

consistently, although I admit this might have deprived the reader of some interesting facts.

Finally, there is the question of the “critical” aspect of the entries. I have already discussed the question of the varying lengths of the entries. In a number of entries, Kersey provides a brief synopsis of some of the published work; in others, she gives an account of the philosopher’s relations with other philosophers, and, in yet others, she attempts some critical analysis of the material. Again, a consistent policy would have been preferable. However, I think the lack of such a policy reflects the fact that this is the work of one person. Kersey is obviously more familiar with some areas of philosophy than with others. I would imagine that she did not feel competent to do more than provide a synopsis for some individuals. However, in some cases, such as the three women I mentioned earlier who were given extremely short entries, she did not even do that.

More seriously, in a number of cases, she appears to me to misrepresent the work of the individuals. Anscombe is represented mainly as a commentator on Wittgenstein, which appears to me to undervalue the original work that she has done. Otherwise she could hardly merit Kersey’s description of her as “the most distinguished woman philosopher that England has produced” (p. 34). Although Suzanne Bachelard “centers her research on mathematical physics” (p. 51), most of the entry concerns her commentary on Husserl. Ruth Saw (p. 186) is best known as a philosopher of aesthetics, but most of her entry is concerned with her early commentaries on Leibniz and Spinoza. In general, there is a tendency to see the work of women as derivative of, and dependent upon, the works of male philosophers. I would agree that no philosopher works in a vacuum, and that we all, male or female, are influenced by our predecessors and contemporaries. However, I thought that this volume, to some degree, contributed to the view that women as philosophers must always be seen as followers of some male philosopher or other, rather than as figures in their own right. Most female philosophers, like most male philosophers, are of course not figures in their own right, but some, such as Anscombe, are. This should be recognized.

Despite the criticisms, I think this volume is a valuable contribution to the growing spread of knowledge about our female predecessors. I found it fascinating. I had not before heard of most of the figures. I had not realized the extent of Conway’s influence on Leibniz. I had not realized how many American women had made their way successfully into the university hierarchy. In other words, I

was genuinely enlightened and educated by the book, and I congratulate Kersey on her achievement.

Carole Stewart
University of Guelph

Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change. Rita Felski, *Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989, Pp. 223 paperback.*

Unlike Toril Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) or K.K. Ruthven’s *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (1984), Felski’s book is not a primer for feminist literary theory. Instead, as the title *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* suggests, the book attempts to go “beyond” current trends in Anglo-American and French feminist theories, beyond the gender-based essentialism associated with these schools, to what Felski has termed the “feminist public sphere.” While Felski’s arguments are well developed and clearly articulated, she does assume — and rightly so — that the reader already has some familiarity with the work of feminist critics, ranging from Elaine Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar, to Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. Much of the introduction and the first chapter is a critical engagement rather than summary of these various forms of feminism.

Of the book’s five chapters, three are devoted to theoretical considerations and feminist dialectics, while the other two are discussions of what Felski believes are dominant modes of “contemporary women’s writing” (p. 86) — the autobiography and the *Bildungsroman*. This balance of sections between theory and practice is one that is becoming popular in studies of women’s life writings. Note that Sidonie Smith’s *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987), and Shari Benstock’s collection of essays, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings* (1988), are both structured this way. However, one quibble I have with Felski’s book is that it is not clearly evident from the rather broad title of the book that the work is to be a study which would focus on these specific forms of contemporary women’s writing.

Felski designates “feminist aesthetics” (Chapter 1) as “any theoretical position which argues a necessary or privileged relationship between female gender and a particular kind of literary structure, style, or form” (p. 19). The reason she is against both American and French forms of feminist analysis is that both positions claim that there is an abstract conception of “feminine” writing,

whether as a result of a distinctive female consciousness or experience of reality (in the case of American feminists), or a “linguistically based and antihumanist” appeal, “understood as a disruption or transgression of a phallogocentric symbolic order” (in the case French feminists) (p. 20). For Felski,

[the] question of the most appropriate strategy for a feminist writing practice cannot be determined a priori in relation to a concept of the “feminine” text, however defined, but requires instead a theoretical approach which can address the social meanings and functions of literature in relation to women writers and readers. (p. 19)

Particularly astute and challenging is the opening section where the author explains the limitations of both forms of feminist analyses. Felski argues that the gynocritical position of American feminism is inadequate because:

[it] operates with a conception of patriarchal ideology as a homogeneous and uniformly repressive phenomenon masking an authentic female subjectivity, rather than conceding that ideology needs to be understood as a complex formation of beliefs, structures, and representations, which shapes and permeates the subjective sense of self of both men and women. (p. 27) [Furthermore], female experience is assumed to generate a unique women’s writing, without consideration for the fact that literature also involves an organization of meaning as *form*, the cultural and aesthetic significance of which is necessarily shaped by its relation to existing literary traditions and conventions. (pp. 28-29)

In the light of what poststructuralist theories have taught us, these criticisms are, of course, valid ones. However, for someone who speaks so strongly on behalf of the historical emergence and the impact on the feminist community of the “feminist counter-public sphere,” one would expect more contextualizing and less condemnation of these early and important forms of feminism.

On the other hand, Felski characterizes French feminism as a critical movement which privileges “negative aesthetics,” as it perceives the artistically radical text, using the anarchic, disruptive energies of what Kristeva calls the semiotics, to be politically radical, in that it “seeks to challenge the most fundamental assumptions of a patriarchal society as embedded in its codes of representation and structures of discourse” (p. 30). Felski asserts:

By favoring linguistic subversion and deconstructive readings as the most authentically oppositional practices, we make it impossible to account for the differing ways and contexts in which women may legitimately

choose to use language for feminist aims in the present cultural context: to negate but also to construct, establish, and affirm, as a form of play and also as a means of developing sophisticated tools of theoretical analysis. (p. 46)

One weakness of French feminism that Felski points out is that it

suffers from an exclusive focus on and celebration of an avant-garde textual practice accessible only to a few as the primary locus of the feminine, and a consequent inability to offer any adequate analysis of what is perhaps *the* major body of contemporary women’s fiction, realist novels with female protagonists in which language is not foregrounded or defamiliarized. (p. 44)

Felski feels that although a feminist politics must necessarily include consideration of women’s pleasure, the recovery of *jouissance* and a valorization of erotic drives in literature, feminism is not “*reducible to the play of desire*” (p. 40). While Felski’s objections are legitimate ones, they do tend to minimize the exhilaration and the deconstructive power provided by this type of feminist theory.

To a great extent, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* succeeds in doing what Felski thinks French feminism does not do. It is able to offer a valuable critical approach to many contemporary novels written by women which do not subvert fixed meanings nor experiment with *l’écriture féminine*. However, whether or not autobiographical realist narrative is actually the “mainstay of feminist publishing” (p. 15), as she suggests, is somewhat questionable. Does Felski mean in numbers of authors publishing currently? Or does she have statistics to show that there are more feminist consumers reading autobiographical realist narratives versus narratives that use other popular forms such as magic realism, detective fiction, science fiction, etc. Obviously not all of the books in these genres can be classified as “feminist literature,” but Felski’s broad definition of the term as “all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women’s subordinate position and of gender as problematic category” (p. 14) invites many possibilities. The range of novels that she does discuss is impressive and multinational, though the authors are all from Western first-world countries.

Felski contends that, in feminist autobiographies, there is a

recognition that it is the representative aspects of the author’s experience rather than her unique individuality which are important, allowing for the inclusion of

fictive but representative episodes distilled from the lives of other women. (p. 94)

In contrast to the traditional autobiography of bourgeois individualism which presents a record of an unusual but exemplary life, feminist confession is less concerned with "notions of essential humanity than with delineating the specific problems and experiences which bind women together" (p. 94). Felski tantalizes our appetites for these confessional narratives by flitting through and citing examples from texts which we, in our one-discipline, specialized area, may not know. For example, from West Germany, there is Svende Merian's *Der Tod des Märchenprinzen* (1980) and Judith Offenhach's *Sonja* (1980); from the United States, Alice Koller's *An Unknown Woman* (1982) and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980); from France, Marie Cardinal's *The Words to Say It* (1975); from the Netherlands, Anja Meulenbelt's *The Shame is Over* (1980); and, from England, Ann Oakley's *Taking It Like A Woman* (1984). While Felski believes that the "strength of confession as a genre lies in its ability to communicate the conflicting and contradictory aspects of subjectivity, the strength of desire, the tensions between ideological convictions and personal feelings" (p. 116), she is still not sure whether one should "celebrate it as a radically subversive" genre or "reject it as self-indulgent and naive" (p. 119).

The other genre Felski sees as "most clearly identified with contemporary feminist writing" is the narrative of female self-discovery, which is a reworking of the *Bildungsroman* (p. 122). Using such examples as Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977), Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), and many others, Felski demonstrates the differences between these feminist enterprises and traditional *Bildungsroman*. On the whole, feminist novels of quest reject the heterosexual romance plot and value separation as the "essential precondition for any path to self-knowledge" (p. 124). Because of the symbolic importance of separation, Felski maintains that notions such as women's right to social identity not determined by their sexual and maternal roles have become embedded within the discursive frameworks of contemporary culture, functioning as an influential source for some of these narratives. Often the goal of these novels of search is not integration into society, but the "recovery of a qualitatively different sense of self" (p. 142).

Finally, Felski develops a theory of the "feminist counter-public sphere" which is thoughtful and very energizing because of its aesthetic, political and practical

implications. First of all, Felski discounts the notion that linguistic or stylistic innovation in a text should necessarily be hailed as subversive. At some point, the defamiliarizing and experimental tendencies of modernism will themselves become conventions just as techniques of realism did. Furthermore, the absorption of many of these techniques into contemporary mass culture forms can be perceived as merely a "fetishization of novelty and fashion which is the hallmark of a capitalist consumer culture built upon constant innovation and instant obsolescence" (p. 160). As avant-garde strategies of self-reflexivity and narrative fragmentation become standardized features of contemporary art, they lose their revolutionary and political value. Felski asserts that "radical impulses are not inherent in the formal properties of texts; they can be realized only through interactions between texts and readers, so that it becomes necessary to situate the modernist text in relation to the interests and expectations of potential audiences" (pp. 161-62). Rather than resorting to the experimental text as a source of subversive impulses, feminism must analyze women's current artistic and critical practice in relation to their social and cultural context.

Drawing upon Habermas' model of the bourgeois public sphere which used rationality as a means of equalizing all participants, Felski discusses the feminist counter-public sphere as "a discursive space which defines itself in terms of a common identity, ... the shared experience of gender-based oppression" (p. 166). It functions both *internally*, generating "a gender-specific identity grounded in a consciousness of community and solidarity among women," and *externally*, seeking "to convince society as a whole of the validity of feminist claims, challenging existing structures of authority through political activity and theoretical critique" (p. 168). Instead of thinking in dualistic terms, where literature and ideology are separate spheres, Felski insists that feminist criticism should be a dialectical mediation between aesthetic and political concerns. Rather than privileging the aesthetic, a feminist cultural politics should "concern itself with addressing the potential value of forms from both high and mass culture in relation to the objectives of a feminist public sphere" (p. 181). With much conviction, Felski maintains that one of the most important strengths of feminism derives from the fact that "it does not simply constitute an academic discourse but continues to inspire a social and cultural movement and this issue must remain central to the discussion of the significance of feminist literature" (p. 182).