What you choose and reject theoretically, then, depends upon what you are practically trying to do. This has always been the case with literary criticism: it is simply that it is often very reluctant to realize the fact. In any academic study we select the objects and methods of procedure which we believe the most important, and our assessment of their importance is governed by frames of interest deeply rooted in our practical forms of social life. Radical critics are no different in this respect: it is just that they have a set of social priorities with which most people at present tend to disagree. This is why they are commonly dismissed as ‘ideological,’ because ‘ideology’ is always a way of describing other people’s interests rather than one’s own.

TERRY EAGLETON (211)

Feminist criticism, like narratology and all good theories perhaps, is an optimistic enterprise, eager to account for the whole of its relevant universe. For nearly two decades it has not only offered new ways of seeing a vast range of texts by both women and men, in virtually every genre and language; it also scrutinized the assumptions, theories, and methods of literary scholarship, from biography and history to deconstruction and psychoanalysis, from archetypal criticism to reader response, and all good theories perhaps, is an opposition that I hope my opening epigraph helps to dissolve.

Although feminism and narratology cannot really be said to have a history, there have been a few gestures of synthesis. While narratological studies are absent from nearly all of the otherwise eclectic and wide-ranging collections of feminist approaches to literature, the excellent volume Women and Language in

Literature and Society (1980) does incorporate essays of structuralist bent. The only direct efforts to link feminism and narratology of which I am aware are Manuela Minich Breuer’s critique of narratology in “A Loosening of Tongues,” Mieke Bal’s application of it in “Sexuality, Symbiosis and Binary” and the recent Femmes imaginaires of my own attempt to forge a feminist poetics of point of view in The Narrative Act, and the very recent essay of Robyn Warhol. Even feminist critics who acknowledge considerable debt to their-formalist or structuralist training have sharply criticized its limitations. Naomi Schor vows that she could not practice feminist criticism at all in the “subtle oppression exercised [in American departments of French] by structuralism at its least self-critical and doctrinaire” (ix); Josephine Donovan, speaking from an Anglo-American perspective, rejects “the dissection of literature as if it were an aesthetic machine made up of paradoxes, images, symbols, etc., as so many nuts and bolts easily disintegrated from the whole” (“Women’s Poetics” 108). It would be safe, I think, to say that no contemporary theory, whether Anglo-American or continental, has exerted so little influence on feminist criticism or been so summarily dismissed as formalist-structuralist narratology.

In part, of course, this coolness toward narratology—both the practice and the word—is characteristic of the profession as a whole. At the end of her excellent book on narrative poetics, Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan feels compelled to ask whether she has written “an introduction . . . or an obituary” to the field (130). Terry Eagleton uses even stronger death imagery when he likens structuralism to “killing a person in order to examine more conveniently the circulation of the blood” (109). To psychoanalytic critics like Peter Brooks, a formalist narratology, however valuable, cannot grasp “our experience of reading narrative as a dynamic operation” (316). And there is perhaps no surer barometer of professional sentiment than David Lodge’s brilliant satire, Small World, in which Morris Zapp says of a Sorbonne narratologist, “Hasn’t his moment passed? I mean, ten years ago everybody was into that stuff, actants and functions and mythemes and all that jazz. But now . . . ” (134). Those Anglo-American scholars who were never comfortable with structuralism in general or narratology in particular have probably been relieved at its decline, while most critics grounded in Continental thinking have moved on to post-structuralist theories that offer an exhilarating openness against which narratology may seem mechanical, empirical, hardly conducive to the plaisir du texte.

Given a literary climate at best indifferent to narratology, my desire to explore the compatibility of feminism and narratology is also a way to think about what narratology can and cannot do, what place it might have in the contemporary critical environment of American departments of literature, and how it might enrich the hermeneutical enterprise for critics who are not themselves theorists of narrative. My immediate task, however, will be more circumscribed: to ask whether feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods and insights of narratology and whether narratology, in turn, might be altered by the understandings of feminist criticism and the experience of women’s texts. It is in the frank desire to say yes to both these questions that this essay has been conceived. It is in the supposition that the readers of this journal are more involved with narratology than with feminism that my emphasis will be on the second question rather than the first.
There are compelling reasons why feminism (or any explicitly political criticism) and narratology (or any largely formal poetics) might seem incompatible. The technical, often neologistic, vocabulary of narratology has alienated critics of many persuasions and may seem particularly counterproductive to critics with political concerns. Feminists also tend to be distrustful of categories and oppositions, of "a conceptual universe organized into the neat paradigms of binary logic" (Shohr ix)—a distrust which explains part of the attraction of feminist theory to Derridean deconstruction. But there are (at least) three more crucial issues about which feminism and narratology might differ: the role of gender in the construction of narrative theory, the status of narrative as mimesis or semiosis, and the importance of context for determining meaning in narrative.

The most obvious question feminism would ask of narratology is simply this: upon what body of texts, upon what understandings of the narrative and referential universe, have the insights of narratology been based? It is readily apparent that virtually no work in the field of narratology has taken gender into account, either in designating a canon or in formulating questions and hypotheses. This means, first of all, that the narratives which have provided the foundation for narratology have been either men's texts or texts treated as men's texts.

Genette's formulation of a "Discours du récit" on the basis of Proust's A la Recherche du temps perdu, Propp's androcentric morphology of a certain kind of folktales, Greimas on Marquand, Iser on male novelists from Bunyan to Beckett, Barthes on Balzac, Todorov on the Descamaron—these are but evident examples of the ways in which the masculine text stands for the universal text. In the structuralist quest for "invariant elements among superficial differences" (Lévi-Strauss 8), for (so-called) universals rather than particulars, narratology has avoided questions of gender almost entirely. This is particularly problematic for those feminist critics—in this country, the majority—whose main interest is the "difference or specificity of women's writing" (Showalter, "Women's Time" 38).

The recognition of this specificity has led not only to the rereading of individual texts but to the rewriting of literary history; I am suggesting that it also leads to a rewriting of narratology that takes into account the contributions of women as both producers and interpreters of texts.

This challenge does not deny the enormous value of a body of brilliant narratological theory for the study of women's works; indeed, it has been applied fruitfully to such writers as Colette (Bal, "The Narrating and the Focalizing") and Eliot (Costello) and is crucial to my own studies of narrative voice in women's texts. It does mean that until women's writings, questions of gender, and feminist points of view are considered, it will be impossible even to know the deficiencies of narratology. It seems to me likely that the most abstract and grammatical concepts (say, theories of time) will prove to be adequate. On the other hand, as I will argue later in this essay, theories of plot and story may need to change substantially. And I would predict that the major impact of feminism on narratology will be to raise new questions, to add to the narratological distinctions that already exist, as I will be suggesting below in my discussions of narrative level, context, and voice.

A narratology for feminist criticism would also have to reconcile the primarily semiotic approach of narratology with the primarily mimetic orientation of most (Anglo-American) feminist thinking about narrative. This difference reminds us that "literature is at the juncture of two systems"; one can speak about it as a representation of life and as a non-referential linguistic system. A rewriting of narratology would have to account for the contextual, it does so in terms of narrative conventions and codes. Yet their capacity to account for social, historical, or contextual differences always remains limited by the original formalist closure within which such codes and conventions are defined (Brewer 1143). This is why early in the history of formalism, critics like Medvedev and Bakhtin called for a "sociological poetics", that would be dialectically theoretical and historical: "Poetics provides literary history with direction in the specification of the research material and the basic definitions of its forms and types. Literary history amends the definitions of poetics, making them more flexible, dynamic, and adequate to the diversity of the historical material" (30). My insistence on writing women's texts into the historical canon of narratology has precisely this aim of making it more adequate to the diversity of narrative.

Finally, feminist criticism would argue that narratology itself is ideological, indeed in an important sense fictional. One need not agree wholeheartedly with Stanley Fish that "formal units are always a function of the interpretive model one brings to bear (they are not 'in the text')" (13), to recognize that no inter-
narratology to certain problems for which other theories have not been adequate and hence illustrate its unique value for feminist scholarship.

I would like to begin the movement toward a feminist narratology by identifying some of the questions a feminist reading might raise for narratology. I will emphasize here not so much the fruitful applications which narratology could currently offer but the questions that it does not yet seem to have addressed. I have chosen, instead of a typical piece of fiction, a far more anomalous work because it presents many complexities in a short space of text and allows me to examine several aspects of women's writing and writing in general. The text is a letter, allegedly written by a young bride whose husband censored her correspondence. It appeared in Atkinson's Casket in April 1832, sandwiched between a discussion of angels and directions for "callisthenic exercises." No indication is given of the letter's source, authenticity, or authorship. I am assuming, but cannot be certain, that it is apocryphal; I make no assumptions about the author's sex. Here is the text as it appears in the Casket:

Secret Correspondence.—A young Lady, newly married, being obliged to show her husband, all the letters she wrote, sent the following to an intimate friend.

I cannot be satisfied, my Dearest Friend! blessed as I am in the matrimonial state, unless I pour into your friendly bosom, which has ever been in unison with mine, the various deep sensations which swell with the liveliest emotions of pleasure my almost bursting heart. I tell you my dear husband is one of the most amiable of men, and the most kind and charitable to the poor—yet I am still and forever unhappy, and my whole being is most acutely sensible of a want which I cannot supply. I long for a bosom-friend and confidant, I and not as a plaything or menial slave, the woman chosen to be his companion. Neither party he says ought to obey implicitly;—but each yield to the other by turns—An ancient maiden aunt, near seventy, an ancient maiden aunt, near seventy, a cheerful, venerable, and pleasant old lady, lives in the house with us—she is the delight of both young and old—she is civil to all the neighborhood round, generous and charitable to the poor—I know my husband loves nothing more...
than he does me; he flatters me more
than the glass, and his intoxication
(for so I must call the excess of his love)
often makes me blush for the unworthiness
of its object, and I wish I could be more deserving
of the man whose name I bear. To
say all in one word, my dear, and to
crown the whole, my former gallant lover
is now my indulgent husband, my fondness
is returned, and I might have had
a Prince, without the felicity I find with
him. Adieu! May you be as blest as I am un-
able to wish that I could be more
happy.

N.B.—The key to the above letter, is to read the first and then every alternate line.

For purposes of easy reference, I reproduce below the decoded subtext that this
reading of alternate lines will yield:

I cannot be satisfied, my Dearest Friend!
unless I pour into your friendly bosom,
the various deep sensations which swell
my almost bursting heart. I tell you my dear
I have been married seven weeks, and
repeat the day that joined us, my husband is
ugly, crank, old, disagreeable, and jealous;
and he says ought to obey implicitly;
An ancient maiden aunt, near seventy,
lives in the house with us—she is the de-
vil to all the neighborhood round.
I know my husband loves nothing more
than the glass, and his intoxication
often makes me blush for the unworthiness
of the man whose name I bear. To
crown the whole, my former gallant lover
is returned, and I might have had
him. Adieu! May you be as blest as I am un-
happy.

Written for two readers (the prying husband and the intimate friend) this letter is
in an unusually obvious sense a double construction, a blatant specimen of writing
over and under censorship. The surface text and subtext are strikingly different
both in story and narration, and a narrative theory adequate for describing
the whole will have to account for both and for the narrative frame that binds
them. In particular, such a text raises for discussion questions about narrative
voice, narrative situation, and plot.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the letters, apart from their con-
trasting stories, is the difference between the two voices. Some linguists have
argued that there is a "woman's language" or a discourse of the powerless:
speech that is "polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossip, talkative, uncertain,
dull, and chatty" in contrast to men's speech or powerful speech, which is "ca-
cable, direct, rational, illustrating a sense of humor, unfailing, strong (in tone
and word choice) and blunt" (Kramarae 58). The two letters illustrate many of
the differences between these two modes of speech. The surface text is virtually
a sampler of "women's language": its self-effacing narrator praises the "more
deserving" husband and blushes for her own "unworthiness"; her "liveliest
emotions" generate a discourse of repetition, hyperbole, convolution, and gram-
matical anomaly. It is the voice of one who clearly cannot "say all in one word,"
who can assert herself only in empty phrases and a syntax of negativism. The
voice of the subtext is, by contrast, strikingly simple and direct, in the kind of
language that commands (an all-too-ready) authority. This second narrator
shows herself angry, strong, decisive, sure of her judgments, acutely aware of her
husband's deficiencies and of her own lost opportunities. Her speech acts—
"I repent," "I know," "she is the devil," "I am unhappy"—are acts of conviction;
such a voice requires enormous confidence and would probably be accorded
an immediate credibility. Beneath the "feminine" voice of self-effacement and
emotionalism, then, lies the "masculine" voice of authority that the writer
cannot inscribe openly. The subtext also exposes the surface text, and hence
the surface voice, as a subterfuge, revealing the "feminine style" to be a car-
icature donned to mask a surer voice in the process of communicating to a
woman under the watchful eyes of a man. But this also means that the powerless
form called "women's language" is revealed as a potentially subversive—hence
powerful—tool.

In The Narrative Act I called for a poetics that would go beyond formal classifi-
cations in order to describe the subtle but crucial differences between voices like
these. For in structural terms the two voices are similar: both are first-person/
protagonist (autodiegetic) narrators (though they are addressing different nar-
ratees). Most of the qualities that distinguish the two voices have yet to be cod-
ified by narratology. One might ask, for example, what kinds of illocutionary acts
the narrator undertakes and whether she undertakes them in a discourse of
"presence" or "absence," if we take "absence" to encompass such practices as
"irony, ellipsis, euphemism, litotes, periphrasis, reticence, pretermission, di-
gression, and so forth" (Hamon 99). This question, in turn, might lead to a
(much-needed) theory that would define and describe TONE in narrative. Tone
might be conceived at least in part as a function of the relationship between the
deep and superficial structures of an illocutionary act (e.g., the relationship be-
tween an act of judgment and the language in which the judgment is expressed).

This double text recalls an even sharper lesson about narrative voice, the
lesson formulated by Bakhtin: that in narrative there is no single voice, that in far
subtler situations than this one, voice impinges upon voice, yielding a structure
in which discourses of and for the other constitute the discourses of self; that, to
go as far as Wayne Booth does, "We are constituted in polyphony" (51). The
blatant heteroglossia of this letter—and I shall suggest below that it is even more
layered than at first appears—is but a sharper version of the polyphony of all
voice and, certainly in visible ways, of the female voices in many women's nar-
ratives. For the condition of being woman in a male-dominant society may well
necessitate the double voice, whether as conscious subterfuge or as tragic dis- possession of the self. Thus in a text like Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator speaks her desires underneath a discourse constructed for her by her husband John; in Susan Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers” two women protect a third from a conviction for murder by communicating in “women’s language” under the watchful but unseeing eyes of the Law; in novel after novel Jane Austen constitutes a narrative voice that cannot be pinned down, that can be read according to one’s own desires; a novel like Marge Piercy’s Small Changes builds a double structure through which both its author and its protagonist work out the necessary living in a world of double discourse (Hansen). A narratology adequate to women’s texts (and hence to all texts, though polyphony is more pronounced and more consequential in women’s narratives and in the narratives of other dominated peoples) would have to acknowledge and account for the polyphony of voice, identifying and disentangling its strands, as recent studies by Graciela Reyes and Michael O’Neal begin to do.

If we return with this understanding of voice to the double-text letter, it is easy to identify those verbal features that distinguish one from the other by examining the forms of “excess” that were pared away in the decoding process. The first and least significant is a combination of repetition and hyperbole that serves as “filler,” yielding phrases like “which has ever been in unison with mine” and “with the liveliest emotions of pleasure.” The second is more important, for it creates the syntactic hinge that binds and finally transforms the whole: a series of negations that the subtext will reverse:

I . . . have never found the least reason to repent
my husband is . . . far from resembling . . . monsters
a wife, it is his maxim to treat . . . not as a playing
Neither party, he says ought to obey implicitly
I am unable to wish that I could be more happy—

This negativity is more than the link between two texts; it is the means by which the two letters finally yield a third: a story, a third voice, a third audience. For the negativity makes of the surface text one narrator’s simple proclamation of happiness but the indictment of an entire social system. What indeed, does the surface paint but the very portrait of marriage that it claims to erase? Each negation suggests departure from a social norm, a norm in which brides repeat their marriages, husbands are monstrous, women are treated as playthings or slaves, and women’s desires are unthinkable. In other words, the surface text, by saying what one particular marriage is not, shows the terrible contours of what its narrator expected marriage to be. While the subtext condemns one man and laments one woman’s fate, the surface letter condemns an entire society, presenting as typical the conditions which the subtext implies to be individual. The subtext, then, becomes an instance of the surface text rather than its antithesis; the two versions reveal not opposing but related truths. It is fitting, then, that they meet at their point of dissatisfaction, at the single line—the first—that does not change: “I cannot be satisfied, my dearest friend!”

In the light of this reading, women’s language becomes not simply a vehicle for constructing a more legitimate (masculine, powerful) voice but the voice through which the more global judgment of patriarchal practices is exercised. This text differs from the “palimpsestic” discourse feminist criticism frequently describes in which “surface designs” act simply as a cover to “conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning” (Gilbert and Gubar 73). Here the “surface design” turns out to be a more damning discourse than the text it purports to protect. The text designed for the husband conceals an undertext (the text designed for the confidante), but the undertext, in turn, creates a new reading of the surface text and hence a third text designed, I would argue, for yet another addressee. This third text is one constituted by the public “display-text” that is the letter as it appeared in Atkinson’s Casket. Its addressee is the literary reader; she is neither the duped male nor the sister-confidante but the unidentified public narratee of either sex who can see beyond the immediate context of the writer’s episitulatory circumstance to read the negative discourse as covert cultural analysis. Thus the literary context of this text provides a third and entirely different reading from the readings yielded to the private audiences of husband and friend. At the same time, it is the knowledge of the other two texts, the access to the private texts, that opens the third reading, in a version, perhaps, of what Genette calls hypertextuality (Palimpsest 11).

The fact that this letter has several narratemes suggests the importance of recognizing the narrative levels a text may contain. Gérard Genette has made an extremely important contribution to narratology in distinguishing the multiple diegetic levels possible in a single text because one narrative may enclose or generate another (Genette, Narrative Discourse 227–37; Nouveau Discours 55–64). Genette speaks of the outermost level as the extradiegetic, of a narrative incorporated within this one as metadiegetic, and of a third narrative level as metalegic. Extradiegetic narrators, says Genette, are usually “narrator-narrators”—Jane Eyre, George Eliot’s “third person” voice—and “as such they occupy the same narrative level as the public—that is, as you and me” (Narrative Discourse 229). But as Genette also makes clear, there is no necessary connection between extradiegetic narration and a public audience; letter-writers and diarists (Pamela, Werther) may also be extradiegetic narrators. Intra-diegetic (and metadiegetic) narrators—Rochester when he is telling Jane Eyre the story of Bertha Mason, the characters in Middlemarch—are conventionally able to address only narratees inscribed within the text. In Frankenstein Walton’s letters to his sister constitute an extradiegetic narrative; Frankenstein’s story, told to Walton, is intra-diegetic, and the monster’s history, narrated to Frankenstein and enclosed within the tale he tells Walton, is metadiegetic. Genette’s notion of levels provides a precise way of speaking about such embedded narratives and identifying their narratees—and for describing transgressions across narrative levels (called metalevels) like those Diderot’s narrator commits in Jacques le fataliste.

But Genette himself recognizes that narrative level has been made too much of, and that indeed it does not take us very far. In the Nouveau Discours he makes clear just how relative the distinction of levels is by generating an imaginary scene in which three men sit down, one offers to tell the others a story which he warns will be long, and the storyteller begins, “For a long time I used to go to bed early . . .” (64). With a frame of only a sentence, says Genette, the entirety of Proust’s A la Recherche suddenly becomes an intra-diegetic narration. If we look at the letter in terms of Genette’s levels, we could identify as either an
extra-diegetic narrator or simply as an editor the voice that presents the letter as a specimen of "Female Ingenuity" and explains both its context and its secret code to the readers of Atkinson's Casket. The diegetic level of the letter is then contingent on this initial decision. And both the surface letter and the subtext, being intertextual, exist on the same level, in an unusual case of double diegesis.

Genette's notion of levels does not allow us to say much about the narrative situation of this letter because it applies only to internal relations among parts of a text. It does not describe any individual narrative act per se, and it closes off the text from considerations external and contextual.

To provide a more complete analysis of narrative level, I would propose as a complement to Genette's system a distinction between public and private narrative. By public narrative I mean simply narration (implicitly or explicitly) addressed to a narratee who is external (that is, heterodiegetic) to the textual world and who can be equated with a public readership; private narration, in contrast, is addressed to an explicitly designated narratee who exists only within the textual world. Public narration evokes a direct relationship between the reader and the narratee and clearly approximates most closely the nonfictional author-reader relationship, while in private narration the reader's access is indirect, as if were "through" the figure of a textual persona. Such a distinction, combined with Genette's notions of both level and person, would yield the typology shown on the facing page.

I propose this notion of public and private narrative levels as an additional category particularly relevant to the study of women's texts. For women writers, as feminist criticism has long noted, the distinction between private and public contexts is a crucial and a complicated one. Traditionally speaking, the sanctions against women's writing have taken the form not of prohibitions to write at all but of prohibitions to write for a public audience. As Virginia Woolf comments, "Letters did not count": letters were private and did not disturb a male discursive hegemony. Dale Spender takes the distinctions even further, arguing that the surface letter is intended by its narrator to be an eminently public text, designed for a private readership. Yet the surface letter is intended by its narrator to be an eminently private text, designed for a public readership.

The dichotomy of male/female, public/private is maintained by permitting women to write... for themselves (for example, diaries) and for each other in the form of letters, "accomplished" pieces, moral treatises, articles of interest for other women—particularly in the domestic area—and even novels for women.... There is no contradiction in patriarchal order while women write for women and therefore remain within the limits of the private sphere; the contradiction arises only when women write for men. (192)

The bride's letter both illustrates Spender's formulation and expands it in important ways. The only public level of narration here is the narration that presents the letter in the Casket as the "display" of a correspondence. In relation to this level, the letter itself is a private text, designed for a private readership. Yet the surface letter is intended by its narrator to be an eminently public text in relation to the subtext, which is the private text she urgently hopes will not be available to the "public" who is her husband. In terms of the 1-narrator's intentions, the
to its existence except itself, and it requires a reader who brings to it particular kinds of knowledge. Since it is at the public level of narration that the ideal reading becomes possible, the letter presented as a display text also escapes the gender associations of the original structure of the intradiegetic narrative (in which it seems that public = male and private = female), suggesting a kind of paradigm for reading "as a woman" that encompasses but is not determined by the question of sex. Equally, when women write novels that use private narrative forms, they are nonetheless writing for a public, and a public that cannot entirely be dichotomized in gender terms. How individual writers negotiate this complex context of gender and public-ity constitutes another important area to investigate.

The difference between Genette's formulation of narrative levels and my own illustrates, I hope, the difference between purely formal and contextual approaches to meaning in narrative. Just as speech act theory understood that the minimal unit of discourse was not the sentence but the production of the sentence in a specific context, so the kind of narratology I am proposing would understand that the minimal narrative is the narrative as produced. In the case of the letter that appears in the Casket, questions of context are closely related to interpretive possibilities. For depending on whether one sees the letter as a historical document or as a text written deliberately for display—and whether, if "display text," an imitation or a parody—different readings of the letter emerge. If the text is an authentic document, a letter actually written by an unhappy wife that somehow came into the hands of the Casket, then the text might become important historical evidence of the ways in which women's writing is conditioned by censorship. If the text were constructed as imitation, it stands as evidence of the perception, if not the historical fact, of censorship. But the letter may well have been intended as a parody of the "female style." Indeed, the history of this style, and its connection to the epistolary, provides the context for an interesting possibility. Historically, the letter has such overdetermined associations with women that what became thought of as the "female style," a style acclaimed for its artlessness, its sense of immediacy and lack of forethought, was a style tied to the epistolary mode (Donovan, "The Silence is Broken" 212-14). If the letter is in fact a "display text," it may well be a display of "female ingenuity" not only in the obvious sense of a clever composition that finds a woman's way around censorship, but in the service of a broader and literary design: to make mockery of the assumptions about women's "artless" epistolary style, to reveal woman as man's equal in intellectual capacity. For "ingenuity," the OED tells us, means not only the (oxymoronic) union of straightforward openness with the genius for skillful, inventive design but also the quality or condition of being a free-born man. And if the letter was written by its own editor, it also provided a convenient and safe vehicle for criticizing male dominance, since an editor need take no responsibility for a private "found" text.

The rhetorical complexity of the letter reminds us that narrative meaning is also a function of narrative circumstance. Narratology has not yet provided satisfying language through which to make distinctions of rhetorical context; feminist criticism, in its concern with questions of authenticity and authorship, might find it difficult even to talk about a text this uncertain in origin. A feminist narratology might acknowledge the existence of multiple texts, each constructed by
women's texts, then what is needed is a radical revision in theories of plot. For one thing, as Katherine Rabuzzi notes (in Donovan, "Jewetts Critical Theory" 218), "by and large, most women have known a nonstrored existence." Women's experience, says Donovan, often seems, when held against the masculine plot, "static, and in a mode of waiting. It is not progressive, or oriented toward events happening sequentially or climactically, as in the traditional masculine story plot" (218–19). This letter, or a novel like Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs, can thus only be defined as a "plotless text." (Donovan, "Women's Poetics," 106). Similarly, some of Grace Paley's finest stories (for example, "Friends" and "Ruthy and Edie" in the recent collection, Later the Same Day), which a traditional narratology would describe as "plotless," are constituted by plots of women's attempts to "make sense" of their world. A contemporary popular novel like Meg Wolitzer's Hidden Pictures, which sets up negative possibilities that neither occur nor are noted not to occur, when measured against plot theories becomes a "flawed" story making worrisome predictions that it does not fulfill. Yet one could also see this plot as a structure of anxiety and (gradual) relief that corresponds to real-world experiences of women in the difficult circumstances of this novel's protagonists, a lesbian couple raising a son in suburbia. If again and again scholars of women's writing must speak in terms of the "plotless" (usually in quotation marks, suggesting their dissatisfaction with the term), then perhaps something is wrong with the notion of plot that has followed women's narratives morphology. Perhaps narratology has been mistaken in trying to arrive at a single definition and description of plot. We will learn more about women's narratives—and about scores of twentieth-century texts—if we make ourselves find language for describing their plots in positive rather than negative terms.

There is another level of plot, too, that the bride's letter urges us to think about. There is, in fact, one sequence of anticipation and fulfillment that this text does fully constitute, and it occurs in the act of writing. In the case of both letters, whether the narrator's life is happy or miserable, what she "cannot be satisfied" without is, simply, the telling—narrative itself. The act of writing becomes the fulfillment of desire, telling becomes the single predicate act, as if to tell were in itself to resolve, to provide closure. Récit et histoire, rather than being separate elements, converge, so that telling becomes integral to the working out of story. Communication, understanding, being understood, becomes not only the objective of the narration but the act that can transform (some aspect of) the narrated world. In a universe where waiting, inaction, reception, predominate, and action is only minimally possible, the narrative act itself becomes the source of possibility.

What happens in the letter, then, is that the wish for the other's happiness substitutes for the possibility of change in one's own life; the writer's experience serves as a (positive or negative) stimulus to the reader's own story. The confidante thus becomes an active participant not simply in narration, but in plot itself; the wish for the narratee's happiness transfers the imperatives of plot, so that the possibilities of change and fulfillment are given over to the narratee. The letter thus suggests a plot behind women's "plotless" narrative, the subversive plot of sharing an experience so that the listener's life may complete the speaker's tale. I would be eager for narratology to talk about such a crossing of the plot of narration with the story plot.

My analysis of this coded letter suggests in sketchy ways aspects of narrative that a revised poetics might scrutinize and codify. A comprehensive theory of voice would develop a framework for describing the elements that constitute polyphony and would formulate a linguistically based theory of narrative tone. Attention to the rhetorical context of narrative—its generic status and the public or private level of the narration—would be understood as important determinants of narrative meaning. And theories of plot and story would be reconceived to find alternatives to the notion of plot as active acquisition or solution and to incorporate the plot that may be generated by the relationship between narrator and narratee. Once it is clear that some (women's) texts cannot be adequately described by traditional, formalist narratology, we begin to see that other texts—postmodernist texts, texts by writers of Asia and Africa, perhaps—may be similarly unaccounted for. It is only, I believe, such an expansive narratology that can begin to fulfill the wish Gerald Prince expresses at the end (164) of his Nar­ratology: that "ultimately, narratology can help us understand what human beings are."

NOTES

I am grateful to Michael Ragussis, Leona Fisher, Caren Kaplan, and Harold Mosher for invaluable criticism of this essay in successive manuscript stages.

1. A simple distinction between so-called "American" and "French" feminisms is impossible. By "French" feminism is usually meant feminism conceived within the theoretical premises of poststructuralism and hence heavily indebted to the writings of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray. "American" feminism tends to be conceived within the political imperatives of the American women's liberation movement and the historical experience of women in general and women writers in particular. Both modes are practiced in the United States, and the two have become increasingly intertwined. Nonetheless, the debates go on. For further discussion of the differences see, for example, the introduction and bibliography and the essay by Ann Jones in Showalter, The New Feminist Criticism; for an example of the new synthesis, see Meese.

2. See especially Furman 45–54.

3. A piece of Bell's book on the Hebrew Bible is available to English-language readers as "Sexuality, Sin and Sorrow."

4. It is revealing that the single sentence in my book most cited by reviewers is the statement that "my training is deeply formalist, and my perspective as deeply feminist"; clearly many scholars consider feminism and narratology an odd pair.

5. I find it ironic that Donovan's rejection of formalist "dissection" is justified by finding it incompatible with what Evelyn Beck and I have called a "women's epistemology" (Lanser and Beck 36).

6. Particularly in the wake of the new psychoanalytic narrative theories the term narratology has fallen into disuse, perhaps perceived as too narrowly structuralist. Critics disagree about the differences between narratology and narrative poetics; see, for example, Rimmon-Kenan's attempt to distinguish the two in Narrative Fiction (133 n.1). By narratology I mean simply that branch of poetics concerned with defining and describing all aspects of narrative.
I have chosen throughout this essay to use the word narratology rather than narrative poetics partly to foreground the dissonance between narratology and feminism and partly to identify more precisely the formalist/structuralist practices that I am discussing here. I will, however, be calling in this essay for a study of narrative that is finally less formalist than narratology generally connotes. For that reason, and since I am also suggesting a less alienating terminology for the study of narrative, I can also see the advantages of narrative poetics, and I would not hesitate to make the change.

7. While there is a reader-oriented narratology that emphasizes the process of text production, Rimmon-Kenan is right to imply that "the more far-reaching 'revisionism' of some reader-oriented studies . . . is often at odds with the very project of narrative poetics" (118).

8. Oppositional thinking has, of course, been sharply disadvantageous to women, as to other dominated groups. Binary pairs of the variety Patri-Patri are precisely the structures that create hierarchy (as in nonwhite, illiterate, un-American). Categories and classifications, while sometimes also used by feminists, are ripe for Froeschian distortions, for premature closures, for stifling rigidities.

9. In The Narrative Act I have in fact worked with women's texts as well as with men's, and I have also included the narrative theories of neglected women like Vernon Lee and Käte Friedemann. But I did not really undertake the radical recalculation I am now calling for, one which would mean beginning with women's writings (both narrative and theoretical) in order not to re-marginalize the marginal, in compensation for a training that has been so strongly biased in favor of male discourse.

10. I discovered this letter quite accidentally. While browsing through the stacks of the University of Wisconsin-Madison library several years ago, I came across an odd compendium titled The Gentle Female, edited by Clifton Furness. Its endpapers consist of the page from Atkinson's Casket which contains the letter.

11. There are three controversies embedded in this topic: whether there is in fact a "women's language," whether it is exclusive to women, and whether it is a negative characteristic. In 1975 Robin Lakoff suggested that women use language forms that differ from men's, and that this language reinforces the social and political powerlessness of women. Other critics have argued that "women's language" is a fiction constructed upon sex stereotypes and that women do not actually speak differently from men. Still others agree that there is difference but rather than seeing the difference as negative, they consider "women's language" better oriented to concern for others and to the careful contextualizing of one's beliefs (rather than the "masculine" assertion of universals). For a sense of this controversy see Spender 32–51. A related question is whether it is more accurate to speak of "women's language" or of "powerless language." On the basis of empirical study in a courtroom context, O'Barr and Atkins found that female witnesses speak in the "powerful style" than to those speaking in the "powerless style.

12. Richard Sennett believes that simple, direct discourse in the active voice bespeaks a confidence that frequently inspires a too-easy and hence dangerous obscissive. See Authority, chapter 5.

13. Mary Louise Pratt uses the term to designate a text or speech act whose relevance lies in its tellability, and which is thus detachable from its immediate circumstances of production. Literary texts and jokes are examples. See Pratt 36–48.

14. I thank Harold Mosher for the suggestion that this figure is not actually a narrator at all but merely an editor. I had been considering this voice to be similar to the one that introduces, say, the governess's narrative in The Turn of the Screw. The problem, I believe, lies at least in part with Genette's own system, which does not distinguish an editor from an extradiegetic narrator. Such a narrator, after all, may appear only briefly to introduce a major extradiegetic narrative and may do so in the guise of an editor.

15. I am suggesting that not only narrators but also narratees can be extradiegetic or homodiegetic—that is, within or outside the fictional world—and that a homodiegetic narrator can address a heterodiegetic narratee (although it would constitute a narrative transgression for a heterodiegetic narrator to address a homodiegetic narratee). I have decided not to use these terms, however, in order to avoid confusion with heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators and because of my commitment to simplify narrative terminology.

16. This is somewhat different from the case of a letter that is intercepted by a character for whom it was not destined, as happens frequently, say, in Clarissa. The difference is that in this case the narratee knows her text will be intercepted and has structured the surface narrative accordingly.

17. The differences between private and public narration in narratives by women are a major focus of the book I am now completing on women writers and narrative voice.

18. As Susan Léger has pointed out to me, a book like Ross Chambers's Story and Situation is a healthy exception to this norm.

19. I am aware that my analysis of the letters has omitted any discussion of the maiden aunt and that her "maidenness" makes her a particularly interesting figure in the context of the portraits of marriage in these letters.

20. One could argue that the presence of a lover in the subtext keeps externally open the possibility of action, even if that action seems to be thwarted by the given text. Such a possibility testifies to the power of the desire for plot.

21. For the example of these Paley stories I am indebted to Alan Wilde, whose book, Middle Ground: Studies in Contemporary American Fiction (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), includes a chapter on her work.

WORKS CITED


