen, 1985; and in Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London, Verso, 1986. For a critique of Kristeva's 'ethic' of feminine negativity, see Drucilla Cornell and Adam Thurschwell, 'Feminism, Negativity, Subjectivity' in Drucilla Cornell and Seyla Benhabib, *Feminism as Critique*, Oxford, 1987, pp. 151–56.

6 Irigaray, for example, has treated *parler femme* as an analogue of female genitalia, in which the continuous, non-adversarial and elliptical quality of the statements of feminine writing is a reflection of the two lips of the vulva.

7 Drucilla Cornell and Adam Thurschwell, *op. cit.*, pp. 150–51.

8 A disengagement reflected in Kristeva's Lacanian presentation of the feminine as semiotic 'other' of the Symbolic even as it is criticized by Kristeva herself.

9 Recent feminist self-criticism regarding the 'white middle-class' outlook of feminist politics reflects this anxiety about conceptual conflations, even if it does not collapse into the extreme particularism which would seem to be its ultimate logic.

10 Jean Baudrillard, *De la séduction*, Paris, 1979, p. 208; cf. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

11 Jean Baudrillard, interview in *Marxism Today*, January 1989, p. 54.

12 There will be some, no doubt, who will come to Baudrillard's defence. They argue, perhaps that he is in fact repaying the debt of patriarchy with a clear and self-confessed vagina envy. Or they may point out that Baudrillard is simply saying that the means must match the end, and that for women to use 'male' methods is to give themselves over to the masculine forms of power they wish to contest. Very well, then, let him for his part, show his good faith by yielding up the language of 'female sacrifice' and 'female seduction'. And let him ask men, too, to put a hand in the churn of cultural revolution. Or is the subversion of the Symbolic to be wholly women's work?

13 François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester, 1986, p. 66; cf. pp. 10–16; 25; 57–59; 63–65.

14 Isaac Balbus, 'Disciplining Women' in *Feminism as Critique*, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–27.

15 Linda Kintz, 'In-Different Criticism' in Jeffner Allen, Iris Marion Young, *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, Indiana, 1989, p. 113.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 130–33.