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Michèle Le Doeuff's "Primal Scene": Prohibition and Confidence in the Education of a Woman

ABSTRACT

My essay begins with Michèle Le Doeuff's singular account of the "primal scene" in her own education as a woman, illustrating a universally significant point about the way(s) in which education can differ for men and women: gender difference both shapes and is shaped by the imaginary of a culture as manifest in how texts matter for Le Doeuff. Her primal scene is the first moment she remembers when, while aspiring to think for herself, a prohibition is placed in her reading of literature. Her philosophy teacher—at a boys' school—told the young Michèle that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was "too difficult" for her to read. In recalling this scene, the older (and wiser) Michèle—now, a woman philosopher—directs her readers to this text by Kant, in order to demonstrate how knowledge has been constrained by the narrative and imagery in the text of a philosopher; similarly, in the texts of others. She finds the central imagery of Kant's text for setting the limits to human knowledge in his account of "the island of understanding," or "land of truth," surrounded by "a stormy sea" of uncertainty; the latter image also retains a seductive appeal, threatening to destroy the confidence of any knower who ventures out beyond the well-marked out island. Moreover, women have (too) often been associated with the dangers at sea beyond the safety of the island, where falsehood and worse reign. I propose that "text matters" here not only for gender issues, but for the postcolonial theory which Le Doeuff's reading of island imagery enhances in western literature and culture. The suggestion is that women in the history of ideas have been more susceptible than men to prohibitions (to reading texts): women's negative education is against going beyond certain boundaries which have been fixed by a generally colonialist culture on the grounds of gender-hierarchies. I stress the significance of confidence in the production of knowledge. A lack or an inhibition of confidence in one's own ability to think critically risks the damaging exclusions of, for example, colonialism

and sexism. My aim is to unearth the political biases evident in textual imagery, while also pointing to new epistemic locations, with island-and-sea imagery that transgresses patriarchal prohibition, liberating subjects for confident reading and writing of texts today.

ABSTRACT

The most precious thing, in my eyes, is that a philosophical text produces in the minds of its readers, in each one, female and male, experiences or creative shocks that the author (or whoever) could not predict, and that take on at once cognitive and therefore political value. A value variable to infinity, since it is the meeting of an individual and a body of work. (Le Doeuff, "Engaging with Simone de Beauvoir" 16–17)

INTRODUCTION

Michèle Le Doeuff describes the "creative shock" produced by a philosophical text in "the minds of its readers," showing how this shock takes on cognitive and political value. In this essay, I would like to demonstrate how Le Doeuff's own text, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.*, produces such an effect in her readers. My claim is that "the meeting of an individual and a body of work" can happen in the reading of Le Doeuff's "primal scene" in philosophy (Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice* 142–47). As will be made clear, this scene conveys something novel that places Le Doeuff's appropriation of island imagery into the history of "the philosophical imaginary" (Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* 8–20 and "Le sexe de la philosophie" 454–73).

We will discover that Le Doeuff's primal scene in Quimper, Brittany, portrays the moment of a prohibition against her sex which is ironically also a sort of permission to transgress the limits of knowledge which had been set for and by western philosophers at least since the eighteenth century. These potentially imperialist and, as Le Doeuff shows, sexist limits of philosophy are variously represented by an island, notably by the "northern isle" (*The Philosophical Imaginary* 17), which Kant carefully charts in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (257–58).

More generally, ironical island imagery appears in Le Doeuff's earliest readings of western literature and philosophy. This means not only the im-

agery of secure knowledge and the illusion of that “security” in Kant, but also the tales of islands and storms at sea in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*; of philosophical freedom and political tyranny in Rousseau; of colonial and anti-colonial tensions in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Le Doeuff’s own irony equally speaks critically of both Shakespeare’s fools and Bacon’s island-utopia, of both Rousseau’s moral education on a south sea island and Kant’s northern island as the “land of truth.” Ultimately, Le Doeuff appropriates reason’s inevitable refusal to remain content within any limits fixed by the privileged male philosopher: she refuses to exclude women and other non-privileged readers from reason’s “new beginning” in self-preservation (cf. Blumenberg 75).

Despite what philosophers have written about its non-philosophical nature, imagery remains central to Le Doeuff’s philosophical reading of texts, but also, according to her, to the history of western philosophy. Island imagery goes back at least to Plato’s tale of the lost island of Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and is recalled in Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*. It can also be traced to a darker reading of human empires and political lives on and off islands. Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* is recommended by Rousseau, in *Émile*, as the first book on moral education to be read by a growing boy; and yet there is ambivalence in its significance as an apologia for, or an ironic critique of, economic individualism, of imperialism and capitalism; as a study in alienation or a spiritual autobiography (Birch 851). The impact of Defoe’s novel has been enormous. But then, as will be seen in this essay, Le Doeuff exposes how Kant brings both the islands of Bacon and of Defoe into a juxtaposition of philosophical and literary texts, of North and South Seas islands, in his own great project, in order to both limit knowledge and expose the inevitability of reason’s transgression of its own limits. Despite, or perhaps because of, her interest in imagery, the real political heart of Le Doeuff’s project is the education of women in philosophy and, more generally, in the reading and writing of texts. For Le Doeuff, texts matter! Texts both prohibit and permit women to think philosophically. If taking up her project, it remains our task to work out how one achieves confidence for women in philosophy.

LE DOEUFF ON HER OWN PRIMAL SCENE

Let us turn to Le Doeuff’s “Each to Her Own Primal Scene” (*Hipparchia’s Choice* 142–49):

Mine took place far from the Luxembourg Gardens [and the Medici Fountain],¹ in Quimper on the south coast of Brittany. As the philoso-

¹ Here Le Doeuff assumes a contrast between her own primal scene in Brittany and what she famously describes as Simone de Beauvoir’s primal scene in Paris. Following Le Doeuff, other feminists (most notably: Moi 37–45), refer to this scene as a formative

phy classes at the girls' school were full, I [was] sent to the classes at the boys' school. This was my first experience of being "the only woman," hence a singular person in a masculine world . . . The teacher was an elderly man who took the content of his classes chiefly from wide circulation magazines on science (for the "philosophy of knowledge") or sport (for the "philosophy of human sciences"). . . .

To compensate for his classes, I read everything I could lay my hands on, understanding what I could, gleaning little bits whose meaning I could grasp . . . skipping the rest, which was beyond me, then going back to it, reckoning that my faculty of comprehension would have opened up a little in the meantime as a result of other things I had read (142–43).

At the back of the classroom there was a huge cupboard: the library. Once a week we were allowed to borrow books if we asked the teacher. I therefore asked for the *Critique of Pure Reason* and my esteemed future colleague refused to give it to me:

"That is *much too hard for you*. Kant . . . Kant . . . you know . . . Kant is very difficult . . ." (143–44; emphasis added).

I have never read the *Critique of Pure Reason*. . . I have never been able to, except by cheating: reading the end first, and then what came just before the end, a little of the beginning, a passage from the middle . . . [about islands . . .] that is not what reading is, particularly for a book like that. I have to admit that my teacher's assessment of it as "too hard for you" has had an effect, and that is very strange. For years before, when the school library refused to let me have Shakespeare (regarded as dangerous for a little girl's morality), I went immediately to the town library, where the librarian always gave me anything I wanted, even precious first editions which were not to be taken out on loan. Why did I not immediately do the same with Kant? . . . [later] I should, simply out of a sense of duty to my work, have devoted two months of my time to reading the *Critique* from cover to cover . . . So . . . that prohibition was paradoxically effective here: a few, totally unjustified words uttered by someone I did not respect still prove insurmountable years afterwards, even when they are counter-balanced by duty. (144)

The above excerpts offer us Le Doeuff's retrospective account of a decisive, creative and cultural shock to her as a young woman who is intent upon thinking for herself, especially in what she reads. But ironically, instead of producing a decisive obstacle to her engagement with literary and philosophical texts, her school teacher's ban ultimately did the opposite. The philosophical "damage" may at first glance seem extreme,

conversation between Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre at the Medici Fountain in the Luxembourg Gardens, Paris, in 1929. For more on Beauvoir's primal struggle with her male contemporary in philosophy, the young Sartre, see Anderson 163–80.

especially when the young Michèle immediately breaks the ban on reading Shakespeare, while still not being able to read Kant “cover to cover,” the latter inability is portrayed as the direct result of her teacher’s claim that Kant is “much too hard for you.” Yet at a closer look, this is ironic.

As I will show, Le Doeuff in fact reads Kant but does so through the lens of the philosophical imaginary. To anticipate my further discussion of this, I offer two salient quotations. First, her comments on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* which she wrote well before writing about her primal scene in *Hipparchia’s Choice*:

. . . [an] ancient happiness is no longer thinkable in the eighteenth century, as Kant does not fail to acknowledge, closing the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, with some thoughts on nature as cruel stepmother, and on the veneration we owe the creator “as much for what he has refused us as for what he has given us in recompense” [Kant, *Critique* 257]. The castrating dimension of the passage in the *Critique of Pure Reason* points in this direction, but at the same time its metaphor annuls this and organizes a seduction into renunciation by depicting an island already discovered. . . . A restoration of paradise on earth, through the work and progress of the . . . sciences, is declared possible and even already begun, despite and notwithstanding everything—even if the system cannot found this hope on reason. But without this hope, can there be a *Critique of Pure Reason*? (Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* 15–16)

In other words, the shock in Le Doeuff’s primal scene must have unwittingly worked for the good, insofar as it opens up the possibility for her to read any and every text with a critical eye for what has been thought to be non-philosophical.

Second, prior to writing her primal scene, Le Doeuff discovers a dialectical relation between image and concept in Kant’s first *Critique*:

The image of the northern isle is thus indeed a precondition of the Kantian theory: in one way it works towards the coherence of the system—we meet in it the major theses of the theory, even down to some of its details. But, in a contradictory sense, it reinstates everything which the work of critique tends to empty or to disavow, it cancels the renunciations demanded by the theory. Decoding it, and reintroducing into the discourse its latent meaning, makes apparent the troubles of the system.

The island of the Analytic compensates for the recognition of the vanity of regrets of South Seas islands. (Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* 17)

It is crucial to bear in mind that one of the subtexts to her primal scene is the tale of *Robinson Crusoe*. Crusoe is the male character who

returns to a very different primal scene to Kant's "northern isle," or to Le Doeuff's classroom: Crusoe is forced back to nature on a desert island in the south sea. And yet, Le Doeuff will use this difference to her own ends. A man is shipwrecked on an island where his ingenuity and labour are necessary in isolation but also in relation to a primal, or "mother," nature. Le Doeuff exploits the fact that this highly gendered tale has been the subtext of many different philosophical and literary texts concerning the politics of empire, variously appropriated for colonial and postcolonial thinking, for individual and communal life. In this context, Le Doeuff's use of primal scenes is highly suggestive and subversive: her description of one's "primal" setting certainly has Rousseau in mind (cf. Nye 92–98). Yet Le Doeuff manages a subtle subversion of Rousseau and his use of Defoe's tale; this is achieved with her feminist appropriation of Kant's imagery of islands at sea. She critically reflects upon the damage done to young girls by prohibitions against both south sea pleasures and thinking which would take them away from island-nature to the stormy seas:

... it is possible that girls and women have a powerful sensitivity to prohibition—a sensitivity which nothing affects—because their education is more closely watched and entirely centred on negativity.

... our intentions were implicitly on trial at all times, as though we were little things to be feared, which had to be stopped from doing damage: preventive precautions were thus the primary concern of educative procedure.

This attitude of prohibition had two features: the first was that it was presented to us in a purely negative form ... We were not charged with fulfilling a hope, dream or ambition).

When I read Rousseau, I again find the pure interdict which characterized our education ... "Girls must be restricted early." (*Émile*; qtd. in *Hipparchia's Choice* 145)

In *Émile: or, On Education* Rousseau restricts a girl's education but gives to his ideal male pupil, Émile, Defoe's fictional tale of the slave trader Robinson Crusoe, as "the man" who is shipwrecked on a desert island and forced to become like "a native," or natural man, and as a consequence, sees Europe differently (cf. Conrad, *Island* 44, 91–97). Although Rousseau's use of travel tales is based upon theory and not his own actual travels, arguably he came closer (to Kant and contemporary postcolonialism) than many other philosophers in suggesting that whether imaginative or real a comparison between the "native" disorder and "civilized" order does not always end up favouring the latter. In other words, Rousseau's view of the state of nature is more optimistic than some of his

contemporaries like Hobbes or Locke, while his view of Europe is arguably less so than theirs.

Unearthing these subtexts and their imagery, these stories with their pictures of nature, of women and men, helps Le Doeuff to convey the reality of flesh and blood even in western philosophy. In the hands of Le Doeuff, the philosophical imaginary comes to include the excluded matter. Although thought to be extraneous to philosophical argumentation, the imaginary becomes central to Le Doeuff's feminist method for what it can reveal about the unavoidable significance of the so-called non-philosophical in philosophical texts; that is, the stories or tales of real life struggles and injustice.

In the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly clear that Le Doeuff's influence on the women's movement is to require both a sense of solidarity and a shared sense of history between women with very different material, social, racial and cultural background. This would have to include understanding how philosophy has assumed, rationalized, and at times encouraged racial and cultural inequalities. In other words, a critical concern for ethnicity, for colonial and postcolonial thinking, in the reading and locating of the asides and imagery in philosophical texts is not just of political significance, it generates a deeper understanding of texts, especially when interpreted from non-privileged positions. But it is not enough to make this a theoretical enterprise—or, even a practice of textual interpretation—which maps the vulnerability of women and so-called natives. Theory and the interpretation of texts alone can leave people to suffer.

The role which Le Doeuff gives to imagery in philosophical texts is not trivial. According to her, at the very least, "imagery is inseparable from . . . the sensitive points of an intellectual venture" (Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* 3). At the most, imagery "occupies the place of theory's impossible" (5). This latter would sustain what the "system cannot itself justify, but which is nevertheless needed for its proper working" (3). Again, in her words, "the imaginary which is present in theoretical texts stands in a relation of solidarity with the theoretical enterprise itself (and with its troubles)" (6). Le Doeuff's position is in sharp contrast with philosophers going back to Plato who have insisted upon the non-philosophical nature of images and metaphorical language. For this reason, the present essay is seeking to persuade readers to notice the great significance of the philosophical imaginary to learning and to philosophy as a vibrant discipline. Le Doeuff both insists and demonstrates that images in philosophical texts are more than pedagogical aids; they are not merely "a stock of cultural forms" either. Instead we need images to cope with life, to think and to encourage the growth of knowledge, freedom and justice.

TO PROTECT “A LITTLE GIRL’S MORALITY,”
NEITHER SHAKESPEARE² NOR KANT

Le Doeuff takes up the imagery of a man stranded on an island, mapping its terrain and learning to survive, as a point of departure for a very different tale of a woman learning to survive, stranded on an island which has already been mapped out for her. But this woman becomes a philosopher by moving off the security of Kant’s land of truth. Crucial to the interpretation of this scene of patriarchal bliss is Le Doeuff’s subtle and poetic challenge to significant spatial imagery concerning an island. In particular, the northern “island of understanding” which has been carefully “charted,” as distinct from the uncharted and uncharitable seas, by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* constitutes—for Le Doeuff—a form of prohibition, ensuring that “confidence” on matters of knowledge is “sexed,” since only possible within certain limits and from certain epistemic locations; that is, those of men. Le Doeuff forces us to ask whether women in the history of philosophy have been more sensitive than men to prohibitions, and so their confidence in the production of knowledge has been seriously inhibited or blocked. Too often women have been associated with the dangers at sea and of disorder beyond the safety of the so-called “secure” island where falsehood and worse reign. This essay suggests the possibility of new epistemic locations by finding space for transgression within the shared imaginary of Bacon, Kant and Le Doeuff. Provocative readings of island-and-sea imagery help us to discover new ways (for women and others) to read both non-traditional and traditional literature in the context of wider political and cultural debates.

As we read Le Doeuff’s texts, we also learn about the exclusionary strategies of reading, the cognitive blocks, as well as sexist bans to the reading of certain texts. In Le Doeuff’s primal scene, a young woman is discouraged from reading Shakespeare because of his “tales of morality,” while this woman has been even more strictly banned from her reading of Kant by sexist claims such as: his texts would be “much too hard” and “very difficult” for a (young) woman (*Hipparchia’s Choice* 144). With Le Doeuff, we are forced to recognize the significance of gender in the reception and dissemination of texts: it goes back to our earliest or most primal encounters with sexist and/or moral development. Although the more general purpose of *Hipparchia’s Choice* is to explore the method, nature and content of philosophy, again and again Le Doeuff illustrates how

² Michèle Le Doeuff not only read and loved Shakespeare at school (despite any bans on his “morality” for young girls), but she translated Shakespeare’s poem, “Venus and Adonis,” into French by reading it aloud in order to render it into a form which can be performed; see Le Doeuff, *Vénus et Adonis* 71–107.

philosophers in the history of western philosophy have restricted those who can create philosophy with prohibitions which, as we have read, can and should be transgressed. Le Doeuff continues to expose and transgress sexist prohibitions in her later writings. On this, Meryl Altman's review of the 2003 English translation of Le Doeuff's third book, *The Sex of Knowing*, is revealing:

Some feminist scholars take the view that one or another Great Philosopher can provide useful conceptual tools for feminists, provided we overlook what he actually said about women. This is not Le Doeuff's approach. To smile demurely in the face of insults ignores the real pain and waste involved as talented young women decide serious intellectual work and professional achievement are either beyond them or not worth the effort. Le Doeuff compares such "cognitive blockage" to the difficulty a woman involved with a violent man may have in admitting that the danger she most fears already occurred. (14–15)

Also, according to Altman, Le Doeuff echoes the "Lady Reason," from the fifteenth-century text by Christine de Pisan, when she reminds each woman

... to trust her own intelligence and judge theories about women by her own experience and observations. Every woman must defend herself against slander, not with tears, piety, or emotional appeals to women's "different nature" but with rational argument, principled debate, and historical and practical example. (14)

Le Doeuff seeks to create the mental space which is necessary for the right sort of confidence of each and every woman: confidence that derives from a woman having looked an intellectual prohibition (often on what are described as "moral" grounds) in the face and so undermined its hold on her subjectivity. In brief, Le Doeuff's approach to philosophy seeks to give confidence in order to increase knowledge and (political) freedom.

Ironically, Le Doeuff seems to have, if not a Kantian then, an Enlightenment motivation: to give women autonomy, treating them as ends-in-themselves; and so, to think for themselves in reading and writing. Yet she is also rightly critical of Kant. To confront the Enlightenment sexism of "the Great Philosophers," Le Doeuff draws on another concept from the history of philosophy: "an interior freedom" which she finds in the writings of the seventeenth-century feminist philosopher, Gabrielle Suchon, who predates Kant but is either informed by, or perhaps even, informs, some of Rousseau's views of moral education. I will return to Suchon before concluding. At this point, let us assess how Le Doeuff's own creativi-

ty becomes productive in expressing the dynamic relationship between the imagery of spatial location and intellectual freedom in which the interior and exterior function together (Le Doeuff, "A Little Learning" 74–89). Le Doeuff focuses on a significant problem:

[I]s the fact that women very seldom adopt the position of creator in philosophy linked to a ban (it would be enough that they should be given to understand that they were not capable of it), or to the structure of the act through which one establishes oneself as someone who is going to produce one's own work, an act which seems to involve assertion of oneself as a super-consciousness with an overview of everything that has been thought until now or is being thought at the moment, in the streets, in other fields of knowledge and in the works of one's predecessors? Theoretically I tend to favour the second interpretation and yet my personal experience tells me that prohibition is a force which unsettles our understanding. (*Hipparchia's Choice* 147)

As already noted, Le Doeuff may claim in the above text that she has never read the *Critique of Pure Reason* cover to cover, yet she had already studied the imagery and metaphors in the latter as a necessary dimension of philosophical argumentation. Thus, Le Doeuff initiates a way to read Kant which is unaffected by either her former school teacher's ban or the tradition of reading a great philosopher as an unquestioned Master of the subject.

In *The Philosophical Imaginary*, Le Doeuff considers how Kant distances himself from his own text when it comes to the seduction of an illicit confidence (or over-confidence) in overstretching the boundaries which he has marked out for the understanding. She indicates an illicit confidence in the seduction of the text's imagery which pushes reason to move out into the uncharted seas. Basically, Le Doeuff's structural analysis of the functioning of the philosophical imaginary in Kant helps (us) to avoid either the no-confidence, as in her school teacher's approach, or the unquestioned confidence (the "yes" of the disciple) following the Master's approach to learning. No prohibition can hold the philosopher on the secure land, even Kant asks whether we are "under compulsion to be satisfied;" yet his answer is unstable: "there may be no other territory upon which we can settle" (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 257).

A DYNAMIC, DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP OF IMAGE AND CONCEPT

Le Doeuff's reading of Kant's text proposes a continual back and forth movement between conceptual thought and imagery. For her, the image

in a philosophical text is neither “radically heterogeneous to” nor “completely isomorphous with” the philosophical concepts. In exploring “the island” in Kant’s first *Critique*, Le Doeuff elucidates four stages of a dynamic relationship of image and concept (Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* 6–7).

First, despite Kant’s apparent insistence to the contrary, the image, at an initial stage, represents what has been established by discursive thought: it establishes this by denial. So with Kant’s passage on the island of truth, in the “Transcendental Analytic,” he aims to repeat what he has just established in earlier chapters (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 102–255, 257); that is, the extent, or in fact the limitations, of the pure understanding are made visible with this spatial imagery. The mariner is safe as long as he, or she, does not venture off the edge of the island. A second mark of Kant’s unwitting denial is his metaphorical description of the island as seductive: “the land of truth—enchanted name!” Seduction is to be resisted but this very acknowledgement of enchantment is seductive.

Second, the image or metaphor has to be investigated to see if it is an isolated feature in the philosophical text or if it appears more than once in the same or another text by Kant. Le Doeuff calls this “an iconographic investigation” (*The Philosophical Imaginary* 9) which reveals, in the case of Kant’s island, that the image re-appears in the first *Critique* (259; 665) and his other texts, including the *Critique of Practical Reason* and in his essay “Conjectural Beginning of Human History;” the latter speaks of the yearning to return to the South Sea islands—as in the story of Robinson Crusoe—which Kant insists is a sign of laziness and a failure to face up to the responsibility of reason, and the human choice to have knowledge of good and evil (Kant, “Conjectural Beginning” 68). Le Doeuff finds that “the northern isle” in the passage from the first *Critique*, “the island one must content oneself with, has its symmetric antithesis in the island of the South Seas [which appears in Kant’s “Conjectural Beginning” as] the seat of the Golden Age, which must be utterly renounced” (Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* 9). Thus, she shows the necessity of imagery for our conceptual thought, even in the writings of Kant, whose difficulty was thought to be blocked from her as a (young) woman.

Third, it is necessary to trace the source of the image beyond the text in other, previous philosophical writings (Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* 9). Le Doeuff finds the source of Kant’s island imagery in Francis Bacon whose work she knows well from her translation of Bacon’s *New Atlantis* into French. Le Doeuff’s subtle knowledge of Kant emerges in her own work on Bacon; notably, on Bacon’s insistence that the sceptics “waver from one side to the other, like an orator speaking from a ship-deck, and they behave towards their idols like lunatic lovers who curse their

loves but can never leave them” (qtd. in *The Philosophical Imaginary* 9). Having recognized the link from Kant back to Bacon’s image of “the island of truth” which is surrounded by a mighty ocean in which many an intelligence will drown in storms of illusion, Le Doeuff not only discovers the imagery on which Kant’s system rests, but moves on to critical ground for a structural analysis of this philosophical imaginary.

Fourth, there is this final stage of structural analysis of the imagery and its relation to a question being evaded by Kant’s text. The metaphor of the island supports the conviction that we should secure our dwelling in the land of understanding and not wander elsewhere. But as Le Doeuff unfolds her reading of the relationship of conceptual thought and imagery, we find her teaching us a lesson in philosophy, about confidence and learning (Le Doeuff, “A Little Learning” 80–84). To see this, read Kant’s words:

Vain regrets for a golden age promise us unalloyed enjoyment of a carefree life, dreamt away idly, or trifled away in childish play. Such yearnings have been stimulated by stories such as Robinson Crusoe and reports of visitors to the South Sea Islands. (Kant, “Conjectural Beginning” 68)

Next, recognize how Le Doeuff’s text recalls the security of Kant’s northern island. And yet she alludes to the above, too, here:

The promise of the island of the understanding is balanced by some terrifying dangers . . . one avoids the discomfort of the icy fogs but at the cost of renouncing the dream of discovery, the call of new lands, and hope. (*The Philosophical Imaginary* 12)

Again, Le Doeuff’s reflection on “the dream of discovery,” of pleasures, connects to Kant’s “Conjectural Beginning of Human History:” “The existence of such yearnings proves that thoughtful persons weary of civilized life, if they seek its value in pleasure alone” (Kant, “Conjectural Beginning” 68). Along with this historical and cultural background on the ambivalence of the island imagery from the northern and southern seas, Le Doeuff portrays the formation of the Kantian subject as one riddled by sacrifices and historically determinate tensions:

the subjectivity which finds pleasure in the passage of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is a subjectivity which is socio-historically determinate. The island . . . dates from the eighteenth century, and marks an epoch: philosophers had previously been in the habit of offering us more joyful and directly desirable things at the end of the path of knowledge—holding out in their discourse a prospect of islands to which we might more happily transport ourselves. In considering then, the historical

singularity of the Kantian island, one should also not forget the historical situation . . . of a dated historical formation which strives to think . . . on questions which are those of an epoch, and of a social category . . . (Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* 14–15)

In part, due to the fact that Kant's passage about the northern island is known to belong to the earliest drafts of the *Critique*, Le Doeuff proposes that the metaphor of the secure island is a "dialectical presupposition of the theory:"

Insofar as [the passage] sets up a distinction (the foggy ocean/the island where one can remain), it is indeed an allegory of the basic distinction between the legitimate (empirical) use of the understanding and its confusing use . . . But [the passage] departs from this simple allegorical function . . . it is a counter-allegory, to the degree that it founds the possibility of retrieving the myth of an earlier philosophical practice [to seek] "eternal happiness" [under] "the auspices of metaphysics."

When one closes the *Critique of Pure Reason* everything will, in the short ending of a chapter, have been recovered . . . it is only under the auspices of metaphysics that the scientific republic can work towards eternal happiness.

For this closing recovery of a primacy of philosophy and of a totality in which knowledge, concord and happiness converge, no proof is or can be offered. (*The Philosophical Imaginary* 16)

Thus, with Le Doeuff, we find a movement of repudiation and return in Kant: "we shall always return to metaphysics as to a beloved one with whom we have had a quarrel" (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 664).

There is a significant sense in which the imagery which the philosopher employs unwittingly yet dogmatically forces the reader to agree, stage by stage, with a certain relationship between concept and metaphor; and this is what has been established by the philosophical imaginary. Of course, philosophical questions remain. How does the image legitimate the confidence of secure knowledge, while the understanding is unstable due to reason's constant striving in its pursuit of the unconditioned totality? Doesn't reason itself threaten the loss or lack of ethical confidence?

ETHICAL CONFIDENCE: OR, ON THE CREATION OF A SPACE FOR POLITICAL FREEDOM

Ultimately, Le Doeuff's creation of a mental space and an interior freedom, with the help of the philosophical imaginary, aims to make possible a public space for learning free of sexist, imperialist and so, unethical pro-

hibitions. In fact, Le Doeuff's method of locating a text in its historical context and in political life seeks to discover "discontinuity." This means that we should locate Kant's philosophy in his own text and in his social context.

Roughly, to apply this method of locating a text's imagery in order to discover discontinuities, we should notice that Kant's writings, in the 1780s–90s about the island of understanding—the secure, but seductive land of truth—or, the northern isle as opposed to the south-sea islands, are located politically and socially in the Prussian state. Now, Prussia, in the first half of the eighteenth century, is subduing islands such as East Frisian islands in the North Sea (which today are German), Wolin in the Baltic Sea (which today is Polish, but was not in the eighteenth century), Uznam in the Baltic Sea (which today is partly Polish, but was not Polish earlier). At the time Poland had river islands which were also taken by Prussia; in particular, in 1793 Prussia took Poland's river island in the centre of Poznań. In this manner, the Le Doeuffian method would aim to locate a text for (Polish, in particular, but also other) readers today, in order to recognize discontinuity between what is argued and what is admitted in the margins of the text (the ambivalent significance of the island imagery); in this way, social-political reality appears in what is discontinuous in the text's margins; and this gives ground for changes in our reading of the past and present. Arguably, whenever past philosophical texts are re-read by a mind which can think and dialogue with both a text and its context, then, a discontinuity will emerge, however small. This re-reading includes the feelings and affections of the heart which are implicit in the work. If the discontinuity is sufficient, it gives an impetus to create a brand new world by recognizing and overcoming the difference between what is said and what is imagined; so, a salient difference can provide the potential for novel ideas and so, for change.

To take an example from Le Doeuff, over a number of years she finds in her reading of Gabrielle Suchon a paradigm case for her feminism. Although Suchon is a seventeenth-century woman, Le Doeuff is able to bring Suchon out from the forgotten margins of Rousseau's seventeenth-century philosophy, in order to speak on a number of levels to women and/ in philosophy. In the case of Suchon, the goal of her philosophy is "a new decipherment of the world as it was, a new set of ethical values, and a new art of deciphering the existing world from a point of view determined by these [new] values" (Le Doeuff, "Women in Dialogue" 12). Furthermore, in Le Doeuff's own account:

[I]n the Cartesian play, there was no pre-arranged category or space that could have accommodated a Gabrielle Suchon. She had to create her own

space, her mental space, for what she called . . . “the conversation of my solitude, the use of my time, the work of my mind, the feelings of my soul and the affections of my heart,” with all this dedicated to the Holy Trinity, but with a clearly acknowledged ambition: to wake women from their slumber, to invite them to read and become self-taught and establish small societies to argue with one another, and exercise their own free minds this way. For the joy of developing their minds and also of becoming politically creative. For Suchon imagined her readers practising their ability to philosophize sufficiently for them to become thus able to put forth propositions about how life in society could be better arranged – particularly regarding the relations between the sexes. (Le Doeuff, “Women in Dialogue” 11–12)

25

In conclusion, allow me to return to Altman’s review of *The Sex of Knowing*, in order to agree that Le Doeuff does not advocate “a women’s way of knowing.” Instead Le Doeuff encourages us to work together and, as Altman insists, “If there is a better way of doing something—if, for example, collaboration is better than competition in academic work—women ought not to claim it as ‘women’s way of knowing’ and congratulate ourselves for having thought of it. Rather, we should seek to teach it to everyone as a better way” (Altman 15). This encouragement is Le Doeuff’s contribution to creating, what I maintain is, ethical confidence in the reading and the writing of texts by women and others who are traditionally excluded from philosophy.

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