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'FEMALE', 'FEMININE' AND 'FEMINIST' IN THE WORK OF
TWENTIETH-CENTURY WOMEN NOVELISTS

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ABSTRACT

A range of critical approaches, popular, feminist and structuralist, to women's writing is examined and the strengths and weaknesses of each evaluated. On the basis of this discussion, an attempt is made to develop a critical method more appropriate to the area of women's fiction.

This method is eclectic, combining elements of each of the forms of criticism previously discussed with an analytic framework comprising three major categories of women's experience.

These are defined as the 'female', or biological elements; the 'feminine', or socially ascribed nature and role of women; and the 'feminist', a response to the 'feminine' which offers some form of challenge to its assumptions.

This methodology is employed in studies of selected twentieth-century women novelists whose works encompass a variety of fictional modes and styles and a range of different perspectives on women's biological and social experience.

Works of Virginia Woolf, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Elizabeth Bowen are taken to represent women's writing in the first half of the century. Novels by Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes and Michèle Roberts are considered together in order to trace certain stylistic and thematic changes in women's fiction between this period and the 1960s and '70s. The genre of domestic realism in these later decades is examined through the work of Margaret Drabble, Fay Weldon and Penelope Mortimer, whilst Doris Lessing, Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin illustrate alternatives to literary realism in modern women's writing.

The findings of this approach are summarised, and its effectiveness as a critical tool evaluated.

CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
List of Abbreviations	1
Introduction	3
 <u>PART I: THE CRITICS</u>	
Chapter 1 Women and Literary Criticism	7
Chapter 2 Feminism and Criticism	25
Chapter 3 Structuralism and the Approach to Women's Writing	44
 <u>PART II: THE AUTHORS</u>	
Chapter 4 Virginia Woolf: an Aesthetic Feminism or a Feminist Aesthetic?	68
Chapter 5 Language and the Family: Ivy Compton- Burnett's Domestic World	94
Chapter 6 Elizabeth Bowen and the Uses of the 'Feminine'	109
Chapter 7 Challenge and Conformity: the Lesbian in Fiction	124
Chapter 8 Tradition and Change in the Novels of Margaret Drabble	149
Chapter 9 The 'Female' and the 'Feminine': Fay Weldon and Penelope Mortimer	177
Chapter 10 Doris Lessing: Form and Fantasy	195

	<u>Page</u>
Chapter 11 Science Fiction and Feminism	228
Conclusion	251
References	261

Note: All footnotes are given at the end of the chapter in which they occur.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

TLS The Times Literary Supplement

Chapter 4:

AR000 A Room of One's Own
TG Three Guineas

Chapter 5:

LF The Last and the First
HH A House and its Head

Chapter 6:

HD The Heat of the Day
DH The Death of the Heart

Chapter 7:

WL The Well of Loneliness
APN A Piece of the Night

Chapter 8:

GY The Garrick Year
JG Jerusalem the Golden
RG The Realms of Gold

Chapter 10:

GN The Golden Notebook
Memoirs The Memoirs of a Survivor

Chapter 11:

The Left The Left Hand of Darkness
Hand...

INTRODUCTION

Readers and critics alike frequently express, with varying degrees of clarity and explicitness, a sense that the fiction written by women exhibits certain characteristics which distinguish it from the work of male writers. There has, however, been little investigation of this experience or its possible causes within the literature. Whilst the terms 'female' and 'feminine' are often used in the attempt to define common features of women's writing these words themselves are notoriously difficult to define in a critical context. For the usage of these terms invariably and inevitably reflects their complex and problematic social meanings.

It thus seems necessary to consider women's writing in the context of the various and often conflicting definitions applied to women writers and used by these women themselves in their exploration and articulation of their own experience. In this process the terms 'female' and 'feminine', along with the 'feminist' critique of their implications, cannot be ignored but must be approached and, where necessary, used with an awareness of the values and controversy which surround them.

These terms, therefore, will provide the categories to be used in this study of women's writing in the twentieth century. But precisely because of their varied and often uncritical usage in the discussion of female authors, and because the terms themselves form part of the social and cultural background of these writers, no study of women authors from this viewpoint can be undertaken in isolation from the criticism which either assumes or challenges the terms in which women writers, as women, are defined. Furthermore, the terms themselves need definition in a form which allows us to use them as critical tools rather than as social or ideological weapons. Only by examining a number of the ways in which they have been and are used in criticism is it possible to arrive at an understanding of their influence and operation within the novels to be studied here.

The first part of this study will therefore examine

various critical approaches to women's writing and attempt to draw from them both a more precise and useful definition of the terms 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist', and a methodology which permits an analysis of their place in the work of the authors to be discussed in the second part.

In chapter one, examples of the treatment of women's writing have been drawn largely from reviewing and other popular, rather than specialist, areas of criticism. This has been done in order to show more clearly certain attitudes towards female authors and their works, but it is not intended to suggest that these attitudes are equally dominant in all criticism which does not adopt a specifically feminist orientation.

PART 1: THE CRITICS

CHAPTER 1

WOMEN AND LITERARY CRITICISM

The feminist literary criticism of the past decade or so frequently argues, and is to a considerable extent motivated by the conviction, that many critics approach the work of women authors with a set of assumptions about women's writing derived from a social theory of women in general, and that it is these preconceptions, rather than the nature and merits of the works themselves, which control the reading and evaluation of female writers. The next chapter will consider the various approaches of feminist critics to the work of women writers. Here we shall examine the validity of their case against criticism which does not take up a feminist or woman-orientated position, and ask whether the effectiveness of such criticism as an instrument of analysis and understanding may be limited by its overt and covert attitudes towards women writers.

The most extended study of critical attitudes to female authors is Mary Ellmann's Thinking About Women which argues, on the basis of an impressive selection of examples from critical writing, that

Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual measuring of busts and hips. (Thinking About Women, (Virago, 1979) p.29)

The critics Ellmann quotes are clearly obsessed not only with the gender but, more specifically, with the sexuality of the authors, as the following example shows.

Poor old Françoise Sagan. Just one more old-fashioned old-timer, bypassed in the rush for the latest literary vogue and for youth. Superficially, her career in America resembles the lifespan of those medieval beauties who flowered at 14, were deflowered at 15, were old at 30, crones at 40. (Stanley Kauffmann, "Toujours Tristesse," New Republic, 29.10.1966, p.2. Cited by Ellmann, p.30)

However witty, this type of criticism fails completely to engage with or illuminate its subject.

Ellmann further argues that social stereotypes of women as passive, irrational, hysterical, are transposed to the discussion of their literary products. She illustrates the common use of analogy between the female anatomy and sexual functions and 'feminine' intellect and creativity. Thus, for example, 'penile thrust' is seen as a male intellectual attribute, the absence of which in the make-up of women limits the scope and power of women writers; the confinement of the uterus is presented as both cause and symbol of the limitations of women's minds. Ellmann produces a convincing indictment of both popular literary criticism and a body of fiction by male authors, arguing that their obsession with the peculiarities of female anatomy and the supposed nature of the female mind prevents them from making any useful contribution to our understanding of either female experience or the work of women writers.

There are, nevertheless, two major problems with her argument for the purposes of this study. Firstly, most of her examples are American in origin. Writers such as Norman Mailer provide her with a rich store of critical and literary misogyny, but, although Anthony Burgess must be counted amongst its practitioners, this kind of literary machismo appears to be less dominant on the English critical scene where Burgess is something of an exception. Few English critics are prepared to write of Jane Austen, for example, in these terms.

I recognise that I can gain no pleasure from serious reading (I would evidently have to take Jane Austen seriously) that lacks a strong male thrust, an almost pedantic allusiveness, and a brutal intellectual content. (Burgess, "The Book is Not for Reading," New York Times Book Review, 4.12.1966, p.74. Cited by Ellmann, p.23)

Secondly, Ellmann devotes a disproportionate amount of attention to book reviewing in newspapers and journals as against more formal and extended works of criticism. This is not an accident for the aims and style of the reviewer differ

from those of the critic and she has clearly selected examples which will strengthen her case. It remains necessary to consider British literary criticism, the critical context of much of the fiction to be examined later, in the light of Ellmann's American examples and to ask whether they present, albeit in a more subtle form, comparable attitudes. For British criticism exhibits, at times, a wary consciousness of the effects of sexual stereotyping on critical appreciation. Thus Frank Kermode suggests a problem the English reader may find with Colette.

Anglo-Saxon attitudes to Colette may be further contorted by our lack of ease with the French concept of the woman writer as homme de lettres. We think, maybe, of some burly suffragette. (Continuities, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968) p.154)

Kermode is clearly trying throughout his essay to be 'fair': the 'burly suffragette' is a joke more at the expense of the reader than the female author. For the most part he succeeds, possibly aided by the fact that the peculiarities of his subject's 'Frenchness' override those of her sex for the Anglo-Saxon reader. Nevertheless, he finds it necessary to comment further on Colette's sex in an outbreak of paradox.

... this homme de lettres is entirely female, and in her total freedom from grand male notions and theories is perhaps the first great woman writer, as distinct, of course, from woman writer. (p.155)

The distinction between the 'woman writer' and the 'woman writer' is unclear, as is the explanatory value of either, whilst the notion of the female author's "freedom from grand male notions" is subtly patronising. At the back of Kermode's mind, and occasionally breaking through to the surface, there appears to be a vague sense of a female literature characterised by 'sensual empiricism', detailed texture, and richness of style.

Kermode's combination of conscientious fair-mindedness with an ultimate inability to evaluate the work of a woman writer is shown even more clearly in his review of Monique Wittig's Les Guérillères, perhaps because he is dealing here with an overtly feminist author. The first part of his article exhibits a clear awareness of Wittig's project of challenging the myths, particularly that of the "powerful, magical penis", on which she sees male domination as being based. He acknowledges that the danger of inventing rival but equally mystifying myths is inherent in any such project and that the book attempts to place such myths in a critical light.

Nevertheless, their first steps seem to have been to invent rival myths by adaptation from the old male ones, and though these have to be rejected in order that the women should not become 'prisoners of their own ideology' they have a strong effect on the book. ... Some myths they recount, but choose to treat as unanswerable riddles; and all are regarded as of a past out of which they are moving. ("The Zero Answer," The Listener, 8.7.1971, pp.53-4)

A more stereotypic attitude to his subject still appears occasionally in his references to "occasional Chairwomanly poems" and the "ritual jeering" to which the penis is subjected.

The most significant weakness of Kermode's review lies, however, not in this vestigial hostility but in the division of the article into a largely neutral account of Wittig's political standpoint and an attempt to evaluate its stylistic idiosyncracies in isolation from this.

So some of the political dimensions of the book are clear enough - it is about revolutionary women's liberation, ... But that seems a very unsatisfactory way to describe the work as a whole. (p.54)

He is unable to relate politics to style in his discussion of the novel or to evaluate the validity of either in terms of the other. His concluding remarks are a virtual admission of the inadequacy of his critical position in the face of a novel which sets out to fracture the smooth surface of a dominant ideology.

It is very little use asking what this book is up to: it's up to itself.

So Les Guérillères is, as to shape and tone, unique and impenetrable: it asks for a curious kind of submissiveness in the reader, perhaps especially in the male. (p.54)

In general, it seems that the woman writer's sex elicits least comment when the critic is able to concentrate on some other category in which she may be placed. Thus Muriel Spark may be discussed in terms of her Catholicism rather than her sex (1). Bernard Bergonzi in The Situation of the Novel (Penguin Books, 1972) presents British novelists of both sexes in contrast with the themes and style of American fiction. It is, however, difficult to account for the absence in his discussion of 'The Ideology of Being English' of a writer so characteristically 'English' in his own terms as Margaret Drabble. Elsewhere, Bergonzi is somewhat less inhibited in his generalizations about female authors, declaring that

women novelists ... like to keep their focus narrow.
(New York Review of Books, 3.6.1965. Cited by Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own, (Virago, 1978) p.9)

The implications of such a remark for the criticism of women's writing will be considered later. Here we might suggest that Bergonzi's fault is a refusal to define his subject more closely. If he is referring solely to the genre of domestic fiction then he may be making a valid point, albeit rather simplistically: on the other hand, his comment can have little

relevance to, say, the science fiction of Ursula Le Guin. He has made the mistake of unquestioningly identifying the woman writer with the domestic.

A more extended attempt to categorise women writers is made by Anthony Burgess who gives them a whole chapter of The Novel Now. He seems to feel it necessary to justify this segregation, and his use of the terms yin and yang.

Whatever title one contrives for a chapter dealing solely with women novelists, it is bound to sound arch or gallant or indulgent or contemptuous. This is perhaps because, as most women novelists are quick to tell us, the notion that art can be categorized according to the sex of the artist is not really tenable: thus, a novelist enters a sphere of the imagination where he or she becomes he-she, being granted equal knowledge of the lives of both (or all) ... And yet we recognize two distinct, opposite and complementary impulses in the novel, which we can designate by the Chinese terms yin and yang - the feminine and masculine poles in a pre-sexual, or if we like, metaphoric sense. The yin is the yielding, the yang the forceful; the yin is concerned with the colour and texture of life, the yang with its dynamic; the yin prose style is careful, exquisite, full of qualified statements, while the yang is less scrupulous, coarser, more aggressive. Henry James was a yin novelist; Ernest Hemingway belonged to the brotherhood of the yang. In the greatest geniuses the two meet, are reconciled, fertilise each other.

But it is very rarely that any of our contemporary women novelists have much respect for the yang. Where they learn from men, it is usually yin writers: it is noteworthy that Henry James has been the greatest single influence on our senior women novelists. (The Novel Now, (Faber & Faber, 1971) p.121)

If the notion that literature is asexual is to be taken seriously, then why should Burgess bother to write a chapter devoted

solely to female authors? Neither do his subsequent remarks offer any evidence that he truly sees yin and yang in a pre-sexual sense or, indeed, as being of equal value in art. After repeatedly emphasising that "some of our women novelists" have "resisted the urge to be 'contemporary'" and "are content to follow old paths in technique", he describes a model of literary history as a kind of evolutionary struggle in which the 'female' yin qualities have little value.

Some of our traditionalists among women, like Storm Jameson, Lettice Cooper, V. Sackville-West ... have made our sweating male experimentalists look gauche and uncomfortable. And the same may be said of their successors - the remarkable Margaret Drabble, Sylvia Clayton, Angela Carter and others who do not mince words. But if the art of the novel is to progress, there will have to be sweat and discomfort. The yin cannot have all its own way. (p.132)

Burgess demonstrates the recurrent dilemma of women novelists, criticised for both conformity to and rejection of the feminine stereotype.

There has been a new wave, both in England and America, of women writers who strive to infuse the yin with some of the aggressiveness of the yang, with very disturbing results. We have seen how in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook there is a powerful expression of resentment of the male - not purely social (in the old suffragette manner) but sexual as well. Woman has a sexual need of man, but she objects to having this need; she wants to dominate him, ... Yin and Yang are tangled up together, and the literary expression of the female dilemma is often harsh, sensational, explosive. A minor, near popular, woman novelist who seems to blame male God for making woman what she is may be taken as exhibiting, in rather crude colours, this big contemporary theme on its simplest level. I refer to Edna O'Brien, who in a trilogy

beginning with The Country Girls and ending with Girls in Their Married Bliss, describes the adventures of two young Irishwomen in London - adventures almost exclusively amorous, though told with a mixture of Irish whimsy and astringent humour. Man is represented as a weak self-regarding creature, sexually demanding and near-impotent at the same time. Male readers are intended to wince, but they soon grow mutinous. (p.124)

Burgess here approaches a Maileresque fear of and consequent hostility towards women, but this type of response to what may be called contemporary neo-feminist literature is found elsewhere, if in a more gentlemanly form, in British criticism.

Doris Lessing's work, and in particular The Golden Notebook, contains another preoccupation which has become increasingly, and understandably, prominent among women writers during the last decade - the exploration of the ways in which modern society appears to offer freedom and equality to women, without any really worthwhile context in which these can operate - and which still, in point of fact, involve both injustice and violence to women's natures and talents. These themes have been the special concerns of novelists like Penelope Mortimer, Brigid Brophy, Edna O'Brien, Margaret Drabble and Antonia S. Byatt. All of them have dealt with various aspects of the modern woman's dilemma with insight, honesty, and an unsentimental realism. Novels like Margaret Drabble's The Millstone (1965) or The Waterfall (1969), for example, succeed without any false heroics in moving us, and convincing us of their closeness to authentic human experience; they release feelings in a way which makes many of the novels of Margaret Drabble's male contemporaries seem forced and faked.

There can be no question of the vital importance, for a society so confused in its sexual values and objectives, of this whole field of exploration. On the adverse side it could be said that a kind of tiredness and defeatism

sometimes enter into the work of this group of writers. Thus the coolness and detachment that distinguish Edna O'Brien's The Country Girls (1960) gradually faded through The Lonely Girl (1962) and Girls in Their Married Bliss (1964) into something which is not far removed from bitterness and stridency in Casualties of Peace (1966), ... The woman reviewer of Casualties of Peace who tartly pointed out: 'Being a woman is fairly normal' was perhaps drawing attention to the fact that there are times when these writers seem to be reverting to the more arid aspects of the 'sex war', becoming 'angry' in the negative, stultifying manner of so many of the 'Angry Young Men' of the 1950s. It could be argued too that the forces that make for division and injustice in the relationship between men and women are those, endemic to our society, that make for the fragmentation of human values in general - and that this is the fundamental concern of the modern novelist, whether male or female. (Gilbert Phelps, "The Novel Today," Boris Ford ed., The Modern Age (Penguin Books, 1973) pp.517-8)

Women writers, it appears, must know their place, but when they start to talk about it are told that their place, their experience, is no different from that of anybody else. The length of time it takes Phelps to make this point, the constant qualification and hedging of his argument, suggests that his approach is perhaps less gentlemanly than hypocritical. You know where you are with Norman Mailer.

Several points may be made at this stage concerning British criticism of women writers. Firstly, its attitude to masculinity and femininity tends to be less clear-cut than that of the American critics quoted by Mary Ellmann. It frequently replaces the notion of 'virility' with that of a moral and intellectual robustness which crosses the boundaries of sex, as in Phelps' comment on Joyce Cary.

There are signs in his work that he was influenced by

James Joyce (for example in his use of the interior monologue) and perhaps also by Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, but his vital attachment was to the most robust part of the English tradition, that represented by the great moral writers such as Joseph Conrad and George Eliot, and beyond them to the Evangelical and Protestant traditions, leading through Defoe back to Bunyan. (Phelps, loc. cit., p.507)

Secondly, the critic's methodology influences the degree of sexual stereotyping: critics such as David Lodge, Malcolm Bradbury and, to some extent, Frank Kermode, who approach the novel as a set of structural and stylistic devices appear less concerned with the gender of the novelist than writers like Burgess who present a more subjective, less disciplined response to literature or, like Phelps, attempt a general review of a large body of fiction. As we saw, Kermode even suggests an awareness of the operation of sexual bias.

Finally, critics appear to find it easier to deal with women writers of an earlier period than those of their own: Jane Austen and George Eliot are firmly established in the critical canon. This has, no doubt, much to do with the establishment of critical tradition and standards, but also reflects, as the remarks of Burgess and Phelps suggest, a response to the subject-matter of writers like Lessing, Drabble and Weldon, to the threatening issues of female aggression and sexuality.

If we turn now to reviews of women's fiction, particularly of this contemporary writing, we shall find these conclusions apply here also. In its less formal structure, reviewing allows both the extended extra-literary diatribe and the casual but sweeping remark, without demanding their justification on the level of argument or critical demonstration. Thus, to take an earlier example, a reviewer of Virginia Woolf expresses clearly his or her sense of the distinctions between male and female writers.

... in (Charlotte Mew's) work or Emily Dickinson's, as in the higher and more accomplished art of Christina Rossetti or Alice Meynell, a certain concentrated quality reappears. So it does in Katherine Mansfield's stories, where at times one feels the point is almost too exactly made. Perhaps such concentration in little is women's equivalent to masculine grasp. 'Grasp' seems to imply both a wider surface and a trenchancy not so much of emotion as of brain. (Unsigned review of A Room of One's Own, Times Literary Supplement, 31.10.1929, p.867)

Women are emotional, men intellectual; women respond to detail, men grasp the broad sweep of events.

Reviewers also feel obliged to evaluate the subject-matter of women's writing in accordance with standards of social significance:

Margaret Drabble's work has been rightly praised, here as elsewhere, for its honesty and elegance. But it has also been disappointing to see such rational talent so narrowly confined. History as well as temperament apparently summoned Miss Drabble to the role of a contemporary George Eliot: to write about work, society, morality in the widest sense; to indulge an 'unfeminine' intelligence in a world where women were at last allowed to be as critical as men. Instead she hugged the domestic shore with a graduate's outboard motor and wrote about the 'new woman's' uneasy inheritance of traditional charts. (Unsigned review of The Waterfall, TLS, 22.5.1969, p.549)

As we shall see later, Margaret Drabble does indeed acknowledge a debt to George Eliot, and also writes about "work, society, morality." Perhaps what the reviewer objects to is that she chooses to do so in terms of women's experience of these grand abstractions, an experience which may appear alien and trivial in the terms of a set of values based on a different, 'male' experience. The suggestion is that she could have

written 'like a man' but, despite her obvious intelligence, stubbornly refused to do so.

Drabble may be taken to represent a kind of neo-feminist writing: full of perceptions into the situation of women, assuming a certain social and sexual freedom and quite capable of irony or aggression at the expense of the male, without overtly formulating these elements in terms of a more politicized feminism. Self-proclaimed feminist authors receive even harsher treatment from the reviewers who frequently refuse to see their work in terms of art at all - an attitude represented by Angela Neustatter whose review of works by Emma Tennant, Sara Maitland and Michèle Roberts is entitled "Feminists turn to fiction - and literature?". Whilst any piece of fiction with a clear political or social motivation is open to the criticism that it is a work of propaganda not art, it is significant that Anthony Burgess, for example, finds the issue of race in southern Africa a legitimate topic in Lessing's fiction but considers that The Golden Notebook, with its feminist theme, shows

... too little digestion of deeply held beliefs into something acceptable as a work of art. The crusader's best medium is the manifesto, which is not quite the same thing as a novel. (The Novel Now, p.102)

There exists some curious double thinking in much reviewing of women's, and particularly feminist, fiction, which is not confined to male reviewers. Thus it seems possible both to treat women's writing as a separate category and to attack any specialisation, defined as narrowness of range, in their material. It is striking also that any extension of the literary presentation of women's experience in terms of its social and political conditions is seen as a narrowing of sympathy, what Anne Redmon describes as a "coven mentality". Redmon, in her review of Michèle Roberts' A Piece of the Night, claims, like Burgess, that great literature is asexual.

Emma Woodhouse, for all her charm and intelligence, was arrogant. I think that if Jane Austen had made her character a man she would have thought him arrogant too; the purgation of this flaw would have been necessary to the novel regardless of the protagonist's sex. Anna Karenina had a soul whose enlargement depended on an apparent diminishment: fidelity to the dull bureaucrat Karenin. Madame Bovary's monstrous pride, greater than her great talent, wreaked destruction.

Perhaps the writers of classics have found women's passivity, their circumscribed lives a good proving ground, a metaphor for the human spirit at large. Without the distraction of the ambitious activity a male character might present, a woman always had a kind of freedom to be; to develop simply in the moral sphere. But, whatever you can say about the heroines and villainesses of first-class literature, they are distinct people endowed with a human dignity which consists of their ability to discern right from wrong.

Women's Lib, in its coven mentality, would have us believe that Anna and the Emmas are victims of sexual politics, not perpetrators of their own dire devices. Like the witches in 'Macbeth', feminists comfort us with the half truths of determinism; while actually they diabolically conspire at our ruin. ("Do novels need a sex-change?", Sunday Times, 5.11.1978)

The reviewer claims that the novel deserves this extended comment precisely because of the quality of its writing but her article contains hardly any direct reference to, or quotation from the book itself - indeed since she twice misquotes its title it is doubtful whether she even considered it necessary to read it.

This example represents an extreme of misogynist criticism, and demonstrates both that the more overtly feminist the novel under review, the less closely the reviewer concentrates on the text itself, and that such criticism is by no means confined

to male reviewers.

We may now suggest some of the ways in which the attitudes of critics and reviewers to women's writing which we have outlined, affect their ability to illuminate and analyse the work before them. For whilst it is clear that British critics are, generally if not at all times, somewhat more subtle and less phallogentric in their approach to women authors than their American counterparts as dissected by Mary Ellmann, our own brief examination suggests that a sense of the author's gender and of what are considered to be related characteristics of mind, style and subject-matter, is not wholly absent. These critics also demonstrate the problems inherent in the terms 'female' and 'feminine', frequently using them in a confused and confusing way. For the categories indicate both biological and social concepts which may slide into critical definitions. If the terms are to have any value in illuminating rather than obscuring the nature of women's writing they must be used with much greater care.

Burgess does not escape this confusion by introducing the terms yin and yang, since he clearly links these closely with the author's actual sex. Thus he produces puzzling statements of this sort.

Where (women novelists) learn from men, it is usually yin writers: it is noteworthy that Henry James has been the greatest single influence on our senior women novelists. Take Elizabeth Bowen, for instance, passages from some of whose books could be inserted in novels by James without anybody's remarking on the intrusion of a feminine voice. (The Novel Now, pp.121-2)

Is 'yin' to be equated with 'female' - if so how can James be a yin writer? - or with 'feminine' - if so why should we remark on the intrusion of a 'feminine' voice in the work of a (male) yin writer? If it has no relation to either of these terms why not state the distinction between yin and yang

more clearly in terms of passivity/aggression, emotion/intellect, or however it is seen, rather than confusing the critical terminology with vaguely defined socio-biological concepts? As we shall see later, this failure to define terms plagues feminist critics equally and occurs noticeably in the polemical writing of Virginia Woolf. Clearly a critical methodology demands a more careful use of the concepts 'female' and 'feminine' although our social as well as our critical thinking may make this difficult.

A further problem of the criticism considered here lies in its judgements of appropriate subject-matter for fiction. As we have seen, women authors are assumed to have a 'narrow' range- Margaret Drabble, for example, is accused of hugging "the domestic shore". What seems to be at issue, however, is not the author's actual breadth of material so much as her chosen focus - the fact that female writers, understandably, frequently describe women's experience and the particular social, psychological and economic issues which dominate it. The problem appears to be one of puzzled ignorance on the part of the critic to whom this experience seems alien and often trivial. This is linked to the assumption that a woman writer's audience is itself largely female whilst that of the critic is predominantly male and that the two have distinct standards of judgement, an idea neatly summarised by Victoria Glendinning in her review of Fay Weldon's Remember Me. As a female reviewer she suggests she is caught between different criteria and sets of values in approaching women's writing in the domestic genre.

Oh I am the reviewer, and I can see that this is an intelligent but not a first-class novel: and oh I am a woman novel reader, and for all my critical remarks I read about these people and their stereotyped conflicts and their sex-lives and their lifestyles with an avidity way beyond the call of duty. ("The Muswell Hill Mob", TLS, 24.9.1976, p.1199)

The assumption concerning the readership of writers like

Drabble and Weldon, if not of others like Iris Murdoch and Ivy Compton-Burnett, may well be true; that concerning the audience of criticism is more doubtful. But the difference in values, experiences and attitudes which this objection signifies suggests that many critics, and not only male ones, may encounter severe limitations in their understanding of women's writing, particularly, it seems, in the domestic genre. Once again, the critic is on surer ground in discussing the more formal aspects of the fiction, but on reaching the point where form and meaning become inseparable, frequently flounders in an alien sea.

If we turn now to a different branch of literary studies, the sociology of literature, we find that these problems of understanding, together with the common sense of women's fiction as a specific category, are nowhere accounted for or even discussed. In books such as Malcolm Bradbury's The Social Context of Modern English Literature (Blackwell, 1971) or Laurenson and Swingwood's The Sociology of Literature (Paladin, 1972), the novelists' readership is discussed in terms of class or, sometimes, race, but never of gender; working-class or black experience are considered relevant to the study of the author's social background, gender and issues affecting women are not. For a factor which appears so significant to writers and critics alike, sex and the different social experiences of the sexes is strangely absent from such studies. Indeed, women appear to have fared rather better in the years before the phrase and discipline, sociology of literature, emerged - in Woolf's A Room of One's Own and Margaret Lawrence's We Write as Women, for example.

This state of affairs has been modified considerably, in the past decade or two, by the growth of a self-proclaimed feminist criticism and the development of women's studies seen as either an alternative or a supplement to more established approaches not only in literary criticism but also in a range of other disciplines. It is to this feminist criticism that we shall now turn to see what it entails and whether it provides

us with a critical methodology more adequate to the study of women's writing.

(1) For example by David Lodge in "The Uses and Abuses of Omniscience: Method and Meaning in Muriel Spark's The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie", The Novelist at the Crossroads, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp.119-144.

CHAPTER 2

FEMINISM AND CRITICISM

The first problem we encounter in attempting to evaluate feminist criticism is that of defining its particular approach to literature. The fact that feminist critics themselves are frequently articulate about the supposedly radical nature of their work is not necessarily helpful to us since their own definitions are often tautological.

The feminist criticism that began emerging in the 1970s attempted to avoid the pitfalls of works like the ones outlined above by writing out of a perspective clearly defined as 'feminist'. Feminist critics write with a consciousness that reflects involvement in one of the various groups in the current movement. (Ann Kaplan, "Feminist criticism: a survey with analysis of methodological problems", University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies, vol.1, no.1, p153)

Kaplan's definition becomes slightly more illuminating in the context of the pre-feminist works she criticises: she finds fault with their failure to come to terms with the ideological and social status of women and their belief that criticism can and must be 'objective' and apolitical. Nevertheless, she does leave us with the feeling that, instead of defining feminist criticism, we now have to define the terms feminist and feminism - an even more daunting task.

This shift is, in part, understandable, since it would be hard to argue with her view that the development of feminist criticism as a body of work is closely related to the nature and growth of the modern feminist movement.

It is immediately obvious that the women's movement today...unlike that in the past has gone beyond the old demands for equal rights and legal reforms and has entered forcefully into the cultural realm. ...

It is in this context that women are beginning to write feminist criticism. Feminist criticism is part of a general interest in researching subject areas

that have mainly been considered hitherto from a male point of view. (p.150)

Feminist critics in a polemical mood often argue that criticism's claim to objectivity - political, social and sexual - is a myth which simultaneously obscures and reinforces the bias of critics whose work conforms to a dominant ideology. Thus they speak of

... the sterile conviction that criticism is a pure and disinterested art, uncontaminated by real life." (Arlyn Diamond, "Practicing Feminist Literary Criticism", Women's Studies International Quarterly, 1978, vol.1, p.150)

Their terms resemble those of marxist criticism, and like marxist critics, they offer the opportunity to explore and rediscover the relationships between literature and social life. Often, however, this is achieved at the cost of distancing the critical work from actual texts no less than the anti-feminist criticism we have already considered. The bias may be different but the critic still fails to come to grips with the work itself. In the worst feminist criticism new stereotypes and pre-determined concepts of 'female culture' and 'feminist consciousness' together with a crusading tone hinder the perception and analysis of the literary texts.

People - both women and men - are beginning to see literature in new perspectives which have been opened up by the Women's Liberation Movement. The writings these people offer enlighten our understanding by helping us distance ourselves from the literature; prevent us falling into the traps of the implications and prescriptions for behaviour, for the limiting self-images and aspirations for women embodied in much of the literature that we have been taught is important. ...

This collection of essays deals with the new forms of

analysis growing out of the new consciousness. ...
 These essays illustrate the beginnings of new directions for women in reading and understanding fiction, and therefore new directions and depths for women in their personal paths. These essays lead us into fiction and then back again into reality, into ourselves and our own lives. (Susan Koppelman Cornillon ed., Images of Women in Fiction (Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972) pp.ix-x)

Even allowing for the fact that any new critical approach will inevitably devote as much, if not more, time to polemic and the outlining of its theory as to the practice of criticism, we find that the bulk of feminist criticism to date fails to engage in any useful way with actual texts, frequently offering an account of the critic's own position rather than any illumination of works of literature. Pursuing the analogy with marxist criticism, it appears that much of what describes itself as feminist criticism corresponds to the simplistic and dogmatic approach of say, Ralph Fox's The Novel and the People and not to the quality and subtlety of, for example, Benjamin's writing which, even at its most theoretical, can constantly be related both to critical and literary practice.

It is perhaps important to note at this stage that one of the most striking exceptions to this generalisation also reminds us that feminist criticism does not concern itself solely with the work of female writers. Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (Virago, 1977) offers readings of Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Jean Genet which involve both a close attention to and a radical re-assessment of their work. In one sense Millett has made her task easier by selecting authors with particularly extreme attitudes to women and sexuality. It might be interesting to see a feminist criticism emerge which is capable of handling writers such as Dickens or L.P. Hartley. Nevertheless, her achievement is considerable. Other feminist critics have stressed the importance of resisting their own 'ghettoization' and result-

ing loss of critical, and political, impact.

... in looking back over reviews of books like Literary Women by Ellen Moers and The Female Imagination by Patricia Spacks and A Feast of Words by Cynthia Wolff I find evidence of a subtle ghettoizing and constricting of feminist criticism. All have been praised in terms that indicate a genuine interest in women's writing but the praise seems to me generally to ignore their most significant virtues and possibilities. It is clear that works which are perceptive studies of particular women writers are more acceptable than works which deal with male writers. ... The rage which greeted Kate Millett lies in wait, I suspect, for Judith Fetterley's book on American literature by men. (Diamond, loc. cit. p.105)

Nevertheless, our aim here is to consider the potential which feminist criticism may have for offering a fuller understanding of modern women's writing than the 'conventional' criticism examined earlier. It is clear that if a new critical approach is to overcome some of the weaknesses of conventional criticism in relation to women's fiction it should succeed in at least some of the following areas.

It must attempt to clarify rather than obscure terms such as 'female' and 'feminine' by maintaining an awareness of their ideological usage, and refuse to allow them to slide into undefined critical concepts.

It must justify 'female' experience as a valid subject for fiction and explore both the presentation of that experience and any related formal and stylistic practices.

Texts should, where this contributes to their analysis, be set within a social and political context in such a way as to create an awareness of gender as a factor of social experience and literary production.

Feminist criticism cannot refuse to attend closely to particular texts or to appropriate as necessary techniques and methods from other forms of criticism.

These points constitute not so much a definition of feminist criticism as a set of aims in the light of which we can evaluate existing work in this area. One of the most damaging accusations which feminists direct at criticism is that it frequently tends in its analysis and evaluation to isolate women's writing without either questioning the stereotypes on which its own judgements are based or exploring the specific nature of women's experience and that of the female writer. Unfortunately, feminist criticism itself often falls into the same practice in positing a 'female culture' in which many an archetypal 'lady novelist' would be at home.

Female culture is the art of the everyday, the arrangement of personal beauty, of home, or environment, and of relationships. It is not the stratified dictates of mass culture. It is anti-mass, anti-the mediocre, the mundane. (Women: A Journal of Liberation, vol.3, no.2, p.29)

The ghetto remains unchanged but is transformed by an ideological sleight of hand into a desirable neighbourhood. The issue of if women live there, and if so why, is avoided and the resulting image of women's writing is what one might expect to encounter in Virginia Woolf's college for women which cultivates the domestic and aristocratic arts.

At the level of fairly extensive and general studies of women's writing, an approach based on the methods and structure of literary history, but supplemented by a particular attention to the circumstances of women writers, proves far more illuminating. Thus, for example, Elaine Showalter distinguishes usefully between those female authors who are themselves defined by the terms of their experience, of 'femininity', and those who consciously articulate and define that experience.

There is clearly a difference between books that happen to have been written by women, and a 'female literature' ... which purposefully and collectively concerns itself with the articulation of women's experience, and which guides itself 'by its own impulses' to autonomous self-expression. As novelists women have always been self-conscious, but only rarely self-defining. (Showalter, (1978) p.4)

Showalter analyses the reasons why, as she puts it,

discussion of women writers has been so inaccurate, fragmented and partisan. (p.6)

Her book is thus both a history of women writers since the Brontës, and a survey of critical attitudes. She sets out to trace a 'female tradition' not as a romantic or psychological abstraction but as

the product of a delicate network of influences operating in time (which) must be analysed as it expresses itself, in language and in a fixed arrangement of words on a page. (p.12)

Rather than abstracting women's literature from its artistic, historical and social context, she insists, we must see it within the overlapping influences of tradition and social experience.

It can however be argued that women themselves have constituted a sub-culture within the framework of a larger society, and have been unified by values, conventions, experiences and behaviors impinging on each individual. It is important to see the female literary tradition in these broad terms, in relation to the wider evolution of women's self-awareness and to the ways in which any minority group finds its direction of self-expression relative to a dominant society. (p.11)

'Female' here is clearly defined in terms of a set of circumstances and influences, rather than as some innate and absolute property. We shall see, in a later chapter, how Virginia Woolf, fifty years earlier, frequently discussed women's writing in similar terms.

Woolf, however, was not always so clear in her usage of 'female' and 'feminine', particularly in relation to the notion of androgyny and her tendency to suggest some kind of 'female culture'. One suggestion of Woolf's has, nevertheless, offered later feminist critics an approach to women's writing in terms of rather more precise matters of style. This is her concept of the 'women's sentence'. Josephine Donovan points out the assumptions on which this concept is based.

... one, that there is a 'female mind,' and, two, that there is or ought to be a feminine style appropriate to that mind. (Cornillon ed., (1972) p.341)

Thus although the idea of a female style would appear to allow somewhat more detailed analysis, it in fact rests on the same kind of assumptions as does that of a 'female culture'. Donovan's own discussion raises once again the stereotypes of the sensitivity and psychological complexity of women's fiction.

If one accepts that this 'tropismic' level of awareness - that is, the awareness of the underlife or the inner mind of the world's reality - is one which women and/or women novelists have to a high degree then it is perhaps Virginia Woolf who has fashioned the most effective sentence style to the purposes of transmitting this reality, while not in the process losing the sense of aesthetic control necessary to great art. She is able to do this because the psychic rhythms conveyed in her style are her own. (p.352)

The abstractions of this passage - "'tropismic' level of awareness," "psychic rhythms" and so on - betray its distance

from the text. Furthermore this approach runs the risk of setting up a standard of 'feminine' style and form of perception against which any female writer will be judged: Woolf succeeded where George Eliot failed, and so on. The fact that they were striving to achieve different ends by different means becomes obscured by the notion of a 'female' sentence or style, based on an abstraction of 'female' psychology.

Donovan does, however, also suggest a more interesting approach to women's writing based on the possibility of a relationship between social authority and the status of the narrator or omniscience of the narrative voice within fiction. This idea enables us, for example, to see Ivy Compton-Burnett, despite her refusal to write a 'feminine' sentence in the manner of Colette, as also rejecting the authority of the conventional narrative voice whilst at the same time being able to expose the inner life and unspoken motivation of her characters. Donovan quotes Nathalie Sarraute who suggests a connection between the work of Compton-Burnett and the aims of the French nouveau roman. Perhaps this connection emphasises the fact that women writers, lacking the social authority of their male counterparts, have been alienated from the authoritative tone and thus enjoyed a greater freedom to experiment with the nature of the narrative voice. As well as Compton-Burnett and Virginia Woolf, we can see contemporary writers such as Fay Weldon in this light.

Such considerations demand a careful re-examination of women writers' work. Feminist criticism, unfortunately, has tended at times to fall into the prescriptive and hortatory mode familiar from the crudest forms of political criticism. Thus one American critic concludes her article on women writers with a programme for future authors.

Three things a really brave and revolutionary woman novelist might consider exploring: First, whether the destruction of an instinctive giving and loving self is really necessary. ... Second, whether the destruction of

that self, if it is necessary, is really no more than the same sacrifice any human being makes once he or she goes after success in the real world, and whether, therefore, we should stop crying over its loss. Third, how might woman learn to be nourished by her own success? What we need are woman writers who will pick up where Glasgow, Wharton, Cather and Chopin leave off, and where later woman novelists fear to tread, or tread, like so many of my students, only in olive drab, painter's pants, heavy boots and the juttied jaw they assume necessary in a foreign and dangerous land. Writers who will give us images of women with the superhuman (perhaps) strength to be passionate without apology; instinctive or impulsive - whatever that may mean - without either pain or fear; intentional and successful without shame or sense of loss. (Susan R. Horton, "Desire and depression in women's fiction: the problematics and economics of desire", Modern Fiction Studies, 1978, p.195)

The kind of fiction Horton suggests, as far as one can interpret her mixture of abstraction and imagery, might well be radical and interesting; unfortunately, like criticism based on stereotypes of the 'feminine' or of 'female culture', her approach threatens to set up a norm against which the work of women authors will be judged.

A more complex understanding of the ways in which social ideology and situation may influence women writers and are embodied in their work frequently emerges from the critical and theoretical writing of contemporary feminist novelists themselves. Joanna Russ, for example, in "What can a heroine do? or why women can't write" (Cornillon, ed., 1972) discusses the relation of female novelists to the dominant 'myths' and plot structures of fiction. She suggests, through specific references, the nature of the relationship between style and structure and the social consciousness and self-image of women writers.

Not every female author is equipped with the kind of

command of language that allows (or insists upon) lyric construction; nor does every woman writer want to employ this mode. The alternative is to take as one's model (and structural principle) not male myth but the structure of one's own experience. So we have George Eliot's (or Doris Lessing's) 'lack of structure', the obviously tacked-on ending of Mill on the Floss; we have Brontë's spasmodic, jerky world of Villette, with a structure modelled on the heroine's (and probably author's) real situation. How to write a novel about a person to whom nothing happens? A person to whom nothing but a love story is supposed to happen? A person inhabiting a world in which the only reality is frustration or endurance - or these plus an unbearably mystifying confusion? The movement of Villette is not the perfect curve of Jane Eyre (a classic version of the female Love Story) - it is a blocked jabbing, a constant thwarting; it is the protagonist's constantly frustrated will to action, and her alternately losing and regaining her perception of her own situation. (pp.13-14)

Another novelist, Michèle Roberts, suggests the potential of art as a radical political tool in terms similar to those of a Marxist criticism, but relates this concept more closely to women and women writers.

Central to both theories (Marxist and Freudian thought) is the notion of conflict. Both argue that history, in terms of economic and political (Marx) and social and personal (Freud) development, is founded in and moves forward through conflict. Yet ours is a society which prefers to smooth over any suggestion of division, whether it be the division between the creators of capital and the owners of it, or the division between those who care for children and those who make the laws about maternity benefits and the employment of women. Crucial to bourgeois ideology at the moment, are notions which deny conflict and assert instead that the nation is basically one big happy family all pulling together in order to

gain benefits for all. ... These kinds of beliefs are expressed as rationality and common-sense, and it is only when they are challenged that those who make the challenge are accused of being ideological.

Certainly art can serve to deny conflict, and frequently does. The novels of Barbara Cartland, for example, are bad art because they describe a non-fissured and harmonious world in which everyone knows their place and all problems are resolved by the kiss on the last page. However, serious art, because it has traditionally been classified as not-theory, as not-science, as not-true, has had a certain freedom, even if it has been at the same time despised and devalued. ... The most exciting art being produced at the moment is by those groups who feel that the tensions and conflicts they carry - women, blacks, the working-class - are intolerable. These constraints sometimes stifle art, but often impel it;... ("Writing and (feminist) politics", Women's Studies International Quarterly, 1979, vol.2, p.216)

Roberts argues that women have a particularly privileged status within this concept of art.

The status of art is rather like that of women. Having been labelled as not-men, as not-actors, as not-rational, we have been both able and forced to explore being emotional, intuitive, loving and supportive. In a culture dominated by the need to make profits, to wring every last ounce of resources from the environment, to control people in order to do this, and to kill for these ends if necessary, the qualities and activities assigned to us, though crucial (the provision of food and nurture), are simultaneously despised. ...women and art can be feared for the same reasons, because both are seen to challenge common-sense notions of the way the world appears to be naturally ordered, and the power that rationality is supposed to have to order the world and make it a safe place to live in - safe and harmonious for those in power. (pp.216-217)

She also indicates an awareness - often lacking in feminist critics - of the problems and dangers of political writing.

If we are honest when we write (however we choose to transform our experience) our art is likely to be called bad, both because it speaks with a gendered voice as opposed to the illusion of universality and sexlessness necessary to bourgeois male-dominated art, and also because, quite simply, it speaks about things that are felt as unpleasant and frightening. We too, as feminists, as writers and readers, can desire to avoid unpleasant and painful recognitions, and to paint portraits of strong, happy, battling feminist heroines (Barbara Cartland in new clothes) who experience no conflicts or doubts whatsoever. It's temptingly easy to replace one icon with another, rather than admit that just as contradictory images of us exist in the culture generally so they also exist in our own unconscious. It is the exploration of these that matters, not the denial of them. (p.217)

Roberts here, like Showalter, does not impose specific categories of style or subject-matter on women authors but suggests that they may share certain structures of experience which influence their work. She argues neither that gender is irrelevant to literature, nor that women writers articulate a pre-determined 'female culture', but attempts to account for features of women's writing in wider social terms, rather than setting them up as a standard of evaluation, either positive or negative. Her article also suggests that women's writing may well be socially subversive without entering into the field of politics as conventionally defined, by the very fact of the authors' gender and resulting social status and experience.

This is a concept frequently seized on by feminist critics who have attempted a re-assessment of writers like the Brontës, Kate Chopin and Virginia Woolf in these terms. Maurianne Adams, for example, writes of Jane Eyre:

Rereading Jane Eyre I am led inevitably to feminist issues, by which I mean the status and economics of female dependence in marriage, the limited options available to Jane as an outlet for her education and energies, her need to love and be loved, to be of service and to be needed. These aspirations, the ambivalence expressed by the narrator towards them, and the conflicts among them, are all issues raised by the novel itself and not superimposed upon it by an ideological or indoctrinaire reader. (A. Diamond and L. R. Edwards eds., The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism, (U. of Mass. Press, 1976) p.140)

Adams points out that this approach to the novel involves a shift in critical focus but also suggests a complete division in the abilities and interests of male and female critics with respect to women's writing.

Every time we rethink and reassimilate Jane Eyre, we bring to it a new orientation. For women critics, this orientation is likely not to focus particular attention upon the dilemmas of the male, to whom male critics have already shown themselves understandably sensitive, but rather to Jane herself and her particular circumstances. (p.141)

Such rereadings may increase our understanding of the works in question, but, as the example of Virginia Woolf suggests, may be reductive and unhelpful. The attempt to demonstrate the political and social subversiveness of Woolf's fiction has become something of an obsession with feminist critics. However, essays such as Lee R. Edwards' "War and Roses: the Politics of Mrs Dalloway" (Diamond and Edwards, (1976), pp.160-177) and Berenice A. Carroll's "'To crush him in our own country:' the political thought of Virginia Woolf" tend to run aground on the confusions in Woolf's thinking between aristocratic and feminist values. On the other hand, her

perception of a relationship between patriarchy and political oppression provides support for a feminist polemic which fails to do justice to the complexities of her thought and style, as the following catalogue of abstractions suggests.

Virginia Woolf recognized in the society around her a political and social system geared to the destruction and perversion of human life and creativity. The pillars of this system were patriarchy, property, possessiveness, dominance and individual distinction. Like many radical feminists today, she saw patriarchy as the central pillar, where domestic politics, institutional politics and state politics converge. ... (Carroll, Feminist Studies, February 1978, vol.4, no.1, p116)

For Woolf's writing involves contradictions between radicalism and traditionalism, which illuminate the tensions women experience, and women writers articulate, between conformity and the desire for self-definition. We shall examine her work more fully in this light later. Here it should be emphasised that feminist critics have frequently evaded or oversimplified the issues involved, sacrificing understanding to polemic.

Feminist criticism, like the feminist voice in other disciplines, has opened up the female experience to discussion and challenged the equation between the female and the trivial, the irrational, the over-emotional. For as we saw in the previous chapter, critics operating within traditional terms of reference are often hostile towards or bemused by writers as dissimilar as Margaret Drabble and Colette. Feminist critics frequently veer in the opposite direction and although their very different perceptions and judgements may at times be valuable and illuminating, as we have seen, their approach does not always escape from the definitions and stereotypes they seek to challenge.

We must also ask whether feminist criticism succeeds in correcting the imbalance of the sociology of literature by

providing any valid theory of women and literature. Some of our previous examples - the essays by Russ and Roberts and Elaine Showalter's book - contribute to this task, and Roberts' article suggests a more specific approach to the subject - that of marxist-feminism. Marxist-feminists argue that women's position within society is a function of their role, and that of the family, in a capitalist economic system. Whilst Virginia Woolf perceived a connection between the status of women and the overall power structures of society, the marxist-feminists describe this connection more precisely or, one might say, more narrowly, in terms of a particular economic system. Their presence within the British Women's Liberation Movement is well marked, as witnessed by, for example, the journal m/f and Juliet Mitchell's Women's Estate. However, for an outline of the relevance of this position to a theory of women's position within culture we shall turn once again to an American example. Lillian Robinson and Lise Vogel ("Modernism and History", Cornillon ed., op. cit., pp.278-307) suggest two areas of concern for a marxist-feminist criticism. Firstly, they attempt to show

that attitudes to women in bourgeois literature reflect capitalist ruling class ideology in the same way as do attitudes to the working class and to blacks. (Ann Kaplan, loc. cit., p.156)

Secondly, they argue that the consciousness, and thus the cultural production, of the woman artist or writer is affected by her exclusion from the dominant social group in a way analogous to that of the black or working-class artist.

To be conscious of race, class or sex with respect to high culture is to be conscious, first of all, of exclusion. The black, the woman, the worker and peasant are all forced to acknowledge the existence of a mainstream, self-proclaimed as the whole of 'culture', in which they do not or do not fully participate. (Robinson and Vogel, loc. cit., p.281)

The problem for cultural theory is to determine the significance of the exclusions based on class, race, and sex and the critique to which they give rise. (p.286)

For women writers, the two areas interlock: as Joanna Russ pointed out, the dominant images and plot structures of literature form part of the social and ideological environment of the writer. The faults of Robinson and Vogel's article lie in its tendency to an oversimplification and distortion of the type of criticism they attack. Not only do they reject what they describe as Modernist criticism with its insistence on the objectivity of the critical discipline and the transcendent status of art, but also the sociologically orientated response to this critical school.

In recent years, there have been a number of attempts to resituate the work of art in its history. These efforts have been based on assumptions about the relevance of subject matter to form and of social or psychological environment to cultural production. They have pleaded with critics to add 'contextual' considerations to their formal analyses and apply 'flexible approaches' when investigating the art of the past. In reality, they have all been extensions of the maxim that circumstances alter cases; nonetheless, they have implicitly accepted certain social and material circumstances as the norm, others as exceptions. Despite its greater attention to the 'history of ideas', such criticism still denies certain concrete properties to the work of art or its point of view. Its underlying assumptions are that if art has a race, it is white; if it has a sex, it is male; if it has a class, it is the ruling one. But these matters are almost never part of the 'social context' we are urged to examine. (p.279)

Criticism of this type with which we are familiar, the work of Raymond Williams or Jeremy Hawthorn, for example, certainly does not deny that literature has a class or a race. As we saw

earlier, it may not encompass the issue of gender as an aspect of the sociology of literature, but Robinson and Vogel do their cause no good by assuming that a socially orientated or contextual criticism is the invention of marxist-feminism.

Furthermore, their polemical approach encourages a seizing upon the most explicit expression of ideas in art and literature and leaves little room for any attempt to unravel meanings created through patterns of imagery, manipulation of plot or the use of parody and irony; neither does their method deal adequately with ideological conflict within the author. Such elements as these may be of particular importance in the work of women, or other non-dominant groups, where ideas and values unacceptable to the main social ethos, or even to the writer's own conscious mind, may have to be articulated through these more covert means.

Whilst a criticism of women's writing must incorporate an attempt to understand the factors acting upon the consciousness of women writers, rather than a mere acceptance of the stereotypes of the feminine and the female, it must also be capable of adapting itself to the individuality of the writer and the work through a readiness to analyse the internal complexities of the text itself. In Hawthorn's terms, it must acknowledge both the 'relationships' and the 'identity' of the work.(1) The failure to incorporate both these approaches seems, at present, the greatest weakness of the bulk of feminist criticism. Works which succeed in doing this, such as Showalter's A Literature of Their Own, demonstrate the potential of a more flexible feminist criticism. No doubt, critics who regard their approach as a feminist one are concerned not to weaken their stand so long as they are under attack from the critical establishment, but it would seem that a methodology which allows the political and social relationships of literature to emerge from a subtle analysis of texts might lead to a more convincing re-assessment of both male and female writers and help to establish the feminist awareness of these critics alongside other proven critical tools.

We may conclude that feminism can provide a valuable corrective to a form of criticism that either ignores or distorts the place of gender in literature, but is frequently so obsessed with this role that it fails to exploit the essential tools of analysis which a more traditional criticism offers. Feminist criticism needs to pass through the phase of strident polemicism to that of a clear-sighted pragmatism. If its aim is to reshape our understanding of women's experience and women's writing, and perhaps ultimately to alter that experience itself, then it needs to distinguish between methodologies which are inherently anti-feminist and those which can be appropriated to its own purposes.

The next chapter will attempt to clarify this distinction and to examine the relationships, both actual and potential, between feminist thinking and the assumptions and methods of contemporary structuralist thought and practice. It will then be possible to offer some more precise definition of the categories 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist', to discuss their usage in criticism and suggest their relevance in analysing the literary works selected for examination in the second part of this study.

(1) Jeremy Hawthorn, Identity and Relationship (Lawrence and Wishart, 1973). Hawthorn refers to the 'identity' of the literary work as the elements of its own specific style and structure - those features which both distinguish it from other works and distinguish it as a literary work from other human artefacts and areas of social existence. By 'relationship' he indicates the various forms of connection between the literary work and these other areas. He argues that any adequate literary criticism involves consideration of both aspects of the work and that the term 'identity' avoids the notion of artistic separatism implied by the alternative term autonomy.

CHAPTER 3

STRUCTURALISM AND THE APPROACH TO WOMEN'S WRITING

In the last chapter it was argued that a feminist criticism, like any other radical criticism, has to appropriate and adapt relevant methods and techniques from what we call popular criticism. For any literary criticism must engage with the text before it as well as with its own ideology. As we have seen, feminist criticism may be attacked for failing in the first of these tasks, popular criticism in the latter. In this chapter we shall be considering an important critical movement, structuralism, in the light of these arguments and in the context of our search for a valid critical approach to women's writing. This involves an examination of structuralist criticism's underlying assumptions and its rules of procedure, together with an attempt to assess its value to this area of criticism. This is an important task because of the influence of structuralist theory and method on feminist thought in this country. The effects for feminist criticism are, as yet, less clear although an article such as Cora Kaplan's "Language and Gender" is based on a Lacanian perspective on the relationship between the acquisition of language and of sexual identity.

Structuralism may be said to have attempted a more clearly articulated codification of the rules of criticism than more traditional approaches. However it remains, itself, notoriously difficult to define. As Jonathan Culler points out,

The common features of everything that has been called 'structuralist' are extremely common indeed. (Structuralist Poetics, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p.3)

In order to prevent its becoming so comprehensive as to disappear completely as a useful term, Culler emphasises the foundations of structuralism in linguistics. He quotes Roland Barthes' own definition.

Barthes himself once defined structuralism 'in its most specialized and consequently most relevant version' as a mode of analysis of cultural artefacts which originates

in the methods of contemporary linguistics. (p.3)

This linguistic basis provides the link between structuralism and semiology, indeed Culler claims the two are identical. For the school of linguistics from which structuralism derives emphasises that meanings are not the intrinsic properties of individual linguistic units, but emerge from the networks of relationships within discourse. The decoding of meaning through the analysis of these relationships is precisely the task of the semiologist. Furthermore, the analytical tools employed in this decoding, the concepts of the signifier, the signified and the sign, are common to both approaches. This unity is only to be expected when one recalls that Saussure, the father of structural linguistics, saw himself also as founding a 'science of semiology'.

What, then, is the relevance of this methodology to literary criticism and, more specifically, to the study of women's writing? It may not appear particularly innovative in criticism, as it does, say, in anthropology, to adopt a linguistic model, when the material of study is itself language. However, a structuralist criticism sees the creation of meaning and the structure of the text in terms which the reference to linguistics might obscure. Roland Barthes argues that a structural analysis of the literary text goes 'beyond' the linguist's conception of the units of meaning to seek the function of every linguistic unit within the meanings of the narrative as a whole.

...it is evident that discourse itself (as a set of sentences) is organized and that, through this organization, it can be seen as the message of another language, one operating at a higher level than the language of the linguists. Discourse has its units, its rules its 'grammar': beyond the sentence, and though consisting solely of sentences, it must naturally form the object of a second linguistics. ... The new linguistics of discourse has still to be developed, but at least it

is being postulated ... for, although constituting an autonomous object, discourse must be studied from the basis of linguistics. If a working hypothesis is needed for an analysis whose task is immense and whose materials infinite, then the most reasonable thing is to posit a homological relation between sentence and discourse insofar as it is likely that a similar formal organization orders all semiotic systems, whatever their substances and dimensions. A discourse is a long 'sentence' (the units of which are not necessarily sentences), just as a sentence, allowing for certain specifications, is a short 'discourse'. ("Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives", Image - Music - Text, trans. S. Heath (Fontana, 1977) p.83)

This passage suggests both the relationship of structuralist criticism to linguistics and its developments away from some of the primary concepts of linguistics, as well as indicating the way in which the structuralists view the relation of literature to language. The "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" sets out the theory and method of this approach which Barthes demonstrates in his book S/Z through a highly detailed examination of Balzac's story 'Sarrasine'. The method involves both a breakdown of units and levels of meaning and a re-integration of these elements in a reading of the total work.

It seems clear that this emphasis on meaning and its production is important to a criticism concerned, as feminist criticism is, with ideological implications of the text. To put the matter crudely, any reading of, say, a writer like Margaret Drabble, which merely extracted from her work explicit statements about women and their social and ideological position without considering her use of irony, her manipulation of plot and character, and so on, would be sadly inadequate. Yet one wonders, on reading the painfully thorough S/Z, whether Barthes' analysis really does tell us more than a less rigorous, more impressionistic approach. As Coward and Ellis

point out, the five 'codes' he describes in Balzac's story correspond to a range of existing critical approaches.

Barthes sees five forms of connotation, five codes that organise the intelligibility of Sarrasine. They correspond to the five major critical languages of our time: narrative, thematic, psychological, sociological and psychoanalytic criticism. (Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, Language and Materialism, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p.54)

Whilst suggesting the problems of distinguishing, in practice and results, between the concepts and analytic tools of a structuralist reading and the study of narrative and stylistic devices which has always been the concern of the critic, Coward and Ellis claim that S/Z is differentiated by its integration of these various critical styles.

But they are not conceived as five independent ways of looking at a text, but as five organisations all of which are essential for any act of reading a text. ... Barthes' analysis splits up the story into 'lexies', sometimes phrases, sometimes groups of sentences, which imply at most three of these codes in their reading, in the way that their connotations are organised. He then identifies the codes and analyses their precise function at that moment ... The result is a 'slow-motion reading', watching the production of meaning. (pp.54-55)

What Barthes offers us, then, is not so much a resumé of meaning as an unfolding of both the production of meaning and the processes of reading. Indeed, the process of reading, the concept of 'literary competence', appears as important to structural criticism as does that of writing.

As suggested in our discussion of traditional criticism, the assessment of women's writing may well be affected by the inability of the reader or critic to 'decode' those aspects of

the text relating directly to the gender of the author. This failure of 'competence' may be seen as arising both from the dominant ideology of women which prevents the reader seriously engaging with these parts of the work, and from the apparently alien and incomprehensible values and experiences implied within the text. These problems are not, of course, confined to our understanding of women's writing and the female reader could be placed in the same position in relation to the work of male writers. The issues also extend to radical cultural and religious differences. What a feminist criticism can hope for and strive towards in these circumstances is a sufficient disruption of critical paradigms to encourage a more conscious analysis of the way we, both male and female readers and critics, read the work of women authors. Structuralism, by emphasising the processes through which meaning is produced in the reading of a text should make us more alive to the possibility that our reading is affected by, amongst other factors, consideration of gender on both a literary and a social level.

So far our discussion of structuralism has indicated that it permits, if not obliges, us to approach the text in the context of its ideological and social relationships. This may appear contradictory, for how is it possible that a method focussing on, to return to Jeremy Hawthorn's terms, the 'identity' or internal organisation of the text encompasses also its 'relationships'? Structuralism has indeed been defined in a way which denies this possibility.

Let me try and put very simply what the 'new way' of reading literature which we associate with such awkward words as 'structuralism' or 'semiotics' is fundamentally about. Instead of looking at a poem or passage from a novel in terms of what it says about 'the world out there', in terms of how the words represent or reproduce external experience, the 'structuralist' critic takes the text to be a complete experience in itself. The action, the only possible truth, is 'inside' the words.

We don't ask of them how they relate to some supposed evidence 'out there' but we look at the manifold ways in which they relate to each other or to comparable verbal 'structures', because we assume that to write or, for that matter to speak, is to enact words as coherent, as self sufficient as are those of our sensory or mental experience. In this internal order the key notion is that of a 'code'. The responsive reader is one who deciphers the author's code, but not so as to translate it into some previous or outside meaning. (George Steiner, "The pursuit of improper conjunctions", Sunday Times, 4.5.1980, p.43)

What we have suggested here is that it is precisely through this concern with the internal structure, the 'identity', of the text, that structuralist criticism provides also the connections we need to discuss the 'relationships' of the literary work. We have emphasised two aspects of the structuralist procedure which indicate that this is the case. Firstly, it is concerned with meaning and meanings in relation to the systems within which they are produced - language, ritual, dress, myth, literature. These systems have relevance only within a particular social group or form of organisation. Secondly, structuralism's concern with the ability of the reader to 'decode' a text and with the processes this involves, brings the whole area of 'relationships' into the discussion of literary works and their codes: Coward and Ellis' use of the term 'connotation' as synonymous with code, emphasises this unavoidable extension of the reading/decoding process.

Whilst we may argue that some of the most rigid of the structuralists' 'rules' add little in practice to our understanding of literature or to our critical procedure, it is clear that their model of the way in which meaning is produced and perceived within the text prohibits both a crude sociologizing of literature and its abstraction from the social world 'outside' the fiction. The literary text is seen as a complex of meaning interwoven with other systems and structures of meaning. This is not to say that the approach

can never become ahistorical, but it does so only when it becomes essentialist - as when Lévi-Strauss posits a correspondence between certain structural aspects of myth and certain structured processes of the human brain.

Our review of the critical treatment of women's writing suggested the importance of an awareness of the ideological status, images and self-images which influences both the experience and the literary production of women. Semiology, as in, say, Barthes' essays in Mythologies clearly offers a method of analysing the ways in which the ideological level of meaning imposes itself upon discourse. This process is set out in his well-known analysis of the photograph of a negro soldier saluting the French flag.

Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. Now this process is exactly that of bourgeois ideology. If our society is objectively the privileged field of mythical significations, it is because formally myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines this society. ...

What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality. ("Myth Today", Mythologies, (Paladin, 1973), p.142)

Mythical discourse operates by the transformation of the 'sign' at one level of meaning, that of language, into the 'signifier' of its own metalinguistic system. The concept of 'woman' as a sign enters structuralist thinking through Lévi-Strauss's analysis of exogamy.

This concept (woman as sign) originates from the work of Lévi-Strauss on forms of kinship, as a result of which he argues that the exchange of woman is the constant term

in all kinship structures. Lévi-Strauss is important to consider here because he offers not simply a description of kinship structures but also a theory: that kinship structures are a system of exchange - the exchange of women- which is a system of communication.

These results (in the understanding of kinship structures) can be achieved only by treating marriage regulations and kinship systems as a kind of language, a set of processes permitting the establishment, between individuals and groups, of a certain type of communication. That the mediating factor, in this case, should be the women of the group, who are circulated between clans, lineages or families, in place of the words of the group, which are circulated between individuals, does not at all change the fact that the essential aspect of the phenomenon is identical in both cases.'

Kinship is a structure through which men and women are put into place, through the complex rules of familial affiliation and the implications of these for a group in terms of duties and rituals to be performed by each sex as a result of that placing - as father, son, husband and brother/uncle, and as mother, daughter, wife, sister/aunt.

Kinship is also a system of communication, the production of meaning between members of the system, a signifying system, in which women are produced as a sign, which is circulated in an identical way to words. (Elizabeth Cowie, "Woman as Sign", m/f, no.1, 1978, pp50-51.

Quotation from Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology)

On the level of myth, this sign is transformed into a signifier whose signification is distorted by the ideological concept of 'woman' - what we have called the concept of femininity. Such an analysis of the production of meaning in and by ideology helps us to avoid the confusion of terms like female and feminine. As Cowie points out, it enables us to see 'women' not as biologically or psychologically 'given' but as a category produced in signifying practices, whether these involve

language, kinship structures or other social structures.

In terms of women's writing, however, this invasion by the ideological becomes even more complex since the writer herself may exist as an area of conflict between different meanings, between the sense of herself as a conscious subject and as a constituent of the category 'woman'. A feminist criticism might usefully engage itself in the unravelling of this conflict - as in the analyses of late-victorian women's novels in Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own.

In their review of structuralist thinking and theory, Coward and Ellis criticise a tendency towards the emphasis of the structure of the signifying system at the expense of the processes by which meaning is produced - of its synchronic over its diachronic aspects. The distinction itself, however, may be seen as central to the structuralist's thought, corresponding to Saussure's differentiation between

'langue', the system of language, and 'parole', the individual acts of realisation of that system. (Coward and Ellis, op. cit., p.12)

If we consider language as a system of meaning it is clear that these meanings develop only in relation to other such systems. Thus the woman writer finds, already embedded in the language she is to use, the values of a social structure based on gender differentiation. As a result the conflict we mentioned previously, between the writer as conscious subject and as 'woman', is one enacted within the language of her work. This point of view suggests that the concept of the 'woman's sentence' we met with in the work of Virginia Woolf and later feminist critics stops halfway in its analysis of style in women's writing. For the stylistic features it posits remain within the terms of the 'feminine' which the woman writer encounters in language, rather than seeking to elucidate the relation between 'langue' as a gender differentiating system in which 'woman' appears as a sign, and the 'parole' of

the individual text in which the female writer seeks, as a conscious subject, to create meaning.

This discussion of the dualities involved in women's writing and its analysis is highly abstract. At a more specific level we may quote Cora Kaplan's analysis of Lady Winchelsea's poetry in which she points to a conflict between conventional poetic imagery and the values of the woman poet, and traces these in the language of the poems. ("Poetry and Gender" in Papers on Patriarchy) In the field of modern fiction we may suggest that it is the opposition of an existing structure of meaning within language and the desire to challenge these meanings, but to do so also through language, which underlies the attempts of feminist writers like Michèle Roberts to appropriate and distort conventional imagery. Without such an overt feminism of aim or orientation, a writer such as Elizabeth Bowen demonstrates the conscious manipulation of the 'feminine' style in an implicit challenge to concepts of the material and interests of women's writing. Both these writers will be discussed at greater length in later chapters.

Structuralism's emphasis on language as a system in which meaning, because it is a product of relationships within the system, may constantly be changed, reproduced, shifted from one level and direction to another, alerts us to the radical potential of language, as well as to its ability to 'solidify' meaning within the terms of ideology. In particular, its approach to literature suggests the way in which realist fiction enacts this solidification by denying language its creative role, its ability to create meaning. The realist text presents itself as merely representing, in a passive way, a 'reality' to which it has no other, more active, connection. In Coward and Ellis' terms, realism imposes "a limitation on the productivity of language". Furthermore, this impression of its own objectivity which the realist text seeks to convey is itself a false one, since the very fact that its elements are organised, that it selects its material and eliminates contingency to a greater or lesser extent, indicates its creative potential. This is hardly an insight which originates with structuralism,

but the stress on the complexity of the relations from which meaning is produced within the literary text finally destroys the concept of the novel as pure representation. Roland Barthes argues that every element of the literary text is functional:

... everything has a meaning, or nothing has. To put it another way, one could say that art is without noise (as that term is employed in information theory).(loc. cit. (1977) p.89)

He claims that the motivation of literature is precisely the opposite of passive reflection.

The function of narrative is not to 'represent', it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us but in any case not of a mimetic order. The 'reality' of a sequence lies not in the 'natural' succession of the actions composing it but in the logic there exposed, risked and satisfied. Putting it another way, one could say that the origin of a sequence is not the observation of reality, but the need to vary and transcend the first form given man, namely repetition. (pp.123-4)

'Realism' in literature does not 'represent' a reality, but signifies and embodies an ideology.

Now, unfortunately, there is no antipathy between realism and myth. It is well known how often our 'realistic' literature is mythical (if only as a crude myth of realism) and how our 'literature of the unreal' has at least the merit of being only slightly so. The wise thing would of course be to define the writer's realism as an essentially ideological problem. This certainly does not mean that there is no responsibility of form towards reality. But this responsibility can be measured only in semiological terms. A form can be judged (since forms are on trial) only as signification, not as expression. The writer's

language is not expected to represent reality, but to signify it. This should impose on critics the duty of using two rigorously distinct methods: one must deal with the writer's realism either as an ideological substance (Marxist themes in Brecht's work, for instance) or as a semiological value (the props, the actors, the music, the colours in Brechtian dramaturgy). The ideal of course would be to combine these two types of criticism; the mistake which is constantly made is to confuse them: ideology has its methods, and so has semiology. (Barthes, loc. cit. (1973) pp.136-7)

It may now be suggested that the attempts of various women writers to break from the mode of realist writing rests on a perception of its ideological function, and we shall be examining these attempts in writers as far apart in style and orientation as Ivy Compton-Burnett and Fay Weldon. The realist text is never free of ideology because ideology is never absent from the formation and perception of reality or, as this discussion of structuralism has suggested, from the writer's material - language. The 'reality' women experience and women writers describe, particularly in the domestic genre, is one defined by notions of women's status and role. The relevance of the ideological content and function of literary realism will become clearer in the discussion both of authors who "hug the domestic shore" and of those, like Ursula Le Guin, who deliberately exploit the non-realist features of a different genre.

So far it has been argued that structuralist thinking in criticism offers a way of analysing the production of meaning, the process of reading and the ideological situation of the text, and that it reinforces our perspective on the nature of realism. We have indicated the value of these issues in a reading of women's writing. On the negative side, we have found that in certain of its forms structuralism may enforce a 'solidification' of meaning, an overemphasis of structure at the expense of process in the operation of language, and a

tendency towards an ahistorical conception of the text. Furthermore, its insights are not always entirely original and the stringency of its rules of critical procedure do not at all times add to our overall understanding of the text.

One further aspect of the structuralist project remains to be discussed, and it is one with a less direct relation to criticism although recent feminist theory has demonstrated its general significance for women's studies. This is the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan which, whilst often claimed as a return to the bases of Freudian thought, may be seen as a structuralist reformulation of Freud. For it emphasises human development in terms of a relation of the subject to an existing signifying system and presents sexual differentiation as ordered by the primary signifying function of the phallus. Feminist theorists have seized on Lacan's work, seeing within it the tools for an analysis of sexual oppression. In one way this is rather odd since in his most readily available works (Ecrits and The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis) he has little to say specifically about the development of the female subject. However, the approach of the feminist theorists emphasises the relationship which Lacan postulates between language as a signifying system and the process of gender differentiation.

The concept of the subject for Lacan is crucially dependent on language. Language is understood as a system that pre-exists the subject and the subject is produced in the entry into language. The subject is constituted as the effect of the signifying chain and the place of the signifying chain i.e. language which orders the appearance of the subject is the Other. 'The other is the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be present of the subject - it is the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear.' (Lacan: 'The Subject and the Other: Alienation.') The field of the Other is the field in which meaning is produced. Meaning is only possible when

the subject constituted within the signifying chain situates itself as a sexed subject in the field of the Other. (Parveen Adams, "Representation and Sexuality," m/f no.1, 1978. pp.71-2)

This passage demonstrates some of the problems involved in discussing Lacan and his significance for feminist theory. Not only is his writing complex, if not obscure, but it will also be seen that many writers on Lacan prefer a re-arrangement of his terms to any attempt at analysis or explication of his ideas. The most complete, although still far from simple, account of his work is probably that of one of his students, Anika Lemaire (Jacques Lacan, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

For Lacan and his followers the primary signifier of the system of meaning into which the subject must insert him/herself is the phallus. This clearly presents the female subject in terms of her lack of the phallus.

The lack in the first Other is the lack in the mother. The recognition of this lack is the recognition of her castration, of the fact that she does not have the phallus. (Adams, loc. cit. p.73)

Lacanian theory would thus appear to return the basis of gender differentiation to the body, mediated through language. Whilst this may seem logical on the grounds that the most obvious and objectively identifiable sexual differences are anatomical ones, it does in fact constitute a kind of intellectual sleight of hand. For what Lacan argues is not simply that anatomy is the ground of sexual differentiation, but that the presence or absence of one particular anatomical feature forms the basis of a system of meaning which controls the development of the human subject. Like much of psycho-analytic theory his argument operates on a level of discourse largely beyond any kind of pragmatic demonstration and isolated from alternative explanatory systems. This means that Lacanian thought never engages with the mechanisms whereby the signifying system in

which the phallus is so crucial is established at a social level. As Monique Plaza points out, the shift from the anatomical to the social is neither straightforward nor self-evidently justified. It requires explanation, it does not provide it.

The fact that men and women have specific genital organs, that woman has the 'privilege' of gestation, does not imply that anatomical sex should prescribe the psychic and social existence of the individual. ... The ability to urinate from a distance (...) does not necessarily lead to the prerogative of founding civilisation. (Plaza, "'Phallomorphic power' and the psychology of 'woman'. A patriarchal chain." Ideology and Consciousness, no.4, Autumn 1978, p.8)

Plaza suggests that feminists have been misled, by the forms which patriarchal domination takes in relation to the female body, into attributing the origins of that domination to anatomical differences.

The oppression of women is based on the appropriation of their bodies by patriarchy, on the restriction of sexuality within the framework imposed by the masculine-feminine opposition, the subjection of women in confinement to medical power, the contemptuousness of menstruation, the lack of recognition of sexuality. But recognising this vast sexual oppression of women must not lead us to the conclusion that oppression derives from the body, or from sex; or that the body explains social oppression. Woman's sex is denied, unrecognised. But that does not mean that woman's oppression derives from that lack of recognition. We must guard ourselves from a form of reflective 'pan-sexualism' which is only a coarse, disguised naturalism. If the category of sex has such an important position in patriarchal logic, this is not because sex gives its shape to the social; it is because the social is able to make sexual forms seem obvious and

thereby hide oppressive systems. (p.9)

The fact that considerable symbolic significance is attached to the phallus is not at issue, but the Lacanian assumption that the signifying system dominated by sexual differentiation originates solely in anatomical difference obscures the whole area of the social production of meaning. This limitation becomes clear when we ask why the phallus, rather than any other anatomical feature, has taken on the character of primary signifier. A purely psycho-analytic approach can provide no answer to this question. We need to go beyond the psycho-analytic to the sociological, to see the primacy of the phallus as a consequence rather than a cause of the specific form taken by gender differentiation.

Now it is not because of its intrinsic qualities that the penis is valued to the detriment of the vulva or the breasts which are themselves also visible. It is to the extent that culture is androgenous, patriarchal that the phallus is raised to the level of a symbol. The 'phallic superiority' of man is nothing other than the interpretation, in terms of nature and hierarchy, of women's oppression by men. If one had to justify women's domination of men an ideology could just as easily claim that men lacked breasts, are mutilated because they can't give birth, and have a monstrous outgrowth in the place of a vulva. We would be as much convinced by the evidence of their 'nothing to show.' (Plaza, pp.10-11)

This argument that anatomical features acquire their particular significance only within the overall structure of meaning in society returns us to one of the precepts of structuralist thought: that meaning arises not from the signifier itself, but from its relationship to other signifiers. Lacanian theory appears to have abandoned this principle.

Equally, we may criticise the attempt of theorists such as Luce Irigaray to transform the significations of the female

body in opposition to the patriarchal symbolism of the phallus. This approach too rests on the illusion that anatomical signification is productive of social meaning, rather than itself being socially produced. In literature, such books as Monique Wittig's The Lesbian Body and Les Guérillères have attempted a transformation, parallel to that of Irigary on a theoretical level, of the symbolisation of the female body. The effect of such fiction, however, is a further mystification of the female along the lines of patriarchy's glorification of women's natural reproductive capacity. Indeed, it may be argued that the kind of experiential account of female sexuality within its existing social context which we find in the work of novelists like Fay Weldon, is more effective in the demystification of the body and the destruction of concepts of the 'essential' female than are Wittig's contrived fantasies.

Lacanian theory raises a further issue which relates directly to the situation of the female novelist. If the human subject enters into an existing system of meaning, of which language is a part, dominated by the possession or the lack of the phallus, what then is the resulting relation of the female subject to language? Feminists have been led to argue that, because language is dominated by patriarchal structures of meaning, women have 'no voice'. This is a position we may, with Plaza, reject on pragmatic grounds.

Now this assertion is false. Woman has always talked and thought at the same time as man, just as she has participated in history. But she has been excluded from discourses, struck out of the archives. This has taken two forms: either it has been impossible for her to occupy certain places; or her effective participation has been killed, denied. Gradually and to the extent that they reach places of speaking modalities (which is very difficult, because barred to them), women bring to light this burying, this erasure, this invalidation of their existence. (Plaza, p.24)

The very existence of the subject matter of this study provides a refutation of the argument that, because of the phallic orientation of our signifying systems, women have 'no voice'. What is of interest here is not whether women are able to participate in discourse at all, but how far a woman who speaks - or writes - is affected by the values embodied in language and, indeed, within the total social structure of which language forms a part. As we have seen, structuralism offers a point of entry into this area through its analysis of the ideological or mythic level of discourse. The methods of literary criticism provide further tools in an examination of the ways in which women writers have accommodated or challenged these values in their work. Lacanian theory, like other psycho-analytic approaches, imposes a naturalistic dogma on social phenomena, and by claiming that its own level of discourse is anterior to the historical or the sociological inhibits the understanding and demystification of ideological structures.

It should now be possible, on the basis of the examination of various types of critical theory and practice undertaken in this section, to indicate the approach adopted in the following chapters to specific examples of women's writing, and to define more clearly the categories of the 'female', 'feminine', and 'feminist'.

Each form of criticism appears to offer something of value to the study: aspects of the methodology of popular criticism, the socio-political awareness of feminist thought, and the structuralist analysis of the production of meaning. It is clear, therefore, that the following studies will be eclectic in their method. It also seems necessary to adapt the approach to the specific nature of each work or author, for we have seen the limiting effects of theories of 'female culture' and other attempts to categorise women's writing in terms of certain supposed common characteristics. The only thing that all women's writing unarguably has in common is the gender of its producers and the range of work considered here

should demonstrate that to say this is to say no more than that all men's writing is written by men. The formulation underlines its own absurdity as a basis for analysis or description.

Nevertheless, a unified approach to the work of female authors is legitimate so long as it does not reduce its field of study to uniformity but rather provides useful terms for the discussion of a range of texts. Thus we shall be concerned primarily with the relationship, whatever form this takes and however it is expressed within the fiction, of these texts to both the social experience of women and the social ideology of 'woman' with which this experience is saturated. Criticism must allow for both this general concern and the specificity of each work of fiction. Elaine Showalter in her study of women novelists adopted some of the methods of literary history in a way which enabled her to relate individual works and authors to both a 'tradition' of women's writing and to their social background. The scope of the present study is not wide enough to place it within the category of literary history, although some attention will be paid to shifts in style and subject matter which can be traced through time. In order, therefore, to keep both the relational aspects of the novels and their individual identities before us, they will be considered in terms of a set of categories constant enough to unify the study but fluid enough to allow for specific forms, modes of expression and ideological positions among the texts.

The terms 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist' are used by Showalter to define the phases she perceives in the history of women's writing during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

I identify the Feminine phase as the period from the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880; the Feminist phase as 1880 to 1920, or the winning of the vote; and the Female phase as 1920 to the present, but entering a new state of self-awareness about 1960. (Showalter, (1978) p.13)

Her use of these categories, however, is inappropriate to the present study not only because it does not offer itself as a literary history, but also because her definition of the term 'female' suggests that an autonomous, self-defined consciousness, free of the ideological implications of 'feminine' and 'feminist', has already been achieved. It is therefore necessary to attempt a redefinition of the terms for our purposes here.

The 'female' denotes a concern with women's biological and sexual experience within a social context. For example, Fay Weldon's description of pregnancy and Margaret Drabble's account of marriage and motherhood. It should be noted that these areas do not stand outside the values embodied in the ideology of 'woman' but are perceived through it. The discussion of Lacanian theory suggested that the symbolisation of the body is invaded by socially produced structures of meaning: similarly, 'female' experience consists of a common understanding of domestic, sexual and maternal experience. By maintaining an awareness of these social meanings, it is possible to counterpoint them, within the category, to a notion of the actual experience of women as subjects perceived by a consciousness itself divided between an experiential and an ideological understanding.

The 'feminine', as the foregoing discussion has suggested, denotes an ideological level of meaning in which woman is the object of social meanings and values. The nature of its operation, however, also creates a form of conflict within the woman as subject so that an analysis of the 'feminine' in women's writing involves a consideration of the degree to which the work exhibits an internalisation of the standards and values implicit in the ideology of 'woman.' This implies a critical concern with the relation of the author to a normative view of women, their behaviour, role and permitted modes and areas of self-expression. Conflict with certain of these norms does not necessarily imply an overt or total rejection, neither does apparent acquiescence exclude the possibility of

a more subtle rebellion. Thus we shall see how Ivy Compton-Burnett seems to confine herself to the 'female' sphere and Elizabeth Bowen to accept the restrictions of a 'feminine' style whilst both deliberately manipulate and extend these areas in order to develop ways of writing which cut through the limitations imposed upon them. On the other hand, Radclyffe Hall ostensibly challenges definitions of women's sexuality in her lesbian fiction but nevertheless reinforces familiar sex-role stereotypes.

The 'feminist' describes a particular form of relationship to the ideology of the 'feminine.' However, whilst it may appear simple enough to define it as a conscious and overt rejection of this ideology and its implications, in practice this definition is highly problematic. For example, Virginia Woolf's 'feminist' awareness of the mechanisms through which patriarchal thinking confines women conflicts with her concept of a 'female mind' that is somehow absolute in its nature. Ivy Compton-Burnett illustrates another problem of definition: we may ask whether her perception of familial power relations takes her into the area of the 'feminist' despite her implicitly hierarchical conception of society.

These complexities arise from the specific operations of the ideology of femininity and its internalisation by women writers. Thus, whilst the following studies will encompass self-proclaimed feminist writers such as Joanna Russ and Michèle Roberts, for the most part the category of the 'feminist' must be seen as a fluid and exploratory one.

This section has provided a range of critical methods and an examination of their limitations and their potential, together with a set of categories or concepts for dealing with the work of female authors. The aim of the second part of this study will be to elucidate the specificity of the woman writer's situation without either obscuring the range of female novelists or transforming the notion of the 'woman writer' into a limiting one. Before going on to consider particular novels,

however, we may bridge the gap between theory and critical practice by discussing the polemical writing of Virginia Woolf. This will not only help to clarify some of the contradictions in her thought noted previously, but also present in greater detail some rather neglected areas of her work instead of offering yet another examination of her fiction.

PART II: THE AUTHORS

CHAPTER 4

VIRGINIA WOOLF: AN AESTHETIC FEMINISM OR A FEMINIST AESTHETIC?

Studies of Virginia Woolf's fiction generally make no more than brief, and often disparaging, reference to her major polemical works, A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas. It would, however, seem useful in the context of this study to consider these books more closely as examples of thinking on women's social and literary position in the 1920s and '30s. For the sake of convenience we may describe these books as representing Woolf's feminist thought, although the purpose here is not to argue the validity of this definition but to view the works in relation to both her experience as a woman writer and to later feminist criticism.

We shall discover, on the one hand, certain contradictions in Woolf's thought which separate her from the feminism of the later twentieth century, whilst her lack of involvement in the early suffrage movement - which she presents with little sympathy in Night and Day - isolated her from the feminism of her own time. This is not to suggest that modern feminism is without contradictions: it merely exhibits different ones. Furthermore, her distance from contemporary activism was precisely what enabled her to analyse the structure and operation of patriarchy more fully than the suffragettes. On the other hand, Woolf's connections with the feminist movement are equally clear. Her concern with the position of women and, more specifically, the experience of the woman as writer anticipates much of the work of later feminist critics. This theme is present not only in the two books to be discussed here but also runs through her critical essays and, as Herbert Marder demonstrates, her fiction. Marder goes so far as to argue that "feminism ... is essential to her conception of reality" and to the nature of her art. Nevertheless, his study remains concerned primarily with the fiction, with the artist rather than the critic or theorist, to the extent that he sees the novels as being occasionally marred by the presence of social comment unsublimated by 'art'. (1)

In discussing Woolf's social thought it is important to recognise it as essentially individual both in motivation and

in the solutions she offers to social and political problems. Thus, since she was a writer and attempted to earn a living by writing this is the area from which much of her thinking developed and in which it is frequently the clearest and most convincing. She was well aware of the constraints on intellectual freedom and personal creativity imposed on women both from within the Victorian family:

Father's birthday. He would have been 96, 96, yes, today and could have been 96 like other people one has known: but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; inconceivable. (A Writer's Diary, Nov. 28th. 1928)

- and on a wider social level. The 'Angel in the House' represents an ideal of femininity opposed to any independent action or thought.

The phantom was a woman and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time, and so tormented me that at last I killed her. ("Professions for Women" in The Death of the Moth.)

It is this experience which enables Woolf to describe both the practical obstacles which existed to women writing, and the conflict between the desire to create literature and the demands of femininity.

... but however strong the impulse to write had become, it had at the outset to meet opposition not only of circumstances but of opinion. Her (Fanny Burney's) first manuscripts were burnt by her stepmother's orders, and needlework was inflicted as a penance, much as, a few years later, Jane Austen would slip her writing

beneath a book if anyone came in, and Charlotte Brontë stopped in the middle of her work to pare the potatoes. But the domestic problem, being overcome and compromised with, there remained the moral one. Miss Burney had showed that it was 'possible for a woman to write novels and be respectable,' but the burden of proof still rested anew upon each authoress. Even so late as the mid-Victorian days George Eliot was accused of 'coarseness and immorality' in her attempt to 'familiarise the minds of our young women in the middle and higher ranks with matter on which their fathers and brothers would never venture to speak in their presence.'

The effect of these repressions is still clearly to be traced in women's work, and the effect is wholly to the bad. The problem of art is sufficiently difficult in itself without having to respect the ignorance of young women's minds or to consider whether the public will think that the standard of moral purity displayed in your work is such as they have a right to expect from your sex. The attempt to conciliate, or more naturally to outrage, public opinion is equally a waste of energy and a sin against art. It may have been not only with a view to obtaining impartial criticism that George Eliot and Miss Brontë adopted male pseudonyms, but in order to free their own consciousnesses as they wrote from the tyranny of what was expected from their sex. ("Women Novelists," Contemporary Writers, (Hogarth Press, 1965) p.25)

Whilst we may doubt whether Woolf herself was often dragged from her desk by the necessity of peeling potatoes, her understanding of the conflict between the feminine self-image of women and the desire to write, of the constraints of language and subject-matter which this image imposed on women's fiction, is clearly a product of her own experience. She had, after all, found it necessary to murder the Angel in the House.

Her isolation from the kind of practical and economic problems she describes women as facing, however, is equally

obvious in her writing and has been subject to criticism at least since Q.D. Leavis wrote in her review of Three Guineas that "there is no reason to suppose Mrs Woolf would know which end of the cradle to stir." Leavis was protesting against Woolf's conception of the 'daughters of educated men' as both the audience and the subject of her book, and she saw the proposals it contained for women's education as suggesting a tripartite division along class lines.

We are to have one kind of educated women, the idle charming cultivated women, who are to be subsidised as hostesses for the art of social intercourse. ... Then we are to have a sterner kind of educated woman, the professional woman, for whose benefit the men's colleges are to be thrown open and all the available scholarship money divided equally between the sexes - the women who are to be just like men only more high-minded. Both these kinds are the five-hundred-a-year-by-right-of-birth-as-daughters-of-the-ruling-class women. Then there are to be the base-born women who come in on the edge of the picture as drudges, to relieve both of the other kinds of women of their natural duties (I mean of course nursing and rearing their own infants) as well as the routine of home-making. (Q.D. Leavis, "Caterpillars of the Commonwealth Unite!" Scrutiny 7, Sept. 1938, p.211)

This criticism has considerable point in relation to Three Guineas but Leavis' attack is somewhat weakened by her assumption that middle-class women obliged to earn their own living are without any relative advantage over working-class women, by her Leavisite affection for the moral value of drudgery and by her failure to envisage any change in, rather than mere addition to, women's tasks. She clearly intends to demonstrate the élitism of Woolf's attitude, yet herself fails to escape from a view of domestic work common amongst both women and men in a position to choose how much, or how little, of it they do. Rearing children may develop valuable qualities in women but rearing children in a slum with no help and little money

is a less inspiring occupation. If the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world it remains true that those who cannot afford cradles do not. This is a thought with which neither Woolf nor Leavis were entirely comfortable.

The activities Mrs Woolf wishes to free educated women from as wasteful not only provide a valuable discipline, they serve as a sieve for determining which values are important and genuine and which are conventional and contemptible. It is this order of experience that often makes the conversation of an uncultivated charmless woman who has merely worked hard and raised a family interesting and stimulating. (Ibid.)

The implications of Leavis' domestic pastoral are no less patronising and conservative than those of Woolf's view of women's work and her criticism clearly stems from a hostility between two groups of differing privilege rather than from a more complete understanding of women's social position. It is also a criticism which ignores the tone of A Room of One's Own in which Woolf notes with excitement the entry of women into 'men's' work.

Also, I continued, looking down at the page again, it is becoming evident that women, like men, have other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity. 'Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together.' (A Room of One's Own, (Hogarth Press, 1929) p.125)

Woolf did not attempt to conceal her lack of wider social experience. In 1930 she wrote an introduction to a collection of autobiographical essays by working-class women in which she emphasised her sense of isolation, of the distance between her own experience and that of the majority of women.

Our sympathy is fictitious, not real. Because the baker calls and we pay our bills with cheques, and our clothes are washed for us and we do not know the liver from the

lights we are condemned to remain forever shut up in the confines of the middle classes.

... we tried ... to explain the nature of fictitious sympathy and how it differs from real sympathy and how defective it is because it is not based upon sharing the same important emotions unconsciously. It was thus that we tried to describe the contradictory and complex feelings which beset the middle class visitor when forced to sit out a Congress of working women in silence. (Introductory Letter, Life as We Have Known It, ed. Margaret Llewelyn Davies, (1931) (Virago, 1977) pp.xxx & xxxi)

Nevertheless, it is clear that the views expressed in Three Guineas itself suffer both from this lack of experience and her refusal to engage in any organised political activity. These factors will be discussed further later.

A Room of One's Own is less vulnerable to this kind of criticism because it confines itself largely to the area of women and fiction and because it concentrates on describing a situation, rather than offering solutions to social problems. Yet the earlier book also appears to move between pairs of contradictory propositions and attitudes: between a 'hard' economic view and a mystical notion of androgyny; between astute social observation and a preoccupation with the personal; between an analysis of the specificity of women's writing and a demand for the reconciling of the 'feminine' and the 'masculine' in literature. Some of these contradictions are resolved within the book itself, others remain.

Woolf sets out her subject matter from the beginning: 'women and fiction.' Then, in a characteristically self-depreciating manner withdraws from its potential complexity.

The title women and fiction might mean, ... women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction they write; or it might mean women and the fiction

that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together. ... But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. ... All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point - a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of fiction unsolved. (AR000, pp.5-6)

This is more than a stylistic ploy or a backhanded attack on the conventions of lecturing. Woolf has already expressed her views on the inadequacies of a gender-based criticism.

Experience seems to prove that to criticise the work of a sex as a sex is merely to state with almost invariable acrimony prejudices derived from the fact that you are either a man or a woman. (loc. cit. (1965) p.24)

Throughout A Room of One's Own she is concerned less with the supposed qualities of women's writing than with the circumstances of the woman writer. Hence her emphasis on the importance of privacy and a degree of financial independence; conveniences which, whilst generally available to men only of a certain class, have, historically, almost invariably been denied to all women. What she claims as a 'minor point' does in fact emerge as an issue crucial to women's writing. The book focuses on those aspects of women's social experience which may be seen as affecting their desire and ability to write, and on the nature of the resulting literary products in relation to these influences. Thus she discusses the limited educational opportunities open to women and suggests not that a university education is essential to the writer, but that the lack of it reduces the chances of earning the £500 a year she considers necessary to the writer and her art. The notion that women do not and should not earn a living by their intellect is damaging to the potential author.

This view accounts for the book's emphasis on the contrasts between the wealth and resources of the male colleges and the poverty of the new establishments for women. The creative soul, she argues, is not fed on a diet of 'beef and prunes'. To the familiar question, why are there no great women artists? Woolf offers a two-part answer frequently used by later feminist critics. Women have been too busy and too poor, both in material and cultural terms, to occupy themselves with art; the history of women is, furthermore, so shrouded in obscurity that the work and identity of women artists and writers is frequently lost to us. (2) The brief history of women authors which she offers demonstrates this argument. The earliest literary women of any reputation she is able to trace are those of noble birth: the Countess of Winchelsea and the Duchess of Newcastle. These were women with sufficient leisure, wealth and status to ignore ridicule and censure.

What one would expect to find would be that ... some great lady would take advantage of her comparative freedom and comfort to publish something with her name to it and risk being thought a monster. (AR000, p.87)

Women of a different class and in greater numbers, she argues, only began to write for publication when social changes and developments within the literary world combined to make it possible for them to earn a living by the pen.

... towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write. ... women generally and not merely the lonely aristocrat shut up in her country house among her folios and her flatterers, took to writing. Without these forerunners, Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe. ... For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome

of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. (AR000, pp.97-8)

Woolf's account of women writers and their struggle to establish a tradition involves the kind of questions which Elaine Showalter considered crucial to a study of women and literature nearly fifty years later.

... why women began to write for money and how they negotiated the activity of writing with their families. What was their professional self-image? How was their work received, and what effect did criticism have upon them? What were their experiences as women and how were these reflected in their books? What was their understanding of womanhood? What were their relationships to other women, to men and to their readers? How did changes in women's status affect their lives and careers? (Showalter, (1978) pp.12-13)

In addition to these observations on what may be called the sociology of women's literature, however, she presents a view of 'female consciousness', its effects on women's writing and the requirement on the great writer to combine aspects of female and male nature in an androgynous consciousness. It is at this point that some confusion appears in her argument. She suggests that "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex" (pp.156-7) but this seems to involve three different, although inter-related, levels of argument. Firstly, she insists that for a woman to be conscious, when writing, of her social position, of all the forms of constraint and oppression which Woolf herself catalogues here, is to endanger the purity of her art, to disfigure her writing with anger and bitterness. She traces the effects of these emotions in the work of the Countess of Winchelsea, arguing that

... her mind has by no means 'consumed all impediments and become incandescent.' On the contrary, it is

harrassed and distracted with hates and grievances.
 The human race is split up for her into two parties. Men
 are the 'opposing faction;' men are hated and feared
 because they have the power to bar her way to what she
 wants to do - which is to write. (AR000, p.88)

An atmosphere of pure aestheticism creeps in here. More damagingly, this view introduces an inconsistency in Woolf's argument. She has already documented the specific social situation of women writers and if, as she freely admits, the author is legitimately affected at all by that social experience then it seems illogical to criticise a work in which that experience is in evidence. If, as she suggests, there are common features of women's lives, even of their consciousness, then, unless we resort to a notion of some detached spiritual level on which creation takes place, it is clear that women's writing will develop from and embody these. Woolf's analysis of Lady Winchelsea's poetry can be usefully contrasted with that of a later feminist critic, Cora Kaplan. The earlier writer describes the passage

My hand delights to trace unusual things,
 And deviates from the known and common way,
 Nor will in fading silks compose,
 Faintly the inimitable rose.

as one in which the poet has overcome resentment to produce 'pure poetry.' Kaplan, however, traces the influence of the writer's sex and social position in the part conscious, part unconscious manipulation of conventional poetic imagery. ("Language and Gender," Papers on Patriarchy, (PDC & Women's Publishing Collective, 1978) pp.21-37)

Secondly, forgetting one's sex could involve simply ignoring criticism based on assumptions as to how women should write. This appears to be Woolf's position when she praises Jane Austen for establishing and maintaining her own style of writing. On the other hand, she later suggests that Austen

also devised a sentence form ideally suited to her needs as a woman writer. The discrepancy here suggests a consciousness of the gap between the nature and requirements of the female author and the image of 'femininity' but this is not a point which Woolf herself takes up here. This leads us to the third possible context for the notion of forgetting one's sex when writing - that of androgyny and the androgynous mind. For this concept makes no sense at all unless we accept in the first place that there exist 'male' and 'female' forms of consciousness. Where Woolf appears confused is in her view of the origin of these forms. Thus, for example, in discussing why it was that, when women did begin to write, they tended to choose the novel as their genre, she seems to suggest a basis for 'female consciousness' in women's socialisation and social experience.

... all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influence of the common sitting-room. People's feelings were impressed upon her; personal relations were always before her eyes. (AR000, p.100)

When she comes to the idea of androgyny itself, however, the impact of the social process appears less relevant and her distinctions of gender more arbitrary, suggesting absolute and intrinsic differences.

Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the act of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. (p.157)

Throughout her discussion it never becomes clear how far these categories of 'male' and 'female' are being used as convenient labels for sets of characteristics and how far they are seen as actual exclusive or dominant attributes of the two

sexes. Indeed the greatest problem with the notion of androgyny is that we are never sure what Woolf means by it and in its lack of clarity it has the air of a metaphysical rather than an explanatory concept. Does she intend to imply that women writing must attempt to be more aggressive and analytic than the conventional image of femininity would allow, men a little more sensitive and intuitive than their 'masculinity' might otherwise dictate? Or does she mean that in the great writer all these qualities co-exist and are reconciled? Or that there is some kind of mystical 'marriage' within the artist's consciousness?

That she does see the male and the female as distinct types is suggested by her discussion of women's creativity and the specificity of their writing.

... this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men. And one must conclude that it would be a thousand pities if it were hindered or wasted, for it was won by centuries of the most drastic discipline, and there is nothing to take its place. It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with only one? (AR000, p.132)

On one level this expresses the idea of plenitude which is intrinsic to Woolf's perception of reality. Reality involves the consciousness of this plenitude and this consciousness - both of internal and external data - is seen as the area of the 'women's sentence' as she describes it in the work of Dorothy Richardson.

She has invented, or, if not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles,

of enveloping the vaguest shapes. Other writers of the opposite sex have used sentences of this description and stretched them to the extreme. But there is a difference. Miss Richardson has fashioned her sentences consciously, in order that it may descend to the depths and investigate the crannies of Miriam Henderson's consciousness. It is a woman's sentence, but only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything that she may discover in the psychology of her sex. And therefore we feel that the trophies that Miss Richardson brings to the surface, however we may dispute their size, are undoubtedly genuine. Her discoveries are concerned with states of being and not with states of doing. ("Romance and the Heart," Contemporary Writers, pp.124-5)

This view carries a certain conviction in its context, but remains open to challenge. If we consider writers like Dorothy Richardson or Colette it appears as a useful description of some of the characteristics of their fiction. On the other hand, if we read Ivy Compton-Burnett or Fay Weldon, or perhaps George Eliot, the description seems less relevant than it does, for example, to the work of Proust. What Woolf has pin-pointed is one possible style of writing and its relation to the author's view of reality and sense of values. It is unfortunate that this style is linked by the concept of the 'woman's sentence' to the sex of the author, not only because we can point to so many exceptions to the classification but also because it introduces further contradictions into the argument of A Room of One's Own. On the one hand she describes a 'feminine' style which corresponds exactly to her own notion of reality and of art; on the other, her concept of androgyny obliges her to present an author such as Tolstoy as the greater artist because of the mixture of the male in his writing.

The idea of the woman's sentence may, however, be employed in a less abstract way. If we accept, as Woolf argues, that historically the experiences of men and women differ and that

these differences affect the way they write, then it seems reasonable to assume that, at the point when women first began to consider the possibility of writing in any numbers and for publication, the stylistic tradition available to them was one predominantly created by and adapted to the male experience.

But whatever effect discouragement and criticism had upon their writing - and I believe they had a very great effect - that was unimportant compared with the other difficulty which faced them (I was still considering those early nineteenth century novelists) when they came to set their thoughts on paper - that is that they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure. Lamb, Browne, Thackeray, Newman, Sterne, De Quincey - whoever it may be - never helped a woman yet, though she may have learnt a few tricks of them and adapted them to her use. ... Perhaps the first thing she would find, setting pen to paper, was that there was no common sentence ready for her use. All the great novelists like Thackeray and Dickens and Balzac have written a natural prose, swift but not slovenly, expressive but not precious, taking their own tint without ceasing to be common property. They have based it on the sentence that was current at the time. The sentence that was current at the beginning of the nineteenth-century ran something like this perhaps: 'The grandeur of their works was an argument with them, not to stop short, but to proceed. They could have no higher excitement or satisfaction than in the exercise of their art and endless generations of truth and beauty. Success prompts to exertion; and habit facilitates success.' That is a man's sentence; behind it one can see Johnson, Gibbon and the rest. It was a sentence that was unsuited for a woman's use. Charlotte Brontë, with all her splendid gift for prose, stumbled and fell with that clumsy weapon in her hands,

Jane Austen looked at it and laughed at it and devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it. ... since freedom and fullness of expression are of the essence of the art, such a lack of tradition, such a scarcity and inadequacy of tools, must have told enormously upon the writing of women. (AR000, pp.114-5)

Despite its tendency to emphasise absolute distinctions between male and female, this passage offers a plausible explanation for some of the stylistic deficiencies of George Eliot as well as, more generally, accounting for the importance of tradition, or its absence, for the woman writer. We may also suggest that the argument has not been made obsolete by the growing body of women's fiction for, whilst later female authors have more of a tradition and precedent on which to base their own work, the critical image of women's writing is still implicated with notions of femininity as a social and psychological characteristic. Any deviation from this norm thus still involves a struggle for a style at once more appropriate to the writer's purpose and acceptable to the reader.

We may conclude that whilst Woolf's sociology of women and fiction contains some acute observation, her use of terms like female, feminine and androgynous is at times confused and insufficiently critical. Certainly the methods of her own argument demonstrate what she describes as the particular operation of the female mind: it is imagistic, ironic and self-depreciating rather than formal and assertive. A similar style in Three Guineas is far more disturbing for in the earlier book there is a congruence of style and subject matter which, combined with Woolf's obvious involvement in her material, makes A Room of One's Own the more satisfying work despite the confusions we have noted.

Three Guineas is the less successful of the two books not only because it deals with an area less familiar to the author but also because its style and method of argument are

irritatingly inappropriate to its subject. For a study of the causes of war, the possibility of avoiding it, international fascism and the relationship between patriarchy and political tyranny, it is a little too arch and contrived to be received with seriousness and sympathy. Throughout the book, indeed, Woolf emphasises her amateur status as a social and political commentator and the contemporary reader, on the eve of the Second World War, must surely have been inclined to agree with Q.D. Leavis that

there is no longer any use in this field of speculation for the non-specialist like Mrs Woolf. (loc. cit. p.214)

Nevertheless, we should give some consideration to Woolf's political position. It may be assumed that she shared many of the liberal attitudes which had come to typify Bloomsbury. Elizabeth Bowen has described her as "the extreme and final product of the English liberal mind, (Bowen, (1950) p.79) and the term liberal applies in both a social and a political sense. This was the kind of liberalism which, by the late 1930s, had come to seem irrelevant to the political circumstances of Europe and against which John Cornford, amongst many, was rebelling in joining the war in Spain. Commentators have always played down Woolf's political concern and Leonard Woolf himself described her as "the least political animal that has lived since Aristotle invented the definition." She was, however, perhaps sufficiently political for the events of the War to have contributed to her suicide.

There remains another element in her politics which owes less to Bloomsbury than to her specific situation as a woman. Essentially she saw power and party politics as a kind of deadly game from which women were excluded and which they could best influence by a studied inattention. Thus she calls upon the 'daughters of educated men'

not to incite their brothers to fight, or to dissuade them, but to maintain an attitude of complete indiffer-

ence ... For psychology would seem to show that it is far harder for human beings to take action when other people are indifferent ... than when their actions are made the centre of excited emotion ... the daughters of educated men should give their brothers neither the white feather of cowardice nor the red feather of courage, but no feather at all. (Three Guineas, (Penguin Books, 1977) pp.125-6)

Whilst it may seem excessively naive, this position does supply a logic to Woolf's view of women's relation to politics and links the thought of Three Guineas to that of A Room of One's Own. In politics as in literature, she argues, women's exclusion from the established institutions equips them with certain qualities and maintains differences from men which should be exploited for the benefit of all.

Thus the exclusion of women from the universities and professions becomes here a positive advantage and this point is emphasised by a movement, through the course of the book, away from an initial ironic depreciation of women to a more assertive appraisal of their position as outsiders.

But here again another difficulty confronts us. For though many instincts are held more or less in common by both sexes, to fight has always been the man's habit, not the woman's. Law and practice have developed that difference, whether innate or accidental. Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman's rifle; ... it is difficult to judge what we do not share.

How then are we to understand your problem, and if we cannot, how can we answer your question, how to prevent war? The answer based upon our experience and our psychology - why fight? - is not an answer of any value.
(TG, p.9)

Later in the book the women become the 'Society of Outsiders', the critics and potential radicals of society who would,

amongst other things,

... bind themselves not only to earn their own livings, but to earn them so expertly that their refusal to earn them would be a matter of concern to the work master. They would bind themselves to obtain full knowledge of professional practices, and to reveal any instance of tyranny or abuse in their professions. And they would bind themselves not to continue to make money in any profession, but to cease all competition and to practice their profession experimentally, in the interests of research and for the love of the work itself, when they had earned enough to live upon. Also they would bind themselves to remain outside any profession hostile to freedom, such as the making or the improvement of weapons of war. And they would bind themselves not to take office or honour from any society which, while professing to respect liberty, restricts it, like the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. ... And in all this, and in much more than we have time to particularize, they would be helped, you will agree, by their position as outsiders, that freedom from unreal loyalties, that freedom from interested motives which are at present assured them by the State. (TG, pp.129-130)

The argument involves not only an impossible purism but also serious contradictions. She suggests that women, as 'outsiders', must acquaint themselves fully with all areas of social life which in her view contribute to war and is, furthermore, as a feminist, concerned that women should be able to participate in the professions. The problem then arises that the 'female' characteristics which she sees as women's potential contribution to peace: lack of aggression and competitiveness, contempt for hierarchy and self-aggrandisement, sensitivity to human emotions, all the lessons of marriage and the drawing-room, may not survive this participation. Woolf is aware of this dilemma.

For the facts which we have discovered ... have raised questions which make us wonder whether we are wise to encourage people to enter the professions if we wish to prevent war. You will remember that we are using our psychological insight (for that is our only qualification) to decide what kind of qualities in human nature are likely to lead to war. And the facts disclosed above are of a kind to make us ask, before we write our cheque, whether if we encourage the daughters of educated men to enter the professions we shall not be encouraging the very qualities that we wish to prevent? Shall we not be doing our guinea's worth to ensure that in two or three centuries not only the educated men in the professions but the educated women in the professions will be asking - oh, of whom? ... the very question that you are asking us now: How can we prevent war? If we encourage the daughters to enter the professions without making any conditions as to the way in which the professions are to be practised shall we not be doing our best to stereotype the old tune which human nature, like a gramophone whose needle has stuck, is now grinding out with such disastrous unanimity? 'Here we go round the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree. Give it all to me, give it all to me, all to me. Three hundred millions spent upon war.' (TG, pp.68-9)

It is not, however, a dilemma which can be resolved within the terms of her own argument, partly because it is never clear whether she sees the 'feminine' as innate or social in origin. There is also a conflict with the notion of androgyny. In A Room of One's Own the ideal of a mixture of male and female characteristics was suggested, but here these are polarised; the male seen as destructive, the female as nurturing. Yet the androgynous ideal also prevents unambiguous praise of the female qualities in isolation. Whilst insisting that women should participate in the 'male' world, Woolf remains confused as to the possible price of this participation both for women and for society as a whole.

Later feminists have resolved the problem by arguing that the feminine is a purely social creation, which gives their theories greater consistency if no more validity than Woolf's. Given the complexity of the issues involved it is hardly surprising that Woolf is sometimes confused in her argument.

More disturbing, however, is the purism and élitism which results from her attempts to reconcile the contradictions. If women are to participate in social life more fully yet without sacrificing their valuable characteristics, then the terms of their participation must be closely defined. Woolf's proposals for women's education, for example, suggest that this must deliberately foster those traits which have flourished accidentally through centuries of domestic life.

The poor college must teach only the arts that can be taught cheaply and practised by poor people; such as medicine, mathematics, music, painting and literature. It should teach the arts of human intercourse; the art of understanding other people's lives and minds, and the little arts of talk, of dress, of cookery that are allied with them. (TG, p.40)

Her notion of femininity is an aristocratic one: despite the mention of poverty, her college sounds more like a finishing school for young ladies than a school for radicals. E.M. Forster makes this point somewhat more sympathetically than Q.D. Leavis, commenting:

She felt herself to be not only a woman but a lady, and this gives a further twist to her social outlook.
("Virginia Woolf", Two Cheers for Democracy, (Arnold, 1972) p.238)

Despite their shared background in the liberal intelligentsia, Forster clearly feels alienated from both the substance and the manner of Woolf's book, describing it as "cantankerous"

and her worst. Furthermore, he considers her feminism "old-fashioned", not, as we might expect, because of its high moral and social tone, but because he regards the oppression she attacks as already weakening.

By the 1930s she had much less to complain of, and seems to keep on grumbling from habit. (p.249)

It seems that Woolf's uneasy combination of the mandarin and the radical alienates all sides in the argument she pursues. It is probable that the young women Forster regarded as the best judges of the book, the young women who, as Winifred Holtby pointed out, (3) had vastly different expectations from those of their predecessors in the 1920s, were as alienated by Woolf's élitism as Forster was by what he saw as her strident feminism.

This élitism extends to her conception of women's place in the social world. For the high moral standards she demands of women in public life depend on what she describes as 'mental chastity'. In one form, that of a 'freedom from unreal loyalties', this follows logically from their previous exclusion from these spheres: patriotism, the 'old-boy' network, political self-seeking were all irrelevant to women. Woolf, however, takes the argument further by claiming that to maintain their intellectual freedom and potential for social criticism, women must be totally free of economic dependence and debts to the establishment. This appears at first sight reasonable but in fact, and she herself suggests these implications, it means that the only women capable of fulfilling these high expectations are those with an independent income. The theme of £500 a year and a room of one's own re-emerges in an altered form. She would ask, for example, women who write

to pledge themselves not to write anything that defiles culture, or to sign any contract that infringes intell-

ectual liberty. And to that the answer ... would be short but sufficient: Have I not to earn my living?
(TG, p.106)

Although the persona of A Room of One's Own had herself an income of £500 a year, she exhorted other women to strive to to earn their living by their own efforts. Here such economic struggle appears as an obstacle to the vital attribute of 'mental chastity.'

The weakness of this argument is twofold. Firstly Woolf appears unaware that the private incomes to which she refers are the outcome of a system of oppression which she professes to despise. Similarly the 'culture' she seeks to preserve is a highly exclusive one. Secondly, what she appears to argue here is that only women of a certain class are able to contribute, by means of the attributes gained through centuries of economic inactivity, to the struggle against war and tyranny. This is presumably why Q.D. Leavis regarding herself as a working woman, if a middle-class one, was so irritated by the book. It also excludes from the programme of social reform all those working-class women for whom Woolf expresses such sympathy, if little understanding, in her introduction to Life As We Have Known It. In the context of Three Guineas it is no excuse that she acknowledges her ignorance of working-class women's lives. The book is specifically directed at the 'daughters of educated men' whom she sees as currently the most powerless of all social groups.

Not only are we incomparably weaker than the men of our own class; we are weaker than the women of the working class. If the working women of the country were to say: 'If you go to war, we will refuse to make munitions, or to help in the production of goods' the difficulty of war-making would be seriously increased. But if all the daughters of educated men were to down tools tomorrow, nothing essential either to the life or to the war-making of the community would be embarrassed. Our class is the

weakest of all the classes in the state. We have no weapon with which to enforce our will. (TG, p.16)

But it is precisely this group which she places in the vanguard of reform, leaving no place for the political understanding, organisation or economic influence of the working-class - men or women. In addition to its immense naivety this argument depends on an aristocratic conception of both society and women. Political struggle is seen as confined to a narrow area of high culture and even higher morals whilst the ideal of woman seems to be that of the social élite: freed by their position from the sordid necessities of economic survival, skilled in the arts of music, literature and conversation, Woolf's women are no more than the Angel of the House transposed to the public sphere.

Such a view of society had little relevance to the 1930s as Graham Greene, in an otherwise surprisingly sympathetic review, noted.

When Mrs Woolf's argument touches morality or religion we are aware of odd sounds in the shell. Can a shell be a little old-fashioned ... a little provincial, even a little shrill? Can a shell be said to lead a too sheltered life? ("From the Mantelpiece," Spectator, 17.6.1938, pp.110-2)

The conclusion would seem to be that when discussing areas with which she is familiar Woolf's writing is full of astute observation and demonstrates an ability to cut through hypocrisy and casuistry. This is true even in Three Guineas where, for example, she shows the fallaciousness of the argument that men and women each have separate spheres of activity, both equally valuable and respected, by pointing out that women are not paid for their work as wives and mothers. Society, she suggests, does not consider women's work worthy of financial reward. Elsewhere, however, she flounders in her own social ignorance and in an idealism which

is not merely impractical but positively damaging to our understanding of women's actual and potential position.

As a critic, Woolf's awareness of the specific influences operating on women writers, if not her conception of the particular nature of their work, makes her a forerunner of much subsequent feminist criticism. However, her attachment to a traditional stereotype of the 'feminine' creates certain problems for the modern critic in reviewing her work. Perhaps the most significant contribution of Woolf's polemical writing lies in her awareness of the connections between women's artistic and literary production and their social position, between, in her own case and that of the other authors she discusses, the woman and the writer.

In the context of the present study she brings into the open many of the problems surrounding the definition and usage of the terms 'female' and 'feminine.' Precisely because she does not make a distinction between the biological (the 'female') and the social/cultural (the 'feminine') she suggests at times that 'femininity' is a natural and inherent feature of femaleness and demonstrates the difficulty of drawing a line between 'nature' and 'nurture' in our perception of women. Furthermore, by providing an example of feminist thought in the period from which many of the texts to be considered here originate, she gives a historical dimension and point of comparison to our third term, the 'feminist'.

We may now turn our attention to the operation of these categories, and the social processes which determine them, in the work of specific women novelists. The examples are drawn from the 1920s to the 1970s but tend to group around the '20s and the '60s and '70s for it was these decades which witnessed, on the one hand the decline, on the other the growth of two distinct feminist movements. The authors chosen all illustrate in various forms the influence and perception of the 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist' in women's writing.

(1) Herbert Marder, Feminism and Art: a study of Virginia Woolf, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1968.)

(2) A similar argument appears, for example, in Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own, and Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists?" in Hess & Baker eds., .
Art and Sexual Politics, (New York, Collier Books, 1973.)

(3) Winifred Holtby, Women, (1934)(John Lane the Bodley Head, 1945.)

CHAPTER 5

LANGUAGE AND THE FAMILY: IVY COMPTON-BURNETT'S DOMESTIC WORLD

Having passed through a certain cult popularity, the work of Ivy Compton-Burnett seems now to be regarded as unfashionable, even old-fashioned, although her final, posthumous, novel was published only in 1971. Yet despite her habit of setting her fiction in the late nineteenth century, and the apparently conventional femininity of their subject-matter - the domestic life of the English upper classes - I wish to suggest here that in both form and content her work is more original than this judgement would allow and merits more attention than it has received from modern critics of women's fiction. It may be useful to consider why her novels have been thus neglected, before attempting to justify these claims.

Reference to Compton-Burnett's fiction is brief and infrequent in recent works on women novelists such as Ellen Moers' Literary Women, Anthea Zeman's Presumptuous Girls and Showalter's A Literature of Their Own. The sense that these critics have that her work is irrelevant to the tradition and the discussion of women's writing arises from the combination of her apparently anachronistic subject-matter and her idiosyncratic style.

The late-Victorian world in which she chooses to set her novels was ended even before she started to write, and yet her work does not benefit either from the popularity of historical fiction. Hers are not period novels, for their ambience remains vaguely defined. Only in A House and Its Head does she provide us with a date, the novel opening on Christmas day 1885. The author herself offers two explanations for her choice of setting: the first may be seen in connection with the view of the female author writing only of that narrow area with which she is familiar.

I don not feel that I have any real or organic knowledge of life later than about 1910. I should not write of later times with enough grasp or confidence. (Interview with Margaret Jourdain, in C. Burkhart ed., The Art of I. Compton-Burnett, (Gollancz, 1972.) p.27)

The second reason involves a claim for the continued relevance of her material, but its social conservatism is hardly likely, either, to endear her to the feminist critics.

I think that some of these modern books that depict human life with people just roaming about London and living in rooms and sleeping with everybody - it's not interesting, because, of course, I can't read them. Everybody doesn't live like that, do they? ... They live in civilized houses as they always did. They have servants, as they always did, although fewer, ... I don't think people do alter - if they do, they react back again, don't they? There must be family life. (Quoted by Kay Dick, Ivy and Stevie, (Duckworth, 1971.) p.6)

The idiosyncrasy of her style, on the other hand, removes Compton-Burnett from the particular tradition and expectations of women's writing that a number of modern critics have attempted to delineate. She is sometimes compared to Jane Austen but, whilst her ability to reveal meanness, hypocrisy and self-seeking in her characters through the words she puts in their own mouths is reminiscent of Austen's verbal wit, the difference lies in the fact that Compton-Burnett's characters are discovered almost entirely through their own words. The ambiguous or ironic authorial comment typical of Austen is absent from her work: she is, paradoxically, a novelist devoted solely to the subtleties and intricacy of the spoken word. This means also that detailed accounts of physical appearance, of character or of scene, are absent, as are the sensitivity to atmosphere we find, for example, in Virginia Woolf, and the labyrinth of introspection, the complex reactions between characters which typify Elizabeth Bowen. As Mary McCarthy argues, however, ('The Inventions of I. Compton-Burnett', The Writing on the Wall, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), pp.112-144) it is a critical myth that physical description is absent from Compton-Burnett's fiction. Rather, it is characterised in her work by a particular formality and is concerned less with individual appearance than with signs which merely enable one character to be

immediately distinguished from another, or with establishing certain relationships, particularly familial ones, between characters.

Eliza ... turned her eyes in maternal feeling on her own children, her expression revealing that it was strong and deep. She was a fair, almost handsome woman of fifty five, with solid aquiline features and a short, upright frame, and active hands that seemed their natural complement.

Her daughter and second child was like and unlike her, with another strain showing in her lighter form and face, and something both weaker and stronger in the impression she made.

The only son, Angus, was as short for a man as his mother for a woman, broad and heavy and almost plain, with a likeness to his father that gave him his family place. They both had more expressive eyes than Eliza, grey in Roberta and hazel in Angus; and Roberta had also what were known as Heriot hands, while Angus's recalled Sir Robert's. Though now between the ages of twenty and twenty-four they were conscious of Eliza and under constraint in her presence.

Hermia, her elder step-daughter, bore the strongest likeness to the father, which was noted by strangers and ignored by Eliza, ... Hermia was a tall, dark, restless woman of thirty-four, with a look of being personally unusual, inherited from her father and recognised by herself. ...

Madeline, four years younger, was taller and fairer and more ordinary, with pale eyes, a compressed nose and mouth, long, rather lifeless hands and limbs and her own self-esteem, which Eliza was inclined to accept, indeed almost saw as justified. (The Last and the First, (Gollancz, 1971), pp.16-17)

This form of presentation of characters suggests that the writer is less concerned with individual personality than with

the structure of relationships - particularly within the family. But since her analysis of these structures is rarely overt, being articulated instead through the speech of her characters themselves, we may understand why those critics searching for political relevance are led to ignore or neglect Compton Burnett: on the one hand she offers no overt political or social comment, on the other, the austerity of language and imagery isolates her work from the conventions of 'feminine' writing. Her style furthermore makes it difficult for critics to situate her work within any stylistic tradition of the novel. Attempts are made to establish a connection with a range of work from Greek drama to Henry James, but never with any degree of success(1). Whilst this style is, as we shall see, highly distinctive, it cannot be said to have developed significantly in the course of Compton Burnett's long writing career (2). It became somewhat more precise and succinct in her later books, but altered little in essentials.

This fact, combined with the deliberate limitation of subject-matter, makes for a certain uniformity amongst her works: although the names change and the details of intra-familial conflict vary, the books are not sharply distinguished one from another. Cumulatively, therefore, they convey very powerfully the way of life they present, but for the critic this uniformity poses the problem of which books to select from a considerable body of work for closer attention. The solution adopted here is to choose one book from the early part of her career, one from the middle period and the final, posthumously published, novel. As well as demonstrating the consistency of style, material and approach, this enables us to discuss the characteristics of Compton Burnett's fiction without the confusions arising from the introduction of larger numbers of rather similar novels.

Despite critical neglect, there seem to be two major aspects of her work which merit further attention. Firstly, the particular picture of the domestic scene that she offers, and secondly, her conception of the role of speech and

language within this scene. It might be assumed that her concentration on family life arises from what is conventionally regarded as a characteristic female ignorance of other areas. However, Compton-Burnett makes a very clear and deliberate distinction between public and private life and suggests that her neglect of the former involves a very conscious choice, permitting a deeper understanding of the domestic scene.

Their professions and occupations are indicated, but I am concerned with their personal lives; and following them into their professional world would lead to the alternations between two spheres, that I think is a mistake in books. (Burkhart ed., op. cit., pp.23-24)

Thus in Brothers and Sisters Christian leaves his home for his work as a doctor, but the work itself is of little relevance to the novel's plot. Osbert Grimstone's work as a lawyer is equally irrelevant to the content of The Last and the First. Her characters frequently live in the country and work in London, further accentuating the distinction between domestic and public life. For others their work is the running of the household or estate, is contained within the domestic scene itself. One effect of this total concentration on the home is the absence of any distinction in her novels between areas of male and female activity - the world and the home. Male and female characters alike are shown in and concerned with the home, which is the scene of drama and tedium for all alike.

In considering the nature of domestic life as portrayed in her fiction, we are struck with her obsession with the possibility and nature of economic and political tyrannies petty only in the limited area of their effectiveness. A House and Its Head, for example, opens with a display of such domestic tyranny.

'Are you going to give the servants their presents afterwards?' said Sybil. 'I always think you do it so perfectly, Father. It is a thing some people would make

so awkward.'

'There are no presents for the servants this year,' said Ellen, stumbling over the words, and withdrawing her eyes from her husband. 'I mean, I have not got them; I have not been able. I was just going to ask Father for some money for them.' Her eyes came back to rest on her daughters.

'I do not like this giving of money to people who have served us personally through the year. We should choose their present for them as individuals. I believe I have spoken of that before.'

'Yes, but I could not get them out of the money for the Christmas expenses. I had thought about it, and planned what they would like; but the other things came to more than you thought, than we thought when we went over them together.'

'All that money gone on a few domestic expenses! It marks the difference between people. It would take me a longer time to spend it on better things.'

'The money has gone on many domestic expenses,' said Nance. 'You forget the sacredness of the home, Father. You and I will stay away from church, and consider the quarter's bills, and arrange an allowance for Mother on the basis of them.'

'And how long has it been your business to talk of an allowance for your mother, or any other affairs of people above you? You need give no thought to any allowance but your own. As long as you need that, you are in no position to.'

'It has been my business since I saw it was imperative. For some time now.'

'And are you the head of the house, or am I?'

'Oh, you are, Father; and I want Mother to be.'

Nance put her hand on Duncan's. 'Do stop trying to be a man and a woman as well.'

(A House and Its Head, (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951), pp18-19)

Compton-Burnett is fascinated by the anatomy of power and

this passage illustrates its five main elements within her fiction: the divisions between those who have and those who receive, between parents and children, master and servant and between male and female, and the use of language as an instrument of power. All these elements cut across each other, forming the complex pattern of power relations within each novel. Whilst the division of power in this passage clearly involves sex-roles, elsewhere, in The Last and the First, for example, the family tyrant is the female parent. Her power, however, is threatened by her step-daughter Hermia's inheritance. Hermia sets out the possibility of her economic tyranny which is acknowledged by the whole family.

'Well, the money need not be legally transferred, if that is too definite a giving up. And if the position of benefactor would be better kept by holding it. I have not anything against the position. I don't suppose anyone would have. And the money could be depended on. There would be no doubt.'

'It is for you to say,' said Sir Robert. 'We should anyhow be taking it from you.'

'It is,' said Eliza. 'And it has been said. By the person who has a right to say it. We know how it is to be.'

'We do,' said Angus. 'And how good it is. We take it from Hermia's hands as from those of a goddess.'

'We do. That is how we are to take it. It is not often that something falls from nowhere and confers the place.'

'From nowhere? Well, from Hamilton Grimstone. Did he know he was creating a goddess?'...

...'It is a daughter, a single woman, who holds the place. It is much to be on her, much to take from her, much to owe her in the end. We can hardly know our own thoughts.'

(LF, pp.126-7)

Hermia relinquishes such absolute power, but the figure of the female tyrant is a reality throughout Compton-Burnett's fiction.

She makes no distinction between men and women when she suggests that tyranny and evil are largely a matter of opportunity.

But I think that life makes great demands on people's characters, and gives them, and especially used to give them, great opportunity to serve their own ends by the sacrifice of other people. Such ill-doing may meet with little retribution, may indeed be hardly recognised, and I cannot feel so surprised if people yield to it. (Burkhart, ed., op. cit., p.30)

What the particular class setting of her books frequently obscures is that, in terms of economic control, this opportunity generally arises less often for women than it does for men.

The domestic scene of Compton-Burnett's fiction, then, is dominated by its tyrants, both male and female. But she is concerned also with their victims, with the effects of their power on others. Whilst arguing that characters are limited by circumstances, she insists on a range of possible reactions to each situation.

I think that economic forces influence people a great deal, that many things in their lives are bound up with them. Their scale of values, their ambitions and ideas for the future, their attitude to other people and themselves.

I think they are all in the grip of forces - economic, and psychological and hereditary ... But I suppose that part of people's equipment is a certain power of choice and strength of will.

(Interview with Michael Millgate, Burkhart ed., op. cit., p.43)

Thus Hermia rejects her opportunity to dominate her family as Eliza had. In the same way the victims react differently to their lack of power. They may, like Nance, resist the power

of the tyrant openly or, like Richard, conceal their resentment. It is, however, interesting that Compton-Burnett usually chooses to present the female children as the more resistant to authority. This is not so much as an expression of her view of sex-difference, but suggests the function of language within her novels. As they are constructed almost entirely through dialogue, it is speech itself which is seen as both the instrument of power and the most important weapon in the struggle to achieve power for oneself or to challenge that of others. Compton-Burnett appears to accept the stereotype of a 'feminine' felicity of language, for it is her female characters who are especially articulate. She gives this convention, however, a new twist - using it to define in part women's function within a system of power relations. This may also help to explain the preponderance of female tyrants in her novels.

It is the family tyrant or the figure of authority - the clergyman or teacher - who has always the power and right of speech. Thus in Brothers and Sisters, where power passes from Andrew Stace to his daughter Sophia they share the gift of speech.

Sophia looked very like her father as she made use of his gift of fluent speech (Brothers and Sisters, (1929), (Gollancz, 1950), p.15)

Others take it and use it as they can, participating in this way in the struggle for power within the family. Dinah comments ironically on this function of speech in the domestic scene.

'And now judgement passed on our pausing to have a word together on the landing,' said Dinah. 'As though it were not a happy condition for a family to be on speaking terms!' (p.35)

For it is, in a Compton-Burnett novel, precisely through speech that animosities and intra-familial struggles are both enacted

and revealed: the structure of her books determines that what is not spoken does not exist. The author demonstrates, within her own highly specific milieu, the Lacanian premise concerning the primacy of language in socialization and social control, without, however, endorsing his association of linguistic authority with the phallus.

Discussing this relation of speech and power in Compton-Burnett's fiction, Mary McCarthy suggests a number of devices, related to speech, through which this struggle for power is carried out. One of these is mimicry, another eavesdropping. Thus Grant mimics the clergyman, a figure of authority, and is discovered by his uncle, the discovery diminishing the sense of power achieved through mimicry.

'Grant, you appear to be taking the lead. Have you had time to collect your thoughts?'

'We were playing a game, as Sybil said, Uncle.'

'You are not capable of forming a reply? Nance, can you give me an answer?'

'No. I cannot. You paralyse me, Father.'

'Grant, whom are you held to be impersonating?'

'Any clergyman, Uncle.'

'Was there nothing else you could think of, to besmirch? You display a belated boyishness.'

'Nothing else came into my mind. That is the only kind of thing we have come into contact with today.'

'You had better have gone to the children's service,' said Duncan, his tone hardly doing well by his earlier suggestion. 'Nance, did this exhibition strike you as humorous?'

'Well, yes, it did, Father.'

'You were in need of something to distract your mind from the thoughts of the day?'

'Yes, I think we were.' (HH, pp.37-8)

As the passage illustrates, each scene in a Compton-Burnett novel enacts the power structure within the family. Here it

is Duncan who is the tyrant whilst his daughter Nance makes the most obvious attempt to resist his authority. The scene recapitulates the resentments and animosities around which the book revolves. This form emphasises an essential quality of Compton-Burnett's fiction: just as she suggests that human life and human nature remain basically unchanged, so in each novel the basic structure of power remains unaltered. The tyrant is not overthrown although he or she may be replaced, due to death or changes in the distribution of wealth, by another.

If this suggests that her books are totally gloomy it should also be noted that they display considerable wit and verbal comedy intrinsic to the structure of the novels. For in these households all that happens is spoken and the fact that all thought has to be betrayed in speech, often against the will of the speaker, is the basis of much of the comedy. This view of the novels, with its emphasis on speech and power presents the complexities of plot and the use of melodrama as peripheral, rather than the real substance of her fiction. They are devices dictated by her conception of the novel as artifice.

I think something must happen in a book - or there is no book. It seems to me that a book must have a structure. It may be an old-fashioned view, but I am surprised by some of these modern books which have no structure at all, but are just a piece of life carved out. It isn't natural for me to write like that. I seem to want a bone foundation for them. The structure is in a sense the bone of the book. (Burkhart ed., op. cit. p.35)

She makes it clear that her own novels make no attempt at the realistic representation of life. This is indeed apparent from their idiosyncratic style and distanced setting. Nevertheless, criticism based on the supposed irrelevance of her fiction to contemporary social issues seems to rest on an expectation of realism. We may suggest that what she attempts

is rather a presentation of structures and relationships analogous to those of life and more readily exhibited when stripped of much of the detail of social, and fictional, realism.

I think that actual life supplies a writer with characters much less than is thought. ... people in life hardly seem to be definite enough to appear in print. They are not good or bad enough. They would have to be presented by means of detailed description, and would not come through in talk. ...

As regards plots I find real life no help at all. Real life seems to have no plots. And as I think a plot desirable and almost necessary, I have this extra grudge against life. But I think there are signs that strange things happen, though they do not emerge. I believe it would go ill with many of us, if we were faced by a strong temptation, and I suspect that with some of us it does go ill. (Burkhart ed., op. cit. pp.27-8)

This does not mean that what her novels do is to reveal the presence of the dramatic in the everyday. Indeed the reverse is more true since the dominant experience within her families is that of tedium which persists through the most dramatic and horrifying events of her plots. Rather, she makes the everyday itself more visible and exposes the structures - of power and hostility - which underlie domestic life.

We may recall here what was said in chapter three concerning the way in which fictional realism obscures the processes of the life it claims to depict. Compton-Burnett's fiction lacks the massive solidity of more conventional domestic fiction precisely because she reveals the patterns which lie beneath the surface of family life. The books are 'unrealistic' not only because they give the impression of a stage-set rather than a 'real' environment, but also because all her characters, including the servants, are impossibly articulate. As we have seen, this arises from her view of language as the

area in which conflict occurs, power is established and sustained. The emphasis on language has an important consequence for the presentation of women in her fiction, for, if the actions of female characters are limited in the Victorian household their verbal engagements in its power struggles are not. Women are just as much, or as little, active agents in her world as are their male counterparts.

Furthermore, whilst the domestic scene is a traditionally 'female' one for the novelist, Compton-Burnett's is not the domestic world of the cradle and the kitchen-sink but one in which the same processes of conflict and oppression which characterise the public sphere dominate human existence and relationships. Whilst her milieu is Victorian she implicitly rejects the Victorian view of the home, and the 'feminine', as a sanctuary from the struggles of public life. Her style too challenges the notion of 'feminine' writing we found in Woolf's book, for language is seen as instrumental rather than reflective, laying bare sharply defined animosities rather than exploring subtle and complex experience. She is concerned not with the texture of domestic life but its anatomy, and this brings her much closer to later writers such as Fay Weldon than to some of her own contemporaries.

The uncompromising quality of her style and her attitude was noted by Elizabeth Bowen.

Miss Compton-Burnett, as ever, makes few concessions; she has not, like some of our writers, been scared or moralised into attempts to converge on the 'real' in life. But possibly, life has converged on her. Elizabethan implacability, tonic plainness of speaking, are not so strange to us as they were. This is a time for hard writers - and here is one. (New Statesman and Nation, 1941, reprinted Burkhart ed., op. cit. p.57)

Compton-Burnett offers a mode in which the 'feminine' or domestic sphere can be presented without certain stereo-

typic elements of style and treatment. She does so partly by denying the term 'feminine' any validity: it is hardly an epithet applicable to any of her women characters. Whilst her books present an implicit challenge to the ideology of the Angel in the House it remains hard to see her as a 'feminist', for issues of gender seem to her largely irrelevant. Perhaps this is the ultimate form of feminism, but it is one with which we can hardly feel comfortable so long as gender remains such a crucial determinant of social life and individual experience. Her interest for this study lies rather in her achievement in shaping a style which owed little to either the 'feminine' tradition or to the epic of family life in the manner of Galsworthy or Bennett, and in her radically unsentimental portrait of domestic life.

The problem of where a writer of this type stands in relation to the terms 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist' will arise again later in the discussion of Fay Weldon. Here we may turn to a novelist who, despite her praise of Compton-Burnett quoted above, appears to offer significant contrasts in both style and material and in her relationship to these categories.

(1) See Michael Millgate, "Interview with Miss Compton-Burnett," Burkhart ed., op. cit. pp.32-47.

(2) The only novel which differs radically from the rest of her fiction is the earliest, Dolores, which she subsequently attempted to suppress.

CHAPTER 6

ELIZABETH BOWEN AND THE USES OF THE 'FEMININE'

The issues which Elizabeth Bowen's work raises for the present study differ considerably from those dealt with in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, whilst her relationship to the concepts of the 'female' and the 'feminine' contrasts to that of Compton-Burnett, these terms remain equally valuable in any attempt to view her fiction as both the product of an individual literary talent and as part of the pattern of women's writing.

Initially we may suggest that she explores the texture of individual experience and the complexity of emotional relationships rather than anatomising structures of power. She develops an intricate prose style which articulates these complexities and displays considerable sensitivity to details of atmosphere and scene. This seems to place her, both stylistically and thematically, in the tradition of women's writing as characterised by Woolf in her discussion of Dorothy Richardson and Kermode in his presentation of Colette. We should also recall, however, that Burgess noted similarities between Bowen's writing and that of Henry James.

Take Elizabeth Bowen, for instance, passages from some of whose books could be inserted in novels by Henry James without anybody's remarking on the intrusion of a feminine voice. (The Novel Now, pp.121-2)

The contradictions of Burgess's use of the 'feminine' in this context have already been discussed, but the comparison with James remains a valid one, extending to thematic as well as stylistic elements. The structuring of The Death of the Heart around opposing houses and groups of characters, for instance, recalls The Awkward Age whilst the book's exploration of innocence and its opposite can be compared to a similar theme in What Maisie Knew.

What Burgess, albeit unintentionally, reveals in this comparison is that what he describes as a 'feminine' or a 'yin' style is less a gender-defined mode than one available

to writers of both sexes. Having seen, in Ivy Compton-Burnett, a woman novelist who rejects this 'feminine' style and transforms the 'female' domestic area, we may now ask whether it is possible for a female writer to transform and exploit the style itself in order to explore areas more conventionally associated with the 'masculine'. The possibility that this was indeed an aspect of Bowen's approach to her work is suggested by her comments on other female authors. We have already seen her praise for Compton-Burnett as a 'hard' writer; her comments on Katherine Mansfield emphasise the same theme.

Useless as it is to lament her going, let us not forget she would have stayed if she could, and fought to do so with savage courage ... Born with good nerve, she had learned comprehensive courage, and in a hard school. In spite of setback after setback, she was already on her way towards equilibrium. Her spirit was of the kind which does not die down. Her beauty, even, was of the enduring kind, hardy and resolute in cast as it was mysterious in atmosphere. ("Stories by Katherine Mansfield," After-thoughts, (Longmans, 1962,) pp.53-4)

She equates this quality with a certain 'masculinity' in Mansfield.

In her letters appears a brusque, formidable, masculine streak, which we must not overlook in the stories. Her art has backbone. Her objectiveness, her quick, sharp observations, her adept presentations - are these taken into account enough? (p.65)

'Toughness' then is a quality which Bowen does not see as incongruous in an author frequently seen as highly 'feminine' in the passion and sensitivity of both her work and her life. Before we consider this issue in relation to her own fiction, however, we may briefly examine her theory of the novel in relation to the theories of Woolf and Compton-Burnett.

Like the latter, she sees plot as the essence of fiction: not a skeleton on which character, scene and language hang, but the form in which the primary conception of each novel presents itself to the novelist.

Plot might seem to be a matter of choice. It is not. The particular plot is something the novelist is driven to. It is what is left after the whittling-away of alternatives. The novelist is confronted, at a moment (or at what appears to be the moment: actually its extension may be indefinite) by the impossibility of saying what is to be said in any other way. ("Notes on Writing a Novel," Collected Impressions, (Longmans, Green, 1950) P.249)

Plot is the particular form in which the book's 'truth' is embodied and Bowen sees the novel as the "non-poetic statement of a poetic truth." (p.250) 'Poetic' is the key-word here for, like Woolf who insists that 'poets' give a more complete picture of reality than do 'truth-tellers', she does not equate 'truth' with 'fact'.

You may say: 'If one wants truth, why not go to the literally true book? Biography or documentary, these amazing accounts of amazing experiences people have.' Yes, but I am suggesting to you that there is a distinction between truth and so-called reality. What these people write in their accounts of happenings is actually and factually true, but the novel is not confining itself to what happened. The novel does not simply recount experience, it adds to experience. ... the novelist's imagination has a power of its own. It does not merely invent, it perceives. It intensifies, therefore it gives power, extra importance, greater truth and greater inner reality to what may well be ordinary and everyday things. ("Truth and Fiction," Afterthoughts, p.114)

There is nothing specifically 'feminine' in this view.

Indeed, it recalls the Romantic theory of art: what Bowen calls the 'lie' enlarges our sense of reality. However, it is a view with particular relevance to domestic fiction and the novel of personal relationships. If the truth or significance of an event lies not in its public importance but its import for the individual consciousness then this sort of novel can claim a significance equal to that of social or political fiction: it does not confine itself to the trivial but presents one amongst a range of areas of reality. Thus, in The Heat of the Day, the subject is not war itself but its implications for a small group of characters and their network of relationships.

We can consider this theory in relation to Bowen's literary practice, looking in particular at her first novel, The Hotel, and the two books, The Death of the Heart and The Heat of the Day, which perhaps show her style at its most mature, and most Jamesian. Each of these works offers a subtle exploration of a particular phase in the life of the female protagonist: adolescence, youth, maturity.

The Hotel is the least complex of these three books. In conception it recalls Mansfield's In a German Pension but takes the form of a single narrative rather than a collection of shorter pieces. Although less bitter in tone than Mansfield's stories, the novel explores the ambiguities of its characters' motivation and dissects with sharp irony the workings of their social world. It was suggested in chapter two that the authoritative authorial tone is one which female writers may have grounds to avoid, and this book clearly demonstrates the ways in which Bowen indirectly manipulates our judgement and understanding by counterpointing various characters rather than offering a direct assessment, and by using atmosphere and scene as an indication of the unspoken.

Both these devices are used in the presentation of the friendship between Sydney Warren and Mrs Kerr. The nature of their relationship is never clearly delineated but is defined

only by its limits, in the contrast with the 'romantic friendship' of Miss Pym and Miss Fitzgerald - which structurally 'frames' the whole narrative - and the comments of other guests. On the one hand Miss Pym reflects

It was wonderful to have somebody, always there, with whom one could discuss the most difficult phases of one's relationship (afterwards) simply and frankly. Whoever might come or might go, there would always be that. Friendship is such a wonderful basis in Life - or has such a wonderful basis in Life: either, she thought, was true. Miss Pym thought of her friend Emily with tenderness. (The Hotel, (1927) (Jonathan Cape, 1950,) p.268)

On the other, a guest discusses the relationship with Sydney's cousin.

'I have known other cases,' said somebody else, looking about vaguely for her scissors, 'of these very violent friendships. One didn't feel those others were quite healthy.'

'I should discourage any daughter of mine from a friendship with an older woman. It is never the best women who have these strong influences, I would far rather she lost her head about a man.'

'Sydney hasn't lost her head,' said little Tessa with dignity.

'Oh but, Mrs Bellamy - I was talking about other cases.' (The Hotel, pp.84-5)

In reality the relationship is neither as supportive as that of Miss Pym and Miss Fitzgerald nor as sordid as the guest suggests. Bowen manipulates these alternatives so that the reader can accept neither as a view of Sydney's friendship until we, like Sydney herself in a moment of confrontation with Mrs Kerr, are suddenly made aware of various hints and undertones running through the book which help us to form a clearer picture. The narrative enacts the structure of

ignorance, uncertainty and discovery which characterises the experience of Sydney and recurs in all the books. The pattern is repeated in Stella's visit to the restaurant with Harrison, in The Heat of the Day and Portia's conversation with Eddie in his rooms, in The Death of the Heart. Like Portia's, Sydney's experience is one of betrayal.

Sydney put down her plate on the table, showed with a gesture what exactly she had brought and silently began sipping her vermouth. 'That 'darling' must have been Ronald,' she thought: 'what a habit of mind he is!' ... 'Do relations become a habit?' she asked. 'I have so few.'

'I dare say they might,' said Mrs Kerr, very kind but abstracted. 'What a pity you've got so few' ... 'I mean after all, home life - Why don't you marry, Sydney?'

'I thought we'd been into that.'

'Yes, but it does worry me rather,' said Mrs Kerr, and turned upon her friend's downcast pallor a profound, limpid, yet prettily conventional stare.

A sharp movement of Sydney's foot shook the table, the china leaped on the tin. 'Well, if you'll keep Ronald a year or two -'

'Sydney!' exclaimed Mrs Kerr in a low voice, paused a moment and put down her fork. 'Don't be so - so ugly! It's like - I don't know what it's like; it's not like you.'
(The Hotel, pp.176-7)

The pattern is not simply that of the characters' experience but relates to Bowen's perception of the individual. In each novel there are characters who, despite partial revelation, remain essentially unknown. Mrs Kerr herself and Robert in The Heat of the Day are each an unknown quantity around which the plot revolves. Their opacity arises from the author's refusal to adopt the position of the omniscient narrator and her presentation of events largely from the perspective of a single character - Sydney, Portia, Stella - who is herself uncertain of her own motivation and ignorant of the other's. All these characters through whom we

receive the story are women and what seems to interest Bowen is the exploration of women's experience in various types of emotional relationships. It is not, however, an experience of submission, domesticity or even marriage: Sydney refuses to form a relationship with Ronald and ends her engagement to Milton; Stella returns to that condition of singleness which everything in her flat articulates as a part of her nature; Portia's betrayal by Eddie is also an escape. Bowen here uses the conventions of 'feminine' material to recast the image of female experience in terms of self-discovery and independence.

Similarly, the relationship of plot and character to scene suggests that the author is less concerned with capturing and conveying sense impressions, with the texture of experience, than with using atmosphere and setting in the novels' statement of 'truth'. In part scene supplements characterisation, for if personality cannot be disclosed directly one method of suggesting it to the reader is through an unspoken analogy with environment. Thus in The Hotel the bare rocky landscape and cloudless sky suggest both the inner solitude of the characters and the lack of privacy in the world of the hotel.

For two days the sun had been cut away by an opaque, grey, absolutely cloudless sky; this made the shapes of the hills and houses more important; an ascent of the heights became arduous in the cool, close air and one was loath to go far up any one of the valleys because one felt it shutting on one like a book. The disappearance of sunlight from the flowers deadened the colours of them; from being like flames, spontaneous, they became tawdry and adventitious; bougainvillaea traced a heavy pattern on the walls, geraniums were the flat stale pink of old confect-ionary, and the mimosa blotched the faces of the hills as monotonous and pale as mustard. The distances were pellucid; one would see for miles every detail of the coast, every ripple of the light sea, and these became important and a little ominous; one felt weighed down by them and half uneasy. (p.214)

The setting of the hotel itself provides Bowen with the opportunity for both social comedy and a sharper criticism. Thus Sydney's tortuous relationships are set off against the mindless prattle of the Lawrence girls, and Milton's high moral standards against the vacuousness of Victor Ammering and the philandering of Colonel Duperrier. The ladies' world of the drawing-room, and the desperate devotion of Mrs Lee-Mittison to her foolish husband are equally sources of social comedy and provide a glimpse of the personal horror behind the façade of convention and social ritual. This duality suggests the value of this traditionally 'female' area in fiction: the comedy of manners involves an exposure of the hypocrisy, fear and self-seeking on the underside of social life.

In The Hotel these themes and techniques are presented and used with less skill and subtlety than in the later books but because of this the novel provides a clear picture of Bowen's method. The same elements, however, compose both The Heat of the Day and The Death of the Heart. In the latter book, for example, there is an important structural contrast between the atmospheres of the house of Portia's brother and his wife in Windsor Terrace and the Heccomb household at Seale. The two suggest not only different social values and lifestyles but also stages in Portia's development. The Quayne house is one of surfaces and social order, with no space for emotion or provision for communal life.

She seemed ... to detect some lack of life in the house, some organic failure in its propriety. Lack in the Quaynes' life of family custom seemed not only to disorientate Matchett but to rouse her contempt - family custom, partly kind, partly cruel, that has long been rationalized away. In this airy vivacious house, all mirrors and polish, there was no place where shadows lodged, no point where feeling could thicken. The rooms were set for strangers' intimacy, or else for exhausted solitary retreat. (The Death of the Heart,) (1938) (Penguin Books, 1979,) p.42)

In contrast the size of the house at Seale enforces an awareness of its other inhabitants. At Windsor Terrace Portia can only divulge her thoughts to a private diary, at Seale she is able to confront both Eddie and Daphne directly after noticing them holding hands at the cinema.

In both books the domestic world, the female enclave of the drawing-room and the household dominated by Anna Quayne's cold correctness, is seen not as a sanctuary but an emotional battlefield in which innocence is lost, truth obscured. Despite this similarity, the movement from the public to the private drawing-room, from The Hotel to The Death of the Heart, is significant. In the later book Bowen has refined her use of subsidiary characters for comment on and contrast with the central figures. Here all characters fall into place on a spectrum of good and evil, innocence and corruption. This suggests once again that the author is exploiting her given form to move between its social surface and its moral and metaphysical foundation. Portia's innocence is set off against the irritating simplicity of Major Brutt and against the worldly wise Lilian, whilst Matchett offers a contrasting human warmth in the Windsor Terrace house. St Quentin's jaded scepticism provides further contrast as well as motivating the betrayal which acts as a kind of awakening for Portia. Through her range of characters Bowen suggests the ambiguities of good and of innocence: the innocents are as destructive as the consciously evil.

Innocence so constantly finds itself in a false position that inwardly innocent people learn to be disingenious. Finding no language in which to speak in their own terms they resign themselves to being translated imperfectly. They exist alone; when they try to enter into relationships they compromise falsifyingly - through anxiety, through desire to impart and to feel warmth. The system of our affections is too corrupt for them. They are bound to blunder, then to be told they cheat. In love, the sweetness and violence they have to offer involves

a thousand betrayals for the less innocent. Incurable strangers to the world, they never cease to exact a heroic happiness. Their singleness, their ruthlessness, their one continuous wish makes them bound to be cruel, and to suffer cruelty. The innocent are so few that two of them seldom meet - when they do meet their victims lie strewn all around. (DH, p.106)

The intricate prose and complex interweaving of plot, character and setting in the novel serve to explore the complexity of the themes and the experience which it presents. In The Heat of the Day the war-time setting accentuates the ambiguities of the characters' relationships, all appearing as strangers to each other and even to themselves. Harrison is the most obvious stranger of the book which opens with his chance meeting with Louie. Yet his role in the plot, as the counter-agent observing Stella's lover, creates a kind of false intimacy, emphasising that apparent closeness may conceal a real distance. The background of war enforces this view: strangers are thrown together through their work or in an intimacy of fear, whilst friends, relatives and lovers are separated and subjected to experiences which may change them radically. The relationship between Stella and her son Roderick, for example, is a disturbing mixture of familiarity, fear of loss and the strangeness and over-sensitivity which separation brings.

... all her movements seemed to him charmed and deft as, shifting his weight from one bare foot to the other, he re-propped himself against the frame of the door. In repose at last, he stood as she often stood. It was to be seen how, each time he came back like this, he was at the beginning physically at a loss; until, by an imitation of her attitudes he supplied himself with some way to behave, look, stand - even, you might say, be. His body could at least copy, if not at once regain, unsoldierly looseness and spontaneity. And he traced his way back to these attitudes, one by one, as though each could act

as a clue or signpost to the Roderick his mother remembered, the Roderick he could feel her hoping to see. He searched in Stella for some identity left by him in her keeping. It was a search undertaken principally for her sake; only she made him conscious of loss or change. It was his unconscious purpose to underline everything he and she had in common. ... For what nagged at her, what flickered into her look each time she confronted the soldier in battledress, was the fear that the Army was out to obliterate Roderick. In the course of a process, a being processed, she could do nothing to stop, her son might possibly disappear. (The Heat of the Day, (1949) (Penguin Books, 1979,) pp.48-9)

The book's plot revolves around this peculiar strangeness between intimates and intimacy between strangers, centring on the issue of Robert's activity as a spy, a betrayer not only of his country but of Stella's understanding of his nature. Bowen has suggested that the model for fiction, in terms of what she calls the 'relevance' of all its elements, is the detective-story. Here she chooses a plot with the elements of a spy-story and uses its structure and demands for the purposes of expressing or 'materializing' her themes. For the motif of the spy takes on a wider significance whilst the notion of observing and betraying comes to dominate the book's relationships.

... her watch on Robert's doors and windows, her dogging of the step of his thoughts, her search for the interstices of his mind. Her espionage - but, apparently, better that. Better that than what? Than the saying of 'I am told you are selling our country: are you?' She should by now, Robert might well reply, be able to judge for herself whether that could be possible. And he would be right, she should know - her having ever asked must end all equability between them. (HD, p.172)

To question, to spy, becomes a kind of betrayal both of Robert's

privacy and of their intimacy.

Throughout the novel relationships are seen in terms of a tension between a need for solitude and for companionship, a fear of loneliness and of intimacy. Thus Louie enters the plot precisely because her loneliness and strangeness to herself force her to strike up acquaintanceships with strangers. She finds Harrison fascinating because of his taciturnity, whilst Stella offers her a possible object of admiration. Her significance in the book is indicated by her presence in the crucial scene in which Harrison takes Stella to the basement restaurant. Here she becomes important to Stella as an escape from the threatened closeness to Harrison. A kind of relationship is established between the two women through their shared opposition to him, and between the three of them as they share revelation and disappointment.

'You must not blame him,' said Stella, 'it has been my fault. He's in trouble too ... Nothing ever works out the way one hoped, and to know how bitter that is one must be a worker-out - you and I are not. This evening was to have been a celebration, the first of many more evenings. It may still be the first of many more evenings, but what will they be worth? This is the truth,' she said, looking round her at all the other people apprehensively staring into each other's faces. 'He cannot bear it; let's hope he will forget it - let's hope that; it is the least we can do; we're all three human. At any time it may be your hour or mine - you or I may be learning some terrible human lesson which is to undo everything we thought we had. It's that, not death, that we ought to live prepared for.' (HD, p.240)

The theme continues in and is emphasised by Bowen's use of place. The restaurant in which the three meet has an air of illegality combined with the desperate seeking out of contact and pleasure. Stella resents Harrison's intrusion into the flat to which she later welcomes both Roderick and Robert,

yet she herself feels little more than a visitor there.

'I said I wanted a talk - Look is that an ash-tray there?' One hand held cautiously cupwise underneath his cigarette, he advanced, gained the hearthrug, knocked off the head of ash into a tray on the chimneypiece near her shoulder. 'Pretty,' he said softly. 'All your things are so pretty.'

'What is?' she said sharply.

'Even this ash-tray.' He was touching around the rim of it with the tip of a finger, it was an ordinary little enamel-flowered one, from any Chinese shop.

'It's not mine,' she flickered. 'Nothing in this flat is.'

There were, naturally, any number of other ash-trays about the room: she put the stratagem in its place by ignoring it. He had brought himself face to face with the mirror and photographs; she went on looking out of the window - only, her stillness and rigidity became more rigid and artificial. (HD, pp.27-8)

Harrison sees his handling of the objects surrounding Stella as a means of drawing closer to her, but her actual distance from his fantasy of their relationship is accentuated by the fact that these objects are not her own. It is his attention to the photographs which disturbs her: Harrison can only relate to and injure her through the connection with Robert.

We may now consider how far Bowen's style and method challenge the implications of the woman writer's definition in terms of the 'feminine.' We have already noted the comparison with James and the way it illustrates the inadequacy of a critical concept derived from a limiting ideology. The discussion of Bowen's fiction has suggested that those aspects of the novels which correspond to the stereotype of the 'feminine': the complexity of her prose style, her focus on the personal rather than the social, a sensitivity to detail

of scene and atmosphere, are neither ornaments to a shallow presentation of sentimentalised relationships nor a way of writing unconsciously determined by the author's self-image as a woman writer. The 'hardness' she admired in Compton-Burnett and Mansfield is present here in the meticulous integration of narrative and stylistic elements and in her rigorous probing of the motives underlying relationships and conduct.

Whilst her method may indicate that gender is irrelevant to the craft of fiction, however, we have seen that this method is exploited for the purpose of exploring and re-assessing the experience of her female characters. The specific quality of her work arises from the tension between conformity to and manipulation of sexual stereotypes. This makes any attempt to 'place' her as a novelist of the 'feminine' or the 'feminist' not only difficult but largely irrelevant to her work.

What Bowen emphasises in these books is that the 'feminine' style is not a mode pre-determined for the woman writer by her gender, but one which may be adopted and exploited to question some of the pre-literary assumptions on which the classification rests. This does not make her a 'feminist' writer in the sense that Michèle Roberts or even Fay Weldon could be so described although these writers also, as we shall see, exhibit a similar tension between conformity and challenge in their method.

The relationship of writers like Bowen and Compton-Burnett to both the ideology of the feminine and the feminist response, is complex and largely implicit in their work. We should, therefore, turn now to a group of authors who both provide a bridge between these earlier writers and those of the '60s and '70s, and, by virtue of their subject-matter are forced, and force their readers, to situate themselves more explicitly in relation to these concepts.

CHAPTER 7

CHALLENGE AND CONFORMITY: THE LESBIAN IN FICTION

This chapter does not examine the work of an individual author but considers the presentation of a specific subject in three novels by different authors. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the novels illustrate various changes in attitudes to the 'female', the 'feminine' and to feminism over the period from the 1920s to the 1970s, and demonstrate shifts in the possibilities open to the woman writer. Secondly, the books articulate different responses to one particular area of the ideology of femininity.

At the centre of this ideology lies a contradiction in its image of women. On the one hand, women's function is largely a sexual one. As we saw in chapter three, Lévi-Strauss analysed the role of women as objects of exchange between kinship groups, but without delving into pre-history it is clear that many of the images of women which surround us in our own culture, in film, advertising, fiction, are essentially sexual. Yet 'woman' is also the Angel in the House to whom the care of children and the preservation of moral values, which can thus be safely ignored in the 'male' public world, are entrusted.

This contradiction has been resolved by a view of female sexuality as largely passive, awaiting the demands of a more active male sexuality. Thus, whilst the sexually voracious woman provides endless material for fantasy and pornography, convention still categorises her as 'unfeminine'. Whilst women have often challenged this image, both privately and publicly, it remains a powerful determinant of both male attitudes and female behaviour and self-perception. Female homosexuality undermines the terms of this resolution, presenting the challenge of a female sexuality from which the male is excluded. Thus, whilst male homosexuality has been outlawed and persecuted, the reaction to lesbianism has been to ignore or deny its existence. This tactic is clearly demonstrated by Lord Desart in the House of Lords during the 1921 debate on a motion to extend the provisions of the Labouchère Amendment to female homosexuality.

You are going to tell the whole world that there is such an offence, to bring it to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamed of it. I think that is a very great mischief. I would be bold enough to say that of every thousand women, taken as a whole, 999 have never even heard a whisper of these practices. Among all these, in the homes of this country ... the taint of this noxious and horrible suspicion is to be imparted. (Quoted by Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out, (Quartet Books, 1977,) pp.106-7.)

The 'feminine' woman is thus to be protected from the lesbian by ignorance, for the view of female sexuality underlying these remarks excludes lesbianism from the area of naturally occurring feelings and responses. It sees as a 'perversion' any form of sexuality which implicitly denies the sexual passivity and dependence of women.

It is now possible to understand the strength of the taboos surrounding the subject and to see why, except in pornography, writers have been reluctant to deal with it. For to do so both challenges the ideology of femininity and, for the woman writer, exposes her to accusations of unfeminine deviancy in her choice of material. There was, nevertheless, by the time Radclyffe Hall published The Well of Loneliness in 1928, already a considerable body of literature which referred in some way to lesbianism. This has been most fully documented by Jeanette Foster in her survey Sex Variant Women in Literature, (Baltimore, Diana Press, 1975). Foster argues that this material has been largely suppressed and ignored, although we may add that the suppression has often originated with the authors themselves.

No class of printed matter except outright pornography has suffered more critical neglect, exclusion from libraries or omission from collected works than variant belles-lettres. (Foster, p.15)

Thus during the Well of Loneliness trial, the Attorney-general, Sir Thomas Inskip, claimed to know of only two literary references to lesbianism. (1) Gertrude Stein offers an example of self-censorship, first suppressing her early autobiographical account of a lesbian triangle, then transposing it into heterosexual terms before all her writing became entangled in a skillful obscurity. (2) Virginia Woolf, in contrast, concealed the implications of Orlando beneath its playfulness and escaped the opprobrium heaped upon Hall in the same year for her more deeply committed novel.

Changes in attitude to the subject are clear from the fact that 'token lesbians' have become an acceptable feature of novels in the 1970s, in the books of Fay Weldon, for example. These characters are often presented as sad and lonely women, unable to relate either to men or to 'normal' women: the lesbian Alice in Weldon's Little Sisters is simply a caricature of the butch woman with 'some kind of genetic deficiency.' In fact, it is in the novel without such token figures that Weldon portrays most convincingly the possibility of women living and working independently from men and demonstrates that

Men are irrelevant. Women are happy or unhappy, fulfilled or unfulfilled and it has nothing to do with men.
(Down Among the Women, (Penguin Books, 1973,) p.84)

We may infer from this paradox that, because of the continuing force of the ideology of femininity, lesbianism remains a difficult theme to handle in the novel and that many writers choose to avoid any direct treatment of sexuality in relationships between women. This solution offers one approach to the subject and suggests a specific relationship to the ideology to which it may be seen as a response. Here, however, we shall consider three examples of a more extended and overt presentation of the subject in fiction. The three novels, Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness, Djuna Barnes' Nightwood and Michèle Roberts' A Piece of the Night,

illustrate various possibilities of style and treatment and suggest differing relationships to the terms of the 'feminine' and the 'feminist.'

The background of Radclyffe Hall's book merits some attention if we are to understand the controversy which it raised. As already indicated, the subject of female homosexuality has been constantly hidden from view, but the period around the 1920s saw a number of incidents and movements which threatened this process. The feminism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries raised the issues of women's status and role, providing a perspective from which assumptions about women's sexuality could be questioned, although its primary impulse was towards legislative reform. In addition, whilst the War gave all women an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to perform 'men's work', so it gave those women whose sexuality challenged conventional patterns a chance to fulfil aspirations and, to some degree, reveal themselves. Radclyffe Hall who, unlike Woolf in Three Guineas ten years later, failed to perceive the relationship between patriarchy and imperialist war, describes the place of these 'masculine' women in a society at war.

And now quite often while she waited at the stations for the wounded, she would see unmistakable figures - unmistakable to her they would be at first sight ... For as though gaining courage from the terror that is war, many a one who was even as Stephen, had crept out of her hole and come into the daylight, come into the daylight and faced her country. 'Well, here I am, will you take me or leave me?' And England had taken her, asking no questions - she was strong and efficient, she could fill a man's place, she could organize too, given scope for her talent. England had said: 'Thank you very much. You're just what we happen to want ... at the moment.' (The Well of Loneliness, (1928) (New York, Covici Friede, 1932,) p.110)

The publicity attached to the Maud Allan case in 1918 and to

the Vita Sackville-West/Violet Trefusis affair culminating in 1920, (3) further publicised the existence of female homosexuality.

The response to The Well of Loneliness must be seen against this background: the idea of a popular and respected novelist producing a serious and sympathetic book on the subject was outrageous. Yet the attempt to suppress the book itself and hence any discussion of lesbianism turned out, as contemporaries noted, to be counter-productive.

... what in fact has been the result of the campaign against The Well of Loneliness? Obviously, as several of our correspondents point out, to increase public interest in it to a phenomenal extent.

... it is a sacred thought for Messrs James Douglas, Joynson-Hicks and Chartres Biron to take to their beds with them that their united efforts have caused certain subjects to be discussed, inquired into and pleasingly investigated as never before in the history of this our hypocritical country. (Time and Tide, 23.11.1928.)

We might suggest, furthermore, that it was as much the attempt to suppress the book as the work itself which turned this novel into an important symbol for homosexual women. For it is, both stylistically and thematically, very much a product of its time and in particular owes much to contemporary theories in psychology. Hall's presentation of the 'invert' Stephen Gordon illustrates theories of homosexuality developed from the 1880s onwards by psychologists such as Karl Ulrichs and Havelock Ellis and adopted in Britain by other writers, probably the best-known being Edward Carpenter.

Briefly, they suggested that homosexual women and men form an 'intermediate' or 'third sex' whose sexuality is congenitally and physiologically determined. As Carpenter explained:

While belonging distinctly to one sex as far as their bodies are concerned they may be said to belong mentally and emotionally to the other; ... men, for instance, who might be described as of feminine soul enclosed in a male body ... or in other cases, women whose definition would be just the reverse. ... this doubleness of nature ... to a great extent proved by the special direction of their love-sentiment. For in such cases, as indeed might be expected, the (apparently) masculine person instead of forming a love union with a female tended to contract romantic friendships with one of his own sex; while the apparently feminine would, instead of marrying in the usual way, devote herself to the love of another feminine. (Carpenter, Love's Coming of Age, (1896) (George Allen & Unwin, 1948,) pp.132-3)

Since, the argument continues, this sexual orientation is pre-determined and not a matter of personal choice, and as it already involves a conflict within the individual, between 'masculine' and 'feminine' elements, these 'inverts' should be neither blamed nor punished but treated with sympathy. Neither are they seen as mental or physical 'degenerates'. Carpenter adds that 'Urnings' or 'uranians'

are by no means necessarily morbid in any way ... Formerly it was assumed, as a matter of course, that the type was merely a result of disease and degeneration; but now with the examination of the actual facts it appears that, on the contrary, many are fine, healthy specimens of their sex, muscular and well-developed in body, of powerful brain, high standard of conduct, and with nothing abnormal of any kind observable in their physical structure or constitution. (op. cit. p.135)

Radclyffe Hall clearly sees her homosexual character Stephen Gordon as belonging to a distinct type, separate from other women. In the early part of her narrative she contrasts Stephen with her entirely feminine and 'normal'

mother who represents

... the archetype of the very perfect woman, whom creating God has found good. (WL, p.4)

The mother's instinctive animosity to the child and resentment over her resemblance to the father: of whom Stephen is a "blemished, unworthy, maimed reproduction" represent the response of the 'normal' woman to the genetic freak. These passages indicate the contrasting sets of imagery through which Hall describes the lesbian and the heterosexual woman. The idealised relationship between Stephen's parents functions as an additional contrast with the unfulfilled and tragic lives of their daughter and the other lesbian women she encounters. Thus from the beginning of the novel the lesbian is stylistically and narratively isolated from other women. The author rejects Carpenter's assertion that the 'invert' physically resembles the normal type of his or her sex so that her lesbian characters are further distinguished by tell-tale physical differences.

... one had to look twice to discern that her ankles were too strong and heavy for those of a female. (p.402)

One might have said quite a womanly woman, unless the trained ear had been rendered suspicious by her voice which had something peculiar about it. It was like a boy's voice on the verge of breaking. (p.117)

Thus the situation of the female homosexual is seen as one of inner conflict, between her 'male' and 'female' elements, complicated by her alienation from a pattern of sex-types and sex-roles ordained by God and by nature. Since this pattern is perceived as a natural rather than a social one, her experience is presented in metaphysical terms, as intrinsically tragic, and not in the context of forms of social organisation. Hall saw the writing of the book very much as a crusade against ignorance and persecution.

I wrote the book from a deep sense of duty. I am proud indeed to have taken up my pen in defence of those who are utterly defenceless, who being from birth a people set apart in accordance with some hidden scheme of Nature, need all the help that society can give them. (Quoted by Vera Brittain, Radclyffe Hall. A Case of Obscenity? (Femina, 1968,) p.85)

But her initial conception of her theme prevents any analysis of its implications for the social definitions of 'masculine' and 'feminine'. As Vera Brittain pointed out in a contemporary review, Hall's view of sexual differentiation of role and characteristics goes beyond, or lags behind, that held by many of her contemporaries in the '20s.

It certainly seems likely that a problem of this type must be intensified by the exaggeration of sex differences which has been peculiarly marked in certain ages of the world, and to which the English middle classes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were particularly prone. Miss Hall appears to take for granted that this over-emphasis of sex characteristics is part of the correct education of the normal human being; she therefore makes her 'normal' woman clinging and 'feminine' to exasperation and even describes the attitudes towards love as 'an end in itself' as being a necessary attribute to true womanhood. Many readers will know too many happy wives and mothers for whom it is not, to take on trust Miss Hall's selection of the qualities essential to one sex or the other.

This confusion between what is 'male' or 'female' and what is merely human in our complex make-up, persists throughout the book. We feel that, in describing the supposedly sinister predilections of the child Stephen Gordon, much ado is often made about nothing; so many of them appear to be the quite usual preferences of any vigorous young female who happens to possess more vitality than her fellows. (Quoted in Brittain, op. cit. pp.50-1)

The narrow and rigid definition of what is permissible to the 'normal' woman further isolates the lesbian from other women in the novel. Stephen's attitude towards her lovers, her active sexuality, her athleticism and her economic independence all classify her in the author's terms as 'masculine' and are perceived as arising not from any dissatisfaction with the 'feminine' role but from an inherent physiological and psychological abnormality.

This determinism involves some rather dangerous contradictions in the narrative. If, as Carpenter suggested, the abnormal woman chooses as a love-object a 'feminine' rather than a 'masculine' type, then the objects of her love must be normal women. For, within the terms of Hall's sex-typing the only normal woman is the completely feminine one. Thus Stephen and her lover Mary Llewellyn play out the roles of protector and dependant, active and passive sexual partners, 'husband' and 'wife'. This is made clear at the end of the book when Stephen gives Mary up to Martin Hallam, knowing that she

... gladly turned to the simple things that so easily come to those who are normal. (p.497)

If this is the case, however, then Stephen may be seen as a seducer, a perverter, of women. She has sinned not by being what she is, for that is something beyond her control, but by attempting to pursue her desires. She is punished by her sense of guilt and by the loss of her lover. The conclusion of the novel would thus seem to imply firstly that there is no morally justifiable way in which the lesbian can fulfil herself and, secondly, that should she attempt to do so she will be rightly punished.

The former point certainly strengthens the novel's argument for sympathy, but the latter obscures this intention. By portraying Stephen seeking not only companionship but sexual involvement with a 'normal' woman she provided fuel for her attackers on the grounds of immorality but at the same time

the narrative withdraws any hope the book might offer for the lesbian reader.

We may speculate on Hall's motivation here for it seems that as a practising Catholic involved in a more or less permanent lesbian relationship she herself must have found some kind of acceptable resolution to this dilemma. It might be that she found the 'tragic' ending both more satisfying artistically and more likely to be acceptable to her readers, providing as it does little challenge to their preconceptions of female sexuality, than one truer to her own experience. However, our discussion of the book suggests that, on a theoretical level, she had no challenge to make, for the tragedy of Stephen Gordon's story is presented throughout as a result of her own nature, not of the limitations which the rigid classifications of 'masculine' and 'feminine' impose on women and men alike.

There remains a sense in which the uncertainties and contradictions of the book arise from the form in which Radclyffe Hall chose to present her narrative. Having decided to cast the novel in terms of an individual biography she was then obliged to provide an explanation of Stephen's nature in individual terms, thus further isolating her from other women in the book. Stephen Gordon is very much a Romantic hero, struggling against a conspiracy between fate and her own flawed nature, doomed inevitably to failure. The religious overtones of the novel's language further emphasise this essentially metaphysical conception of her story.

The author, we may conclude, found herself trapped between the desire to speak the unspoken, claim sympathy for a reviled group without alienating her readers and somehow remain true to her own experience. Her inability to theorise her subject adequately or to develop a form and language appropriate to its potentially radical nature means that the novel fails to achieve her stated aim and remains a work which readers, whatever their attitude to its subject-matter,

cannot find wholly convincing or satisfying.

These criticisms of The Well of Loneliness must be seen against its social and literary background. Although published only eight years later, Djuna Barnes' Nightwood was produced within and received into a much changed social and intellectual milieu. As Vera Brittain argued, the ultra-feminine model of behaviour that Hall paradoxically accepted as 'normal' had not been the only one available to women in 1928. By the mid-thirties alternative notions of womanhood had become even more acceptable and Winifred Holtby noted that

Anyone can stroll through the suburbs of a provincial town and see girls in their light frocks playing tennis; anyone can see, in the parks and squares of modern industrial cities, the young people from factories and squalid streets, running in shorts and socks round the ash track, playing feeble but merry tennis on the red rubble courts, lounging on the edge of the bathing-pools. (Women, (1934) (John Lane the Bodley Head, 1945,) p.119)

The modern girl might have been a phenomenon disturbing to some but her behaviour was not automatically regarded as an indication of sexual deviancy. Congenital theories of homosexuality were modified under the influence of Freudian thought, an influence increasingly present in the popular as well as the clinical literature. (4) The Freudian approach to the subject tended to present lesbianism as consequent upon an incomplete 'psycho-sexual development' and thus as part of a continuity of sexual forms rather than a total inversion of the 'normal'.

Barnes' book, however, does not reflect or illustrate these theories in the same way as The Well of Loneliness was based on earlier views. Although changed attitudes may have influenced the reception of her book, its literary roots lie in Modernism, its social background in the world of expatriate American writers and artists in Paris.

In many ways it does not purport to be a book 'about' lesbianism at all and Sara Maitland, in a recent review, seems to see the work rather too much in the terms of modern feminism when she describes it as

a staggeringly beautiful, if gloom-laden, evocation of lesbian love, heavy with concepts of gloom and inevitability, but also lyrical and sexual. Three women love and damage each other, despite a desperate willingness to save. (Spare Rib, no.82, p.37)

Like Hall's novel, Nightwood lacks a social dimension and is largely metaphysical in tone but, in contrast to the tragic story of Stephen Gordon, it presents a metaphysic in which the sexual identity of its characters is largely irrelevant, so that T. S. Eliot was able to comment in his Introduction that

the book is not a psychopathic study. The miseries that people suffer through their particular abnormalities of temperament are visible on the surface: the deeper design is that of human misery and bondage which is universal. (Eliot, Introduction to Nightwood, (Faber and Faber, 1974), p.5)

The book thus integrates the homosexual woman into the society it depicts, instead of emphasising her alienation as The Well of Loneliness does. This integration is a formal, rather than a theoretical one, depending on elements of style, structure and setting. Thus, for example, the rigid distinction we found between 'masculine' and 'feminine' in the earlier novel is not challenged on a social level but negated through the imagery associated with male and female characters. In this way Felix's mother and father are respectively masculinised and feminised.

Hedvig Volkbein, a Viennese woman of great strength and military beauty, lying upon a canopied bed of rich spectacular crimson, the valance stamped with the

bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg, the feather coverlet an envelope of satin on which, in massive and tarnished gold threads, stood the Volkbein arms ...

(Nightwood, p.11)

He had been small, rotund, and haughtily timid, his stomach protruding slightly in an upward jutting slope that brought into prominence the buttons of his waistcoat and trousers, marking the exact centre of his body with the obstetric line seen on fruits ... (p.12)

When she danced, a little heady with wine, the dance floor had become a tactical manoeuvre; her heels came down staccato and trained, her shoulders as conscious at the tips as those which carry the braid and tassels of promotion; the turn of her head held the cold vigilance of a sentry ... (p.16)

The major male character of the novel is Matthew O'Connor, a transvestite and a false doctor. The book conveys a powerful sense that nothing is what it seems and that the categories, moral, social and sexual, on which we normally base our judgements have no validity. The setting of the narrative within a world of pseudo-aristocrats, circus artists and confidence-tricksters reinforces this point.

Whilst the story of Nora, her lover Robin and the rapacious Jenny who steals Robin from her, is a tragic one, it is presented in terms which deny either a social or a moral evaluation of the characters and their situation. Lesbian relationships are not differentiated from any other form of human intercourse: all are equally valid in the sense that all are invalid, corrupt and at the mercy of a malignant fate. Thus the marriage of Felix's parents is not an idealised heterosexual partnership like that of Stephen Gordon's mother and father, but one based on social ambition and a mutual self-interest which destroys intimacy.

He had tried to be one with her by adoring her, by imitating her goose-step of a stride, a step that by him adopted, became dislocated and comic. She would have done as much, but sensing something in him blasphemed and lonely, she had taken the blow as a Gentile must - by moving toward him in recoil. She had believed whatever he told her, but often enough she had asked: 'What is the matter?' - that continual reproach which was meant as a continual reminder of her love. It ran through his life like an accusing voice. (pp.14-15)

The thing that she had stalked, though she had not been conscious of it, was Guido's assurance that he was a Baron. She believed it as a soldier "believes" a command. (p.16)

If Robin's relationships with women end in disaster, this is not because they are either 'unnatural' or punished by society. Simply, no one should expect happiness as Matthew O'Connor argues

'Oh', he cried. 'A broken heart have you! I have falling arches, flying dandruff, a floating kidney, shattered nerves and a broken heart! But do I scream that an eagle has me by the balls or has dropped his oyster on my heart? Am I going forward screaming that it hurts, that my mind goes back, or holding my guts as if they were a coil of knives? Yet you are screaming, and drawing your lip and putting your hand out and turning round and round! ... Are you the only person with a bare foot pressed down on a rake? Oh, you poor blind cow! ... What end is sweet? Are the ends of the hair sweet when you come to number them?' (Barnes, pp.218-219)

This determinism applies as much to the genesis of these relationships as to their conclusion. Unlike Hall whose aim and narrative form alike demanded an aetiology of homosexuality, Barnes need only make us aware of powerful and destructive

forces beyond both the control of the individual and the norms of moral judgement. This is clear in her description of the first meeting between Robin and Nora.

Then as one powerful lioness came to the turn of the bars, exactly opposite the girl, (Robin) she turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars and, as she regarded the girl, as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface. At that the girl rose straight up. Nora took her hand. 'Let's get out of here!' the girl said, and still holding her hand Nora took her out.(p.83)

It was suggested in chapter three that literary realism may convey a certain determinism - the 'reality' depicted is so detailed and concrete that it appears beyond change. Nightwood demonstrates a kind of poetic determinism whereby recurrent sets of imagery and a highly specific setting create a similar impression. The book's determinism, however, is metaphysical rather than social and is one in which moral judgement or individual action seem not only useless but irrelevant. The implications of this for the novel's presentation of female homosexuality and its relationship to the ideology of femininity are complex. On the one hand the novel does not reinforce the concepts of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' as does The Well of Loneliness or differentiate between the sexually 'normal' and 'abnormal'. Barnes has succeeded in writing a narrative of lesbian relationships to which any kind of moral or normative evaluation is completely irrelevant. She has done so, however, by negating all forms of judgement, subjecting all forms of relationship to a metaphysic of doom and an atmosphere of corruption and removing her story from the area of social experience.

The book thus evades any engagement with the ideology of femininity at all, despite the implicit challenge its subject-

matter raises for this ideology. Nevertheless there is no obligation for an author to approach his or her work in political terms and political criticism only becomes over-riding when, as in the case of The Well of Loneliness a project of reforming attitudes is undertaken but flawed by inconsistencies within the work. Barnes, on the other hand, has chosen to present a kind of tour de force of negation, a book which strives to free itself of all external social values, and she has subjected all the novel's formal and narrative elements to the demands this project imposes. Given this aim, however, we must ask why she chose in particular to present her central characters and relationships as homosexual. The theme carries too much weight of cultural judgement to fulfil the book's demand for the suspension of our moral faculties, and whilst, within the work itself it receives neither condemnation nor justification, it seems that the author is covertly exploiting the connotations of corruption, unnaturalness and frustration which homosexuality carries in our culture in order to strengthen the book's atmosphere of evil and darkness.

Whilst it may be argued that the lesbian theme is used poetically - that is, for the purposes of extending and strengthening the effect of the book's imagery - this is done in such a way as to exploit rather than explore its overtones: in rather the same way as a novel in which all the villains are black and the good-guys white. Seen in this light, the effect of the novel rests precisely on those distinctions and judgements which, ostensibly, it refuses to make and the reason it does not engage with the implications of its theme lies not in its transcendence of those issues, but in their deliberate manipulation in a context which denies the value of engagement.

Nightwood thus exploits covertly the image of female homosexuality implicit in the ideology of the feminine. The Well of Loneliness strives to challenge the one without sufficient theoretical understanding of the other. A Piece of the Night integrates its presentation of lesbianism with a critique of social definitions of the female and the feminine

which determines its structure and style as well as shaping its narrative.

Just as Radclyffe Hall's novel has been viewed against its social and historical background and Nightwood as, in part, a product of the formal preoccupations of Modernism, so Michèle Roberts' book has to be seen in terms of the conjunction of an individual talent with the impulses and influences of the modern feminist movement. It is doubtful whether, without the current lifting of taboo from the subject of homosexuality, Roberts could have presented the theme so openly and been able to devote so much attention to the formal elements of her novel without being sidetracked into justification of its narrative content. Because of the altered social climate she does not need to justify her central character's lesbianism, as Hall did, but can concentrate on exploring her experience as a woman, emphasising what she shares with other women rather than what separates her from them. For this reason the term 'feminist fiction' is perhaps more appropriate to the book than that of 'lesbian novel'.

Like The Well of Loneliness, A Piece of the Night is a narrative of one woman's life, describing Julie Fanchot's childhood in rural Normandy, her education at an English convent school and Oxford, her marriage and its break-up and her subsequent life in a London household with her daughter and a group of women including her lover, Jenny. Various narrative and stylistic devices, however, act to integrate her story with that of other women and with an awareness of the definitions, expectations and conflicts which shape their experience. In contrast to Hall's narrative, Roberts rejects a linear time-scheme for one which is far more flexible, allowing her to explore both the influence of Julie's past and future changes. As Rebecca O'Rourke comments

This break is important because works tied closely into the realistic mode either lapse into pessimism or ambiguity or else they force a rhetoric of change out of

implausible situations and characters. (Feminist Review, no.2, 1979, p.6)

The importance of this technique becomes clear when we compare the book with other feminist fiction, such as Marilyn French's The Women's Room, where stories of everyday feminists and passages of rhetoric are tacked unsatisfyingly together.

In A Piece of the Night the constant shifts of time and sequence appear as consequences of the operation of memory under pressure of Julie's personal crises: her mother's illness, the uncertainty of her relationship with Jenny, Ben's threat to sell the house in which the women live. They are not merely formal tricks but rather enact and reveal Julie's attempts to make sense of her life, both as it is lived and in retrospect. The narrative presents the various roles offered to women, its structure demonstrates that these are simultaneously available and offer possibilities of both confrontation and retreat. Thus Julie, a mother herself, returns home to nurse her own mother and seeks to become a child again in order to escape the responsibilities of her own life. Julie the lesbian recalls the circumstances of her marriage and the desperate need for acceptance which led her to behave in the manner appropriate to a woman seeking a husband. Her preparations for the Summer Ball at Oxford emphasise the way in which this behaviour obscures the individual.

Julie is getting ready for the ball. She lies back in the narrow college bath, her face a white mask of slowly stiffening face-pack. She soaps herself, she piles shampoo and conditioner on her hair. Her hands shave her legs and armpits, scrub her toenails and fingernails, splash her face with cold water to remove the face-pack. Cautiously she dabs deodorant on her stinging armpits, squirts another deodorant between her thighs. Then she creams herself, powders between her toes, seizes tweezers and plucks her eyebrows to a narrow line. She soothes her itching face with witch-hazel, then applies moistur-

iser. Now she is ready for the paint. First a coat of beige, to muffle the blush of her exuberant cheeks, then a dab of green rouge for the same purpose. Shiny white stuff dabbed at the corners of her eyes, to widen them, and underneath her brows. Smudgy olive-green eye-shadow on her eyelids, a line of purple in the eyelid crease, a black line drawn with a tiny brush along the outer edge of her eyelids, three coats of black mascara. Tiny black lines painted in below her eyes to resemble eyelashes, two applications of pale pink lipstick. A whisk of translucent powder to set it all and stop tiny beads of perspiration bursting through. (A Piece of the Night, (The Women's Press, 1978,) pp.50-1)

Roberts juxtaposes this description with the presentation of collective myths surrounding women, the pageant of Palamon, Arcite and Emily; and with the challenge to both in the May Day march.

The novel's continuous reference to Julie's childhood emphasises the relationship between patterns of behaviour established there and the adult woman's attitudes and self-perception. The men work the farm and demonstrate their manhood through their sexual activity, the women cook and clean and are taught to be silent about the processes of their own bodies.

Julien, Claude and Julie are sent down to breakfast while Claire washes the offending parts of the sheets before the chambermaid arrives to make the beds. Julie will sleep for the rest of the holiday with her mother; her father will share a bed with Claude. Julie must now begin to lock the bathroom against the cries and kicks of her former companion, her hurt and uncomprehending brother. Nor must she mention to her father that she is bleeding; in front of him she may only refer to difficult days, and that with a blush. She must never let him see the stained towels she brings downstairs to burn in the

kitchen boiler; similarly she must smuggle upstairs the new ones she buys. She finds this totally acceptable; for Julien she does not wish to be woman, mysterious terrifying hole stinking with blood and darkness, she wishes to remain his child, clean, attractive, charming, assured of his protection and his love. (APN, pp.47-8)

The girl-child must sit still and silent through the family meal whilst the little boy can, with impunity, kick her under the table. It is these memories of childhood which return to Julie for they represent the assumptions and practices which define her existence as a woman.

Finally, over all these social codes stands the ritual and teaching of the Church, confining women to the images of mother, virgin or whore and repressing and stigmatizing relationships between women. Julie is punished, Jenny expelled from the convent and Sister Paul chastised for her failure to discourage their 'unhealthy intense friendship'.

A further consequence of the book's structure is its presentation of the narrative not in terms of Julie's conscious choices of action but of her responses to the social opportunities and expectations available to women; sometimes acquiescing, sometimes resisting. Neither is she a kind of feminist hero: she experiences guilt, jealousy and the desire for power.

I would have become Mother Superior in time, able to punish as I had been punished, to make others do as I wanted. I lusted for power which girls and women do not have in this world; I would have it, by going beyond womanhood into sanctity, and reaching a kingdom far beyond the earth. (APN, p.53)

Her actions are determined not by a political line but by her own past, her needs and her circumstances. Furthermore, the constant shifts in time relate to a deeper structural principle

of the novel.

The way in which Julie's seemingly unique and exceptional life history is seen to have meaning and resonance for women whose only similarity to her is their commitment to feminist politics, relates to the novel's underlying thematic structure of exile and exchange. Julie is presented as moving from one country to another, feeling displaced in each. She moves from childhood to adolescence to maturity; from heterosexuality to lesbianism; from oppression to liberation; from being a child to being a parent and then back as a child again. It is this representation of movement and change which interests us as something different from our own experience, at the same time as we are able to recognise certain aspects of behaviour and response as our own. (O'Rourke, (1979,) p.7)

Perhaps this formulation does not emphasise enough that these changes are continuous and confused, not forming a linear progression. Julie struggles for and against herself in the women's household as much as she had in her marriage.

In addition, Julie's experiences are constantly placed in relation to those of other women: not only her mother and the women with whom she lives, but also Amy Sickert and her companion Harriet; the nuns in the convent to which the rejected Amy, now Sister Veronica, is sent; the women of the Normandy village, and the women of Peckham. Julie's lesbianism does not isolate her, either structurally or thematically, as Stephen Gordon's does, and if the novel traces any development of her consciousness it is towards a recognition of these connections and of the experience of other women.

Tell me about your past, Julie begins to urge other women, and they to urge her. The women sit in circles talking. They are passing telegrams along battle lines, telling each other stories that will not put them to sleep, recognising allies under the disguise of femininity, no

longer smuggling ammunition over back garden walls, no longer corpses in the church and mouths of men. (APN, p.186)

This common experience is embodied and re-interpreted in the book's imagery, in particular through the symbolism of the wedding-ring and the theme of night and darkness. The significance of the ring is reshaped by Julie herself who sells her own ring, an heirloom of her husband's family and first given to Aunt Harriet, to finance her desertion of Ben. Instead of submission to the husband the ring stands for freedom in a most concrete way and, like Harriet the explorer, Julie

is on a voyage of discovery, she is brave and full of confidence, she is facing the streets as a woman on her own, she is a little crazy with freedom. In fact she is in flight from her husband and is wishing for a divorce; she has sold Aunt Harriet's Balinese ring that goes to the eldest son's wife of each generation, and is abandoning herself and her child to a women's commune in south-east London. The first fact upsets Ben, the second and third outrage him as she intends them to. (p.110)

She takes with her Amy's diary of her travels with Harriet and of Harriet's rejection, as a kind of talisman in her own rejection of the security of the child-wife. As Amy moved from companionship with Harriet to isolation and a repression of her sexuality in the convent, while Harriet moved towards marriage, so Julie moves from marriage to a different form of women's community.

Within the symbolism of the Church, the nun achieves purity and power by a transcendence of her sexual nature as a woman and becomes symbolically wedded to Christ. In A Piece of the Night the symbolism is exposed as a denial of the fact: the nuns continue to bleed and more or less successfully repress their sexuality. One reviewer has described Roberts' presentation of the nuns as "necrophiliacs in love with a darkness they call God." (Redmon, loc. cit.) This is to entirely

misrepresent the author's use of imagery. Roberts deliberately exploits the imagery of night and its range of connotation. Darkness may, for example, represent men's sexual fear of women.

He is swimming, in dark water, in darkness, towards further darkness. Dark is endless, he is lost within it. Darkness is his death, the further that he goes he is losing himself, losing all control. She will swallow him up and devour him, her terrifying darkness. (APN, p.82)

For women themselves, however, it may signify not chaos and destruction but the peace which can come with submission to external definitions of their nature.

She has no time for an angry retort, ~~she~~ does not have to face an angry response. She is a piece of the night, broken off from it, a lump, a fragment of dark, lying in her marriage bed, her husband's hands and the pills healing her rift with the night, sliding into the dark, into the quiet. (p.84)

When the definitions can no longer be reconciled with her own needs darkness becomes the scene of loss and denial.

... darkness has always meant loss, been absence. Larger than me, outside me, threatening to enter and devour me so that I too am lost. I struggle to stay visible in darkness. As I do so, I must face the fact that it is peopled with horrifying presences: ghosts, the devil, vampires. Darkness, loss, my mother, Jenny, the house. (p.104)

Whilst in Nightwood this cluster of imagery relates to a kind of metaphysic of evil, in A Piece of the Night darkness is the area of everyday struggle and its imagery is seen to function both as part of the social definition of women and within the consciousness of women themselves.

The direction of our discussion of this novel indicates that Roberts saw her subject-matter much more clearly within the context of, and as a challenge to, the ideology of the 'feminine' than Hall or Barnes. This is, no doubt, to a considerable extent a matter of historical situation but her theoretical basis has also enabled her to eliminate a number of ambiguities inherent in the treatment of female homosexuality in the two earlier novels. She has evolved a form for her narrative which emphasises both the relationship between lesbianism and women's experience in general, and the nature of 'femininity' as a social construct rather than an absolute characteristic of the 'female'.

The book thus provides us with an example of the 'feminist' influence in modern women's writing and brings our survey into the period of the contemporary writers to whose work we may now turn. These authors have a less direct and overt relationship to the feminist movement than Roberts and, in terms of genre, can be placed within the tradition of domestic realism. For this reason their responses to the ideology of the 'feminine' are complex and, at times, ambiguous.

(1) One in the Epistle to the Romans, the other in the work of Juvenal. (Cited in Brittain, op. cit.)

(2) The original version is available in Fernhurst, QED and other Early Writings, (New York, Liveright, 1972.)

(3) See Weeks, op. cit. p.105 and Nigel Nicolson, Portrait of a Marriage, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973.)

(4) For example in Laura Hutton's survey of The Single Woman and her Emotional Problems, (1935) (Baillière, Tindall & Cox, 1937.)

CHAPTER 8TRADITION AND CHANGE IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET DRABBLE

The fiction of domestic realism is largely associated with female writers and is discussed at length in these terms by, for example, Vineta Colby in Yesterday's Women: Domestic Realism in the English Novel, (New Jersey, Princeton U.P., 1974.) Accepting this literary division of labour, however, we may still view the genre and its practitioners from differing standpoints. Either their preference for the genre is a sign of the weakness of women as novelists, a criticism implied in Bergonzi's assertion that "women novelists ... like to keep their focus narrow," or we may see the emphasis of domestic fiction on the everyday, the personal and the 'trivial' as a defining feature of the novel itself. Bergonzi himself quotes Ian Watt's comment that

Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendency of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth: the plots of classical and renaissance epic, for example, were based on past history or fable ... This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience. (Bergonzi, (1972,) p.20)

Whilst the aim here and in the following chapter is not to argue the validity of either view, their implications should be born in mind in the discussion of Margaret Drabble and Fay Weldon, whose novels may be considered to indicate the direction of domestic fiction in the 1960s and '70s. For it is certainly true that the focus of both novelists is, if not narrow, clearly defined. Their major characters are women, often of a particular social class and background; their interests may be defined as 'female' if not 'feminine'; the setting of their work is predominantly domestic. On the other hand, it might be possible to argue that much of English fiction is domestic in setting and theme. This applies not only to female writers for, despite differences in their perspective, Dickens and Lawrence, for example, are as much concerned with the family and its functioning as are George

Eliot and Virginia Woolf.

The difference between domestic fiction and the novel which may use a domestic setting is one of emphasis and range; as the critic, quoted in chapter one, who criticised Margaret Drabble for not being a modern George Eliot, realised. However, the nature of the domestic writer's interest has shifted with changes in social reality itself. Thus, whilst the English domestic novel remains largely middle-class, discussion of women's sexuality and the conflict between home and work, domesticity and education, have become more pointed and overt, reflecting in the nature of their presentation and resolution within the fiction considerable changes of attitude. Alongside these changes we may note a movement towards introspection: the domestic novel has become not only a study of women's lives, but of women's consciousness. This development can be traced, beyond the confines of the domestic genre, through a stylistically and thematically innovative tradition in the twentieth century women's novel, through Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and Doris Lessing, to emerge in the characteristic alternation of narrative, comment and reflection which we find in the work of Drabble and Weldon.

These changes and continuities are summarised by Elaine Showalter who suggests that in the work of contemporary women writers

Feminine realism, feminist protest, and female self-analysis are combining in the context of twentieth century social and political concern. (Showalter, (1978) p.304)

For the writers themselves the continuities may be as important as the innovations. Margaret Drabble, commenting on the experimental novel, stated in 1967:

I'm just not interested. I'd rather be at the end of a dying tradition, which I admire, than at the beginning

of a tradition which I deplore. (Quoted by Bergonzi, (1972,) p.78)

Fay Weldon, whose style is certainly more idiosyncratic than Drabble's, remarked that she would like to write extended paragraphs of polished prose but, as a mother, is too prone to interruption to do so: either an interesting sidelight on 'female' style or a little irony at the expense of the interviewer.

Despite these gestures, and in the case of Drabble at least, very real connections with tradition, it is still useful to consider the relationship between these authors and the fiction of feminist protest. Not only are there certain thematic and stylistic similarities but, in addition, the tendency towards introspection in domestic fiction can be compared with a characteristic form of feminist writing noted by a reviewer of Michèle Roberts' book.

Confession ... has currently a 'special value' for women and a special importance in women's literature: it is a means of sharing, declaring, daring to say 'I'. But it is not a mode which readily endears itself to outsiders. (Blake Morrison, "In confessional circles," TLS 1.12.1978, p.1404)

Confession is not a new form in women's writing, as the novels of Charlotte Brontë demonstrate, but it is likely that whilst feminist fiction finds its largest audience amongst feminists, so the work of Drabble in particular which describes the lives of more or less well-educated middle-class women draws its readership from this group. Perhaps of all forms of women's writing, domestic realism is most noticeably fiction not only by but for women. We have already seen Victoria Glendinning's remarks on this point in connection with Weldon's Remember Me.

Oh I am the reviewer, and I can see that this is an intelligent but not a first class novel; and oh I am

a woman novel reader, and for all my critical remarks I read about these people and their stereotyped conflicts and their sex lives and their lifestyles with an avidity way beyond the call of duty. (Glendinning, loc. cit. p.1199)

Central to our examination of Drabble's and Weldon's fiction is the image and ideology of women in the '60s and '70s and the manner in which they present and comment upon this. John Goode, in "Woman and the literary text," (in Mitchell and Oakley ed., The Rights and Wrongs of Women, (Penguin Books, 1976.)) has suggested categories for the analysis of articulations of this social area within fiction. He considers a range of works in terms of the presentation of women as the object of male subjectivity, or the subject of their own; of the affirmation or subversion of 'woman-as-object'; and of the degree of freedom of women's subjectivity in relation to their experience. Goode is careful not to imply that fiction by and about women, written in the first person or a confessional mode, may be considered automatically in the category of 'woman-subject'. The author may choose to present her characters as articulating, and may articulate herself, assumptions of the male subject, expressing attitudes to the experience and role of women which are often ambiguous. How, for example, are we to situate Sarah's statement in A Summer Bird-Cage?

'I've always rather fancied you as a don,' said Louise.

'I used to fancy myself as one. But I'll tell you what's wrong with that. It's sex. You can't be a sexy don. It's all right for men, being learned and attractive, but for a woman it's a mistake. It detracts from the essential seriousness of the business. It's all very well sitting in a large library and exuding sex and upsetting everyone every time your gown slips off your bare shoulders, but you can't do that for a living. You'd soon find yourself having to play it down instead of up

if you wanted to get to the top, and when you've only got one life that seems a pity.' (Margaret Drabble, A Summer Bird-Cage, (Penguin Books, 1967,) pp.183-4)

Female fiction is by no means necessarily feminist fiction but may involve a complex, even contradictory, combinations of the voices, influences and interests of the 'female', the 'feminine' and the 'feminist'. In this chapter we shall consider and attempt to distinguish these areas in the fiction of Margaret Drabble before turning, in the next chapter, to the work of Weldon.

The female characters of Drabble's books tend to be young, middle-class, frequently university- educated, but often lacking any great sense of direction. The focus shifts slightly in her later books, The Realms of Gold and The Ice Age, but otherwise the variations are minor: Emma in The Garrick Year chuses not to go to university, becomes a model and marries an actor; Rosamund's baby is illegitimate (The Millstone); in Jerusalem the Golden Clara comes from a lower middle-class northern family and wins a place not at Oxford but London University. Emma is annoyed by a literary friend who insists on discussing

... whether or not it was permissible to keep on writing the same novel over and over again with different characters. (The Garrick Year, (Penguin Books, 1966,) p.101)

Drabble's own practice seems to be the reverse; to write different novels with basically the same characters.

The specificity of Drabble's material, however, does not negate its social realism

If people in fifty years time want to know what it was like to be a young woman in London in the 1960s, this novel (Jerusalem the Golden) like her others, will tell

them: not the whole truth, but a large part of it, and truthfully. (Unsigned review, TLS, 13.4.1967, p.301)

For the 'Drabble woman' is a significant contemporary figure and her preoccupations, and those of the author, have been the concerns of a large number of women from the '60s onwards. As Valerie Grosvenor Myer suggests, the 'graduate wives' of the period identify with Drabble's heroines and with the specific form of their "difficulties of fulfilment and self-definition in a man's world" and the "contrast between expectation and experience" which they encounter. (Margaret Drabble, Puritanism and Permissiveness, (Vision Press, 1974) p.13) Despite this contemporary significance, Drabble also has a place firmly within the tradition of women's fiction which influences both the style and material of her books.

It is to the women writers of the nineteenth century that she most noticeably turns, even borrowing from them the names of her heroines - Emma, Jane. Indeed the characters themselves emphasise this preoccupation.

How I dislike Jane Austen. How deeply I deplore her desperate wit. Her moral tone dismays me: my heart goes out to the vulgarity of those little card parties that Mrs Philips gave at Meryton, to that squalid rowdy hole at Portsmouth where Fanny Price used to live, to Lydia at fifteen gaily flashing her wedding ring through the carriage window, to Frank Churchill, above all to Frank Churchill, lying and deceiving and proffering embarrassing extravagant gifts. Emma got what she deserved, in marrying Mr Knightley. What can it have been like, in bed with Mr Knightley? Sorrow awaited that woman: she would have done better to steal Frank Churchill, if she could. (The Waterfall, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969,) p.61)

Given much of the content of Drabble's fiction; the concern with the suitability of marriages, the parties and social set pieces, the relationship between individual moral conduct and

social norms, this disparagement of Austen must be seen as partly ironic. It does, however, indicate areas in which she has modified the Austen scene. The basis of moral and social judgements has shifted and both sexual experience and the nature of life after marriage are discussed as they tend not to be in the earlier writer's novels.

The making of suitable marriages, or the selection of sexual partners, is a common theme in Drabble's fiction, but with the removal of social pressures to marry, her characters may, like Rosamund, decide not to marry at all. Alternatively, their motives may differ from those of Austen's heroines. Thus Clara pursues Gabriel not in search of status or an economically secure marriage but to prove to herself her right and ability to enter the world of glamour her represents. He is the myth of the 1960s personified.

She had presupposed such a man as Gabriel, such a dark and surreptitious lunch, such an episode upon an unfamiliar floor, and it had happened to her. She felt triumphant, but mingled with her triumph there was a certain alarm. She felt that she was being supported and abetted by fate in some colossal folly: that circumstances were conspiring maliciously to persuade her that her own estimate of herself, that high and grandiose self-assessment of adolescence, was right. She had considered herself too good for such as Walter Ash, and she had got Gabriel. There seemed to be no end to the possibilities of mad aspiration. And yet she could not feel that this was the way the world should go, she felt that she was breasting, rashly, the marching currents of humanity, and that she would in the end be forced to turn about. (Jerusalem the Golden, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967,) pp.173-4)

Sarah is partly shocked but largely fascinated by her sister's confession that she married simply for money.

'Good Lord,' I said, 'how ignorant I must be. I think

you're the only person I know who married for money. I know they're always doing it in books but I thought it was just a novelist's convention.' (A Summer Bird-Cage, p.195)

Louise is vindicated in Sarah's eyes by the fact that her sin has enabled her to enter the world of glamour; she has at least found something to do with her life.

Married women in these novels may look back, unable to remember why they married but certain of the foolishness of their decision and their choices.

In cold blood, in bed alone or drinking my morning coffee, I was stunned by the unlikelihood of it; my rarified, connoisseur's self and this self-evident cliché of a man? (GY, p.25)

The perceived unsuitability is not a matter of financial prospects or social convention, but of personal self-assessment. Clearly, the social, moral and economic criteria of sexual selection have shifted in both the real and the fictional worlds. This does not mean that the novelist is no longer concerned with moral questions and these preoccupy Drabble throughout her fiction. In The Waterfall Jane reflects on the contrasts between the modern world and the moral code of George Eliot.

Those fictitious heroines, how they haunt me. Maggie Tulliver had a cousin called Lucy, as I have, and like me she fell in love with her cousin's man. She drifted off down the river with him, abandoning herself to the water, but in the end she lost him. She let him go. Nobly she regained her ruined honour, and ah, we admire her for it: all that super-ego gathered together in a last effort to prove that she loved the brother more than the man. She should have, ah well, what should she have done? Since Freud, we guess dimly at our own passions,

stripped of hope, abandoned forever to that relentless current. It gets us in the end: sticks, twigs, dry leaves, paper cartons, cigarette ends, orange peel, flower petals, silver fishes. Maggie Tulliver never slept with her man: she did all the damage there was to be done, to Lucy, to herself, to the two men who loved her, and then, like a woman of another age, she refrained. In this age, what is to be done? We drown in the first chapter. I worry about the sexual doom of womanhood, its sad inheritance. (The Waterfall, pp.163-4)

The passage suggests both a continuity of moral choices and the changes in acceptable conduct. Jane does sleep with her cousin's husband and her sense of guilt is delayed until he is seriously injured in a motor accident.

The Waterfall, with its aqueous imagery and passive heroine, provides constant reminders of The Mill on the Floss, but Drabble has also commented of A Summer Bird-Cage,

A lot of the plot was based on Middlemarch, with the two sisters and the honeymoon in Rome, where she realises that she has married a terrible man, and that kind of thing. (Quoted by Bergonzi, (1972) p.28)

A moral concern is central to the tradition of the English novel, but Drabble also stands within another moral tradition, that of English Puritanism. Valerie Grosvenor Myer (op. cit. (1974)) argues that the novels reflect a moral conflict which arises when author and characters reject intellectually an ethical tradition by which they yet remain conditioned. The puritan values of "thrift, self-denial and hard work" prove only partially vindicated when they are shown to distort personality and threaten individual fulfilment. This conflict between inherited codes and altered circumstances and values has been a particularly painful one for women in the 1960s and '70s, so that the form of Drabble's moral concern is a particularly 'feminine' one whilst her perception of the conflict

connects her with issues raised by more overtly feminist writers.

The moral nature of her middle-class women is seen in relation to their upbringing. Rosamund's parents leave her their London flat whilst her father is lecturing in Africa, not out of parental obligation but because

They disapproved very strongly ... of the property situation, and were unwilling to become involved in it except on a suffering and sacrificial basis: so their attitude was not pure kindness, but partly at least a selfish abstinence from guilt. (The Millstone, (Penguin Books, 1968,) p.9)

Such ethical ambivalence is typical of her characters and she is equally ready to expose the convolutions of Rosamund's own moral conduct.

They had drummed the idea of self-reliance into me so thoroughly that I believed dependence to be a fatal sin. Emancipated woman, this was me: gin bottle in hand, opening my own door with my own latchkey. (Ibid.)

Discovering she is pregnant, Rosamund suffers no great moral crisis in deciding to abort. However, the ethic of self-reliance demands that she organise and carry out the procedure on her own. In a highly comic scene we see how her socialisation obliges her to share the gin bought for this do-it-yourself abortion to visiting friends. The need to prove personal competence is overcome by the obligation to be sociable. Finally, left alone with the dregs of the gin, she is unable to run a hot bath from her less than efficient heater. Her solution is, paradoxically, the acceptance of guilt.

My sister had babies ... My friends had babies. There was no reason why I shouldn't have one either, it would serve me right, I thought, for having been born a woman

in the first place. I couldn't pretend that I wasn't a woman, could I, however much I might try from day to day to avoid the issue? I might as well pay, mightn't I, if other people had to pay? (The Millstone, p.16)

Drabble here exposes with considerable wit the process whereby some failure in one area of the moral code can be justified by reference to another. There is a ready body of determinist notions on which any woman, however self-reliant and 'liberated' she considers herself, may fall back. Rosamund is, however, aware of a change in the nature of the sexual crime for which pregnancy is to be her punishment.

I was guilty of a crime, all right, but it was a brand new, twentieth-century crime, not the good old traditional one of lust and greed. My crime was my suspicion, my fear, my apprehensive terror of the very idea of sex. ... I walked around with a scarlet letter embroidered upon my bosom, visible enough in the end, but the A stood for Abstinence, not for Adultery. In the end I even came to believe that I got it thus, my punishment, because I had dallied and hesitated and trembled for so long. Had I rushed in regardless, at eighteen, full of generous passion, as other girls do, I would have got away with it too. But being at heart a Victorian, I paid the Victorian penalty. (pp.17-18)

Similarly, Jane is aware of a change in the nature of women's 'punishment'.

I think I mentioned that on the eve of our departure to Norway I lay awake imagining a pain in my leg: well, it was a real pain, it was a swelling, a thrombic clot. The price that modern woman must pay for love. In the past, in old novels, the price of love was death, a price which virtuous women paid in childbirth, and the wicked, like Nana, with the pox. Nowadays it is paid in thrombosis or neurosis: one can take one's pick. (The Waterfall, pp.254-5)

The language of Drabble's fiction, with its references to sin, salvation, guilt and punishment, is traditional. Her originality lies in the juxtaposition of this vocabulary with a new scepticism in her characters and a comic trivialization in the presentation of their moral conflict. Jane imagines James dead but cannot believe there is any glory in his having died for love.

Romantic love, that was what he had died for: how could he have allowed himself to be a martyr in so sick a cause, how could she have let herself accompany his suicidal fall? (The Waterfall, p.215)

Louise's sin is traditional; she cynically marries for money and then is discovered by her husband with her lover. The cause of her distress, however, is comic rather than tragic.

She also said that when Stephen went and caught them together in the bath, what upset her most was that she was wearing her bath-cap. To keep her hair dry. She said she would have started a scene if she had had her hair loose, but with a plastic hat on like that she felt so ridiculous that she couldn't. (A Summer Bird-Cage, p.208)

If the moral issues and vocabulary remain akin to those of nineteenth century fiction, the moral code itself has altered sufficiently for the protagonist to feel she has some right to personal happiness and for the author to treat these issues with a degree of humour.

As a novelist Drabble also expresses concern with the morality of her own craft: morality and style are here interwoven. The highest value, in both life and art, is attached to truth. Jane feels as much, if not more, guilt at her failure to recount the truth about her relationship with James as she feels over the affair itself. Truth, however, is seen as a problem of style and perception.

It won't, of course, do: as an account, I mean, of what took place. I tried, I tried for so long to reconcile, to find a style that would express it, to find a system that would excuse me, to construct a new meaning, having kicked the old one out, but I couldn't do it, so here I am, resorting to that old broken medium. ...

Because it's obvious that I haven't told the truth, about myself and James. How could I? Why, more significantly, should I? ... And yet I haven't lied. I've merely omitted: merely, professionally, edited. This is dishonest, but not so dishonest as deliberate falsehood. I have often thought ... that the ways of regarding an event, so different, don't add up to a whole; they are mutually exclusive: the social view, the sexual view, the circumstantial view, the moral view, these visions contradict each other; they do not supplement one another, they cancel one another, they destroy one another. They cannot co-exist. (The Waterfall, pp.48-9)

The passage summarises the problems facing the realist novelist in choosing material, selecting her range and reconciling the different perspectives which both social attitudes and the tradition of fiction demand. Any solution to these problems within the novels, however, is stylistic rather than moral. Here, for example, the 'truth' of Jane's confusion is enacted in the short hesitant phrases. Furthermore this kind of narrator's comment, in the voice of character or author, has a paradoxical effect. Whilst protesting a concern for truth it serves to reinforce an illusion of actuality, of facts which the narrator is striving to report faithfully. In addition the change of voice allows a doubled sense of verisimilitude, the first person narrative promising a truth to individual experience, the third person a conviction of objectivity.

The concern with truth is apparent in narrative as well as style. Thus when Rosamund discovers her flatmate Lydia's latest novel is a somewhat garbled version of her own sit-

uation and then finds that the manuscript has been destroyed by her baby, the morality of fiction itself is at issue. Who is guilty; Lydia for appropriating and distorting somebody else's life in the name of art, or Rosamund who is responsible for the destruction of art?

These are the devices and the concerns of the realist author. Similarly Drabble's style, appearing frequently as an absence of style, makes a deliberate contribution to the illusion of the 'real' narrative. Simplicity and precision form the basis of this style which frequently has the air of documentary, although always filtered through the consciousness of the Drabble woman, as in the account of Rosamund's visit to the ante-natal clinic.

They had one thing in common, of course, though their conditions varied from the invisible to the grossly inflated. As at the doctor's, I was reduced almost to tears by the variety of human misery that presented itself. Perhaps I was in no mood for finding people cheering, attractive or encouraging, but the truth is that they looked to me an unbelievably depressed and miserable lot. One hears much, though mostly from the interested male, about the beauty of a woman with child, ships in full sail, and all that kind of metaphorical euphemism, and I suppose that from time to time on the faces of well-fed, well-bred young ladies I have seen a certain peaceful glow, but the weight of evidence is overwhelmingly on the other side. (The Millstone, p.57)

She is equally meticulous in her description of the painstaking way in which her characters conduct their relationships. In the careful use of subordinate clauses, the references to the motivation of each remark, the process by which each assesses the other on the basis of what is said is enacted in the dialogue.

They did not talk much in the car. He asked her how

she had spent the summer, and she said she had done nothing, what had he done, and he said he had been working. She enquired the nature of his work, feeling that such a question, to a member of such a family, could not be impertinent, and indeed knowing already, from Clelia, something of the answer; he said that he worked for one of the largest of the Independent Television companies, and that he had been doing a documentary on the life of Lorca, a subject which would surely interest her, as he knew that she knew Spanish. She did not accept the offered politeness, but asked him, instead, if he enjoyed his work, and he said that he did not like it as much as he had hoped, and that he had to please too many people. She could not see that this would give him too much difficulty, though she did not say so, for he had every advantage, every faculty for pleasing, he was Clelia all over again, but lacking even her faint abrasive edge. She could not see that he would arouse in others any oppositions save the oppositions of jealousy. (JG, pp.126-7)

Having suggested that Drabble both stands within the tradition of women's writing, and reflects the issues of women's lives in the '60s and '70s, we can now consider her presentation of these issues more fully. Her work encompasses all three areas defined by our terms of analysis: the biological area of the 'female' - birth, menstruation, lactation, pregnancy; the ideology of the 'feminine' as it is met with by her characters; the 'feminist' which forms part of the response to this ideology within her fiction. The three are bound together in a complex pattern but we may attempt some separation and description of their effects in Drabble's work.

The biological experiences of motherhood are central to the account of women's lives. Pregnancy, however, seems to occur more frequently from accident than by design. Jane, for example,

conceived almost instantly after marriage, out of what I

pretended to myself was laziness, but which I knew to be a deep terror of the disgusting contraceptive techniques that I was told that all sensible women employ: I tried to obey the rules, but there were some sacrifices I could not make, so I conceived instead. (The Waterfall, p.106)

Rosamund conceives at the same time as she loses her virginity and is astonished at her own fertility. These are women with little control or understanding of their bodies and, indeed, a considerable fear of them: one character describes how, as a teenager, she fainted on reading the instructions in a box of Tampax. Drabble's characters do not, initially, see themselves in the maternal role. Emma's reaction is **representative** if **extreme**.

After thirteen months we had Flora. I was furious: she was David's responsibility, we owed her to his carelessness. I was appalled by the filthy mess of pregnancy and birth, and for the last two months before she was born I could hardly speak to him for misery. (GY, p.27)

Once faced with the actuality, however, their views change.

But somehow, after she was born, and this again is a common story, I am proud of its commonness, things improved out of all recognition. (*Ibid.*)

In the same way Rosamund is surprised that, concerning her daughter, she "had felt what all other women feel." (The Millstone, p.103) This suggests a certain unity amongst women in their reactions to maternity and a possible confusion of the 'female' and the 'feminine'. Drabble's women, by and large, accept their child-bearing and -rearing role with little complaint and often with joy. Children may cause anxiety but rarely frustration. The title, The Millstone can only be ironic for Rosamund continues unhampered with her work after Octavia's birth. Emma may complain to her potential lover, Wyndham, that because of the children she cannot go out as

she pleases, but this seems merely a convenient excuse; when she has the opportunity to sleep with him she decides she would really rather not. Female characters obliged to bring up children in squalor do exist in the novels but are either peripheral figures, like Stella in A Summer Bird-Cage, or unsympathetic like Karel's wife in The Realms of Gold, who is violent, masochistic and, as it turns out, a lesbian anyway. The central characters are fortunate not only in their economic circumstances but also in their reactions to motherhood. Whilst both they and we as readers are made aware of their good fortune, this selectivity on the part of the author acts as an evasion of some important issues in women's lives, the situation she chooses repeatedly to present being the least problematic of a range of possibilities.

This does not mean that women are presented in her fiction as aspiring to or finding satisfaction solely in motherhood, in the fulfilment of a biological role. Frances Wingate is the very archetype of the successful woman, pursuing a career and raising a family. Maternity appears, rather, as a demonstration of maturity for women whose status would otherwise remain in many ways that of a child. There is little overt comment on this rather dubious motivation but it remains as a slight irritant to the picture of blissful maternity.

Unlike maternity, marriage in these novels is constantly shown as inhibiting personal activity and fulfilment. Marriage is invariably seen as a mistake, at least in terms of the choice of partner. Emma marries David because it seemed "the most frightful, unlikely thing" she could do, (GY, p.25) whilst Jane

never managed to find any point in living with a man and cooking his meals in return for housekeeping money. (The Waterfall, p.107)

The women, however, take on themselves the responsibility for the mistakes and failures of matrimony.

... the secret was never revealed, the door into the garden never opened. I would gaze at other couples and wonder if they knew what they were doing, whether I alone was shut out and excluded from joy. (Ibid.)

Thus their dissatisfaction rarely reaches the point of outright and conscious rebellion. Whilst they complain frequently about the state of their marriages they also exhibit a continuing dependence on their male lovers or husbands. Sarah is ruefully aware of this.

The thought of my empty bed appalled me. I waved goodbye to them and unlocked the front door, and thought how sad it was that I had only found it amusing to be a bachelor girl for a week at most. I hadn't much independence, I thought. And those stupid home truths about a woman being nothing without a man kept running through my head as I groped my way up the unlit stairs. (A Summer Bird-Cage, p.187)

Their dependence often seems masochistic: if Emma has an explanation for her marriage to David it lies in the "feeling of terror" he inspires in her. (GY, p.24) The origins of this temperament and its contradictions are hardly subjected to any scrutiny in Drabble's work. She is more concerned with depicting its consequences than analysing the operations of a biological determinism and a social pattern within her female characters. This perhaps makes for more entertaining fiction but also frequently leaves us with a sense of wanting to know more about the motivation of her characters. Her insights are presented less analytically and often with ironic humour. Thus, whilst her women may be sexually passive or indifferent, she suggests this may be caused by their perception of the social concomitants of sex.

'What's the matter?' he said, after a while. 'What's the matter with me? What have I done? Don't you want me to make love to you, Emma?'

'Not particularly,' I said, turning over and lying on my back to stare at the ceiling. 'Not particularly, to tell you the truth.'

'Why not?'

'Oh, I don't know,' I said. 'All the washing up, and I can see that there's a button off your shirt, and I know that any minute now you're going to ask me to sew it on for you, aren't you? Be honest, tell me, you were, weren't you?'

'Well, it had crossed my mind. But not immediately, of course. Not now.'

'No, after.'

'Yes, I suppose so. After.' (GY, p.130)

The comedy does not obscure the acuteness of the comment. Sarah's remark, quoted earlier, on the impossibility of being a 'sexy don' indicates a similar type of awareness of the way in which the ideology of the 'feminine' operates, and a similar reluctance to expend energy or anger in protest or challenge. These heroines typify the 'emancipated' educated women of the '60s, enjoying certain new freedoms, aware of certain continuing limitations but unwilling to disturb the established rhythms of their lives, their marriages, their affairs.

Nevertheless, if Drabble's fiction differs in tone from that of the 'feminists' they share common areas of concern and, indeed exhibit striking stylistic similarities.

(She) is never for a second free of the consciousness of what she looks like. She moves along streets holding out to male passers-by photographs of herself taken from the most flattering angle, she spends hours despairingly contemplating her face and body in the mirror, her work suffers, she does not see other people but sees them seeing her. She does not know what it is like to live in her own body and forget it sometimes.

Proper people, the people of the real world,

seemed to claim their identities so easily, to step into them with their professions, to wear with defiance the uniforms and voices and faces of their selves: but she felt herself to be nothing, nebulous, shadowy, unidentifiable.

The first paragraph of this passage comes from A Piece of The Night, (p.68) the second from The Waterfall (p.150). Their juxtaposition suggests similar perceptions of the problems women encounter in forming a self-defined image of themselves.

The difference between Drabble's fiction and that of writers like Roberts lies, rather, in the closed nature of the former. This has two aspects. Firstly, her limited range of character and experience excludes a number of issues and experience which might transform insight to protest. The second point is, however, the more important: Drabble's characters appear closed to change, their only form of development being towards a reconciliation with roles already established. In a sense this results from her dislike of the dramatic, the conclusive.

There isn't any conclusion. A death would have been the answer, but nobody dies. Perhaps I should have killed James in the car, and that would have made a neat, a possible ending. (The Waterfall, p.246)

Her preference is a realist one, for a 'slice of life' cannot have a tidy conclusion, as Jane adds.

We should have died, I suppose, James and I. It isn't artistic to linger on like this. It isn't moral either. One can't have art without morality anyway, as I've always maintained. (p.248)

Fiction which is engaged upon passing itself off as an account of reality can neither analyse in depth the structure of what it depicts nor give a shape to alternatives.

Although certain forms of development are excluded from each novel individually and the earlier books form a distinct group with shared characteristics, in her later work Drabble appears to be breaking new ground. We may suggest that, whilst she began her career as the novelist of the hopeful '60s, by the time of The Realms of Gold, (1975) the promise was beginning to fade and by The Ice Age (1977) it had vanished completely.

Frances Wingate, the protagonist of the first of these two books, appears at first sight to be happy and successful enough. She has money, a career, a professional reputation, contented children and, if she is currently without a husband, has a lover. Yet throughout the novel signs of a different reality, or what Drabble might call different facets of the same truth, emerge. In a more extensive way than in A Summer Bird-Cage which contrasted the lives of two sisters, or Jerusalem the Golden which documents Clara's escape from her home and background, the author here uses the heroine's family to expose and illustrate the ills beneath the placid surface of her life. There is an aged relative who dies alone and is not discovered for months; a nephew who kills himself and his baby daughter; an alcoholic brother; a whole race afflicted by what Frances describes as the 'sickness' of the East Midlands, a sense of total desolation and negation from which even she does not escape.

She walked up and down the room a few more times, and looked again. Still only ten past. And here it came, this indescribable event, which as soon as it had past would be gone and forgotten, leaving nothing in its wake, though in other ways one could have compared it to a change in the weather, to a feared approaching squall or hurricane... It grew darker, a kind of blue-grey watery darkness, and she began to moan (as she had always moaned as a child, finally beating her head against the wall or the rails of the bed.) Indescribable, how bad it was, when it came. (The Realms of Gold, (Penguin Books, 1979,) pp.13-14)

Frances herself differs from Drabble's earlier, and younger, heroines. She does not choose, like Clara or Rosamund, the kind of involvement and the kind of man which suits her, but is in love with a man with a troublesome wife. Furthermore, precisely because, of all the author's female protagonists, she is the most competent, the one most able to cope with the practical aspects of life, her dependence on Karel is more complete because wholly emotional. It is also more painful for, during the first part of the book, they are separated. What Drabble shows here for the first time is a character apparently in total control of her life but in fact subject to a variety of misfortunes beyond her control. Perhaps without these Frances would appear an impossibly self-satisfied prig. Yet Drabble chooses to provide for her a most happy ending. Frances and Karel are, like Clara, survivors.

From these projections, it may be concluded that Frances' reunion with Karel, though achieved in ill-health, and cemented by death and tears, proved permanent. ... Frances ran her large household with great satisfaction, feeling that her energies, which she had feared were going to waste, were properly taxed at last. (RG, p.355)

The optimism of the '60s wins after all. It seems that these characters survive because of the benevolent selfishness which enables them to assimilate misfortune without judgement or anguish.

A friend of hers, another archaeologist, had recently discovered unmistakable evidence that the civilization he had been investigating had, contrary to all previous suggestions, practised cannibalism. He was still close enough to the discovery to admit that it had shocked him: the practises of people centuries dead had shocked him, because he had invested them with his own values, he had learned to like them. In time, he said, I know I shall justify them. I will see why they did it, and why I am wrong to judge them. It is simply a question of investing

five more years of thought.

What for, what for, said Frances to herself. What is it for, the past, one's own or the world's. To what end question it so closely?

Generations of her ancestors had gathered stones in those fields. Her grandfather had grown tomatoes and potatoes. Her father had studied newts and become a professor of zoology. And for herself, as a result of their labours, the world lay open. That was why she sat here, so comfortably, with a tumbler of brandy at her elbow, a portable typewriter in front of her, a choice of two single beds ... and a handy nylon jersey smoking by her side. Even her lumps were benign. Her spirits soared with the steam. (RG, p.124)

Personal survival itself takes on an almost moral quality here. Yet Drabble also feels obliged to insert into the story the history of Frances' cousin, Janet Bird whose dissatisfaction can be seen in neither personal nor metaphysical but social terms.

Like Jane in The Waterfall, Janet feels herself inadequate as a mother but this feeling can here be traced clearly to her cramped environment and self-regarding husband. The family 'sickness' is given a distinct social setting and aetiology: the housing-estate, the high street, the dinner-parties; and the contrast with Frances' life is overtly made.

(For Frances Wingate tolled the Christian bells of the church. Happily neglectful, confident mother, no agonizer over bits of bread salvaged from the carpet, over mud and diseases: haphazard, confident, efficient cook. To them that have, it shall be given. There was no need for Frances Wingate to bury her talents. Stony ground, stony ground, tolled the bells, for Janet Bird. (RG, p.134)

Janet offers a contrast to the typical Drabble woman, introducing an area hitherto excluded from the novelist's portrait

of women's lives. Neither Janet's social nor her sexual life are determined by her own needs or desires but by a dreaded and eternal routine. This new material also calls for a markedly different style: the introspection is conducted more hesitantly, less confidently, than elsewhere in her fiction, appearing as a struggle for articulation rather than the voice of the educated and self-aware. Yet by allowing her character a degree of both insight and wit, Drabble succeeds in conveying the triviality, and the importance of trivia, within Janet's life, without condescension.

The subject of the gravel pit did not interest Janet greatly, and she did not really understand why it aroused such strong feelings in the others. She sipped her sherry (her second glass) and listened anxiously to Hugh's muffled cries, and dutifully to animated chat about local politics. ... She could never quite tell who was on whose side in politics - national politics were bad enough, but Tockley affairs were worse. For instance, she did not quite see why Mark and Ted, who worked at a plastics factory trying to invent new kinds of indestructable matter, should be so interested in conservation, unless perhaps it was for guilt feelings. (p.161)

The Realms of Gold, then, introduces new elements into Drabble's fiction: disquieting aspects of social and personal experience, an older heroine and a type of female character absent from the earlier books; there are modifications of style to articulate these new elements and an increased use of cutting between characters, as if no single figure could present the whole truth. These changes become even more marked in the next novel, The Ice Age, in which the idyll of the '60s is only a memory. Characters have heart-attacks at an early age, are bankrupted, injured in bomb attacks, imprisoned, suffer from breast cancer, guilt and infidelity.

Whilst the carefree young women of the earlier books are absent here, so is the character of the isolated and

dissatisfied housewife introduced in the previous novel. This is a novel in which social events are not ignored and yet it makes no attempt to go beneath these events to the structures and movements operating within the society. It is, rather, a portrait of individuals caught within a particular social crisis and an attempt to represent the whole through the lives of these selected individuals. Experience and causation alike are seen, as in the earlier books, in personal terms.

She glimpsed for a moment in the dark night, a primitive causality so shocking, so uncanny, that she shivered and froze. A world where the will was potent, not impotent: where it made, indeed, bad choices, and killed others by them, killed them, deformed them, destroyed them.

(The Ice-Age, (Penguin Books, 1979,) p.97)

Drabble does not succeed here in reconciling the personal and the social: her representative characters turn into stereotypes, the men enchanted by business and wealth, Kitty the forgiving saint, Jane the disaffected adolescent. In part this may be because the author has, for the first time, chosen a male central character, Anthony, and constructed the narrative not around a single introspecting figure but in terms of a movement between groups of interlocking characters. This structure demands a complexity of plotting which creates a certain hollowness and abstraction in both characterisation and scene which suggests that, in attempting to change the nature of her fiction, Drabble has fallen between the two stools of fictional realism and social allegory. Despite the elegance of her plotting and style which makes the bulk of the book still pleasant enough reading, certain passages indicate the author's unease with the weight her characters are being forced to carry, together with a certain straining for effect.

Not everybody in Britain on that night in November was alone, incapacitated or in jail. Nevertheless, over the whole country depression lay like a fog, which was just

about all that was missing to lower spirits even further, and there was even a little of that in East Anglia. All over the nation, families who had listened to the news looked at one another and said 'Goodness me' or 'Whatever next' or 'I give up' or 'Well, fuck that', before embarking on an evening's viewing of colour television, or a large hot meal, or a trip to the pub, or a choral society evening. All over the country, people blamed other people for all the things that were going wrong - the trade unions, the present government, the miners, the car workers, the seamen, the Arabs, the Irish, their own husbands, their own wives, their own idle good-for-nothing offspring, comprehensive education. Nobody knew whose fault it really was, but most people managed to complain fairly forcefully about somebody: only a few were stunned into honourable silence. (The Ice-Age, p.62)

The banality of metaphor, heavy irony and generalization here are untypical of Drabble's writing.

In contrast, she shows herself still capable of the effective use of detail. Alison's reflections, in the aeroplane from Walachia, on her "ignorance about world affairs" are neatly juxtaposed with her relief at being able to buy Tampax and to leaf through a glossy news magazine - each offering "another promise of civilization." (p.153)

The book as a whole, however, demonstrates the problems which face an author attempting to extend the social range of her work. The vision remains largely personal so that the social experience presented remains essentially individual in the way it is perceived and presented. This returns us to the point we noticed in the earlier books: when Drabble's characters do perceive limiting or unsatisfactory aspects of their existence, this dissatisfaction is personalised rather than generalised or analysed. In part this arises from the realist mode itself which allows the author to convey in detail the texture of women's lives but has the limitation, and it is also

and necessarily a limitation of the consciousness of her characters, of being unable to 'place' this experience in terms of the factors which have shaped it. Essentially this is a limitation of the 'feminine' consciousness or, rather, a limitation of women's consciousness by and to the 'feminine.' As suggested earlier, however, the acuteness of perception of the feminine within these novels indicates a perspective outside its terms, one which approaches the feminist. The limitations to which we refer here may be seen as limitations of form rather than of awareness.

It seems, therefore, appropriate to turn now to an author more innovative and idiosyncratic in the style and structure of her work than Drabble and to consider, in the novels of Fay Weldon, the perceived relationship between the 'female' and the 'feminine'.

CHAPTER 9

THE 'FEMALE' AND THE 'FEMININE':
FAY WELDON AND PENELOPE MORTIMER

There are aspects of the style, structure and content of Fay Weldon's fiction which may seem to remove it from the area of domestic realism. Her books appear at times more akin to fairy-tales, stories told by women to frighten or enchant their listeners. In this fairy-tale tradition the author/storyteller is at liberty to comment overtly upon the action and its meaning, and we shall find this type of comment a feature of Weldon's novels.

Nevertheless, the material of these novels is essentially that of domestic fiction: the relations of women to men and between women competing for men; childbirth, marriage and motherhood. Indeed, the fairy-tale atmosphere with which the author surrounds her stories functions to emphasise her sense of the particularity of women's experience, the closed nature, the 'otherness' of their lives.

Down among the women. What a place to be! Yet here we all are by accident of birth, sprouted breasts and bellies, as cyclical of nature as our timekeeper the moon - and down here among the women we have no option but to stay. (Down Among the Women, p.5)

Like Drabble's, Weldon's fiction involves the presentation and awareness of the 'female', the 'feminine' and the 'feminist': life 'down among the women' involving both biologically and culturally produced experiences and characteristics. The response of characters and author shifts uneasily between the ideology of the 'feminine' itself and a form of feminist response and complaint.

In order to analyse and unravel these elements it is necessary, first, to consider certain aspects of Weldon's idiosyncratic style, for the specificity of her writing is inseparable from that of her attitude. Introspection was seen to be a common feature of Drabble's novels, but the reflections of Weldon's characters resemble dramatic soliloquy.

Oh, I am Madeleine, the first wife, the real wife, standing once again at my own front door. Look! Double-glazing and window-boxes: pretentious. The plaster in fresh two-toned beige: revolting. A giant gold K upon the striped pine door. K for Katkin. Jokey. But the age of jokes has passed - do neither Mr K nor the new Mrs K realise that? The gap is narrowing between them and me, between the blessed and the damned. Long live the revolution. Long live me. (Remember Me, (Coronet Books, 1979,) p.45)

The style has the effect of distancing characters who articulate their own definitions and self-definitions so clearly. But their reflections also have a precise social and material context, removing the experiences presented from the mythical mode and placing them firmly within a specific historical background. We can contrast this process with Michèle Roberts' tendency to mythologise her women.

I am decadent and superb, rotten with ill-health, too many cigarettes, the wrong kind of food, jumping with caffeine and alcohol in my blood, unkempt and filthy. Nobody dares to name me woman, for I am dangerous and powerful. I can make others go mad too, just by desiring them. I cause storms and migraines, I turn milk sour, I am both the ruined harvest and the shameful blood which sickens cattle. I am the witch whom you call your crazy daughter. (Roberts, APN, p.108)

Weldon's women struggle equally articulately, but in isolation, with the definitions they encounter rather than create.

Oh, I am the doctor's wife, waking. I am Margot, housewife, mother, waking to the world I have made; a warm and homely place, in which others grow if not myself. How nice! But something lingers after sleep, some sense of sorrow, apprehension. What is it? Am I in mourning for myself, lost somewhere long ago, drowned in the sea of

other people's demands, a family's expectations? No, as the eyelids flutter, apprehension vanishes, sorrow dissolves, reality sweeps in. I am Margot, wife and mother, folding in night thoughts before the day as a sailor folds in a sail before a rising wind. Beside me, sleeping too late, Philip. Downstairs, rising too early, the children, breakfasting no doubt on cereal and too much milk. Philip's milk. Philip comes first. Husbands do. (Remember Me, p.7)

Weldon juxtaposes the inner rhetoric of her characters with a detailed portrait of their material environment, thus both emphasising the conflict between the two and suggesting that, in their external behaviour, they merely act out scripts, conform to established roles.

Helen turns up at Jocelyn's house in the middle of the night. (It is fortunate that Philip is away on business.) Jocelyn lives in Chelsea now. She is a cool chic, childless young lady. She has a built-in kitchen, new American style. Her cushions are covered in Thai silk, and tastefully arranged in a cool, chic, childless drawing-room. Her bathroom is pink and orange, and the soap and towels match. Her drinks tray contains bottles of every imaginable form of alcohol. Her accent has sharpened into Upper English Chelsea. Shopgirls pay attention when Jocelyn walks in. (Down Among the Women, p.138.)

Thus her characters appear to move according to stage directions, but criticism of their shallow, puppet-like presentation ignores the point that this is precisely the way Weldon perceives the life of the individual. She makes this point particularly clearly in relation to her female characters.

At a time when women's instincts were so much at variance with the rules of society, such localised amnesias were only to be expected. But was this episode out of

character; or was it that her whole life otherwise was out of character? Was my mother, from the age of thirty to the age of seventy, living out a part that did not suit her at all? I believe the latter. (Praxis, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1978,) p.35).

Social determinism and a more generalised fatalism combine in the books, accentuated by the frequency of arbitrary violence and grotesque accident, related in a calm and precise manner.

Nine minutes to one. The back left tyre of Madeleine's car, worn thin, finally worn through, deflates. The car veers off through the central reservation, hits a post, carries on, crumbling as it goes, hits another. A twisting piece of metal from the bonnet sheers off Madeleine's right leg above the knee: the steering wheel impacts itself into her chest; large or small, her tits, her boobs, her breasts, will not help her now. The car comes to a stop. In the total silence that ensues, in the few seconds left of life, Madeleine can hear her heart still beating. It is open to the air. Madeleine is not in pain: not as she remembers pain: splitting and tearing to press out baby Hilary, as the sun split and tore to give birth to the world. (Remember Me, pp.83-4)

In Little Sisters, Gemma finds a severed finger, is threatened by her employer with a knife and becomes, inexplicably, paralysed; in Praxis a baby is torn from the body of its mother in the ruins of a bombed house.

Weldon alternates these brief, telegraphic passages documenting disaster or conventionally significant events, with more extended accounts of the trivia of daily life, and a liberal scattering of "marmoreal aphorisms that rattle across each page." (Eric Korn, TLS 24.2.1978, p.227) The incongruity of these juxtapositions acts as an ironic device, deliberately contrasting banality with the futility of any

attempt to draw meaning from it. This enables Weldon to expose the obsession with triviality, with the difference between a Laura Ashley dress and a Marks and Spencer's sweater, between fish-fingers and boeuf en daube, without either becoming wholly immersed in it or setting up an authoritative narrative voice.

Thus the techniques of Weldon's fiction serve to provide ironic comment upon its material, whilst her use of the fairy-tale mode and elements of fantasy suggest a view of the shared experience of women. In Remember Me, for example, Margot, the doctor's wife, is 'possessed' by the dead Madeleine. The two women represent two of the author's major female types: Margot the self-sacrificing, self-effacing housewife, devoted to husband and children; Madeleine the bitter, rejected, slovenly, self-indulgent woman, all that the ideology of femininity fears. It is this initial contrast, rather than the coincidence of Margot's pain at the moment of Madeleine's death, or the confusions of paternity, which justifies the 'magical' device. For the 'possession' of one woman by the other exposes the congruence of their experience as women: Margot perceives the relevance of Madeleine's complaints to her own life.

Oh, I have wasted my life, cries Margot in her heart. I am nearly old and I have known nothing. Only two men in all my life, Jarvis and Philip. I have wasted my youth. The body God gave me, I have muffled it up with respectability and the terror of experience. I have given myself away, for the sake of my children, my husband, my home: I have been the doctor's wife, mother to the doctor's children: I have been daughter to Winifred. Is there nothing left of me? (Remember Me, p.174)

The fantasy device enables the author to imply shared experience beyond the normal perception of her characters without invoking the jargon of 'sisterhood' and without authorial rhetoric.

Elsewhere, however, the presence of the narrator, either

identified with or separated from that of the author, is more insistent. Little Sisters and Praxis are largely in the form of a narrative related by a central or participating character. The narrative voice is not limited, as in Drabble, to personal reflection, but is very much that of the storyteller, conscious of her audience. In Little Sisters Gemma's primary audience is another character, Elsa, and her narrative a fairy-tale designed to gain power and control over her listener by shattering the ignorant contentment of her life.

'I can read your heart, Elsa, because I can read my own. I have a story to tell. Its a fairy-tale. I love fairy tales, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'I thought you would. Princes, toads, princesses, beggar girls - we all have to place ourselves as best we can.' (Little Sisters, (Coronet Books, 1979), p.20)

Praxis is to a considerable extent the presenter of her own reminiscences, the narrator of her own life. Whilst the narrative itself slides between the first and third persons, Praxis interprets and draws conclusions from it, justifies herself and suggests her own growth.

Listen! I am not anxious. I am angry, resentful, spiteful, plagued with self-pity, frightened by death, but I am not anxious; not plagued by the worm Anxiety, which gnaws away at the foundations of female experience, so that the patterns of magnificence fail, time and time again, to emerge.

Don't pity me, down here in my basement. Don't blame yourselves for your neglect of me. Old woman and a nuisance. I am all right, I tell you. The worm is gone. I am everything disagreeable, but I am not anxious. (Praxis, p.127)

Praxis marks a considerable achievement in Weldon's work and

a development of her style in the creation of a stylised but authentic voice for the old woman, Praxis, which yet enables us to distinguish between her **own** self-perception at various ages and her retrospective understanding of her life. Whilst the contrast of banality and aphorism remains, the latter appears now to arise out of the character's experience and to articulate not merely fatuous comment but certain values emerging from this experience. This novel suggests a certain change and deepening in Weldon's approach to her material. The focus on a single character who recalls and reflects on her experience enables her to introduce a greater degree of analysis into her writing. Praxis is allowed considerably more self-awareness than the earlier characters whilst the range of her contacts with other women, her mother, sister, colleagues at work, women she loves and lives with as well as those with whom she competes for men, extends this awareness to a collective and social level. In these ways the book seems to move, both structurally and thematically, towards the area of the 'feminist'.

We may now consider the author's presentation of the 'female' and the relationship to the 'feminine' and 'feminist' throughout her work.

As suggested earlier, Weldon's fiction is enacted 'down among the women' in a female world. It is, however, a world determined by social as much as biological factors and, like that of Drabble's women, socially and historically placed. Gemma's narrative, for example, may be a fairy-tale, the classic Bluebeard story, but is also set firmly in the nineteen sixties.

Picture Gemma in the year 1966 at the age of nineteen, arrived in London from the distant provinces, where time stood still - as could be seen from her green tweed skirt, which reached down to her knees, and the twin-set - jumper and cardigan - which blurred the outline of her chest. ... So her mother had walked before her, though never in London, city of sin. ...

Now her daughter Gemma, more adventurous, five good fingers still on each hand, walked on two good slender working legs down Carnaby Street, London, and saw her contemporaries with their skirts high above their knees and breasts clearly outlined beneath thin fabric, and even, here in Carnaby Street, at the heart of the world's fashion events, a few going braless, precursor of what was to come. (Little Sisters, p.24)

Fantasy has a well-recognised role in fiction read largely by women - one which is not obscured by a close attention to detail. For the 'realistic' presentation of other people's lives provides an escape from one's own - the trivia are always more interesting on the other side of the garden fence. Drabble tends to eschew fantasy altogether, preferring to present the middle-class reader with a mirror of her own situation. Weldon exploits the fantastic for quite different purposes - clarification rather than evasion, a placing of individual experience rather than an escape from it. Her fairy-tales are contemporary ones, full of up-to-date socio-scientific fact, so that, for example, whilst Gemma, the wicked stepmother figure, plots Elsa's sexual encounter with Hamish, she also contrives that the girl fails to take her contraceptive pill.

Her rendering of a specific goal and historical moment extends to the attitudes of her characters. Like Drabble, and indeed Michèle Roberts, she emphasises a world of physical and sexual experience which women share but which separates them from men. She also suggests changes in women's attitudes, particularly on the part of the young, to this experience. Contrast the responses of Praxis, an adolescent during the war years, with those of Lettice, the modern child.

Patricia started to bleed , one day. Crimson drops appeared on her legs. A scratch, a nick? No, it came from between her legs, where she never looked, or felt: from some hidden dreadful, internal wound, Patricia ran to her sister, crying. ...

'I don't believe it,' said her mother, aghast.
 'Fifteen is the proper age. Now if it had been Hilda -'
 Lucy went to the linen cupboard, chose the most
 threadbare of the sheets, tore them into ten neat strips,
 assembled a piece of white tape into a belt, found two
 safety pins and handed them to Patricia.

Patricia cried all night. Five twenty-eights of her
 life gone, stolen, and for no other reason than that she
 was a woman. 'Of course men can't know when your unclean,'
 said Hilda. 'It says so in the Bible. That's why it's
 called the curse. It's God's punishment.'

'For what?'

'Giving Adam the apple, I suppose.' (Praxis, p.37)

Lettice has recovered from her morning's despair: she
 bought Tampax on the way to school, and discarded her
 belt and towel in the girl's loo. (Remember Me, pp.124-125)

Detailing all aspects of the experience of individual
 women and of mothers and daughters from the early part of the
 twentieth century through to the present, Weldon is able to
 stress the inter-relations of the social/technological and
 physical/sexual elements of this experience and the attitudes
 and fears of the women themselves, a combination of fact and
 myth.

Contraceptives. It is the days before the pill. Babies
 are part of sex. Rumours abound. Diaphragms give you
 cancer. The Catholics have agents in the condom factories -
 they prick one in every fifty rubbers with a pin with the
 Pope's head on it. You don't get pregnant if you do it
 standing up. Or you can take your temperature every
 morning, and when it rises that's ovulation and danger
 day. Other days are all right. Marie Stopes says soak
 a piece of sponge in vinegar and shove it up. ...

There is a birth control clinic down in the slums.
 You have to pretend to be married. They ask you how
 often you have intercourse - be prepared. They say it's

for their statistics but it's probably just to catch you out. ...

Try hot baths and gin. There's an abortionist down the Fulham Road does it for £50. But where is £50 going to come from? Who does one know with £50? No one. Could one go on the streets? And why not? Jocelyn once said, when drunk, it was her secret ambition. No, not to be a courtesan. Just a street-corner whore.

Down among the girls. (Down Among the Women, pp.18-19)

Power, sex, ignorance, innocence, guilt and fear are, she suggests, all intermingled. Furthermore, her account implies that despite the changes in sexual technology which she traces, the social status and role of her female characters changes only superficially.

Basically Weldon presents three groups of female characters who can be classified in their relation to the ideology of femininity - the 'good', the 'bad' and the 'beautiful'. The good have internalised a 'feminine' image of themselves; the bad, like Madeleine, or Wanda in Down Among the Women reject it, whilst the beautiful conform to one of its requirements although they may fail in others.

The secretary in her turn needs comforting because her boyfriend has become engaged to a plain fat girl who cooks Apfelstrudel and piles it high with whipped cream, and who came top in housecraft at school. 'A man needs two women,' maintains the boyfriend who is all of twenty-two, 'one to cook and one for bed. I love you but I shall marry her. As life goes on, sex grows less important and dinner more so.' (Down among the Women, p.152)

Weldon's perception of the mechanisms of this ideology, however, together with its own internal contradictions, further complicate the classification. The 'good' are the simplest to define - like Margot or like Chloe in Female Friends they fit their own lives into those of their husbands and families;

They cook, clean, go to bed only with their husbands and feel guilty or disorientated when any element of this routine breaks down.

Clearing up! How gratefully Margot clears up after Philip. Laurence and Lettice. It is her privilege to do so. To have a man, a husband of her own, and children too? Margot never thought it could happen to her. Such riches! She lives in fear lest they evaporate like phantasmagoria, and she finds herself once again living with mother, and gran, and her happiness only a dream, and all her clearing up concerned again with the debris of the past, and not making way for the future.

Oh, back-ache! (Remember Me, p.177)

Their protest is limited, retrospective; they struggle in isolation to articulate what Betty Friedan described as the "problem that has no name."

In the case of both Margot and Chloe, Weldon chooses to symbolise their dissatisfaction in vaguely lesbian scenes. In Female Friends, however, this scene is engineered by Oliver, Chloe's husband, and demonstrates not only the relationship between a woman's social role and the image of her sexuality, but also the social and sexual power of the male. If he can prove that Chloe is sexually 'abnormal' then he can explain her dissatisfaction in terms which absolve him from all responsibility.

Oliver: So, Chloe, now we see at last what your true nature is. I have always suspected it. You do not really care for me or for any man. Your true response is to women. To your Grace, or your Marjorie, or your mother. The maid, even. Well, why not? There is nothing wrong with being a lesbian, except that the degree of your hypocrisy has been damaging to me. All those

years pretending to be something you weren't,
 blaming me for all our failures, throwing away
 our children. Of course your body rejected them.
 You have not been fair with me, Chloe. (Female
 Friends, (N.Y. Avon Books, 1974), pp.243-244)

Since relationships between women are central to Weldon's interest, lesbianism would seem a natural theme for her, and her stage lesbians, hirsute Françoise, "child-loving, man-hating Renée" and Alice with her motor-bike, are no more grotesque or stereotyped than her heterosexual characters. However, they remain peripheral because her primary concern is relationships between women, in particular the conflict between the good and the bad, within the context of femininity. The category of the 'bad' in her fiction has two major subdivisions with very different relationships to the notion of femininity. There are those who reject this image and the conduct of the 'good' altogether, and others who behave impeccably according to certain of its precepts but whose motivation and aims are far from the purity and simplicity of the 'good'. We may say that the image of the good woman itself condemns the former, Weldon the latter. This distinction implies in her writing a complete if not always overt critique of the social idea of femininity and of women's role.

Her female characters who reject their socially prescribed role and conduct do not do so out of any ignorance of women's biological nature, of the 'female'. Wanda offends her pregnant daughter Scarlet with her irreverent ditty:

'Ta-ra-ra boom de-ay!
 Did you have yours today?
 I had mine yesterday,
 That's why I walk this way - '
 (Down Among the Women, p.9)

But Scarlet herself soon adopts her mother's attitudes, untidy, vulgar, aggressive, in conflict with the apparently good Susan,

her step-mother, the new wife of Wanda's husband. Susan's upbringing and the resulting perversion of the feminine resembles that of Lily in Remember Me. Lily plays the role of the perfect woman, her body young, her clothes neat and feminine, her house clean and carefully furnished. In return, however, she must be the sole object of love. She may be responsible in thought if not in action for the death of her younger sister, she displaces her mother in the affections of her father, ousts Madeline, rejects, after Madeleine's death, Jarvis's daughter Hilary. Jarvis's function is to enable her to play this role to the full - her dependence on him is not personal or emotional, he is rather a kind of stage property.

Lily looks at her sleeping husband, and feels a pang of horror at his sudden, apparent decrepitude. He seems inappropriate to her life and times. The bedroom is so young, so clean, so fresh, in its muted pinks and greys, the bed itself so delicately wrought in brass; her little jars of cosmetics (Lily's mother Ida contented herself with sensible tubes of sheep lanolin) so expensive and so pretty on the pine dressing table - and here in broad daylight, gross, unshaven and snoring, lies this man, this husband, this creature, surely of the night, from whom admittedly all money flows, but on whose absence during the day she totally relies. (Remember Me, p.125)

Usually the relationship between Weldon's female types is one of hostility, but Irma in Praxis moves from one group to another. She starts life as the woman determined to obtain, through her sexuality and her feminine behaviour, the man of her choice, only to become a discontented and slovenly wife and, finally, a lesbian feminist. Her path crosses that of Praxis herself for the second time at the point where Praxis too is changing, although her progress is more complicated, from student to devoted wife living in squalor, to suburban housewife before turning super-career-wife writing advertising copy which supports her position and conventional definitions of femininity.

'A woman's satisfactions,' wrote Praxis, 'are husband, child, and home. And a new electric stove is one of her rewards.' (Praxis, p.213)

Finally she moves outside these various roles altogether. Despite the recurring feminist perceptions throughout her work, Praxis is the first of Weldon's novels in which these find expression not only through individual discontent, counterpointed with the contrasting experiences of men and women and of her different female types, but also through a social movement.

Mary went back to Brighton and Praxis to her office, where she viewed rather differently the women who came and went. Those whom she had privately regarded as rejected, humiliated, obsessive, angry and ridiculous, she began to see as brave, noble, and attempting, at any rate, to live their lives by principle rather than by convenience. All kinds of women - young and old, clever, slow, pretty, plain; the halt and the lame, the sexually confused, or fulfilled, or indifferent, battered wives, raped girls, vicious virgins, underpaid shop assistants, frustrated captains of industry, violent schoolgirls, women exploited and exploiting; but all turning away from their inner preoccupations and wretchedness, to regard the outside world and see that it could be changed, if not for themselves, it being too late for themselves, then at least for others. (Praxis, pp.252-253)

In addition to this awareness, what is new in Praxis is not so much the experience of women which it presents, but the movement of the central figure from one category to another within a context of personal experience and social change. In content, the book has much in common with Marilyn French's The Women's Room, but with considerably more wit and stylistic vigour. The success of Praxis, and to varying degrees of all Weldon's fiction, depends on an interweaving of the female, the feminine and the feminist. This is made possible by a

combination of her domestic, 'feminine', material, her movement between the voices of various characters and the ironic voice of the narrator, the intercutting of scenes and characters, and the use of the fantastic. Her technical and stylistic innovations permit a reworking of the domestic genre which alters its relation to the 'feminine' and the 'feminist' whilst her books give a new importance to the 'female', the biological aspects of women's lives. For these are seen not simply as an area of determinism but one shaped and controlled by the ideology of femininity.

Weldon's work provides an interesting contrast with that of Penelope Mortimer, who is equally conscious of the social oppression and personal depression of women - "for whom marriage is chiefly an opportunity to be wounded." (1) Because in each novel Mortimer focuses on a single figure, a woman whose dependence for her own sense of identity on husband, home and family, is total, her fatalism is more complete than Weldon's whose authorial comment and alternation of characters emphasise a gap between actuality and the desire for meaning and autonomy. Mortimer's wholly realist mode further traps us in the actuality, whilst, because her characters introspect in a more extended and agonised way than Weldon's, she depicts even more clearly and painfully the personal damage done to women by the form of their relationships, their dependence and their lack of social status. This format, however, has the disadvantage of presenting these problems in completely individual terms - the discontented woman is a sick woman and Mortimer does little to challenge this judgement. Thus The Pumpkin Eater opens with its central character relating her story and her problems to a psychiatrist whilst the middle-aged heroine of Long Distance is sent to a kind of psychiatric rest home.

Mortimer focuses on the individual and her marriage with the same exclusive intensity of the characters themselves and all these relationships are presented through the viewpoint of the central female character so that the reader is placed in the position of an analyst in relation to the disturbed and

discontented narrator/protagonist. Her novels are brilliant case studies in distress, but their very intensity precludes any representation or analysis of the factors behind this distress.

In contrast, whilst Weldon's analysis of individual character is shallower, her more extended subject-matter and the stylistic devices discussed here permit a more detached viewpoint encompassing the relationship of the individual to the social. Paradoxically, despite her stylistic idiosyncracies and decidedly disenchanted view of women's position, it is Weldon who is the more traditional of the two in so far as her novel's present, in the manner of George Eliot, for example, the interactions of individuals and groups within a specific social framework, whilst Mortimer writes novels of feminine psychology in the modernistic line of Woolf and Dorothy Richardson. Margaret Drabble in many ways falls between the two. Her perceptions of the biological and social determinants of 'femininity' are often as acute as Weldon's: her women may agonise over their families, their inadequacies, their personal dissatisfactions in the manner of Mortimer's characters, but they are less helpless and considerably more in control of their own lives. Stylistically too she stands between the poles of Weldon's blunt telegraphic style with its short paragraphs and constant shifts of scene and character, and Mortimer's careful prose, finely tuned to the labyrinths of 'feminine' consciousness.

Together these three authors seem to represent a range of contemporary women's domestic fiction. Mortimer appears the least interesting of the three because both in style and material she represents a fairly conventional view of 'feminine' fiction. Lerner classifies her with the 'sensitives' as opposed to the 'feminists', that is, "those who are willing to begin from the traditional 'feminine' virtues and draw on these for their talent." (Lerner, *op.cit.*, p.182) Drabble and Weldon, on the other hand, display a much more interesting relationship to both the tradition of domestic realism and to contemporary fiction which is more overtly feminist. Whilst it

may be true that each of Mortimer's books is illustrative of her sex's predicament, a portrait of the 'prison of femininity' (2) does not itself suggest the kind of awareness of social and individual processes, together with a style adapted to the articulation of this awareness, which we find in both Weldon and Drabble.

This discussion has illustrated various possible relationships of modern domestic fiction to the concepts of 'femininity' and 'feminism' and the further relationship between style and mode of writing and the degree of awareness and criticism each author suggests in the presentation of her material. In order to extend our examination of these concepts we may now move back to an author who has generally been seen as having a much more clearly-defined connection with feminism but in whose work the interrelationships discussed here are equally complex.

(1) Laurence Lerner, Love and Marriage; Literature and its Social Context, (Edward Arnold, 1979), p.183.

(2) The term is used to describe Mortimer's fictional world by Lydia Kristofferson in The Prison of Femininity; Central Themes and Relationships in Penelope Mortimer's Novels, thesis presented at the University of Tromsø, 1978.

CHAPTER 10

DORIS LESSING: FORM AND FANTASY

The writers studied so far illustrate not only a variety of relationships to the female, feminine and feminist in modern fiction, but also differing relationships to the techniques and implications of literary realism. The next two chapters will consider firstly an author who displays a keen awareness of the connections between form and meaning and also, in her later works, moves away from the realist mode into that of science fiction; and then two women whose work is entirely contained within the latter mode, raising the question of the implications of science fiction or fantasy for an analysis of the ideology of the 'feminine'.

Doris Lessing provides a link between the two modes of writing and also illustrates the problems and limitations of each for a writer who seeks in her fiction to both embody and analyse the social and personal experience of women. In order to fully explore and contrast her responses to these problems in the two modes, the discussion of Lessing's work will be confined to two books, The Golden Notebook which both marks the culmination and signals the end of her realist work, and Memoirs of a Survivor which, in its deliberately limited scale, is a more coherent and artistically satisfying book than much of her later fiction.

The Golden Notebook raises in a very immediate way the question of what constitutes a 'feminist' novel. As we have seen, Michèle Roberts placed her novel very openly in this category, and critical comment on A Piece of the Night has been considerably influenced by this. However, whilst critics like Burgess, as we saw in chapter one, regarded Lessing's novel as a work of feminist propaganda, the author herself seems to have been surprised by this reception.

I was so immersed in writing this book, that I didn't think about how it might be received. I was involved not merely because it was hard to write - keeping the plan of it in my head I wrote it from start to end, consecutively, and it was difficult - but because of what

I was learning as I wrote. Perhaps giving oneself a tight structure, making limitations for oneself, squeezes out new substance where you least expect it. All sorts of ideas and experiences I didn't recognize as mine emerged when writing. The actual time of writing, then, and not only the experiences that had gone into the writing, was really traumatic: it changed me. Emerging from this crystallising process, handing the manuscript to publishers and friends. I learned that I had written a tract about the sex war, and fast discovered that nothing I said then could change that diagnosis.

Yet the essence of the book, the organisation of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise. (Preface to The Golden Notebook, (Michael Joseph, 1974), pp.ix-x)

Thus, contrary to the opinion of Burgess, Lessing appears to have been very much concerned with 'art', with the formal aspects of the work, rather than with its political implications. She goes on to say that the novel attempted a portrait of 'the intellectual and moral climate' of an era, to which the sex of the central protagonist seems, to her, almost incidental.

Of course this attempt on my part assumed that the filter which is a woman's way of looking at life has the same validity as the filter which is a man's way ... setting that problem aside, or rather, not even considering it, I decided that to give the ideological "feel" of our mid-century, it would have to be set among socialists and marxists, because it has been inside the various chapters of socialism that the great debates of our time have gone on; ... (GN, p.x)

The politics of her main character was thus a more conscious choice on Lessing's part than her sex. The initial assumption that the 'filter' of a woman's consciousness has the same validity as that of a man's, can hardly be seen as a radical

one since, in a slightly different form, it must underly the work of any woman writer. Nevertheless, it is this assumption which offers a partial explanation for the disagreement between Lessing and her critics over the book's central theme. Both the novel itself and its critical reception demonstrate the importance of the category of sex in our social thinking for, whilst Lessing has presented a woman involved in socialist politics, it is the gender and sexuality of her character, rather than her politics, which primarily concern the critics.

This response is not confined to non-feminist critics. Thus, for example, Mary Cohen sees the division in the novel between those, such as Anna and Molly, who continuously lay themselves open to various forms of experience, and those, like Marion and Richard, who shut themselves off from such variety and potential chaos, specifically in terms of receptivity to feminist thinking and practice.

However, whether or not we fully accept Lessing's disclaimers as to her intentions in writing the novel, we must acknowledge elements of the book which contribute to a reading of it which stresses its concern with women's experience. Thus, on one level, the book catalogues a number of forms of relationship between men and women, discusses the role of women as mothers and wives and various aspects of their sexuality.

It is necessary, then, to admit that the role of women in Western society is only one of Lessing's concerns; yet, despite her protests, it is equally clear that Lessing's fiction adds significantly to our understanding of what it means to be a woman in contemporary life.

(Mary Cohen, "'Out of the chaos a new kind of strength.'
Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook ", Diamond and Edwards eds., op. cit., p.179)

Burgess's argument that the novel is a work of propaganda, not art nevertheless remains less easy to justify, particularly given Lessing's obvious concern with its structure,

which she describes thus:

There is a skeleton, or frame, called Free Women which is a conventional short novel, about 60,000 words long, and which could stand by itself. But it is divided into five sections and separated by stages of the four Notebooks, Black, Red, Yellow and Blue. The Notebooks are kept by Anna Wulf, a central character of Free Women. She keeps four, and not one because, as she recognises, she has to separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness - of breakdown. Pressures, inner and outer, end the Notebooks; a heavy black line is drawn across the page of one after another. But now that they are finished, from their fragments can come something new, The Golden Notebook. (GN, p.vii)

The book thus not only has a clear and deliberate form, it is also a novel about form and formlessness, and one in which form and meaning are closely related.

... my major aim was to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped. (GN, p.xiii)

Lessing is, furthermore, concerned with the relationship of her own work to the tradition and form of the novel.

Another idea was that if the book were shaped in the right way it would make its own comment about the conventional novel: the debate about the novel has been going on since the novel was born. To put the short novel Free Women as a summary and condensation of all that mass of material, was to say something about the conventional novel, another way of describing the dissatisfaction of a writer when something is finished: 'How little I have managed to say of the truth, how little I have caught of all that complexity; how can this small neat thing be true when what I experienced was so rough and apparently formless

and unshaped.' (GN, p.xiii.)

The central character of the book, Anna Wulf, is a writer, "but with a 'block'". Free Women is the novel she herself could have written had she been prepared to submit the complexity of her experience to the demands of artistic form, to select and exclude for the sake of order. It is, however, a paradox that Lessing seeks to articulate this critique of form through form, through the careful structuring of the novel.

There are thus two major issues which emerge in the discussion of The Golden Notebook. Firstly, what is the relation between its 'feminist' theme as perceived by the critics, and the other elements of the novel to which Lessing herself calls attention? Secondly, how effective is the structure of the book in presenting and integrating these themes?

The accusations of narrow range which we have seen levelled at writers such as Margaret Drabble, working within the genre of domestic fiction appear irrelevant to Lessing's novel. In terms of its scene the book moves from colonial Africa to London flat-land and the world of left wing politics. This constant movement is a function of the author's awareness of the problem of the relation between domestic and public life - the 'personal' and the 'political'. She is particularly concerned with this relationship in the form of the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective as stressed by socialist critical thought.

At last I understood that the way over, or through this dilemma, the unease at writing about 'petty personal problems' was to recognise that nothing is personal in the sense that it is uniquely one's own. Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions - and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas - can't be yours alone. The way to deal with the problem of 'subjectivity', that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual

who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvelous possibilities, is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does, transforming a private experience ... into something much larger: growing up is after all only the understanding that one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares.

(GN, pp.xii-xiii)

This perception, as we found in discussing the work of Drabble, Weldon and Mortimer, is as crucial to the author's response to the ideology of femininity as it is to the approach to all forms of politics.

Lessing's novel itself illustrates this concern with the relationship of the individual to others and to the public, 'political', world. Thus Anna and her friend Molly are seen as parts of a single whole.

'But do you know something? I discovered while you were away that for a lot of people you and I are practically interchangeable.'

'You've only just discovered that?' said Molly, triumphant as always when Anna came up with - as far as she was concerned - facts that were self-evident.

In this relationship a balance had been struck early on: Molly was altogether more worldly-wise than Anna who, for her part, had a superiority of talent. (GN, pp.9-10)

Their pretensions to originality of thought and experience are denied:

Molly said at last, sighing, 'free. Do you know, when I was away, I was thinking about us, and I've decided that we're a completely new type of woman. We must be, surely?'

'There's nothing new under the sun.' said Anna.
(GN, p.10)

its structure and its narrative content. Anna's attitude to experience is ambivalent: on the one hand she refuses to separate and confine areas of her life and work - hence her revulsion at the art-gallery atmosphere of Mrs Mark's office and the analyst's view of art as the production of perfectly finished objects. As we saw, Lessing herself designed the novel as a criticism of this conception of art. However, as Anna explains to Tommy, the four notebooks serve to separate elements of her experience and her consciousness in order to avoid their potential chaos.

'Why do you have four notebooks?'

'I don't know.'

'You must know.'

'I didn't ever say to myself: I'm going to keep four notebooks, it just happened.'

'Why not one notebook?'

She thought for a while and said: 'Perhaps because it would be such a - scramble. Such a mess.' (GN, p.226)

'Why the four notebooks? What would happen if you had one big book without all those divisions and brackets and special writing?'

'I've told you, chaos.'

He turned to look at her. He said sourly: 'You look such a neat little thing and look at what you write.'

Anna said: 'You sounded just like your mother then: that's how she criticises me - in that tone of voice.'

'Don't put me off, Anna. Are you afraid of being chaotic?'

Anna felt her stomach contract in a sort of fear, and said, after a pause: 'I suppose I must be.'

'Then it's dishonest. 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.'

(GN, p.233)

The ability to place one's own experience in relation to wider issues, to make connections, is related to the breadth of that experience and, as Mary Cohen suggested, characters in the novel fall into place along a spectrum defined by openness to experience or deliberate self-limitation. Tommy, Molly's son, discusses these differences with her ex-husband.

'People like Anna and Molly and that lot, they're not just one thing, but several things. And you know they could change and be something different. I don't mean their characters would change, but they haven't set into a mould. You know if something happened in the world, or there was a change of some kind, a revolution or something ...' He waited a moment, patiently, for Richard's sharply irritated indrawn breath over the word revolution to be expelled, and went on: 'they'd be something different if they had to be. But you'll never be different, father. You'll always have to live the way you do now.'

(GN, p.36)

Tommy perceives the connection between individual personality and experience and wider social developments. This connection is emphasised by the fact that the book deals not only with Anna's personal relationships with a series of men, Willi, Michael, and Saul Green, but also suggests that the nature of these different relationships is influenced by both her personal and political situation and development. Lessing is also concerned with relationships within a group: the party-members and their camp followers in Africa, the communist group in London. These relationships are not purely individual ones, for any character or couple within the group is affected both by the presence, absence or attitudes of the other members and by social and political factors.

If this unity of the individual with the group and the social world is an important theme of the book, its opposite, the fragmentation of the individual consciousness under the pressure of personal and social experience, is central to both

its structure and its narrative content. Anna's attitude to experience is ambivalent: on the one hand she refuses to separate and confine areas of her life and work - hence her revulsion at the art-gallery atmosphere of Mrs Mark's office and the analyst's view of art as the production of perfectly finished objects. As we saw, Lessing herself designed the novel as a criticism of this conception of art. However, as Anna explains to Tommy, the four notebooks serve to separate elements of her experience and her consciousness in order to avoid their potential chaos.

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(GN, p.233)

The individual not only divides up experience, but also his or her own consciousness. The 'novel' The Shadow of the Third contained in the Yellow Notebook centres on the idea of this fragmentation.

... as she comes to understand the image she has created of the other serene, etc., woman, she wonders about Paul's jealousy, and comes to think - not from bitterness but to understand it - what it really means. It occurs to her that Paul's shadow, his imagined third, is a self-hating rake, free, casual, heartless. (This is the role he sometimes plays, self-mockingly, with her.) So what it means is, that in coming together with Ella in a serious relationship, the rake in himself has been banished, pushed aside, and now stands in the wings of his personality, temporarily unused, waiting to return. And Ella now sees, side by side with the wise, serene, calm woman, her shadow, the shape of this compulsive self-hating womaniser. The two discordant figures move side by side, keeping pace with Ella and Paul. And there comes a moment (but right at the end of the novel, its culmination) when Ella thinks: 'Paul's shadow figure, the man he sees everywhere, even in a man I haven't noticed, is this almost musical-comedy libertine. So that means Paul with me is using his 'positive' self' ... 'With me he is good. But I have as a shadow a good woman, grown-up and strong and un-asking. Which means that I am using with him my 'negative' self. So this bitterness I feel growing in me, against him, is a mockery of the truth. In fact he's better than I am, in this relationship, these invisible figures that keep us company all the time prove it.'

(GN, pp.179-180)

'Ella' is one of the characters through whom Anna attempts to capture and understand her own situation, her own relationships, and Anna herself is seen as not only divided in terms of various 'roles', writer, socialist, woman, but within her consciousness. The inner and the outer fragmentation are inter-related.

... who is that Anna who will read what I will write? Who is this other I whose judgement I fear; or whose gaze, at least, is different from mine when I am not thinking, recording, being conscious. And perhaps tomorrow, when that other Anna's eye is on me, I will decide not to leave the Party? For one thing, I am going to miss Jack - with whom else could I discuss, and without reservations, all these problems? With Michael, of course - but he is leaving me. And besides, it is always in bitterness. But what is interesting is this: Michael is the ex-communist, the traitor, the lost soul; Jack the communist bureaucrat. In a sense it is Jack who murdered Michael's comrades ... It is Jack who labels Michael a traitor. And it is Michael who labels Jack a murderer. And yet these two men (if they met they would not exchange one word out of mistrust) are the two men I can talk to and who understand everything I feel. (GN, p.300)

Thus the various relationships in which we see Anna have an interest not only in their analysis of women's experience, but also suggest the fragmentation of her consciousness: the different men are sought by and respond to different aspects of herself. Furthermore, the failure of these relationships is seen as due, in part at least, to the inability to integrate both her experience and her personality. Lessing presents Anna as the classic 'new woman', torn between traditional values and emotional patterns and the demands and desires of a changing role and consciousness.

'That's what's wrong with us all. All our strongest emotions are buttoned up, one after another. For some reason, they're irrelevant to the time we live in. What's my strongest need - being with one man, love, all that. I've a real talent for it.' (GN, p.535)

Feminist critics, like Sydney Janet Kaplan in Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1975, p.157) have noted the essential

passivity in Lessing's conception of women in this novel. However, the book's structure enables Lessing to distance herself from attitudes and forms of consciousness articulated in the text: both the Notebooks and the short novel, *Free Women* can be seen as Anna's own work, and what she 'writes' illustrates not so much the author's views as other aspects of the 'character's' experience within the book. It is Anna who, with part of her consciousness, sees women as almost entirely dependent, sexually and emotionally, on a male lover. Emotional and sexual satisfaction, she argues, result from acceptance of this dependent status, expressed in terms of the superiority of the vaginal orgasm over the clitoral. It is, furthermore, noticeable, that it is the man who determines the form of sexual activity.

As time went on, he began to use mechanical means. (I look at the word mechanical - a man wouldn't use it.) Paul began to rely on manipulating her externally, on giving Ella clitoral orgasms. Very exciting. Yet there was always a part of her that resented it. Because she felt that the fact he wanted to was an expression of his instinctive desire not to commit himself to her. She felt that without knowing it or being conscious of it (though perhaps he was conscious of it) he was afraid of the emotion. A vaginal orgasm is emotion and nothing else, felt as emotion and expressed in sensations that are indistinguishable from emotion. The vaginal orgasm is a dissolving in a vague, dark generalised sensation like being swirled in a warm whirlpool. There are several different sorts of clitoral orgasms, and they are more powerful (that is a male word) than the vaginal orgasm. There can be a thousand thrills, sensations, etc., but there is only one real female orgasm and that is when a man, from the whole of his need and desire takes a woman and wants all her response. Everything else is a substitute and a fake, and the most inexperienced woman feels this instinctively. Ella had never experienced clitoral orgasm before Paul, and she told him so, and he was delighted. 'Well, you are

a virgin in something, Ella, at least.' But when she told him she had never experienced what she insisted on calling a 'real orgasm' to anything like the same depth before him, he involuntarily frowned, and remarked: 'Do you know that there are eminent physiologists who say women have no physical basis for vaginal orgasm?' 'Then they don't know much, do they?' And so, as time went on, the emphasis shifted in their love-making from the real orgasm to the clitoral orgasm, and there came a point where Ella realised (and quickly refused to think about it) that she was no longer having real orgasms. That was just before the end, when Paul left her. (GN, p.186)

The idea of 'woman' in this passage is highly complex. On the one hand, Anna clearly resents the presumption of the 'experts' in defining women's sexual and emotional responses, and yet it is clearly Paul who controls their love-making. However, she suggests herself that there is one particularly 'female' form of sexual response, the desire for the 'real' orgasm, and that women seek a total emotional commitment from which men turn away. Sydney Janet Kaplan points out (op. cit.) that 'Anna's' writing here suggests a falseness of tone, for she is unable to write about this experience with any originality, resorting instead to the imagery of pulp romance: "a dissolving in a vague, dark generalised sensation like being swirled in a warm whirlpool." It seems likely that this difficulty arises precisely because of her awareness of a negative side to this female response and need.

I am always amazed, in myself, and in other women at the strength of our need to bolster men up. This is ironical, living as we do in a time of men's criticising us for being 'castrating' etc. ... For the truth is, women have this deep instinctive need to build up a man as a man. Molly, for instance. I suppose this is because real men become fewer and fewer, and we are frightened, try to create men.

No, what terrifies me is my willingness. It is what

Mother Sugar would call 'the negative side' of women's need to placate, to submit. Now I am not Anna, I have no will. I can't move out of a situation once it has started. (GN, p.414)

Anna sees and resents two aspects of this 'feminine' dependence: firstly, a kind of masochism.

It was from Willi that I learned how many women like to be bullied. It was humiliating and I used to fight against accepting it as true. But I've seen it over and over again. (p.90)

Lessing herself expresses the same view in the tone of irritation feminists frequently fall into in referring to 'other' women.

A lot of women were angry about The Golden Notebook. What women will say to other women, grumbling in their kitchens and complaining and gossiping, or what they make clear in their masochism, is often the last thing they will say aloud - a man may overhear. Women are the cowards they are because they have been semi-slaves for so long. The number of women prepared to stand up for what they really think, feel, experience with a man they are in love with is still small. Most women will still run like little dogs with stones thrown at them when a man says: You are unfeminine, aggressive, you are unmaning me. It is my belief that any woman who marries, or takes seriously in any way at all, a man who uses this threat, deserves everything she gets. For such a man is a bully, does not know anything about the world he lives in, or about its history - men and women have taken infinite numbers of roles in the past, and do now, in different societies. So he is ignorant, or fearful about being out of step - a coward. (Preface, p.vii)

This leads to the second aspect of women's submission and

dependence: the egocentric, bullying behaviour on the part of men which it permits. Within the novel, the story of De Silva's neglect and abandonment of his wife, together with Nelson's relationships with women demonstrate this. Nevertheless, the presentation of individual relationships within the context of the social and psychological pressures acting on the characters prevents the book from becoming merely a 'tract about the sex war'. The problem about the novel's treatment of female experience lies rather in Anna's inability to develop a language and a style to describe it. She is able to laugh at Mrs. Mark's conception of 'woman' as an absolute:

'Of course you are a real woman.' She uses this word, a woman, a real woman, exactly as she does artist, a true artist. An absolute. When she said, you are a real woman, I began to laugh. (GN, p.204)

However, through Anna's own use of terms such as "deep instinctive need" and "one real female orgasm", Lessing suggests her character's rejection, with one part of herself, of the concepts of flexibility, openness and transformation on which the book is based. Whilst this failure of nerve may be attributed to Anna rather than her creator, it remains true also that Lessing herself offers us no alternative formulation, no other terms in which to discuss women's experience and sexuality, so that, despite her assertion that

everything we now take for granted is going to be utterly swept away in the next decade... (GN, Preface, p.ix)

the men and women in her novel appear trapped in a situation where only a very limited range of possible relationships, all based on myths of power and submission, need and frustration, is open to them. Anna's sense of the new complexity and scale of human experience is stronger than the hope that individuals and their relationships will develop in such a way as to transform the modern nightmare into a golden age, and whilst the book's structure, fragmentation and final integration in

the Golden Notebook itself, is clearly an attempt to suggest a resolution, its effectiveness, as we shall suggest later, is strictly limited.

The narrative and the characters of the novel function as elements within these themes of fragmentation/integration, limitation/openness. There is a clear opposition between Molly and Anna who both attempt to accommodate the chaos of experience and suffer guilt and self-doubt as a result, and Richard and Marion who survive by remaining static and shutting themselves off from complex experience. Between the two groups stands Tommy who initially criticises his father's position before accusing Anna of hypocrisy and rejecting her attempt to face up to the multiplicity of personal and social events, a rejection symbolised by his self-inflicted blindness.

The final sections of the book; the last part of the Blue Notebook, The Golden Notebook and Free Women five, constitute an account of Anna's relationship with the American writer Saul Green, 'Milt' in Free Women. Lessing claims that the Golden Notebook provides a climax to the novel in which the earlier fragmented Notebooks and their material are combined into a total apprehension of experience. Although in terms of narrative and structure this is true for, the other Notebooks having been brought to a close, Anna now writes only in one, the claim is not entirely justified. For one thing, this section deals almost exclusively with Anna's personal life and her existence as a writer; other areas such as her politics are not so much integrated as left out entirely. Furthermore, the relationship with Saul is the most problematic and least convincing in the novel. Saul's function appears to be to lead Anna through breakdown to a new wholeness, symbolised by her return to writing. But as Mary Cohen points out, the character presented is inconsistent with this role.

Lessing's portrayal of Saul Green works against his function in the novel. He is meant to lead Anna into breakdown and exorcise her fear of formlessness. While

he seems to do so, he is so little different from other men in his treatment of Anna that it is difficult for the reader to accept him as her mentor. He uses her sexually, ignoring her emotional needs, in fact, tormenting her further by seeking out other women - or at least seeming to. ... Apparently these failings are not intended to interfere with the reader's recognition that his perseverance through madness and his faith in literature and its value to a recorded world are crucial to Anna's recovery and growth. (Cohen, loc. cit. p.190)

Lessing may intend to suggest that Saul, precisely by this behaviour, pushed Anna into madness, and that this is, finally, the way to a new health and unity. Indeed she implies a criticism of Saul by reproducing parts of his journal in the same style as that which Anna had earlier used to parody the young male writer. It is, however, this view of 'therapeutic' breakdown as much as the character of Saul, which leads us to question the success of the novel's ending. Tommy's breakdown, earlier in the book, had led in precisely the opposite direction, resulting from and confirming an acceptance of self-limitation and accommodation with conventional values. Furthermore, it is not clear whether Anna will recover from her 'block' and be able to write again, although the ability to integrate her experience sufficiently to write about it seems crucial to the idea of her recovery. In the Golden Notebook, Saul provides her with the opening sentence of her new novel but in the final Free Woman section she tells Molly that she intends to find a job and the question of her writing remains without a clear answer.

'I'm going to take a job.'

'You mean, you're not going to write?'

'No.' (GN, p.568)

'No' she will not be just a writer, will refuse to separate life and art; or 'no' she will not write at all?

The novel's resolution then is neither as clear-cut nor as satisfactory, in terms of both structure and theme, as some critics have maintained. It remains to consider whether the book's form and its theme of Anna as writer, its implicit and explicit concern with art, clarify the issues of personality and experience which it raises and which, on the narrative level, are problematic.

In one sense the book's structure offers five different ways of telling the same story. Anna herself sees the Notebooks as covering different areas:

I keep four notebooks, a black notebook, which is to do with Anna Wulf the writer; a red notebook concerned with politics; a yellow notebook in which I make stories out of my experience; and a blue notebook which tries to be a diary. (GN, p.406)

But her consciousness of these divisions arises only after the fact. There was no original intention to write four notebooks or to divide her experience up in this way and we can see each of the notebooks as recording an aspect of a single life. The fifth perspective is offered by the novel *Free Women* which is the book which Anna could have written had she accepted the idea of art as the creation of form and order through the exclusion of chaos and multiplicity. In this context the yellow notebook represents a first attempt at structuring and fictionalising painful personal experience and Lessing has modified her own style in these sections to emphasise this function.

Much of the complexity of the ideas in the other notebooks comes through the richness of description, imagery and extended narrative. But the single-mindedness and oversimplification of Anna's initial attempts at fictionalizing are revealed through her frequent use of statement to carry the burden of meaning. (Kaplan, (1975) p.156)

As Lessing makes clear in her Preface, she is concerned

with a writer no longer able to write. In part this inability arises from the confusion of her experience, but she is also in doubt about the morality of literature, the distance between art and truth. Thus the Black Notebook documents her revulsion from her own first novel which has become, on one level, merely a source of income as well as a source of guilt over the distortions and falsifications which its writing imposed on her experience and her portrayal of others. Whilst still protecting the novel from further exploitation by film or television, Anna attempts to get back, in the Notebook, to the reality of the experience behind it but concludes that even her 'non-fictional' account no longer approximates to any truth she can recognise.

I read this over today, for the first time since I wrote it. It's full of nostalgia, every word loaded with it, although at the time I wrote it I thought I was being objective. ... And the 'Anna' of that time is like an enemy, or like an old friend one has known too well and doesn't want to see. (p.135)

The problem of truth is not merely one of time and change: she comes to see writing fiction as an escape from the pain of the real experience.

I came upstairs from the scene between Tommy and Molly and instantly began to turn it into a short story. It struck me that my doing this - turning everything into fiction - must be an evasion. Why not write down, simply, what happened between Molly and her son today? Why do I never write down, simply, what happens? Why don't I keep a diary? Obviously my changing everything into fiction is simply a means of concealing something from myself. (p.197)

The use to which Anna thus puts her writing is further demonstrated in the transposition of her own painful experience into the story of Ella in the Yellow Notebook. What she does not appear to notice, however, is that art may bring her closer

to the truth. For the short stories which she at one stage outlines (pp.455-462) predict events which follow in her own life and are recorded elsewhere. It seems that she has been, unconsciously, able to perceive both these developments and their underlying causes, and to articulate them in fiction.

Anna is, however, obsessed by the distortion, not the insight, created both through fiction and through the very act of recording. At one point she endeavours to write down the events of a single day but feels, even as she does so, that truth to experience is impossible.

A period is something I deal with without thinking about it particularly, or rather I think of it with a part of my mind which deals with routine problems. ... But the idea that I will have to write it down is changing the balance, destroying the truth. (GN, p.291)

We have seen already that the prevailing ideology of 'woman' which is built in to our very language may make it difficult for a writer to give an account of women's experience. Anna too finds the problem of truth not only a general one of fiction, but especially obstructive in dealing with areas related to sexuality where the words themselves are so loaded with association and taboo as to negate any attempt at simple documentation.

... I am worrying about this business of being conscious of everything so as to write it down, particularly in connection with my having a period. Because, whereas to me, the fact I am having a period is no more than an entrance into an emotional state, recurring regularly, that is of no particular importance; I know that as soon as I write the word 'blood', it will be given a wrong emphasis, and even to me when I come to read what I have written. (Ibid.)

Similarly we have noted the awkwardness of 'Anna's' writing

when attempting to discuss the female orgasm. This seems not to be a problem which arises in the same way in dealing with male sexuality and Lessing shows us male characters in the novel able to talk in an easy 'club-man's' tone of, for instance, the problems of achieving an erection with their wives. For the writer these are points of literary tact but emphasise also the specific difficulties of offering an accurate account of women's experience.

The issue is raised frequently in the work of later, overtly 'feminist' writers who attempt to place subjects such as menstruation, lesbianism and other areas of female sexuality within a context of social and personal experience but, because of the traditional literary neglect of these topics, are forced into a false emphasis. (1) We may see this indeed as one reason why Lessing's novel has been perceived as more feminist in its orientation than she herself would admit. Thus her discussion, through the presentation of Anna's writing, of the problems of literary representation offers some response to this interpretation, whilst the division of the book into sections dealing with specific areas of Anna's life should warn us that the attempted scope of the novel is considerably wider than such a reading would allow.

All this is not to deny, as Lessing suggests in her Preface, that the perspective taken in the book is that of a particular type of woman at a specific historic moment. What the structure of the novel does unquestionably is to indicate the range and complexity of experience to which the individual, here the individual woman, is subject in contemporary life. Whether it serves to articulate the theme of breakdown or integration is more doubtful, for Lessing cannot escape her own controlling artistic activity of selecting and shaping in the novel. What we are made aware of through the elaborate system of division and sub-division is the problem of recording and giving appropriate significance to experience, and yet, in one way, she has simplified the task itself by containing the narrative within the consciousness, however fragmented, of a

single individual.

The problems Lessing raises and attempts to overcome in The Golden Notebook are essentially those of literary realism. The final part of the novel, however, signals a movement away from realism which was to become a feature of her later work. Whilst The Golden Notebook traces an individual's route to personal breakdown within a social context, subsequent novels will develop the theme of social collapse alongside that of madness. The Four-Gated City in particular illustrates the transition from the realism of the earlier books in the "Children of Violence" sequence, to the mode of science fiction and fantasy. Here, however, we shall be looking at a novel entirely contained in the science fiction mode, The Memoirs of a Survivor.

In this novel the theme of fragmentation continues but is not articulated through structure which is in the form of a single narrative, literally the 'memoirs' of a single survivor. Fragmentation rather forms the very substance of this narrative. It is implicit even in the geography of the book for the country appears to be divided between the southern and eastern parts already affected by a cataclysm whose precise nature is unclear, and the northern and western areas to which refugees flee. The narrator's own city seems, despite the constant movement of people through and from its streets, strangely isolated from both areas, either relying on rumour or without any information as to what is happening elsewhere.

And of all those people who had left, the multitudes, what had happened to them? They might as well have walked off the edge of a flat world ... On the radios, or occasionally from the loudspeaker of an official car ... came news from the east; yes, it seemed there was life of a sort down there still. A few people even farmed, grew crops, made lives. ...

But north and west, no. Nothing but cold and silence.
(The Memoirs of a Survivor, (Picador, 1976,) p.185)

Internally too, the society is divided: despite the breakdown of structures of authority and control, the old ruling group, "Them", still maintains its separateness.

Yet even at that late stage, there was a level of our society which managed to live as if nothing much was happening - nothing irreparable. The ruling class - but that was a dead phrase, so they said; very well then, the kind of person who ran things, administered, sat on councils and committees, made decisions. Talked. The bureaucracy. An international bureaucracy. But when has it not been true? - that the section of a society which gets the most out of it maintains in itself, and for as long as it can in others, an illusion of security, permanence, order. (Memoirs, p.95)

The novel traces the breakdown of social organisation and the growth of new structures whilst, at the same time, showing the survival of anachronistic patterns and habits. Thus the gang becomes the new social unit, replacing the family and the couple.

In front of my eyes, on that pavement, for weeks, for months, I could have watched as in a text book or a laboratory the genesis, growth and flowering of society's new unit. (p.52)

Yet the old emotional patterns continue, despite their irrelevance.

The next thing was that Emily fell in love ... I am conscious that this seems a term inappropriate to the times that I am describing ...

I remember I used to wonder if these young people, living as they had to from hand to mouth, who could never shut themselves off in couples behind walls unless it was for a few days or hours in a deserted house somewhere, or a shed in a field, would ever say to each other: I love

you. Do you love me? Will our love last? - and so on. All of which phrases seemed more and more like the keys or documents of possession to states and conditions now obsolete. (Memoirs, pp.76-7)

The sudden unexpected and unexplained arrival of Emily in the home of the older narrator emphasises the co-existence of traditional and new structures and attitudes in terms of different generations, as well as exemplifying the way in which the extraordinary is accommodated in an image of normality. What the narrative describes is not immediate and total collapse of social, moral and personal order, but a gradual shift in what is considered to be normal and a progressive breakdown of the processes of socialisation affecting the young. The groups of young people forming on the pavements are seen initially as anarchic, but gradually the narrator realises that they too live by rules and form themselves into a hierarchy, albeit unspoken. It is only with the emergence of gangs of even younger children, to whom not only the rules but the very terms of reference of social life are meaningless, that a total collapse of order becomes apparent.

Once, a few months ago, we had seen these gangs as altogether outside any kind of order. Now we wondered if and when we should join them. But above all the point was that when studied, when understood, their packs and tribes had structure, like those of primitive man or of animals, where in fact a strict order prevails. A short time with people living this sort of life, and one grasped the rules - all unwritten, of course, but one knew what to expect.

And this was precisely where these new children were different. No one knew what to expect. Before, the numerous children without parents attached themselves willingly to families or to other clans or tribes. They were wild and difficult, problematical, heartbreaking; they were not like the children of a stable society: but they could be handled inside the terms of what was known and

understood.

Not so this new gang of 'kids'. Gangs, rather: soon we learned that there were others; ... They seemed never to have had parents, never to have known the softening of the family. Some had been born in the Underground and abandoned. How had they survived? No one knew. But this was what these children knew how to do. They stole what they needed to live on, which was very little indeed. They wore clothes - just enough. They were ... no, they were not like animals who have been licked and purred over, and, like people, have found their way to good behaviour by watching exemplars. They were not a pack either, but an assortment of individuals together only for the sake of the protection in numbers. They had no loyalty to each other, or, if so, a fitful and unpredictable loyalty. (Memoirs, p.154)

The book's treatment of socialisation, social order and their breakdown, remains, however, highly critical. On the one hand these youngsters are seen as a totally destructive force, threatening both the older inhabitants of the city and the new communities of young people. On the other, older forms of socialisation, education into the moral and social order, are represented by the stifling 'personal' experiences which the narrator witnesses in the other world, 'behind the wall'. In these scenes the child is terrified, bullied, punished and broken into family and social life by her parents. This view is clarified when the narrator explains to Emily how ideas of order are introduced to individuals and come to appear as a 'natural' part of consciousness.

Only a few days before Emily had come in late from this household, and had said to me: 'It is impossible not to have a pecking order. No matter how you try not to.' And she had been not far off tears, and a little girl's tears at that.

And I said: 'You aren't the first person to have that difficulty!'

'Yes, but it isn't what we meant, what we planned. Gerald and I talked it over, right at the start, it was all discussed, there wasn't going to be any of that old nonsense, people in charge telling people what to do, all that horrible stuff.'

I had said to her: 'Everybody has been taught to find a place in a structure - that as a first lesson. To obey. Isn't that so? And so that is what everybody does.'

'But most of these children have never had any education at all.'

She was all indignation and incredulity. A grown-up - a very grown-up and responsible - question she was asking: after all, it is one that most adults never ask. But what had confronted me there had been a young girl in whose eyes kept appearing - only to be driven down, fought down - the needs of a child for reassurance, the sullen reproach against difficult circumstances of a very young person, not an adult at all.

'It starts when you are born.' I said. 'She's a good girl. She's a bad girl. Have you been a good girl today? I hear you've been a bad girl. Oh she's so good, such a good child ... don't you remember?' She had stared at me; she had not really heard. 'It's all false, it's got to do with nothing real, but we are all in it all our lives - you're a good little girl. "Do as I tell you and I'll tell you you are good." It's a trap and we are all in it.'

'We decided it wasn't going to happen,' she said.

'Well,' I had said, 'you don't get a democracy by passing resolutions or thinking democracy is an attractive idea. And that's what we have always done. On the one hand "you're a good little girl, a bad little girl", and institutions and hierarchies and a place in the pecking order, and on the other passing resolutions about democracy, or saying how democratic we are. So there is no reason for you to feel so bad about it. All that has happened is what always happens.' (Memoirs, pp.117-8)

socialisation or anarchy. This suggests, however, only the initial flaws of the society depicted. Elsewhere, in The Golden Notebook, Lessing indicates that it may be worthwhile striving for a more satisfactory balance between the individual and the society which has, from the outset, produced her. In the later book she approaches the Romantic fallacy of the autonomous, pre-social personality.

The relevance of the narrator's 'personal' experiences beyond the wall which divides her two worlds, underlines the falsity of any distinction between personal and social; a theme carried over from The Golden Notebook. For whilst these experiences appear totally enclosed and cut off from the rest of the novel's action, taking place indeed in a different world, they demonstrate the action of social forces in a world of real experience. Thus Lessing argues once again that the individual can in no way be isolated from the pattern of collective experience. It is precisely within the 'personal' life that the patterns, demands and restrictions of social life appear at their most powerful and terrifying.

These experiences, occurring as they do 'behind the wall', nevertheless emphasise the fragmentation of the individual consciousness. The narrator's ability to move between the two worlds suggests a split in her consciousness and, although closely interrelated, her perception of and response to experience in each differ. The parallels between the two worlds indicate precisely that they offer different modes of perception. Thus as conditions in the 'real' world deteriorate, so do those 'behind the wall'.

As the summer ended there was as bad a state of affairs in the space behind the wall as on this side, with us. Or perhaps it was only that I was seeing what went on there more clearly. (Memoirs, p.140)

The status of this other world is, however, yet more complex for it appears at times to fulfil a double role: whilst reflecting life in the 'real' world it also stands for an older, idyllic existence, one into which the 'personal' experiences of fear and repression break with shattering effect.

Lessing is thus able to describe the problems of social breakdown without oversimplifying her picture of the original order. She does so, though, at the expense of confusing the status of this world 'behind the wall', and this becomes increasingly problematic towards the end of the book. A parallel may be drawn with the ambiguities noted in the closing sections of The Golden Notebook. If the movement through the wall does not offer simply access to an idealised alternative to the 'real' world, and it cannot do so as long as it focuses the critique of socialisation and reflects the decline of the narrator's other world, then the final scene in which Gerald, Emily and Hugo the dog accompany her through the wall in what seems like an escape from reality, is difficult to interpret.

Emily took Gerald by the hand, and with Hugo walked through the screen of the forest into ... and now it is hard to say exactly what happened. We were in that place which might present us with anything - rooms furnished this way or that and spanning the tastes and customs of millenia; walls broken, falling, growing again; a house roof like a forest floor sprouting grasses and birds' nests; rooms smashed, littered, robbed; a bright green lawn under thunderous and glaring clouds and on the lawn a giant black egg of pockmarked iron, but polished and glassy, around which, and reflected in the black shine, stood Emily, Hugo, Gerald, her officer father, her large, laughing, gallant mother, and little Dennis, the four-year-old criminal, clinging to Gerald's hand, clutching it and looking up into his face, smiling - there they stood, looking at this iron egg until, broken by the force of their being there, it fell apart, and out of it came ... a scene, perhaps, of people in a quiet room bending to lay matching pieces of patterned materials on a carpet that had no life in it until that moment when vitality was fed into it by these exactly answering patches: but no, I did not see that, or if I did, not clearly ... that world, presenting itself in a thousand little flashes, a

jumble of little scenes, facets of another picture, all impermanent, was folding up, as we stepped into it, was parcelling itself up, was vanishing, dwindling and going - all of it, trees and streams, grasses and rooms and people. But the one person I had been looking for all the time was there: there she was.

No, I am not able to say clearly what she was like. She was beautiful: it is a word that will do. I only saw her for a moment, in a time like the fading of a spark on dark air - a glimpse: she turned her face just once to me, and all I can say is ... nothing at all. (pp.189-90)

The image of the egg may suggest renewal and the woman whom the narrator finally glimpses - having previously sensed as a presence during her visits behind the wall - perhaps indicates that here people satisfy some need which remains unfulfilled in 'real' life. Both these ideas, however, seem inconsistent with many of the experiences of this other world. The novel's promise of recovery and integration is thus as ambivalent and dubious as that of The Golden Notebook.

It remains to be considered whether this novel, despite its difference in form, raises any of the 'feminist' issues of the earlier book. In Memoirs of a Survivor the narrator adopts the position of an observer and recorder: indeed, most of her time is spent in watching events from her window or gathering news in the city. The narrative is thus concerned largely with the changes and crises occurring in the society as a whole. Despite its form as a diary or memoir, therefore, the tone and content of the book are more impersonal than those of The Golden Notebook. Issues specifically relating to women are presented obliquely, as part of the discussion of socialisation and through reference to the role of women in this changing society.

This role embodies continuities and alterations. Romantic love has become an anachronism and yet Emily experiences all the joys and pains of first love, whilst Gerald's position

as leader of the group is demonstrated in traditional form by his right to choose amongst its women. The hierarchy of male and female remains, for Emily's status within the clan involves considerable personal authority and yet she is essentially subordinate to Gerald and indeed draws much of her own authority from her position as 'his' woman.

And now I suppose it must be asked and answered why Emily did not choose to be a chieftainess, a leader on her own account? Well, why not? Yes, I did ask myself this, of course. The attitudes of women towards themselves and to men, the standards women had set up for themselves, the gallantry of their fight for equality, the decades-long and very painful questioning of their roles, their functions - all this makes it difficult for me to say now, simply, that Emily was in love. Why did she not have her own band, her own houseful of brave foragers and pilferers, of makers and bakers and growers of their own food? Why was it not she of whom it was said: 'There was that house, it was standing empty, Emily has got a gang together and they've moved in. Yes, it's very good there, let's see if she will let us come too.'

There was nothing to stop her. No law, written or unwritten, said she should not, and her capacities and talents were every bit as varied as Gerald's or anybody else's. But she did not. I don't think it occurred to her.

The trouble was, she did love Gerald; and this longing for him, for his attention and his notice, the need to be the one who sustained and comforted him, who connected him with the earth, who held him steady in her common sense and her warmth - this need drained her of the initiative she would need to be a leader of a commune. She wanted no more than to be the leader of the commune's woman. His only woman, of course.

This is a history, after all, and I hope a truthful one.
(Memoirs, pp.98-9)

The final, ironic, comment suggests an awareness that even within a radically altered society, the role of women does not automatically change and may, indeed, not easily do so even with strenuous effort. The image of the 'feminine' remains potent.

This point is accentuated by the responses to the one exclusively female group which does form and which is subject to exactly the same curiosity and criticism one would expect in a less disrupted society.

By the end of that summer there were hundreds of people of all ages on the pavement. Gerald was now only one of a dozen or so leaders. Among them was a middle-aged man - a new development, this. There was also a woman, who led a small band of girls. They were self-consciously and loudly critical of male authority, male organization, as if they had set themselves a duty always to be there commenting on everything the men did. They were a chorus of condemnation. Yet the leader seemed to find it necessary to spend a great deal of energy preventing individuals of her flock from straying off and attaching themselves to the men. This caused a good deal of not always good-natured comment from the men, sometimes from the other women. But the problems and difficulties everyone had to face made this kind of disagreement seem minor. And it was an efficient group, showing great tenderness to each other and to children, always ready with information - still the most important of the commodities - and generous with what food and goods they had. (Memoirs, p.144)

The direction in which Lessing's fiction has moved in this novel supports the claim made in the Preface to The Golden Notebook that she does not see 'women's' issues in isolation from other themes in her work. Here, although there is a clear awareness of the way in which both general issues and the specific ideology of 'woman' affect women's experience, this remains situated firmly within the overall portrait of society

and social change under crisis. We can see this more clearly by comparing the book with a novel like Zoë Fairbairn's Benefits, a novel with marked structural similarities to The Memoirs of a Survivor, but concerned almost exclusively with the role of women.

The Memoirs of a Survivor may be seen as one of Lessing's more successful attempts to use the mode of science fiction as a means of commenting on current social issues, and to integrate a feminist concern with the overall portrait of a society. Here, in contrast with The Golden Notebook, abnormal personal experience is linked to developments in the social world, rather than being offered as a therapeutic resolution to the problems of the latter. As a futurist work offering also a social critique, the simple structure of the book is more effective than the somewhat contrived framework of later novels such as Shikasta.

What both the books discussed here suggest, is Lessing's awareness that the issues of the 'feminine' and of feminism do not arise in isolation but exist within, and take a particular form because of, specific social and political structures. Her portrait of women's experience, in both her realist and science fiction writing, is one which attempts to integrate the personal, the sexual and the social. Furthermore, she is fully conscious of the relationship between formal and ideological elements of the novel, even where, as at times in The Golden Notebook, she does not entirely succeed in controlling the latter.

The discussion of The Memoirs of a Survivor brings us into the area of science fiction and to the work of two authors who, whilst illustrating different relationships to the 'feminist', exploit the mode in order to explore and evaluate the ideology of the 'feminine'.

(1) See for example the collections, Tales I Tell My Mother,

Fairbairns et.al., (The Journeyman Press, 1978) and Hard Feelings, ed. Alison Fell, (The Women's Press, 1979.)

CHAPTER 11

SCIENCE FICTION AND FEMINISM

A mode of fiction which sets out to describe the actual, to convey the texture of women's lives, encounters a number of problems in articulating any perception of the social and ideological influences upon these lives. We have seen in the work of writers as different as Radclyffe Hall and Margaret Drabble how a failure in the author's theorisation of her subject matter or a deliberate confinement of expression to the consciousness of her characters may limit her ability to expose the determinants of the experience she describes. It has been suggested that Fay Weldon, Doris Lessing and Michèle Roberts have all, to varying degrees, exploited a range of stylistic and structural devices to clarify the disjunction between women's experience and the concept of the 'feminine' ; whilst in the work of Ivy Compton-Burnett and Elizabeth Bowen a number of the thematic and stylistic components of the stereotype of the 'feminine' in literature have been, as it were, turned against themselves in a form of challenge.

An alternative approach to the problem of realism was encountered in Lessing's work: to avoid the world of recognisable 'reality' altogether and to enter that of fantasy, in the form of futurist or science fiction. What science fiction offers the writer who wishes to question rather than record the nature of our social reality, is the opportunity to radically recast that reality, making the familiar itself appear alien and presenting the alien as an implicit comment on the terms of the known. Joanna Russ suggests the implications of this for a critique of the 'feminine', arguing that the traditional plot and narrative elements of realist fiction act as a restraint on the woman writer, reflecting social attitudes from which she cannot escape within the realist convention. She suggests science fiction as one mode in which sex roles and sexuality can be rethought from the beginning.

Science fiction ... seems to me to provide a broad pattern for human myths, even if the specifically futuristic or fantastic elements are subtracted. (I except the kind of male adventure story called Space Opera, which may be

part of science fiction as a genre, but is not innate in science fiction as a mode.) The myths of science fiction run along the lines of exploring a new world conceptually, (not necessarily physically), creating needed physical or social machinery, assessing the consequences of technological or other changes, and so on. These are not stories about men qua Man and women qua Woman; they are myths of human intelligence and human adaptability. They not only ignore gender roles but - at least theoretically - are not culture-bound. (Russ, "What Can a Heroine Do? or Why Women Can't Write", Cornillon ed., (1972) p.18)

This potential may be overlooked if we regard science fiction merely in terms of 'pulp' adventure-comic writing and forget that works like Wells' The Time Machine, Huxley's Brave New World and Orwell's 1984 exploit the genre in order to explore current social and political preoccupations. It remains true, however, that the bulk of science fiction writing rarely uses this potential to re-assess our assumptions, preferring to reflect existing stereotypes. Pamela Sargent comments:

Any worthwhile literature reflects its time, and science fiction is no exception. Though science fiction writers have often prided themselves on being able to entertain an unlimited number of exotic possibilities, the fact is that the genre, which is uniquely part of the twentieth century, reflects our century's attitudes. Often future societies are seen as monarchistic, capitalistic, militaristic or, in the case of post-holocaust stories or tales about the settlement of other planets, primitive. Since these 'future' societies are often modelled on past or present societies which have little regard for women, female characters are of little importance except in their traditional roles.

I do not believe that science fiction can be considered a truly serious literature unless it deals more thoughtfully with women and the concerns of women. These concerns should of course be of interest to everyone; the

division of various pursuits into 'masculine' and 'feminine' activities limits all people. Writers of adventurous science fiction, and those who use science-fictional ideas metaphorically rather than realistically, can improve their work by more thoughtful characterization. As more women writers enter the genre, and as more men deal thoughtfully with their female characters, science fiction will ... become a more androgynous and human literature. (Sargent, ed., Women of Wonder, (Penguin Books, 1978,) p.13)

A very obvious reason for the failure of science fiction to take these issues seriously, lies in its authorship and audience.

Most science fiction has been written by men, and they still form a majority of the writers today. About ten to fifteen per cent of the writers are women. The vast majority of the readers are male and a fair number of them are young men or boys who stop reading sf regularly when they grow up. It is difficult to get exact figures on this, but publications for science fiction readers have at various times reported that most of their subscribers are men; a readership of ninety per cent male and ten per cent female is not unusual. (Sargent, op. cit. p.11)

This may seem odd when we consider that science fiction, in the form with which we are familiar today, may be said to originate with the work of a woman, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. One explanation may lie in the scientific orientation of the genre: science fiction has always been dependent not only on science itself, but also on social attitudes towards science and technology.

... science fiction could begin to exist as a literary form only when a different future became conceivable by human beings - specifically a future in which new know-

ledge, new discoveries, new adventures, new mutations, would make life radically different from the familiar patterns of the past and present. Once it becomes possible to think in this way, the division between realism and fantasy begins to fade, and we can see that realism depends on a view of the world that largely ignores the future. ... Once we understand this we can see how Mary Shelley changed her reality by simply projecting a scientific advance that might be made some day upon her own historical time. She introduced a piece of a possible future into her own world and altered forever the possibilities of literature. (R. Scholes & Eric S. Rabkin, Science Fiction: history - science - vision, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1977,) p.7)

Science is an area from which women have been traditionally excluded and alienated. Whilst, in Mary Shelley's time, imaginative projection could provide an adequate grasp of its implications this has become less true as both science and the technology based upon it have developed. In a sense, for the woman writer to work in the genre at all is a form of challenge to the definitions of the 'feminine'. (1) But, as the writers considered here demonstrate, women writers of science fiction have employed the strategy of emphasising the social consequences of technological change, rather than its scientific foundation, or of presenting alternative societies in which the scientific is largely peripheral. Thus in The Left Hand of Darkness Ursula Le Guin limits her exploration of science to a passing suggestion that the people of Gethen may be the result of an earlier genetic experiment.

The science fiction considered here does not employ any of the forms of fantasy in women's writing mentioned in the discussion of Fay Weldon. For, whilst it may provide both author and reader with the means of transcending not merely the texture of reality but the very terms of that reality, it does so not by avoiding engagement with those terms but by creating a contrast through which they can be exposed,

or brought to consciousness. The nature of this contrast may vary: it can be highly explicit as in Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time (The Women's Press, 1979), which alternates between the oppressive reality of one woman's life and the utopian future with which she establishes contact; it may involve a more complex interweaving of different worlds and times as in Russ' The Female Man; the 'alien' may be emphasised by the presence of the 'normal' become the exception, as in Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness. Contrast of some kind would appear essential but it may threaten the coherence of the book, as in Zoë Fairbairn's Benefits where the realist expectations established in the first section lead us to question the validity of her futuristic projections. A similar problem arises in Woman on the Edge of Time because the 'realistic' elements are so much more convincing - and interesting - than the utopian fantasy.

In the books to be considered here, Le Guin's Left Hand of Darkness and Russ' The Female Man, these problems are largely overcome, although in different ways. The authors differ too in their relationship to the modern feminist movement and the culture of science fiction. Le Guin is a highly respected author in the genre, winner of important science fiction awards, who may be said to have discovered the potential of the genre for a re-assessment of generally unquestioned areas of our experience. Russ, on the other hand, has deliberately chosen science fiction in order to exploit this potential; she appears as a feminist writer first, a writer of science fiction only as a result of this. Nevertheless, both authors subject the terms of the 'feminine' to equally searching analyses.

Le Guin's novel explores the nature not only of femininity but of the biological as an area of sexual differentiation. She presents a world in which there are no 'women', and no 'men' either. Her view of the relationship between such 'fictions' and the known reality is made clear in the introductory comment of her Narrator, Genly Ai.

I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it, and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive. (The Left Hand of Darkness, (Panther, 1977,) p.9)

Whilst her recasting of 'reality' is radical, she employs a traditional device to emphasise the strangeness of the planet Gethen, or Winter, presenting the narrative as that of an alien visitor, as in More's Utopia or Swift's Gulliver's Travels. Le Guin's narrator, Genly Ai, is ambassador to Gethen with the task of persuading the Gethenians to join a federation of planets and she has combined the convention of the visitor with that of the alien in science fiction writing in a way which, far from exploiting the theme in a xenophobic or racist way, suggests and explores the experience of alienation through sexual differentiation. Thus, in attempting to describe women to his Gethenian companion, Genly finds that the idea of sexual differentiation, so fundamental to his own consciousness, is entirely absent from that of his listener, making the task virtually impossible. All he can do is stress the 'otherness' of the female sex.

'Tell me, how does the other sex of your race differ from yours?'

He looked startled and in fact my question rather startled me, kemmer brings out these spontaneities in one. We were both self-conscious. 'I never thought of that,' he said. 'You've never seen a woman.' He used his Terran-language word, which I knew.

'I saw your picture of them. The women looked like Gethenians, but with larger breasts. Do they differ much from your sex in mind behaviour? Are they like a different species?'

'No. Yes. No, of course not, really. But the difference is very important. I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one's life is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners - almost everything. Vocabulary, semiotic usages. Clothing, Even food. Women tend to eat less. It's extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones. Even when women participate equally with men in the society, they still after all do all the childbearing, and so most of the child-rearing.'

'Equality is not the general rule, then? Are they mentally inferior?'

'I don't know. They don't often seem to turn up mathematicians, or composers of music, or inventors, or abstract thinkers. But it isn't that they're stupid. Physically they're less muscular but a little more durable than men. Psychologically -'

After he had stared a long time at the glowing stove, he shook his head. 'Harth,' he said, 'I can't tell you what women are like. I never thought about it much in the abstract, you know and - God - by now I've practically forgotten. I've been here two years ... You don't know. In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are. With you I share one sex, anyway.' (The Left Hand ..., pp.159-60)

Unlike many feminist writers, Le Guin does not attempt here to describe female experience or to analyse directly its biological and ideological components. Instead, she emphasises its 'otherness' to the male, by presenting a man who has never considered women "in the abstract" with the task of describing the female sex to a humanoid totally unfamiliar with the concept or implications of sexual differentiation. Piercy and other feminist authors have questioned dominant sex roles by projecting a future society in which they have been abolished; Le Guin takes this process further by doing away, in her imagined world, with their biological basis. By eliminating

the 'female', and indeed the 'male', she is able to explore the cultural construction of the 'feminine' built upon it. This is a consequence of the unique sexuality of her Gethenians.

The sexual cycle averages 26 to 28 days ... For 21 or 22 days the individual is somer, sexually inactive, latent. On about the 18th day hormonal changes are initiated by the pituitary control and on the 22nd or 23rd day the individual enters kemmer, estrus. In the first phase of kemmer ... he remains completely androgynous. Gender, and potency, are not attained in isolation. ... When the individual finds a partner in kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated ... until in one partner either a male or a female hormonal dominance is established.... Normal individuals have no predisposition to either sexual role in kemmer, they do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have no choice in the matter. ... The culminant phase of kemmer ... lasts from two to five days, during which sexual drive and capacity are at maximum. It ends fairly abruptly, and if conception has not taken place, the individual returns to the somer phase within a few hours ... and the cycle begins anew. If the individual was in the female role and was impregnated, hormonal activity of course continues, and for the 8.4-month gestation period and the 6- to 8-month lactation period this individual remains female. ... No physiological habit is established, and the mother of several children may be the father of several more. (The Left Hand ..., pp.67-8)

Both Genly and the reader are made to realise the far-reaching social and psychological implications of a form of sexual organisation which we otherwise take for granted. For, to the Gethenian, the notion of permanent readiness for sexual activity and of pre-determined roles within that activity appears as a perversion. To us, the Gethenian arrangement seems equally alien, cutting through many deep-seated assumptions and habits of mind. Le Guin emphasises the connection between sexual and cultural organisation.

Consider: Anyone can turn his hand to anything. This sounds very simple, but its psychological effects are incalculable. The fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be ... 'tied down to childbearing' implies that no one is quite so thoroughly 'tied down' here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be - psychologically or physically. Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make. Therefore nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else. ...

Consider: There is no unconsenting sex, no rape. As with most mammals other than man, coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent; otherwise it is not possible. Seduction certainly is possible, but it must have to be awfully well timed.

Consider: There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed on Winter.

... Our entire pattern of socio-sexual interaction is non-existent here. They cannot play the game. They do not see one another as men or women. This is almost impossible for our imagination to accept. What is the first question we ask about a newborn baby? (The Left Hand ..., pp.69-70)

The immense difference between the Gethenian system and our own are demonstrated through the problems of trust and understanding Genly encounters in his relationship with Harth who, nevertheless, saves the ambassador's life at the cost of his own. Le Guin shows how a people who depart from the norm of sexual differentiation and are not overtly 'female' will tend to be categorised as 'male'. Not only has she chosen to use the male pronoun in writing about the Gethenians, but Ai also describes a Gethenian who departs markedly from his concept of a 'man', as 'feminine': he continues to think of individuals in terms of a basic division with no relevance on Winter, and

to place them on a scale of masculinity/femininity.

The book's title takes up the theme of division and integration on another level, recalling the duality of yin and yang, and is drawn from the Gethenian proverb in which duality is transcended, as it is in their peculiarly integrated sexuality.

Light is the left hand of darkness
and darkness the right hand of light.
Two are one, life and death, lying
together like lovers in kemmer,
like hands joined together,
like the end and the way. (p.159)

The subsequent discussion of this text in the novel stresses its philosophical implications.

Ai brooded and after some time he said, 'You're isolated, and undivided. Perhaps you are as obsessed with wholeness as we are with dualism.'

'We are dualists too. Duality is essential, isn't it? So long as there is myself and the other.'

'I and Thou,' he said. 'Yes it does, after all, go even wider than sex.' (Ibid.)

It may be that Le Guin wishes to suggest here that dualism is an inherent feature of human thought and perception. If even the Gethenians, who lack any sexual basis for dualism, perceive it as such then it may be that our social and cultural differentiation between the sexes is one which, whilst constructed upon biological differences, originates in a more general need to make and mark fundamental distinctions amongst our perceptions. This certainly points to the disjunction between the biological, the 'female', and the 'feminine', the way the biological is perceived and expressed. It does not, however, account for the specific form the differentiation between 'feminine' and 'masculine' takes in a particular society and it removes from the discussion of these

terms any political dimension. It may explain why sexual distinctions are so important in our culture but not why it is women who are subordinate, why the 'masculine' appears as the norm, the 'feminine' as the 'other'. By presenting a world in which the categories themselves do not exist, except within the consciousness of the narrator, Le Guin has been able to expose their centrality and absolute nature in our own thinking and life, but is prevented from considering their aetiology.

Significantly, however, it is not along these lines that the book has been criticised. Rather, criticism has further emphasised, often unintentionally, just how difficult it is for us to escape from the terms of our own socio-sexual organisation. Thus Stanislaw Lem accuses Le Guin both of evading the psychological problems inherent in Gethenian sexuality, and of failing to present the inhabitants of Winter as truly androgynous in a social as well as a biological sense.

... let us imagine ourselves in the situation of the people in this novel. Two questions about basic existence force themselves upon our minds:

(i) Who will I become during the next 'kemmer' (sexual) period, male or female? Contrary to all stereotyped opinions, the normal uncertainty of our lives, already well-known to us, becomes painfully extended by this sexual indeterminism. We wouldn't need to worry merely about the trivial question of whether next month we impregnate or get impregnated, but we would face a whole new class of psychic problems about the roles which await us at the two poles of the sexual alternative.

(ii) From the circle of totally indifferent people, to whom will we feel erotically attracted during the next 'kemmer'? For the time being, everybody else is a neuter as well, and so we can never determine our biological future. The changing pattern of sexual relationships will always surprise us with new and always doubtful

changes within the already known environment. ...

But consider the cruel irony of fate: Let's assume that a person as a male happened to love somebody else as a female during the 'kemmer' period, and that after some months both became 'women' or 'men'. Can we believe that both will then simply search for biologically suitable (heterosexual) partners? If we answered 'yes' to this question, then not only would we speak nonsense, but we would also tell a flat lie, because we know more clearly how the power of cultural-psychological conditioning may form our inner lives in defiance of our biological instincts. ...

I take from the novel the truth about me (i.e. about all human beings) that however painful our sexual lives may be, the limitation of our sexual unequivocality is a blessing, and not a curse.

... Whatever the author may try to tell us, she has written about a planet where there are no women, but only men - not in the sexual, but in the social sense - because Karhider (Gethenian) garments, manners of speech, mores and behaviour, are masculine. In the social realm the male element has remained victorious over the female one. (SF Commentary, 24.11.1971, pp.22-4, quoted in Sargent ed., op. cit. pp.27-8)

Lem's criticism is based entirely on the kind of assumptions which the novel questions, on rigid categories of masculine and feminine in both biological and social fields. In response to the second part of this critique, Le Guin argues that the possibility of seeing the Gethenians as socially, if not biologically, male arises not from the book itself but from the tendency in our thought, embodied in language itself, to see the male as a norm of character and conduct.

Lem is not the first to accuse the Gethenians of being all, or 90%, male. ... Will he, or anyone else, please point out one passage or speech in which Estraven does or says something that only a man could or would

do or say?

Is it possible that we tend to insist that Estraven and the other Gethenians are men, because most of us are unwilling or unable to imagine women as scheming prime ministers, haulers of sledges across icy wastes, etc?

I know that the use of the masculine pronoun influences the reader's imagination, perhaps decisively ... Alexai Panshin and others have demanded an invented neuter pronoun. I did consider this carefully, and I decided against it. The experiment was tried by Lindsay in A Voyage to Acturus, and it is to my ears a failure, an exasperating preciousness; three hundred pages of it would be intolerable.

You refer to their dress as masculine. What do people in really cold climates wear? I took the eskimos as models. They - men and women - wear tunics and trousers, of course. Did you ever try to wear a skirt - long or short - in a wind at 20°F in deep snow? (SF Commentary, 26.4.1972, pp.90-2, quoted by Sargent, op. cit. pp.28-9)

Lem's criticism is valid only in relation to a society where sexual identity forms the basis of the individual's social and psychological identity, as it does in our own. However, the aim of Le Guin's novel is to realise a world in which this form of identification and self-identification has no place. The radical disruption of our normal ways of thinking which this project involves is shown by the need to imagine a world without even biological differentiation. Both Lem's points may be answered by seeing the novel as a kind of experiment through which Le Guin can present the reader with certain possibilities. This seems to be her own view of the book.

... I still believe that one can convey more indirectly than directly, unless one simply delivers a message. I am a novelist, not a telegraph office ... What I had to say about Gethenians was designed to rouse the reader's own imagination. (Ibid.)

Le Guin's science fiction is thus intended to increase our awareness of areas of our own lives, rather than to oversimplify the issues which it raises. Thus she refuses to employ either the form of feminist utopia, as Marge Piercy does, or to emphasise the oppression of women in the present by projecting its consequences in the future, like Zoë Fairbairns in Benefits. As a result, her work shares with realist fiction the suggestion of complexity in experience but is also able to analyse the terms of that experience with greater clarity than is often the case in the realist mode. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the nature of Gethenian sexuality and society prevents the author from dealing with certain social and political aspects of gender differentiation, and these are precisely the areas with which Russ is concerned in her novel.

Russ is clearly aware that, because of the nature of this subject-matter, responses to her book are likely to be determined as much by the reader's attitude to sexual politics as by its literary merit. She thus decides to include within the novel a sample of this conjectured criticism, providing what could be a summary of Mary Ellmann's findings in Thinking About Women.

We would gladly have listened to her (they said) if only she had spoken like a lady. But they are liars and the truth is not in them.

Shrill.. vituperative .. no concern for the future of society .. maundering of antiquated feminism .. selfish femlib .. needs a good lay .. this shapeless book .. of course a calm and objective discussion is beyond .. twisted, neurotic .. some truth buried in a largely hysterical .. of very limited interest, I should .. another tract for the trash-can .. burned her bra and thought that .. no characterization, no plot .. really important issues are neglected while .. hermetically sealed .. women's limited experience .. another of the screaming sisterhood... .. (etc.)

Q.E.D. Quod erat demonstrandum. It has been proved.
(The Female Man, (Star Books, 1977,) pp.140-1)

This passage suggests some of the stylistic features of the book as well as its 'political' standpoint. The style is often telegraphic and exhibits considerable verbal wit; the narrative is fragmented and interspersed with comment and reflection. This fragmentation serves two purposes, both allowing Russ to interweave the lives of four women and to exploit the possibility that, in reading science fiction, we do not always know and are not expected to know exactly 'what is going on' and thus cannot construct expectations as to what will happen next.

The women of the novel appear to belong to different worlds with a range of attitudes towards sex-roles and the status of women. The element of contrast we noted as central to science fiction arises from the unlikely conjunction of these characters. Furthermore, one of these women appears to be the author/narrator herself, who thus stands at the centre of her own novel. The account of her "bodiless wanderings" is constituted by projections of the actualities, possibilities and fantasies of women's lives. Scholes and Rabkin note this feature of her work.

... in The Female Man she has used the visionary potential of science fiction to convey the contrast between life as it is presently lived by many women and life as it might be. Among other things, Russ has demonstrated the unique potential of science fiction for embodying radically different life styles, which can hardly be conveyed in fiction bound by the customs of present behaviour. (Scholes & Rabkin, op. cit. p.97)

This is, however, to oversimplify the narrative structure of the book which is not limited to a simple opposition of what is and what might be. The nearest thing it offers to a feminist utopia is the planet Whileaway, inhabited solely by women who have developed a means of reproduction without men after a plague eliminated the male population. The very name of the planet suggests a highly ambivalent, tongue-in-

cheek attitude towards it: is it only a 'while away', or will it always remain so, never quite realised? Indeed, does it represent a desirable state of affairs? Certainly the absence of men is seen as having advantages arising from a perceived relationship between patriarchy, authoritarian social structures and sexual violence.

There's no being out too late in Whileaway, or up too early, or in the wrong part of town, or unescorted. You cannot fall out of the kinship web and become sexual prey for strangers - the web is world-wide. In all of Whileaway there is no one who can keep you from going where you please (although you may risk your life if that sort of thing appeals to you), no one who will follow you and try to embarrass you by whispering obscenities in your ear, no one who will attempt to rape you, no one who will warn you of the dangers of the street, no one who will stand on street corners, hot-eyed and vicious, jingling loose change in his pants pocket, bitterly, bitterly sure that you're a cheap floozy, hot and wild, who likes it, who can't say no, who's making a mint of it, who inspires him with nothing but disgust, and who wants to drive him crazy.

On Whileaway eleven-year-old children strip and lie naked in the wilderness above the forty-seventh parallel, where they meditate, stark naked or covered with leaves, ... You can walk around the Whileawayan equator twenty times (if the feat takes your fancy and you live that long) with one hand on your sex and in the other an emerald the size of a grapefruit. All you'll get is a tired wrist.

While here, where we live ! (The Female Man,
pp.81-2)

Whileaway is, however, constantly placed as a fantasy among other fantasies and Russ deliberately points to the fallacy on which it is based. If the 'feminine' is seen as

a construct which determines the nature and existence of women, rather than a neutral description of their 'innate' character, then we must further accept that what are seen as 'feminine' qualities; lack of aggression, gentleness, sympathy, are not necessary attributes of women but simply contingent upon the culture and ideology of the 'feminine'. A world without men will not be a world of 'feminine' women. This is precisely what the warrior woman Jael, in whose world the term 'sex war' is not a metaphor, suggests to the Whileawayan Janet.

'disapprove all you like. Pedant! Let me give you something to carry away with you, friend: that "plague" you talk of is a lie. I know. The world-lines around you are not so different from yours or mine or theirs and there is no plague in any of them, not any of them. Whileaway's plague is a big lie. Your ancestors lied about it. It is I who gave you your "plague," my dear, about which you can now pietize and morailize to your heart's content; I,I,I, I am the plague, Janet Evason. I and the war I fought built your world for you, I and those like me, we gave you a thousand years of peace and love and the Whileawayan flowers nourish themselves on the bones of the men we have slain. (p.211)

Whileawayan society rests as much on myths of women, as any other world.

This criticism within the book itself implies that Russ is not offering any programme for change or an account of an ideal world for women, but rather exploring various alternative worlds in which the laws of our own, laws of logic, physics, psychology and culture, are for a moment suspended in order that not only our experience but the terms in which we perceive it, may be reconsidered. At the beginning of the novel she sets out both her conception of this book, and the premise on which science fiction rests.

Sometimes you bend down to tie your shoe, and then

you either tie your shoe or you don't; you either straighten up instantly or maybe you don't. Every choice begets at least two **worlds** of possibility, that is, one in which you do and one in which you don't; or very likely many more, one in which you do quickly, one in which you do slowly, one in which you don't but hesitate ... and so on. To carry this line of argument further, there must be an infinite number of possible universes (such is the fecundity of God) for there is no reason to imagine Nature is prejudiced in favour of human action. ... It's possible too that there is no such thing as one clear line or strand of probability, and that we live on a sort of twisted braid, blurring from one to the other without even knowing it, ... Thus the paradox of time travel ceases to exist, for the Past one visits is never one's own past but always somebody else's; or rather, one's visit to the Past instantly creates another Present (one in which the visit has already happened) and what you visit is the Past belonging to that Present - an entirely different matter from your own Past. ...

Thus it is probable that Whileaway - a name for the Earth ten centuries from now, but not our Earth, if you follow me - will find itself not at all affected by this sortie into somebody else's past. And vice versa, of course. The two might as well be independent worlds.

Whileaway, you may gather, is in the future.

But not our future. (The Female Man, pp.6-7)

The alternatives which the book presents are imaginative ones and their value lies in the new perspectives they present on the concept of the 'feminine' and its relation to the 'female'. If there is a disjunction between the demands of femininity and the perceptions women have of their own situation, however, then some form of critique must arise from within the experience of this disjunction and much of the comment which intersperses the narrative of Russ' book is of this type, keeping before us the actual, as well as the 'possible'.

It's very upsetting to think that women make up only one-tenth of society, but it's true. For example:

My doctor is male.
 My lawyer is male.
 My tax-accountant is male.
 The grocery-store-owner (on the corner) is male.
 The janitor in my apartment building is male.
 The president of my bank is male.
 The manager of the neighborhood supermarket is male.
 My landlord is male.
 Most taxi-drivers are male.
 All cops are male.
 All firemen are male.
 The designers of my car are male.
 The factory workers who made the car are male.
 The dealer I bought it from is male.
 Almost all my colleagues are male.
 My employer is male.
 The Army is male.
 The Navy is male.
 The government is (mostly) male.

I think most of the people in the world are male.

Now it's true that waitresses, elementary-school teachers, secretaries, nurses and nuns are female, but how many nuns do you meet in the course of the usual business day? Right? And secretaries are female only until they get married, at which time they change or something because you usually don't see them again at all. I think it's a legend that half the population of the world is female; where on earth are they keeping them all. (pp.203-4)

The narrator/author describes the process by which women are transformed into 'woman', and the alienation from their own experience which this produces.

At thirteen desperately watching TV, curling my long legs under me, desperately reading books, callow adolescent that I was, trying (desperately!) to find someone in

books, in movies, in life, in history, to tell me it was OK to be ambitious, OK to be loud, OK to be Humphrey Bogart (smart and rudeness), OK to be James Bond (arrogance), OK to be Superman (power), OK to be Douglas Fairbanks (swashbuckling), to tell me self-love was all right, to tell me I could love God and Art and Myself better than anything on earth and still have orgasms.

Being told it was all right 'for you, dear,' but for women.

Being told I was a woman.

At sixteen, giving up.

In college, educated women (I found out) were frigid; active women (I knew) were neurotic; women (we all knew) were timid, incapable, dependent, nurturing, passive, intuitive, emotional, unintelligent, obedient and beautiful. You can always get dressed up and go to a party. Woman is the gateway to another world; Woman is the earth-mother; Woman is the eternal siren; Woman is purity; Woman is carnality; Woman has intuition; Woman is the life-force; Woman is selfless love.

'I am the gateway to another world,' (said I, looking in the mirror) 'I am the earth-mother; I am the eternal siren; I am purity;' (Jeez, new pimples) 'I am carnality; I have intuition; I am the life-force; I am selfless love.' (Somehow it sounds different in the first person, doesn't it?) (The Female Man, p.205)

The combination of this type of writing and the fantastic or science fiction elements within the book enables Russ to present both a radical critique of the 'feminine', as Le Guin's work did, and to explore its social basis and implications for women in terms of actual experience, in a manner impossible within the framework of The Left Hand of Darkness. She can only do this, however, by shattering the narrative structure of the novel. The author herself becomes the centre of the book and it is through the wit and vitality of her 'voice' rather than an interest in plot or character that our attention is held. This 'voice' provides unity in

the book despite the fragmentation of the narrative and the disparate nature of its material, fictional and 'non-fictional.'

The world of The Female Man is very clearly one which is imagined, rather than represented or constructed. This aspect of the book is deliberately exploited by the author to present a portrait of a 'female' consciousness which can transcend the terms of the 'feminine' only in fantasy, a fantasy which, as the words of Jael suggested, cannot be sustained when confronted by logic but may, in turn, oppose these terms with an equally potent logic based on its own experience.

In order to create this double-sided view of the 'feminine' Russ has been obliged to discard the conventions not only of realism but of science fiction and the narrative mode itself. This perhaps suggests, as she herself does in "What Can a Heroine Do? or Why Women Can't Write" (Cornillon ed., 1972), that narrative forms inhibit the articulation of any challenge to dominant modes of perception. This appears more doubtful, however, when we recall the range of form and style of the writers discussed previously and their articulations of a perception of the 'feminine' as a construct which invades but is not congruent with women's consciousness. Russ' style thus becomes one amongst a range of possibilities open to female writers: it may be accounted for in terms of the influences and environment of the modern feminist movement, but does not represent either a 'correct' or an inevitable way of writing for the woman author.

It seems, perhaps, that we have returned to a definition of women's fiction as fiction written by women, and of women writers as writers who are women. This profundity, however, is not the sole conclusion to be drawn from this study and nor need it be as banal as it appears. We can now turn to look again at the ground covered in this study, to evaluate the categories of analysis used and to summarise what they have suggested to us about women's writing.

(1) This is not to suggest that women have never, until recent decades, written and published science fiction. Rather, they have always done so as a minority and, as Pamela Sargent's historical survey shows, very often under male pseudonyms.

CONCLUSION

In reviewing criticism of women's writing it was suggested that any adequate form of criticism must engage both with the text before it and with its own assumptions, both literary and social. Much of the 'popular' criticism examined failed in the latter task, resting on social judgements about the role and consciousness of women and of women as writers. Feminist criticism, on the other hand, sets out to challenge these judgements but, as we saw, does not always escape from a categorisation of women writers which serves to limit rather than to extend our understanding. Neither does it always find, or even seek, a critical methodology adequate to the complexities of both the formal and the ideological aspects of the texts discussed. It was noted that structuralist criticism offers a way of explicating precisely those ideological components of a text with which other approaches often fail to engage, whilst retaining a sense of the literary work as a complex verbal structure. The influence of structuralism on feminist theory has been, however, double-edged, encompassing also the possibility of ahistoricism and, on the level of social thought, the phallogentrism inherent in Lacanian theory.

To isolate a group of women writers at all in a study of this sort, it may be argued, implies a form of categorisation, of 'ghettoization'. But to reject the kind of "intellectual measuring of busts and hips" which Mary Ellmann found in the criticism of women's writing, is not to reject the hypothesis that if women have always been seen as a specific social group, governed by particular images, codes of behaviour and forms of socialisation, then this position may, on the one hand, have some influence on women who write and, on the other, be usefully explored through what they write. The work of women writers may thus be seen as both a cultural product, arising from the combination of individual talents and responses and a specific social and historical situation; and as a tool for analysing that situation on the level of women's consciousness. We may quote again Elaine Showalter's summary of these inter-relationships.

It can however be argued that women themselves have constituted a sub-culture within the framework of a larger society, and have been unified by values, conventions, experiences and behaviors impinging on each individual. It is important to see the female literary tradition in these broad terms, in relation to the wider evolution of women's self-awareness and to the ways in which any minority group finds its direction of self-expression relative to a dominant society. (Showalter, (1978) p.11)

To say, therefore, that what these writers have in common is that they are women, need be neither as limiting nor as trivial as it might appear. The task of criticism now becomes that of both exploring the implications of this commonality within the work of individual authors, and of suggesting the nature of their individuality, in terms which enable us to keep both areas in view. We return to Jeremy Hawthorn's concept, discussed in chapter two, of a criticism which clarifies both 'identity' and 'relationship'.

What are the implications of this for critical method? Firstly, we must, to some extent, allow the nature of the material to control our approach. Thus, to take examples from the present study, in discussing three novels dealing with the theme of female homosexuality, it appeared necessary and fruitful to compare their presentation of this theme and to relate this to both the formal elements of the novels, and to the authors' understanding of the relationship between the social treatment of lesbianism and the dominant attitudes towards female sexuality in general. Ivy Compton-Burnett's work, in contrast, demanded some consideration of the connections between her idiosyncratic style and her particular conception of family life and the role of language in the domestic power struggle.

These examples, however, illustrate a further demand on critical method for, in both cases, stylistic and formal elements of the books, their 'identity', may be probed only so

far before they start to raise other issues: once we start to ask why Michèle Roberts dispenses with a linear narrative, why Djuna Barnes chooses the particular setting of her book, why Compton-Burnett makes her characters so impossibly articulate, the answers which offer themselves take us into the field of 'relationships', placing the literary work in a wider context. In considering women writers it would seem appropriate to select for particular attention those areas of the novels' 'relationships' which are defined by the context of social experience and ideas surrounding the gender of the authors. Such an approach only becomes limiting if we see this context in a fixed way: that is, to use Barthes' term, if we conspire in the 'naturalisation' of a socially-constructed view of 'woman'. This is what happens in the kind of criticism discussed by Mary Ellmann. The critic begins from the premise that women have, for example, a very limited range of experience, defined as the domestic, and that the failure to deal with other areas of social life must be a salient feature of their writing. Or the critic sees women in terms of sensitivity and is disturbed by writing which suggests other qualities.

If, however, we ask why women are confined to the domestic sphere, in both fact and image, and how women writers respond to this situation, or how writers like Compton-Burnett and Weldon reshape the view of the domestic world, we are able to illuminate rather than obscure both the social definition of women and the specific qualities of the books in question. It was for this reason that all the authors considered here - and the range of their work suggests that there can be no simple or single definition of women's writing - have been approached in terms of three categories or areas derived from the social, rather than the critical context.

These terms have been used, necessarily, in a flexible way since they refer to a highly complex set of experiences, assumptions and responses. Having referred to them in various

contexts throughout this study, it is now possible both to refine their definitions and to assess their value in a reading of women's fiction.

Taken together, the terms 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist' encompass what may be seen as three levels of women's experience. Thus 'female' indicates the biological, the specific physical features and functions which differentiate women anatomically; 'feminine' as used here defines not women themselves but the complex of assumptions, roles and modes of behaviour which do seek to define women within our culture; 'feminist' indicates a form of response to this context on the level of the individual woman's consciousness and whilst the relationship of some writers in this study to a feminist movement has been mentioned, it is with the 'feminist' as an attitude of mind rather than a political grouping that we are concerned here.

The separation of these three areas is an artificial one. As we saw in the discussion of Lacanian theory, perceptions of the 'female', the biological, are clearly influenced by the ideology of the 'feminine'. The response to the 'feminine' is not simply a response to something external, but is complicated by the internalisation of its ideology in the consciousness and self-awareness of women.

Since they interlock and interact within women's experience, it would seem reasonable to suppose that these areas are also inter-related within the work of women writers. Thus, whilst they have been discussed as aspects of particular works, it has nowhere been possible to categorise an author as a 'feminine' writer, for instance. This would involve an oversimplification of precisely those relationships which require exploration. Penelope Mortimer has been described in relation to Fay Weldon, as a novelist of the 'feminine' and yet it remains true that what her work conveys so overwhelmingly is just those aspects of women's experience in living the 'feminine' which are so destructive of individual fulfilment

and self-respect: she describes but never justifies the 'feminine'. Similarly we have considered Michèle Roberts and Joanna Russ in the light of their feminism, yet we are able to do so because of the nature of their responses to the 'feminine': they do not ignore or escape its terms but, on the contrary, are obliged to deal with its effects both inside and outside themselves.

What emerges from this study is not, therefore, a system of classification but the discovery of a range of responses. It may be argued that any writer who explores and presents women's experience will also explore to a greater or lesser extent and with varying degrees of explicitness, the operations of the 'feminine' within that experience. Explore here suggests perhaps more awareness of what is being done than is always present: it might, for example, be more true of Radclyffe Hall's book that it reveals rather than analyses the dilemma of the homosexual woman unable to perceive the 'feminine' as a construct and not a natural attribute.

Nevertheless, we have found in all the writers studied here, a relationship to aspects of the 'feminine' which implies some degree of alienation from it. The possible range of response to the 'feminine' might spread from complete acquiescence, in which case there would be no intimation of its existence since the 'female' and the 'feminine' would appear as synonymous; through varying degrees of conflict and criticism to an outright refusal to acknowledge that being 'female' has anything to do with being 'feminine'. Terms like 'proto-feminist' or 'neo-feminist' could be used to describe various points in this spectrum but it seems reasonable to define quite simply as feminist, on the level of consciousness rather than of politics, any response which implies a distinction between being 'female' and being, or indeed, as now becomes a possibility, choosing not to be, 'feminine'.

The writers considered here do not all articulate these responses with the same degree of explicitness, neither do

they all engage in an analysis of the 'feminine' as a social construct. We look to literature, however, not only, perhaps not primarily, for analysis but for the expression and exploration of consciousness. What all these novelists do suggest is a consciousness, whether or not it is articulated explicitly, of some form of conflict within women's social existence and within their perception of that existence. The awareness of this conflict may be expressed, as we have seen, precisely through those definitions of the 'feminine writer' exposed by Mary Ellmann. Thus, for example, writers in the domestic genre explore precisely what confinement to the domestic sphere entails, whilst Elizabeth Bowen uses the fiction of personal relationships to redefine these relationships in terms of deception, corruption and mutual incomprehension.

Michèle Roberts suggested (loc. cit. 1979) that women's social situation makes their writing inherently radical. This appears as something of an over-generalisation although this study provides evidence to support it. However, its radical nature is neither straightforward, nor all-embracing. The works examined here have suggested that much of the conflict experienced and expressed by the women writers takes place within, as well as with, the ideology of the 'feminine'. Djuna Barnes, for example, presents a 'radical' view of female homosexuality insofar as she refuses to differentiate it clearly from other forms of relationship, but she also covertly exploits the precise kind of differentiation enforced by conventional definitions of women's sexuality. Radclyffe Hall adheres rigidly to categories of 'masculine' and 'feminine' yet saw it as her purpose to assert the right to public sympathy and understanding of a group of women whose very existence challenges the adequacy of these terms. Margaret Drabble's work displays a tension between the demands and experiences of the 'new woman' of the 1960s and the precepts of a traditional morality.

It may thus be suggested that the terms through which we have looked here at the work of women writers, have served to

emphasise the complexity of the factors influencing women's lives, women's consciousness, and the situation in which the woman writer works. But this is to stress the role of criticism in raising questions, in suggesting that things are not so simple as they might at first appear. Does the survey also provide any answers to the questions it raises about women's writing, or suggest any generalisations which may be made without becoming ensnared in the assumptions of the 'feminine'? As Elaine Showalter argued, it makes no sense to speak of a 'tradition' of women's writing in isolation from women's social existence. What we have found that these writers share is some form of critique of the terms of this existence as defined by the ideology of femininity. That is, they all express conflict or an awareness of conflict in the lives of women.

Does this mean, then, that we can confirm Michèle Roberts' view of women's writing as, of its nature, subversive? Roberts herself points to the exception of what we might call the 'Barbara Cartland School'.

Certainly art can serve to deny conflict, and frequently does. The novels of Barbara Cartland, for example, are bad art because they describe a non-fissured and harmonious world in which everyone knows their place and all problems are resolved by the kiss on the last page.

(Roberts, loc. cit. (1979) p.216)

Such work falls into place on our scale at the extreme of acquiescence, of an identification of the 'feminine' with the 'female'. Roberts does seem, however, to be in danger of raising conflict itself to a literary value. It would seem rather that the presence of conflict in the text is of value because it suggests alternative perspectives within the work and permits alternative interpretations of it: conflict is a source of ambiguity and re-evaluation.

Despite these exceptions, it may be said that those works by women writers which do present forms of conflict, frequently

deal with those arising from gender differentiation, precisely because this is an area of conflict inherent in the writer's own consciousness of herself and perception of her own experience. This is not merely another way of saying that women write about women, for it is a formulation which explicitly rejects the assumption that the scope of women's writing is confined to the trivial, the irrelevant. Furthermore, it refers not only to what women write about, but also to the way they write about it. We may recall the distinction Showalter made between

... books that happen to have been written by women, and a 'female literature' ... which purposefully and collectively concerns itself with the articulation of women's experience, and which guides itself 'by its own impulses' to autonomous self-expression. As novelists women have always been self-conscious, but only rarely self-defining. (op. cit. (1978) p.4)

Showalter's terminology is somewhat different from that used here and what she calls a "female literature" corresponds most closely, although not exactly, to what we have referred to as a 'feminist' one. It also seems that women novelists cannot be totally "self-defining" so long as their social experience obliges them to engage with the 'feminine' as an ideology operating in their socialisation and the formation of their self-images. However, the distinction between books which "happen to have been written by women" and those which attempt to articulate women's experience, is one which illuminates the presence or absence within women's writing of the kind of conflict we have been discussing. We might say, and the paradox is itself instructive, that writing by women which displays not only no challenge to or conflict with, but no awareness of the constructed nature of the 'feminine', just "happens" to have been written by a woman, might as easily have been written by a man (as, indeed, often under female pseudonyms, much 'romantic' genre writing is). For such writing evades crucial issues in women's experience and glosses over a whole

area of women's consciousness. If literature is a product of human consciousness within a social context which to some degree determines, to some extent conflicts with the demands and perceptions of that consciousness, then women writers who fail to engage with the concept of the 'feminine' on any terms other than those of identification, present us with a distorted product. Their work and motivation may raise important questions for the sociologist or the semiologist but fall outside the present study.

Whilst this formulation may seem valid and useful on a theoretical level, its flaws become clear once we begin to ask where specific female authors stand in relation to its terms. The notions of presence or absence of conflict and of acquiescence or rejection appear a little crude in the face of a writer like Jane Austen whose very absorption in the society she depicts makes possible a ruthless anatomising of its processes. Again, Jane Eyre may be, as Joanna Russ describes it, a "classic love-story", but it is doubtful whether we could seriously call it a dishonest book or deny that its very equivocations are disturbing and revealing. In the field of twentieth century fiction, it is possible to find novels by women such as Iris Murdoch or Muriel Spark within which the concepts that have dominated this study appear irrelevant. We would not, however, wish to accuse these writers of over-simplification or a thoughtless acceptance of socially pre-determined views.

This does not, however, force us back to the belief that nothing can be said about women writers as a group or learnt from their work about the images and realities of women's experience. Rather we should acknowledge firstly that social acceptance may also be a productive value in literature and, secondly, that the concepts used here provide only a partial view of the works considered. But it is a view which has to a large extent been ignored in the assessment of women's writing and one which requires emphasis if the experience of women is to be seen clearly both in its social and its literary manifestations.

Returning to the authors studied here, we may say that their work displays, in various forms and through a variety of narrative, structural and stylistic means, an awareness that the 'feminine' is not synonymous

with the 'female', an exploration and response to that situation which may be defined as 'feminist'. They share, therefore, certain thematic elements in their fiction; but they do so not because they are 'female', but because they are all, as it were, on the receiving end of the 'feminine'. Furthermore, whilst these writers demonstrate that the 'feminist' is an aspect of women's writing more ubiquitous than its association with a social theory or movement might suggest, the range of their work also indicates that the literary responses of women writers are as complex and multifarious as the definitions and images which surround them in society. Nevertheless, just as the ideology of the 'feminine' retains through all its guises a certain coherence, so there is a recognisable unity in the work of all these authors which reflects their shared experience of living as women in a culture where we ask first about a new-born child: Is it a boy or a girl?

To understand women's writing we must keep its variety and its unity simultaneously in mind: to ignore the first is to accept that women can be defined, not as individuals, but as the 'other', the not-male; to ignore the second is to evade the practical consequences of this form of definition for women within our society and for women as writers.

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