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RESPONSE TO TORIL MOI

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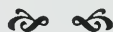
I am delighted to have the opportunity to comment on a paper by Toril Moi, whose work I much admire, and in particular to comment on this paper, which I consider to be not only brilliant but downright inspiring on many different levels. I am especially grateful to her for being willing to share her paper with us ahead of time. I do not want to take much of your time, so let me try to get expeditiously to what I find most suggestive and inspiring about this wonderful paper. Professor Moi rightly insists that we must try to get beyond “a debilitatingly narrow set of binary oppositions,” which have created an impasse in contemporary thought. These include (and I am stretching beyond her in some cases to dig out binaries that I think are present but not always explicitly formulated as such by her): theory vs. autobiography, equality vs. difference, essentialism vs. complete nominalism, monolithic causality vs. no causality at all, and so on. Her paper does *not* propose to *break through* this impasse in any of the usual ways, to deconstruct it, to blow it up, or to pretend that it does not exist. She does *not* rehearse all the old arguments on these vexed issues. Instead she argues in the deepest and most refreshing sense for “patience”: speaking of a key passage in Beauvoir she says, “I want to suggest instead that if we allow ourselves to be patient with this passage, it will emerge as the cornerstone of a truly original effort to think beyond the narrow choice between theory and autobiography . . .” (2). Her own paper writes large this same patience as well as this same ambition to build the cornerstone of a truly original effort to think beyond narrow binaries. She does this here—as she did

in her remarkable paper on Freud's Dora's case—by reading with and into the grain of the argument rather than simply and insistently against it. This kind of reading “with” has fallen out of fashion, and I think it is worth underlining just how fruitful such a style of reading can be.

Appropriately, her paper, I think, is about metaphor. She is seeking a way to understand “embodied subjectivity” in ways that valorize but do not reduce to gender. She finds a possible solution in Merleau-Ponty's “phenomenological materialism,” that is, in the metaphor of foreground/background. Foreground and background are precisely not binaries, I take her to be arguing. They represent alternating perspectives, rather than fixed categories, embodiments rather than discursive projections, or as she puts it, ways of understanding body as *presupposing* agency and at the same time as *enabling* agency to come into being. Agency here is not the space between or the space created by discursive systems; it has a location, dare I say, even an “origin,” perhaps to be safe, let us say, a “source.” Many have remarked on how “body” in cultural studies has come to mean all too often “writing about bodies.” This is what I mean by discursive projections rather than true embodiments. Ethnographers, in particular, have insisted that we need to return to some kind of kinesthetic sense of embodiment, to how it feels to be in a body. Professor Moi offers us ways of understanding the theoretical stakes of such kinesthetic embodiment through the particular understanding of this process of a singular, specific person, Simone de Beauvoir. Thus embodiment allows her to negotiate the terrain between theory and autobiography, as well as all the other binaries I listed before.

Now, it is not accidental, I suspect, that she has chosen her metaphor from the world of sculpture/architecture rather than literature (that is, from embodied as opposed to discursive aesthetics) or that she wants to align herself with Merleau-Ponty rather than, say, Derrida or Freud. By mentioning, albeit in passing, “phenomenological materialism,” she aims, it seems to me, to cut across the usual categories: she wants materialism without reductionism and perception without idealism. She thereby suggests that seeing is not just reading, that being IS be-

coming, that it is possible to theorize the practices of everyday life, that experience is not an empty discursive category but rather a pattern of shifting perceptions that calls out to be traced. Her invocation of Frantz Fanon is especially telling in this regard. Nothing goes without saying, but saying something is not just a mental operation. Her paper is one of the most astute and economical prescriptions that I have seen for intellectual work in our post-paradigm world. It requires patience, alright, for Professor Moi herself seems to refuse to prescribe, to lay out a fully formed new paradigm. Instead, she offers a way of seeing, ways of thinking about our ways of seeing. She does not offer to solve all the problems, but she does show, I think, how maintaining the sense of tension between background and foreground, perception and material determinations, body and self can provide us with new materials and new perceptions for understanding the world.



Le Corps et L'Esprit
in French Cultural Production



Paroles Gelées

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Selected Proceedings from
UCLA French Graduate Students'
Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference

Le Corps et L'Esprit in French Cultural Production

Selected Proceedings from
The UCLA French Department Graduate Students'
Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference
April 16–18, 1999

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,
Le Quart Livre

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