SENTIMENTAL MODERNISM

WOMEN WRITERS AND THE REVOLUTION OF THE WORD

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The Sentimental and the Modern
A Common History

They had no words to express the sublime emotions they felt.

—ANN RADCLIFFE, *THE MYSTERIES OF UDOLPHO*[1]

I

The sentimental has a strange existence as a discourse, with its coherence defined by opprobrium. Making a narrative of its history would involve rewriting the history of literary criticism, a task beyond the scope of my inquiry. I can only suggest how the "serious" constitutes itself again and again—not as a continuity but in a series of repetitions—against a feminized "other" discourse which functions like woman herself to make the binary definition possible. The specific contents of these oppositions change, but the gendered difference is renewed. For example, romanticism arose as an opposition to a feminized sentimentality and its accompanying natural sublime. But modernism constituted itself by conflating the romantic with the sentimental and the popular. The private discourse of feeling and the public community of women, guardians of feeling, are, under modernism, both sentimental. And postmodernism, apparently, is conflating modernism with a sentimental humanism, if Gitlin's characterizations are to be believed. In retrospect, no discourse is without emotional appeal or pathos, and so, in retrospect, the sentimentality becomes evident.

A host of dissimilar discourses have been assimilated to the feminine by the ongoing construction and denial of the sentimental: working-class vernacular, peasant dialects, the bawdy and the carnivalesque, the rhetoric of religious dissenters, but also the refinements of aristocratic poetry and the aristocratic lover. Defending writers against the kind of dismissal that classifying them with the sentimental might imply involves disentangling

them from this conflation and making distinctions. For example, Carol McGuirk, in her study of Robert Burns, restores the sense in which he might be called "sentimental" and defends the eighteenth-century sentimental poetic: "Being sentimental required a pursuit of intense responsiveness that always created some pathology of feeling in a text. . . . the text solicits intense reader reactions to dire events that probably would have been averted by protagonists committed to the normal social world of survival and compromise."[2] McGuirk wants to reassert the value of a rhetorical literature: "when the writer happens to be adept at manipulation . . . classic literature results." She also wants to assert the value of the vernacular. The fact that Burns writes in a dialect—solidifying a Scottish time and place—does not mean he is a minor writer. The case of Burns exposes the politics of the sentimental. Even though the stakes are obviously high for women writing, breaking open the undifferentiated otherness of feeling releases everyone else in the vernacular margins as well.

The discourse is not called "sentimental" because it takes a position even though the position seems clear enough: in favor of a gendered individual, one who would have a heart, who could draw on feelings of sympathy, an individual who could, therefore, make moral judgments grounded in a private realm which oppose the developments of urban industrial society. The early, positive representation of the sentimental soon came under fire. The sentimental has been composed since then not only as a writing about the feminine but, more important, by judgments about it. In Western culture, the discourse of reason denies that its unconscious enters through style. The reason denies that the text functions as a hysterical body, communicating through symptoms, and tries to eliminate the marks of pathos. Reasonable histories have produced the sentimental retroactively as the effect of their judgments about emotion in discourse, and their efforts to eject it. So the history of the sentimental in literature is a history of these judgments as well as of the fragmented body and conventions that both serve as examples and make the woman a stranger to language. Its kinship with melodrama on the one hand and with the psychoanalytic discovery of hysteria on the other suggests that the sentimental operates to translate the relations of gender and the body's gestures into drama.

The word *sentimental* came into being in eighteenth-century England, together with the sentimental novel, as a term of approval.[3] It was connected to the pathetic appeal—the appeal to emotions, especially pity, as a means of moral distinction and moral persuasion. The seemingly ahistorical critical term *sentimental* as we use it now refers obliquely and disparagingly to its historical roots in a literary tradition dominated by women. The disparagement has served, indeed, to repress the fact that writing women were beginning to dominate the history of writing and that their

domination was far from being a sign of escapism. Writing women crossed the borders between the domains of production and reproduction. Dale Spender points out that this writing by women started with a sense of great transgression: "by the time of the Restoration when more and more women were earning their living by the pen, the distinction between the prostitute and the woman writer was so blurred as to be almost non-existent and it is possible that the opprobrium associated with both is more closely connected to the *selling* and *money making* than it is to any particular commodity they were trying to sell."[4]

The sentimental is a turning point for narratives of sociability.[5] Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* and Wollstonecraft's *Maria* do not argue the idea that there are overwrought emotions. The gothic begins with that assumption and then works to classify and make distinctions. In the eighteenth-century concept of sociability, for example in Hume and Adam Smith, the place of the passions undergoes a change, a decline. In Richardson, Sterne, and later novels such as Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*, there is a development from sympathy, from a conception of passion as the basis of sociability, into a conception of passion as hypochondria and hysteria—that is, a turn from pathos as a rhetorical asset to pathos as not only diseased, and isolated, but feminized. The development of the gothic novel from the late eighteenth century to *Wuthering Heights* testifies to an ambivalence about the emotions, marking precisely this turn from that which is the basis of the social to that which threatens the social.

This represents the narrative sequence of the common critical judgment about the sentimental as a lower, degraded mode. We might recognize the premonitions of a Freudian form. Critical philosophy appears to correct the hysteria and pathos. But in fact this narrative with its privileging of the critical represents a recurring dialectic of male/female, reason/passion, city/country, public/private, and serious/popular which has reappeared again and again in various guises. The intense emotional response of a sentimental figure generates its critical opposition almost from the beginning. First the new woman appeared—Clarissa—fixing the object of desire, and in response developed the whole structure of middle-class man. But the response to Clarissa also redefines other forms of desire and introduces gender as a means of social oppression. Sentimental elements appear in all periods of literature. Pathos in the eighteenth century is distinguished by being made *central*, so that literature is defined together with other kinds of nonliterary texts in terms of its instructional and moral value, and other fictional elements, such as plot and character, play a secondary role to the often static tableaux of domesticity, virtue, bliss, and suffering.[6] This centrality means that pathos was organizing social change as the appeal to emotion mobilized not only the domestic but also democratic revolutionary sentiment.

Sentimental writing in the eighteenth century established a recognizable, highly conventionalized style. Its normalizing mannerisms are thoroughly intertwined with skeptical resistance to the sentimental. Thus the nineteenth-century "poetesses" seem sentimental because they make lyric expression a convention of feeling. The question of style is critical, for its abstraction and/or repetition both assumes and re-creates a *community* of like-minded readers.

In the eighteenth century, the vocabulary itself often presumed the reader's agreement. Sentimental expression is fragmented, illogical, a rupture of narration by static tableaux evoking the melancholy and the sublime. The scenery in Radcliffe's *Udolpho* delays the reader's progress constantly:

> During the first days of this journey among the Alps, the scenery exhibited a wonderful mixture of solitude and inhabitation, of cultivation and barrenness. On the edge of tremendous precipices, and within the hollow of the cliffs, below which the clouds often floated, were seen villages, spires, and convent towers; while green pastures and vineyards spread their hues at the feet of perpendicular rocks of marble or of granite, whose points, tufted with Alpine shrubs, or exhibiting only massy crags, rose above each other, till they terminated in the snow-topped mountains, whence the torrent fell and thundered along the valley. (168)

Emily combines the images coming to her mind into a sonnet, which also appears in the text, interrupting the narrative.

Tropes of sympathy argue through embodiment and an appeal to experience: the sentimental locates moral values in the (feminized) heart and denies the importance of external differences. Thus the sentimental also grounds the moral appeal to respect individual differences. The terms are hyberbolic and abstract: *benevolence, virtue, esteem, delicacy, transport, weakness, sweet, delicate, grateful, cruel, base, unkind, ungenerous, unfeeling.* Furthermore, phrasing itself is predictable. There is both extreme conventionality and extreme fragmentation. All the resources of the page are summoned to heighten—by punctuation marks, typographical devices, and gaps and breaks in the text—the often declared insufficiency of words to express the feeling described.

Sentimentalism is international, but like the history of modernism, its history takes form in ways specific to each culture. In England, sentimentalism is connected to the rise of Methodism and to religious dissenters. Methodist hymns reveal the patterns of a spirituality which is disconnected from established institutions and makes its appeals "directly" to the heart.[7] The English sensibility is distinct from that of other countries in its relationship to the bourgeoisie. When Rousseau takes up the epistolary forms of the sentimental in *La Nouvelle Heloïse*, he makes those love letters the

basis not only of pedagogy and domestic and religious doctrine but also of political change.[8] The sentimental enters into French literature with its radical politics evident, appealing to avant-garde intellectuals in the formative years of the French Revolution.

In the United States, the history of sentimentalism and women's writing carries pervasive religious connotations at the same time that it is connected to the politics of social reform. The rational and theological versions of scapegoating are joined in Puritan rhetoric. Perhaps the modernist revolution of language in the United States seemed much closer to a battle of the sexes than elsewhere because American intellectuals (always the colonized) indeed, in some sense, fear being more "feminized." Women writers in the United States have not only the question of conduct to negotiate but also the legacy of Puritan threat and feminine heresy. Ann Hutchinson's notorious challenge to the Puritan priesthood was based on claims for the validity of religious emotion, or "enthusiasm"; her figure connects radicalism with female hysteria.[9] Her story suggests the violent prejudice of Puritan rhetoric. American Puritanism was able to be severe about religious dissent. The English Puritan ascent to power under Cromwell necessitated some degree of compromise with religious enthusiasts, a sort of coalition politics that encouraged tolerance. The American tradition of extremity together with the symbolic weight of the Salem witch trials provides evidence of a rhetorical paranoia which had to do with the dangers of trusting women's emotions. Americans had an early history of demonizing the female body and condemning female hysteria which presses questions of social virtue into theology. By the time of American modernism, women writers had a sentimental past which allied them not only with weakly ineffectual claims for the powers of sympathy, as Ann Douglas portrays it, but also with the strongest (most threatening) elements of social revolution and anarchy.[10]

A brief characterization of the history of women's rhetoric in America may help to make the point. In the nineteenth century an American discourse had been forged which combined the political appeal for social change with the religious and emotional appeal to personal experiences of sympathy—a discourse emerging in the 1830s with the first public expression of women's voices and the growth of antislavery movements, identified with the democratic ideals of American progress. The young Harriet Beecher Stowe probably participated at her father's dinner table in the early debates about women's right to speak in the western New York great revivals.[11] The increasing public influence of women—what Ann Douglas documents as "the Feminization of America"—depended on the immense success of this discourse with its combination of religious affiliation, a rhetoric of sympathy, and liberal appeals for change. After the Civil War, this discourse separated into specialized strands of women's rights and

temperance, theological modernism, national progress, and moral reform. One could argue that the strong joining together of the various elements into the antislavery movement suffered disintegration and decline after 1865, as the rise of the industrial machine—the "dynamo"—and the adventures of the frontier captured the American imagination, and the feminine appeal to sympathy became a matter of convention, "genteel." But this would mean overlooking the rise of feminism and reform movements based on the moral appeal which grounded the sentimental.

Sentimental writing provided overt connections with sociocultural ethics that modernist criticism made it difficult for women to express. There are many qualities of the most sentimental fiction that we might want to endorse. That first best-selling American novel, *Charlotte Temple,* rehearses the sentimental situation which must at the date of its publication in 1791 already have been quite familiar. Late-twentieth-century readers will find elements of it so conventional that it seems like parody. Perhaps this parodic quality will now help make it attractive again. During the nineteenth century the story appeared in every form of publication; by the time *Charlotte Temple* appeared in a corrected, scholarly edition, in 1905, it had surely been learned "by heart."[12] It emphasizes the vulnerability of women, and it also expresses the pressure of women's desire. The innocent Charlotte is lured away to America by a rake, who abandons her after she becomes pregnant, and she dies pitifully upon the birth of her child, reunited at last with her grieving father. The message seems clear: smart ladies resist their sexuality because motherhood makes them vulnerable. (Is the message really out of date?) But the scenes of high emotion do their cultural work (as Foucault has taught us) to produce a dangerous female sexuality, its power the more alarming because it is seen only in its effect, the wrenching scenes of debasement, loss, and regret.

The author, Susanna Rowson, does not intervene to condemn Charlotte. As readers, our sympathy is all with the heroine, even though she plays a willing role in the seduction. What Rowson condemns is the cool greed and self-promotion of several villains. There is the calculating Mr. Lewis, who loans a Mr. Eldridge money for his son's advancement and forces the father into ruin when he protects his daughter from Lewis's seduction. Superfluously, the villain also kills the son in a duel. There is the French teacher, Mademoiselle La Rue, who lures Charlotte into the seduction and then, having made her own way into a good marriage, repudiates her. And there are the faithless friend, Belcour, who ought to have given Charlotte the money left for her but tries to seduce her instead, and even the landlady who throws poor Charlotte out into the cold when she has no rent money.

All of these villains are people who misuse the power of money and position, who fail to help another in need. By contrast, the heroic figures

are defined by their social morality. Charlotte's father, who is not rich, rescues Mr. Eldridge and lives a good life frugally in the country. And Mrs. Beauchamp extends her care to the pregnant Charlotte without blame. The seducer himself, Montraville, is not really a villain but a man of feeling, who finishes out his days "subject to severe fits of melancholy" and makes frequent visits to "weep over the grave, and regret the untimely fate of the lovely Charlotte Temple" (118).

The moral of this sentimental story might well outrage Puritan morality, testifying as it does to the power of feeling. It suggests why the sentimental has become the obscene; *Charlotte Temple* locates evil not in sex but in the unfeeling. Early in the story Mr. Eldridge formulates what Mr. Temple calls the "true philosophy": "Painful as these feelings are, I would not exchange them for that torpor which the stoic mistakes for philosophy" (17). This book is meant to teach an ethic of social responsibility which respects both passion and suffering. Why should women writers deny themselves access to this ethos or the force of such an appeal? Modernist literature allowed writers such as Kay Boyle and Louise Bogan to acknowledge women's sexual desires. But they write about narratives of desire as they intersect with the painful issues surrounding love and domesticity. The modernist refusal of the sentimental has obscured their wider concerns.

The practice of separating literature from rhetoric and hence from ethics is recent in American culture, and in some ways antithetical to its Emersonian traditions. But getting rid of sentimentality has made it hard to restore the place of rhetoric as well. In his *Philosophy of Rhetoric,* first published in 1776, the Scottish theologian George Campbell endorsed the sentimental at the same time that he recognized its connection to ideology, to "the moral powers of the mind."[13] According to Campbell, the sentimental "occupies, so to speak, the middle place between the pathetic and that which is addressed to the imagination, and partakes of both, adding to the warmth of the former the grace and attractions of the latter." Campbell, like Hugh Blair, assumed the importance of appeals to passion. The pathetic works best, he says, "by some secret, sudden, and inexplicable association, awakening all the tenderest emotions of the heart. . . . it will not permit the hearers even a moment's leisure for making the comparison, but as it were by some magical spell, hurries them, ere they are aware, into love, pity, grief, terror." The description suggests the kinship of sentimental and sublime. The description also suggests, perhaps, the kinship of the sentimental with power, loss of control, and female sexuality.[14]

Although Campbell wrote in the eighteenth century, his was the dominant rhetorical text for much of the nineteenth century in America. In spite of romantic turns against this rhetorical doctrine, it was not so bad to be sentimental, then. What has happened to the once-positive connotation of

the word? Campbell joined two things together which were firmly separated by modernism: he considered poetics to be a "particular mode" of rhetoric, and he considered both reason and passion to be legitimate parts of persuasion. This larger view of the rhetorical situation disappeared from departments of literature in the wake of modernism.

However, the fate of the sentimental in America is not a matter of a straightforward chronology. Serious romanticism opposed sentimental moralizing, and the instructional intention. Hawthorne's influential reformulation of sentimental philosophy in *The Scarlet Letter* breaks with rhetoric by condensing theological, sexual, and political heresy into a single emblem and affixing the moralizing symbol of the scarlet letter on the free-thinking woman Hester Prynne. The book has evident affiliations with sentimental and feminist traditions. Richard Chase points out the book's close likeness to a "feminist tract" (and Hawthorne's debt to Margaret Fuller's rhetoric), and Leslie Fiedler calls Hester "the female temptress of Puritan mythology, but also, though sullied, the secular madonna of sentimental Protestantism."[15] But Hawthorne denies that he moralizes and denies responsibility for the rhetoric of judgment which he calls up from the ghosts of a Puritan past. His novels, he claims, are not conduct books or moral tales but rather acts of imagination, romances. His Puritan ancestors would say he was "disgraceful": " 'A writer of story-books? What kind of a business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!' " (89).[16]

Thus does Hawthorne stage the separation of art from morality. His works represent not only a borrowing of the women's sentimental but also a struggle against the sentimental community, against their scribbling women and their feminists. Hawthorne calls not on his readers' sympathy so much as on their horror at the uncanny aura of crime surrounding women's sexuality and women's power, exemplified not just by Hester Prynne but by one female figure after another in his writing. He is haunted not just by lady novelists but by a powerful rhetoric—perhaps associated in his mind with Margaret Fuller. Hawthorne repudiates rhetoric. Henceforth the severity of a Puritan judgment will be directed toward a rigorous separation of art from life.

Modernist critics welcomed him as an ancestor. Rewriting elements of the sentimental into the form of the romance (Richard Chase says *The Scarlet Letter* is "almost all picture") and withdrawing from the hurly-burly of prose into a more poetic, more literary discourse, he does not violate the plain speech of the Puritans so much as he withdraws literature from the common house of political discourse; Chase claims Hawthorne has no politics (70, 74). The romance does not speak directly to its readers to instruct them. Like the sentimental heroine, the book does not speak for

itself. It practices, indeed, a rhetoric of embodiment which transfers the sexuality of the woman which appears in *Charlotte Temple* to the body of the book, to an uncanny textual criminality, *The Scarlet Letter*. When modernist criticism at last theorized the ontology of the text, it is not surprising that it also reached back in literary history to canonize Hawthorne and to discard Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*. At the same time that Hawthorne denies the real power of the book, he takes up certain elements of the sentimental into *style* and perhaps inaugurates the politics of American symbolism.[17]

The relationship of the sentimental to the romanticism which follows it, in so many ways takes it up, and yet separates its powers from the femininized rhetoric of pathos, has much to do with the vexed history of the sublime. Samuel H. Monk, in his influential classic of critical history *The Sublime*, details the connection of literary women with the development of the eighteenth-century taste for the sublime, which was, of course, not separated as an aesthetic from natural emotion.[18] Thus he cites Mrs. Elizabeth Carter's " 'passion for the sublime' " and her " 'taste for the terrific' which impelled her to seek out ocean storms on nights when people of less fine sensibilities were content to remain at home" (212). Anna Seward represents an "epicurean pursuit of sensation" (214). He suggests that these tendencies appear earliest among women—Carter, Montagu, Vesey, Chapone, Seward, Radcliffe—because women did not have the education in the classics which men had. This was an advantage for the development of the sublime, Monk says: "They were . . . by virtue of their sex, somewhat outside the tradition, and if they had intellectual tastes, they might be able to criticize more independently than could men" (216). Monk means to compliment the women: Mrs. Carter's report of her experience of the sublime scene is "remarkably similar to Kant's conception of sublimity." But women were not able to carry it beyond mere sensibility, as Kant and the romantics would do.

In Monk's history, Wordsworth rescues literature from the women's imitative art, and from the inadequate aesthetics of Burke and of Blair, by the "high seriousness" which integrates the sublime experience of nature with religion:

> If one contrasts Wordsworth with any or with all of the enthusiastic admirers of nature in the last decades of the eighteenth century, he will observe that the basic difference between them is that while the Blue Stockings and the picturesque travelers strongly resemble faddists, and were concerned with the resemblance of natural scenes to paintings, Wordsworth was mainly interested in his aesthetic experience of nature as it offered support for his religious intuitions of the reality of the One in the Many. (228)

Like Allen Tate, Monk finds women lacking in "high seriousness." Like other modernist critics, he associates women with "faddists." First published in 1935, his history of the sublime is also a history *within* critical modernism, concerned to separate the merely sensible from aesthetic sublimity. His narrative follows the familiar sequence from an immaturity of women's writing to the mature male romanticism.

Modernist women, even more than a male writer such as Hart Crane, faced difficulties invoking the romantic tradition. Kant's attachment of the aesthetic sublime to the masculine, and beauty, the lesser category, to the feminine, had refigured the silences and the sublime emotion associated with female sensibility by the sentimental. Romanticism brought the representational shift away from a mimetic aesthetic to the romantic concept of the *imagination* and left women seeming inadequate to the figures of authorial transcendence and original genius. Female romantics might confront the sublimity of the creative identity as Gilbert and Gubar's "madwoman in the attic," or as a selfhood become monstrous, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Louise Bogan's "Medusa."

If we think of the romantic individualist as inherently male, then women were not romantic.[19] They could not, at least, appear as unique and singular identities, since women were the other of the individuating logic. Even though the romantic poet appears to continue the tradition of the sentimental Man of Feeling (and the ideology of gendered individualism which women's writing from its gendered point of view was also constructing), the poet does not belong to the low culture of the novel. Women played a role in developing the romantic sense of self, and it would distort their contribution to think otherwise. At the same time, however, the cultural consensus developed quickly to exclude men from the interior, domestic space. The male romantic poet could have feelings, but they must be philosophically significant, and he must express them in the domain of high culture if he was not to seem laughable.[20]

The sentimental tradition was always dialectical, made up of writing by men and by women, and likewise criticized by both men and women—that is, by the very men and women who were making use of the convention. Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* gives us the two sides, with feminine sensibility already under criticism. As Mary Wollstonecraft exemplifies, a recurrent theme is that women should stop being—by situation and by choice—like children, dependent on their fathers and husbands. In particular, their subjection seems to Wollstonecraft to be caused by women's attachment to sentiment rather than reason. "Another instance of that feminine weakness of character, often produced by a confined education, is a romantic twist of the mind, which has been very properly termed *sentimental*," Wollstonecraft declares: "Women subject by ignorance to their sensations, and only taught to look for happiness in love, refine on sensual

feelings, and adopt metaphysical notions respecting that passion, which lead them shamefully to neglect the duties of life . . . " (157).

Adopting an ideal of rationality which would deny that the sentimentality associated with domestic life has anything to do with important pleasures and would abhor everything to do with the domestic, Wollstonecraft here defines women's sensations as aberrant, thus condemning her own emotional life. In other words, this notion of the superiority of the rational over the sensible had a long history before modernism: it was, of course, fundamental to liberalism and to the history of liberal feminism. The modernist innovation was to challenge the representability of the sensible, to try to stop the dialectic and end history.

A century after Wollstonecraft, many modernist women also rejected the domestic tradition on similar grounds, seeing an antiintellectualism in the sentimental. Yet nineteenth-century liberalism fed into the modernist rejection of the woman's emotional and communal life. In *The Subjection of Woman*, John Stuart Mill provides us with the epitome of the liberal argument as it seems to be prowoman.[21] Yet in Mill we can see the problem of liberal rationality more clearly. Mill splits women into rational, free (masculine) individuals and inferior, unconscious individuals embedded in the matrix of feeling and ordinary life—like mothers. What Mill has done is to invent "the exceptional woman" who chooses to be different from the ordinary. The woman who "chooses" housemistress as her profession, however, cannot be free to do anything else.

The Other that Mill thus constructs as the unconscious feminine is associated not only with domestic chores but with all of the messiness of sentiment and sexual desire, including motherhood. Cultural reproduction, including the work of writing the domestic, is separated from production and occupies a diminished and secondary terrain, not the primary arena of political and philosophical issues. Mill assumes that women's cultural production is inferior. He says that "their sentiments are compounded of a small element of individual observation and consciousness and a very large one of acquired associations"—women are inferior in literature and art because they are not modern; they suffer from a "deficiency of originality."[22] The argument idealizing rational will and the freedom to change represses issues of feeling together with the facts of economic deprivation. The working classes, the poor, the foreigners, as well as women, are consigned to represent the irrational. Emphasizing originality, Mill denies the cultural work of women's writing and mystifies the way serious (male) writers imitated, for example, the feminine sublime.

The modernist oversimplification of a mixed history made the traditions of women's writing seem univocally sentimental and uncritical. But the sentimental was not only complicated by the ongoing conflict of liberalism and romanticism; it was also fractured by the construction of sexu-

ality. In the nineteenth century, the idea of free love, arising at first as the idea of a freedom to choose one's mate separate from patriarchal arrangement, began to involve feminists in an ongoing struggle to define sexuality from one generation to another. Feminists have often taken limited definitions of sex as their starting point, accepting the idea that the domestic and sentimental traditions have nothing much to do with sex. Feminists in the nineteenth century did not often endorse free love outside marriage, but they rather generally emphasized the dangers of sex and emphasized "social purity." They did not think of the strong feminine friendships they developed as sexual; they thought sexuality belonged to men and prostitutes. Nevertheless radical women, in particular Victoria Woodhull in the 1870s, took a "prosex" position. In the twentieth century, feminists have increasingly asserted women's right to pleasure, but this often takes the form of advocating the old ideas of free love. The problem for this debate is that neither feminist tradition questions the gendered construction of sexuality.[23]

The "free love" doctrine was adapted in complex ways to the logic of anarchy by most modernist women, by Emma Goldman and Edna St. Vincent Millay when free love was part of the Greenwich Village credo, but by Louise Bogan and Kay Boyle less as a belief than as a separation from ordinary expectations about the constraints of marriage. Lesbian women such as Natalie Barney and her fortunate circle of friends were able to free themselves from the woman's role and find support and love in the company of women, which offered some protection against the violence of attacks on women who broke sexual codes.[24] At the turn of the century, just as Ferdinand de Saussure was discovering the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, the avant-garde was also discovering the arbitrariness of gender and asserting, like Oscar Wilde, the freedom to violate the conventions not only of dress but of desire. This freedom turned out to be a dangerous and difficult exercise, however, for both lesbian and heterosexual women. Women such as Louise Bogan and Kay Boyle were isolated, not in spite of their heterosexuality but because they challenged the conventions of marriage and family, and they felt the force of social oppressions in the everyday difficulty of their lives.

Modernist notions of sexuality were of course very much influenced by Freud. But Freud's theory enacts what it describes, repressing and denying its attachments to a maternal matrix—not only the influence of mothers, but also its origins in the nineteenth-century romantic literature's advocacy of feeling and desire. In order to assert male independence in the postures of a scientific attitude, the law of the father and the influence of science are fully acknowledged. This amounts to a rejection of certain kinds of discourses: the sentimental because it insists on maternal power, the religious because it encourages weakness and self-abnegation, the romantic when it hysterically embodies the unconscious rather than sublimating and projecting and objectifying.

Narration in the twentieth century would become a struggle over how emotion is to be regulated and distributed, where feeling can be allowed. The word which marks a passing over the limits of acceptable feeling for Freud is not *obscene*, but *sentimental*. But from another point of view, the sentimental made unrepresentable becomes the unconscious. Freud introduces the sentimental—that is, love—into the heart of reason where mother love is forbidden, and so he sets the scene for the return of the repressed.

II

Modernist literature (like Freud) shattered the pure, proper, inviolable "I." This splitting of the identity of the speaking subject unsettled gendered individualism and promised a kind of liberation for women—but the anarchy of the word was confined to the text. T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" articulates a split subject of ambivalent desire, where the retreat from the woman as object elicits a greater intensity for questioning of imaginary identity, turned back in narcissistic self-reflection upon itself. But the separation of poem from author protects Eliot's status as a critical intelligence; the separation protects a conservative propriety from the unsettling effects of poetic language.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* distributes the power of desire ironically, with Jake occupying the psychoanalytic position of the woman, already castrated, so that he can serve neither as the subject nor as the object of an eroticism which defines Lady Brett's identity. Jake's ironic response to what might have been, "Isn't it pretty to think so," locates the action in a discredited imaginary.[25] The book unsettles the male plot of desire with its female objects—shouldn't it have been written by a woman? But the struggle with the objects of desire is less important than the struggle to separate from a maternal past and the mother country where it is located, and in the experience of war, a violent and painful separation from optimism about the future. These texts work at the borders of identity where the other is not an object but is ambiguously mingled and rejected from the self, where what is evasive is not the object of desire but a desiring subject, and the problem of intersubjective relations is paramount.

In the texts of modernist women writers, such an erotics is also apt to govern—arising also as an ambivalent refusal of the mother and the sentimental past, also ambivalent about the woman as object of desire, but often without the leverage of symbolic irony mediating the social impact

of their questioning, and perhaps with different relationships both to freedom and to pleasure, or *jouissance*.

Literary modernism founded itself on an appeal for freedom, but the nature of its conflicting politics has been covered over by the polarization of advocacy for free love against a sentimental gentility that came to seem antierotic. This in spite of the fact that, as Foucault argues, the Victorians articulated a sexuality by their discourse about the repressed.

Modernism is an ambiguous term. In fact, it has been used to identify histories that came to be completely opposed to each other in the first decades of this century. On the one hand, modernity continues the utopian and progressive themes that began to appear in the nineteenth century. This optimistic attitude had been connected to many of women's social and cultural involvements, from fighting for the abolition of slavery through promoting public education to social reform movements and the beginnings of feminism.

The hope for a better future that characterized the narratives of modernity influenced socialism, anarchism, and communism but also, of course, liberalism and the rise of the middle class. Modernism in the church was a liberalizing trend, with figures such as Harry Emerson Fosdick, an important model for Martin Luther King, encouraging believers to accept change.[26] These narratives of progress helped to create a revolutionary pressure for change, but they also came to be associated with a sentimental ideal that the reality of industrialization seemed to contradict.

However, the major public battles of modernist literature were fought over censorship and sex, not over industrialization: think of the confiscation of the *Little Review* when it printed parts of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Gilbert and Gubar have taken up this theme and characterized it as part of a battle of the sexes.[27] In agreement with them that gender is an issue, I nevertheless want to change the focus of attention from authors and characters who seem to be already constituted subjects in the field of sexual battle to the field itself, to discourse, where what is at stake in the erotics of the text is how the subject might enter into discourse and how ideology might be reproduced. The censorship battles were not just proof of American narrow-mindedness but proof that the field of discourse was articulating sexuality together with the political. If Comstock's prosecution of offenses against decency was defining the limits of the field in terms of a Puritanism that would protect women within language, the revolution of poetic language was defining a crisis of gendered subjectivity that might open up the limits. Modernism was transgressing the limits of identity. At the same time, however, the political significance of this crisis was obscured by the separation of art from life.

Women writers in the first two decades of this century entered a well-established female literary tradition which joined art and life, a rich, elaborated, complex, and contestatory tradition which included not only the private realm of letters, diaries, and personal memoirs (many at that time beginning to be published) but also a highly successful, highly visible public record in fiction, poetry, essays, critical and historical analysis, and journalism. In the context of social movements for suffrage and birth control, with writers such as Gilman, Addams, Beard, and Gage providing social analysis, writers such as Freeman, Jewett, and Chopin in the recent past, and Austin, Wharton, and Cather evolving prose forms, women writers before World War I would seem to have entered a literary field of unparalleled opportunity for women in particular. The tradition had through all its development in the nineteenth century become deeply involved both with social progress and with the inflection of gender. But the revolt against the sentimental, after its three or so decades of ascendancy, effectively buried that tradition. Women writers found themselves gradually cut off from the very past that might nurture them—at the same time that they seemed to be gratefully freed from a patriarchal family structure that threatened them, and a sentimentality associated with maternal-seeming ties.

In the matrix of American modernism as it emerged in the years before World War I—beginning perhaps before the 1912 appearance of the "imagists" in *Poetry*, with the immigration of literature from the European avant-garde, or when H. D. was a college-age friend with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore—the older discourse of progress and reform mixed confusedly with the new revolutionary forms, also associated with political revolution in the minds of participants. Emma Goldman, publishing her *Mother Earth*, and John Reed were political activists *and* literary figures in the Greenwich Village of the *Masses*, with Max Eastman (who was a poet as sentimental as any of the nineteenth-century poetesses). Artists such as Man Ray, John Sloan, and Robert Henri did covers for the radical magazines. Sadakichi Hartman, who had been attending Mallarmé's Tuesday nights in Paris, contributed stories.

But at the same time, T. S. Eliot was already abandoning with revulsion his kinship to an American past, linked all too directly through his grandfather's ministry to New England traditions of Unitarian liberalism and the proprieties of Boston ladies. And Ezra Pound was already advocating a new mode of writing, cleansed of all vague appeal to emotion, of the abstract vocabulary of sentiment—closer to the object-centered scientific procedures of observation exemplified by the story of Louis Agassiz in Pound's *ABC of Reading*. Pound was writing into literary theory an alphabet of misreading which would both appropriate and disconnect the sympathetic rhetoric of women writers, beginning with H. D.

Radicals to the right and the left shared a certain antihistorical fervor with European pronouncements in the arts, such as Marinetti's futurism. The excitement had a carnivalesque quality that would be lost by the later

seriousness of the academics. For example, Guillaume Apollinaire posted a bulletin for the Paris artistic community in 1913, shocking for its typography and green color (called "merde") as well as for its program of "destruction and construction." Labeled "L'ANTITRADITION FUTURISTE" or THE FUTURIST ANTITRADITION, the manifesto called for "a suppression of history" without regrets—"a suppression of poetic melancholy, of exoticism, of the copy, of syntax, of the adjective, of punctuation, of typographic harmony, of the tense of verbs, of the orchestral, of theatrical form, of the artistic sublime, of verse and strophe . . . and of boredom."[28] This kind of program of revolt against stylistic convention appealed to Margaret Anderson as she and Jane Heap began their editorship of the *Little Review*, as did Emma Goldman's political anarchy: they featured both the art of futurism and notices of Goldman's appearances in their pages.

After World War I the optimistic mixing of progressive politics and literary revolution came apart, and the use of the term *sentimental* grew as the zero degree of critical opprobrium. For many woman writers in the twenties, poets and novelists alike, the woman's tradition was all too coherent, and they even shared the modernist revulsion against it in some ways. In the era of the 1920s, as literary modernism gained authority, a woman poet such as Edna St. Vincent Millay defied the laws of modesty, obscurity, and constraint when she reached out for her woman readers, and critics such as Ransom unleashed their contempt. It was risky for a writer to appeal to a community of readers which identified her with the feminine.

How in the world, we might ask, could it possibly be a daring or political gesture to write "O world I cannot hold thee close enough"? But the popular appeal was precisely what was risky. Millay had grown so hugely popular by the late 1920s that her kitchen was featured in *Ladies' Home Journal* ("Polished as a sonnet . . . Light as a lyric . . . Must be the kitchen for EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY." Only late in the article, at the back of the magazine, was it admitted that her husband was really the cook of the household.) The risk of shaming and exile was especially daunting when the female readership was middle-class, bourgeois, and sentimental, and when the values affirmed had to do with love and motherhood. That feminine community, however populous, was nonliterary and nonauthoritative by definition. Therefore what Millay risked by writing poetry of inclusion rather than of exclusion—risked and perhaps lost—was poetry itself.

In American literature, the political triumph of the new criticism which emerged was to install high modernism as a critical field which obsessively focused on the careers of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and perhaps Stevens and Williams. High modernism meant that the works of a few male writers stood for a whole period of literary history, with a definition of literature

that would seal off the anarchic forces of the revolution of the word. It left women out of the literary canon, and it made *sentimental* into a term of invective. The modernist criticism also posed a problem for feminism which persists to this day, separating literary style from rhetoric and political practice and estranging the serious critic from the popular community: "the high forms of literature offer us the only complete, and thus the most responsible, versions of our experience," asserted, for example, Allen Tate.[29] The high forms of literature came to define a "modernism" at odds with cultural modernity. Part of the double bind for women comes out of this contrary assignment of meaning.

Modernism, literary modernism, the American movement in intellectual politics, was against what not only feminists but also the engineers and churches and social workers and evolutionary biologists thought of as *modernity*. Literary modernism was ironic about progress and critical of the cultural history around it, from Main Street to old Boston.

The modernists were resistant to dominant capitalist culture, but that did not mean they were necessarily radical. The avant-garde was associated with progressive politics for Emma Goldman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, or Kay Boyle. But when Ezra Pound said "make it new," he was headed in the opposite direction. A decidedly reactionary trend developed which emerged triumphant. Many critics followed the lines of T. E. Hulme's influential rejection of humanism and revolutionary optimism, "Romanticism and Classicism."[30] Both a philosopher and a poet, Hulme associated romanticism with the ideals of the French Revolution, in particular the enthusiasm for "liberty." He rejected the metanarrative of Progress, the idea that bad laws and customs had suppressed "the infinite possibilities of man." These hopeful romantic sentiments Hulme identified as "spilt religion," a mistake: "The concepts that are right and proper in their own sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear outlines of human experience. It is like pouring a pot of treacle over the dinner table" (118). Romanticism was conflated with sentimentality; Hulme looked to the classical past for his model of reason.

Even when a certain disillusionment with politics set in after the war, modernist writers such as Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Louise Bogan,and Kay Boyle wrote with a longing and sense of loss that suggested utopian critical perspectives, not a rejection of the sentimental. Even *The Waste Land* gains power from its melancholy nostalgia. But T. S. Eliot, taking up Hulme's severity, wrote insistently about the priority of form over content in judgments about art. In a 1928 essay reviewing *Personae* and defending Ezra Pound, he revealingly argued for the idea that Pound's innovation and influence were a matter of his form and not his contents, which Eliot freely admitted were reactionary.[31] This *formalism* connects Eliot to the new critics. Making form the basis of positive value rather than the

means of revolution, he shifts attention away from the issues of morality, politics, love, and community associated with the sentimental.

The new critics, many of them poet-critics who greatly admired the early trio of Hulme, Pound, and Eliot, soon took up the banner. Yvor Winters, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren were part of the artistic community in the 1920s, but they translated the new movement into the universities. Ransom, Tate, and Warren were members of the Fugitives (said to be fleeing sentimentality), and then the Agrarians.[32] They were associated with Vanderbilt University, and with promoting the South as a model of antiindustrial culture. When Cleanth Brooks joined the circle, he and Warren published in 1938 *Understanding Poetry*, a textbook that transformed the teaching of literature from a study of history, authors, and social context to the close reading of the text. In 1939, John Crowe Ransom published *The New Criticism*, formalizing a movement that had been growing out of literary modernism for twenty-five years, a movement that was about to dominate English departments and literature for several decades.[33] Its suspicion remains: of the progressive themes and appeals to feeling Hulme called sentimental, overlapping with the hermeneutics of suspicion, invisible within the rationality of the critical.

The modernism women participated in threatened social stabilities, including the stabilities of intellectuals on the left as well as the formalists. By 1931 Edmund Wilson was worrying, in *Axel's Castle*, about how the new movement seemed, like symbolism, to be withdrawing from political commitments.[34] But he too defined feminine sensibility as the opposition, identifying the feminine with the conservative. Powerful critical antipathy was directed against women writers from the left as well as the right, and they began to be driven out of the canon as modernism worked its way into the literary and academic establishments. Willa Cather, like Edna St. Vincent Millay, saw her credibility decline; Granville Hicks followed Wilson and others to attack her in 1933 for her conservatism, romanticism, and nostalgia.[35]

About the same time Kenneth Burke argued that the aesthetic perspective of modernism was too limited, that from a rhetorical perspective the arts were participating in a wider cultural revolution.[36] Burke wanted to counter the aesthetic claim that art is useless or amoral or merely formal and to restore it within rhetoric—to claim the possibility that art might indeed have an effect on morality and history, even though the effect might be threatening. Burke might have made an opening for women's writing, but he didn't acknowledge that the issue of morality/immorality was gendered. That possible immorality was what got Flaubert into trouble over *Madame Bovary*, at a moment in the history of nineteenth-century France when the avant-garde began to clash openly with the values of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, the trial of *Madame Bovary* in 1857, reproduced by the trial

of *Ulysses* so many years later, marks the way that the novel, as Dominick LaCapra argues, might commit "ideological crime," and thus might be connected with "sociocultural transformation, through effects of the uncanny and carnivalesque."[37]

By the thirties, as events in the Soviet Union as well as in Europe made it seem increasingly that "progress" would be accompanied by violence, the distances between the political left and the antipolitical aesthetic criticism had grown painful. Louise Bogan wrote in a 1936 letter: "If revolution is the one means of change, I wish people would stop being sentimental about it. . . . revolution is also hell."[38] Let us take this reversal quite seriously as an argument: perhaps there is a sense in which pitching the site of struggle on the terrain of international politics is also conventional, escapist, a fantasy—"sentimental." The practice of political revolution was even then taking shape not only as fascism but also as Stalinism. But if the individual subject is the site of revolution, that does not make it less painful. Considering her several personal struggles with psychosis, let us also imagine that Louise Bogan knew what she was talking about when she said that revolution was violent. Her experimental writing represents a challenge to the codes of the family romance, not only at the level of theme but also at the level of subjectivity, at the level of the Freudian drama. While stories of free love and narratives of maturing to manhood may only reinforce the power of the family romance, women writers such as Bogan march to a different sense of story. And we need to be cautious about assuming that such a revolution of poetic language was necessarily a withdrawal from combat.

Feminist criticism has made defining and retrieving a women's literary tradition an important part of its critical agenda. Yet in doing so it has discovered the dilemma that situates women's writing in the twentieth century: the past exists as an unwarranted discourse, tied to the sentimental domestic configurations which wrote the modern woman into social existence. This sentimental is affiliated with the domestic discourses which founded the terms of the imaginary worked out across the last three centuries, inventing the modern individual, gendering not only human bodies but the institutions of culture. Frequently identified as the support for patriarchy, the sentimental nevertheless also marks the terrain of ideological conflict and so the site of women's struggle to find a voice.

Feminist critics have often called sentimental literature patriarchal, subservient to a male-dominated middle-class order. Nancy Miller, for example, in *The Heroine's Text*, reads the speeches of women in romantic fiction as finally subordinate to the dominant order of a male authority, a narrator who is looking past them at a male reader.[39] However, others, including Leslie Rabine, have argued that women's voices enter into novels as into a dialogic text, where the power of their discourse is not obliterated

even if it is overlaid with a controlling structure.[40] The literary history of the sentimental coincides with what Terry Eagleton labels "the feminization of value."[41] And Armstrong warns us that women need to recognize our own contributions to the construction of middle-class gender.[42]

Women's involvement with the traditions of the sentimental has been a source of rhetorical power and of revolution at the level of the subject. If the sentimental has been an "unwarranted discourse," it nevertheless, as Jane Tompkins has argued, includes the women's fiction which is associated with social and political reform and with assertions of female power. It is also, as Nancy Schnog has added in her analysis of Susan Warner's *Wide Wide World*, a form of fiction which constructs an "emotional landscape" mapping the internal world of female sentiment.[43] And the sentimental has functioned, as Schnog argues, to "ameliorate women's psychosocial needs," to provide a model of mother-daughter and woman-woman relationships which might help assuage the isolation and vulnerability of women produced by history (n. 20, p. 25).

Critical arguments about the function of the sentimental have perhaps overlooked the overdetermination of its forms. Sentimental fiction has functioned in some respects to reproduce patriarchy, to produce it in new forms, and its failure to successfully invent a revolutionary order beyond patriarchy has made the happy endings seem hollow to succeeding generations of political women. However, the sentimental has also successfully functioned to promote women's influence and power, and this rhetorical success continues to be met with a countermovement of criticism and resistance which simply opposes women.

Modernist women writers called upon traditions established by women, the appeal to feeling, their loyalties to the "new woman," their desire for progress, their allegiance to maternal and comforting forms, but they also participated in the revolution of the word. As Louise Bogan recognized, they made an important contribution to poetics, "keeping the emotional channels of a literature open," not in spite of their close association with sentimental conventions but in some respects *because* of it: "women poets share with men the need for some sort of civilized ground from which to draw sustenance."[44] Poets such as Emily Dickinson and Sara Teasdale and Edna St. Vincent Millay trace the lineage. Not only Marianne Moore and H. D., Gertrude Stein and Katherine Anne Porter, but also Amy Lowell, Elinor Wylie, Leonie Adams, Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, Renee Vivien, and Kay Boyle: they were modernists and they were women, and so they worked to define a new kind of writing, a writing which might unsettle the terms of the cultural gendering which oppressed them. This struggle shaped their writing in ways that I think we can begin to use ourselves.

Acknowledging the necessary dialogue of modernism with the sentimental can give feminism a postmodern identity. This notion of a writing

subject acting not to oppose but to unsettle also characterizes Julia Kristeva, suggesting a continuity between modernism and the poststructuralist critique of the subject which is the context of her work. More important, there is a continuity between the presence of the symbolist intervention in American modernism and Kristeva's presence in the scene of American postmodernism—the American Kristeva. She represents the way an apparent internationalism disguises the specifically American form of the opposition of high and low culture, a form that is gendered. American feminists have taken her up as perhaps their most important woman critic for American reasons, precisely because she doesn't (as a French critic) enter the debate as a woman.[45] The fact that everyone overlooks how her Bulgarian origins might function in her work suggests how little nationality is really the issue.[46] As a modernist criticism, her position can function simply to continue the modernist exclusion of the sentimental. But her criticism can also function to carry out the unsettling that modernism inaugurated—particularly if we keep her feminine strangeness before us at the same time: her overlapping of the low-culture novel and the high-culture symbolist revolution, of the low-culture conversation of psychoanalytic clients and her high-culture psychoanalytic criticism.

Kristeva, influenced by Bakhtin, suggests that the subversive dialogic novel, as well as the subversions of poetic language (e.g., of the literary avant-garde), provides means of countering the forms of domination:

> the dialogism of Menippean and carnivalesque discourses, translating a logic of relations and analogy rather than of substance and inference, stands against Aristotelian logic. The novel, and especially the modern, polyphonic novel, incorporating Menippean elements, embodies the effort of European thought to break out of the framework of causally determined identical substances.[47]

Similarly, the poetic function of language is by nature revolutionary; it "has 'musical' but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations, but in radical experiments, syntax itself, that guarantee of thetic consciousness."[48] These effects of language are what Kristeva calls the "semiotic," as opposed to the "symbolic," proposition-making, or "thetic" mode. The poetic function uses the semiotic—in whatever text it might appear—to subvert the domination of the discourse's implied ideology, because it is heterogeneous to *meaning*. Therefore, critical practice needs to take account of the poetic.[49]

This accent on the revolutionary potential of style rather than reason is modernist and runs the modernist risk of an aestheticism. Kristeva does not sufficiently acknowledge the importance of gendered histories in the politics of criticism or in the history of class formations in the West. Her

work needs the corrective of sentimental history to be useful to Western feminists. But American women modernists can help us with that corrective. They were already taking the sentimental into account; thus their work can provide us with a dialectical perspective on developments in postmodern theory that is more grounded in American sociocultural history.

Nevertheless I think there are affinities between Kristeva's project and the work of modernist women writers. Modernist women tended to be politically utopian, whether they were politically active or not—to see the revolution of the word as potentially liberative. Kristeva's text is postmodern rather than modern most of all because (for all of its journey through melancholia) it is not unhappy. Her critical practice does not endorse pessimism even though she advocates setting limits to one's labors—as psychoanalysis limits itself to addressing the pain of individuals, rather than taking up all of society at once. Her notion of "revolution" comes out of a sense of possibility that is nothing short of utopian when compared to the massive resistance against notions of progress characteristic of modernism. She and American modernist women share, in that sense, the same modernity.

The revolution of the word was a revolution in style which challenged conventional expression, including the sentimental. The new criticism, however, exploiting the antihistoricism of modernist poetics, limited the destabilizing effects of philosophical perspectives—the threat of Nietzsche, the sexuality of Freud—to the interior of the poem, just as psychoanalysis condensed and displaced the effects of modernity on society to the interior life of the individual subject. Advocating an impersonal poetics, Pound and Eliot paved the way for the new critics who would separate literature from the personal self, inaugurating a logic excluding "intentional" and "affective" fallacies.[50]

Thus the revolution of the word worked by a double movement to both claim and deny the political significance of private experience. Authenticity was relocated in the word, not in the persons of author or reader. Modernist poetics addressed Baudelaire's estranged reader, the "hypocrite lecteur" invoked again by T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. American individualism was under assault, but a new polarity replaced the old essentialism of gendered subjects. Private experience came to seem the final political reference point for the anarchical revolt against convention: even Emma Goldman thought so. However, modernist art separated the work from the person; "the symbols of Symbolism were metaphors detached from their subjects," said Edmund Wilson, and the modernist poem seemed to represent authentic experience precisely because of its ironic distance from personal feeling.[51] That ironic distance segregated art from a personal subjectivity that in the United States seemed increasingly feminine and sentimental. But style itself was in the feminine domain.

The separation of literature and everyday life replaced the separation of male and female traditions, so that women writers, like today's feminist critics, were cut off either from the serious or from the community of women. Modernism wrote itself out on a metaphor of the subject, the body of a textuality that was already gendered, the text itself—Rimbaud's "hallucination of the word"—feminine, hysterical, a rhetoric of embodiment, in ironic relationship to the symbolic mastery of other languages. Literature took over the domestic space of emotional language and the hysterical body of the text, repressing the historical body of gendered discourse and the genealogy of the personal. Contemporary writers of what Alice Walker calls "womanist" prose reconnect with that community but may still endanger their status as serious writers by doing so. The modernist revolution generated a new aesthetic theory which saw poetic language as a rupture of an oppressive social logic, surely a sentimental claim. But the voice of a revolutionary femininity was disconnected from power, as literature structured itself upon the exclusion of a banality identified with women.

And yet, is not this question of the banality of the subject precisely what postmodernism must still address? The movement of desire in language is at issue, and the question of emotion. Deconstruction locates the motor of rhetorical invention in the gaps of difference. But the sentimental by its excess of both feeling and conventionality displaces the power of desire from a never-attainable object to discourse as the object of sociability.[52] The love letter exposes the crisis at the level of identity: the incapacity of rhetoric to guarantee authenticity, and yet the importance of the reproduced formula.

The sentimental, that unwarranted discourse, constructed by negativity, inhabits the very notion of authenticity. As I will further explore in the chapters to come, the uncanny reproduction of the letter of love—by its very claim to authenticity in the middle of a negation—guarantees that literature will continue to exhibit the symptoms of a rhetorical subject, maintaining embodied, hysterical powers. When woman appears as the author, the discourse may be always already discounted, parodic, rhetorical, and estranged from the warrant of historical truth, at the same time that its pathetic appeal elicits our banal responses. But for postmodernity this represents the return of an author counted as dead. Barthes argued for antihumanism in "The Death of the Author," Foucault for the "ethical" principle of an "indifference" about who is speaking in "What Is an Author?"[53] The unexpected rebirth of the author, or ethos, through the feminine subject will return in my conclusion as sentimental modernism, a maternal irony.