PHILIP R. YANNELLA

AMERICAN LITERATURE IN CONTEXT FROM 1865 TO 1929


Reviewed by Antje Kley

This concise volume sets out to frame historically the rich and diverse period of American literature from the ending of the Civil War to the stock market crash of 1929. As the second volume on American Literature in Blackwell’s “Literature in Context” series, it comes between Susan Castillo’s American Literature in Context to 1865 and Yannella’s own American Literature in Context after 1929 (both 2010). Conceived as a set of primers on history for students of literature, the series adopts a traditionally mimetic aesthetics that avoids being recognized as an aesthetics at all: each volume is meant to “demonstrate how context contributes to meaning” in a literary text (front matter) as well as to show that the stability of meaning may be guaranteed by the authors’ engagement with the socio-political issues of their time and by the directness with which they express their presumed intentions. This agenda casually ignores other factors at work in the construction of meaning, such as literary form, linguistic structure, and readers’ expectations. In other words, this book avoids discussing what specific elements make a work of literature literary. As Jonathan Culler explains in his widely received Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction (2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2011): “literature involves both properties of language and a special kind of attention to language” (52). The “Literature in Context” series considers neither.

Thus pursuing a decidedly mimetic and occasionally expressivist approach, Yannella asserts that literary writing was the ethnography of post-bellum America and that its writers were considered interpretive authorities by their audiences (1). Focusing on the three literary
categories most commonly identified with the period – realism, naturalism, and regionalism – Yannella circumvents authors who “were not attracted or were repelled by social issues” (4). He does not even aim to contextualize literary writing in general, insofar as it includes modernist and experimental writing (which may be linked to historical, social and scientific contexts); in his mimetic conception of literature, the writer simply represents historical realities that are presumably given, ready-made, as the context for the literary work.

The table of contents also confirms that this book pursues the cause-and-effect model of extrinsic (“old”) historicism, which, as Lee Patterson explains, aims “to specify the forces that caused, governed, entailed, or were expressed by literary texts – what made them what they were rather than something else – and the routes by which these forces exerted their influence upon literature” (Lentricchia/McLaughlin, Critical Terms for Literary Study, Oxford UP, 1995, 250-62). Without mentioning literary traditions, genres, or aesthetic concerns, the table of contents indicates that the chief topics of the book are the Civil War, Reconstruction, immigration, city-country differences, economic inequality, Progressivism, and the beginning of the First World War. Since “much of the social content of the writing is lost on modern readers,” Yanella claims, “literary works are often ripped from their contexts and their meanings destroyed, their richness lessened” (3). In the first half (and sometimes more) of each chapter, therefore, he furnishes an informative but rather conventional historical narrative based on extensive research in newspaper and magazine archives, in government publications, popular book discussions and other documentary sources on the acceptance and exclusion of racial minorities, class conflict, progressivism, and city-country differences. He thereby avoids refiguring the relation of literature--as one of many forms of cultural production--to other kinds of writing in a more openly discursive approach to his period.

Besides recovering historical facts, Yanella serves the mission of the series as a whole by reinstating the author as the ultimate guarantor of textual meaning. “The chapters,” he
states (in his introduction), “describe how the issues might have been understood at the time by a curious, intelligent person – a smart writer, for example – who read considerably in contemporary sources including newspapers, magazines, nonfiction accounts, and so forth” (4). Trying to imagine the mindset of those living in each period and to avoid anachronisms, he refrains from terms that were coined or gained currency only later, such as “robber barons” and “Social Darwinism” (77), and he eschews revisionist history. Yet revisionist history clearly informs his way of framing post-bellum American literature during a time of upheaval and transformation, of juxtaposing the national narrative of progress with the very different counter-narratives of the African American struggle for legal and social equality, of Native American decimation, and of multinational mass immigration. Also, in a move he could not have made if he had refused to consult recent interpretations of his period, he takes information on the authors he treats from the authoritative American National Biography Online. Yanella’s attempt to efface his own historical position is troubling, then, especially as it resonates with the series’ assumption that historical facts are fixed and impervious to the continuously conditioned social practice of interpretive reception.

The second parts of the six thematic chapters do little better than the first parts. “Not intended to be complete discussions of literary works,” they are meant as “relatively brief examples of how to read texts in their contexts” (4). On never more than ten pages, these parts succeed in identifying authors and texts that meet the criteria set by this book. They frequently fall short, however, in explaining how literary texts use fictional modes to explore the issues they address. Anyone actually interested in reading these texts will be disappointed by the sketchy plot summaries, an almost exclusive focus on the diegetic level, decontextualized quotations, and frequent conflations of narrators and authors. Why read literature at all when all it does is rehash history or authors’ opinions – both of which are presumably more accessible in history books, essays, and (auto)biographies? Yannella himself seems to have realized that the concept of the series elides the functions of the
literary. “Writers,” he admits, “do not usually write about historical events and patterns, demographic shifts, natural or man-made catastrophes, and so forth. They do, however,” he continues, “sometimes without even knowing that they are doing it, write about the human impact of events, the particular feel and texture of history as experienced by their characters” (3).

Yanella thus implies a distinction between history, which records actual events or developments, and literature, which explores their impact on one or more imagined characters. To adapt social discourses and flesh out discussions of the social, cultural, artistic or scientific issues of their time, writers certainly use characters--and, I might add, semantics of place and time, narrative perspectives, intricately structured plot lines, metafictional devices, intertextual references, and so on. This volume, however, values such devices only where they serve to provide verisimilitude and ostensibly reveal an author’s personal disposition. Apropos Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, for instance, Yannella writes: “Twain probably knew slavery better than any other important writer of the period. […] All of that knowledge can be felt in the novel, as can the varieties of dumb, hateful, white belief about blacks” (27; my emphasis). A book that promises “brief examples of how to read texts in their contexts” (4; my emphasis) should offer more than such vague, generalizing statements about literary texts.

Since the Civil War “did not produce a great body of fiction” beyond the work of Bierce and Crane (10), chapter 1 cursorily mentions the poetry it inspired--both ephemeral and enduring. Slighting Emily Dickinson’s work, Yannella highlights the unprecedented candor of Whitman’s poetry, which directly critiqued the ideology of patriotism. Likewise, Yannella’s discussion of Crane’s early modernist combat novel The Red Badge of Courage (1895) underlines its skeptical perspective on the nation’s patriotism. This reading is one of
the longest – and, with its focus on the protagonist’s revisions of his own memories and motivations, strongest – in the book (12-15).

Chapter 2, on black Americans after Emancipation, examines literary responses to Reconstruction and its disintegration as well as the Indian Wars in both political discourse (W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington) and more literary writing by Joel Chandler Harris, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Mark Twain, Gertrude Stein and Charles W. Chestnutt. In representing black Americans, Yanella asserts, these writers either reproduced popular stereotypes or attempted “to convey the humanity of black people” (27). Apropos Huckleberry Finn and Stein’s story “Melanctha” (from Three Lives [1909], her first published work), Yannella finds “[r]ational thought . . . in very short supply in these, as in many other, American fictions of the era, regardless of race or ethnicity or social class or gender” (29). He thus raises questions about textual framing that he otherwise tends to neglect: questions like who says what to whom in what context, and how are a character’s actions and claims evaluated within the text? But he also implies that irrationality hampers what rationality would enable: the destruction of racist stereotypes. This idea is clearly denied by Huckleberry Finn, which makes the irrational and naïve character of Huck the most humane figure in the text.

Chapter 3 charts American writers’ responses to immigration and immigrant destinies with a particular focus on the first generation of Jewish immigrant writing at the turn of the nineteenth century. At the same time, as explained in Chapter 4 (“Countrysides”), writers from Sarah Orne Jewett and Edith Wharton to Robert Frost and Sherwood Anderson showed “how local environments shaped character, established outlooks, and defined individual possibilities” (60). Chapter 5 (“The Poor and Wealthy”) documents the fundamental contradiction between poverty and industrial progress in the early decades of the 20th century before inspecting “some of the literature focused on wealthy people” (77). While living
conditions were pervasively dire among the working poor, the widely and reverently told success stories of the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, Guggenheims, and Carnegies fed popular belief in the value of rugged individualism and the ubiquity of opportunity in America. In spite of all empirical evidence to the contrary, such as that furnished by the Industrial Relations Commission report of 1916, Americans were led to believe that poverty was self-created, that the poor were simply lazy and morally deprived.

In literary writing of the time, however, Yanella finds popular trust in upward mobility challenged by “considerable skepticism” (78). But when he reads writing by Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Kate Chopin as “the classic literature of wealth,” and as period pieces detailing the living conditions of the frivolously rich, he reduces work that is both aesthetically and socially innovative to a set of lifestyle illustrations. The discussion of James’s short novel *Daisy Miller*, in particular, shows what Yanella loses by tracking only its story line. Reflecting contemporary explanations of consciousness, specifically those of James’s brother William as well as of James Cooley, the novel is famous for its effective use of internally focalized narrative perspective to show how social expectation and judgment co-constitute a character that is purportedly viewed only from the outside. But Yanella treats the text as simply the story of a rich, misbehaved, neglected girl and an ostentatiously well-mannered libertine addicted to observation and analysis (79-81).

Varying the structure used in the other chapters, chapter 6 separately covers three historical movements--Temperance, the Union Movement, and Socialisms-- together with the literary responses to each. Here Yanella barely explains how the representation of heavy drinking in texts by various writers comments on the world outside them: it may serve to discredit reformers (Twain), to signify familial dysfunction (Crane, McTeague, Cather), to explore social conditions leading to drinking (Sinclair), or simply as a “triggering device for life-changing events” (91; Dreiser). As for the Union Movement, Yannella quickly
summarizes some of the typical strike stories published by unions to illustrate their “understanding of the core characteristics and modes of behavior of employees, employers, and representatives of government” (93). Chapter 7, ranging from America’s entry into World War I up to the Crash of 1929, closes the volume by considering how the works of Fitzgerald, Cather, Hemingway, Williams, Lewis, Hughes and Hurston critically assessed the war and postwar depression, prosperity, and nationalism.

This well-produced volume occasionally exhibits a careless dearth of quotation marks, as in discussing D.W. Griffith’s racist film Birth of a Nation (25) and popular conceptions of Irish immigrants (33), and at one point Kate Chopin’s protagonist Edna Pontellier is called Agnes (52). More seriously, what characters do or say and what entire texts achieve are treated as the same thing and both reported in past tense. Thus Yannella conflates fictional characters with historical personages and again disregards the effects of characterization, narrative technique, or lyrical presentation.

Altogether, Yannella’s volume presents a distinct but narrow vision of the powers of American literature from 1865 to 1929. It tells us only how history validates that literature, which is otherwise apparently inconsequential. It may be useful for upper-division undergraduates and above (who may see the volume’s shortcomings along with its strengths) and for anyone interested in the literary mimesis of socio-historical developments. Those who want more comprehensive, more research-oriented, and more systematically differentiated information should consult Susan V. Donaldson’s Competing Voices: The American Novel, 1865-1914 (NY: Twayne, 1998), which stresses the novel’s role in constructing the 19th century American public sphere, and the voluminous collection A Companion to American Fiction, 1865-1914, edited by Robert Paul Lamb and G.R. Thompson (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).
Antje Kley is Professor of American Literary Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg (Germany).