

Fall 2008, Volume 41, Number 2

Revisiting Realisms; or, WWJD (What Would Jakobson Do?)

Brian McHale

The house of realism is a shambles, and Jakobson is just the man to bring order to the chaos. But he appears to go about it in an unpromisingly taxonomic way, discriminating among varieties of realism in much the same way that the intellectual historian Lovejoy would later discriminate among romanticism. Actually, however, one needs only to exert a little pressure on Jakobson's proliferating categories to make them yield a pair of sharper-edged underlying types of realism.

Against the "Foetus of Symmetry": Sur-realism and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

John McGuigan

Few novelists argue with Djuna Barnes's gusto that love, marriage, and family are primarily paths to human misery, paths we nonetheless pursue both compulsively and indifferently. Such arguments may share something with naturalist modes of realism, where psychological compulsions often amount to a destructive, atavistic determinism, but the compulsions are no longer social-Darwinian drives of greed and the lust for power, drives for "success." In *Nightwood*, the compulsions are undirected and never understood, and their realm of destruction is the domestic - the realm realist and naturalist fiction sometimes offers as a *refuge* from the battlefield of greed and power.

"Chinese, Japanese, What's the Difference?": Lensey Namioka's Realist Young Adult Fiction

Margaret D. Stetz

Who's Hu? Re-examined the seemingly idyllic, leafy worlds of the 1950s New England suburbs and found them to be destructive to girl's intellectual and professional ambitions, as well as stratified in terms of class and segregated according to racial and ethnic categories. At the same time, however, Namioka's novel offered both a comic first-person narrative voice and a series of events bordering on slapstick to lighten the effect of its social critique, while adding a chronological frame that moved backwards and forwards in time and place, between Beijing in 1977 and Evesham in 1952, to afford the protagonist and the reader alike a sense of distance and perspective.

Revisiting Realism in Nineteenth-Century Spanish America: Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Birds*

Without a Nest

George Antony Thomas

In writing a work that purports to provide an accurate picture of the abuse of Indians in a small Andean town, it was crucial for Matto de Turner to attempt to highlight the lack of integration between urban and rural communities. Her novel was written not to provide escapist entertainment to a bourgeois readership, but rather to educate them about serious problems facing Peru and to stimulate their desire to participate in national reform. In this vein, Matto de Turner prefigures the civilizing discourse of her religionist heirs.

Cords of Memory: Charles Chesnutt Recites the History of Racial Injustice

Joshua Kotzin

The problematic relation between past and present emerges as the source of Chesnutt's difficulty with realism, or at least the literary realism of William Dean Howells and the late nineteenth century. Chesnutt thus stages a critique of literary realism as insufficiently historical - as unable to account for the impact of the past on the present.

Book Reviews

***The Temple and the Forum: The American Museum and Cultural Authority in Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, and Whitman.* By Les Harrison. (Kimberly Engber)**

Harrison juxtaposes two figures he sees as increasingly central to nineteenth-century American society, the curator and the showman; he thereby uncovers a series of corollary oppositions between the elite and the popular, the academic and the populist, and what he calls "the temple" and "the forum." He argues that the tension between the regulating impulse of government and the potentially liberating world of commerce is reflected in the development of museums and other cultural forms in nineteenth-century America.

***Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture.* By Lucy E. Frank. (Kristen Proehl)**

This collection challenges readers to redefine the concept of "death" itself. As Frank explains in her introduction, minority groups, deemed "non-citizens" at various historical moments, experienced a form of social death and thus developed a unique relationship with mortality.

***Contesting the Past, Reconstructing the Nation: American Literature and Culture in the Gilded Age, 1876-1893.* By Ben Railton. (David T. Humphries)**

Using the language of time, Railton focuses each of his first four chapters on a key "question" - the race question, the Indian question, the woman question, and the South question. Bringing diverse literary texts into contact with each other, Railton largely avoids issues of authorship, literary production and reception, and immediate historical context. Instead, he engages the voices of historical perspective that emerge within and among texts.

***The Origins of American Literary Studies: An Institutional History.* By Elizabeth Renker. (Rocelle Zuck)**

As a social and institutional history of American literature, Renker's work challenges teleological histories of the field that narrate American literature's humble beginnings in college classrooms, the fight for recognition waged by individual scholars such as Fred Lewis Pattee, and the ways in which the nationalistic imperatives of World War I and World War II cemented American literature's place in the college curriculum. By focusing on four institutions - Johns Hopkins University, Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Wilberforce University, and

Ohio State University - Renker demonstrates that American literature's road to "curricular stability" was a rocky one.

***Disturbing Indians: The Archaeology of Southern Fiction.* By Annette Trefzer. (Joanna Davis-McElligatt)**

ATrefzer argues that Lytle, Gordon, Welty, and Faulkner constructed native peoples in two contradictory ways: as first Americans whose resistance to hegemonic and imperial forces was a source of inspiration to southerners and a regional identity continually threatened by the rhetoric of the nation, and simultaneously as threats to Western expansion, American nationalism, and white identity.

***Where the Wild Grapes Grow: Selected Writings, 1930-1950.* edited by Verner Mitchell and Cynthia Davis. (Rychetta N. Watkins)**

While the editorial attempt to trace the web of West's social, biographical, and historical influences can seem digressive at times, the essay illuminates many of the common subjects and themes found throughout West's work: loss; the difficulties negotiating race, color, and class boundaries; the tenuous love relationships; complex familial relationships; parent-child relationships; fraught friendships; and the Boston/Cape Cod/ Oak Bluffs area where West spent most of her life.

***Letter to My Mother.* By Edith Bruck. Trans. Brenda Webster with Gabriella Romani. (Glenda Jones)**

Bruck's "letter" is as much about surviving a mother-daughter relationship as it is about enduring the Holocaust. Her sojourn in the land of memory is quite repetitive, just as memory itself is circular.

***Religious Idiom and the African American Novel, 1952-1998.* By Tuire Valkeakari. (Artress Bethany White)**

Valkeakari reinforces her examination of the limits of resonant tropes by considering them alongside additional religious symbolism, including that of prelapsarian innocence, forbidden fruit, and Edenic expulsion as they present themselves in Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

***Personality Disorders and Other Stories.* By Juan José Millás. Trans. Gregory B. Kaplan. (Janis Breckenridge)**

Centered on themes of precarious subjectivity, obsessive imaginings, and compulsive storytelling, this collection of stories disrupts a facile, conventional understanding of contemporary social reality by featuring empathetic characters (in bizarre situations) that fall far outside societal conceptions of the norm.

***Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures.* 3rd Edition. Edited by David G. Nicholls. (Marja Mogk)**

Chapters on Literary Theory as well as Canonicity and Textuality have disappeared from the third edition. In their place are chapters on Poetics, Interpretation, Translation Studies, Comparative Literature, and Migrations, Diasporas, and Borders. These replacements reflect a larger shift in the discipline's critical focus over the last ten years from language as a construct to language as culture, from theorized aesthetics to affective possibilities, and from expanding national canons to querying the notion of nations themselves.

