



BOOK REVIEWS

FEMINIST LITERARY HISTORY

Janet Todd. New York: Routledge,
1988

Carol Margaret Davison

If there exists any "New Wave" of feminism in the 1990s, it may be termed a more enlightened materialism. Following the trendy 1980s cult-like adherence to post-structuralism in its various forms, current feminist literary criticism calls for a thorough spring cleaning of our somewhat untidy theoretical closets. Janet Todd's *Feminist Literary History* declares itself firmly at the forefront of this movement, adopting Wollstonecraft's much disparaged socio-historically based Enlightenment philosophy as its primary organizing principle. Todd maintains that "however battered, deconstructed, and falsified, the enlightenment's individualistic bourgeois liberalism, its belief in rational advance, and its aim of increasing freedom and equality through greater awareness of self and culture still form the ground of hope and of collective action."

Todd not only manages to stay true to this rationalist philosophy throughout this engaging work, she does it a service by injecting a great deal of lively wit into what might otherwise become a dry theoretical discourse. In what she describes as a "defence of the early socio-historical enterprise," Todd is particularly apt at providing intelligent and provocative assessments of the shortcomings, blindspots and assumptions of several "new" theories. She singles out psychoanalytic theory and deconstruction for specific critique. Both, she concedes, are attractive in their conception of the decentred subject but, she warns, "to decenter it out of existence is to leave ourselves open to remaining locked in the categories that we bring to bear on literature at this specific

moment in intellectual history and to mystify history into the timeless model of psychoanalysis." According to Todd, feminist literary critics who have employed psychoanalytic and deconstructive theories have privileged theory over literature. Furthermore, historically-rooted female experience has been cast aside in favour of the "idea" of woman within these paradigms. It is time, Todd declares, that we historicize the discourse, methods and aims of an otherwise unquestionable psychoanalysis, and recognize that in its unproblematized obliteration of binary opposites, deconstruction aims at the evaporation of female experience. It is time, in other words, that we don our "hermeneutics of suspicion" thinking-caps when confronted with an apparently wonderful new theory. Chances are that we will discover patriarchal epistemology at its root.

As a British feminist, Todd situates herself mid-point between the American versus the French feminist debate. For Todd, while "practical" American feminists stress history and overlook issues of class and ideology, French feminists have been overwhelmed by what she deems the "howling psycho-babble" of psychoanalysis and deconstruction. Ideologically aware yet self-righteous British feminists, Todd claims, are in need of "a practical and historical feminist criticism in the American mode." Also, certain insights from post-structuralism should be appropriated by British and American feminists. All, in short, stand to gain at this pot-luck Dinner Party featuring the culinary delights of feminist theory.

Although Todd specifies in her introduction that she does not wish to present an overview of feminist criticism, the dust jacket of her book labels it an introductory text to feminist studies. This is undoubtedly part of Routledge's marketing strategy, but it is not a complete misrepresentation of the work. Todd's book does trace the general movement of the Western

feminist debate from the 1960s to the present day and, in this, it is highly reminiscent of Toril Moi's popular *Sexual Textual Politics* (1985). Indeed, in spite of the fact that Todd insightfully critiques Moi's book and its obvious championing of French feminist thought, Todd does not acknowledge her debt to the structural outline of Moi's study for the first three chapters of her own. A certain anxiety of influence may be readily detected here. (It is interesting to note that Elaine Showalter falls under attack in both books.) In the final analysis, Todd's study successfully manages to cover more territory in a more discerningly critical fashion than Moi's. Apart from an excellent chapter devoted to the generally taboo question of men in feminist criticism, Todd provides a much needed synopsis of the writings of representative British feminist theorists—Michelle Barrett and Cora Kaplan are highlighted. This latter inclusion is particularly commendable and long overdue, for if a truly politicized feminist future path lies anywhere—and Todd stresses that, unlike our pioneering foremothers, we have forgotten that the primary aim of feminist criticism should be the subversion of patriarchy—it seems (to this reviewer anyway) to lie in the pragmatically rooted, ideologically aware standpoint of the British feminist movement. Todd seems to agree, but underlines that it must be revived with a blood transfusion of empiricism, historicism and pragmatism in order to fulfill our ever-expanding needs.

If *Feminist Literary History* deserves special accolades, it is because it forces us to recognize the specificity and materiality of history and its impact on theory. "If theory has taught us anything," Todd writes, "it is that we are all theorized and that historical discourses of different kinds are never transcendental truths." Such a historicizing process involves forging links with our feminist foremothers and revising our aims and aspirations for the movement's future. It also necessitates an examination of the specific socio-his-

toric conditions which gave rise to the recent post-structural era. The Pendulum theory of revolution and reaction often applied to history does indeed appear to be at work in literary criticism. In a passage illustrative of her application of this theory, Todd posits that "To deny that the author lives in any way in the work is also a gesture in time, conditioned by our own historical moment of criticism in high reaction to the overt presence of the author in Romantic art." Read within a feminist framework, this issue of the "dead author" proves to be a clearly dangerous theory for Todd for, as she states sarcastically yet emphatically in her conclusion, "Feminist literary history finds signature important. The woman who wrote is no doubt in the end unknowable, but, at some level or in some gap, trope or choice, she was working to be known."

Todd's study also aims to resuscitate the question of aesthetics—an issue which is recently becoming significant (see Rita Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989). Entering into Bakhtinian territory, Todd specifically tackles generic considerations which seek to make "discernible hidden ideological constraints." This will prove to be extremely fruitful, according to Todd, because it situates the female author within her specific literary environment. The question arises, for example: Is the female author articulating ideological assumptions common to her day at certain moments in the text, or is she writing against the grain? Only through a thorough examination of the genre within which she is writing may such a question be best answered.

Feminist Literary History is, to extend a pun, a truly timely study. It is also a testament to Todd's prolificacy. Her often disarming language is a lethal weapon against esoteric, elitist, and even deliberately mystifying post-structural discourses. Coupled with coherent and clever argumentation, Todd's book marks a new era in feminist literary history. Especially for newcomers to women's studies, it is an excellent resource guide that will provide a sense of the current debate. (For introductory purposes, I would also suggest Rosemarie Tong's new *Feminist Thought* [Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press, 1989]. It is the most comprehensive and coherent introduction around.) As for the weathered women's studies specialists, read Todd's book as a challenge and put your theories to the test. You have nothing to lose but your psycho-babble.

FEMINIST THEORY AND THE PHILOSOPHIES OF MAN

Andrea Nye. London: Croom Helm, 1988

Lorraine Code

"Does a practising feminist need theory?" Andrea Nye asks, or is it "a luxury that she cannot afford" in her preoccupation with the pressures just to survive in a patriarchal society? Faced with the conflicts a feminist practice inevitably creates, feminists are constantly trying to make sense of their experiences, and to devise theoretically sound strategies to inform their activism. They do, often, need theory. The problem is that the most innovative and promising social and political theories of the modern era are, indeed, "the philosophies of man:" "theories invented by men to rationalise and justify men's activities." The question Nye addresses throughout the book is whether these philosophies inevitably work against women's interests, or whether women can find in their tenets and categories any useful constructs for the creation of an emancipatory feminist practice. From her engagement with this question, Nye develops a series of interestingly nuanced readings of liberal political theory, Marxism, Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, Freudian and post-Freudian theory, and modern and post-modernist theories of language. Each of these topics constitutes the subject of one chapter of the book. The exegetical part of each chapter is even-handed and lucidly written, especially in the chapters on psychoanalytic linguistic theory, where Nye is clearly in her element. Her conclusions are insightful and provocative.

Readers will be familiar with many aspects of Nye's treatment of liberal and Marxist theory, both of which have been amply discussed in feminist literature. Liberal political theory, social contract theory and utilitarianism are ill-equipped to provide economic or social equality for women, she argues. Although "rights talk" allegedly guarantees women the freedom to participate in all aspects of society, economic barriers and the relegation of women to lower-paid jobs ensure that the "equality" the rhetoric promises is more theoretical than real. Marxism too remains

a "philosophy of man," for all the attention it pays to the political economy of the capitalist, patriarchal family. It offers no adequate analysis of the familial and sexual relations that do not relate directly to production; nor can it ascribe value to women's domestic labour. In short, neither liberalism nor Marxism can explain or eradicate sexism.

What is novel about Nye's book is its foregrounding of the contributions of women who have engaged with, criticized, sought enlightenment from, and contributed to the development of these theories, throughout their history. Citing Madame de Staël as a forerunner of Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Taylor, Nye notes de Staël's claim that there is no happiness in, and no escape from, the role women are expected to play in society. Her discussion of liberal theory highlights Taylor's contribution to its development both in her own works, and in her influence on Mills's work. It was Taylor who made the more radical proposals, arguing for women's full labour market participation, not just for their formal equality and their right to vote.

Feminists Alexandra Kollontai, Clara Zetkin and Emma Goldman figure prominently in Nye's account of the development of Marxist theory. Disillusioned with socialism's failure to deal with such specifically female problems as maternity, child care and housework, these women argued, variously, for radically transformed personal and sexual relationships; for a reshaping of family structures; and for such practical measures as paid maternity leave, and socialized child care and domestic work. Feminists of the "second wave," such as Alison Jaggar, Juliet Mitchell, and Christine Delphy have picked up many of these lines of argument in an attempt to reclaim Marxism for feminism. Nye concludes, however, that the theory remains, inescapably, a philosophy of man: "The human world theorised by Marx and projected back onto human history by Engels is a world that excludes women."

Reading the work of Simone de Beauvoir both for the advances it promises over liberal and Marxist theory, and as a forerunner to radical feminism both in the United States and in France, Nye claims that the theory of subjectivity de Beauvoir develops is tainted by its Hegelian and Sartrean origins. While de Beauvoir's