

Musings on Feminism, Surrealism, and Synthesis

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Surrealism as portrayed quite differently by the male and female artists of the movement. The article further explores the dialectical concept of synthesis as a representation of "simultaneous states" and envisions feminism as a synthesis in the current historical context.

Keywords: feminism, surrealism, dialectic, synthesis

INTRODUCTION³¹

Some years ago I explored, with Adrian Carr, the similarities between critical theory and surrealism (Carr & Zanetti, 2000). In this article, we suggested that surrealism could be seen as a form of critical theory, contributing an important negation-estrangement effect, stepping outside oneself or one's customarily-held perspective to imagine and accept the antithesis: seeing the new in the old as well as the old in the new (see also Zanetti, 2003). This estrangement-effect is at the heart of dialectical thinking and dynamics. Dialectical thinking is destructive, but this destruction re-emerges as a positive act. Marcuse writes in the preface to the 1960 edition of *Reason and Revolution* that the function of dialectical thought

... is to break down the self-assurance and self-contentment of common sense, to undermine the sinister confidence in the power and language of facts, to demonstrate that unfreedom is so much at the core of things that the development of their internal contradictions leads necessarily to qualitative change: the

explosion and catastrophe of the established state of affairs (Marcuse, 1960, p. ix).

Estrangement produces emotional disturbance, turmoil, and discomfort in the psyche of the viewer (see Zanetti & Carr, 1997, 1998, 1999). It runs counter to prevailing attitudes and modes of thought. But this estrangement creates the conditions for overcoming the social amnesia, for seeing the world anew in the form of the synthesis. Jameson writes evocatively:

There is a breathlessness about this shift from the normal object-oriented activity of the mind to such a dialectical self-consciousness - something of the sickening shudder we feel in an elevator's fall or in the sudden dip of an airliner. That recalls us to our bodies much as this [dialectical transformation] recalls us to our mental positions as thinkers and observers. The shock is indeed as basic, and constitutive of the dialectic as such: without this transformational moment, without this initial conscious transcendence of an older, more naive position, there can be no question of any genuinely dialectical coming to consciousness.

But precisely because dialectical thinking depends so closely on the habitual everyday mode of thought

³¹ A version of this paper was originally presented at the "Anti-Essentialism Conference," Florida Atlantic University, Ft. Lauderdale USA, 2007, and I thank Hugh Miller and the conference participants for their helpful comments. I would also like to thank several anonymous reviewers for their insightful observations that have helped me refine some of the concepts presented here.

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which it is called on to transcend, it can take a number of different and apparently contradictory forms. So it is that when common sense predominates and characterizes our normal everyday mental atmosphere, *dialectical thinking presents itself as the perversely hairsplitting*, as the overelaborate and the oversubtle, reminding us that *the simple is in reality only a simplification, and that the self-evident draws its force from hosts of buried presuppositions* (Jameson, 1971, p. 308, emphasis added).

A feminist review of surrealism

In the years since the publication of the surrealism article, I've had cause and opportunity for continued rumination over the thesis. In retrospect, I don't believe we went far enough in our exploration of the relationship between surrealism and critical theory, for while the movement did provide an important intellectual foundation for twentieth-century developments in art, literature, and philosophy, the most prominent Surrealists were still prisoners of their historical context vis-à-vis their view of, and relationship with, both females and the feminine.

Reviewing Surrealist work with from a feminist ontology brings the work into an entirely different (and horrifying) perspective. Surrealism employed an "aesthetic of dismemberment" (Lyford, 2000) to illustrate the fragmentation of the world order, an aesthetic Lyford suggests was forged in the Parisian military hospital of Val-de-Grâce, where both Louis Aragon and Andre Breton met and served as physicians in training in 1917. Val-de-Grâce was a cutting-edge teaching hospital but also housed a museum that hosted and displayed a visual collection of the carnage of war: human bones and preserved body parts, medical and surgical equipment, prostheses, wax casts of injuries, and an assortment of drawings, paintings, and sculptures of the carnage of war. The French government opened the collection to public display beginning in 1916 in an attempt

to generate support for the war (honoring the brave men) and to highlight the ways in which French science and technology were treating the most severely wounded soldiers. It is certain that Aragon and Breton viewed the materials and exhibits. Lyford suggests this aestheticization of human suffering, portrayed primarily in terms of shattered and dismembered male bodies, as used by the government to promote national reconstruction, was not surprisingly picked up and employed by the Surrealists themselves as critique:

[S]urrealism's emphasis on dismemberment suggests a proposal to recast the state's rhetoric of reconstruction in language that reasserted the carnal horror of the war (the kind of destruction that Salvador Dali's melting, invaded forms or Man Ray's cropped and headless figures might conjure forth) instead of framing trauma as a necessary element in France's social and industrial evolution (Lyford, 2000, p. 52).

A number of scholars (I am not alone in this view) have critiqued Surrealism as hostile (or, at least, unenlightened) regarding women. Almost from the beginning, as in the 1934 pamphlet entitled "Qu'est-ce que le Surrealisme?", disturbing images of the female form prevailed. On the cover of this noted and notable pamphlet was printed Magritte's work entitled *Le Viol* (The Rape), a depiction of a woman's head in which her face has been replaced by her torso: her eyes are now her breasts, her nose has become her navel, and her mouth is depicted by her pubis (Greely, 1992). The ostensible purpose of this selection was indeed to shock and repulse, as Breton was announcing a revolutionary program. Surrealism was intended to disrupt conventional bourgeois morality and reveal its hypocrisy; free love and unconventional sexual arrangements were a part of this revolution (Gubar, 1987). The work can be interpreted as a commentary on the sexual silencing of women within the confines of a

stifling social order, and Kuspit (1988) argues that the Surrealists represented a transitional phase between authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism. Still, I would argue that the psychoanalytic undercurrents and associations cannot be ignored: the male as voyeur; the image of woman speaking only through her genitals; an excessively long neck that suggests a puppeteer's hand animating the otherwise mute and lifeless figure. Aesthetic purpose, as Greely and Gubar suggest, does not automatically legitimize degradation.

Markus (2000) notes the Surrealist fascination with the praying mantis, a powerful metaphor and archetypal symbol of the devouring (castrating) female. As I have discussed in other work (see Zanetti 2002, 2003, 2007), the female mantis is notorious for devouring her male partner after mating (although there is some evidence that this ritual is most likely to occur when the creatures are in captivity). Markus notes:

Andre Breton and Paul Eluard cultivated mantises in their homes, studied them closely, and invited others to observe the spectacle of their macabre sexual rites The Surrealists' attraction to the mantis is underscored by the two most prominent motifs in their art, metamorphosis and vagina dentata. Both are

represented frequently through the image of the mantis (p. 33).

Sex and death seem to be inextricably linked for the Surrealists, especially Bataille, who explored this theme extensively. Images of devouring females with prominent teeth can be seen in Picasso, especially in his works *Nude on a White Background* (1927), *Bust of a Woman with Self Portrait* (1929), *Large Nude in a Red Armchair* (1929), *Seated Bather* (1930), and *The Kiss* (1931).³²

The dismembered female form occurs

³² Interestingly, these works were produced in the years that Picasso was most closely associated with the Surrealists (Markus, 2000).

repeatedly throughout Surrealist art. One of the most disturbing series, to me, is that of Hans Bellmer's revolting headless and disfigured dolls, which generally appear to be female forms. Man Ray's photographs are arresting but also fetishistic: see, for example, *Restored Venus*, 1936, a female torso - headless, limbless - in bondage; *Juliet, Nude in a Blond Wig* ca.1950-51, with her harsh red lips and dominatrix wig, even as she is nude and vulnerable; *Henry Miller and Masked Nude*, 1945, where the author appears as himself but the woman's face is obscured; and his "Electricity" photos, where only the woman's nude torso is visible.³³

Female surrealists, as far as is known, did not use the mantis to represent woman, although they, too, employed techniques and themes of violence, dismemberment and destruction. Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe, better known by their deliberately gender-neutral names of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, pushed the boundaries of gender and androgyny in ways that were disturbing - sometimes even dismembered and fragmented (see Claude Cahun and Moore, *Untitled*, 1928) - but not dismissive or misogynistic. For one thing, their faces remain: bold, assertive, androgynous (especially in the case of Cahun) and challenging.

I am particularly captivated by the work of the female Surrealist Leonora Carrington, whose paintings are on display at the Dallas Museum of Art as I write this, and whose art I find psychoanalytically interesting as some of it reminds me of the blazing, shimmering work often created by persons with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.³⁴ The daughter of a wealthy British textile manufacturer, she rebelled against her social class in striking ways, running off with Max Ernst in 1937 (he was still married), surviving

³³ I do, however, love Man Ray's "Kiki" photos, which are transgressive in a fun and playful manner.

³⁴ Indeed, Carrington was at one time institutionalized for a mental breakdown and medicated with the drug cardiazol (Chadwick, 1986).

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the war and eventually settling in Mexico with the exiled Hungarian photographer Emerico Weisz. Hers is the art of self-exploration, utilizing symbols of alchemical transformation and the wisdom of the feminine. She employs the figure of the hyena to represent the merging of male and female. And perhaps because she has led such a long life (she is still living), we have an extraordinary opportunity to watch the development of her work as the representation of a woman's life journey.

It is also intriguing to read Carrington's descriptions of her time spent with the Surrealist masters. In an interview entitled "Leonora and Me," British journalist Joanna Moorhead (2007) writes of her discovery that she is related to the artist, and of her journey to meet and interview her famous relative. The first statement that caught my attention was that Moorhead's family referred to Carrington as the somewhat eccentric cousin who ran off to be "an artist's model." The assumption, we note, is not that Carrington could have been an artist, but only an artist's model (with the suggestion of loose morals that the phrase evokes). Moorhead had no idea of the vast body of work produced by her distant cousin; nor was she aware that Carrington had an international reputation as an exceptional artist and writer.

When Moorhead finally travels to Mexico to meet her famous cousin, she asks for Carrington's recollections of some of her most famous (and notorious) colleagues. About Ernst, for example, Moorhead writes:

In 1936, the first surrealist exhibition opened in London - for Leonora, something of an epiphany. "I [Carrington] fell in love with Max [Ernst]'s paintings before I fell in love with Max," she says. She met Ernst at a dinner party. "Our family weren't cultured or intellectual - we were the good old bourgeoisie, after all," she says. "From Max I had my education: I learned about art and literature. He taught me everything."

Carrington was somewhat less profuse in her admiration of others in the Surrealist circle. Moorhead continues:

Picasso is just one of the artists she [Carrington] came to know. "A typical Spaniard - he thought all women were in love with him," she remembers. And were they? "Well, I certainly wasn't. Though I liked his art." And then there was Salvador Dalí: "I met him by chance one day in André Breton's shop. He certainly wasn't extraordinary then: he looked like everyone else. It was only when he went to America that he started looking extraordinary." Dalí liked her - "a most important woman artist," he called her. She didn't much like Man Ray, "though I liked his girlfriend Ady Fidelin. What she saw in him, I'll never know - it certainly wasn't his looks." The couple knew Joan Miró - "He gave me some money one day and told me to get him some cigarettes. I gave it back and said if he wanted cigarettes, he could bloody well get them himself. I wasn't daunted by any of them" (Moorhead, 2007).

Finally, Moorhead writes of Carrington's importance as an artist:

Back in England, I talk to Matthew Gale, a curator at Tate Modern, about Leonora's significance as an artist, and detect an embarrassment that the Tate owns only two of her works, both pen and ink drawings. "In many ways, Britain has acted in the same way as your family," he says. "She has been neglected: apart from the collector Edward James, who bought many of her paintings, and an exhibition at the Serpentine in the 1980s, she's had very little exposure here. But all the time, she's been building up a massive international reputation, so suddenly we're scrabbling around to catch up, to put her in her rightful place in her native country."

Her importance, he says, lies partly in that she - along with artists such as Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo - opened up a new, and more female, strand of surrealism: in Mexico, Leonora and Varo dabbled in alchemy and the occult, and the work of both was rooted for a time in the magical and domestic elements of women's lives. "One of the extraordinary aspects of Leonora's work is how she draws on so many different inspirations, from the Celtic legends she learned from her nanny, through the constraints of her upper-class upbringing, to the surrealism of Paris in the 1930s - and then to the magic of Mexico," Gale says. "Her work is evocative of so many things, and it's enormously complex: she hasn't had a massive output because her technique is so meticulous and the work so detailed. She certainly wasn't a Picasso who could churn out several pictures a day; her work would take many months, even years."

When I tell Leonora about my conversation with Gale, she is thrilled. I hear the mischievous note in her voice that once so infuriated her father, and delighted Max Ernst. "So, they think they should have more of my work, do they?" she says. "Good! That's made my day!" (Moorhead, 2007).

Feminism and essentialism

Discussions regarding essentialism have surfaced in many fields of inquiry. Essentialism, in its most stripped down meaning, refers to the belief that people and/or phenomena have an underlying and unchanging "essence," similar to Plato's ideal forms. The term essentialism is commonly used in three main ways. First, it refers to the use of biological, physiological and, increasingly, genetic, causes as explanations for human social behavior. In this case little, if any, explanatory weight is given to psychological, sociological or cultural

explanations. An example would be to argue that women are more emotional than men and that this is inevitably due to hormonal differences. The intention is to use biology to argue that a particular social difference and/or behavior is both unalterable and unavoidable.

A second use of the term essentialism is when generalized statements make no reference to cross-cultural differences or previous historical variation (also sometimes known as universalism). An example would be to state that men are more visual than women, in all cultures and at all times. Against this a sociologist or anthropologist may argue that the way we use our senses, and which ones we prioritize, is something that varies between cultures and throughout history.

Third, the term essentialism refers to the use of unified concepts. This means that when we talk of the experiences, for example, of the disabled, the mentally ill, or (often) the experiences of women, we are lumping all individualized experiences together to provide a generalized (and generalizable) description of highly individualized conditions.

Essentialism is often posited against anti-essentialism, following our Western "principle of non-contradiction" which dictates that contradictions ("a" and "not-a") cannot logically exist simultaneously. Therefore, when we encounter contradictions, we typically are tempted - indeed, often we are instructed - to resolve them at any cost. Typically, the evocation of anti-essentialism is attributed to the group of scholars loosely referred to as postmodernists (Baudrillard, Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault, among others) who trace their intellectual genealogy back to Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Dialectic and non-essentialism

I suggest that this characterization omits an important intellectual option in failing to address the contributions of critical theory, which, through the use of dialectic, provides a distinctive approach to logic and patterns of

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thought that provides an alternative to the principle of non-contradiction, and, by extension, to the opposition of essentialism and anti-essentialism. In response, I would like to consider the possibility of what I call "non-essentialist" thinking, characterized by the dialectical logic of critical theory.

Dialectic has a long history as a form of philosophical debate which developed from Socratic dialogue. It is the major form of debate in Plato's "Dialogues" where the protagonist provisionally accepts an opponent's view in order to explore contradictory consequences. Aristotle identified dialectic as a form of argument which started from unsubstantiated opinion and which therefore could not result in the verifiable conclusions of logical forms of argument. For the Stoics, and later for medieval thinkers, the term simply referred to a form of argument. Hegel gave new meaning to the term, seeing the dialectic as a process of reconciliation of opposites (thesis and antithesis, leading to synthesis). For Hegel, the dialectic was the driving force behind historical change and an expression of a Universal Mind or Spirit.

However, not every framework presenting two sides of a question or situation is dialectical. Dialectic incorporates a "substantive" contradiction, rather than simply a formal-quantitative one. Second, simplistic reduction of the familiar thesis-antithesis-synthesis relationship has given rise to the perception that the synthesis is analogous to compromise, a kind of middle ground halfway between the two original starting points (Horkheimer spoke contemptuously of the tendency to represent dialectic as a "lifeless diagram").³⁵ Mediation takes place in and through the extremes (the thesis and antithesis); it is not a simple give-and-take along a continuum. The synthesis becomes a new "working reality" and may, in turn, become a thesis (which then engenders its own antithesis). The contradiction is not "resolved" but instead is absorbed and transformed: the frame of reference which

made the poles opposites in the first case is transcended (Arato and Gephardt, 1982/1993). Thus, what might appear to be opposites in one construction (force and consent, for example) might no longer be opposites in a different context.

A third common misunderstanding refers to the nature of contradiction represented by the dialectic. Traditional (or formal) logic dictates that two contradictory elements can never be true together (see, for example, Popper, 1963), but traditional logic, because it focuses on empirical (mostly quantitative) representations of reality, necessarily builds on arbitrarily constructed foundations. At some point, the logic is abstracted from reality (formalized). In critical theory, however, form cannot be separated from content. It must continually reflect the whole of reality, not just a simplification of it.

Adorno's goal was to formulate a post-Hegelian dialectic which does not culminate in a final synthesis or conceptual unity, but which provides a reflective openness that infinitely postpones the moment of closure. What is problematic, for Adorno, is the tendency of modern reason to culminate in self-enclosure or self-sufficiency, elevating human subjects to a position of mastery or domination in and over the world. Adorno's dialectic is negative in the sense of nonaffirmation: with the claims of linear teleology and systematic unity cast aside, human reason is no longer an instrument of domination but instead assists in the emancipation of social phenomena from conceptual restraints (Dallmayr, 1997).

Non-essentialism, ambivalence, and simultaneous states

Despite our brain-marination in the flavor of Western logic, we are, in fact, surrounded by examples and experiences of non-essentialism. Keats used the evocative phrase "negative capability" to characterize the key attribute of a great poet. In this state, "man [sic] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable

³⁵ Horkheimer, in Arato & Gephardt, 1982/1993. p. 414.

reaching after fact & reason” (Keats, 1970, p.43). Negative capability indicates the capacity to live with ambiguity and paradox, to hold or contain - not just react to - the pressure to act from one's own ego impulses or act out, to identify with the moods and modes of suffering of another. It was necessary, Keats believed, for the poet to be, above all, open to impressions, sensations or whatever, which means that the “camelion” (sic) poet is forever changing his/her ideas. Although it may to some extent come naturally to us, negative capability must also be learned: “This is a difficult intellectual stance to maintain even in the best of circumstances. To an active, seeking mind, the existence of mysteries poses a challenge. When those mysteries begin to touch a man directly, when they become, as Keats would call them a 'burden,' the mind grows increasingly less capable of ignoring them” (Ryan, 1976: 157).

Ambivalence involves expression of both sides of a dualism, in contrast to compromise, which seeks a middle ground and therefore may lose the essence of both (all) sides. In political science, the term ambivalence is often used to suggest value conflict. Hochschild (1981) finds that “given the opportunity, people do not make simple statements; they shade, modulate, deny, retract, or just grind to a halt in frustration.” Hochschild is clear that not all value conflicts result in ambivalence. For example, an individual might sort the importance of different norms among different domains. In Hochschild's work, individuals experience ambivalence when they aren't able to resolve the conflict; however, she does not separate out similarly conflictual states. Ambivalence is manifested in helplessness, anger, inconsistency, or confusion. Feldman and Zaller (1992) also view ambivalence as a manifestation of value conflict. In their study using open-ended questions, they find that social welfare liberals tend to be more ambivalent regarding social welfare, and they suggest that this is due to their difficulty in reconciling their pro-welfare view with individualism, and limited government, which are highly valued in American politics.

Ambivalence is a type of conflict in both of these works, but neither of these works addresses intensity, or personal importance. For example, a person could be conflicted about whether there should be a flag burning amendment, but feel that they want more information before they make up their mind. Another might feel conflicted, but also not care as it has little impact on their life. A third might care deeply about the issue but also feel conflicted- perhaps they strongly believe that freedom of expression should be protected, but also believe that flag burning hurts national pride, which they value highly. When asked about flag burning, all three individuals might appear ambivalent under this first definition.

To complicate things further, in political science there has been a tendency to use the term ambivalence in the context not of individual citizens and their individual attitudes, but in the context of public opinion. It is common to read impressionistic reports of public opinion polls in the media, or to hear talking heads debate the “ambivalence” of the public - when the data being discussed show disagreement in aggregate public opinion about some policy. But just because 49% of the public believes that policy should go in one direction, and 51% disagrees, does not indicate that *individuals* are ambivalent.

Psychologists define ambivalence more narrowly. Cacioppo and Berntson (1994) argue that ambivalence is a state of simultaneous high positive and high negative evaluation of an attitude object. Importantly, they argue that positive and negative evaluations are not necessarily coupled as the traditional bipolar scale implies. People can hold a very positive evaluation and little in the way of negative feelings towards the same attitude object, as the bipolar scale implies, or they could hold low negative and low positive feelings, or even high negative and high positive feelings simultaneously. This last state is their version of ambivalence. Bassili (1998) also measures ambivalence by asking respondents about positive and negative feelings separately, and measure the amount

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of conflict. He finds that the higher the conflict (or potential ambivalence), the slower they are to express their opinions.

Some political science views of ambivalence are closer to the definitions found in psychology. McGraw et. al. (2003) include subjective and objective measures of ambivalence and uncertainty in a study of on-line and memory-based candidate evaluation. Their objective measure of ambivalence is calculated by dividing the subject's average intensity of reactions to characteristics (positive and negative) by the similarity of reactions, while their subjective measure is a simple agree/disagree with the statement "I have both positive and negative feelings about [candidate]." Interestingly, they find that the subjective experience of ambivalence is related to a memory based judgment strategy, meaning that these participants were more likely to rely on information that was readily accessible (as opposed to their on-line tally). They also find that the subjective measure of ambivalence is directly related to candidate evaluation for participants low in political sophistication, but not for participants high in political sophistication. In contrast, the objective measures of ambivalence are moderately related to candidate evaluation for more sophisticated participants, and are unrelated for less sophisticated participants.

Alvarez and Brehm (2002) define ambivalence as strong internalized conflict. In their book, they characterize it as when:

Coincident predispositions induce wider response variability [and when] information widens response variability. Ambivalence results when respondents' expectations or values are irreconcilable... (p. 58).

In their operationalization, Alvarez and Brehm portray ambivalence as a condition experienced by the respondent at the moment of the interviewer's question, which reveals itself because of characteristics of prior information about the respondent's choices, in the form of their value-orientations and state

of informedness, and detected via an inferential statistical approach.

There are important distinctions in the ways these authors are using the term ambivalence. Some view it as a general state of confusion, and others restrict it to only those instances of high evaluative conflict. Depending on which definition is used, ambivalence is either common or rare in public opinion. Another important distinction is between the subjective experience of feeling ambivalent, and ambivalence as a property of an attitude, as measured by combining separately measured positive and negative evaluations.

Sociologically speaking, in an ambivalent stance, the clear positions of the oppositions are retained (Meyerson, 2001). However, I suggest that ambivalence does not necessarily involve conflict, but can represent the ability to be non-essentialist - that is, to maintain both "a" and "non-a" simultaneously - a condition I am calling "simultaneous states."

So how does this relate back to feminism? Much of the scholarly discussion and disagreement among feminist theorists can be characterized as a debate between essentialists (women are different from men) and anti-essentialists (there may be differences, but they are largely socially constructed). I am, in some respects, an essentialist. I accept, for example, that there are significant biological differences between the brains of most women and those of most men, and that those differences may cause men and women, as groups, to approach and interact with the world quite differently. In the recently-published book *The Female Brain* (2006), for example, Brizendine provides some very convincing arguments for the physiological equivalent of "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus": that men and women are fundamentally different.

But I also accept that male and female, as sex categorizations, are not dichotomous distinctions, as compellingly illustrated in the

Jeffrey Eugenides 2002 novel *Middlesex*. Despite external appearances and the presence of either/or categorizations on bureaucratic forms, inter-sexed individuals (hermaphrodites) are far more commonplace than we are led to believe.³⁶ In many plant and animal species, hermaphroditism is commonplace, or even a normal part of the life cycle. Generally, hermaphroditism occurs in the invertebrates, although it occurs in a fair number of fish, and to a lesser degree in other vertebrates. On very rare occasions, such a hermaphrodite can even impregnate itself, but this will result in complications, such as the offspring having identical DNA to its parent.

Sequential hermaphrodites are organisms born as one sex which later change into the other sex, and can only function as one sex at one time. A few species in this group can sex change multiple times, but they can only function as one sex at a time.³⁷ One example, Clownfish, are colorful reef fish found living with anemones. Generally one anemone contains a "harem" consisting of a large female, a smaller reproductive male, and even smaller non-reproductive males. If the female is removed, the reproductive male will sex change into a female, and the largest of the non-reproductive males will mature and become reproductive.

Protogyny describes a situation in which the organism starts as a female, and changes sex to a male later in life. Wrasses are reef fish that are all protogynous, but have two different life strategies: some species all start out as females, and when they get large enough they will change sex to males. Other species start out as females or

males (initial phase), and either may shift to become a supermale (terminal phase male). The females and the initial phase males have similar colorations. The supermale is larger and usually brightly colored, and there is only one in a given area of the reef. This supermale dominates the other wrasses of the species, and "pair spawns" (one male with one female) repeatedly. The initial phase males will group spawn, with many males and females participating. When the supermale dies the largest wrasse in the area (male or female) changes into the new supermale.

A simultaneous hermaphrodite (or synchronous hermaphrodite) is an adult organism that has both male and female sexual organs at the same time. Usually, self-fertilization does not occur. For example, Hamlets (a species of fish) do not practice self-fertilization, but when they find a mate, the pair takes turns between which one acts as the male and which acts as the female through multiple matings, usually over the course of several nights. Earthworms are also synchronous hermaphrodites. Although they possess ovaries and testes, they have a protective mechanism against self fertilization and can only function as a single sex at one time.

Banana slugs are still another example of synchronous hermaphrodite. Mating with a partner is most desirable, as the genetic material of the offspring is varied, but if mating with a partner is not possible, self-fertilization will occur. The male sexual organ of an adult banana slug is quite large in proportion to its size, as well as compared to the female organ. If a banana slug has lost its male sexual organ, it can still self-fertilize, making its hermaphroditic quality an invaluable adaptation.

The term hermaphrodite is also used in botany to describe a flower that has both staminate (male, pollen-producing) and carpelate (female, seed-producing) parts that are self fertile or self pollenizing. Hermaphroditism in plants is more complex

³⁶ True hermaphroditism requires the presence of both ovarian (female) and testicular (male) reproductive tissue and is relatively rare and poorly understood. Pseudo-hermaphroditism is more common.

³⁷ Unlike humans, these animals' DNA does not determine their sex, allowing full functional sex change without modifying the DNA. Protandry describes when the organism starts as a male, and changes sex to a female later in life.

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than in animals because plants can have hermaphroditic flowers as described, or unisexual flowers with both male and female types developing on the same individual—a closer analogy to animal hermaphroditism.

The point of the above discussion is that the sexes of “male” and “female,” which we conventionally categorize as essentialist, discrete conditions, can and do exist quite widely as simultaneous states. We see a similar condition when we look at certain illnesses. Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression or manic-depressive illness, is a mental illness in which one's moods can swing wildly from euphoria to deepest depression. In the manic phase, sufferers typically experience a range of symptoms, including increased energy, racing thoughts and rapid speech, impaired judgment, reckless behavior, a sense of exhilaration, irritability and hostility, and changes in perception, which can extend to hallucinations, delusions, and paranoia. A somewhat milder form of mania, generally referred to as hypomania, is particularly seductive and difficult to recognize. Then there is the inevitable depression. Bipolar depressions tend to be different from unipolar depressions, and often in the absence of a full-blown mania it is the atypical depression that finally identifies the disorder.

But the experience of bipolar disorder is not limited to the two poles of mania and depression, separated by periods of stability. It is also possible to be both manic and depressed at the same time, a turbulent condition with the disarmingly diffident classification of “mixed state” or “mixed episode.” The DSM-IV alludes to mixed states where full-blown mania and major depression collide in a raging sound and fury, but there are also more subtle manifestations. Clinicians commonly refer to these under-the-DSM radar mixed states as dysphoric hypomania or agitated depression, often using the terms interchangeably. Some describe the former as “an energized depression.” In any case, the point is that both conditions — mania and depression, “a” and “not-a” — exist

simultaneously. In my experience, it is the physical (physiological) manifestation of Jameson's intellectual description earlier in this article: the “sickening shudder” of synthesis.

Feminism as synthesis

I want to suggest that, as it relates to any number of fields of scholarly study, feminism has served important dialectical functions. On the one hand, feminist interpretations have served as the antithesis to many patriarchal, prevailing explanations of the world. On the other hand (and owing a great debt to Judith Butler), I suggest that, for the time being, feminism may also be a contemporary synthesis.

Over the past several years I have been musing about the exact nature of synthesis. What is it, really? What happens in the “black box” between thesis and antithesis? How does that Hegelian shift take place — how does the slave come to understand that s/he is actually overlord of the master?

It seems to me that some degree of ambivalence must be present in the synthesis — and expression of both sides of the dualism. Furthermore, it seems that a condition of “simultaneous states” must also take place — that in the process of thesis resolving with antithesis, we must be able to “be both” and hold contradictions long enough for the organic process of synthesis to occur (see also Zanetti, 2003).

Judith Butler's brilliant book *Undoing Gender* (2004) gives us much to think about along these lines. In the chapter entitled “The End of Sexual Difference?” Butler, a Hegelian scholar and feminist theorist, reviews the questions posed by various theorists regarding this question. For Luce Irigaray and Drucilla Cornell, the question is how to come to terms with otherness. For Anne Fausto-Sterling, the question is one of multiple genders and/or degrees of hermaphroditism, as discussed earlier in this article. Rosi Braidotti considers the question one of

metamorphosis and transformation, using bodily activism to find a way through pain and limitation.

In the following chapter, Butler addresses the question of social transformation, and it was in reading this chapter that I found myself thinking of feminism as contemporary synthesis. She writes:

That feminism has always thought about questions of life and death means that feminism has always, to some extent and in some way, been philosophical. That it asks how we organize life, how we accord it value, how we safeguard it against violence, how we compel the world, and its institutions, to inhabit new values, means that its philosophical pursuits are in some sense at one with the aim of social transformation (p. 205).

I particularly like this assessment because of its focus on the nexus of sex and life, rather than sex and death as seen in Freudian psychoanalytic theory and the work of the male Surrealists. I have long maintained that, as a woman who has borne and reared children, my associations with sex are generative rather than nihilistic and the connection between sex and death makes no sense to me. Furthermore, these associations do not change simply because I will no longer bear children. I do not suggest that these associations are biologically bound; rather, they seem more a product of the patriarchal, bourgeois social-cultural framework.

Feminism, I would argue, represents the synthesis in this historical moment. On the one hand, it is important to maintain a framework of sexual difference because it reminds us that patriarchal domination is a continuing cultural and political reality. Until that situation changes, it will always be different for a woman to enter into transgressive gender norms (while acknowledging that men have their issues with gender norms, as well). In exploring

butch-femme distinctions, theorists and activists noted new understandings emerging; butch and femme were not just replications of heterosexual roles but something distinct. Butler continues: "I would hope that we would all remain committed to the ideal that no one should be forcibly compelled to occupy a gender norm that is undergone, experientially, as an unlivable violation" (p. 213).

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