

1 JOEL PFISTER, *Surveyors of Customs: American Literature as Cultural Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 276 pp.

5 Joel Pfister's *Surveyors of Custom: American Literature as Cultural Analysis* is a timely contribution to the current debate around critique and post-critique. In his monograph, Pfister makes the case for an understanding of literature as critique, foregrounding the "critical work" that literature is doing: literature, he argues, is cultural analysis and writers are analysts, or, as he phrases it in the title of his book, "surveyors of customs." This guiding metaphor, equally inspired by Hawthorne's and Melville's day jobs in custom houses and Thoreau's work as surveyor, is explained by Pfister as follows: "surveyor" signified one who oversaw resources and assessed value" (5). "[C]ustoms," meanwhile, should be understood as punning on to "become accustomed to structures, processes, and relations that damage themselves or others" (5). The structures and processes that Pfister is interested in are specifically those of capitalism. Riffing on Walter Benjamin's famous seventh thesis in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Pfister substitutes "capitalism" for "barbarism" to state that "in industrial and corporate America there has never been a document of culture that was not also a document of capitalism" (14). In order to promote such an understanding of American literature as a "document of capitalism," he introduces the term "systemic reading." Taking his cue from Fredric Jameson, Pfister argues that "society [...] disables people [...] from perceiving the outlines, interactions, and movements of the system that reproduces them" (27). Systemic reading renders these invisible structures visible. More specifically, Pfister proposes what he calls systemic reading as a method for understanding the workings of soft capitalism through a reading of American literature published between the end of the eighteenth and the middle of the twentieth century. In *Surveyors of Customs*, Pfister contrasts soft capitalism with hard capitalism: the latter is found, for instance, in literary representations of "alienating workplaces, strikes, and poverty" (33), whereas the former is characterized by modern forms of management that pay attention to the cultural and psychological elements of work. Systemic reading, Pfister argues, shows that what Americans get out of capitalism is more than just "hard" economic

rewards, it also includes "soft" rewards that are emotional and subjective.

In the first chapter, "Inner-Self Industries: Soft Capitalism's Reproductive Logic," Pfister "investigates how American literature and capitalism's investment in culturally producing [...] 'interiorities' have been intertwined" (40). The dominant concept that is proposed by Pfister is Raymond Williams's "incorporation," which, he argues, based on his reading of a wide range of primarily canonical, mostly nineteenth- and some twentieth-century American literature, "should be extended to analyze the incorporation of subjectivities, agency, and energy, especially romanticized forms of secular soul making and individuality" (46). Pfister argues that American literature provides insights into how soft capitalism makes workers relate to themselves as possessing a singular interiority rather than as alienated workers. The list of authors marshalled by Pfister in this chapter to illuminate his thesis is impressive, including Herman Melville, L. Frank Baum, T.S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherman Alexie, and Leslie Marmon Silko. He reads Melville's *Pierre* as a book that both partakes in and parodies the structure of interiorization characteristic of soft capitalism, and studies the uses made of Emerson in present-day advertising to market a "do your thing"-style individualism. In fact, Pfister's technique of systemic reading frequently cuts across eras, bringing the contemporary concept of "soft capitalism" to writers like Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson and showing how writers from past centuries illuminate the present.

In the second chapter, "How America Works: Getting Personal to get Personnel," Pfister again engages with a wide range of authors including Rebecca Harding Davis, Jack London, Nathanael West, Charles Chesnutt, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright to study the place of "incentives" in the workings of soft capitalism. Here Pfister also introduces another term, namely "*personnel culture*" (93), which he considers as a type of emotional Taylorism exemplary of soft capitalism. Personnel culture stands for a human resource management which tries to sell "top-down management as supportive of bottom-up agency" (94). This is to say that the ideology of incentives relies "on the production of personal relationships, emotional interdependencies, and self-definitions" (95). Pfister discusses both writ-

1 ers who propagate an ideology of incentives
 2 (e. g., Benjamin Franklin) and writers who are
 3 critical of the ideology of incentive (e. g., Mel-
 ville in “Bartleby”). For Pfister, the strongest
 nineteenth-century critique of the ideology of
 5 soft capitalism’s culture of incentives, how-
 ever, is formulated by Edward Bellamy and
 William Dean Howells in their utopian roman-
 ces. There is also a special connection, for
 Pfister, between soft capitalism and the emo-
 tional work that women traditionally perform.
 10 Pfister analyzes both women writers who are
 complicit with the workings of soft capitalism
 as well as those who are critical of it, descri-
 bing Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* as “an
 incentive manual instructing readers in how
 to form, reform, and manage boys and men”
 15 (106), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Wom-
 en and Economics* as a critique of precisely
 the type of personalized soft capitalism ad-
 vocated by Alcott. Finally, he notes that the
 “gender-and-domesticity system” (108) is also
 interrogated in texts by male writers such as
 20 Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Eugene O’Neill.

The third chapter, “Dress-Down Conquest:
 Americanizing Top-Down as Bottom Up,”
 is concerned with a prevalent ideological in-
 version: “capitalism’s top-down ‘masquerad-
 ing’ as democratic bottom-up” (122). In this
 25 chapter, Pfister investigates how American
 literature represents and critiques “seemingly
 classless performances of class identity and
 ‘equality’” (123). Unlike in previous chapters,
 Pfister is less interested in presenting a pan-
 oramic overview on a broad range of Ameri-
 can authors and instead places a strong focus
 on discussing the work of a single author,
 30 Mark Twain. For Pfister, Twain is a cultural
 analyst whose critique aims at capitalism and
 imperialism and who cautions Americans
 “not to be conned by a dressed-down big-fish-
 eat-small-fries culture” (164). Pfister argues
 35 that the feigned equality staged by Twain in
A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court
 exposes the cultural logic of soft capitalism,
 and that the very same logic of an American
 dress-down politics is still made use of by

present-day politicians on both the right and
 the left. As Pfister convincingly shows, such a
 “dress-down style” was already practiced by
 eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ameri-
 cans like Thomas “Tom” Paine, Benjamin
 “Ben” Franklin, or Andrew “Old Hickory”
 Jackson. Pfister further discusses Twain’s
 creation of the figure of the “Boss” in *A Con-
 necticut Yankee* as a conqueror and “cultural
 producer of customs and needs” (150).

Surveyors of Customs is a spirited investi-
 gation of the cultural work of soft capitalism
 densely packed with readings of nineteenth-
 and twentieth century American literature.
 Pfister shows how a Marxist and Cultural Ma-
 terialist method of reading—systemic read-
 ing—is capable of advancing our understand-
 ing of soft capitalism. One particular quality
 of *Surveyors of Custom* is Pfister’s attention
 to rhetoric, especially metaphors, which al-
 lows him to trace literary and economic con-
 nections across centuries. If the book has a
 flaw, then it is its wish to be more than a study
 of the critical insights that American litera-
 ture provides into what today is described as
 soft capitalism. Pfister also wants to show,
 among other things, that American literature
 is American Studies and Cultural Studies
avant la lettre. Certainly, nineteenth-century
 American literature is fundamental to Ameri-
 can Studies, and this discipline developed
 to a large part out of interpretations of this
 literary corpus. But reading nineteenth-cen-
 tury American literature through the lens of
 American Studies or Cultural Studies and
 finding insights that look like those formu-
 lated by these two critical paradigms makes
 this enterprise appear circular. Nevertheless,
 while Pfister’s argumentation is not always as
 thorough as one would wish for, this does not
 take anything away from the achievement of
 this book. Readers interested in learning what
 American literature can teach us about the
 workings of soft capitalism will find *Surveyors
 of Customs* highly illuminating.

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