

SOME FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM AND A THEORY

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*. New Haven and London. Yale University Press, 1980. 719 pages. Index. \$45.00 (hardcover), \$16.95 (paper)

Writing and Sexual Difference. Ed. Elizabeth Abel. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press, 1982. 315 pages. Index. \$7.95 (paper)

Joan Kelly. *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press, 1984. 163 pages. Index. \$18.00.

*Where are the songs I used to know,
Where are the notes I used to sing?
I have forgotten everything
I used to know so long ago.*
Christina Rossetti

We are concerned with “. . . the story of the woman artist who enters the cavern of her own mind and finds there the scattered leaves not only of her own power but of the tradition which might have generated that power. The body of her precursors' art, and thus the body of her own art, lies in pieces around her, dismembered, dis-remembered, disintegrated. How can she remember it and become a member of it, join it and rejoin it, integrate it and in doing so achieve her own integrity, her own selfhood?” (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 98)

In two of the books under consideration the effort has been made by women writers to address this task *as women*—for, as Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert ironically point out, though in the parable of the cave the woman *is* the cave, “it has been the man who [knew] the cave, who analyse[d] its meaning, who (like Plato) author[ed] its primary parables, and who even interpret[ed] its language. . . .” (TMW p. 96) While many gifted women scholars and critics are now writing about women's writing, the fact remains that such writers' common basis and point of departure is still that women have several—many—centuries of catching up to do, and that any “basket of leaves” must be examined the way dirt from an archaeological dig is examined. One such basket is, of

course, the writing of Victorian women, whose lives were outwardly so restricted and conventional, and whose society so frowned on their stepping out of their assigned roles as housekeepers and child-rearers and societal ornaments.

According to Gubar and Gilbert, four parables illustrate the situation of gifted women writers from Elizabethan times until quite recently, and especially of the nineteenth century woman writer. Their first parable, which they call “The Queen's Looking Glass” from the story of Snow White, likens the woman writer both to Snow White in her glass coffin, and to the Stepmother, the wicked witch who is ostracised from society for using her female power and intelligence. The coffin represents the “male-authored text” which women writers had to break out of in order to find their own relation to language and creativity, while the Stepmother represents both the sense of power and the sense of isolation resulting from that breaking out. In a related essay, “The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity” (*Writing and Sexual Difference*, p. 73 ff.) Susan Gubar uses a different metaphor—that of the blood-stained wedding night sheets of Isak Dinesen's short story—to explore the same problem. In order to free herself the woman must become—not the blank page on which the male author is to write with his pen (penis), but the *author* producing the text out of her most intimate physical being—her blood as ink. Even “as pious and proper a poet as Christina Rossetti” serves as an example, “for this Victorian conspicuously offers her song as a virginal blood sacrifice. . . . Choosing to become a nun because there is mysterious ‘blood’ between her lover and herself, she looks down to see her lily feet ‘soiled with mud, / with scarlet mud which tells a tale’” (Author's italics) (W&SD p. 83). Rossetti's effort to break out of the convention which is stifling her, but which a part of her has nevertheless internalised, is the source of the almost overpowering sense of guilt—other-