rest of us: 'They did not yet see, and thousands of young men as hopeful now crowding to the barriers of their careers do not yet see, *that if a single man plant himself on his convictions and there abide, the huge world will come round to him.*' " Nothing finer can be said about this statement than that it is true. But it is good to think of Kennedy writing it, good, even, to think of him remembering Emerson's word *instincts* as *convictions*. The convictions of Allard Lowenstein were as inveterate as instincts, and his every speech and gesture held practical proof of the idea that one person can make a difference. A few weeks earlier Kennedy had announced that he would not run except in "unforeseen circumstances." The man now beside him on the bus had told him then, "*I'm* an unforeseen circumstance," and his life made thousands know what that could mean. □

Ann Snitow

RETURNING TO THE WELL

THE DIALECTIC OF SEX: THE CASE FOR FEMINIST REVOLUTION, by Shulamith Firestone. William Morrow, 1970. (Reissued in 1993.) 224 pp. $10.00, paper.

Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* has been reissued, after many mysterious years out of print. It was written twenty-five years ago, when the author was twenty-five and the modern U.S. women's movement was about three. Firestone was there from the beginning, first in Chicago SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), defying sexist catcalls from New Left men, then in New York, co-founding Redstockings and New York Radical Feminists, and co-editing the early, hot publishing ventures of the movement, *Notes from the First Year* (then the *Second* and *Third Year*).

In those "Years," which have attracted metaphors like "explosion" and "revolution" and my own favorite, "mushroom effect," I didn't know the rules, so I reviewed *The Dialectic of Sex* on Nanette Rainone's WBAI radio show, "Womankind," even though I was in Firestone's women's group at the time, the "Stanton-Anthony Brigade" of New York Radical Feminists. Because of the bad, paper-hoarding habits of a lifetime I still have that review—which, alas, includes no mention that I was then closely acquainted with the author. My hopes to discover either prescience or idiocy (which I planned, of course, with hindsight to forgive myself) have both been disappointed on re-reading this handwritten souvenir of 1970. There is, however, a more solid inheritance: I liked the book then and I like it still—if, inevitably, with a difference. Once again, I find it remarkable.

In the interval between my two readings, *The Dialectic of Sex* has remained famous—either for being radical or being outrageous—depending on who is (half) remembering it. From the first, it was demonized for some of its epigrams ("pregnancy is barbaric") or for some of its speculative practical suggestions (children should be raised by groups bound by seven- to ten-year contracts because the family, like a genetic code, reproduces the domination of men over women and children). During the backlash years, conservatives used the book as a convenient proof of the dangerous madness of feminist desires. (They refuse to be mothers! They want babies from test tubes!) During those same years, some feminists used the book to show how short-sighted, overweening, or half-baked the early women's movement had sometimes been. (They didn't like mothers! They wanted babies from test tubes!) Certainly a movement that was changing, testing its basic propositions, settling down for what looks like a long haul has used the book to measure distances: "Firestone promised us a rose garden; look how far we have come; we no longer believe in rose gardens."

No doubt Firestone invites some of these irritated readings. Her bold voice and sailing pace seem at odds with the enormity and difficulty of the change she is seeking. She is like a wonderful child who wants the moon, something big, bright, and at a distance she's not concerned to estimate. This sort of person appears (is created? is momentarily heard?) at the beginning of movements. Magnificent and stunned by insight, they tell us we must change our lives; the way we live is intolerable. Then they stagger off, leaving the

less moonstruck but considerably brightened to try to live the insight out.

The ambition of the text has certainly been counted as one of its offenses: "Who does this little girl think she is?" She introduces almost the entire spectrum of subsequent movement interests in one big bang. She points out the limitations of Marx and Freud; she anatomizes the inner, often gendered dynamics of race and class; she compares the oppression of women and children (and finds them deeply analogous); then she goes on to make a chart of the great rolling dialectic of history from nomads to the disappearance of "culture" as we know it and the "realization of the conceivable in the actual."

Even in 1970, I seem to have felt the scary undertow of this all-encompassing wave. I wrote: "Perhaps the reason membership in the women's movement is so often a painful experience is that the more we know, the more powerless and overwhelmed we feel. Knowledge doesn't turn out to be the instant kind of power we first expected it to be. In fact, the more conscious we become, the more lonely and naked we are in the middle of what we now understand to be an unfriendly situation." Unfriendly situation! This sort of mournful irony, this shy understatement of male intransigence is so far from Shulie's tone. She was a great leader partly because she eschewed such hedging. The risks she took opened a path. I took it and am eternally grateful to her.

Yet at some moments, *The Dialectic of Sex* wears the unassuming disguise of a mere advice book. The prose bops along, with its summings-up of the little gender knots of daily life. Finally, though, there's always a trick; instead of the bromide that usually follows this now familiar kind of popularization, Firestone ends her snappy accounts of sexism with this warning: there is no private solution, dear reader, no short-term fix. There is only the revolution. Ann Landers from Hell, she makes mincemeat of the very concept "advice."

Her true genre is Utopia: "[I]n our new society, humanity could finally revert to its natural polymorphous sexuality. . . . [A]ll relationships would be based on love alone, uncorrupted by dependencies and resulting class inequalities." "Good luck," I find myself thinking, but could this sarcasm be one symptom of the post-sixties taboo on mentioning such far-off desires, such confident demands for structural transformation? We are allergic to utopia just now, often seeing any sweeping prefigurative thinking as falsely universalizing, naive, out of touch with the hardness of power. Certainly Firestone's text is vulnerable to such criticisms. It can easily be dismissed as marginal ("cybernetic communism," ha, ha). Or her grand gestures, which clear families, races, classes from the board of history, can be dismissed as totalitarian. But this is to read the text out of its time. In an unequivocal voice now rare, Firestone simply insists that only fundamental reordering will change women's unfriendly situation, and that parts of that restructuring are currently imaginable in the West, while other parts are still only dreams.

The dynamism of Marxism, the flowing sixties atmosphere, and the general tendency of feminist utopians to dream of amniotic bliss—all meet in *The Dialectic of Sex*. At that inspired moment, opposites—and barriers—seemed about to dissolve. The book is full of wishful fusions between contradictory concepts. For example, it begins:

> Sex class is so deep as to be invisible. Or it may appear as a superficial inequality, one that can be solved by merely a few reforms, or perhaps by the full integration of women into the labor force. But the reaction of the common man, woman, and child—"*That?* Why you can't change *that!* You must be out of your mind!"—is the closest to the truth. We are talking about something every bit as deep as that. This gut reaction—the assumption that, even when they don't know it, feminists are talking about changing a fundamental biological condition—is an honest one. That so profound a change cannot be easily fitted into traditional categories of thought, e.g. "political," is not because these categories do not apply but because they are not big enough: radical feminism bursts through them. If there were another word more all-embracing than *revolution* we would use it.

Typically, the protean Firestone is here the

first essentialist feminist and the first social constructionist. She felt she could have it both ways, could claim the body as cause, as female prison, then could break the locks through social transformation. The pace at which modern Western societies seemed to be moving, the expansion of possibilities from the 1950s to the 1970s, lifted what Firestone saw as the heavy burden of biology off many women in the West. Biology-as-destiny was their past, but not their future.

Ironically enough, though feminist theory has moved steadily away from such biological determinism, feminists now have much lower expectations than Firestone's for the dissolving of "differences" like gender or race. These days, difference is either tolerated or valued as an axiom of political life. Contemporary feminists tend to be skeptical about the end of "othering."

Even with hindsight I find it hard to sort out my feelings about movement hopefulness in general. Feminism by its very nature demands such basic changes that none of its work would make much sense without an Enlightenment confidence in progress, without a belief in the human capacity to give conscious shape to ourselves. Yet part of what has happened to feminist thought since Firestone is the development of wise, rich doubts on these very matters. For those who remain feminist activists, these doubts are now baggage, the necessary, the useful impediments one carries with one on long journeys. I miss Firestone's avid joy, but I accept its absence as one by-product of the movement's longevity.

Now is a particularly good time to read or re-read *The Dialectic of Sex*. Ten years ago it might well have seemed merely dated, with its confidence in "cybernation" and its brash social generalizations about male and female, black and white (and most objectionably at moments about homosexuality). A decade ago, the sixties were under vicious attack and even the most committed sixties people felt bitten, no longer in tune with sixties ardor.

But the wheel has turned again, and *The Dialectic of Sex* will now be exciting to a number of different sorts of readers. For those who are re-reading, this is a period of memories and memoirs. Many feminist scholars and activists of a certain age have had their long, second thoughts, have put in their time in the necessary work of refining, revising, glossing, and pruning feminism, and may be interested in going to the well again to feel what that first energy was like.

Firestone felt herself to be throwing off a yoke, and in her first gallop, she wrote fast, wildly, freely. Those who came after have had to work at a slower pace, to take greater care. We police ourselves and each other more, while Firestone was shamelessly willing to generalize, speculate, make mistakes. To re-experience this unapologetic voice now is tonic.

For a new generation of readers, Firestone is movement history. Just what *was* it about the women's liberation movement that so took the culture by storm that—with whatever shortcomings, whatever waterings-down—it still has the power to interpret experience for millions? Young readers will sometimes think, "I already know this," then with some historical sense will, I hope, shake themselves and register that in 1970 no one knew any of it, even though it was all always already there to know.

For readers of whatever generation who have been following the feminist story line, the book's precocity gives little gooses of surprise. For example, who remembers that John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* is fully anticipated in Firestone's dazzling chapter on culture? And move over Donna Haraway on cyborgs: " . . . to grant that the sexual imbalance of power is biologically based is not to lose our case. . . . [T]he 'natural' is not necessarily a 'human' value." (Like Haraway, Firestone would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.) If her reading of Freud has been outdistanced, it is a pleasure to find here the still durable historical point that "Freudianism and feminism are made of the same stuff." Indeed, for a text so famous for its iconoclasm, the book devotes a lot of loving attention to the masters and the past. Radical, it returns to founding texts. It is a love letter to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony

(in 1970, lost to history or scorned). It converses respectfully with Marx and Freud, and its hero is Simone de Beauvoir. It honors its dead and refuses the obfuscations of revisionists.

When one remembers that the feminist bookshelf wasn't a foot long in 1970, the fullness, clarity and force of Firestone's feminism is simply amazing. (It's touching to see that her only source on childhood is the admirable Philippe Ariès and that she thinks there is no tradition of women's utopias. Today the library shelves are stuffed with feminist books on childhood and with feminist utopias old and new—and all in print.) She sought what roots she could find, and overnight she produced sturdy, waving green branches. Her analysis of women's daily experience—in love, in sex, in (mostly repressed) world-building—is as fresh and right as it seemed then; I regret to say this part of her work hasn't dated at all:

> *The sex privatization of women is the process whereby women are blinded to their generality as a class which renders them invisible as individuals to the male eye. . . .*
>
> Women everywhere rush to squeeze into the glass slipper, forcing and mutilating their bodies with diets and beauty programs, clothes and makeup, anything to become the punk prince's dream girl. But they have no choice. If they don't the penalties are enormous: their social legitimacy is at stake.
>
> Thus women become more and more look-alike. But at the same time they are expected to express their individuality through their physical appearance. Thus they are kept coming and going, at one and the same time trying to express their similarity and their uniqueness. The demands of Sex Privatization contradict the demands of the Beauty Ideal, causing the severe feminine neurosis about personal appearance.
>
> But this conflict itself has an important political function. When women begin to look more and more alike, distinguished only by the degree to which they differ from a paper ideal, they can be more easily stereotyped as a class: they look alike, they think alike, and even worse, they are so stupid they believe they are not alike. . . .

A hundred articles and books have since sorted through these painful paradoxes, major sources of female self-loathing, but here they are, in a witty, full-blown description on Day One. Firestone criticizes the false eroticism of this essentially bleak sexual landscape, but she draws back from the antipornography conclusions of a less insurgent, later time:

> In conclusion, I want to add a note about the special difficulties of attacking the sex class system through its means of cultural indoctrination. Sex objects *are* beautiful. An attack on them can be confused with an attack on beauty itself. Feminists need not get so pious in their efforts that they feel they must flatly deny the beauty of the face on the cover of *Vogue*. For this is not the point. The real question is: is the face beautiful in a *human* way—does it allow for growth and flux and decay, does it express negative as well as positive emotions . . . ?
>
> To attack eroticism creates similar problems. Eroticism is *exciting*. No one wants to get rid of it. Life would be a drab and routine affair without at least that spark. That's just the point. Why has all joy and excitement been concentrated, driven into one narrow, difficult-to-find alley of human experience, and all the rest laid waste? When we demand the elimination of eroticism, we mean not the elimination of sexual joy and excitement but its rediffusion over—there's plenty to go around, it increases with use—the spectrum of our lives.

So, sex, yes; beauty, yes; freedom, yes; an end to the boundary of gender altogether, yes—and to all boundaries. This was then. Our time is different, but this very fact is relevant evidence of the relentlessness and promise of change. □

Don't Forget to Give Your Friends the Gift of Thought.