

A Personal Addendum

At various conferences, when my mind begins to wonder, I often contemplate how individual women would be regarded if they took on the characteristics of some of our male leaders/speakers. What would happen to individual women who would take on commonly accepted male mannerisms of arrogance, abrasiveness, and conceit? *Men in feminism* raises the converse imaging of how men would appear in the world view of feminism. That requires much less of a stretch of one's imagination.

References

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FEMINISM AS METAPHOR

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When I was first invited to be on a panel discussing "Men in Feminism," my only thoughts on the topic were, "Sure, we need men in feminism. Feminism is a way of looking at the world, so why not!" But then I continued to myself, how could I be a spokeswoman for men? Maybe only men are in a position to talk about the subject. Perhaps if I read the book, *Men in Feminism*, the selection of presentations from two sessions of an MLA Conference in 1984 which inspired this panel, I'd have more to say about the topic... I did have more to say, although it was not at all what I had expected.

I had an immediate reaction to this sampling of feminist literary criticism. These essays were *about* feminism, but the style and syntax of the language and the insular nature of the discussions seemed inconsistent with feminist values. It was difficult to get to the question of men in this (un)familiar and (un)feminist forum.

My ideas about feminism were shaped during the early 1970's, in one of the consciousness-raising groups spawned by the Women's Liberation Movement. The values which shaped, in some measure, the content and structure of our meetings have been delineated by Kathleen Weiler in her recent book, *Woman teaching for change: Gender, class and power* (1988) as:

an emphasis on lived experience and significance of everyday life. This is expressed in several different ways: by an assertion that the personal is political; by a rejection of positivism and an interest in phenomenological or social interactionist approaches; by a new definition of the relationship between woman researcher and woman subject (pp. 58-59).

The values which have come to be identified with feminism are certainly not new nor restricted to women. They define a way of being in the world - a way of thinking, seeing, understanding, writing, working, and so forth. I contrasted my understanding of feminism with a typical message from *Men in Feminism* (Heath, 1987, p. 27) which made me feel like Alice listening to the White Rabbit recite the nonsense poem as evidence during her trial. It was as if I had to stand on my head to penetrate the dense thicket of its verbiage. The sentences are long and convoluted with punctuation playing a major role in the communication of ideas. Certain code words laden with hidden meanings, are accessible only after a thorough grounding in the work of other literary theorists.

But is there another way to write? Aristotle said, "To write well, think like the wise man, and speak like the common man." The language of feminist literary theorists is not very different from the language of most theorists and critics, including male and female art educators who write for *Studies in Art Education*, *Art and Learning SIG Proceedings*, *Visual Arts Research*, and *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, male and female art critics who write for *Art in America* and *Art Forum*, and male and female art historians who write in the *Art Journal of the College Art Association of America* and comparable professional journals. Often the language of theory and criticism is not rooted in actual lived experience. It is abstract, hermetic, self-referential, and inaccessible to the uninitiated. Why, when ideas are difficult, use language to compound the difficulty? Ironically, those who write about practice usually *do* write clearly but don't often draw conclusions about their practice. In our field, teachers who write articles in *School Arts* and *Arts and Activities*, and to some extent, in *Art Education*, often describe without reflection, explanation, or commentary. While the language is not convoluted, there are rarely connections made between a particular practice and some other practice or concept. The writing becomes reportage.

What kind of writing should we aspire to in our professional lives? Can this language be shared by practitioner, theorist, and critic? In the next section of my paper, I used passages from the writings of Ernst Gombrich, Sergei Eisenstein, John Berger, and Roger Shattuck, "male" scholars and theoreticians who are models for such "feminist" discourse. These scholars are theoreticians who write in a clear, accessible style, using devices like metaphor, popular references, repetition, and examples from a variety of sources (often outside the boundaries of their discipline), to ensure their communication with the reader. Although I realize that feminist literary critics believe that we can no longer frame our questions and critique in a language that is patriarchal in structure and vocabulary, I am not sure that their strategy will help the majority of practitioners who are unable to participate in their discourse.

Carolyn G. Heilburn in *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988) has similar qualms about the literary disciplines of biography and autobiography:

Yet there is a real danger that in rewriting the patriarchal text, scholars will get lost in the intellectual ramifications of their disciplines and fail to reach out to the women whose lives must be rewritten with the aid of the new intellectual constructs. I mean no anti-intellectual complaint here. Without intellectual and theoretical underpinnings, no movement can succeed; the failure of feminism to sustain itself in previous incarnations may well be attributable to its lack of underlying theoretical discourse. But we are in danger of refining the theory and scholarship at the expense of the lives of the women who need to experience the fruits of research (p.20).

It is not just women writing about their own lives and lives of other women who need to experience the fruits of feminist and other theoretical research. As teachers who write, we need to begin to use our language to bring together the theorist and the practitioner both within and outside our own discipline.

References

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