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Review of Mary Jacobus, *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading*

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Mary Jacobus, *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 241 pp. ISBN 0198184344.

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Almost inevitably, Derrida was asked if the method of deconstruction was a psychoanalysis of philosophy. The essay “Freud and the Scene of Writing” collected in the volume *Writing and Difference* provides Derrida’s subtle response. There Derrida grants certain “discoveries” to Freud even as he shows how psychoanalysis fails in the end to elaborate the “repression” of writing throughout Western philosophy (197). For such an elaboration, Derrida turns to Freud’s troubled investment in *Nachträglichkeit*, the concept central both to his belated return to trauma in *Moses and Monotheism* and to what Derrida calls the “effect of deferral” (203) for his own elaboration of *differance*.

A resurgence of interest in trauma has occurred across the disciplines over the past twenty-five years and Derrida is not alone in his recognition that trauma occupies a troubled but productive lacuna in psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, a reading of Derrida’s work through the recent discussions of trauma promises to be extremely useful. Mary Jacobus begins to follow one or two of the implicit lines of such a reading by “riff[ing]” (26) on Derrida’s title in her own, taking as her central focus the “peculiar mental absorption involved in the activity called ‘reading’” (2) and its relationship to certain psychoanalytic theories, including the recent innovations of trauma studies. The “scene of writing,” so vital to Derrida’s discussion of Freud’s speculative promise and disappointment, now becomes the “scene of reading” for Jacobus, one matching her own determination to deploy the “scene” of psychoanalysis to refine the “accounts” (25) of reading at once so promising and undertheorized in cultural studies today.

The careful attention Jacobus lavishes on the close of Derrida’s essay reminds us that she continues to value the challenge Derrida poses for our thinking, including our investment in the “spacing” and displacements of reading. From the outset, Jacobus focuses on the “writerly” readers, among them Rousseau, Claire de Duras, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Mary Shelley, Mary Hays, Frantz Fanon, and Freud. Jacobus tells us that her analysis should not be seen “as a contribution to recent attempts to understand relations between gender, class, nation, and print culture in the modern period, let alone as a brief history of reading or its discontents” (8). Yet her essays all move steadily to the threshold of these concerns. Indeed, it is precisely the threshold of reading that is at stake here: borrowed from D.W. Winnicott, the “potential space” of both play and cultural experience supplies reading’s most enigmatic and valuable site for Jacobus. Preferring not to empty this enigmatic boundary of its historical value, Jacobus explores scenes of reading in “historically specific private and public spaces” (33) notably those of “modernity” worried by Alix Strachey and Virginia Woolf. So too, Jacobus refines the “engendered and disembodied” ideal of “Enlightenment rationality” (206) that emerges in the “Habermasian” notion of the public sphere by paying close attention to certain women writers of the period, notably Mary Hays. Here Jacobus joins Nancy Fraser in her effort to include a closer look at the transformation of the private sphere grounding the idea of community elaborated by Habermas. It seems inevitable that a long-standing interest in feminism would foster this shift from “scenes of writing” to “scenes of reading,” though Jacobus does not so insist, perhaps because the women uniquely situated at those scenes already demonstrate this status. While women reading

outnumbered women publishing, these readers influenced what Habermas calls important social “experiments” with “subjectivity” through their role in epistolary exchanges. Authors like Hays make this clear, according to Jacobus.

The six chapters in this volume were originally the 1997 Clarendon Lectures in English Literature at Oxford University. Revised during her year as a Faculty Fellow at the Society for Humanities at Cornell, the essays reflect a rich reading itinerary in themselves. That abundance is reflected in both the choice of topics and the valuable array of notes accompanying each (here nicely situated at the foot of the page). Jacobus divides her book into three parts. Part One, “Scenes of Reading,” contains two essays introducing the psychoanalytic concepts threading the volume and highlighting her particular emphasis on the “temporary form of madness permitted by both reading and psychoanalysis” (13) as a state through which real “change” may be possible for the “work of culture” (24). Jacobus deploys British object-relations theory, notably that emerging from theories of Melanie Klein and post-Kleinian analysts, including those working on the Continent in fruitful conversation with this revision of Freud. At the same time, Jacobus does not wish to “chart local vicissitudes of psychoanalysis” (8). Thus we as readily discover a passage from Winnicott as we discover one from Klein, Hanna Segal, Riviere, Ferenczi, Laplanche or Nicolas Abraham (to name a few) as Jacobus works with brio through various literary texts.

The opening chapters take us back to the moment when reading was first being theorized actively by analysts like Strachey to include questions of “incorporation, introjection, and projection” explored as “moveable boundaries” of “aesthetic rapport” (45) by writers like Virginia Woolf. Part Three, “Romantic Women,” marks a valuable elaboration of the work begun through the delightful reading of Strachey and Woolf and an accompanying chapter on Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Heloise* and Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. As a student of the Romantic period and its deferral “effect” on women, Jacobus discovers cognate concerns in Mary Shelley’s *Matilda* and *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* by Mary Hays. It would be impossible to do justice to the subtlety of the arguments made through the extensive and close readings provided by Jacobus, though it is perhaps useful to note that each one works to gloss assumptions about reading presented within them. Throughout, special attention is paid to “concepts or unconscious phantasies of inner and outer, absence and boundaries, and the transmission of thoughts and feelings between one self (or historical period) and another” (9).

Jacobus is most determined to show how Freud’s notion of “object loss” in *Mourning and Melancholia* (albeit transformed by Klein and her heirs) can help us to “think our own relation to lost objects when we read” (25). This ambition, inviting a unique look at the relationships shaping each woman writer, depends upon a subtle interpretation of what Jacobus calls the “double time” of rereading. Playing somewhat freely with Derrida’s critique of “presence,” [writing that “the negative of presence is not absence, but hatred” (57)] Jacobus invests the concept of “absence” with a temporal dimension; through this haunting double valence she begins to show how the psychoanalytic understanding of absence has a cultural dimension. Her interpretation of Mary Shelley’s “unreadability effect” (making good use of an earlier essay by Tilottama Rajan) is one of her most compelling, in my view. There Jacobus helps us to imagine how Shelley may have been cut off from a recognition of her own best work in the writing of that book, leading her reader to experience the same.

Yet the focus on absence and particularly the effect of “mourning” so prevalent throughout all of these chapters leads to the most provocative caesura in this volume. Part Two, the center section entitled “Reading Trauma,” enacts a type of traumatic disruption of the argument connecting the first and third sections of the book. In the two chapters at the middle, Jacobus moves her attention into the widely popular realm of trauma theory. Her earlier focus on the double meaning of “absence” with its temporal dimension began that association (it is not far from Freud’s interest in the double valence of “distortion” in *Moses and Monotheism*), particularly as it plays into her discussion of the “double time” of rereading. Yet Jacobus is not particularly concerned with the changes in her theoretical ground that a direct emphasis on trauma might demand.

Jacobus chooses to open the first essay with a brief allusion to Frantz Fanon’s engagement with the potential and limit of psychoanalysis for both an analysis of racial trauma and an enactment of revolutionary transformation. It was Fanon, of course, who first deployed protocols of reading from psychoanalysis for his understanding of the postcolonial subject. His forceful rejection of the Oedipus complex for black Antillean culture did not deter him from embracing valuable (and sometimes problematic) Lacanian revisions of Freud for his social commentary. Indeed, one could argue that Fanon’s tentative revision of Freudian trauma theory proves central to his revolutionary critique. Rather than giving us a full analysis of Fanon, however, Jacobus provides a close reading of two novels separated in time, *Ourika* by Claire de Duras and *A Woman Named Solitude* by Andre Schwarz-Bart. Jacobus is interested here in finding a “transracial imaginary” that can enable a “radical displacement” in our reading, allowing us not only to “read with different eyes,” but also to “read one historical trauma in and through another). This idea of the “transracial imaginary,” while provocative, remains only implicit in these readings, however. One wonders, in fact, if this concept should remain the goal of the book’s deliberate engagement with the “Location of Cultural Experience” in our reading. Here Derrida’s concern for the nostalgia of Western culture might be revisited. [After all, when summoning Melanie Klein in the closing paragraphs of “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Derrida cautioned that a “prudent” (231) reading of her work would be imperative.]

In her analysis of the trials of the black colonial subject in these novels, Jacobus repeatedly refers to their entanglement in the specular economy of colonial encounter and subjugation. The constant “need” by “Western civilization” to “represent itself, to itself” (103) is the source of this economy, according to Jacobus. Yet the mechanisms of this economy are the same ones which invariably ground the theories of “absence” and mourning which Jacobus also deploys for her earlier readings of Austen and Rousseau. The Kleinian account of literary creation upon which so much of the analysis depends is one that “tends to emphasize the impulse to recover past times and lost objects, or to repair damaged ones” (83). While Jacobus does say, in passing, that what she calls “literary memory” does not *only* work in this way, she somewhat casually ignores the unhappy “equivalences” (32) between this process and the “creative” work of the conquest and domination. For this reader, “seeing with different eyes” will require a stronger transvaluation of her earlier powerful insight into the temporality of absence.

Jacobus is forced to ask in the end if the unconscious can “resist the specular legacy of colonial oppression?” (110). While her answer, in the service of subaltern agency, is obviously yes, it nevertheless depends too readily upon a fondness for the borderline conditions of the “madness”

in reading and psychoanalysis. True, it is on that site that Jacobus provides one of her more compelling readings of literature as the “borderline where one state of mind crosses over to another (and indeed one’s state of mind may be transferred to another)” (133). Her valuable tour of important literary encounters with trauma theory (notably Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth, Mark Seltzer, Elaine Scarry, Diana Fuss, Andre Green and Jean Laplanche) proves fascinating and productive for the attentive reader. It is certainly complicated by the “effect of deferral” on her analysis of Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments: Memoirs of a Wartime Childhood*. The belated disclosure of the author’s identity and the scandal surrounding his “recovered memory” provides a “timely reminder,” according to Jacobus, “that trauma theory is more than just another branch of aesthetics” (162). Yet the reader of this essay cannot help but wish for a still greater elaboration of the reference to W.R. Bion whose advice to “investigate the caesura; not the analyst” (123) assumes an ironic cast by the end of the essay. Perhaps Barthes put it best when he cautioned: “Those who do not reread are obliged to read the same text everywhere.” The final thoughts on Bion that we do get, including a nice play by Jacobus on his distinction between “tears” and “moisture,” merely tease without demonstrating the full prescience of Bion’s thought.

One applauds the creative associations Jacobus discovers throughout her argument, particularly when they reflect so vividly on the traumatic structures informing this activity we call reading. If it is really true that “reading is what we do when we make [a] commitment to otherness” (13), it remains for those “attentively” absorbing the extraordinary intellectual energy of this volume to elaborate the full peril and hope of that commitment.