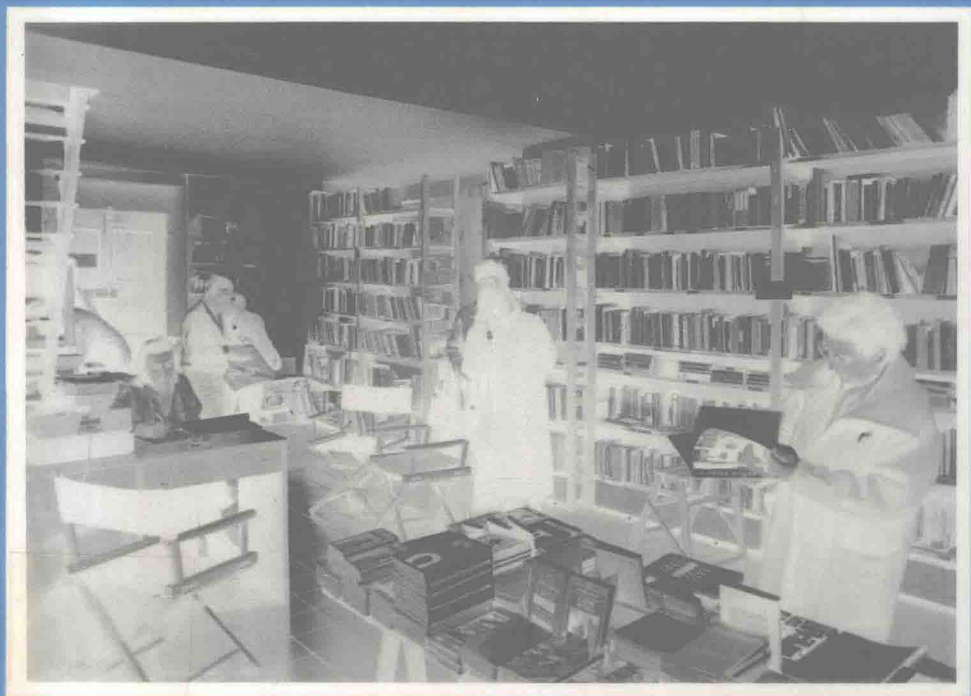


Sexual Difference

A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice



The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective

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Practice

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Sexual Difference

Theories of Representation and Difference

GENERAL EDITOR, TERESA DE LAURETIS

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The Practice of Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy

An Introductory Essay

by Teresa de Lauretis

Italian feminism is not well known in North America. With very few, very recent exceptions, its critical texts are not translated, discussed, or cited by American and other anglophone feminists.¹ In presenting this text to them and others concerned with the development and elaboration of feminist thought and its relations to history and cultural practices, I shall especially resist the temptation of providing even a brief overview of a social, political, and intellectual movement whose history is still as ever in process, multifaceted, overdetermined, contradictory—in a word, emergent. The book you are about to read, however, is not only a major theoretical text of Italian feminism but one which, in elaborating a critical theory of culture based on the practice of sexual difference, also reconstructs a history of feminism in Italy from the particular location, the social and political situatedness, of its authors.

That this is only one possible history, one story that may be told out of the many documents and social memory of Italian feminism, and the experiential recollections of individuals and groups, is clearly stated in the book's original title, *Non credere di avere dei diritti: la generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne* [Don't Think You Have Any Rights: The Engendering of Female Freedom in the Thought and Vicissitudes of a Women's Group]. The partiality and situatedness of the book's theoretical and historical project—a project *at once* theoretical *and* historical—are further emphasized by its attribution of collective authorship to the Milan Women's Bookstore [Libreria delle Donne di Milano], which one infers must be roughly coextensive with the "women's group" referred to in the subtitle. They are reiterated in the authors' introduction: "This book is about the need to make sense of, exalt, and represent in words and images the relationship of one woman to another. If putting a political practice into words is the same thing as theorizing, then this is a book of theory, because the relations between women are the subject matter of our politics and of this book."

The events and ideas recounted in the book, the authors continue, took

place between 1966 and 1986, mainly in Milan; they commonly go under the name of feminism. But in reassessing them retrospectively, in rewriting its history, the book renames it *genealogy*: "In the years and places we mention, we saw a genealogy of women being charted; that is, women appeared who were legitimized by referring to their female origin. . . . We are not certain that the history reconstructed in this book will really produce what we wanted, that is, to be inscribed in a female generation. We cannot be sure that, put to the test, our experience will prove to be only one of the many historical vicissitudes of the fragile concept of woman."

The bold injunction of the title, "Don't think you have any rights" (a phrase of Simone Weil's, cited in the epigraph), with its direct address to women and its unequivocal stance of negativity, sharply contrasts with the subtitle's affirmation of a freedom for women that is not made possible by adherence to the liberal concept of rights—civil, human, or individual rights, which women do not have *as women*—but is generated, and indeed en-gendered, by taking up a position in a symbolic community, a "genealogy of women," that is at once discovered, invented, and constructed through feminist practices of reference and address. Those practices, as the book later specifies, include the reading or rereading of women's writings; taking other women's words, thoughts, knowledges, and insights as frame of reference for one's analyses, understanding, and self-definition; and trusting them to provide a symbolic mediation between oneself and others, one's subjectivity and the world.

The word *genealogy*—whose root links it with *gender*, *generation*, and other words referring to birth as a social event—usually designates the legitimate descent, by social or intellectual kinship, of free male individuals. The intellectual and social traditions of Western culture are male genealogies where, as in Lacan's symbolic, women have no place: "Among the things that had no name [prior to feminist discourse] there was, there is, the pain of coming into the world this way, without symbolic placement." In this sense, Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own" may not avail women's intellection if the texts one has in it are written in the languages of male genealogies. A better figure of symbolic placement [*collocazione simbolica*] is Emily Dickinson's room, as Ellen Moers describes it, filled with the insubstantial presence of women writers and their works—a symbolic "space-time furnished with female-gendered references [*riferimenti sessuati femminili*]" which mediate her access to literature and poetry. Only in such a room may the woman "peculiarly susceptible to language," as Adrienne Rich has put it, be able to find, or to look for, "*her way of being in the world.*"² In other words, the authors suggest, the conceptual and discursive space of a female genealogy can effectively mediate a woman's relation to the symbolic, allowing her self-definition as female being, or female-gendered speaking subject. And lest it be misconstrued, let me anticipate right away that this notion of genealogy is not limited to literary figures but reaches into relationships between women in everyday life.

Woolf, Dickinson, and Rich are major points of reference in the critical genealogy of feminism in Italy, which, while distinct in its historical and

political specificity from both Anglo-American and French feminisms, nonetheless retains significant connections with them. Thus, if the terms *symbolic*, *genealogy*, *freedom*, and others, all newly inflected and recast in this text, come from the philosophical tradition of Nietzsche, Benjamin, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, Foucault, et al., the sense of their recasting can be traced to Rich's 1971 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," published in the collection *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979), which was translated into Italian in 1982. See, for instance, the passage I cited above about

the girl or woman who tries to write because she is peculiarly susceptible to language. She goes to poetry or fiction looking for *her* way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together; she is looking eagerly for guides, maps, possibilities; and over and over in the "words' masculine persuasive force" of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salomé, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together. So what does she do? What did I do? I read the older women poets with their peculiar keenness and ambivalence: Sappho, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Elinor Wylie, Edna Millay, H. D. (p. 39)

The notions of a woman's relation to the symbolic marked by "peculiar keenness and ambivalence," of a female genealogy of poets, makers of language, and of their active role in mediating the young woman's access to poetry as a symbolic form of being (female being or being-woman) as well as writing (authorship, author-ity), are all there in Rich's passage, although the first two are stated, the last one only suggested by negation. Nearly two decades later, the Milan feminists turn the suggestion into positive affirmation.

In her reading of Rich over and against a comparably influential text in the male genealogy of poststructuralist criticism, Barthes's "The Death of the Author," Nancy K. Miller uses this very essay by Rich to argue for a double temporality of intellectual history unfolding concurrently, if discontinuously, in the "women's time" of feminist criticism and in the "standard time" of academic literary criticism. With regard to Rich's later work, however, Miller questions the "poetics of identity" grounded in a community of women exemplified by "Blood, Bread, and Poetry" (1983) and the limitations set to feminist theory by what she takes to be "a prescriptive esthetics—a 'politically correct' program of representation."³ Instead, Miller proposes irony as a mode of feminist performance and symbolic production.

Now, there definitely is irony—whether intended or not—in a theory of sexual difference such as the one proposed by the Italian feminists that draws as much on the philosophical and conceptual categories of poststructuralism and the critique of humanism as it does on the classic texts of Anglo-American feminism—and recasts them all according to its partial, political project; an

irony most remarkable in that it underscores precisely the effectivity of the concept of genealogy. For while both Miller and the authors of *Sexual Difference* are feminist theorists fully conversant with poststructuralist critical thought, the latter trace their descent from Irigaray rather than Barthes. It is Irigaray's reading of woman's oblique, denied, repressed, unauthorized relationship to the symbolic order from Plato to Hegel and Lacan that resonates, for the Italian theorists of sexual difference, with Rich's "peculiar keenness and ambivalence" to language, and motivates their shared political standing as (in Rich's words again) "disloyal to civilization." Here is, for example, another Italian feminist, the philosopher Adriana Cavarero, writing "Toward a Theory of Sexual Difference":

Woman is not the subject of her language. Her language is not *hers*. She therefore speaks and represents herself in a language not her own, that is, through the categories of the language of the other. She thinks herself as thought by the other. . . . Discourse carries in itself the sign of its subject, the speaking subject who in discourse speaks himself and speaks the world starting from himself. There is thus some truth in man's immortality, which I mentioned earlier as a joke: in universalizing the finitude of his gendered being [*della sua sessuazione*], man exceeds it and poses himself as an essence that of necessity belongs to the "objectivity" of discourse.⁴

The history of philosophy, Cavarero continues, records in various ways the finitude that the thinking subject carries in itself *qua* thinking being, but is extraordinarily blind to the finitude of its sexual difference. While it would have been possible to start from a dual conceptualization of being-man [*l'esser uomo*] and being-woman [*l'esser donna*] as originary forms of being, Western philosophy has started from the hypothesis of the one and from the assumption of a "monstrous" universal, at once neuter and male, whose embodiment in individuals of two sexes does not concern its essence as thinking being but remains external to it. "The task of thinking sexual difference is thus an arduous one because sexual difference lies precisely in the erasure on which Western philosophy has been founded and developed. To think sexual difference starting from the male universal is to think it as already thought, that is, to think it through the categories of a thought that is supported by the non-thinking of difference itself" (48).

The question, then, for the feminist philosopher is how to rethink sexual difference within a dual conceptualization of being, "an absolute dual," in which both being-woman and being-man would be primary, originary forms. This is a question that subverts the categories of Western thought which, precisely, elide sexual difference as primary—as "being there from the beginning" in both woman and man—and relegate it to the status of a secondary difference contained in the gender marking [*sessuazione femminile*] of the being-woman: "Woman is thus the repository of sexual difference, which constitutively belongs to her (and thus constitutes her) since the process of universalization has excluded it from the male" (62). It is a question quite similar to the one posed by Irigaray throughout her readings of Western

philosophers in *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*, and similarly located, framed from inside the philosophical discourse they both mean to subvert.

I will come back later to the notion of an originary or primary character of sexual difference. For the moment, I return to the Milan Bookstore and its history of feminism in Italy, where the critical reflection on sexual difference has been going on since the early, activist days of the women's movement but, in the more self-reflexive writings of the '80s, has been taking shape as both a theory of sexual difference and a theory of social practice: the theory of that particular and specifically feminist practice now emerging in Italy, which the book names *the practice of sexual difference* [*la pratica della differenza sessuale*] and proposes as the conceptual pivot of its critical and political project.

The first document of Italian feminism, in this history, was a manifesto issued in 1966 by a group known as Demau (acronym for Demystification of Patriarchal Authoritarianism). While centered on the contradictory position of women in society—which at the time and in the terms of its most progressive social thought, Marxism, was called “the woman question”—the Demau manifesto contained the suggestion that no solution could be found to the problem women pose to society as long as women themselves could not address the problem that society poses to women; that is to say, as long as the terms of the question were not reversed, and women were not the subject, rather than the object, of “the woman question.” A further step in the development of what the Milan book calls “the symbolic revolution,” namely, the process of critical understanding and sociocultural change whereby women come to occupy the position of subject, was the celebrated pamphlet by Carla Lonzi first published in 1970 with the title *Sputiamo su Hegel* [Let's Spit on Hegel]. Not coincidentally it is a philosopher, and a philosophy of history and culture, that are targeted in Lonzi's critique (“*The Phenomenology of Mind* is a phenomenology of the patriarchal mind,” she wrote unhesitantly), rather than an anthropological or sociological notion of patriarchy, though she was not a philosopher but an art historian and later a feminist theorist whose influence on the development of Italian feminist thought has obviously continued long after her untimely death. Also not coincidentally, therefore, her writing resonates not only with Marx's *Communist Manifesto* but even more distinctly with the manifestoes of the Futurist movement, which ushered into Italy and into Europe the very image of a cultural revolution, the avant-garde, in the first two decades of this century.

The idea of women as a social subject, the “Subject Unexpected by the master-slave dialectic,” recurs in Lonzi's impassioned pamphlet, as it did in the first feminist manifesto, their stylistic and ideological differences notwithstanding; but Lonzi articulates it further, in a dimension at once utopian, historical, and philosophical. “The unexpected destiny of the world lies in its starting all over with women as subjects,” she wrote. Yet, with regard to the political strategies of feminism, she argued against equality and for difference:

Equality is a juridical principle . . . what is offered as legal rights to colonized people. And what is imposed on them as culture. . . . Difference is an existential

principle which concerns the modes of being human, the peculiarity of one's experiences, goals, possibilities, and one's sense of existence in a given situation and in the situations one may envision. The difference between women and men is the basic difference of humankind.⁵

Hence, feminism's fight for women's equality with men is misdirected since equality is "an ideological attempt to subject women even further," to prevent the expression of their own sense of existence, and to foreclose the road to women's real liberation.

Evident in the above passages are the roots of the current concept of sexual difference as constitutive of one's sense and possibilities of existence. Elsewhere the ideal of a female symbolic or symbolic mediation is implied by negation ("the equality available today is not a philosophical but a political equality"), and the necessity of a politics of radical separatism is adamantly asserted against the grain of the Marxist analysis of culture that has shaped all of Italy's recent social movements, the women's movement included: women, Lonzi states, who for two centuries have tried to express their demands by joining in the political demands of men, first in the French revolution and then in the Russian revolution, but obtaining only a subservient role, now see that "the proletariat is revolutionary with regard to capitalism, but reformist with regard to the patriarchal system" (29). "Women's difference is in their millenary absence from history. Let's take advantage of that difference. . . . Do we really want, after millennia, to share in the grand defeat of man?" (20).

During the '70s, the better part of Italian feminism took the latter road, a radical anti-institutional politics, even as large numbers of women continued to work within the parties of the Left for women's rights and social equality, achieving major social reforms such as the legalization of abortion in 1978. But even for those women (and they were many) who continued to be active in Left party and union politics, the development of a feminist consciousness took place in small women's groups, in the form of the separatist feminist practice known as *autocoscienza*; and because the two forms of activism were necessarily and strictly separated in time and place, not only during the first decade of the movement but well into the '80s, Italian feminism was characterized by the widespread phenomenon of "the double militancy," a particular variant of what here was called "the double shift," with its distinctive contradictions and difficulties.

Autocoscienza [self-consciousness or consciousness of self, but the Italian word suggests something of an auto-induced, self-determined, or self-directed process of achieving consciousness] was the term coined by Carla Lonzi for the practice of consciousness-raising groups which Italian women adapted from North American feminism to suit their own sociocultural situation. They were intentionally small groups, unattached to any larger organization, and consisting exclusively of women who "met to talk about themselves, or about anything else, as long as it was based on their own personal experience." And while this form of gathering could easily be grafted onto traditional cultural practices in a

country more deeply conscious of gender and pervasively gender-segregated yet more thoroughly politicized than the United States, the impact of this first, specifically feminist, political practice was perhaps stronger and ultimately more significant for the development of feminist theory in Italy than in North America.

Here, easier institutional access and a less gender-segregated history of white women in the public sphere (e.g., in education, social work, and what is now called pink-collar work) favored the diffusion, much earlier on, of the sites and modes of feminist consciousness. From the relatively private environment of small women's groups, feminism could move into more public ones—academic Women's Studies programs, publishing and media enterprises, social service and law firms, etc. Concurrently, a greater social and geographical mobility made life in separatist communities seem more of a realizable possibility than it ever could in Italy—or than it actually can be in the United States, for that matter. Whence the different meaning and relative weight of the term *separatism* itself in feminist discourse in Italy and North America: there, it is mostly a “good” word, almost synonymous with feminism, and with positive connotations of intellectual and political strength for all feminists, regardless of sexual orientation or class differences. It lacks, in other words, most of the negative connotations that have accrued to separatism in this country and that, in my opinion, are due to more or less founded fears, on the part of feminists, of loss of professional status, loss of heterosexist privilege, or loss of community identity.

In Italy, on the other hand, if it valorized women's interactions with one another and the sharing of personal experience by conferring upon the latter an unprecedented social significance and analytical power, nevertheless the relatively privatized practice of *autocoscienza* could not fulfill the need for immediate political effectivity in the larger world that was the goal of the movement (and hence the practice of the double militancy); nor could it promote the public recognition of feminism as a critical analysis of society and culture, and not merely a narrowly political one. Above all, it could not envision (as this book's authors now can) a different symbolic order by reference to which women could be legitimated as women. Thus feminist thought found itself in a bind: it needed conceptual tools to develop itself and its relation to the world but, wishing to guard its own authenticity, it could use none except *autocoscienza*. Which for many had become insufficient.

In a sense, it can be argued retrospectively, the “static” separatism of the small group practice that marked the Italian movement in the '70s, in contrast with the more dynamic separatism (or “diffuse feminism”) of the present day, reproduced and solidified the split between private and public existence typical of women's lives in general: a painful and contradictory rift between, on the one hand, the experience of a shared language and apprehension of female subjectivity and existence that occurred inside the movement, and, on the other, the daily confirmation of its incompatibility with, its utter otherness and alienation from, all other social relations outside the movement, where women's new

critical knowledge—their “sense of existence” or their “ways of being in the world”—were neither legitimated nor recognized. And where, on the contrary, sexism and a pronounced disregard for feminism continued to pervade, as they still do, all social intercourse. Yet, I would suggest, that experience of a harsh and protracted separateness, of social-symbolic defeat—in the impossibility for women to achieve what Lonzi called “philosophical equality” and to gain self-representation in the established symbolic order—may be just what enabled the subjects of that experience to reach the present-day critical understanding of their own different subjecthood (the theory of sexual difference) and to attempt to define the modes of its possible existence, the ways of living it out in the practice of everyday life (the practice of sexual difference).

Eventually, then, under the pressure of its own contradictions, the practice of *autocoscienza* evolved into other, more open and conflictual practices that expanded or created new spaces of female sociality: cultural activities, parties, dances, conferences, journals, group holidays and travel, teaching, and direct contacts with feminists in other countries, notably the “Politique et psychanalyse” group in France (also known as “Psych et po” from its former name, “Psychanalyse et politique”). This more dynamic and interactive, though no less separatist, mode of sociality and communication among women is regarded by the Milan authors as a breakthrough in the development of their theory of feminist practice. For among the results of the new practice of female relationships [*pratica dei rapporti tra donne*] was the necessity of coming to terms with the power and the disparity—the social and personal inequality—inherent in them, as well as with the erotic dimension of all relationships between women and *its* relation to power. This proved to be especially conflictual, indeed “scandalous,” in view of the ethos of parity (equality among women), nonaggressivity, and sisterhood in oppression that had characterized the past practice and self-image of the movement. Not surprisingly, these issues are still live as coals, and the views of the Milan authors very much contested.

A first formulation of the issues and perspective that inform *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* appeared in 1983 as a pamphlet of the Milan Bookstore publication *Sottosopra* [Upside Down] entitled “Più donne che uomini” [More Women Than Men] but better known as “the green *Sottosopra*” from the color of its print. It was this text, by national consensus, that marked a definitive turning point for all Italian feminists, whatever their positions, pro or against or ambivalent about its authors’ position.⁶ Several years of intense debate ensued, in many Italian cities and with many groups representing various tendencies within the movement. The debate has been rekindled since the publication of the book.

One of the major points at issue is the notion of *entrustment* [*affidamento*], a term proposed to designate a relationship between two women which, though recorded and variously accounted for in feminist and women’s writing, had not yet been named or formally addressed in feminist theory. Briefly, the relationship of entrustment is one in which one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman, who thus becomes her guide, mentor,

or point of reference—in short, the figure of symbolic mediation between her and the world. Both women engage in the relationship—and here is the novelty, and the most controversial aspect of this feminist theory of practice—not in spite but rather because and in full recognition of the disparity that may exist between them in class or social position, age, level of education, professional status, income, etc. That is to say, the function of female symbolic mediation that one woman performs for the other is achieved, not in spite but rather because of the power differential between them, contrary to the egalitarian feminist belief that women's mutual trust is incompatible with unequal power.

Sexual Difference questions this belief on the basis of the experience of social defeat and personal disempowerment that women in the movement have admitted to, and that led to a weakening of energy, a leveling of women's fantasies, and a stifling of female desire ("within feminism, the politics of equal rights had no theoretical grounding but was nourished by the weakness of female desire, in its reluctance to expose itself, in its lack of symbolic authorization"); and it forcefully argues that the disparity, which does exist in the world as constructed and governed by the male social intercourse, is invested in women by dint of their subjection to the institutions of the male social contract, i.e., by their being objects of the male symbolic exchange. To confront that disparity and to practice it in the relationship of entrustment establishes the ground of a symbolic exchange between women, a female social contract whose terms can be defined autonomously from the male social contract.

Naming the fact of disparity among women was certainly the decisive step. It meant breaking with the equalization of all women and their consequent submission to the distinctions set by male thought according to its criteria and the needs of men's social intercourse [*dei commerci tra uomini*]. It meant that among women there can and must be established a regime of exchange [so that] from being objects of exchange, as they were in the male world, women can and must become subjects of exchange.

Only a generalized social practice of entrustment through disparity, the book implies, can change the affective contents, symbolic meaning, and social value of women's relations to one another and to themselves, and produce another structure of symbolic exchange and other practices of signification. But how can trust be given to the powerful (woman) when power has been the means of women's oppression, by other women as well as men?

The examples of the relationship of entrustment given in the book range from the biblical story of Naomi and Ruth to the relationships between H. D. and Bryher in Greece described in H. D.'s *Tribute to Freud*, between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, Emily Dickinson and (the writings of) Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mme du Deffand and Mlle de l'Espinasse, and from the "Boston marriages" back to the myth of Demeter and Persephone. What these have in common, besides the intimately complex and often erotic nature of the bond between the women, is the symbolic recognition, the value or valuation of human, gendered worth that each one is capable of conferring upon the other,

their formal social differences notwithstanding. Although their roles and symbolic functions with respect to one another may have been as different as their social or personal powers, yet each woman of each pair validates and valorizes the other within a frame of reference no longer patriarchal or male-designed, but made up of perceptions, knowledges, attitudes, values, and modes of relating historically expressed by women for women—the frame of reference of what the book calls a female genealogy or a female symbolic. The recognition of mutual value is thus made possible by their inscription in a symbolic community for which the authors again borrow a phrase from Adrienne Rich, “the common world of women” (and here Mille de l’Espinasse serves as the negative example). But all this does not yet explain the concept of entrustment through disparity, in which consists the originality of this theory of female social-symbolic practice as well as its major difficulty, and on which are predicated two other crucial notions—the notions of female freedom [*libertà femminile*] and of the originary nature of sexual difference.

Again, since this theory of sexual difference is also a theory of social practice, we must go back to the history of the women’s group whose critical autobiography, as it were, is written in *Sexual Difference*. By the early ’80s, as women’s politics had effectively pushed social legislation toward a degree of emancipation unprecedented in Italy, the process of women’s assimilation into (male, or male-directed) society was well on its way, and the need for a discourse that could account for sexual difference by concepts other than victimization and emancipation was all the more urgently felt. The group began a project of reading literary works by women, especially novels, hoping to find in their contribution to Western culture some expression of “what human culture does not know about the difference in being a woman. What it was exactly, we could not know then, because what was missing was a ‘language,’ that is, a symbolic structure of mediation.”

Their method, therefore, was “experimental,” from the perspective of literary criticism. Very simply, they treated the texts as they would have their own words, as parts of a puzzle to be solved by disarranging and rearranging them according to extratextual, personal associations and interpretations, and thus erasing the boundaries between literature and life. This practice of reading (based on the group’s previous experience of a collective, wild form of psychoanalysis, which they named “the practice of the unconscious”) led to a division in the group regarding the preferred writers and the contest of interpretations: some women, like their favorite writers, were seen as authoritarian “mothers” prevaricating over the preferences and interpretations of the others, who thus felt cast in the role of daughters. The admission of disparity among women—if only, in this case, in matters of literary authority or critical persuasiveness—was at first shocking but subsequently liberating. “We were not equal. . . . Mentioning the disparity present in our relations apparently freed us from the constraint of representing them according to an ideal of neutral, genderless justice, and cleared our minds of the image of this kind of justice as well as of the guilt feelings and the resentment that this neutral authority introduced into our