

act plays published in 1972), and, finally, to five recently published novellas (1979-81). Although one might complain that some of his favorites have been given short shrift, e.g. "The Babysitter" (1969), her readings of the highly inventive fiction of *Prickongs and Descants* will prove especially helpful to those coming to this collection for the first time. The analyses of the plays are similarly instructive. As for the novellas, a legitimate reservation might be raised with regard to Gordon's curt treatment of Coover's most recent work, *Spanking the Maid* (1981). The latter, a highly involved version of the earlier "multiple fictions" of *Prickongs and Descants*, would have benefited from the patient scrutiny given, for example, to *Hair O' the Chine* (1979).

While her critical readings are informed, Gordon's monograph suffers from the lack of a concluding chapter in which she might have drawn together the various threads of individual textual readings. Furthermore, Gordon might have concerned herself with the shifting emphases of Coover's work over the last twenty years and their aesthetic and philosophical implications. The author fails, generally, to see Coover's work in historical, developmental terms. Gordon makes frequent and often vague comparisons between Coover and prominent Anglo-American poets of the last two centuries. These frequently serve to distract the reader and blunt the poignancy of the discussion rather than sharpen it. The contextualization of Coover within American and international postmodernism would have proven more illuminating. Few contemporary writers are mentioned beyond the introductory chapter.

Her bibliography of Coover's works seems to be definitive. It would have proven useful, however, to have listed the actual dates of composition (where possible) for, as Gordon herself acknowledges, major time lags often exist between the composition and publication of his works (p. 15). A closing, perhaps pedantic observation. To designate the bibliography as "Works about Robert Coover" misrepresents some of the catalogued items. In fact, several of the listed texts, those of Federman, Zavarzadeh (misspelt, p. 177), and Klinkowitz for instance, make little reference to Coover—only one in each of the two former cases. These texts do, of course, offer engaging studies of contemporary innovative fiction but they are not substantially concerned with Robert Coover. Obvious bibliographical lacunae are Richard Andersen's Coover monograph

(Boston: Twayne, 1981)—the first book-length study by my reckoning—and Alan Wilde's *Horizons of Assent* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) which, though more concerned with Barthelme, says quite as much about Coover as some other works listed by Gordon. (Having only appeared late in 1982, the absence of Larry McCaffery's *The Metafictional Muse* [Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press] is understandable.)

These reservations notwithstanding, Lois Gordon's work accomplishes two important goals—to provide access to the philosophical and structural peculiarities of an as-yet-neglected author, and to promote the study of noncanonical literature in general.

Jerry A. Varsava

JANET HOLMGREN MCKAY
Narration and Discourse in American Realistic Fiction
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. pp. 212. \$20.00.

Realism in nineteenth-century fiction, as virtually all readers and scholars know, is a notoriously slippery topic. But the easy evasions of vague terms like "true to life," "honest," "objective," "anti-sentimental," or "anti-romantic" are nowadays more difficult to maintain, thanks to critical investigations of the subject by Edwin Cady, Richard Bridgman, Douglas Hewitt, Harold Kolb, Gordon Taylor, and others. Supplementing these scholars' concern for realistic characterization and psychological processes, documentary techniques and historical-sociological subject matter, Janet Holmgren McKay here focuses on narrative modes and discourse devices as artistic activities basic to realism. With help from a group of contemporary narratologists—including Prague's and Toronto's Lubomir Dolezel, France's Gérard Genette, and U.S. critics like Dorrit Cohn, Seymour Chatman, and Ann Banfield—she grounds her discussion freshly but narrowly in a double development in storytelling: ". . . limitations

on the author/narrator's role and the representation of characters' perspectives" (p. 31). The "illusion of life" realism strives for, she argues, is created by shifting the relationships among author, narrator, character, reader. Omniscient narration gives way to less authoritative modes, a shift resting upon the conviction that language *expresses* not just *interprets* life. McKay anatomizes these strategies by turning a magnifying lens on but three exemplary texts and authors: Henry James's *The Bostonians*, William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. "Theirs were technical successes and failures," she asserts, "that have profound significance for the development of the American novel's structure and for the portrayal of perception and the handling of point of view in later fiction" (p. 3).

Such severe selectivity has drawbacks as well as obvious advantages. McKay's "technical" or micro-analysis allows scant space for (or, rather, simply assumes the reader's familiarity with) the broadly cultural contextualizing of verbal acts as advocated, say, by Barbara Herrnstein Smith. (See Smith's "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories" in W.J.T. Mitchell, *On Narrative*). Though McKay is a discriminating borrower and a clear explainer of theories, she bypasses theorists of narrative and discourse like Smith, Lukács, or Jameson. Preoccupied with questions of *mode* and *voix*, overt and covert narrators, direct, indirect, and free indirect discourse, she dismisses issues involving the actual historical audiences James, Howells, and Twain addressed. Her "reader" is a generalized factor in a dynamic but narrowly defined equation, never one of the 200,000 subscribers to the *Century* magazine in 1885. Only a few scattered references, therefore, are made to the Post-Civil War changes in U.S. life and thought—industrialization, urbanization and destruction of the pastoral myth, growing moral uncertainty, the spread of democratic ideology—which engage other critics of realism.

An author must, of course, be allowed his or her subject and emphasis. What the prospective reader of *Narration and Discourse in American Realistic Fiction* is entitled to ask is: how well does McKay's close analysis of three representative novels work, both to illumine each text and create a broader understanding of this major mode of fiction during a transitional period of literary and cultural history?

James and *The Bostonians* is a plausible place to start. Not only does this novel mark

the midpoint in its author's career, but its ambiguous mode of narration has often confused readers. The narrator at first locates himself at a distance from the characters, in order to establish an apparently firm social context and satiric stance. James's model seems to be Balzac. Readers of Book One, therefore, have no trouble fitting *The Bostonians* into the pattern Douglas Hewitt suggests for most realistic novels: ". . . they are like the experience of being told about life by someone whom we trust" (p. 86). Later, however, the narrator's relationships to the characters shifts; he approaches more closely in order to dramatize individual motives and points of view. Yet in doing this he never identifies sympathetically with any of the actors. McKay, in line with others, considers this switch unsuccessful. No "center of knowing" is maintained, so *The Bostonians* remains a flawed and transitional text, the writing of which, however, helped James to achieve later, more controlled narrations like *The Ambassadors*: "There the reader is never sure how accurate Strether's, perceptions are, but the reader, through the narrator, is committed to Strether's perspective from the outset. The narrator sees through the character while gradually allowing the reader to see around him. James's experiment in *The Bostonians* results in an interesting but unsatisfactory objectivity; we are able to see the motivations of each character, as well as their strengths and weaknesses, without having a great sympathy in any one direction" (pp. 88-89). One question nevertheless remains. McKay never makes it clear why detachment or "unresolved ambiguity" is per se less satisfactory (because less real?) than a "centered" ambiguity. If realism represents an attack on sentimentality, surely authorial sympathy is not always necessary. McKay's description of James's purpose in *The Bostonians*—to dramatize, not ideas, classes, genders, or sections, but "the tensions between the main characters, the sources of these tensions in their personalities, and the less than satisfactory resolution of those tensions" (p. 69)—seems adequate reason for his shifts in narration.

Howells's characters inhabit the same historical city as James's, but their fictional status is confirmed by a different mixture of techniques. Given the author's desire to depict ordinary human situations and emotions "in their true proportion and relation" (p. 91), his problem was how to present the Laphams as both commonplace and sympathetic. The solution: traditional omniscient narration used more liberally than

either James or Twain did, as well as more directly reported discourse. McKay nicely demonstrates Howells's mastery of middle-class, domestic conversation. But she also praises his indirectly reported discourse, which is imaginatively used to capture unobvious states of consciousness. However, the narrator of *Silas Lapham*, though in tight control of the storytelling, seems uneasy in this authoritative role. His voice mingles with the characters' without losing distance or detachment. This inconsistent presence in the text undercuts the illusion of life so richly created by the direct discourse. "Ultimately," McKay concludes, "the narrator of *Silas Lapham* seems to deny control but not to relinquish it," an inconsistency grounded in Howells's moralism and one which "contributes to a sense that these characters are 'small'; they remain types rather than growing into people" (pp. 134-35).

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain succeeds where his two friends failed, though his is no unqualified triumph of narrative technique. By collapsing narrator and central character, he achieves at once control, intimacy, and detachment. Huck's manipulation of direct and indirect discourse achieves several powerful effects: a convincing identity between his roles as narrator and character; ironic distance between his naive self and Mark Twain's moral perspective; and dramatic distance between himself and other characters. Though Huck's is a retrospective account (like Ishmael's in *Moby Dick*), the effect of the boy's vernacular presentation is dramatic; "Huck tells his story as he lived it" (p. 146). Through Huck's discourse, Twain effectively communicates the "realistic" truth that humans can neither describe nor control the world authoritatively. The mixture of art and artlessness in the famous sunrise description of Chapter 19, for instance, displays the boy's knowledge of the natural world and his sense of mystery and ignorance. This narrative honesty falters, however, in the Evasion and McKay's final judgment is qualified. "As long as Huck controls the situation and his material is sufficiently demanding," she observes, "Twain maintains the flexibility and credibility of Huck's style. However, when the material does not demand that the basically simple style be innovative in order to capture complex and significant scenes and ideas, the temptations inherent in simplicity take over" (p. 162). This happens occasionally early in the narrative where Huck seems too obviously Twain's mouthpiece. Far more discordant, however, are the final eleven chapters at the Phelps farm. For McKay, as

for Hemingway and others, the Evasion displays at tedious length Huck's loss of narrative control and his creator's entrapment by burlesque. "Like Howells, Twain pulls back from his character just when he has portrayed him most sympathetically" (p. 188). Again, McKay reveals her never-fully-explained preference for sympathetic treatment of character as a necessary feature of realism. Other considerations besides narration and discourse (including childhood's grip on Twain's imagination, the "civilization" motif, and death's fascination for Huck) provide possible justifications for the Evasion—though *not* for its length.

McKay's significant achievement in this tightly argued book is to demonstrate carefully the shift away from interpretation towards dramatic enactments of reality. Realists like these three masters exploited early the discovery made by linguists—the paradoxical truth that in literary discourse the responsibility for directly reported discourse is assumed to be the speaker's alone, even though that speaker is a fictional creature. Alongside this psychological fact about the experience of realistic narration stand political, moral, and epistemological beliefs all realists—not just James, Howells, and Twain, but their descendants Crane and Dreiser—share: the convictions that "reality" is plural, relative, ambiguous, and that the reader must share in interpreting its fictional representations.

Albert E. Stone

JAN FERGUS

Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel: Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice.

Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1983, Pp. ix + 162. \$26.50.

Studies of Jane Austen's sources have not, in general, been very rewarding. There is no denying that Austen was thoroughly imbued in the literature of the eighteenth century, particularly the novel. However, she