

The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and "The Mill on the Floss"

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## The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*

Mary Jacobus

The first question to pose is therefore: how can women analyze their exploitation, inscribe their claims, within an order prescribed by the masculine? Is a politics of women possible there?

—LUCE IRIGARAY<sup>1</sup>

To rephrase the question: Can there be (a politics of ) women's writing? What does it mean to say that women can analyze their exploitation only "within an order prescribed by the masculine"? And what theory of sexual difference can we turn to when we speak, as feminist critics are wont to do, of a specifically "feminine" practice in writing? Questions like these mark a current impasse in contemporary feminist criticism. Utopian attempts to define the specificity of women's writing—desired or hypothetical, but rarely empirically observed—either founder on the rock of essentialism (the text as body), gesture toward an avant-garde practice which turns out not to be specific to women, or, like Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa," do both.<sup>2</sup> If anatomy is not destiny, still less can it be language.

1. Luce Irigaray: "La première question à poser est donc: comment les femmes peuvent-elles analyser leur exploitation, inscrire leurs revendications, dans un ordre prescrit par le masculin? *Une politique des femmes y est-elle possible?*" ("Pouvoir du discours, subordination du féminin," *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* [Paris, 1977], p. 78; my translation, here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated).

2. See Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1 (Summer 1976): 875–93. The implications of such definitions of "*écriture féminine*" are discussed briefly in my "The Difference of View," in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Jacobus (London, 1979), pp. 12–13, and by Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis

A politics of women's writing, then, if it is not to fall back on a biologically based theory of sexual difference, must address itself, as Luce Irigaray has done in "Pouvoir du discours, subordination du féminin," to the position of mastery held not only by scientific discourse (Freudian theory, for instance), not only by philosophy, "the discourse of discourses," but by the logic of discourse itself. Rather than attempting to identify a specific practice, in other words, such a feminist politics would attempt to relocate sexual difference at the level of the text by undoing the repression of the "feminine" in all systems of representation for which the other (woman) must be reduced to the economy of the Same (man). In Irigaray's terms, "masculine" systems of representation are those whose self-reflexiveness and specularly disappropriate women of their relation to themselves and to other women; as in Freud's theory of sexual difference (woman equals man-minus), difference is swiftly converted into hierarchy. Femininity comes to signify a role, an image, a value imposed on women by the narcissistic and fundamentally misogynistic logic of such masculine systems. The question then becomes for Irigaray not What is woman? (still less Freud's desperate What does a woman want?) but How is the feminine determined by discourse itself?—determined, that is, as lack or error or as an inverted reproduction of the masculine subject.<sup>3</sup>

Invisible or repressed, the hidden place of the feminine in language is the hypothesis which sustains this model of the textual universe, like ether. We know it must be there because we know ourselves struggling for self-definition in other terms, elsewhere, elsehow. We need it, so we invent it. When such an article of faith doesn't manifest itself as a mere rehearsal of sexual stereotypes, it haunts contemporary feminist criticism in its quest for specificity—whether of language, or literary tradition, or women's culture. After all, why study women's writing at all unless it is "women's writing" in the first place? The answer, I believe, must be a political one, and one whose impulse also fuels that gesture toward an elusive "*écriture féminine*" or specificity. To postulate, as

Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," *PMLA* 96 (January 1981): 37. The present essay owes its existence in part to Miller's stimulating account of *The Mill on the Floss* in the context of the theoretical implications of "women's fiction" in general.

3. See Irigaray, "Pouvoir du discours," pp. 67–82 passim, and her *Speculum, de l'autre femme* (Paris, 1974), pp. 165–82. See also Carolyn Burke, "Introduction to Luce Irigaray's 'When our Lips Speak Together,'" *Signs* 6 (Autumn 1980): 71.

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Irigaray does, a “work of language” which undoes the repression of the feminine constitutes in itself an attack on the dominant ideology, the very means by which we know what we know and think what we think. So too the emphasis on women’s writing politicizes in a flagrant and polemical fashion the “difference” which has traditionally been elided by criticism and by the canon formations of literary history. To label a text as that of a woman, and to write about it for that reason, makes vividly legible what the critical institution has either ignored or acknowledged only under the sign of inferiority. We need the term “women’s writing” if only to remind us of the social conditions under which women wrote and still write—to remind us that the conditions of their (re)production are the economic and educational disadvantages, the sexual and material organizations of society, which, rather than biology, form the crucial determinants of women’s writing.

Feminist criticism, it seems to me, ultimately has to invoke as its starting-point this underlying political assumption. To base its theory on a specificity of language or literary tradition or culture is already to have moved one step on in the argument, if not already to have begged the question, since by then one is confronted by what Nancy Miller, in a recent essay on women’s fiction, has called “the irreducibly complicated relationship women have historically had to the language of the dominant culture.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps that is why, baffled in their attempts to specify the feminine, feminist critics have so often turned to an analysis of this relationship as it is manifested and thematized in writing by and about women. The project is, and can’t escape being, an ideological one, concerned, that is, with the functioning and reproduction of sexual ideology in particular—whether in the overtly theoretical terms of a Luce Irigaray or in the fictional terms of, for instance, George Eliot. To quote Miller again, the aim would be to show that “the maxims that pass for the truth of human experience, and the encoding of that experience in literature, are organizations, when they are not fantasies, of the dominant culture.”<sup>5</sup>

But Irigaray’s “politics of women,” her feminist argument, goes beyond ideology criticism in its effort to recover “the place of the feminine” in discourse. The “work of language” which she envisages would undo representation altogether, even to the extent of refusing the linearity of reading. “*Après-coup*,” the retroactive effect of a word ending, opens up the structure of language to reveal the repression on which meaning depends; and repression is the place of the feminine. By contrast, the “style” of women—*écriture féminine*—would privilege not the look but the tactile, the simultaneous, the fluid. Yet at the same time, we discover, such a style can’t be sustained as a thesis or made the object of a position;

4. Miller, “Emphasis Added,” p. 38.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

if not exactly “nothing,” it is nonetheless a kind of discursive practice that can’t be thought, still less written. Like her style, woman herself is alleged by Irigaray to be an unimaginable concept within the existing order. Elaborating a theory of which woman is either the subject or the object merely reinstalls the feminine within a logic which represses, censors, or misrecognizes it. Within that logic, woman can only signify an excess or a deranging power. Woman for Irigaray is always that “something else” which points to the possibility of another language, asserts that the masculine is not all, does not have a monopoly on value, or, still less, “the abusive privilege of appropriation.” She tries to strike through the theoretical machinery itself, suspending its pretension to the production of a single truth, a univocal meaning. Woman would thus find herself on the side of everything in language that is multiple, duplicitous, unreliable, and resistant to the binary oppositions on which theories of sexual difference such as Freud’s depend.<sup>6</sup>

Irigaray’s argument is seductive precisely because it puts all systems in question, leaving process and fluidity instead of fixity and form. At the same time, it necessarily concedes that women have access to language only by recourse to systems of representation which are masculine. Given the coherence of the systems at work in discourse, whether Freudian or critical, how is the work of language of which she speaks to be undertaken at all? Her answer is “mimetism,” the role historically assigned to women—that of reproduction, but deliberately assumed; an acting out or role playing within the text which allows the woman writer the better to know and hence to expose what it is she mimics. Irigaray, in fact, seems to be saying that there is no “outside” of discourse, no alternative practice available to the woman writer apart from the process of undoing itself:

To play with mimesis, is, therefore, for a woman, to attempt to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without letting herself be simply reduced to it. It is to resubmit herself . . . to “ideas,” notably about her, elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but in order to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what should have remained hidden: the recovery of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It is also to “unveil” the fact that, if women mime so well, they do not simply reabsorb themselves in this function. *They also remain elsewhere.*<sup>7</sup>

6. See Irigaray, “Pouvoir du discours,” pp. 72–77 passim.

7. Irigaray: “Jouer de la mimésis, c’est donc, pour une femme, tenter de retrouver le lieu de son exploitation par le discours, sans s’y laisser simplement réduire. C’est se resoumettre . . . à des ‘idées,’ notamment d’elle, élaborées dans/par une logique masculine, mais pour faire ‘apparaître,’ par un effet de répétition ludique, ce qui devait rester occulté: le recouvrement d’une possible opération du féminin dans le langage. C’est aussi ‘dévoiler’ le fait que, si les femmes miment si bien, c’est qu’elles ne se résorbent pas simplement dans cette fonction. *Elles restent aussi ailleurs*” (“Pouvoir du discours,” p. 74).

Within the systems of discourse and representation which repress the feminine, woman can only resubmit herself to them; but by refusing to be reduced by them, she points to the place and manner of her exploitation. "A possible operation of the feminine in language" becomes, then, the revelation of its repression, through an effect of playful rehearsal, rather than a demonstrably feminine linguistic practice.

Irigaray's main usefulness to the feminist critic lies in this half-glimpsed possibility of undoing the ideas about women elaborated in and by masculine logic, a project at once analytic and ideological. Her attack on centrism in general, and phallogentrism in particular, allows the feminist critic to ally herself "otherwise," with the "elsewhere" to which Irigaray gestures, in a stance of dissociation and resistance which typically characterizes that of feminist criticism in its relation to the dominant culture or "order prescribed by the masculine." But like Irigaray herself in "Pouvoir du discours," feminist criticism remains imbricated within the forms of intelligibility—reading and writing, the logic of discourse—against which it pushes. What makes the difference, then? Surely, the direction from which that criticism comes—the elsewhere that it invokes, the putting in question of our social organization of gender; its wishfulness, even, in imagining alternatives. It follows that what pleases the feminist critic most (this one, at any rate) is to light on a text that seems to do her arguing, or some of it, for her—especially a text whose story is the same as hers—hence, perhaps, the drift toward narrative in recent works of feminist criticism such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's formidable *Mad Woman in the Attic*.<sup>8</sup> What is usually going on in such criticism—perhaps in all feminist criticism—is a specificity of relationship that amounts to a distinctive practice. Criticism takes literature as its object, yes; but here literature in a different sense is likely to become the subject, the feminist critic, the woman writer, woman herself.

This charged and doubled relationship, an almost inescapable aspect of feminist criticism, is at once transgressive and liberating, since what it brings to light is the hidden or unspoken ideological premise of criticism itself. *Engagée* perforce, feminist criticism calls neutrality in question, like other avowedly political analyses of literature. I want now to undertake a "symptomatic" reading of a thematically relevant chapter from Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* in the hope that this quintessentially critical activity will bring to light if not "a possible operation of the feminine in language" at least one mode of its recovery—language itself. I will return later to the final chapter of Irigaray's *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* in which an escape from masculine systems of representation is glimpsed through the metaphors of female desire itself.

8. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn., 1979).

Nancy Miller's "maxims that pass for the truth of human experience" allude to Eliot's remark near the end of *The Mill on the Floss* that "the man of maxims is the popular representative of the minds that are guided in their moral judgment solely by general rules."<sup>9</sup> Miller's concern is the accusation of implausibility leveled at the plots of women's novels: Eliot's concern is the "special case" of Maggie Tulliver—"to lace ourselves up in formulas" is to ignore "the special circumstances that mark the individual lot." An argument for the individual makes itself felt by an argument against generalities. For Eliot herself, as for Dr. Kenn (the repository of her knowledge at this point in the novel), "the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims" (p. 628). Though the context is the making of moral, not critical, judgments, I think that Eliot, as so often at such moments, is concerned also with both the making and the reading of fiction, with the making of another kind of special case. Though Maggie may be an "exceptional" woman, the ugly duckling of St. Ogg's, her story contravenes the norm, and in that respect it could be said to be all women's story. We recall an earlier moment, that of Tom Tulliver's harsh judgment of his sister (" 'You have not resolution to resist a thing that you know to be wrong' "), and Maggie's rebellious murmuring that her life is "a planless riddle to him" only because he's incapable of feeling the mental needs which impel her, in his eyes, to wrongdoing or absurdity (pp. 504, 505). To Tom, the novel's chief upholder of general rules and patriarchal law (he makes his sister swear obedience to his prohibitions on the family Bible), the planless riddle of Maggie's life is only made sense of by a "Final Rescue" which involves her death: " 'In their death they were not divided' " (p. 657). But the reunion of brother and sister in the floodwaters of the Ripple enacts both reconciliation and revenge, consummation and cataclysm; powerful authorial desires are at work.<sup>10</sup> To simplify this irreducible swirl of contradictory desire in the deluge that "rescues" Maggie as well as her brother would be to salvage a maxim as "jejune" as "*Mors omnibus est communis*" (one of the tags Maggie finds when she dips into her brother's Latin Grammar) stripped of its saving Latin.<sup>11</sup> We

9. Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. A. S. Byatt (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 628; all further references to this work will be included in the text. I am indebted to Byatt's helpful annotations.

10. See Gilbert and Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, which succinctly states that Maggie seems "at her most monstrous when she tries to turn herself into an angel of renunciation" (p. 491), and Gillian Beer, "Beyond Determinism: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf," in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, on an ending that "lacks bleakness, is even lubricious" in its realization of "confused and passionate needs" (p. 88).

11. "*Mors omnibus est communis* would have been jejune, only [Maggie] liked to know the Latin" (*The Mill on the Floss*, pp. 217–18); see below.

might go further and say that to substitute a generality for the riddle of Maggie's life and death, or to translate Latin maxims into English commonplaces, would constitute a misreading of the novel as inept as Tom's misconstruction of his sister, or his Latin. Maggie's incomprehensible foreignness, her drift into error or impropriety on the river with Stephen Guest, is a "lapse" understood by the latitudinarian Dr. Kenn. For us, it also involves an understanding that planlessness, riddles, and impropriety—the enigmas, accidents, and incorrectness of language itself—are at odds with the closures of plot (here, the plot of incestuous reunion) and with interpretation itself, as well as with the finality of the maxims denounced by Eliot.

For all its healing of division, *The Mill on the Floss* uncovers the divide between the language or maxims of the dominant culture and the language itself which undoes them. In life, at any rate, they remain divided—indeed, death may be the price of unity—and feminist criticism might be said to install itself in the gap. A frequent move on the part of feminist criticism is to challenge the norms and aesthetic criteria of the dominant culture (as Miller does in defending Eliot), claiming, in effect, that "incorrectness" makes visible what is specific to women's writing. The culturally imposed or assumed "lapses" of women's writing are turned against the system that brings them into being—a system women writers necessarily inhabit. What surfaces in this gesture is the all-important question of women's access to knowledge and culture and to the power that goes with them. In writing by women, the question is often explicitly thematized in terms of education. Eliot's account of Tom's schooling in "School-Time," the opening chapter of book 2, provides just such a thematic treatment—a lesson in antifeminist pedagogy which goes beyond its immediate implications for women's education to raise more far-reaching questions about the functioning of both sexual ideology and language. Take Maggie's puzzlement at one of the many maxims found in the Eton Grammar, a required text for the unfortunate Tom. As often, rules and examples prove hard to tell apart:

The astronomer who hated women generally caused [Maggie] so much puzzling speculation that she one day asked Mr Stelling if all astronomers hated women, or whether it was only this particular astronomer. But, forestalling his answer, she said,

"I suppose it's all astronomers: because you know, they live up in high towers, and if the women came there, they might talk and hinder them from looking at the stars."

Mr Stelling liked her prattle immensely. [P. 220]

What we see here is a text-book example of the way in which individual misogyny becomes generalized—"maximized," as it were—in the form of a patriarchal put down. Maggie may have trouble construing "*ad unam*



*mulieres*,” or “all to a woman,” but in essence she has got it right.<sup>12</sup> Just to prove her point, Mr. Stelling (who himself prefers the talk of women to star gazing) likes her “prattle,” a term used only of the talk of women and children. Reduced to his idea of her, Maggie can only mimic man’s talk.

Inappropriate as he is in other respects for Tom’s future career, Mr. Stelling thus proves an excellent schoolmaster to his latent misogyny. His classroom is also an important scene of instruction for Maggie, who learns not only that all astronomers to a man hate women in general but that girls can’t learn Latin; that they are quick and shallow, mere imitators (“this small apparatus of shallow quickness,” Eliot playfully repeats); and that everybody hates clever women, even if they are amused by the prattle of clever little girls (pp. 214, 221, 216). It is hard not to read with one eye on her creator. Maggie, it emerges, rather fancies herself as a linguist, and Eliot too seems wishfully to imply that she has what one might call a “gift” for languages—a gift, perhaps, for ambiguity too. Women, we learn, don’t just talk, they double-talk, like language itself; that’s just the trouble for boys like Tom:

“I know what Latin is very well,” said Maggie, confidently. “Latin’s a language. There are Latin words in the Dictionary. There’s bonus, a gift.”

“Now, you’re just wrong there, Miss Maggie!” said Tom, secretly astonished. “You think you’re very wise! But ‘bonus’ means ‘good,’ as it happens—bonus, bona, bonum.”

“Well, that’s no reason why it shouldn’t mean ‘gift,’ ” said Maggie stoutly. “It may mean several things. Almost every word does.” [P. 214]

And if words may mean several things, general rules or maxims may prove less universal than they claim to be and lose their authority. Perhaps only “this particular astronomer” was a woman hater or hated only one woman in particular. Special cases or particular contexts—“the special circumstances that mark the individual lot” (p. 628)—determine or render indeterminate not only judgment but meaning too. The rules of language itself make Tom’s rote learning troublesome to him. How can he hope to construe his sister when her relation to language proves so treacherous—her difference so shifting a play of possibility, like the difference within language itself, destabilizing terms such as “wrong” and “good”?

Maggie, a little parody of her author’s procedures in *The Mill on the*

12. “*Astronomer: ut—‘as’, astronomus—‘an astronomer’, exosus—‘hating’, mulieres—‘women’, ad unum [mulierem]—‘to one’ [that is, in general]. (Eton grammar, 1831 edition, p. 279) (The Mill on the Floss, p. 676 n.55).*”

*Floss*, decides “to skip the rules in the syntax—the examples became so absorbing”:

These mysterious sentences snatched from an unknown context,—like strange horns of beasts and leaves of unknown plants, brought from some far-off region, gave boundless scope to her imagination, and were all the more fascinating because they were in a peculiar tongue of their own, which she could learn to interpret. It was really very interesting—the Latin Grammar that Tom had said no girls could learn: and she was proud because she found it interesting. The most fragmentary examples were her favourites. *Mors omnibus est communis* would have been jejune, only she liked to know the Latin; but the fortunate gentleman whom every one congratulated because he had a son “endowed with *such* a disposition” afforded her a great deal of pleasant conjecture, and she was quite lost in the “thick grove penetrable by no star,” when Tom called out,

“Now, then, Magsie, give us the Grammar!” [Pp. 217–18]

Whereas maxims lace her up in formulas, “these mysterious sentences” give boundless scope to Maggie’s imagination; for her, as for her author (who makes them foretell her story), they are whole fictional worlds, alternative realities, transformations of the familiar into the exotic and strange. In their foreignness she finds herself, until roused by Tom’s peremptory call, as she is later to be recalled by his voice from the Red Deeps. Here, however, it is Maggie who teaches Tom his most important lesson, that the “dead” languages had once been living: “that there had once been people upon the earth who were so fortunate as to know Latin without learning it through the medium of the Eton Grammar” (p. 221). The idea—or, rather, fantasy—of a language which is innate rather than acquired, native rather than incomprehensibly foreign, is a consoling one for the unbookish miller’s son; but it holds out hope for Maggie too, and presumably also for her creator. Though Latin stands in for cultural imperialism and for the outlines of a peculiarly masculine and elitist classical education from which women have traditionally been excluded, Maggie can learn to interpret it. The “peculiar tongue” had once been spoken by women, after all—and they had not needed to learn it from Mr. Stelling or the institutions he perpetuates. Who knows, she might even become an astronomer herself or, like Eliot, a writer who by her pen name had refused the institutionalization of sexual difference as cultural exclusion. Tom and Mr. Stelling tell Maggie that “ ‘Girls never learn such things’ ”; “ ‘They’ve a great deal of superficial cleverness but they couldn’t go far into anything’ ” (pp. 214, 221). But going far into things—and going far—is the author’s prerogative in *The Mill on the Floss*. Though Maggie’s quest for knowledge ends in death, as Virginia

Woolf thought Eliot's own had ended,<sup>13</sup> killing off this small apparatus of shallow quickness may have been the necessary sacrifice in order for Eliot herself to become an interpreter of the exotic possibilities contained in mysterious sentences. Maggie—unassimilable, incomprehensible, “fallen”—is her text, a “dead” language which thereby gives all the greater scope to authorial imaginings, making it possible for the writer to come into being.

## 3

We recognize in “School-Time” Eliot's investment—humorous, affectionate, and rather innocently self-loving—in Maggie's gifts and haphazard acquisition of knowledge. In particular, we recognize a defence of the “irregular” education which until recently had been the lot of most women, if educated at all. Earlier in the same chapter, in the context of Mr. Stelling's teaching methods (that is, his unquestioning reliance on Euclid and the Eton Grammar), Eliot refers whimsically to “Mr Broderip's amiable beaver” which “busied himself as earnestly in constructing a dam, in a room up three pairs of stairs in London, as if he had been laying his foundation in a stream or lake in Upper Canada. It was ‘Binny's’ function to build” (p. 206). Binny the beaver, a pet from the pages of W. J. Broderip's *Leaves from the Note Book of a Naturalist* (1852), constructed his dam with sweeping-brushes and warming-pans, “hand-brushes, rush-baskets, books, boots, sticks, clothes, dried turf or anything portable.”<sup>14</sup> A domesticated *bricoleur*, Binny made do with what he could find. A few lines later, we hear of Mr. Stelling's “educated” condescension toward “the display of various or special knowledge made by irregularly educated people” (p. 207). Mr. Broderip's beaver, it turns out, does double duty as an illustration of Mr. Stelling's “regular” (not to say “rote”) mode of instruction—he can do no otherwise, conditioned as he is—and as a defence of Eliot's own display of irregularly acquired “various or special knowledge.” Like Maggie's, this is knowledge drawn directly from books, without the aid of a patriarchal pedagogue. Mr. Stelling and the institutions he subscribes to (Aristotle, deaneries, prebends, Great Britain, and Protestantism—the Establishment, in fact) are lined up against the author-as-eager-beaver. Eliot's mischievous impugning of authority and authorities—specifically, cultural authority—becomes increasingly explicit until, a page or so later, culture itself comes under attack. Finding Tom's brain “peculiarly impervious to etymology and demonstrations,” Mr. Stelling concludes that it “was peculiarly in

13. See Woolf, “George Eliot,” *Collected Essays*, 4 vols. (London, 1966), 1:204: “With every obstacle against her—sex and health and convention—she sought more knowledge and more freedom till the body, weighted with its double burden, sank worn out.”

14. See *The Mill on the Floss*, pp. 675–76 n.44.

need of being ploughed and harrowed by these patent implements: it was his favourite metaphor, that the classics and geometry constituted that culture of the mind which prepared it for the reception of any subsequent crop." As Eliot rather wittily observes, the regimen proves "as uncomfortable for Tom Tulliver as if he had been plied with cheese in order to remedy a gastric weakness which prevented him from digesting it" (p. 208). Nor is Eliot only, or simply, being funny. The bonus or gift of language is at work here, translating dead metaphor into organic tract.

Like Maggie herself, the metaphor here is improper, disrespectful of authorities, and, as Tom later complains of his sister, not to be relied on. Developing the implications of changing her metaphor from agriculture to digestion, Eliot drastically undermines the realist illusion of her fictional world, revealing it to be no more than a blank page inscribed with a succession of arbitrary metaphoric substitutions:

It is astonishing what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor! Once call the brain an intellectual stomach, and one's ingenious conception of the classics and geometry as ploughs and harrows seems to settle nothing. But then, it is open to some one else to follow great authorities and call the mind a sheet of white paper or a mirror, in which case one's knowledge of the digestive process becomes quite irrelevant. It was doubtless an ingenious idea to call the camel the ship of the desert, but it would hardly lead one far in training that useful beast. O Aristotle! if you had had the advantage of being "the freshest modern" instead of the greatest ancient, would you not have mingled your praise of metaphorical speech as a sign of high intelligence, with a lamentation that intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor,—that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else? [Pp. 208–9]

In the *Poetics* Aristotle says: "It is a great thing to make use of . . . double words and rare words . . . but by far the greatest thing is the use of metaphor. That alone cannot be learned; it is the token of genius. *For the right use of metaphor means an eye for resemblances.*"<sup>15</sup> Of course there's authorial self-congratulation lurking in this passage, as there is in Eliot's affectionate parade of Maggie's gifts. But an eye for resemblances (between Binny and Mr. Stelling, for instance, or brain and stomach) is also here a satiric eye. Culture as (in)digestion makes Euclid and the Eton

15. Aristotle *Poetics* 22. 16 (my italics); see *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 676 n.46. J. Hillis Miller notes apropos of this passage that it "is followed almost immediately by an ostentatious and forceful metaphor [that of a shrewmouse imprisoned in a split tree (p. 209)], as if Eliot were compelled . . . to demonstrate that we cannot say what a thing is except by saying it is something else" ("The Worlds of Victorian Fiction," *Harvard English Studies* 6 [1975]: 145 n).

Grammar hard to swallow; Aristotle loses his authority to the author herself. On one level, this is science calling culture in question, making empiricism the order of the day. But there's something unsettling to the mind, or, rather, stomach, in this dizzy progression from culture, digestive tract, and *tabula rasa* to ship of the desert (which sounds like a textbook example of metaphor). The blank page may take what imprint the author chooses to give it. But the price one pays for such freedom is the recognition that language, thus viewed, is endlessly duplicitous rather than single-minded (as Tom would have it be); that metaphor is a kind of impropriety or oxymoronic otherness; and that "we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else."

Error, then, must creep in where there's a story to tell, especially a woman's story. Maggie's "wrong-doing and absurdity," as the fall of women often does, not only puts her on the side of error in Tom's scheme of things but gives her a history; "the happiest women," Eliot reminds us, "like the happiest nations, have no history" (p. 494). Impropriety and metaphor belong together on the same side as a fall from absolute truth or unitary schemes of knowledge (maxims). Knowledge in *The Mill on the Floss* is guarded by a traditional patriarchal prohibition which, by a curious slippage, makes the fruit itself as indigestible as the ban and its thick rind. The adolescent Maggie, "with her soul's hunger and her illusions of self-flattery," begins "to nibble at this thick-rinded fruit of the tree of knowledge, filling her vacant hours with Latin, geometry, and the forms of the syllogism" (p. 380). But the Latin, Euclid, and Logic, which Maggie imagines "would surely be a considerable step in masculine wisdom," leave her dissatisfied, like a thirsty traveler in a trackless desert. What does Eliot substitute for this mental diet? After Maggie's chance discovery of Thomas à Kempis, we're told that "The old books, Virgil, Euclid, and Aldrich—that wrinkled fruit of the tree of knowledge—had been all laid by" for a doctrine that announces: "'And if he should attain to all knowledge, he is yet far off'" (pp. 387, 383). Though the fruits of patriarchal knowledge no longer seem worth the eating, can we view Thomas à Kempis as anything more than an opiate for the hunger pains of oppression? Surely not. The morality of submission and renunciation is only a sublimated version of Tom's plain-spoken patriarchal prohibition, as the satanic mocker, Philip Wakem, doesn't fail to point out. Yet in the last resort, Eliot makes her heroine live and die by this inherited morality of female suffering—as if, in the economy of the text, it was necessary for Maggie to die renouncing in order for her author to release the flood of desire that is language itself.<sup>16</sup> Why?

*The Mill on the Floss* gestures toward a largely unacted error, the

16. See Carol Christ, "Aggression and Providential Death in George Eliot's Fiction," *Novel* (Winter 1976): 130–40, for a somewhat different interpretation.

elopement with Stephen Guest which would have placed Maggie finally outside the laws of St. Ogg's. Instead of this unrealized fall, we are offered a moment of attempted transcendence in the timeless death embrace which abolishes the history of division between brother and sister—"living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love" (p. 655). What is striking about the novel's ending is its banishing not simply of division but of sexual difference as the origin of that division. The fantasy is of a world where brother and sister might roam together, "indifferently," as it were, without either conflict or hierarchy. We know that their childhood was not like that at all, and we can scarcely avoid concluding that death is a high price to pay for such imaginary union. In another sense, too, the abolition of difference marks the death of desire for Maggie; "The Last Conflict" (the title of the book's closing chapter) is resolved by her final renunciation of Guest, resolved, moreover, with the help of "the little old book that she had long ago learned by heart" (p. 648). Through Thomas à Kempis, Eliot achieves a simultaneous management of both knowledge and desire, evoking an "invisible" or "supreme teacher" within the soul, whose voice promises "entrance into that satisfaction which [Maggie] had so long been craving in vain" (p. 384). Repressing the problematic issue of book learning, this "invisible teacher" is an aspect of the self which one might call the voice of conscience or, alternatively, sublimated maxims. In "the little old book," Maggie finds the authorized version of her own and Eliot's story, "written down by a hand that waited for the heart's prompting . . . the chronicle of a solitary, hidden anguish . . . a lasting record of human needs and human consolations, the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt and suffered and renounced" (pp. 384-85).

Where might we look for an alternative version or, for that matter, for another model of difference, one that did not merely substitute unity for division and did not pay the price of death or transcendence? Back to the schoolroom, where we find Tom painfully committing to memory the Eton Grammar's "Rules for the Genders of Nouns," the names of trees being feminine, while some birds, animals, and fish "*dicta epicoena* . . . are said to be epicene."<sup>17</sup> In epicene language, as distinct from language imagined as either neutral or androgynous, gender is variable at will, a mere metaphor. The rules for the genders of nouns, like prescriptions about "masculine" or "feminine" species of knowledge, are seen to be entirely arbitrary. Thus the lament of David for Saul and Jonathan can be appropriated as the epitaph of brother and sister (" 'In their death they were not divided' "), and "the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt and suffered and renounced" can double as the voice of a sister-author, the passionately epicene George Eliot. One answer, then, to my earlier question (Why does Eliot sacrifice her heroine to the

17. See *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 676 n.53.

morality of renunciation?) is that Eliot saw in Thomas à Kempis a language of desire, but desire managed as knowledge is also managed—sublimated not as renunciation but as writing. In such epicene writing, the woman writer finds herself, or finds herself in metaphor.

## 4

For Irigaray, the price paid by the woman writer for attempting to inscribe the claims of women “within an order prescribed by the masculine” may ultimately be death; the problem as she sees it is this: “[How can we] disengage ourselves, *alive*, from their concepts?”<sup>18</sup> The final, lyrical chapter of *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*, “Quand nos lèvres se parlent,” is, or tries to be, the alternative she proposes. It begins boldly: “If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story.”<sup>19</sup> This would be a history of disappropriation, the record of the woman writer’s self-loss as, attempting to swallow or incorporate an alien language, she is swallowed up by it in turn:

On the outside, you attempt to conform to an order which is alien to you. Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything that you encounter. You mime whatever comes near you. You become whatever you touch. In your hunger to find yourself, you move indefinitely far from yourself, from me. Assuming one model after another, one master after another, changing your face, form, and language according to the power that dominates you. Sundered. By letting yourself be abused, you become an impassive travesty.<sup>20</sup>

This, perhaps, is what Miller means by “a posture of imposture,” “the uncomfortable posture of all women writers in our culture, within and without the text.”<sup>21</sup> Miming has become absorption to an alien order. One thinks of Maggie, a consumer who is in turn consumed by what she reads, an imitative “apparatus” who, like the alienated women imagined by Irigaray, can only speak their desire as “machines that are spoken, machines that speak.” Speaking the same language, spoken in the language of the Same (“If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries . . . we will fail each other”), she can only be reproduced as the history of a fall.<sup>22</sup> Eliot herself, of course, never so much as gestures toward Irigaray’s jubilant utopian love

18. Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” trans. Carolyn Burke, *Signs* 6 (Autumn 1980): 75.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 73–74.

21. Miller, “Emphasis Added,” p. 46.

22. Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” p. 69.

language between two women—a language of desire whose object (“*l’indifférente*”) is that internal (in)difference which, in another context, Barbara Johnson calls “not a difference between . . . but a difference within. Far from constituting the text’s unique identity, it is that which subverts the very idea of identity.” What is destroyed, conceptually, is the “unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another.”<sup>23</sup> Irigaray’s experiment in “*Quand nos lèvres se parlent*” is of this kind, an attempt to release the subtext of female desire, thereby undoing repression and depriving metalanguage of its claim to truth. “This wearisome labor of doubling and miming” is no longer enough.<sup>24</sup>

But for all Irigaray’s experimentalism, the “difference” is not to be located at the level of the sentence, as Miller reminds us.<sup>25</sup> Rather, what we find in “*Quand nos lèvres se parlent*” is writing designed to indicate the cultural determinants which bound the woman writer and, for Irigaray, deprive her of her most fundamental relationship: her relationship to herself. In fact, what seems most specifically “feminine” about Irigaray’s practice is not its experimentalism as such but its dialogue of one/two, its fantasy of the two-in-one: “In *life* they are not divided,” to rephrase David’s lament. The lips that speak together (the lips of female lovers) are here imagined as initiating a dialogue not of conflict or reunion, like Maggie and Tom’s, but of mutuality, lack of boundaries, continuity. If both Irigaray and Eliot kill off the woman engulfed by masculine logic and language, both end also—and need to end—by releasing a swirl of (im)possibility:

These streams don’t flow into one, definitive sea; these rivers have no permanent banks; this body, no fixed borders. This unceasing mobility, this life. Which they might describe as our restlessness, whims, pretenses, or lies. For all this seems so strange to those who claim “solidity” as their foundation.<sup>26</sup>

Is that, finally, why Maggie must be drowned, sacrificed as a mimetic “apparatus,” much as the solidity of St. Ogg’s is swept away, to the flood whose murmuring waters swell the “low murmur” of Maggie’s lips as they repeat the words of Thomas à Kempis? When the praying Maggie feels the flow of water at her knees, the literal seems to have merged with a figural flow; as Eliot writes, “the whole thing had been so rapid—so dreamlike—that the threads of ordinary association were broken” (p. 651). It is surely at this moment in the novel that we move most clearly into the unbounded realm of desire, if not of wish fulfilment. It is at this

23. Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference* (Baltimore, 1981), pp. 4, 5.

24. Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” p. 71.

25. See Miller, “Emphasis Added,” p. 38.

26. Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” pp. 76–77.



moment of inundation, in fact, that the thematics of female desire surface most clearly.<sup>27</sup>

We will look in vain for a specifically feminine linguistic practice in *The Mill on the Floss*; “a possible operation of the feminine in language” is always elsewhere, not yet, not here, unless it simply reinscribes the exclusions, confines, and irregularities of Maggie’s education. But what we may find in both Eliot and Irigaray is a critique which gestures beyond cultural boundaries, indicating the perimeters within which their writing is produced. For the astronomer who hates women in general, the feminist critic may wish to substitute an author who vindicates one woman in particular or, like Irigaray, inscribes the claims of all women. In part a critic of ideology, she will also want to uncover the ways in which maxims or *idées reçues* function in the service of institutionalizing and “maximizing” misogyny or simply deny difference. But in the last resort, her practice and her theory come together in Eliot’s lament about metaphor—“that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else.” The necessary utopianism of feminist criticism may be the attempt to declare what is by saying something else—that “something else” which presses both Irigaray and Eliot to conclude their very different works with an imaginative reaching beyond analytic and realistic modes to the metaphors of unbounded female desire in which each finds herself as a woman writing.

27. See Gillian Beer, “Beyond Determinism”: “Eliot is fascinated by the unassuageable longings of her heroine. She allows them fulfilment in a form of plot which simply glides out of the channelled sequence of social growth and makes literal the expansion of desire. The river loses its form in the flood” (p. 88).