

Carol Shields

A recent example of this imposing, this failure, is the American novel The Women's Room by Marilyn French. This book is, I think, a poor book and, like many poor books, I suspect it was written with the best of good intentions. I recently noticed that part of it has been serialized in Cosmopolitan magazine which seems to me a just resting place for it.

As for great books, they do change the world but they do not change it quickly. And organized movements want change; they want it in a hurry; it's in their nature. But for those of us who are both feminists and writers, I would like, as a cautionary tale, to quote from the American critic Richard Gilman, writing critically (in both senses of the word) about Norman Mailer. "Fiction," Gilman says, "that slowly achieved, bodiless, ineffectual system for changing the world, could not contain Mailer's impatience nor assuage his disconsolate wish to see himself as the recognized source of change." As writers, I believe we should heed Gilman's words, they apply to anyone, male or female, who sees power in too pragmatic a way. Writers, whether they are men or women, have, after all, only one responsibility, and the woman writer, when she is alone in a room with a blank page before her, should do everything in her power to meet it: she should listen to her own voice.

Let me say at once that I would be happy to embrace the altogether attractive myth of the feminine voice. It is a temptation to believe that delicacy, fluidity, subtlety and elegance are more pronounced in the writing of women--though one must bear in mind that these qualities in their over-ripe stages produce preciousness, whimsy and flatulence.

Many of you here will be familiar with Frances Brooke's Quebec novel The History of Emily Montague. Published in 1769, it is regarded by some as North America's first novel. In the story one of the characters, a vivacious young coquette, writes to a friend in England promising that with her very next letter she will enclose a frost piece, a frost piece being a silvery little bit on wintery description, an exercise in pure style, the kind of genteel piecework which ladies of the time turned out much as they produced water colours or embroidered cushions. The important thing is, I think, that even then, in 1769, Frances Brooke was gently mocking this tradition.

Female chauvinism would be gladly served by a belief that women are masters of rich language patterns, intricate clustered metaphors or a syntax which is artful, supple and suggestive --but all these things are difficult to prove. What is somewhat more ap-

parent, in Canadian writing at least, is a difference in tone. And what is very different is the sort of topics women have chosen to write about.

First, to talk briefly about tone, the women who are writing fiction in Canada at the moment--and there are many--seem to speak in a voice which is both present and personal. The first person is often used, and there has been an increased use of the present rather than the past tense. The settings tend to be simple enclosures, patiently explored. I think I see, too, a shift away from the tone of irony which has marked much of Canadian women's writing.

It is really the question of content which marks the difference between men and women writers. Think of Canadian men novelists--Richardson, Kirby, Grove, Callaghan, Davies and Cohen; what they have written about is man and landscape, man and history, man and moral issues. Think of our women writers--Moodie, Duncan, Laurence and Munro. Almost from the start in this country women have chosen to write about the relationships between people and particularly between men and women.

You may say this is not really surprising. Women have also been mothers and therefore witness the growth and development of human personality. Then there is the question of confinement and expectation: cut off from the world of affairs and from a his-

tory of their own, women may have turned instinctively to the present moment and to the immediate concern of what it means to be a woman.

Susanna Moodie was a nineteenth-century-writer of prose and poetry whose stated desire was simply to entertain and divert with tales about her family and neighbours. Her views on the role of women were not advanced. The serious matters of the world, she said, should be left to men. Consciously she may have believed all of this. But in her writing one sees again and again the tableau of the failed man and the heroic woman. Men died, lost money, drank and acted foolishly; women survived, held together families, guarded the public morality and gave to society its art and its meaning.

Sara Jeanette Duncan wrote novels about women at the turn of the last century, a time when the question of women's rights was at issue. In her novels, The Imperialist and Cousin Cinderella, there is a consistent pattern which in many ways echoes Moodie. Women are adaptive, pragmatic and realistic while men give way to ill-defined idealism and bouts of romanticism which are as damaging as disease.

And in the present day we find that the stories by the Canadian writer Alice Munro are about what it means to be a woman. She deals not with problems of civil rights but with the more central issue which is the

struggle of the feminine spirit to survive. In her story "Boys and Girls," for example, she looks at the kind of compromise women have had to make, surrendering power in order to remain human.

Briefly then the isolating of the feminine voice in terms of language is a difficult, perhaps impossible, task. But listening to what the voice is saying is immediately revealing.



Audrey Thomas

I will confess that until I was invited to this conference I had never thought very much about whether I was part of a feminine tradition in literature or whether, in a good sense, there was such a thing as a "feminine voice" in our novels, stories, plays and poems. Perhaps I avoided thinking about it because I did not wish to be labelled a "feminine writer" (a woman, say, who writes only for other women) the same way I have always sidestepped the question of whether I am an "American" or "Canadian" writer. I was simply a woman who was born in the United States and happened to choose Canada as her (adult) home. Leave me alone, please, and let me get on with my writing.

But knowing that I was coming here, to listen, to discuss, with other women writers made me think and made me study up. Now I am tremendously excited. I see how my own work has been shaped by some of the great women of the past, Harriet Beecher Stowe, whom I read in an illustrated edition when I was very very young (and who had an enormous influence on the women of her own and the succeeding, generation), Louisa May Alcott, Willa Cather, Sigrid Undquist, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing and so on. I see terrible gaps which I am determined to fill--Mrs Gaskell,