

Feminist criticism



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In a splendidly witty dialogue of 1975, Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson identified two poles of feminist literary criticism. The first of these modes, righteous, angry, and admonitory, they compared to the Old Testament, 'looking for the sins and errors of the past'. The second mode, disinterested and seeking 'the grace of imagination', they compared to the New Testament. Both are necessary, they concluded, for only the Jeremiahs of ideology can lead us out of the Egypt of female servitude' to the promised land of humanism. Matthew Arnold also thought that literary critics might perish in the wilderness before they reached the promised land of disinterestedness.

Heilbrun and Stimpson were neo-Arnoldian as befitted members of the Columbia and Barnard faculties. But if, in the 1980s, feminist literary critics are still wandering in the wilderness, we are in good company; for, as Geoffrey Hartman tells us, all criticism is in the wilderness. 2 Feminist critics may be startled to find ourselves in this band of theoretical pioneers, since in the American literary tradition the wilderness has been an exclusively masculine domain.

Yet between feminist ideology and the liberal ideal of disinterestedness lies the wilderness of theory, which we too must make our home. Until very recently, feminist criticism has not had a theoretical basis; it has been an empirical orphan in the theoretical storm. In 1975, I was persuaded that no theoretical manifesto could adequately account for the varied methodologies and ideologies which called themselves feminist reading or writing. By the next year, Annette Kolodny had added her observation that feminist literary criticism appeared 'more like a set of interchangeable strategies than any

coherent school or shared goal orientation. ' Since then, the expressed goals have not been notably unified. Black critics protest the ' massive silence' of feminist criticism about black and Third-World women writers and call for a black feminist aesthetic that would deal with both racial and sexual politics.

Marxist feminists wish to focus on class along with gender as a crucial determinant of literary production. 5 Literary historians want to uncover a lost tradition. Critics trained in deconstructionist methodologies wish to ' synthesize a literary criticism that is both textual and feminist. ' 6 Freudian and Lacanian critics want to theorize about women's relationship to language and signification. An early obstacle to constructing a theoretical framework for feminist criticism was the unwillingness of many women to limit or bound an expressive and dynamic enterprise.

The openness of feminist criticism appealed particularly to Americans who perceived the structuralist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist debates of the 1970s as arid and falsely objective, the epitome of a pernicious -308- masculine discourse from which many feminists wished to escape. Recalling in *A Room of One's Own* how she had been prohibited from entering the university library, the symbolic sanctuary of the male logos, Virginia Woolf wisely observed that while it is ' unpleasant to be locked out it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in.

Advocates of the antitheoretical position traced their descent from Woolf and from other feminist visionaries, such as Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich and Marguerite Duras, who had satirized the sterile narcissism of male scholarship and celebrated women's fortunate exclusion from its patriarchal

methodolatry. Thus for some, feminist criticism was an act of resistance to theory, a confrontation with existing canons and judgments, what Josephine Donovan calls ‘ a mode of negation within a fundamental dialectic’. As Judith Fetterley declared in her book, *The*

Resisting Reader, feminist criticism has been characterized by ‘ a resistance to codification and a refusal to have its parameters prematurely set. ‘ I have discussed elsewhere, with considerable sympathy, the suspicion of monolithic systems and the rejection of scientism in literary study that many feminist critics have voiced. While scientific criticism struggled to purge itself of the subjective, feminist criticism reasserted the authority of experience. 7 Yet it now appears that what looked like a theoretical impasse was actually an evolutionary phase.

The ethics of awakening have been succeeded, at least in the universities, by a second stage characterized by anxiety about the isolation of feminist criticism from a critical community increasingly theoretical in its interests and indifferent to women’s writing. The question of how feminist criticism should define itself with relation to the new critical theories and theorists has occasioned sharp debate in Europe and the United States. Nina Auerbach has noted the absence of dialogue and asks whether feminist criticism itself must accept responsibility:

Feminist critics seem particularly reluctant to define themselves to the uninitiated. There is a sense in which our sisterhood has become too powerful; as a school, our belief in ourself is so potent that we decline communication with the networks of power and respectability we say we

want to change. 8 But rather than declining communication with these networks, feminist criticism has indeed spoken directly to them, in their own media: PMLA, Diacritics, Glyph, Tel Quel, New Literary History, and Critical Inquiry.

For the feminist critic seeking clarification, the proliferation of communiques may itself prove confusing. There are two distinct modes of feminist criticism, and to conflate them (as most commentators do) is to remain permanently bemused by their theoretical potentialities. The first mode is ideological; it is concerned with the feminist as reader, and it offers feminist readings of texts which consider the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and woman-as-sign in semiotic systems.

This is not all feminist reading can do; it can be a liberating intellectual act, as Adrienne Rich proposes: A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name — and therefore live — afresh. This invigorating encounter with literature, which I will call feminist reading or the feminist critique, is in essence a mode of interpretation, one of many which any complex text will accommodate and permit. It is very difficult to propose theoretical coherence in an activity which by its nature is so eclectic and wideranging, although as a critical practice feminist reading has certainly been influential.

But in the free play of the interpretive field, the feminist critique can only compete with alternative readings, all of which have the built-in obsolescence of Buicks, cast away as newer readings take their place. As Kolodny, the most sophisticated theorist of feminist interpretation, has conceded: All the feminist is asserting, then, is her own equivalent right to liberate new (and perhaps different) significances from these same texts; and, at the same time, her right to choose which features of a text she takes as relevant because she is, after all, asking new and different questions of it.

In the process, she claims neither definitiveness nor structural completeness for her different readings and reading systems, but only their usefulness in recognizing the particular achievements of woman-as-author and their applicability in conscientiously decoding woman-as-sign. Rather than being discouraged by these limited objectives, Kolodny found them the happy cause of the ‘playful pluralism’ of feminist critical theory, a pluralism which she believes to be ‘the only critical stance consistent with the current status of the larger women’s movement.’¹⁰ Her feminist critic dances adroitly through the theoretical minefield.

Keenly aware of the political issues involved and presenting brilliant arguments, Kolodny nonetheless fails to convince me that feminist criticism must altogether abandon its hope ‘of establishing some basic conceptual model’. If we see our critical job as interpretation and reinterpretation, we must be content with pluralism as our critical stance. But if we wish to ask questions about the process and the contexts of writing, if we genuinely wish to define ourselves to the uninitiated, we cannot rule out the prospect of theoretical consensus at this early stage.

All feminist criticism is in some sense revisionist, questioning the adequacy of accepted conceptual structures, and indeed most contemporary American criticism claims to be revisionist too. The most exciting and comprehensive case for this ‘ revisionary imperative’ is made by Sandra Gilbert: at its most ambitious, she asserts, feminist criticism ‘ wants to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority.

But in practice, the revisionary feminist critique is redressing a grievance and is built upon existing models. No one would deny that feminist criticism has affinities to other contemporary critical practices and methodologies and that the best work is also the most fully informed. Nonetheless, the feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanizing, or even attacking male critical theory keeps us dependent upon it and retards our progress in solving our own theoretical problems.

What I mean here by ‘ male critical theory’ is a concept of creativity, literary history, or literary interpretation based entirely on male experience and put forward as universal. So long as we look to androcentric models for our most basic principles — even if we revise them by adding the feminist frame of - 310- reference — we are learning nothing new. And when the process is so one-sided, when male critics boast of their ignorance of feminist criticism, it is disheartening to find feminist critics still anxious for approval from the ‘ white fathers’ who will not listen or reply.

Some feminist critics have taken upon themselves a revisionism which becomes a kind of homage; they have made Lacan the ladies' man of Diacritics and have forced Pierre Macherey into those dark alleys of the psyche where Engels feared to tread. According to Christiane Makward, the problem is even more serious in France than in the United States: ' If neofeminist thought in France seems to have ground to a halt,' she writes, ' it is because it has continued to feed on the discourse of the masters.

It is time for feminist criticism to decide whether between religion and revision we can claim any firm theoretical ground of our own. In calling for a feminist criticism that is genuinely women centered, independent, and intellectually coherent, I do not mean to endorse the separatist fantasies of radical feminist visionaries or to exclude from our critical practice a variety of intellectual tools. But we need to ask much more searchingly what we want to know and how we can find answers to the questions that come from our experience.

I do not think that feminist criticism can find a usable past in the androcentric critical tradition. It has more to learn from women's studies than from English studies, more to learn from international feminist theory than from another seminar on the masters. It must find its own subject, its own system, its own theory, and its own voice. As Rich writes of Emily Dickinson, in her poem ' I Am in Danger — Sir -, ' we must choose to have the argument out at last on our own premises. Defining the feminine: gynocritics and the woman's test

A woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine. Virginia Woolf It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, encoded — which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" In the past decade, I believe, this process of defining the feminine has started to take place.

Feminist criticism has gradually shifted its center from revisionary readings to a sustained investigation of literature by women. The second mode of feminist criticism engendered by this process is the study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition. No English term exists for such a specialized critical discourse, and so I have invented the term ' gynocritics. Unlike the feminist critique, gynocritics offers many theoretical opportunities.

To see women's writing as our primary subject forces us to make the leap to a new conceptual vantage point and to redefine the nature of the theoretical problem before us. It is no longer the ideological dilemma of reconciling revisionary pluralisms but the essential question of difference. How can we constitute women as a distinct literary group? What is the difference of women's writing? Patricia Meyer Spacks, I think, was the first academic critic to notice this shift from an androcentric to a gynocentric feminist criticism.

In *The Female Imagination* (1975), she pointed out that few feminist theorists had concerned themselves with women's writing. Simone de Beauvoir's treatment of women writers in *The Second Sex* 'always suggests an a priori tendency to take them less seriously than their masculine counterparts'; Mary Ellmann, in *Thinking about Women*, characterized women's literary success as escape from the categories of womanhood; and, according to Spacks, Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, 'has little interest in women imaginative writers. 13 Spacks's wideranging study inaugurated a new period of feminist literary history and criticism which asked, again and again, how women's writing had been different, how womanhood itself shaped women's creative expression. In such books as Ellen Moers *Literary Women* (1976), my *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Nina Baym *Woman's Fiction* (1978), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), and Margaret Homans *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (1980), and in hundreds of essays and papers, women's writing asserted itself as the central project of feminist literary study.

This shift in emphasis has also taken place in European feminist criticism. To date, most commentary on French feminist critical discourse has stressed its fundamental dissimilarity from the empirical American orientation, its unfamiliar intellectual grounding in linguistics, Marxism, neo-Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Derridean deconstruction.

Despite these differences, however, the new French feminisms have much in common with radical American feminist theories in terms of intellectual affiliations and rhetorical energies. The concept of *écriture féminine*, the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text, is

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a significant theoretical formulation in French feminist criticism, although it describes a Utopian possibility rather than a literary practice.

Helene Cixous, one of the leading advocates of *écriture féminine*, has admitted that, with only a few exceptions, 'there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity,' and Nancy Miller explains that *écriture féminine* 'privileges a textuality of the avant-garde, a literary production of the late twentieth century, and it is therefore fundamentally a hope, if not a blueprint, for the future.'¹⁴ Nonetheless, the concept of *écriture féminine* provides a way of talking about women's writing which reasserts the value of the feminine and identifies the theoretical project of feminist criticism as the analysis of difference.

In recent years, the translations of important work by Julia Kristeva, Cixous, and Luce Irigaray and the excellent collection *New French Feminisms* have made French criticism much more accessible to American feminist scholars.¹⁵ English feminist criticism, which incorporates French feminist and Marxist theory but is more traditionally oriented to textual interpretation, is also moving toward a focus on women's writing.¹⁶ The emphasis in each country falls somewhat differently: English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American -312- feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression.

All, however, have become gynocentric. All are struggling to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority. Defining the unique difference of women's writing, as Woolf

and Cixous have warned, must present a slippery and demanding task. Is difference a matter of style? Genre? Experience? Or is it produced by the reading process, as some textual critics would maintain? Spacks calls the difference of women's writing a 'delicate divergency' testifying to the subtle and elusive nature of the feminine practice of writing.

Yet the delicate divergency of the woman's text challenges us to respond with equal delicacy and precision to the small but crucial deviations, the cumulative weightings of experience and exclusion, that have marked the history of women's writing. Before we can chart this history, we must uncover it, patiently and scrupulously; our theories must be firmly grounded in reading and research. But we have the opportunity, through gynocritics, to learn something solid, enduring, and real about the relation of women to literary culture.

Theories of women's writing presently make use of four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. Each is an effort to define and differentiate the qualities of the woman writer and the woman's text; each model also represents a school of gynocentric feminist criticism with its own favorite texts, styles, and methods. They overlap but are roughly sequential in that each incorporates the one before. I shall try now to sort out the various terminologies and assumptions of these four models of difference and evaluate their usefulness.