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Christopher A. Burkland
Macalester College

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Literature Down a Mineshaft: Theories of Literature and Philosophy as Creators of a Biased Literary Canon

Christopher A. Burkland

Introduction

What makes something "literature"? Can anyone, perhaps a coal miner, create literature, or a 75 year-old quilter? Or perhaps an 8th grader full of angst? Or, is "literature" only what is produced by a trained writer? How is literature related to what is considered literary and what is meant by "literary"? Can a text be literary even if it does not meet established standards of the literary community?

In this essay I describe ways literature has been evaluated and theorized about in order to show how literature continues to perpetuate a male biased literary canon or canonical view of literature. In the first section, I examine briefly theories of literature in order to uncover the implicit and explicit standards that have been used traditionally in theories and theorizing about literature. In the second section, I describe how literature historically has been read and interpreted. In the third section, I examine the male-biased ways philosophy has played a role in shaping the nature and evaluation of literature In the fourth and final section, I examine feminist literary criticism and the ways such criticism has pushed a rethinking of canonical literature (or, "the canon"). I conclude that in order to correct the objectionable, male biased nature of the literary canon, not only must the so-called minority and feminist literatures be included; the traditional (canonical) tools for identifying and evaluating a text as literature must be reevaluated.

Section I: Theories of Literature

The field known as "the philosophy of literature" traditionally has been concerned with searching out a definition of literature. In his book, *Philosophy of Literature: An Introduction*, Christopher New lists several theories that have emerged. One

such theory is a formalist approach which defines literature through the structure, language, or form of a text. It uses the distinction between a norm and a deviation (such as the difference between literal or practical language and a figurative or poetic language) to determine whether a text is more or less "poetic" and thereby represents a deviation from a norm of practical discourse. Although a formalist approach goes a certain theoretical distance in recognizing differences between literary and non-literary discourses, it is problematic because it does not actually define literature or what is literary, only the structure or language of what is (already acknowledged as) literary or literature.

Wellek and Warren are authors of one of the most influential books in literary theory and what, throughout this paper, I take to be representation of the literary tradition, *Theory of Literature.* They put forth a second theory: anything in print can justifiably be considered literature. But this is immediately problematic, insofar as few people who would consider the telephone book, or a stereo instruction manual "literature" or "literary."

A third position, called the social practice theory, states that there needs to be some literary background or context that informs a text for the text to be considered literature (New, 33-34). On this view, literature does not refer to some Truth or objective view of the world, but only to other literature. This position is problematic insofar as it commits the "referential fallacy" (Danto, 45): It is either circular or tautological to claim that one must have literature to be able to have (other) literature or to be able to assess works as literary.

A fourth and perhaps more common and accommodating view is simply to think of literature as the "great books"—books that, are "notable for literary form or expression," whatever the subject matter (Wellek and Warren, 21). But this theory is vulnerable to New's critique that "a literary work is a discourse upon which a person or persons acting of behalf of a certain social institution (the lit world) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation" (31). The problematic nature of this view is similar

to views that commit the reductionist fallacy: Literature is what is literary or literature. It also raises the question. Who decides, and on what basis does one decide, what the "great books" are?

What is common to these four theories is the foundationalist assumption that one can provide a definitive idea of (pure) literature by means of an analytic, reductive process that supplies a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be literature or literary. This assumption implies that it is through objective, necessary and sufficient conditions that one can definitively discern what counts as literature or literary, or what constitutes the "great books." For some, e.g., Wellek and Warren, this involves using methods of natural science for identifying and assessing literature; .they speak about "collecting neutral facts" about literature. For others, e.g., Christopher New, a neutral methodology can identify a text as literary or literature: "We are classifying works neutrally, by the size of the role that literary qualities play in the whole work; in the other answer we seem to be classifying works only according to the value of their literary qualities" (New, 3). Both approaches reflect the logical positivist bias that science or the scientific method, conceived as value-neutral and objective, provides way of obtaining reliable Truth (in this case, about literature or what is literary).

In the case of Wellek and Warren, their main premise is that *bona fide* literature has no given intent. Neither propaganda nor a project that has a vested interest in a cause is literature since neither is pure art—that is, art for the sake of art. On this much "minority literature" and "women's literature" would not be considered literature, since such genres typically are wedded to a project in their literary works. In most academic circles, there is a tendency to identify literature by African Americans as part a body of work called "Black literature," though there is hardly ever a tendency to call Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* or other key works of the "literary canon" White literature. No one picks up *The Scarlett Letter* and asks, "How does this speak to the White

experience?"[1] This holds true for feminist literature as well. Literature classes read Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* or Chopin's *Awakening* to get an idea of a (usually described as "the") female perspective on women and issues they were writing about in distinct time periods. But since such descriptions presume that these works have a definable intention or direct project, under Wellek and Warren's criteria, they cannot be considered literature: they do not fit the logical positivist methodological assumptions about literature.

Is this logical positivist bias and attendant assumption about the usefulness and appropriateness of applying Western scientific methodology to determine whether a text counts as literature warranted?

I think not. The position, that categorization and objective criteria provide the best way of describing and establishing "literariness" is flawed. The refutation of this view is, in a sense, the greater project of this paper. A postmodern critique of this position would deny that there is such a thing as "pure literature." It would claim, instead, that each work emerges from a specific space and time and exhibits characteristics unique to that spaciotemporal, historical context. Similarly, judgments of a work as either good (excellent) or bad (poor) are viewed as objective when, in fact, they are based on equally time/space specific criteria of evaluation. According to this view, "purity" assumes that a set of evaluative criteria can exist apart from any context, thereby offering a critical point of view that is (allegedly) universal. According to postmodernist perspectives, literary criticism is contextual and institutional; it must be rigorously self-critical in order to avoid being self-serving or self-aggrandizing (Raval, 43). Otherwise, literary criticism assumes the power of universality, which marginalizes or denies the status of "literary" or "literature" texts which fall outside the parameters of universality.

In order for a theory of literature to speak accurately and apply coherently to the literature it critiques, it must recognize the

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[1] This claim was made by Professor Michelle Wright in a conversation with me on 10/28/02.

social forces that have produced it. Most contemporary texts interested in literary theory include a section that more or less agrees with the (post-modernist) institutional perspective (mentioned above). They may even describe literature as an economic product concerned with meeting the commercial needs of each person involved in its creation: the author, editor, publisher, marketer, consumer, and critic–what New calls "agents acting on behalf of the literary world" (31). But when one recognizes these "agents acting on behalf of the literary world" and the steps they take to produce and promote literature, then literature can no longer be defined or evaluated in a vacuum free from economic concerns. As the economist Keynes says, such agents " were just in a position to afford Shakespeare" (Wellek and Warren 153). Not even the Bard is immune to the far-reaching invisible hand of capitalism, free to create an unfettered art.

These economic considerations produce two realizations: first, the producers of literature are not concerned with literature in any "pure" sense, but with what the public will buy; and, second, they are not in a position to produce any "pure" literature even if that was possible or their concern. Producers of literature exist in a specific time and space and have multiple, sometimes conflicting, evaluative viewpoints, any concept of 'purity' is no longer applicable.[2] The object of this section is to notice that literature is inextricably linked to its social context, spaciotemporal factors, and theoretical underpinnings of economic

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[2] There are also feminist objections to a theory based on a conception of literature in terms of an "actor on behalf of the literary world". One such objection would object that letters, diaries, journals, autobiographies, oral histories and other historically female-identified texts can be rich in literary but not economic value, since historically women have not been 'agents of the literary world', even though they have been producing deep, complex, and meaningful works of writing for centuries. While important, feminist and other objections to the definitions of 'literary' and 'literature' are not the focus of this essay.

dimensions of the production and evaluation of literature or what is considered literary.

The upshot is that, as Wellek and Warren recognize, every attempt to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the evaluation and criticism of literature has failed, and no data in literary history are neutral facts. The historical applications of the way in which our evaluation of literature changes as the historical context changes and evolves. Wellek and Warren write, "We must always read with some preconceptions and we change and modify these along with our experiences" (223). However, despite their recognition of the vital role played by socioeconomic and historical contexts in the generation and evaluation of literature, they do not seem to alter their own theories in light of this recognition. What remains is a conflict between such acknowledgements *in theory* and implicit claims that their work *in actuality* is exempt from these social influences and constructions. In fact, there is an irreconcilable discrepancy between Wellek and Warren's acknowledgment of social factors and the project of their book as a whole, which is to use scientific methodology to clarify and obtain objectivity in literature.

In summary, all four theories (discussed above) are based on this assumption of a pure literature. Each searches for a definition of literature that is based on trends or characteristics that differentiate one form of language from another, or they rely on aesthetic theories that lay out guidelines for the degree of 'artfulness' or 'poetry' that a text should express through a stylistically-based conception of language, or that attempt some set of necessary and sufficient condition accounts of what literature is. In contrast, a postmodern theory of literature insists that there is no vacuum of language, no context-free criteria or methodology for identifying and evaluating literature, no objective definition of literature. Postmodern theories provide a social and institutional context in which to identify and define literature. Such postmodern accounts render the Welleck and Warren view implausible or untenable.

The implications of these four theoretical perspectives is significant from a non-traditional, postmodernist and feminist perspective. One implication of some theories (e.g., Wellek and Warren's) is that they imply a false hierarchy of good (pure texts) and bad (texts with a particular agenda or intent) literature such that only those who have a specialized knowledge of literary aesthetics and history are in a position to really understand and criticize literature (240-241). This altogether elitist view suggests not only that those who lack the requisite specialized knowledge neither understand nor produce literature; it also problematically privileges academic forms of literary evaluation as a better or correct way to understand literature.

A second implication of these four theories is that they ground literary theory in tenets of objectivity, context-neutrality, and lack of intent. We have seen respects in which each of these tenets is biased insofar as it privileges a certain type of text.

A third and final implication is that the value of rationality is hyper-exaggerated in literary theory and the philosophy of literatures. An overemphasis on the value of reason and rationality to (good) literature goes as far back as Plato, who thought that if we regard literature (indeed, all art) as nothing but a source of pleasure, several levels removed from the world of perfect Ideas or Forms, then art is inferior even to that which it represents or depicts; it relies on and appeals to sentiments that are inferior to our reason, knowledge, or objective understanding. According to much feminist literary and philosophical criticism, such views of the inferiority of emotions and sentiment to reason, and the historical gender association of superior reason with men and inferior emotion (or, sentiment) with women have contributed to the male-bias in theories of literature that focus on the importance of reason in understanding and evaluating literature.

Section II: Interpretation

Many theories concerning how to read or interpret literature walk hand in hand with the more general theories of literature (described in Section I). New writes,

"Deconstructionists and Postmodernists maintain that the author is absent from the text... if anything it is the reader who 'makes' the text" (96). These theories would say that once the text leaves the author's desk, s/he is no longer attached to it. The text is a separate entity, open for any interpretation that it can support. IN this respect, understanding literature and interpreting its meaning becomes a task accomplished solely by the reader. As a position on the interpretation of literature, this postmodern view reinforces the postmodern theory of literature that everything is constructed by the subject. The work exists for the spectator, not "for its own sake." The apprehension of the work completes it—I becomes the subject of the story.

In contrast, some theorists have argued that knowledge of the author's intent or meaning is central to textual interpretation. The reader's main goal is to figure out what that intent is. On this view, the division and relationship between author and reader is clear and profound. (The nature of this relationship comprises a large body of philosophical work, which, despite its interesting nature, is not explored in this essay.)

A third method of interpretation is quite similar to the social practice theory of literature—that literature does not exist on its own but only in reference to other literature. Every line of poetry and every novel can be better understood by referring to another line of poetry or to another novel. These strategic references serve to give the reader a broader context with which to understand the text on a variety of levels. One main problem with this method is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to say what every literary theme, trope, or effect is and how each can be better understood through a reference to another. This theory of reading (or, interpretation) inherits the same problems with hierarchical order is of meanings discussed above (in Section I), namely that it suggests that one who has to have a scholarly literary background is in a better position to make the necessary connections and to read a text on the "higher," "better' or "correct" Furthermore, on this view, each text can be read as a network of reciprocal effects, producing far too many meanings and interpretations. A reader

should not be obsessed with going too far back in this network, else the relations between works become obscure (Danto).

A fourth theory of reading denies that art (and literature, as a form of art) has any distinguishing characteristics, so that even if we are looking at (reading) it, we can never be positive that it is, in fact, literature. Danto writes that "proposed distinctions based upon perceptual difference will have proved to be artificial" (159). He introduces an example put forth by Duchamp: Nothing the eye can reveal will distinguish between art and a real thing that resembles it perfectly. On this view the time-honored, canonical philosophical presumption and favoring of universality, objectivity, and definability of literature or art dissolves; everything would be art and phone books would be literature. This fourth theory of reading denies philosophy what it wants: necessity, that is, Truth for and in all possible worlds (Danto 166)[3].

Section III: Literature as Philosophy/ Philosophy as Literary Criticism

There are many different perspectives on whether or not literature can be read as philosophy, or vice versa. The field called "the philosophy of literature" is as voluminous as theories of literature and of reading. The relationships between the two is often contentious. As many sources have claimed, there exists a "professional enmity" between literature and philosophy (Plato, Danto, LaBranche). However, there exists an equally well articulated and defended position that one may derive

[3] In all fairness, it should be noted how many philosophers do not fit this claim. Philosophy is quite diverse and within this diversity there will be undoubtedly many philosophers that argue against this claim. However, I do not think that Danto and the feminists are setting up straw men; I think a feminist criticism of this would remain that what philosophers have attempted to call "Truth" for many years is actually the truth as they have constructed it, and that "all possible worlds" really means a tiny world for a select, privileged few.

philosophical arguments and ideas through literature (Nussbaum, Barr). Which, if either, of these viewpoints is most plausible?

Some of the most convincing arguments against reading literature as philosophy are given by Stephen Ross in his book *Literature and Philosophy*. Ross writes, "philosophic views found in works of literature are not interpretable so much as explicit philosophic claims but as the embodiment of a philosophic position without argument" (4). Ross's position stresses the importance of structured argumentation to anything identified as "philosophy" or "philosophical." Literature can have philosophic ideas embedded within it, because, after all, many problems in life are also problems in philosophy. But, according to Ross, insofar as these texts do not include or focus on arguments, they may be literature but they are not philosophy Ross goes even further: He claims that philosophic arguments within literature are "in the wrong medium"(5). Such arguments are "derivative," meaning that they come originally from elsewhere, namely philosophy (27). In his model, philosophy came first and is foundational to literature. For Ross, literature as doing an imperfect job of copying it, or, rather, using philosophy without its teeth. Wellek and Warren, to return to literary theory for a moment, agree with Ross that literature cannot (and should not) be read as philosophy. For them, literature is what philosophy would be were the latter translated into art by means of imagery and intricate, detailed description:" Literature is not philosophy translated into imagery and verse. It is a general attitude towards life that may end up with philosophical questions, but it is unsystematic" (115). However, unlike Ross, Wellek and Warren take this position further, claiming that if literature is read as philosophy, then one may be left only with interpretations of text that are relativist. This would not be only harmless relativism; literature as philosophy "implies a radical and excessive relativism" (119). Although many are tempted by the seemingly close integration of literature and philosophy, they consider this view is deceptive and harmful. Extracting a philosophical position, let alone argument, from a piece of literature seems entirely dependent on what the reader

thinks the author is trying to say. Discerning the intent of an author is a sketchy endeavor at best (as mentioned above), giving rise to a host of other questions about literature and philosophy. Nonetheless, despite implications of lack of argumentation, unstructured text, and a descent into relativism, when it comes down to it, Wellek and Warren just argue that there really is not a common social background for a connection between philosophy and literature. The link that many people assume, see, or want to see just does not exist and never has existed; philosophy and literature have emerged from two very different frameworks.

Some of the arguments for reading literature as philosophy are premised on the claim that literature provides an ideal ground for putting forth philosophical ideas. Plato said that art misled reason by influencing the emotions. It is this Platonic view that led feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum to argue in her book *Love's Knowledge,* that literature is a more contextual and therefore more accurate location from which to test philosophical ideas. The feminist aspect of this critique is that we live in and are partially socially constructed from an emotional world; to declare ourselves free from those emotions when we exercise reason (or, rationality) is not only unrealistic, but gives rationality undue privilege over emotions. Contra Ross and other literary theorists who point to a lack of a specific structure or type of argumentative analysis that philosophy requires in literature, Nussbaum points out that "stories show complexity, many-sidedness, and a temporally evolving plurality that is not in theory" (2). Life leans more in a pluralist direction than towards a rational formatted scheme. On this view, it follows that philosophy must account for emotional complexity in its theories of interpretation, reason, and knowledge. If stories are equipped to deal with the intricacy, paradox, and variety that is inherent in life, then why should they not sometimes count as philosophical or philosophy? I think Nussbaum is correct when she calls philosophical prose "flat and lacking in wonder" (3) and goes on to assert that "a view of…life is never *presented* by a text; it is always *represented as* something" (5—her emphasis).

Is there a commonality between literature and philosophy when each is understood as a historical product? Suresh Raval examines a common connection in that both are historically based. He cites Gadamer as saying that "literary meanings are historical, contingent, always in flux and so are always operating with cultural transitions, within historical horizons" (57). Raval goes on to say that when literature is recognized as linked with shifting history, there are two ways to view literature. One view, accredited to Hirsch, is that a literary work and criticism not only changes with history and culture, but is structured and built from the foundation of the historical context. A different, more conservative view is that the work frees itself from both the author's intent and historical context. According to Raval, this notion of a literary work that is timeless and without context is one identified with Wimsalt and Beardsley, who want literature to be static and dependent only on a sense of a 'pure' textual analysis, having a timeless sense of universality—a work can better speak to humanity, the theory goes, if it is timeless. The real postmodern move here, however, would be to see the work as culturally contingent, that being the reason to examine it only as a text, to preserve the ineffability of the historical/cultural context.

Like literature, Ravel notes that philosophy is historically based as well (as the famous modern philosopher Hegel recognized). However, a historically contextualized view of philosophy must recognize the roles played by logic and reason in the creation of philosophy. Ravel says, "systematic philosophy was a product of logic which decided in advance the kind of relation philosophy would have with history" (63). Philosophy as "critical history" has to deal with the same problems as theories of literature: they must assume "the possibility of a determinate meaning as well as something inherent that makes the work available to posterity" (53). Ravel's solution, however (and in contrast with my own), is to make philosophy of literature, like literary criticism, self-critical so as to avoid being self-serving or self-aggrandizing.

If Ravel (and others) is correct, then literary criticism, in its new postmodern form, will produce theories that generate new and interesting vocabulary by questioning and realizing the social, cultural, historical biases of literary criticism itself. That is the basis of deconstruction theory, postmodernism, and social construction theory. Ravel's final move is to critique the creation of and preference for these new theories by saying that they are not actually or necessarily progressive. They are a new means of creating new criteria, not a necessarily or naturally better one. These new theories still come from specific critical cultural contexts. No matter where we start from, we still stand in culture and history.

I would take Raval further than he wants to go by arguing that these new theories actually will be better, in the sense that they will offer a less biased, more inclusive view of literature and the world. By recognizing that these theories are emerging from a specific space, the hope is that they will refrain from speaking for people, or making assumptions that push already marginalized voices further to the margins, by denying those people either the ability to speak (e.g., through literature) or the agency to act. However, Ravel is correct about one thing: no matter how postmodern the theory, it will still come from the same historical tradition that traditional canonical theory comes from. There's a small bit of theoretical irony here: the same system that new theories are questioning actually created those new theories.

Even as this piece of theoretical irony is problematic, Nussbaum would say that we d need the combination of philosophy/literary theory and literature to understand a story. For Nussbaum, although stories give a contextual and varied perception of a literary works' philosophical content, philosophy is what frames a story. She writes "philosophy shows us the boundaries of a story, permits us to trust and find truth (14). Nussbaum's claims seem to be the more plausible of the two poles: literature is philosophy and literature is not philosophy. However, as Raval reminds us, these newer literary/philosophical theories are not better just because they are new. They are better

because they are more accurate in describing a plurality of voices and perspectives in the current cultural contexts. But they still emerge from the same structures and vocabulary that has always formed theories.

Section IV: Feminist Literary Criticism

In her article "The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory," Nina Baym states that "'serious' writing implies profound Victorian patriarchal didacticism" (154). What she means here is that what has become known as "'serious; writing" implies predetermined labels of what is 'literary' and what has 'authentic' aesthetic and literary worth. However, these labels are derived from the same problematic theories that have marginalized voices that do not fit them. Therefore, "serious" literature always carries with it the artifice of being approved by the dominant group. The next step is to take a close look at the literature that women have produced to see just how it fits with the traditional literary canon. Much of feminist literary theory has focused on a much-debated question: Do women have a specific way of writing that sets them apart from men? Is there a unique female language?

Nina Baym cites Christiane Makward, who claims that female language is "open, non-linear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, attempting to speak to the body i.e. the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from preconceived, oriented, masterly, or 'didactic' languages" (157). French feminism did this as well: Helène Cixous and Luce Irigaray describe female literature with a vocabulary based more on female sexuality. It is described as vaginal, clitoral, and multi-climactic, as opposed to phallic and in terms of 'classic plot' leading only to one climax and dénouement. Baym reads such views of a distinctly female way of writing as problematically essentializing women and women's voices by relying on preconceived, culturally biased notions of femininity. These include such stereotypes of women as open, emotional, intuitive, nurturing, concerned with the body, etc. Elaine

Showalter agrees: "Most critics, when attempting a taxonomy of feminine "peculiarities." end up only showing their own cultural biases rather than explicating sexual structures." Baym's point is not that there are no differences between the ways in which men and women (also working class, gay/lesbian, women of color) actually do write. Her point is that if one begins a reading with an idea that there is a difference, as well as with notions of what that difference is, then that reading will already be tainted with these expectations. One result is that the literature of these marginalized voices is not just forced into a unified, essentialized category ("women's writing" or "female writing" or "lesbian writing), but a category that reflects the very biases that the writer may be attempting to write against. It this way it "forces minority writers into an unnatural, uncongenial shape that they may not necessarily want to assume" (Baym 162).

An interesting question in feminist literary criticism is, Who has the authority to interpret women's literature? Some feminist critics claim that only feminist scholars may interpret so-called women's literature, but this runs into the same problem about who can teach and interpret African American literatureit assumes that only women or African Americans (respectively) can understand women's or African American literature (1991: Showalter). Not only does this assumption essentialize women (African Americans), implying that there is something ineffable about being a "woman" (African American) when really other differences among women (African Americans) maybe more significant than a presumed gender (race/ethnic) commonality: a poor woman may have no ability to identify with a rich woman, or a straight woman could not understand the daily implications of being a lesbian.. Furthermore, if only women (African Americans) are permitted to analyze women's (African American) literature, then such literature may be ghettoized forever, isolated and read only by members of the relevant circle.

Another interesting but discouraging issue addressed by feminist literary critics is a direct extension of Raval's notion that literary criticism can never exist outside of its foundations. Can

there be a feminist consciousness or culture outside patriarchy? If, as Showalter holds, there cannot be one, then no feminist attempts at writing criticism outside the dominant culture will emerge successful on the other side. Therefore, feminist literary criticism may emerge, but it would do so from a male biased tradition, vocabulary, and structure. The worry is that feminist literary criticism will or already has made itself acceptable to men and to the male biased academy and is therefore irretrievably misogynist.

There are more hopeful aspects of feminist literary criticism. One is to tie the study of literature with gender theory and comparative study of gender difference. This was an idea from Gilbert and Gubar. Applying all the different ways in which women are constructed, not just in women's literature but in society as well, would be immensely helpful. Similarly, a study of historic criticism could be undertaken to reinterpret female characters, or, more broadly, to reexamine texts from a feminist perspective, perhaps uncovering gender bias that has gone unnoticed in years past. Some feminist literary critics argued for an intellectual rebellion called gynocentrism that fully embraced the notion of an "écriture féminin" and made a conscious effort at literature that was multi-climactic, and clitoral, called: "an exhilarating change to phallocentrism" (Showalter 182).

Showalter pursues an altogether different route of a feminist literary criticism. In her chapter "The Female Tradition," from *A Literature of Their Own,* she does not look at anything inherent in women's writing, but at the ways in which the self-awareness of the author has translated itself into literary form, how this self-awareness has changed, and where it may lead. According to Showalter, when looking at women's writings collectively, there are common themes, patterns, problems that emerge that arise from still evolving relationships between women writers and their society (not from distinct "female imagination"). Showalter endorses Guyatri Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism, which states that its acceptable to ally oneself politically or strategically with others for certain purposes and goals. Among feminist literary critics (and philosophers), a common strategy is to dispel

once and for all artificial oppositional dualisms and binaries: e.g., real versus unreal, evasion versus commitment, women versus real women, reason versus emotion, mind versus body, culture versus nature. Such binaries are constructed as a discourse of difference, sets out to create an Other (Curti, 1). One way of doing is through strategic use of genre and form. As Curti writes, "denial of a rigid gender dichotomy is connected to the refusal of a rigid law of genre through displacement, transference, ambiguity, and multiplicity" (xii). This solution operates at a more concrete level than that of a distinct feminist aesthetic, dealing with the function of form, rather than an aesthetic meta-theory.

In terms of fiction, Marleen S. Barr supports a complex yet convincing argument for using fiction, science fiction specifically, to "expose, subvert, and rewrite" the dominant patriarchal myth (xii). There are increasing instances of authors taking familiar power relationships (such as male/female, colonizer/colonized, and straight/gay) and subverting them so as to inverse the power dynamic. In terms of theory, we can apply Martha Nussbaum's solution: bring emotion into the very structure of philosophy and literary criticism. She writes, "an attempt to grasp love intellectually is a way to avoid loving" (275). This implies a distinct rejection of the reason/emotion dichotomy, implying that one must rely on emotion in philosophizing: if one tries to understand life or love with only the mind, one will actually prevent oneself from finding that which one seeks.

To summarize: We have seen the way in which the historical theories and aesthetic expectations of literature are biased towards the literary productions of minorities, specifically women, and how they operate to keep women at the margins. We have also seen ways in which feminist literary theory and criticism is attempting to gain voice, credibility, and more mainstream recognition. The presumption underlying all that we have seen thus far is that there now exists a male-dominated literary canon. When students take literature classes, they read the same texts over and over. These texts are written almost exclusively by men. Teachers rationalize this exclusion by claiming (falsely) that there

just were not women writers. This is patently untrue. Women wrote in a variety of narratives and with many methods. It is not that there are no texts by women, it is that we have accustomed ourselves to never reading any, or to reading an acceptable chosen few. This is partly because of the male bias in the way literature historically has been conceptualized (as I have shown): literature must be pure of context or intent, that we need a rational set of objective criteria to evaluate a literary work.

Conclusion

Mainstream literary theory, represented in this paper by Wellek and Warren, searches for and promotes 'pure' literature, literature without intention, and literature based on historically conventional aesthetics. In reality, literature is plural, highly contextual, and always is representative of a specific time and space. Most literature comes with a perspective and a purpose, whether explicit or implicit. By conventional theories of literature, literary products that have this intent and context are not considered as literary as other pieces that promote themselves as being free of these characteristics. Feminist literature has been marginalized because of the bias in the way in which society sees literature. It has never been the case that women do not write, but their literature is not given the prominence, 'timelessness', or received the consideration of critics, or the commercial success of male authors. The end result of this male bias in the 'literary world' is that the literary canon has formed to reflect and perpetuate that bias. This is not to say that women write in a distinctly 'feminine' way, and that that is what is missing from the canon. Therefore, to insert female writers into the canon is not the solution. Rather, that would be essentializing women, and would merely fit them into a biased structure. The structure itself must change.

Elaine Showalter and Gayatri Spivak's solution of strategic essentialism focuses on creating a critical mass and a unified voice for women. This solution might work well for activist work, and in terms of producing a higher volume of what

could be considered and accepted as 'feminist literature', a hotly contested term as of this point. Another possibility from Spivak and from Lidia Curti is assuming role of subordination deliberately, and subverting it the dominant male-biased canon. This would entail exposing, subverting and rewriting patriarchal myths and stories, something Marleen S. Barr advocates. This works toward changing the perceptions of the reader and for inverting textual power hierarchies, but this seems limited to the world of the reader. It will have broader applications, however. It will change the critical world from the inside. As critics find themselves reading, reviewing, and critiquing these books they will be forced to reconcile and make sense of the subverted power dynamics. However, the change must also come on a broad, meta-level. The standards and theories that we use to evaluate and read literature must change to accept as literary that which has been silenced. Logic and objectivism cannot be the only values by which we read literature. as Martha Nussbaum proclaims. The 'literary world' cannot thrive with unbending structures, nor with power hierarchies.

A coal miner's poem may not be written in iambic pentameter, and it may not fall under conventional definitions of 'aesthetic'. The author may not even think s/he is writing literature. This may or may not be considered 'literary' under a new type of theory and new methods of evaluation, but the possibility must exist. What good is poetry at the bottom of a mineshaft? A scrap of paper goes unread, even unseen, and an unheard echo recoils humbly from black walls.

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