

PATTERNS OF DISSONANCE



ROSI BRAIDOTTI

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A study of women in contemporary philosophy

Rosi Braidotti

Translated by Elizabeth Guild

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For Bruna and Mario

That is where I disagree with the philosophers. They talk about passionate things but there is no passion in them. Never talk happiness with a philosopher.

Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*

Because they are human and not gods, I now and then strike a bargain with philosophers. Philosophers cannot promise you anything. You cannot make a deal with them; but betrayal is not within their power either.

Miriam Guensberg, *Foto Josef*

1

Images of the Void

It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance. For this void does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that must be filled. It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think. *Foucault*¹

For over a century now, philosophical modernity has been aware of fundamental problems in the nature, function, and limits of human subjectivity. Special attention has been paid to the critique of the classical representations of the subject, as exemplified in seventeenth-century rationalism. This vision of subjectivity has become as much a contested object as the Enlightenment project of the historical progress of humanity through the adequate use of reason. Anti-Cartesianism has therefore been put on the agenda of modernity: it raises questions concerning the structure of subjectivity in such a way as to challenge dualism, of which the Cartesian body-and-soul dichotomy is the paradigm, and in so doing to change the very definition of the function of philosophy.

The contemporary theoretical climate, at least in 'Continental' and especially French philosophy is dominated by the discourse of the 'crisis', meaning the questioning of 'subjectivity' and 'rationality'.

The object of this study is the intersection of philosophical modernity, defined as the discourse of the crisis of the rational subject, and the question of the feminine and of women in philosophy. Bordering this territory are, on the one hand, analyses of the state of contemporary philosophy by such philosophers as Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze; and on the other, the research into theory, politics, and subjectivity pursued by a growing number of women working in the field of philosophy.

DIAGNOSING THE CRISIS

According to Foucault, our age, as a whole, is trying to escape from the heritage of classical rationalism.²

We are all epistemological orphans, and the ontological insecurity we suffer is our unavoidable historical condition. Afflicted by the melancholy which henceforth³ marks the end of this millennium, haunted by a feeling of loss, philosophy is no longer the queen of knowledge, nor is it the master-discipline any more. At the most it can claim the status of a merry widow,⁴ sadly trying to find her place in the new cynicism of postmodern society. As a famous graffito on the Paris walls put it: 'God is dead, Marx is dead, and I'm not feeling too well myself'.

The French school of philosophical modernity builds upon and works through the issue of the crisis of rationality and, contrary to the German critical tradition, focuses on the decline of reason as the ideal and the appropriate definition of human subjectivity. At times, this approach drifts into a critical, nihilistic mode,⁵ but it never ceases to bring the discourse of the crisis to bear upon the issue of changing notions of subjectivity.

The state of intellectual 'crisis' we are in is not necessarily the sign of the imminent death of theoretical practice, or of those whose living and pleasure depend on exercising it. The issues – the death of the subject, the end of man(kind) – which the post-structuralist generation put on the agenda, are in my view a set of figures of speech that express the will to go on theorizing, that is, to engage in philosophical discourse by all possible means. Far from being a metaphor for the void, this set of questions is the sign of an irrepressible theoretical vitality: the problematization of the 'crisis' of the subject, far from being related to any 'death of man(kind)', is rather the leitmotiv for a whole generation of French philosophers. As I see it, the so-called 'death' of the subject is less important than the funeral ceremony which marks it as a central theoretical *event*.

Another example of this crisis is a series of plaintive meta-narratives about the crisis of rationality and of the rationalist subject, which forms the essence of the theoretical legacy of the sixties. Precipitate, inaccurate and often aberrant readings of Foucault, Lacan or Derrida are part of the air one breathes in France today.⁶ The tendency is not simply to lower the intellectual level but also to trivialize texts and their authors, if not positively to despise them. The discourse of the crisis of philosophy has been hijacked to the profit of a loose form of neo-humanism which accuses the 'post-structuralist' generation of failing to respect the basic rights of 'Man'.

The so-called 'neo-liberals/humanists' shift the grounds of the argument from the idea of 'crisis' to that of the 'void' and so too to the notion that any questioning of subjectivity tends to endanger the 'human

person'. These are conceptual slippages which I would rather resist, for there is a world of difference between the statement that a quite specific form of philosophical *ratio* is now outmoded and the most banal forms of nihilism. What I call nihilistic in this respect is the attempt to trivialize both the theoretical complexity and the subversive potential of post-structuralist philosophy, replacing them with a generalized nostalgia for humanistic ideals.

Contrary to this regressive tendency, the post-structuralist insight is that the subject of modernity does not coincide with self-reflecting consciousness; s/he therefore cannot fulfil the role of founder of discourse. The philosophy of the 'crisis' thus expressed is both critique and act of creation of new forms of thought. It calls into question the very foundations and premises of what we recognize as 'thinking'.

This way of approaching modernity implies that strong emphasis is laid on the historicity of philosophy as discourse; according to Foucault, 'We are destined historically to history', that is, to the repetition of discourses on discourses.⁷ In this sense we are still involved with the last century, though only by negation.

Consistent with the premise that philosophy today can only be conjugated in the plural, contemporary French philosophers are not systems-builders. They rather prefer to define themselves as providers of services, of 'toolboxes', working with ideas which are programmes for action rather than dogmatic blocks. First and foremost is their concern for the relevance of their work in drawing up connections and linkages between philosophy and the fundamental problems and preoccupations of our age. Faithful to the insight that one never thinks in a void, the French post-structuralists present themselves as diagnosticians of their time and age. In their perspective, 'thinking' is akin to Lévi-Strauss's idea of a constructive '*bricolage*'.

Deleuze defines this mode of thinking as 'problematic',⁸ that is, a line of questioning that is organized around the problematization of ideas in the 'nomadic' style. I shall return to this later. Theoretical work, especially philosophy, is rather like a building site: the selection of elements, the distribution of tasks, and the overall plan for the project are the key to what is called the 'materiality' of ideas. Thinking is a skill that requires a certain craftsmanship: *homo sapiens* turns out to be a slightly more elaborated version of *homo faber*.

To adopt the 'problematic' model of philosophy is therefore a political gesture, which connects the act of reflection to the context which engendered it. It consists in locating the 'apologetic or polemical targets'⁹ which sustain the theoretical process, attaching it firmly to its material and theoretical conditions of production. Setting up a problematic in philosophy means setting the margins, tracing the frontiers of a line of questioning which – by being thus framed – can be formulated as discourse, that is to say: it becomes utterable just as it becomes visible.

The crisis in the speculative function of *ratio*, which has also led to the

liquidation of the principle of the subject's identity with consciousness, ultimately poses the question: what is the relation between thought and the subject? What do we call 'thinking'? This question challenges the very legitimacy of philosophical discourse as a specific style and mode of thinking.

In the French context, the questioning of the rationalist vision of the subject merges with a broader debate concerning the role of the intellectual. This topic stems not only from the prestige which French culture has traditionally accorded to its intellectuals,¹⁰ but also from the fact that the philosopher represents the prototype of the French intellectual. The philosopher stands for the masterful self-control that is expected from the thinker but also from the average citizen. This contributes to the political dimension of this discipline, as if the debates of ideas were analogous to political combat.¹¹

As Descombes argues, the relationship between philosophy and public opinion has been mediated in France via the literary and political milieu.¹² Since the fifties, it has in fact been impossible in France to separate the institutional practice of philosophy from avant-garde thought, literature, and philosophy. The monumental figure of Sartre as intellectual-philosopher represents most effectively this vision of the social function of philosophy.

The political events of the May 68 students' and workers' riots are very significant in this respect and they deserve independent analysis.¹³ As regards philosophy, one of the fundamental effects of May 68 was the questioning of the power of institutions of learning, such as the university, with its traditional faculty and disciplinary distinctions. The idea of the institution itself became the centre of a reflection on the link between power and knowledge; supported by the insights of psychoanalysis, linguistics, and semiology, French philosophy evolved towards a structured reflection on the power of discourse. The work of Michel Foucault, which I shall shortly analyse, clearly exemplifies this.

Another significant effect of the cultural prestige of philosophy outside the university in France has been the role played by philosophers in places such as critical journals, reviews, the media, journalism, and publishing.

A painfully clear example of the potential dangers of this vision of philosophy is the episode in the mid-seventies known as the 'new philosophy'.¹⁴ Launched by a series of television shows, it proved the power of the mass media as a vehicle for intellectual ideas, transforming thought into a sales system subject to literary marketing. Deleuze has quite rightly emphasized that it represents a 'new type of thought, interview-thought, talk-show-thought, instant-thought'.¹⁵

In a socio-economic climate dominated by increasing budgetary cuts for the humanities in general and philosophy in particular, it is, therefore, important to recognize the far from accidental coincidence

between the 'increasing scarcity of teaching posts and the increasing number of television sets'.¹⁶

The controversy over the intellectual power of the media and the difficulties inherent in the transmission of a post-68 theoretical legacy add a significant new light to the question of the crisis: isn't it true, after all, that the function of self-questioning suits philosophy rather well? Has this discipline ever been anything other than a reaction and an attempt to respond to a crisis situation: what is to be done? What should we think? How do we get out of it? Are these not the sempiternal questions underlying the philosophical discursive order, endemic to this discipline and as such constitutive of its field of enunciation? If so, what is the specificity of the crisis we are going through?

Instead of falling into the nostalgic rhetoric of the void, could it not be said, in the post-structuralist context, that the history of philosophical thought is inevitably linked with its decline, that is to say, with the transition of this discipline from the prestigious role it had played as dominant discourse to a much humbler role? The post-modern condition which Lyotard analyses so lucidly is marked by the fact that philosophy loses to the hard, technological sciences the function of cultural codification which had been its historical prerogative.¹⁷ This in turn marks a shift towards an instrumental conception of thought which brings the classical rationalism of the seventeenth century to the brink of implosion: reason turning against itself.

While recognizing the significance of these shifts, I maintain that what is, historically and structurally, the strength of this discipline is also its fundamental belief in the power and aesthetic beauty of thinking. Philosophy thus defined is an act of faith, however illusory, in the exercise of thought. As such it can be seen as the living stock of cumulated knowledges about reason, rationality, and the structure of the thinking subject itself.

This is why it is important to resist all temptation to vulgarize or trivialize the current discourse on the crisis of rationality, by keeping in mind the historical and discursive conditions which produced it. The very notion of 'crisis' should be understood as an opening up of the field of philosophy to other, new, extra-philosophical preoccupations. Unless it is understood in this sense, there is a risk of defining the crisis in an unhistorical or, even worse, ideological way.

In this work I will approach the French philosophers' emphasis on the crisis or on the death of the subject not in the sense of a low-key anti-humanism, but rather as the mode of enunciation best suited to their redefinition of what it means to think. For me the 'void' is not a substantial concept: it is not the mark of an absence, or of a hole in the heart of the subject; rather, it signifies the transcendence of absence. Neither nothing, nor something, the conceptual value of the crisis as void should not be understood by negative reference to theoretical

plenitude, but rather, as the historical impossibility for philosophy today to postulate yet another global theory – as a rupture in its tradition of representation and legitimation of the subject.

It is on this level that I also take my distance from the ‘postmodern’ stance in Baudrillard’s sense of the term, which implies the reduction of theoretical thought to a process of signification that bears no link to its empirical referents, the material conditions of its production.¹⁸

I would therefore propose to displace the problematic of the void and suggest that both the vitality and the relevance of the redefinition of philosophy undertaken by post-structuralist thinkers can be assessed by taking into account the impact and the extent of the problem of femininity, women, and woman in contemporary French philosophy. To relate these two aspects of the same discursive universe seems to me a much more fruitful way of evaluating both the question of modernity and the specificity of post-structuralist thought in France than the vain rhetoric of the crisis.

For in the midst of all this, philosophy is far from being dead: to be dead – isn’t this what Sartrean philosophy taught us? – is to be in the hands of the living.

The kind of critical reading I propose stems less from a sociology of knowledge than from an ‘analytics’, that is, an analysis of the conditions of possibility of its enunciation. It is therefore an epistemological analysis quite as much as a political one.

If crisis there be, it marks the opening of the borders of this discipline, affirming the obligation to respond to the historical context. This fundamental questioning has enabled, amongst other things, the emergence of the question ‘women and philosophy’. As an offshoot of the crisis of the rationalist, ‘logocentric’ subject, it is coextensive with it.

THE FEMININE AT STAKE

The relations between femininity, women, feminism, and philosophical modernity do not yet form an established, well-defined problematic, perhaps because as a whole, questions concerning women in philosophy have not received enough attention from professional philosophers. So, the problematic which interests me here is still theoretically rather amorphous.

The sheer possibility of enunciation of this however, is significant as an epiphenomenon: as evidence, above all, of the remarkable historical coincidence described above as the intersection of two parallel phenomena: on the one hand, the resurgence in the last thirty years of women’s struggle in social, political, private and theoretical domains, which has raised a whole range of questions and analyses of the role, lived experience and modes of existence of women. I shall refer to this heterogeneous and polymorphous set of open questions as ‘feminist

reflection', or 'feminist thought'. And on the other hand, the 'crisis' of classical reason, a rupture inside the Western order of discourse. This 'crisis', which has profound links with the socio-economic conditions of late capitalism, has radically called into question not only the epistemic structures of the rational subject, but also its role as guardian of the transmission of discourse. That is to say, it has unveiled the structural links between rationality and the spirit of mastery. As Foucault puts it:

I would say, then, that what has emerged in the course of the last ten or fifteen years is a sense of the increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourses. A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existence – even, and perhaps above all, in those aspects of it that are most familiar, most solid and most intimately related to our bodies and to our everyday behaviour. But together with this sense of instability and this amazing efficacy of discontinuous, particular and local criticism, one in fact discovers something that perhaps was not initially foreseen, something one might describe as precisely the inhibiting effect of global, totalitarian theories.¹⁹

An in-depth analysis of the crisis that constitutes the very threshold of modernity falls outside the framework of my project. I shall simply outline the aspects that are most relevant for the question of the feminine. Thanks to the logic of a very precise historical situation, philosophy finds itself sharing, for the first time in its long history, the unhappy and contradictory destiny of the oppressed. One of the positive effects of this marginalized position has been to make philosophical discourse aware of everything which had previously been constructed as 'other' than the global and totalitarian knowing rational subject. Foucault calls this moment at which the centre of philosophical discourse shifts the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges'.²⁰

Faced with the same crisis, women have reacted in profoundly different theoretical ways. The age of 'crisis' and/or the 'death' of rationality is also, historically and discursively, the age which has witnessed the social and theoretical emergence of feminist theory and practice. What has emerged is not a unified or monolithic phenomenon, but rather, a variety of modes of reflection which take as their point of departure a female/feminist/feminine perspective. Chapter 6 is entirely devoted to a theoretical reading of feminist thought as I see it.

The focus of my reading is the way in which feminism has put into question the corporeal nature, and above all the sexuation of the subject. The following examples, the first drawn from an American feminist, the second from a French, stress this point and set the boundaries of this complex set of problems. In the words of Adrienne Rich:

I am convinced that 'there are ways of thinking that we don't yet know about'. I take those words to mean that many women are *even now*

thinking in ways which traditional intellection denies, or is unable to grasp . . . In arguing that we have by no means yet explored or understood our biological grounding, the miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings, I am really asking whether women cannot begin, at last, to *think through the body*, to connect what has been so cruelly disorganized.²¹

Or Luce Irigaray:

Those who have distanced themselves from their bodies so greatly that they have forgotten them, need to have the truth. But *their* 'truth' immobilizes us, like statues, unless we lose our fondness for it, unless we shake ourselves free of its power, by trying to say, here, there, at once, how we are moved.²²

One of the main issues for women in contemporary philosophy is the need to speak about the bodily roots of the thinking process, of all human intellect, and to reconnect theoretical discourse to its libidinal and consequently unconscious foundations. How are women to overcome the objectified state in which they have been fixed by the male gaze? How are women to elaborate a truth which is not removed from the body, reclaiming their body for themselves? How are women to develop and transmit a critique which respects and bears the trace of the intensive, libidinal force that sustains it? What must women do to keep truth not ossified but alive?

Although women pose these questions with their own specific inflection, they cannot claim exclusive rights to them: the issue of the sexuation and embodiment of the subject is part and parcel of the non-Cartesianism of our era. For instance, the urgency of a return to the body and to the affective roots of all thought is also one of the most significant traces of the psychoanalytic revolution, the effects and implications of which are particularly crucial for feminism and philosophy alike. Thus, in order to mark clearly the discursive frontiers within which it has been possible to formulate the question of 'femininity' and of women, I will take psychoanalysis as one of the central axes of my argument. I will return to this in the next chapter.

The assumption of this book is that, genealogically speaking, the problematization of woman, women and the feminine in contemporary French philosophy is a major factor in the critique and deconstruction of the rational subject. My approach consists in pointing out and then assessing the extent and structure of the relationship between the discourse of the crisis and the new feminist reflections on subjectivity. That the two discursive areas should be connected is obvious, considering that in my reading of modernity the emergence of women's socio-political and theoretical struggles is one of the main factors that bring about the 'crisis' of the subject. The gender-specific analysis of the

feminists splits open the complicity between the dominant notion of 'subjectivity' and the image of triumphant masculinity.

What I will show in the course of this book is that it is clearly not accidental that certain forms of post-Hegelian philosophy (though not all), victims of an unprecedented crisis of legitimation, resort, as the only way out, to a redefinition of the feminine, or of the 'becoming-woman'. I think it essential to analyse philosophy's 'marketing of the other'²³ as well as its 'becoming woman' in terms of their relation to the theoretical, political, and affective transformations brought about in and by the women's movement. The many discourses on the feminine as symptom of the crisis and malaise of the masculine subject and of his homosocial bond – the male *corpus socians*,²⁴ is also, incontrovertibly, a positive moment of affirmation by women of a new female subject.

In this perspective, I think that the relation between the heterogeneous and complex field that is feminist theory and the 'dominant' discourse of philosophy can only be political. I would even argue that this dimension of active strategy, this emphasis on the implicitly political nature of the act of thinking, is the trademark of feminism as a discursive practice.

The link is obviously not causal and perhaps it is not simply a question of the historical coincidence of two phenomena, but rather, an extraordinary concomitance of effects: the new feminism AND the crisis of philosophical knowledge. Here the conjunction AND marks not only the point at which two series converge, but also the point at which they diverge, opening into an infinite series: women and philosophy and crisis and psychoanalysis, and so on. So, for the problem to be adequately articulated, the conjunction AND, which both conjoins and disjoins, and which makes the link between my two discursive poles, would have to be multiplied indefinitely.

In other words, the desire which sustains this work is both a response to a theoretical challenge – women and philosophy in the age of modernity – and also the will radically to restructure this question, so as to do justice to the theoretical impact of feminism.

In the following chapters I shall read some of the French post-structuralist thinkers in terms of their definition of the feminine and respective positioning of women in their system, spelling out the various reactions they embody: some nostalgic, others nihilistic, a few envious of the newly-born feminist subject. Despite the variety of discourses on the topic of the feminine, women, and woman within contemporary French philosophy, I shall take their proximity as my point of departure. It is as if the growing social recognition of women were a sign or a symptom, echoing on the one hand the crisis of classical rationality (as in the work of Foucault and Deleuze) and on the other, the de-phallicization of philosophical thought, particularly in the work of Derrida.

What I want to emphasize, above all, is that what makes the

enunciation of the problem at all possible is the set of multiple and often contradictory transformations that this historical conjuncture has operated in both the social and the discursive representation of the relations between the sexes and especially of their differences. In other words, the problem of 'women and philosophy' has become visible and utterable in a 'here and now' that cannot be detached from the very groundwork of modern philosophical dislocations of the subject. In this respect, feminism is THE discourse of modernity.

All the same, I cannot help wondering about certain aspects of this proximity which borders on promiscuity if not concubinage. Coincidences are always suspicious. Is it not strange that the legitimation of the philosophical 'other', of all that traditionally had been constructed as other-than the rational subject occurs precisely at the theoretical and historical moment when the privileged subject of knowledge is at crisis-point? Is it not strange that the reflection on the feminine is so closely connected to a masculine disorder, to the 'death of man', meant as the questioning not only of philosophical truth but of knowledge? For it is in part thanks to this crossing into the void, this phenomenal acting-out on the part of the philosophical subject, that the problematic of the feminine has been given status, as the carrier of a 'new' truth. It is as if the modern subject, the split subject, discovers the feminine layer of his own thought just as he loses the mastery he used to assume as his own. He discovers his gender-specificity as a loss of the former universal value that was attributed to the masculine gender. Under the impact of feminist criticism, in fact, the complicity between the masculine and the universal is unveiled and rejected.

Faced with such discourses on radical otherness as feminine, and on women as the hew horizon of theoretical discourse, in other words, faced with a trend towards the feminization of the postmodern field of knowledge, feminists would be advised to exercise their critical judgement. For all this emphasis on the feminine is no guarantee that the concerns and the revindications of women are actually being taken into account. On the contrary, there is a danger that the new metaphors will be as much a snare as a present for women. Could it be rather that Man, in his historical exhaustion, is holding out the poisoned apple of knowledge to his female companion as she becomes emancipated? Will this new Woman be Man's future? What if this exchange amounts to nothing more than a simple exercise of substitution, a plain reversal of roles, turning the former slaves into new mistresses, replacing the old, depreciative definition of the feminine with a new but not a less normative one in the end?

What is at stake in the formulation of a new problem called 'women and/in philosophy' is not just the description of the points of contact between women, feminism and philosophy, so as to put a new 'topos' on the map. It is rather the quest for a new mode of relation between the two. The heart of the matter is the sense and force we give to the

con/dis-junction AND as a strategy both in the theoretical and the discursive sense of the term: what is the theoretical significance of women's political struggles in terms of the development of our thinking on the feminine? If it is evident that feminist thought is firmly located in its socio-political context, so as to enact transformations of the status of women, what are the theoretical foundations of this movement? What are the discursive agendas that accompany the political ones? And inversely, what is the political significance for feminism of contemporary philosophical positions on the subject?

While we are bound to recognize, following Nietzsche,²⁵ that at times of crisis every culture tends to turn to its 'others', to become feminized, in the sense of having to face its limitations, gaps and deficiencies, on the other hand it should also be said that the thought, speech and actual agency of these same 'others', namely, feminist theory and practice, do play an important function in bringing about this 'crisis'. If feminist thought is clearly situated in the field of modernity, in the critique of the subject, it is because women's struggles are one of the facets of the same 'crisis', and act as one of its deepest theoretical and political rhizomes or roots.²⁶

It follows that although the crisis of the rational subject is not exclusive to French philosophy, being rooted in the last one hundred years of European history, it has nevertheless been developed in very significant ways in this culture. These deserve attention from a feminist perspective, not only for their own intrinsic value, but also if one considers the enormous influence that 'French theories of the feminine', often hurriedly assimilated to 'French feminist theory', have had upon American and British women's movements. As Alice Jardine points out in her very important book, how does one explain the fact that in and through French culture it has become both possible and necessary to question classical reason by advancing a series of configurations of the 'feminine'?

In an excellent introduction to the English translation of texts by Lacan,²⁷ Jackie Rose argues that the strategic position occupied by the 'feminine' in the French framework is due to the influence that Lacanian redefinitions of 'Woman' have had on the discourse of the human sciences. According to Rose the cross-fertilization of post-structuralist philosophy by psychoanalysis results in the setting up of the feminine as the emblem of a new vision of subjectivity as anchored in language, and therefore in alterity.

My question would then become: even assuming that the new, post-structuralist vision of subjectivity requires a redefinition of the self's relation to otherness, to difference, is the trip into the discourse of the crisis the necessary precondition for the recognition of the other(s) who were traditionally excluded from the enlightened circle of reason? Just how far must a culture become engulfed in a crisis before it begins to question its relationship to alterity, difference and to the patterns of

exclusion that accompany them? How far must we walk into cultural decline, before the notion of gender gets top rating on the intellectual agenda?

On a more conceptual level, how does the thought of alterity and difference lead to or result in the question of 'sexual difference'? Is this connection necessary, and if so on what grounds? Is it the case that only at times of crisis a culture actually does ask questions about sexuality and the sexed nature of the human subject? In other words, is the discourse about the embodied, sexed structures of subjectivity a sign of the troubled times of crisis, a symptom of loss of stability and certainty? Does the question of sexual difference have to be associated with decline and nihilism – as in the Nietzschean legacy – or, even worse, be rejected as decadent as in the fascist nostalgia for a 'strong, wilful subject'? Can we posit the question of sexual difference positively? Translated into feminist terms the question becomes: is the emergence of discourses on the 'feminine' symptomatic of, and therefore dependent on, the vicissitudes of the classical, masculine subject? Or does it rather reflect another dynamic: that of women's emergence as a political and theoretical subject of enunciation? This comes down to how we assess the notion of the crisis as the pretext for fundamental renewals of the notions of subjectivity, knowledge and the function of theoretical discourse.

Alongside the questioning of the political economy of modernity, the question of the feminine in philosophy posits problems of even greater moment concerning the role of creation in theoretical thought. How does one go about defining a new field of reflection? Where do new ideas in philosophy spring from? What is meant by a 'new' philosophical idea? How does one explain, for instance, the fact that contemporary French philosophy's questioning of philosophical reason and of its others has entailed the critique of the conceptual barriers which used to separate 'theory' from 'fiction'? How does one explain that this blurring of disciplinary boundaries has led to the glorification of a notion of the feminine as privileged place of creativity, as sign of creation? I shall return to this.

THE FEMALE FEMINIST²⁸

Faced with such a wide array of theoretical possibilities, tracks, and open questions, I must insist on stating precisely my place of enunciation as a woman, a philosopher, and a feminist. The last expresses my commitment to a political women's movement, which is far from being an all-encompassing ideological point of reference. In theory and practice alike, feminism for me is the critical and living experience of discovering new woman-based modalities of existence, creation, and communication of knowledge. At no point in this book will it be a question of trying to formulate feminist thought as a counter-

philosophical system: the definitive synthesis has not taken place yet.

True to the spirit of my initial premises, I hope, instead, to work towards new formulations of the question of women and philosophy as a singular multiplicity of related issues. A plurality of questions. This position is due not only to a vision of what the task of philosophy can be today, but also to the conviction that at this precise historical moment feminist thought cannot be systematized, cannot be represented as a continuous sequence of clearly elaborated theoretical points. As a relatively new and fast-growing field, it can only be a discontinuous line which from time to time intersects with socio-political realities, and then is confronted by new potentialities for action. A line that keeps on tracing theoretical itineraries which differ from traditional reflection – and deviate from our established mental habits. After all a discontinuous line is only a collection of points. The philosophical style I want to argue for in my defence of ‘women and/in philosophy’ is one of carefully considered nomadism.

The woman, the philosopher and the feminist refer to different linguistic instances, or discursive registers, that encompass various structural aspects of my ‘self’, but never quite coalesce into full synthetic unity. My own split subjectivity being at stake in the pages of this book, I shall not propose a counter-subject but rather leave room for the ‘differences within the self’ to play a role in the production of a discourse that will not be a monolithic One.

Least of all do I undertake this work in what I can only describe as the perfectly illusory hope of reaching the fusion of my terms of reference. The question of ‘women and philosophy’ is a forked formula, which cannot be developed without continuously splitting itself, in a constant movement of self-transcendence towards what is beyond, multiple, and plural.

If we pursue this line of argument far enough, we shall realize in the end that the fragile dis/conjunction AND which dis/conjoins women and philosophy is an in-between space that separates, in terms of both category and quality, two discursive spheres, two referents. Like the two banks of a single river, the feminine in feminist discourse and the feminine of philosophical modernity are kept apart by the very matter which unites them.

It will indeed be a question of differences: differences between men and women, differences among women, differences within the woman that ‘I’ is. The difference that is thus marked and enacted is such that it would disqualify any attempt at synthesizing the referents. Like weaving parallel lines which will never meet as one; like the contours of two bodies in a film by Marguerite Duras, hermetically empathic; like ‘pure’, that is, irreducible and fertile difference. A sign of infinite possibilities of difference. This is how I understand Luce Irigaray’s warning. I think this open-ended definition of difference is just, in both its poetic justice and its political justness, because by refusing to be fixed, it underlines the

mortal dangers of a mimetic relation to the master's knowledge.

The danger is that of homologation, and hence of disappearing into the other's text, the master's voice, in established conceptual frameworks. Like an acrobat who steps onto the tightrope without a safety net, the feminist theoretician of difference runs the risk of a fall into the void. The stronger her desire to emulate, the dizzier she may become. Hence the necessity for an other mode of relation to the void left by the crisis of the master's discourse.

I shall call it: dissonance, for what interests me is the play of this irreducibility, the ultimate non-coincidence of the two objects of this study: the discourse of the crisis in philosophical modernity and the elaboration of feminist theories of subjectivity, the total lack of symmetry. I would like to raise them to the status of a new style of thought; I will call it the female feminist way: it consists in devising my own flying paths through the multiple points of intersection that make up the discontinuous line. The interest of these conceptual trajectories and intellectual tracks is that they are not interchangeable. They constitute a nomadic project, aiming to exhaust its own premises by following them through a voyage as complex as it is refractory: women and philosophy – patterns of dissonance, a polyphonic play, a game of multiplicities that may collapse into cacophony and even shock some sensitive ears.

The very novelty of this problematic and the kind of style I advocate expose my research to some unexpected dangers. On the one hand I do enjoy some freedom of action in setting up the case, insofar as feminist thought is by definition resistant to syntheses and still too much alive to turn into a sedentary truth-system. This leaves me open, on the other hand, to charges of illegitimacy: by being pre-philosophical, the female feminist philosopher is in danger of collapsing into the non-philosophical. The nomadic style of thinking that I advocate as a new feminist position requires the talents of a tightrope-walker, an acrobat. To avoid falling headlong, I will seek after a precarious balance: the dis/conjunctions, the sheer size of the field, all force me to concentrate on a precarious conceptual geometry of the non-Euclidian type.

This search for a dynamic balance also determines the shifts in mood and mode of enunciation: from one chapter to another, like variations on a theme, different levels of intensity come into play. These respond to the demands of my object of research, which is interdisciplinary in its very conception; it therefore transposes knowledge from many different fields, derives theory from practice and draws material from several disciplinary sources. Is also made necessary by the fact that this is a work of translation. I mean that quite literally, insofar as the text was originally written in French, but also conceptually, because many of the sources used here are foreign in origin, above all Italian, French, and English (of the British, American and Australian kind). Translation, transposition, transferral: these are the ways of being of ideas within a

dynamic theoretical field. This style contributes considerably to the creation of the effect of dissonance.

These discontinuous variations also call for modulations of an affective order; indeed, for me, this work, which constituted the main corpus of my doctoral thesis,²⁹ also traces a personal itinerary, a discursive trajectory which, taking as its point of departure a constellation of ideas, has followed its course, often turning away from its initial objectives, taking new and unexpected paths. Let this be taken as evidence of my total confidence in the activity of thinking, meaning a constantly evolving creative drifting. This affective element is in my view absolutely essential: the effort to theorize is always sustained by passion. It has often been said that writing is only a way of witnessing; so I, too, write this in witness of my intellectual gratitude for the vast theoretical, philosophical AND feminist corpus which has nurtured my reflection over the last ten years.

These 'other' voices inhabit my text, all the way through, and by the same token are in excess of it, they transcend it. In acknowledging my intellectual passions and debts I therefore also mourn that which cannot be repaid: the influence of those who came before me, whose anteriority in time places them forever beyond my reach. Time, the great master, only leaves us some space in which to trace some semblance of continuity with the past. It is the space of a written page, but also the mental space within, where those 'other' voices, those 'other' presences can freely play. That which, in me, is the others' voice marks that inner dissonance that I take both as evidence of the non-unity of the subject and also as guarantee against the formulation of new falsely dogmatic or pseudo-universal discourses. Allowing free play within my text to the others' voices, I will stress the fundamental otherness of the 'self' whose signature marks this text as my own.

I will give full reign to this notion of dissonance, so as to stress the point that all elaboration of theory today – especially for a feminist woman – can only be a play of lines which intersect only to break up instantly, of breaches which open into the void, of tracks which multiply indefinitely. There is no longer any ultimate truth to establish: free at last from the encumbering pursuit of completion, synthesis, fullness, women as philosophers need to establish new balances, to invent new ways of thinking. For if Ariadne has fled from the labyrinth of old, the only guiding thread for all of us now, women and men alike, is a tightrope stretched above the void.

Desidero Ergo Sum

The Improbable Tête-à-Tête between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

On the horizon of any human science, there is the project of bringing man's consciousness back into its real conditions, of restoring it to the contents and forms that brought it into being, and elude us within it; this is why the problem of the unconscious – its possibility, status, mode of existence, the means of knowing it and bringing it to light – is not simply a problem within the human sciences which they can be thought of as encountering by chance in their steps; it is a problem that is ultimately coextensive with their very existence. A transcendental raising of level that is, on the other side, an unveiling of the non-conscious, is constitutive of all the sciences of man. *Foucault*¹

What exactly is modern about us? In attempting to answer the question of modernity, we are confronted by the necessity to reconsider the relation between thought and social reality, between theory and creation. How can we invent new ways of thinking? What philosophical style is appropriate to modernity? François Châtelet proposes the 'practice of disrespect' as the distinctive trait of contemporary philosophy: the philosophers of today 'invite us scrupulously and learnedly to follow – in mourning clothes but in a spirit of intense jubilation – the funeral cortege of the Family, the Word, and Being'.² The crisis of philosophy is thus translated into a climate of loss, of a break in filiation, or, as Jean-François Lyotard observes, into a loss of legitimacy, which obliges the sons to celebrate with all due traditional ceremony the death of the philosophical father.³

The decline of the paternal metaphor is the subtext of the philosophical discourse of modernity. It is as if the crisis of this discipline could be read in terms of the displacement of the network of symbolic relations which centre on the paternal figure as emblem of authority and, through his mediation, structure the field of knowledge. What sort of thought can a 'fatherless society' have?⁴

The decline of the paternal metaphor is at the heart of the discourse of psychoanalysis and as such it contributes to our understanding of the crisis of the rational subject. Psychoanalysis is the discourse of this crisis par excellence: it has come gradually to be accepted as a radically new reading of the structures of human subjectivity.

The focus of this critical tradition of thought is the corporeal roots of subjectivity (Nietzsche) and more specifically, the dynamic interaction between the body and the human psyche (Freud). The project of thinking the subject as a corporeal entity is one of the key events of the philosophy of modernity.

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche claims that, from the outset, philosophy has had to think the body. But this inevitability has the force of a necessary exclusion. Anticipating Freud's discoveries, Nietzsche stresses the fundamental incompatibility of theoretical thought, institutionalized as philosophy, and the body. It is clear that this onslaught on philosophy, as being a fundamental misunderstanding of the bodily roots of human subjectivity, could not fail to have repercussions for the discourse about women and the feminine – traditionally assigned to the corporeal or the physical.

The epoch of modernity, seen in terms of the crisis of the paternal metaphor, also implies that new emphasis is placed on the structure of female sexuality, on the woman's body as the maternal site of origin. The revaluation of the feminine thus defined is an effect of the malaise which affects the paternal metaphor, the law of the father. The proliferation of discourses about the mother's body and female sexuality is symptomatic of the crisis of the masculine social contract and its self-legitimizing discourses. The feminine body is the subtext of the major theoretical confrontations in modern discourse.

In order to make sense of the seemingly paradoxical relation between the crisis of the paternal metaphor and the emergence of theoretical discourses about the female subject in sexuality, that is to say of the feminine-maternal site of discourse, we need to reconsider the relation between philosophy and psychoanalysis. Already in *The Future of an Illusion* Freud underlined the deep-seated misunderstanding that marks the philosophical attitude towards psychoanalytic practice. Freud identifies philosophy with religion insofar as both are neurotic structures which nurture the illusion of all-powerful totality and unity of the subject. Philosophy, by definition a 'noble' discipline, is the basis of a system of knowledge which implicitly supports a scale of ethical values based on rationality. We shall see in chapter 4 how the radical critic of psychoanalysis, Gilles Deleuze, develops this idea.

In the Freudian perspective philosophy is not just one cognitive system among others but rather the discipline which operates the hierarchical systematization of different stages of knowledge. It therefore creates conditions of possibility for the elaboration of other discourses. This philosophy is for Freud the intellectual emanation of

the spirit of mastery: it rests on the misunderstanding of the structure of the very object it takes as its central point of reference: the subject. Philosophy fixes the subject in an idealizing image of him/herself. According to Freud, philosophy remains behind the conceptual advances operated by psychoanalysis in our understanding of the structure of subjectivity.

The most far-reaching critique Freud advances of philosophy is that it establishes a *de facto* and *de jure* identification between human subjectivity and rational consciousness. P. L. Assoun names this tendency 'conscientialism',⁵ which he opposes to the analytic insight that promotes the interrogation of, and challenge to, the subject in terms of his/her relation to structures that lie structurally beyond his/her reach.

In psychoanalytic discourse, it is less a question of producing another cognitive positivity than of disclosing the subject's structural incapacity to be 'master in his own house'. All claim to synthetic unity of the subject is thus reduced either to ignorance of his/her real structures or the expression of a will to master and dominate the self that borders on pathology. Psychoanalysis effects a critical reading of conceptual thought, such as it is manifest in the specific mental operations of philosophy.

Its central challenge touches upon the relation between unconscious and conscious thought, which Freud formulated as follows: how are we to understand, and theorize, the form of thought which is at work in dreams? How are we to take the fact that clear, distinct and pertinent forms of thought can reproduce themselves without the intervention of consciousness?

To postulate, after Freud, the primacy of the demands of the unconscious is to relegate consciousness to a place which is vital but not determinant, as a mechanism that relays and transforms the fragments of libidinal life into forms of mental activity that are self-consciously representational. The dominant system of representation being organized around rationality, consciousness can only play a normative role in psychic life.

The process of transmutation and transposition of unconscious material makes consciousness one of the key faculties in psychical life, but not its motor or its dynamic: on the contrary, its function is rather to purify the libidinal residues, and to master them so as to offer the subject the stability of a reassuring self-image.

Thus an equation between on the one hand consciousness and rationality and on the other, self-affirmation and ideal self is established. The originality of analytic thought lies less in its having 'discovered' the unconscious – as Freud emphasizes, poets had always known it – than in having shown and conceptualized the primacy of unconscious elements in psychical life.

Psychoanalysis places a question mark beside the hard kernel of the philosophical equation of subjectivity with consciousness, by emphasizing the paradox of unconscious thought. This implies a view of