

24. Aldiss's chapter on Mary Shelley is entitled "The Origins of the Species." See Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree*, p. 24, for his admiring statement.

25. Walling, p. 72.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

27. *Three Gothic Novels*, p. 267. According to the introduction to the 1931 edition, Percy Shelley wrote the original preface.

28. According to Professor Judith Long Laws of Cornell University (in conversation, fall 1971), the intense emotionality of the Modern Gothics and the romance magazines is a form of pornography for women who read them. Many feminist writers, including Phyllis Chesler in *Women and Madness* and Germaine Greer in her chapter on "Romance" in *The Female Eunuch*, suggest that the quintessential form of sexually arousing experience/fantasy for women in a patriarchal culture is father-daughter incest. See Joanna Russ, "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 6 (Spring 1973), 666-91.

29. Walling, p. 82.

30. Abridged versions of *The Last Man* have appeared twice, to my knowledge: in *Strange Signposts*, Roger Elwood and Sam Moskowitz, eds. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), and in *Speculations: An Introduction to Literature through Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Thomas E. Sanders, ed. (New York: Glencoe Press, 1973). Nobody seems able to bear it at full length. One sometimes wishes that what James Blish calls the British writers of "one-lung" catastrophes would read it once and die.

31. Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree*, p. 34.

32. George Bernard Shaw, *Music in London*, vol. 1 (London: Constable and Co., 1956), p. 293.

33. George Bernard Shaw, *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, vol. 3 (London: Constable and Co., 1954), pp. 236, 318.

34. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 99.

35. *Three Gothic Novels*, p. 262.

36. Quoted by Ellen Moers in "Female Gothic: The Monster's Mother," *New York Review of Books*, March 21 and April 4, 1974. Moers's treatment of *Frankenstein* stresses its importance as a myth of birth. However, none of Moers's treatment of Gothic writing by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries deals with the social conditions experienced by them, outside of a quasi-Freudian reference to the sexuality of the nursery. Moers sees childhood as determining (supposed) adulthood, but does not see who or what determines the conditions of child life or what children learn.

37. Walling, p. 17.

## 10

## Recent Feminist Utopias

**I** finished *The Female Man* (one of the novels cited in the following essay) in 1971. It saw publication in 1975, some years after Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*. The women's movement that first flowered in the 1970s had its repercussions in science fiction as it had in so many other literary and extra-literary areas in the United States. The following is an attempt to sum up what had been happening in science fiction and the common themes and common terms all of us seemed to turn to when we wrote. I do not think most of this should be conceptualized as "influence" since I wrote *The Female Man* without having read *Les Guérillères*, Gearhart wrote at least some of the stories in *The Wanderground* before *The Female Man* came out, and all but one of the utopian stories or novels considered below resemble not only each other but also the nineteenth-century feminist utopias Carol Pearson talks of and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. What we have here is, I suspect, parallel evolution.

In the last few years, science fiction in the United States has seen a mini-boom of feminist utopias, a phenomenon obviously contemporaneous with the women's movement itself. Of the books and short stories considered in this paper, the earliest—not actually American but possibly a catalyst for some of the others—was Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*,<sup>1</sup> brought out in English translation by Viking in 1971. The latest—Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines*<sup>2</sup>—was published by Berkley-Putnam in 1978. Of the group of works I will be considering here, Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*<sup>3</sup> was published in 1974 and my own *The Female Man*<sup>4</sup> in 1975. The remaining seven works (two of which are by a single

author) appeared in 1976. These are Samuel Delany's *Triton*,<sup>5</sup> Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Shattered Chain*,<sup>6</sup> Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*,<sup>7</sup> Sally Gearhart's *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women*,<sup>8</sup> Catherine Madsen's "Commodore Bork and the Compost,"<sup>9</sup> and two stories by Alice Sheldon, "Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light!"<sup>10</sup> under the pseudonym of Raccoona Sheldon and "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" under the pseudonym of James Tiptree, Jr.<sup>11</sup>

Although "utopia" may be a misnomer for some of these works, many of which (like *Triton* or *The Dispossessed*) present not perfect societies but only ones better than our own, "feminist" is not. All these fictions present societies (and in one case, a guild organization) that are conceived by the author as better in explicitly feminist terms and for explicitly feminist reasons. In only one work, *The Dispossessed*, is feminism *per se* not the author's primary concern; it is secondary to Le Guin's communitarian anarchism. No doubt such a formulation does less than justice to Le Guin's work, but oversimplifications are necessary in dealing with so many works in so short a space. Even though *The Dispossessed* is feminist and utopian (rather than a feminist utopia as such) and though the society in *The Shattered Chain* is a group (the Guild of Free Amazons) within the larger society of the planet Darkover, these works form a remarkably coherent group in their presentation of feminist concerns and the feminist analyses that are central to these concerns.

Moreover, they imagine their better—and feminist—societies in strikingly similar terms. Science fiction is a small field and it's likely that these writers have read one another (with the exception of Wittig, who could not have read the others' works, although they have probably read *Les Guérillères*); nonetheless it is significant exactly what these writers choose to imitate. In Carol Pearson's recent "Women's Fantasies and Feminist Utopias,"<sup>12</sup> an essay covering six modern works (five of which I also examine in this paper) and two that "grow out of the nineteenth-century women's movement," Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora*, Pearson finds "surprisingly numerous areas of consensus among such seemingly divergent works."<sup>13</sup> She does not, in fact, find it necessary to distinguish between the two older novels and their modern cousins. It seems to me reasonable to assume that, just as Gilman and Lane were responding to the women's movement of their time, so the works I discuss here are not only contemporaneous with the modern feminist movement but made

possible by it.\* Both sets of books become even more interesting in the light of the twentieth-century tradition of American science fiction. I have argued elsewhere that American science fiction (until the 1970s) has in general ignored both woman's estate and the problems of social structure with which feminism deals.<sup>14</sup> Even such honorable exceptions as Theodore Sturgeon and Damon Knight, to name only two, could only indicate their distress at a state of affairs in which women were perceived as inferior and men were encouraged in machismo, without providing the political analysis that did not, at that time, exist, since earlier feminism had been buried and the new feminism of the late 1960s had yet to occur. For example, Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X*<sup>15</sup> presents no political analysis of sex class, and its solution—literal unisex—places the blame for oppressive social conditions on the biologically innate temperament of the sexes, a solution the authors I am considering here would certainly reject, because of either the assignment of blame to biology or the assignment of blame to both sexes equally. Aside from such atypical works, most American science fiction can be divided into three categories according to its attitude toward sex roles: the status quo (which will be carried into the future without change), role reversals (seen as evil), and fiction in which women (usually few) are shown working as equals alongside men; but the crucial questions about the rest of society (e.g., personal relations and who's doing the work women usually do) are not answered. When science fiction between 1965 and 1975 has dealt with feminist insights, it has usually been by the expansion of that last category, with the usual evasions: parenting and human nurturing take place offstage, as do the effects of such work on the personalities of those who do it. The work women do in acting out sexual and power fantasies for the emotional R & R of men is either not present or it is taken for granted as a natural part of the human scene. Work that is both sex- and class-limited (for example, the drudgery of maintenance and production as well as the drudgery of housework) is usually ignored altogether. When such work occurs, it is part of the natural world and is not examined; it is something the superior hero must escape from or something that is to be done away with (vaguely)

\*Pearson covers some of the materials I focus on in this paper, notably the communal nature of the societies portrayed, the absence of crime, the relative lack of government, and the diffusion of the parental role to the whole society. She also treats the lack of dualistic thinking, the importance of mothering and the philosophical and religious attitudes of the societies portrayed.

by machinery, or something that, although boring and dehumanizing, is nonetheless better than the boredom presumed to follow (in the mass of ordinary people, not in the hero) from its absence.

In view of this general previous neglect, the works treated in this paper are remarkable not only for their explicit feminism but for the similar forms the feminism takes. They not only ask the same questions and point to the same abuses; they provide similar answers and remedies.

For one thing, the societies portrayed in these tales are, with one exception, *communal*, even *quasi-tribal*. Government does not exist or hardly exists, although there is sometimes a council dealing with work assignments (seen as the main problem of government). *Les Guérillères* is self-consciously "tribal" in its imagery. The Anarresti of *The Dispossessed* are anarchists; their communities recall in flavor the Israeli kibbutz. The core of social structure in *The Female Man* is families of thirty to thirty-five persons; children have free run of the planet past puberty, and "the kinship web is world-wide."<sup>16</sup> In "Your Faces, O My Sisters!" the society imagined by the mad, present-day protagonist practices common worship in the open, as do the characters in the Gearhart stories, who live in small groups in a setting so natural as to recall primatologists' descriptions of the nightly nests gorillas make in trees. In "Houston, Houston" government exists largely to shift people from job to job; families are groups of women cloned from the same stock, who refer to each other as "sisters" and keep a family book. The two Judys in the story (their names, Judy Dakar and Judy Paris, recall the feminist painter Judy Chicago) refer to "The Book of Judy." The society in "Commodore Bork and the Compost," a spoof of *Star Trek*, is a small, closed society in a spaceship, in which everyone is related, while in *Woman on the Edge of Time* the world consists of many such family-communities, in which everyone knows and is a relative of everyone else. *Motherlines* is literally tribal, with its horse-riding nomads who raid each other's camps for horses. Carol Pearson has suggested that women's visions of utopia use the family as a model for social structure, but the unowned, non-patriarchal family, headed by nobody.<sup>17</sup> Certainly the groupings in most of these tales go beyond small-town neighborliness into genuine family cohesion or at the least (in *The Dispossessed*) the cooperation and comradeship expressed by the Anarresti word "ammari." (Le Guin translates the word as "brothers.") Only in *Triton* is there an urban society in which one can meet real strangers, though

even here we're told that Lux, the biggest city on Triton, numbers only ten thousand people.

Without exception the stories are ecology-minded. Such concern is common in science fiction nowadays. However, many of the stories go beyond the problems of living in the world without disturbing its ecological balance into presenting their characters as feeling a strong emotional connection to the natural world. The Gearhart stories are the most insistent about this, the characters on occasion talking to (and listening to) trees. A native of the Ark in "Commodore Bork" describes in lyrical terms the ship's compost room, in which "the eggshells, the cabbage leaves, the tampons softly moldering" make the visitor from the *Invictus* feel ill, and tells a defector from that ship (the only female officer on it), "If you get homesick for metal surfaces, I'll even take you up to the navigation rooms."<sup>18</sup> *Woman on the Edge of Time* is so suffused with the feeling of harmony with nature that one quotation would understate the importance of this in the novel, while in "Houston, Houston" the spaceship of the utopian society contains not only chickens but an enormous kudzu vine, and the women who run the ship talk excitedly about the possibility of getting a goat. The Anarresti spend much of their time out-of-doors (it would be interesting to do a line count of outdoor versus indoor scenes on Anarres), and the most lyrical parts of *The Dispossessed*, to my mind, take place outdoors, as do most of the Whileawayan scenes in *The Female Man*. Only in *Triton* is there no connection with the out-of-doors, since in this case the "out of doors" is the surface of a moon of Neptune, an environment absolutely hostile to life.

*Triton* is also an exception to another rule that prevails in this group of fictions; except for it, all the societies presented are *classless*. Le Guin's book is a long discussion of this fact; the other stories simply take it for granted. Even Bradley's Guild of Free Amazons, which exists on a feudal world in which class is omnipresent and an absolutely assumed social constant, abolishes class distinctions within its own organization, i.e., it does not model its structure on the hierarchy of the world around it. Even "Commodore Bork," while it pokes fun at the *Invictus's* chain of command and casually mentions its own job-shifting, does not argue the point. So pervasive are the results of this classlessness—e.g., the informality of tone, the shifting of jobs from person to person, the free choice of jobs whenever possible—that the authors' not discussing their worlds' forms of government seems neither ignorance nor sloppiness. Rather, classlessness is an assumption so absolute that it need not be

discussed. Similarly, few of these societies (except perhaps that of *The Dispossessed*) examine gender stereotypes to see if they are true, or argue against them. We merely see that they are not true and do not apply. For example, on the Ark one of the natives asks the woman officer from the *Invictus* (in mild bafflement), "Do they make you do that to your hair?"<sup>19</sup>

Triton, the only utopian society here that is class-stratified, is also the only society engaged in international (or rather, interplanetary) war. However, this war is very different from those usual in science fiction, for example, Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* or Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, in which inter-species war resembles (respectively) the Korean War or the Pacific theater in World War II, with more advanced technology. Delany's war, science-fictionally ingenious, consists almost entirely of sabotage, the results of which are like natural disaster. In *Motherlines* there are occasional clashes between the border guards of the Riding Women and the Holdfasters (the gynocidal society of the Eastern seaboard) who accidentally stray into their territory. In *Woman on the Edge of Time* there is a war going on between the utopian society of the novel and a dehumanized, class-stratified, mechanical society, which holds the moon and a few remote bases on earth—and yet this war may be only a possibility in another continuum. Even the possibility is kept on the margins of the book. In *Les Guérillères* there is a war between the women and the men—presented, however, pretty much in metaphor (as is everything else in the book). The Anarrestis of *The Dispossessed* constitute one, warless society, nor is there a war going on between them and their mother/sister planet, Urras. There are no wars in the other utopias, although in at least two cases ("Houston, Houston" and one society of the four in *The Female Man*) there were—or rather, may have been—wars in the past. Even these are not national, territorial wars, but, in one case, a sexual Cold War and, in the other, a general breakdown of society caused by biological, natural disaster.

In short, the violence that does occur in these stories (with the exception of *Triton*) is that of ideological skirmish, natural disaster, social collapse, and/or something that may have occurred in the past but is not happening in the present. (One might argue that women's usual experience of war is just that: social collapse and natural disaster. Certainly few women have experienced war as part of a military hierarchy and few expect to do so.) None are dramatically full-scale shooting wars and none are central to the plots of the stories. (The war in *Triton* is confined to its effect on helpless civilians; it occurs in two fairly brief episodes.) In

general violence seldom occurs and is taken seriously when it does occur, *Triton* in particular focusing on the anguish of helpless people harmed or killed by the sabotaging of Triton's artificial gravity. Violence in these tales has emotional consequences and is certainly not presented as adventure or sport.

Classless, without government, ecologically minded, with a strong feeling for the natural world, quasi-tribal in feeling and quasi-familial in structure, the societies of these stories are *sexually permissive* in terms I suspect many contemporary male readers\* might find both unspectacular and a little baffling, but which would be quite familiar to the radical wing of the feminist movement, since the point of the permissiveness is not to break taboos but to separate sexuality from questions of ownership, reproduction, and social structure. Monogamy, for example, is not an issue, since family structure is a matter of parenting or economics, not the availability of partners. *Woman on the Edge of Time* is reproductively the most inventive of the group, with bisexuality (they don't perceive it as a category and so don't name it) as the norm, exogenetic birth, triads of parents of both sexes caring for children, and all three parents nursing infants. Exclusive homosexuality (also not named) is an unremarkable idiosyncrasy. *The Shattered Chain*, the most conservative in its sexual/reproductive arrangements (necessarily since its Guild is only an organization embedded in a larger feudal society), nonetheless presents two separate, legal forms of marriage—one more than we have!—and the Free Amazons are casual about male and female homosexuality. In *The Dispossessed*, monogamy (which has no legal status), casual promiscuity, homosexuality and heterosexuality are all acceptable, and adolescent bisexuality is the norm. I find that Le Guin's biases for monogamy and heterosexuality show (there seems to be only one male homosexual on Anarres and no female ones and the monogamous people we see are clearly nicer—at least in adulthood—than the promiscuous) but the auctorial intention is clear. "Commodore Bork" is cheerful about homosexuality, heterosexuality, promiscuity, and a reproductive technique that allows one woman to have a baby "with" another; everybody parents. The response to all of this by the Captain of the *Invictus* is to try to seduce all the young women he meets, telling them (in effect): What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?

\*The matter is amply dealt with in the literature of the feminist movement. Briefly, these stories would be very much out of place in *Playboy* and its imitators, as well as in the underground press (e.g., underground comics).

*Triton*, always the exception, goes beyond the permissiveness of the other works into an area of argument I suspect the other authors might find both witty and unpleasantly mechanical, since Delany divorces sex from affection (as the other works do not) and both recognizes and, philosophically speaking, honors erotic specializations like sadism that the other authors ignore. That is, he considers no uncoerced form of sexuality privileged. Triton's is the only society in the group that provides for sex-change surgery, although the novel's detestable protagonist is the only character in the book who takes the change as seriously as do contemporary transsexuals. The other characters seem to see it as a form of cosmetic surgery. On Triton, transsexing as gender-role change is impossible, since Triton's is a society in which it is impossible to be "masculine" or "feminine." As in Piercy's book, parenting is shared by all the members of a family and men suckle infants.

There remain six works in which the only sexuality portrayed is matter-of-factly Lesbian, and necessarily so, since the societies described contain only women. Since Lesbianism is a charge routinely made against feminists (the recent sexual-preference resolution at the women's conference in Houston was passed in part to combat the disuniting of women that arises from such a charge), and since many men appear to believe that the real goal of all feminists is to get rid of men, it is important to investigate the reasons why these authors exclude men from their utopias. In the two-sexed utopian societies, Lesbianism is one among many forms of freedom, but a world without men raises two questions: that of Lesbianism and (lurking behind it) the question of separatism. I believe the separatism is primary, and that the authors are not subtle in their reasons for creating separatist utopias: if men are kept out of these societies, it is because men are dangerous. They also hog the good things of this world.

In "Houston, Houston" the intruders (men from our time) into an all-female world are given a disinhibiting drug. The results are megalomania, attempted rape, horrifying contempt, and senseless attempted murder. One of the women comments with obvious irony, "You have made history come alive for us." The men will be killed; "we simply have no facilities for people with your emotional problems."<sup>20</sup>

In "Your Faces, O My Sisters!" (by the same author) a madwoman who believes she is living in a future, all-female utopia, and is therefore safe anywhere at any time, is raped and murdered by a male gang in a city at night.

In *Motherlines* the heroine, a native of the society of the Holdfast, where all women are chattel slaves owned in common by all men, escapes only because she has been trained as a runner. She is pregnant with a child, the product of rape. She meets the Riding Women, strong, free, nomad Amazons who travel adventurously over the Great Plains. Gathering an army of women from among the "free fems" (escaped slaves), she becomes a chief and leader of her people.

In *The Female Man* women of the all-female utopia are farmers, artists, members of the police force, scientists, and so on, and: "there's no being out too late in Whileaway, or up too early, or in the wrong part of town or unescorted. . . . There is no one who can keep you from going where you please . . . no one who will follow you and try to embarrass you by whispering obscenities in your ear. . . . While here, where we live!"<sup>21</sup>

In *Les Guérillères* bands of strong women roam freely everywhere, run machinery and control production.

Sally Gearhart's characters, with their hard-won training in para-physical powers, travel freely over forests and plains. But they avoid the cities, for men still rule there.

The physical freedom to travel safely and without money is emphasized also in the two-sexed societies, though *The Dispossessed* shows such freedom being enjoyed by a male character. Most of *The Shattered Chain* is taken up with the travels and adventures of bands of Free Amazons, who are twice taunted and attacked by groups of men (for no reason). Even Triton—urban, class-bound, money-economy that it is—is far freer physically than any American city; indeed Delany emphasizes that the "Unlicensed Sector" of Lux, the part of the city without laws, is safer than the rest. (This sort of unpoliced part of town is usually used in science fiction as a pretext for showing various kinds of violence.) It's hardly necessary to stress here that physical mobility without cultural restraints, without harassment or the threat of it, is denied women in the United States today (not to mention elsewhere) and that access to most professions and public activities is similarly restricted.

Careful inspection of the manless societies usually reveals the intention (or wish) to allow men in . . . if only they can be trusted to behave. *Les Guérillères*, the most lyrical of the group, has the women allowing men back into their society, but only after the women have won. *Motherlines* (the sequel to a previously published novel, *Walk to the End of the World*, which depicts the Holdfast society) has a sequel in which the

escaped slaves return to the Holdfast as an army, though the Holdfast may have destroyed itself in the interval.<sup>22</sup> In *The Female Man* Whileaway is one of a number of possible societies, none of them in our future.

Whether tentative or conclusively pessimistic, the invented, all-female worlds, with their consequent lesbianism, have another function: that of expressing the joys of female bonding, which—like freedom and access to the public world—are in short supply for many women in the real world. Sexually, this amounts to the insistence that women are erotic integers and not fractions waiting for completion. Female sexuality is seen as native and initiatory, not (as in our traditionally sexist view) reactive, passive, or potential. (Earlier sexist views, which see women as insatiable, do not really contradict the later view. Both address themselves, in reality, to problems of male sexuality, i.e., the problems of controlling women, and both perceive female sexuality as existing in relation to male fears or needs.)

Along with physical mobility and the freedom to choose one's participation in the world goes a theme I shall call the rescue of the female child. This theme occurs in only three works under discussion here, but it also turns up in two recent, non-utopian science-fiction novels, both of them concerned with feminist themes and both written by women.

In *The Shattered Chain* occurs the clearest example of this event: Free Amazons rescue a twelve-year-old girl, Jaelle, and her mother from the gynocidal Dry Towns, in which pubertal girls' wrists are chained together and the chain fastened to their waists so that never again will they be able to extend both arms fully. Jaelle (her name echoes Jael in *The Female Man*) later becomes a Free Amazon.

In *Walk to the End of the World* the fem Alldera is pregnant when she flees slavery. Her daughter, born after her own rescue by the Riding Women, is adopted by them and eventually goes through an adolescent rite of passage. As Alldera puts it: "I really did it. I was no mother, I didn't know how to become one—I was just a Holdfast dam. But I got her away from the men and I found her a whole family of mothers, and saw her into a free life as a young woman."<sup>23</sup>

*Woman on the Edge of Time* also shows a serious rite of passage undergone by a female child at puberty. Connie Ramos, the heroic and abused woman of our own time, able to visit this future utopia, witnesses the beginnings of the rite (survival in the woods alone). At first disgusted by the future society, Connie finally wishes that her own

daughter—taken away from her three years before by the state—could somehow be adopted by the people of the novel's utopia.

The two subsequent novels are my *The Two of Them*,<sup>24</sup> written before my acquaintance with these other examples, and Vonda McIntyre's *Dreamsnake*.<sup>25</sup> In *Two* a twelve-year-old girl living in a quasi-Islamic, misogynist society, who wants to be a poet, is taken off-planet at her own request by a man and woman from an interstellar espionage organization. In *Dreamsnake* the heroine rescues a pubertal girl from a brutal male guardian who beats and rapes her. The author of *Dreamsnake*, told of this paper, objected that the little girl's oppression did not come from the realities of the nonsexist society depicted in the novel. However, she then added that the character's oppression might very well come out of the conditions of the author's society.

Puberty is an awakening into sexual adulthood for both sexes. According to Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, it is also the time when the prison bars of "femininity," enforced by law and custom, shut the girl in for good.<sup>26</sup> Even today entry into woman's estate is often not a broadening-out (as it is for boys) but a diminution of life. Feminist utopias offer an alternative model of female puberty, one which allows the girl to move into a full and free adulthood. All the novels described above not only rescue the girl from abuses that are patriarchal in character; they provide something for her to go to, usually an exciting and worthwhile activity in the public world: healer (*Dreamsnake*), Free Amazon (*The Shattered Chain*), Riding Woman and horse-raider (*Motherlines*), or poet (*The Two of Them*). We are used to envisioning puberty for girls as a sexual awakening, usually into reactive sexuality (*Sleeping Beauty*, q.v.). This is one aspect of puberty missing in the above examples; the children therein are sexual beings, certainly, but the last thing (say the tales) that matters for the adolescent girl is that she be awakened by a kiss; what is crucial is that she be free.

A discussion of these recent feminist utopias would be incomplete without some reference to their anti-feminist opposite numbers: the role-reversal (or battle of the sexes) science-fiction novel, which assumes as its given the sexist assumptions the feminist utopias challenge and attack. I have discussed this subject elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> Briefly, the battle-of-the-sexes stories present all-female or female-dominated worlds (of which there are none among the feminist utopias) that are returned to the normalcy of male dominance by male visitors from our own society or male renegades from the world of the story. These men overthrow a

gynocracy that is both awesomely repressive and completely inefficient. The method of overthrow is some form of phallic display: flashing, a kiss, rape. The books are badly written, apolitical, and present women as only potentially sexual; they also present rape as either impossible or desired by the woman. These stories are not only strikingly violent; they are violent without feeling, and in contrast to the all-female, feminist utopias, never propose an all-male world as a solution to their problem. Their authors are not, it seems, willing to do without women. However the books are surprisingly non-erotic, sex being a matter of power in them and not pleasure.

It seems clear that the two kinds of novels are not speaking to the same conflict. That is, the battle-of-the-sexes stories envision what is essentially (despite science-fiction trappings) a one-to-one confrontation between one man and one woman, in which the man's sexual power guarantees his victory, while the feminist utopias, if they present a conflict at all, see it as a public, impersonal struggle. One might expect public war to be more violent than personal conflict; thus the relative gentleness of the feminist books is all the more surprising.

However, it may well be that the feminist books, because their violence is often directed *by women against men*, are perceived as very violent by some readers. For example, *The Female Man* contains only four violent incidents: a woman at a party practices judo on a man who is behaving violently toward her and (by accident) hurts him; a woman kills a man during a Cold War between the sexes after provocation, lasting (she says) twenty years; a woman shoots another woman as part of her duty as a police officer; a woman, in anger and terror, shuts a door on a man's thumb (this last incident is briefly mentioned and not shown). A male reviewer in *Mother Jones*<sup>28</sup> quoted at length from the second and fourth incidents (the only quotations from the novel he used), entirely disregarding the other two. Ignoring the novel's utopian society, which is one of four, he called the book "a scream of anger" and "a bitter fantasy of reversed sexual oppression," although the only fantasy of reversed sexual oppression in the novel appears to be the reviewer's. There is one scene of reversed sex roles in the book, and that involves not a woman and a man but a woman and a machine.

What are we to make of these books? I believe that utopias are not embodiments of universal human values, but are reactive; that is, they supply in fiction what their authors believe society (in the case of these books) and/or women lack in the here-and-now. The positive values

stressed in the stories can reveal to us what, in the authors' eyes, is wrong with our own society. Thus if the stories are family/communal in feeling, we may pretty safely guess that the authors see our society as isolating people from one another, especially (to judge from the number of all-female utopias in the group) women from women.

If the utopias stress a feeling of harmony and connection with the natural world, the authors may be telling us that in reality they feel a lack of such connection. Or perhaps the dislike of urban environments realistically reflects women's experience of such places—women do not own city streets, not even in fantasy. Nor do they have much say in the kind of business that makes, sustains and goes on in cities. (For example, according to the popular culture fantasies about cities expressed on TV cop shows, cities are places where women and powerless men are threatened with bodily harm by powerful men and saved [if at all] by other powerful men. Since truly powerful men, one would think, don't need fantasies about being powerful, such fantasies must be addressed to ordinary, powerless men. They are certainly not addressed to women.)

The stories' classlessness obviously comments on the insecurity, competitiveness, and poverty of a class society.

Their relative peacefulness and lack of national war go hand in hand with the acceptance of *some* violence—specifically, that necessary for self-defense and the expression of anger, both of which are rare luxuries for women today.

The utopias' sexual permissiveness and joyfulness is a poignant comment on the conditions of sexuality for women: unfriendly, coercive, simply absent, or, at best, reactive rather than initiating.

The physical mobility emphasized in these books is a direct comment on the physical and psychological threats that bar women from physical mobility in the real world.

The emphasis on freedom in work and the public world reflects the restrictions that bar women from vast areas of work and experience.

The rescue of the female child speaks to an adolescence that is still the rule rather than the exception for women, one made painful by the closing in of sexist restrictions, sexual objectification, or even outright persecution.<sup>29</sup>

Some of the above is common to thoughtful people of both sexes, like the dislike of war and the insistence that violence has consequences, but most are specific to women's concerns. Noticeably absent are many

wishes common in contemporary fiction and contemporary science fiction: material success, scientific triumph, immortality, being admired for one's exceptional qualities, success in competition, inherited status, and so on. In general, competitiveness and *the desire to be better than* are absent. Also absent is a figure who often appears in women's novels: the Understanding Man, a love affair with whom will solve everything.\* There is only one Understanding Man in the group, and he is a spectacular failure, put into the story to illustrate the ineffectuality of undoubted good will and intelligence in dealing with great differences in power between groups. As the women's-movement slogan goes, there is no personal solution.<sup>30</sup> *The Shattered Chain* presents a nice young fellow for the Free Amazon, Jaelle, to fall in love with; he too is a spectacular failure, not (I suspect) because the author intended him to be one, but because having set the book's terms up so uncompromisingly in the first two-thirds of the novel, Bradley cannot make him a real character and still have her love affair even remotely workable.

Comparison of *Triton* with the other books is instructive; it seems to me that for better or worse the one male author in the group is writing from an implicit level of freedom that allows him to turn his attention, subtly but persistently, away from many of the questions that occupy the other writers. For example, *Triton* argues that no form of voluntary sexuality is privileged, while the other books deal with rape and the simple availability of sex that is neither coerced, exploitative, nor unavailable. *Triton* enjoys its sophisticated urban landscape, while the other stories are preoccupied with escape from an urban landscape that they do not own, do not enjoy, and in which they are not safe or happy. *Triton* makes a point of the financial discrimination suffered by children, while the other authors are busy saving their children from solitary imprisonment, madness, rape and beatings, or being chained for life.

In short, most of these utopias are concerned with the grossest and simplest forms of injustice. I do not believe that this fact detracts from their value any more than it detracts from the value of, say, *The Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*. And in these recent feminist utopias we certainly have part of the growing body of women's culture, at least available in some quantity (however small) to readers who need and can use it. I need not recommend *The Dispossessed* to anyone—it's already famous in the science-fiction community—nor does Samuel Delany lack readers. But it might not be amiss to mention that *Woman on the Edge of Time* is a

\*For example, the unconventional, non-masculine lover, Duncan, in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (New York: Popular Library, 1969).

splendid book in the tradition of nineteenth-century utopias, with all the wealth of realistic detail that tradition implies, and that women's studies classes might also tap the raw power of "Your Faces, O My Sisters!" to mention only two of the works discussed here. Here is Alice Sheldon's mad young woman, unable to stand our world and so by sheer imagination trying to inhabit another, the woman who will be killed because she thinks she's free:

Couriers see so much. Some day she'll come back here and have a good swim in the lake, loaf and ramble around the old city. So much to see, no danger except from falling walls, she's expert at watching for that. Some sisters say there are dog-packs here, she doesn't believe it. And even if there are, they wouldn't be dangerous. Animals aren't dangers if you know what to do. No dangers left at all in the whole, free, wide world!<sup>31</sup>

And here is Piercy's Consuelo Ramos, trapped for life in a big state mental hospital (a much worse place than a prison), later to be the subject of an experiment in brain control through surgery that is not in the least science-fictional but very much of the present.<sup>32</sup> Connie's longing for and assent to utopia states eloquently the suffering that lies under the utopian impulse and the sufferer's simultaneous facing of and defiance of pain, racism in this case, as well as class and sex:

Suddenly she assented with all her soul. . . . For the first time her heart assented. . . . Yes, you can have my child, you can keep my child. . . . She will be strong there, well fed, well housed, well taught, she will grow up much better and stronger and smarter than I. I assent. I give you my battered body as recompense and my rotten heart. Take her, keep her! . . . She will never be broken as I was. She will be strange, but she will be glad and strong and she will not be afraid. She will have enough. She will have pride. She will love her own brown skin and be loved for her strength and her good work. She will walk in strength like a man and never sell her body and she will nurse her babies like a woman and live in love like a garden, like that children's house of many colors. People of the rainbow with its end fixed in earth, I give her to you!<sup>33</sup>

#### NOTES

This essay first appeared in *Future Females: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Marleen Barr (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981).

1. Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969), English trans. David Le Vay (New York: Viking Press, 1971).
2. Suzy McKee Charnas, *Motherlines* (New York: Berkley-Putnam, 1978).



3. Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).
4. Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (New York: Bantam, 1975).
5. Samuel Delany, *Triton* (New York: Bantam, 1976).
6. Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Shattered Chain* (New York: Daw Books, 1976).
7. Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).
8. Sally Gearhart, *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1979).
9. Catherine Madsden, "Commodore Bork and the Compost," *The Witch and the Chameleon*, no. 5/6 (1976).
10. Raccoona Sheldon, "Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light!" in *Aurora: Beyond Equality*, ed. Vonda N. McIntyre and Susan Janice Anderson (New York: Fawcett, 1976).
11. James Tiptree, Jr., "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" in *Aurora: Beyond Equality*.
12. Carol Pearson, "Women's Fantasies and Feminist Utopias," *Frontiers* 2, no. 3 (1977).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
14. Joanna Russ, "The Image of Women in Science Fiction," in *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972).
15. Theodore Sturgeon, *Venus Plus X* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976).
16. Russ, *The Female Man*, pp. 81–82.
17. Pearson, p. 52.
18. Madsden, p. 16.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
20. Tiptree, p. 97.
21. Russ, *The Female Man*, pp. 81–82.
22. Volume 3 is in progress. The author refuses to divulge what the free fems find at the Holdfast or what happens there.
23. Charnas, p. 234.
24. Joanna Russ, *The Two of Them* (New York: Berkley, 1978).
25. Vonda McIntyre, *Dreamsnake* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).
26. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1961), pp. 306–47.
27. Joanna Russ, "Amor Vincit Foeminam: The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction," Chapter 4, this volume.
28. Michael Goodwin, "On Reading: A Giant Step for Science Fiction," *Mother Jones* 1 (1976), 62.
29. "Persecution" may strike some readers as too strong a word. But surely father-daughter incest (which, to judge from the publicity recently given the problem is usually unwanted by the daughter and enforced by the father through threats of emotional blackmail) deserves to be called persecution, as do wife-battering and rape.
30. See Suzy McKee Charnas, *Walk to the End of the World* (New York: Ballantine, 1974).
31. Sheldon, p. 17.
32. See Peter Roger Breggin, "The Second Wave," in *Madness Network News Reader* (San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1974). Amygdalotomy, the operation with which Connie is threatened, is part of the contemporary repertoire of psychosurgery. So are the other operations described in Piercy's book.
33. Piercy, p. 141.

## 11

## To Write "Like a Woman": Transformations of Identity in the Work of Willa Cather

The following essay, first published in 1986, had a stormy career. I read all of Cather I could after a Colorado friend and colleague, Michele Barale, told me that Cather described Nebraska and the mountain West better than anybody and that her women were immensely attractive. I found that Barale was right and came up for air, thinking, "I know this woman and I know her life because it's mine." I thought that by the middle 1980s (when I finished the piece) Cather's lesbianism had certainly become an open secret, at least among feminist critics. I was wrong. The first (feminist) journal I sent this essay to gave it—with my name on it—to six readers, two of whom liked it and four of whom objected to it in the strongest terms, all denying that Cather was a lesbian, all insisting that I hadn't conclusive evidence of her gayness, and one calling my description of her an "accusation." In short, the documentation demanded to substantiate a description that still seems to me a very, very obvious one exceeded that of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, all of it. I have since become familiar with this typical manifestation of homophobia (a chapter in the book I have just finished is called "She Isn't, She Wasn't, and Why Do You Keep On Bringing It Up"), but it was new to me then. I wrote an enraged letter, tore it up, wrote another, waited three days, wrote an even angrier one and sent it. The essay finally came out in 1986 in *The Journal of Homosexuality*. Since 1986 I have learned not only to expect homophobia (from a good many feminists but also to dislike the whole courtly minuet of introductions, explanations, notes, bibliographies and so on which seems to have been devised largely to keep the peasants from bursting into the ballroom and clumping about with you know who. I do not mean that people should be allowed to invent their footnotes but one of the kinds of intelligent and knowledgeable critics discouraged by requirement for the right mannerisms are those who have disabilities