Book Reviews

Carole Ferrier, ed., *Gender, Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women's Novels*. St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1985. pp. 262. $32.50.

As both a senior lecturer in English at Queensland University and editor of *Hecate*, Australia's foremost journal of women's interdisciplinary studies, Carole Ferrier is uniquely well-placed to assemble a collection of studies on the relationship of gender and politics to the twentieth-century Australian women's novel. Ferrier put together the collection because she believed that critical response to Australian women's writing has been limited and deficient. She describes the volume of essays as analyzing "from a range of perspectives how in Australia over the past eighty years or so women have expressed in fiction their understanding of their surrounding society, the situation of women within it, and the relationship of women to debates about class, nationalism, feminism, race, 'literature,' and culture ..." (6). While the book definitely valorizes women's writing, it frankly confronts the fact that many women writers discussed in the essays were so concerned with exalting the Australian that they often did not notice that they were living in a society that was oppressive from the point of view of class, race, and gender. Such oppression does not, however, escape the notice of the present essayists, whose point of departure is feminist or socialist or both.

Gender, Politics and Fiction is a yeasty brew of academic essays by women, largely, if not exclusively, Australian. The ferment of debate in Australia, as elsewhere, over appropriate methodologies for feminist studies is candidly recognized in Ferrier's introduction and allowed to operate among the essays, but she sees the book as arising out of a third stage of feminist literary critical activity.

Ferrier identifies the first development with the examination of the "image of women" in literature and with a frequently prescriptive criticism that judges texts as valuable if they present desirable

"role models" and a "positive sense of feminine identity" (3). In the present book, Margaret Smith's survey "Australian Women Novelists of the 1970s" comes closest to representing this kind of approach, and it does strike me as methodologically the most unsophisticated of the pieces. It is a kind of annotated bibliography (without complete bibliographic details, these being supplied by Ferrier in Part I of the creative, critical, and theoretical bibliography at the end of the book), grouping discussions of the plots, themes, and characters of various novels under such headings as "Rising Stars of the Women's Movement," "Traditional Women Writers," "Black Women Writers," and "Lesbian Novels." Smith concedes that none of the work she discusses has quite the breadth of scope of the best of Henry Handel Richardson's or Christina Stead's fiction, but her rather lame rhetorical ending — "The reasons why this should be so are complex, and, for their clarification, further investigation beyond the boundaries of the novels themselves will be necessary" (221) — makes an unfortunately limp conclusion to a book that is for the most part taut. However, for a reader or researcher wanting a who's who and what's what of the field covered, the essay has evident usefulness.

Ferrier identifies the second development within feminist literary studies with the attempt "to find common elements in the work of women writers and to 'rediscover' and republish many 'lost' works by women writers" (3). Susan Gardner's "*My Brilliant Career*: Portrait of the Artist as a Wild Colonial Girl" has clear affinities with this kind of study. It uses Annis Pratt's myth studies as a paradigm for a reading of a book charged in influential places, such as the *Oxford History of Australian Literature*, with being chaotic. The ultimately sympathetic reading of Miles Franklin's text, however, is never sentimental. Gardner is clear-eyed enough to recognize the book is in some respects a "racist, national-chauvinist, conceptually and aesthetically garbled narrative with an inadequate presentation of class questions" (38), and yet she finds the basis of the novel's appeal in its manipulation of mythic archetypes.

A salvaging of literary reputations is integral to many of the essays in the collection, but Deborah Jordan's "Nettie Palmer as Critic" is also designed to combat the sexist notion that "women have rarely entered the arena as critical commentators on Australian literary production" (59). By researching Palmer's journalism, letters, and other writings, Jordan is able to document Palmer's "dual role" (65) as an educator of the reading public and an encourager of artists, one who showed a consistent interest in and concern for women as both readers and writers. Joy Thwaite's "Eve Langley: Personal and Artistic Schism" is part of a larger effort to recognize that writer's contribution. Thwaite's account of film-maker Meg

Stewart's arrival at Langley's hermit's hut only to find the tragically troubled writer dead makes a compelling opening to her psychological portrait of a writer destroyed by the sexist, anti-intellectual attitudes of her country, attitudes which she tried to counter by becoming a pseudo-male. The discussion of Langley's decline into incoherence both as a writer and as a person forms the background for the reading of Langley's two novels, *The Pea-Pickers* and *White Topee*.

Despite such essays as those considered above, Ferrier sees her book as moving beyond the methodologies of the first two stages. Ferrier's claim is forcefully substantiated in Bronwen Levy's "Constructing the Woman Writer: The Reviewing Reception of Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus*" and Pat Buckridge's "Katharine Susannah Prichard and the Literary Dynamics of Political Commitment." Levy uses reception theory to provide a thought-provoking analysis of the critical success of Shirley Hazzard's fourth book, examining the semiotic messages implicit in the various jacket designs used in and outside of Australia and the strategies used to market the book. Levy concludes that a good deal of the book's success results from the construction of a "non-threatening" profile for Hazzard. For example, outside Australia the profile was made to seem non-threatening by exploiting, on the jacket, the classical connotations of Venus, while within the country, an Australian painting was used on the jacket to play up nationalistic elements. Levy does make clear, however, that such characteristics reflect the conservative middle-class intellectual nature of *The Transit of Venus* itself.

Buckridge's fine essay on Katharine Susannah Prichard uses her novel *Working Bullocks* to study "the interplay between an active political purpose and the use of traditional literary forms and conventions" (85). Buckridge isolates three options that were open to Prichard for handling her material, given her political stance. She could have exploited the national option, which rests on the supposed natural socialism of the Australian bush tradition; the propagandistic tradition, which self-consciously structures plot and develops character for political ends; or the conventions of romance. Buckridge demonstrates how Prichard theoretically deconstructs these options but then shows how the novelist in fact makes all these options serve her purpose. Studying the way Prichard's commitment to socialism textualizes itself, Buckridge is able to demonstrate, for example, how expressions of delight in physical strength create "a signifying chain which prefigures, both metaphorically and metonymically, the direct appropriation by the working class of the products of their labour and of the means of production" (95-96).

Ferrier's own study "Jean Devanney, Katharine Susannah Prichard, and the 'Really Proletarian Novel' " admirably exploits her knowledge of both feminist and socialist theory. Ferrier offers an analysis of the problem socialist realist prescriptions for writing fiction posed for Australian writers. She explains that they faced the difficulty of maintaining credibility in adhering to the revolutionary romanticism dictated by architects of the Soviet revolution because the Australian working class was a long way from seizing power. The essay compares Devanney and Prichard on three points: the contributions each made to the historical understanding of the lives of working-class men and women; the way their works contested bourgeois hegemony on behalf of groups marginalized because of race, class, and gender; and the means by which their novels subverted the forms and conventions of certain novelistic genres for a particular communist purpose.

One of the most insistent themes of the book is the recognition of the mundane domestic impediments to women's writing that existed in pioneering Australia, and continue to exist for many contemporary women writers. The existence of these impediments makes all the more lamentable the reception received by the writing that *did* get done. That it was often arrogantly dismissed or pejorated simply because it was written by women is first established in *Gender, Politics and Fiction* by the Vance Palmer epigraph, which declares that "the atmosphere of women's novels is not good for [a man, because] . . . it is warm and enervating, like a small room heated with an asbestos stove" (v). Given this kind of reader climate it is small wonder that so many Australian women writers hid behind male masks of one kind or another. Deborah Jordan's article on Nettie Palmer, Vance's wife, raises the question of whether Nettie's fostering of other talents was a way of escaping the burden of her own creativity, given her own personal and cultural situation, and then suggests that Palmer's situation was common. By way of proof, Jordan cites Kay Iseman's view of the tradition of Australian women novelists as "a history of conformity to male standards and approval, as a complex struggle for validation" (61). Brief reference has already been made to Eve Langley's attempts to become as male as possible, her attempts having both physical and emotional dimensions, as she dressed like a man and lost herself in the alter-ego of Oscar Wilde. A whole article, "Alias Miles Franklin," is addressed to the causes, nature, and effects of Franklin's series of aliases, and several of the essayists comment on the need Henry Handel Richardson (Ethel Robertson) felt to hide her gender from the reading public.

Of course to be a writer at all in a pioneering society is to risk being perceived as out of the mainstream of that country's life, as

being effete; what *Gender, Politics and Fiction* makes clear is that to be a woman writer in such a society is to be doubly marginalized. Sneja Gunew's essay "Migrant Women Writers: Who's on Whose Margins?" looks at female writers at one more remove from the perceived centre of Australian life. Using Michel Foucault's notion of the transgressive to replace a multicultural model, Gunew examines various tropes of migrant writing, various ways of transgressing on the established territory of Australian culture. These tropes include a schizophrenic perspective and the representing of government institutions as instruments of oppression. Gunew's essay sits a little uneasily in the collection, not because she explores different kinds of Otherness, but because two of the four writers with whom she deals are essentially poets.

In *Man-Made Language,* another Australian, Dale Spender, makes clear one antidote to the marginalizing and pejorating of women that occurs because men's names for things have been accepted as the right ones: women must speak their own names for things forcefully and in such a way that succeeding generations can inherit these namings and the meanings they carry. Several of the essays in *Gender, Politics and Fiction* examine women's writing from this point of view, two making a central issue of the names for family life. Susan Sheridan's article on Christina Stead, "*The Man Who Loved Children* and the Patriarchal Family Drama," offers a counter-reading to Randall Jarrell's admittedly appreciative introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel. Taking a psychological approach, Sheridan renames (in relation to Jarrell's naming) the phenomenon Stead's novel addresses, which is the patriarchal naming of the nuclear family experience. Frances McInherney's study of Elizabeth Harrower's *The Watch Tower* similarly explores the way in which a woman's novel serves to deconstruct the patriarchal notions of family living, exposing the claustrophobic effects of the nuclear famly.

Together the essays in *Gender, Politics and Fiction* succeed in presenting a picture of women's creative and critical writing in Australia in the twentieth century as determinedly resilient. The collection also makes it abundantly clear that it has had to be resilient, given the social and economic status of women in Australia. Canadian readers will certainly see parallels to their own situation, and though the comparative references to Canadian writers are few (Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood are mentioned), Susan Gardner does make a call for studies comparing the women's literatures of the former colonies. Undoubtedly women would be well served by a collection of essays that took up Gardner's sug-

gestion and maintained the stimulating level of discourse that the essays in *Gender, Politics and Fiction* offer.

University of Saskatchewan SUSAN GINGELL

Kirsten Holt Petersen and Anna Rutherford, eds., *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*. Mundelstrap, Denmark: Dangaroo, 1986. pp. 188. $8.95 paper; $15.95 cased.

In 1977, in *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter defined literature by women as a literary subculture, speaking of it in terms of the three phases already identified in Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic reading of the cultures of the colonized: internalization of values, protest, and autonomy. It has since become standard to speak of literature by women as a literature of the colonized. The metaphorical links are clear. Women write under a patriarchal culture which renders them alien or "other" and marginalizes their literary achievement; in a colonial culture patriarchy takes particular care to construct a "feminine" sensibility, exploiting it to provide a sentimentalized version of an aggressive ideology and to pass on to younger generations a set of cultural values threatened during the conflict between different cultural nationalisms.

As a whole the collection under review makes useful reference to the "dislocations" suffered by women writers, their burden of "femininity," the presence of contradictions and ambiguities in their texts, and their subversive or re-visionary strategies. That the editors see the colonizing process of subordination, marginalization, and exploitation as a dual process when it is suffered by women, as the title — *A Double Colonization* — suggests, presumably speaks of their desire to distinguish between a primary universal subordination to a patriarchal or phallic Symbolic, and the secondary, colonial subordination to the demands of cultural nationalism. The conceptual framework is not, however, foregrounded either in the introduction or in the essays. It is elsewhere and not here, for instance, that the South African writer Lauretta Ngcobo, represented in this volume, speaks of her inability to write a feminist novel because of the prior demands of black (patriarchal) nationalism.

The cover illustration depicts black women engaged in agricultural activities and emphasizes a close relation with nature. The contents, which include critical essays, short stories, and poems, deal with both black and white women, with colonizing class and colonized as well as with women like Jean Rhys and Adelaide Casely Hayford, somewhere in between. One of the stories, "Lunch" by

Marion Halligan, deals with the break-up of a love-affair, another, "Tourist" by Marian Eldridge, with a woman in Rome eager for romantic adventure; neither breathes a word, except perhaps in the vaguest of metaphorical terms, about colonization, nor does the interview with the popular Australian writer Barbara Hanrahan. What is needed here is some kind of editorial helping hand; how do we read such texts? How are we to compare the kind of colonization suffered by, say, Aphra Behn with that by Grace Akello? What are the precise meanings to wring from the connections between woman and colonized? This editoral absence is a disappointment, as is the occasional evidence of lack of care regarding more mundane editorial matters, such as the punctuation of Agnes Sam's essay, for instance.

Nevertheless, the editors have included some important material and have also managed to create the impression of women talking to and for one another in what Diane Fahey has called in her poem "Battery Hens" a "low swelling surge," a "corporate cry," that "wedges open the mind" (47). To frame the body of works, they have chosen two essays on class, Ann Curthoys's "Women and Class" and Bronwyn Levy's essay on "Reading the Difference," which, in their different ways, deconstruct the notion of female homogeneity hinted at in the volume's title. What Curthoys calls "the production of inequalities other than those based on sex or gender" (17) informs Shirley Lim's "Between Women": "you — taller, tougher, curved Amazon" and "I, the stray dropping by" (80), as well as Nadine Gordimer's short story "What Were You Dreaming?" which skids away from sympathetic identification between white woman and black to suggest vast distance instead, with each woman privately manipulating and exploiting the other. And then, in counterpoint, comes the voice of Abena Busia's "Counter-Coup," which speaks of women holding vigil in a revolution that keeps them out: "From guns to guns again: full circle" (121).

In colonial societies, where the concepts of masculinity and femininity have been particularly sharply polarized, women have been almost totally restricted to travel tales, autobiography and romance, and to fulfilling the definitions of women as "natural," that is, as generous and self-sacrificing mothers who elevate feeling above reason. Women who write other kinds of texts are subject to different kinds of misreading. Elaine Campbell provides one example in her essay on Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, which comes from Behn's own Surinam experience instead of being, as critics have claimed, stolen from a male text. Susan Sheridan provides another example in an essay on some of the Australian writers of the 1890's, generally read as trapped within the conventions of popular narrative fiction while they were, in fact, contesting them. In order to express thoughts for-

bidden to patriarchal texts, Georgiana McCrae, an early Australian diarist, finds oblique expression in her use of the passive mood and the apparently neutral weather report, as Brian Matthews argues: Sheila Roberts even tries out a fart (134) for her colonized heroine's colon-ic expression. Most outrageously, Aritha van Herk exhorts women writers to ravish the male virgins, the chaste and blameless Adams who have fathered North American literature, in order to rewrite the male versions and take over once and for all the metonymic process withheld by men who penetrate an endlessly passive female terrain in their own, sad metaphor of the creative, literary act.

University of Cape Town DOROTHY DRIVER