

PATRICINIO SCHWEICKART
"READING OURSELVES: TOWARD A FEMINIST THEORY OF READING"

Schweickart begins by noting that "different accounts of the reading experience . . . overlook the issues of race, class, and sex" (529). As a feminist, her interest is in the following question: "what difference does it make if the reader is a woman?" (529). Reader-response criticism has largely focused on two main questions. The first is: "Does the text control the reader, or vice versa?" (529). Fish and company assert that the reader holds controlling interest" (529) in that the "constraints imposed by the words on the page are 'trivial,' since their meaning can always be altered by 'subjective action'" (529). At the other pole are theorists like Poulet and Iser who, while acknowledging the creative role played by the reader "ultimately take the text to be the dominant force. To read, from this point of view, is to create the text according to *its* own promptings" (529). The second (and related) question is: "what is 'in' the text? How can we distinguish what it supplies from what the reader supplies?" (539). Both these questions refer to the "subject-object relation that is established between reader and text" (539).

Schweickart then turns to the distinction proposed by Showalter between *feminist critique* and *gynocriticism*. The former is, she points out, "counter-ideological in intent and concerned with the feminist as reader" (530). The goal of feminist reading is, accordingly, to "disrupt the process of immascultation by exposing it to consciousness, by disclosing the androcentricity of what has customarily passed for the universal" (534). By contrast, the focus of gynocriticism is, Scweickart quotes Showalter, on the

study of woman as *writer*, 'of the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition.' (530)

Schweickart contends that if "it is possible to formulate a basic conceptual framework for disclosing the 'difference' of women's writing, surely it is no less possible to do so for women's reading" (531). The key question for most feminist critics has been: "What does it mean for a woman to express herself in writing? How does a woman write as a woman?" (541). Schweickart contends that feminist critics "should also inquire into the correlative process of *reading*: What does it mean for a woman to read without condemning herself to the position of other? What does it mean for a woman, reading as a woman, to read literature written by a woman writing as a woman?" (541). Accordingly, Schweickart wants to substitute for Showalter's distinction between woman as reader and woman as writer a distinction "between feminist readings of male texts and feminist readings of female texts" (531). In other words, Schweickart's emphasis is not so much on the difference between women readers and women writers but on the process by which women read works by both male and female writers. Arguing that both feminists and reader-response theorists reject the 'fetishisation' of the text as well as any belief in critical objectivity, Schweickart contends that it is "but a small step from the thesis that the reader is an active producer of meaning to the recognition that there are many different kinds of readers" (531). Her point, too, is that it must be remembered that feminist criticism is a praxis, a political activity, its goal being not merely to interpret literature but to change the world in so doing. "Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers" (531), she reminds us.

Feminist Readings of Male-Authored Texts

For the female reader, how she reads is linked inescapably to what she reads precisely because the "literary canon is androcentric, and . . . this has a profoundly damaging effect on women readers" (532). Schweickart contends that "androcentric literature structures the

reading experience differently depending on the gender of the reader" (533). Where the effect of the canon on men is to create a sense of "affinity with the universal, with the paradigmatic human being, precisely because he is male" (533), the effect on women is to instill something akin to schizophrenia. The woman reader's encounter with androcentric texts results in the "immascultation of women" (534): women "are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central values is misogyny" (534). Virile power is not imparted to the female in the process: the result is, rather, "powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self" (534). When read by women, male-authored literature "solicits her complicity in the elevation of male difference into universality and, accordingly, the denigration of female difference into otherness without reciprocity" (534).

This raises the question why androcentric texts retain an irresistible pull. The answer is not so much the power of the false consciousness into which women have been socialised, but the power of such texts to harness authentic female desires to the process of immascultation. Women learn to identify with the vicissitudes and the aspirations of the male protagonists. The woman reader experiences a "bifurcated response" (540) in that she reads "both as a man and as a woman. But in either case, the result is the same: she confirms her position as other" (540).

The major question confronting contemporary feminist theorists of the reading process is whether the text controls the reader or vice-versa. When women read canonical texts, it is the text which controls the woman reader, immascultating her. She also points out, however, that the woman reader, given the productive role played by all readers, is necessarily an active "agent of her own immascultation" (540). In other words, the crucial thing to note is not only what happens to the female reader of androcentric literature (immascultation) but also the complicity of the female writer in that immascultation. Schweickart identifies one method by means of which the female reader can take control of the process of reading male-authored texts. Firstly, she should recognise that the text "has power to structure her experience" (540). However, this acknowledgement is "matched by her awareness of her essential role in the process of reading. Without her, the text is nothing" (540). Once the feminist reader realises her active role in the process of the production of meaning and "without forgetting the androcentricity of the text, she can read the text in question against the grain: "[t]aking control of the reading experience means reading the text as it was *not* meant to be read, in fact, reading it against itself" (540). The result is the "possibility of reading as a woman *without* putting one's self in the position of the other, of reading so as to affirm womanhood as another, equally valid, paradigm of human existence" (540).

Schweickart recognises that this process of reading against the grain is not easy. She agrees with Fish that the "production of the meaning of a text is mediated by the interpretive community in which the activity of reading is situated" (541) and that the "choice of strategy is regulated (explicitly or implicitly) by the canons of acceptability that govern the interpretive community" (541). The "ruling interpretive communities are androcentric" (541), this androcentricity being "deeply etched in the strategies and modes of thought that have been introjected by all readers, women as well as men" (541). Taking control of the reading process involves "taking control of one's reactions and inclinations" (541) as a result of which a feminist reading is actually a "therapeutic analysis" (541): the reader "examines how she would 'naturally' read a male text in order to understand and therefore undermine the subjective predispositions that had rendered her vulnerable to its designs" (541).

In short, from this point of view, feminist readers of male-authored texts are primarily what another famous Feminist critic Judith Fetterly calls 'resisting' or adversarial (in the sense described in the previous section) readers. Reading canonical texts written by males is

something akin to class warfare. Indeed, “[w]hether concerned with male or female texts, feminist criticism is situated in the larger struggle against patriarchy” (542).

Feminist Readings of Women-Authored Texts

Schweickart begins this section by cautioning against applying androcentric critical strategies to texts by women. She calls for the “articulation of a model of reading that is centered on a female paradigm” (542) and, accordingly, for the “revision of the canon to include a significant body of works by women, and for the development of the reading strategies consonant with the concerns, experiences, and formal devices that constitute these texts” (537). To this end, Schweickart draws upon Adrienne Rich’s essay “Vesuvius at Home: the Power of Emily Dickinson” the “rhetoric” (537) of which “represents an implicit commentary on the process of reading women’s writing” (537).

Schweickart notes three rhetorical devices used by Rich which speak volumes about how feminist readers ought to read:

- firstly, Rich’s use of a “judicial metaphor” (537): the feminist reader “speaks as a witness in defence of the woman writer” (537), taking the “part of the woman writer against patriarchal misreadings” (537) of her;
- secondly, Rich’s use of a “dialogic” (542) metaphor, one “of visiting” (538) and “of intimate conversation” (542), the destination of such a critical approach being ultimately “Dickinson’s mind” (538). A woman’s text per se is not the endpoint of feminist criticism. Rather, women’s writings “are doorways to the ‘mind’ of a ‘woman of genius’” (538). To “reach her heart and mind” (538), the feminist critic must “make a detour through the ‘house and adjacent buildings’” (538) (the text itself). As a result, feminist critics seek to “construe the text not as an object, but as the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author--the voice of another woman” (538). The feminist critic must use her imagination “to evoke ‘the figure of powerful will’ who lives at the heart of the text. To read Dickinson, then, is to try to visit with her, to hear her voice, to make her live *in* oneself, and to find her impressive ‘personal dimensions’” (538). Rich’s essay is “directed toward evoking the personality of Dickinson, toward making *her* live as the substantial, palpable presence animating her works” (542).
- thirdly, Rich’s use of a metaphor of hovering uncertainly like an insect “vibrating the frames of windows, clinging to the panes of glass, trying to connect” (537). The feminist reader tries to gain access to the meaning of a text but is necessarily separated from its author. Schweickart stresses in this regard Rich’s “use of the personal voice” (538): “reading is necessarily subjective” (539) as a result of which some elements of the critic’s perspective would necessarily have been alien to the author in question (the author may be from the nineteenth century while the critic is from the twentieth century) while others would establish their affinity (they may both be women).

Schweickart argues that in the process of reading a woman’s text the feminist reader “encounters not simply a text, but a ‘subjectified object’: the ‘heart and mind’ of another woman” (542). Schweickart stresses that Rich’s interest in “construing readings as an intersubjective encounter suggests an affinity with Poulet’s (rather than Iser’s) theory” (542) of the reading process. For Poulet, reading is an intersubjective process that occurs between the reader and a projected author. As is the case with Rich’s model, for Poulet, the “subject of the literary work is its author, *not* the reader” (542). Schweickart quotes Poulet: “[t]o understand a literary work . . . is to let the individual who wrote it reveal [herself] to us *in* us” (542). There are, however, important differences: between Poulet’s and Rich’s respective models which are revealed by Poulet’s choice of tropes “of mastery and submission, of

violation and control" (543): the reader's consciousness is depicted as being violated or invaded or even possessed. In Poulet's model, the "prospect of close rapport with another provokes both excitement and anxiety. Intimacy, while desired, is also viewed as a threat to one's integrity" (545). By contrast, Schweickart claims, in Rich's essay, the "dialectic of control . . . gives way to the dialectic of communication. For Rich, reading is a matter of 'trying to connect' with the existence behind the text" (543).

- Schweickart argues that this dialectic of communication "has three moments" (543): firstly, the recognition that "genuine intersubjective communication demands the duality of reader and author (the subject of the work)" (543)--the author and reader are separate personalities;
- secondly, the recognition that "this duality is threatened by the author's absence" (543) as a result of which "reading is necessarily subjective" (543): the "subjectivity roused to life by reading, while it may be attributed to the author, is nevertheless not a separate subjectivity but a projection of the subjectivity of the reader" (543). As a result, in reading a work by a woman writer, the feminist critic "seeks to enter her mind, to feel her presence. But the text is a screen, an inanimate object. Its subjectivity is only a projection of the subjectivity of the reader" (539);
- thirdly, the recognition of the need to keep the reading process "from being *totally* subjective ushers in the third moment of the dialectic" (543): reading is a "mediation between author and reader, between the context of writings and the context of reading" (543). The end-result of reading is the merging or fusion or dialectical synthesis of the consciousness of the woman who writes with the consciousness of the woman who reads.

This is why Rich seeks to "avoid imposing an alien perspective on Dickinson's poetry" (543) by informing her reading with a knowledge of the "circumstances in which Dickinson lived and wrote" (543). This results in the "weaving--not blending--of the context of writing and the context of reading, the perspective of the author and that of the reader" (544). Rich "reaches out to Dickinson not by identifying with her, but by establishing their affinity" (544). By producing a "context that incorporates both reader and writer" (544), this "common ground becomes the basis for drawing the connections that . . . constitute the proper goal of reading" (544).

Rich's use of the personal voice (her alternation of "quotes from the text with her own commentary" [544] on both the text and her own experiences) is a key device in this regard, allowing her not to "appropriate the authority of the text as a warrant for the validity of the interpretation" (544). Because the interpretation is "presented as an *interpretation*, its claim to validity rests on the cogency of the supporting arguments, *not* on the authorisation of the text" (544). Indeed, she argues (in a way indebted to Fish) that the validity of an interpretation ultimately "cannot be decided by appealing to what the author 'intended,' what is 'in' the text, or to what is 'in' the experience of the reader" (545). Validity is not a property inherent in an interpretation, but rather as a *claim* implicit in the *act* of propounding an interpretation. An interpretation . . . is not valid or invalid in itself. Its validity is contingent on the agreement of others. (545)

Obviously influenced by Fish's notion of *interpretive communities*, Schweickart argues that "to read a text and then to write about it is to seek to connect not only with the author of the original text, but also with a community of readers" (545). "Feminist reading and writing alike are grounded in the interest of producing a community of feminist readers and writers" (545) who will have final say in determining the interpretation of a given work written by either a man or woman.

Agreeing with feminist thinkers like Nancy Chodorow that, due to the circumstances of their upbringing, men "value autonomy" (544) while women "value relationships" (544),

Schweickart contends that “[m]ainstream reader-response theories are preoccupied with issues of control and partition--how to distinguish the contribution of the author / text from the contribution of the reader” (544). By contrast, she argues, in the dialectic of communication informing the relationship between the feminist reader and the female author / text, the

central issue is not of control or partition, but of managing the contradictory implications of the desire for relationship (one must maintain a minimal distance from the other) and the desire for intimacy, up to and including a symbiotic merger with the other. (544)

According to Schweickart, where female readers are concerned with the “drive ‘to connect’” (544), male readers are concerned with the “drive to get it right” (544).

In short, Schweickart points out that if feminist readings of male-authored texts are motivated by the “need to disrupt the process of immasculation” (539), feminist readings of female-authored texts are motivated by the need “‘to connect,’ to recuperate, or to formulate . . . the context, the tradition, that would link women writers to one another, to women readers and critics, and to the larger community of readers” (539). Studying literature by women is a more “heartwarming . . . task” (541) because it involves “recovering, articulating, and elaborating positive expressions of women’s point of view, of celebrating the survival of this point of view in spite of the formidable forces that have been ranged against it” (541). There is a distinction, in other words, between what Schweickart describes as a “negative hermeneutic of ideological unmasking” (541) and a “positive hermeneutic whose aim is the recovery and cultivation of women's culture” (541).