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# Reality Check: Review of *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* by Toril Moi.

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**Susan Jacoby**

as the United States and France, Jewish parents shielded children born during and after the war. They didn't tell them of grandparents dead in Auschwitz. Many didn't circumcise their sons. Some gave their children their mother's Christian surname. Or more subtly, but equally destructively and futilely, the parents never talked about what happened "over there"—sometimes only fifty kilometers away, sometimes three thousand. Reading Jacoby reminds us of how far Madeleine Albright went to deny her Jewish roots and the murder of her relatives.

The Holocaust haunted children, even a child like Susan Jacoby whose father's relationship to Jewishness was entirely negative. Sometimes they fled their Jewish homes and tried to correct their speech patterns, control the gesturing of their hands, even their faces. Sometimes they became anxious and forgetful, obsessive and paranoid. David Grossman's seven-year-old Momik in *See Under: Love* hears his parents whispering about the Nazi Beast. He imagines a terrible animal and is sure it lives in their basement. Trying to devise ways to trap the beast and kill it and so protect his parents, he becomes so overwrought that he stops eating. No one ever told Momik about the camps, yet he comes to look more and more like one of their walking dead. Soon his parents send him away to a camp to get well.

Jacoby's book lacks a certain narrative drive, and is rather over-stuffed with filler about German Jews, the history of anti-Semitism in America, and Jacoby's own family's history. But there is a fundamental question at its emotional heart, and that is: "Can there be Jews without Judaism?" To which she notes that most rabbis would say, No. Then she quickly slides over the question of cultural Jewishness, which she is clearly not that familiar with, and gets to where she's going—which is that her father "did not qualify as 'culturally Jewish' (and would not wish to do so).... He was a man with no Jewish education of any kind, a vessel emptied of Jewish content, open to the magical metamorphosis promised by conversion." This is where Jacoby missed an opportunity, I think. For her father's intense negativism about Jewishness pointed to his struggle with a history that was his, a Jewish history willy-nilly. He probably was culturally Jewish, but not by choice.

What a complicated question Jacoby raises but sidesteps. Her book is meant for a popular audience, so she avoids the sort of anxieties and inconclusiveness the question, "What is a Jew?" raises. It's an old and thorny question, and one that many secular Jews in the US have taken up again in the last fifteen years. It is one of the reasons that a number of universities and colleges have initiated or injected new life into Jewish Studies programs, and why there has been a revival of the study of Yiddish, the language of that Ashkenazik culture practically wiped out by Hitler, that was to a great extent secular, socialist, Zionist, psychological in its passions. Much of the discussion of secular or cultural Jewishness today revolves around just these issues.

Josef Hayim Yerushalmi writes this about what he calls, after Philip Rieff, the Psychological Jew: "Alienated from classical Jewish texts, Psychological Jews tend to insist on inalienable Jewish traits. Intellectuality and independence of mind, the highest ethical and moral standards, concern for social justice, tenacity in the face of persecution—these are among the qualities they will claim, if called upon, as quintessentially Jewish."[1]

Freud, that most articulate of men and an atheist, could not himself answer the question, "What is a Jew?" He knew in his bones he was a Jew and relished it, but what it was precisely he could not say. In a letter to the sister-in-law of the psychoanalyst David Eder, Freud wrote, "We were both Jews and knew of each other that we carried that miraculous thing in common, which—inaccessible to any analysis thus far—makes the Jew." Writing to Arnold Zweig about Israel, he grew yet more mystical: "we hail from there...our forebears lived there for perhaps a whole millennium...and it is impossible to say what heritage from this land we have taken over into our blood and nerves." "Our blood and nerves"! If this is what Freud had to say about his Jewishness, small wonder Robert Jacoby could say nothing about an ethnicity he did everything to shed.

And yet when Adolf Eichmann was tried in Jerusalem, Jacoby writes, "My father would watch, tight-lipped." And in angry response to the suggestions in the press that perhaps Israel didn't have a right to try him, her father said, "He's in a courtroom, he has a lawyer.... Did he give any of his victims a trial?" Her father, it seems, also expressed "bellicose enthusiasm" for Israel even though he shied away from things military in general.

As sympathetic as I was towards Robert Jacoby's suffering from anti-Semitism as a child, and again at Dartmouth, and to the lack of love from his repressive mother, in the larger picture it seemed inappropriate that his daughter dwell on these, considering the destruction of European Jewry during World War Two. Her description of her father's suffering as a Jew, in short, lacked a certain historical perspective. Also I wondered whether Jacoby never thought her father was a coward. Mightn't she have been just a little perturbed by the great lengths he went to to deny his Jewish past?

Jacoby is a journalist and that's the voice we get in this book, but the subject cries out for something more. She loved her father and suffered his repressions and shame, but what she doesn't do here is acknowledge how these shaped her—where she has hidden, or refused to hide, where she felt cornered and coerced or simply robbed. She learned a great deal about her father's family. She found lost cousins and filled out her past. But to what end, one wonders. There was no catharsis in the telling, no apparent change in the writer. The lack of rage, and humor, suggest that some deep level of understanding was never reached. *Half-Jew* remains cool at its center, but around its edges one senses enormous sadness and regret.

[1] Josef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

# Reality check

*by Meryl Altman*

**What is a Woman? And Other Essays** by Toril Moi. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 517 pp., $35.00 hardcover.

**What we need today** more than ever is a feminism committed to seeking justice and equality for women, in the most ordinary sense of the word.... That feminism, I am happy to say, exists. Moreover, usually even the most anti-metaphysical feminist theorists support it in practice. No feminist I know is incapable of understanding what it means to say that the Taliban are depriving Afghan women of their most elementary human rights just because they are women. (p. 9)

*Yes.* But can "today" really be the year 2000? And can the author of these words really be Toril Moi? Maybe there's hope for feminist theory after all.

Toril Moi's first book, a little primer of feminist literary criticism called *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1983), sold a lot of copies and made a lot of people very angry, including me. Moi's scathing dismissals of most American approaches to criticism, including lesbian studies and the critiques offered by women of color, as "phallogocentric" and tied to naïvely undeconstructed conceptions of "the unified self," seemed to demand that we abandon political approaches to literature in favor of Kristevan meanderings about subversive textualities. The field has yet to recover from this setback.

I was not alone in finding the tone of *Sexual/Textual Politics* unnecessarily contentious and contemptuous. But in 1996 Moi published *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, a lovely, articulate, informative book, firm-minded but sympathetic, responsibly historical, attentive to textual detail. One of the very best efforts in the current renaissance in Beauvoir studies, this book taught me more than almost any other, not just about Beauvoir, but about how literary criticism could still be made to do feminist work. But that book had so little to say about theory with a capital T that it almost left one wondering whether there could be two Toril Mois.

Now we have this complex huge doorstop of a book, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*. It's really two books: the first, a substantive new piece of work exploring Beauvoir's continuing value for feminism, the other a loosely connected set of essays on topics ranging from Tristan and Iseult to Pierre Bourdieu. And here the real Toril Moi stands up (at least I hope so) as one of the most astute and lucid critics writing today. What she calls her "attempt to work [her] way out from under post-structuralism, and to see what happens when one goes elsewhere"—a move undertaken in good faith as a feminist and with uncommon critical common sense—points a way forward, both for literary critics and other feminists.

It would be impossible to exaggerate the sense of relief this book gave me. A theorist famous for critical sophistication and range argues persuasively in print what I've been thinking: compared to what passes for feminist theory now, existentialism looks pretty darn good.

Moi shares my puzzlement that feminists have not read or have misread Beauvoir, that the theoretical establishment (feminist and/or philosophical) seems not to have noticed what my undergraduates have no trouble seeing—to wit, that every meaningful dilemma that has arisen between Wollstonecraft and the year 2000 can be usefully explored using Beauvoir's lens. According to Moi, "post-structuralist theorists of sex and gender are held prisoners by theoretical mirages of their own making": what ails feminist theory is mostly self-inflicted. Meanwhile Beauvoir still offers us, or offers us again, neither a feminism of equality, nor a feminism of difference, but a feminism of *freedom* that dares to speak its name. Why not take up the chance to "use the word woman without having to blush," the invitation to "make theory fun again"?

And yet there is no retreat into anti-intellectualism here. Moi's book is a serious attempt to get to the bottom of something that matters, rather than a set of elegant evasions and euphemisms, dancing on the shimmering but ever-shrinking surface of the head of a pin. One ought to be able to ask, in testing a theory, how powerful it is—how much of the world does it help explain—and how useful it is—how it works to solve the problems actually confronting women today and to move toward the better world we are hoping to build. "Any theory of subjectivity that fails when confronted with a concrete case is not going to be able to tell us much about what it means to be a man or a woman today." Moi's disagreements, more tightly argued than I can indicate here, could serve as a lucid introduction to recent theoretical debates, and also as a farewell to them.

The book's main theoretical contribution is to point various ways around, or rather away from, the aridity of the essentialism vs. anti-essentialism wrangle, with its resulting agonies about "agency" and "the real." By retracing the history of the distinction most feminists now make between sex and gender, Moi shows how crucial this distinction is to opposing the notion that women are determined by their biology in any particular way. But she also points out that Beauvoir was able to oppose that notion quite successfully without making any such distinction; she asks why a determinism of the body ought to be more fearsome to feminists than other sorts of determinisms (religious, ethical, cultural); and she questions the centrality of the sex/gender distinction to current theory, especially given the contortions around subjectivity and "the body" that result.

In its place she outlines and re-proposes Beauvoir's notion of the body as a *situation*—"the instrument of our grasp on the world," in Merleau-Ponty's phrase, the ground and basis of "lived experience" for both women and men. "Our flesh comes to us through history," but it is still,

recognizably, flesh. In a careful reading of the opening chapter of *The Second Sex* Moi gives us back what Beauvoir actually said about the body, which is basically, yes, men and women are different: So what? Many things have followed, from sexual difference and embodiment, but no particular thing *need* follow from it in any concrete instance. The important thing about the Beauvoirean body is that it isn't just a sexual body. It eats, it sleeps, it dies, it climbs trees. Sometimes the most important thing to notice about it is that it's the body of a woman, or of a man, and sometimes that's not the most important thing.

My suspicion is that most feminists will continue to find the distinction between sex and gender helpful in everyday use—particularly if we live and work where the understanding that biology doesn't trump all other sorts of explanations of behavior cannot be taken for granted. Still, permission to stop worrying about it so much—to stop worrying it to death—does feel like a breath of fresh air in a very stale room.

Moi still makes big claims. But here she develops them through careful close readings, sensitive to both historical context and textual nuance. While she continues to maintain that the right to disagree openly, to argue, to think and say, are crucial to feminism as to the life of the mind generally, she offers the views of even those she disagrees with with refreshing clarity, fulfilling the first task of the teacher, which is to be a good explainer.

While the "return to Beauvoir" is the book's main theme, she is not the only authority invoked here. Moi also mobilizes Bourdieu, Freud, Wittgenstein, "ordinary language" philosophy, logic and common sense. It's almost her *Complete Essays*, stretching back to a graduate-school paper on Andreas Capellanus, and arranged more or less in reverse chronological order—which is a bit disconcerting, since issues are sometimes raised that were seemingly resolved earlier in the book.

A pack rat myself, I understand the impulse to include everything and envy the accumulation of cultural capital that makes it possible, but there is some resulting sacrifice of overall coherence. As Beauvoir's friend Zaza, caught between the Catholic moralism of her mother and the intellectual fearlessness of her friends, observed: "les choses que j'aimaient, ne s'aimaient pas entre elles"—the things I like don't all like one another. Freud (a very old friend of Moi's) and Bourdieu (a rather new one) might be a bit less comfortable, and behave a bit less well, at this party honoring Simone than the hostess might hope. But Moi's justification for inviting, or as she says, "appropriating," them is impeccable: they'll come in any case. "...genuinely revolutionary work has always taken as its starting point the tradition it wishes to transform.... All intellectual statements, whether by Aristotle or Plato or Woolf and Beauvoir, require rethinking in new circumstances. We always read with an eye to what we need and what we can use. What other way is there? Intellectual life *is* appropriation."

Moi is perhaps too quick to dismiss the problem of whether "the master's tools can demolish the master's house." That debate was really about who had access to academic and cultural institutions, who had the right and was empowered to speak, as much as it was about the possibility of feminist autonomy. Still non-trivial questions. But I think she is correct to observe that one ought first to inquire what the task is and then use whatever tools come to hand. Any valuable insight of major proportions can be reached by more than one road; most of the places feminists have gone by way of Foucault can be approached through Beauvoir, usefully detouring around the vexed problem of agency his work raises. The real question might be whether to appropriate the master's tools means to acknowledge him (or her) *as one's master.* The worst mistake is to spend so much time collecting and polishing the tools, and boasting that you have better tools than others, that you forget entirely that there was a house to build in the first place. This is what Moi means by "theoreticism." If we all agree the nail needs hammering in, hammer it with the heel of your shoe and move on to the next nail.

Questions of subjectivity, and of style and tone, converge in a discussion about using the personal voice, that inevitably returning repressed Other of theoretical purism. In several essays here, a defense of the right to object to what seems wrong and to think and speak seriously about difficult things leads to a thoughtful distinction between narcissistic uses of the personal voice and more honest ways it can correct for over-abstraction. Like Moi, I too have come to find the "adversary paradigm" less irritating and more politically defensible than the woolly-minded all-embracing civility that cushions "us" against being asked hard questions, both on grounds of a J. S. Mill-like view that truth emerges from controversy and on Beauvoir-type grounds of honesty and authenticity. Beauvoir was not the only girl who noticed that you had to choose, not always but a lot of the time, between being smart and being nice; she decided that the second alternative destroyed both the mind and the heart...

The personal, more or less clearly labelled such, ought to come into an intellectual argument when it clarifies or advances that argument; otherwise, not. That is Moi's practice; it was more or less Beauvoir's practice in *The Second Sex*; I hope it has been mine. If we're clearer about what the point of writing theory is supposed to be, maybe we can be clearer about using "the personal" as a means to that end, rather than as an end in itself.

One theoretical aporia remains. Excuse me. I mean, there was one place where I still couldn't agree, an unsolved problem I find crucial. Moi offers a fine theory of subjectivity, of "I"; but how are we supposed to get from "I" to "we"? In the 1940s Beauvoir could sketch no collectivity; all gatherings of women she'd encountered pre-1948 still seemed to her (and were) bourgeois, collusive and a little suspect. Freud was not interested in this problem except insofar as political collectivities seem to have struck him as mystifications or "cover stories" for something else. Bourdieu's apparent answer—that praxis is a sort of game—is too cynical, for my taste at least. Not every book can solve all problems even if it is 500 pages long. But if the goal of feminist theory is usefulness in concrete cases, a theory that leaves out the question of how groups can form and press for change leaves more work to be done.

While we're waiting, what emerges? Well ... The reports of the death of the self were greatly exaggerated. Read *The Second Sex* (all of it, in French if you can); take long views; practice random acts of concrete close reading and critical lucidity. Trust yourself, but remember the reader. And don't give up.