Michel Foucault. Power, Truth, Strategy
eds M Morris & P Patton, Feral Publications 1979

Meaghan Morris

THE PIRATE'S FIANCEE

Feminists and Philosophers, or maybe tonight it'll happen

Lacking faith in their ability to change anything, resigned to the status quo, they have *to see beauty in turds because, so far as they can see, turds are all they'll ever have.*

I would like to make a few slanted suggestions about the possible value of Foucault's work to those feminists who might be reading it. This isn't a theoretical text; though that is not because I wish to avoid being caught at commentary, or to tick down my allegiance automatically to a politics (which I do support) of the provisional and the definitely uncertain. Still less does it claim to have anything to do with a genealogical analysis; far from being patiently documentary, it's rather a matter of some impatient speculations on some affairs currently absorbing (in theory) a small section of the women's movement.

Discipline and Punish and the *History of Sexuality 1* arrive in troubled times: their propositions have a kind of rampant inappropriateness around them. Foucault's recent work is not enamoured of psychoanalysis, being much more concerned with the possibility of its emergence. It displaces some of the traditional concerns of marxism, and has scant respect for semiotics: "Neither the dialectic (as logic of contradiction) nor semiotics (as structure of communication) can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of confrontations. The "dialectic" is a way of evading the always hazardous and open reality of this intelligibility, by reducing it to the hegelian skeleton; and "semiology" is a way of evading its violent, bloody and deadly

character, by reducing it to the pacified and platonic form of language and dialogue".[1]

In the English speaking world, marxism and psychoanalysis have been playing a positive role in many women's work for some time; and semiology, while making a major public appearance for the British in a baffling book called *Language and Materialism*, has yet to emerge fully into the limelight. And for backdrop, we have a general proliferation of references to French texts (many of them creative English fictions) which leads some people to call for the cultural vice squad to intervene.

The Foucault-problem which these conditions create cannot be entirely dismissed by saying, with some malicious souls, that for a culture where the traditional duty of the intellectual is to prove for ever after that he is not a swot and came top of the class without really trying, this is all too much for the mind. (In Australia, this is essentially a masculine model; the witty drinking companion. Most female intellectuals one can unearth tend to be discreet writers, but raving workaholics.)

- In many places in Australia, students and teachers can fall into fatal disfavour for introducing marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics (outside the relatively safe place of the modern language department, where they disappear into the innocuous category "foreign culture"). Whether these are worth fighting "for" is a non-question in this context; real struggles take place around them, and through them.

- marxism (and specifically, marxist political economy) has a local subversive potential unthinkable to most European intellectuals, when deployed in a culture where the most elementary affirmation of the existence of class struggles past or present is capable of triggering explosions left and right.

- marxism and psychoanalysis have been all the more effective in opening up possibilities for political struggles, in that much Australian activism is still organised by the ritual form of the catholic canonical Index: the "what you should not read". Marx and Freud have had less the status of master-thinkers, and more the exhilarating effect of an indecent adventure; (outside the universities, at least).

- for many feminists, marxism and psychoanalytic theory (semiotics in the past only drew a few strays) have played the role of unblocking a dead end encountered after a certain period of feminist practice — that of separatism for some, "women's studies" for others. Secondly, with the passing of time, marxist and/or freudian feminism now functions for some women as a beginning; what used to be called "radicalisation". Thirdly, given the anxiety and aggression which has

surrounded the mysterious entity "theory" in the women's movement (and the complex history of that would be well worth looking at), marxism and psychoanalysis have helped to organise the beginnings of a resistance to the appalling behaviourist and sociological bog which swallows up so much valuable feminist empirical research; at the same time, they have helped to make incursions into the institutionalised exclusion of women from certain kinds of knowledge (and a statement like that these days is no longer an empty rhetorical gesture, but a fully loaded one).

In fact, the first thing that one might want to say about Foucault's recent work (particularly the notion of the specific intellectual, and the analyses of the place of resistance in power relations) is that it is Foucault's work itself which provides a strategic thought sparing one the absurd paralysis of wondering whether participation in the real struggles going on is corrupting to one's revolutionary essence. (Although a little political *nous* might do the same job just as well). If there is indeed – in those few ordered little spaces where anglo-althusserianism calls the shots – a totalitarian reading of Foucault which rifles for References in order and interrogates his respect for Marx, there is also an authoritarian and equally abusive reading, which brandishes the texts at feminists working with marxism and psychoanalysis, casts the anathema of co-optation and then hopes for recantations.

This is a body of work which asks for patient and cautious appraisal. It should be obvious, however, that the last thing that the concept of "regime of truth" can lend itself to is a politics of the pointing finger (even if, in the ritual of self-criticism, one points it at oneself). Nor can "truth" be invoked every time someone (especially a "known marxist") opens their mouth to make a statement: the concept retains its rigour; and if catatonia operates within the theatre of thought, Foucault's work is not a prop to quell others into mutism, "Theatrum Philosophicum" is not a monologue on the final effacement of all distinctions.

With that said, however, more interesting questions can arise than the "demoralisation in the current conjuncture" which some people fear might follow from reading Foucault's work. For instance, it would be nice to eye a body of work which offers itself as a toolbox, and start asking what use its tools might be to us; or, more positively, what use we might make of them. But wielding a feminist "we" is tricky at the moment.

The roar of battle surrounds the pronoun: "I" spells a host of sins from the humanist horror of talking heads to the simple vulgarity of claims to authenticity; "one" has been written into the masculine, and as for "we", that embarassing macro-binary constraint from the days of units and solidarity, whatever is to be done with "we"? How many

disparate and displacing "you's" and "I"s are being dis-possessed?

We are not only choking on the utterance act. Worse, we seem to be sliding on our signifieds, and the scare quote stalks in to fence off the space of a disaster zone: "woman", "women", "Woman" are the warning signs of an increasingly unposable problem, all of a heap, wrong from the start. Yet when the watchful scare quotes are absent, the result is irresistably comic: one article stolidly observes, "Thus women cannot be taken as an unproblematic collection of subjects, once the concept of subjects is challenged".[2] (Indeed, one would hope not . . .).

In the name of the patriarchal mode of production, Monique Plaza berates Luce Irigaray for flirting with the unseemly proposition in which it is said that woman does not exist[3]; and Mark Cousins (who asserts in a different sense that women do not exist) also cautions that, in Marxist terms at least, what cannot be said to exist is the patriarchal mode of production.[4]

While it is frustrating to read too many of these arguments (and if at times it seems as though Valerie Solanas' observation "*the ultimate male insight is that life is absurd*" only needs a little rephrasing in the days of the profound examination of the non-existence of women), it is nevertheless a little too easy to make fun of them.

Feminisms both past and present have run into some very solid brick walls through trusting too lightly to "the obvious", assuming a continuous and evenly distributed, consistently significant, oppression of the eternal natural object "woman" or "women" through the ages. Much of the work going on at the moment which is questioning the "existence" of women (within different or incompatible frameworks) is attempting to break this wall down and so solidify – or diversify – the grounds for an extension of women's struggles. The research which might roughly be called marxist-freudian-feminist (sign of a strange conglomeration) is insisting that women are "constructed" in a variety of practices, and attempting to find a way of integrating feminist and class analysis: another kind of investigation is being carried out in terms of women's language, the possibility of discovering or re-discovering a speech which articulates the diversities of women's reality.

However I would like to use a couple of aspects of Foucault's recent work to raise some questions about the terms in which two particular skirmishes going on *within* these general areas at the moment are being carried out: one around the programme for a so-called "theory of the subject" (with "I anguage" and "subjectivity" as two defining terms); and the other around the celebration of a "feminine" writing, ("discourse" and"femininity") -- blending an old anglo-american interest in women writers with the newer discovery of the work going on in France on "feminine specificity".

In doing so, I don't mean to suggest that these are in any sense the

main or "Leading" theoretical tendencies of Feminism. Whatever one thinks about woman, feminism, at least, is never One; and marxist-feminism, for example, is very far from being reducible to the theory of the subject, or to any form of freudian inclination at all. The two debates in question probably impassion remarkably few women. But they do pose fairly acutely, even if only in passing, an ever discreditable and ridiculous political question – the (shaky and shifting) place within the women's movement, and beside it, of academics, intellectuals; or "theorists", in British-inspired terminology.

These three terms are used with a variety of connotations by different people in different situations. They cover abuse, dismissal, distrust (it's a strange thing to hear two women, each employed in tertiary teaching, describe each other contemptuously for some *other* reason as "typical academics"), self-abasement, fierce or shy self-assertion. They also hide a multitude of problems. Problems of practice, for even if one leaves aside the proposition that the real task of feminist and other revolutionary intellectuals is to use a privileged relation to truth to explain matters gently to the People, there is always the pressure to feel that "Practice" always lies *elsewhere* (on the streets, on the beaches . . .) and never there where one works, which is rarely an ivory tower of dreams called Theory, but the school, the university, the college, the hospital, the clinic, the media . . . contexts in which, if it becomes impossible to cling to the simplicities of sex war, then it also becomes impossible to escape specification as "a woman". Problems too of formulation; since behind much of the embarassment and muddle lies a barely broached question sometimes labelled "women and philosophy", or "women and theory", which women working *in* either are the first to realise cannot be posed like that at all.

It's worth insisting that in looking at this – obliquely – through Foucault's work, the point is to use it and not to "apply" it. Even if his texts did not take their own precautions against application, I doubt whether Foucault would apply himself at all well if put directly to work for women. Foucault is a profoundly androcentric writer; it may be frivolous to say so (or worse, old-fashioned), but one only needs to flirt with the possibility of censorship in the act of translating his texts to feel "Homme . . . " resound like a mantra. "The Life of Infamous People" just would not do, it would not do at all.

In fact, the nicest thing about Foucault in this respect, at least, is that not only do the offers of a philosopher to self-destruct appear to be positively serious on this occasion, but that any feminists drawn in to sending Love Letters to Foucault would be in no danger of reciprocation. Foucault's work is not the work of a ladies' man: and (confounding the received opinions of the advocates of plan speech, straight sex) some recent flirtations between feminists and other more susceptible thinkers would seem to suggest that there are far worse

fates than wanking (like being thoroughly screwed).

However *The History of Sexuality 1* contains a number of perspectives of immediate interest to feminists: apart from the suggestive references to the hysterisation of women, the chapter "Right of Death and Power over Life" for example casts a curious light on the question of abortion and its history, on the research which has been surfacing on eugenics and the history of feminisms, on the "professionalisation of birth control".[5] At the same time, it seems to me that for such serious research projects, more would eventually be gained from attention to Foucault's proposals on the analysis of power, knowledge and struggle than from simply *isolating* the more obviously "relevant" material on sexuality. For if it *is* extracted in isolation, then it becomes only too tempting to observe that much of the book's analytical force is directed against a generalised dream of "sex liberation" which the women's movement began by resisting; by resisting the invitation floating festively above the tents of the revolution of a decade ago, calling "Free Pussy" . . .

> *. . . they've seen the whole show – every bit of it – the fucking scene, the sucking scene, the dick scene, the dyke scene – they've covered the whole waterfront, been under every dock and pier – the peter pier, the pussy pier . . . you've got to go through a lot of sex to get to anti-sex, and SCUM's been through it all, and they're now ready for a new show; they want to crawl out from under the dock, move, take off, sink out. But SCUM doesn't yet prevail; SCUM's still in the gutter of our "society", which, if it's not deflected from its present course and if the Bomb doesn't drop on it, will hump itself to death.*

The project of a theory of the subject and the project of a feminine writing have many incompatibilities, and at least one thing in common; the unlikely tool of Lacanian analysis. But the manipulation of the tool is itself a source of dispute. The advocates of "feminine writing" play with a Lacan who flirts with Derrida, admire ruse and dirty fighting, cultivate the tactics of the pricktease; the rigidity of solid philosophical discourse is taunted and tautened unto dissolution. In contrast, the theory of the subject aims to be nothing if not solid; in Coward and Ellis' *Language and Materialism*, or in the pages of the journal *m/f*, there is not much fooling around. The Lacan solicited

there is one who could be put to bed with Marx, discomfiting the latter considerably no doubt, but all in the cause of knowledge rather than desire; science coupled with science breeds science. The language of Lacan is scanned and straightened out; divested of its power to tease, it becomes simply "Hard". It stimulates exegesis, not exhibitionism.

Yet *Language and Materialism* crystallised a new attention to language, an attention which displaced for marxist-feminists much of the earlier work on "the subject" which had sprung up around Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. The earlier work relied heavily on the notion of symptomatic reading, in which the text is a sort of medium facilitating the location and diagnosis of tainted concepts; and tried to use healthy pieces of Lacan to "fill in the gaps" in Althusser's comments on ideology. Theories of signification, and the implications of text and discourse analysis received relatively little attention in themselves – partly because of the (continuing) unavailability of most of the material in English, partly because despite its apparent exoticism and "structuralist" overtones, the method of symptomatic reading did not involve any attention to "language" at all. Coward and Ellis point to one immediate consequence of the absence of "a radical understanding of signification, of identity and the sign" in Mitchell's book itself;[6] the Lacanian analysis of the unconscious was ignored, and as a result the unconscious was treated as a repository of the structural relations of patriarchy. Marxist-feminists then spent a great deal of time arguing whether this was an *acceptable* formulation, or not; a difficult subject, since while curiously attractive to their feminism, it was quite indigestible for their marxism, and had some rather horrifying implications all round.

Language and Materialism offered a new set of possibilities. By restoring something of the complexity of Lacanian analysis, *and* – at the same time – by interpreting its importance through some concepts extracted from Kristeva's early work, Coward and Ellis were able not only to insist that subjects, and therefore the unconscious, are "produced" by language,[7] but also to dismantle the fairly simple, monolithic and determined subject of the work inspired by Mitchell. Positions were cleared for plurality, diversity, multiplicity, heterogeneity, disruption, contradiction; the pay-off was not only another crack at a theory of ideology, but also a reopened possibility for struggle; which might, into the bargain, allow marxism to catch up finally on some of its opponents in the ideological domain.

The mention of this possibility prompts questions about the method of *Language and Materialism* itself. Despite its hard-core conceptual approach, there are a number of strange and paradoxical things about it. One is the blithe narrativisation of "developments" in semiology – a discipline (some would say science) whose development is virtually absent from the story except from some glancing asides on Hjelmslev and Greimas. Another is the tendency, disarming

in a text written so much in praise of heterogeneity, to synthesise unrelated or conflicting discourses by looking at them through the unifying lens provided by the concept of the "subject in process", with the equally disarming prospect of a study of the "subject in crisis" in poetic language, performed in the most placid and imperturbable of philosophical styles, in which "insights" are clear or unclear, "appropriations" correct or incorrect. *Language and Materialism* is a monument to the spirit of system; and, courageously enough, builds itself up with the aid of *S/Z* – one of the fiercest attacks on systematisation and on semiotics as a science ever written. The *lexie*, for example, with its nonchalent arbitrariness, is not only a tool for a new kind of analysis; it is also an inspired and lethal joke.[8]

But the terrain of the theory of the subject is not the terrain of the joker, and it really accords only a very circumscribed place to the productivity of language. Lacanian analysis and semiotics are courted only for their use value; they *account for*. If they also explode as well as explain, then the degree of disruption is carefully controlled – the explosion is limited to the site of the "subject", and not to "the theory of". The status, function, and the writing of "theory" remains untouched. One can write that "Narration rather sets the subject in place as the point of intelligibility of its activity: the subject is then in a position of observation, understanding, synthesising" (p. 50), as part of the process of constructing a text which precisely has that position of the subject – among other things – in common with the procedures of narration. With no "contradiction" at all, in truth, since apart from the text's necessary and worthwhile pedagogical intention, a very traditional mode of distinguishing discourses is at work; the theory of the subject is science, and not literature.

> We have tried to show in this book how the problematic of language has influenced the developments of both Marxism and psychoanalysis in a way that their encounter must necessarily produce a new object of knowledge. This new object is the scientific knowledge of the subject.[9]

The critique of the instrumental theories of language is purely instrumental for the theory. There is therefore every reason why the pursuit of this new object should most rigorously not involve being lured off the path (by Barthes, Kristeva, Lacan) into the thorny territory of the disarticulation of classical rationalism. There, things are sloppy, confused, indistinct, unclear; and as one enthusiast for the theory said, there are perfectly sound philosophical objections to that part of it anyway. (Indeed; and from what place might we speak if there were not?).

If the object at stake is the scientific knowledge of the subject, then the political function of knowledge is that of equipment *for* ideological struggle. "Until Marxism can produce a more adequate account of the role of ideology, subjective contradiction and the

family, it will never provide a real alternative to such operations of bourgeois ideology" (p. 156). Knowledge guides struggle, somehow but surely; theoretical competence improves political performance.

If one steps outside this framework – which is not reducible to *Language and Materialism* itself, nor co-extensive with it – then innocent and discreditable questions arise again; although it seems to me that to pose them it is neither necessary to adopt the facilities of "feminine writing" and claim that this is all too cocky for words, nor sufficient to harangue it self-righteously in general terms for complicity with Truth (nor for pretensions to such complicity; the argument has rather the imprint of utopian desires and all discussion of it needs to take account of its marginality). Instead one can ask in a more limited way what the local implications of these developments might be for women's struggles. What is happening there where women work so hard on distinguishing the penis and the phallus? What is going on when the privileged areas of a marxist theory become "the subject" on one hand and "language" on the other?

In one sense, it is easy to see the immediate value of this, since constructing a theory of the subject involves trying to work on two legendary disaster-and-devastation zones: one being the outcome of a pugnaciously practical feminism actively hostile to any reflection, confiding itself trustfully to the tender care of sociology, ignoring the claims of economy, and proceeding from the attempt to pit all women against all men at all times to the discovery that the main enemy, when not in The Head, was other women; the other being the failures of an economistic marxism which not only failed to account for subjective contradictions and the appeals of bourgeois ideology, but could not even begin to account for its own remarkable failure to appeal.

Yet the way in which the repair project has been undertaken has some awkward consequences, related at least in part to the althusserian inheritance at work in the plan's scientific design. Since it is of the first importance to distinguish science from ideology, it therefore becomes extremely important for "theory" to take up a position of combating the enemy *within*. Bourgeois ideology, idealism, humanism . . . if the procedure by which the theory of the subject constructs its *object* is one of forging an identity from (and between) a series of discourses flourishing outside marxism, then it establishes its own *necessity* by demonstrating that idealism and humanism have infiltrated marxism itself (and that feminism is fairly seething with both). This is not really a manoeuvre of dogmatism, but of defence; since error leads to practical ineffectiveness.

The first consequence is that it becomes strictly speaking unthinkable to question the tools of the necessity-demonstration in any fundamental way, although their refinement, correction and adjustment are allowed to be not only possible but necessary. For example,

when psychoanalytic theory is accepted both for its explanation-value *and* its use in combating humanism in marxism and feminism, then not only do critiques of the social function of psychoanalysis become irrelevant, or at best a carefully defined "separate" question; but no problems can arise within the space of the theory about the *history* of the relations between (for example) psychoanalysis on the one hand and humanism on the other.[10] As long as a "science" of the subject can be distinguished from an "ideology" of the subject, the former accounting for the wanderings and limitations of the latter, then there is nothing disturbing about the peculiar convergence of their concerns. Only the naive humanist feminist thinks she can change something by changing her consciousness; the rigorous feminist plumbs the hidden depths of subjectivity, studies its construction in language, follows the diffusing implications of Benveniste's empty instance through to its fulfilments elsewhere, winds through the labyrinth to find not a monster but a new position of the subject . . . .

Robert Castel has argued in *Le psychanalysme* that the famous decentring of the subject (and today one needs to add detotalising, deglobalising and deunifying) serves precisely to displace the subject's functions by carrying them elsewhere and further: but one has trouble arguing effectively in this way with a science. For Castel's observation rests on a series of assumptions, guiding his own research as well as that of Michel Foucault: it depends on assuming that it be *significant* that there is a relation between analytic knowledge and practice, and socio-political power relations; that this analytic knowledge and power inscribes itself in a certain socio-economic form (the contractualisation of subjectivity); and further it depends on insisting that this knowledge cannot be unravelled intact from the networks of power in which it is actively enmeshed, networks whose proliferation can be mapped by *historical* research.

Few proponents of a theory of the subject would deny that these assumptions point to real questions; what is at stake, however, is their importance and the time of their asking. A theory of the subject cannot incorporate them if a theory of the subject is to be possible in the first place. (It might be unkind to suggest that this can be an example of a moment of tactical option, in which false unities dissolve indeed; as when, within the space of marxist epistemology, an observation of similarities between Althusser and Popper leads some marxists to take a good hard look again at Althusser, and others to warm to Popper once more). So one awkward consequence of the freudo-marxist marriage presided over by language, is to open up an inviting space for marxist and feminist labours which can only be defined by the systematic evacuation of certain questions – political, economic, and above all historical questions. Unfortunately this strange form of materialism has its non-intentional relays in practice as well: leaving aside the transfer of some theorists from armchair to

couch, the work on constructing a theory of the subject has had some success in partially neutralising the crude and direct assault on psychoanalytics which was once a major tactic for the struggles of women and homosexuals. Long before *Language and Materialism* this was shown to be mistaken, not because it wasn't having effects (which it was; though not all of them brilliant), but because in erroneously assuming that a wide variety of theories, institutions and practices could be called "psychoanalysis", its aggressively operational ignorance was obscuring the possibility of something much better for the long Run – an adequate "analysis".

Other problems appear when the task of assuring internal security takes top priority, if not for its own sake, then at least for the welfare and further development of the struggles under investigation. It then becomes a *point of departure* for "theory" to insist on the presence of humanism etc. in feminist discourses and practices (a fairly easy job, in fact). The immediate disadvantage of this is not that it can lead to a delirious enumeration of theoretical errors and dangers, though these do diversify delightfully in the site of the hapless subject: apart from the old favourites idealism, humanism, and empiricism, there can be essentialism, moralism, unification, centralisation, necessitation, globalisation and totalisation. Nor is it that this is the speech of policemen or judges: the "theorist" on these occasions is rather in the speaking position of the impotent and ex-centred chieftain of South American tribes, pouring out words (in times of peace) while others go about their business.

The immediate disadvantage is that "*the*" subject looms up even more hugely as problem and as formulation; though this is often a subject that is indeed an effect of language, emerging from a convenient shorthand term for a multiplicity of problems, and enlarging itself to assume the status of a reading grid. "*The*" subject as a concept in some British work has assumed a massiveness which is probably only equalled in the concepts of French new philosophy. The construction of "the" subject as problem in the discourse and practice of others means that not only is one forced into the constraints of that form of analysis which consists in demonstrating that women willy-nilly reproduce or reintroduce exactly what they thought they were fighting, but that

1. there is no escape from "the" subject as an effective concept in the analysis of political struggles, and
2. in the process, that analysis is largely deprived of any operative means of distinguishing between strategies of power and tactics of resistance, between statements in common (Right to Life, Right to Choose, for example) on the one hand, and antagonistic discourses on the other.

The most one can do is acknowledge difference in vague and general terms, in an admissive mode; "It may be necessary at this time . . . ";

since the foundation of the whole procedure is not to use research itself to diversify the possibility of struggles, but to establish identity, equivalence, significant similarity. Theory as watchdog is a poor creature: not because it is nasty or destructive, but because for attacking the analysis of confrontations, it simply has no teeth.

One of the great beauties of Foucault's recent work is the way that his displacement of the problematics of science and ideology, in favour of an analysis of the fundamental *implications* of power-knowledge and their historical transformations, permits the beginnings of an analysis of that favourite rhetorical flourish, "struggle": and in so doing, displaces the problematics of humanism – and thus of "anti-humanism" – altogether (a displacement marked by the wickedness of "soul" in *Discipline and Punish*).

It is this displacement, for example, which allows Foucault to continue his detailed analyses of the technologies of subjection and subjugation, and at the same time to speak of "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges" in history; of the revolts of disqualified knowledges, and of their insistent emergence in the political struggles in recent years.[11] It is this which permits a rigorous distinction, for example, between "prison reform" projects initiated through officials, commissioners and functionaries, and the demands made by prisoners themselves and those who work for them on their terms. It is this which could permit a more productive approach to the articulation – and extension – of the struggles of those resistant objects of knowledge, "women". For in a perspective in which bodies and souls are seen as not simply constituted but also invested and *traversed* by relations of power-knowledge (and that unevenly and inequitably – it is not a question of a uniform distribution or a stable "effect") then what becomes possible in relation to "women", special category in the catalogues of the human sciences, is something more than a history of a "construction": it is rather the possibility of a history of a strategic *specification* – a real one, productive perhaps not only of "specificity" but also of its status as "intrinsic" in fiction and in truth – and at the same time, a history of that in women which *defies* specification, which escapes its hold; the positively *not* specific, the unwomanly in history.

> *Men who are rational, however, won't kick or struggle or raise a distressing fuss, but will just sit back, relax, enjoy the show and ride the waves to their demise.*[12]

Passing from the realm of the theory of the subject to the shifty

spaces of feminine writing is like emerging from a horror movie to a costume ball. The world of "theorisation" is a grim one, haunted by mad scientists breeding monsters through hybridisation, by the hunted ghosts of a hundred isms, and the massive shadow of the subject surging up at every turn. Feminine writing lures with an invitation to licence, gaiety, laughter, desire and dissolution, a fluid exchange of partners of indefinite identity. All that custom requires is infinite variety, infinite disguise. Only overalls are distinctly out of place; this is the world of "style". Women are not welcome here garbed in the durable gear of men; men, instead, get up in drag. Lacan reigns here not as law-giver, but as queen.

Each performance has its code, however, and the naive feminist blunders in at her peril. The audiences gather to watch her slip on a central shibboleth, the language of psychoanalysis. In Frankenstein's castle, the penalty for careless definition is swift but clean dismemberment: in the shimmering world of feminine impersonation, a worse fate awaits the woman with the wrong style of argument – she is exposed for the straight that she is, stripped bare to reveal (to her shame and surprise) that she is only equipped with a phallus. In either case, however, there is no forgiveness for not knowing what you do when you speak.

But when it comes to a competition between these two rather risque forms of entertainment for feminists, the gothic stories of science seem to lose out well and truly. Feminine writing is never One, by definition cannot be defined, asserts itself as irreducible difference, as always other and elsewhere, and when confronted by an "incisive argument", just laughingly melts away. And with certain eminent philosophers laying bets on the lady, all that wheezing science can do is demonstrate, laboriously, its own limitations.

Traditional political criticism in France has indeed had great difficulties with feminine writing when the latter assumes, chameleon-style, an explicitly political or philosophical colour. Christine Delphy has most success in transfixing Annie Leclerc;[13] but then Annie Leclerc's writing is drivel rather than flow. Yet even here, in the midst of a fine dissection of Leclerc's personal "I" of unquestionable authenticity, Delphy is irritated into matching the mawkishness of her opponent by a melodramatic gesture in the direction of another (if impersonal) mode of authentication – ". . . psychologism, biologism, and idealism are the three udders of ideology".[14] One cannot win this argument like that; one can only call for approving cheers from those who are always already on side.

Monique Plaza tries a similar tactic at times in her heroic assault on Luce Irigaray, " 'Phallomorphic power' and the psychology of 'woman' ".[15] Plaza's theme is naturalism. However it is impossible to pin down the formidable Irigaray in this way – her ploys are much more lethal than the simperings of Annie Leclerc, and have practically

nothing in common with them. On the shifting, treacherous ground of femininitude, there is nothing more dangerous than appeals to underlying similarity and resemblance, or to kinship. Annie Leclerc, for example, does believe in a "natural" woman, socially devalorised: Luce Irigaray is very far from confusing the anatomical and the social, but works with a deadly deliberation *on* the point (the site and the purpose) of the confusion of anatomical and *cultural*.

If a systematic analysis born of concepts like mode of production and reproduction is certainly absent from *Speculum*, then in a sense the power of that form of analysis is actively deflated in the text (although its questions are fleetingly re-raised): but to reinstate its potency, Plaza is forced into merely ignoring the problematics of discourse and the unconscious assaulted in Irigaray's work, and thus in trying to make the charge of naturalism stick she is obliged to read it largely in terms of Freud rather than the terms of Lacan. Plaza's sense of nature, culture, and society is oddly pre-linguistic – baby talk. While it is immensely cheering to read an analysis in which it is Lacan rather than women reduced to effective non-existence, this is achieved at the cost of triumphantly confronting a text with an argument which is already only one of its own antecedents. So too does Plaza find it sufficient to reveal the ambiguity of Irigaray's project, number its contradictions – when ambiguity and contradiction are openly flaunted as its most tormenting methods in the first place.

Irigaray's text itself infuriatingly resists definition as feminine; for her the feminine is conditional or future tense, an interrogative mood. These pervade her writing, with possibility, it is true, but the speculum is a masculine instrument; the feminine is suspended and explored, and the circular form with the fitting contours for the job is one beloved of classical ("masculine") intelligibility fondling its own limits – the paradox. Irigaray remains the recalcitrant outsider at the festival of feminine specificity – she lounges ironically at the door. For what goes on inside, celebrated in the joyful present tense of Hélène Cixous or Marguerite Duras, is nothing more powerful than literature.

And where political criticism and philosophy flounder before a menace of some kind, literary criticism runs up joyfully to embrace feminine writing. Men in literature departments love it (the "display" of power) – relieved of the tedium of exposition, they too can flaunt and fling and giggle with the girls. For in practice, the feminine writing which has "come" has very little to do with biological sex and unspeakable desire, and everything to do with gender and gesture. The language of the feminine body, woman's desire, is a deliriously cultural ploy; entirely organised by the binary logic which Luce Irigaray alone attempts (and wittingly refuses) to dismantle.

It is here, however, that Plaza does point to a way of sneaking up

on specificity and stabbing in the back. "Woman", she says, "exists too much as signifier. Woman exists too much as subjected, exploited individual". It is the absolute irrelevance of women to feminine writing that is the give-away; and Plaza shows this up best not when she herself hurls socialism head-on against biologism, but when she points to a possible under-mining of the binary problematisation of difference itself, and to the desirability of the study of its destruction. (A major exploit for which some marauding philosophers do deserve our admiration, is their effort to think difference in terms of more than two).

Women are irrelevant to feminine writing when what is at stake is a binary stirring, a revolution (turning over) *in the name of* "Woman". In "Long Hair, Short Ideas", Michèle Le Doeuff suggested that Hegel's listing of pythagorian oppositions was not out of date: limit and infinity/unity and multiplicity/masculine and feminine/light and darkness/good and evil.[16] Feminine writing – and much of the proudly obscure literature of "disruptive" multiplicity – would seem to suggest that this list is indeed not out of date, and that the terms of the final couple are changing places. In the feminine "beyond", we are only invited to dance in the next same old two-step.

"Woman" not only exists too much as signifier; she has existed too long as such for too much triumphant celebration of the "coming" of woman in writing to be undertaken without some protective paranoia, least of all when the context is a cult of the signifier itself. The problem "women and literature", for example, has a history, although that is also a history of the diversity of its formulation: but it is difficult to claim any significance for this once the tantalising suggestion that woman does not exist is converted – as it has often been in the debates on feminine writing in France – to a flat dismissal of the possibility of anything of interest to the present having been said or done by or about women in the past. What a systematic study of the history of specificity as problem could expose I do not know. But even the most cursory glance at the underground of the recent debates in France alone – if a girl takes her eyes off Lacan and Derrida long enough to look – shows up the outline of a couple of regular features.

For one thing, those texts which pose their problem in the name of the *specificity* of women, in some sense, are rarely specifically about women. To take just four examples: there is the complex debate (analysed by Georges May in *Le dilemme du roman au dix-huitième siècle*) which raged around the status of the novel from the late seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth century, with "école des dames", the school for women, as one of its key terms – the problem of women reading, women writing, what they read and wrote and how, became the symbolic battle ground of a whole series of social, political and moral conflicts, and transformations. At the end

of the eighteenth century, one finds the hilariously inciting text of Mme de Genlis, *De l'influence des femmes sur la littérature comme protectrices des arts et des auteurs*; here the greatest pedagogue of the age argues in terms of "influence", and the most monstrously prolific of scandalous women writers speaks coyly and decently of "protectors"; but what is elaborated here – *through* a conception (and prescription) of woman's nature and ideal function – is an outline of the woman-function as "model" for social conduct, social control. Closer to home is Theodore Joran, *Les féministes avant le féminisme*, in 1910; this is the age of significant biography, and Joran's second volume uses a series of wonderfully vicious attacks on the manners, morals, abilities and reputations of a parade of women writers through the ages in order to oppose the notion of women having a "right" to vote – and across that, the concept of "rights" in itself. Finally, in Jean Larnac's gallant defence of women in 1929, *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France*, "feminine literature" becomes the fascinating and dramatic site of a pressing problem of knowledge; can the structure of a brain inhibited and weakened by thousands of years of patriarchal oppression be modified by sudden and rapid social change?

Whatever conclusions could be drawn from this, something more is at stake than a general observation that talking about women involves talking about everything and nothing. When feminine specificity is taken as a point of departure, or as defining the contours of a problem, then we are on the verge of a "something else"; a reorganisation, major or miniscule, in the articulation of power and knowledge. This can be, and has been, exploited by real women (who are never "only" women). But it can also suggest that women wishing to examine the underside of their present specificity as women might come closer to succeeding by taking their own point of departure somewhere else entirely.

While the practice of Writing and experiments in the artifice of dissemination may seem lightyears away from the naive evolutionism of Larnac, "woman" as signifier seems to show a remarkable stability: as *site* of change and changeability, innovation, rebirth, renewal, experiment and experimentation, the place for the planting of otherwise discredited questions. The speaking body of feminine writing is perhaps (like the silent muse) only the condition of possibility for the birth of something other. Whether this use, this time, can be of benefit or solace to women is impossible to say: but since, on this occasion, it is a raid on philosophy which feminine writing is not only being summoned to accompany, but being urged to put its body in the forefront of battle and incited to say its piece, it can do no harm to go humming "Promises, promises . . .".

For another feature which seems to recur in the histories of feminine writing which might make us wary of incitements to speak

a feminine truth, and to burst across the threshold of "discourse" to the thunder of public applause, is that this theme of shocking visibility ("Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts")[17] is involved in a reaffirmation of a Literature blending disruption and revelation. If Foucault is right in suggesting that literature has occupied a special place in the systems of constraint bringing the "everyday" into discourse – a special place defined by transgression, the task of saying the most unsayable – then it becomes noticeable that this literature has itself accorded a special place to the discourse of women.[18] Here again, it is Georges May who has made the most extensive study of feminism and realism in the early eighteenth century; whatever the vicissitudes of the relationship would turn out to be, there is surely something in the belief that the novel is the ultimate "feminine" *genre*, and something more in the belief that the feminine novel is a patriarchal plot.

May plays with the traditional idea that in the period of transition from romance to novel, men left the field temporarily free for women because of the debased status of the indistinct and undistinguished new form. Foucault (without reference to women) suggests that we are living through the death of the great writer as model intellectual; "All the fevered theorisation of writing which we witnessed during the sixties was no doubt only a swan song: the writer was desperately struggling for the maintenance of his political privilege".[19] To make any extrapolations from that to speculate on the appearance of the great "feminine" writer aureoled with political import, would be both abusive and too paranoid for words.

Besides, in our own culture, political privilege has not weighed upon the writer-intellectual for some time; it is rather invested in the writer as journalist. (Had the New Philosophers been Americans, they would certainly have written for *Rolling Stone* – though had they been Australians, they would probably have emigrated to Paris). Yet there is, in each place, a highly prized and profitable form of feminine writing (very carefully delimited as such, and never disrupted by shrillness or imperative mood). In the cult(ure) of the signifier and the irruption of the repressed, it is that of the speaking sext; in the culture of the solid signified, the hard facts, the true story and Amazing Scenes, it's the literature of "what it's *really* like for women" – *Fear of Flying, Kinflicks, The Women's Room, Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*.

Foucault gives a passing pat of approval, if not quite to the sext show, then at least to chatter-boxing, in an interview called "Non au sexe roi":[20] tactical reversal and resistance, women are turning their sex-saturation back on the sexuality apparatus (sex you have said we are, sex we will be . . .) and in so doing, women begin to outflank it. Perhaps. But if it becomes hard not to sense just a wee tinge of vacuity in this, it certainly also becomes futile to think the phenomenon of feminine writing in terms of co-optation, since nothing follows from that formulation but fear, paralysis, the injunction to secrecy, silence and surveillance; or, less melodramatically, the form of "feminist criticism" which consists in showing that women who have succeeded in reaching some large audience are prostitutes (selling out) or pimps (selling out women), while those who do not or will not are hopeless auto-erotics (wanking). The position of women desiring both, or neither, would certainly be Unspeakable.

It is not a question of co-optation *in general*; but of the efficacy of different methods of attack in different situations, of the possibility of multiplying rather than restricting (for "safety's sake") the points from which women's struggle can develop, and of refusing to think in terms of all or nothing – conserving one's virginity for the ultimate Event. To take two films, for example, which define two poles of a debate on women and experiment in the cinema: we do not have to adjudicate between Marguerite Duras' *India Song*, and Nelly Kaplan's *La fiancée du pirate*, either on the grounds that the former has been heralded as a work of genius, an avant-garde "classic", and the latter has subversively escaped that fate; nor on the grounds that the former deconstructs traditional narrative while the latter is a "bourgeois" simple tale about a witch.

But to refuse the logic of all or nothing is not to assert equivalence, nor to propose a bland avoidance of conflict at all. The seductions of Duras' "profoundly absent" Anne-Marie Stretter, and the well-orchestrated irruptions of the unintelligible language of her mad and colonised double in *India Song*, those of Irigaray's woman thinking of everything and nothing, and of the coming of Cixous' woman giving birth to herself: in all these lady-like textual exhibitions, *a* language is whispering uncommonly loud of desire, the same language which in another dialect and in a harsher register promises knowledge through fidelity to a theory of the subject. That this language can be the language of women – or of their present political struggle – sounds extremely unlikely.

At any rate, the seductive sound and the fury have been drowning out another kind of women's speech; feminism already has its store of forgotten and ignoble texts. Aggressive fairy-tales, mostly, like Kaplan's dream of the serving girl who didn't hang round waiting for any black freighters to cruise in and pick her up: sentimental celebrations of a women's language which was never unconscious, and a desire which was most unrepressed, like Monique Wittig's *The Guerilleres*: or fanatical attempts to make the metaphorical war a real one, like the crazy Tactical-Strategy Charts of Ti-Grace Atkinson's *Amazon Odyssey*. Savagely ingenuous texts: not solid science, but then most unsusceptible to the teasing of pricks. Genuinely disastrous texts too, in many ways: with (in differing degrees) their simplistic view of class and sex, their binary vision of power, their imperative

utopianism. Texts disgraced and disqualified: it seems impossible to mention them at the moment without incurring suspicion of nostalgia, saccherine celebration, necrophilia, romantic anarchism, belief in the timeless subversive integrity of texts irreducibly outside truth . . . . Besides, if in France one philosopher can accuse another of being the last dinosaur of the Classical age, the most dreadful condemnation stray feminists have to fear here is dismissal with the last dinosaurs of the late sixties; apart from reassuringly familiar brays about co-operation from other dinosaurs.

However these museum pieces of *women's* writing do have both a potent charm and a power: which is not to lure back, but to point elsewhere, further, and beyond. As Valerie Solanas (a woman who wrote most certainly in order to become something else than a great writer) reminds us from a place far beyond the construction-sites of "theory" or the dressings-up of analytical practice, stretching binary schemes to their limits, defining male sex in terms of "feminine" soul and its undoing, bringing a speech of "refuse" into being – not to dig deep in the truth of every day, but to wheel round for an extraordinary future – there are lots of other things to do:

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.

Meaghan Morris

NOTES

1. M. Foucault, "Truth and Power"; see this volume.
2. P. Adams and J. Minson, "The 'Subject' of Feminism", *m/f, 2*, (1978), p. 44.
3. M. Plaza, " 'Phallomorphic power' and the psychology of 'woman' ", *Ideology and Consciousness, 4*, (1978), pp. 4-36. This text is a critique of L. Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme*, Paris, Minuit, 1974, and *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Paris, Minuit, 1977: cf also "Women's exile: interview with Luce Irigaray", *Ideology and Consciousness, 1*, (1977), pp. 62-67; and "That sex which is not one", in P. Foss and M. Morris, *Language, Sexuality and Subversion*, Sydney, Feral, 1978, pp. 161-172.
4. M. Cousins, "Material Arguments and Feminism", *m/f, 2*, (1978), pp. 62-70.

5. Cf. Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, London, Penguin, 1977.
6. R. Coward and J. Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, p. 155.
7. "It is this concentration on language – language producing the subject and therefore the unconscious – which points a way to avoiding incorrect appropriations of psychoanalysis to Marxist thought. These are characterised by seeing the concerns of psychoanalysis as pre-existing the social operations analysed by historical materialism", *ibid*, p. 155.
8. It is a fundamental principle of the scientific semiotics of A. J. Greimas, for example, that the methods of analysis be such that an analysis *is repeatable* with a multiplicity of texts: while *S/Z* might just conceivably give rise to imitations, by means of the *lexie* it aspires to absolute unrepeatability.
9. R. Coward and J. Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
10. A guide to other unposable questions is contained in Luce Irigaray's account of an expulsion, "Questions", in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-164.
11. Lecture at the Collège de France, 7/1/1976. English translation forthcoming. Throughout this section I am alluding in part to the method of argument adopted in P. Adams and J. Minson, "The 'Subject' of Feminism", *op. cit.* This is a text with which one could initiate a lengthy argument of interpretation in relation to Foucault's work: for example on the status of "discourse" in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Birth of the Clinic*, or whether Foucault ever appeals to "the body" in general in the sense that Adams and Minson suggest. A text with a very different interpretation of these questions (pointing out, for example, that for Foucault the "pre-discursive referent" is *not a natural object*), is P. Veyne, "Foucault révolutionne l'histoire", in *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, Paris, 1978, (2nd. edition), pp. 347-385.
12. I would like to thank André Frankovits for his relaxed assistance in the ordering of this article.
13. C. Delphy, "Proto-féminisme et anti-féminisme", *Les Temps Modernes, 346*, (1975), pp. 1469-1500. (Translation in *The Main Enemy*, London, WRRC, 1977). Works by Annie Leclerc are *Parole de femme*, Paris, Grasset, 1974: *Epousailles*, Paris, Grasset, 1976: "La lettre d'amour", in H. Cixous, M. Gagnon, A. Leclerc, *La venue à l'écriture*, Paris, U.G.E., 1977; and, with M. Cardinal, *Autrement Dit*, Paris, Grasset, 1977. An introduction to the work discussed in this section is E. Marks, "Women and Literature in France", and C. Greenstein Burke, "Report from Paris: Women's Wrtiting and the Women's Movement", both in *Signs*, Vol. 3, *4*, pp. 843-855.
14. C. Delphy, *op. cit.*, p. 1475.
15. M. Plaza, *op. cit.*
16. M. Le Doeuff, "Women and Philosophy", *Radical Philosophy, 17*, (1977), p. 6.
17. H. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", quoted as epigraph to E. Marks, "Women and Literature in France", *op. cit.*
18. M. Foucault, "The Life of Infamous Men"; see this volume.
19. M. Foucault, "Truth and Power", see this volume.
20. M. Foucault, "Non au sexe roi", *Le Nouvel Observateur, 644*, 1977.

EROTICA

L'Arc, 58, Jacques Lacan, (1974).
DERRIDA, J., "The Question of Style", in Allison, D.B., (Ed.), *The New*

Nietzsche, New York, Delta, 1977.
DERRIDA, J., "Becoming Woman", *Semiotext(e): Nietzsche's Return*, Vol. 3, *1*, (1978).
DERRIDA, J., "The Purveyor of Truth", *Yale French Studies, 52*, (1975).
GALLOP, J., "The Ladies' Man", *Diacritics*, Winter 1976.
LACAN, J., *Le Séminaire Livre XX: Encore.*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.
LYOTARD, J., "One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles", *Sub-Stance, 20*, (1978).

THE LOTTERY OF LIFE

I. *Oliver Twist* was a tale Dickens felt *must* be told, with every miniscule and grey detail of the truth. This insistence on the truth in writing is made evident in a little preface to the 1841 edition of the novel, when he says of Nancy: "It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE. Every man who has watched these melancholy shades of life knows it to be so. Suggested to my mind long ago – long before I dealt in fiction – by what I often saw and read of, in actual life around me, I have, for years, tracked it through many profligate and noisome ways, and found it still the same. . . . It involves the best and worst shades of our common nature; much of its ugliest hues, and something of its most beautiful; it is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility, but it is a truth. I am glad to have had it doubted, for in that circumstance I find sufficient assurance that it needed to be told."[1]

Here Dickens speaks of a truth which is the morality of minutia. Fiction can only be true, he claims, on the condition that it shows the world to us as it is really lived, warts and all. But this grim truth is not inscribed on the surface of things, for nature is not superficial in essence. It is really quite deep. Therefore the book, as image of the world, must probe into the depths of nature by means of the gaze: indeed for Dickens, the act of watching itself seems initiative to the whole process of writing; the author tells us that he watches first, then writes. But what has he seen? Chaos, only chaos. This crack in the world of ordinary affairs into which the writer stares so intently reveals to him the fact that disorder exists everywhere and in everything. Not only an abyss, nature is also tainted; the deeper one looks there, the more one finds that things are swallowed up in darkness. That is why there is a constant play of the flickering shades of life in these pages