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Interview: Choreographies: Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald

Author(s): Christie V. McDonald and Jacques Derrida

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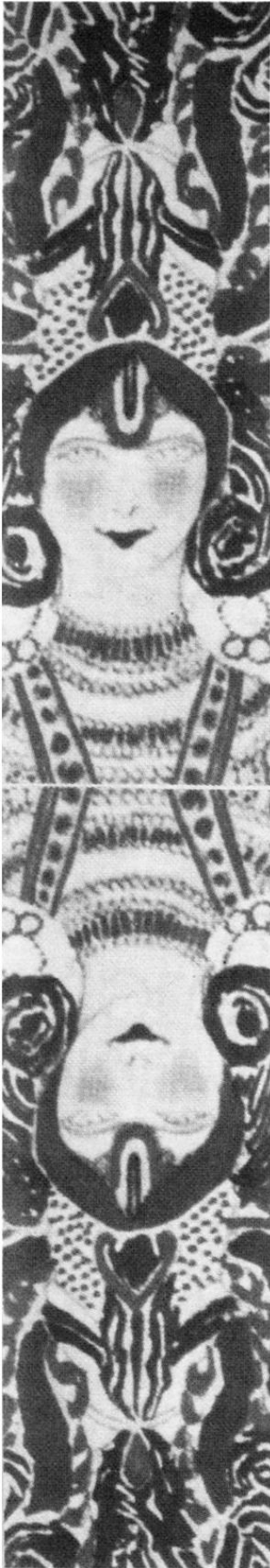
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## INTERVIEW

# CHOREOGRAPHIES

JACQUES DERRIDA and CHRISTIE V. MCDONALD

### Question 1<sup>1</sup>

MCDONALD: 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." Jacques Derrida, you have written about the question of woman and what it is that constitutes 'the feminine.' In *Spurs/Eperons* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), a text devoted to Nietzsche, style and woman, you wrote that "that which will not be pinned down by truth [truth?] is, in truth, *feminine*." And you warned that such a proposition "should not . . . be hastily mistaken for a woman's femininity, for female sexuality, or for any other of those essentializing fetishes which might still tantalize the dogmatic philosopher, the impotent artist or the inexperienced seducer who has not yet escaped his foolish hopes of capture."

What seems to be at play as you take up Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche is whether or not sexual difference is a "regional question in a larger order which would subordinate it first to the domain of general ontology, subsequently to that of a fundamental ontology and finally to the question of the truth [whose?] of being itself." You thereby question the status of the argument and at the same time the question itself. In this instance, if the question of sexual difference is not a regional one (in the sense of subsidiary), if indeed "it may no longer even be a question," as you suggest, how would you describe 'woman's place'?

DERRIDA: Will I be able to write improvising my responses as I go along? It would be more worthwhile, wouldn't it? Too premeditated an interview would be without interest here. I do not see the particular finality of such an endeavor, its proper end. It would be interminable, or, rather, with respect to these questions – which are much too difficult – I would never have even dared to begin. There are other texts, other occasions for such very calculated premeditation. 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. We will therefore not leave time to come back to what is behind us, nor to look attentively. We will only take a glimpse. [In French, to take a glimpse is to look into the spaces between things, *entrevoir*, that is, inter-view.]

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<sup>1</sup> The following text is the result of a written exchange carried on during the fall of 1981. Jacques Derrida wrote his responses in French, and I then translated them into English for publication. It should be noted that I do not ask the following questions in the name of any specific feminist group or ideology. I do nevertheless owe a debt to longstanding conversations on the subject of "Woman" and "Women" with, among others, A. Jardine, C. Lévesque, N. Miller, N. Schor and especially J. McDonald.

It was a good idea to begin with a quotation, one by a feminist from the end of the nineteenth century maverick enough to ask of the feminist movement its questions and conditions. Already, already a sign of life, a sign of the dance.

One can question the repetition. Was the matrix of what was to be the future of feminism already there at the end of the last century? You smile, no doubt, as I do, at the mention of this word. [The word matrix in English like *matrice* in French comes from the Latin *matrix* meaning womb. In both languages it has taken on, among others, the following two meanings: 1) a situation or surrounding substance within which something originates, develops, or is contained; 2) in printing it means a metal plate used for casting typefaces.] Let us make use of this figure from anatomy or printing a bit longer to ask whether a program, or locus of begetting, was not already in place in the nineteenth century for all those configurations to which the feminist struggle of the second half of the twentieth century was to commit itself and then to develop. I refer here to their being in place at all levels – those of socio-political demands, alliances with other forces, the alternatives of compromise or various radicalisms, the strategies of discourses, various forms of writing, theory or literature, etc. One is often tempted to think of this program – and to arrive by way of conclusion at the stasis of a simple combinatory scheme – in terms of all that is interminable and exhausting in it. Yes, it is exhausting (because it always draws on the same fund of possibilities) and tedious because of the ensuing repetition.

This is only one of the paradoxes. The development of the present struggle (or struggles) is extraordinary not only in its quantitative extension within Europe – because of its progress and the masses that have been slowly aroused – but also, and this is a much more important phenomenon I believe, outside of Europe. And such progress brings with it new types of historical research, other forms of reading, the discovery of new bodies of material that have gone unrecognized or misunderstood up until now; that is to say, they have been excessively [*violemment*] concealed or marginalized. 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. And if there is no doubt that this theatre, upon which the progress of feminist struggles is staged, exists, it is a relatively short and very recent sequence within “extreme-Western” history. Certainly, it is not timely politically, nor in any case is it possible, to neglect or renounce such a view of “liberation.” However, to credit this representation of progress and entrust everything to it would be to surrender to a sinister mystification: everything would collapse, flow, founder in this same homogenized, sterilized river of the history of mankind [man’s kind in the locution *l’histoire des hommes*]. This history carries along with it the age-old dream of reappropriation, “liberation,” autonomy, mastery, in short the *cortège* of metaphysics and the *tekhnè*. The indications of this repetition are more and more numerous. The specular reversal of masculine “subjectivity,” even in its most self-critical form – that is, where it is nervously jealous both of itself and of its “proper” objects – probably represents only one necessary phase. Yet it still belongs to the same program, a program whose exhaustion we were just talking about. It is true that this is valid for the whole of our culture, our scholastics, and the trouble may be found everywhere that this program is in command, or almost everywhere.

I have not begun as yet to answer your question, but, if you will forgive me, I am going to try to approach it slowly. It was necessary to recall the fact that this “silent past” (as that which was passed-over-in-silence) could still reserve some surprises, like the dance of your “maverick feminist.”

MCDONALD: Yes, and in that respect, recognition of the paradox suggests that while nineteenth century and late twentieth century feminism do resemble each other, it is less because of their historical matrix than because of those characteristics which define them.

True, the program was in place.<sup>2</sup> The resurgence in the United States during the nineteen sixties of anarchist-like attitudes, particularly within the feminist movement, attests to that. But Goldman was not before or behind the times. An admirer of Nietzsche as “rebel and innovator,” she proclaimed that “revolution is but thought carried into action.” She was an activist unable to support those forms of organized feminism that focused on merely contesting the institutionalizing of inequalities for women. Her stance was more radical – one that called for the restructuring of society as a whole. If she refused the vote, for example, it was because she deemed that behind standard forms of political action there lay coercion. As an anarchist-feminist she had no truck with statism.

*DERRIDA:* Perhaps woman does not have a history, not so much because of any notion of the “Eternal Feminine” but because all alone she can resist and step back from a certain history (precisely in order to dance) in which revolution, or at least the “concept” of revolution, is generally inscribed. That history is one of continuous progress, despite the revolutionary break – oriented in the case of the women’s movement towards the reappropriation of woman’s own essence, her own specific difference, oriented in short towards a notion of woman’s “truth.” Your “maverick feminist” showed herself ready to break with the most authorized, the most dogmatic form of consensus, one that claims (and this is the most serious aspect of it) to speak out in the name of revolution and history. Perhaps she was thinking of a completely other history: a history of paradoxical laws and non-dialectical discontinuities, a history of absolutely heterogeneous pockets, irreducible particularities, of unheard of and incalculable sexual differences; a history of women who have – centuries ago – “gone further” by stepping back with their lone dance, or who are today inventing sexual idioms at a distance from the main forum of feminist activity with a kind of reserve that does not necessarily prevent them from subscribing to the movement and even, occasionally, from becoming a militant for it.

But I am speculating. It would be better to come back to your question. Having passed through several detours or stages you wonder how I would describe what is called “woman’s place”; the expression recalls, if I am not mistaken, “in the home” or “in the kitchen.” Frankly, I do not know. I believe that I would not describe that place. In fact, I would be wary of such a description. Do you not fear that having once become committed to the path of this topography, we would inevitably find ourselves back “at home” or “in the kitchen”? Or under house arrest, *assignation à résidence* as they say in French penitentiary language, which would amount to the same thing? Why must there be a place for woman? And why only one, a single, completely essential place?

This is a question that you could translate ironically by saying that in my view *there is no one place for woman*. That was indeed clearly set forth during the 1972 Cerisy Colloquium devoted to Nietzsche in the lecture to which you referred entitled *Spurs/Eperons*. It is without a doubt risky to say that there is no place for woman, but this idea is not anti-feminist, far from it; true, it is not feminist either. But it appears to me to be faithful in its way both to a certain assertion of women and to what is most affirmative and “dancing,” as the maverick feminist says, in the displacement of women. Can one not say, in Nietzsche’s language, that there is a “reactive” feminism, and that a certain historical necessity often puts this form of feminism in power in today’s organized struggles? It is this kind of “reactive” feminism that Nietzsche mocks, and not woman or women. Perhaps one should not so much combat it head on – other interests would be at stake in such a move – as prevent its occupying the entire terrain. And why for that matter should one rush into answering a *topological* question (what is *the* place of woman [quelle est la place de la femme])? Or an *economical* question (because it all comes back to *loikos* as home, *maison*, *chez-soi* [at home in this sense also means in French within the self], the law of the proper place, etc. in the preoccupation with a woman’s place)? 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

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<sup>2</sup>On August 26, 1970, a group of women calling themselves the Emma Goldman Brigade marched down Fifth Avenue in New York City with many other feminists, chanting: “Emma said it in 1910 / Now we’re going to say it again.”

condition that it challenge a certain idea of the *locus* [*lieu*] and the place [*place*] (the entire history of the West and of 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. The most innocent of dances would thwart the *assignation à résidence*, escape those residences under surveillance; the dance changes place and above all changes *places*. In its wake they can no longer be recognized. The joyous disturbance of certain women's movements, and of some women in particular, has actually brought with it the chance for a certain risky turbulence in the assigning of places within our small European space (I am not speaking of a more ample upheaval en route to world-wide application). Is one then going to start all over again making maps, topographics, etc.? distributing sexual identity cards?

The most serious part of the difficulty is the necessity to bring the dance and its tempo into tune with the "revolution." The lack of place for [*l'atopie*] or the madness of the dance – this bit of luck can also compromise the political chances of feminism and serve as an alibi for deserting organized, patient, laborious "feminist" struggles when brought into contact with all the forms of resistance that a dance movement cannot dispel, even though the dance is not synonymous with either powerlessness or fragility. I will not insist on this point, but you can surely see the kind of impossible and necessary compromise that I am alluding to: an incessant, daily negotiation – individual or not – sometimes microscopic, sometimes punctuated by a poker-like gamble; always deprived of insurance, whether it be in private life or within institutions. Each man and each woman must commit his or her own singularity, the untranslatable factor of his or her life and death.

Nietzsche makes a scene before women, feminists in particular – a spectacle which is overdetermined, divided, apparently contradictory. This is just what has interested me; this scene has interested me because of all the paradigms that it exhibits and multiplies, and insofar as it often struggles, sometimes dances, always takes chances in a historical space whose essential traits, those of the matrix, have perhaps not changed since then in Europe (I mean specifically in Europe, and that perhaps makes all the difference although we cannot separate world-wide feminism from a certain fundamental europeanization of world culture; this is an enormous problem that I must leave aside here). In *Spurs/Eperons* I have tried to formalize the movements and typical moments of the scene that Nietzsche creates throughout a very broad and diverse body of texts. I have done this up to a certain limit, one that I also indicate, where the decision to formalize fails for reasons that are absolutely structural. Since these typical features are and must be unstable, sometimes contradictory, and finally "undecidable," any break in the movement of the reading would settle in a counter-meaning, in *the meaning* which becomes counter-meaning. This counter-meaning can be more or less naive or complacent. One could cite countless examples of it. In the most perfunctory of cases, the simplification reverts to the isolation of Nietzsche's violently anti-feminist statements (directed first against reactive, specular feminism as a figure both of the dogmatic philosopher and a certain relationship of man to truth), pulling them out (and possibly attributing them to me though that is of little importance) of the movement and system that I try to reconstitute. Some have reacted at times even more perfunctorily, unable to see beyond the end of phallic forms projecting into the text; beginning with style, the spur or the umbrella, they take no account of what I have said about the difference between style and writing or the bisexual complication of those and other forms. Generally speaking, this cannot be considered reading, and I will go so far as to say that it is to *not read* the syntax and punctuation of a given sentence when one arrests the text in a certain position, thus settling on a thesis, meaning or truth. This mistake of hermeneutics, this mistaking of hermeneutics – it is this that the final message [*envoi*] of "I forgot my umbrella" should challenge. But let us leave that. The truth value (that is, Woman as the major allegory of truth in Western discourse) and its correlative, Femininity (the essence or truth of Woman), are there to assuage such hermeneutic anxiety. 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 an other inscription, one very old and very new, a displacement of bodies and places that is quite different.

You recalled the expression “essentializing fetishes” (truth, femininity, the essentiality of woman or feminine sexuality as fetishes). It is difficult to improvise briefly here. But I will point out that one can avoid a trap by being precise about the concept of fetishism and the context to which one refers, even if only to displace it. (On this point, I take the liberty of alluding to the discussions of fetishism and feminine sexuality in *Spurs*, *Glas* or *La carte postale*, specifically in *Le facteur de la vérité*.) Another trap is more political and can only be avoided by taking account of the *real* conditions in which women’s struggles develop on all fronts (economic, ideological, political). These conditions often require the preservation (within longer or shorter phases) of metaphysical presuppositions that one must (and knows already that one must) question in a later phase – or an other place – because they belong to the dominant system that one is deconstructing on a *practical level*. This multiplicity of places, moments, forms and forces does not always mean giving way either to empiricism or to contradiction. How can one breathe without such punctuation and without the multiplicities of rhythm and steps? How can one dance, your “maverick feminist” might say?

*MCDONALD*: This raises an important question that should not be overlooked, although we haven’t the space to develop it to any extent here: the complicated relationship of a practical politics to the kinds of analysis that we have been considering (specifically the “deconstructive” analysis implicit in your discussion). That this relationship cannot simply be translated into an opposition between the empirical and the non-empirical has been touched on in an entirely different context.<sup>3</sup> Just how one is to deal with the interrelationship of these forces and necessities in the context of feminine struggles should be more fully explored on some other occasion. But let’s go on to Heidegger’s ontology.

*DERRIDA*: To answer your question about Heidegger, and without being able to review here the itinerary of a reading in *Spurs/Eperons* clearly divided into two moments, I must limit myself to a piece of information, or rather to an open question. The question proceeds, so to speak, from the end; it proceeds from the point where the thought of the gift [*le don*]<sup>4</sup> and that of “appropriation” disturbs without simply reversing the order of ontology, the authority of the question “what is it,” the subordination of regional ontologies to one fundamental ontology. I am moving much too rapidly, but how can I do otherwise here? From this point, which is not a point, one wonders whether this extremely difficult, perhaps impossible idea of the gift can still maintain an essential relationship to sexual difference. One wonders whether sexual difference, femininity for example – however irreducible it may be – does not remain derived from and subordinated to either the question of destination or the thought of the gift (I say “thought” because one cannot say philosophy, theory, logic, structure, scene or anything else; when one can no longer use any word of this sort, when one can say almost nothing else, one says “thought,” but one could show that this too is excessive). I do not know. Must one think “difference” “before” sexual difference or taking off “from” it? Has this question, if not a meaning (we are at the origin of meaning here, and the origin cannot “have meaning”) at least something of a chance of opening up anything at all, however im-pertinent it may appear?

## Question II

*MCDONALD*: You put into question the characteristic form of women’s protest, namely the subordination of woman to man. I shall attempt here to describe the direction of your argument, as I understand it, and then comment on it.

The new sense of writing (*écriture*) with which one associates the term deconstruction has emerged from the close readings that you have given to texts as divergent as those of Plato, Rousseau, Mallarmé and others. It is one in which traditional binary pairing (as in the

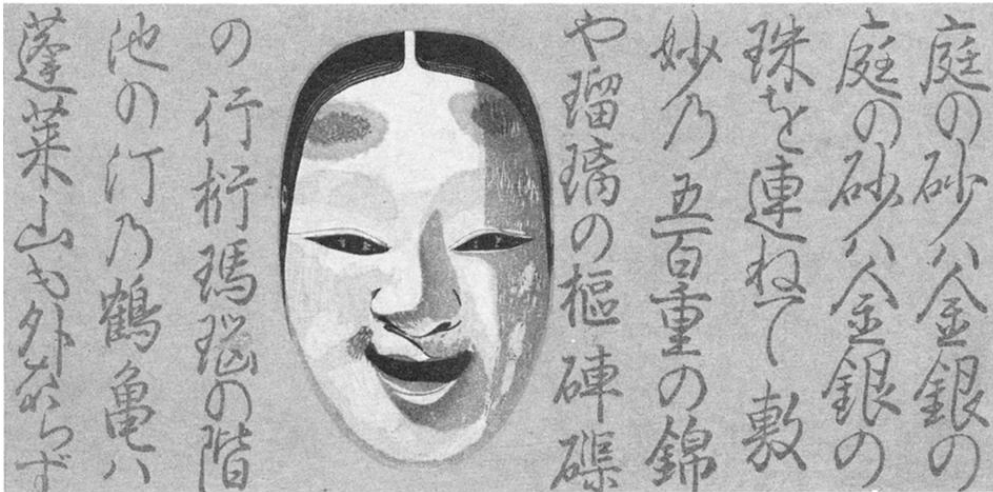
<sup>3</sup>See Rodolphe Gasché, “La bordure interne,” and the response by Jacques Derrida, in *L’oreille de l’autre: textes et débats avec Jacques Derrida*, ed. C. Lévesque and C. McDonald, VLB, Montreal, 1982.

<sup>4</sup>The gift is a topic that occurs in a number of recent texts, among others: *Glas*, *Eperons*, *La carte postale*. TN.

opposition of spirit to matter or man to woman) no longer functions by the privilege given to the first term over the second. In a series of interviews published under the title *Positions* in 1972, you spoke of a two-phase program (phase being understood as a structural rather than a chronological term) necessary for the act of deconstruction.

In the first phase a reversal was to take place in which the opposed terms would be inverted. Thus woman, as a previously subordinate term, might become the dominant one in relation to man. Yet because such a scheme of reversal could only repeat the traditional scheme (in which the hierarchy of duality is always reconstituted), it alone could not effect any significant change. Change would only occur through the 'second' and more radical phase of deconstruction in which a 'new' concept would be forged simultaneously. The motif of *différance*, as neither a simple 'concept' nor a mere 'word,' has brought us the now familiar constellation of attendant terms: trace, supplement, pharmakon and others. Among the others, two are marked sexually and in their most widely recognized sense pertain to the woman's body: *hymen* (the logic of which is developed in *La double séance*) and *double invagination* (a leitmotif in *Living On/Borderlines*).

Take only the term hymen in which there is a confusion or continuation of the term coitus, and from which it gets its double meaning: 1) "a membranous fold of tissue partly or completely occluding the vaginal external orifice" [from the Greek for *membrane*] and 2)



marriage [from Greek mythology; the god of marriage]. In the first sense the hymen is that which protects virginity, and is in front of the uterus. That is, it lies between the inside and the outside of the woman, between desire and its fulfillment. So that although (male) desire dreams of violently piercing or breaking the hymen (consummation in the second sense of the term), if that happens there is no hymen.

It seems to me that while the extensive play on etymologies (in which unconscious motivations are traced through the transformations and historical excesses of usage) effects a displacement of these terms, it also poses a problem for those who would seek to define what is specifically feminine. That comes about not so much because these terms are either under or over-valued as parts belonging to woman's body. It is rather that, in the economy of a movement of writing that is always elusive, one can never decide properly whether the particular term implies complicity with or a break from existent ideology. Perhaps this is because, as Adam says of Eve in Mark Twain's satire, *The Diary of Adam and Eve*, not only does the "new creature name . . . everything" because "it looks like the thing," but – and this is the crux of the matter – "her mind is disordered [or, if you like, Nietzschean] – everything shows it."

In this regard there comes to mind a footnote to p. 207 of *La double séance*, concerning the displacement of writing, its transformation and generalization. The example cited is that of a surgeon who, upon learning of Freud's own difficulty in admitting to the possibility of masculine hysteria, exclaims to him: "But, my dear colleague, how can you state such absurdities? *Hysteron* means uterus. How therefore could a man be a hysteric?"

How can we change the representation of woman? Can we move from the rib where woman is wife ("She was called Woman because she was taken from man" – Genesis 2:23) to the womb where she is mother ("man is born of woman" – Job 14:13) without essential loss? Do we have in your view the beginning of phase two, a 'new' concept of woman?

*DERRIDA*: No, I do not believe that we have one, if indeed it is possible to *have* such a thing or if such a thing could exist or show promise of existing. Personally, I am not sure that I feel the lack of it. Before having one that is new, are we certain of having had an old one? It is the word "concept" or "conception" that I would in turn question in its relationship to any essence which is rigorously or properly identifiable. This would bring us back to the preceding questions. The concept of the 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. Moreover, I am not sure that "phase two" marks a split with "phase one," a split whose form would be a cut along an indivisible line. The relationship between these two phases doubtless has another structure. I spoke of two distinct phases for the sake of clarity, but the relationship of one phase to another is marked less by conceptual determinations (that is, where a new concept follows an archaic one) than by a transformation or general deformation of logic; such transformations or deformations mark the "logical" element or environment itself by moving, for example, beyond the "positional" (difference determined as opposition, whether or not dialectically). This movement is of great consequence for the discussion here, even if my formulation is apparently abstract and disembodied. One could, I think, demonstrate this: when sexual difference is determined by *opposition* in the dialectical sense (according to the Hegelian movement of speculative dialectics which remains so powerful even beyond Hegel's text), one appears to set off "the war between the sexes"; but one precipitates the end with victory going to the masculine sex. The determination of sexual difference in opposition is destined, designed, in truth, for truth; it is so in order to erase sexual difference. The dialectical opposition neutralizes or supersedes [Hegel's term *Aufhebung* carries with it both the sense of conserving and negating. No adequate translation of the term in English has yet been found] the difference. However, according to a surreptitious operation that must be flushed out, one insures phallogocentric mastery under the cover of neutralization every time. These are now well known paradoxes. And such phallogocentrism adorns itself now and then, here and there, with an appendix: a certain kind of feminism. In the same manner, phallogocentrism and homosexuality can go, so to speak, hand in hand, and I take these terms, whether it is a question of feminine or masculine homosexuality, in a very broad and radical sense.

And what if the "wife" or the "mother" – whom you seem sure of being able to dissociate – were figures for this homosexual dialectics? I am referring now to your question on the "representation" of woman and such "loss" as might occur in the passage from man's rib to the womb of woman, the passage from the spouse, you say, to the mother. Why is it necessary to choose, and why only these two possibilities, these two "places," assuming that one can really dissociate them?

*MCDONALD*: The irony of my initial use of the cliché "woman's place" which in the old saw is followed by "in the home" or "in the kitchen" leaves the whole wide world for other places for the same intent. As for the "place" of woman in *Genesis*, and *Job*, as rib (spouse) or womb (mother), these are more basic functional differences. Nevertheless, within these two traditional roles, to choose one implies loss of the other. You are correct in observing that such a choice is not necessary; there could be juxtaposition, substitution or other possible combinations. But these biblical texts are not frivolous in seeing the functional distinction which also has distinguished "woman's place" in Western culture.

*DERRIDA*: Since you quote Genesis, I would like to evoke the marvelous reading that Levinas has proposed of it without being clear as to whether he assumes it as his own or what the actual status of the "commentary" that he devotes to it is.<sup>5</sup> There would, of course, be a

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<sup>5</sup>Jacques Derrida refers here to the text *En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici* in *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas* (J. M. Place, Paris, 1980). *Derrida interprets two texts in particular by Levinas* (Le judaïsme et le féminin, in *Difficile liberté*, and *Et Dieu créa la femme*, in *Du sacré au saint*). In order to clarify this part of the discussion, I am translating the following passage from Derrida's text in which he



certain *secondariness* of woman, Ischa. The man, Isch, would come first; he would be number one; he would be at the beginning. *Secondariness*, however, would not be that of woman or femininity, but the *division* between masculine and feminine. It is not feminine sexuality that would be second but only the relationship to sexual difference. At the origin, on this side of and therefore beyond any sexual mark, there was humanity in general, and this is what is important. Thus the possibility of ethics could be saved, if one takes ethics to mean that relationship to the other as other which accounts for no other determination or sexual characteristic in particular. What kind of an ethics would there be if belonging to one sex or another became its law or privilege? What if the universality of moral laws were modelled on or limited according to the sexes? What if their universality were not unconditional, without sexual condition in particular?

Whatever the force, seductiveness or necessity of this reading, does it not risk restoring – in the name of ethics as that which is irreproachable – a classical interpretation, and thereby enriching what I would call its panoply in a manner surely as subtle as it is sublime? Once again, the classical interpretation gives a masculine sexual marking to what is presented either as a neutral originariness or, at least, as prior and superior to all sexual markings. Levinas indeed senses the risk factor involved in the erasure of sexual difference. He therefore maintains sexual difference: the human in general remains a sexual being. But he can only do so, it would seem, by placing (differentiated) sexuality beneath humanity which sustains itself at the level of the Spirit. That is, he simultaneously places, and this is what is important, masculinity [*le masculin*] in command and at the beginning (the *arkhè*), on a par with the Spirit. This gesture carries with it the most self-interested of contradictions; it has repeated itself, let us say, since “Adam and Eve,” and persists – in analogous form – into “modernity,” despite all the differences of style and treatment. Isn’t that a feature of the “matrix,” as we were saying before? or the “patrix” if you prefer, but it amounts to the same thing, does it not? Whatever the complexity of the itinerary and whatever the knots of rhetoric, don’t you think that the movement of Freudian thought repeats this “logic”? Is it not also the risk that Heidegger runs? One should perhaps say, rather, the risk that is *avoided* because phallogocentrism is insurance against the return of what certainly has been feared as the most agonizing risk of all. Since I have named Heidegger in a context where the reference is quite rare and may even appear strange, I would like to dwell on this for a moment, if you don’t mind, concerned that I will be both too lengthy and too brief.

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*quotes from and then comments upon Levinas’ commentary: “. . . The meaning of the ‘feminine’ will be clarified in this manner by beginning with the human essence; the female Isha [la Isha] begins with Ish: not that the feminine originates in the masculine, but rather the division into masculine and feminine – the dichotomy – starts with what is human. [ . . . ] Beyond the personal relationship established between two beings, each born of a discrete creative act, the specificity of the feminine is a secondary matter. It is not woman who is secondary; it is the relationship with woman as woman, and that does not belong to the primordial level of the human element. The first level consists of those tasks that man and woman each accomplishes as a human being. [ . . . ] In each of the passages that we are commenting upon right now, the problem lies in the reconciliation of men’s and women’s humanity with the hypothesis of masculine spirituality; the feminine is not the correlative of the masculine but its corollary; feminine specificity, as the difference between the sexes that it indicates, is not situated straightaway at the level of those opposites which constitute the Spirit. An audacious question, this one: how can equality of the sexes come from masculine “ownership” [la propriété du masculin]? [ . . . ] A difference was necessary that would not compromise equity: a difference of sex; and from then on, a certain pre-eminence of man, a woman whose arrival comes later and who is, as woman, the appendix of the human element. Now we understand the lesson. The idea of humanity is not thinkable from two entirely different principles. There must be a sameness [le même] common to others: woman was taken from man, but came after him: the very femininity of woman is in this inaugural after-thought.” (Et Dieu créa la femme, in Du sacré au saint). And Derrida follows up, commenting: “It is a strange logic, this ‘audacious question.’” One would have to comment each step of the way and verify that the secondariness of sexual difference signifies the secondariness of the feminine in every case (but why indeed?). One would have to verify that the initialness of what is pre-differential is always marked by the masculine; the masculine should come, like all sexual marks, only afterward. Such a commentary would be necessary, but I prefer to first underscore the following, in the name of protocol: he himself is commenting and says that he is commenting; one must bear in mind that this is not literally the discourse of E.L. He says, as he is discoursing, that he is commenting on doctors, at this very moment (“the passages upon which we are commenting at this moment,” and further along: “I am not taking sides; today I am commenting”). However, the distance of the commentary is not neuter. What he comments upon is consonant with a whole network of his own assertions, or those by him, “him” [pp. 53–4] TN.*

Heidegger seems almost never to speak about sexuality or sexual difference. And he seems almost never to speak about psychoanalysis, give or take an occasional negative allusion. This is neither negligence nor omission. The pauses coming from his silence on these questions punctuate or create the spacing out of a powerful discourse. And one of the strengths of this discourse may be stated (though I am going much too quickly and schematizing excessively) like this: it begins by denying itself all accepted forms of security, all the sedimented presuppositions of classical ontology, anthropology, the natural or human sciences, until it falls back this side of such values as the opposition between subject/object, conscious/unconscious, mind/body, and many others as well. The existential analytic of the *Dasein* opens the road, so to speak, leading to the question of being; the *Dasein* is neither the human being (a thought recalled earlier by Levinas) nor the subject, neither consciousness nor the self [*le moi*] (whether conscious or unconscious). These are all determinations that are derived from and occur after the *Dasein*. Now – and here is what I wanted to get to after this inadmissible acceleration – in a course given in 1928, Heidegger justifies to some degree the silence of *Sein und Zeit* on the question of sexuality [*Gesamtausgabe*, Band 26, No. 10, p. 171 ff.]. In a paragraph from the course devoted to the “Problem of the *Sein und Zeit*,” Heidegger reminds us that the analytic of the *Dasein* is neither an anthropology, an ethics nor a metaphysics. With respect to any definition, position or evaluation of these fields, the *Dasein* is *neuter*. Heidegger insists upon and makes clear this original and essential “neutrality” of the *Dasein*: “This neutrality means also that the *Dasein* is neither of the two sexes. But this a-sexuality (*Geschlechtlosigkeit*) is not the indifference of empty invalidity, the annulling negativity of an indifferent ontic nothingness. In its neutrality, the *Dasein* is not the indifferent person-and-everyone (*Niemand und Jeder*), but it is originary positivity and the power of being or of the essence, *Mächtigkeit des Wesen*. One would have to read the analysis that follows very closely; I will try to do that another time in relation to some of his later texts. The analysis emphasizes the positive character, as it were, of this originary and powerful a-sexual neutrality which is not the *neither-nor* (*Weder-noch*) of ontic abstraction. It is originary and ontological. More precisely, the a-sexuality does not signify in this instance the absence of sexuality – one could call it the instinct, desire or even the libido – but the absence of any mark belonging to one of the two sexes. Not that the *Dasein* does not ontically or in fact belong to a sex; not that it is deprived of sexuality; but the *Dasein* as *Dasein* does not carry with it the mark of this opposition (or alternative) between the two sexes. Insofar as these marks are opposable and binary, they are not existential structures. Nor do they allude in this respect to any primitive or subsequent bi-sexuality. Such an allusion would fall once again into anatomical, biological or anthropological determinations. And the *Dasein*, in the structures and “power” that are originary to it, would come “prior” to these determinations. I am putting quotation marks around the word “prior” because it has no literal, chronological, historical or logical meaning. Now, as of 1928, the analytic of the *Dasein* was the thought of ontological difference and the repetition of the question of being; it opened up a problematic that subjected all the concepts of traditional Western philosophy to a radical elucidation and interpretation. This gives an idea of what stakes were involved in a neutralization that fell back this side of both sexual difference and its binary marking, if not this side of sexuality itself. This would be the title of the enormous problem that in this context I must limit myself to merely naming: ontological difference and sexual difference.

And since your question evoked the “motif of difference,” I would say that it has moved, by displacement, in the vicinity of this very obscure area. What is also being sought in this zone is the passage between ontological difference and sexual difference; it is a passage that may no longer be thought, punctuated or opened up according to those polarities to which we have been referring for some time (originary/derived, ontological/ontic, ontology/anthropology, the thought of being/metaphysics or ethics, etc.). The constellation of terms that you have cited could *perhaps* be considered (for nothing is ever taken for granted or guaranteed in these matters) a kind of transformation of deformation of space; such a transformation would tend to extend beyond these poles and reinscribe them within it. Some of these terms, “hymen” or “invagination,” you were saying, “pertain in their most widely recognized sense to the woman’s body. . . .” Are you sure? I am grateful for your having used such a careful formulation. That these words signify “in their most widely recog-

nized sense" had, of course, not escaped me, and the emphasis that I have put on re-sexualizing a philosophical or theoretical discourse, which has been too "neutralizing" in this respect, was dictated by those very reservations that I just mentioned concerning the strategy of neutralization (whether or not it is deliberate). Such re-sexualizing must be done without facileness of any kind and, above all, without regression in relation to what might justify, as we saw, the procedures – or necessary steps – of Levinas or Heidegger, for example. That being said, "hymen" and "invagination," at least in the context into which these words have been swept, no longer simply designate figures for the feminine body. They no longer do so, that is, assuming that one knows for certain what a feminine or masculine body is, and assuming that anatomy is in this instance the final recourse. What remains undecidable concerns not only but also the line of cleavage between the two sexes. As you recalled, such a movement reverts neither to words nor to concepts. And what remains of language within it cannot be abstracted from the "performativity" (which marks and is marked) that concerns us here, beginning – for the examples that you have chosen – with the texts of Mallarmé and Blanchot, and with the labor of reading or writing which evoked them and which they in turn evoked. One could say quite accurately that the hymen *does not exist*. Anything constituting the value of existence is foreign to the "hymen." And if there were hymen – I am not saying if the hymen existed – property value would be no more appropriate to it for reasons that I have stressed in the texts to which you refer. How can one then attribute the *existence* of the hymen *properly* to woman? Not that it is any more the distinguishing feature of man or, for that matter, of the human creature. I would say the same for the term "invagination" which has, moreover, always been reinscribed in a chiasmus, one doubly folded, redoubled and inverted,<sup>6</sup> etc. From then on, is it not difficult to recognize in the movement of this term a "representation of woman"? Furthermore, I do not know if it is to a change in representation that we should entrust the future. As with all the questions that we are presently discussing, this one, and above all when it is put as a question of representation, seems at once too old and as yet to be born: a kind of old parchment crossed every which way, overloaded with hieroglyphs and still as virgin as the origin, like the early morning in the East from whence it comes. And you know that the word for parchment does not come from any "road" leading from Pergamus in Asia. I do not know how you will translate this last sentence.

*MCDONALD*: It is a problem. In modern English usage the word for parchment no longer carries with it the sense of the French *parchemin*, on or by the road, as the Middle English *perchement* or *parchemin* did. The American Heritage Dictionary traces the etymology thus: "Parthian (leather) from *pergamina*, parchment, from Greek *pergamene*, from *Pergamēnos*, or *Pergamun*, from *Pergamon*, . . ." Lempriere's Classical Dictionary says further that the town of Pergamus was founded by Philaeterus, a eunuch, and that parchment has been called the *charta pergamena*.

*DERRIDA*: The Littré Dictionary which gives the etymology for French makes war responsible for the appearance of "pergamena" or "Pergamina." It is thereby a product of war: one began to write on bodies and animal skins because papyrus was becoming very rare. They say too that parchment was occasionally prepared from the skin of still-born lambs. And according to Pliny, it was out of jealousy that Eumenes, king of Pergamus, turned to parchment. His rival, Ptolemies, the king of Egypt, was so proud of his library that he had only books written on paper. It was necessary to find new bodies of or for writing.

*MCDONALD*: I would like to come back to the writing of the dance, the choreography that you mentioned a while back. If we do not yet have a "new" "concept" of woman, because the radicalization of the problem goes beyond the "thought" or the concept, what are our chances of "thinking 'difference' not so much before sexual difference, as you say, as taking off 'from'" it? What would you say is our chance and "who" are we sexually?

*DERRIDA*: At the approach of this shadowy area it has always seemed to me that the voice itself had to be divided in order to say that which is given to thought or speech. No

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<sup>6</sup>This is an allusion to, among other things, all the passages on the so-called "argument of the gaine" ["sheath," "girdle"; cognate with "vagina"], in particular pp. 232 ff. 250 ff. Furthermore, the word "invagination" is always taken within the syntax of the expression "double invagination chiasmatisque des bords," in *Living On* (Deconstruction and Criticism, The Seabury Press, New York, 1979) and *The Law of Genre* (in *Glyph* 7). TN.

monological discourse – and by that I mean here mono-sexual discourse – can dominate with a single voice, a single tone, the space of this half-light, even if the “proffered discourse” is then signed by a sexually marked patronymic. Thus, to limit myself to one account, and not to propose an example, I have felt the necessity for a chorus, for a choreographic text with polysexual signatures.<sup>7</sup> I felt this every time that a legitimacy of the neuter, the apparently least suspect sexual neutrality of “phallogentric or gynocentric” mastery, threatened to immobilize (in silence), colonize, stop or unilateralize in a subtle or sublime manner what remains no doubt irreducibly dissymmetrical. More directly: a certain dissymmetry is no doubt the law both of sexual difference and the relationship to the other in general (I say this in opposition to a certain kind of violence within the language of “democratic” platitudes, in any case in opposition to a certain democratic ideology), yet the dissymmetry to which I refer is still let us not say symmetrical in turn (which might seem absurd), but doubly, unilaterally inordinate, like a kind of reciprocal, respective and respectful excessiveness. This double dissymmetry perhaps goes beyond known or coded marks, beyond the grammar and spelling, shall we say (metaphorically), of sexuality. This indeed revives the following question: what if we were to reach, what if we were to approach here (for one does not arrive at this as one would at a determined location) the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating? The relationship would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond bisexuality as well, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing. As I dream of saving the chance that this question offers I would like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminate number of blended voices, this mobile of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each “individual,” whether he be classified as “man” or as “woman” according to the criteria of usage. Of course, it is not impossible that desire for a sexuality without number can still protect us, like a dream, from an implacable destiny which immures everything for life in the figure 2. And should this merciless closure arrest desire at the wall of opposition, we would struggle in vain: there will never be but two sexes, neither one more nor one less. Tragedy would leave this strange sense, a contingent one finally, that we must affirm and learn to love instead of dreaming of the innumerable. Yes, perhaps; why not? But where would the “dream” of the innumerable come from, if it is indeed a dream? Does the dream itself not prove that what is dreamt of must be there in order for it to provide the dream? Then too, I ask you, what kind of a dance would there be, or would there be one at all, if the sexes were not exchanged according to rhythms that vary considerably? In a quite rigorous sense, the *exchange* alone could not suffice either, however, because the desire to escape the combinatory itself, to invent incalculable choreographies, would remain.

<sup>7</sup>This is an allusion to Pas, in *Gamma 3/4*, 1976, *La vérité en peinture*, 1978, *En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici* in *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, 1980, *Feu la cendre, to appear*. TN.

