

ture methodiz'd," that is, making explicit what a universal human nature inevitably produces.

When the focus shifts to the rules governing how readers constitute literature, however, we believe we have something more than a set of conventions. This belief is particularly striking at a time when the conventional nature of just about everything is being widely asserted. In our culture one can fictionalize, allegorize, or thematize a swatch of language to make it literature, and students are routinely taught to do so. Knowledge of such conventions is not what the scientific critics were after, and while it is worth getting, it is a very different sort of thing.

Patrick D. Murphy is confused about what I was trying to do in "Poetics against Itself." Contemporary feminist critics in general, including those he names, are not in the line of scientific criticism at all. They are trying to introduce (or restore) a socially critical dimension to academic criticism. Scientific critics had nothing to do with such efforts, which they would have understood as "extrinsic" criticism, however worthy on ethical or political grounds. Nor does Bakhtin claim, as far as I know, that he is making criticism scientific; dialogism is an interpretive principle. I was also not concerned with poststructuralism, which is an explicitly interpretive enterprise that has nothing to do with transforming criticism into a scientific discipline. Quite the reverse; it relentlessly criticizes such objectivist efforts as inevitably self-deceptive.

Murphy's explanation of why I cited only two women critics out of thirty-five—my sexism—trivializes the issue. If the low representation is simply a result of my sexism—for he makes no effort to say that I am typical—it is a sad but distinctly minor episode. Isn't it more plausible as well as more significant (though the tale has now been told many times) that the reason for the imbalance is our culture's attitudes toward women and work outside the home? A more interesting thesis for the absence of women in the scientific stream has been advanced by Elaine Showalter. (Fraser Easton, my former student, brought this to my attention.) In "Toward a Feminist Poetics" Showalter argues that Marxism and structuralism "claim to be sciences of literature," and that they, along with other "new sciences of the text[,] . . . have offered literary critics the opportunity to demonstrate that the work they do is as manly and aggressive as nuclear physics—not intuitive, expressive, and feminine" (*The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, London: Virago, 1986, 139, 140). There may be something to this. Where I came from poetry was for sissies, but science was OK. Showalter's idea—and simple prejudice—is a more plausible and interesting way of thinking about

the paucity of women theorists in my essay than my "blatant sexism," though even here we should be careful; Constance Rourke and Josephine Miles were among the more scientific of the New Critics.

I agree with R. Lane Kauffmann's criticisms of the "flawed premises" of scientific criticism, and he puts lucidly and straightforwardly what I, as he says, merely implied and hinted. But it still strikes me that one makes a very strong case against a theoretical position if one can show that its practitioners seem unable to practice what the theory preaches. Attacking premises head-on may not be as effective.

The relation between literary theory and interpretation is complex. It is striking that the classic documents in literary theory from Plato to our century hardly mention interpretation or offer anything like what we think of as interpretations, that is, saying the meaning of whole works at some length. Literary theory was tied to the making and appraisal of works and the defense of or assault on poetry itself rather than to interpretation. Meaning seems to have been taken for granted. Things have changed. Now theory becomes the basis for interpretation. Whenever critics use a theoretical vocabulary to talk about an individual work they transform a theory into metaphors that then *thematize* that work. For example, "like transformational grammar before it, speech act theory has been sacrificed to the desire of the literary critic for a system more firmly grounded than any afforded him by his own discipline" (Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980, 221). I hope to show in a sequel to "Poetics against Itself" that what results from this use of theory is the allegorizing of literary works. This is the contemporary parallel to the allegorizing of Homer by Greek natural philosophers and the Christianizing of classical works by generations of interpreters. It is such allegorizing interpretation rooted in theory that has become, I believe, the dominant form of academic commentary. I think such allegorizing should be clearly distinguished from the various forms of theory that were concerned with making and, by implication, appraising.

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The Fall(?) of the Old English Female Poetic Image

To the Editor:

The argument of Pat Belanoff's engaging article, "The Fall(?) of the Old English Female Poetic Image"

