"WHAT ARE WE DOING, REALLY ? — FEMINIST CRITICISM AND THE PROBLEM OF THEORY"

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I

In "Free Women", the novel within a novel in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Tommy, a young man suffering from an identity crisis, accuses Anna, a writer suffering from a writer's block, of dishonesty for keeping four notebooks instead of one.

> 'After all, you take your stand on something, don't you? Yes you do — you despise people like my father, who limit themselves. But you limit yourself too. For the same reason. You're afraid. You're being irresponsible.' He made this final judgement the pouting, deliberate mouth smiling with satisfaction. Anna realized that this was what he had come to say. This was the point they had been working towards all evening.[1]

Shortly afterwards, Tommy shoots himself. He does not die — he is blinded, and this produces a surprising change in him. His mother observes:

> He's happy for the first time in his life . . . he's all in one piece for the first time in his life.' Molly gasped in horror at her own words, hearing what she had said: *all in one piece*, and matching them against the truth of that mutilation.[2]

Lessing underscores the irony further. In Tommy's story, blindness and mutilation do not, as one might expect, signify castration. Instead they become

the preconditions for attaining phallic power. By blinding himself, Tommy escapes the influence of the women who nurtured him, and qualifies himself to succeed his father as "husband" to his father's alcoholic wife and as head of his corporate empire.

The moral of this story has not been lost on feminist critics. Definition — *being all in one piece* — equals phallogocentric delusion. The female text like the female body is irreducibly plural. And so should feminist criticism be. As Annette Kolodny put it: "Our task is to initiate nothing less than a playful pluralism responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive of none." This playful pluralism is appropriate "not simply as a description of what already exists but, more importantly, as the only critical stance consistent with the current status [segmented and variously focused] of the larger women's movement."[3]

Although Kolodny's argument for pluralism has been highly influential, there are dissenting voices. In her review of feminist literary criticism, Cheri Register writes:

> If we are to retain control over the migratory pattern of the monster we have created, we need to capture her and put a tracking device on her. We should take frequent readings on the basic issues: With what questions is feminist literary criticism concerned? What do we really want to know? What use will we make of this knowledge? What makes it literary criticism?[4]

More recently, Elaine Showalter explicitly disputes Kolodny's argument for pluralism:

> In spite of her brilliant arguments, Kolodny nonetheless fails to convince me that feminist criticism must altogether abandon the 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 uninintiated, we cannot rule out the prospect of theoretical consensus at this early stage.[5]

Register could not have chosen a more distressing metaphor, nor one which is more revealing. Her portrayal of feminist criticism as a wild creature in danger of growing to monstrous proportions and of straying out of control, and of theory as a "tracking device" verifies our worst suspicions about the desire for a comprehensive theory — namely, its complicity with the logic of domination. If

this is what a comprehensive theory entails, I would rather endorse Kolodny's playful pluralism.

In the above-cited article, Showalter proposes what at first glance seems to be a sensible compromise between Kolodny's and Register's positions. While granting that the activity of feminist readers ("feminist critique") is necessarily pluralistic, she argues that it is possible to develop a basic conceptual model for the study of the work of women writers ("gynocritics"). Her argument, however, is not really convincing. I think it makes sense to distinguish between feminist criticism of female texts (call this gynocritics), and feminist criticism of male texts (feminist critique). But I do not see why the former should be more or less pluralistic than the latter. Besides, if a basic conceptual framework could be developed for the study of women writers, surely a corresponding framework could be developed that would make sense of the activity of women readers. The same *difference* — linguistic, biological, psychological or cultural — should operate in both.

Before we go further, let us clarify the problem. When we speak of theory, we could be thinking of one of three kinds.

1. A feminist theory about a specific subject matter — e.g. Amercican literature, 19th and 20th century British fiction, images of women in literature, the female imagination, the feminine consciousness, the female or feminist aesthetic, the implication of literary conventions, the relationship between literature and life, and so on.

2. A basic conceptual model or methodology, a "grammar" that would descriptively and/or prescriptively codify feminist critical practice.

3. A comprehensive framework that will represent criticism as a coherent critical enterprise.

Theory 1 is hardly problematical. A cursory survey of feminist criticism will reveal many such theories. Feminist discussions of theory are blocked by the confusion of Theory 2 and Theory 3. What we really want is Theory 3, but we are led by the prevailing "commonsense" to conflate this with Theory 2; hence, the talk of tracking devices, manifestos, solid systems, dogmas, party lines, and uniform, rigid methodologies.

As much as I disagree with Register and Showalter, I share their discontent with pluralism. It is worth noting that even Kolodny's advocacy of pluralism is far from unequivocal. She supplements her model with a "shared ideology" that "manifests its power by ordering the *sum* of our actions."[6] The desire for a comprehensive theory of feminist criticism persists in spite of the obstacles that block its realization. It would be rash to write this off as a manifestation of phallologocentric nostalgia.

The Golden Notebook offers another, more difficult, moral than the one noted above. Although the aftermath of the scene cited earlier reveals Tommy's bad faith, his charge — that by adopting a pluralistic strategy Anna is actually limiting herself — is eventually vindicated. Anna abandons the four notebooks to "put all of herself" in the golden notebook. This marks "the end fragmentation — the triumph of a second theme, which is that of unity."[7] Although it is tempting to think that this statement carries the central "message" of Lessing's

novel, in fact it only puts us on the track of a moral which is not immediately accessible, for it is found not in any statement in the text (or even in Lessing's introduction), but in the "wordless statement" provided by the *shape* of the novel. The odd arrangement of the text affirms neither the sufficiency of a pluralistic model of reality nor the feasibility of a seamless unity. Instead, it suggests a third alternative: a model that represents a coherence, as interrelatedness, one that does not cancel diversity, but on the contrary is articulated through the play of different moments.

The structure of *The Golden Notebook* suggests that we need not be bound by the customary association of coherence with systematic consistency and uniformity. While it would be worse than useless to codify feminist criticism, it is not beyond us to strive for what we really need, namely, Theory 3 — specifically, a conceptual model that will allow us to make sense of feminist criticism as a whole, to see it not as an *ad hoc* collection of concerns and strategies, but as a segmented, variously focused, *yet* coherent and genuinely collective enterprise.

II

Of course we are not starting with a clean slate. Anyone proposing a definition of feminist criticism is obliged to refer to the work done in the last decade and a half. To keep this project manageable, I will focus my remarks on three representative works, works by Showalter, by Fetterly and by Gilbert and Gubar, which I will assume to be familiar to most feminist critics. I will use these works to illustrate both the diversity and the interrelatedness of the strategies and concerns of feminist criticism, and to develop a model that will adequately represent the structure of the whole enterprise.

A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing, by Elaine Showalter, is feminist scholarship at its best.[8] It provides a wealth of information, and it corrects the misimpressions created by androcentric scholarship. Above all, Showalter provides a much needed antidote to the image of the woman writer as a "singular anomaly." She restores the "links in the chain that bound one generation to the next,"[9] and she tells the story, not so much of writing as an individual achievement, but as a production process — a collective engagement with the culture industry. What emerges is a picture of a multitude of women (a threatening mob, some thought) — diligent, energetic, resourceful, undaunted by tremendous disadvantages — struggling to overcome their historical circumstances, seizing and making opportunities to educate themselves, to achieve economic independance, and to write their own stories — in short, to claim their right to be authors rather than merely objects of literature. While it is difficult to claim that the four or five or ten "great" women novelists of the last two centuries deserve to be taken as a separate literary tradition, the multitude uncovered by Showalter's research suggests at least a *prima facie* case for the existence of such a tradition.

Showalter's book is theoretically significant, however, because she does not rest on this *prima facie* case. She recognizes that to make good the claim that the

works of women constitute a separate tradition, she must articulate the cultural and literary consequences of sex. Showalter advances the thesis that women "have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society, and been unified by values, conventions, experiences and behaviour impinging on each individual." Furthermore, she stresses the ambiguous character of this female subculture. Certainly it is dominated, and therefore "custodial," constituted by "a set of opinions, prejudices, tastes and values prescribed for a subordinate group to perpetuate its subordinate status." But not wholly so. The female subculture is an authentic culture to the extent that it is also a "thriving and positive entity," the expression not only of accommodations to domination, but also, of "enduring values" — of authentic human needs and aspirations, of the drive for self-realization and community in spite of inimical historical circumstances.

To say that the literature written by women is an "ideational" manifestation of a subculture is to indicate its affinity with other "minority" literature (e.g. Black literature vis-à-vis American literature, or the fledgling American literature vis-à-vis English literature). A sub-literature is defined by three characteristics. First, it derives from a shared experiental base or "habit of living." For women in Victorian England, this centered around the events of the female sexual life cycle which had to be increasingly secretive and ritualized. Second, it signifies a more or less covert solidarity among the individuals forming the subculture. According to Showalter, women novelists in the nineteenth-century had an awareness of each other that often amounted to a "genteel conspiracy." Finally, a sub-literature is defined by its problematic relationship to the hegemonic culture, and its history is the history of strategic approaches to this relationship. Showalter distinguishes three phases in the female literary tradition: a prolonged *feminine*, imitative phase (1840-1880), characterized by the internalization of prevailing social and aesthetic norms; then a *feminist* phase (1880-1920) of explicit protest against these norms and of advocacy of minority rights; and finally a *female* phase (1920-present) of self-discovery, characterized by a relatively autonomous "search for identity."[10]

The theoretical import of Showalter's thesis that literature written by women is the manifestation of a subculture transcends its usefulness in interpreting and organizing the data produced by her research on British novelists. It gives theoretical expression to our intuition that "a special female self-awareness" distinguishes the literature written by women from that written by men. It represents a crucial step towards "establishing a more reliable critical vocabulary and a more accurate and systematic literary history for women writers."[11]

The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach To American Fiction, by Judith Fetterley, is concerned with literature, in this case American literature, written by men. She explicitly states her basic premises: "literature is political," and "American literature is male."[12] In other words, the dominant American literature functions as an instrument of masculine sexual politics. Fetterley's book is reminiscent of the criticism of works by men — notably in Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and in numerous studies of sexist stereotypes and images of women — that dominated the first years of feminist criticism.[13] However,

Fetterley adopts a novel approach to the masculine text. She is concerned not with isolated components of the text (e.g., male and female images), but with its overall narrative strategy and with the way this structures the response of the reader. Fetterley argues that "as readers, teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny."[14] This process of "emasculation" does not impart virile power to women, but on the contrary, it doubles the experience of powerlessness.

> To be excluded from literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness — not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequences of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male — to be universal, to be American — is to be *not female*.[15]

Thus, American literature — and androcentric literature in general — induces a differential experience in male and female readers. For the male reader the text mediates the reciprocal realization of the individual and the universal; it confirms his status as the essential subject — his (generic) manhood. Female readers are not barred from this process. Literature is all the more efficient as an instrument of sexual politics because it does not leave women alone. It does not allow them to seek refuge in their difference, but entices them into complicity with a process that turns that difference into *otherness without reciprocity*.[16]

If literature is political, then, Fetterley concludes, feminist criticism must be counterpolitical: "the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader," whose goal is to disrupt the process of emasculation in order "to make available to consciousness that which has been largely left unconscious, and thus to change our understanding of these fictions, our relation to them, and their effect on us."[17] The theory of reading which is barely sketched in Fetterley's book indicates a necessary supplement to the sort of feminist criticism exemplified by *A Literature of Their Own*. It extends the idea of a female literary subculture to include not only women writers, but also women readers. At the same time, it reminds us of the power of the dominant tradition, and of the need to undermine its authority.

The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar returns our attention to the literature written by women. At one level, this work seems to conform to the conventions of normal practical criticism. It applies the method of "close reading" to certain exemplary texts in order to demonstrate the recurrent patterns that characterize the work of women:

> Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors — along with obsessive diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia.[18]

However, Gilbert and Gubar depart from conventional criticism in that their analysis is directed toward the elaboration of a "feminist poetics." They regard the texts they examine as "touchstones" for understanding the dynamics of female literary response to male assertion and coercion."[19] In Part I of their book, Gilbert and Gubar elaborate a theory of female literary response which has been inspired in part by Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence." They begin with a provocative demonstration that the "patriarchal poetics" governing the dominant tradition is rooted in the conception of the pen as a metaphorical penis.

> In patriarchal Western culture . . . the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen's power, like his penis's power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim, as . . . 'an increaser and thus a founder.'

Hence, the author/father is the owner/possessor not only of his text and his reader's attention, but also of "those figures, scenes, and events — those brainchildren — he has both incarnated in black and white and 'bound' in cloth and leather."[20]

Then follows the obvious question. "What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are . . . overtly and covertly patriarchal?" What would be her relationship to her predecessors? Gilbert and Gubar argue that Bloom's theory of Oedipal combat between an emerging "strong" writer and the reigning patriarch does not apply to women writers. Although the authority of the reigning patriarch inhibits and forestalls the "coming of age" of a new male writer, it nevertheless *affirms* his potential authorship. A woman's situation is more difficult because she has to contend not only with the authority of the reigning patriarch, but with an entire literary tradition that decrees (or insinuates) that to be a writer is to be *not female*. Instead of the "anxiety of influence" found by Bloom in male authors, the woman writer experiences the "anxiety of authorship" — "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a precursor,' the act of writing will isolate and destroy her."[21]

This literature written by women is marked (and marred) by this anxiety of authorship and by strategies they employ to overcome it. Gilbert and Gubar brilliantly document the most significant of these strategies. They show that the works of great women writers are palimpsestic: "the surface designs conceal or obscure deep, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning.

Thus these writers manage the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal authority."[22]

The relationship of women writers to their female predecessors is no less complicated. Overlaid upon the "anxiety of authorship" is a longing for a *female* precursor, "who far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by her example that revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible."[23] The problem is that the literature written by women is marked by "disease", by the anxiety of authorship that afflicts their authors. Disappointed with the ambiguous accomplishments of actual women, women writers often displace the longed-for female precursor onto a mythical woman (Mary Shelley's Cumaen Sybil or Virginia Woolf's Judith Shakespeare) or onto a lost "mother country" where women could "live aloud." This mythic origin, whether imagined as motherland or mother, allows the legitimation of female authorship to the extent that it allows the conception of writing as a project of reconstruction and recovery.

Let us take stock. At first sight the three works just discussed appear to validate the pluralistic conception of feminist criticism. Each represents a different point of entry into feminist discourse. Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar examine literature by women; Fetterley, literature by men. The first two works privilege the activity of writing, the third, the activity of reading. Showalter adopts a sociological approach emphasizing the collective (or "mass") character of the female tradition, and the social relations underlying literary production. Fetterley and Gilbert and Gubar, on the other hand, adopt a psychological orientation that emphasizes the individual character of reading and writing and employs the technique of close reading of individual masterpieces.

Furthermore, these three works display different — indeed contradictory — attitudes toward literature. Fetterley adopts an antagonistic posture, which is in marked contrast to the friendly attitude assumed by Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar. Fetterley's approach emphasizes the *objective* aspect (the thingness, the otherness) of the text. Subjectivity belongs to the reader. The text is a structure — a "practico-inert" — designed to trap the subjectivity of the female reader and to turn it against itself. Accordingly, the task of the feminist critic is to disrupt this process, to de-sediment, dis-man-tle, what has become "second nature." By contrast, for Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar, literature is the expression of the self-consciousness, the subjectivity of women. The text is the residue of human *praxis*, and feminist criticism is a recuperative activity.

Needless to say, differences multiply rapidly as soon as we extend our attention to all the critical works and positions associated with feminist criticism. For example, the "empiricist" approach of Anglo-American feminism clashes with the deconstructive approach inspired by French post-structuralism. The privileged position given by Elaine Showalter to the study of women's writing conflicts with the reader-oriented perspective of Jane Tompkins, Jean Kennard and Elizabeth Flynn.[24] Some of us think that we should stress the common humanity (or androgyny) of women and men, while others think that we should focus on sexual difference. The singular focus on sexual

difference is opposed by socialist-feminists like Jane Marcus.[25] Even among those who have no problem with privileging sexual difference, there is disagreement about how this is to be situated — within the framework of biology, psychology, linguistics, history or cultural anthropology? The archetypal approach of Annis Pratt is at odds with feminist approaches that emphasize the historicity of literature.[26] The recent work of Nina Auerbach contradicts the early studies of images of women in literature.[27] And certainly it could be pointed out — and often is — that "woman" is an abstraction that obscures crucial differences among women — specifically race, class, national origin and sexual preference.

This is only a partial list of current points of contention. Surely, there is no shortage of controversy within feminist criticism. And yet, for all this, the impression remains that these diverse and contradictory works and positions belong together. And so we are thrown back to our initial question: can we specify the principle of coherence of feminist criticism without compromising its irreducible plurality? I claim that the answer is yes — provided we adopt the appropriate model of coherence. I suggest we think of feminist criticism as a *conversation* — as having the coherence of a conversation.

The model of conversation has considerable intuitive appeal. A conversation does not have the objectionable rigidity of an "ideology" or a "solid system". Its coherence does not depend on logical consistency. We know that people can differ wildly and still go on talking. At the same time, conversation has an advantage over the pluralistic models that picture feminist criticism as an umbrella covering a variety of interests and concerns, or an interpretive community made up of several sub-communities. The problem with pluralistic models is their tendency towards progressive atomization. They have no way of representing the interrelatedness of the parts. The model of conversation retains the plurality, and adds interrelatedness.[28]

On the other hand, the model of conversation may not seem promising, precisely because it is so commonsensical. It sounds as if I am proposing that we regard feminist criticism as nothing more than "clever chat about our favorite things." Surely this can't count as a definition. If the model of conversation is to be useful, we must develop it further. We need to specify the structure and characteristics of the feminist critical conversation. However, for now let me emphasize that invoking the model of conversation signifies a crucial transition. We have shifted our focus from finding a definition of feminist criticism that reflects its diversity to developing a model that allows us to understand how feminist criticism hangs together in spite of internal conflicts and contradictions.

III

To gain some perspective on the model of conversation,it is helpful to consider the work of the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, a Frankfurt School critical theorist. He is especially illuminating to feminists, because he gives discourse a central role in revolutionary *praxis*.[29] According to Habermas,

political movements have three functions: theory formation, the organization of the process of enlightenment, and the organization of the conduct of political action. On the first level, the aim is true statements; on the second, authentic insights; on the third, prudent decisions.[30]

Each of these functions requires a different model of communicative interaction. At the level of theory formation, the model is scientific discourse, the formation and argumentative testing of hypotheses. Here, ideally, the participants in the discussion have a symmetrical relationship. Each is as able as the other to know what she wants and to speak her mind cogently, and each has an equal chance to participate in the discussion. In this way the process of theory formation is cleared of all internal and external constraints, and is made subject only to the "unforced force of the better argument."

At the level of the process of enlightenment, the appropriate model is the therapeutic discourse of psychoanalysis. This model presupposes an asymmetrical relationship. It assumes that the "patient" or member of the "target group" (e.g., an unenlightened worker) is unable to meet the conditions for genuine dialogue. The aim of the interaction is to remove the barriers (ignorance, "false consciousness", self-deception), and to make symmetrical interaction possible. In spite of the asymmetrical relationship between the "bearers" and the "objects" of enlightenment, Habermas carefully explains that the process cannot succeed through force, deception or manipulation. The analyst can only serve as a guide. Authentic insight can only come when the truth of the analysis is confirmed by the self-reflection of the analysand. The "patient" must be the agent of her own enlightenment.

At the level of the conduct of political action, risky decisions concerning strategic action in concrete circumstances can only be justified by a consensus attained in *practical discourse* among the participants. Like theoretical discourse, practical discourse requires a symmetrical relationship. Each participant is the best judge of what risks she is willing to take and with what expectations. "There can be no theory which assures from the outset a world-historical mission in return for potential sacrifice . . . a political struggle can be legitimately conducted only under the condition that all decisions of consequence depend on the practical discussion of the participants. Here too, and especially here, there is no privileged access to truth."[31]

Habermas' analysis of political movements is based on a Marxist paradigm. Nevertheless, it has obvious applications to feminism. The feminist movement exhibits the three functions he describes: theory formation, the process of enlightenment (consciousness-raising), and the selection of strategies for political action. For the sake of convenience, let us set aside the third function, so that we may concentrate on the two that are most germane to feminist criticism: theory formation and consciousness-raising.

Ideally, feminist theoritical discourse satisfies the symmetry requirement. However, a crucial departure from Habermas's model occurs at the level of the process of enlightenment. The analytic dialogue adopted by Habermas assumes a confused and troubled patient who is guided into self-knowledge by a trained and knowledgeable analyst. At first glance, this resembles feminist pedagogical

and outreach work, since of necessity these involve asymmetrical relationships. But feminists have a more basic model for the process of enlightenment, namely, the collaborative and reciprocal consciousness-raising to which many of us trace our understanding of our situation as women in patriarchal society. In the feminist consciousness-raising groups that abounded in the 1970s, much attention was devoted to the structure of the process, and in particular, to the elimination of hierarchical relationships. No one was allowed to dominate the conversation; positions of leadership were rotated; everyone became analyst and analysand in turn. Although the consciousness-raising discourse may be said to be therapeutic, it is more comparable to the symmetrical discourse of peer-counseling than to the asymmetrical discourse of psychoanalysis.

It is also significant that although enlightenment was certainly one of the goals of a consciousness-raising group, it was not the only one. Women examined their experiences in order to understand their situation in patriarchy, and to overcome the ideological and psychological structures that bind them to oppressive institutions. However, consciousness-raising was also a process that combined individual self-recovery with the creation of group solidarity. With the support of others, each participant learned to find her own voice, to validate her own experience, and at the same time, to recognize herself in the experiences and aspirations of other women. Ideally, a feminist consciousness-raising group not only promoted the attainment of authentic insights into one's life and into the situation of women in general; it also provided its members with the concrete experience of political and affective bonding with other women.

The collaborative, symmetrical and affective relationships characteristic of feminist consciousness-raising groups strongly influence the structure of pedagogical and outreach activities, so that in spite of residual asymmetry, even these activities do not fit the psychoanalytic model. In women's studies courses, for example, much thought is given to organizing the course so as the counteract the traditional teacher-student hierarchy, and to approximate, as much as possible, the collaborative and egalitarian spirit of feminist consciousness-raising. Thus, the preferred pedagogical strategy is often small group discussions to encourage the participation of even the shyest student. Moreover, the teacher's experience is frequently as much the object of analysis as that of her students. By her openness and willingness to offer up her experience for analysis (within prudential limits, of course), she provides her students with a "role-model" that can inspire and guide their own consciousness-raising.

The difference in the organization of the process of enlightenment is rooted in a fundamental difference between the Marxist and the feminist projects. According to Marxist theory, the working class is the proper agent of revolutionary change. Marxist theory — presumed to be the expression of the class consciousness of workers — has been produced in general by people who have been spared the lot of the proletariat. To complicate the situation further, the actual consciousness of workers often contradicts the class consciousness imputed to them by Marxist theory from an analysis of their role in the production process. Hence, the split between the "bearers" and the "objects" of enlight-

enment. Happily, the women's movement is not burdened by such a split. Feminist critics and theorists, like almost all feminists, are women struggling to liberate themselves from their oppression. Theory formation occurs from within the oppressed group (albeit within one of its more privileged segments). Thus, feminist theory is objectively *and* subjectively grounded in the experience of living as a woman in patriarchal society.

One consequence of the identity of subject-object in feminism is the symmetrical structure of consciousness-raising. Another consequence is that the processes of theory formation and enlightenment are more intimately related in feminism than they are in Habermas' model. In feminism, theory formation is a vehicle for consciousness-raising *and* vice versa.[32] This close association is especially true in feminist criticism, and this shapes the modes of interaction — the pragmatic infrastructure — underlying the conversation. First of all, my model assumes the "universal symmetry requirement" of Habermas' model for theoretical discourse. Feminist criticism is a discourse among equals. Secondly, the conversation is oriented toward individual and collective enlightenment, toward the attainment of authentic insight into the experience and interests of women. Finally, feminist criticism possesses a characteristic that is slighted by Habermas' description of the functions of discourse within political movements. It is a medium for the realization of sisterhood — the political and affective bonding among women.

IV

We are now in a position to elaborate the definition of feminist criticism as a conversation. We have already noted that feminist criticism is rife with controversy. However, this should not blind us to the existence of something that might be called a "shared perspective" — a background consensus, more or less, concerning certain general theses. For example, feminist critics agree that, whatever else it might be, the dominant literary and critical tradition is androcentric, and as such it has functioned as an instrument of sexual politics. Similarly, that the literature written by women is, in some way related to — "reflects," "expresses," "bears the traces of" — their situation within patriarchy. We can list other such theses. In addition, feminist criticism is marked by certain characteristic themes. For example, the theme of woman as other in patriarchal culture, the theme of female bonding, the theme of the quest for an autonomous self, the theme of madness as the figure for the psychic condition of women in patriarchy, and at the same time as the figure for the moment of enlightenment. It is important to stress that in formulating the shared perspective of feminist criticism, the point is not to advance precise statements that rigorously determine the domain and the rules of feminist critical discourse. The coherence of a conversation does not depend on precise or uniform agreement, only on the possibility of reciprocal comprehension.

It should also be noted that conversation is a dynamic process. Each speaker refers to her predecessors. She takes up an idea, a problem, or an argument suggested by previous speakers, and in turn sets the stage for her successors. *A Literature of Their Own* and *The Resisting Reader* supplement each other. The first represents the strand of feminist criticism that Showalter calls gynocritics, the other the strand she calls feminist critique. One assumes the other, and together they span the relatively autonomous subculture of women writers and readers. *The Madwoman in the Attic* builds on preceding studies of women writers, specifically the work of Elaine Showalter and Ellen Moers: Gilbert and Gubar's psycho-history elaborates Showalter's contention that the female tradition is marked by its problematic relationship to the dominant culture. The anxiety of authorship is "in many ways the germ of a dis-ease, at any rate, a disaffection, a disturbance, a distrust that spreads like a stain throughout the style and structure of most literature written by women, especially . . . throughout literature by women writers before the twentieth century."[33]

The Madwoman in the Attic also follows up Fetterley's ideas about the politics of reading. To be a writer, one must first be a reader, and in the work of women writers we can discern the strategies they employ to resist the debilitating effect of reading texts that decree (or insinuate) that to be a writer is to be not female. There is no reason for the conversation to stop here. We can go on to explore the possibilities of studying literature by women from the point of view of the relationship they form with their readers, and the way in which they differentially inscribe prospective male and female readers. In turn, such studies will open up further topics of conversation.

Now we come to a very important point. The model of conversation has the advantage of representing a conception of coherence that does not preclude diversity and disagreement. The participants in a conversation may introduce different concerns, and they may contradict each other without destroying its continuity. Instead, the opposition can be played out — one approach can shed light on the other, and the conflict can provide topics for further conversation. The dynamic of the conversation, in other words, is constituted by two modes of interaction: contradiction as well as recuperation. One mode conditions — constrains *and* promotes — the other. This observation in turn suggests a revision of the initial conception of the unifying principle of the conversation. The background consensus described earlier must be supplemented by an ensemble of contradictions. I would even argue that *subjectively* the ensemble of contradictions is more basic than the background consensus, that we speak of a "shared perspective" or "ideology" not so much because we hold the same beliefs but because we feel the pressure of the same problems.

Let us briefly illustrate one of the contradictions in the ensemble. In *A Literature of Their Own* Showalter calls the object of her study, "the female tradition." On the face of it, this seems to be a perfectly reasonable label, consistent with her decision to be exhaustive rather than selective. Moreover, "the female tradition" contrasts well with the "feminine phase" of imitation and accomodation, and the "feminist phase" of politically conscious opposition. Difficulties arise, however, when we see that the third phase of the "female

tradition" is the "female phase" of relatively autonomous self-discovery. Here, the positive connotation of "female" is inconsistent with the neutrality of the earlier usage. The problem is further complicated by the contradiction between the positive connotation indicated by the association of "female phase" with self-discovery and the negative evaluation suggested by Showalter's actual discussion of this phase. The conclusion of her discussion of Virginia Woolf, for example, is that "the ultimate room of one's own is the grave."[34]

The name of the third phase is both predictable (what else could follow "feminine" and "feminist"?) and disconcerting. The difficulties it entails throws into question the appropriateness of the entire system of nomenclature. It is easy to point out other difficulties. The sequence "feminine", "feminist", "female" implies closure. What names, consistent with this sequence, can we give to the phases preceding the "feminine" and following the "female"?

Readers are likely to be disturbed by the awkwardness of this nomenclature. But *feminist* readers will recognize in it a problem that all of us have encountered — our own indecision as to what to name the cultural productions of women, as well as our sensitivity to the significance of the choice. Although Showalter's nomenclature leads her into difficulties, there is a sense in which it is appropriate: the literature (and for that matter the criticism) written by women is marked by the working out of the contradictory significations of "feminine," "feminist" and "female." In other words, feminist discourse is the working out of our ambivalence toward womanhood, our need to *overcome* and at the same time to *affirm* experiences and values bound up in the "feminine" and the "female."

It is beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate fully the ensemble of contradictions that unify feminist criticism.[35] However, we are in a position to make some formal observations. If feminist criticism is informed by an ensemble of contradictions, then it follows that any consensus is necessarily equivocal, and contingent on the present state of the conversation. The ensemble of contradictions serves as a critical ground for the undoing of any prevailing agreement and of the reconstruction of another. This does not mean, however, that the ensemble itself is fixed. For example, the contradictory significance of "feminist," "feminine," and "female" did not become problematical until we began (implicitly or explicitly) to conceive of women as constituting a relatively autonomous subculture, and of our experience as something *more* than the experience of victimization. Feminist criticism is shaped by the dialectical interaction of a background consensus and an ensemble of contradictions. Neither of these is fixed. One serves as the ground for the elaboration and revision of the other.

V

To round off this essay, let me briefly address two issues brought to the fore by my definition of feminist criticism as a conversation. The first has to do with the relevance of this definition to the entire feminist project. Clearly, the model

of conversation can be extended into a definition of feminism. Let me stress again the advantage of using the model of conversation. It allows us to break the customary association of coherence with consistency, uniformity and fixity — with a "solid system" or a "rigid ideology" — and from the prescriptive spirit and the impulse toward mastery implicit in these. The model of conversation has the advantage of representing both *the unity in diversity* and the *dynamism* of feminism. It allows us to see our work not as an *ad hoc* collection of concerns and strategies, but as a coherent and genuinely collective project. Moreover, it does so *without* glossing over or forcibly resolving intramural conflicts.

The second issue refers to the relationship of feminist criticism to literary criticism, and by implication, of feminism to the non-feminist establishment. It appears that the model of conversation applies as well to the entire discipline of literary criticism. Indeed, of all disciplines, literary criticism best approximates Richard Rorty's idea of a hermeneutic project consisting of various discourses conversing with each other.[36] Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that conversations feminists have with non-feminists are different from those they have with each other. For example, it is clear to feminists that the literary and critical canon is androcentric and founded on the exclusion of the female perspective. Most non-feminist critics, on the other hand, believe that the canon represents universal values that have withstood "the test of time", and are frequently annoyed with feminist criticism's persistent and, in their view, wrong-headed "gendrification" of literature. At the same time, they are likely to miss the point of problems that feminists consider crucial. Non-feminists are likely, for example, to regard Elaine Showalter's awkward juggling of "feminine", "female", and "feminist" as a simple mistake.

It is also important to emphasize that the conversation between feminists and the non-feminist mainstream conform neither to Habermas' model for theory formation nor to his model for the process of enlightenment. "While this is good enough on its own turf," writes the editor of a prestigious journal to a feminist critic, "it fails to address key issues in the current critical debate." In other words, in order to be admitted into the conversation, feminist must fit their discourse into the categories set by non-feminist discourse, and they must do so *without* reciprocity. Most non-feminist critics do not feel obliged to inform themselves of the work of feminist critics, much less to respond cogently to the issues they raise. The pressure of non-feminist categories on feminist discourse follows from the asymmetrical distribution of power which generally exists between its practitioners. This asymmetry violates the key condition, which according to Habermas, assures that theory formation will be governed only by the "unforced force of the better argument." At the same time, although an important goal of feminism is to enlighten others, its discourse with the mainstream does not fit the psychoanalytic model proposed by Habermas because the unenlightened party (from the feminist point of view) is also in possession of the instruments of power, and specifically, of the means for producing and regulating knowledge. The full elaboration of the structure of the conversation between feminists and the establishment is a very complicated project. For now, let me say simply that the interactions consituting this

relationship involves a substansial "strategic" component — i.e. the sort of non-discursive political struggle suggested by two alternative metaphors for feminist criticism: "dancing through the minefield" and "storming the toolshed."[37]

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Notes

I would like to thank Nelly Furman who read and commented on an earlier version of this essay, and David Schweickart, who saw it through all the stages of its development.

1. (New York: Bantam, 1973), p. 274.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
3. "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies*, 6 (Spring 1980), 19-20.
4. Review of Literary Criticism, *Signs*, 6 (Winter 1980), 268-69.
5. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness, "*Critical Inquiry*, 8 (Winter 1981), 183.
6. Kolodny, pp. 20-21.
7. Lessing, Introduction to *The Golden Notebook*, p. vii.
8. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
9. *Ibid.*, p.7.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-15.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
12. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. xi-xii.
13. Today much of feminist criticism of male texts employs the methods of semiotic analysis and deconstruction. See, for example, Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); and Elizabeth Earmath, "Fictional Consensus and Female Casualties," in *The Representative of Women*, eds. Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 1-18.
14. Fetterley, p. xx.
15. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
16. This, of course, is Simone de Beauvoir's famous definition of the condition of woman in patriarchal society *(The Second Sex.*, trans. H.M. Parshley [New York: Modern Library, 1958]).
17. Fetterley, p. xxii, and pp. xi-xii.
18. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. xi.
19. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

24. Jane Tompkins, "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane Tompkins (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 201-32, and "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," in *Glyph 8* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 79-102; Jean Kennard, "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life," *New Literary History*, 13 (Automn, 1981), 69-88, Elizabeth Flynn, "Gender and Reading." College English, 45 (Mar. 1983) 236-53.

25. Jane Marcus, "Storming the Toolshed," *Signs*, 7 (Spring, 1982), pp. 622-40.

26. Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981). For a contrasting view see Lilian Robinson, "Dwelling in Decencies: Radical Criticism and the Feminist Perspective," in *Sex, Class and Race* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1978). See also Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860* (Athens, GA: Georgia University Press, 1981).

27. Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

28. The model of conversation is perhaps more plausible at the moment, given the current interest in *The Dialogic Imagination* by Mikhail Bakhtin (ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press [Slavic Series, No. 1], 1981), and in Richard Rorty's suggestion that we abandon the epistemological project of commensuration in favor of regarding the "relations between various discourses as strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites speakers, but where hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts" (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979], p. 318). It is important to stress that the project of "edification" which defines Rorty's conversation lacks the critical edge that is crucial to feminist discourse by virtue of its grounding in the project of liberation.

29. For an excellent and readable account of Habermas's work, see Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979).

30. Jurgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), p. 32.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

32. Habermas insists that failure to preserve the autonomy of the three functions of political groups (theory formation, the organization of the process of enlightenment, and organization of the conduct of political struggle) would compromise the emancipatory intention. Habermas is concerned about the fact that in the tradition of the European working-class movement, all three functions have been assigned to the party organization. The specific target of his remarks is Georg Lukacs' theory of the party, which in Habermas's view subordinates both theory formation and the process of enlightenement to the exigencies of party organization. Of course, the women's movement does not have a party structure. Its radically decentralized character undermines the force of Habermas's reservations.

33. Gilbert and Gubar, p. 511.

34. Showalter, p. 297.

35. I could add other contradictions: the disciplinary requirements of literary criticism versus the demands of feminist *praxis*; aesthetic versus political concerns; the political versus the personal; integration versus separation; and so on. The point, however, is not to formulate as complete and as precise a list as possible, but to understand the structure of the enterprise and to see in what way feminist criticism constitutes a coherent critical community.

36. See note 28.

37. The first, of course, is Annette Kolodny's metaphor. The second is from Jane Marcus, "Storming the Toolshed," *Signs*, 7 (1982), pp. 622-40.