

Carole Ferrier, ed.  
*GENDER, POLITICS AND FICTION: TWENTIETH  
CENTURY AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S NOVELS*  
St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1985  
Diana Brydon,

This is an important and valuable book, but like most anthologies, uneven. The collection has been designed to bring together "a range of new readings of twentieth century Australian women's fiction from socialist and/or feminist standpoints," readings designed to question the "literary establishment's construction of the institution of literary criticism, its notions of 'literary value', and its concepts of 'literature.'" The editor's introduction provides an overview of the overlapping historical, political, and theoretical contexts in which the study locates itself: the development of feminist criticism, the history of women's writing and its reception in Australia, and the necessity for addressing class and economic questions.

Eleven essays follow, most of them original contributions in line with one or several of the anthology's stated objectives. Susan Gardner's excellent essay on *My Brilliant Career* places it in the context of colonial women's writing. Valerie Kent focuses on Miles Franklin herself. Both these essays resist hagiography to focus intelligently on Franklin's inability to connect racial and gender oppression. Deborah Jordan's essay on Nettie Palmer as critic reclaims an undervalued writer and genre for analysis. While the essays on Franklin and Palmer consider the ways in which their Australian nationalism interfered with their feminism, the essays by Pat Buckridge on Katharine Susannah Prichard and by Carole Ferrier on Jean Devaney consider the interplay between political and literary commitments.

Joy Thwaite's essay on Eve Langley is more traditional in focus and scope, linking the life and work of a neglected minor writer. Susan Sheridan's reading of Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* as a critique of the patriarchal family drama demolishes Randall Jarrell's well-known introduction to the novel to set up its own convincing reading, albeit one that dismisses the anthology's declared interest in questions of class. In arguing for Elizabeth Harrower's participation in a female subculture, Frances McInhery goes further in underplaying time and place to focus on "the almost universal subordination of women."

Perhaps appropriately for its subject matter, Sneja Gunew's essay on migrant women writers is more theoretically exploratory and attuned to the questioning of discursive formations. In looking at the critical reception of Shirley Hazzard's *Transit of Venus*, Bronwen Levy uses reception aesthetics to question the literary establishment's construction of value. These essays are exceptionally fine, illuminating the collection's stated objectives and suggesting directions for future thinking. Indeed only the final essay falls disappointingly short in this otherwise stimulating anthology. The subject matter itself is largely at fault: any survey of Australian women novelists of the 1970s would have difficulty remaining true to the anthology's questioning spirit. This article, however, seems not only devoid of any theoretical self-consciousness but actually at odds with the direction of the rest of the book, eclectic as it is. Plot summary at the level of "*Tirra Lirra by the River* has much typical women's experience" provides a disappointing conclusion to a lively and generally challenging collection. Despite this final lapse, however, *Gender, Politics and Fiction* remains essential reading.

Karen B. Mann  
*THE LANGUAGE THAT MAKES GEORGE ELIOT'S  
FICTION*  
Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.  
Pp. 226. \$22.95

Alexander Welsh  
*GEORGE ELIOT AND BLACKMAIL*  
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985. Pp. 388.  
\$24.00  
Reviewed by Daniel P. Deneau

The vast amount written in the last thirty years about the life and works of George Eliot must leave her readers with some very sober reflections on the purpose and the future of scholarship. For whom are the rapidly multiplying studies being prepared? Is it possible even for dedicated specialists to digest the ever-increasing information and insights? And is the

literary criticism being stored in thousands of libraries like agricultural and manufactured products which have a limited duration and limited usefulness? Though the large questions remain unanswered, at least one certainty can be underscored here: if book reviews are to serve any real purpose at all, they must be frank and, insofar as space permits, rigorous evaluations.

As painful as it is to say so, Karen B. Mann's *The Language That Makes George Eliot's Fiction* is for me an unreadable book, though my will forced my eyes and mind to encounter the entire text twice. Mann writes about comedy, pathos, and especially figurative language; she expresses an interest in the "relationship between self and world" in George Eliot's fiction, as well as in "larger fictional units" (structures, plots), which supposedly are generated "from the meaning expressed by language." Although the book makes some incidental references to modern theorists and may purport to deal with epistemological questions, it is primarily a New Critical study of imagery or figurative language, the kind of study which seemed "fresh" in the 1950s and 1960s but which seems anachronistic in the 1980s. At times Mann forces incidental or isolated images to yield overly large conclusions, and her method of shifting from one fictional work to another and her grouping and regrouping of characters can be very taxing for her readers. Most serious of all, however, is the fact that her theses and terminology are never adequately clarified. Much too much remains pretentious and unclear. Consider these examples. "Here, then, we have the same doubleness of role which is a crucial aspect of George Eliot's presentation of man's sexual identity: each person is potentially both spectator of the actions of others and actor himself in the 'great drama of human existence'" (p. 141). Obviously! "Tony Tanner's terms, then, support my earlier generalization that George Eliot's fictions explore the conflict between the energy of passion and the social structure, especially as that structure is mirrored in its marital forms and restrictions" (p. 98). The same could be said about nearly any novelist? Or consider this: "In these cases, and in the many similar ones, the single image of the plant can imply a whole fictional structure governed by forward directionality in its plot as well as the sympathy or pathos that can accompany that plot when the emphasis is on its inevitably mortal conclusion" (p. 15). Clear? No doubt *The Language That Makes George Eliot's Fiction* has cost its author a great deal of thought and effort and will be purchased by most academic libraries in the English-speaking world, but I cannot discover any justification for the book's existence.

Alexander Welsh's *George Eliot and Blackmail* is a wide-ranging and genuinely original work which should contain much to interest both critics of George Eliot and "new" literary historians. As Welsh commences his lucid preface which outlines the order to be followed in his sixteen chapters, he explains that after *The Mill* George Eliot became increasingly aware of "a relation between knowledge and accountability that is still without a name but may easily be recognized in the criminal form blackmail." In addition, George Eliot and other Victorian novelists did invent a great many "blackmail plots," and it seems logical to study the nature of these plots and the society in which they were produced. In order to establish certain patterns and Victorian concerns, Welsh offers some pleasant commentary on Alfred Hitchcock's first talking film, *Blackmail* (1929), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), a popular Victorian tale. Then, in three chapters designed "to show the historical and cultural ground of reputational blackmail," Welsh deals with the nineteenth-century information revolution, the rise of publicity (various conditions of society intensified the individual's need for privacy and secrecy), and the concept of circumstantial evidence—topics which certainly remain important in the twentieth century. After dwelling on some relevant facts of George Eliot's life, Welsh does turn to the fiction itself: he writes briefly about the early or "pastoral" works; offers individual chapters on *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Felix Holt*, and *Middlemarch*; generously devotes seventy five pages (three chapters) to *Daniel Deronda*; and concludes with chapters entitled "Blackmail and the Unconscious" and "From Chillingworth to Freud." In short, Welsh's book is concerned with cultural history, sociology, literary criticism, and psychology.

Like many writers before him, Welsh endeavors to chart the contours of George Eliot's career; he focuses on one of her well-known themes—the continuity or discontinuity of a human life—and then distinguishes between variations in this theme. Generally: "All her later novels contain within the action a marked discontinuity between the present and some experience of the past that has been deliberately or otherwise forgotten." Naturally he dwells on such matters as scandal, secrets, publicity, public opinion, reputation, concealment, mysteries, information, and blackmail. His commentary on *Romola* makes particularly absorbing reading; and his elucidation of "the seekers of knowledge" in *Middlemarch* suggests that, after

all, this much-discussed novel has not been exhausted by modern criticism. As one might expect, some of the material on the information revolution is only very obliquely related to Welsh's literary criticism; and his final chapters, in which he attempts to relate the information culture or revolution, modern psychology, and George Eliot's fiction, seem more suggestive than conclusive. Though Welsh's book is readable, at times (for instance, the chapter "Ideology in *Daniel Deronda*") it may lack conciseness and a clearly established progression toward definite conclusions. But the final note must be a positive one: obviously using terms quite unlike previous commentators, Welsh does offer further evidence of the continuity between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and does reaffirm George Eliot's modernity.

John Freccero

*DANTE: THE POETICS OF CONVERSION*

ed. Rachel Jacoff

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986. Pp. 328. \$25.00

Reviewed by Linda Hill

John Freccero's *Dante* is a collection of seventeen essays published from 1959 to 1983. Rachel Jacoff has contributed an introduction to Freccero's critical methodology and furnished translations of quotations in the text. In the notes, citations are left in the original languages, including medieval Latin. The book is intended as a companion to the *Comedy*; the essays appear in the same order as the passages from the *Comedy* on which Freccero comments. Two thirds of the book deal with the *Inferno*. As Jacoff notes (p. xv), the essays proceed from convincing exegesis to broader insights.

Invoking Lukács on the *Comedy* as the last epic and first novel (p. 138), Freccero offers a number of observations on narrative technique. He discusses the need for a perspective from the ending in fictitious autobiographies, which he calls "novels of the self" (p. 58), and touches on suspense and linearity (p. 138). The chapter "Infernal Irony: The Gates of Hell" (1983) analyzes the "mimesis with a vengeance" (p. 102) through which Dante damns souls by representing them as bodies, that is, by reducing the signified (soul) to the signifier (body). The stimulating final chapter, "The Significance of *Terza Rima*" (1983), examines the logic of forward progression and recapitulation underlying Dante's rhyme scheme, the narrative structure of the *Comedy*, and autobiography in general. The triple rhymes which point forward as well as backward require a double rhyme at the beginning and the end; otherwise there would be no opening or closure at all. Similarly, the pilgrim undergoes a spiritual death and conversion without which he could not develop into the poet of the conclusion. The transcendent closure in paradise harks back to the language of the beginning and is necessary for the starting point, the poet's record of the pilgrim's bewilderment. In autobiography the beginning requires the end as a precondition.

The understandable choice of thematic rather than chronological order sets up a few methodological jolts. While the early chapters combine medieval philology with New Criticism, the later chapters employ structuralist and deconstructionist arguments. For example, in "Pilgrim in a Gyre" (1961) Freccero states that "we must assume the existence of a coherent pattern and abandon our hypothesis only when our resources, or those of the poem, are exhausted" (p. 71). The semiotic analysis of "Infernal Irony" (1983) follows abruptly. Older methods reappear in the next chapter, "The Neutral Angels" (1960). This somewhat disconcerting arrangement has the advantage of documenting how drastically literary scholarship has changed over the last three decades.

Roman Struc and J. C. Yardley, eds.

*FRANZ KAFKA (1883-1983): HIS CRAFT AND THOUGHT*

Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986.

Pp. 157

Reviewed by Kurt J. Fickert

In his becomingly modest introduction to this selection of papers from those presented at the University of Calgary's centennial conference on Franz Kafka, Roman Struc characterizes them as conveying "imperfect insights" into the ambiguities of the Kafka canon, while affording at least "a more systematic perspective" (p. 1). The systematic aspect which relates