

(*Fugue*), Monique Wittig (*Les Guérillères*), Marguerite Duras (*L'Amour*), and Hélène Cixous (*Souffles*).

The twelve texts that Dina Sherzer presents span a period of about thirty years during which time the "writerly," as Roland Barthes defined it, subverts the "readerly," asserts differences, and devalues normative expectations. Instead of univocity, totality, wholeness, hierarchy, and polarity, these fictions display randomness, pluralism, heterogeneity, multiplicity, dispersion, and indeterminacy. The author explains and expands upon these terms in her excellent study of postmodern French fiction. She argues convincingly that these *nouveau nouveau roman* texts do not stage the writing of adventures but present instead the adventures of writing. She maintains that although language may foreground itself by displaying intrinsic linguistic properties such as puns, portmanteau words, heterogeneous verbal textures, metaphors, intertextuality, play, and so forth, it also transmits referential meaning. Dina Sherzer validates the autonomous play of language *and* its mimetic properties. Says she: "It is not desirable to operate with the prestructuralist emphasis on signifiers; rather, it is necessary to examine both signifiers and signified with the understanding that there is not a one-to-one relationship between them but that both generate meaning independently of each other" (p. 5).

Although formalists may insist on the pure play of signifiers, verbal traces, and intratextual games, Dina Sherzer ably demonstrates that the subversion, devaluation, and parody of normative texts cannot function without a referential presence, that is, without the firmly anchored values that are being opposed. Thus, the indeterminacy and discontinuity of texts, while foregrounding language, nonetheless oppose the conventional norms of well-crafted fiction. What appears to be a closed, arbitrarily constructed linguistic system, is, after all, "open" to audience response. What appeared to be independent, floating, linguistic constructs, are entities embedded in a literary experience and a cultural matrix that allow intentionality to play with the denotations and the connotations of language even when language may not be intended to signify. "In these texts," says Dina Sherzer, "everything is meaningful; meaning is expressed not only by the semantic or referential content of language but also in the various modes of communication" (p. 5). Intertextual and architextual components, isomorphisms, and harmonics overlap and intersect in order to create multilayered systems of meaning. She evinces no single model—be it linguistic, literary, or psychoanalytic—but combines a diversity of approaches in order to arrive at a *thick description* of texts, a term borrowed from Clifford Geertz who has used it to define the deep, intricate, and plural nature of cultures. Indeed, in her chapter on feminist fiction, Dina Sherzer shows how Wittig's "systematic reversals," or Cixous's "mental and physical exhilaration," although employing the devices of postmodern writing, nonetheless affirm meaning by opposing the codes and the values of a phallogocentric culture in order to subvert the authority of a logocentric discourse.

Representation in Contemporary French Fiction provides essential insights for understanding the operational field of postmodern writing: how decentering, entropy, lack of temporality, and emphasis on process inscribe a reality that is isomorphic with the reality of the universe from the point of view of quantum mechanics and human behavior. Dina Sherzer demonstrates that in addition to the foregrounding of language and the interplay of constructs, these twelve texts have meaning precisely because they function as epistemological metaphors; because the ways in which their *representation* is structured reflect the configurations of contemporary science as well as the cultural stratifications of the postmodern era.

Jerzy Kutnik

*THE NOVEL AS PERFORMANCE; THE FICTION OF
RONALD SUKENICK AND RAYMOND FEDERMAN*

Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986.

Pp. xxviii + 275. \$22.50

Reviewed by Melvin J. Friedman

Jerome Klinkowitz, in his *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction* (1975), seems to have been the first to couple Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman. Indeed since then the two have been fashioned by critics to fit the mold of Beckett's pseudocouples; they have become, so to speak, the Mercier and Camier of American surfiction.

Here, for example, is John Barth making oblique reference to their presence on the American Creative Writing scene in "Writing: Can It Be Taught?" (*New York Times Book Review*, June 16, 1985): "There are lively pods of metafictionists, among other species, in Buffalo and Boulder" (p. 37). Federman teaches at the State University of New York at Buffalo and Sukenick at the University of Colorado, Boulder. The two writers have been friends for some years, have occasionally reviewed each other's books, and have engaged in a variety of collaborations.

It is only fitting, then, that the Polish critic Jerzy Kutnik should group them together in *The Novel as Performance*. This book is part of a fascinating new series at Southern Illinois University Press, edited by Jerome Klinkowitz, which includes such noteworthy companion volumes as Ronald Sukenick's *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* (1985) and Ihab Hassan's *Out of Egypt: Scenes and Arguments of an Autobiography* (1986).

The Novel as Performance is impressively launched by an eleven-page foreword by Larry McCaffery, author of *The Metafictional Muse* and one of the leading interpreters of American postmodern fiction. McCaffery interestingly explains why American avant-garde writing goes over so well in Europe, especially in Jerzy Kutnik's Poland, but does err slightly when he indicates parenthetically, "one thinks of the enthusiasm in France for Faulkner during the 1940s, while in the United States his books were being allowed to go out of print" (p. x). He must mean the 1930s when, for example, André Malraux and Valéry Larbaud wrote their prefaces to the French translations of *Sanctuary* (1933) and *As I Lay Dying* (1934) respectively and when Jean-Paul Sartre wrote his celebrated essay on *The Sound and the Fury* (1939) and his less-well-known study of *Sartoris* (1938). This was the decade also when neglect of Faulkner's writing was most keenly felt in the United States.

Kutnik begins his book with some fifty pages of theoretical discussion before he offers his elaborate analyses of the literary careers of Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman. This discussion lucidly explains the contours of postmodern practice in all the arts, as mimesis gives way to performatory modes and sensibilities. Performance, we are told, replaces representation as fiction is brought "up-to-date with contemporary art and culture" (p. xxvii). After a stimulating account of the nonmimetic rhythms of recent art forms, Kutnik turns his attention to the "free prose" writers Sukenick and Federman.

The hundred page section devoted to Ronald Sukenick offers two chapters on the criticism, five on the fiction. Kutnik shows how *Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure*, a revised Brandeis doctoral dissertation, and the pieces collected in *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction*, offer something of a poetics for the novels and stories. He devotes a chapter each to the collection of what he calls "exemplary fictions," *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, and to the four novels, *Up, Out, 98.6*, and *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues*. (Unfortunately, Kutnik's book went to press before he was able to consider Sukenick's *The Endless Short Story*, which Fiction Collective published in 1986.) Kutnik traces the maturing of this fiction from the "short pieces which explore various strategies of composition" (p. 73) in *The Death of the Novel*, through *Up*, which "does not fully satisfy the requirement of Sukenick's aesthetics of failure because it moves in a (closed) circle" (p. 98), down to *Out*, "a fully metafictional work" (p. 108), and the completely realized surfictional texts, *98.6* and *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues*. Toward the end of the Sukenick section he makes this telling observation: "The development of Sukenick's writing from *Up* through *Long Talking Blues* demonstrates his progressive movement toward that level of abstractness at which fiction becomes expressive only of its own unfolding" (p. 145).

The slightly shorter Federman section has a parallel structure: two chapters on the criticisms are followed by four on the fiction. Just as Kutnik led into Sukenick's work through a discussion of his *Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure* so now he launches his treatment of Federman with an analysis of his revised UCLA doctoral dissertation, *Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction*. (For a somewhat different view of *Journey to Chaos*, see my review of it in *The French Review*, April 1966, pp. 817-18.) Just as he explained Sukenick's debt to Stevens so now he cautiously accounts for the Beckett legacy in Federman: "This is not to say that Federman has taken the ideas of Beckett at face value—rather, he has studied them critically for their usefulness in working out his own, original and theoretically more advanced, poetic of fiction" (p. 155). Indeed as Kutnik soberly makes his way through the Federman canon, studying *Double or Nothing; Take It or Leave It; The Voice in the Closet; and The Twofold Vibration* in admirable detail, he makes only infrequent mention of Beckett's work. This omission is unfortunate because echoes of Beckett are everywhere. The title *The Twofold Vibration* is taken

from *The Lost Ones*. There are references to Beckett as obvious as “imagination is far from being dead, my friends, in spite of what has been rumored lately, imagination dead imagine” (*The Twofold Vibration*) or “In complete LESSNESSness my friend Sam would say where nothing is even less than nothing” (*Take It or Leave It*). Some are more obscure such as this embellishing of a line from *Murphy*, “MUST I BITE THE HAND THAT STARVES ME SO THAT IT CAN STRANGLE ME BETTER?” (*Take It or Leave It*). The sentences from *Double or Nothing*, “In fact I’ll change all the names eventually. Has to be” make us think of the monologuists’ odd gestures in Beckett’s trilogy. There is no doubt that Federman is one of Beckett’s genuine fictional heirs; the younger writer, to his credit, has never ceased to acknowledge his indebtedness. Beckett, one can say, has played a more crucial role in shaping Federman’s art than Wallace Stevens did with Sukenick’s.

Kutnik says interesting things about Federman’s fiction from *Double or Nothing* through *The Twofold Vibration*. It is too bad that he never mentions his 1985 *Smiles on Washington Square*, which is Federman’s most conventional novel thus far, as it avoids many of the earlier experiments with telling, typography, paragraphing, and punctuation; it is also, I think, his least Beckettian text.

A brief conclusion follows the Federman section. A useful twenty-page bibliography completes *The Novel as Performance*. One might mention that two items listed under the name Richard Pearce as “unpublished” (p. 265) are actually parts of Pearce’s excellent study, *The Novel in Motion: An Approach to Modern Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983).

Jerzy Kutnik is to be congratulated for defining so well what he has called “the antimimetic disposition of twentieth-century art” (p. 228). He has also commented on the subtleties and intricacies of the work of Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman in the most lucid and convincing terms.

George Steiner
TOLSTOY OR DOSTOEVSKY
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985
First published in 1959 by Alfred Knopf.
Reviewed by Edward Wasiolek

Steiner wrote this book almost thirty years ago without knowing Russian, and without scholarly credentials for either Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, or for that matter, for Russian literature. It was a bold and hazardous task and one that he carried off with a mixture of bravado and deep passion. He did so not at the end of his career, but at the beginning, and he did it well. No one before him, or indeed after him, had placed Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in the matrix of the Western tradition and saw so keenly and sensitively how both were a product and coronation of Western art. He did it, too, at the dawn of scholarship and criticism of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in America. Except for early criticism on Tolstoy at the beginning of the century and perhaps Hugh I’Anson Fausset’s slim work on Tolstoy in 1928, there was nothing of substance and any length on Tolstoy in the late fifties when Steiner’s work appeared. The situation was a little better on Dostoevsky, but not much. There were a half dozen books on Dostoevsky in English before Steiner (Fayer, Lavrin, Lloyd, Curle, Powys) but none with the sweep and depth of his book.

He called the study a work of “old criticism”, separating it from the then-reigning “New Criticism”, that is, from that procedure of microscopic examination of images and language and from that indifference, if not hostility, to literature’s relations with disciplines outside itself. Steiner defined the old criticism in these terms: “The old criticism is engendered by admiration. It sometimes steps back from the text to look upon moral purpose. It thinks of literature as existing not in isolation but as central to the play of historical and political energies. Above all, the old criticism is philosophical in range and temper.” He might have added, too, that the old criticism was one of taste, and personality, and of commitment and belief, as is Steiner’s study.