Vision and Revision: Nineteenth-Century Women

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EVEN CHILDREN of the 'sixties can remember when bookstores had no shelves labeled "Women's Studies." History and literary criticism were ostensibly sex-blind until just over a decade ago; topics like "the English novel" and "the city in America" seemed equally to include men and women. But recognizing their need to redefine their contemporary role, members of a new generation of feminists soon realized that the past too had to be reclaimed. Incorporated in standard male versions of history, women's experience had been systematically distorted or suppressed.

Perhaps the most striking result of the feminist reinterpretation of the past now underway is the number of new topics it automatically releases. (The same, of course, is true of any field of study that defines as significant the activities of people previously considered unimportant.) Historians, for example, have been led away from public events—the wars and political events in which nineteenth-century women could play a little part—to domestic concerns. Birth control, child-rearing, and intra-familial power struggles affect men and women alike; they are new subjects because they do not involve men exclusively or primarily. Similarly, the feminist readings of the Anglo-American literary tradition have not excluded men; they have simply made a place for women on their own terms.

At the same time, however, that it introduces new subjects, a feminist approach—or, of course, any political approach—can restrict our understanding of them. (That all historical points of view are, at one level or another, political, and that the interpretation of the past offers large and varied opportunities for inaccuracy, should go without saying.) Thus a commitment to feminist ideology can encourage the historian or critic to mine the past for proof of what he or she knows must have happened, and to ignore evidence or possible interpretations that undermine cherished preconceptions.

In The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism, Barbara Berg explores the attempts of certain women in the first half of the nineteenth century to liberate themselves from the constraining ideal of woman as "angel in the house." Berg interprets this ideal as an attempt by middle- and upper-class men, shaken by the weakening of class distinctions caused by urbanization and the beginnings of industrial capitalism, to limit women to trivial activities and supportive roles. Yet, sheltered as they were, genteel women could not help noticing the truth and misery in which many inhabitants of their cities lived; some of them, recognizing a worthy cause and an opportunity to add meaning to their lives, organized to try to ameliorate the effects of urban poverty, especially as they touched other women.

In 1840, as now, the women best equipped to struggle for fulfillment (as opposed, in some sense, to survival) against the restrictions imposed by a male-dominated society belonged to the middle and upper classes. These are the women who most interest Berg, and her interpretation of their tribulations and achievements reflects a strong unspoken comparison with the current female drive to enter the professions and the higher echelons of business. She even, occasionally, refers to her volunteers as "managers."

The constant presence of 1970s ideology works to narrow the scope of The Remembered Gate. It excludes both the perspective of the recipients of charity, and the possibility that the satisfactions of the givers were not entirely professional. Indeed, it is possible to see female volunteerism not as rebellion against a male-imposed female role, but as the only appropriate public activity of the domestic angel, one that extended her ministering and caring function into a wider sphere. Berg assumes that all energetic women rejected the "angel" image in some way; she fails to account for its apparent acceptance by many others, some of whom advanced the quasi-feminist argument that it at least reserved one sphere for female activity. And she gives the misleading impression that the mistress of a substantial nineteenth-century household had domestic duties as undemanding as those of the mistress of a modern suburban house.

The problem of twentieth-century bias is not confined to the social historian, Nina Auerbach's Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction exemplifies the difficulty of approaching the literature of the past through distinctively contemporary feminist concerns. She illustrates her theme most effectively in an imaginative introduction about all-female groups—the Graiae, the Fates, the Amazons—in classical mythology. But she is less successful in imposing her structure on the insists and often bulky prose of a rather miscellaneous group of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, a list which begins with Pride and Prejudice and Little Women and ends with The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. Although the individual readings are interesting, the book lacks unity. Most of the novelists are not really writing about the subject Auerbach identifies, but about a larger subject—the relations between men and women. Oddly, the novels that come closest to dealing with female communities are by men: Henry James's The Bostonians and George Sissing's The Odd Women.

The most illuminating feminist studies struggle successfully against the temptation to impose modern perspectives on material from the past. At the end of the introduction to Frontier Women, Julie Roy Jeffrey says that when she began her research, she had "hoped to find that pioneer women used the frontier as a means of liberating themselves from behavior which I found constraining and sexist," but she discovered instead that women pioneers fondly cherished the angel-in-the-house ideal as they cooked by their covered wagons and built their houses on the prairie. It would have been impossible to dismiss this astonishing group of women as useless and sheltered, so Jeffrey reformulated her question: how did stereotypical female role models help the women who settled the agrarian, mining, and urban frontiers of the trans-Mississippi West?

The simple answer seems to be that traditional roles provided both a goal and a link with the relatively secure and civilized life that the women had left behind. Most women pioneers followed their husbands west in search of economic opportunity. Beginning with the long overland trek, most women were deprived of female companion- ship; circumstances demanded that they share their husbands' hard physical labor. In the first years of settlement, especially if they were homesteaders, there was little distinction between home-making and income-producing activities. Forced to assume duties they regarded as masculine, pioneer women clung to the Victorian ideal in order to preserve their sexual identity.

They yearned, too, for a sphere of their own. Although they did men's work, pioneer women seldom usurped their husbands' prerogatives. The diaries and letters examined by Jeffrey clearly show that women accepted and expected male domination of family and communal life, a domination that was more pronounced than in the East. So...
women longed for the end of the first phase of pioneering because more set-
tled communities would mean more women. A network of women friends to
give mutual support at times of stress (such as childbirth) was an early
sign of an emerging female community; institutions like colleges, schools, and
libraries would soon follow.

The angel of the house was conven-
tionally the guardian of morality; she
exercised authority through virtue. The
absence of Sabbath observance on the
trail symbolized the disappearance of
female influence; the reestablishment of
organized worship and the enforce-
ment of other kinds of social codes in
pioneer communities signalled the re-
crudescence of a female source of
power. That, at least, was the pattern in
agricultural settlements. In the min-
ing towns, however, which attracted
many single men in search of quick for-
tunes, there were often competing
centers of female power.Prostitutes,
some very attractive and at least rela-
tively refined, had often established
themselves in such towns before wives;
successful prostitutes, especially in
cities like Denver and San Francisco,
might live in a sort that parodied the
aspirations of more respectable women
—to whom, therefore, they represented
a serious threat. Rather than combining
in sisterhood, western wives organized
repeated attacks on vice. Occasionally,
the stakes were very high indeed. Jef-
frey cites San Francisco's Cora affair,
which began when U.S. Marshall Wil-
liam H. Richardson, urged by his wife,
tried to make gambler Charles Cora
and his mistress (a madam on a large
scale) leave a public theater. They re-
fused, but the next day Richardson
shot Cora on moral grounds.

Jeffrey shows that women generally
accepted and endorsed images of them-
theselves that modern feminists find
depressing and degrading. That these
women were, however, unusually in-
dependent and capable suggests that
such images must be interpreted care-
fully, with an understanding of how
they were actually used. Jeffrey shows

that even the polygamous doctrine of
Mormonism could occasionally offer a
woman the chance to achieve kinds of
self-realization not possible in an or-
dinary household: in the most successful
and harmonious polygamous marriages,
the most capable of the wives might ad-
minister the whole family's assets. That
is to say, Jeffrey, herself a resourceful
and flexible interpreter of cultural im-
ages, is able to recognize the same
qualities in pioneer women.

If cultural stereotypes dictate the pat-
terns of physical existence, they shape the
life of the mind more powerfully still.
Women writers, according to Susan
gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert in The
Madwoman in the Attic, have
always had to struggle with a double set
of inhibiting masculine-derived pre-
conceptions. One is that literary crea-
tion is an essentially masculine activity,
which women, at best, palely mimic.
The other is that if a woman is not an "angel," docile and submissive—and,
almost by definition, no substantial
woman author fits this category—she
must be a freak. In the nineteenth
century, female authorship became
very common and women authors very
diverse. Yet Gubar and Gilbert argue

that beneath their differences, these
writers—novelists especially—share a
central concern to define themselves as
authors. Thus two major themes emerge
in work after work: the title image of the
madwoman in the attic (which refers
specifically to Bertha Mason, the
first wife of Mr. Rochester in Jane
Eyre, and generally to the novelists'
and poets' own socially unacceptable
images); and a pattern in the plots of
enclosure and escape. In a brilliant and
often surprising analysis, Gubar and
Gilbert uncover the submerged feminist
dialogue which modifies the works of a
wide range of nineteenth-century
authors into a coherent female tradi-

The madwoman is at once the double
of the lady author and of the author's
gentted heroine. In Pride and Prejudice,
for example, Elizabeth Bennet is rebel-
lious, for a young lady, but not all that
rebellious—her high spirits do not
make her less eligible for a splendid
marriage. Her prospective aunt-in-law
Lady Catherine de Bourgh, a rich, ec-
centric, and self-willed widow, allows
herself much more latitude in behavior.
Economically independent and socially
secure, she enthusiastically manipulates
those around her, making and unmaking
the plots of their lives.

The "madwoman" appears more
dramatically in Frankenstein. Gubar
and Gilbert read Mary Shelley's novel
as an analogy to Paradise Lost (Milton's
being, in their view, the male author
most oppressive to female authors),
radiately retold from feminine point of
view. Victor Frankenstein, the mon-
ster's creator, though he resembles
Adam and Satan, is most like Eve: his
most important act, after all, is to give
birth to the monster. And the monster,
some of whose attributes are obviously
Satanic, is also at bottom an emanation
of Eve. Excluded, as she is, from inter-
course with rational beings, the monster
blames his grotesque body, which is
described in terms that evoke a long-
standing masculine tradition of horror
at female flesh. (The pure angel
woman has always seemed somehow
disembodied, free from the taint of
physicality; Lemuel Gulliver's horrified
description of a Brobdignagian breast
epitomizes the reaction to real women
on the part of men attracted by angels.)
Along with much else, women absorbed
this opinion of their bodies, and in
Frankenstein, as in the creations of
many women, it merges with the idea
that public female intellectual activity is
unnatural and unpleasant.

Besides their stimulating interpreta-
tions of individual works and their well-
established connections among a large
and varied group of writers, Gubar and
Gilbert offer an organic method of
feminist criticism. Their political con-
viptions are expressed in what they
choose to talk about; they never seem
to force modern issues on a bewildered
nineteenth-century text. And because
they identify demonstrably central con-
cerns of the writers they discuss, their
proposal of a coherent female counter-
tradition in literature—which embraces
Jane Austen and Mary Shelley, George
Eliot and Emily Dickinson—is persua-
sive, as is their explanation of how
that tradition worked with and against
the mainstream, male-defined tradi-
tions. Their strict attention and sympa-
thetic response to the texts of nineteenth-
century women allow Gilbert and Gu-
bar an understanding of ideology and
criticism; they show that reading with
specifically female issues in mind makes it possible to identify the extent
to which these writers were concerned
with the same problems. They do not
claim to have discovered a hermetic
tradition, veiled from all but initiated
readers. Indeed, they make a contrary
claim: to have uncovered a theme that
should have been plain to any reader
whose eyes had not previously been
closed by the prevailing view of
literature.