

Temporality and Metaphoricity in Contemporary Swedish Feminist Historiography

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“At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial
– and any question about sex is that – one cannot
hope to tell the truth.”

Virginia Woolf,
*A Room of One's Own*¹

All history writing involves and actualizes different temporal structures, many of which are heavily laden with value judgements. The past can be constructed either as something primitive or as a lost origin. A central aspect of feminist critique of science has been the problematizing of how science traditionally writes history. The introduction of gender history into the discipline of history, like the comprehensive critique of the canon which has taken place in many humanities subjects, including literary history and the history of ideas, is an example of how historiography and the critique of science have been closely associated in research into gender theory. Feminist theory has been developed by means of the critique of science as well as an advanced and ongoing metacritique. Despite this, feminism's own historiography has remained a blind spot, above all, its account of the very recent past. Near-contemporary history is rarely experienced as history. Its narration can easily become a matter of where the narrator found himself or herself at a particular point in time. It becomes testimony rather than history writing, and, as such, difficult to problematize. Many of those active in the nineteen-seventies are currently writing their memoirs or journals.² Such personal observations and

memories are perhaps not felt to be historical accounts. Yet that is precisely what they are. My aim here is not to open a debate over “what really happened” in the seventies, eighties, or nineties, but to ask why a *particular* history is narrated, and how it serves to confer a particular identity on the narrator.

As a literary scholar working with issues relating to gender, much of my work relies on some kind of criticism of the canon in which questions of inclusion and exclusion are continually at stake. Feminist theory must be able to reflect upon its own writing of history in order to avoid creating new ideologies of exclusion and inclusion. The subject of this article is a brief investigation into how Swedish academic feminism represents its own recent history, that is to say, between 1970s Second Wave feminism and the present. Which words are used, and which intellectual models structure the way we write history? My case material comprises a section of articles from anniversary or field-surveying special issues of feminist journals from the last few years.

A central problematic of my investigation relates to how we interpret discontinuity in the course of history. Dramatizations of historical moments as “breaks”, “defeats”, and “turning points” evoke the temporal models which govern our models of historical understanding. Yet my aim here is not to advance *one* correct historical account but to show how temporal metaphors operate in feminist historiography and what problematic implications they can have. Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz has observed that feminist work relies on, and carries out, analyses of both the past and those present: “[T]o the extent that all radical politics is implicitly directed towards bringing into existence a future somehow dislocated from the present, our very object and milieu is time. We need to address these assumptions about the nature of time and its role in political (and biological) struggle”.³

Gender and the construction of time

The representation of temporality is important because even temporality is often gender coded and consequently hierarchical. Rita Felski has noted that gender does not only affect the actual content of history, i.e. what is included and what excluded, but also “the philosophical assumptions underlying our interpretations of the nature of social

meaning.”⁴ Felski draws on Marshall Berman’s analysis of Goethe’s Faust as an example of how what is feminine in Gretchen is coded negatively as being older, indeed, as being precisely that which stands in the way of (masculine) modernity: “Woman is aligned with the dead weight of tradition and conservatism that the active, newly autonomous, and self-defining subject must seek to transcend. Thus she functions as the sacrificial victim exemplifying the losses which underpin the ambiguous, but ultimately exhilarating and seductive logic of the modern.”⁵

Felski’s analysis of Berman’s association of masculinity with the modern, and femininity with conservatism, shows how a standard reading of modernity as forward-looking and progressive is tied to a temporal metaphoricity in which breaking with the past stands for innovation. Berman illustrates the way in which the gender coding of temporality also elicits hidden normative values and hierarchies, and vice versa. If even the temporal metaphoricity of historiography is gender coded, it is imperative that we remain vigilant with regard to how feminism’s own history is written.

Our view of ourselves as modern is based on the conception of time that governs our view of history. In *Zeit und Tradition: Kulturelle Strategien der Dauer* (*Time and Tradition: Cultural Strategies of Duration*), literary historian Aleida Assmann, who has worked extensively on our cultural constructions of time, describes how our current conceptions of time emerged during the French Revolution. As a result, history was relieved of its exemplariness, instead becoming unique and irreversible: “When history proceeds by means of revolution, the past is forcibly detached from the present, and becomes antiquated. History, as Heidegger has it, is that which no longer happens.”⁶ Such a model of history requires us to view the past as something alien and irreversible:

What characterizes this model is the way that, alongside its explicit thematizing of temporal constructions, it remains wedded to a fixed temporal structure, namely, a linear and irreversible succession of events. This temporal model, which has emerged from narrative, is the backbone of all historiography. It forces us to emphasize change, development, and substitution as well as to *disregard contemporaneity in all that is non-contemporary*.⁷ (emphasis added)

The requirement to disregard contemporaneity in all that is non-contemporary is fundamental to twentieth-century Western culture. There is, I would argue, a connection between Assmann's analysis of the way in which our temporal construction forces upon us a definition of time, including the present, which can only exist in relation to that which does not exist, i.e. the *non-contemporary*, and the gender coding of the past as feminine and the present as masculine revealed by Berman's analysis of Goethe. What ties them together is the way they are defined by means of absolute exclusion of the other, making contemporaneity/modernity/masculinity a norm for how we understand the world.

In her historiographical investigation of historians of the early women's movement, Ulla Manns highlights the ideological dimensions of writing history. Manns also points out that historians of the women's movement have several functions: "repositories of memories, important "we"-creating instruments of socialization, and contributors to social debates of the day and to internal debates".⁸ This double orientation, outward and inward, is characteristic of all feminist historiography. In this way, all feminist historiography, consciously or otherwise, makes a contribution to contemporary debates over questions of interpretation.

In a similar historiographical study of modern histories of the recent feminist past, British feminist Clare Hemmings shows how ideological even contemporary histories can be. Hemmings identifies a pattern whereby feminist history is evoked in terms of clear periods and thresholds, which principally coincide with the decades of the seventies, eighties, and nineties. For Hemmings, this involves its relation to poststructuralism. Either history is portrayed as a question of *development* from a naïve past, with the seventies representing essentialism and the nineties difference, or, alternatively, history is portrayed as a *defeat*, with involvement and politics becoming a thing of the past. Regardless of which history is being presented, poststructuralism is assigned the central role: "Yet, however inflected, the chronology remains the same, the decades overburdened yet curiously flattened, and poststructuralism animated as the key actor in challenging."⁹

Hemmings description of the technologies which have shaped "feminist storytelling" fit both with Assmann's description of a linear

and irreversible structure of events, and Felski's analysis of the underlying gender coding at work in modernity's self-conception as the result of an irreversible break with tradition and the past. As I will show, Hemmings's description of feminist historiography as split between defeat and celebratory interpretations of the importance of poststructuralism well describes the situation in Sweden.

The temporality of generational conflict

A number of Second Wave feminists have written memoirs in the last few years. Explicit or implicit in these accounts is a critique of the present and of feminism today that makes reference to a loss of involvement and unity. Journalist Gunilla Thorgren's *Grupp 8 och jag* (*Group 8 and Me*) is an example. Yvonne Hirdman, Professor of History, has defended what she understands, with some irritation, to be the referent of "classic gender theory", i.e. the view that differentiation of masculine and feminine is a "fundamental pattern" in which masculine dominance is always the norm (rather, say, than placing the emphasis on heteronormativity). "Elementary, my dear Watson," writes Hirdman, and continues her critique of younger queer feminist: "But apparently it shouldn't be elementary. It should be muddled. These are the Muddle Ages."¹⁰

In recent years, Ebba Witt-Brattström, Professor of Comparative Literature, has clearly taken on the role of mouthpiece for the loss scenario. The fact that she has made this a question of generations, and hence a generational conflict, reinforces the impression that this relationship is based on temporality. In the sesquicentennial anniversary issue of the journal *Hertha*, she writes:

Feminism finds itself in crisis. An historic unwillingness to understand and learn from history characterizes today's young feminists. Concrete politics are out. Instead of rallying living people on the street and in squares [...] we have the blogosphere's hysterical opinion-mongering, careerist media-feminism, and politically correct gender theory.¹¹

In an article titled "When Sisterhood Was A Political Act", published in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* on International Women's Day, 8 March 2011, Witt-Brattström took up the subject again, citing

journalist Inga-Lisa Sangregorio, another member of the original feminist “Group 8” who, according to Witt-Brattström,

always hits her mark: ‘I have never [writes Sangregorio] heard of anyone distancing themselves from their aberrations in the women’s movement, we had fun, *we were right, and if they had only done as we said everything would have been much better today!*’ (my emphasis).¹²

In Sangregorio’s statement, the generational conflict becomes even more strained. It is now longer simply a question of defeat but of outright mistakes in the behaviour of younger feminists.

Witt-Brattström and Sangregorio are both examples of the history of lost involvement which Hemmings describes as one of the standard scenarios in feminist historiography: “A shift from the politicized, unified early second wave, through an entry into the academy in the eighties, and thence a fragmentation into multiple feminisms and individual careers, charts the story as one of loss of commitment to social and political change.”¹³

In her article of 8 March 2011, Witt-Brattström sharpens the generational metaphor still further. Now it is not only a question of older and younger but of daddy’s daughters rebelling against their mothers:

The ‘woman-mother’ who lived in solidarity with her sisters had to make way for endless new versions of Pallas Athena, who had sprung from her father’s head on a mission to restyle the goddesses of maternal retribution as the domesticated ‘daughter-women’ of paternal domesticity.¹⁴

When the conflict is described as being between mothers and daughters, rather than between different feminist positions, the generational metaphor serves to cement a temporality that is, as Assman puts it, “structured as an irreversible sequence of events”.¹⁵ That the stake here, as with the Anglo-American debate, is feminism’s relation to poststructuralism, can clearly be seen from the fact that Witt-Brattström’s *Hertha* article is criticizing a 1980s, postmodernist critique of the essentialist risks entailed by the term “woman”. Strangely, since this was a critique which she herself helped initiate, she now describes it as a – false – artefact of modern gender theory:

Many gender theorists in our universities cherish the bizarre notion that simply referring to someone as ‘woman’ or ‘feminine’ is an act of violence which legitimizes the global exploitation of women’s labour and bodies.¹⁶

In Witt-Brattström’s loss scenario, gender theorists and queer activists are identical.

Gender theorist Sara Edenheim has been specifically addressed, openly or covertly, in several of Witt-Brattström’s articles as someone who, instead of moving women’s experiences up the political agenda, “recommends the instant solution of leaving the prison of Woman.”¹⁷

In a polemical article titled “A Few Words to My Dear Mothers In the Event That I Had Any”, Sara Edenheim remarks that the nineteen-seventies are very much present on the curricula of gender studies departments, alongside “other feminist theoretical schools than yours.”¹⁸ Firmly rejecting the metaphor of generational conflict, Edenheim observes that this is a case of different theoretical traditions:

But of course it may also be that you have an altruistic concern that we will need to reinvent the wheel. That is why I write to you now: have no fear. For we are not working on the same wheel. Indeed, this conflict has nothing to do with generations; you are not our mothers. Let me explain. The thing is, we do read and cite a great many feminists of your generation, just not *you*.¹⁹

Well aware of the dangers of defining feminism in terms of generations, periods, and breaks, Edenheim does not use a label to define her own position. However, she does point out in a footnote that the generational metaphor also seems to conceal a conflict over the validity of poststructuralism. Edenheim’s analysis of Witt-Brattström’s generational metaphor confirms that this is the very structure identified by Hemmings: “poststructuralism animated as the key actor” is the core of the problem:²⁰

The ‘we’ which I’m using here is not necessarily *de facto* the younger generation of feminist scholars but those of us who (against our will) have been interpellated by a portion of the older generation as being the *lost* generation, whereby our supposed deviation from the path stems from the fact that we spend far too much of our time on abstract

theorizing. This deliberately vague interpellation has led me to conclude that this ‘we’ in fact consists of both younger and older feminist scholars who explicitly base their research on poststructuralism.²¹

In Witt-Brattström’s loss scenario, poststructuralism denotes a fall, or a loss of involvement. But for many others, it is a shift that should be celebrated, although this celebratory history often results in the same history of a break and the same temporal problematic.

Another history, the same temporality

Poststructuralism also plays a central role in an article by Mia Liinason, titled “Institutionalized Knowledge: Notes on the Processes of Inclusion and Exclusion in Gender Studies in Sweden” and published in the *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, as a tool for differentiating between conservative and progressive feminisms.²² Liinason’s article is an interesting indicator of how far the establishing of Gender Studies as a discipline has come. In barely two decades, a new university discipline has emerged, together with a definition of the discipline and a curriculum, and a canon may even be in the process of formation. There is thus every reason to discuss the starting-points of these new formations.

In her article, Liinason discusses the inclusions and exclusions which have been manifested in the historical account that has been established in introductory undergraduate courses on Gender Studies. Her aim is to show how Gender Studies is constructing a notion of heteronormative and essentialist femininity. For Liinason, the institutionalizing of feminist knowledge is also linked to a nationalist project:

Perceiving the institutionalization of feminist knowledge in academia both as an effect of and a cause of a national project, I suggest in the course of this paper that the production of a particular understanding of gender in gender studies supports the idea of gender as it is re/produced in the national discourse in Sweden.²³

Liinason seizes upon a textbook used in many departments of Gender Studies, Lena Gemzöe’s *Feminism* (2002), which reviews the various strands of feminism. The book, which is also intended for a general

readership, presents itself as an introductory overview. Liinason criticizes Gemzöe for creating a feminism which rests on a dualistic model of two sexes that fails to see the differences between women:

Yet, in Gemzöe's feminist vision, women are infallible and cannot oppress each other. To her, differences between women are not significant, because the most important feminist struggle is the struggle against patriarchy. Accordingly, Gemzöe constructs women as universal category, subordinated under a similarly universal oppression, enacted towards 'women as mothers and sexual beings' (Gemzöe 2002:172). By way of this, Gemzöe reiterates a problematic slide of the national equality project 'in which sex is now gender is now sex is now woman's reproductive potential and the political battles over its control' as aptly phrased by Bidy Martin (1994: 107).²⁴

Liinason constructs Gemzöe as an essentialist feminist who denies the differences between women and instead constructs women as a universal category, using an analogy between woman and nature in which motherhood is central and sexual difference the most fundamental category. Liinason needs to assign Gemzöe the role of essential feminist who believes in fundamental sexual difference and women as a universal category, in order to show, using Gemzöe's book as Exhibit A, that this position is identical with HSV's description of gender theory. Liinason can thereby describe how gender theory, based on a conception of sexual difference as the most fundamental social category, serves as the framework for both a national and an academic project which constructs men and women as binary opposites, "not only resulting in compulsory heterosexuality but also reinforcing the differences between the sexes."²⁵

Using a series of analogies, Liinason in this way manages to construct gender theory as the locus of a conservative, heteronormative national project, and herself as the poststructurally-informed critic who questions identities, sexual and national alike.²⁶ My aim here is not to criticize her reading of Gemzöe (see instead Gemzöe's own response²⁷) but to see how a poststructuralist approach is here used as a means of breaking with history. Hemmings observes in a follow-up article from 2007 that it is this very either/or description of "what happened" which has failed to discern the complexity in feminist

history: “Further, these presentations, while narrated as mutually exclusive, combine to produce a remarkably similar account of what has been left behind, namely, unity under the category of ‘woman.’”²⁸ Liinason’s line of reasoning proves this point. Even when it is a case, not of defeat, as with Witt-Brattström, but of criticism in relation to a notion of development, unity behind the category of women becomes a decisive line of demarcation.

I am also interested in the temporal models which implicitly inform Liinason’s argument. She concludes her article with a call to break with the teleology now inscribed in gender theory’s proto-nationalist curriculum: “*Breaking* with the teleology that is constructed through references to a common past and a shared future” (my emphasis).²⁹ Using terms like “break” and “teleology”, Liinason portrays gender theory as a solid and preordained construction which it is the task of gender theory’s critics to smash. It is a historical account which produces “then” as the counterpart of the critic’s “now”, creating new varieties of inclusion and exclusion. From her perspective of a critical need to create “counter-stories”, Liinason nonetheless creates a historiography which rests on the irreversibility that effectively prevents us from seeing what Assmann calls “*contemporaneity in the non-contemporary*”.³⁰ It is also a way for her to relate to the past, which itself repeats Berman’s gender coded description of tradition and modernity. In the process, and even when viewed from a poststructuralist perspective, the sexual difference that all gender theory wishes to do away with finds itself reinscribed at the level of temporality.

At the end of her article, Edenheim also notes that it is the metaphor of time which must be changed: “In a contingent temporality, feminist struggle can carry on without being forced to accept a beginning or an end, but merely trying different roads”.³¹ We have to get away from the notion of generations and succession because it erases both the difference between women and the similarities between ideas across time. Investigating technologies for feminist historiography, as Hemmings urges us, and seeing their connection to constructions of time and temporality, are both necessary if writing history is not simply to repeat old patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Penguin, London & New York (1993) 4.
2. Recent books published on this topic in Sweden and in our Nordic neighbouring countries include: Bente Hansen, *En køn historie: erindringer fra kvindebevægelsen*, København: Lindhardt & Ringhof, 2004; Ida Blom, *Vi var med-: kvinnekamp i Bergen på 1970-tallet*, Bergen kvinnesaksforening (utgivare) Bergen: Bodoni forl., 2007; Pia Ingström, (red.) *Den flygande feministen och andra minnen från 70-talet*, Helsingfors: Schildt, 2007; Ebba Witt-Brattström, *Å alla kära systrar!: historien om mitt sjuttioal*, Stockholm: Norstedt, 2010; Ingrid Sillén (red), *Tusen systrar ställde krav: minnen från 70-talets kvinnokamp* Stockholm: Migra, 2010; Gunilla Thorgren, *Grupp 8 & jag*, Stockholm: Pan, 2004; Kirsti Niskanen & Christina Florin (red.), *Föregångarna: kvinnliga professorer om liv, makt och vetenskap*, Stockholm: SNS förlag, 2010.
3. Elizabeth Grosz, "The Untimeliness of Feminist Theory", *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 18:1 (2010): 51.
4. Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press 1995), 1.
5. 5. Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 2. Felski also remarks that this logic is only one of several possible narratives of the modern. As an example, she mentions Gail Finney's analysis of the numerous heroines in literature at the turn of the twentieth century: "The so-called private sphere, often portrayed as a domain where natural and timeless emotions hold sway, is shown to be radically implicated in patterns of modernization and processes of social change." Felski p. 3.
6. Aleida Assmann, *Tid och tradition: Varaktighetens kulturella strategier* [Aleida Assmann: *Zeit und Tradition. Kulturelle Strategien der Dauer*, 1999] trans. Peter Jackson (Nora: Nya Doxa 2004), 76.
7. Assmann, *Tid och tradition*, 74.
8. Ulla Manns, "Så skriver vi historia. Den svenska kvinnorörelsen ur et historigrafiskt perspektiv", *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift*, 4 (2000), 8.
9. Claire Hemmings, "Telling Feminist Stories", *Feminist Theory*, 6:2 (2005), 116. Hemmings is criticized by Rachel Torr in "What's wrong with aspiring to find out what really happened in academic feminism's recent past?", *Feminist Theory*, 8:59 (2007). Hemmings replied in "What is a feminist responsible for?", *Feminist Theory*, 8:69 (2007).
10. Yvonne Hirdman, "Han och hon och dom – frågor i tidens töcken" in *Att göra historia – vänbok till Christina Florin*, ed. Maria Sjöberg och Yvonne Svanström, Institutet för framtidsstudier, Stockholm 2008, p. 43.
11. Ebba Witt Brattström, "Feminism i kris", *Hertha* 150 (2009): 65.
12. Ebba Witt-Brattström, *Dagens Nyheter*, mars 8, 2011, 8. Sangergori's statement is taken from Sillén, ed., *Tusen systrar ställde krav*. 2010.
13. Hemmings, 2005, 116.
14. Ebba Witt-Brattström, 2011, 8.

15. That generational metaphors are regarded as problematic, regardless of the age barrier, is *inter alia* evident from an article in *Dagens Nyheter* in which eleven feminists from different generations responded to Ebba Witt-Brattström's article of 8 March. See Malin Axelsson, Suzanne Osten, Maria Sveland, Farnaz Arbabi, Hanna Hallgren, Athena Farokhzad, Vanja Hermele, Birgitta Englin, Fataneh Farahani, Lawen Mohtadi, and Pia Laskar, "Generationskrig. Witt-Brattström skapar motsättningar som inte finns", *Dagens Nyheter*, mars 14, 2011, 5.

16. Witt-Brattström, 2009, 69.

17. Witt-Brattström, 2009, 69. See also Ebba Witt Brattström, *Å alla kära systrar* (Stockholm: Norstedts 2010, 191) in which she relates "the pipedream of contemporary postfeminism, that the very epithet 'woman' is an outrage."

18. Sara Edenheim, "Några ord till mina kära mödrar ifall jag hade några", *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap*, 4 (2010), 111.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

20. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, London & New York 1999, p. 207.

21. Edenheim, 2010, 118.

22. The article is taken from Mia Liinason's doctoral dissertation, *Feminism and the academy: exploring the politics of institutionalization in gender studies in Sweden*, Lunds universitet. Centrum för genusvetenskap, 2011.

23. Mia Liinason, "Institutionalized Knowledge: Notes on the Processes of Inclusion and Exclusion in Gender Studies in Sweden", *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 18:1 (2010) 39.

24. Liinason, 2010, 41.

25. Liinason, 2010, 45.

26. Liinason contends that 1970s and 1980s feminism constructed a specifically Swedish "'we-pride' produced in contrast to the outside world – in turn characterized by chaos, irrationality, and conflicts". Liinason, 2010, 44. Here, too, Liinason appears to emphasize her critique for polemical purposes. The claim that 1970s and 1980s feminism constructed an unproblematic category of inclusion ("we") is reasonable in itself, but, as Ulla Manns has shown in her analysis of research by Nordic women, this category was never national, but Nordic. It is precisely the idea of a given *transnational* community, stretching across the Nordic countries, that underestimated the linguistic deficiencies and differences between women, as deconstructed by Ulla Mann in "En ros är en ros är en ros. Konstruktionen av nordisk kvinno- och genusforskning", *Lychnos* (2009).

27. Lena Gemzöe, "Faux Feminism? A reply to Mia Liinason's Position Paper", *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 18:2 (2010), 122–128.

28. Claire Hemmings, "What is a feminist theorist responsible for? Response to Rachel Torr", *Feminist Theory* 8:69 (2007): 70.

29. Liinason, 2010, 45.

30. Assman, *Tid och tradition*, 74.

31. Edenheim, 2010, s. 117.