

1 MARK STOREY, *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities: A Geography of Gilded Age American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 208 pp.

5 Mark Storey's study, *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities*, aims to read markers of modernity as "absent presences" (2) in a number of novels set in rural environments of the Gilded Age. His argument is based on the assumption that traces of the relationship between literature and modernity can also be detected, and in the next step analyzed, in texts that seem to evade themes related to modernity in general, and to a dominant US-American "urban industrial capitalism" in particular. Building on Bill Brown's thesis that literature contains historical traces that are not recorded in official historiography,¹ Storey formulates a pronounced claim: "I will argue that rural fiction is a unique record of modernity's impact on socio-cultural life and literature" (2). With this claim, he intends to re-conceptualize the line of literary criticism that was first established by Leo Marx with his *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). The rejection of Marx's clear antithesis between the "pastoral" and the "technological" is transferred to the rejection of the dichotomy "countryside" vs. "urban." (Here, Storey also relies on Raymond Williams's partial deconstruction of "the country and the city" in the latter's eponymous book-length essay.) A further revisionist intention of *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities* addresses the tendency of literary history to differentiate between "rural" and "urban" cultures, not just in terms of geographical separation, but also in terms of chronology, with "rural" preceding "urban." Instead, Storey aims at an "intimately historicized reconstruction of the period's historical imagination [...] by piecing together the way in which an urban fabric became part of the material of rural representation" (20). As a method, "piecing together" has some problems—problems that Storey is aware of, but hopes to overcome by "defamiliarizing the lense that rural fiction provides on the period" (21).

40 The metaphors Storey uses for the description of his method testify to his rhetorical skill, but they do not make entirely clear at the outset of his investigation how exactly they

44 ¹ Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economics of Play* (London: Harvard UP, 1996), 4.

will bear upon the more or less purely thematic analyses that follow in the main part of the book. In these chapters, he looks at, in turn, the railway, the country doctor, lynching, and finally, literary utopias. All in all, *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities* is based on the analysis of about forty novels and short-stories published between 1868 and 1902. Many of these works are only mentioned in passing, to cite some relevant detail that is being discussed in the respective chapter. A handful of writers and their works are more extensively referred to; among them William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, Edward Eggleston, Sarah Orne Jewett, Joseph Kirkland, and Owen Wister. In histories of American Literature, these authors are associated with aspects of realism and regionalism, but for Storey they are also remarkable for the way elements of "modernity" emerge in these works. Interestingly (and sometimes confusingly) "modernity" and "urbanity" are, in practice, synonyms for Storey, and stand in opposition to "the country" or "the rural"—in spite of his previous assertions that such conceptualizations "reiterate a potentially limiting binary logic" (7).

The first thematic focus, taking up where Leo Marx left off, deals with the railway. Three related aspects are presented and discussed in some detail: the introduction of standard ("railway") time in America, the new perception of the landscape from a fast-moving vehicle on rails, and the way the train and the railway create an "obvious physical link to the expanding urban world—being simultaneously a cause and a symptom of that very expansion" (53). Storey lists many interesting examples and passages from a number of novels and short stories where train rides, timetables, and new careers are described, but it remains questionable whether his results are really so new; after all, the "strangeness" and "novelty" of the railway as a harbinger of something qualitatively different in American life, also in rural life, had not been lost on the original authors of the literary works, let alone on many other writers of literary criticism that Storey himself refers to.

The next chapter deals with the role of the traveling circus after the Civil War. By the 1890s, the circus had become a technological and organizational marvel; an entertainment "factory" and at the same time a perfect representative of American "show business." Storey builds on theories of the spectacle (Guy Debord), the carnivalesque (Bakhtin), and on

1 the considerable literature on performative
 2 culture of the Gilded Age when he discusses
 3 circus-references in works by Jewett, Twain,
 4 and Garland. The circus, with its fragmented
 5 narratives and episodic structure, is seen as
 6 representing the “generic complexities of the
 7 Gilded Age.” At the same time, because it is a
 8 temporary intruder into the organization of a
 9 given community, Storey also categorizes the
 10 circus as a material reminder of the alternative
 11 realities of the bustling city, as opposed
 12 to the comparatively monotonous and repetitive
 13 life of the countryside, as, for example,
 14 in a reading of Garland’s *Rose of Dutcher’s
 15 Coolly* (1895). In order to sidestep the obvious
 16 dichotomy offered by such readings, Storey
 17 emphasizes the “paradoxical” nature of the
 18 circus: while it relies on order and technological
 19 perfection for a successful execution of its
 20 program, this very same program is character-
 21 ized by a “spectacular (if only) illusory coun-
 22 ter to that rationalism in the act of its perfor-
 23 mance” (82).

24 Railroads and traveling circuses are obvi-
 25 ous links to city-life, and thus explicit medi-
 26 ators of urban principles, but in what sense is
 27 a “country-doctor” connected to the topic of
 28 urbanity? Storey takes his clue from Michel
 29 Foucault’s conception of medicine as a disci-
 30 pline of not purely scientific nature, but as the
 31 conglomeration of a modern science together
 32 with so-called “subjugated knowledges.”
 33 Modern, scientific medicine is thus taken to
 34 originate in the metropole, while traditional
 35 forms of healing are connected with the coun-
 36 tryside. However, Storey identifies the treat-
 37 ments and “panaceas” sold by peddling mer-
 38 chants also as some kind of “urban” medicine,
 39 although these are clearly fraudulent products
 40 and have nothing to do with the accomplish-
 41 ments of a new, scientific, and in many ways
 42 extremely successful (though not almighty)
 43 medical profession. In the concluding analy-
 44 sis, Storey again tries to reconcile his individ-
 45 ual readings with his wish to “destabilize” the
 46 dichotomy between city and countryside. He
 47 claims to have succeeded in doing so by hav-
 48 ing shown how literary and scientific con-
 49 ventions in these works have also been “destab-
 50 ilized.” But it remains questionable whether a
 51 short story such as “The Romance of Sunrise
 52 Rock” by Mary Noailles Murfree really has a
 53 “self-consciously unsettled sense of literary
 54 genre” (100). It takes more than a scene with
 55 “ghostly hallucinations” of a character to turn
 56 a local-color story into a Gothic romance.

Storey’s general ability to “destabilize”
 the realistic representations of the narratives
 he has chosen to examine also shows itself in
 the last two chapters of the book, with a topi-
 cal focus on lynching and on utopian novels.
 When he talks about lynching, he does not
 primarily address racially motivated killings,
 but cites examples from Bret Harte, Hamlin
 Garland, and other regionalists. With a tale
 by Chesnut, the racial aspects of lynch-law
 are also being skirted, but this is not the em-
 phasis of the argument. The dichotomy he has
 identified is the one that opposes lynch-law
 as an archaic, frontier custom, to the work-
 ing out of a systematical, legal system, as part
 of the modernization in and through civiliz-
 ing urban environments. This chapter offers
 the most convincing analysis of an expression
 of modernity and the conflict between indi-
 vidual and “down-to-earth” solutions and the
 progressive systemization of the modern legal
 system. His main example, in Owen Wister’s
The Virginian, is a convincing reading of the
 clash of these two systems and their literary
 representations.

In the final chapter of the book, Storey’s
 ideas concerning the centrality of the rural-
 urban antithesis in American history and
 culture come to their fruition. Examining
 utopias by Ignatius Donnelly, William Bishop,
 Joaquin Miller, Henry Miller, William Dean
 Howells, and Edward Bellamy, he makes best
 use of the general historicity of utopian fic-
 tion, i.e. the indirect reference to the time
 when the novels were written. The examples
 Storey chose, are all “trying to imagine a
 landscape that is neither urban nor rural and
 somehow both” (161). According to his own
 admission, this is what he was trying to bring
 to the fore in his analyses; to regard “rural
 fiction as a way to read the presence of the
 urban in Gilded Age life” (170). Storey’s in-
 tention was to “destabilize” the boundaries
 between the two, and also to show how such
 a systematic deconstruction (without using
 the term) will also lead to a more “intricate
 picture of modernization.” Although some of
 his findings are not surprising, being already
 more or less explicitly discussed in the works
 he examines, his treatment of the moderniza-
 tion of the legal system, and also of the way
 utopias deal with the rise of a new American
 urban culture, certainly have the capacity to
 inspire further studies.

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