

In her introduction to her collection of short stories by twenty six female authors, Susan Cahill gives vent to her beliefs and prejudices about literature generally and that relating to women's fiction in particular. She sees women as able to use the influence of their environment to craft works which plumb the complex mysteries of life without claiming any pat answers. Yet ironically, she reveals herself limited by the paradox of a specifically female literature, and has difficulty in coming to terms with ideology, her own and others', as it effects literature.

A recurrent assumption about literature for Cahill is the crucial importance of environment. Her triumvirate of giants, Eliot, Bronte and Austen, are defined in terms of their "varied and multiple environments,"¹ their particular styles depending on where their training was received - Austen's sitting room, Bronte's moors and Eliot's London. The more mundane environmental influences of housework, children and interruptions are invoked for their descendants who soak in everything because "everything contributes"² to the woman's experience and contributes to what Cahill calls the "psychological authority of the stories in the collection."³ Cahill doesn't try to explain how women are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary - "the truth of paradox"⁴ is seen as sufficient.

As an editor of a book entitled "Women and Fiction", the implicit assumption is

¹ Cahill, S. (Ed.) *Women and Fiction* New York: Mentor, 1975, p. xii.

² *Ibid*, xv.

³ *ibid*

⁴ *Ibid* xiii

that there is some point to having a collection of works written by women only. Justifying the collection on the grounds that "poor representation of fiction by women in standard anthologies is universal"⁵ is only restating the assumption that there is something that sets women's works apart from those of men. Of Cahill's "Big Three", it is Austen, viewed through Woolf's distinction between novelist and poet, who is the archetypal female fiction writer, "destined to watch and wait in the parlours of her father and husband ... thus better equipped for writing fiction than poetry."⁶ Woolf's assumption, borrowed by Cahill, that women are thus trained to be novelists rather than poets implies a group of people more suited as poets, as defined by their self-directed activity; the obvious candidates being males. The assumption of a different literature produced by men as opposed to women springs from the pairing of her belief in environment as the creative catalyst, and the roles assigned to each sex.

Feminists would wish to argue the role Ms. Cahill gives the writers in her collection is a tacit acceptance of culturally learned female characteristics as appropriate. She calls the works "feminism's sacred texts."⁷ Yet her emphasis on the passive lady author typified by Austen who "watched...waited, and after they all left ... scratched away again,"⁸ reinforces the inheritance of cultural stereotypes which feminism often sees as inappropriate to present situations. Cahill seems trapped by her unwillingness to embrace feminism as a resting place for her collection, ostensibly because she fears it divorces them from literature as a whole, when her anthology,

⁵ Ibid xvi

⁶ Ibid xi

⁷ Ibid xiii

⁸ Ibid xi

by including only women, has already condemned it to a "smaller place"⁹ than the entire "house of fiction."¹⁰ It is perhaps understandable then that Jean Stafford would refuse her work for inclusion in an exclusively female collection.

A wariness to any ideology seems to underlie this unwillingness to come too close to the feminist camp, Cahill assuming an exalted status for Art as an alternate intellectual activity.

Surely, a collection of fiction that exposes the tyranny of theoretical views - whether sociological, psychological, theological - in the light of fiction's complex honesty serves to truly liberate the reader's consciousness.¹¹

If she assumes a distinct place in literature for women, Cahill assumes pre-eminence for literature in learning. Her further statements that in ideology one finds "rote answers"¹² and "doctrine"¹³ would perhaps surprise those involved in the lively debates which characterise scholarship in sociology, psychology or theology. The idea that ideology is incompatible with and lethal to imagination does not necessarily follow even in feminism, and perhaps what we really are meant to gather from this is that systematising belief isn't very ladylike and that women's intuition, here called "the truth of paradox,"¹⁴ is a much easier way out than rationalisation. The tyranny she exposes in ideology may be no more than the yoke of rigor in intellectual endeavour, as, allowing for the mysteriousness of the human condition is also a convenient way of avoiding the hard questions. A certain superficiality comes to Cahill's rejection of ideology in psychology; for example, as she feels comfortable

⁹ Ibid xiii

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

using the jargon to propose that Stubb's finds deeper truths than Stein by employing a "more complex psychological background."¹⁵

For all her discomfort with ideologies and love of the instinct and unfathomable Ms. Cahill works within a humanist, liberal ideology herself. "Art as a moral imperative"¹⁶ and fiction in particular as a means of liberating consciousness and refining human sensitivity is as much an ideology and Cahill as much an ideologue as any. Taking her assumption that "the house of fiction has never been a comfortable place for ideologues"¹⁷ at face value, that she revels in it suggests that it can made comfortable as long as the implications aren't thought through enough to be systematised.

Through her introduction, Cahill emphasises paradox. Further paradoxes suggested by this piece are that although women are "extraordinary,"¹⁸ they are still defined in terms of cultural stereotypes and requiring special consideration in their own anthology; and how a love of mystery and uncertainty can cloud issues until this author can see her own beliefs as deep truths and other ways of looking at life mere dreary ideology.

¹⁵ Ibid xviii

¹⁶ Ibid xiii

¹⁷ ibid

¹⁸ Ibid xv

Bibliography

Cahill, S. (Ed.) *Women and Fiction* New York: Mentor, 1975.

Seldon, R. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* Sussex: Harvester Press, 1985.