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tric and inadequate system.) We must assume technical dictionaries, and Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire du siècle*, provided certain names, Perron, and many acquaintances who drifted in and out of his life. With a monument standing on the stones of Paris, the mortar of exten-

sive Degas we have a three-volume history of the artist and his work. His ambition surpasses that of any other book's "Preface," Mr. Degas as an "exemplar" of a type that emerged after the war and disappeared after Sarah Bernhardt. Degas, we are told, is brought into the creative process of cultural history. I am not sure we get anything more than a rich reconstruction of a contradictory individual. Mr. McMullen's very definition of Degas is not, in itself, the best. As for the creative process, the best by the close of the work in relation to the artist is by such obsessively detailed work as *Degas: The Painter as a Man*, not exactly readable, but worth a look over the

work of Houghton Mifflin, which did not respond to the primary interest of Mr. Degas's illustrations that do it better than reproductions, all in black and white. Early points of reference are discussed in the book with a certain dismay. Since this is not the usual sense but the artist's, its visual composition is in the reproduced reproductions of his notebooks, photographs of the places Degas has visited, and the

Ultimately one wonders what significance a book like this has in illuminating Degas's work. The situation recalls Paul Valéry's battle with Leonardo while attempting to write about Leonardo: he decided that the best way to serve the artist was to leave out as much as possible of his life. "Consequently, no mistresses, no creditors, no anecdotes, no adventures!" Valéry wanted a more "honest method." For Leonardo that meant conceiving of "a theoretical being, a psychological model . . . which represented one's capacity for reconstructing the work to be explained." Valéry wanted to avoid the usual assumption that the artist, as the documented hero of a novel, had been the cause of the work.

In Mr. McMullen's biography we have the opposite aim. But it seems exactly right, even necessary, for understanding Degas's work that we should know about the man in the terms the biographer sets out for us. Valéry's "author" had to be invented. "Fortunately the author is never the man," he wrote. In Degas's case the world in which he lived was the very material of his art. The coincidence of "artist" and "man" here is essential. The gents in top hats backstage may as well be "the celibate." Degas's notion of narrative is to implicate not only the viewer but, by extension, himself. Renaissance art imposed a necessary psychological distance between the world of the viewer and the work's distilled perfection. Degas's art as a whole constitutes a calculated attack on this grand tradition. That we be given the richest possible biography of him is essential for our gaining the proper insight into his work's modern mentality. Courbet's decision in the 1840s and 1850s to become, as it were, the hero of his own novel permitted artists ever after to make of their work some kind of biography. Thus, the shape and content of Degas's work derives from the drawing rooms that unconditionally received the aging bachelor with the sharp tongue. To know the texture of the carpets, the smell of the velour, the starch of the antimacassars, is to enter into the true spirit of the pictures. Degas's art is founded on the caprices of

perceptual experience, however classical the distillation. The more detail we have about it the better.

This past year we have seen the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of Degas's birth celebrated with a series of wonderful exhibitions, in France, Italy, Germany, and America. Roy McMullen's biography was perhaps the first garland bestowed on Degas's memory. What a pity that the author, who died while the book was still in production, will not be able to enjoy the accolades due him, or to see the effects of his labors on subsequent scholarship, for this biography will surely color the present efforts of the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris to produce the grand Degas retrospective projected for 1988.

In *Degas*, Mr. McMullen has created a portrait, perhaps even an "exemplar," but he would not have deluded himself about his contribution to the reputation of his combative subject. "We painters do not have synthesizing minds," Degas himself reminds us. "And yet in a way we do, more than we seem to. In a single stroke of the brush we can say more than a literary man can in a volume."

Feminism and literature

Elaine Showalter, editor The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory. Pantheon, 403 pages, \$22.95

reviewed by Carol Iannone

As feminist ideology would have it, the world presents a harsh and alien landscape to woman. Shaped against her grain by a tradition that has left her true identity out of account, she must articulate her very grievances in a language created by her oppressor. Inevitably, in the feminist view, literature itself mirrors this oppression. Thus, the feminist literary critic sees the traditional liter-

ary canon as a "culture-bound political construct" and literary posterity as nothing more than a "group of men with the access to publishing and reviewing that enabled them to enforce their views of 'literature' and to define a group of ageless 'classics.'" Given the profound illegitimacy at the heart of literary tradition, the feminist critic insists upon "a complete revolution of our literary heritage"—"a revision of the accepted theoretical assumptions about reading and writing that have been based entirely on male literary experience." In this way gender is established "as a fundamental category of literary analysis."

Such is the view of literary culture presented in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, a collection edited by Elaine Showalter, professor of English at Princeton University. The collection consists of "eighteen of the most important and controversial essays written by pioneers in the field [of feminist literary criticism] over the last decade." Contributors include such prominent feminist critics as Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Carolyn Heilbrun, Annette Kolodny, Nancy K. Miller, Lillian S. Robinson, and Showalter herself, who is responsible for the views quoted above. These essays detail the possibilities for a "female aesthetic," a "gynocritics" as Showalter terms it, comprising "women's culture" and specifically female literary forms and critical models. They also address the function of feminist criticism in the academy.

While there is no firm agreement on the exact nature of the "female aesthetic," it is indeed the governing principle of the book. In "A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," Annette Kolodny argues that the artistic obscurity of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers"—two short stories by early twentieth-century American writers—was due to society's failure to appreciate them as encodements of "women's imaginative universe." In "Sentimental Power," Jane P. Tompkins denounces the traditional aesthetic dismissal of sentimentality as a male

formulation and attempts to advance Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to a higher artistic plane. In "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," Nancy K. Miller isolates the moments of defiance against the "dominant" culture in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and comes to read "everywhere [in this novel] a protest against the division of labor that grants men the world and women love." For Lillian S. Robinson—in "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon"—it would appear to be the "female aesthetic" alone that makes "women's letters, diaries, journals, autobiographies, oral histories, and private poetry" significant subjects for scholarly attention. The most obvious embodiment of a "female form" in the book is Rachel Blau DuPlessis's essay, "For the Etruscans," an attempt at "nonlinear," non-discursive criticism that weaves personal experience with wide-ranging meditations on literature.

As this sampling of articles may suggest, the collection offers a fairly good demonstration of the liabilities of the feminist approach to literature. No amount of theorizing, for example, can disguise the fact that "nonlinear"—when applied to intellectual scholarship—is a euphemism for confused, evasive, and inconclusive. But the problems are not just formal ones. How does anti-sentimentality come to be a male construct any more than a female one? And since when is *The Mill on the Floss* a novel about the contemporary feminist view of the female dilemma? Clearly, feminist politics are the touchstone of this criticism, and every explanation must follow therefrom, no matter what damage it does to our understanding of the complexity of art. Inevitably, the feminists discredit their own efforts through political urgency. It is not politics, after all, that will obtain higher artistic status for writers like Glaspell and Gilman, assuming they are proper candidates for literary revaluation. But of course, without the constraints of traditional literary aesthetics, the possibilities for revision are endless. Annette Kolodny even dismisses the "recurrent de-

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clusion" that there are universal truths—al-
though she does not explain on what basis
she can then make so confident a statement.

In spite of the obvious political character
of this approach to literature, and despite
its critical distortions, feminist literary crit-
icism has found a home in the academy.
Showalter claims that "the increased power
of feminist perspectives within the university
has led to innumerable changes in literary
textbooks, in curriculum structure, and in
the publication of articles and books." Some
three hundred colleges and universities now
offer degree options in women's studies. In
addition, many new journals of feminist
thought have sprung up, some, like *Signs*
and *Feminist Studies*, with respectable ac-
ademic backing. General academic periodicals
of the stature of *PMLA* and *Critical Inquiry*
have also granted generous space to feminist
criticism. Moreover, Showalter claims, fem-
inism is forging alliances with other modern
critical schools. "Feminist, black, and post-
structural critics, both male and female"
now comprise an "avant-garde that shares
the same enemies, namely those who urge a
return to the 'basics' and the 'classics,'" those who fail to recognize in these new
schools of criticism a virtual "renaissance"
in the humanities. As Sandra Gilbert de-
scribes it, feminism is only one of a series of
"profound changes that have recently shaken
Western culture in general and English
departments in particular"; among them,
"open enrollment, the sixties, . . . extra sec-
tions of remedial English, . . . and a whole
new literary canon, including not just the
works of Borges in translation and the nov-
els of Virginia Woolf but also science fic-
tion, films, women's literature, black liter-
ature, Chicano literature, Asian-American
literature, native-American literature, and
more, much more."

While forging their new approach, fem-
inist critics met their most obvious resis-
tance in the form of male colleagues sup-
posedly terrified by alterations in a canon
that had, in Annette Kolodny's words, "pre-
viously reified [their] sense of power and
significance in the world." Nevertheless, ac-

ording to Showalter, the resistance of male
critics is easing now as they begin to con-
cede that "literary misogyny can no longer
be overlooked or excused." Thus, some of
the classics "now seem less heroic," as one
Lawrence Lipking observes to Elaine Sho-
walter, "and some of them less funny." In
the words of a male medievalist quoted by
Gilbert, "Everything has to be done again."

Despite Showalter's celebration of the tri-
umph of feminism in the academy, however,
a number of critics in the collection insist
that feminism is being granted only token
acceptance, and they have a point. Indeed,
what kind of serious dialogue can emerge
with a critical school that considers litera-
ture by women the "cultural manifestation
of an oppressed people"? Gilbert herself
suggests that even "apparently supportive
colleagues only support feminist criticism
because it is 'in,' it is popular, it is trendy."

The truth is that the academy has not so
much accepted feminist criticism as it has
simply capitulated to it. Like feminism gen-
erally, literary feminism encourages a kind
of intellectual blackmail, according to which
objections to feminist theory and practice
can only derive from sexism, male para-
digms, masculine aesthetics, "literary mi-
sogyny," etc. Moreover, by demanding a
wholesale revisionism, feminist critics have
flaunted what amounts to an incapacity
to work creatively with the varying weights
and nuances of tradition. They have placed
themselves outside the values and stan-
dards that have traditionally governed
intellectual discourse and academic debate;
thus their "acceptance" is of necessity only
a nominal one.

These tactics may well betray feminism's
lurking suspicion of its own illegitimacy,
since no valid intellectual position can be
entirely beyond all procedures of verifiabil-
ity. Perhaps feminists have dismissed tradi-
tion—in favor of a reductive and bullying
ideology—because they sense that they can't
demand the status they want, for themselves
and women generally, on the usual grounds.
"Male-dominated" though the Western tra-

dition may be, it has always granted both sexes the possibility of transcending gender—in religion, for example, or in literature itself. Indeed, those detested classics became classics precisely because they transcended the ordinary life of their times and addressed themselves to (yes) universal truths. Furthermore, women *have* enjoyed various forms of power, although not always those forms favored by contemporary feminism. It is feminism that presents an extraordinarily withered view of feminine history, by focusing only on female deprivation and ignoring female fulfillment. And it is feminism that has transformed gender—in literary studies as elsewhere—from a merely biological imperative into a totalitarian determinism that would resist all the qualifications of centuries of culture. Elaine Showalter's counsel that feminist criticism has "more to learn from women's studies than from English studies, more to learn from international feminist theory than from another seminar on the masters" can only result in impoverishing women scholars, exacerbating any real alienation from which they may suffer, ghettoizing them, setting them apart as a subspecies, as prisoners of sex.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for guarded optimism. Two recent debates in the pages of *The New York Times Book Review* would seem to indicate that many thoughtful women—women writers in particular—do not accept the interests of ideological feminism as identical with their own, or the methods of feminist literary criticism as the best means of understanding either literature in general or literature by women in particular.

The first debate began with an essay by the ubiquitous Elaine Showalter objecting to the resistance of many women writers—Joan Didion, Doris Lessing, Susan Sontag, Iris Murdoch, and Cynthia Ozick—to the idea of a female literary tradition. In a reply, Ozick noted the contradiction in feminists' lamenting "the exclusion of women writers from the 'cultural mainstream' while simultaneously supporting their exclusion through insistence on 'women's writing as a distinct

literary category.'" Another female respondent argued that writing and reading by gender narrows the focus of how we create and enjoy art.

The second debate involved Gail Godwin's review of the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who, in addition to being contributors to the present collection, are the authors of the seminal work on the so-called female literary tradition, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Godwin—a novelist of considerable reputation—protested that their anthology elevated "the values of feminist interpretation . . . to a *summa* at the expense of literary art and individual talents," and that women writers, especially younger ones, "whose prose or poems do not always deal with the female experience or lend themselves to feminist explication," had been virtually ignored. Furthermore, Godwin observed, even renowned writers like Jane Austen and George Eliot were represented in the anthology by lesser work (in Austen's case by a spoof she wrote as a teenager) because these fit better into the "feminist pattern" Gilbert and Gubar were "attempting to impose."

Godwin was met by a wave of angry responses from the editors of the book and from other major feminist literary critics. One respondent, Joanne Feit Diehl, predictably characterized Godwin's view as "the resistance of a woman writer who is herself at odds concerning her relationship to a tradition of other women"—such resistance being of course for feminists the only grounds from which disagreement with their ideas can spring. But in her reply Godwin reported receiving many supportive letters from women readers and writers.

Ironically, if feminism would define itself, as Godwin suggests, as a celebration of "women's strengths and opportunities"—or, as Cynthia Ozick suggests, as the desire for "access to, and participation in, the professions, the arts and every other human enterprise that makes the world go"—then it would be at odds with the aspirations of

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the new feminist criticism as represented in
Elaine Showalter's collection. Such a view
would have to presume women's capacities
for thriving within their cultural tradition
and would eventually have to acknowledge
the representation women have had in that
tradition even to this point. Perhaps this is

why feminist critics are driving themselves
to such egregious violations of common
sense and scholarly standards as are shown
in *The New Feminist Criticism*: not because
women haven't had cultural status, but be-
cause they have, and it has failed to bring
about the utopia of the feminists' dreams.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to two recently published books
by contributors to *The New Criterion*: James Lord's *Giacometti: A Biography*
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$30), and Hilton Kramer's *The Revenge of the*
Philistines: Art & Culture 1972-1984 (The Free Press, \$25). Parts of these
books were published in earlier issues of *The New Criterion*.