
MADSEN, Deborah Lea


DOI: 10.1017/S0021875800024245

Available at:
http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:93092

Disclaimer: layout of this document may differ from the published version.


The critique of the canon that underlies much of contemporary critical practice takes part of its theoretical impetus from poststructuralism – writings like those of the mature Paul de Man. And yet this collaboration of theory and practice produces very diverse forms of critical discourse. These essays on Paul de Man are theoretically self-conscious and sophisticated, in contrast to the essays in Graham Clarke's collection which are able to tell us unproblematically what fiction says and what is its significance in a number of contexts. Yet both collections address the issue of "difference" and its impact upon contemporary culture.

The volume of essays on recent American fiction is symptomatic of one trend in contemporary American Studies. Rather than provide a commentary on current questioning of the American literary canon, this book sidelines the familiar set of post/modernist texts and addresses instead writers and issues which, while hardly "new," have only recently begun to attract institutional attention. The volume attempts to take up where Tony Tanner's *City of Words* (1971) left off both by dealing with writers who have come to prominence since 1970 and by turning away from those texts that engage in strategies of reaction with the canon of "high Modernism." These essays seek different patterns of connection within post-war American culture.

Henry Claridge describes in terms of his experiments with narrative voice E. L. Doctorow's fictive revision of modern American history which (re)places at the centre of their own stories those marginalized by official histories; Peter Doughty explores Toni Morrison's fiction as a part of the rearticulation of black history by black writers; Eric Mottram considers Don DeLillo's manic pursuit of meaning through nine novels; the representation of American reality as a mosaic of media-controlled images is an issue picked up by Graham Clarke's essay on Raymond Carver, an essay that also addresses the notion of suburban minimalism which is explored by David Seabrook in the fiction of Gordon Lish; these issues of cultural determinism and literary amorality receive generic consideration by Julian Hurstfield who looks at recent American crime fiction. To my mind, the most interesting essay, unfortunately weakened by a tendency to lapse into plot summary, is A. Robert Lee's account of the "ethnic renaissance" in American literature. Focussing on Rudolfo Anaya, Louise Erdrich and Maxine Hong Kingston, this discussion registers a genuine departure from the post/modernist dialogue of much work on recent writing. I hope that a volume dedicated to the re-emergence of Amerindian, Hispanic, Chicano and Asia-American writing will not be a long time coming.

The very notion of a revised canon characterized by "difference" – ethnic, social, historical, aesthetic – perhaps owes its existence to the institutional acceptance of deconstruction and the lesson it has taught about the dangers of seeking monolithic patterns of sameness in literature and in culture more generally. The real political force of such ideas is inescapably at issue in *Discontinuities: Essays on Paul de Man* and the essays that make up the volume are themselves aware of the dangers of an unquestioning acceptance of theoretical authority. As the editors suggest, in his controversial juvenilia Paul de Man has provided the context for his own deconstruction; no matter how well liked or how highly respected was De Man, his writings are bound by his history to the contingent and are not available as a pseudo-transcendental authority. Emphatically, his is not an innocent discourse.
The volume is divided into three sections: "The Paul de Man Case," "Paul de Man and Martin Heidegger," and "Reading Paul de Man after the polemic." It is time that Belgian theorists committed to the record their views on one of Belgium's most famous expatriates and to this end a lucid account of De Man's wartime journalism, the significance of these writings for a view of De Man as a collaborator, and the implications of the entire debate for De Man's peculiar brand of poststructuralist theory is given by Ortwin de Graef (the student who uncovered De Man's juvenilia), Jean Stengers (who dismisses as trivial De Man's "crimes"), and Stanley Corngold (who repeats the charges) in the opening, and to my mind most interesting, section of the book. Concluding the collection is a delightful essay by Christopher Norris which plays off Donald Barthelme against Kierkegaard and Schlegel, against Hillis Miller, against De Man, on irony and ethics. The collection forms the second volume in the series "Postmodern Studies" and, although the term "postmodern" appears only in Norris's essay, the book is not inappropriate as a part of the series. Aside from the relationship between poststructuralism and postmodernism (which is left implicit here), and the fact that the linguistic insights of poststructuralism transcend the limits of the postmodern moment, still the controversy aroused by De Man's wartime journalism and the (dis)continuous relationship between his early and later writings has raised to a pitch postmodernism's concern with the ethics of writing, the possibility of meaning and the retrievability of history.

DEBORAH L. MADSEN
University of Leicester