

10-1993

# Delicate Subjects: Romanticism, Gender, and the Ethics of Understanding [Review]

Michael Fischer

Trinity University, [mfischer@trinity.edu](mailto:mfischer@trinity.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/eng\\_faculty](https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/eng_faculty)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Repository Citation

Fischer, M. (1993). Delicate subjects: Romanticism, gender, and the ethics of understanding [Review of the book *Delicate subjects: Romanticism, gender, and the ethics of understanding*, by J. Ellison]. *Philosophy and Literature*, 17(2), 394-396. doi: 10.1353/phl.1993.0045

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

mystification or transcendence, but to a shift to the self as the object of representation.

Bersani rejects "humanistic criticism" with its "reparative nature of cultural symbolisation" (p. 7) because it devalues historical experience, misreads art as philosophy, reaffirms an authoritative tradition of powerful selfhood, and misrepresents the process of cultural symbolization.

The textual choices and readings are intriguing, ranging from Proust juxtaposed with Melanie Klein to Malraux's *La Condition humaine* to Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. The method owes much to Derrida and de Man. The shifts or moves of the text show a neutralization or negation of representation, idealization, or transcendence or an actualization of these forms of redemption, in spite of the supposed scepticism of the author. The latter is most evident in the chapter, "Against Ulysses," in which Joyce, in contrast to Beckett, is seen as reaffirming cultural memories and "the enormous power of sublimation in our culture . . . as the appeasement and even transcendence of anxiety" (p. 176).

Given Bersani's assumptions, an observant reader may come away with the feeling that his canonic authors are Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Bataille, Melville, and Pynchon, and the unfortunates are Proust, Joyce, Benjamin, and Malraux. Bersani speaks of the "possibility of pursuing not an art of truth divorced from experience, but of phenomena liberated from the obsession with truth" (p. 26). This is what he values; readers who share his materialist scepticism will admire his readings. Those who do not will be troubled by his failure to address the far-ranging ontological and historical assumptions which govern his criticism.

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

PATRICIA A. WARD

***Delicate Subjects: Romanticism, Gender, and the Ethics of Understanding***, by Julie Ellison; xv & 306 pp. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, \$16.95, paper.

We are still trying to sort out the complex legacy of romanticism. "We" here includes philosophers Stanley Cavell and Richard Rorty, feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and a remarkable variety of literary theorists, from Northrop Frye, M. H. Abrams, Paul de Man, and Harold Bloom through Hazard Adams and Jerome J. McGann. Julie Ellison's important book, *Delicate Subjects*, focuses on an especially difficult problem we have inherited from the romantics: the problem of defining the ethics of interpretation. According to Ellison, male romantic writers worry that in literary interpretation, we murder to dissect (to paraphrase Wordsworth). Criticism, from this point of view, has

troubling affinities with such masculinist values as aggression, violence, possession, penetration, and mastery. Unwilling to see themselves as ruthless Ahabs ripping out the hidden meaning of innocent texts, the romantics privilege moments of nonexploitative understanding, moments associated with values culturally encoded as feminine: receptivity, love, friendship, conversation, and empathy. But even as the romantics appreciate these values, they still see the need to justify criticism as manly, hard intellectual work, distinct from the irresponsible gossip and sensationalistic novels that they often align with women. With intelligence and care, Ellison explores how the romantics struggle to distance themselves from masculinist aggression without succumbing to what they see as the opposite effeminate extreme.

Her three well-chosen examples of romanticism are Friedrich Schleiermacher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Margaret Fuller. Schleiermacher enforces the linkage between understanding and the "divinatory" or intuitive knowledge of women. Although divination is valuable for Schleiermacher, he cannot allow it to be sufficient. Feminine receptivity needs to be tempered by method and systematic analysis. In a fine account of Coleridge's shifting career (from the early poetry through the *Biographia*, *The Friend*, and the later writings), Ellison shows how he sees the influence of women as an antidote to political conflict and divisive ideological rhetoric, while nevertheless wishing to present himself as a forceful critic—a man with a peaceable manner but still a man. Coleridge tries "to develop a philosophical identity based on nonviolence or, to be more precise, reluctant violence" (p. 158). Neither a gothic novelist catering to women nor a Jacobin terrorist riding roughshod over them, Coleridge thinks he has "the ability to speak as the defender of the home and of the purity of women—even, occasionally, to speak as a suffering woman—and yet, insistently, to be unlike them" (p. 186). In discussing Fuller, Ellison's main point is that she remains a romantic—even in her feminist *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and in her realist, politically charged writings from Italy. Fuller grapples with some quintessentially romantic problems: for example, conserving "the imaginative energy of the self" (p. 242) while responding to the justifiable demands of friends and society (in Fuller's case, these demands include the imperatives of feminist politics) and relating her writing to the political and military actions she witnesses in Italy.

These analyses of Schleiermacher, Coleridge, and Fuller are insightful and thorough. The larger implications of the book, however, remain unclear, partly because of some compositional problems. There are not enough cross references linking the readings of Ellison's three exemplary romantics; explicating their writing sometimes gets the better of using it to advance a larger point; and the book lacks a conclusion. Ellison's own vantage point is consequently unclear. She notes, for example, that "the irony of some feminist discourse, including that of [Luce] Irigaray, is that the collectively projected morality of the speech community is available as a feminist ideal arising in part from a forgotten

masculine romanticism" (p. 20; see also p. 99). I am not sure what she makes of this irony—whether it incapacitates feminism or rehabilitates romanticism.

Although key points remain undeveloped, Ellison is on the right track. As she points out, "feminist theory has exhibited sustained dislike for the romantic" (p. 11). *Delicate Subjects* adumbrates a more thoughtful response to romantic theory. Ellison rightly encourages us to draw on romanticism in addressing current issues in feminist theory, especially the vexed relationship between ideology and subjectivity, political action and imaginative writing. *Delicate Subjects* lays the groundwork for "a differently modulated feminism" (p. 225), one that sees romanticism as a resource rather than an encumbrance.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

MICHAEL FISCHER

*Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity*, by George J. Stack; xi & 379 pp. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992, \$39.95.

In a fine 1980 essay, John McDermott, speculating on Emerson's underappreciated influence on American philosophy, noted the curious situation of Emerson studies: "In the vast secondary literature on Emerson distinctively philosophical considerations are virtually absent." The only thing wrong with that perceptive remark was its relegation to a footnote. For any reconsideration of Emerson's thought must begin with his uniquely problematic reception-history.

Why have critics, academic and nonacademic, persistently for over a century and a half, lifted Emerson to unquestioned canonical status—all the while dismissing his work as unworthy of serious attention as either philosophy or even as coherent prose? John Dewey was one of the first to object to this pattern; Stanley Cavell has been objecting again. The prevailing "condescension" to Emerson, Cavell insists, "helps to keep our culture, unlike any other in the West, from possessing any founding thinker as a common basis for considerations." Such condescension has now become an ingrained, largely unconscious part of Emerson scholarship—and one needs some understanding of this fact to appreciate the importance of Stack's careful, idea by idea, placing of Emerson's work in an American-European philosophical tradition that includes Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Freud.

The ramifications of this relocating of Emerson are enormous. If Stack is right (as I believe he is)—if that radical, immensely influential philosophy/psychology we call "Nietzschean" must now be rechristened "Emersonian," so