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Keeping Literature Impure

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Jonathan Arac is a first-rate critic, and this collection of essays spanning several years is evidence of both his range and his acuity. Although he has a broad command of literary theory, as his *Critical Genealogies* (1987) demonstrates, he does not bind himself to a single approach, but employs whatever critical methods are necessary for his particular occasion. Hence, in this collection he can approach *Huckleberry Finn* from a sociopolitical stance in one essay, and concentrate on language in another. Arac’s range of subjects is broad in these essays from a study by Samuel Johnson and Charles Lamb on *King Lear* to a close reading of Baudelaire’s poetry, but he seems most comfortable in the nineteenth century, whether Europe or America.

He uses the expression “impure worlds” to indicate what interests him most in these essays—that is, the interaction of the novel and life. He investigates connections that are made by breaking boundaries and is more interested in the wayward and disruptive than the continuous and unified; hence, much of what he writes about has to do with conscious or unintended modes of disruption, mainly in fiction.

A lucid preface lays out the intended connections and origins of the several essays and makes a case for their being assembled together, though, to my mind, the first essay, “The Impact of Shakespeare: Goethe to Melville,” seems to fit.
least well in the series, the essay being largely a history of critical attitudes toward Shakespeare by notable writers. Arac has divided the book into two parts: “Politics and the Canon” and “Language and Reality in the Age of the Novel.”

In “Hamlet, Little Dorrit, and the History of Character,” Arac goes some way to justify the inclusion of his Shakespeare essay by arguing that the modern sense of character, and of literature found in Shakespeare’s works, became available only in the nineteenth century, a century deeply interested in human psychology. He goes on to show in some detail Arthur Clennam’s debt to Hamlet for elements of his character. Like the famous Dane, Clennam’s character remains to be forged, something unique in Shakespeare’s protagonists, as Arac points out. Arac also notes that Hamlet may be considered the source of an entire genre popular at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century and affecting the literature of the later nineteenth century, as well. He writes, “Along with the castle, the ghost, and the portrait, the other crucial element Hamlet offered to gothic fiction that finds its way emphatically into Little Dorrit is the motif of usurpation” (42). Arac again justifies his inclusion of his Shakespeare chapter, but this time explicitly as he sums up the significance of this essay: “My argument holds that between Hamlet and Little Dorrit there intervened a series of cultural shifts mediated by the romantic critics of Shakespeare, who staged him in their writing. The corpus of this criticism provides a third intertextual strand for Dickens’s work” (45).

Two essays are entitled “Rhetoric and Realism.” The first is on “Hyperbole in The Mill on the Floss,” and the second adds “or, Marxism, Deconstruction, and Madame Bovary.” In the first, Arac argues that Floss exhibits two incommensurable patterns, the first associated with realism and moving toward a unity of experience, which is the dream of science, whereas the second is a more romantic and emotional pattern of hyperbole, or “going beyond.” The division represented by these two patterns is evident in the narrative method as well, for George Eliot exploits “a discrepancy between narrator and characters, presenting characters’ minds in words they would never themselves use, offering an interpretation of their world unlike any they could make” (100). The second pattern reveals the fictionality of the concept of a stable, continuous world, so the narrative actually works against itself to reveal the “impure” relationship of Eliot’s novel to actual experience. In the second “Rhetoric and Realism” essay, Arac moves from Gustave Flaubert’s use of ellipses in the direct speech of his characters to the centerlessness of Emma Bovary. Centerlessness is part of Arac’s notion of hyperbole as well. But the
stress here falls more upon the reader than the narrator. Without our participation as readers, Flaubert’s novel remains “a mere formal fiction” (121).

Reader response is not far from much of what Arac is getting at in this book, for he realizes that readers bring experiences far beyond anything intended by the authors they read. In a way, the mixture of the authors’ and the readers’ experiences relate fictional and social experiences in a healthy combination of rhetoric and realism that constitutes Arac’s impure worlds.

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