

Suppressing the Mental Fright of Castration and a  
Creative Language of Dreams in Temma F. Berg's  
“Suppressing the Language of Wo(Man):  
The Dream as a Common Language”

Mustafa Zeki Çıraklı  
Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi

“And none can read the text, not even I...”  
Alfred Tennyson, “Merlin and Vivien”

This paper analyses Temma F. Berg's “Suppressing the Language of Wo(Man): The Dream as a Common Language.”<sup>1</sup> As the title suggests, Berg argues that a common language, which does not exclude either man or woman, is possible. She rereads Sigmund Freud's conception of dreams from a Kristevan perspective and removes sexual differences in reconceptualizing the literary language. She maintains that dreams can be useful to understand the nature of such a common language that will be “fluid, nonteleological, crammed, condensed, subversive and erupting with the power of the repressed” (p.15). According to Berg, Jacques Lacan excludes the (m)other/the feminine from his ‘Symbolic Order’ and considers language as a necessarily male realm. Luce Irigaray, on the other hand, in her *This Sex Which Is Not One*, is fascinated with her femininity and the imaginary and is particularly concerned with *feminine* writing/language.<sup>2</sup> As for Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, they are involved in *women's own* subversive language including new words to express women's experience.<sup>3</sup> However, Berg explores the idea of a common language that does not exclude either sex since she believes that woman's voice has never been completely suppressed within texts. For this

1. Temma F. Berg, “Suppressing the Language of Wo(Man): The Dream as a Common Language,” in Temma F. Berg, Anna Shannon Elfenbein, Jeanne Larsen and Elisa Kay Sparks (eds.), *Engendering the Word: Feminist Essays in Psychosexual Politics* [with foreword by Sandra M. Gilbert] (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp.3-28.
2. Luce Irigaray. *This Sex Which Is Not One* [translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke] (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp.26-33.
3. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Tradition and Female Talent,” in Nancy K. Miller (ed.), *The Poetics of Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp.184-205.

reason, Berg reads Freud from a Kristevan perspective dealing with poetic language that does not work on sexual differences but, like Mikhail Bakhtin, attempts to demonstrate that no voice (voice of the other) can be completely suppressed and the feminine can never be totally excluded from language. Therefore, Berg refers to Julia Kristeva's terms 'semiotic' and the 'chora,' and to Bakhtin's idea of 'dialogicism.'<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Berg revises Freud's concept of the pre-oedipal and claims that it is in fact a sexless realm related with both man and woman; and, she conceives of dreaming as a common process to all that is repressed or outlawed, which can apparently be compared to the common language she suggests.

Berg discusses Lacan's influential attitude towards women in terms of the 'Symbolic Order'/language. It is crucial because Lacan takes a view of language that is essentially a male realm, in which woman is excluded or inferiorized because 'the imaginary' is repressed/suppressed by the name of the Father or Phallus. Therefore, entrance into the realm of the 'Symbolic Order'/language means for a woman to be trapped in it. According to Lacan—who is obsessed with the story of woman's lack of phallus—the child, through language, detaches himself/herself from his/her mother, that is, from the feminine. S/he regulates his/her sexual desire, acknowledges social rules and internalises male culture. Thus, the feminine will be inevitably suppressed through this symbolic process and language denies woman's libidinal economy. For this reason, Lacan notes that woman is excluded by the very nature of words, and states that "they don't know what they are saying, which is all the difference between them and me."<sup>5</sup> From a feminist point of view, the Lacanian attitude towards women and language works on differentiation and exclusion, on inferiority and male privilege. Therefore, such a view of language is questionable, and accepted rules and conventions based upon the law of the Father need to be violated through a new language that excludes none.

Berg considers Irigaray's objection to Lacan significant in the above context. However, Irigaray is primarily concerned with the idea of *écriture féminine* and does not emphasize a common language for all. Nevertheless, women's use of language is a significant issue for Irigaray, and, according to her, Lacan's claim that women do not know what they are saying means that "women speak a language men do not know how to listen to," because their language, like their sexuality, is "fluid and open."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Irigaray

---

4. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* [edited Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist] (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981).

5. Temma F. Berg, "Suppressing the Language of Wo(Man): The Dream as a Common Language," p.6.

6. Temma F. Berg, "Suppressing the Language of Wo(Man): The Dream as a Common Language," p.8.

deliberately works on their so-called lack/difference; Berg, on the contrary, praises their lack/difference and regards it as a source of *écriture féminine*, and therefore considers women privileged in writing. She argues that women writers need to learn to use a language of their own, and suggests that women should find a language that will enable them to extend the imaginary phase into the organization of language from which women seem to be excluded (p.8). Berg points out that Irigaray is fascinated with the fluidity of the union with the mother because it helps the woman writer to achieve fluidity in writing. Her language will be fluid because it escapes from "interpretive mastery" (p.9), and neither the reader, nor the author can control the meaning of her text. Meaning of texts in general, however, is impregnable—as seen in a male writer's lines given in this review's epigraph. For this reason, Berg asserts that texts' escape from interpretive mastery is a significant idea in the way to a common language and relates this idea to the process of dreaming that resists again interpretive mastery as explained by Kristeva in terms of poetic language.

Furthermore, Berg deals with Gilbert and Gubar's attempt to discover a subversive language, which will be "powerful enough to subvert patriarchal power" (p.11). According to Gilbert and Gubar, however, this language, which they call mother tongue, needs to be acquired in socio-historical striving for the discovery of female literary authority because they believe that there has always been an *écriture féminine* but it has been overlooked. For this reason, they put emphasis on reconstructing the female tradition in order to "nurture women's writing" rather than producing a new language. Therefore, their emphasis is particularly on the oppression of woman's voice rather than suppression/repression of expression. Although they know that "the woman writer needs to survive in a man's *linguisterie*" they claim that there is a difference between feminine fluidity and masculine rigidity as seen in various works. Thus, this difference is conceived of as one of the ways of men's attack on women's writing because they usually scorn the 'scribbling' of women.<sup>7</sup> Gilbert and Gubar therefore rejects the practice of the *patrius sermo* and criticize exclusionary language of critical theory for being obscure and unnecessarily difficult. According to Berg, however, the language of women writers is also difficult, crabbed, obscure, condensed, crammed and criss-crossed. Furthermore, she states that from Emily Dickinson to Jacques Derrida, both the mother tongue of women writers and the *patrius sermo* of male theorists tend to "hide, condense, and distort their message" (p.12). Thus, Berg underlines the fact that *all* writers need a language that will

---

7. Temma F. Berg, "Suppressing the Language of Wo(Man): The Dream as a Common Language," pp.10-11.

“capture experience in all its unmediated intensity” (p.12). This need is obvious in Gilbert and Gubar’s call for a common language but it remains questionable because they insist upon a language of *women’s own* and move away from the idea of a mother tongue common to both genders. Therefore, questioning the possibility of a language of *women’s own*, Berg asks: “Do [can] women have a sentence of their own or not?” (p.12).

So as to answer the question above, Berg suggests a language beyond “misogyny and feminist doubt” (p.13). According to Berg, Kristeva does not confine this alternative language to a sexual difference although Irigaray deliberately seeks fluidity in writing for the purpose of experiencing female sexuality. Berg also notes that Gilbert and Gubar praise women’s sexuality as a primary source of feminine style in writing. It can be seen that Berg’s language of dream is indebted to Kristeva’s poetic language very much since it deals with the space of the unconscious as the common language of dreams does. The Kristevan ‘chora’ is common to everybody since it refers to the semiotic, which is regarded as sexless, full of undifferentiated drives, and fore-language. The semiotic is repressed through the process of language/the symbolic, but it never stops erupting since it is a kind of undercurrent co-existing within language. The space of Kristevan ‘chora’ reminds us of the space of the unconscious, which never acknowledges differentiation, categorization, hierarchy or order, and, it seems highly subversive, suggestive and mystical as experienced in the common language of dreams, and, therefore, resists interpretive mastery as explained above. Hence, according to Berg’s reading of Kristeva, the repressed semiotic is felt/experienced in the *avant-garde* literature and in the heterogeneity of poetic language, in which, “carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language [male ‘Symbolic Order’] censored by grammar and semantics” and “challenges official law [law of the Father]” (p.13). Furthermore, Bakhtin’s ‘dream discourse of polyphony’ is quite suggestive because no voice is repressed in the eternal feminine, and this idea opens a way through the possibility of breaking up conventional linguistic codes and freedom from the Phallus, and Kristeva shares this revolutionary view; and, therefore, Berg claims that “the *avant-garde* unsettles and displaces” the rigidity of language (p.14). Thus, Kristeva’s repressed semiotic or Bakhtin’s suppressed voice is extended into the ordinary/symbolic/official language, and a poetic/dream language comes out. However, in poetic language there is no emphasis on sexual difference; rather, both men and women are conceived of as having the subversive force of poetic language, just as they dream in the same way.

Berg notes that Freud’s pre-oedipal space can be described as “the lost pre-oedipal wholeness of mankind” (p.16). Therefore, his idea of dream and the lost pre-oedipal

wholeness does not seem to contradict the semiotic wholeness in the sense that both Freud and Kristeva consider it as a sexless space, which Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray regard as "feminine territory." Therefore, Berg ironically considers Freud as being castrated through dreams because in the process of dreaming "one is left without any words, returns to the womb, submits to castration and becomes woman" (p.22). According to Berg, dreaming is returning to the eternal feminine, in which "the dreamer [woman] and the dream interpreter [man, male therapist, Freud], woman and man, are [become] one" (p.22). Dreams exclude none; thus, the constructed identity dissolves and becomes very fluid in dreams, and one loses his/her words—as Freud does—in them. However, in this release there shouldn't be a "mental fright of castration" (p.19) because one's being exiled from the unconscious, from the body of the mother and the dream, is impossible; and, dreams are "the matrix of creativity" for art.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Berg refers to the language of dreams in order to illustrate the common language. It is likened to Kristeva's poetic language in which there is a constant interplay of suppression and expression between the semiotic and the symbolic within the ongoing process of language practice. Berg states that "we are never completely exiled from the language" (p.24) but we are also aware that to return to the eternal feminine is needed to *speak* in a common language: "We must sometimes forget to re-member" (p.23). The voice of (m)other/mother tongue within the organisation of the official *patrius sermo* can turn into a condensed, subversive, powerful and charming language, and, therefore, texts can be compared to dreams since the author and the dreamer have no control over the meaning or interpretation of their texts or dreams as in Tennison's lines: "And none can read the text, not even I..." Dreams always exceed their commentaries, and all hierarchies get upside down in dreams because in the primal language of the dream there is no sexual difference since everything is incomprehensible in that space. This space is open to both women and men in the same way. Therefore, Berg states that "using condensation, displacement, [basic features of dreams], metaphor, symbolism and narrativization, we can all become poets of the imaginary" (p.16). A language that allows both a surface order and a subversive undercurrent at the same time, in which all that is repressed returns, is possible and results in "the heterogeneity of the text" in which the unconscious and the eternal feminine can never completely be repressed (p.23).

Thus, Temma F. Berg's "Suppressing the Language of Wo(Man): The Dream as a Common Language" explores the possibility of a language of wo(man), both woman and

---

8. Temma F. Berg, "Suppressing the Language of Wo(Man): The Dream as a Common Language," pp.22-23.

man, and argues that a common language, which does not exclude either sex, is possible. She uses dreams, and revises Freud's conception of dreams from a Kristevan perspective, in order to illustrate the nature of such a language that will be erupting with the power of the repressed, and therefore be fluid, nonteleological, condensed and subversive. Like Kristeva, Berg too does not work on sexual differences, and attempts to demonstrate that the voice of eternal mother can never be completely suppressed within the symbolic; and, therefore, feminine voice cannot be exiled from the literary language, which is, in fact, necessarily a common language just as Freud's preoedipal phase is a sexless realm related with both man and woman. This reinterpretation of Freudian concepts calls for a consideration of dreaming as a common process for *all* genders, which can be used to imagine a common language.