
The difficulty of reviewing a book that critiques masculine systems of "representation" and "genre" categories that elide traces of the "feminine" begins with the question of "representing" it within a field of discourse conventions that we can recognize in order to consider its curricular value and its critical effects. That is, to what genre (a concept that determines both the self and substance of discourse) do we assign this text in order to avoid mis-representing its claims for the audience of Composition Studies? The editors of the Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory and the publisher list the book under six different categories: 1) Literature, Modern - 20th century - History and criticism - Theory, etc.; 2) Femininity (Psychology) in literature; 3) Psychoanalysis and literature; 4) Authorship - Sex differences; 5) Feminism and literature; and 6) Literary form (ix). At first glance (pre-view), the fact that Shari Benstock’s text defies categorization could be "seen" as its failing. A second look (re-view) reveals that such a displacement of canonical categories is her attempt to "illustrate the very textual concerns [her readings] address" (x). In either case, readers need first to suspend their will-to-categorize and second, to possess some understanding of French philosophy and psychoanalysis (or willingness to learn) in order to ponder the potential of Benstock’s approach to issues that directly concern the writing/English classroom. My sense is that you will not be disappointed.

To situate this text for the moment, I am going to describe it as "feminist textual criticism." My reason for this is that, for all that it claims (and Benstock aims to examine many thematics), its overarching methodology for revealing the implications of its claims is through a feminist textual criticism. (Those interested in the field of textual criticism might consider Benstock’s chapters on Joyce’s Finnegans Wake and Woolf’s Three Guineas alongside Philip Cohen’s recent publication, Devils and Angels: Textual Editing and Literary Theory, University Press of Virginia, 1991.) For example, Benstock introduces the problem of writing and subjectivity as a backdrop for her feminist concerns about "how psychosexual-textual structures fail to represent woman-in-the-feminine and how the feminine works within the cultural construct to support and subvert systems of representation" (xvii). In other words, for Benstock, the "feminine" is part of a structure of traditional, culturally-coded norms she calls "woman-in-the-feminine" and that "signifies all that is lost, overlooked, or denied" by that cultural category (xvi). Her book is an intricate journey through (and transgression of) a labyrinth of distinctions such as gender/genre, conscious/unconscious, lack/excess, law/Law, and symbolic/semiotic. Benstock positions herself on the edge of the slash dividing these concep-
tual metaphors to produce a reading practice she calls "psychogrammanalysis" (xvi). Her primary theoretical support comes from Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva. Benstock writes within/beyond the intersections of feminism, psychoanalysis, grammatology, rhetoric, and literary criticism. She moves comfortably among diverse discourses as well as between traditional philosophical argumentative conventions and other modes of "reading" to comprise a feminist counter-tradition to such conventions and norms. Incorporating the textual marks of a loss of the "feminine" into her readings, Benstock aims to produce an effect that "confounds the linear plot of phallogocentric and patriarchal oppression" (xix).

Using texts that defy representation in terms of gender/genre distinctions (e.g., Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, Derrida’s *The Post Card*, Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, and H.D.’s poem, "Helen in Egypt"), Benstock examines such rhetorical and grammatical figures as ellipsis, a device that effects "textual displacements of narrative alignments and confuses genres" (xix), and *apostrophe*, a form of address that "problematises narrative authority and subjectivity" (62). In each chapter, her deconstruction of these figures attempts to sustain a tension between orders of representation, or between terms in a phallogocentric binary. For example, she writes that "Woolf’s ellipses open onto a textual unconscious, creating a permeable textual boundary rather like the traversable inner boundary that separates the semiotic from the symbolic in Kristeva’s formulation of the *thetic* or the *hymen* that confuses borderlines between textual interiority and exteriority in Derrida’s works" (xix). Benstock is not saying that there is "anything inherently ‘feminine’ in the forms of rhetoric, grammar, and punctuation" she analyzes; rather, "apostrophes, ellipses, footnotes, and certain epistolary forms, orthographical conventions, and alphabetic signifiers occupy a textual space of loss or oversight" (xvii).

Benstock is also careful to anticipate the book’s would-be detractors by not avoiding the feminist debate over using Lacan, Derrida, and Kristeva. In each case, Benstock provides ample justification for her readings. She acknowledges that the "sexually coded critical vocabulary (invagination, hymen)" (xvii) used by Derrida is problematic for many feminists because these terms mark "a site of colonization over the female body" (xviii). Rather than end a feminist analysis there, however, Benstock (in an affirmative deconstructive move) wants to hold the question open. That is, even though such terms can serve to inscribe the feminine in masculine discourse, "they open an important question: if feminine sexuality is the vanishing point of meaning within psychic structures, as Freudian/Lacanian theory argues, does it also mark textual limits?" (xviii). Kristeva’s work constitutes a slightly different problem for feminists; yet, Benstock skillfully explicates her theories and explains
how Kristeva is misunderstood. Because Kristeva links the psyche and body through analyzing the linguistic effects of psychic structures in poetic language, she is often seen as an essentialist. In addition, Kristeva's reliance upon “twentieth-century avant-garde European men writers” produces analyses that appear “to eclipse the psycho-textual issues of women’s writing so important to feminist criticism” (xviii). Benstock argues (quite convincingly) that Kristeva’s examination of “the relation of the semiotic to the gendered subject” and her theory of “the process by which a semiotic ‘un-signifying’ . . . stands outside representative, cognitive orders”(xviii-xix) is crucial to understanding “the psycho-sexual determinants of textual practices” (xviii).

Benstock focuses “relentlessly” throughout the book upon “the textual, upon the representational veil that the Symbolic weaves to hide its fictions and fears” (190). The Symbolic, according to Lacan, “is an interpretive order, governed by an unconscious structure” (9). Kristeva, who revises Lacan’s categories of psychic structures (Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary), reveals the semiotic as a signifying process that “is destructive of” the privileged order of the Symbolic, at the same time it must operate “within and through” the symbolic (25). Since Benstock is interested in textual locations of loss of the feminine, Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic is crucial to her analyses of grammatical and rhetorical figures that mark the sight of such loss. For Benstock, the semiotic “represents all that the symbolic cannot order according to its terms, what is excluded (and therefore necessary) to its founding principles” (24). By the end of her book, Benstock’s emphasis upon subverting the Symbolic (made manifest through her readings of textual sites of loss of the feminine) reveals a darker problem.

In the initial paragraph of her Epilogue, “Last Words/Lost Words,” Benstock asks a critical question: “If these is no escaping the Symbolic, in which our systems of representation function, is there hope of transforming it?” (190). Benstock points to the possibilities for transformation in those textual structures that evade the “substitutionary logic of the Symbolic” (191). For example, H.D.’s poem testifies that “Helen” is not a meaning that can be exchanged between cultures across time without instantiating the failure of signification in the Symbolic (death). Transgressing the moment of such failure marks, for Benstock, the opportunity for escaping the totalizing structures of patriarchal binary logic by demanding a new process of signification and a new order of representation. Benstock’s analysis of Helen reveals that she cannot be substituted or exchanged, or used as a signifier “to fill the vacuum created by death .... Helen is the symptom of an impending psychosis of civilizations that refuse to acknowledge death” (191, 193). In the closing paragraphs, Benstock’s hidden thematic is revealed. She writes: “It is death, which any
real transformation of the Symbolic must (inevitably and impossibly) take into its account" (195).

If these are troublesome conclusions, then Benstock has perhaps achieved her purpose, to remind us that "gendered subjectivity is a fragile construction ... [that] is demanding and requires constant negotiation against heavy odds" (195). It is also important to attend to ways that "we as subjects are also 'spoken' by the social systems and language functions into which we are born and through which our individual subjectivities are constituted" (195). In poetic language, and in the permeable, traversable shield between the semiotic and the symbolic, these negotiations take on meanings that resist oppressive masculine systems of representation and genre/gender distinctions. For those of us who teach writing and the study of literature, the implications are certainly not innocent, much less to be ignored. The gravity of Benstock's text can be (perhaps should be) a welcome mode of resistance to texts with less courage and understanding of the relation between writing and subjectivity, and to the growing "genres" of pedagogical practices that reject theory in the name of "real" classroom experience. This is a challenging work that deserves, at minimum, your open-minded consideration and, at most, your critical acclaim.

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Chilling. No other expression, except "essential reading," more accurately reflects my response to Jonathan Kozol's discussion of the Savage Inequalities that exist within American education. This is not a happy book. Kozol does not attempt to distance his discussion of American education from the harsh realities of racial segregation, total isolation from avenues of/to power, abject poverty, inadequate funding and staffing, as have many critics of American education who cry "crisis" (i. e., Edward Bennett, E. D. Hirsch, Alan Bloom).

Kozol's task is the more difficult and important task of entering into the situations in which too many American children find themselves during the 180 days they are required (sentenced is a better description in these cases) to attend school. He takes the reader to see schools such as