

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF WOMEN WRITERS:
THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, 1845 - 1860

by

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I.

This study examines the critical reception of literature by women in the North American Review between 1845 and 1860. The project was first suggested by Carol Ohmann's article "Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics,"¹ in which she points out that one NAR² reviewer "found in Jane Eyre the signatures of both a male and a female mind" (p. 907). Such an interpretation of the Currer Bell pseudonym was not impossible, as Charlotte Brontë herself explains:

Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because--without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called "feminine"--we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise.

Roughly contemporary with the Brontë sisters was the American craze of the sentimental novel, which occasioned Hawthorne's famous complaint to his publisher about the "damned mob of scribbling women" in 1855. The remarks of these novelists suggest two questions: Were the Brontë sisters right about critics and authoresses? Was Hawthorne's remark typical of the critical attitude in the mid-1800's toward scribbling women? My research was undertaken with the anticipation that both questions could be answered in the affirmative. It was presumed that NAR reviewers would express much

condescension to and limited expectation of women as writers. These attitudes are indeed encountered on occasion, but there is also widespread acknowledgment that women can be successful as literary artists. Serious attention was paid women writers in mid-nineteenth century America, and a surprising number of reviewers, in the NAR at least, were women. While one can find some quaint misconceptions, like the before-mentioned view of Jane Eyre, and some distinctions between male and female that have since been abandoned as artificial, one also finds reviewers who scarcely mention the sex of the writer being reviewed.

The selection of 1845 to 1860 as the period for study may appear arbitrary, at least in the determination of a starting point. However, the period is a significant one in the history of American feminism. The Women's Rights Convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, and the following decade has been called "the feminine fifties."⁴ Women were active in the abolition and temperance movements and were energetically campaigning for their own social, political, and educational rights. Women were also writing. During this fifteen years the first and second editions of the Brontë novels were published, as well as Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë, which appeared in 1857. In America, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Catharine Sedgwick, and Sarah Josepha Hale were well-established literary figures by the fifties. The sentimental novel, primarily feminine in authorship and audience, was tremendously popular: Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth's Retribution appeared in 1849; Susan Warner's The Wide, Wide World in 1850; and in 1854 Maria Cummins' The Lamplighter sold forty thousand copies in eight weeks. The scribbling woman was a conspicuous figure in the world of letters.

The choice of the North American Review as the periodical for study may also seem arbitrary, but it, too, is justifiable. The Atlantic Monthly

was not founded until 1857; the Southern Literary Messenger was on the decline in these years; and the Knickerbocker Magazine was a comparative newcomer. The NAR was founded in Boston in 1815 by William Tudor and the Anthology Club, and through the next three decades it secured a reputation for excellence on both sides of the Atlantic. The Edinburgh Review had called it "by far the best and most promising production of the press of that country that has ever come to our hands."⁵ By the fifties the NAR was old enough to be conservative, and a few of its 3,200 readers⁶ were beginning to complain of dullness. Despite these complaints, however, it would still have to be considered among the leading American periodicals of the time.

The North American Review did not limit itself to only literary matters. Its original title, the North American Review and Miscellaneous Journal, had been shortened in 1821, but throughout the century its scope was broader than that of a strictly literary periodical. It printed articles on the social and physical sciences as well as on the arts. The January 1855 number contains articles on the Moorish Dominion in Spain, Greek pronunciation, the transmigration of souls, nineteenth-century history, "Kansas and Nebraska [sic] ," universities, the slave trade, George Berkeley, and Fisher Ames, as well as short critical notices on books about diseases, psychology, religion, anthropology, and the U. S. Constitution. If any testimonial to the NAR's status or variety is needed, William Cushing provides one from, judging by the initials, Oliver Wendell Holmes:

As it is, it is like a dictionary in which the letters are mixed up promiscuously, full of what we want, if we only know where to find it. As it will be with your index, it will constitute a library in itself, containing many articles by which the wisest and most learned may profit, but especially interesting to all American students, as the best connected record of the growth of native thought and scholarship.

Reviews in the NAR were lengthy (twenty to thirty pages) and often used the books selected only as a starting place for an essay by the reviewer on the same subject. Thus, a review of books on Kansas and Nebraska becomes an anti-slavery tract; a review of a biography of Addison is, for the most part, another biography of Addison. This tendency to stray is not so evident in reviews of imaginative literature, especially poetry, but reviewers do allow themselves leisure to generalize about such matters as the current conditions of literature, the propriety of female authorship, or methods of moral instruction. Reviews usually include mention of other works by the author under discussion, and sometimes include a bit of biographical information. Plot summaries are rarely given and such summary as does appear is often so mixed with simple allusion to incidents and characters as to drive the uninitiated to distraction. Reviewers seem to assume their readers have read the books at hand. As the length of the reviews and the tendency to digress make clear, these are not reviews in the modern sense. Neither are they critical articles by our standards. Instead, they combine the immediacy of the review with some of the thoroughness of the critical study. Some reviews include several similar books, thus making the article a series of short reviews, unified sometimes by what could be considered digressive material. The reviews were published unsigned, but individual reviewers have been identified with the aid of Cushing's Index to volumes 1 through 125 of the NAR. Identification of the authors of the shorter critical notices appearing in the back pages of each number is more difficult, because Cushing himself could not obtain all the information he needed about such notices.

This study focuses on ten of the longer reviews, equally divided between fiction and poetry, which include most of the NAR criticism of women writers. Shorter critical notices may be referred to, but brevity and

anonymtly render them unreliable as significant evidence of a set of critical attitudes. The longer reviews will be discussed in some detail, with the articles on fiction considered first. After examination of the reviews, I will discuss the critics in relation to each other to clarify the differing sets of standards by which they evaluated literature by women. Of the eight reviewers studied here, five are women, a fact which in itself shows that women were significant in the world of American letters in the 1850's

Several problems attend a project of this kind. Dealing with a number of different reviewers means studying a variety of critical approaches. This renders generalization difficult and precise conclusions impossible. During the first fifteen years of the NAR's existence, the work of the reviewers was "so homogeneous that one can almost treat them as a sort of composite critic," according to one twentieth-century scholar.⁸ Perhaps so, but by the forties and fifties, this was no longer the case. A dissertation on literary criticism in the North American Review from 1815 to 1865⁹ does generalize about trends, theories, and influences, but that treatment is far more complex than the present undertaking. The variety of critics causes another problem, less significant perhaps, but no less frustrating: the problem of terminology. It is difficult to know, for example, what is meant by "imagination" and "fancy" when a distinction between the two is implied. One suspects, too, that such terms vary in meaning from critic to critic. "Novel" and "romance" are generally used interchangeably, but again a distinction is sometimes implied. Despite these problems, and with an awareness of them, we can proceed to make some meaningful observations of critical inclinations.

There are indeed some reviewers who condescend to or apologize for women writers, but such attitudes are less prevalent in the NAR than was

expected. Instead, these reviewers approach literature by women in much the same way they treat literature by men. Two major tendencies can be identified in the NAR criticism of women writers: some reviewers judge a work in terms of its efficacy as an instrument for moral and religious instruction, whereas others evaluate literature on the basis of more strictly aesthetic standards. The sex of the artist is rarely a major factor in critical judgment. The Brontës may have been wise in their choice of pseudonyms, and Hawthorne may have had good reason for contempt, but we do not often find critics in the North American Review using the weapon of personality or flattery which is not true praise.

II.

The novel reviewers discussed in this section all treat more than one book, although the reviews of the Brontë novels and of the fiction of the Warner sisters are ostensibly more narrowly focused. Robert Streeter notes that North American Review critics always took the novel seriously as a literary form, and certainly these reviewers of literature by women do.¹⁰ Caroline Kirkland and Margaret J. M. Sweat discuss the development of the novel; Anne Wales Abbot joins them in commenting on it as an instrument of instruction. Edwin P. Whipple makes a few comments on the novel as a genre, especially in its recent inclinations, and his review is predicated on a clear concept of the genre, its worth and purpose. These critics approach the novel from different points of view, and the two most interested in female authorship, Abbot and Kirkland, will be considered first. Sweat and Whipple discuss novels by both men and women, and each of them writes on the Brontë novels; their widely differing comments will be examined in the latter part of this section.

An article entitled "Female Authors" (Vol. 72, pp. 151 - 177)¹¹ by Anne Wales Abbot allows us to begin by examining a woman's judgments of women. Abbot is further identified in a later short critical notice as the editor of a children's magazine, an office for which that commentator feels she is particularly well-qualified (Vol. 85, p. 277). She sets out to review the following:

A Trap to catch a Sunbeam. By the author of "Old Jolliffe."
Only. By the Author of "A Trap to catch a Sunbeam." Boston:
 James Munroe & Co. 1849. 18mo.
Truth stranger than Fiction: a Narrative of Recent Transactions,
involving Inquiries in Regard to the Principles of Honor, Truth,
and Justice, which obtain in a Distinguished American University.
 By Catharine E. Beecher. New York: Printed for the Author.
 1850. 12mo. pp. 296.
Rural Hours. By a Lady. New York: G. P. Putnam. 1850. 18mo.
 pp. 521. (p. 151, italics in original).

Her essay includes several pages of quotation from the last named book, as well as a lengthy discussion of how difficult it is "to clothe moral and religious truths in an appropriate garb of fiction" (p. 154).

Abbot, who believes literature can delight chiefly by teaching, judges primarily from that basis. She admires the "naturalness and freedom" of style in Rural Hours (p. 171), but most of her comments on that work are of the "Isn't this nice?" variety. Only is not mentioned at all in the review; Trap to catch a Sunbeam merits almost an entire paragraph of approval. Truth Stranger than Fiction is discussed for more than three pages, but it is not clear whether Abbot disapproves more of the book or the situation it represents. The book purports to be based on fact, a claim the reviewer never clearly accepts or rejects, although an acceptance is implied in her disapproval of the publication of private affairs and in her comment on the novelist's lack of imagination (p. 168). Abbot's remarks in this section of her review are scarcely literary judgments at all; she comments on society, flirtations, common sense, and human nature in general.

In addition to quotations from Rural Hours, her methodology for moral instruction through fiction, and some comments on the specific works at hand, Abbot's review includes a discussion of female authors. She mentions the changing attitudes toward female authorship, its appropriateness, its causes and effects, and she comments on a tendency in the evaluation of literature by women. She begins her article by remarking that "it has become a wonderfully common piece of temerity for a lady to make a book" (p. 151). Further evidence of changing times is offered in her remark that if a woman does not "hear some gruff remark upon misdirected talents, and the concocting of puddings being the appropriate sphere of feminine intellect, it will be because the time is gone by for that" (p. 152). She thinks female authorship is quite proper, especially if it results in "improving influences": "No one can think a woman quits her heaven-appointed province of blessing the home, by publishing books of the class of which these are a specimen. She is but extending the influence she is accustomed to exercise in the narrow sphere of the family" (p. 154). It seems not to occur to Abbot that a woman would ever write anything but domestic novels and Sunday school books.

Abbot identifies one motivation for women who want to write, and it is appropriate to the "heaven-appointed province":

In many of these female authors we recognize an earnest and holy spirit and true aim, inconsistent with a petty love of display. We need not as yet surely deprecate this appetite as a new and higher form of the childish (shall we be pardoned if we say, feminine) desire for personal admiration. As we read, we feel that the desire for success, in many cases, must be the pure prayer for power to do good; if it looks to earthly approbation, it is for encouragement, and a deeper conviction of truth than can be felt without sympathy (p. 153).

A "pure prayer for power to do good" leaves us in no doubt as to what Abbot expects of woman writers. It is this aspect of Trap to catch a Sunbeam

that Abbot praises; David, the hero, "bears a message to which every heart throbs a response with a quickened faith and love; and to those who feel that the world goes hard with them, he brings comfort and hope and animation, to help them on, and awaken a cheerful industry and self-reliance" (p. 154). We begin to see, at this point, how well qualified Abbot is to edit a children's magazine.

The "female authorship" approved by Abbot is not a direct threat to the home, the male ego, or the republic, at least as long as it is not too leniently regarded, and the woman herself is in no danger of damaging her reputation. Abbot says that this has not always been the case:

Formerly, if a woman published her writings, and thereby attained any enviable celebrity, she became almost as unsexed as if she had shouldered the gun and knapsack She was even in danger of sacrificing forever her domestic felicity, at least so far as it depended upon the masterful sex, with whom it was a maxim that a clever woman inspired admiration at the expense of love, and that fame should be reflected upon her, or its scorching rays would wither those elements of happiness that were accustomed to shade and retirement (p. 160, italics in original).

In recent days, however, the man has nothing to fear--the threat to the male ego is not serious, nor is the foe worth fighting:

Female authorship being quite too common in these latter days to strike the world agape, nobody dreams of being eclipsed or envious. A man must fill an exceedingly small space in his own opinion, who could not afford not to be jealous of the amount of approbation that follows the most successful effort of his wife's pen, so long as her dabbling in ink does not involve his domestic comfort. Neither need he trouble himself about her temerity. Minerva's helmet and sword are a joke, and her shield is only useful to lean upon (p. 163).

Even the most moderate twentieth-century feminist would find such obsequiousness unpalatable.

When Abbot discusses the attention female authors receive, she echoes Charlotte Brontë's mention of "flattery which is not true praise," saying "it is the custom to praise lady authors," even those who are privately

criticized by their own sex:

It must be a very uncommon merit or demerit, which receives any thing like discriminating retribution in the court of letters, if a lady claims the award. Her book receives no more just meed than the "Very well--exceedingly well, indeed," bestowed by a smiling school-committee man upon a smart school-girl's theme, after a whispered agreement, that with some pruning and a little more thought, it would be really a surprising achievement for a girl. The blushing smile of girlhood is a very pretty and pleasant thing to look upon; and, under the circumstances, to throw a damper upon harmless vanity, by pointing out an exuberance to be restrained, or a more vigorous tone of thought to be wrought for, is hardly worth the while. And thus the enterprises of full-fledged ambition among the scribbling fair, are dealt with by good-natured critics. If they have the good fortune to be brought under notice at all, they are the theme of neatly turned compliments and ingenious congratulations (p. 163, italics in original).

In comparison with other NAR articles on female writers, Abbot's comments misrepresent the critical reception of "lady authors." Her article is not simply an automatic compliment to the authors under consideration, but one wonders why she does not take advantage of the opportunity to offer some more "discriminating retribution." She goes on to warn of the dangers of "such a half contemptuous leniency" and then suggests that "A wholesome dread of satire may in time be a necessary curb upon the shrewish element in the feminine character" (p. 163). She paints an alarming picture of the results of unchecked indulgence of the "vixenish impulse," but it appears that the threat of such an ill-natured invasion is not immediate:

Having so many agreeable books upon our shelves, for which we have to thank and to love gentle authors, we have, perhaps, cherished too comfortable a confidence that the prevalence of good taste would bar the entrance of the Amazonian mania into literature, at least in any offensive form. . . . As we look abroad, we see only a chivalrous disposition, not merely to respect the rights, but to uphold the privileges, of the fair sex, which makes it, in our view, altogether unnecessary that they should advocate their own claims or be each other's champions (p. 164).

Apparently gallantry and common sense will prevail against the shrewish element, but Abbot's position is ambiguous. The "privileges of the fair sex" are to be upheld, but it seems regrettable that women do not receive

more serious criticism of their literary efforts.

The fact that in 1851 a woman's review of books by women should occupy twenty-six pages in one of the leading periodicals of the country is a clear indication that "female authorship" was a significant part of literary activities, even though the article itself is disappointing. Abbot makes only a few judgments, and those unsupported, on the literary merit of the works at hand; she indicates that literature should be judged by its effectiveness in teaching moral and religious truths. She wants literature by women to be treated honestly but also thinks the fair sex should be respected.

Another critic who feels that religious instruction is of prime importance in the consideration of a literary work is Caroline M. Kirkland, whose article "Novels and Novelists" (Vol. 76, pp. 104 - 123) is a review of The Wide, Wide World and Queechy by Elizabeth Wetherell (Susan Bogart Warner) and Dollars and Cents by Amy Lothrop (Anna Bartlett Warner). She evaluates literature on ethical grounds and looks for certain "feminine" virtues. Although she seems to be more aware of literary trends than Abbot, she, too, makes very few comments based solely on aesthetic standards.

The first third of Kirkland's review is devoted to tracing the development of the novel. It is a curious historical survey, however, in that there is no mention of Fielding, Smollett, or even Richardson. The discussion is further hampered by the absence of a clear definition of "novel" as distinct from "romance." The terms were generally interchangeable in the middle of the nineteenth century, but Kirkland's usage implies a difference between them. She prefers the sentimental romance, and objects to the current, more realistic version of the novel because it deals more with the real than the ideal world. The easiest way to get some understanding of her critical values is to look at her comments on two well-known authors.

Her favorite writes romances:

The illusions of old romance were, for a time, revived, while the splendid magic of Scott ruled the hour. Pageant and tournament, presence-chamber and battle-field, dizzy turret and fell oubliette, imprisoned the willing imagination in turn, while over all alike, hovered the sweet spirit of Humanity, and, not far in the background, beamed the hallowed face of Religion, consecrating our pleasure. O, those were happy days for readers! (p. 107)

Jane Austen, a novelist, does not fare so well:

The sensible and amusing novels of [Austen] are the product of much knowledge of society, and sharp, though not ill-natured, observations of its motives and pretences. . . . We laugh at foibles or frown at meannesses; perhaps, resolve to beware of the one and the other. So far, well enough. But what is our feeling toward the social world thus exhibited? Is our love of kind increased? Are the Christian desire and duty of remedying the ills we see, quickened by these pictures of prevalent heartlessness and folly? Causes are no more indicated than remedies are suggested. The worldly view of corrupt and hollow social life is simply, that such things are, and being so, must so remain . . . (p. 108).

Kirkland's conclusion is that the novel has become more respectable but also less pleasing in its current inclination to social reform. She seems to say that on the one hand the novel should be a form of escape and should appeal only to the fancy or imagination, while on the other hand it must not omit religion, which is the "salt and savor" of life. It is difficult to understand how someone who values the presence of religious instruction joined with an appeal to the fancy can at the same time regret the good intentions of the reforming novel.

Kirkland, touching briefly on the subject of women writers, provides comments that are not as completely expressed as Abbot's. She claims that "Although a very large proportion of the novels of the day are written by women, yet the novel feminine is nearly extinct" (p. 110). She wonders where we can find a novel of "decided and intentional feminine aspect." What she means by the "novel feminine" is never made clear, though we may get some idea of what constitutes the "feminine aspect" in her description

of female writers. "The qualifications of our most popular lady-novelists are, not tenderness, piety, imagination, fancy, but keen observation, powerful satire, knowledge of the world, strong common sense, and . . . democratic principles . . ." (p. 110). There is, of course, nothing wrong with the latter set of characteristics, but the former, which are conspicuous by their absence, seem to be what she expects in a woman writer. Kirkland makes one more interesting remark on the qualifications of female novelists in her comparison of the Warner novels with The Vicar of Wakefield. Goldsmith and the American women both give us "a simple transcript of country life and character, depending for interest partly on the ordinary joys and sorrows of our common humanity" (p. 114), but the American books are "deficient, certainly," in plot and " . . . in variety they fall immeasurably behind, as every picture of common life drawn by a woman necessarily must, for want of the wide experience open only to the other sex" (p. 114). This is not a fault that can be easily mended.

Kirkland's long description of the female character as developed by Susan Warner show us again her emphasis on religion and clarifies her use of the term "feminine," whether applied to novelists of other. The novelist's point in The Wide, Wide World is the development of a female character and

. . . she makes religion the decisive element, as whoever would draw from nature must do She makes her young girl passionate, though amiable, in her temper; fond of admiration though withheld by innate delicacy from seeking it unduly. She . . . brings her . . . to the state of self-governed and stable virtue which fits woman for her great office in the world . . . To build such a character on any basis other than a religious one, would have been to fix a palace upon the shifting sands [Her heroines] are reared, by their truly feminine and natural experiences, into anything but "strong-minded women" They are both of velvet softness; of delicate, downcast beauty; of flitting but abundant smiles, and of even too many and ready tears. . . . They live in the affections, as the true woman must; yet they cultivate and prize the understanding, and feel it to be the appointed guardian of goodness, as all wise women should. . . . They are conscious of having a power and place in the world, and they claim it without assumption or affectation, and fill it with a quiet self-respect, not inconsistent

with modesty and due humility (pp. 114 - 115).

Such consummate goodness and "femininity" are beyond the range of ordinary twentieth-century experience, and it is perhaps not surprising, given this example, that there was such a dearth of "feminine" novels.

In judging the novels, Kirkland values the "pictures of American country life and character above all their other merits" (p. 115). The use of pecuniary difficulties as the chief means of developing character (whether real or fictional character is not clear) bothers her because that practice makes money more important than it ought to be (p. 117). She dislikes the intrusion of long arguments "which here and there dilute the richer current of natural thought and lively description" and also disapproves of "certain specimens of homeliness of diction" (p. 120). Her final comment on the novels re-emphasizes her critical values: "They paint human nature in its American type; they appeal to universal human sympathy They recognize the heart as the stronghold of character, and religion as the ruling element of life" (p. 122). A work of genius, by Kirkland's standards, is one to which the "universal heart leaps up" (p. 113), and religion must be the "ruling element" in both life and literature.

The contrast between Kirkland and Margaret J. M. Sweat is striking, especially since both trace the history of the novel as an adjunct to reviews of similar books. While Kirkland seems to regret the decline of the romance, Sweat traces some positive developments in the novel. Kirkland judges on the presence of religious elements and the reader's emotional response; Sweat, on more strictly literary standards.

Sweat's "A Chapter on Novels" (Vol. 83, pp. 337 - 351) is a commentary on Zaidee: A Romance, by a Miss Oliphant; Tolla: A Tale of Modern Rome,

by Edmond About; and Rachel Gray: A Tale Founded on Fact, by Julia Kavanaugh. She has little praise for any of the novels and less blame for Zaidee than for the other two. After a brief examination of these three, she devotes most of her attention to the development of the novel. Sweat makes no distinctions between the comparative abilities and achievements of men and women as novelists.

In Zaidee, Miss Oliphant's first book, Sweat sees evidence of "youthfulness" in "freshness and keenness of perception, and a happy abandonment in description" and also in "rawness and want of artistic skill in the development both of plot and character" (p. 338). She finds some attractive elements of episode, description, and atmosphere, but also notes a "want of definite aim and of force in the book as a whole" (p. 338). She quarrels with "the perfect squareness with which the tangible reward of the sacrifice is arranged" (p. 338). To Sweat, at least, Zaidee is not even successful as didactic literature: "The history of Zaidee's struggles to be a victim teach [sic] either no lesson at all, or else one which nobody ought to follow" (p. 338). She concludes with advice to the author: "Miss Oliphant needs to study mechanical details more carefully to make her story move freely; and must take her lovable but foolish heroine down from her lofty stilts, if she would make her walk the earth a graceful woman" (p. 339).

In contrast to the promise shown in Zaidee, Tolla (written by a man) "belongs to a class which we feel sorry to see increased" (p. 339). Sweat minces no words in her condemnation:

A faint halo of pitying interest surrounds Tolla herself, partly, perhaps, because she is kept somewhat out of sight. Still, if we get provoked with Zaidee for her pertinacious endeavors to continue a victim, we are quite incensed with Tolla for not seeing through the vapid weakness and indolent selfishness of the stupid

lover for whom she dies. The absurd helplessness of everybody who ought to do anything, is absolutely ludicrous (p. 339).

Sweat is even briefer with Kavanaugh, who, she believes, has written too much too quickly, confusing quantity with quality. Kavanaugh's failure in Rachel Gray is the more regrettable because she "has not succeeded in making an attractive fiction out of a fact, which, in its naked simplicity, is not without interest" (p. 340). A footnote informs us that the editor's opinion of Rachel Gray is much higher than "the present contributor's." The novel is first discussed in a short critical notice (#17, Vol. 82, p. 579), where it is praised as "a tale of engrossing interest, and, yet more, a series of graceful and unobtrusive lessons in the science of holy living" (p. 579). The notice, by A.P. Peabody, then editor, concurs in Kirkland's emphasis on religion: "The Christian literary artist needs but to wave his wand over the very dust-heaps of humanity to turn the clods into diamonds" (p. 579). One wishes Sweat had expanded her criticism of Rachel Gray so the two different opinions could be more thoroughly compared.

These three novels are selected as "types of prevalent fiction" which Sweat compares with the "best which the age produces" (pp. 340 - 341).

In none of them do we discern the elements of greatness, the indications of immortality. In none is found the glowing, passionate life of Currer Bell's creations, the wonderful world-knowledge of Thackeray, the intense psychological insight of Hawthorne, or the healthful moral energy of Dickens (p. 341).

Significantly missing from these "elements of greatness" is anything resembling didacticism, religion, or escape. According to Sweat, the novel can teach, but this must be accomplished with great subtlety, as we shall later see. She includes as works of genius those "which make the novel a medium for the promulgation of some great truth, involve some high teaching, or picture forth human nature with a master-hand," but excludes "the popular ephemera of the day, which have a brilliant but short existence from causes

independent of their intrinsic merit" (p. 324, *italics added*). In addition to having a clear idea of the elements of greatness, as she calls them, Sweat also recognizes that the novel should be discussed as a work of art:

The successful novel of the present day is strictly a work of art, amenable to all the laws of art. When tried by the rules of criticism, and tested by severe analysis, it must be able to prove that its effects proceed from sufficient causes. Too many liberties with probability are inadmissible for the purpose of bringing about the catastrophe. Artistic beauty of style must accompany the creation, development, and completion of the plot. Harmonious and dignified expression must follow powerful conception in the romance . . . (p. 342).

In her awareness of the rules of art and criticism, Sweat differs in another way from Abbot and Kirkland, who do evaluate the works they review, but with less consciousness than Sweat of the demands and premises of rigorous criticism. The rules she refers to are formal; she is less concerned with content or purpose than with such matters as causality, plausability, development, and expression. She does not go so far as to propound any cogent theory of criticism; her remarks are limited to those already quoted. It is clear, however, that she has, in her own mind, at least, a definite set of critical standards by which she judges literature in a more disciplined way than Kirkland's looking for an "appeal to human sympathy" or a moral lesson.

The remainder of Sweat's article is a discussion of the development of the novel. Beginning with the sentimental romances of Richardson, Radcliffe, and Burney, she analyzes the elements of the sentimental novel, and her dissection is performed with a scalpel dipped in acid: "The hero and heroine are permitted to become the dupes of this villain to an extent which would for ever disgrace their reputation for common sense in any actual community" (p. 344). The shallowness of the characters, the simple

machinations of the plot, and the intrusion of the supernatural all receive their full share of her scorn. She takes no notice of Richardson's contributions to the novel, and it is, perhaps, unfair of her to include his works with the novels she treats so harshly.

The novels of Fielding and Smollett, according to Sweat, are better in "human elements, in actual naturalness and vitality" (p. 346). In discussing other contributions of these two novelists, she mentions conversation, which was by and large absent from the earlier romances, and comments on the development of female characters:

Much greater advance is made in the delineation of men than of women. The women have still only two modes of action,--one to fascinate through the senses, the other to suffer through the affections. The power and beauty of woman's spiritual influence seem to have been little understood by the authors of the old romances. Possibly in their own lives they felt this influence, but without analyzing it or understanding its worth and force in the machinery of fiction. Not one among them could shadow it forth with the delicate yet powerful touches of a Dickens, a Thackeray, or a Currer Bell (pp. 346 - 347).

The reference to "woman's spiritual influence" sounds like Kirkland, but Sweat uses as positive examples Thackeray and Currer Bell, who are not known for providing models of feminine spiritual influence as Kirkland describes it.

After a discussion of the historical novel and an approving mention of Scott, who commits fewer transgressions than others in that type of fiction, she comments on the improvement in character development in more recent novels. Characters are now more complex; difficulties arise from within the characters as much as from external circumstances. The final point she makes that is of interest here concerns the novel as "an assistant in mental and moral culture." A novel must contain a "deep and searching moral" which is more forceful if it is "subtile and beneath the surface." This sounds like the emphasis on didacticism found in the reviews by Abbot

and Kirkland, until Sweat introduces her example of a book with a "moral":

Vanity Fair.

Is not Thackeray's "Vanity Fair" a sermon of the most stringent application? Its author holds a mirror to our hearts, which reveals to each of us many a spring of action that we blush for, many a littleness and weakness, with much of worldliness and vanity, which we have never before been forced fairly to acknowledge, even to ourselves. We lay down the book, confessing in spite of ourselves, that it is a faithful likeness of a large part of our human nature, and this confession is followed by a pang that is not always useless. . . . Much self-knowledge may be attained, much healthful humility promoted, by having, as it were, the picture of our own hearts set forth before our astonished eyes . . . (p. 349).

Sweat's idea of the "moral" of a book is much different, apparently, from Kirkland's. Sweat feels we can learn much from an excellent picture of things as they are, while Kirkland seems to think we learn best from a description of what ought to be.

We can find more evidence of Sweat's critical standards in her review of the Brontë novels. However, we should first consider an article on "Novels of the Season" (Vol. 67, pp. 354 - 369) by Edwin Percy Whipple, which is an omnibus review of Jane Eyre, An Autobiography, edited by Currer Bell; Wuthering Heights, by the author of Jane Eyre, and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, by Acton Bell, author of Wuthering Heights, as well as other novels, including Grantley Manor, a Tale, by Lady Georgiana Fullerton, and Vanity Fair.

At this distance one is tempted to laugh at Whipple's assumption that Currer Bell "divides the authorship . . . with a brother and sister" (p. 356). While Whipple is by no means the only reviewer to misinterpret the Brontë pseudonyms, his distinction between masculine and feminine qualities is interesting in its implication that men and women perform differently as novelists and that both men and women face sexually determined limitations. He notices some "unconscious feminine peculiarities" which refer to "elaborate

descriptions of dress, and the minutiae of the sick-chamber, [and] to various superficial refinements of feeling in regard to the external relations of the sex" (p. 356). He goes on to say, "It is true that the noblest and best representations of female characters have been produced by men; but there are niceties of thought and emotion in a woman's mind which no man can delineate, but which often escape unawares from a female writer" (p. 356). The feminine contributions are clearly not as important as the masculine; the woman is responsible for "peculiarities," "minutiae," "superficial refinements," and "niceties of thought and emotion." The male mind, however, does most of the work in Jane Eyre and is also responsible for Wuthering Heights and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Whipple finds a great deal of evidence for masculine authorship:

The leading characteristic of the novel . . . and the secret of its charm, is the clear, distinct, decisive style of its representation of characters, manners, and scenery; and this continually suggests a male mind. In the earlier chapters, there is little, perhaps, to break the impression that we are reading the autobiography of a powerful and peculiar female intellect; but when the admirable Mr. Rochester appears, and the profanity, brutality, and slang of the misanthropic profligate give their torpedo shocks to the nervous system . . . we are gallant enough to detect the hand of a gentleman in the composition. There are also scenes of passion, so hot, emphatic, and condensed in expression, and so sternly masculine in feeling, that we are almost sure we observe the mind of the author of Wuthering Heights at work in the text (pp. 356 - 357).

Although commending the power of the novels, Whipple deplores the offensiveness and limited view of life. In Wuthering Heights the reviewer notes a "strong hold upon the elements of character, and [a] decision of touch in the delineation of the most evanescent qualities of emotion" but concludes that "for all practical purposes . . . the power evinced in Wuthering Heights is power thrown away. Nightmares and dreams, through which devils dance and wolves howl, make bad novels" (p. 359). In his final comment on "the firm of Bell and Co.," Whipple implies that the "practical purposes"

alluded to above are those of moral edification, and he comments on the scope of the novels:

Everywhere is seen the tendency of the author to degrade passion into appetite, and to give prominence to the selfish and malignant elements of human nature; but while he succeeds in making profligacy disgusting, he fails in making virtue pleasing. His depravity is total depravity The reader of Acton Bell gains no enlarged view of mankind, giving a healthy action to his sympathies, but is confined to a narrow space of life, and held down, as it were, by main force to witness the wolfish side of his nature literally and logically set forth. But the criminal courts are not the places in which to take a comprehensive view of humanity, and the novelist who confines his observation to them is not likely to produce any lasting impression, except of horror and disgust (p. 360).

While Whipple does refer intelligently to such technical matters as plot, character and style, his primary basis for judgment seems to be the scope and faithfulness of the picture of life presented.

Modern Brontë defenders have taken Whipple to task for his remarks in this article. K. J. Fielding, for example, terms the review an "onslaught," but he does admit that "fantastic as [Whipple's] ideas were, they have the merit of being written by someone who knew nothing but the novels themselves."¹²

Ohmann, in the article already mentioned, seems to misinterpret him:

"Whipple . . . said that female authors sometimes wrote well 'unawares.'"¹³

It must be remembered, in light of her disapproval, that, if it is the man Whipple praises, it is also the man he blames in his review. He proceeded on the basis of a mistake, but he treats the Brontë novels no differently than the others under his attention.

In another section of the review Whipple comments on Grantley Manor by Lady Georgiana Fullerton. The novel has "the rose-color of young England and the purple light of Puseyism on its pages, and doubtless presents a very one-sided view of many important matters with which it deals; but it evinces talent of a very high order, and is one of the most pleasing novels of the season" (p. 367). He praises the heroine Ginevra

as an "original and beautiful delineation, the foundation of whose character is imagination intensified by passion and purified by religion" (p. 367).

One of the male characters, however, is "genuine and manly in general, with an occasional touch of sickliness and feebleness. Though far from being a lady's man, he is unmistakably a man delineated by a lady" (p. 368).

Whipple does make a distinction between men and women as novelists in this part of his review, but it is a reasonable one: " . . . it is but common gallantry to admit the right of a lady-writer to abase the hero rather than the heroine, when it is necessary to degrade either" (p. 367).

Of the eight novels reviewed, Whipple finds, not surprisingly, that Vanity Fair is the best. His justification of his choice leaves no doubt as to what he considers the true purpose of the novelist.

Of all the novels on our list, Vanity Fair is the only one in which the author is content to represent actual life. . . . It is also noticeable, that Thackeray alone preserves himself from the illusions of misanthropy or sentimentality, and though dealing with a host of selfish and malicious characters, his book leaves no impression that the world is past praying for, or that the profligate have it. His novel, as a representation of life, is altogether more comprehensive and satisfying than either of the others. . . . it is creditable to the healthiness of his mind that he could make so wide a survey without contracting either of the opposite diseases of misanthropy or worldliness (p. 369).

In the later NAR discussion of the Brontë novels (Vol. 85, pp. 293 - 329), Sweat discusses all of the novels and Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë. "Charlotte Brontë and the Brontë Novels" is in large part a summary of the events Gaskell relates in the biography; discussion of the novels themselves is limited though relatively enlightened. Sweat is sometimes clearly responding to earlier criticism of the Brontë works, but she does make her own assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of the novels. Her judgments are based primarily on aesthetic standards; she sees character as the main element of fiction. She adopts a biographical stance in that

she allows information about the lives of the Bronte sisters to inform her reading, but she does not assume that the novels are in any way autobiographical.

Sweat recognizes that personal knowledge of the life of a writer may well destroy objectivity, but this is outweighed by the corresponding gain in "thorough and sympathetic understanding of [a writer's] point of view, his qualifying circumstances and his personal enthusiasms and prejudices" (p. 295). She believes that biographical information is unusually helpful in criticising the Brontes.

We believe that this knowledge of the individual--always more necessary in judging of a woman's comparative position than of a man's, since her sphere of feeling is less rounded by external action--is in a peculiar degree necessary to a full comprehension of Currer Bell's romances. We also believe that many of the criticisms made in times past, in the total absence of such knowledge, would now, were it possible, receive very decided modification . . . (p. 297).

Certainly Whipple, who made his judgments in the absence of biographical information, must have been chagrined at the revelation of the pseudonyms. Sweat echoes Kirkland here in noting the limited experience available to the woman writer, but does not feel that this limitation hinders artistic endeavor. It simply makes knowledge of the individual more necessary. Sweat makes only one other specific reference to women writers: "The . . . account . . . of Charlotte's method of composition, and of her patient fulfillment of household drudgery when her brain was on fire with the creative impulse, proves that it is by no means necessary that literary women cease to be bound by domestic laws" (p. 307). This evidence should assuage Abbot's fear that a woman's literary endeavors might interfere with her husband's domestic comfort.

Her brief comment on the morality of Jane Eyre notes that "public judgment still remains somewhat undecided" on this point (p. 317). In

Sweat's discussion of the moral aspect of this novel, she reinforces her earlier explanation of how literature teaches.

The situations in "Jane Eyre" are powerfully drawn and brilliantly contrasted; but there is nothing impossible in the circumstances, and we are able to follow every change of scene, and to trace the working of each heart with understanding interest. To those who track "little Jane" over the stony road of her temptation, and go forth with her as she goes into the desolate world, impelled by the unerring instinct of her conscience, no further search for moral power will be necessary (p. 317).

It is enough that this picture of the workings of one conscience reminds us of the workings of our own. The individual situations are "brilliant" and "powerful" but are the more attractive and effective because they are linked by plausibility and causality. That effectiveness assists the "moral." Sweat briefly dismisses "the charge of coarseness" which has occasionally reappeared, despite the biographical explanation that the Brontë sisters drew life as it lay around them: " . . . after the vindication of Mrs. Gaskell, we think it must rank with those suggestions which recommend a 'Shakespeare for the use of private families' and a mantilla for the Venus de' Medici" (p. 327). As for Wuthering Heights, Sweat feels moral judgment is beside the point: "It calls for no harsh judgment as a moral utterance; for its monstrosity removes it from the range of moralities altogether, and can no more be reduced to any practical application than the fancies which perplex a brain in a paroxysm of nightmare" (p. 328).

As might be expected from her earlier discussion of novels in general, character, which Sweat feels is the primary element of fiction, is the focus of most of her commentary on Charlotte Brontë's work. She sees a new demand by novel readers for more complex characters and thinks of Charlotte Brontë as a kind of "literary clairvoyant" in meeting that demand solely on the basis of her own judgment (pp. 318 - 319). She compares "Currer Bell" and Thackeray on the basis of characterization, and finds that though

the latter is more skillful, the former is "more genial . . . and never loses her faith in the heroic element of humanity" (p. 319). Her characters are "neither magnificently handsome nor superlatively magnanimous" but they "have warm human hearts and active minds" (p. 319). "There is more of good than of evil in her characters; and we feel confidence in their latent heroism, draw strength from the contemplation of their struggles, and rise from the perusal of her works without bitterness" (p. 327). Thackeray, on the other hand, becomes "jocosely bitter" over his creations.

According to Sweat, conflict, for Brontë's characters, is "no ignoble struggle, though it may be a silent and single-handed one" (p. 319). The internal conflict Brontë's characters face is a major attraction of her work:

In this conflict of life within itself in which Currer Bell finds the secret of progression, the labor of the soul upon itself and the fulfillment of its appointed work, she is very skillful to interest us and powerful to reveal its movement. We feel that the hard discipline of her men and women is like that which we make for ourselves, and that the process by which they struggle into greater freedom is that by which we must ourselves emerge from bondage (p. 324).

This too could be a source of "moral" instruction as Sweat sees it. Her discussion of Brontë's characters is as tough-minded as the novelist's creation.

In Shirley, Sweat finds a change in the general tone, an increase in the number of characters and the variety of scene, but a "less concentrated" interest. The novel "lacks the impetuous impulse, the passionate glow, the lava-rush towards a single point, and gives us instead, more changing tableaux, more general friction, wider varieties of emotion" (p. 322). Villette, possessing "a more classic elegance of outline and a more delicate finish of detail" than the other two (p. 324), is defective in the "transfer of interest" in the third volume and in the development of Paulina. The Professor, with its many faults, including "crudeness" (of construction)

and "choice of material," is interesting as an indication of Brontë's early talents (p. 326). Works by Anne and Emily receive only brief comments.

In Jane Eyre the characters are "stronger than most of the surrounding circumstances, to which . . . they are made to yield" (p. 320). Sweat discusses each of the three main characters in some depth, and without flinching at the profligate Mr. Rochester or the selfish clergyman, St. John. In a comment on Shirley, Sweat shows us Brontë's dedication to a kind of realism in character portrayal:

Having acknowledged . . . any . . . element of character in her creations, she never avoids for them any legitimate consequence of its existence, never shrinks from any situation into which it brings them, from fear of jarring upon the prepossessions of the reader. Inexorable as Nemesis, she forces upon them the mortifications and the disasters which are their due (p. 323).

This is clearly not the same kind of fiction Sweat deplored in "A Chapter on Novels." These characters are not the pasteboard of the Burney-Radcliffe set, nor are they the "victims" of popular literature.

Despite her sympathy with Charlotte Brontë and the high praise she bestows, Sweat is not blind to faults in the novelist. She expresses reservations about "the too highly colored pictures of the physical distress endured by Jane after leaving Thornfield, and the somewhat hackneyed melodrama of the discovery of her cousins in the persons of her chance benefactors, and her subsequent acquisition of a fortune" (p. 321).

Sweat does consider the extra-literary factor of biography in her discussion of Charlotte Brontë, but, although she sees correspondences between the life and the works, she does not mistake the one for the other. Her evaluations of the novels are based on such strictly literary concerns as character, conflict, and plausibility. She makes the then obligatory comment on the morality of the novels, but it is beside the main point of her criticism.

These four critics approach the novels before them from differing premises; as already indicated, their standards are either primarily ethical or primarily aesthetic in nature. Despite other differences, all of them take the novel seriously as a literary genre. Each reviewer comments at least once on women as novelists, but, with the possible exception of Abbot, they see nothing unusual in a woman writing novels and do not afford women special treatment. Whipple expresses some "common gallantry," and Kirkland and Sweat recognize a limitation of experience, but none of these North American Review critics follows Abbot's scenario for judging a smart school-girl's theme.

III.

The criticism of poetry by women in the North American Review is somewhat different from that of fiction. There is still some seeking for the ethical value of a poet's work, but other standards are also used, primarily a reliance on the "rules of art." Reviews by Elizabeth F. Ellet and Francis Bowen treat a number of poets, and shall be examined first. Whipple and Harriet P. Spofford review only one poet each, Lydia H. Sigourney and Anne Whitney, respectively. This section will conclude with a discussion of Charles C. Everett's lengthy review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry.

"The Female Poets of America" (Vol. 68, pp. 413 - 436) is by Elizabeth F. Ellet, whose own work on women of the Revolution is reviewed elsewhere in the same number. The works under review are anthologies: The American Female Poets, with Biographical and Critical Notices, by Caroline May (1848), [Thomas Buchanan] Read's Female Poets of America (1841), and The Female Poets of America, by Rufus Wilmot Griswold (1849). Ellet discusses the

life and education of an individual poet, mentions her other works, and occasionally quotes other commentators on the work or poet under discussion. Her review is more a history of American female poets than an evaluation of the anthologies at hand. She begins with pre-Revolutionary poets (Anne Bradstreet, Jane Turell, and Mercy Warren); her comments consist largely of quotations from other critics on Bradstreet and discussion of the historical roles played by Warren and Elizabeth Ferguson. Ann Eliza Bleecker, her daughter Margaretta V. Faugeres, and Phillis Wheatly are also mentioned as poets of the Revolutionary period. These poets share the same faults (p. 418), which are not discussed at length. The major fault would seem to be lack of originality, if we are to judge by Ellet's comments on Warren, Bleecker, and Wheatley:

Vigor of thought and clearness of expression are [Warren's] characteristics But her style often humors too much the artificial tastes of the day, many passages . . . being curiously elaborated (p. 416).

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Some of Mrs. Bleecker's poems are full of nature and feeling, though they have not much originality (p. 417).

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If the inspiration of genius be denied [Wheatley] it must be acknowledged that her productions, in sentiment and diction, equal those of her contemporaries (p. 418).

While the female poets writing after the Revolution were decidedly better, according to Ellet, she does little more than name them. She mentions Mrs. [Susanna] Rowson, Sarah Porter, Mrs. Morton, Mrs. Little, Mrs. Stoddard, and Eliza Townsend. Among her contemporaries, Ellet refers briefly to a Miss Gould and to Mrs. Sigourney (whose poetry is reviewed elsewhere in the number) and quotes extensively from Maria Brooks (Maria del Occidente) and Sarah Josepha Hale before proceeding with a discussion of poetesses by geographical region.

The discussion of contemporaries makes up the major portion of the review (the anthologies and their editors receive a hasty paragraph at the

conclusion), for Ellet offers a variety of quotations from the poets she discusses. Unfortunately, much of the poetry quoted strikes the modern reader as belonging to that class which has been termed "needlepoint poetry," as such titles as "Labor," "Sinless Child," and "Musings" might indicate. The qualities Ellet praises are for the most part summed up in her comment on Anne Charlotte Lynch: "Miss Lynch has ease and grace of expression, with purity and elevation of thought. Some of her pieces have an unaffected tenderness and depth of feeling, that cannot fail to touch the reader's sympathies" (p. 433). "Felicity of expression," "depth of feeling," and "elevation of thought" or similar phrases recur in her evaluations of poets.

The purpose of poetry, especially poetry written by women, apparently is to provide a moral uplift or religious consolation to the reader. Ellet speaks approvingly of "a religious spirit [which] breathes through" the work of Sara Josepha Hale: "It is plain that Mrs. Hale's constant aim is to show the true source of strength and cheerfulness amid the trials of life, and to inspire the hope that looks beyond it" (p. 422). The writers of the Eastern and Middle States "sing from the impulse of untaught nature, and their song spreads cheerfulness around their homes, and lingers in the hearts of those who, passing, chance to catch its melody" (p. 428). There is no doubt in Ellet's mind about the nobility of poetry: it "infus[es] into the heart a love of the highest truth and beauty" (p. 414).

An additional aspect of Ellet's critical standards should be discussed. She is a firm believer in "the rules of art," to use her own phrase (p. 432). While she generally does not elaborate on exactly what rules have been followed or abandoned, her discussion of the sonnet, though long, gives a clear idea of her expectations. One of the poets she reviews has written a number of sonnets, although the verses are not entitled to the name

according to the strict rules of that invented by Guittone d'Arezzo and consecrated in Italian literature by Petrarch and the early poets. A true sonnet must not only consist of fourteen lines in heroic measure, but there must be a pause, either a colon or a period, at the end of the first quatrain, and also of the second. The stanzas must contain but two rhymes, and are employed to open the subject and prepare the mind for what succeeds. The two stanzas of three lines each, which succeed, must also contain not more than two rhymes, and move more rapidly, completing the image; and the poem should terminate with some striking or epigrammatic turn of thought. The law of but two rhymes in the last two stanzas must be regarded as essential to the perfection of the regular sonnet; though Petrarch and many other Italian poets frequently assumed the license of three rhymes. . . . Milton, whose sonnets are good specimens in English of this species of verse, seems to prefer the [three rhyme] arrangement, but takes the liberty of departing from it; and the same may be said of Wordsworth. Shakespeare neglects the prescribed recurrence of rhymes. Gray, like many of the Italians, has varied the arrangement in the first two stanzas, by interlacing alternate rhymes. Those who wish to have a perfect idea of the sonnet, so as to fully appreciate its harmony and grace, are recommended not to take as a model any English writer (pp. 430 - 431).¹⁴

One must admire the lady's learning, if not her flexibility.

Equally inflexible but far less polite is the acerb Francis Bowen, whose essay "Nine New Poets" (Vol. 64, pp. 402 - 434), comments on Emerson and Channing, among others, and two women, Frances Elizabeth Browne and Harriet Farley. Bowen's acidity may be a refreshing antidote to the sugary surfeit of Abbot and Kirkland but his bullheadedness leaves one in doubt as to the reliability of some of his evaluations. In contrast to his remarks on Emerson and Channing, he is almost benevolent, perhaps even gallant, in his treatment of the women on his list. He refers to The Dial as a "strange periodical work, which is now withdrawn from sunlight into the utter darkness that it always coveted" (p. 406). He says of Emerson and Channing that "their peculiarities of style are matters of choice and not of accident; their diction is slovenly upon system, and they strive after dulness and imbecility, as for hidden treasures" (p. 415). His comment on Frances Browne's work is so brief it can be quoted in its entirety:

The seventh Muse has inspired a lady, and we are of opinion that we shall best manifest our deference for the sex by passing over her effusions very hurriedly. Mrs. Browne is an Englishwoman, who can probably allege the old excuse for her appearance in public,--

"Obliged by hunger, or request of friends."

She has certainly a kind heart and is disposed to commemorate in undying verse the virtues of some of these importunate friends, who might otherwise have remained unknown to fame. How grateful they are likely to feel for the compliment may be judged from the following stanza, taken from a little poem on the death of the Dowager Lady Powerscourt.

"She who gains a heavenly crown
Earthly honors meekly bore,
Gladly laid the burden down,--
Powerscourt was the name she bore."

This is quite enough. It is but a brick from the lady's edifice, but an architectural survey of it could not convey a more faithful idea of the whole structure (p. 432, italics in original).

This deference is clearly a fine example of male chauvinism, but it is also an act of mercy; any more detailed discussion of the poet's artistic merits and demerits would certainly have led to venom.

Bowen's treatment of Harriet Farley's book is slightly longer and much more gentle. He regrets her title (Shells from the Strand of the Sea of Genius) but he speaks kindly of her work and of the Lowell Offering, of which she was the editor. Though he recognizes the limitations in her background, he is not condescending. One wishes he had been as specific in discussing her merits as he was in pointing out the faults of the others.

Miss Farley's book shows more talent certainly, but not a higher degree of cultivation, or a wider range of reading, than is quite common among her associates in labor. She writes with facility and correctness, showing a tolerable command of expression, and an instinctive good taste. Her poems are smoothly versified, and display considerable fancy and humor, with frequent indications of deep feeling. . . . Certainly, the perusal of her volume was the least disagreeable portion of our task, when we undertook to give . . . some account of nine new poets (p. 434).

Though Bowen's praise is faint, Harriet Farley is certainly not damned.

As Bowen makes no comment on the propriety of a woman writing poetry, it is apparently not a phenomenon worthy of remark. The reviewers of both Lydia Huntley Sigourney and Anne Whitney are aware they are writing about female poets, but neither devotes much attention to woman-as-poet in general. Sigourney's reviewer is E. P. Whipple ("Mrs. Sigourney's Poems," Vol. 68, pp. 496 - 503), who again makes a distinction between the masculine and feminine capabilities for literary art. "As is the case with most female poets, Mrs. Sigourney's powers act with intensity only on those subjects which have fallen on her womanly sympathies. She does not evince that masculine imagination, by which the mind passes out of its own individual relations of sex and person, and animates numerous and widely different modes of being" (p. 497). This distinction explains his belief that no woman could have done what Emily Brontë did, and, aside from Wuthering Heights, there may not be a striking example available to him of a female imagination as he defines it. Whipple further classifies Sigourney's poetry as devotional and didactic, but by this he intends no disparagement of her accomplishment. For example, he says,

A healthy moral energy is diffused generally through her poems, which steals into the reader's mind through subtle avenues lying beyond his consciousness, and declares the presence of a poet gifted with the power of inspiring strength in the very heart of weakness and lassitude. This is a great poetic excellence, however limited may be the range of its exercise, and that Mrs. Sigourney possesses it cannot be denied or even contested (p. 499).

He notes her weakness in drawing characters, representing qualities instead, but comments that this may be a chief source of her effectiveness. Whipple clearly approves of the moral tone of Sigourney's poetry, and ends his short review with quiet good wishes for the work at hand.

The poems of Anne Whitney are reviewed by Harriet Spofford ("Anne Whitney's Poems," Vol. 90, pp. 345 - 356), who feels no need to comment at length on the gender of the poet. She mentions the lack of attention paid

to Whitney's poems and hints that it may be due to the poet's sex. She tells us nothing about the poet herself; most of her review is discussion, accompanied by frequent examples, of the poet's strengths and weaknesses. Much of the article is given over to enthusiastic quotation and "Isn't this nice?" comments; most of the quotations seem to be intended as examples of "felicitous phrasing" or "intensity of feeling." Whitney's virtues are summarized at the conclusion of the review:

. . . Thought as well as language is at the command of the poet of whom we have written, and whom, if it were not for the deficiencies we have mentioned, we might regard as crowned rather than aspirant. Originality, strength, and imagination that seldom degenerates into fancy, characterize her method; and the maturity it already exhibits is only, we trust, the promise of a rich harvest in coming years (p. 356).

Whitney's moral position is not clear from the review; she is apparently neither as devout as Mrs. Sigourney nor as immoral (or amoral) as Currer Bell and Co. Spofford refers to Whitney's feeling "the cruel indifference of the elements" and finding "no sympathy in the alien sky"--a far cry from "Labor" and "Sinless Child" as subject matter. Spofford seems uninterested in either devotion or didacticism.

She finds fault with Whitney's poems in their "obscurity, lack of euphony, and defect of artistic polish" (p. 353). Of the latter weakness, Spofford notes

such minor details as the introduction of a French word,--sufficiently bad taste in prose, insufferable in poetry; a hyphen breaking an epithet at the end of a line; the unpleasant collocation of similar sounds; the use, and, still worse, the need of italics; and the indolence which, not always fortunate in the selection of titles, frequently gives us none at all (p. 354).

She does admit that these are minor flaws, but, like Ellet, Spofford seems to be a strict constructionist when it comes to the "rules of art."

The review "Elizabeth Barrett Browning" (Vol. 85, pp. 415 - 441) by Charles C. Everett, is quite different from those of Sigourney and Whitney; it is longer and more thorough. Everett too makes a distinction between the minds of male and female poets: "There is perhaps no more general distinction between the mind of man and that of woman, than that, where the former requires something to mediate between itself and the object of its contemplation, the latter approaches this object directly, without any such mediation" (p. 416). He goes on to discuss this difference in regard to artistic freedom and to mention the limited experience of women. He then puts all this by the wayside with his first mention of Mrs. Browning:

The fact that Mrs. Browning has attained to such a height of poetic excellence, not in spite of her woman's nature, but by means of it, shows that the difference which has been hitherto supposed to exist between poets and poetesses is not, so far as relates to the matter of power, founded upon the nature of things (p. 419).

He puts her "not merely in the front rank of our female poets, but of our poets" (p. 418), but he is nonetheless aware of her significance as a woman poet: "Mrs. Browning's poems are, in all respects, the utterances of a woman,--of a woman of great learning, rich experience, and powerful genius, uniting to her woman's nature the strength which is sometimes thought peculiar to man" (p. 419).

Everett proceeds in an orderly fashion, discussing first the form of the poems, then the content, and finally both aspects together, supporting his statements with quotations from the poetry. He works from a biographical position to the extent that he sees her marriage as a turning point in her artistic and spiritual growth. Everett traces Mrs. Browning's spiritual development, identifying three stages,¹⁵ and shows that different qualities of form are apparent in each different stage of her work. His discussion shows that Everett takes Mrs. Browning seriously as a poet, with no need to

apologize for limitations and no doubt of her significance. His comments on the interrelation of form and content at all three stages of development serve as a summary of his review. "In the first period we found that the subject-matter was for the most part made up of sorrow, longing, and faith. . . . These undefined longings . . . mould the outward form of her poems. She has power enough over language to exhibit her thought clearly and gracefully; but so far as this thought is vague and shadowy, so far do her expressions become harsh and obscure" (p. 438). In the second stage, however, " . . . these vague yearnings become satisfied; the sorrow that had striven for utterance passes away; the realities of earth replace the "visions" in which she has thus far lived; the inward conflict has become changed to a joyous peace. Her poems exhibit this change in their outward form. What she has to say is distinctly before her, and is clearly and gracefully spoken" (pp. 439 - 440). This stage, too, passes, until at last her spiritual development is complete:

She has acquired a command of her own resources; her thought arises before her, grand and clear. She demands only a medium for its representation. She does not wander, as before, among symbols and types. She does not seek, on the other hand, that beauty of expression which marks her later sonnets It is enough for her that her thought is understood. If a figure suits her turn, no matter how often she may have used it before, it will serve just as well again. . . . We thus understand the carelessness and the realism which we found to mark the "Aurora Leigh" (p. 440).

In discussions of the form of any phase of her poetry, Everett is not dogmatic in an insistence on following the rules, even in his comments on the sonnets. Nor is he concerned with didacticism. He speaks of her "deep and living faith" and "consciousness of the Divine 'presence'" (p. 427) and he discusses her spiritual development, but he never makes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning a model of piety, nor of her poems sermons.

The criticism of poetry by women in the North American Review is characterized in part by a paradoxical combination of a rigid interpretation of the rules of art side-by-side with impressionistic comments about "intensity of feeling." These critics, like those of novels by women, use both ethical and aesthetic standards in evaluating the works before them, combining the two approaches more than the other group of reviewers does. There is little comment on the propriety of a woman writing poetry and no condescension toward women poets. Bowen politely removes his hat in the presence of Frances Browne, and Whipple and Everett note distinctions between men and women as poets, but when it comes to judging the poetry before them, these critics make no special provisions for the ladies.

IV.

By way of conclusion, all eight North American Review critics of literature by women will be discussed in relationship to one another. However, the limits of this study should be kept clearly in mind, because, while focusing on reviews of literature by women, it can offer no conclusions about NAR criticism in general. Nor should the ten reviews just examined be taken as representative of individual critics; Whipple, Bowen, and Everett were all frequent contributors to the NAR, and the one or two reviews cited give an incomplete understanding of their critical habits. It should be noted, too, that the conclusions that can be safely drawn from this research are not those originally predicted. There is a temptation to expect condescension in all nineteenth-century evaluations of women writers, especially in light of such specimens as the 1850

Athenaeum remark, quoted by Ohmann, that Wuthering Heights is only a "more than usually interesting contribution to the history of female authorship in England" (p. 908). In the NAR, however, such comments are rare and perhaps, as in the case of Frances Browne, well-deserved; instead, we find Everett saying that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's place is "not merely in the front rank of our female poets, but of our poets."

Rather than cataloguing critical abuses, this study has examined standards by which writers in the NAR judged the work of women novelists and poets. Discussion has included all critical standards used in an article, not simply those that take a special cognizance of the artist's sex. This broadening of scope was necessitated by the discovery that there is no special criticism for works by women. Since no particular set of attitudes "for ladies only" can be identified, an inquiry into the criticism of literature by women can only examine the general standards used. These standards are so varied that it is impossible to observe any tendency common to all; we can only conclude that women were judged primarily as writers, not as women.

As already explained, the judgments by NAR reviewers of women writers were based on standards primarily aesthetic or primarily ethical in their criteria. A reviewer may use one set of standards almost exclusively, as do Abbot and Kirkland, who discuss only the religious aspects of the works they review; or, a critic may rely on both kinds of criteria, as Whipple does in his comments on both the literary and ethical aspects of the "novels of the season." Ellet, who refers learnedly to the rules of the sonnet, is more concerned with the inspirational nature of poetry. In contrast, Bowen and Spofford do not comment at length on the moral issues in the poetry they review; they stress originality, facility, and correctness, along with other more technical aspects of verse. Sweat and Everett judge

literature almost exclusively on aesthetic, or literary, bases, discussing such matters as character, conflict, symbols, control over language, and artistic development.

As may be expected, these reviewers apply their different critical standards with varying degrees of effectiveness. All are consistent and objective. Although she is undecided about how women writers ought to be treated, Abbot does not contradict herself. The rest of these critics are all reasonably consistent in applying the standards they set up for themselves; they do not make exceptions that undercut the integrity of their criteria. They are also objective. No one expresses a predilection for a certain author or type of literature; although he apparently wants to quarrel with Emerson and Channing, Bowen expresses no detectable bias for or against the women whose work he reviews. Ellet and Spofford do not always clearly support their "Isn't this nice?" comments, but they are objective in that they find both strengths and weaknesses in the poets they discuss. Consistency and objectivity are virtues all of these reviewers share.

There is some variation, however, in the thoroughness of the criticism. Abbot, Kirkland, and Bowen either discuss in depth only one aspect of a given work or else none very thoroughly, and Ellet, who ambitiously discusses three collections of poets, has so much to look at that she has no time for complete critical discussion of any one poet. The remaining four--Whipple, Spofford, Sweat and Everett--are all more thorough in their evaluations of several aspects of the writer's work. Whipple refers to such aspects of a novel as character and style, as well as the scope of the representation of life; Spofford discusses "thought as well as language." In her remarks on Charlotte Brontë, Sweat considers character, conflict,

and morality at some length, and also makes occasional mention of tone or style and variety. Everett considers both form and content in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry throughout her career, with a long and detailed analysis of both aspects in Aurora Leigh. Sweat and Everett tell even twentieth-century readers more about their subjects than the other NAR critics of literature by women, but perhaps we are partly inclined to regard them as the most useful of these eight because Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are still read, whereas Anne Whitney and Julia Kavanaugh, for example, are not. The reviews by Sweat and Everett are the best examples of the respect and honesty with which women writers were treated by NAR critics.

In discussing the delay of "the admission of women to the literary peerage," Fred Lewis Pattee mentions the NAR: "The aristocracy of letters as recognized by such editorial boards as those of the North American Review were, in heart at least, with Dr. Samuel Johnson, whose opinion of 'blue stockings' is well known."¹⁶ Perhaps, in their hearts, the editors of the North American Review did not appreciate scribbling women. We cannot know that, and it really does not matter. What matters is that in the pages of the Review itself women received honest chastisement and true praise.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Carol Ohmann, "Emily Bronte in the Hands of Male Critics," College English, 32 (1971), 906 - 913.

² Hereafter, North American Review will be abbreviated NAR as convenient.

³ Charlotte Brontë, "Biographical Notice," in Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights, (Oxford: The Shakespeare Head Press, 1931), 3.

⁴ Fred Lewis Pattee, The Feminine Fifties (New York: Appleton-Century, 1940).

⁵ Edinburgh Review, 34 (Aug. 1820), 161, n.

⁶ Frank Luther Mott, A History of American Magazines (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1967), II, 231 - 232. Mott's entire chapter on the NAR, 219 - 261, has been generally helpful.

⁷ William Cushing, Index to the North American Review (Cambridge: Wilson, 1878), reverse of title page, seven line quotation signed O. W. H.

⁸ George De Mille, Literary Criticism in America: A Preliminary Survey (1931; rpt. New York: Russell, 1967), 21.

⁹ Robert E. Streeter, "Critical Thought in the North American Review, 1815 - 1865," Diss. Northwestern 1943

¹⁰ Streeter says, "From its first issue the NAR had shown itself remarkably hospitable to serious criticism of the novel as an important literary form" (p. 317).

¹¹ All articles quoted appeared in the North American Review. Title and author appear in the text; volume and page numbers are provided parenthetically. The original punctuation has been retained in all quotations.

¹² K. J. Fielding, "The Brontës and 'The North American Review': A Critic's Strange Guesses," Brontë Society Transactions, 13 (1956), 14.

¹³ Ohmann, 909. She mentions the second review, by Sweat, only in a footnote, referring to the unidentified critic as "he."

¹⁴ This disquisition is occasioned by the poems of Mrs. Elizabeth Oakes Smith, whom Pattee identifies as "the first woman of note to take the woman's rights question to the platform as a lecturer" (p. 100).

¹⁵ Streeter explains that Everett, in reviews of both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Tennyson, applies a Hegelian aesthetic, identifying three stages of artistic development: symbolism, in which the spirit is clouded by physical data; classicism, in which the soul and body of art are perfectly blended; and romanticism, in which the ideal elements begin to gain ground over the material (pp. 276 - 277, 287).

¹⁶ Pattee, 98.

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THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF WOMEN WRITERS:
THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, 1845 - 1860

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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The purpose of this study is to examine reviews of literature by women, focusing on the North American Review in the years between 1845 and 1860. This was a time of feminist action in such areas as education, and the period also includes the craze of the sentimental novel, written largely by and for women. During this period the NAR was a well-established medium for literary communication, with a sound reputation on both sides of the Atlantic. It printed ten lengthy articles on women writers and their works during this fifteen year span, five reviews of novelists and five of poets. It was assumed that these articles would express much anti-feminine bias; however, such an attitude is conspicuously absent. Instead, there is an acceptance of women as writers, with little attempt to apologize for or explain away feminine literary endeavor. Women writers are apparently judged by the same standards used for men. These standards include both strictly literary concerns and more pragmatic considerations of the usefulness of the work as an instrument for moral instruction. Some reviewers, notably Anne Abbot and Caroline Kirkland, evaluate novels on the latter basis, whereas others, like Charles Everett and Margaret J. M. Sweat, judge literature according to aesthetic criteria. NAR critics used such a variety of standards and procedures that generalizations about their response to literature by women are impossible except to notice that women were taken seriously as literary artists and judged by some definable set of standards having nothing to do with sex.