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Correspondence, subscriptions and manuscripts should be addressed to:
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Reviews : Alice Jardine, Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity, (Cornell University Press, New York, 1985)

Ariel Salleh

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that this new self understanding will come from a synthesis of two traditions — philosophical hermeneutics and the work of Karl Mannheim as representative of the tradition of the sociology of knowledge purged of certain misconceptions. But what Heckman finds attractive in Mannheim's work is simply first, that it anticipates to some extent the approach to objectivity, truth, the distinction between the natural and human sciences, etc., which emerges in the analysis offered by philosophical hermeneutics. And, second, that in some way, never adequately specified, Mannheim's studies of particular belief systems, his analysis, say, of conservatives in nineteenth century Germany, are an example of how a new social science, one inspired by Gadamer, should proceed (p.158).

3. Hekman does state that the aim of her book is limited to showing how Gadamer provides an accurate understanding of the social sciences and that to develop the methodological implications of this claim is beyond the scope of her book (p.12). But the whole argument assumes that practical consequences will follow from this new understanding.
4. *Hermeneutics and Social Science/ 2 Cultural Hermeneutics* (1975) 307 at 316.
5. *Truth and Method* Crossroad, 1975 at XXV; *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Univ. California Press, 1976 at 84.
6. *Truth and Method* at xiii.
7. *Philosophical Hermeneutics* at 96.
8. *Truth and Method* at xvi, 465f.
9. *Truth and Method* at 236, 237.
10. *Truth and Method* at 261, 262.
11. See the fifth and sixth essays in *Reason in the Age of Science*, MIT Press, 1981.
12. She accepts, how could she not, that methodology is not Gadamer's main concern but argues that his lack of interest in this aspect of interpretation does not prevent his ontological account from having methodological implications (p. 95,140,156).

Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*,
(Cornell University Press, New York, 1985)

Reviewed by Ariel Salleh

The unhappy marriage of Marxism, 'master narrative', with feminism, is still unresolved. Now a third party, 'another woman', but this time, the wife's companion — *gynesis* — aggravates the uneasy *menage* with a 'subversive power of the feminine'. History capital-H becomes anachronism. All its props from the classical era of Representation collapse; its social contract based on the Phallus, law, the paranoid state, phonetics, a polarity of the sign, Oedipus and meaning. How indeed, does the once radical master cope in this post-Freudian, post-Hegelian, post-Saussurian domesticity? How can it voice its predicament? Jardine traces the genealogy of this feminist affair with *gynesis*, and the threat to it, in turn, from ongoing incestuous ties between 'the other woman' and her Parisian

brothers. For Lacan, Baudrillard, Derrida, Lyotard, while enjoining the feminist antagonism to ‘the Name of the Father’, nevertheless attack the women’s movement for being insufficiently emancipated from the classical logic of Marxism and liberalism before it. But the betrayal of the brothers runs far deeper than this . . .

Jardine’s sense of this ‘affair’ is the product of a mid-Atlantic identity crisis; suspended as she is, between two cultural superpowers — France and the United States. A too impatient view from the periphery, perhaps? At any rate, she believes there is an urgent need for French theorists of *gynesis* and American feminists grounded in an intransigent context of empiricism, humanism, social science and movement activism, to work through their points of contact. Jardine, the liberal, does not prescribe the nature of this therapeutic meeting. Always cautious and muted, she will elucidate the most outrageous phallic text, then slip across into the academic pro-and-con. What she does, and does well, is arrange the Parisian furniture for her Anglo readers. The vignette of Goux early in the book is a patch of brilliant exegesis; while her third section ‘Intertexts’ is bound to be treasured by students of Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze. What remains unclear, unspoken, is the global politics of Jardine’s invitation.

Gynesis applauds the discovery of a feminine *écriture*, the re-valorisation of ‘women’ in the discourses of modernity; but she thinks there ought to be a fundamental difference between the ‘problematisation of woman’, found, say in Derrida’s writing, and the practice of *gynesis* in women’s texts. History may well be in demise, but as Jardine points out, feminism ‘is finally rooted in the belief that women’s truth in-experience-and-reality is and has always been different from men’s...’(p.147) Further, she asks: to what extent is the work of Irigaray, Kristeva, or Cixous, female ‘disciples’ of male philosophers, contaminated by the classic paranoid ‘masculine’ position? In framing this project of course, Jardine immediately transgresses the post-structural disavowal of authorship and authenticity. What is more, her keen feminist eye detects a ‘slippage in male discourse, from the feminine (anonymity, passivity, and so on) to women (as metaphysically opposed to men) and, finally, to ‘we’ (‘we Westerners’)...(p.66) Who is this ‘we’? A valid question. Just as it is valid for feminists to ponder: who is the ‘we’ that Marxism speaks for?

The precise status of ‘experience’ is a question that haunts Jardine’s book. While she acknowledges it as the source of feminist insight, its ‘materialist’ base, she simultaneously endorses Jane Gallop’s claim that ‘The politics of experience is inevitably conservative politics, for it cannot help but conserve traditional ideological constructs which are not recognised as such but taken for the ‘real’. (p.155) True, unless we insist on knowing where, how, and to what end, words like ‘woman’, ‘femininity’, ‘the maternal’ are used, we are liable to lapse into an unreflected and reactionary practice. Equally as the exercise of *gynesis* by a complacent literary establishment demonstrates, this process constitutes a necessary, but not sufficient condition of politics.

Concepts like ‘experience’, ‘goodness’, ‘the natural’, do come to us as reified categories, but that does not mean they have no referent. The new ‘silent majority’ however, those totalizing adherents of discourse analysis, deflected by its glittering ‘partial truths’ and whirling simulacra, cannot make contact with the everyday world. This historical paralysis is quite unwarranted though. A very similar epistemological lesson, a form of *difference*, the chiasma, ironic reversal, was

delivered to us some 30 years ago with Adorno's negative dialectic; and, without losing touch with the wider political/ethical pulse. In the end, this obsessive concern over 'a politics of enunciation' may speak little more than the commercial ingenuity of a multi-national book trade and the parochialism of a French literary-philosophic corpus, quite unawares of what has already been said a bike ride away.

In her desire to accommodate what is useful in *gynesis*, Jardine observes that Derrida treats 'experience' as synonymous with 'presence, transparency, egotism, meaning, and, therefore, violence'.(p.151). Yet surely, what feminists and others must get to grips with here, is the historical and discursive assymmetry of the 'masculine' and 'feminine' speaking positions. As the author herself has commented in another context: modern women find themselves obliged to exist in two discourses at once — a day to day 'historical' space shared with colleagues, lovers and such — and another, which deconstructs the first; a space affirmed by other women, by reflection and writing. Those who would communicate with feminists need to take both discursive worlds into account, but this rarely happens. Increasingly, women find themselves in a sort of remedial, limping, one-dimensional dialogue with those around them locked into the 'historical' plane.

There is no doubt that empiricism is philosophically incapable of justifying itself; yet so, in principle, is any other panopticon you care to name. Agreed, it is 'a good thing' to stop taking our experience literally, but, this implies of course, that we stop taking our theorising so literally as well! The textual politics/epistemology of *gynesis* is particularly in need of scrutiny. It grows, in practice, out of a profoundly classical bourgeois schism between thought and sensuous activity, that lived materiality of finding money for children's shoes or fighting bureaucrats over toxic pollution. Its pretense to dissolve conceptual boundaries and hierarchies becomes transparent when it is noted how the conditions of its *écriture* depend on an invisible, unspoken, appropriation of other's less than free 'experience'.

The claim of *gynesis* to voice 'the feminine' is something else again. And this is the nub of Jardine's book in my view, a hard nub to find too, in her dense and gushing text. What is the hidden agenda of our French brother? — She suspects it may be a direct response/reaction to the 20th century emergence of feminism: 'is it not possible that the periodic coming to the surface of male homosexuality... through a new master of the unnameable ... could be directly related to the presence of Woman's word?'(p.99) A new attempt to drown the rising voice of witches in simulation of their own babble? Afterall, Baudrillard admits that dissimulating woman is prototype for the age of the simulacrum.

In accepting that suppression, even mutilation of woman is an ongoing fact of the patriarchal libidinal economy — the very basis of our Western social contract in fact, Jardine breaks out of the programmed synchronicity of the word and takes up with an historical dialectic again. Rejection of 'the mother' is prior to the killing of her abstract substitute, the Father, with his Cartesian consciousness. This powerful thesis is dispersed through *Gynesis*, but never made into an organising principle of the volume. The book remains fundamentally a collection, just as Jardine remains a student of literature, rather than a social theorist. The contemporary masculine relation to *gynesis* is a dual one. First, it is a search for the feminine within the men themselves; a 'femininity' exorcised at the original matricide and moment of the patriarchal contract. It is a drive to remedy their human lack, by creating the 'woman-in-effect' as problematic of their writing. At a second level, *gynesis* serves

the desperate attempt to drown the rising voices of real empirical women by speaking over them. For the boys, writing is 'awoman', but, to quote Michel Leiris: 'She is not in any way an 'object', but rather the 'melancholic substance' of that which is missing for 'him', that which forces him to desire, that is, to write. The function of writing is, for him, 'to fill a void'...' (p.115).

The void is a symptomatic theme for the practitioners of *gynesis*. And perhaps this is Althusser's single permanent bequest to us — always look for the unspoken, the meaning in the gaps, holes, fractures, silences . . . 'Woman' then, becomes the utopia, the ultimate *jouissance*, which will seal over the loss created by the social contract. 'The contemporary French writer is participating in an extreme *emptying out* of images, narrative, characters, and words, in order to reach their silent but solidly significant core — an erotic core that he can then embrace'. (p.235) Such is Jardine's diagnosis. When she compares this condition to that of her US male compatriots like Burroughs, Mailer or Miller, she finds that for them, the Father is already absent from the scene. How to make sense of this — Protestant individualism? The War of Independence? Mommism? The American writing tends to thematise 'woman' rather than actualise 'the feminine' in and through textuality itself, but the unconscious sexual hatred is just as strong in the New World as in the old. Caught up somewhere between Uncle Sam, bureaucracy, mass culture and Mother, these men find women invariably viscous, cancerous and uncontrollable. Maybe, Jardine suggests, drawing on a sympathetic fragment from Michel Serres, there has only ever been two sexes/classes: the Mothers, and all the rest. (p.116)

Jardine has little to say on political activism. At one point, she remarks that the exercise of *gynesis* may 'enable us to envision a feminist strategy more attentive to the rational violence of an ever-spiraling technocracy.' (p.49) It seems a rather lightly considered proposal. In another place she writes: 'to be radical in our culture may require new kinds of mental acrobatics: for example, to be radical may no longer be to work for the side that is 'right', speaks the 'truth', is most 'just'. It may infact be to work for the *Pseudos*, for the highest power of falsehood, thereby confusing and finally destroying the oppressive system of representation...' (p.146) I find this line singularly unconvincing; not to say dangerous. Is this what our old 'brotherly machine' the dialectic has finally come to then — our science of contradiction capable of comprehending and overturning the fact of master and slave? Is a true dialectical materialism to be found in what Marx did not say?

In terms of praxis, the political import of *Gynesis exists less in its content than in its occasion; the politics of its own enunciation. That paradoxical question — If all discourse is patriarchal, then how can a woman speak? — does not go away.* Jardine finds no answer to it, and worse, her impressive scholarly engagement with the mannequins of *gynesis* only serves to deepen the irony of the feminist dilemma. To say this, is not to trivialise her work, rather it is to urge Marxist and other radicals to stand up and face this intractable problem.