Interview with Elaine Showalter

Pamela Ryan

The well-known feminist literary critic was interviewed at Princeton University, USA, on 11 February, 1985.

PR: I think we should begin by clarifying the feminist literary critical endeavour. What would you say is the central assumption of feminist criticism?

ES: I think that, at least by 1985, feminist literary criticism is the literary theory of gender, which is to say, the investigation of sexual difference at every literary level, in reading, writing and in criticism itself.

PR: Up until recently, that being the case, it has been one of the feminist's tasks to dismantle androcentrism which is the predominance of male literary endeavour, and male critical endeavour. You criticized this activity in 1981, when you called the work of revising, correcting, and attacking male critical theory as a 'feminist obsession'. What conditions made you call it an obsession, and what do you see as a viable alternative to this?

ES: In order to answer, I think it's important to take into account that feminist criticism developed differently in different national settings, and I'm really speaking primarily of the American experience in the USA where feminist criticism basically came out of the universities. This was not true everywhere. In England, for example, it came much more out of publishing and the radical left, and in France, it came from women writers and from the seminars of male theoretical mentors of various kinds. But I think in the United States, the history of feminist criticism parallels the professional emergence of the woman critic as an important figure within the academy, within the institutions of criticism in this country, and I think that the evolution of feminist criticism in some ways was determined by the needs that women critics, ourselves, were feeling as we made our own voices heard within those institutions. So in other words, the subjects that came up, the sequence of the subjects that came up for us, in many ways paralleled the issues in our own careers, and in a more collective sense, paralleled voices that we were facing as a generation. Obviously, there have been a lot of women in the academy for a long time, but I think it's fair to say (although we didn't think about this, it wasn't deliberate or conscious), that the space for women in literary criticism and theory itself, has been opened up by feminist criticism, whether or not the critics now are feminists. I mean, if you look at anthologies of critical theory, you don't find women in them doing anything until feminist criticism establishes itself as the opening space. So what happened in the first phase was a concentration on the male literary tradition, in part because we ourselves were entering a

male literary tradition, which is to say the tradition of criticism, and as we became more secure with that and moved on to another phase, there was a point at which justifying ourselves to that establishment seemed to be a primary task, and I think it did become obsessive. And then we had to make a decision, which was to reject this as a limited reaction, and we are still operating within that dialectic. Is there a possibility of escaping that entirely and defining our own subject? In a sense, I think of it as promoting a critical revolution, just as in a scientific revolution you break away entirely from the established framework, and you begin, somewhere outside, to organize your own nucleus of ideas, and gradually with shifts of generations, you take over. *(Laughs.)*

PR: Like a new paradigm? Like Thomas Kuhn?

ES: Yes, there's a lot that's wrong with Kuhn's theory of paradigms – I don't think he's been much criticized – but it's a really interesting way of understanding how critical revolutions take place, and we have a new idea that, as Kuhn would say, explains the anomalies. If you're working within the patriarchal framework, even when you're attacking it, you can never really deal with those anomalies. So you have to move outside, to women's writing, which is the anomalous form. And as you begin to generate an idea which was previously an anomaly, more and more people are drawn to your side. And then there's a generational thing too, the adherents of the earlier age, the earlier paradigm, are aging, or dying: there are certainly parallels between institutions and generational cycles.

PR: But you really invented the term 'gynocritics' for an American audience, although I presume it came from the French. Would you like to talk about 'gynocritics'?

ES: Actually, I invented it for an English audience. I used that term for the first time when I was speaking at Oxford in a series that they had on women and literature. It was the first year that Oxford had had a series on women – the university had a bequest, and some of that money was given to women in the university to run a year long lecture series.

PR: When was that?

ES: This was in 1977/1978. I arrived in the Spring of 1978 and gave the first lecture in the literature series. They had had one each in anthropology, social science, and in history – this was the last one. I felt very self-conscious about using the word 'gynocritics' because it was a strange experience for me in several ways. I do believe that it is important for women to take control of language in the French way – *language* and *parole*. I really think that's something that has to be done. But, the act of doing it is quite difficult. Of course, contemporary male literary theory is full of neoligisms and difficult vocabularies – Harold Bloom is the best example (but not the only example). And one of the ways in which male critical theory establishes its panel is to create the vocabulary in which it even has to be attacked. It's really a form of imperialism – you get another people to speak your language, or impose your language on a colonial body. And for years women have had to learn the theoretical

language of men and, in fact, have had to be multilingual, speaking many male critical languages. So I thought it was important, even in a very, very modest way to begin to invent some sort of female critical language so that if people wanted to attack me they would have to use it. But it felt very odd to do it, and I was convinced when I actually used the term that people would burst into laughter and all fall about. It seemed very transgressive.

PR: Especially for an English audience.

ES: Yes, for an English audience and, of course, I was an American feminist, and I thought the best thing to do was to exploit that rather than try and cover up. Any kind of difference should be foregrounded rather than concealed. Using the word was an interesting experience – how really transgressive it feels for women to dominate language in these ways, to be innovative in language. In fact, they were very respectful – it was fascinating. I think that the work that we're doing needs a new terminology because it does take material that has been written about. It's not as if women writers never existed, but that the perspectives and assumptions have been so spectacularly altered that in some sense to use the old terms is to invite a certain amount of wonder and confusion. The term 'gynocritics' was meant to suggest that this was a more systematic kind of inquiry, much more self-conscious, much more coherent, and much more theoretically complete.

PR: And in what ways has that been a successful movement? How far do you take the idea of inventing a new women's language? Do you go as far as the French feminists, who advocate 'writing from the body'?

ES: No, absolutely not. In the specific instance of inventing a new vocabulary, 'gynocritics' is my only word. I think that the French idea of women's language (and there's an American version of it as well) operates much more as an inspiration than as a reality. I find it a fascinating idea, and it's interesting to talk to students about. I think that there's an enormous gap between its theoretical power, and the way it would operate in any practical sense. It seems to me that gynocritics itself has been enormously productive. It just astonishes me how far we've come. The amount of research that has been done on individual women writers is staggering – the amount of theoretical speculation – the extraordinary fruitfulness of these ideas, and they are still developing. However it's all been focused on English women writers, which makes sense, because they seemed to be the strongest figures. It's now beginning to branch off into American women writers, which is what I'm working on, and there you have a very different national literary tradition, a very different cultural heritage, a whole set of different themes, images, influences, motifs, situations. You have the problem of a multi-racial cultural and literary society which England does not have. Also, American women who work in French are beginning to study the work of French women writers, which the French are not doing themselves because they're studying semiotics.

PR: So you don't really follow the Kristevan theoretical model? Kristeva

seems to be an anomaly herself, because many feminists accuse her of being a traitor to the cause. In fact she dismantles feminism as much as she dismantles logocentrism. Would you agree that she has not been an enormous influence on American feminist thought?

ES: Well, I think she's becoming more important but her work is being used in the way that I think Americans have used a great deal of continental theory, which is to say that it has been historicized and brought down to a kind of material reality in a way that she might not have anticipated. A lot of her ideas about the expressive modes of the pre-oedipal and the semiotic conjoin in interesting ways with the work of American psychologists and sociologists about mother/child relationships. In addition they connect with the American women's culture of the nineteenth century, a culture that came out of mother/daughter bonding. It may exist in other cultures as well, but it's never been documented as thoroughly. So Kristeva's work is confirmed, and, I think, given a necessary material and historical base by work that's being done here. I think she'll be more and more important. What bothers me more is the very general kind of attack, which comes from the French side, on people who want to work on gynocritics, people who want to work on women writers, that we're essentialist and that to talk about the sex of a writer is essentialism. This seems to me to be one of the silliest ideas I've ever heard. It's become very fashionable, it's almost a slogan now to say that if it really makes a difference to you whether a writer is a man or a woman, that you're an essentialist. I would have thought we had long gotten over the idea that sexual difference is constructed biologically. Men and women occupy different cultural and traditional spaces, and writing, like any art, is an act which is so overdetermined, so complicated, so unfree, so dictated by all of these multiple streams of influence, that to say that one can only look at women's writing out of the belief in biological difference is absurd. No feminist critic is saying that, but it's become a slogan of the French side, and I think it's time that we responded very forcefully to that.

PR: It's interesting when you talk about biological differences and what seems to be very major differences between two continents, but how do you see the future of feminist criticism? Do you see it going in a separatist way, where women concentrate on the gynocritical aspect looking at women writers and the way women think, or do you see a kind of happily androgynous heaven where one day it will not be necessary to talk about biological gender differences, and cultural gender differences? There seems to be two clear paths that feminist criticism can take – the separatist or the integrationist.

ES: I don't think either one of these is going to happen, actually. I think that the direction in feminist criticism now, as I said in the beginning, is towards gender theory. The study of women writers will be the main part of this enterprise, and the most rewarding. But what I see now is not a kind of happy androgyny but an incorporation of gender analysis into literary theory at all levels and into discussions of the male tradition.

This is very different from where we started out, which was an attack on the representation of women and so on. I think it's much more a consideration of how masculinity functions as a literary determinant and how sexual difference itself is part of genre, form and language. Among younger men in this country there's a great deal of interest in feminist criticism, and not particularly because of an interest in women writers. I wish they *were* more interested in women writers, because this seems to be something that we have to continually insist upon: that the centre will reproduce itself if you let it, and you have to enlarge the canon and keep it open. But what is very striking to the younger generation, and I think to those of us who are teaching literary theory in general, is the movement within literary theory towards the incorporation of gender, which is not coming from feminism, but which is coming from Derrida in *Spurs* or Eagleton in *The Rape of Clarissa* and *Literary Theory* where the insistence on feminism as one of the forms of radical criticism is at its most exemplary, and in the work of critics like Wayne Booth, Jonathan Culler, and so on. In addition, less directly, even in the work of critics like Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman, who are not explicit about this but are working with psychoanalytic metaphors, gender is obviously a central concern. So I think that it's going to become a very major and central area in literary theory as a whole. I would never have predicted this five years ago, but I think in some ways it's not surprising because it's such a basic component of human experience.

PR: You mentioned in a previous conversation that you were interested in the history of science. Where are you personally going, and how does the history of science link up with your interests?

ES: Well, I was always interested in the history of science, medicine, psychiatry. My interests are very historical, and the book that I've just finished is a book about women and madness, but it's a cultural and feminist history of English psychiatry. It's historical and one part of a two-volume study. The second volume will deal with much more literary materials – the representation of madness and sexuality in nineteenth century texts. It's not like Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* because first of all I'm not talking exclusively about women's writing, and secondly, my madwoman is real – she's in an asylum – she's not in the attic at all. I'm not exactly sure how that will tie up with the future. It was more a continuation of things I had been interested in for a long time. The first thing I ever published was about Victorian women and menstruation. I was interested in how medical categories defined the feminine and how women functioned within those. What I seek in my own research is a subject that seems at the centre of a lot of cultural forces and madness obviously occupies that kind of place. What I'm doing now is in a very different direction, and it will probably occupy me for several years. I want to do a literary history of American women writers. Amazingly, no such thing exists, not even partially. So I've started re-educating myself as an Americanist. You see, I come from a generation of American feminist critics who did our work in England – it was much more

hospitable. Now it seems time to turn it around, so this is in a sense a 'literature of *my* own', something much more immediate and I think in many ways very different from the English tradition.