The Other Side of the Story
Hite, Molly

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The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives.

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This book began with a question I first formulated some years ago in all innocence: Why don’t women writers produce postmodernist fiction?

Like so many questions of the “Why don’t women . . . ?” variety, this one initially seemed both straightforward and plausible, which is to say, neither particularly ambiguous nor particularly implicated in a network of masculinist assumptions. As far as ambiguity went, the possibility had not occurred to me. I meant by the question something fairly simple: it appeared evident to the point of being a truism that the important male fiction writers of the period after 1960 were characteristically engaged in certain kinds of stylistic and structural innovation and that the important female fiction writers of the period were engaged in no sort of innovation at all. If this assessment of the situation of contemporary writing now strikes me as so naive that it amounts to purblind complicity, I will add that whenever I brought up my “Why don’t women writers . . . ?” question—most often in feminist critical circles—people not only took my meaning in exactly the way that I had intended it, but responded with great interest, “Yes, why don’t they?” and immediately began to propose possible answers. I suspect that I would get the same kinds of response today from many people, including many feminists.

Of course, addressing the question forced me to move rapidly from “Why don’t they . . . ?” to “What do they do?” at which point
a whole other world opened up, the other side of this particular metanarrative about how men and women write. This book contends that a number of the most eminent and influential women writing in the contemporary period are attempting innovations in narrative form that are more radical in their implications than the dominant modes of fictional experiment, and more radical precisely inasmuch as the context for innovation is a critique of a culture and a literary tradition apprehended as profoundly masculinist. But I did not end up trying to admit a select group of female—and feminist—writers to the emergent canon of postmodernism. I now believe that one reason Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing, Alice Walker (whom I consider in relation to her literary progenitor Zora Neale Hurston), and Margaret Atwood have not been more widely regarded as innovative narrative strategists is that they seem, as a group, recognizably distinct from the postmodernists: equally concerned with the languages of high and low culture, for instance, but differently implicated in these languages, similarly aware of the material and cultural conditions of their own writing but calling attention to this status in more complicated and more ideologically charged ways.\textsuperscript{1} In particular, experimental fictions by women seem to share the decentering and disseminating strategies of postmodernist narratives, but they also seem to arrive at these strategies by an entirely different route, which involves emphasizing conventionally marginal characters and themes, in this way re-centering the value structure of the narrative.\textsuperscript{2}

This claim for the highly experimental nature of recent women’s

\textsuperscript{1}Brian McHale, \textit{Postmodernist Fiction} (New York: Methuen, 1987), offers an intelligent and accessible overview of the conditions and defining features of the postmodernist narrative—and establishes in addition the masculine and masculinist characteristics of this category of writing. My \textit{Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon} (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983) aims to situate Pynchon as an exemplary postmodernist and, to this end, discusses implications for narrative of specifically modernist and postmodernist ontological premises. See especially pp. 3–10 and 13–45. Although I am explicitly concerned here with four widely read and widely accepted female writers, my list is in no way intended to be exhaustive. A few of the writers (in English) whose fictions also belong under the rubric of contemporary feminist narrative are Kathy Acker, Christine Brooke-Rose, Angela Carter, Michelle Cliff, Elizabeth Jolley, Toni Morrison, Grace Paley, Joanna Russ, and Fay Weldon.

\textsuperscript{2}I deal more explicitly with one instance of an “entirely different route” in “\textit{(En)Genderning Metafiction: Doris Lessing’s Rehearsals for The Golden Notebook},” \textit{Modern Fiction Studies} 34, no. 3 (1988), 481–500.
writing may strike many readers as unusual—perhaps even outrageous—given the various institutional contexts within which we read, describe, debate, evaluate, categorize and analyze contemporary fiction. But these contexts are no more innocent of masculinist presuppositions than my original question, and they condition critical practices that lead us to read innovative fiction by women back into a tradition that presumes women’s writing is inherently conservative or flawed or both. Such contexts serve to mute female difference, effectively intervening in women writers’ attempts to articulate what I call here the other side of the story.

I take it as a premise that it is possible to read other-wise, in ways that acknowledge female-created violations of convention or tradition as deliberate experiments rather than inadvertent shortcomings. The silencing of female attempts to articulate an “other side” to the dominant stories of a given culture is never complete, in that this “side” is not in any absolute sense unimaginable or inconceivable (or outside the Symbolic order, in Lacanian terms). My readings imply a somewhat different account—at once less drastic and more political—not only of the relation of women to language but also of the relation of the feminist writer to a narrative tradition that works to inscribe her within its own ideological codes. I return briefly to this issue at the conclusion of the book, at a point where I hope it will be more evident that the key question for feminist narrative is not “Can there be discursive practices that to some extent evade or undermine masculinist presuppositions?” but “Given such discursive practices, under what conditions and using what strategies are we most likely to discern them?”

Quite early in my reading, I found that I was appropriating the

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3Important precedents for this contention and for my own methodology are Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); and Jane Marcus, Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

4See Margaret Homans, Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), especially pp. 1–39, for a feminist treatment of an alternative, “maternal” mode of expression, which manages to appropriate the Lacanian account of cognitive and linguistic development while avoiding the implication of silencing inherent in the Kristeva premise of a semiotic order.
metaphor of an "other side" to a story purporting to be "the" story and that this figure was singularly fruitful for my own consideration of contemporary feminist narrative. Cliches tend to have unanticipated potency in relevant contexts, and certainly the notion of telling the other side of the story in many ways describes the enterprise of feminist criticism, perhaps even of feminist theorizing generally. Much of the power of the metaphor here derives from the fact that it makes visible the association of alterity—otherness—with woman as a social, cultural, and linguistic construction: Other as woman, or in Luce Irigaray's provocative conflation, the Other Woman. But the other side of the story is also, if implicitly, another story. The notion that stories inevitably both obscure and encode other stories has been axiomatic to our understanding of narrative since at least the eighteenth century; when construed as repressed or suppressed stories of the Other, these other stories become the enabling conditions for the writing and reading of feminist narrative.

I

Stories in the modern sense are always somebody's stories: even when they have a conventionally omniscient narrator they entail a point of view, take sides. Such a perspectival notion of story implies that the coherence of one line of narration rests on the suppression of any number of "other sides," alternative versions that might give the same sequence of events an entirely different set of emphases and values. One immediate consequence is that even though conventions governing the selection of narrator, protagonist, and especially plot restrict the kinds of literary production that count as stories in a given society and historical period, changes in emphasis and value can articulate the "other side" of a culturally mandated story, exposing the limits it inscribes in the process of affirming a dominant ideology.

Ian Watt observes that the rise of realism in the late eighteenth century denoted "a belief in the individual apprehension of reality through the senses"; because stories in these terms are ultimately grounded in individual apprehension, they entail a point or points of view even when they employ omniscient narrators. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), p. 14.
For example, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both male and female authors produced what Nancy Miller has termed "heroine's texts," novels with sexually vulnerable female protagonists whose entire futures turn on the possibility of being integrated into the surrounding society through a successful marriage. As a number of feminist critics have recently demonstrated, many of the female writers during that period made it at least part of their project to articulate the "other side" of this story, stressing the constrictions of the romance plot and thus how this plot enforces the prevailing cultural construction of female identity and destiny. Jane Austen foregrounded the economic necessity motivating marriage and, through the exemplary situations of her peripheral female characters, showed how likely it was that marriage would prove a painful necessity, psychologically damaging if not spiritually annihilating. Charlotte Brontë modified or withheld a narrative closure that her novels revealed inevitably to be an enclosure, ultimately entrapping the heroine. George Eliot made a central theme of the female martyrdom inherent in both the "dysphoric" and the "euphoric" endings of the romance plot—that is, not only in those endings that resolved the situation created by the sexual susceptibility of the protagonist by terminating her life but in those endings that resolved the same situation by absorbing her into a conventionally happy marriage. Indeed, one reason that "heroine's texts" written by women remained vital for so long and can still engage reader expectations may well be that in revealing the "other side" of an apparently simple and familiar story, female novelists imbedded a cultural critique that introduced complication and novelty.


Miller, The Heroine's Text, p. xi.
The "other side" thus has a venerable history of being the woman's side, the version that discloses how the heroine is constrained by a set of narrative givens not of her own making. By the same token, however, it affirms woman's side as the side of an Other constructed by a maculinist discourse, as the place of an anterior femininity defined by reference to the masculine norm. As Simone de Beauvoir has observed, "woman" in these terms is a relational sign: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other." The constraints that the female writer exposes and articulates are the constraints that define the position of "woman" within a system of linguistic oppositions. They guarantee that the female writer speaks from this position even as she denounces it.

Because this concept of woman as subordinate and supplementary Other was particularly involved in with the conventionally clear and unproblematic discourse of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century realism, many female fiction writers of the early twentieth century regarded themselves as having a vested interest in the modernist project of unsettling realist assumptions by overturning realist conventions. Rachel Blau DuPlessis has shown how stylistic and structural "ruptures" in works by writers as diverse as Olive Shreiner, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and H.D. constitute strategies to evade or undo an established system of representation that dictated the imaginable varieties of male and female possibility in the same gesture as it dictated the permissible varieties of narrative sequence, character, and relationship. But to a great extent, these female attempts to write other-wise, to create an experimental syntax and structure that would not merely expose but would refuse altogether the prevailing constructions of gender and genre, were read back into the discourse they tried to challenge or circumvent. "Ruptures," after all, are easily integrated into the familiar account of femininity as inferiority or lack. Effects conceived as subversions of a literary tradition may be construed as failures to work within that

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tradition, mimetically motivated by a limited female point of view or breadth of experience or, in more extreme accounts, by an inherently flawed female nature. The works of these writers were simply assimilated into literary history—or, more frequently, excised from literary history—as further evidence of woman’s subordinate and supplementary otherness.

The dilemma that women writers encounter in their project of telling the other side of the story clearly has affinities with the debate over sexual difference currently preoccupying feminist theorists on both sides of the Atlantic. On one hand, the woman writer is often working explicitly from the recognition that received notions of plot, character, sequence, and even the grammatical structures in which these notions are received presume a dichotomy of same/other that institutes and preserves sexual difference within a binary schema of dominant and muted values. On the other hand, her attempts to overthrow or evade the terms of her inherited tradition are liable to be co-opted by these same terms, so that resistance is reinscribed as the failure inherent in the very concept of feminine literary endeavor. The question of literary intention becomes embroiled in the question of literary re-

ception, and in the process two meanings of otherness—otherness as a deliberate project of writing other-wise, and otherness as an unavoidable effect of a preexisting limit called femininity—seem almost inextricably conflated.

Far from being the discoveries of recent feminist theory, these issues of a gendered otherness and of how this otherness is construed by the surrounding culture are repeatedly raised within women's experimental writings in the twentieth century. For instance, in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, a thirteen-volume *Kunstlerroman* written largely between 1913 and 1938, the protagonist, Miriam Henderson, reflects that the stories she is trying to write are not, like her best work, "alive all over"; she locates the paradoxical source of her problem in a man's encouragement and in the expectations this encouragement tacitly raises:

It was Bob, driving so long ago a little nail into her mind when he said, "Write the confessions of a modern woman," meaning a sensational chronicle with an eye, several eyes, upon the interest of sympathetic readers like himself—"Woman, life's heroine, the dear, exasperating creature"—who really likes to see how life looks from the other side, the woman's side, who put me on the wrong track and created all those lifeless pages. Following them up, everything would be left out that is always there, preceding and accompanying and surviving the drama of human relationships; the reality from which people move away as soon as they closely approach and expect each other to be all in all."

Although this passage begins from the identification of "the other side" with "the woman's side," it does so only to reject this identification as dictated by masculine desire, by a voyeurism frankly prurient in its assumption that this side will reveal itself in the form of "confessions," a "sensational chronicle" presumed by the man who solicits it to be intended for "sympathetic readers like himself." Otherness becomes the thing disclosed by the glimpse into the seraglio, the posited subjectivity that emerges only as the object of male scrutiny. It is accessory to the dominant sensibility, lovably "exasperating" in its subordination and consequent irrationality. Miriam here acknowledges that this supposi-

tion of an otherness brought into being by the requirements of a male audience has put her on the “wrong track,” leading her to create “lifeless pages.” The characteristic pronominal slide in the opening sentence of this passage—from the third-person “her mind” to the first-person “put me on the wrong track”—suggests how such provocation throws Miriam into the position of a speaking subjectivity, inasmuch as she cannot at the moment of realization go on occupying what she recognizes as a voyeur’s stance on female experience.

Yet Pilgrimage has traditionally been read as if it constituted the “confessions of a modern woman”: as if its stylistic innovations, including the “stream of consciousness” narrative mode that it pioneered, resulted from a sort of authorial striptease, whereby self-exposure spontaneously generated its own discourse. A contemporary critic compared it to “the collections of a lifetime, a boxful of scraps of old silk and stuff such as hoarding women gather and leave behind at death,” and the gendered character of the assemblage he describes (“hoarding women” appear to gather without taxonomizing and perhaps even without examining) engenders questions about advertency, about “whether . . . such impressionism [is] anything more than a marvellous feat of memory, of reproduction,” and about “how far deliberate is that portrait [of Miriam]? Is it not there, inferentially, as it were, by the accumulated indications? How far is the character created?”13 If Pilgrimage was widely conceded to be the first major work of the twentieth century to present “the other side, the woman’s side,” it was also trivialized by that concession, becoming simply the imprint of “life’s heroine” as she flung herself onto the page.

In the quoted passage from the novel, however, Miriam explicitly rejects the version of her enterprise that equates women’s writing with “confessions” and goes on to provide what amounts to a negative manifesto for the project of Pilgrimage itself—by implication, the book she will be able to write when she transcends the demands that have produced “lifeless pages.” The project is one of inclusion and involves changing the principles of selection that have governed

the kind of novel in which "woman" figures as "life's heroine." What Miriam proposes is to bring into her fiction the events "preceeding and accompanying and surviving the drama of human relationships"—that is, to honor the continuity of lived experience, replacing the realist representation of "key" events in causal sequence with a mode of representation that she regards as closer to the configurations of reality.14 The enterprise is strikingly similar to Virginia Woolf's famous formulation: "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?"15 But while Woolf's attack on realism is couched in strategically general terms, in that the thing in need of accurate depiction is that large entity "life," Richardson's emphasis is on representations of female experience and thus on the question of whether a woman's life is accurately rendered as a selection of incidents "symmetrically arranged," specifically, as a selection of those incidents involving women in "the drama of human relationships" in which the members of a heterosexual couple "expect each other to be all in all." The realism that Miriam Henderson finds "lifeless" is precisely the heroine's text. The project that Richardson delineates for her writer-protagonist at once honors the modernist demand for fidelity to the continuum that is conscious experience and writes the quondam heroine out of the constrictions of her cultural text by using the model of the continuum to undo selection and priority: in particular, the selection of events leading up to and culminating in a marriage and the priority placed on this romance plot as the sole meaning of female experience. The narrative mode of Pilgrimage celebrated in May Sinclair's famous description—

14The implied judgment—that realism fails to be realistic enough—was a modernist commonplace: Virginia Woolf castigated Arnold Bennett for concentrating so much on details of housing, apparel, and economy that he failed to depict that exemplar of "human character" Mrs Brown "as she is," for instance. See "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" in Woolf, The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), pp. 99–111.
"There is no drama, no situation, no set scene. Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson’s stream of consciousness going on and on"—is also the vehicle whereby Miriam herself goes on and on, passing through the various enclosures that contained and summed up her eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors: the nurseries and schoolrooms; the ballrooms, chapels, music rooms, and walled gardens; the kitchens and bedrooms of married friends and relatives; and most significant, the gentlemen’s rooms, and even the gentlemen’s arms. If in thirteen volumes Miriam manages to slip through any number of potentially entrapping social situations that threaten to terminate her story by marrying her off or disgracing her to the point where suicide becomes her only option, she also exists within a narrative structure that dissolves much of the teleology of the romance plot by supplanting the realist emphasis on event and sequence with a characteristically modernist emphasis on the indivisibility of consciousness, and thus on continuity.\footnote{May Sinclair, “The Novels of Dorothy Richardson,” *Egoist* 5 (April 1918), 57–68.}


The project of writing another *kind* of story in effect enables Richardson to present "the other side, the woman’s side" without accepting a maculinist definition of what this "side" consists of. Her example suggests how the literary movements of the twentieth century that arose in opposition to realism—most evidently modernism and postmodernism—have strong affinities with a specifically feminist interrogation of the assumptions encoded in realist conventions. Yet despite these affinities, there are fewer female writers in the canons of twentieth-century narrative experiment than in the canon of English nineteenth-century realism.

The point is so obvious that it rarely provokes comment. Any list
of great English novelists in the nineteenth century (the sort of list that determines examination subjects for graduate students in English, for instance, and that also lurks, if less visibly, behind the decisions about course offerings made by the academic departments in which they are enrolled) is almost certain to contain Jane Austen, one or two Brontës, and George Eliot.\textsuperscript{18} In the twentieth century, even when national boundaries fade away in the canon makers’ acknowledgment of an International Modernism, only one woman, Virginia Woolf, finds a place in the company of Joyce, Conrad, Lawrence, Forster, Ford, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner.\textsuperscript{19} The postmodernist canon, similarly international, is even more rigorously masculinist. In an essay surveying recent literature sufficiently innovative and interesting to warrant being called postmodern, John Barth mentions no woman writing in English; and indeed only one woman, Nathalie Sarraute, appears on Barth’s list, although there are twenty-three men, among them William Gass, John Hawkes, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Stanley Elkin, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Vladimir Nabokov, John Fowles, and Barth himself.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18}The nineteenth-century American canon, however, is wholly male, largely because female writers were working in a separate—and thus detachable—genre. For an examination of the sentimental novel and its disappearance from American literary histories, see Jane P. Tompkins, \textit{Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

\textsuperscript{19}Hugh Kenner’s essay "The Making of the Modernist Canon" (in \textit{Canons}, ed. Robert von Hallberg [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], p. 371) relegates her to secondary status as "not part of International Modernism; she is an English novelist of manners, writing village gossip from a village called Bloomsbury for her English readers."

\textsuperscript{20}John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment," in John Barth, \textit{The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction} (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1984), pp. 193–206. Larry McCaffery’s compendious \textit{Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-bibliographical Guide} (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1986), extends the boundaries of the genre to include such neorealists as Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie as well as such disparate writers of nonfictional theory and criticism as Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jerome Klinkowitz, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault (the practitioners of \textit{écriture féminine} are conspicuouslly absent from this assembly) and still comes up with only eleven women as opposed to ninety-five men. It is also interesting that the "guide" section passes over most of the forty-two authors discussed in Bonnie Zimmerman’s article "Feminist Fiction and the Postmodern Challenge," which is included in the "overview" section, pp. 175–88. To be sure, Zimmerman contends that despite "a demonstratively reflexive, experimental tendency in some feminist fiction," there are nevertheless...
The judgment both assumed and fostered by such catalogues is that women are conservative, upholders of tradition and thus to be found among the perpetuators of a realism that continues to flourish alongside the modes of writing that play off it. Reasons have even been advanced for this presumptive state of affairs—for example, that women have "too much to say" to fool around with structural niceties. But such justifications regard realist form as transparent in the service of content and thus make precisely the assumption that both modernism and postmodernism dispute: that realism is something like a "natural" or "straight" mode of writing that does not involve stylistic choices in the way that experimental writing does.

Rather ironically, the notion that women are in this sense "natural" or "straight" writers, who manage to get reality—particularly their own experiences—onto the page with a minimum of art or decision making, has informed a whole practice of feminist criticism, so that some of the most important examples of this criticism have fostered the association between women's writing and aesthetic conservatism. Many of the Anglo-American feminist critics who began with the intent of doing justice to women's fiction as a chronicle of female experience seem to have found themselves in the process purveying an exaggerated theory of mimesis, in which authors are simply mirrored in their own texts. This tendency led on a more sophisticated level to developments like the Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar "anxiety of authorship" paradigm of women's writing, in which realist conventions of sequence, plot, and character are assumed as norms, and all deviations are attributed to unrecognized
eruptions of repressed biographical material acting as disruptions of
an otherwise traditional text. Both the biographically mimetic and
the "anxiety of authorship" models involve what Mary Jacobus has
identified as "an unstated complicity with the autobiographical
'phallicy,' whereby male critics hold that women's writing is some-
how closer to [women's] experience than men's, that the female text
is the author, or at any rate a dramatic extension of her uncon-
sciousness." As a consequence, both of these models tend to elide
the distinction between the woman writer's deliberate attempts to
create innovative and disruptive narrative structures or styles—to
write other-otherwise—and the otherness that a masculinist culture posits
and expects of "woman, life's heroine, the dear exasperating crea-
ture." When women writers emerge as "different," this difference
tends to be attributed to their perspective, to their situation in so-
ciety, to their temperament, or in the most extreme cases to their
nature. It is rarely, and only in passing, attributed to their conscious
agency.

In the contemporary period, and especially for the body of fiction
written after 1960, "women's writing" is a category almost com-
pletely outside the dominant experimental movement of postmod-
ernism. The prevailing assumption seems to be that female writers
are interested in "other things" than formal experimentation: in
psychological subtleties, personal relationships, social accommo-
dation, or revolution. Once again, this model presumes a "natural"
or "straight" style and structure subordinate to and in service of content. Even when such presumptions intend to value "having something to say" over the stylistic and structural modes that mediate the "saying," they consign women to subordinate roles in literary culture inasmuch as they consign women writers to the conservation of past traditions. In any period of literary history, new and innovative writing tends to supersede writing that maintains and continues older practices: canonization is, among other things, a means of consolidating the emblematic forms with which the period comes to be identified. As David Lodge has noted, realism never stopped being a vital movement, insofar as vitality is measured in the number and popularity of realist writers. But despite the number and popularity of realist writers between 1900 and 1945, the canonized works of the modern period are the works of "high" modernism, just as the likely-to-be-canonized or "precanonized" works of the contemporary period are for the most part works of postmodernism. The writing perceived as the avant-garde at a part-

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In *The Modes of Modern Writing*, Lodge makes an impressive case for the importance of realist writing among English novelists in the modern period, citing Woolf's nemeses Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy, along with subsequent generations beginning with George Orwell, Christopher Isherwood, and Graham Greene, and followed by Angus Wilson, C. P. Snow, Kingsley Amis, Anthony Powell, Alan Sillitoe, and Margaret Drabble (he might also have added David Lodge). But his admission that "we have no term for the kind of modern fiction that is not modernist except 'realistic' (sometimes qualified by 'traditionally' or 'conventionally' or 'social')" betrays that even important fiction of this sort stays outside a canon that makes modernism the defining feature of the modern period.

See Richard Ohmann, "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960–1975," in *Canons*, ed. von Hallberg, pp. 377–401. Ohmann places illuminating emphasis on the material conditions of contemporary canonization—agents, publishers, reviews, and advertisements in reviewing journals—and not surprisingly, his emergent American "precanon" turns out to be disproportionately masculine. For example, the *Wilson Quarterly*’s "1977 or 1978" poll of professors of American literature yielded a list of eleven novels judged to be "most important" in post–1960 American writing; all are by men (p. 384). A list from *Contemporary Literary Criticism* constituting, in Ohmann's view, "a sampling of the interests of those who set literary standards," yields seven women and forty-one men, admittedly a better ratio than McCaffery’s more recent bio-bibliography of postmodern fiction. But despite his therapeutic cynicism about
ticular moment tends to define that moment in literary history. Other practices elicit at best a contextual footnote as indexes of the popular or mass culture of the time; at worst, the record ignores them entirely.

But while much American feminist criticism has concentrated on the woman who writes and the female experience represented, in the process presuming a realist or even a confessional mode of women's fiction, another strain of feminist criticism has demonstrated that the decentering and destabilizing tendencies of recent experimental writing have a great deal in common with the feminist project of overturning culturally constructed oppositions, among them the oppositions that constitute the powerful codes of gender. Aligning literary postmodernism with poststructuralist theory and the *écriture féminine* of such writers as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, Alice Jardine celebrates all three practices as manifestations of an alternative discourse aiming to "give a new language to these other spaces" that are subordinated in the traditional Western dichotomies: body rather than mind, nature rather than culture, other rather than same, woman rather than man.27 Theorists of postmodernism on both sides of the Atlantic similarly affirm that their movement shares a political agenda with feminism, inasmuch as to destabilize narrative relations between dominant and subordinate, container and contained, is also to destabilize the social and cultural relations of dominance and containment by which the conventionally masculine subsumes and envelops the conventionally feminine.28 Because feminism has a stake in the undoing of hierarchy and containment, it appears that writing commonly described in terms of its subversive newness, as avant-garde or postmodern, can also

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be described in terms of its subversive political implications, as "feminine" or feminist writing.

There is, however, an irony attendant on this identification, which is poignantly illustrated by Linda Hutcheon in a review article that addresses the overlapping concerns of recent metafiction and recent feminist theory. Hutcheon characterizes metafiction by its "subversion of the stability of point of view" and aligns this "subversion" with the disintegration of the bourgeois, patriarchal subject. But the books that she chooses to illustrate this point are all by men, and as a consequence her argument tends to imply that feminism is so purely a product of literary language that it is entirely restricted to the domain of literary representation. To be sure, her topic is precisely "the relation of non-coincidence between the discursive construct of 'woman' and the historical subjects called 'women,'" but the "historical subjects called 'women'" with whom she in fact deals are discursive constructs produced by male authors. In effect, her whole discussion is framed by the premise of male authority.29

To give the problem its most radical formulation, it would seem that in the contemporary period, fictional experimentation has everything to do with feminism and nothing to do with women—and emphatically nothing to do with women as points of origin, as authors. Yet alongside the theoretical writing that appears to set up this disjunction, there exist a number of structurally and stylistically interesting fictional works by female authors, works that might well be regarded as experimental if it were possible to discount the reviews and criticism that, with ingenuity and even sympathy, trans-

29Linda Hutcheon, "Subject in/of/to History and His Story," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986), 80, 83. Similarly, in the early work of Hélène Cixous the two great "feminine writers" are Jean Genet and James Joyce. See Cixous, *The Exile of James Joyce; or, The Art of Replacement*, trans. Sally Purcell (New York: David Lewis, 1972). Alice Jardine notes Cixous's focus on Genet, Hölderlin, Kafka, Kleist, Shakespeare, Derrida, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Lacan and glosses, "Because in the past women have always written 'as men,' Cixous hardly ever alludes to women writers" (*Gynesis*, p. 62). Here, as in the case of Hutcheon's discussion, it may be worth wondering about the political efficacy of writing "as women" or of textual feminism if the practice is restricted almost entirely to men—and to luminaries of the literary and philosophical canon at that.
late experimentalism into flawed realism (for example, faulting a utopian romance for being insufficiently plausible) or into hyperbolic mimesis (for example, presuming that a disjointed narrative reflects the state of mind of a flaky or insane heroine). My own enterprise here might be to indicate an "other side" to these critical accounts, specifically to indicate ways in which works by Rhys, Lessing, Walker, and Atwood have eluded or overflowed certain established modes of reading and ways in which we might learn to read—as they write—other-wise.\(^3\)