THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, SINCE 1945

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1. Essays, Studies, Critical Theory

François-Bernard Michel, *Le Souffle coupé. Respirer et écrire*, Gallimard, 278 pp., is a singular essay: an exploration by a practising doctor of the effects of asthma and tuberculosis on the writer. There are chapters on Barthes and Camus. Though the product of a formidable knowledge of literature, it is often little more than a pulmonary *Who's Who* in which lung-trouble is the biographical *leitmotiv*. This is especially the case with Camus. Given the relevance of the body to Barthes, the exercise makes more sense. Very readable however. *The Existential Coordinates of the Human Condition: Poetic — Epic — Tragic*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1984, xviii + 571 pp., contains chapters on the Nouveau Roman as the ultimate expression of Impressionism by V. Carrabino; on the self-reflexive process in the Nouveau Roman by F. Ravaux; on the problems of reading Beckett phenomenologically by J. Margolis, as well as a fund of other pieces. Mary Ann Frese Witt, *Existential Prisons. Captivity in Mid-Twentieth-Century French Literature*, Durham, Duke U.P., xii + 231 pp., examines the persistence of imprisonment as a historical reality and as metaphor in the writing of Malraux, Camus, Sartre, and Genet. Detailed and revealing, the study underlines both the difference between the modern versions of imprisonment and that of say Pascal, and the differences in the use made of it by each author studied, emphasizing the unique situation of G. A valuable study. Alice Jardine, *Gynesis. Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 281 pp., is truly a major work. The crisis which has affected the master narratives of European culture in the past century has provoked in them a vast self-exploration. This turning-back, says G., has created a *spacing* within the discourse of these narratives which has been coded as feminine, as woman. This process, which she terms *gynesis*, is examined in the writings of Sollers, Duras, Cixous, Derrida, Kristeva, and Lacan. Her analyses provide a precious means of access to the inter-relation of theory and fiction in contemporary writing. Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics. Feminist Literary Theory*, London, Methuen, xviii + 206 pp., devotes half of its attention to French feminist theory. After a brief history, there are chapters on Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva. This is an important introductory study. Its author's commitment to a politicized feminism, while ensuring the vigour of her argument, does all the same entail a narrowing of the
perspective on feminism (and the political) which her book provides. L. A. C. Dobrez, The Existential and its Exits. Literary and Philosophical Perspectives on the Work of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter, London, Athlone—NY, St Martin’s Press, viii + 392 pp., seeks to relate contemporary literature to Existential philosophy while respecting the specificity of each. D. begins by tracing what he terms the ‘Beckett Reduction’ in the novels and the plays, emphasizing convincingly the irreducibility of the Unnamable to any notion of Self or identity. Then, after a succinct exposition of existential thought and its relation to Husserl, he proceeds to examine the Unnamable first as it relates to the Sartrcean pour-soi, then in turn to Heidegger’s Angst and to Dasein. The section on Ionesco treats him as a visionary moralist rather than as a philosopher. By concentrating the comparison with Heidegger on the later plays, D. effectively misses much of what makes I. most original. The exercise is illuminating nevertheless. Genet is examined mostly in relation to Sartre. Essential reading. Linda Hutcheon, Formalism and the Freudian Aesthetic. The Example of Charles Mauron, CUP, xvi + 249 pp., is an original contribution to understanding of literary criticism this century. Mauron’s own psychocritique is presented first of all, then taken as the basis for examining the enduring question of whether literary analysis is a subjective or an objective activity. In the way it brings together French and Anglo-Saxon critical traditions, then relates them through Mauron to the modern French critical context, this book opens up important new perspectives. Demougin, Dictionnaire des littératures, t, is a formidably comprehensive work, with entries for a wealth of lesser-known figures of the period, as well as detailed coverage of major authors, works and trends. C. B. Okolo, International Philosophical Quarterly, 24, 1984: 427–38, claims that modern scholars have sidetracked the issue of the relevance of négritude to social action. Négritude, he claims, is a praxis in which reflection and action combine. M. Steins, Neohelicon, 11, 1984, no. 2: 83–126, traces the birth of négritude out of the spirit of the war, with special reference to Césaire’s ‘Les pur-sang’. P. Lejeune, SRLF, 23, 1984: 149–94, is an exploration of the difference between autobiography and fiction, centred round the question whether the hero of a novel can have the author’s name. Detailed examination of works by Lanzmann, Navarre, and Doubrovsky. I. Higgins, FMLS, 21: 274–90, examines some of the ways Resistance writers ‘used their literary heritage to turn the pagaille of defeat into a web of resistance and victory’. Detailed and informative, though it is surprising to find ‘the fastidious conservative’ Thierry-Maulnier grouped with Resistance writers, given his antecedents and his standing at the Liberation. L. A. Higgins, *In/on translation. Recent French feminist writers*, Translation Review, 17: 13–16.