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Something about Woman and Monsters and a Bit of a Dance

Pauline Morgan*

* University of Sussex

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Her conceit, her baffled vanity were possibly monstrous: she certainly often threw herself into a defiant conviction that she would have done the whole thing much better. ("In the Cage" by Henry James: 230)

Instead of going on playing the overall boring game which consists in applying the most worn-out schemes of the history of ideas to the specificity of what is happening now, especially in this country; instead of giving in to normalizing and legitimating representations which identify, recognize, and reduce everything too quickly, why not rather be interested in "theoretical" monsters, in the monstrosities which announce themselves in theory, in the monsters who, beforehand, outdate and make comical all classifications or rhythms such as: after New Criticism comes an "ism" and then a "postism", and then again another "ism", and today still another "ism", etc. (Derrida 1990: 79)

It is impossible to dissociate the questions of art, style and truth from the question of the woman. Nevertheless the question of "what is woman?" is itself suspended by the simple formulation of their common problematic. One can no longer seek her, no more than one could search for woman's femininity or female sexuality. And she is certainly not to be found in any of the familiar modes of concept or knowledge. Yet it is impossible to resist looking for her. (Derrida 1978: 71)

In any writing concerned with saying anything about deconstruction and its relation to an inevitable but non-teleological "look" for woman, what would seem to be the most important question to consider is the one about *style*: how to write,

what tone to adopt. When sounding the above quotations together, it would appear that, for Derrida at least, "the question of the woman" is a "'theoretical' monster". It is a question whose response requires a monstrous tone, or at least a tone that would accommodate a way of thinking that is curious, unfamiliar and "not to be found in any of the familiar modes of concept or knowledge". Like a piece of fiction then, I would like immediately to introduce, bring on scene, *monstrous* characters (which also means "letters" and "qualities" (Chambers Dictionary)) whose performativity operates to thrill and motivate imagination (all those silent and subtle things that happen when one sees or utters the word "monster"). Monsters, as Derrida suggests, "who, beforehand, outdate and make comical all classifications" and who are irreducible to any theory which trains its sights on their identification. In calling upon "monsters" to talk about "woman", I am calling for a tone that moves, that works well, where the word "work" is concerned with the occupations of something active, something inventive, originally creative, at least something that aspires to the chance of saying something interesting, in an interesting way. This seems to be the most fruitful option when approaching the *extraordinary* status of "woman" whilst maintaining a desire *not* to give in "to normalizing and legitimating representations which identify". As Diane Elam acknowledges in Feminism and Deconstruction (1994), "We do not yet know what women *can do*" (27). Similarly, we do not yet know what writing (*style*) can do. But it is more interesting, as Derrida suggests, "not to reduce everything too quickly" in hasty attempts to determine possibilities. For this reason, I would like to be patient and try to say something about the monstrous qualities of "woman" that will always operate to resist the confines of feminism, and any other "ism", forever.

Perhaps to offer some shape to this monstrosity, that is to the structure of my own text as well as its concerns, my thoughts evolve out of a response to a feminist thesis put forward in a recent text entitled The Phenomenal Woman (1998) by Christine Battersby. In the course of her book, Battersby engages in the most traditional way with a number of philosophers and theorists such as Kant,

Wittgenstein, Lacan, Derrida, Irigaray, Adorno, Kierkegaard and Deleuze, to name but a few, with the determined purpose of "developing a feminist metaphysics that takes to norm the female-subject position" (Battersby: 61). Battersby, with quick assertion, identifies and positions herself by stating that she writes "from within a post-Kantian tradition of philosophy, analyzing the philosophical concepts of the transcendental ego, 'personhood' and related notions of spatial and temporal self-identity" (Battersby: 1). For this authorial woman at least, there is no question of where to begin, of which tone to adopt. Her voice echoes the voice of Kant.

To be clear, there are two things about The Phenomenal Woman that I would like to draw attention to and write about. First, in order not to be impatient by immediately disregarding Battersby's thoughts on female subjectivity without taking time to appreciate her ideas, I would like to offer some account of her position. As it is not possible to do justice to all the aspects of her thesis, I will focus specifically on her reading of Kant, which I take to be her starting point. The second, directly related to this, is concerned with the force of what appears to be Battersby's agitated hostility to deconstruction and more specifically to the work of Jacques Derrida. If we are again to pay attention to tone, it must be said that there is something of a neurotic anxiety, a fear of anything *different*, in the rather familiar complaints: "Derrida aims to undercut all metaphysics, and to leave us with an epistemology that is also unstable... Derrida is, in effect, celebrating the ruin and decay of western metaphysics in ways that involve a form of philosophical refusal – a refusal to think identity *otherwise*" (Battersby: 98). "*Otherwise*" – it comes with an emphatic cry of frustration, as if to say "Derrida won't play by the philosophical rules. Derrida won't take sides." No, and there are reasons for this "refusal", but they are not given enough time for consideration in Battersby's text. Before saying anything more at this point about Derrida, however, it is better for me first to practise the patience that I preach and focus on Battersby's Kant.

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Soon it will become clearer why, but for the moment, I introduce the *anti-monstrous* character of The Phenomenal Woman:

Immanuel Kant's 'Copernican revolution' sought to rewrite philosophical tradition by placing man – instead of God or the object – at the centre of the reality which we inhabit. My own feminist philosophical turn displaces the apparently gender-neutral Kantian self at the centre of the knowable world. However, instead of dispensing with the self in ways now fashionable in the postmodern tradition, I am attempting to construct a new subject-position that makes *women* typical. In effect, this means dispensing with the (Kantian) notion that the 'I' gives form to reality by imposing a grid of spatio-temporal relationships upon otherwise unformed 'matter'. Focusing on the female subject involves treating humans as non-autonomous, and instead thinking relationships of dependence (childhood/weaning/rearing) through which one attains selfhood. It also involves thinking the process of birthing as neither monstrous nor abnormal. Mothering, parenting and the fact of being born need to become fully integrated into what is entailed in being a human 'person' or 'self'. (Battersby: 2)

The opening that provides the way for Battersby's desire to construct a female subject or "self", as well as her aspiration to create a "feminine metaphysics", is fundamentally based on woman's ability to give birth. Her critical strategy is to adopt, up to a point, Kant's theory of a transcendental "I" but to prioritise this "I" on the side of the female by attempting to bring to the fore the disruptive effects that notions of sexual difference present to the masculine bias of the Kantian system.

According to Battersby (and to echo the way she puts it), Kant makes the assumption that the identification of selfhood, or a transcendental "I", is only possible through a relation to external matter that remains unchanged and constant across time. In the Kantian model "inert matter is the self's necessary other" (70),

where "inert matter" constitutes the primal substance of "nature" and a formless universe. The world of the five human senses for Kant is the phenomenal world and is an illusion, not a reality. However, the ordering of this illusion is necessary if the transcendental self is to say "I" and have the ability to distinguish and separate itself from that which it is not. By categorising the data collected by the senses into a spatio-temporal network the transcendental imagination brings understanding and form to an external world within which it can identify itself. As Battersby summarises it, "The ego could not know itself as itself unless it simultaneously constructed a world – the phenomenal world – other than itself [...] It is man's transcendental ego – not matter or God – that constitutes the creative centre of the knowable (phenomenal) world" (62).¹

[Is this tone familiar?]

Human understanding, through the imagination's conceptual constructions of space and time, gives order to the matter of the external world (nature) and provides a structure within which the self can become conscious of its own existence. However, this model runs into problems when faced with the female body's ability to give birth, its ability to contain something in excess of an autonomous self. Battersby's feminist objection to Kant's system is based on the fact that his "women both are, and are not, granted the status of having a transcendental self". This comes about because "the supposedly 'universal' structures of the Kantian space-time world also make the female body – and her transcendental 'I' – a transitional structure, somewhere between self and not-self" (66).

[Whose voice is this?]

The reproducing body of woman does not fit adequately into the category of an autonomous "person" and is, therefore, destined, within this framework, to be positioned first and foremost as something unknowable on the side of a chaotic nature. Her ability to form separate matter (a separate self) out of the matter of her body is repressed in the Kantian system because it disrupts the conditions

necessary for the construction of a defined male identity which is built on the rational exclusion of everything beyond the boundaries of a "closed" body. Battersby's suggestion is that the reproductive functions of the *female* body provide an alternative more practical model for thinking about how matter (indeed, nature) operates. She picks up on and explores Kant's attitude towards the possibility that nature can be perceived to exist as a kind of "primal mother", giving birth to new forms, rather than as a chaos which is given form only by the space-time categories of humanity's transcendental imagination. It is this notion of nature as self-forming matter, an idea that would imply that there is a commonality across *all* matter, which most threatens the stability and stasis of a masculine transcendental subject. As Battersby notes, "if matter can form itself, why must Kant treat all form as if imposed by the structures of the human mind?" (74). "Kant expresses his horror at this suggestion, as he claims that the notion of a 'family bonding' (*Verwandschaft*) amongst species or races that emerge from 'one single generative mother-womb' is 'so monstrous that reason shrinks back'" (Battersby: 77).

[Shrink back then, reason.]

What I would like to draw attention to at this point is the equivocal status of the "monstrous" here. Taking great pains to emphasise the fact that Kant himself "acknowledges sexual difference as a monstrous 'chasm' in his thought" (67), it is interesting to notice that Battersby seems just as anxious and quick to repress this monstrosity in her desire to transform it into something not "abnormal". Just like Kant's transcendental "I", she ultimately wants to organise a system for a female self that would involve the exclusion of anything out of the ordinary, anything not strictly mundane (in all the senses of the word), anything that cannot be absolutely familiarised within a subjective world of normality.

Battersby's desire is to present a theory that "involves thinking the process of birthing as neither monstrous nor abnormal". Why? Without getting into the blatant hierarchical problems of who decides what is "normal" and what is not, why must a monstrous, a non-identifiable, status be necessarily disruptive for how

women think themselves? Surely it is more disruptive for a masculine discourse, if Battersby's account of Kant is anything to go by. Isn't it more interesting always to ask questions about what is going on within any idea that claims to be normal? About why it *wants* to be thought of as normal? Why can't monstrous thought, the thought of monsters, be taken, as it sounds, as something performative, something creative? Who is afraid of what? What authority do these monsters threaten? Could it be *any* philosophical authority that would want to do away with, or at least reduce, the imaginative and deconstructive repercussions of using such words? The thought of monsters gestures towards things unknown, perhaps "as told of in fables and folklore" (Chambers), even things inconceivable. What danger that way for stabilised notions of selfhood. The reality of birth *is* a monstrous thought. What is it that is being born? To begin with, it is certainly not essentially human, never mind a subject or a woman.

I am being too hasty – going to fast? – I feel it in the tone. After all, Battersby herself makes the claim at the beginning of her book that she will use "this monstrosity – this 'phenomenality' – productively". She suggests that "woman is 'monstrous', but in a way that allows us to think identity otherwise" (11). The "monstrous" sounds so promising, but in The Phenomenal Woman, it never comes to much. It is sedated by the "*isness*" of a supposedly otherwise "I". Monsters (by the very repetition of the word) are conjured up and used many times in the text, carrying all the suggestive possibilities of literature or a folktale, only to be reduced and normalised by a desire to identify, finally, once and for all, a place for woman.

Throughout the rest of her book, Battersby uses the birthing ability of female bodies to justify woman's replacement of man at the authoritative end of a normalised hierarchy. In saying this, however, I do not mean to suggest that she does not develop her thesis in sophisticated ways through an intelligent engagement with innumerable philosophers and theorists. I do not want to reduce or for that matter dispute the rigourousness of her *philosophical* propositions. It is just that, as a female, I do not want to be in the place that she aspires to put me. I

have no wish to go there. Battersby pitches what she is selling by suggesting that the "metaphysics of flesh and fluidity that is developed in this book is far from being a new 'common' sense." Nevertheless, she goes on to suggest that this "new" metaphysics, or conception of female identity as norm, is "not at all that strange" (Battersby: 14). Putting aside the undesirability of any process of identification built on a theory of "norms", what is there to celebrate in this? Doesn't strangeness, the uncertainty of what *is*, in a sense, like the idea of monsters, inspire and open the space for creative thinking? Let me "look" for reassurance in the voice of a different female academic, in Feminism and Deconstruction, when she, Diane Elam, says that,

... the gains of feminism have produced a situation in which the meta-narrative of the affirmation of female identity has foundered precisely because its realization can only be imperialist. To put this another way, we don't need more lessons in how to be a woman; feminism is no longer only the search for an authoritative, subjective, speaking position. In a sense, then, we have to learn to negotiate outside the horizon of authority. No more authoritative deconstructions of literary texts, no more authoritative statements on the essence of woman. (Elam: 120)

Ironically, in spite of all her intentions to escape the authority of the phallus, it is in true oedipal fashion that Battersby identifies herself as writing from within a tradition (she is proud of being Kant's "post") before asserting herself with murderous intent. Her style of argumentation makes it clear that, secretly, she wants to kill off Kant, the one who taught her, the one who set the deep structure of her ideas, by proving him wrong. Battersby claims to have a better angle on the way things are, on how humans *ought* to be identified, even if hers *is* an identity, as she continually claims, that would be "fluid" and "fleshy" (- !! - ?).

What I am most concerned with giving some thought to here has to do with the strategies and "qualities" that silently inhabit writing. It is a consideration of style that, to me, seems the most important aspect of making *any* proposition about

woman. In the very process of attempting to establish a female speaking position, Battersby's *style* does not deviate at all from that of the most patriarchal of her predecessors. Her voice is a masculine voice. It is perhaps, fundamentally, for this reason that she reveals so much impatience and hostility when it comes to deconstructive thought. Is it not this type of "feminism" that Derrida resists? when, whilst reading Nietzsche, he writes,

Feminism is nothing but the operation of a woman who aspires to be like a man. And in order to resemble the masculine dogmatic philosopher this woman lays claims – just as much as he – to truth, science and objectivity in all their castrated delusions of virility. Feminism too seeks to castrate. It wants a castrated woman. Gone the style. (Derrida 1978: 65)

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The Phenomenal Woman from its beginning is convinced that when it comes to the question of woman, Derrida and deconstruction are negative and defeatist. In the ears of Battersby, "Derrida's voice is the voice of despair". She suggests that "For Derrida 'woman'; – and, as in Lacan, this has nothing to do with *women* – is not the name of a thing. The *féminin* has no essence. Instead, 'woman' represents a boundary, an absence, a becoming and an instability that inhabits 'phallogocentric' language" (Battersby: 92). She states the above as though this is the position of "woman" as decreed by Derrida himself, rather than pointing out that he is offering a descriptive analysis of how meaning and "woman" are constructed within phallogocentric systems of thought.

Ironically, Battersby's fundamental objection to Derrida comes with an accusation of reductionism. 'When Derrida reduces the whole of the history of metaphysics to the history of "presence" isn't he refusing to recognize differential changes in the way "absence" and "otherness" have been used in the history of western modernity?' (Battersby: 92). No, because when Derrida talks about "presence" it is always in a specific context. When considering the place of "absence" and "otherness" in relation to Husserl in Speech and Phenomena, that which is

suggested is something completely different from what is said about "absence" and "otherness" in relation to Rousseau in Of Grammatology. At the risk of saying something completely obvious, they are two *separate* (singular) texts.

Nevertheless, in response to Derrida's notion that Kant writes from within the tradition of a metaphysics of presence, Battersby opposes this claim with the suggestion that "what we have found in Kant is an account of identity that is linked to a metaphysics of absence" (80). But surely this is arguing for arguing's sake, arguing that black is white in order to assert a difference.

When Battersby suggests a "metaphysics of absence" she is referring again to the fact that woman is absent from the Kantian system and that the female is positioned as a necessary other, placed alongside a monstrous nature, beyond the boundaries of the knowable. "Like Goethe's 'eternal feminine', Kant's 'nature' is an ever-elusive presence that draws man – males – onwards" (Battersby: 79).

Derrida would not disagree, but he would call this a metaphysics of presence because it is a philosophical system within which the "ever-elusive presence" of absence is disavowed. Within this structure, it will always be the "knowable" (whatever achieves the status of presence by way of "Truthful" understanding) that will lay claim to power and go about constructing a world of reality. Even if Kant admits that the ordering of reality is a necessary fiction, his rationality does its best to keep reality and fiction apart and to forget that the two terms are interdependent when it comes to meaning. Similarly with Battersby, by building an argument on a metaphysics of absence as opposed to one of presence, is she not driving herself back into the masculine hierarchies and simplifying logic of binary oppositions? as though we can in *truth* distinguish between presence and absence. Is Battersby herself, when it comes to her consideration of deconstruction, not guilty of the very reductiveness of which she accuses Derrida? There are at least two aspects of her argument that suggest this.

First, in the way that she claims Derrida does not pay enough attention to the *different* treatments of "absence" and "otherness" across the history of philosophy, Battersby is as quick to establish a sameness, an intimacy even,

between Derrida and Lacan. Their names, throughout her text, are continually joined with an "and". They are even (in a suspiciously reductive tone) referred to as "'the two Jacques' – Lacan and Derrida – who both place the '*féminin*' outside the bounds of the knowable" (Battersby: 13), as though the radical differences between "the two" are not strongly marked. To try to say something about this in simple terms in order to make the point: Lacan's structuralist theory of the self is fundamentally based on lack; Derrida's ideas, on the other hand, which would not claim to be theories at all, evolve out of affirmations. Unlike Lacan, Derrida has no interest in defining subjectivity but neither does he want merely to get rid of the subject in a nihilistic fashion, something that is completely misunderstood in Battersby. In an interview with Richard Kearney in 1984, Derrida makes it clear,

I have never said that the subject should be dispensed with. Only that it should be deconstructed. To deconstruct the subject does not mean to deny its existence. There are subjects, 'operations' or effects' (*effets*) of subjectivity. This is an uncontrovertible fact. To acknowledge this does not mean, however, that the subject is what it *says* it is. The subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure cogito of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language. My work does not, therefore, destroy the subject; it simply tries to resituate it. (Derrida 1984: 125)

Second, although The Phenomenal Women provides some account of Derrida's writing, Battersby's conclusions about "Derrida's overall position" (137) (a reduction in itself) stem from a superficial analysis of the most basic moves of deconstruction (see "Derridean Complications", Ch. 5). Battersby engages mostly with material from Writing and Difference (1966) and Of Grammatology (1967). There is nothing wrong with this in itself, but she does not focus on the parts of these texts, or on other more recent texts, that seem crucial to any consideration of Derrida's ideas about the place or non-place of woman and the feminine. In a book about the future of woman (where "woman is 'monstrous', but in a way that allows us to think identity otherwise" (Battersby: 11)) which takes its starting point from her ability to give birth, a book which is also determined to set itself

against deconstruction, it is odd to notice that the author has nothing to say about the explicit remarks that Derrida makes about birth, the monstrous and the thought of the future. At the end of "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966), a text that Battersby *does* include in her bibliography, Derrida writes,

Here there is a kind of question, let us still call it historical, whose *conception, formation, gestation, and labour* we are only catching a glimpse of today. I employ these words, I admit, with a glance toward the operations of childbearing – but also with a glance towards those who, in a society from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity. (Derrida 1966: 293)

What Battersby and Derrida have in common is their interest in the birth of a different way of thinking. Battersby, however, as we have seen, immediately wants to normalise thought, to turn her eyes away from Derrida's "as yet unnamable" monstrosity, by making it fit into the familiar history of defined subjectivity. With Battersby, the future of thinking differently, thinking monstrously, would be immediately aborted, because identified, in the event of its birth. With Derrida, as he puts it in another unmentioned text, "the figure of the future, that is, that which can only be surprising, that for which we are not prepared, you see, is heralded by species of monsters. A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be predictable, calculable and programmable tomorrow" (Derrida 1992: 386-7). Ironically, by not even making *reference* to this thought of the future, it is almost as though Battersby, like Kant and the monstrous, represses anything of Derrida that would upset the assertions of her theory.

When it comes to Derrida, The Phenomenal Woman's reductive summary creates the impression that his thought is nothing more than a nihilistic critique of phallogocentrism. There is no space provided for the possibility that it is also philosophically inventive. Perhaps the only slight hint of this is when Battersby suggests that "Derrida could be construed as optimistic in that he does invite us to think 'beyond metaphysics': to join the dance of 'woman, *différance* and becoming'" (92). However, this invitation is at once rejected due to Battersby's resolute commitment to a "new metaphysics" and an unwillingness to interrogate the more subtle structures of her philosophical tradition. She does aspire to something "new" in that the aim of her "book is to deal with a transcendental self that exists over time" (Battersby: 206). Derrida, however, would want to ask why philosophical thought must always return to a "transcendental self", why always "metaphysical", even if it *is* branded "feminine", why not explore a writing, a vocabulary, that is more imaginative, inventive, which might be more hospitable to things monstrously unfamiliar; woman, for example? With this in mind, I would like to head for the end with something in defense of deconstructive thought by moving away from Battersby and towards a reading of "Choreographies", an interview with Derrida, which comments explicitly on his thoughts in relation to feminism and the question of female identity. It is the concern, the dance, of this text that is surreptitiously referred to in the quotation above, Battersby's one statement which allows for the tiny possibility that Derrida might have something optimistic and interesting to say about woman.

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In order to set the tone of "Choreographies", originally published in Diacritics in 1982, Derrida's interlocutor begins: "Emma Goldman, a maverick feminist from the late nineteenth century, once said of the feminist movement: 'If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution'" (Derrida 1982: 89). This subtle and spirited assertion from a woman maintaining some reserve in the face of the militant feminist action of the nineteenth century becomes the kernel from which

Derrida takes his starting point: the interview as a whole tip-toes its way around the matrix of creativity implied in Goldman's "dance".

What is perhaps the most important aspect of "Choreographies" is its performativity in terms of the text's interaction with this "dance" and with notions of "chance". Derrida embraces improvisation rather than premeditation within his responses. In order to mark out a certain inventiveness in relation to his ideas surrounding sexual difference within the writing itself, he suggests: "There are other texts, other occasions for such very calculated premeditations. Let us play surprise. It will be our tribute to the dance [in French the word dance, *la danse*, is a feminine noun requiring the use of a feminine pronoun, *elle*]: it should happen only once, neither grow heavy nor ever plunge too deep; above all, it should not lag or trail behind its time" (Derrida 1982: 90). What Derrida is drawing attention to within this play, and what he continually returns to throughout the text, is the necessity for feminist thought to open itself, to *ceaselessly* open itself anew, to the rhythms of futurity. Only this can provide it with the chance of creating an altogether "new" space for itself.

The history of different "feminisms" has often been, of course, a past "passed-over-in-silence." Now here is the paradox: having made possible the reawakening of this silent past, having reappropriated a history previously stifled, feminist movements will perhaps have to renounce an all too easy kind of progressivism in the evaluation of this history. Such progressivism is often taken as their axiomatic base: the inevitable or rather essential presupposition (*dans les luttes*, as we say in French) of what one might call the ideological consensus of feminists, perhaps also their "dogmatics" or what your "maverick feminist" suspects to be their sluggishness. It is the image of a continuously accelerated "liberation" at once punctuated by determinable stages and commanded by an ultimately thinkable *telos*, a truth of sexual difference and femininity etc. (Derrida 1982: 91)

What Derrida is warning against here is the temptation for feminist movements to get caught up in, or be seduced by, obvious forms of "progressivism" and/or

"freedom". It is important to make clear that he is not belittling the importance of progress at political, social and economical levels. Rather, he is making a bid for a certain reserve at the level of conception.² If the thought of a more feminine space is to come about, one that is more accommodating for women, it must arise from the inventiveness and singularity of a mobility of patience.

Derrida is concerned first and foremost with *always* reserving, or leaving open, a space for displacing the male/female binary, and any female/male one, precisely in order to question the phallogocentric (philosophical) assumptions that appear to naturalise or stabilise notions of identity and subjectivity. He is more interested in allowing for the specific, and differing, rhythms of bodies, in an attempt to move more in time to the chance/nature of desire: perhaps to try to listen for rhythms unknown.

It might be said that it is an age-old fear of the unknown, the programmed (masculine) anxiety of not already *knowing* what one should hear in the event of any listening, that forces Derrida, in "Choreographies", prompted by his interviewer, to return to the task of *defining* "woman's place": "the expression recalls, if I am not mistaken, 'in the home' or 'in the kitchen'" (Derrida 1982: 93). However, rather than aiming to complete this task by providing a description, he dances his way out of the confining topography of answers by continuing, always, to question: "Why must there be a place for woman? And why only one, a single, completely essential place?" (Derrida 1982: 93). Perhaps on a par with such provocative statements as "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida 1967: 158), Derrida suggests that "there is no place for woman" (Derrida 1982: 93). However, this is far from the nihilistic Lacanian paradigm that Battersby in The Phenomenal Woman equates it with, which *rests* on the premise that woman does not exist.

Within the Lacanian model, man's sexual attraction to woman is based on a desire for the Other, which in fact, is entirely removed from the body of woman. He (man) nevertheless maintains this illusion and woman herself becomes the veil that hides her nothingness. In a text called "The Poverty of Psychoanalysis"

(1977), Luce Irigaray launches a feminist attack directly on these aspects of Lacan and Lacanian psychoanalysis. With regards to the positioning of woman in his theory she concludes, "If that is all there is to the sexual relation – man's fascination with the nothingness she veils – then we are defenseless against the most negative elements of nihilism" (Irigaray 1977: 87). Derrida, on the other hand, is more on the side of *celebrating* "the dance of the veil" in the way that Irigaray, elsewhere in her text, claims "many traditions" (Irigaray 1977: 87) do.³ By focusing on the dance (the placeless veil) rather than the nothingness, on mobility rather than on a nihilistic stasis, Derrida is leaving the way open for something radical, a way of being, that has not yet taken place. There is feminism, its action, and there is the possibility of what it, the idea of it, can become. His focus is on the chances of its future. It is this specific duality within modes of feminism that is being implied when he says that the idea of there being no place for woman is "not anti-feminist, far from it; true, it is not feminist either" (Derrida 1982: 94).

When speaking of this paradox and this displacement of women, Derrida is making a distinction between a way of thinking about the feminine that is preoccupied with a continuing effort to escape the topological questions (what is *the* place of women?) and the economical questions (where is woman's place *present*?) of metaphysics, and, basically, a way of thinking about the feminine that is not. There is the double-bind of feminism, where it goes on making apparent progress but at the same time fails to escape the confining, because so deeply engrained, structures that it has inherited from a phallogocentric history. What Derrida is making a move towards is a thinking that dances, mobilises its way out of this double-bind by being open to the "*to-come*".

Why should a new 'idea' of woman or a new step taken by her necessarily be subjected to the urgency of this topo-economical concern (essential, it is true, and ineradicably philosophical)? This step only constitutes a step on the condition that it challenge a certain idea of the *locus* [*lieu*] and the place [*place*] (the entire history of the West and its metaphysics) and that

it dance otherwise. This is very rare, if it is not impossible, and presents itself only in the form of the most unforeseeable and most innocent of chances. (Derrida 1982: 94)

Derrida is not naive to the fact that the unlocatable nature of this "dance-step" in relation to feminism has implications for its political impact. It is not easy for an energy, a thought, so mobile to revolt in the normal (patriarchal) way. It faces the trick of overthrowing metaphysical thought and "re-placing" it with something that is concerned with disseminating notions of "place". Indeed, Derrida recognizes that the very *difficulty* of this "new 'idea' of woman" "serve[s] as an alibi for deserting organized, patient, laborious 'feminist' struggles when brought into contact with all the forms of resistances that a dance movement cannot dispel, even though the dance is not synonymous with powerlessness or fragility" (Derrida 1982: 95). In other words, the events of a "dancing revolution" move vertiginously close to the impossible but, the point is, they will always have chance. This is precisely why it is essential for feminism to resist impatience, and for woman to resist rushing towards a place for herself via (masculine) definitions of her desire and subjectivity. If Derrida is accused of being non-political it is because he does not abandon the productive subtlety that characterises the paradoxes of feminine thought. Or perhaps more specifically, in spite of the enormous pressures of a masculine discourse, he refuses to separate outside from inside, public from private, action from thought, politics from desire. Instead, he writes at the level of a "microscopic" politics, refusing to give up a particular dream, bound up with feminism but not restricted by its "ism", where a more radical revolution, evolution, would take place in imagination, in a different way of thinking: "Each man and each woman must commit his or her own singularity, the untranslatable factor of his or her life and death" (Derrida 1982: 95).

For Derrida, this stress on the idea of singularity arises because he sees within it the opportunity to pass beyond the "difference" of sexual difference.⁴ That is not to say that this difference should be over-looked or erased in the search for a sameness, far from it. It is more that this "difference" should be addressed, not

only at a public or general level, where Man and Woman stand apart, but also at the more private level of singular experience.⁵ This has to do with focusing on the way every imagination thinks itself, its desire, consciously and unconsciously, in terms of its space-time in life and death.⁶ The *affirmation* of singularity, of trying to allow for the untranslatable complexities of every inner-life/desire, makes a move away from conscious rationalism by opening itself to the possibilities of the other (and not the Other as Truth), the desire that is not known.

Derrida highlights the fact that "the truth value" of metaphysics stems from the notion of "Woman as the major allegory of truth in Western discourse". Similarly, "Femininity" is taken as "the essence or truth of Woman". It follows then, in this discourse, that "Femininity" is Truth, an "ecstatic projection", and is, therefore, far-removed from the body of woman in "reality" (96). It is in the blinding light of this Truth, of this untouchable Ideal, that woman becomes transparent, non-existent, Other. Man cannot see *her* for looking at *Her*. This continued search for Woman as Truth provides the focus that Man preoccupies himself with in metaphysical thought, even when the thought claims to be feminine. Thus, within this discourse, Woman becomes Man's conception instead of her own. It is precisely within the space provided by the interrogation of these preoccupations that Derrida moves.

These are the places that one should acknowledge, at least that is if one is interested in doing so; they are the foundations or anchorings of Western rationality (of what I have called "phallogocentrism" [as the complicity of Western metaphysics with a notion of male firstness]). Such recognition should not make of either the truth value or femininity an object of knowledge (at stake are the norms of knowledge and knowledge as norm); still less should it make of them a place to inhabit, a home. It should rather permit the invention of another inscription, one very old and very new, a displacement of bodies and places that is quite different. (Derrida 1982: 96)

Derrida would always want to challenge any discourse that upholds "knowledge [fixity] as norm". In response to the question as to whether this letting go of "knowledge as norm" provides "a 'new' concept of woman", Derrida again side-steps this entire (phallogocentric) logic by challenging the question, and the assumptions behind it, rather than resting on an answer. "The concept of concept, along with the entire system that attends it, belongs to a prescriptive order. It is that order that a problematic of woman and a problematic of difference, as sexual difference, should disrupt along the way" (Derrida 1982: 100). In other words, this "prescriptive order", an order of strict categorisation, is the system that a "problematic of woman", a problematic of non-conceptual thought, should disrupt.⁷

It is the performance of "non-knowledge", or at least the celebratory acknowledgement of *different* ways of "knowing", that interests Derrida. Notions of sexual difference, if they are to be positive, productive, creative, *real*, have to be thought of in terms of this affirmation. The thought of "difference" has to take account of something that has not been previously introduced and that would seem monstrous to *any* notion of an identifiable self. It has to take account of that which belongs to the body, to the other, to the other's body (male or female) and to that which will always be surprising, unpredictable. Inscribed in the very *ability* to ask the question as to whether there are ways of thinking about life and woman *other* than the ways of metaphysics is in itself an affirmation. As Derrida suggests: "Does the dream itself not prove that what is dreamt of must be there in order for it to provide the dream?" (Derrida 1982: 108). It is the *dream* of another way of being, the very idea, that creates the space for a more dynamic, feminised politics and an inscription that would mark time for woman (as opposed to Woman, the metaphysical Ideal). What is there of nihilism in this tone? To me it sounds monstrously creative.

Endnotes

1 According to Battersby's Kant, even although the appearances of things in the phenomenal world might change, as in the caterpillar to the butterfly (p.69),

ontologically speaking, there is still a more primitive "substance" which constitutes the noumena, or essence, of the phenomena. The phenomena might change in space, but the noumena remains across time. This constitutes the fixed matter from which the transcendental self can separate itself ("that is not me") and stabilise an identifiable existence.

2 This aspiration of patience within thought is necessary for a more sophisticated feminism if it wants to avoid all that is negative and reductive within the closures of phallogocentric discourses. Franz Kafka dances around the idea so very gracefully: "All human errors are impatience, a premature breaking-off of methodical procedure, an apparent fencing-in of what is apparently at issue" (Kafka: Aphorism 2).

3 Irigaray notes: "... in many traditions, the dance of the veil is the sexual rite *par excellence*, a dance with a mystery and a cosmic reality that is at once prior to and beyond an already-constituted subjectivity. The scene is played out by the Mother-Goddess or the Betrothed, the gods and the universe. It does not cover nothingness; it attempts to pass through the veil of illusion to reach act/gesture creating or begetting the world" (Irigaray 1977: 87). It is interesting to note that Battersby, being so anti-Derrida, should on the whole claim to be writing The Phenomenal Woman "with Irigaray". Irigaray's most inventive and influential writing owes much to Derridean thought, as is particularly apparent in "The Poverty of Psychoanalysis".

4 When I say pass beyond the "difference" here I have in mind Irigaray's view that: "The subject always speaks in the same gender (unless it exposes the flaw in its own truth)" (Irigaray 1977: 79). To speak unselfconsciously of "difference" within a phallogocentric discourse is to recognise no difference at all. When addressing Lacan Irigaray points out: "You reduce everything to an equivalence where nothing has any value. Your language [*langue*] is nothing but a cheap imitation which is unconscious of its own nature" (Irigaray 1977: 88).

5 In a seminar on feminism called "Women in the Beehive", Derrida asserts: "In our language, when one says 'Man' with a capital M and 'Woman' with a capital W ... it's not at all the same, not at all, because 'man' with a capital M means 'mankind'. Woman with a capital W means ... Truth or things like that, but doesn't mean mankind or womankind" (Derrida 1978: 195). It is with this structure in mind that I employ the upper-case at various points throughout the rest of the essay. See also Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Eperons: les styles de Nietzsche (1978).

6 In "Sexual Difference" Irigaray emphasises the importance of our relationship to notions of time and space when considering alternative approaches to desire and thought. "The transition to a new age in turn necessitates a new perception and a new conception of *time and space*, our *occupation of place*, and the different *envelopes known as identity*. It assumes and entails an evolution or transformation of forms, of the relationship of matter to form and of the interval *between* the two... Desire occupies or designates the place of the *interval*. A permanent definition of desire would put an end to desire" (Irigaray 1982: 167).

7 The refusal to comply, or, to put it crudely, to give a straight answer, is the Derridean characteristic which seems to irritate and infuriate so many people, not only Battersby. Yet it is precisely by way of a rigorous adherence to this characteristic that he takes part in a very different kind of thinking.

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First Response

This is patient, lucid work of a high quality. Derrida's thinking on "theoretical monsters" and on "woman" are utilised with great surety in a convincing argument with the feminised Kantianism of Catherine Battersby's important recent book The Phenomenal Woman (1998). This article should be recommended to anyone working in the fields of deconstruction and feminist philosophy/criticism.