Book Reviews

Teresa Kieniewicz, *Men, Women and the Novelist: Fact and Fiction in the American Novel of the 1870s and 1880s.* Washington, *D.C.*: University Press of America. 172 pp.

Teresa Kieniewicz's *Men, Women, and the Novelist* is deceptively brief; for it has an extraordinary amount to say about the period following the Civil War. Further, the claims which Professor Kieniewicz makes are excessively modest: her method is subtle, her intellectual grasp of her subject is vigorous, and her knowledge is comprehensive.

She refers to my book *Harvest of Change: American Literature 1865-1914* as the starting place for her work; and her central premise is, as mine was, that the central experience of the post-Civil War period in America was of rapid, unstoppable, unprecedented change in social, economic, and cultural life. In such a circumstance, when the products of thought and imagination and belief lag behind change or seem to drift helplessly in its currents, the writer has the special task of trying to represent what Kieniewicz names as ail-lusions, dreams, ideals, and wishful thinking, . . . the borderline between the true and the invented" (p. 3), thereby bridging fictions and facts.

She has her own distinctive and highly interesting position on how the writer fulfilled this role in the later nineteenth-century. Regarding the novel (or any imaginative work) as a system of signs created through the inscription of social consciousness into the internal rules of the genre, she sees fiction as the intersection of social reality and imagination; conscious apprehension and unconscious clues or verbal »slippage«; high Culture and popular culture; and the ideologies and social roles of men and women. Her dialectics are subtle and persuasive. She believes, and I am convinced that she is correct to do so, that in this period novelists provided maps of reality, and that the task of the historian is to now read those maps and to discern therefrom what guides were needed, what routes for understanding where provided, and what formations in mental geography were all important.

By this approach she is able to push aside much that is peripheral and to focus upon the men and women on whom the burden of change fell, and to whom the novelists — themselves men and women — directed their productions. Business enterprise, she says, was the fulcrum of social and imaginative activity during the last quarter of the nineteenth-century and both the practice of business and the perception of it shaped masculine roles. Implicitly she shows a dramatic, difficult crisis in male behavior, a possible loss of moorings, the threat that male character would be transformed by the paradigms of business enterprise. In the context of business arose, most importantly: the

ideals of success, the high value placed on money, and the noticeable corruption in contemporary politics. In her treatment of success as a *topos,* the novelist's vehicle for social mapping, she writes: »it was the novelist's task to test the doctrine, i.e., to show it operating successfully in an imaginary but probable reality of fiction« (p. 12). She concludes that American novelists »made a serious attempt to adapt the model of success to new circumstances. In part they accommodated change, . . . Furthermore, they consistently redefined success in terms of human values« (p. 62); and so they helped to keep the idea of success tied to character, virtue, and human striving, maintaining traditional American values in the context of flux and novelty.

Women, no less than men, experienced a crisis in social roles, in thought, and in emotional orientation. »An average American male felt, perhaps, equal to the demands of the success code; however, to live up to the ideal womanhood he was supposed to worship and marry must have been a difficult task indeed . . . He was judged by what he did, she by what she was: thus, the differences between them were marked as between two species« (p. 76). A woman was, ideally, like a poem; she must not mean, but be. »Her true mission,« Kieniewicz writes, »is to be a lady« (129). The male role threatened to attenuate thought by virtue of the emphasis on activity, while the role offered to women threatened to narrow her contacts with the social world so far that she would seem almost disembodied thought. Barred from business activity and thus separated from the sphere of male values, women sought to enlarge the orbit of their activities by taking up all those that men, in their narrowed engagement with frenzied finance, had left behind: the arts, social interaction, travel, study, and refined modes of expending money. Often, lacking native codes for such activities, women had to seek out European examples, and thus began the split in America, so often remarked by Henry James, between native, democratic, male power; and foreign, aristocratic female sophistication. What men had left behind more than anything else was the home; and there women established their domain. The home, then, and the interior life of sensibility, were the centers of the female myth of success, which, as Kieniewicz well observes, was as fully elaborated as the male myth of success in business enterprise.

If men and women were thus beset in social life by such contradictions and divergent pulls, how much more were men and women writers faced by their ambiguous positions. Culture had assigned men and women widely separated domains; but when those men and women were writers, culture also asked them to mediate between the varieties of cultural experience — to harmonize, to combine, to unify. When culture set men and women, the stuff of novels, so far apart, how could the novelist bring them into a relation? To make matters worse, the novelist in America could not even count upon a traditional role or place in social structure: »the social status and function of a professional writer were not 'given' in America, in the sense of being an a *priori* specified role to be assumed and enacted by an individual. On the contrary. Whether aware of the fact or not, American men [and women] of letters of the later nineteenth century faced the necessity of 'creating social space' for themselves« (p. 162). So the novelist was doubly set adrift.

The novelists's problems, as Kieniewicz sees, provided their solutions. If the novelists were in ambiguous positions, they turned this personal disadvantage

into literary works that were rich because of their ambiguities; into plots, characters, scenes, tone, and structure, novelists invested the **paradoxes** which their social mores and creative mission forced upon them. Witness the continuous emphasis on doubles, oppositions, contraries, and paradoxes in Twain, Howells, James, and lesser writers. Writers also found a shell of a social role which they occupied in order to be mediators. This was the role of the gentry, not really vital in America since the Revolution. Writers tended to adopt the moral and behavioral codes of the gentry precisely because the gentry class had become completely marginal by the end of the century, and thus provided writers with the semblance of a fixed position by which they could stand outside society yet criticize it from a superior position. (This analysis should help us to understand why, when the code of gentility finally crumbled at the century's end, writers looked for another role that was socially critical yet marginal — and adopted the point of view of radical revisionists. Writers of the last quarter of the nineteenth century justified their marginal position by their adherence to the past; writers of the early twentieth-century accomplished the same defensive claim by adherence to the future.)

So much of *Men, Women, and the Novelist* is interesting and illuminating that I would have liked to see other lines of development followed. Certainly the roles of male and female novelists were ambiguous in very different ways; and the differences I believe, could be drawn. Then, too, men and women do not cover all of society: especially in the late nineteenth-century, children seemed almost to form a separate class (as they do in the Soviet Union today); they were not, Louisa May Alcott to the contrary, just little men and little women. Yet, when any book makes us wish the author had made it longer, the achievement must be remarkable, as it is here.

One negative must be stated. Written by a Polish scholar but printed in America at a time when, for obvious reasons, the author could not easily proofread it, this book contains an extraordinary number of typographical errors. I can only hope that the book will attract the interest it deserves and the small first edition rapidly bought up so that a second, corrected printing can be made. The book is worth it.

University of Southern California *Jay Martin*