

GENDER & GENRE

Helena Sheehan



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A series of profound cleavages run through the history of writing. The fault lines opened by the social division of labour, most particularly by the sexual division of labour, have cut deeply into whole process of writing. Most overtly through the historical exclusion of women from the whole process of writing. Most subtly through the psychological severing of human personality according to gender, such that the rational, the theoretical, the political have been identified as masculine and the emotional, the experiential and the personal as feminine. This psycho-sexual cleavage has entered into the writing process itself, affecting the nature of the work of both male writers who have dominated the

writing process and female writers insofar as they have progressively entered into the process.

This cleavage has cast a dark shadow over the formation of any writer, although it has taken diverse forms. Perhaps if I trace how it has played itself out in the case of my own development as a writer it will shed some light on aspects of the larger process. I shall focus on theoretical writing, because it presents the hardest case of the exclusion of the feminine, both in terms of the relative absence of the female of the species from the process for so much of its history and in terms of the dominance of what have been considered to be masculine characteristics within the process itself. Also because it is what I know best, as I am a theoretical writer.

The sexual division of labour presented an enormous problem for me for as long as I can remember. The only women in the world of my youth were housewife-mothers and teacher-nuns, along with a few shop-assistant-maiden-aunts. Never did I have any intention of being a housewife-mother, not least because, as the oldest in a large family, I was under constant pressure to be a little housewife-mother while still a child myself. A never-ending list of domestic tasks stood as obstacles before any book I ever wanted to read. As to alternatives, who would set out to be a shop-assistant-maiden-aunt? I ended up being a nun. This was an orientation toward something larger and higher than the small domesticated lives of other women.

But this too was highly problematic. I did not wish to be enclosed in a world of women. I hated the saccharine female spirituality of Therese of Liseaux and Cornelia Connolly, but I identified with the robust male spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola and Teilhard de Chardin.

From the time I came to what was called the age of reason, I became increasingly alienated from my own gender, from what was considered the female realm, from women's preoccupation with details of domesticity, their sugary sentimentality, their lack of knowledge of the wider world, their absence from the activity of shaping it.

From the time I was very young, the strongest force in me was the desire to know, to see the world truly and fully. I experienced rationality, not as a cold analytical detached activity, but as a burning involving passion. It was not something alien to emotion, but it was the strongest emotion I knew. Although it was defined as the domain of men, I would not be excluded from it.

I read voluminously: philosophy, politics, literature. All the great thinkers were men: Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas. Most of the books I read were by men. I grew increasingly disdainful of women. By the time I was a teenager, I had little patience with anyone of my own age or gender. I sought out older consequential men: teachers in other schools, lawyers, politicians. When not in libraries, I was at the city hall, in courtrooms or in the galleries of

the US congress. All my role models were men. Later I came across a term for it: the male-identified female.

I don't think that in later times a girl could ever experience this as starkly as I did, but this was the way it was then. There was no women's liberation movement to open up the options then. Other girls of my time did experience this as starkly as I did, although they didn't find it as problematic as I did and they generally made the opposite identifications and choices. They grew confident sexually but not intellectually. I was the opposite. But we all developed in an unbalanced, one-sided way because of the sexual division of labour and the definition of personality in terms of masculine / feminine characteristics that went with it. If I had to choose between being intellectual or being feminine, I would be intellectual, repressing those other vague (and sometimes not so vague) stirrings within myself.

My gender was not the only obstacle I had to overcome in my intellectual development. There was also class. I did not come from the thinking / writing class. I came of peasantry turned proletariat. The anonymous peasantry. The anonymous proletariat. My ancestors did not inhabit the groves of academe. Certainly none ever published. Exclusions from the thinking / writing process ran along lines of class and also race as well as gender.

But the front line of opposition came from religion. Within catholicism, I struggled for the rationalist and modernist modes against the authoritarian and traditionalist, but eventually my rationalising and modernising tendencies took me out of it altogether, especially under the pressure of the monastic ethos. I could not separate my 'soul' either from my mind or from my body. I could not reconcile myself to the constant negation of what I knew in the depths of myself was to be affirmed. I left the convent and soon after the church.

It was the collapse of my whole world view. It put every aspect of my thought, every aspect of my life, into the most severe crisis I have ever experienced. This is a story too complicated to tell here, but I note that in this reconstruction of the world without God, male writers were again my mentors: Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Camus, Sartre, Marx, Engels, Gramsci, Caudwell.

In the midst of this process came the great social movements of the era, the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the anti-war movement, which expanded into an anti-imperialist movement, the whole atmosphere of the 1960s new left. The intellectual consequence of my engagement in this ferment, and I was a wholehearted activist in it, was that all existing knowledge was perceived as tainted by the exclusions of race, class and gender.

The history of knowledge was shaped by the world view of those who held power. It reflected the experience and the interests of a white male aristocracy then bourgeoisie.

This I and others experienced as a moment of profound negation, a moment necessary to the development of ourselves as individual thinkers / writers / persons and to the development of our gender / species. I met a feminist academic who engaged in a radical separation from all male thought insofar as she could manage it on a year's leave, ie, she talked to no men, read no books by men, heard no television or radio programmes produced or presented by men, etc. This may be an extreme experiment, but every serious feminist has experienced this sort of negation and played it out in one way or another.

In my own case, I did not experience it in isolation. Patriarchy was not the only force that had to be faced down. I had to deal with the exclusions of class, race and gender more or less simultaneously, because that is how these realisations came to me. Here I focus on gender, although how I dealt with gender was shaped by the fact that I was doing it within a larger process. This has given me a different view of it from that of other feminists, for whom feminism in itself is a complete world view, rather than what it is for me, a strand woven into a wider world view. However aware I have become of the complex ways in which women are oppressed as women, I still wince when women, who absolutely reek of class privilege, speak myopically of their own oppression.

A certain dynamic, I believe, works itself out in the struggle out of oppression toward liberation:

Those who are outsiders to the dominant forms of social power and its underlying world view first demand inclusion, more or less within the existing structure of power and modes of thought. Women demand women's rights in a man's world, accepting on the whole the existing terms of reference. The epistemology of this stage is an empiricist pluralism. The politics of it is liberalism. But it is the beginning of a repudiation of the existing sexual division of labour.

Then comes the realisation that patriarchy has shaped the very character of the social order and penetrated to the very core of personality. To adopt male ways of working, male modes of thinking, male styles of writing, will not do anymore. The history of philosophy, of science, of culture, is seen as the product of male hegemony. Rationality itself is distorted through its association with the male experience of the world, through its exclusion of female experience. This is the moment of negation, of rejection, of separatism. Its epistemology is a social constructivism, an escalating relativism turning into postmodernist nihilism. It is a consciousness that is one-sided, partial, ultimately irrationalist. Ironically, although its impulse is to repudiate, it ends up by re-inforcing the sexual division of labour and the psycho-sexual severing of personality.

A further stage is to re-appropriate the the history of knowledge, of writing, from the position of a new realisation. It may have been produced from a division of labour based on race, class and gender, on a radical cleavage between those who could think and write and those who laboured to feed, clothe and shelter them, but through this our species evolved

and produced what imperfect forms of thought and literature that we have. That legacy belongs not only to those who wrote the books, but to those who gave birth and tilled the soil, those who built the cities and laid the tracks. It lived from their labour. Those who have ruled have had no trouble taking what my ancestors have produced to do with whatever they would. Why should I not take what their ancestors have produced to do with whatever seems right to me? True liberation involves taking possession of what has been produced by the collective labour of the centuries and taking responsibility for carrying it forward in the most appropriate way.



I do not renounce Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, but I re-claim them in a new way.

I am no longer the wide-eyed girl reading the Socratic dialogues on the Philadelphia subways, but I know that I am who I am today because I was once that girl. I do not renounce Nietzsche, even though I know that his views on women were barbarous, even for his time, but I remember the boldness, the evolutionary longing, that filled me as Zarathustra took hold of my imagination in a process which kept me alive long enough to become a feminist.

But the life experience of the excluded needs to be re-included. This means far more than finding traces of voices not included in the canon, for the real exclusion has been that for the most part their voices did not speak. It does not solve the problem of the history of philosophy for me if someone could find a few more women, most probably of the aristocratic class, who wrote something philosophical. The problem is the degree to which women did not / could not write or even think philosophically. It is the legacy of underdevelopment and it is not to be glorified. It is a legacy of great silences. My ancestors did not write.

The current debate in the US, called the political correctness or multiculturalism debate is rooted in this deeper problematic. The conservative position is the defence of the existing constitution of knowledge based on the existing sexual, racial, class, neo-colonial division of labour. Contesting this are some who fundamentally accept the existing terms of reference and structures of power, but want more female and black faces and voices playing it out: a few more black writers in the *Great Books* course, a few more women writers in the *Field Day* anthology. Contesting it further are those who call for the rejection of the canon and put in its place either an alternative canon based on pseudo-primitivist forms or post-modernist formlessness. Contesting it differently are those who claim the canon critically, expand it and engage it within an ongoing struggle over the constitution of knowledge.

Rationality needs to be re-cast. The experience of the excluded must be re-integrated into it and allowed to re-shape it. This is a concept of rationality that is more earthy, more experiential, more contextual, more holistic. It is a definition of rational of which the

opposite is not emotional but irrational. It is rationality transcending the existing sexual division of labour. It is reason, which is no longer specifically masculine, organically connected to emotion, which is no longer specifically feminine.

What practically this has meant for me in my development as a writer is that I have tried to write theory in a way that is more in touch with experience. I have gone through a number of stages in working this out and I have not entirely settled yet.

When working out the foundations of my world view, I was still a student and much of my writing was in the form of term papers and theses, but I could never do any of it just to pass through the academic hurdles. I turned every assignment into something that was existentially vital for me. My philosophical intensity was a source of affectionate amusement to my (all male) teachers. When one heard I was going to the shore the weekend, he speculated that my beach towel probably had on it: "*The unexamined life is not worth living*" (Socrates). Another tried to put me off it, predicting a long virginity for me if I kept it up: "*After all, who wants to talk about Hegel at the breakfast table?*"

Another, who didn't find it so unattractive, gave me one of my favourite books ever, Helen Waddell's (at last a woman writer comes into my story) *Peter Abelard*, a book which spoke to so much of what was stirring in me about rationality and sexuality and the relationship between them (as I was no longer convinced that I had to choose between them). I was meant, I think, to identify with Heloise, and I did to some extent, but I also identified strongly with Abelard, particularly with the experience of the exultation of reason, the ecstasy of rationality:

It was about him again, the dark immensity, the pressure of some greatness from without upon his brain, and that within which struggled to break through to it ... The wave of power swept up: he swung on the crest of it ...

Hours he would talk and we would never know we were hungry. You do not know what he was like. His lectures, they were like a great wind that leapt suddenly, and you went with it, the trees tearing and shaking. It was like galloping horses ...

It was a strange and subtle and colourless world, thought Abelard, this world that Origen lived in: to read him after Augustine was like passing over from that warm bar of light into the grey north light of intellectual vision, and though Origen had his own high eloquence, it was a vibration like the vibration of stars on a night of frost ... And was it not the heat and passion of the whole man, rather than the effortless austerity of the sterile man, that gave his prose its kindling power of fire?

I have found the standard forms of academic writing deeply alienated and alienating, more and more so as the years have gone on. Academic discourse is littered with every sort of

false dichotomy. Even attempts to overcome these antitheses most often eventuate only in low level eclecticism and not genuine synthesis. Theory has flown so far apart from the experience giving rise to it. And it is written in such an esoteric and clumsy language. Literary style is thought to be irrelevant to intellectual content.

When I began to publish, my writings took the form of arguments for a holistic philosophy and interpretations of feminism along these lines. There were also various leftist tracts written from within the movements of the times. Once I read Gramsci, I saw myself as an organic intellectual.

My first book was a large sweep of intellectual history: *Marxism & the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History*. I imposed on myself the discipline of using the first person only in the preface, introduction and footnotes. Nevertheless, there was an existential passion running through it and I was pleased when some reviewers, although they considered it to be a work of sound scholarship, said that it read like a novel, one even said a thriller. I found the unfolding of ideas in history to be full of dramatic tension and narrative drive. I was never detached from my subject matter. I was thoroughly engaged with it. I had to sort it out for myself for real out of an extreme inner necessity. Although I was by that time a feminist, it was a story in which women played very little part. Yet it was a body of knowledge, a historical struggle over knowledge, which I had to make my own. In the preface, I defended the epistemological basis of this, arguing for a participational theory of truth and insisted that my engagement enhanced my treatment of this material rather than militating against it:

As I worked through the history set out here, it forced me to come to terms with many issues in a sharper way than I would have otherwise. There were times when I was quite shaken by what I realised I had to write. My views on various questions evolved, reached points of crisis, and then resolution...I have never believed that openness of mind required detachment or lack of commitment, as the prevailing academic ethos would have it ... I believe that my active involvement with organisations of the left, old and new, at various times and in various places, has been epistemologically important for me. It is not simply that it has brought me to know things that I would not otherwise know, but it has involved a way of knowing that would not be open to me in any other way ... I believe that the world is known best by those who most actively take hold of it, interact with it, participate in it.

My second book *Irish Television Drama: A Society & Its Stories* was much the same in this respect (as was another book of the same structure about American television from which I became distracted with other preoccupations before quite finishing). Introducing it:

This is essentially a story about storytelling ...

It is my belief that there is a deeper logic to most things than is at first apparent

...

Time and again I was told that there was no pattern in it all ...

428 pages later I hoped that I had established a complex pattern based on the flow of collective experience and my own filtering of it.

While writing these books, I was all the time engaging in journalism, in recent years more and more of it. I think that this has had a salutary influence on my writing style, pulling it away from the academic toward crisper, clearer and more concrete modes of expression, without (I hope) sacrificing the intellectual thrust of what I am trying to do.

What I am trying to do is to feel the pulse of the zeitgeist, to give critical expression to the temper of the times, to construct (against all the voices warning me off it) an evolving grand narrative, to articulate a world view.

In the last years I have become clearer about the form of philosophical narrative that I think is the most appropriate genre for me. I have become bolder about the use of the first person, but I am always aware that it needs to be disciplined. I am more and more inclined to treat a theoretical question in something like the way I am trying to do it here, ie, to set it within an experiential narrative, to reconstruct the socio-historical and autobiographical context of working through it in the concrete.

It is tricky, though, as I do not want to engage in flabby, self-indulgent, particularistic writing. I want to use my experience to resonate with the experience of others, to engage them in a common struggle to sort out the world. The influence of the new left and of the feminist movement, for whom the personal was political and vice versa, was crucial in setting me in this direction.

In *Portrait of a Marxist as a Young Nun* I tried to reconstruct the process that had brought me to where I stood:

In one day, all the questions of centuries came to a crescendo in my brain and I felt as if the ground had come out from under my feet, sending me in a free fall through a void, bereft of my bearings, deprived of all my traditions ... There were no shortcuts between the collapse of a complete world view and the construction of a well grounded alternative. A long and winding road stretched between what was lost and what was yet to be found...I often wonder where I found the strength to cross the bridge from that emptiness to the first stirrings of hope in the possibility of a new fullness. Perhaps it was sheer curiosity, a need to know: if the world was not as I thought it was, what way was it anyway ? Or perhaps it was pure animal survival, the sort of natural evolutionary striving that brought our species up from the mud and the dark ... Prometheus defying the gods and seizing fire, Sisyphus negating the

gods and raising rocks, Zarathustra proclaiming the death of god and the transcendence of man, Atlas, proud and unyielding, sustaining alone the world he had created: these were the most powerful images illuminating the darkness and pointing beyond it.

In trying to see the shape of what I have lived through so far, I began:

Sometimes I feel as if I have lived eons in a matter of decades. The waves of historical change such as swept over centuries in the past seemed to have swept over my world several times already. And who knows what I have yet to see ? I am perhaps only halfway through the time I may expect my life to be.

Ironically, I wrote that in 1988. Since then, I have lived through another era of history already.

Since 1989, I have been writing about Eastern Europe for *The Irish Times*, trying to sort out what does this vast turn of history mean in world historical terms. I have been more restrained in using the first person and focusing on my own existential struggle with these matters in the IT than I have in writing about these matters elsewhere, such as in *Making Sense*, but I have not repressed this even in the IT, although the dominant male view of journalistic writing would be that I should. A male acquaintance said to me that he really liked my articles in the IT, except when I put my own opinion into it. Even that way of putting it: "putting my own opinion into it" was epistemologically so alien to what I was doing.

In 1989, I wrote a pamphlet in the Attic Press series. I could feel the building momentum of what was coming in the east later that year (not that I predicted exactly how it would ultimately unfold). It was called *Has the Red Flag Fallen?* I wrote much of it in the first person plural. Writing about the defeat of the new left and rise of the new right in the west in the previous decade:

For my generation who moved to the left in a time of upsurge and felt that the world was ours to reshape, these have been dark days. History, which once seemed so malleable in our hands, suddenly became so recalcitrant and resistant to our touch. No matter how hard we continued to struggle, the world moved on in a direction disdainful of our desires.

Sometimes, when I was pushing further out on a limb, I used the first person singular, but even this 'I' was meant to reach out and evoke a 'we':

Was it for this, I ask myself, that men and women gave their sweat, their tears, their blood, their lives ? ... In Western Europe, I witness the debut of designer socialism in sections of this new look left ... The male manual worker is yesterday's

man, says today's man, as he rolls up the sleeves of his baggy Miami Vice suit with such smugness on his stubbled face. Meetings and agendas and resolutions and wage claims are so boring, says today's woman, clad in the latest post-everything pastiche. They give off such an air of knowingness. After all, they have read Pynchon novels and they have seen Paris, Texas. They can discourse about Derrida and deconstruction, about floating signifiers with no signified ... In Eastern Europe, I see the spoiled children of socialism ... I also feel the force of the long dark struggle from the South of the world and the questions it poses to the North. I look into deep dark eyes that wonder if the beacon they have seen shining before them is going dim ... It unravels before me like a nightmare. No more the red flags flying. No more the head held high and the fists clenched and voices raised to the strains of The International.

I was disappointed with many of the reactions it got. One (male) reviewer said that I displayed an attachment to symbols that was embarrassing. Many of the comments treated it simply as autobiography, but it was meant to be more than that. It was meant to be an argument. It was meant to be social history and theory. There is a tendency to reduce anything autobiographical to autobiography in a way that is deeply alien to my intent. It is, I believe, rooted in false dichotomies of political and the personal, the rational and the emotional, the real and the symbolic, the masculine and the feminine.

Nevertheless, I persist in writing this way. When I wrote in European Socialism: A Blind Alley or a Long and Winding Road ?

In my comings and goings from Eastern Europe these days, I sometimes pass through London. I see their monstrous mounted monarchs set in stone and bronze and unchallenged and looking as if set to stand forever, while all the icons of our movement are being torn down in derision or smashed or smeared with rude graffiti. How have the ancestors of the Windsors got off so lightly, while Lenin and Tito are judged so severely ?

I was trying to do much more than to register my presence in London and my personal revulsion at these particular statues, but to evoke deep and hard questions about the trajectory of history.

I feel exposed and bleeding in what I am writing these days, but I do it because it I must, even in the face of all the emotional and economic risks it involves. It is essential to my struggle to come to terms and to give others the courage to come to terms against the whole weight of the orthodoxy of the times:

It seems sometimes as if history is moving backwards. Leningrad has become St. Petersburg again. Karl-Marx-Stadt has become Chemnitz again. They speak longingly of the Romanovs in Moscow and of the Hapsburgs in Budapest. They cry

out in the streets for King Michael in Bucharest, for Alexander in Belgrade, for Simeon in Sofia. The Ustasha flag flies over Zagreb and Dubrovnik. On the Palast der Republik in Berlin, there is a disturbed space where the hammer and compass used to be. Junker aristocrats have returned to reclaim their old estates. Eastern enterprises, built proudly through collective labour, are being sold off at knock-down rip-off prices to western investors, who expect to be thanked for their exploitation and their insults.

It has been for me a time of grief and loss. I have shed no tears for Honecker or Zhivkov or Ceausescu, but I have for honest men and women who have had their work taken away and their whole world turned upside down in the massive hostile takeover that has been German unification. I have for Bulgarian peasants, who have shown me orchards they have planted and buildings they have constructed and live in fear of the day this land is handed back to its former owners. I have for Yugoslav partisans, who spent their teenage years carrying guns and sleeping on cold ground, who devoted their adult years to the higher social experiment of self-managing socialism, who have come to retirement age now, to see everything they have built torn apart in a downward spiral of disintegration.

Standing in the ruins of our overturned utopia, I grieve for them and for myself. Something in our lives has died. I miss the GDR. I miss Yugoslavia. I miss the USSR. I am unrepentant for my defense of them. I am proud to have been a part of this movement and I am also proud to have been a difficult and disruptive presence in it. No one can take this from me ... But I / we must move on ... History is not moving backwards.

Writing this way resists existing categories. Because it is factual, intellectual and prose, and not fiction, drama or poetry, it is not considered to be creative writing. One reason why I have become active in the Irish Writers Union / Irish Writers Centre is to expand the social concept of creative writing. Because it is so personal and emotional, it is not what is thought of as philosophy.

Nevertheless, I insist that I am a philosopher, not because I have a PhD in philosophy, but because the central drive in my life is to work out a coherent world view. I do not want to do it in the way that men have done it and I am severely alienated from philosophy department philosophy. I want to do it my own way and in so doing to contribute to the long hard struggle of our species towards wholeness. I am claiming what has been male territory, but I refuse to traverse it in a male way. I refuse to be schizoid. I want to speak in my own voice and to be whole, to be rational and emotional all at once, to be female and philosopher at the same time.

Of the icons with which I surround myself in my immediate living / working space, there are two statues, copies of ancient artefacts dug from the earth, which I bought in a museum in Bucharest: the (male) thinker and the earth mother.



I am descended from them both. I am both, but I am neither. I am thinker, but I am not male. I am earth mother, not only because I have given birth, but because I embrace the concrete, the sensuous, the sexual, the emotional, but I do not separate these from the rational.

Perhaps further on in human evolution our descendants will come upon another artefact: the (female) thinker.

PS: Since I first wrote this, I have found statues of the female thinker.



The first was in an African shop in Philadelphia.



Another was in the courtyard of Humboldt University in Berlin.

Website: <http://webpages.dcu.ie/~sheehanh/sheehan.htm>

E-mail: helena.sheehan@dcu.ie