

Book Reviews

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Volume 1: The War of the Words*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. xvi + 320 pp. Cloth and Paper .

_____. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Volume 2: Sexchanges*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. xviii + 455 pp. cloth and Paper .

The first two volumes of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land*, the projected three volume sequel to *Madwoman in the Attic*, replicate certain features of Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (New York: Metheun, 1985). Moi, in her flawed but important historical survey and ideological assessment of Anglo-American and Francophile feminist literary theory, deliberately omits "black or lesbian (or black-lesbian) feminist criticism" but argues that "[t]hese 'marginal feminisms' ought to prevent white middle-class First World feminists from defining their own preoccupations as *universal* female (or feminist) problems. In this respect, recent work on Third-World women has much to teach us" (86). This explicitly stated heterosexist and eurocentric bias shows precisely how insidious feminist exclusionary practices are and how subtly hegemonic feminist thought can control the discourse of the margins (86).

Like *Sexual/Textual Politics*, *No Man's Land* is an invaluable and often brilliant contribution to feminist literary criticism. I think it is crucial to identify political fault lines in the theoretical edifice of *No Man's Land*. The controlling argument of study is powerfully persuasive. As the authors abundantly illustrate, canonical Anglo-American male modernism is a side-effect not of the Great War but of the terrifying and emasculating implications of the women's movement.

The authors demonstrate that women and men writers have reacted asymmetrically to this sexually charged conflict. Male modernist writers seem to see the no man's land between the genders as the site of horrible sexual humiliations and have consistently responded to women's growing independence by imagining either a second and definitive world historical defeat of women or a dreadful castrating gynocracy in which subjugated "no-men" suffer in miserable servitude to women's whims. By contrast, Anglo-American female writers envision this no-man's land as a space where women can for the first time explore their humanity.

Yet, the audacity of Gilbert and Gubar's revisionary engendering of modernism does not entirely offset the fact that the first two works in the study, *The War of the Words* and *Sexchanges* evidence some of the same sins of elision that mar Moi's work. Though it may seem petty to call attention to mere parts of speech, I think it is worth noting that the three definite articles in the subtitle of the three volume series, *No Man's Land: The Place*

of the *Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, suggest a comprehensive geographical, cultural, and temporal compass of inquiry never fully realized in the study. The authors term their work “transatlantic” in scope (Preface, *Sexchanges* xvi), but the overwhelming majority of women writers discussed in the first two volumes (even the expatriates in Paris) are from England and the United States and are white, privileged, and (generally) heterosexual. As the authors themselves indicate, not until the third volume, *Letters from the Front*, will “the emergence of a black female literary tradition” be analyzed (Preface, *Sexchanges* xvii). Thus, when Gilbert and Gubar say, however innocently, that they are writing “the history that has made all of us who we are” (Preface, *The War of the Words* xviii), they are using an implicitly exclusionary “we.”

Because liberal feminism defines gender conflict as the primary source of oppression in society, it necessarily represses the problems of racism and class privilege that have plagued the women’s movement from its inception. Gilbert and Gubar do try to address issues of racial discrimination, but are clearly uneasy with this difficult topic. For example, in their discussion of Amiri Baraka’s play *Dutchman* (in which a white woman systematically murders black men), they quickly shift from racial tensions to the question of gender bias, arguing that Baraka evidently “believes the white female is specifically the oppressor of the black race” (55).

I think it is significant, too, that, in *Sexchanges*, two “mainstream artists” (215), Edith Wharton and Willa Cather (whose lesbian orientation is “the thing not named” [211]), are canonized and allocated a chapter each in the center of the book, while in the final section, “Reinventing Gender,” the expatriate lesbian writers of the Left Bank, including Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes, H.D., Renee Vivien, and of course, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, are marginalized and discussed collectively in a single chapter, “‘She Meant What I Said’: Lesbian Double Talk.” (The chapter “Cross-Dressing: Transvestism as Metaphor” also deals to some extent with lesbian aesthetics.)

In such a brief discussion of a complex and multi-faceted work, the emphasis on what has gone awry creates a false sense of disproportionate negativity. There is certainly far more to celebrate in *No Man’s Land* than to censure. Gilbert and Gubar’s groundbreaking study reinterprets an entire era of cultural history. One particularly exciting segment of *The War of the Words* is the wonderful chapter “Sexual Linguistics: Women’s Sentence, Men’s Sentencing,” in which the authors argue that the male modernists’ “anxiety about the potentially anarchic implications of the vernacular” and “nostalgia for the lost cultural authority of the classics,” coupled with their resentment of sharing the same “mother tongue” with women writers, forced them to create elaborate “linguistic fantasies” of a powerful “*patrius sermo*” or ‘father speech’ (253-54). In *Sexchanges*, an equally interesting chapter, “Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War,” juxtaposes literary texts with historical commentaries and selected photographs and posters from the British Imperial War Museum

to reveal the dramatic shifts in gender dominance as women were empowered at the expense of men by the trauma of World War I. *Sexchanges* also traces the mythos of Sappho in the evolving lesbian aesthetic and reveals the pervasive effects of previously undervalued texts such as Rider Haggard's *She*.

Given the ambitious range of the study, it is scarcely surprising that there are blind spots, blind spots balanced in many contexts by vivid insights. *No Man's Land* is already a major achievement and the third and final volume, *Letters from the Front*, should be equally generative of new ways of reading culture from feminist perspectives.

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Trinh, T. Minh-ha. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989. viii + 173 pp.

From the seemingly anecdotal prologue of Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other* (1-2, henceforth WNO), entitled "The Story Began Long Ago . . .," one can detect the author's desire to displace received, even rewarded, modes of reading, reasoning and representation and to situate her interrogation of otherness (woman/native) in an intermediate zone (oscillating) between dichotomies of subject/object, of openness/closure, of utterance/silence. As such, Trinh's "story" does indeed "unwind like a long thread" (4, quoted from her film-in-progress, *India-China*), some of whose strands consist at the very least: of: 1) her cinematographic "texts" (*Reassemblage*, 1982; *Naked Spaces - Living Is Round*, 1985; *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989; *India-China*) dispersed in multiple photographic stills juxtaposed with citations drawn from the films as well as from WNO; 2) numerous other citations from an array of sources situated throughout the book as epigraphs and within the arguments as so many voices entering into dialogue both with the cinematographic images and with the focal critique; and 3) a conscientious textualization whose formal strategies as well as themes take into account the central problems of shifting subjectivity and scriptural multiplicity within diverse critical domains. Given this general focus, however, each of the four sections of WNO emphasizes specific topics: the possibility of women writing in/with commitment while/by admitting to the plurality of subjectivity (I. "Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box"); the inadequacies of the "positivist dream of a neutralized language" (53) that dominates Western anthropological inquiry (II. "The Language of Nativism: Anthropology as a Scientific Conversation of Man with Man"); the colonizing and separatist gestures that arise in questions of "difference" when referred to Third World women (III. "Difference: A Third World Women's Issue"); and the powerful

regenerative force of story-telling as distinguished from the truth-effects of so-called "factual," "civilized" history (IV. "Grandma's Song").

This overview of Trinh's study and reflections should suggest, in fact, that WNO calls for a rupture with the traditional format of "book review" by questioning and destabilizing the very context in which such reviews are produced. That is, the reader in an academic context seeks to judge the rigor of a critic's analysis, the "scholarship" (works cited, bibliography) brought to bear in the author's critique, and the overall contribution that the study makes to the field. By these standards, WNO is quite important since all of these elements are fully in place: Trinh's insights and questions are consistently sharp and upsetting; the scholarly apparatus is not only complete, but provides a rich network of sources from overlapping fields; and rare are the writer-critics who can situate so succinctly the problematics of "writing postcoloniality and feminism" at the heart of political and ethical as well as socio-historical concerns. As Trinh notes: "From jagged transitions between the analytical and the poetical to the disruptive, always shifting fluidity of a headless and bottomless storytelling, what is exposed in this text is the inscription and de-scription of a non-unitary female subject of color through her engagement, therefore also disengagement, with master discourses" (43).

These ambitions and achievements occur, however, only through Trinh's efforts to render them different, if not difficult, to "make of writing a site where opposites lose their essential differences and are restored to the void by their own interchangeability" (48). Take, for example, the place of the writing subject in WNO. Early on, in relation to the familiar distress and guilt a would-be author experiences in following the "rites of passage" for writing and publishing, we read: "Now I (the all-knowing subject) feel almost secure with such definite 'not-to-do's.' Yet I/i (the plural, non-unitary subject) cannot set my mind at rest with them without at the same time recognizing their precariousness. I (the personal race- and gender-specific subject) have, in fact, turned a deaf ear to a number of primary questions: Why write? For whom? What necessity? What writing? What impels you and me and hattie gossett to continue to write . . . ? And why do we care for our books' destinations at all?" (9). Trinh concludes that these rites and this guilt are grounded in the fact that "the writer is a kept wo/man who for her/his living largely relies on the generosity of that portion of society called the literate" (10). My focus, though, is how Trinh almost casually mixes the possible loci of the writing, and necessarily reading, subject. As she later notes: "writing, like a game that defies its own rules, is an ongoing practice that may be said to be concerned, not with inserting 'me' into language, but with creating an opening where the 'me' disappears while 'I' endlessly come and go, as the nature of language requires" (35). This displacement of subject/object is part of dualism, like life and death, that "is a process": "Writing so as not to die, we hear. Or so as to die? Every moment I ask. To disarm death? Or to kill immortality? That composite, in essential space where identity gives way to difference" (35).

This process, especially bound in the marketing/marketed garb of an academic press book on "cultural" and "feminist studies," dislodges the linear procedures of thesis-development (attribution)-conclusion. Trinh recognizes in a practical manner that "language is always older than me," that "never original, 'me' grows indefinitely on ready-mades, which are themselves explainable only through other ready-mades," that "writing as an inconsequential process of sameness/otherness is ceaselessly re-breaking and re-weaving patterns of ready-mades. The written bears the written to infinity" (36). Or, as the title of the first section suggests, "like the Japanese boxes that contain other boxes, nest one inside the other ad nihilum, writing is meshing one's writing with the machinery of endless reflexivity" (23). This is surely not the stuff of a "clear," "well-organized" analysis, and deliberately so, for Trinh underscores the political investment of "clear expression, often equated with correct expression" as serving "the purpose of a classical feature in language, namely, its instrumentality.... To use language well, says the voice of literacy, cherish its classic form. Do not choose the offbeat at the cost of clarity. Obscurity is an imposition on the reader" (16). True, Trinh admits, but more formidable dangers than discourtesy to the reader arise as well: "Clarity is a means of subjection, equality both of official, taught language and of correct writing, two old mates of power, together they flow, together they flower, vertically, to impose an order" (16-17).

Thus, WNO requires a considerable effort of the reader to understand the difficulties of a destabilized writing and reading subject and to raise the implicit questions that these reflections suggest: how do the cinematographic stills form an integral part of the complete, fractured text-in-process? How do the shifting distinctions of "I," "I/i," "i," "me" and all other pronouns deployed, multiply the possibilities of Trinh's writing/readings of the text and constitute a resistance to the "Alienation," i.e. the depersonalization usually required in such inquiry (cf. 27-28)? To what extent does WNO achieve the "ongoing unsettling process" (40) of *écriture féminine*, of "writing-the-body," since "taking in any voice that goes through me, I/i will answer every time someone says: I. One woman within another, eternally" (37; cf. 41-44)? What role does the consistent elision, in section II, of the "masters'" names (i.e. of the male anthropologists in question) play toward the goal of undoing "an anonymous, all-male, and predominantly white collective entity named he." Not by "judging the veracity of his discourse in relation to some original truth," but by "reproducing a few traits of the numbness of a tradition which he happily spreads about" (48-49)? What contribution does section III make "toward the unlearning of institutionalized language," of unsettling the "apartheid language" of "separate development" which the "masters' tools"/discourse perpetuate(s) (80-86); toward undermining the preoccupations with Third World speakers'/writers' "authenticity," a concern of (First World) audiences that overshadows "issues of hegemony, racism, feminism, and social change (which s/he lightly touches on in conformance to the reigning fashion of

liberal discourse)" (88); toward undermining difference "comprehended as absolute presence" and developing "differences grasped both between and within entities, each of these being understood as multiple presence" (90-94), not only for interpersonal subjectivities, but also for feminism's questioning of "the belief in its own identity" and reliance on "the master's logic" (95-96), particularly regarding the "Gender controversy" (103-116)? What are the dimensions of "story" and "storytelling," in section IV, that constitute a renewed definition of fiction in relation to "history" and its regimes of truth? How do these distinctions (story/history) relate to the ongoing problematics of writing/reading, anthropological inquiry, and discourse(s) on/of the Third World Women's issue? Finally, how do (auto)biography and poetry necessarily (fortuitously) foreground and/or unsettle "critique" and "analysis" in WNO?

These questions form the most appropriate way in which to re-view WNO, as a means of handling "structure," as Trinh suggests, "by letting it come, instead of hunting for it or hunting it down, filling it with one's own marks and markings so as to consign it to the meaningful and lay claim to it" (143). A story, Trinh argues, is "a living thing, an organic process, a way of life. What is taken for stories, only stories, are fragments of/in life, fragments that never stop interacting while being complete in themselves" (143). WNO, like Trinh's films, is such a story, a "writerly" text (*texte scriptible*), and like Marmon Silko's tale "Storyteller," keeps "the reader puzzling over the story as it draws to a close" (with "A Bedtime Story" by Mitsuye Yamada ending "That's the END?"). In this multiple story, where truth "exceeds measure," and "even if the telling condemns her present life, what is more important is to (re-)tell the story as she thinks it should be told; in other words, to maintain the difference that allows (her) truth to live on. The difference. He does not hear or see. He cannot give. Never the given, for there is no end in sight" (150).

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Waelti-Walters, Jennifer. *Feminist Novelists of the Belle Epoque: Love as a Lifestyle*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990. 224 pp.

The Subject announced is treated squarely in this no-nonsense gynocentric essay, and the subtitle correctly reflects the dominant thematics of the corpus. You will not have to look up esoteric words; you will frown only a couple of times. Waelti-Walters recalls the premise defining gynocentered readings: gender is as fundamental as class, race and culture (she lists religion instead as a category for analysis. Her introductory chapter presents the basic pre-texts for feminist novels of the Belle-Epoque: the corset of the Napoleonic code (1804) is beginning to burst as Romantic

era ideologies produce effects with education for girls, divorce for women, and non-domestic, that is "comparable," work. Most illuminating, although the author does not connect it with the impact of (the Catholic) religion on French culture, is a difference we are not often conscious of, namely that sex segregation is not entrenched or institutionalized in France and consequently single women are even more odd and isolated than in Protestant cultures. Alternate visions of women thrive in the Belle Epoque under feminist pens, and Waelti-Walters covers the field coherently enough, her chapters focussing alternately on an author or a theme analyzed through several authors.

A chapter is devoted to several lesbian novels, revealing the role of the Anglo-Saxon heroine in this sub-genre; the next one turns to (even more) positive or viable models of modern femininity in Marcelle Tinayre's works. Useful independence and autonomous womanhood (bedroom dynamics excepted, notes Waelti-Walters) are repeatedly illustrated by Tinayre, whose *Rebel* the critic has successfully taught as foreplay for *Swann's Love*. More powerfully than any other novelist under consideration, Tinayre envisions a world where love of men, of women, of children, feminism, and autonomy are not mutually exclusive. Pregnancy, so rarely treated in depth in canonical literature, provides a different focus to discuss more of Delarue-Mardrus' plots, including a graphic birthing-scene, and a character who reveals her impregnator's identity, contrary to the sacrificial archetype we have always heard of. Professional women who chose "free love" and unmarried motherhood existed in literature before they became banal near our turn of the century. Daughterhood is then analyzed, in relation to father figures (mothers having no real, i.e. political/financial power, are apparently not a prime concern of these novelists); this is the stage for studies on incest and other forms of tyranny when daughters love fathers too much (Reval's *La Bachelière* reminded me both of Gide's *L'Immoraliste* and of Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images*) and I have definitely put Yver's *Les Cervelines* on my reading list. The chapter on marriage ("good for men, my dear" and amounting to subjection and reproduction) is followed by one on the struggles entailed by professional achievement (love or status but not both). The critic develops a pessimistic (realistic) picture of possibilities for women's self-realization in the golden age of bourgeois patriarchy. In a separate chapter, early Colette is treated sternly if fairly with her emphasis on a sexual freedom which does not address the most urgent debate for women in this period, that is the relationship between autonomy and love, usually an either/or question for Colette. The last two chapters, perhaps the strongest ones, are devoted to "Perversions" of love as a lifestyle, whether in male or female characters concocted by these "feminist novelists." It is refreshing to find a positive and decidedly gynocentric interpretation of Rachilde's famous provocative plots: *Monsieur Venus* (the futuristic, perhaps, love and sex-object), *La Tour d'Amour*, which was magnificently adapted for the stage in 1985, and the incredible *Jongleuse* who makes love to a man-sized precious vase under the eyes of her seduction-prey. Of

course, the hurried reader should first read the solid, if pessimistic conclusion (we have not come such a long way after all in the 1990s).

I wish Waelti-Walters had given Colette a better chance, that is at least alluded to the more inspiring—for feminists—elements of her monument, the celebration of the non-conforming mother-figure, of health and a strong body, and of polymorphous sensuality. I particularly wish the critic had meditated more deeply the implications of explicitly, humorously, and repeatedly questioning the sacrosanct institution of marriage, the very cornerstone of the system feminist novelists write against, a questioning which would propel de Beauvoir (and friends) onto the Vatican's black list half a century later.

This is a well-made book for students and instructors, which reminds us (or teaches us) about the realities of patriarchal and bourgeois order as seen through conscious women's novels. Along with lesbianism, necrophilia and self-love, they dared to treat the theme of hermaphroditism. A more ominous, albeit seemingly benign example, might be the censoring of girls' and wives' readings by fathers and husbands for their (natural and female) own good of course, echoing religious guidance. If de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* could be greeted by sarcastic references to her vagina, it could only have been—and indeed was much uglier half a century earlier. Tragic examples abound in feminist novels of lives destroyed and characters shrunken into non-existence because of internalized devaluation (also called the virtue of self-sacrifice). The further tragedy is that for this type of "fiction" the direct link with social reality can never impose itself. Notably enough, budding psychoanalysis is not reflected in Waelti-Walters' corpus, nor incredible positivist approaches to feminine (should we say female?) psychology, as illustrated in Daniel Lesueur's *Névrosée* for example. The "scientific" construction of women does not find its way to this forum. Perhaps my only serious reservation is that the critic does not consistently enough report to the reader about the readability of these novels for today's various constituencies: students, cultural critics, literary purists, almighty "theorists" of literature, and old-fashioned pleasure-seeking readers of either sex.

I wish this book—pragmatic, sympathetic, clear, useful and unequivocally political and inspiring—covered more of the writers whose names and astonishing publication statistics have intrigued some of us for years. Like the author, I want to think of it as a decisive step forward, one that opens new paths. It sent me wondering who I might be today, had I been given some of these novels to read when I was a teenager instead of Dely's—too bad that those who comfortably believe we are in a post-feminist era may not bother to initiate themselves into the way things truly were for the vast majority of their grandmothers.

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