

SOME REMARKS ON GYNOCRITICISM: OBSERVATIONS OF A MEMBER OF "MASCULINI GENERIS"*

Marián GÁLIK, Bratislava

During the last years, having the possibilities to participate in different international congresses or conferences on literature or comparative literature, I have had the opportunity to hear quite a few representatives of feminist criticism. For the most part, but of course, not always, these contributions were rather dull pieces with an inadequate knowledge of the subject and full of prejudices. I do not say that gynocriticism, which has become part of contemporary literary scholarship, both in West and East, when put into the schedule of literary meetings, discussions and university courses, should always be evaluated in this way. I dare now to offer some comments and critique to its most detrimental, derogatory aspects in regard to the male sex.

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Let me start with the ontology and basic epistemological aspects assumptions of this kind of feminist criticism. Allow me to begin with an essay by Naomi Segal, who teaches modern languages at St. John's College, Cambridge. This work struck me with its very special interpretation of the Greek myth of Narcissus. She delineated the place where this hapless young boy found his death after the rebuffal of Echo and his own inner suffering:

"This pool is not only as glassy as a mirror; (here Segal changes the description by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, M.G.) its shadiness, secrecy, mysterious coolness and inaccessibility to anyone but Narcissus, surely designate it as the entrance/exit of the mother's genital. His fate is to return to the uncanny repressed, seek his reflection there and find death."¹

In the history of the elaboration of this myth this explanation is probably most shocking. How can we believe that the primeval mythical man could even subconsciously ponder or meditate over his own mother's vulva or vagina?

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¹ SEGAL, N.: *Echo and Narcissus*. In: BRENNAN, T. (ed.): *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. London and New York, Routledge 1989, pp. 170-171.

Another woman from Jesus College in the same city quotes well-known French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan when writing about a similar problem in her lecture entitled *The Aesthetics of Impenetrability*. His theories revolve around the *penis-Angst* of the part of the modern feminists, who are worshippers of the Goddess (not God) of whom Professor Lacan is one of the prophets:

“There is a *jouissance*, since we are sticking to *jouissance*, *jouissance* of the body which is, if you allow me the expression, *beyond the phallus...*”²

The term *jouissance* is a French word difficult to translate into English: it is not only enjoyment or pleasure. A few people outside of France have had the opportunity to read my friend André Levy's wonderful translation of the Chinese classic (and partly erotic) novel *Jin Ping Mei cihua (Fleur en Fiole d'Or)* from the 17th century. Here they will find how the passionate concubines, maids or courtesans just before the sexual climax exclaim something like: “*Wo jiu la*” (*Je jouir*).³ An orgiastic climax here follows penetration and the sexual act. For the most militant contemporary feminists it is different. They are proselytes of the “politics of impenetrability”. Except for the vagina which according to Luce Irigaray, one of the most devoted followers of Mr. Lacan, should be passive, all other “sex organs” should play active role, since the woman “experiences pleasure almost everywhere. Even without speaking of the hysterization of her entire body, one can say that the geography of her pleasure is more diversified, more multiple, than is imagined...”⁴

The other sex or gender is the aim of their critical essays and deliberations. Phalocracy and a phallus-centred universe is the target of their attacks. The idea and strategy of going “beyond the phallus” have found different manifestations in their writings. Many masculine values are attacked or at least alluded to in the work by Hélène Cixous entitled *The Laugh of Medusa*: “Their (i.e. phalocratic, M.G.) ‘symbolic’ exists, it holds power – we, the sources of disorder, know it too well.”⁵ This last, of course, does not mean that women's (even radical feminists') quest for more power is a bad thing. When transposed into works of art,

² JARDINE, L. In: BRENNAN, T. (ed.): op. cit., p. 64.

³ *Fleur en Fiole d'Or*. 2 vols. Paris, Gallimard 1985. According to one source: “This pleasure, when attributed to a woman, is considered to be of different order from the pleasure that is represented within the male libidinal economy often described in terms of the capitalist gain and profit motive. Women's *jouissance* carries with it the notion of fluidity, diffusion, duration. It is a kind of potlatch in the world of orgasms, a giving, expending, dispensing of pleasure without concern about ends or closure.” (MARKS, E. and DE COURTIVRON, I. (eds.): *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press 1980, p. 36). Here probably to say that *satis eloquentiae, sapientiae parum* would be quite appropriate.

⁴ IRIGARAY, L. In: BRENNAN, T. (ed.): op. cit., p. 67. Originally appeared in *Ce Sexe qui ne'en est pas un*. Paris, Minuit 1977, pp. 25-26.

⁵ CIXOUS, H. In: BRENNAN, T. (ed.): op. cit., p. 153. Originally appeared in the journal *Signs*, 1, 1976, 4.

the suppression of men's claim for supremacy is a state of affairs we may actually agree with. In the opera *Le Nome d'Œdipe* by Cixous we may see such an approach. Deep knowledge of some aspects of psychoanalysis and subconscious helped the author to show Oedipus and Jocasta in a new light. The "symbolic" order as seen in the traditional treatment of the subject has been attacked, and made suspicious, but not changed for another one, since that does not seem to be possible.

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Gynocriticism is a newly coined word. Even in the 1986 book by Maggie Humm entitled *Feminist Criticism. Women as Contemporary Critics*,⁶ this term is not used at all. I found it in an learned article by Elaine Showalter *Feminism and Literature*⁷ from 1990. As to literary criticism in general it is that part written by and mainly for women.

If not gynocriticism, represented very often by the radical feminists, then feminist criticism in general has a longer history beginning at least with the famous Simone de Beauvoir⁸ and the well-known Betty Friedan⁹ and Germaine Greer.¹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, a philosopher and writer, common-law wife of Jean Paul Sartre, showed in her book the firm conviction that women are constructed differently from men, but the physical distinctions between the sexes have some meaning only due to the social circumstances (this is where the meaning and status of the gender comes from). Men have deprived women of their liberty and women were forced to become narcissists, and therefore theirs is inward tendency and social dependence. If now Segal's vision comes to mind, then Narcissus *feminini generis* should look with awe at the shadiness and mystery (?) of her father's penis. Of course, Madame de Beauvoir was not so dull and perverse. If this is really so, I abstain from any comment.

Although both feminists, Friedan and Greer seemed to be a bit conservative to later followers. In their time at the end of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s they were very popular and served as enlighteners for things feminist and sexual. Friedan especially showed American women the way to be a woman outside of the framework of marriage and family. Although not so much for Greer,

⁶ Brighton, The Harvester Press Ltd. 1986.

⁷ JONES, A.R.: *Writing the Body. Toward an Understanding of l'Ecriture féminine*. In: SHOWALTER, E.: *Feminist Criticism. Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. New York, Pantheon Books 1985, p. 365 and COLLIER, P. and GEYER-RYAN, H. (eds.): *Literary Theory Today*. Cambridge, Polity Press 1990, pp. 179–202. She proposed this term for the first time in 1978, see p. 189.

⁸ Her book *The Second Sex* appeared originally in French as *Le deuxième Sexe* in 1949.

⁹ FRIEDAN, B.: *The Feminine Mystique*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books 1982.

¹⁰ GREER, G.: *The Female Eunuch*. London, Paladin 1971.

but for de Beauvoir and Friedan, sexual abstinence is typical which is usually not the case with later feminists.

Probably the most radical of all pioneers of feminist criticism was Kate Millet in her book *Sexual Politics* (1977). She followed the critique of male myth in the *Second Sex* with some different approaches, devoting more time to literary issues, namely the works of typically male authors like Norman Mailer, Arthur Miller and D.H. Lawrence, criticizing them for distorting women characters and making fetishes out of violence, sexuality and money. Male writers were not able to delineate women and their femininity since they were representatives of masculine culture. This is a very rigorous value judgement. All those wonderful women characters like Iphigenia, Electra, Medea, Sakuntala, Ophelia, Juliet, Lin Tai-yü, Margarete, and Anna Karenina cannot be regarded as misproducts of male phallogocentric constructions.

To establish gynocriticism as an academic discipline was not an easy task. After thousand of years of male domination the aim and the methodology of this criticism should be defined in order successfully to attack the millennial stronghold of a "patriarchal" institution such as literature was.

It was first in the area of language with the help of psychoanalysis and the study of texts by Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse where there was provocation to ask questions and find answers concerned with feminist problems. But these three were only instigators of change. Probably the most important pioneer of this late feminist criticism was Julia Kristeva who tried to analyse the language of babies and mothers before the "symbolic" language of "patriarchal" structure began to prevail among children, including girls. Cixous and Irigaray went further. They tried formulate discourse that would be different from the language of men in order to create the *écriture féminine*. This is questionable and many feminists even deny this possibility. If the feminist critic Mary Daly thinks that the women writers should "re-member the dismembered body of our heritage", we men as the Other need not protest. Only if she supposes that to "re-cover" in feminine language means to "cover again" or the feminine vocabulary should refuse to be a receptacle for "semantic semen"¹¹ (understood is the male use of the words, M.G.), then we should read such pronouncements with caution. In spite of the deepest conviction of Mrs. Humm that the challenge "facing feminist criticism today is nothing less than to 'reinvent' language, to relearn how to speak", it is to be doubted whether those modes of speech outside the so-called "phallogocentric structures" practically exist, and it is questionable whether their realization is within the framework of possibility.¹² Hardly any language in the world possesses so many features that are so closed to the feminist demands as Japanese language. Professor Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit,

¹¹ DALY, M.: *Gyn-ecology*. Boston, Beacon Press 1978, p. 23.

¹² HUMM, M.: op. cit., p. 71.

well-known Japanologist from Free University, Berlin, who studied *onna bungaku* (women's literature) in Japan with impressive results, doubts whether even a Japanese kind of feminine discourse can fulfil feminist expectations. In her essay "Frau-Sprechen" und "onna-kotoba". *Vorläufige Bemerkungen zum Thema "Sprache und Geschlecht" am Beispiel Japans*, it was shown that even here only a small part (e.g. of vocabulary or grammar) fulfils feminist needs, like personal pronouns *boku* and *ore* (male) or *atashi* (female). The same holds true for *kimi* and *o-mae* which can be used only by men when addressing women or men of a lower social position.¹³ Professor Hijiya-Kirschnereit clearly asserts that no special language of Japanese women exists which is different from that of men.¹⁴

Feminist myth criticism is another kind of gynocritical study and creation. Myths are present in the literature of all ages. Women writers are mythmakers like their male counterparts. Feminist writers and critics in the last decades proceeded somewhat differently – especially in one way – they tried to neglect European and Hebrew myths (or at least to change them to a great extent), and devoted much time and space to the mythologies of other peoples and cultures. A long tradition of mythical elaboration made the first myths, according to the feminist mythographers and mythopoets, the tools conforming to phallocentric structures. The volume of studies entitled: *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* is a book of this orientation. The critics in this book "work with the polytheistic myths of the ancient Near East juxtaposing these with the contemporary culture of native American Indians and white women writing today."¹⁵ As just pointed out this does not mean the "wholesale repudiation" of the two above traditions since this is not possible without losing its own European or American identity. The feminine is exalted and stressed much more than in earlier elaboration. In the story of Perseus and Medusa, not the favourite Pallas Athena is victorious, but Medusa triumphs over Perseus with her laugh.¹⁶ The so-called phallocentric myths are the objects of feminist critical investigation and their gynocentric basis, is very industriously searched for. In *Gyn-ecology* Mary Daly presents Pallas Athena as a goddess who serves for phallographic male gods and their aims. The Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone is crucial for contemporary feminists and the whole book entitled *The Lost Tradition* revolves around it. The mother-daughter bond, probably the most intimate and important for the gynocritical ideal, is regarded as a vital task to be solved in an appropriate manner. For instance, tragic fate as demonstrated in the case of Sylvia Plath and her attitude to her mother and vice versa, is a memento which should be ana-

¹³ HIIJIYA-KIRSCHNEREIT, I.: *Das Ende der Exotik*. Frankfurt am Main 1988, p. 29. *Onna-kotoba* means women's speech.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁵ New York, Frederick Ungar 1980, p. 91.

¹⁶ P. 92.

lysed, together with the final results, including literary. I doubt whether this could be adequately resolved only by feminist means.

For the reasons of the prescribed length of this contribution, I will skip the Marxist and Black feminist criticism.

Lesbian criticism is another type and probably the most radical kind of gynocriticism of the last years. The most important theoretician and writer is Adrienne Rich who teaches lesbian feminist ideas to black American students. Her book *Of Woman Born* is partly autobiographical, as are nearly all her writings. She eulogizes maternity (herself being a mother) but not marriage (her husband committed suicide). According to her, women are basically homosexual, although to be lesbian for her does not always include sexual experience. She invented a theory of the so-called "lesbian continuum", potential quality present in all female species. Genital organs here are mostly for reproductive and secretive functions only:

"Lesbian existence suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman – identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman."¹⁷

This idea has been accepted differently. By many women, feminists included, it has been regarded as ahistorical since the "lesbian identity as we know today is a twentieth century construct, to place women living in earlier eras on a 'lesbian continuum' is to attribute to them a sexual identification which they did not possess and would not recognize."¹⁸

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After the analysis of the ontological and epistemological bases of contemporary feminist criticism and its theoretical assumptions, some practical observations from the feminist creative writings would probably be interesting for the readers. The language area of gynocriticism found only very sparse traces in creative literature except for some new words, very often cursing and abusing the male sex. The elaboration of mythic themes we find in the feminist literature as has been shown in the case of Hélène Cixous. One such example is the novel *Sita* (1976) by Kate Millet where the Demeter-Persephone myth is presented not as mother and daughter, but as two women friends, one young, one older, and depicted from a radical perspective. Kate, the older one, is a cruel, selfish woman, who is attracted to the bisexual and very experienced Sita, but in the end she

¹⁷ RICH, A.: *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience*. In: ABEL, E. and ABEL, A.K. (eds.): *Women, Gender, Scholarship*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1983, p. 156.

¹⁸ PALMER, R.: *Contemporary Women's Fiction. Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory*. Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf 1989, p. 149.

denies her love to young woman. Here Millet, maybe unconsciously, delineates those shadowy sides of lesbian love the radical feminists do not like to see and analyse. Another novel by militant feminist Fay Weldon entitled *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) uses the reconstructed motifs from Andersen's *Little Mermaid* and Brothers Grimm's *Cinderella*. Ailing La Tourette goes too far in her novel *Nuns and Mothers* (1984) when she compares lesbian cunnilingus with Christian Holy Communion.

An entire book has been devoted to myths and modern mythmaking science fiction written by woman: Thelma J. Shinn's *Worlds Within Women. Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Woman*.¹⁹ Myths of many nations of the world are elaborated using the feminist or at least the female perspective. Once again the Demeter-Persephone myth together with that of the Babylonian Ishtar-Tammuz (the last corresponding to a great extent to Aphrodite and Adonis in Greek mythology) is processed in the novel *Silver Metal Lover* (1981) by Tanith Lee. Demeta (Demeter) sends her daughter Jane (Persephone) to the polluted world. There she meets Silver (Silver Ionized Locomotive Verisimulated Electronic Robot) who creates natural surroundings for her by painting the clouds and rainbow on the walls of their slum flat and makes love to her. Persephone was a Queen of the Underworld and Hades never did "it" to her. According to Jane, Silver is love, similar to "God is love" according to St. John. World society kills her Silver, not in the same way as in the Babylonian myth, but through his death, Jane (now Jain) finds a new love in his resurrected soul.

Lesbian fiction is probably most widespread kind of feminist literature in more than the last twenty years. There you can find nearly everything which this kind of women approve or disapprove of: coital imperative, clitoral sex, sexual molestation and rape, heterosexuality as a cornerstone of male tyranny, vaginal intercourse as an anathema in interhuman relations (penetration=invasion), lesbian motherhood, sisterhood, lesbian chauvinism, lesbian woman as a superwoman, etc. but also its stigma and slow but gradual disintegration of this kind of feminist movement in the 1980s.

The first two subjects are treated in the novel by Mary Piercy *Braided Lives* (1982). Two cousins Jill and Donna grope between the Scylla of the "coital imperative" and the Charybdis of clitoral *jouissance* later to be defined as "signifier of female sexuality". Rape is also present in the novel as is sexual aggression without consent. In another novel, *Choices* (1980) by Nancy Toder the "politics of clitoris" is presented even as a subject at a conference! Gillian Hanscombe's novel *Between Friends* (1983) revolves (or feministically speaking: re-evolves) around the penetrative sex: "About vaginal penetration: quite simple we should think about giving it up. Not participate in this act. Unless we are *deliberately*

¹⁹ New York, Greenwood Press 1986.

planning to become pregnant.”²⁰ Men are degraded here to being bulls for insemination stations.

Not many women followed this feminist policy and after a short involvement started to doubt its usefulness and advantages. They returned to traditional sexual practices despite the fact these were labelled as “male chauvinistic”. The characters of lesbian superwomen²¹ were unconvincing for the militant feminists themselves, the ideas concerned with lesbian sisterhoods or sororities began to be regarded as the newest utopias in the world of social mythology.

At least in two places in her book Pauline Palmer acknowledged that the feminist fiction is a “fiction of ideas”.²² Every literature has to do with ideas in some form or another, it is a peculiar part of social consciousness, but not every writing connected with ideas can be regarded as literature or as good literature. As a vehicle for these ideas much of this literary (?) production has to suffer from the “overweight” of ideological indoctrination.

Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis was not only a manifestation of “patriarchal” wisdom of “phallogocentric” Romans. At least a few of the movements contemporary to the feminist one are dead: the sexual revolution owing to the pandemic AIDS, the psychedelic revolution owing to the social, biological and mental danger coming from the use of drugs, the New Left because of the collapse of the unsuccessful socialist or pseudo-socialist ideas. The 1980s clearly showed a re-entry into heterosexuality.

Everything came back to where it started in the women’s movement about 1968 and after in the 1970s with the slogan: “*Femmes! Libérons-nous!*” For Mira, the main protagonist of the bestseller *The Women’s Room* (1976) by Marilyn French it took years before she knew herself in a truly sexual way after meeting Ben. Disappointment followed, but the physiology of carnal love is immensely complicated. Pandora’s box is always a valid mythologeme for all human beings: this realm of interhuman relations included. I regard it as a good novel and its subtitle: *For every man who ever thought he knew a woman! For every woman who ever thought she knew herself*, really hit the mark. The book served as a *Bildungsroman* for many American and European women’s rooms, which certainly does not mean lavatory or W.C. in this case.

Another novel that meant an even bigger success (between 1973 and 1988 over 6.5 million copies were printed) was Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (since 1992

²⁰ PALMER, R.: op. cit., p. 52.

²¹ Cf. the girl named Sandy in the previously mentioned novel *Choices* by Nancy Toder. Here clitoris is an *epitheton constans* of “female chauvinism”. According to L. Irigaray in the interpretation of Ann Rosalind Jones, women “experience a diffuse sexuality arising, for example, from the ‘two lips’ of the vulva, and multiplicity of libidinal energies that cannot be expressed or understood within the identity-claiming assumptions of phallogocentric discourse” (Jones, A.R.: op. cit., p. 364).

²² PALMER, R.: op. cit., pp. 8 and 162.

also in Slovak). According to John Updike, it was the "most uninhibited, delicious, erotic novel a woman ever wrote" (New Yorker) and I would regard it as very witty and satirical self-exposé of both men and women. Her ideal of the Zipless Ultimate (she called it Fuck, not me!) was a part of her illusory dreamwork and never came true. This quest is unrealizable in the world of human beings. In Japan this novel so famous that the term *tonderu onna*²³ (flying woman) was used for women who could "score every man in the zodiac", who were "stars and sensual", perfuming themselves with Channel No. 5 or Opium and who were allegedly *Femmes* with a capital.²⁴ The Japanese very soon abandoned this ideal since it was contradictory to their opinions concerning the position of women in family and society. They regarded it as too dangerous for their male centred universe and establishment.

It is interesting that Erica Jong, in spite of what has just been said, was able to write the following lines:

I sleep with double pillows since you're gone.
Is one of them for you – or *is* it you?...
I keep your pillow pressed down with my books.
They leave an indentation like your head.
If I can't have you here, I'll take a cold type –
& words: the warmest things there are –
but you.²⁵

These verses remind me of the most lyrical passages in the works of old Chinese poetesses. One of Jong's husbands was Chinese: her surname is Chinese, too.

Does our *fin de siècle* mean the decline of the most radical gynocriticism and the removal of the hot-bed leading to it, or not? In any case gynocriticism is not dead and its better part need not be. Among gynocritics we find talented and able women, who could help us to better understand literature as an art and as an axiological treasury. It seems to me that reasonable feminist values are to be reevaluated in our days and in the years to come. Elaine Showalter proposed the feminist "development of comparative literature and theory, a poetics of the Other"²⁶ as two examples. There are certainly other fields to be elaborated in order "to work together for an understanding of literature that is truly universal."²⁷ Are we the

²³ HIIJIYA-KIRSCHNEREIT, I.: *Das Ende der Exotik*, pp. 44–51.

²⁴ JONG, E.: *Fear of Flying*. New York, A Signet Book. New American Library 1988, p. 9.

²⁵ JONG, E.: *I Sleep With*. In: *How to Save Your Own Life*. London, Panther, Granada Publishing 1978, p. 299.

²⁶ SHOWALTER, E.: *Feminism and Literature*, p. 199.

²⁷ Loc. cit.

critics and historians of *masculini generis*, those who belong to the Other according to her understanding, or not?

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At the beginning of Narcissus' myth, asked Zeus his wife Hera whether man or woman gets more pleasure from the act of lovemaking. Since their opinions differed completely, they called in the old seer Tiresias to arbitrate: his view contradicted to that of Hera (allegedly females get more pleasure out of loving than we poor males) and she made him blind. Nowadays not many male critics would dare to say that gynocriticism is not always outstanding, since there is a danger that they could be struck blind by military feminists. Gynocriticism as pointed out above is a part of the literary and critical world of today. Its very problematic and harmful sides have been shown in this essay already, but where its more mild components are concerned, its methodology could improve some aspects of study, e.g. women's psychology reflected in literary works and overall female culture. Besides the inadequacies and harms of militant feminist criticism, its weighty disadvantage is an insufficient literary knowledge of the zealots who supply their feeble command of literary facts and scholarly preparation with ideological clichés, and I dare say prejudices. Many pieces of feminist criticism remind me of Soviet Onguardists who smashed Russian Formalist criticism, the most progressive in the world of the 1920s.

The old seer Tiresias was struck blind by Hera, but Zeus in compensation, gave him the power to know the future. Rosi Braidotti, a young Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Utrecht, mentioned in one of her essays that beyond the "fantasy of feminine power" and the "illusion of a pure feminine species" (one that lies beyond the grasp of the phallus), the project of "sexual difference" (of being-a-woman outside of heterosexual frame of reference) "may well be the last utopia of our dying century".²⁸

Eureka! Maybe this woman, certainly not blinded by the Queen of Heaven and quite highly endowed intellectually by the Almighty Father, is a new Tiresias.

²⁸ BRAIDOTTI, R.: *The Politics of Ontological Difference*. In: BRENNAN, T.: op. cit., p. 89.