Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway

review by Patrick West

Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway
Nick Mansfield
Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000
ISBN 1-86448-939-1
207 pages, $32.95

Perhaps the best place to begin reading this book is at the end. Excellent writing might be defined as writing able to communicate a meaningful summary of complex and anti-intuitive concepts in very few words. Nick Mansfield's Glossary to Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway achieves this level of competence without any difficulty. Signifiers weighed down by the history and multiplicity of their signifieds rest very lightly on these pages. This section is a sort of micro Keywords. Small essays as they are, the various entries can almost be taken in and understood at a glance.

I had already read this publication once, when I unexpectedly encountered it again in a pile on the bottom shelf of an inner-city Melbourne bookshop. A tower of copies rose just high enough to threaten to sway a little in the summer air. There are no doubt hopes for this paperback edition. As I write this review, the academic calendar is just beginning a new cycle. I am reminded of all of those hundreds of books that grow out of the crowded floors of university bookshops every year about now, gradually to be reduced in size as the semester grows old. Where does Mansfield's text fit into this picture of sudden emergence and subsequent diminishment?

This is a 'learning and teaching' book par excellence, particularly suitable for all of those students who might otherwise graduate out of humanities departments without the sort of basic understandings that should really be inculcated, as they certainly can be, right from the beginning. Subjectivity is a resource for teachers who think about the 'how' of teaching as much as about the 'why'. It made me cast my thoughts back to my own experiences as a student. 'God made you a boy but he didn't make you cut your hair short!' That explanation of the sex/gender distinction - concise and sardonic as it is - has remained etched into my mind for many years now. It was an important learning moment: a teacher's clever use of words to generate perception and retention. Mansfield's explanation of this axiomatic proposition loses nothing by comparison. Contained in the glossary, it is, like the rest of the book, admirably clear and rigorous: easy to understand.

I suspect that Subjectivity will very quickly become a compulsory acquisition for undergraduate subjects all over the place. The voice of a thoughtful and lively academic/lecturer/thesis supervisor speaks through all of these pages. Evidence for past subjects successfully taught can easily be found. Distilled knowledges are reiterated in user-friendly prose. Sometimes, it is almost as if private thoughts (silent attempts at comprehension) are being revised and read back to you. It's that good.

Things are said differently: usefully. There are suggestive echoes and resonances contained in almost every paragraph. Phrases tend to linger in the mind. The items in the Further Reading sections at the end of each chapter are an opportunity for providing more answers, and for asking more questions. Mansfield is a superior sort of guide.

There are at least two ways of reading this book. First and foremost as a basic introduction to the
work of theorists 'from Freud to Haraway' (note that provocative combination and expanse of thought), *Subjectivity* is also a set of notes towards an enquiry into the historical, social and cultural circumstances that are responsible for our veritable obsession with subjectivity. Adding spice to the writing are the many allusions and references to current affairs and the productions of popular culture. These are not just heuristic. Accompanied by rhetorical questions that now and again become something more than rhetorical, inviting us to reflect upon what is actually happening around us in our daily lives, these allusions and references are the iceberg tips of another project. The questioning of the question 'Who am I?', might ensure that the shelf-life of this book is somewhat extended. Inevitably, however, in that same bookshop in inner-city Melbourne, Mansfield's text will eventually find itself wedged upright on the top shelves, secure and immobile. It will gradually disappear from university reading lists.

The progressive redundancy of this book would seem destined to proceed from the inside out, microwave fashion. Of the thirteen chapters, chapter six is about the work of Julia Kristeva. Sandwiched between 'Femininity' and 'Masculinity', it already has just the slightest whiff of epitaph about it. Those sections that come before Freud and after Deleuze will on this basis be the ones that lose their importance last. More expansive, and contained on plateaus that extend further into both the past and the present, they are the indices of a general interest in the problem of subjectivity that, expressed like that, shows no signs of disappearing anytime soon.

I encourage you to buy this book and to make use of it in your teaching.

*Patrick West is a lecturer in writing and literature at Griffith University, Gold Coast campus. He is currently at work on his first novel.*

---

**TEXT**

**Vol 5 No 1 April 2001**


**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady**

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au