

Nov-2000

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Recommended Citation

Keskinen, Mikko (2000). Her Mistress's Voice: Gynophonocentrism in Feminist Discourses. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 2(1), 1-15.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol2/iss1/1>

Her Mistress's Voice: Gynophonocentrism in Feminist Discourses

By Mikko Keskinen

Her voice was ever so soft,
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman
(Shakespeare, 1961: 215)

The logo of RCA-Victor records used to feature an image of a terrier keenly listening to “His Master’s Voice” which a phonograph trumpeted, presumably with such high fidelity that the poor creature mistook it for his actual master. This sharp-eared man’s best friend, a he-terrier called Nipper, epitomizes – besides the quality of analog sound reproduction – obedience, domestication, and the uneven distribution of articulatory power in the master/slave dialectics. A feminist critic is likely notice that the logo features this constellation in unmarked masculine terms: the he-dog stands for his whole breed and the master represents the human kind in general, thus including both sexes in the scope of the masculine gender. A patent feminist reading of such suppression of the feminine would suggest that patriarchy works exactly in this manner; the masculine master has not only the power to speak but also to command, and the servant holds the position of quiet submission.

From a historical perspective the link between the masculine gender, power, and the right to speak is indeed a solid one. Thus, the logo unintentionally gives away a fundamental structure of power. However, it is questionable whether the connection between articulatory power and gender is necessary or coincidental. What if we transexualize the logo? What will happen when we, so to speak, play the reverse side of the recording of the master’s and his servant’s relationship? The dog would now be a bitch, harking to her mistress’s disembodied voice and believing that it is a token of her true presence. The structure of power seems to remain intact in spite of the change in the sex. In the rhetoric of feminist discourses, such a reversal in the source of sound seems as commonplace as unreflected. Therefore, I will propose an analysis of the ways in and the possible purposes for which the imagery of voice is used in selected feminisms.

In the present article, I will be literally logo-centric: I will follow the spiral of implications from the feminized label to the very lead-in groove and finally go off the record. In other words, I will trace the metaphors of voice in the discourses of feminisms as articulated by Judith Fetterley, Kaja Silverman, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous. I will analyze the presuppositions of their vocal or sound imagery, paying special attention to the implications of the essentialism/constructivism opposition. It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive account of voice in feminisms, nor to make sweeping generalizations on the basis of a very limited corpus. Moreover, in spite of their differences in cultural background, period, and main area of study, the four theorists to be read are, as it were, within earshot from each other, centering, whether anglo- or francophone, around the phónè, the voice. Such themes as psychoanalysis and problems of literary representation and meaning are shared by the theorists, who, with the exception of Fetterley, could be called post-structuralists.

Why these four writers? Not only have they been influential in feminist theory and practice, but they have also contributed to my own speciality, literary criticism. If, as British critic Jacqueline Rose puts it, “[l]iterature served as a type of reference point for [American] feminism, as if it were at least partly through literature that feminism could recognise and theorise itself” (Rose, 1987: 10), perhaps literary theory could be used for the same purpose. In other words, I will read feminist theory as a post-structuralist literary critic, thus responding, echo-like, to its call of the literary selfhood. The four theorists have often been used as unreflected sources in feminist studies, without questioning their validity, not to mention their rhetoric. I will concentrate on the latter, which will no doubt have some bearing on the former as well.

I will utilize French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive critique of phonocentrism as a tentative hearing aid in my itinerary. I will also lend an ear to his critics, who have blamed Derrida’s idea of phonocentrism for both over-hearing and unsound scholarship. For the present purpose, I will coin the neologism gynophonocentrism, by which I mean the insistence of voice, speech, and the auditive in feminist discourses or in texts dealing with femininity, womanhood, or the female gender.

Basically, there is nothing wrong with the use of vocal metaphors in theoretical discourses. It is not, then, my intention to police the rhetoric of the four theorists or to suggest that their argumentation would have profited from choosing, say, the metaphors of inscription instead of voice or speech. What I am, however, emphasizing is that the unreflected use of any metaphors in a given text may bring about significations countering its apparent intent or at least expose it to ill-intentioned readings.

While deconstructive readings of theory implicitly seem to have a tendency to bare, and sometimes even mock, argumentative weaknesses and logical inconsistencies, it is my intention in this article to account for the strategic or political potential of the terrier-like insistence of voice in texts that otherwise muzzle the essentialized body.

Metaphysically Speaking; or, I Hear Voices

Speaking Freely, Radical Voices, Unheard Voices, Embodied Voices, Ventriloquized Voices, Dead Voices, New-Found Voices, The Voice of a Sainly Woman. These are but a few of similar titles given to books on feminist readings of literature, music, or critical theory. Why the figure of voice? Why the opening or muting of it? Why the recurrence of a metonymy, albeit supplemented with more or less improbable attributes? Leaving aside the possibility that voice qua metonymy of an intending subject sounds good in the ears of the publishing companies’ editors, the persistence of an auditive figure may presuppose, as an undertone, a more profound rationale. The voice is commonly, as if naturally, taken to connote presence, immediate self-expression, and intentionality of a speaking subject. Analogously, anything that goes against the vocal articulation relates to absence, deferred communication, and endangered mediation of intended meanings.

Jacques Derrida has called this privileging of speech over writing in Western thinking phonocentrism. In Derrida’s analysis, speech, voice, and spoken signifier are thought to be superior, because both the speaker and listener are simultaneously present to what is uttered. The speaker, speech, and listener are both temporally and spatially undistanced, for the utterer hears him/herself speak at the same time as the auditor does:

“My words are ‘alive’ because they seem not to leave me: not to fall outside me, outside my breath, at the visible distance ...” (Derrida, 1973: 76). By using transparent, or rather, invisible signifiers, speech appears to express truth and thought directly, seemingly without the difference between signifier and signified (Derrida, 1976: 8, 20). Through a series of deconstructive readings of philosophical texts dealing with the speech/writing dichotomy, Derrida radically re-evaluates the opposition by stating that both share the fundamental attributes of writing (institutioning and arbitrariness of signs). Derrida calls this writing-in-general arche-writing (*archi-écriture*), and it includes, as subcategories, a vocal and a graphic writing (Derrida, 1976: 44-45). Derrida’s idea of phonocentricity in Western thinking is by no means a widely acknowledged fact but has been criticized on several grounds. Strictly historically, his view may be too sweeping or totalizing, but this does not diminish the heuristic value of Derrida’s readings of particular texts.

My coinage, gynophonocentrism, takes after Derrida’s term but provocatively delimits its scope. In their survey of the word voice in feminism, American musicologists Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones state that it has been used to mean cultural agency, political enfranchisement, sexual autonomy, and expressive freedom, all of which have been historically denied to women. In this context, “voice” has become a metaphor for textual authority, and alludes to the efforts of women to reclaim their own experience through writing (“having a voice”) or to the specific qualities of their literary and cultural self-expression (“in a different voice”) (Dunn & Jones, 1996: 1). Dunn and Jones have edited a collection of articles on the concrete physical female voice, which has easily been forgotten in the pervasive use of the vocal metaphors in feminism (Dunn & Jones, 1996: 1). My term gynophonocentrism points at exactly the opposite direction, at the metaphysical dimension of female voice, which has quietly sunk in oblivion in feminist discourses and in the metacriticism dealing them (cf. Gal, 1991). There is, in my view, a third, largely unreflected, space between female voice as a consciously used intrinsic metaphor and as a concrete phenomenon.

Sound Criticism?

American critic Judith Fetterley’s highly influential book *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978) represents feminist criticism from the period when work was mainly done on the images of women in male-authored fiction. As these images invariably turned out to be false or at least heavily biased, feminist critics started to practise reading against the grain, resisting the apparent ideology that the texts imposed on readers. Fetterley reads canonized American literature with the contention that it is thoroughly male. This means that a woman reader “is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is asked to identify against herself” (Fetterley, 1981: xii). This results in the “immascultation” of women: they are taught to think, perceive, and interpret like men (Fetterley, 1981: xx). But instead of yielding to power, the woman reader can also turn against it, to resist it, and disclose the political and the subjective in the seemingly apolitical and universal. Fetterley’s resisting reader is an emancipatory one, since the disclosure also tries to “disrupt the process of immascultation by exposing it to consciousness” (Schweickart, 1986: 42). Fetterley describes the processes of immascultation and resistance to it in explicitly vocal terms. Immascultation means silencing, whereas “[f]eminist criticism represents the

discovery/recovery of a voice, a unique and uniquely powerful voice capable of canceling out those other voices ... which spoke about us and to us but never for us”(Fetterley, 1981: xxiii-xxiv). Voice clearly relates to authenticity, identity, and self-expression.

The identity of the voice-carrier turns out, however, to be problematic. The resisting woman reader is capable of resistance by virtue of the underdog position she is put into by oppressive literature (and a whole misogynist culture in general); her female identity is thus formed by oppressive forces. On the other hand, resisting reading itself forms that identity by increasing the reader’s self-awareness, emancipating her true nature, “exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us” (Fetterley, 1981: xxii). Voice, be it silenced by oppression or amplified by feminist criticism, is a token of origin and essential, unchanging womanhood. In this curious constellation, the feminist critic is both the phonograph reproducing the original sound and the dog admiring the mistress’s voice. The voice seems to be a constant, an unchanging kernel, unlike the rest of the mind which is exposed to patriarchal mutilations. American critic Julie Rivkin notes the uncanny mixing of metaphors in Fetterley’s rhetoric: While the process of immasculating a woman reader is imagined as a grotesque inversion of castration (an implantation of a male part), the reversal of such intellectual surgery comes not from a similarly scientific act, but instead as an operation of spirit, an exorcism.... this image of haunting and exorcism suggests that resistance is not a wholly rational, willed or conscious act (Rivkin, 1987: 12).

The immasculated woman reader is possessed by an alien (male) spirit, which suppresses the original female voice without the victim’s knowledge. Once the subjected reader is made aware of her condition, she can again become a sovereign subject. This regaining of the original female condition, as epitomized by the unique voice, is wholly dependent on a benign (female) spirit, which voice, in turn, articulates.

Fetterley’s rhetoric treats not only the individual reader but also the literary text and its critical reception in terms of speech and voice: literature “speaks” (Fetterley, 1981: xi, xiii) and literary criticism is either a “closed conversation” or an “active dialogue” (Fetterley, 1981: xxiii). In this way, Fetterley conceives literature in terms of actual communication and naturalizes writing into metaphorical speech. Fetterley is not certainly alone in using this kind of rhetoric, and it does not necessarily relate to gynophonocentrism. Her insistence of voice in the whole institution of literature does, however, reinforce Fetterley’s overall phonocentric strategy. All American literature resembles, in Fetterley’s reading, actual speech, but only men have had the right to fully express themselves, to articulate their own voice completely. This – at least partial – muting of women writers’ voice has also resulted in the corresponding deafening of readers’ perception and reception. Fetterley’s rhetorical decision to link female self-expression (writing) and self-awareness (reading) with speech and voice paradoxically ties in with an ancient male tradition. The apparent resistance to male ideology and the radical rereadings are articulated by Fetterley with figures which hark back to the very root of male cultural dominance. This secret rhetorical connection between the resistance and the resisted can expose Fetterley’s argumentation to an ill-intentioned reading which could emphasize the primordial dependance of women on male thinking. This is not, of course, the only possible interpretation of Fetterley’s rhetorical discrepancy. In the last section of my article, I will suggest a more positive reading of her project.

Fetterley does not use solely vocal figures. She sometimes has recourse to specular or visual diction, even in one and the same sentence: “It is the purpose of this book to give voice to a different reality and different vision ...”(Fetterley, 1981: xi). This synesthetic mixture of the auditive and the visual serves as an overture to my analysis of the voice in feminist film theory. Literature is by definition a visual medium which silently appeals to all the senses. The nature of the cinema is, in contrast, audio-visual. Literature uses natural language, whereas the movie has developed a cinematic, arbitrary language of its own. The conception of literature as (metaphorical) speech is therefore, at first sight, more probable than that of film. On the other hand, the sound film creates an illusion of being capable of representing speech and other sonic phenomena as they are heard in the real world. In the following section, I will try to find out how film criticism thematizes the voice and how it relates to gynophonocentrism.

Signal to Noise Ratio: Cracks in the Acoustic Mirror

American film theorist Kaja Silverman’s influential book *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988) is filled with the themes of vocalicity, speech, and sound, but it decidedly abstains from treating them in Derridean context. Silverman acknowledges Derrida’s contribution to the problematic on which she is focusing but, in the same breath, dismisses its relevance to her project. In what follows, I will examine whether Silverman’s decision is too hasty and whether the introduction of phonocentrism could heuristically open up her air-tight argumentation.

The soundtrack has the miraculous ability to create an illusion of auditory plenitude; in cinema, a reproduced profilmic event appears to be taking place before the viewer’s very eyes and ears. This illusion of restored phenomenal losses is nurtured by viewers and many theorists alike, in spite of the fact that such a restoration may be by definition impossible. Every acoustic event is likely to be spatio-temporally unique, which means that to repeat it identically is practically impossible in “live” situations, not to mention in recording. Still we wish to believe in the illusion of seeing and hearing our favourite film actor or actress speaking in perfect sync on the silver screen or on television, thus giving a seeming proof of his/her (self-)presence. Articulated in this way, the situation does indeed seem to fit in the metaphysics of presence as theorized by Derrida. Silverman does not, however, follow Derrida’s cue but instead chooses French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in order to read speech and voice as an agent producing absence, not as a token presence (Silverman, 1988: 43-4). In a similar fashion, Silverman also maintains that “interiority has a very different status in classic cinema from the one that it enjoys in the literary and philosophical tradition which Derrida critiques. Far from being a privileged condition, synonymous with soul, spirit, or consciousness, interiority in Hollywood films implies linguistic constraint and physical confinement ...” (Silverman, 1988: 45). But voice is not a monolithic entity. Silverman claims that the female voice is closely identified with spectacle and the body, whereas the male voice tends towards invisibility and anonymity; this dichotomy is articulated in Hollywood as the “disembodied male voice against the synchronized female voice” (Silverman, 1988: 39). Silverman may be right in her interpretation of the meaning of voice in cinema, but she misses the very significance of voice as a metaphor which is chosen instead of some other figure. It is important that it is the voice that is given meanings, congruous or incongruous with the tradition of Western metaphysics. For instance, the sonic

impression of the real in Hollywood films results in familiar-sounding privileges: the *vraisemblable* subordinates “nonhuman sounds to the human voice, and ‘noise’ to speech” and the diegetic speech is emphasized at the cost of the non-diegetic (Silverman, 1988: 45). The anthropomorphized thematization of voice apart from the realm of sounds may not imply the origin of meaning or the sphere of soul, but the very ranking of sonic phenomena suggests the unchallenged position of human speech. Silverman’s main point, the meaning given to the female voice in cinema and psychoanalysis, can be conceived as a corollary of this fundamental principle.

There are a number of codified deviations to the rule of synchronization in cinema. Postdubbing can marry another voice to an actor’s body and give an impression of a perfect sync; the cinematic co-presence of the body and voice is thus as mutable as the identity of any (actual, “live”) vocal event. The voice-off provides another codified deviation and at the same time an example of the vertiginous shuttling between presence and absence. In the voice-off, the “ostensible source is not visible at the moment of emission” but it will almost invariably be revealed later on (Silverman, 1988: 48). The situation mimes the actual sensory state of “normal” or “sane” human beings: we hear things we do not simultaneously see, but the “sync” is recoverable by turning our heads or moving to a position where the auditory and the visual can meet. Both the cinematic and the actual voice-off thus exceed the limit of momentary sensory situation (“frame”), but not that of the personal world of living (“diegesis”). If a persistent voice, say, denigrating one’s pursuits or urging one to commit a murder turns out to lack a diegetic source, we are faced with madness – or with an avantgarde film. The voice-over, for its part, functions on a different diegetic level but its source is also sanely revealed in the course of the film. Because of its topmost diegetic position, the voice-over has the overtones of quasi-theological omniscience and spirituality: the voice has superior knowledge of the cinematic story and (to a degree) discourse, and its relation to the body is more contingent than in other coded deviations to synchronicity. Granted, in spite of the transcended body, the voice-over bears a definite sign of gender, or rather, the masculine gender, since the female voice-over is extremely rare in the Hollywood film (Silverman, 1988: 48-9). If the disembodied (male) voice-over implies superior knowledge in general, the embodied voice-over creates the impression of an access to the immediate, the innermost, and the uncensored (Silverman, 1988: 52). The narrational situation is naturalized; it is as if the voice-over narrator were intimately telling his true feelings to the viewer, who, by the necessity of the confessional structure, is holding a listener’s position.

As these deviations indicate, the illusion of living voice in cinema hinges on attributes that are usually reserved to writing: it is materially preserved and conceivable in the utterer’s absence; it is apt to misunderstandings or even deliberate exploitation; and it seeks to make up its lack of plenitude by imitating tokens of actual speech situations. If speech and voice are thus problematic and inherently disharmonious, why does the vocal trope figure in film theory? The answer may lie in Silverman’s other interest, the psychoanalytic theory and its object of study.

Sounds Fantastic

In recent psychoanalytic theory, the mistress’ voice, with all its connotations, is traced back to the maternal voice. The acoustic surroundings of the newborn infant is

characterized by engulfing, overwhelming, softly enveloping sounds that mainly consist of the mother's voice. The real meaning of this sonorous realm is as unheard-of (i.e. unknown) as its cultural popularity is unheard-of (i.e. unprecedented). The maternal blanket or envelope of sound is an extension of a cultural fantasy which informs both psychoanalytic theory and the aesthetics of classic cinema (Silverman, 1988: 72). That fantasy is curiously ambivalent: the sonorous envelope both soothes and menaces, it both comforts and threatens to entrap and suffocate the infant.

French psychoanalyst and critic Julia Kristeva claims that, in its attempt to break free from Meaning, Western rationality has had recourse to childhood, be it that of Rousseau's *Émile* or Freud's Little Hans or Dora (Kristeva, 1984: 271). The idea or idealization of the child functions as a fetish of generalized humanity (Kristeva, 1984: 272). Infant does not speak (in-fans), and the infant within the adult remains silent for now or forever, only articulating in the cleavages of speech (Kristeva, 1984: 272). The metaphysical realm of speechless infancy is, as it were, supplemented with theoretical voice-over which seeks to make the mute speak, and the inaudible be heard. Kristeva herself does this in spite of her warnings against the projection of adult characteristics on to childhood experiences and against the possibility of ever re-entering the presymbolic (Kristeva, 1984: 276).

The sonorous realm of the prenatal phase and of infancy, which we all once inhabited and which we then irredeemably lost, represents a shared experience which also functions as a token of the genuine core of general humanity, as a fantasm of unifying origin. The fantasy of origins materializes in the trivial fact that it is always the mother who carries the fetus and it is usually she who nurtures the infant, thus forming its main source of auditory information. That the lost world was an acoustic one is by no means insignificant. The prenatal "oceanic" stage in the womb is both tactile and aural, and the same synesthetic tendency prevails in the depictions of the newborn baby's sensory experiences: the maternal voice is a "sonorous envelope" which "surrounds" and "sustains" the baby (Rosolato & Doane); it is a "bath of sounds" (Anzieu); like water, it both envelops and entraps the infant (Chion) (all quoted in Silverman, 1988: 73). As if to linguistically hint at this connection, the French *la mère* ("mother") and *la mer* ("sea") are homophonous, sounding exactly the same. But the fetus does not only float on or dive into the sonorous sea of the motherly voice; the birth of its own voice coincides with its transition from the womb to the external world. On losing the uterine realm, the baby cries for its life, for help, which, according to Kristeva, leaves a permanent imprint in the lingual memory of all human beings (Kristeva, 1984: 281-282). The baby's cry does not vanish into the unknown exteriority but reaches the mother and her response; she "provide[s] an axis, a projection screen, a limit, a curb" (Kristeva, 1984: 282). The mother's vocal response is in a way an echo, an aural reflection of the baby's interiority in the external world. The baby feeds in the maternal sonorousness but also feeds into it.

The maternal voice which the baby listens to is a woman's voice but it has the overtone of the voice-in-general; it is the voice of a mentor, authority, master which only later is specified as that of a mistress. Analogously, the newborn infant is in a way a baby-in-general (hence the pronoun *it*), before the sexual differentiation has functionally taken effect. In this respect, the original voice, whatever the attributes, is neuter. It is this generality of the primordial maternal/feminine voice that makes it possible to understand the subsequent fate of the phenomenon. For instance, the unmarked female voice is

muted and made specifically male in classic cinema, as film theorists have pointed out. As Silverman puts it, Because her [mother's] voice is identified by the child long before her body is, it remains unlocalized during a number of the most formative moments of subjectivity. The maternal voice would thus seem to be the original prototype for the disembodied voice-over in cinema It is astonishing that a cinematic device which thus carries within it the symbolic "trace" of the mother should have become the exclusive prerogative of the male voice within Hollywood film, while the female voice not only is confined to the "inside" of the narrative, but is forced again and again into diegetic "closets" and "crevices." (Silverman, 1988: 76)

I disagree with Silverman's analysis of this curious turn. True, "the discursive potency of the male voice is established by stripping the female voice of all claim to verbal authority" with the help of the "substitution of the mother for the child." (Silverman, 1988: 77) But this imposed "male voice-over" would not be so easy if the maternal voice were not – for the infant – asexual in the first place. One could even state that the masculinization or père-version of the maternal voice takes place soon after the initial semiotic stage, which is characterized by the disorganized non-meaning of sounds (including the involuntary uterine sounds). Once the mother starts to function as a "language teacher, expositor, and storyteller" (Silverman, 1988: 76), she in fact promotes the symbolic and leads the child into the masculine order, becoming herself a virtual carrier of the male voice. The difference may not be radical but it does relocate the denial of female subjectivity: for a child, the maternal voice is in a way predubbed. This state of affairs naturalizes the fade-in of the male voice at the cost of fade-out of the female one but it does not, of course, justify it in any way. Rather, as an imagined, idealized fantasm of a sonorous tableau long ago silenced, the infant's initial world of sounds gains evidence of both for and against the actuality of the case from the commonplaces of Western culture. The woman usually occupies the position of the primary articulator for the infant, but it could also be fulfilled by the man. The possibility (and in some cases actuality) of such a reversal problematizes the male voice in turn. If my remastering of the maternal voice is correct, then the paternal voice is asexual voice-in-general as well.

The primordial voice is always already disembodied, a voice without (sound) organs. Granted, in cultural and political practice, the symmetry between the female and male voices is far from being perfect. Woman is doomed to lose the voice which she never really had, whereas man becomes the voice which he imitated all the time. This asymmetry may, in fact, be one of the strategic reasons for the insistence of the voice metaphors in Silverman and Kristeva as well as in feminist discourses in general. I will return to this possibility at the end of my article.

Voicing Mistress Discourse

French critic and psychoanalyst Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*, the feminine practice of writing, is as luring a concept as it is ambiguous. In her "Sorties," Cixous readily admits that this practice cannot be theorized, for "it will always exceed the discourse governing the phallogocentric system; it takes place and will take place somewhere other than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination" (Cixous, 1988: 92). Cixous is explicitly subjective and sensory rather than objective and rational in her survey of these unmapped territories: she "senses femininity in writing" by a host of indefinite features (Cixous, 1988: 92). First of these invisible and

almost inaudible characteristics is “a privilege of voice” (Cixous, 1988: 92; emphasis in original). In her depiction of this privilege, Cixous anthropomorphizes voice and writing to such a degree that the rhetorical situation starts to resemble prosopopoeia, the giving of life and voice to an inanimate object or abstract concept: “writing and voice are entwined and interwoven and writing’s continuity/voice’s rhythm take each other’s breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries” (Cixous, 1988: 92; emphasis in original). The idea of voice is mute and Cixous’s writing seeks to voice it, make it speak. On the other hand, woman signifies materially, carnally: “she conveys meaning with her body” and “she inscribes what she is saying” (Cixous, 1988: 92; emphasis in original). In Toril Moi’s reading, this means that woman “is wholly and physically present in her voice – and writing is no more than the extension of this self-identical prolongation of the speech act” (Moi, 1985: 114). I would conceive the problematic differently. Rather, there is a dual tendency at work in woman’s discourse: her writing gets attributes of speech and her speech resembles the material permanence of inscription. Cixous’s *écriture féminine* only superficially resembles Derrida’s *archi-écriture*, the radically generalized notion of writing which comprises both vocal and graphic inscription. By privileging voice, the inalienable attribute of speech, Cixous takes a conscious phonocentric turn in spite of her relative blurring of the voice/writing opposition. Furthermore, Cixous’s conception of voice carries definite undertones of origin, truth, and authenticity - the classic tokens of speech in Western metaphysics.

The only difference between classic Occidental logocentrism and Cixous’s gynophonocentrism is that for her Logos is not the unmarkedly masculine God or spirit but Mother. Woman articulates, not her “own,” but her mother’s primordial voice: “there never stops reverberating something that, having once passed through us, having imperceptibly and deeply touched us, still has the power to affect us – song, the first music of the voice of love, which every woman keeps alive” (Cixous, 1988: 93). Woman’s writing thus echoes the voice of the mother, the origin and source of auditory information. While Logos relates to God the symbolic Father and the Lawgiver, Mother resides in the imaginary, in “the time before law” (Cixous, 1988: 93). Mother *qua* feminine godhead is underlined by Cixous’s enigmatic crystallization: “The deepest, the oldest, the loveliest Visitation” (Cixous, 1988: 93). Woman embodies the divine Mother and her primordial voice, just like an infant sucks milk from its mother’s breast. Therefore woman’s voice and writing are, so to speak, lactic: “Voice: milk that could go on forever.... Eternity: is voice mixed with milk” (Cixous, 1988: 93). “There is always at least a little good mother milk left in her. She writes with white ink.” (Cixous, 1988: 94).

If Logos is “His Master’s Voice,” then the symmetry seems to demand that Mother be “Her Mistress’s Voice.” In an exchange between Cathérine Clément and Héléne Cixous, the problem of mastery is developed in connection with the master/mistress dyad. Cixous states that she finds it impossible to use the term “mastery” because of the implied repression: “The one who is in the master’s place, even if not the master of a knowledge, is in a position of power” (Clément & Cixous, 1988:139-40). Cixous admits that in some rare historical situations women have been on the side of “knowledge-power,” although typically they align with “no-knowledge” or “knowledge-without-power” (Clément & Cixous, 1988: 141). Pre-historically, however, Cixous grants woman (mother) the position of primordial “knowledge” and vital power, although

Cixous does not acknowledge it in this connection. Interestingly enough, both for Cixous and Lacan, woman engenders or positions the subject presumed to know. For Cixous, mother qua mistress is usurped by the symbolic order, whereas for Lacan, mastery “is inseparable from something fundamentally bound up with woman, with the hysteric, her referential figure,” who puts the master “in check” (Clément & Cixous, 1988:140) and who thus demarcates his superior position. The giver of voice and the matrix of (the possibility of any) mastery is both silenced and instrumentalized.

Making Sound Waves: Hearing the Mother of Seas

In Cixous’s critical practice, the fount of voice is not, however, restricted to the presymbolic relation to mother. Cixous’s cherishing reading of Brazilian author Clarice Lispector’s work grants the author the status of a prelapsarian goddess of language (Cixous, 1979). Lispector’s writing carries her true voice and a concrete sensual meaning. Or even more radically, in Cixous’s reading, Lispector’s words have hardly separated from their referents: her signifiers not only evoke corresponding signifieds but in a sense contain the presence of actual objects. Her text makes the perception of the world anew but even more so than was theorized in Russian Formalism. Instead of only representing the world in a fresh manner, she recreates it, gives it a new birth: “[The Clarice voice] [g]ives us eternity: the present life.... Makes us hear/understand the call of things. The call which the things have; she gathers it.... Clarice looks, and the world becomes present. Makes born things be born again.” (Cixous, 1979: 409; transl. mine) A veritable cornucopia of signification, Lispector’s writing nourishes the readers in need of referents: her sonorous text is both edible (“fruit”) and drinkable (“juice of the moon”) (Cixous, 1979: 409). As a provider of gratification to basic needs, Lispector’s writing resembles a symbiotic mother, who takes care of both physical and metaphysical necessities. Lispector’s gift to readers is that of the vocal mother. Toril Moi reads the following passage in Cixous’s essay on Lispector as an example of un-Derridean essentialism: There is almost nothing left of the sea but a word without water: for we have also translated the words, we have emptied them of their speech, dried, reduced and embalmed them, and they cannot any longer remind us of the way they used to rise up from the things as the peal of their essential laughter... But a clarice voice only has to say: the sea, the sea, for my keel to split open, the sea [lamer] is calling me, sea! calling me, waters! (Cixous, 1979: 412; transl. in Moi, 1985: 115) True, Lispector is praised for her “capacity to endow words with their essential meaning” (Moi, 1985: 115). But Lispector herself articulates even more profound entities: the mother and her voice. It is exactly the sound, voiced orthography that condenses Cixous’s metaphor of the sea with mother, the homophonous mer and mère. It is not (only) the sea that is calling “me” but (also) the mother, the watery source of living words. Thus, Cixous is not actually exalting Lispector but the mistress behind her mastery, the mother of all meanings.

Woman’s voice heard in Lispector’s writing is revelled to such a degree that Cixous seems to give it attributes of, not only a female master, but a female lover. The mother of voice is also that of love; the primordial sounds heard in Lispector’s writing are those of the female sex. When hearing and loving Lispector’s voice, Cixous metaphorically hears and loves her own sex, and metonymically herself. Cixous’s affair with Lispector qua mistress is thus transgressive in at least four senses: quasi-incestuous, adulterous, homosexual, and autoerotic, this linguistic liaison breaches the institutions of

exogamy, marriage, compulsory heterosexuality, and other-oriented eroticism. Via the Lispectoresque resonations of the mother, Cixous harks back to the primordial provider but also harks at her own voice. A hybrid of the mythological Echo and Narcissus, Cixous kisses the image of herself reflected on the (sound) waves Lispector's writing.

Cixous's treatment of voice and writing thus seems to depart radically from Derrida's treatment of the opposition. In her poetic account of the matter, woman's voice and writing are seemingly exalted to the degree that they transcend the normal limits of signification. Cixous's rhetorical praise may not, however, be taken as such. The ultimate reason for her rhetorical gesture can rather be a provocation against the gender-insensitivity (and hence male-orientation) of early deconstruction. By exploiting the seemingly unproblematized concept of the voice, Cixous can be seen to deconstruct both the androcenteredness and the implicit phonophobia of deconstruction.

Stuck in the Groove or Gynophonocentric Provocation?

My rhetorical readings above found out a recurrent metaphoricity of sound and voice in theoretical writings by selected feminist women. The implications of the metaphors are phonocentric and since the writers are women, their choices could be called gynophonocentric. Cannot my reading in this article be accused of repetitiveness, of being stuck in the same deconstructive groove? Are not I essentialistic and informed by masculine bias? This is true in the sense that I would not call my Shakespeare epigraph gynophonocentric, although it utilizes the metaphor of voice in connection with woman, for the simple reason that the writer is a man. Hence the writer's sex seems to be given and dominant to the degree that it affects the metaphysical presuppositions in question. Furthermore, to differentiate gynophonocentrism from the classic phonocentrism of Western metaphysics is to treat the latter as the original and hence the unmarked form; the masculine thus gets attributes of the human-in-general, whereas the feminine is treated as a deviation or an exception. That is why androphonocentricity sounds pleonastic.

I accept my own criticism and at the same time refute it. My tentative term gynophonocentrism is intended to be a pro-vocation, a calling forth of a renewed sense of a relatively established concept. However, as is commonplace in rhetoric, my choice both questions certain essentialistic presuppositions in feminism but also, at the same time, reinforces them. The radical interpretive drive is at least partly undermined by the performatively conservative terminology. But once this is said or written, something can be done about both.

The double logic of provocative gestures can be used in reading gynophonocentrism, not against but, with the grain. Nowadays men's texts do not perhaps use vocal metaphors as repeatedly as women's, except in such cases as gay, black, or otherwise marginalized men. Admittedly, the questions about where from, to whom, and why one speaks recurs in ethnographic writings regardless of the scholar's or informant's gender (cf. Probyn, 1993: 61). This may be due to the paradoxical marginality and hence inaudibility of the "real" of the quotidian which ethnography studies.

The insistence of women's voice can be a token of strategic essentialism. Since empirical women feel silenced or find it difficult to get their voice heard in a male-dominated culture solely because of their gender, the very metaphoricity of voice may

function as an appropriate means to express that situation theoretically. That the use of vocal metaphors almost automatically presupposes a belief in given origins and essentialism is but a necessary corollary of that rhetorical choice. Some feminists have emphasized the strategic reasons for using concepts in unproblematized senses; by that gesture they may conquer and maintain a critical ground. For instance, British critic Sara Mills opposes the destabilization of the concept woman brought about by deconstruction: “[t]his category needs to be maintained for the simple reason that women are still discriminated against as women” (Mills, 1994: 33; emphasis in original). In a similar fashion, Indian-born American critic Gayatri Spivak approves of “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (Spivak, 1988: 205; emphasis in original).

In this positive reading of gynophonocentrism, the main stress falls on gyno-. At the risk of exposing oneself to deconstructive readings of assumed presence or to constructivist critique of essentialist claims of authenticity, feminists may have had recourse to voice for pragmatic political reasons. Not only does voice sound fantastic but it also provides a heuristic ground for realizing such fantasies as equality and freedom of speech. In the post-structuralist condition, where categories, including woman, are destabilized, even immaterial voice can function as a sound enough stepping-stone.

In Fetterley’s model for the resisting reader, there is no room for a problematized concept of woman. Woman and man, female and male are, for strategic reasons, stable in Fetterley’s rhetoric and argumentation. If there were nothing constant and unchanging in womanhood, feminist resisting reading would be just another version of the cultural manipulation of the subject and, as such, no more preferable than the mainstream masculine one. That Fetterley’s theoretical rhetoric gets mixed up with the implications and presuppositions of voice does not diminish the validity and heuristic power of her actual readings of American literature and of the cultural-political situation which nurtured it. Silverman’s Kristevan reading of the female voice notes a curious muting and amplification of it in cinema and psychoanalysis respectively. Instead of theoretically acknowledging the disembodied, asexual nature of the primordial voice, both Silverman and Kristeva emphasize the asymmetry of male and female voices in actual cultural practice. Again, the reasons for this strategic decision may be political: it is a matter of gaining the female voice, not of regaining an originary fantasm of symmetrical voices. Cixous’s seemingly un-Derridean emphasis of voice and essentialistic womanhood can also be read as an example of the classic deconstructive use of established concepts under erasure (*sous rature*): because signs are both necessary and ambiguous, they must be both used and suspected (cf. Derrida, 1976: 18-19). In Cixous, the necessary return to logocentric concepts may not only destabilize patriarchal ideology but also criticize early deconstruction, which tended to overlook the problems of gender.

However, what is taken up temporarily, for strategic or pragmatic reasons only, can easily stagnate as a permanent condition, in which the momentary brackets petrify and form a rigid wall. This also applies to my own article, which at times tends toward greater harmony than dissonance, toward unison rather than polyphony. The scrupulously visible or audible rhetorico-political interest of my article is, I hope, to account for a more effective political and discursive work in which, say, freedom of speech and voice vote are simultaneously social practices and rhetorical figures. I have tried to account for the dynamics of sound and voice that could fracture or even undo the Jericho-like walls of

positioning in selected branches of feminism. Voice can turn from a repetition of the same, from the obedient listening to the imaginary mistress, into a siren's song that lures and even frees one from the mass of non-problematized presuppositions.

Endnotes

1 The author is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Dr. Keskinen has published, in addition to numerous articles, a book called *Response, Resistance, Deconstruction: Reading and Writing in/of Three Novels by John Updike* (U of Jyväskylä Press, 1998). The present article is part of Dr. Keskinen's work in progress, tentatively entitled *The Audio Book: Readings in Voice, Sound, and Writing*. E-mail: keskinen@cc.jyu.fi

2 Essentialism refers to the conception of gender as a biologically given entity, whereas constructivism emphasizes the social and cultural formation of it.

3 For instance, British anthropologist Elspeth Probyn's otherwise acute and perceptive work on the use and formation of self in feminism and cultural studies takes the metaphors of speaking and voice for granted, only briefly acknowledging their metaphoricity (Probyn, 1993: 146; cf. 7-31, 58-71, 165-73).

4 Much of the criticism aimed at Derrida tends to be based on a deliberate misunderstanding of his thought or on a limited knowledge of the scope and nature of his project. For instance, Raymond Tallis' provocative reading of Derrida simplifies deconstruction into a pathological state by literalizing and analogizing his highly abstract philosophical discourse (for the critique of the primacy of speech, see Tallis, 1988: 164-202). For more philosophically informed criticism of Derrida's treatment of Husserl and of Plato, see Evans (1991) and Pickstock (1998: 3-46) respectively.

5 That this phenomenon is but an illusion is proved by the development of the very apparatus that makes it possible. If the first hissing and crackling sound films of the 1930 could be said to have restored the phenomenal loss, what can be said of the digital Dolby Surround system? That the latter features the actress as more present? That the categories of presence and absence do not completely fill the logical space, but allow for included middle possibilities? Presence is indeed one of the recurring key words in the rhetoric of high-end or high-fidelity, to which the cinematic illusion of reality is related, but I will not go into this fascinating connection here.

6 True, the auditory is subordinated to the visual track, but this may be due to the writing-like nature of the cinema; it is from the outset and after all a visual medium, and the camera easily gets attributes of a writing or painting implement, cf. the French *caméra-stylo* ("camera pen") as theorized by French film critic Alexandre Astruc (1948).

7 Ideologically, the male voice-over relates to power, to the position at the top of the hierarchy of discourses in classic realist texts and films. In avantgarde feminist cinema, this convention is often either turned upside down or cancelled altogether by allowing for a multiplicity of voices, none of which holds a dominating position.

8 One could develop this tendency further. If speech is regarded as being the closest to the Logos, to the speaker's intentions, then an unuttered thought is even closer to it. According to this phonocentric logic, the silent woman could in fact be the ultimate holder of truth and the one whose intentions will not be distorted by worldly hiatuses. Obviously this syllogistic take is a false one, since woman's reticence in cinema is a result of silencing, not of a deliberate decision by a sovereign subject.

9 Granted, the mastery aspect typically belongs to the repertoire of the symbolic order and thus to the masculine law of the father.

10 French structuralist critic Roland Barthes's definition of "Babil" in *Le Plaisir du texte* condemns milky writing exactly for the preoidipal, babbling, and non-differentiated characteristics that Cixous exalts in woman's discourse (Barthes, 1982: 12).

11 On the other hand, ethnographer usually writes when s/he claims to be speaking, and when s/he professes to study the informant's speech, it is the written transcription of it that is being analyzed.

12 Spivak uses the term strategic essentialism in connection with the historiography of the Subaltern Studies group and refers to its practice - also found in different guises in Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida - of the simultaneous use of the "critical force of antihumanism" and the very notions from which that criticism stems (Spivak, 1988, 205, 206-207). This is a difficult and hazardous strategy, and indeed it

actual uses have not always accorded with Spivak's intentions. Instead of going into the debate over the correct use of the term or the strategy, I want to point out that both can be strategically read into a given practice of study. Spivak herself acknowledges this metacritical gesture in her own conception of the Subaltern Studies and the degree of strategy-consciousness shown in its work (Spivak, 1988, 206-207). For my part, I have read above a certain strategy into Fetterley's partially unwitting and inarticulate critical practice in order to enhance its potential force.

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