also this temporal element of difference, *différance* being derived from the verb *différer* which also means to postpone, to make a temporizing detour. As such, Hélène Cixous' literary enterprise will be continued, exploring more differences and challenging the power of representation.

POETRY AND SEDUCTION

On reading as a lesbian

Maaike Meijer

Our Groningen colleague Riet Paasman commissioned me to open this day of learning and discussion with a short lecture.[1] She asked me to speak about the seductive character of poetry. What is it in poetry that leads us to read and analyse it with so much patience, attention and love? And if I would show you how I go about reading poetry in my search for meaning, could I then, being the guide, also seduce you, the audience, to become responsive to the seductive strategies of the poem? Can I, in other words, tell you about my being seduced, and thereby seduce you? I think this is a lovely assignment. I don't think I have ever been invited to seduce an audience before. There is however one problem with it. The metaphor of *seduction* implies a 'story of reading' where the text is the active agent, and the reader the more passive - though willing - one. It implies that the text brings some very forceful rhetoric into play, we might say irresistable artistic devices, that the text exerts such powerful text-appeal that we cannot escape its charm. This is of course a very old and popular story of reading [2]: there are many readers working within this scheme, acting out their role in this play: the text takes them to strange places, the text instructs and teaches them, they let themselves be carried away, and so forth and so on. We tend to forget, however, that we first endowed this powerful text with its power to seduce. The poem can move us and teach us, because the capacity to do so was bestowed upon it by cultural agreement. We have conventions of reading, which define the poem as a text that can do something to us. We bring so much attention

---

1 Part of this text is translated from my essay in Lover (1988) 15 number 4 'Lezen als lesbo. Eigenzinnig interpretatiekader neemt de plaats in van objektieve teksteigenschappen' (Reading as a lesbian. An idiosyncratic interpretive framework to replace objective textual properties.) The complete text of this essay will probably appear in Journal of Homosexuality. The talk has been edited by Drs. Renée Hoogland. The editing was made possible by STEO (Stimuleringsgroep Emancipatieonderzoek), Ministerie van Sociale Zaken, The Hague.

2 The term 'story of reading' was introduced by Jonathan Culler in On Deconstruction 1983:64-83. A 'story of reading' is a narrative construct, which accounts for the experiences the 'reader' is supposed to go through. This narrativisation of theory does justice to the process-character of reading. It provides the script for the little theatre-piece in which text and reader can play their attributed roles.

and so many expectations to the poem, and we enable its rhetorical devices to work so intensely, that the poem becomes very significant and very meaningful as a result of our endeavours. In other words: the whole script of what happens between text and reader has been written by the reading subject. Now, in the 1980's, there is much more selfawareness on the fact that we set ourselves up as actors in this whole drama of reading. We can think about the conventions, needs and interests which lead us not only to the production of certain meanings, but also to the roles into which we stage ourselves as readers.

There are many 'stories of reading', many ways to go about the act of reading and of interpreting texts. I was asked for this occasion to give you an overview of the ways of reading which I have used in my dissertation *Lust for Letters*.[3] Now the problem is that I have tried many ways of reading, and tested many theories and frames of interpretation. I also cooked up some ways of interpretation myself - making a rough division between the 'erotics of reading' and the 'politics of reading'. These I take as reading strategies, which are certainly not mutually exclusive. I consider them as programs which the reader can key into his/her reading act, to be used where they are most apt. But if I would demonstrate them here for you in all their complexity, I would take too much time. Very central to my work has been the notion that the reader him/herself contributes enormously to the production of meaning. I stress this point most vehemently, even extravagantly in the chapter 'Lezen als lesbo': 'Reading as a Lesbian'. This chapter is built upon the following story of reading: the lesbian reader fights herself back into an alienating heterosexist culture. She does so by seducing the text to produce the meanings she longs for and needs. The text succumbs, gives way, opens itself up so to speak, for the designs of this longing reader. So the story of seduction comes up again, but then, as you will notice, reversed: the active reader seduces the passive - though willing - text.

From this chapter I would like to present something here. I do this, since I expect some discussion of my views: in fact my beloved colleague Pamela Pattynama has already opposed my 'too exclusively reader-oriented position', fruitfully quarreling with me on the eternal question: where is the locus of meaning: in the text *or* in the reader.[4]

3 Maaike Meijer, De lust tot lezen. Nederlandse dichteressen en het literaire systeem. Amsterdam van Gennep, 1988. (Lust for Letters. Dutch Women Poets and the Literary System. Dissertation. With a summary in English.)

4 See Pamela Pattynama, 'De herinnering aan het oude verhaal. Intertekstuele overdracht van het lesbische' (Echo of the old story. Intertextual transmission of lesbian meanings). In: Lover 16/2 1989:88-93 and Pamela Pattynama, 'Lust en lezen' (Desire and reading) in: Forum der Letteren 1990 (forthcoming)

I focus indeed on what the lesbian reader does to the text. I am interested in the possibility of lesbian *projections* onto texts, springing from the desire for particular meanings. I am reading in the hope that the text will not exclude lesbian existence and push us out of its world. I want to fulfill this hope by using our capacity as readers to make the text mean what we wish her to mean. The activity of the reader therefore takes up a place of central importance in my argument.

The explicit attention for a reader's contribution to textual meaning forms part of the great shift in the Theory of Literature to have occurred in the past decade, a shift aptly characterized by Terry Eagleton (1982) as the Revolt of the Reader.[5] Developments in critical theory since structuralism have led to the virtual abandonment of the illusory notion that any text has a predetermined and fixed meaning. The actual words appearing on the page have shown to be capable of meaning many different things for different readers. Literary texts are by their very nature often ambivalent, using words in a deliberately condensed way, or full of gaps and silences. A literary text is open: it operates as a potentiality of meaning, a field of meanings to which the reader brings her/his own knowledge, feelings, opinions and desires.

No theorist of literature today will any longer maintain that there are scientific means of textual analysis or methods of interpretation which produce the one and only "correct" explanation of the text. Notions such as the Truth of the text or Objectivity in the realm of textual analysis have become obsolete. I am here of course referring to a large body of critical studies of which I will mention only the work of Stanley Fish (1980), Jonathan Culler (1983), Hans Robert Jauss (1982 a,b), Wolfgang Iser (1976), Jane Tompkins (1980) and of many feminist theorists (Flynn/Schweickart 1986).[6] The trend in critical theory which has come to be known as Reader Response Criticism would appear to have opened new perspectives for lesbian readers.

5 Eagleton, Terry, 'The Revolt of the Reader' in New Literary History Vol XIII no. 3 Spring 1982; 449-452.

6 Fish, Stanley, Is There a Text in this Class? Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980; Culler 1983 see note 2; Jauss, Hans Robert, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception. Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1982; Jauss, Hans Robert, Aesthetische Erfahrung und Literarische Hermeneutik. Frankfurt a/Main, Suhrkamp, 1982; Iser, Wolfgang, Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie aesthetischer Wirkung. Munchen, Fink, 1976; Tompkins, Jane,(ed) Reader-Response-Criticism. From Formalism to Post-Structuralism. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1980; Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (eds) Gender and Reading. Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts. Baltimore/London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1986.

To clarify my point, I will now proceed to give you some illustrations. To begin with, an example from the absurd: John Donne's *To His Mistress Going to Bed*. I first became aware of this poem when Elly de Waard, a Dutch poet who presents herself in public as outspokenly and indeed flamboyantly lesbian, recited the poem as one of her favorite poems in world-literature. De Waard's public reading of Donne's poem made me wonder anew: what constitutes a lesbian poem? *To His Mistress* is a playful and sexy text, an 'ode to undressing' in fact. Allow me to invite you to envisage the following scene; a lesbian poet gives a public reading of a poem - and that in a highly sensual and extravagant manner - in front of a nearly all-female audience. The speaking voice of the poem is that of a lover, lying in bed and waiting for his lady ('Come, Madam, come') to join him:

[...]
Off with that girdle, like heavens Zone glistering,
But a far fairer world incompassing.
Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear,
That th'eyes of busie fooles may be stopt there.
Unlace your self, for that harmonious chyme,
Tells me from you, that now it is bed time.
Off with that happy busk, which I envie,
That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.
Your gown going off, such beautious state reveals,
As when from flowry meads th'hills shadow steales.
Off with that wyerie Coronet and shew
The haiery Diademe which on you doth grow:
Now off with those shooes, and then safely tread
In this loves hallow'd temple, this soft bed.
[...]

With articles of dress thus flying through the air, the tension in the audience was rising. De Waard's performance became even more exciting when the lady had finally mounted her lover's bed:

[...]
Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
Before, behind, between, above, below,
Oh my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd,
My Myne of precious stones, My Empirie,
How blest am I in this discovering thee! [7]
[...]

7 John Donne, Selected Poems. Ed. and introd. by John Hayward. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973; p.88-89

The listeners sat enthralled. What was going on here? A lesbian reader - standing in front of a mainly female audience - placed herself with total abandon in the position of the lyrical speaking subject, the lover waiting impatiently for the beloved. De Waard was not in any way discouraged by minor details such as the fact that today our lovers as a rule do not wear "busks" (corsets), or that they no longer lace themselves. She completely ignored any aspect of historical distance between herself and the poem. Without any visible effort she took the place of the male lover, and brought the poem to life simply by imbuing it with lesbian sensuality. De Waard took possession of the poem, captured it, ran away with it. This is not to say that she identified with the male speaking voice. What de Waard accomplished was a transformation of the male lyrical subject into a lesbian one, i.e. a transformation of the heterosexual into a lesbian lover.

Feminist literary critics have rightly pointed out that male texts necessarily violate the female reader's subjectivity, in that they inevitably compel women to identify with specifically male points of view. This process has been defined as the 'immasculation' of the woman-reader by Judith Fetterly.[8] Since the majority of books are still being written by men, female readers are continually forced to see through male eyes, to follow male lines of thought, to perceive the world from male perspectives. De Waard's lesbian-subversive reading, for instance, of Donne's poem *To His Mistress* can easily be countered with a feminist reading, through which the woman becomes the object of the dominant and constricting male gaze. In such a case, following Fetterley, the female reader can do either of two things. She can passively identify with the male perspective; this is the strategy of the assenting reader. She can, however, also defy and oppose the implications of the poem and thus become a resisting reader. But rather than restricting myself to these two possibilities I would like to propose an additional reading strategy. For it is not only the text which is capable of penetrating the reader's mind by means of its images, style, rhythm and so on. The reader herself can exert her power and invade the text with her own designs and implant in it her own desire for particular meanings. Nor is the reader's power limited to either resisting the poem as a whole, or to unmasking it as merely serving male interests: the reader is capable of having the text produce her subjectively desired meanings. What lesbian woman would not like to sing an ode to undressing? What lesbian lover then would not be affected by at least this aspect of

8 Judith Fetterley, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978.

Donne's poem, i.e. the highly suggestive image of the tantalizingly falling clothes?

In a fascinating argument, feminist theorist Patrocinio Schweickart[9] has described the ways in which woman-readers can, as it were, "seize" male texts to put them to their own uses. She demonstrates that emotions and desires expressed in a male-written text can be appropriated by the female reader and thus turned into her own. This is not to deny that a female reader must follow a long and complex road in order to make the text worth her while, but it is not impossible for her to project her own subjective desire onto a text while still staying outside the implied entanglements of patriarchal ideology. Schweickart calls this reading-strategy a 'double hermeneutics'. She makes a distinction between, on the one hand, the reader's application of a 'negative hermeneutics', enabling her to recognize the ways in which a text constitutes or reinforces patriarchal ideology, and on the other, a 'positive hermeneutics', through which the female reader can capture the 'utopian moment' of the literary text for herself, the take-off moment which of course is also present in texts written by men. It is not my intention to go into the complexities of the reading process described by Schweickart. What I want to bring to the fore is the power of the female reading subject to make a text fulfil her needs. To put it even more strongly: the lesbian reader has the power to transform any poem she likes into a lesbian poem.

I am deliberately pushing the point to the extreme for this allows me to bring the problem I am concerned with clearly into focus. I am not declaring Donne's *To His Mistress* to be a lesbian poem; such a claim is obviously refuted by the explicit references to male anatomy. After all, the speaker maintains that 'she', the lover, '[sets] our flesh upright', and the poem's concluding line reads: 'What needst thou have more covering than a *man*'. But what if the gender of the lyrical subject would have remained indefinite, as in so many well-known love-poems? What would have prevented the reader from filling the ambiguity in whatever way she liked? If I am right in claiming the possibility for the lesbian reader to experience her erotic *joie de vivre* without any problems in even an undeniably "masculinist" poem such as Donne's, and that this can be accomplished by the imposition of her own *designs* and fantasies over and on top of the symbols of masculinity, what does this tell us about the relation between the reader and the text? How can we still talk about a heterosexual text or, for that matter, about a homosexual one?

9 Patrocinio Schweickart, 'Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading.' In: Flynn/Schweickart 1986; 31-63

As you know lesbianism and homosexuality in literature have received a great deal of critical attention over the past ten years. The majority of critics start from the assumption that the lesbian aspect of a text can be shown clearly and unequivocally. It seems to me that the matter is riddled with complications. For the question remains: what is it that makes a text into a lesbian text? Who or what determines a text's lesbian character? Is it the evidence in the text itself (the text deals explicitly with a lesbian issue)? Or is it the reader who decides (the reader yearns for lesbian meanings, and projects her desires onto the text)? Or is it in the final instance the author or her/his sexual orientation who preserves the right to classify her/his text (s/he is One of Us)? Or is it perhaps the context in which a text is being read (say, for example, in front of the gay monument in Amsterdam: will this turn the text into a homosexual one? This, by the way, is indeed what has happened to the inscription on this monument, which consists of the highly ambiguous line of verse 'Naar vriendschap zulk een mateloos verlangen' - Such endless desire for friendship). But these questions only give rise to further complications. If it is the author who is the source of true textual lesbianism, what then are we to do with a poet who has *become* a lesbian only at a later age? Are we to consider the poems she produced prior to her conversion lesbian poems or not? And what in case the author is in the closet, when she does not make use of codes, comprehensible only to an insider-audience, but is nevertheless undeniably gay. Must we still assume that her lifestyle is of determining influence on her work? And then again, how do we delimit the number of texts we take to be 'lesbian'?

In order to demonstrate that this is not a simple nor indeed a purely academic matter, I will consider two examples. One is a poem by the white South-African poet Elisabeth Eybers, who lives in Holland and whose work I consider to be politically sound. The second example I take from the Belgian poet Paul Snoek, a poem from his cycle 'Zangen van Lesbos' - Songs of Lesbos. Biography as a possible source of lesbianism is clearly ruled out here: Paul Snoek can hardly be suspected of being a lesbian since he is a man, and both he and Eybers - although this kind of information should be of no concern the reader of their work - are known to be practicing heterosexuals.

Scribble

Framed in the corner of the café: four women
old friends since schooldays: three by diligence
and demure decency
worn out, talkative, sour.

Only one of them, her gaze drifting away
away from the talking voices, hiding the spark
of dreams and grief - not young
but passionate, ageless, glad.

Eybers 1958:30. Transl. M. Meijer & R. Hoogland.[10]

I and She

My fingers sharpened into carving knives
into steel arrows, pointed into hooks of ice
that cut her sweet marrow through to the bone
with the ease of a just-sharpened scythe.

Many injuries I have collected, painstakingly
I have carried her wound, as though it were mine
as a sign of her liquidity,
a mark of loneliness. Mine.

Her kiss like a fuse hiding in her mouth
her tongue like a reptile between wet mossy lips
Her whimpers and moans spasmodic
Like tightly-stretched silk roughly torn

10 'Krabbel'

In die kafeehoek-kader vier
ou skoolvriendinne: drie deur vlyt
en sedige fatsoenlikheid
verslete, mededeelsaam, suur.

Slegs een, van wie die blik vergly
uit die gesprek, bedek die vonk
van drome en verdriet - nie jonk,
maar driftig, ouderdomloos, bly.

Elisabeth Eybers, Neerslag. Gedigte. Amsterdam (van Oorschot) 1958; 30.

I know I will lose her in an early spring
just as a young tree does its remaining winterleaves.

Snoek 1982:595 Transl. M. Meijer & R. Hoogland[11]

I do not present these poems in order to subject them to traditional classroom hermeneutics ('What does the poet mean in line...'). My question is once again, could these poems be called lesbian poems or not? And if so, why? (They certainly did not ask you such things in college!) I will return to these questions in a minute.

First I will play the devil's advocate a little longer, to prove to you that there is absolutely no firm ground which enables us to distinguish homosexual from heterosexual texts. What seemed to be a self-evident truth - a lesbian text is one that deals with a lesbian subject - can no longer be maintained as such. There is no such thing as Absolute Truth, and this includes any notion of True Lesbianism. The concept of lesbianism/homosexuality is in fact historical and thus fundamentally constructed, as has been convincingly shown by i.a. Carol Smith-Rosenberg, Lillian Faderman, Martha Vicinus, and by Dutch scholars such as Mineke Bosch, Miriam Everard, Gert Hekma, myself and many others.[12] The successive meanings of these concepts

11 'Ik en zij'

Mijn vingers geslepen tot snijdende messen,
tot pijlen van staal met een weerhaak van ijs
die met de scherpte van een pas gekaarde zeis
haar zoete merg tot op het been doorklieven.

Vele letsels heb ik verzameld kieskeurig.
Haar wonde, als was het de mijne, gedragen
als een teken van haar vloeibaarheid,
als een bewijs van eenzaamheid. De mijne.

Haar kus als een lont in haar mond verborgen
als een reptiel haar tong tussen lippen van nat mos.
Haar fluisterend gekreun duidelijk krampachtig
als strakgespannen zijde die ruw wordt gescheurd.
Ik weet dat ik haar in een prille lente zal verliezen
zoals een jonge boom zijn laatste winterblad.

Paul Snoek, Verzamelde Gedichten. Samenstelling en nawoord Herwig Leus. Antwerpen/Manteau 1982; 595 ('Zangen van Lesbos')

12 See Carol Smith Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual' in: Signs Vol 1 no 1 1975; 1-29; Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men. London, Junction Books, 1981; Mineke Bosch, 'De geschiedenis van een en ander. Naar een discussie tussen lesbische en vrouwengeschiedenis' (The history of one thing and

vary from era to era and indeed from country to country. The terms lesbian/homosexual themselves emerged only in the 19th century, when homosexuality was medicalized, and in this century we have seen many definitions of the lesbian. Within feminist discourse, especially in the late 1970s, the meaning of the term 'lesbian' was stretched to such an extent that it appeared to comprise practically all women. Considering this state of affairs, how can we still claim to be capable of recognizing and delineating the lesbian aspect of a poem, let alone to make such statements about a poem written several centuries ago? Are we to consider only those poems 'truly' lesbian poems in which an explicit lesbian sexuality, or lesbian passion, are being depicted? Or are we to include all those poems which are covered by Adrienne Rich's almost inexhaustible notion of the 'lesbian continuum'? How can we, under the circumstances, ever construct a lesbian canon?

The project of setting up a lesbian canon in itself runs the risk of amounting to nothing but a dreary exercise of literary bookkeeping. This kind of accountancy indeed becomes superfluous, once we stop conceiving of 'lesbianism' - whatever we take this to mean - as an objective property to be located in a literary text. The status of 'textual properties' has become a central issue within critical theory over the past decade: what is and what is not an objective property of a text can no longer to be established with any certainty. The current debate within literary theory on the reception of and readers' responses to literary texts has dislodged any fixed notions of the status of textual 'facts'. Since each successive generation of readers has been capable of reading totally different meanings into a classic play such as, for instance, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it appears to be ineluctable to infer that a reader's contribution to the production of textual meaning is substantial. Textual 'facts' turn out to be multiple and flexible to such an extent that each individual reader and every group of readers can make their own choice in what is and what is not central to a given text's meaning. As a result of this theoretical debate, the focus within comparative literature has shifted from the

another. Towards a discussion between lesbian and women's history) In: Lover 10 no 3 1983; 115-125; Myriam Everard, 'Verandering en verschil. Lesbische geschiedenis in Nederland.'(Change and difference. Lesbian history in the Netherlands.) In: Lover 10 no. 4 1983; 198-201 en 253-254; Maaike Meijer, 'Vrome en geleerde hartsvriendinnen in de achttiende eeuw in Nederland.' (Pious and learned best friends in 18th Century Holland.) In: Duyves, Hekma, Koelemij (eds) Onder mannen onder vrouwen (Between men between women). Amsterdam (SUA) 1984; 167-182; Martha Vicinus, Independent Women. Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920. London (Virago) 1985; Gert Hekma, Homoseksualiteit, een medische reputatie (Homosexuality, a medical reputation). Amsterdam SUA 1987.

search for the meaning inherent in a given text, to an analysis of the strategies readers use in order to make texts 'mean' what they want them to mean, and consequently, to the ways in which contingent factors and social categories such as a reader's historical and geographical contexts, class, gender, education, and acquired reading conventions determine her/his reading processes. At this point we can add to the list of factors contributing to the meaning-production in literary practices: the individual reader's sexual orientation.

From the notion that the reader's activity is in fact central to the process of meaning-production it follows that 'lesbianism' is not a quality residing exclusively in a given text. Or rather: the presence or absence, or degree of a 'lesbian' quality in a particular text would be a matter for endless debate among different (lesbian) readers. What's more, it means that we have to let go of biographical determinism, since textual lesbianism can no longer be argued to be determined by the sexual orientation of the author. This has never been any of our business anyway. Moreover, since probably all human beings are bi-sexual to start with, it might be suggested that a given text actually functions so as to provide an outlet for the secret homosexual desires and fantasies of indisputably heterosexual authors, aspects which they feel compelled to repress in their social lives. So let's liberate ourselves from these irrelevant speculations on author's private lives as the *source* of literary meaning. We do not have to know what they did with Whom and in What bed. Of course the knowledge that an author is a lesbian can trigger off certain readings, but lesbian meaning is not dependent on that. I hereby proclaim that the lesbian quality of a particular text resides to a considerable degree in the reader herself. Lesbian meanings can be attributed to literary texts, because a lesbian *frame of interpretation* can been mobilized.

The phrase 'lesbian frame of interpretation' does not refer to the reader's search for masks and secret signs, for insider-codes, for references to Sappho or the use of the sapphic metre, in other words, not to the 'detective-work' of traditional interpretive practice. We all know this lesbian Columbo, frantically searching for the traces of highly significant words such as 'friendship', 'secret', 'sin', 'guilt', 'fear', 'shame' and 'loneliness', words serving as screens, hiding a type of homo-eroticism which only the 'good' reader will be able to interpret correctly. I do not mean to suggest that this kind of textual analysis is not important, but what I have in mind would in fact go beyond the confinements of such lesbian hermeneutics. It is my aim to lure lesbian readers into what I consider to be a playful and liberating exercise: to try and appropriate whatever text we come across, to take over the canon itself, and find out for ourselves what we as lesbians can read *into* those texts, *into* a canon from which we have

traditionally been excluded. And ultimately, to discover how a lesbian reader can read a text in such a way that it aligns with her own imagination and desire for meanings.

For it is true: lesbians are still being excluded from literature today as much as they have been in the past. The problem that Judith Fetterley calls the constant 'immasculation' of the woman reader, can, in the present context, be reformulated as the constant 'heterosexualisation' of the lesbian reader. Fetterley locates the power of meaning exclusively in the text: her female reader can either submit to a text's rhetorical structures, *or* resist its 'designs'. But let us instead follow Schweickart, and counter the act of (male) textual violence, and *in extenso* heterosexual domination, and consciously assume our power as lesbian *readers*. Of course, not every text can be 'salvaged' in this way for lesbian readers. Some texts are so blatantly and repulsively heterosexual, that we had better leave them alone. But there are texts sufficiently ambivalent to be liable to our appropriation. Indeed, on the premise that it is us, lesbian readers, who produce lesbian meanings, there is a host of texts we can yet make into our own.

With this perspective in mind I want to return to the poems by Eybers and Snoek. Are these lesbian texts or not? A curious thing now seems to occur: although Snoek's poem is sexually very explicit, it finds a resisting reader in me. I dislike his combination of sex and violence:

> 'My fingers sharpenend into carving knives/ into steel arrows, pointed into hooks of ice/ that cut through her sweet marrow to the bone/ with the ease of a just-sharpened scythe.'

Such is this poet's fantasy when he thinks about lesbians. It actually disgusts me. Snoek's comparisons - a tongue like a *fuse* and a kiss like a *reptile* do not appeal to me at all. The suggestion in the closing line of the poem that the lover might be lost 'in an early spring' - does it imply that she might convert to heterosexuality again? - appears to be no more than a stereotypical notion. This would seem to represent exactly what pornographers and some men *imagine* lesbianism to be all about. Paradoxically, their limited imaginative capacities in fact exclude lesbian readers.

Eybers' poem, on the other hand, is not explicit, or explicitly sexual, at all. And yet, this poem does appeal to me, in my desire for lesbian meaning. The poem presents a group of four women, old school-friends, three of whom have lost their illusions:

> 'three by diligence/ and demure decency/ worn out, talkative, sour.'

Possibly, these three are or have been married. They no longer have any secret desires, or covert dreams, they have even lost their ability to feel grief, they have no inner lives. They have found no rest in their souls, crushed and swamped as they are by the needs of their husbands and children. But the fourth woman is different from the others; in what respect exactly remains open:

> 'Only one of them, her gaze drifting away/ away from the talking voices, hiding the spark/ of dreams and grief - not young/ but passionate, ageless, glad.'

The poem creates room for contemplation, it opens up a *space*, a space to ponder on what it might be that keeps a woman alive, why one woman allows herself to be crushed by the exigencies of family life while another preserves a certain measure of autonomy, about what it means to be growing older, about the value and significance of female friendship. One could say that the poem creates a 'Leerstelle'. As I said, how or why the fourth woman's life differs from those of her friends is merely hinted at, suggested, not made explicit. The desiring reader can use this space, to consider the possibility that this woman has taken the conscious decision not to marry, that she is independent from men and shares her life with other women.

Dear colleagues, there are many more examples in the literary canon by means of which I could demonstrate the kind of 'playful exercise' I have been advocating here. Lesbian meanings could be generated in a wide range of texts. My purpose in this talk has been to promote lesbian readings, in order to provide some counterweight against the still all-pervasive heterosexual reception and critical interpretation of literary texts. I have chosen to do this exercise for you, in order to inspire more seductive readings today. In case I have succeeded in inspiring you to set out and produce your own unorthodox interpretations of famous heterosexual masterpieces, I would be most happy to hear about them.

ON TRANSGRESSION. METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON LITERARY INQUIRY.

Johanna Bossinade

In this essay I will review some current semiotic theories of transgression. The matter in dispute is what the respective concepts may contribute to the field of literary inquiry and the methodological reflections thereon. The underlying assumption is that the idea of transgression can serve as a useful guide in the area mentioned before. It helps to obstruct the perception of texts, textual representations of sex and gender included, as static entities. Special attention will be given to the splits within the concept(s) of transgression. Julia Kristeva, who theorizes poetic language as a "transgression of the symbolic", opposes this poetic modality to "both the kind that sets up the signifier as a untransgressable law and the kind for which there exists no thetic and therefore no subject"[1]. I take this differentiation as a clue that there must be some method (method: way, route, track) of transgressing the symbolic sign which avoids the pitfalls of either 'not touching the law' or 'vanishing in the void'.

My search for transgression does not strive for a coherently explicative analysis. After a short historical retrospective, I will take a look at the logical scope of transgression, followed by some of transgression's notional implications, and then go on to the questions of subjectivity and methodology. In due course I hope to arrive at the suggestion of a conscious exploitation of the innate ambiguities of the idea of transgression. I consider this exploitation as a condition for an open-ended and multi-layered kind of textual inquiry which includes a critical viewpoint on gender, especially concerning the position of women.

The romantic prelude

Between 1804 and 1806 Bettine von Arnim exchanged letters with the

1 Julia Kristeva: Revolution in Poetic Language (1974), in: The Kristeva Reader, edited by Toril Moi. Oxford 1986; p. 113. In her by now famous theory Kristeva describes two heterogeneous realms which she calls the semiotic and the symbolic. The second, which is installed by the thetic function of official discourse, includes part of the first, and their scission is thereafter marked by the break between signifier and signified (p. 102). To this relation Kristeva connects her concept of poetic transgression. "Poetic mimesis maintains and transgresses thetic unicity by making it undergo a kind of anamnesis, by introducing into the thetic position the stream of semiotic drives and making it signify" (p. 112). For an evaluation of this and other Kristevan concepts in relation to feminist approaches to the cultural tradition, see the introduction of Moi p. 1-22.

poetess Karoline von Günderode. Both women were bound in a friendship with amorous undercurrents and all the wild enthusiasm of early German romanticism. In 1839, Bettine collected the letters in a book, entitled "Die Günderode". When in 1983 a new edition of the book appeared, Christa Wolf added a letter of her own in the appendix. In this letter, she presents the 'Mischform' of the epistolary work as a provocation of the literary conventions of the time. The mixed structure also reveals some of the existential problems of Bettine and Günderode. Günderode wanted to be lover and artist at the same time and tried to meet the aesthetic standards. Bettine devoted herself neither to love nor to art. Her unchained language roamed on this or the other side of the timeless work of art. According to Wolf, both women struggled with the irresolvable paradox that literature depends on arrangements which it nevertheless must transgress:

> Es ist ein unlösbarer Widerspruch, daß Literatur von den Ordnungen abhängt, die sie doch, um Literatur zu werden, dauernd überschreiten muß. [2]

Bettine's book displays many traces of this dilemma of social attachment and poetic transgression. Günderode, who strove for public recognition, looked at herself and her creations with a feeling of longing for a higher state of being. Bettine acclaimed an unreasoned love between language and mind. This, she hoped, would bring forth a religion of poise, a *Schwebe-Religion*. [3]

The argument for playful poise sounds very modern indeed. One of the roots of the post-modern debate lies in the early romantic movement. Wolf views it as the foundation for the new ideas on gender, poetics, and language. Her involvement in romanticism was shared by feminist critics who, mainly between 1975 and 1985, discussed the romantic projections.[4]

I take romanticism as proof of a new significance of language. Since traditional patterns of genre, style, and narrative lost their influence, language shifted to the centre of the writers' attention. Bettine often dropped into a lingual spell, her famous 'Sprachrausch'.

2 Christa Wolf, 'Ein Brief über die Bettine' (1979) in: Bettine von Arnim, Die Günderode. Frankfurt a.M. 1983; p. 582.
3 Bettine, Die Günderode. p.406/7; 342.
4 See, for example, 'Projektionsraum Romantik', alternative 1982.