

Is There Such a Thing as “Woman Writing”? Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Writing as Gendered Experience

In 1898 Charlotte Perkins Gilman warned us that “There is no female mind. The brain is not an organ of sex. Might as well speak of a female liver.” (Gilman, 1898: 149). Yet, today we still find that research in neuroscience of sex difference argues that “some brain structures are sexually dimorphic” (Cahill, 2006 and Ruigrok et al, 2014). Some studies show that brain dimorphism is evidenced in both structure (“male brains are optimized for intrahemispheric and female brains for interhemispheric communication” (Gross, 2013: 823)), and functioning (“male brains are structured to facilitate connectivity between perception and coordinated action, whereas female brains are designed to facilitate communication between analytical and intuitive processing modes” (Gross, 2013: 823)). Structural and functional dimorphism is deemed responsible for an array of behavioural differences between men and women, from cognitive aptitude to sexual orientation. Explanations for differences range from evolutionary needs (for example females needing to maximise their chances of impregnation and the survival of their offspring developed more sophisticated perception of social cues and better recall of vital information such as location of food), to hormonal stimulation during brain development (Cahill, 2006). My aim is not to put evolutionary and biological motivations for gender differences of the brain on trial¹ but to use scientific findings as a starting point to revisit the idea that writing might indeed be a gendered activity.

Since feminists have put gender on the political map, the very experience of writing has been intimately enmeshed with the experience of gender. There are few who would reject the idea that gender is a political category of meaning. But to categorically say that there is such a thing as gendered writing is more tricky. In this piece, I am focusing on the possibility of “woman writing” which, by default, suggests there is also such a thing as “man writing”. I use terms like “woman” and “man” as the expression of a social experience, founded on one’s engagement with one’s biological gender (being female or male) and on one’s culturally contingent gender (being feminine or masculine). I am using the phrase “woman writing” to point to a philosophical discussion on what writing the experience of “woman” might entail. I have intentionally avoided the use of established phrases (women’s writing, poetic language, *écriture féminine*, queer writing, etc), which belong to particular moments in academic understandings of what it is to write as a woman. Today, feminist work on epistemic bias is, to say the least, ambiguous and inconclusive. Let us start with second-wave feminists. The work of feminist academics, like Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, Germaine Grier or Gloria Steinem, has profoundly altered our perception of gendered experience from the 1970s onwards. For reasons of space, I am synthesising here the wonderfully diverse positions these authors have taken over years of academic and popular engagement. These feminists have all agreed that in a patriarchal world there is necessity to build a woman-centred culture, lest women carried on being denied the specificity of their gendered experience. For example, the creation of British publishing group Virago Press in 1973 aimed to publish, revive and/or

¹ I refer the reader to my article on *The regulation of gender in menopause theory* (Gambaudo, 2015) for further critical discussion on this matter.

rehabilitate work written by women until then neglected by traditionally male-oriented publishing houses. To allow the specificity of women's experience to come forth, second-wave feminism argued for two things: the importance of one's confrontation with a phenomenology of femaleness in writing material and the importance of having female authors. So in their eyes, gendered writing is not solely about the stuff that writing is made of, but also about the reader's knowledge that it is indeed woman's stuff or man's stuff they are being presented with. Gendered writing is about harmony between author and her text, between her being and her telling of being. Indeed, from the Brontës to J.K. Rowling, the absence of female gender markers presupposes the author is expressing the experience of man. It would then appear that second-wave feminists were right to insist that female authors write in the name of woman and about female experience, to disambiguate gendered writing.

The rise of poststructuralist thought both confirmed and challenged this view. It confirmed it by positing omniscience and authority of writers as a declarative effect; woman writing is the writing of woman's experience because she indeed declares her sex and asserts the content, and in some cases the form of text as exclusive to female experience. Poststructuralism also challenges "woman writer" by pronouncing the death of the author, but also the death of the totalised, meaningful subject of enunciation. The death of the author signals the end of the authorial pretence to omniscience and control over interpretation of text. The death of the subject establishes a critical theory of writing whereby the presentation of literary heroes as fully formed, totalised beings immediately raises suspicion of political malpractice. To avoid accusations of collaboration with bourgeois values, narrators now need to present characters with less defined identities, and this includes gender.

While the death of the author has had negative repercussions on the facilitation of female authorship, it has also opened new debates and possibilities for gendered writing. To evaluate a philosophy of the writing experience, two authors spring to my mind for their invaluable contribution to poststructuralist feminist thinking. They are Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. Grouping these two may seem controversial given Butler's critique of Kristeva's framework, and given Kristeva's doubt regarding the possibility of Butlerian "queer" to become anything socially significant. Yet, their common interest in re-positioning gender away from a strictly biological body has opened the door to interesting possibilities regarding one's experience of gender, including experiences once thought to belong strictly to the "opposite" sex. Let us look at this more closely.

Kristeva has argued that gendered experience is really a positioning along a masculine-feminine spectrum of practices, whose gender markers are dependent on particular cultural moments in history. In a world where cultural organisation is by and large founded upon patriarchal experience, the ordering of meaning is necessarily mediated by patriarchal rule. Hence, in Kristeva's model, we are born into a rule that informs us as to what signifying practices we might choose or dissent against. The representative of patriarchal rule, which

conveys practice its teleology, remains ultimately “the father”, a term that does not so much refer to the flesh and blood person, but rather to a function of fatherhood, a paternal function that Kristeva openly borrows from Jacques Lacan and makes her own. The creative legacy of Kristeva possibly lies here: she takes the omnipotent, omniscient, untouchable and ultimately unchangeable father of psychoanalytic models to change “him” into a more human and fallible agency, a father with whom one may engage more creatively, precisely because “he” is fallible. We will return to the issue of paternal fallibility later. For now, beyond the more humane face of the Kristevan father, however innovative she hopes her psychoanalytic model will be, explaining human experience is always for her an act of positioning in relation to what comes to signify paternal rule. Hence, the father, however approachable he has become, remains the representative of rule, *before* I even attempt to make my experience meaningful to others. So, in a father mediated masculine-feminine spectrum, what does woman writing look like for Kristeva?

Defining woman writing would amount to seeking out in women’s experience the material that typifies them and that Kristeva calls “the feminine”. “The feminine” in Kristeva’s work is not the popular understanding of feminine, like wearing make-up, having long hair or being gentle and caring. Rather, the feminine is that material that typifies females as women in their own right. In a patriarchy where recognised experience is mediated by male bodies, the feminine remains obscured by the difficulty in reconciling female experience with male bodies/sensitivities. It does not mean it is impossible, but that feminine experience is to be found where phallus-centred experience breaks down². For example, in her novella *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892) initially proposed to denounce the medical malpractice she was subjected to as a woman suffering with neurasthenia. Her work has been one of the most celebrated and studied pieces of woman writing in Anglo-American feminist studies. However, her work has not gone down feminist literary history because of its critique of late 19th Century medical practices, as Gilman planned. Instead, the text is still fascinating readers for its ability to convey feminine experience, in spite and through the fabric of American *fin-de-siècle* literary conventions. So, while the essence of feminine may be by definition unintelligible, we are in no doubt as to what the experience of “feminine” looks like in Gilman’s account. How does Gilman achieve this?

First, she proposes a narrator who agrees with everything she is told while injecting her text with doubt. The un-named narrator strives to obey social order, but uses words connoting negation thus giving an image of her experience as that which is not what it is she says (Ford, 1985). In other words, what she says she is, is the learnt narrative of woman’s experience mediated by phallogentric (marital/medical) experience telling her how she should talk about herself. The insertion of negation has the effect of making this well-rehearsed narrative negate itself to the point of saying that what the narrator is telling us she is, is really what she is not. What she may positively be is not spelt out, except in terms of contradictions and metaphors. Contradiction is conveyed primarily through discrepancy between form and content (Crewe, 1995): her husband expresses his love and care for the narrator (form), but we work out that he locks her up in her room, has put bars on the

² In what follows, I shall use the Derridean term ‘phallogentric’ to mean the privileging of masculine experience in the construction of meaning.

window and screwed the furniture to the floor (content). The narrator herself is a clumsy speaker when it comes to explaining her condition using learnt medical terms. (Treichler, 1984). Her awkwardness becomes the awkwardness of the medical profession at truly “getting her”. As phallogentric narratives fail under her pen, woman-centred texts emerge at the same time in the form of contradictions, awkwardness, images and metaphors that mirror her experience. The metaphor of the wallpaper being ripped off the wall to reveal the woman trapped behind its crazy-making pattern is graphic enough to need no further rational elaboration and gains meaning through its imaginary strength. Hence, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, strong repression of woman’s authorship and of female experience is no barrier to woman writing. Many critiques (Mills and Pierce, 1989; Clark, 2008) have objected that the narrator’s salvation is indeed in the margin, even outside the realm of normal experience, and while the mad text may be her triumph and liberation by literary standards, the narrator’s evident psychosis is hardly the sign of a socially viable woman. Perhaps, but it is too limiting a conclusion.

Returning to Kristeva, woman writing is a positioning of writing on the side of the feminine. In the case of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, it would be the positioning of the narrator on the side of insanity that would evoke the narrator’s feminine experience. Admittedly, the narrator’s insanity is true only in the context of late 19th century medical narratives. Today, *The Yellow Wallpaper* could not be written to the same effect, given new understandings of the narrator’s experience as post-natal depression (although we might today see patency, especially in relation to hormonal disarray, as a figure of feminine experience, but I do not have the space to develop this here). The text is more likely to end up on the reading list of trainee doctors, as the place where they might study a phenomenology of post-natal depression. But given the 19th Century context, the narrator’s insanity becomes the vehicle for woman writing. Indeed, Kristeva has spoken about psychosis, woman’s primary homosexuality³ and maternity as overarching forms of feminine experience. But the narrating of feminine *experience* is not enough to warrant calling a piece “woman writing”. Kristeva also insists that it is the manner the narrator attempts to stabilise (or not) chaotic experience through narrative strategies that conveys “feminine” to textual practice. This requires the writer’s engagement with paternal mediation and the “father” needs to remain relatively stable in the writer’s imagination for meaning to be possible. It is this stability that confers the paternal function its power to hold the writer while s/he ventures on the edge of signification. Hence, in Kristeva’s understanding, woman writing is dependent on a signifying practice that precedes its telling. The writer in search of a narrative of marginal experience can only hope to navigate the edge of that practice, but not to cross its borders towards a pure “woman writing” realm. Or at least not if that writing seeks to convey some semblance of coherence. We saw how the sensical text, informed by phallogentric narratives, can be the vehicle of a form of woman writing, in the example of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. More contemporary writers have tried to purposefully create a truer version of woman writing.

In a text entitled *Inside*, Hélène Cixous (1994) attempted to capture the moment before the individual is born, before separation, before there is a distinction between self and other. In other words, she attempted to

³ For an explanation of why we should talk about woman’s primary homosexuality rather than lesbianism, see my “Kristeva, ‘Woman’s Primary Homosexuality’ and Homophobia” (2011).

represent the very margin that has come to be regarded as the privileged terrain of *écriture féminine* (woman writing). Here is one extract:

A mouth with a firm line is speaking to the bowl of undelineated night. The mouth is speaking to me, inside me however, I see its firm lips forming speech, I do not see myself, I am black, filled with a soft pliable substance, an unlimited mass, silent, vibrant. The lips in profile articulate vigorously: their color? a young man's lips, full, carmine perhaps, though shaded, warm, a living man, young eloquent: they persuade me. He's right, thinks my black pasty mass kneaded to attention. Fibres stretch me taut, pulling on invisible ends of myself – am I contractile? I must have an end. (Cixous in Sellers, 1994: 20, translation Hélène Cixous)

Cixous's text is, by rational standards, fairly non-sensical. However, if we use a Kristevan approach, then meanings emerge. As we saw, the father confers meaning to experience, as the holder of a law that enables the separation of meaning into distinct categories. *Inside* evokes the experience of transformation of one's being, at two (at least) moments of individual experience: parturition is physical transformation of one body that becomes two, a physical movement from inside the mother's body to a space outside of her. The second moment is castration when the individual experiences psychical transformation from unintelligible, shapeless mind to separated, contained, meaningful consciousness. The narrator appears caught in defining moments where s/he will either refuse transformation and stay unintelligible, or forsake present experience against the promise of another way of being. But Cixous goes further. Faced with tension and choice she challenges established (patriarchal) narratives of castration and loss whereby maternal, feminine experience must be forsaken and lost in order to make room for paternal, masculine experience. Instead, she suggests another form of experience when one may let contradictory (feminine *and* masculine) experiences cohabit within one single yet multiple experience.

The understanding of such a text still requires some regulatory intervention that is borrowed from traditional narratives of self. Void of adopting some form of pre-existing framework of human development, we could not gain any insight into the world that Cixous presents us with. This would then go some way towards agreeing with Kristeva that outside the paternal framework, no woman writing is possible. Woman cannot make herself intelligible away from patriarchal presence as paternal rules of meaning help us decipher her experience by comparison or in relation to established narratives. So, while authors like Kristeva or Cixous grant the challenging of the father power of creation, in the form of woman writing for example, this is only conditional upon a pre-existing paternal agency effectively remaining stable and secure beyond the personal history of the speaker. Yet, it is rarely the case that such a strong and un-problematically stable father figure actually exists.

Kristeva proposes that the individual does find such a “good father”⁴, somewhere else than in the encounter with the imperfect flesh and blood father figure. The good father would be an imagined, idealised father. This ideal father does not come from direct experience with the actual father, but rather from experiences with the mother who herself has an interest in that more perfect paternal agency. The young child learns about this more perfect father because the mother sometimes turns her attention away from the child and towards something else: her work, an activity, a partner, etc, in short what ties her to the social contract. The child imagines this something else to be better than itself (since it captures the mother’s attention better than the child does) and desires to emulate it to re-capture maternal focus on to itself. While still tied to the biological body, the child’s desire to identify with the something else located in the social contract is the blueprint for future identifications. In Kristeva’s work, experience with the good father marks the moment one begins to become a consciousness, and will affect future identifications. The Oedipal father will intervene later and replay the same scenario but with a more tangible force, given that the Oedipal father takes form in the social contract, for example the actual father, the school teacher, the driving instructor, etc. The failure of primitive experience with the father bodes badly for the individual’s future social viability, as the blueprint for identification with social things outside of the individual is truncated. All experiences are founded on resembling the original blueprint of experience, and on the “success” of that primitive experience depends the possibility of future identifications.

Before turning to Butler’s critique of the Kristevan model and contribution to the possibility of woman writing, I would like to recapitulate Kristeva’s position. For Kristeva no woman writing is possible outside the symbolic framework. The aim of woman writing is then defined as how meaning is conveyed in relation to phallogentric intelligibility. Both texts given as illustrations of woman writing present us with a similar strategy. In the case of Gilman’s text, the aim is clearly to respect phallogentric rules of writing and make oneself intelligible within that framework. Gilman succeeds (albeit unintentionally given the text was published in 1892) in creating an example of woman writing by tapping into some form of psychology of the reading experience. The injection of negation or hesitancy on the one hand and of metaphor on the other is mirrored in the reading experience. The reader’s mind is eased into agreeing to negate, or at least doubt phallogentric experience. It is also readily caught in the play of metaphor: as Freud explained, with its condensed and displaced meanings, metaphor is a

⁴ Kristeva terms the good father “loving father” to differentiate him from the stern and punishing Oedipal father.

figure of speech that by-passes defences we would expect with the presentation of blunter meanings. Cixous resorts to similar strategies with the advantage of late 1960s interest in psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories (*Inside* was first published in French as *Dedans*, 1969). She is thus able to more self-consciously create a text that speaks about the difficulty of writing woman's experience and preserving phallogocentric clarity. In both cases, woman writing is dependent upon its positioning *vis-à-vis* phallogocentric experience. Hence for Kristeva, woman writing *per se* cannot exist. But if woman writing does not exist strictly, Kristeva's work opens another door that is radical in its own right. Her contribution to woman writing is found in her work on the feminine. I said earlier that the feminine is that material that typifies female experience. This was a rather quick definition of the feminine and not quite complete and I can now flesh out further what feminine writing entails. In Kristevan theory, the formation of the feminine happens when the individual, whether male or female, learns to relinquish certain materials in favour of more coherent ones. As we saw earlier, the child wants to become something other than itself hoping to re-capture the maternal interest temporarily lost when she turned her attention to other things than the child. This is the moment phallogocentric content and the feminine become separated. As s/he is drawn towards becoming meaningful to the mother, the individual also leaves the fragmented, unintelligible experience of the baby world. The feminine is thus associated with early, pre-oedipal experience. While the experience of Oedipus will be played out differently for each sex, both sexes retain a memory of feminine experience, or rather, both retain the memory of the separation from the maternal that brought about the formation of the feminine/phallogocentric separation. Feminine writing is then the recalling of that experience in the moment of writing, and is open to both sexes. But at the risk of repeating myself, feminine writing cannot be found independently of phallogocentric experience because the phallus precedes and moderates significations. This is what Judith Butler criticizes Kristeva for.

In her most famous contribution to gender theory, *Gender Trouble* (2008/1990), Judith Butler vehemently refutes the possibility of a father existing *à priori*. On the one hand she notes that Kristeva's "theory appears to depend upon the stability and reproduction of precisely the paternal law that she seeks to displace" (108); on the other, she accurately describes the modalities of maternal experience as a "prediscursive libidinal economy which occasionally makes itself known in language, but which maintains an ontological status prior to language itself." (Butler, 2008 109). Butler critiques the way Kristeva imagines maternal experience, not as a

modality in its own right with its own prepaternal causality, but as “a closed concept, indeed, a heterogeneity confined by a teleology both unilinear and univocal” (Butler, 2008: 122). Instead of being an origin of signification, maternal experience, where we might hope to find one source, if not “the” source of feminine writing, becomes the outcome of paternal regulation of meaning:

The law that is said to repress the semiotic [maternal experience] may well be the governing principle of the semiotic itself, with the result that what passes as “maternal instinct” may well be a culturally constructed desire. (Butler, 2008: 123)

This is quite a damning conclusion. Kristeva proposed feminine writing as a possibility, partly hidden behind the prism of phallogentric interpretation, but nevertheless palpable. Butler sweeps the prospect of feminine writing as an effect of that interpretation. In short, if there is no pre-discursive maternal experience to speak of, there is then no woman writing that is not already an intrinsic part of the construction of phallogentric narratives.

Whereas Kristeva posits a maternal body prior to discourse that exerts its own causal force in the structure of drives, [...] the discursive production of the maternal body as prediscursive is a tactic in the self-amplification and concealment of those specific power relations by which the trope of the maternal body is produced. (Butler, 2008: 125)

So what is woman writing for Butler? Like Kristeva, she also envisions writing as an experience dependent on social forces within which the writing is taking place. Short of being able to dis-engage from the regulatory forces of phallogentric discourse, Butler proposes to challenge them from within. Identity is not to be discovered in searching ways to better express some biological being for there is no biological gender waiting to be discovered, outside its expression. Rather, Butler draws a novel way of thinking about identity with what she calls *re-iterated performativity*. Its definition is that identity would be “performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results” (Butler 2008: 34). For example, if in the process of wanting to tell the world who I am I come to understand that raising my left arm signifies “woman”, then that is what I will do. The repetition of left-arm-raising over time gives me and others an illusion of constancy of being which, soon enough, is understood as the origin of my being. Seeking to capture who I might be, others notice that I raise my left arm and conclude that I am a woman: left-arm-raising has become the origin of my identity. Butlerian theory asks that we critically engage with identity politics by being aware, if not exposing, the inversion of meaning by which we become meaningful to others. To explain this further, we need to turn to Butler’s work on melancholia.

In *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Butler takes up Freud’s theory of grief and melancholia to put “loss” forward as an essential element formative of identity. Freud had suggested that loss of a loved object generates either grief or melancholia. Grief would be achieved when the individual disengages his/her attachment to the lost object to invest it in other existing objects. Melancholia, on the other hand, would be loss that does not achieve grief because the individual cannot let go of the object lost. Instead, attachment to loss, with all its emotional force, becomes the site where the lost object is retained. In short, melancholia is attachment to loss following attachment to the object lost. Butler proposes that there is “a peculiar turning of a subject against itself that takes place in acts of self-reproach, conscience, and melancholia that work in

tandem with processes of social regulation" (18-19). In the Freudian model of development, the relinquishing of the individual's pre-history in favour of paternal regulation is accompanied by strong repression of those contents that are undesirable under paternal rule. Although she does not name her sources, Butler pitches that part of Freud's work that posits undesirable contents as *repressed* against Lacan's re-reading of Freudian repression as sometimes *foreclosed*. Lacan introduced the term "foreclosure" to account for the difference between grieved and melancholic contents during castration. In Freud, repression marks the moment the individual's psyche becomes divided into conscious and unconscious. During castration, some experiences of pleasure are rejected into a part of the psyche the individual will not be conscious of, and replaced by more acceptable and pleasurable formations, for example for their power to confer intelligibility, belonging or personal worth. Foreclosure distinguishes itself from repression in the way the repressed elements "are not integrated into the subject's unconscious" (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988: 166), that is in the way they are not strictly speaking "repressed". Instead they reappear as psychotic episodes, that is pre-discursive, pre-imaginary contents, having by-passed repression on the way, as in the experience of hallucinations for instance.

Returning to Butler, she is interested in those foreclosed elements as they are by definition capable of bursting forth unchanged into citational narratives, where their presence undoes the work done by paternal repression and opens speech to new possibilities. A big part of her work has been and still is to bring forward those experiences that manifest foreclosed contents: homosexuality or warfare for example. To remain close to our topic, woman writing, I find interesting the way Butler magnifies the presence of melancholia in expression as that which "grounds the subject" and "threatens to unsettle and disrupt that ground" (Butler, 1997: 23). Grounding and unsettling are generated by the presence of melancholic content and, for Butler, melancholia is thus

"the limit to the subject's sense of *power* [...]. Because the subject does not, cannot, *reflect* on that loss, that loss marks the limit of reflexivity, that which exceeds (and conditions) its circuitry. Understood as foreclosure, that loss inaugurates the subject and threatens it with dissolution." (23)

But while foreclosure prevents the reflecting on the object of loss, thus limiting the writer's agency and condemning her to circular, paternally mediated expression, it also constitutes excess. Excess then represents that which dissolves circularity and potentially permits new possibilities of expression. Hence, in melancholic loss we find the matter out of which the writer may challenge paternally mediated expression, if not undo paternal narratives and formulate the content of woman writing. We are of course far from second-wave feminist visions of woman writing as that which typifies female experience and bears the name of female authors. But we are closer to an understanding of woman writing as textual and subjective practice. I would like to bring back Kristeva into the picture and recapitulate our discussion, and offer conclusions on what a Kristevan and Butlerian approach to woman writing practice might entail.

If we compare Butler and Kristeva, there is no doubt the latter proposes a more embodied model of gendered writing, anchored in some form of physiological event. Maternal experience acts as a form of blueprint of pre-discursive experience, out of and from which the writer draws psychical material. Pre-paternal time is psychically imprinted on the individual's mind. Out of those psychical impressions, the individual will be able to draw memories of archaic being that Kristeva sees as the mark of the feminine. Those memories are not the organised narratives that we usually refer to as memory. Instead, they are closer to embodied memory, made of sensations and proto-representation of the world. So, in this sense, maternal time is closer to a physiological state of being. Yet, Kristeva does not offer pre-paternal experience as purely physiological. Indeed, parental desire and especially maternal desire already inscribes the future individual into a matrix that is always already social, before the child is even conceived. Kristeva's work on maternal experience is undoubtedly the closest we get to a theory of pre-discursive experience, and that is, in my mind at least, its force. Maternal experience is then that pre-discursive experience where woman writing can be located. But Kristeva has particular views about what "woman" might be in the experience of woman writing. In her theoretical and critical work, she acknowledges the possibility of woman writing, but only on the condition that it is not bound to a biological category. In other words, woman writing is not the privilege of females. For that matter, we need to remember that phallogocentric writing is not the privilege of males either. Instead, abiding by phallogocentric rules of writing is man writing and any attempt to recapture the experience of pre-paternal time typifies woman writing, whether the writer is male or female. Woman writing then tries

to put the neutral surface of abstract words into contact with a whole dynamic of recollection that leads us at once to recall traumas, the pains or the pleasures, and the most archaic sensations. (Kristeva, 1996: 55)

More tangibly, woman writing is an opportunity to convey two things. First, it seeks to recapture what psychoanalytic theory describes as "the repressed", that is experiences evoking one's personal pre-history. In agreement with Freud, these repressed contents can return on the condition they are disguised (condensation and displacement), for instance as metaphors as we saw with *The Yellow Wallpaper*. But Kristeva goes further. Woman writing also testifies to the individual's encounter with the maternal and in particular what Kristeva calls "the semiotic". The semiotic refers to those contents that belong to the early relationship with the mother and that the baby perceives as her "language": its rhythm, pitch, musicality, etc. Early in her career, Kristeva proposes a theory of subjectivity (*Revolution in Poetic Language*) that challenges Freud and Lacan. In addition to Freud's oedipal model of repression/return of repressed contents, she adds the semiotic as a modality of language that can be heard in communication and typifies woman writing (Kristeva herself refers to it sometimes as "poetic language", sometimes as "*écriture féminine*"). If we return to Cixous's text, the reading aloud of *Inside* echoes the musicality of human speech that a baby would hear: the rhythms, repetitions, alliterations, and so on participate in creating the experience of hearing this strange speech, more efficiently than if the author had spelt out her intention. Hence, in Kristeva's work, the experience of maternity, or of woman's primary homosexuality, or of psychosis are all incidences where we might find

materials for woman writing; through them, the individual has the opportunity to recall and make intelligible maternal contents, and to mimic semiotic experience linguistically.

For Butler, such historicising of the content of one's speech is highly problematic. Indeed, there can be no such thing as woman writing if by woman writing we understand the telling of experience that pertains to something we could trace back to an original experience. For Butler, there is no "woman" to be (re)discovered in maternal experience. In a Butlerian world where mimicry and repetition of experience is all, that original blueprint cannot exist. Instead, woman writing would be that experience co-dependent with phallogentric writing. But it does not mean that phallogentric writing is any more authentic or essential than woman writing either. Again, in Butler, we find that there is no such thing as phallogentric writing, if by this we mean experience that would typify the experience of man. There is no phenomenology of gender that we may discursively discover and describe, because it is always preceded by the terms by which we are meant to discover it.

This is where I find that Butler strangely joins Kristeva. She decried Kristeva's body politics for its selective ignorance of the political motivations hiding behind the creation of ontological categories like "symbolic" or "semiotic", or its fabrication of a historically feasible speaking subject. Yet, like Kristeva, she denies the possibility of intelligible discourse outside paternal regulation of meaning. "[T]he terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself)" (Butler, 2004: 1). Whether we call it paternal or sociality, the function of that regulating force amounts to the same thing. The next best thing then is challenge to the pressure to perform identity correctly in order to retain some semblance of agency. In Butler, the misalignment between the performance I wish to copy and my performance is the source of differentially constituted agency. It may not be intentional, but that differential is where resistance is at, and so, it is where woman-writing-like practice could be found.

So, we are left with two approaches to defining woman writing. We can either locate woman writing in the historicising of individual development in a time that precedes the acquisition of language, as Kristeva does. We have distinguished earlier the mark of woman writing in texts that either openly (Cixous) or unintentionally (Gilman) seek to make intelligible a distinctive experience that women would share. In both cases, the manner the narrator magnifies elements marginal to signification constitutes the idiosyncrasies of woman writing. These marginal elements suggest that at least for those narrators, being themselves is not solely here-and-now experience, but arches back and beyond to a time when marginality was their true being.

Or, we can agree with Butler that there never was a time when individuals were any more real or true to some natural state of themselves. And so the narrative search for this pre-historical individual is futile. All writing is regulated by normative forces outside the writer's control. To critically engage with such forces would mean decoding the rules by which the telling of experience is made acceptable while recognising that these rules are also what makes such telling unviable. So, what is the point? For Butler, critical engagement with the terms

that constitute *and* undo the individual is the way to open up possibilities. Her politics thus rejects a founding moment of resistance and anchors resistance in the moment of enunciation itself.

While it would seem that the two thinkers are in disagreement, their differing positions can be reconciled. Kristeva and Butler have in common an understanding of marginal experience (queer for Butler, semiotic for Kristeva) as encompassing the experience of loss. For Kristeva, loss is a founding moment and that which one must let go off. But in letting go, loss also becomes the material of woman writing. Kristeva does not envision woman writing in melancholic experience. Melancholic experience, for her, signals the inability of the individual to situate him/herself on the side of the father and his linguistic rule. In melancholia, there is no confrontation between the paternal symbolic and the feminine, since the individual is unable to let go of the object of loss in favour of other objects (loss that would be “metaphorised” for instance). Without the transformation of loss, through writing, there can be no critique of established narratives of experience. Hence, the idea of a type of writing that would be, say, entirely psychotic, is not possible. When Kristeva speaks of privileged experiences, like maternal, homosexual or psychotic, to generate woman writing material, it is always with the understanding that the writing occurs from a symbolic position, that is that the writer is aiming to bring to intelligibility the experience obscured by the absence of symbol. In other words, woman writing tells of the experience of pre-oedipal maternal time and of the moment that narrative pre-history is relinquished in favour of a paternally regulated narrative. Woman writing is a tool empowering the writer to confront (phallogentric) claims to writer omniscience and rationality. That confrontation with one’s own desire for omniscience is then where a woman writing practice is found. For Butler too, loss is the site of a revolt of expression. But her work makes more of melancholia because she rejects the historicising of identity formation. Instead, melancholic elements come to constitute *and* undo identities *at the same time*. Even if regulation closes off the possibilities offered to make myself socially viable, those closed off possibilities are nevertheless present through the very terms I “choose” when I re-iterate who I might be. Woman writing, seen through the Butlerian prism, can thus be situated in an intentional, re-iterated and performative writing practice of individual experience.

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