Our Guest Editor:

Several hundred critics and writers from more than ten countries met at the University of Ottawa from May 20 to May 24 to exchange views and share experiences, attend poetry readings, participate in panel discussions, and read and debate critical papers.

It was sponsored by the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, Department of the Secretary of State, and Department of External Affairs. Professor Martinez, Department of Slavic Studies and Modern Languages, University of Ottawa, chaired the organizing committee.

This was the third conference of Inter-American Women Writers. A fourth is planned for two years' time, place and date to be determined.

Papers were read on English Canadian, French Canadian, United States', Mexican, Carribean and South American writing. Several sessions were held simultaneously. Canadian critics were among those contributing papers on writers from the United States, Mexico and South American countries, as well as on Canadian writers. Delegates from all countries and of all languages gathered for panel discussions. Here writers from various countries addressed themselves to such topics as the feminine voice in literature, women writers and society, women and the theatrical tradition, poetry as a means of communication in the works of women poets, the feminine tradition in literature. These discussions were translated simultaneously into English, French and Spanish, so that participants of different cultures and languages could exchange views and respond to questions and comments from the audience.

Included in this issue of Atlantis are a selection of critical papers read on English Canadian writers and many of the contributions of English Canadian dramatists, poets and fiction writers to the panels. Two of the papers from the Quebec literature section of the conference also appear in this issue. A collection of other papers from the Québec literature section will be published in book form by Editions Parti pris (Collection "Délires").(1)

A number of the papers focussed on unduly neglected women writers. Margaret Whitridge in her paper, "The Distaff Side of the Confederation Group," drew attention to the many women active in journalism, fiction and poetry in the late nineteenth-century, who are now relatively unknown. Whitridge cited as examples of these "lost women," Helen M. Merrill, Susan Frances Harrison ("Seranus") and Ethelyn Wetherald--all of whom made significant contributions to Canada's post-Confederation nationalist literature.

Equally unknown today is Annie Howells Fréchette. James Doyle describes the

deleterious influence of William Dean Howells on his sister, Annie, whose attempts to write realistic fiction were submerged by her brother's adverse criticism.

It is not only women of the past who require our attention. Other critics at the conference noted contemporary Canadian writers whose works have been undervalued or ignored. Among those treated were fiction writers, Mavis Gallant, Ethel Wilson and Elizabeth Smart, and playwrights Gwen Pharis Ringwood and Joanna C. Glass.

Several critics also introduced topics of a general nature. They discussed patterns and themes in writing by Canadian women and identified feminine aspects of writing. Some even questioned whether there are feminine modes, images and themes, and, if not, whether there should be. In the first session, Clara Thomas' paper, "Heroinism, Feminism and Humanism: Anna Jameson to Margaret Laurence," introduced the question of voice, a question which which was to surface time after time during the conference, and to which a variety of reactions was evinced.

During the panel specifically directed to this topic, "Is there a feminine voice in literature?", Miriam Waddington stated that there is "a feminine view of life and certainly a content that arises out of feminine experience," and suggested that women have been more innovative than men in their use of language and form. On the same panel, Carol Shields observed that there is a difference of tone in women's writing and, like Waddington, Shields felt that there is a difference in what women choose to write about. Whereas men write about "man and landscape, man and history, man and moral issues," women write about "relationships between people, particularly between men and women." Carol Bolt observed later that she has never been conscious of writing in a specifically feminine voice or out of a specifically feminine tradition. Still later, Audrey Thomas was to refer to specifically female experiences which women can and should explore.

The question of feminine voice surfaced again following Nancy Bailey's paper, "Fiction and the New Androgyne: Problems and Possibilities in The Diviners." Bailey's paper was typical of the majority of papers which were ostensibly concerned with an individual writer but which also raised intriguing questions of a general nature. Bailey views Morag's development as a writer as a symbol for her development of creative wholeness. She defines androgyny as "representing an inner state of wholeness which engages masculine and feminine polarities in an harmonious balance." Not all feminist critics are comfortable with the concept of androgyny, and Bailey's paper

was followed by debate about whether an acceptance of the androgynous concept would negate the possibility of a specifically feminine voice or feminine perspective. There seems to be a marked movement among contemporary women writers in Canada, such as Laurence, Wilson and Beresford-Howe, to portray protagonists who, in their search for self, do move toward the androgynous ideal of wholeness.

A related question was the connection between autobiography and fiction. Carol Shields', "Three Canadian Women: Fiction or Autobiography," took issue with those critics who are determined to place works in precise categories. Shields looks at three early writers--Susanna Moodie, Jane Ellice and Susan Moir Allison--to demonstrate "the inextricable linking together of autobiography and fiction." Shields notes, in passing, the sexual reversal in the traditional roles of men and women evident in writings of early women, especially Moodie, in whose works men tend to be weak and inept while women are able to cope with the problems of pioneer life.

Joanne Hedenstrom's paper on contemporary novels, "Puzzled Patriarchs and Free Women: Masculine and Feminine Patterns in the Canadian Novel," presents a positive analysis of the the themes of women writers. Hedenstrom sees the heroines in women's novels as breaking through life-denying limitations, whereas the protagonists of men's novels are destroyed if they attempt to rise above their limitations. Metamorphosis and escape are dominant themes of women writers and nonconformity is a creative force; in novels written by men, deviance from the norm is destructive.

Catherine Ross links the woman's quest with the traditional elements of the initiation rite in "A Singing Bird: Female Rites of Passage in Klee Wyck, Surfacing, and The Diviners." Ross sees the protagonist in each of these three works as achieving her creativity through some contact with Indian culture: "To penetrate to the deepest sources of power, each must learn a new secret language, unknown to the civilizers who try to regulate nature with their technology." The theme of female rites of passage is not unlike the concept of the bildungsroman which Rebecca Smith explored in her article "The Only Flying Turtle Under the Sun: The Bildungsroman in Contemporary Fiction"(2), and developed further in her paper on American writers, at this conference." A Loving League of Sisters: The Bildungsroman in Women's Literature." A parallel approach is my own exploration of the quest motif in "Woman as Hero."(3) These related themes--the quest, rites of passage, the maturing of the young woman, metamorphosis, escape and androgyny--are all modes of exploring what seems to be the overriding concern of women novelists today--search for self

identity, self knowledge and psychological freedom.

Donna Bennett's paper, "The Failure of Sisterhood in Margaret Laurence's Manawaka Novels," indicates the antithesis to "a loving league of sisters." Bennett sees the alienation of women from one another as a dominant theme in the Manawaka novels. Only The Diviners is an exception to this generalization. Bennett notes that, when the protagonist achieves some degree of freedom, she is enabled to make some positive contact with other women.

A section of the conference was devoted to women dramatists. Although women have been in the forefront in Canadian writing since Frances Brooke published the first Canadian novel, The History of Emily Montague, in 1769, women dramatists have been notably absent until recent years. During the panel on theatrical tradition, Gwen Pharis Ringwood gave a brief history of women in drama, including a vivid account of her own beginnings in the 1930s. Geraldine Anthony's paper on Ringwood provided an excellent introduction to this neglected playwright, and Hetty Clews, "Kindred Points: The Two Worlds of Joanna Glass," directed attention to another dramatist deserving of more recognition.

Opinions differed among writers, themselves, concerning involvement of writers in social concerns. Dorothy Livesay, who has written from a feminist stance for many years, urged women writers, in the panel "Women Writers and Society," to be concerned with the whole of society. Reminding the audience of the writing of women during the depression, Livesay, exposed the serious social issues of the time. Elizabeth Brewster, however, in a later panel on poetry as a means of communication, commented, "Probably because I think of poetry as intimate, I haven't thought of it as having a 'message' in a didactic sense, at least not very often. One doesn't too often attempt to teach one's friends, after all." Beth Harvor confronted the dilemma in the panel on feminine tradition. She pointed out while some important women writers have been feminists, some try to be and fail as artists. The writer's responsibility, Harvor concludes, is to "listen to her own voice."

The conference was truly an international one, and in the panel on the feminine tradition, the international flavour became most evident. Writers of various backgrounds spoke of Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing. For instance, Beth Harvor lists as influential to her development such authors as Jane Austen, the Brontes, Colette, De Beauvoir, Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Isak Dinesen, Flannery O'Connor, Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro--writers of half a dozen countries. The existence of an international community of women,

transcending racial and linguistic barriers, the fact that women now speak to and listen to the voices of other women, was a major point, also, in Margaret Atwood's remarks on the poetry panel: "Many women poets have an increased sense of speaking through a community that is not confined within national borders, that attempts at any rate to transcend the usual barriers, just as the fact of being female transcends these barriers."

There was much agreement with Miriam Waddington's assertion that "as with all minorities women writers have always had to be better and to achieve more than men in order to achieve the same recognition." More than one delegate quoted Samuel Johnson: "Sir, a woman preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all," as still typical of the attitude toward women writers. As an example, Beverly Mitchell noted in her analysis of Ethel Wilson's use of the Ulysses myth in Tuesday and Wednesday, the general disregard of this fine novel by Canadian critics when it was published. The British critic who did deign to notice and commend the work, described it as "charming," hardly the term he would use to compliment, for example, the work of D.H. Lawrence.

The papers published here present a variety of responses to literature written by women, all of which may be gathered under the umbrella term, "feminist literary criticism." Some may question whether this is really "feminist" literary criticism? My answer is yes. Intelligent, scholarly criticism which draws attention to the excellence of specific works by our women writers, and to ignored or underrated women, is a form of feminist criticism. So also, is that work which explores specific themes or patterns in works written by women, places works in a specifically feminist tradition, explores the feminine voice, or seeks in women's writing a specifically female way of viewing the universe.

Where do we go from here?

Because of the nature of this conference, no papers were directly concerned with images of women in works by male novelists nor with the stereotypes of women presented in Canadian literature. The fact that there is an international community of women, which this InterAmerican conference clearly demonstrated, does not mean that we accept generalizations offered by critics of other literatures. What is true in American literature, for example, is not necessarily true of our own. National differences is an area of Canadian feminist criticism which requires our attention.

Many of our writers spoke of the importance of women writing about specifically female experiences.

Harvor, for example, spoke of the way in which a woman sees herself as a sexual being, and said, "It has been extraordinarily important to women (as writers, as readers) to have women writers writing about their most secret relationships to themselves and others." Without being prescriptive, for one must recognize the writer's freedom to "listen to her own voice," feminist critics can and should draw attention to writing which does explore experiences common to all women, which provides some awareness and understanding to other women of their own reality. Critics are needed, too, to explore the use of language by women--the words, symbols, images, allusions--which give voice to their reaction, emotions and perceptions, whereby they seek to give new meaning to female experience. And there remains the need for strong, assertive and perceptive critics to fight for a just recognition of women writers, so that it will no longer be necessary to "be better and to achieve more than men in order to achieve the same recognition."

Lorraine McMullen

NOTES

1. This volume will include the contributions of Quebec writers to the round table discussions as well as feminist approaches to literary criticism and to Quebec literature. Following are some of the titles to be included in the volume:

   Caroline Bayard, "Nicole Brossard et l'utopie du langage"

   Caroline Barrett, Marie-Josée Des Rivières, "La femme dans la littérature populaire québécoise (1945-1966)."

   Louise Cotnoir, "Contribution des femmes écrivains du continent américain à la littérature."

   Marie Couillard-Goodenough, "La femme et le sacré dans le roman québécois contemporain."

   Louise Dupré, "L'écriture féminine dans Les Herbes rouges."

   Josette Féral, "Du texte au sujet: conditions pour une écriture et un discours au féminin."

   Suzanne Lamy, "Voyage autour d'une écriture."

   Christiane Makward, "Nouveau regard sur la critique féministe en France."

   Gabrielle Pascal, "La femme dans l'oeuvre de Gabrielle Roy."

   Patricia Smart, "La poésie d'Anne Hébert: une perspective féminine."

   Orders for the book can be placed with Editions Parti pris, 947, rue Duluth est, Montréal.

2. Atlantis II, 2, Spring 1977.

3. Ibid.