BOOK REVIEWS

NO MAN'S LAND: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth-Century

Volume 1: The War of the Words

Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Terri Doughty

The title of Sandra M. Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's long-awaited sequel to *The Madwoman in the Attic* carries powerful images of both the battle-scarred terrain of twentieth-century literature, site of bitter war between creative men and women, and the more idealistic landscape of a female utopia, along the lines of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. *The War of the Words* is the first volume in a projected trilogy, to include *Sexchanges* and *Letters From the Front*, which explores these two poles of women's experiences in the world of modern letters. Gilbert and Gubar present the first volume as "an overview of social, literary, and linguistic interactions between men and women from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present." An ambitious undertaking, certainly, and at times the scope of their task results in the co-authors being unable to elaborate on different propositions; nonetheless, their wide-ranging approach has much to recommend it, as they tantalize and provoke their readers with a radical revision of literary history, which claims that many of the features we associate with literary "modernism" have their roots in "an ongoing battle of the sexes that was set in motion by the late nineteenth century rise of feminism and the fall of Victorian concepts of 'femininity.'"

Sex antagonism is a central topic in *No Man's Land*, and despite their profession of description over prescription, Gilbert's and Gubar's text itself becomes an antagonist in the sex war of the twentieth century by engaging with (male) literary history, as well as by exchanging a sexually monolithic canon for a dialogue between the sexes. The first two chapters relate "The Men's Case" and "The Women's Cause," describing how male anxiety in response to the developing feminist movement engenders misogynistic texts, which in turn produce a complex female response. In terms of male writers, Gilbert and Gubar trace a linear development of hostility to women's aspirations beginning with Tennyson's *The Princess*, continuing through writers like Eliot, Nathanael West and Henry Miller, on to Ted Hughes today. However, despite the optimism of turn-of-the-century feminist polemicists like Christabel Pankhurst, women writers from Emily Dickinson to Sylvia Plath display unease with matching the directness of male antagonism, and they also have difficulty imaging women triumphing over men's brutality. Only with the second wave of feminism, particularly in the genres of science fiction, fantasy and lyric poetry, do Gilbert and Gubar see a revival of belief in the possibility of female triumph.

The field of literary history is the most difficult for women to assail, as not only must they face the resistance of male writers safely entrenched in tradition, but they must also contend with what Gilbert and Gubar term the "female affiliation complex." That is, modern women writers have to resolve their relationship to their literary mothers and sisters as well as to their fathers and brothers. Gilbert and Gubar take Freud's family model in "Female Sexuality" as their paradigm for the experience of the woman writer. Although this gives them three paths for the female artist — adoption of the father's tradition, claiming the mother's tradition, or a "frigid" rejection of both (and of aesthetic ambitions) — the Freudian model proves problematic, as Gilbert an Gubar admit, for his analysis of female sexuality is itself determined in part by sex antagonism. Moreover, the Freudian paradigm is limiting, as the woman artist's interaction with literary forebears is more complicated than the model allows. Finally, by working from Freud, Gilbert and Gubar are at times placed in the position of claiming that women are guilty of their own silencing. In some cases this may be so, but the argument is more palatable when it also takes into consideration economic and social factors rather than just psychosexual ones.

One of the more thought-provoking areas of sexual warfare that Gilbert and Gubar discuss is the battleground of language. Wisely, they avoid passing judgement on whether biology or anatomy actually determine linguistic power; instead, they focus on the interesting issue of how both male and female writers work with fantasies of linguistic primacy. Whereas the language play of Joyce, Pound and Eliot simultaneously devalues women's words as hysterical or incoherent and excludes women from the "civilized" father speech (Walter Ong's *patrius sermo*, cited p. 243), linguistic experimentation by Djuna Barnes, Woolf, Stein, and other women writers is aimed at achieving a true "mother tongue," achieving linguistic autonomy from the male tradition. Women's drive for linguistic freedom is further considered in terms of the importance of "naming" for such writers as H.D., Rebecca West and Isak Dinesen. What clearly matters here is not that men and women write differently out of different bodies, but that both

sexes feel the need to distinguish their language from the other. It is to be hoped that this "war of words" receives further attention in the succeeding volumes of *No Man's Land.*

Although it has some of the problems of an introductory volume, generally stemming from too much to cover in too little space, *The War of the Words* augers well for the rest of *No Man's Land.* Gilbert and Gubar may at times frustrate the reader, but they are never dull, nor do they fail to challenge the reader's preconceptions of twentieth-century literary history. Their wit and fresh perceptions demand the reader's engagement with their text. Just as *The Madwoman in the Attic* necessitated a new reading of nineteenth-century literature, so *No Man's Land* will generate much debate over the next years, revising our understanding of literary modernism.

TEACHING WRITING: PEDAGOGY, GENDER, AND EQUITY

Edited by Cynthia L. Caywood and Gillian R. Overing. Albany: State University of New York, 1987.

Deborah F. Kennedy

The subtitle registers the difference between this book and the many other writing books on the market. This group of essays by American academics (twenty women and two men) attempts to present a feminist approach to teaching composition. The editors and many of the contributors assert the connection between theories of writing as process and feminism. While the book contains some excellent suggestions for a feminist to use in the classroom, I object strongly to the often explicit equation of the irrational aspects of writing with the female mode of being and the rational aspects with the male mode of being.

Drawing on Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice,* many of the authors identify a less hierarchical, pluralistic and relational mode of being as female. Thus they see the revisionist theory of writing, which makes use of prewriting, free-writing, and journal writing, as representative of a female style because these forms of expression mirror those to which women have historically had access, such as letters, diaries, and oral narratives. As Wendy Goulston states, "Prewriting is, after all, what women have been doing for centuries." But surely men also write letters and journals. The point is that women have been excluded from using other forms of discourse like scientific writing and journalism. We need to read the letters and hear the stores of women, but we should not deduce that these are the modes in which women best or "naturally" express themselves.

Olivia Frey follows Goulston's essentialist argument when she protests against the violence done to students by grading and competitiveness. Ironically, her ideas reinforce the patriarchal myth of the nice, unassertive female: in the new writing class, the "teacher no longer has the Truth about writing... [she] questions and suggests, but rarely mandates." Caywood and Overing similarly criticize colleagues for marking against an ideal text. Yet, neither paper addresses how to deal with grading or how to schedule student-teacher collaboration and peer editing. I would like to know how collaboration works when one has one hundred students who must each submit eight essays per term, as is often the case. Typically, a teacher of composition has little freedom to design a syllabus or choose a textbook, let alone time to read every draft of every essay. As well, composition teachers are often women without tenure and with no institutional power, hired as teaching assistants or part-time or sessional instructors to do the "housework or dirty work of English departments," as Elisabeth Daümer and Sandra Runzo describe it. Yet, in this collection, scant attention is given to this important feminist issue.

Caywood and Overing complain that "the expository essay is valued over the exploratory;...the impersonal, rational voice ranked more highly than the intimate, subjective one". Indeed, college composition courses are not group therapy sessions; rather, they often have as their goal to provide students from a variety of fields with the skills to write adequate essays, reports, memos, and business letters. It seems to me that learning how to write a clear sentence or coherent paragraph is important for students. These are not evil, male things.

One can find in this book some useful ways to highlight feminist concerns. Susan Radner, Diana J. Fuss, and James D. Riemer discuss their use of themes of family, gender, race and class, which, for Radner, infuses "a feminist perspective into a rigid syllabus." As well, Alice F. Freed discusses one of the most important concerns for a teacher: sexist language in the classroom. She offers a number of ways to correct the gender biases in our speech and writing.

These practical suggestions help us to learn a new way of teaching, without demanding that we put the chairs in a circle and paint the walls pink.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH: Aboriginal Women Speak Out

Janet Silman (recorder). Toronto: Women's Press, 1987.

Julia Emberley

On 28 June 1985, a piece of federal legislation known as Bill C-31 was passed by the Canadian government stipulating that those sections of the 1869 Enfranchisement Act and the 1876 Indian Act which discriminated against Native women in general, and prohibited Native women who married non-Natives from maintaining their native rights and associations, be removed. Academic writers and journalists have told this story. They tell an official story that records the historical and political events involving large organizations such as Indian Rights for Indian Women, the Native Women's Association for Canada and the National Action Committee for the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, all of which brought significant pressure to bear on the federal government to change its policy. But as official stories go, they fail to tell of the personal struggle and resistance carried out by Native women on a daily basis to change the conditions of their life. The success of this piece of legislative reform owes a great deal to