
John Carlos Rowe. *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 377p.

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This study exemplifies the best of recent developments in American Studies and new historicist literary criticism. Like other leaders in the field, Rowe forsakes the old national culture models and uses multicultural, international, transnational, and postcolonial methods. As such, some of his primary influences are Annette Kolodny, Arnold Krupat, Patricia Limerick, Edward Said (above all), Mark Seltzer, Richard Slotkin, Eric Sundquist, and Ronald Takaki. Rowe's task is to show how America's literature and imperialist foreign policy have had a mutual cause and effect relationship since their inception. His focus includes America's projection and displacement of its imperialism onto other nations.

In general, Rowe's analysis grows increasingly original and valuable with each successive chapter. After an introductory discussion of theory and method, he devotes one chapter to each of ten writers: Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, John Collin Ridge, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Henry Adams, W.E.B. Du Bois, Black Elk, and Zora Neale Hurston. Although it is not new to discuss the racism of Brown and Poe, Rowe's treatment of their imperialism is more trenchant than that of his predecessors. Rowe's resistance to recent efforts at folding Melville into the dominant ideology is indispensable. Challenging the ideology of American exceptionalism, Melville was one of the first and few to compare America's slavery with the colonialism of America's expansion, and to compare those two to world imperialism. Since John Collin Ridge has not been studied much, the chapter on him is almost necessarily Rowe's most original. Focusing on *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* as an early anti-imperialist text, Rowe deflects recent attempts to construct Twain as a racist, but he shows that (unlike Melville) Twain did not understand that imperialism had long been an American trait rather than a symptom of the Gilded Age, nor that free trade was as much the problem as the solution. The chapter on Crane is rather like those on Brown and Poe in that to focus on Crane's racism (especially his war journalism) is not to focus on something new, yet Rowe's reading is more subtle and complex than are previous studies. Rowe uses Henry Adams as an example of how fetishizing the aesthetic can mystify imperialism. Adams ostensibly eschewed politics in *The Education*, but he aligned himself with imperialism in his letters to his close friend, Secretary of State John Hay. In what is perhaps the most original and significant chapter, Rowe revises prior constructions of Du Bois' sexism, and he

shows how Du Bois understood the connection between racism and imperialism, yet failed to see the imperialism of Stalinism. Black Elk also emerges as undermining yet supporting the dominant ideology. The last chapter, an examination of Hurston's non-fiction, revises the heretofore evasive approaches to her conservatism, in particular her advocacy of America's occupation of Haiti.

Although the new historicism may be the most important method of the last twenty years, its flaws mar this study. Ostensibly the new historicism immerses texts in contexts and shows how each constitutes the other. But too often discourse is the presumed cause and economics the effect. Several times Rowe assumes rather than demonstrates that because a discourse preceded an event, the discourse caused the event. One does not have to subscribe to the notion of an all-determining economic base to suspect philosophical idealism in such statements as "the territory to be conquered and the commodities to be exchanged are already effects of discursive production" (51). Similarly, when lesser scholars than Rowe speak of economism as "vulgarly Marxist," they can be vulgarly pluralist (196). Rowe avoids the pious tendentiousness that confuses progress for all with progress for one's self-interest group. However, Rowe's historicist trait of judging the value of a discourse by its political utility—by whether or not it spurs us to action—is not historicism but pragmatism. And it is an odd historicism that implies on one page that history controls us and then on the next page that we can control history.

In addition, he subscribes to the opposition of formalism and historicism. He refers to his method as "anti-formal close readings" (16). But form has a history, and close readings that ignore form are readings that beg questions. He says, "There are other ways to judge the 'value' of literary and cultural works" (23). But attending to form is necessary if we are to define the things we are talking about. For scholars from Tony Bennett to Fredric Jameson, form is not the only ingredient in value, yet form tells us what is and is not signified by such signifiers as "literary and cultural works." Rowe says he has selected texts according to their "representation of a common historical subject" (23). But before that, he excluded everything not written, and then excluded poetry and drama. The recent axiom that analyzing form is not sufficient has turned into the shibboleth that analyzing form is not necessary. This error has enabled many of the forced readings of Melville, Twain, and Du Bois that Rowe rectifies.

Nonetheless, this book is (as we have come to expect from Rowe) original and important. Though daunting, its breadth and depth are inspiring. Scholars will be engaged with this book for a long time to come. Despite its political engagement, it is not out to attack the canonical or promote the non-canonical. And it is nuanced, balanced, fair-minded, and willing to challenge regnant readings. ✿