

## INTRODUCTION

One day it will be obvious that there are male writers and female writers, rather than, as at present, female writers and writers (read **real, male**). We're not there yet. We've got to continue through the process, initiated by women, of recognizing masculine and feminine experience. (Michelle Roberts, "Questions and Answers," in **On Gender and Writing**. Michelene Wandor, ed., London: Pandora Press, 1983:63)

The growing interest in the study of women writers has opened up in the last fifteen years a vast and diversified territory, not yet fully explored or mapped out. In this introduction, therefore, rather than present a cumulative survey of the controversial scholarship on the subject, I want to consider and examine in a very personal way some of the major issues related to women and literature.

Not too long ago, when I was searching for a subject for my doctoral dissertation, I knew for one thing that I wanted to write about a woman — a contemporary American woman novelist. I was tired of dealing with a literature which only very remotely, if at all, illuminated my life, my place in the world. Knowing that much, I set out in search of a writer, for in my three years as a graduate student I had hardly read any. Very few contemporary women novelists had acquired a critical reputation that warranted a full-length study, and fewer still (and that was a major problem) had been read by the members of the English Department.

Commenting on the problem with an acquaintance of mine, a woman, member of the Philosophy Department, I eagerly hoped for some encouragement. But, to my surprise, she tried to dissuade me. Her words, I remember well, amounted to the following: that I should write on a **serious** subject, one with **universal** appeal, something that would eventually lead to **publishing**. Otherwise I might jeopardize my entire academic career and probably end my days as a teacher. In short, I'd be damned. Ironically, the only reply I could think up at the moment was Huckleberry Finn's "All right, then, I'll go to Hell!"

This personal anecdote illustrates, among other things, two basic issues related to the subject of women and literature. First, the assumption, among men and women alike, that there is such a thing as a universal frame of reference, disembodied and sexless, and that whatever is specifically female cannot stand for human experience. Second, the relative unavailability of literature by women in the academic canon. My courses on the American Realistic Novel, for example, included John DeForest, Harold Frederick, and Henry Blake Fuller, but not Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, or Kate Chopin. For the Contemporary American Novel I had read Ken Kesey and Robert Coover, but not Anne Tyler or Marge Piercy. And though I had studied Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, I had not even heard of Zora Neale Hurston or Toni Morrison. Yet women had written extensively. And were now writing more than ever before.

At this point, I suppose, we have to acknowledge that women have written comparatively less than men. At least in a visible way. And, to be honest, we cannot avoid confronting the old, often insidious question of why there haven't been any great women artists.

Refusing to accept the answer of inferiority implicit in the question, some scholars have undertaken a revisionary study of literary history, attempting, in their search for answers, to render the invisible visible. Some, like Simone de Beauvoir and Tillie Olsen, see the apparent failure of women to create artistic objects or texts as a consequence of the social and institutional restrictions which have curtailed women's freedom and experience

of the world.

Others, like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, examine the more complex and less obvious issue of female creativity. As they so cogently argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), our western culture has traditionally identified the author as a male, who is primary, and the female as his passive creation, an artistic object. In Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, for example, Isabel Archer is referred to as a blank page upon which an edifying text would be written. Similar metaphors abound in the arts. And in our everyday lives the belief that men should be industrious and women beautiful is still a widely-held social norm. Thus, having internalized such views, the woman writer has had to overcome, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, a tremendous obstacle — the anxiety of authorship — before she can accept herself in the role of creator.

One of the primary implications such anxiety of authorship has had for the woman writer is the need to obliterate aesthetic distance: the preference for confessional poetry, for poetry as experience; the insistence on personal forms of expression such as journals, diaries, the personal essay; in fiction, the blurring of lines between author and narrator, and the close connection between the author and her protagonist. If we consider that until very recently evaluative criticism entertained the highest notions about the purity of Literature, it is not difficult to see why much writing by women has been excluded from the literary canon.

Finally (for our purposes here at least), some scholars have found in language an explanation for women's comparatively scant literary production. Xavière Gauthier, Mary Jacobus, Dale Spender, Luce Irigaray, Susan Bassnett, among others — all propose, in varying ways and degrees, that women are handicapped by having to articulate their specifically female experience through a linguistic system which is inherently male. As Spender points out in *Man Made Language* (1980), males as a dominant cultural group have shaped language, thought and reality, by enshrining their own subjectivity as objective truth and by promoting the cult of memorability and rigor. If this is indeed so, then Irigaray's recognition, in "Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un" (1981), of a silent,

multiple, diffuse tact among women explains not only the relative absence of women from literature, but also much of the subversive use of language which has colored the work of female authors as diverse as Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and Toni Morrison.

In exploring such issues, students of literature by women have achieved several important goals. Criticism has progressed beyond the ideological critique of male-authored texts, propounded by de Beauvoir and Kate Millett, into what Elaine Showalter has termed "gynocritics" — concern with woman-produced literature, with the woman as writer. A wealth of long-ignored literary material has been unearthed and is being reissued and re-evaluated, as is the case with Aphra Behn and May Sinclair in England, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Rebecca Harding Davis in the United States. Also, important thematic and formal threads have begun to be found among the works of women writers throughout time and space.

The investigation has been rich and varied. In spite of the feminist suspicion of theory, gender criticism has produced a wealth of theoretical studies and developed a specific (anti) methodology of women's studies in literature.

According to Elaine Showalter — "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1978) and "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981) — the refusal to accept traditional theoretical practices is an act of negation, a consequence of the divided consciousness of women: both part of and excluded from the dominant culture. But, as Showalter reminds us, "No theory, however suggestive, can be a substitute for the close and extensive knowledge of women's texts which constitute our essential subject." Hence, this rather eclectic issue on Women Writers.

To begin with, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) whose **The Second Sex**, published in 1949, raised fundamental questions about the position of women in literature and society. Rosa Alice Caubet provides some important insights into the life and work of de Beauvoir, within the broader context of existentialism, which forms the historical background for her ideas.

Making a leap back in time and across national and methodological barriers, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), whose

innovative poetry remained for almost a century without due recognition. In a meticulous and highly knowledgeable formal analysis of three of Dickinson's poems, Sigrid Renaux reveals the full measure of the poet's well-crafted art.

From poetry to prose, from 19th-century New England to the Harlem Renaissance, from social seclusion to political involvement — such is the route to encounter Zora Neale Hurston (c.1901-1960). Rita Schmidt's thorough and perceptive feminist analysis of Hurston's major works succeeds not only in revealing the literary value of a still much neglected black woman writer, but also in exposing some of the oppressive tendencies which have obliterated much of the literature produced by women.

Roughly contemporary to Hurston, though of a very different background, Paris-born Anaïs Nin (1903-1977) illustrates a similarly revolutionary scrutiny of personal and collective experience and a search for a female identity. In his study of Nin's novel, Ubiratan Paiva de Oliveira offers a clear view of the novelist's self-probing, multi-sensuous experimental aesthetics.

And to end up with a still broader, future-oriented analysis, Deirdre Burton's fascinating linguistic study of four utopian feminist novels. The implications of Burton's work for both sociolinguistics and literary criticism take us full circle to the very questions with which we started this Introduction: the need for recognition of a specific female experience and for its inclusion in the broad, universal realm of literature.

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innovative poetry, and the poet's role in society. The poet's role is to be a witness to the human condition, to record the experiences of his time, and to give voice to the silent. The poet's role is to be a prophet, to speak the truth, and to inspire the people to action.

