

Porter's demonstration of "the problem of unconsciously playing out old plots, even after one has become a feminist reader aware of their dangers" (295). Two essays on Black narratives—Sharon Davie's on Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Carla L. Peterson's on Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*—illuminate not only each other but other texts as well. Davie's discussion of double voicing recalls Jadwin's highlighting of Becky Sharp's double discourse, while Bonnie Zimmerman, writing on *Daniel Deronda*, and Peterson both identify ways of using historical romance to interrogate the culture's gender system: Eliot by providing a "feminist chorus" to "undermine the complacency of the androgynous male story" (167), Hopkins by both stressing female bonding and suggesting the possibility of equality within heterosexual marriage. Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*, Christine L. Krueger contends, refuses closure by ending *before* its ending, with a speech by its central character critiquing both marriage and the assumptions of the Victorian novel. Similarly, *Wide Sargasso Sea* ends both before its own ending—with Bertha on the point of burning down Rochester's house—and before that of *Jane Eyre*, the book which Rhys, in what Caroline Rody argues is an anticipation of postmodern techniques, radically revises. On the other hand, Wharton's *House of Mirth* concludes, after Lily Bart's ambiguous death, with a space which its society leaves empty; its last word, says Shari Benstock, can never be spoken. U.C. Knoepfmacher's Afterword extends the discussion, introducing *Villette*, *Frankenstein*, and *To the Lighthouse* as further revisions of woman's story and seeing Woolf's ending, Lily's final brush stroke, as reasserting, not resolving, "insecurities and contradictions" (361).

True to its subject, which Booth describes as "*unending* bids for ultimate authority" (3), *Famous Last Words* is an open-ended text. Every reader with an interest in narrative will find much to admire, learn from, and carry further.

Olga Anastasia Pelensky, ed.

*Isak Dinesen: Critical Views*

Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993. Pp. xvii + 354. \$39.95

Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

The Danish author and painter Karen Blixen, known better internationally under her pseudonym, Isak Dinesen, always refused to allow her character or her writing to conform to any category. Consequently, critics have approached Dinesen's relatively small oeuvre only hesitantly. In addition, critical reception has been hampered by the fact that a Danish author writing in English occupies a problematic position in a practice that traditionally organizes literature and criticism according to national origins and standards. *Isak Dinesen: Critical Views* gives an overview of this critical reception by collecting twenty-six essays, originally published between 1952 and 1992, with a heavy emphasis on pieces from the early 1980s, which saw a rise not only in critical but also in public interest in Dinesen's writing, exemplified by the Hollywood version of her memoir, *Out of Africa*.

The essays, arranged in chronological order, demonstrate the developments over forty years not only of Dinesen criticism but of literary criticism in general. Four examples demonstrate the range of views on Dinesen and her writing presented in this collection.

In the opening essay, "Karen Blixen and Marionettes," first published in 1952, Aage Henriksen reads *Seven Gothic Tales* and *Winter's Tales* in a manner typical of that time with a heavy emphasis on symbols and mythic intertexts. Consequently, he concludes with a suggestion strongly reminiscent of Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, to "see Blixen's marionettes in a new way: as figures enacting the limited number of valid destinies that are available down through the ages" (9).

Robert Langbaum's 1964 essay, "Autobiography and Myth in the African Memoirs," expands upon Henriksen's myth-centered approach, moving beyond the generality suggested by Henriksen to the specific situation of Dinesen's local and temporal circumstances. So he argues that "it is because she assimilated her African memories to the myth of the fall that Isak Dinesen made a unified book of what started out to be a series of disconnected anecdotes" (39).

Susan Gubar's contribution, "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," also uses biographical consideration as its starting point, but the focus is not on specific details of Dinesen's life but on the general issue of gender. Taking the story "The Blank Page" as her starting point, Gubar puts Dinesen in a line with George Eliot, Edith Wharton, H.D., and Katherine Mansfield as an author "involved in efforts to sanctify the female through symbols of female divinity, myths of female origin, metaphors of female creativity, and rituals of female power . . . in an ongoing revisionary female theology" (117).

Yet another completely different approach to Dinesen's writing is represented by Abdul R. JanMohamed's essay, "*Out of Africa*: The Generation of Mythic Consciousness," in which Dinesen's African writing is put in the context of the colonial experience in Kenya. Langbaum had praised Dinesen's use of Africa: "In writing about the feudal society of her farm in relation to the rhythms of Africa . . . Isak Dinesen is reconstructing that organic life of the European past projected by the romantic mythology" (43). JanMohamed, on the other hand, after distinguishing Dinesen's behavior from that of other colonial farmers, proceeds to deconstruct Dinesen's portraits of herself and her interaction with the Africans to point out a central self-delusion: "Dinesen's schematization . . . erroneously implies that the dependency and reciprocations are equal: in fact, Dinesen is the leader and the natives are the followers. . . . Her central position as the leader provides an organizational basis for her world without disturbing its dynamic balance; the egocentric organization produces a world that is simultaneously subjective, that is, defined by Dinesen's idiosyncratic perceptions, and objective, that is, non-egotistic and full of empathy. The egocentricity of Dinesen's experience allows her to play her ultimate role—that of God" (152-53).

These few examples indicate the variety of Dinesen's writing as well as the scope of critical reaction to it. Pelensky's collection deserves credit for representing these varieties in the understanding that an oeuvre as complex as Dinesen's cannot be reduced to simple generalities. It is regrettable, however, that *Isak Dine-*

sen: *Critical Views* aims so strongly at representing the development of Dinesen criticism that it neglects current interpretations. Only one essay, Morten Kyntrup's "The Vertigo of Staging: Authority and Narration in Isak Dinesen's 'The Roads Round Pisa,'" was first published after 1985, and none of these essays is a new contribution. This criticism notwithstanding, *Isak Dinesen: Critical Views* is a solid collection providing a good and useful survey of criticism for readers acquainting themselves with Dinesen's writing.

Philippe Sollers

*Watteau in Venice*

Trans. Alberto Manguel

New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994. Pp. 240. \$22.00

Reviewed by T. Douglas Doyle

What does an author do when he finds the literature of his time "of no use whatsoever"? If that author is the French writer/critic Philippe Sollers, the answer is simple: reinvent literature. Such is the philosophy which underlies *Watteau in Venice*, a text that is as innovative and controversial today as were the paintings of Antoine Watteau in the first decades of the eighteenth century.

Whether one reads this text to indulge an interest in art or literature (as indeed it will appeal to lovers of both), most will concur that *Watteau in Venice* is a composition unlike anything they have seen before. Those who seek an engrossing plot, for example, will be disappointed, for as the author himself explains, "The eminent reader-critic . . . has no wish to know the world of today, is happy with clichés lifted from vague detective novels produced by the entertainment industry in charge of amusing their ignorance" (157). What little plot this novel does have revolves around a black market art dealer, Pierre Froissart, a.k.a. Watteau, who is conducting a clandestine art sale in Venice. In between dealings, he and his beautiful American astrophysicist mistress reflect upon the degeneration of contemporary techno-commodity culture and find solace among the philosophical musings of a host of painters and poets about whom our salesman demonstrates almost encyclopedic knowledge. In fact, some of this novel's most moving and entertaining passages are purloined directly from the letters and journals of an eclectic catalogue of artistic visionaries from Mrs. Monet to Mr. Stendhal.

What this novel lacks in cohesiveness, however, it more than compensates for in complexity. Because this text tries hard to link the art of writing with that of painting, it assumes an impressionistic quality which will challenge the sensibilities of casual readers. Its teasing narrative twists and turns in a prose labyrinth as playful and unpredictable as the avenues of that European city which shares its name. Speakers and tones of voice change abruptly, as do the meanings of words (and even names, e.g., Watteau), which Sollers's wordplay ultimately forces us to question. And, happily, this English translation preserves much playful parlance present in Sollers's 1991 original.