reviews

American Studies instructs its reviewers to report briefly on most scholarly volumes on American subjects, stating major theses, indicating the quality of the scholarship and analysis and pointing where appropriate to implications broader than a title might suggest. New books which seem to our editors to be saying important things to the field of American Studies as a whole are reviewed at somewhat greater length. We also run review essays from time to time to brief our readers on developments in scholarly fields when we judge them to be of use to a wide range of Americanists.

literature


This useful but square book contains, in its introduction, a justifiable defense of historical literary scholarship, correct but needlessly fearful of other approaches. We do not need partisanship. We need to learn from one another. Too much of American Gothic is plot summary, and the author does not always convincingly demonstrate the nature of connections he names between philosophical movements, literary ideas, specific authors and Gothic strategies. Ringe is not a good critic; his discussions of Gothic elements in Poe and Hawthorne are mechanical and pedestrian, though finally pretty sound. But we have never before had so comprehensive a guide; he does explain the links between, for example, Scottish common sense philosophers, Emerson, the Edinburgh magazines which were so popular in the United States, and the several ways in which American Gothicists in different eras used Gothic materials. Moreover, the attention paid to little-read Gothicists like Richard Henry Dana and the author-painter Washington Allston helps fill in blanks and make connections.

Perhaps because it is very difficult to do so, Ringe fails to connect the latter parts of his study, those which deal with Poe and Hawthorne, and, to a lesser extent, with Howells, James and Ambrose Bierce, to his earlier discussions of the philosophical underpinnings of the Gothic. I find no real point, for example, to such sections as his review of Poe’s use of room décor, beyond that the rooms stand for mental states. That’s interesting, but hardly new, and not related to what we assumed were the central theses of the book. The author has failed also to notice, in his discussion of such late nineteenth-century manifestations of the Gothic as the use of occultism, occult elements in Naturalist writers such as Frank Norris.
When I exposed a group of good graduate students to some of Ringe’s ideas, they very quickly carried them beyond anything in the book. That suggests the limitations of his critical imagination, perhaps, but it is in no sense a criticism of American Gothic: indeed, one of the best things one can say of a scholarly study is that it is fruitful, that it generates further creative ideas. At the very least, one can say that of this earnest and conscientious study.

SGL


Powers, a noted Jamesian scholar, argues that Faulkner’s writings are comedic inasmuch as they are essentially optimistic. Specifically, Powers cites two recurring Faulknerian themes (the “Self-Destructiveness of Evil,” and the “Second Chance” or “Quo Vadis” theme), plus an attendant theme involving those characters who function as the “Saving Remnant.” Although Powers’ thesis seems valid and interesting, his efforts to establish it in thirteen chapters (each devoted to an analysis of a single novel of the Yoknapatawpha Saga) prove unevenly rewarding. The chapters are often admittedly derivative and too sparsely documented, and the three themes seem oddly peripheral to the analyses.

Rhode Island School of Design


This informed, intelligent and learned book explores how H.D. broke out of the cocoon of an early imagist mode and emerged as a full-fledged modernist poet. She earned her wings by mythologizing Freud, with whom she doctored, and by feminizing mythology, of which she became chief sibyl, hierophant and priestess. Although living a few doors down from Jung, H.D. remained perversely loyal to Freud, who paradoxically became the Wise Old Man in her crypto-Jungian search for archetypes. She found these in her deep study of the hermetic tradition—alchemy, mystery religions, kabbalah—all of which Friedman handles with aplomb, though her astrological interpretation of Doolittle’s natal chart is a bit shaky. This book is a must for all those interested in modernist culture, American poetry, occultism, psychoanalysis and feminism. Friedman’s sympathetic biographical approach is much more than the sum of these parts, yet as feminist fascination with H.D. begins to assume cult proportions, she, too, fails to answer the overwhelming aesthetic question of why Doolittle’s late poetry, including Trilogy, reads like a flat, remote translation of some lost, authentic original.

BLSA


Anyone who has ever wondered whether it is worth figuring out all the details of a Brown plot—and the numbers must be legion—will find the answer here. With detail that almost rivals Brown, Grabo relentlessly pursues the argument that there is “more pattern and purpose in Brown’s fiction than is generally granted.” What exactly is the pattern and purpose is not much clearer than a Brown plot, but it has something to do with the “distinction between the stories one tells and the more satisfying story one lives.” The study concludes with a chapter on fictional “doubling.”

TRH


Raymona Hull’s factual narrative portrays an older, increasingly less Romantic and