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Critical success
by Meryl Altman


W ho reads literary criticism? Other literary critics, presumably. But not with pure delight. Finding out what others have written about one’s topic is meant to be an early stage of one’s research, to help me the reader, so far as possible, find one’s way through the morass of articles about one’s topic, many of them obviously destined (in a sense) for desuetude, but not until the reading is finished is one to be able to judge one’s last step of an aborted project. Why write, if one can imagine being read in this dingy spirit only? Why add to the dismal glut? Yet while grasping and groaning my way along the library shelf, MLA citations in hand, I accidentally came across Dwelling in Possibility, a big, complicated, lovely book, which made me ashamed of my mean-spirited mood and reminded me why writing about literature in an intellectually sophisticated and politically committed way once struck me as a passionately interesting thing to do. For the reviewer, this anthology is immensely erudite, detailed, precise and thoughtful; it does not dodge the difficult theoretical questions of the two decades in which it is written, and it is written from feminist first principles, especially to the idea that women’s writing matters. (We may no longer be quite sure what women’s writing is, but we may still be sure that it matters: as the editors say on page one, “gender may be a hypothetical category and yet it is real.”) While many of the contributions here are fairly traditional discussions of a writer or a work of literature (the modernist long poem, the Renaissance love lyric), roughly half give us a living woman poet introducing several of her own poems, explaining and then showing what she does. The collection would be worth having only for the wonderful writing in this vein by such familiar names as Rita Dove, Joy Harjo, Eavan Boland, Marilyn líder, and Sheila Blau (and T Begley, by less well-known poets M. Nourse Philip, Susan Howe, Eleanor Milligan, and by some newer voices, perhaps the most promisingly in newer voices—Ann Carson, bell hooks, Alicia Ostriker, Rachel Blau DuPlessis.) Somehow the company of the poets keeps the critical voices grounded. And something (the company of the critics? the astute choice of editors?) stimulates poets beyond silly answers to Para-Review-type questions. Some of the perplexes and paradoxes of gender and genre that come up in the critical essays actually appear to animate the creative work, to make the visions of the poets possible. There are links in all directions, often unexpected ones, and the essays run together: one is particularly moved by a running focus on lamentation that led from Angela Bouke’s review of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chomhghall’s book to Mairead Corrigan on Adrienne Rich’s Jewishness, to bell hooks’ discussion of how Christian scripture figures in her work and to Kathryn Grover’s presentation of Erinn, who wrote about a death of a woman friend in the fourth century BCE. Issues of collaboration, translation, identity, being versus being, oral performance versus written text, run throughout, as does the problem of finding voice in a divided language, a divided culture.

This review was greatly enhanced by the contributions of Laurie Toby Edison.


I also had occasion, over this past summer, to look back at some of the earliest, founding books of feminist literary criticism—Patricia Meyer Spacks, Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter’s first book. Twenty years is a long time. “I wouldn’t write that now,” as Anna said in The Golden Notebook, but I do feel some nostalgia for the possibilities of critical voice in the days when one book could promise the whole truth about women (often the first sentence would start, “since the dawn of time”) and one could call one’s course simply “Women and Literature,” and do everything, if only because it was the only course on the books and so it had to.

I certainly don’t miss the naive ethnoscience of those early accounts, or the attempts to specify a central idea to “female experience” (invariably leaving somebody out), and searches for an “aesthetic,” whether feminist, feminine, or simply “women’s,” still strike me as wrong-headed. And yet, there was an emotional and political energy to that writing, a sense that what is being said is risky personally and professionally but that nonetheless it must be said. Now that those risks have paid off, the excitement is harder to find. Many people complain that feminist criticism has become inaccessible; for me, the true issue isn’t “jargon” (any field of study is entitled to a specialized vocabulary) but whether one can identify, and identify with, the question being addressed, whether it is a question that matters.

Prins and Shreiber have made me feel that it is possible to emerge from this cul-de-sac with a sustained sense of feminist project and energy. The Names of the (Big) Brothers, Lacan and the Others, are here, but rather sparsely, where they actually seem to help, and the insights of post-structuralist theory certainly inform Prins and others. But the project is not unconnected by the desire to prove or disprove or honor or dishonor it, or to play little games in which the text vanishes up the critic’s sleeve and takes the world with it. The introduction proclaims lack of a consensus on these and other points; that’s certainly both right and good. Nor am I exalting “practice” over something called “theory” here: things move forward theoretically when we can see that something “doesn’t fit,” that a certain language poem is not an epic but is not an epic, that “Michael Field” are and aren’t “lesbians,” and so on. We won’t see this sort of thing if we aren’t looking for it.

The book’s first two sections are called “Questioning the Subject” and “The Voice in Question,” which suggests that the editors have some anxiety about whether terms like “silence” and “voice” and “experience” may still be used after postmodern critiques of the unity of the subject and the transparency of language, as well as the charges aimed at “Woman” from positions other than white and other than heterosexual. But this collection remains true to what theorists now describe as the impossibility of the single “I” or the single “voice,” poets have always known. For anybody who actually writes, the subject is of course in question, the voice is in question.

But the question has (sort of) an answer: look, I did it, I wrote. I wrote. Here’s the poem, or the paragraph. Many of the poets who speak or are spoken of here write from the positions—split, complicated, oppositional, oppressed—where those critiques of “subject” originated; but the power and originality of each individual and yet rooted voice is also the answer. And part of the answer is, don’t write.