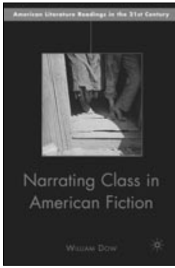

Narrating Class in American Fiction

By William Dow. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Hardback, 271 pp., $89.95.

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In examining the "narration and narrating" (15) of class in America's realist literature from 1850 to its social realist literature of the 1930s and 1940s, *Narrating Class in American Fiction* proffers what William Dow calls "a rethinking, reworking, and reformulation of class" (8) as a heuristic method for literary criticism on a par with those of race and gender today. Because many of the American writers discussed here also published nonfiction that complements their literary representations of the under- and working classes, Dow feels that they should be considered as having contributed to "the legacy of literary journalism, whose cultural interventions and inscriptions of class must be more clearly recognized." (15-16) A book, then, equally about canonized American literature *and* literary journalism, *Narrating Class in American Fiction* not only provides ample proof that any study of class, literary and journalistic alike, is unavoidably phenomenological in nature, but also counters existing claims from academics in both disciplines that the two genres are ideologically irreconcilable.

Dow builds his argument around the polemical stance that class should not to be taken as a "totalized structure" but rather as a "dynamic, discursive product of history" (219) that informs us less about a writer's political motivations than about the discourse that that writer uses to represent the socially disenfranchised of a given political economy. At the conclusion of his opening summary of how class has been perceived in philosophy and in literary criticism over the last century as the byproduct of these political and economic interrogations, Dow offers to view class as a literary aesthetic alongside of the more traditional definition as "an objective set of material conditions (or relations) that can be observed in society." (219) Literary representations of class, he claims throughout this study, are "most visible in [their] discursive and aesthetic effects," (16) with discourse being one of the best "means to access the way class becomes part of subjectivity: how it forms, in conjunction with race and gender, a discursive subject." (1) Given these theoretical parameters, Dow then proceeds to examine how Walt Whitman, Rebecca Harding Davis, Stephen Crane, Jack London, Jean Toomer, Meridel Le Sueur, Agnes Smedley, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Agee all adopt a "class vocabulary" in their imaginative and nonfiction writings that invokes the real language of experience to "bridge the abyss" (89) between their working-class subjects and their middle-class readers and to represent "a reality lived by others in the face of readership often far from such realities." (219)

Essentially relational like class itself, language more than politics lies at the heart of class representations in American literature, Dow argues. Democracy, for example, is less a "realizable mode of form of government" (18) than a classed body politic for Whitman, who endeavors to overcome national sectarianism with literary tropes that bind laborers and newsmen, poets, and immigrants. For London and Le Sueur, "class is a matter of a corporealized identity" (76, 141) based on "real experience as the legitimating source of narrative authority." (219) And if Harding Davis and Crane depict class through a language of performance that reproduces the social transformations responsible for growing urban class divisions at the turn of the century, Toomer, Hurston, and Smedley all view class in the opening decades of the twentieth century as a means to negotiate an identity, racial and sexual alike. Each of these writers, Dow posits, demonstrates that class is to be expressed "in language rather than in the material conditions of production," (8) and privileging the latter configuration alone in one's literary analysis of their work not only risks distorting that writer's relationship to his or her subject but also diminishes their capacity to represent the "truth value" of their subject's reality, no matter how harsh that life may seem to their middle-class readers. And while all literature engages with social nature in general, literary journalism in particular best puts these classed elements of aesthetic representation into relief, since writers position themselves here more transparently between the subject and the reader than they do in fiction.

Since most of these writers were "involved with journalistic writings that fused with their literary objectives" (2)—in effect, "problematizing … distinctions between literature and journalism" (97)—Dow includes at the end of each chapter a discussion of that writer's literary journalism and contribution to the debate over the literary merits of phenomenological writings. And it is here that readers of this journal may find the book most beneficial. Whitman, for example—who printed his famous preface to *Leaves of Grass* in two columns to make it appear like a news story—was not just a journalist in order to finance his poetic aspirations; rather, his many journalistic pieces provide "a blueprint for his class sympathies" (37) as explored in *Leaves of Grass*. A similar case concerns the novelist Crane, who wrote much of his literary journalism after his novellas *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *The Red Badge of Courage*, (66) disproving the widely accepted theory that a writer's journalistic efforts prepare him to become a novelist: "Crane's performative artistry [as Dow argues for *Maggie*] can help explain the complex class subtexts in his newspaper pieces of the 1890s." (65)

For Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* "is based on how an observer slides into his role as participant to justify his truth claims," (94) while his journalistic writings, "The Dignity of Dollars" (1900) and "Mexico's Army and Ours" (1914), "purport to tell the 'truth' while at the same time differentiating themselves from nonfiction, and, for London, remaking the relationship of truth to his ideological agenda." (97) As for Le Sueur,

> [H]er reportage/journalism [was] a catalyst for social change, bringing her readers the direct experience of injustice, poverty, and oppression. Yet, like [Dorothy] Day, Le Sueur also believed that the most compelling way to get her political ideas across was to use fictional techniques. Thus, she deployed scene setting, "lyricism," characterization, juxtaposition of contrasting images, tropic language, and reportorial realism in ways and degrees rarely found in conventional journalism. (154)

And finally, Agnes Smedley's "insistence immersion" (a term Dow describes earlier in the book to mean a writer's willing or unwilling immersion in an environment that he or she wants, through factual reporting and fictional representation, to change and not just to describe) demonstrates how documentary case-studies—"self-conscious 'ethnographies'"—like hers on radicalized working-class women have "address[ed] the relationships of their narrators to their subjects and readers." (14)

In their fiction, just as in their literary journalism, each of these authors sought to represent class via language rather than situation alone, thereby narrowing the epistemological gaps between writer-subject-reader. Class representations in literature, as in literary journalism, are not intended to be divisive but rather inclusive, and only by breaking down those class barriers between subject and reader through language can a writer hope to impress upon the upper and middle classes the need to improve social conditions of the poor and to respect the positions and "truth" values of the underprivileged. One way to accomplish such a feat, Dow proposes in his conclusion, is to "elevat[e] the genre of reality-based writings" (220) and thus narrow the existing divide between literary journalism and literary criticism:

> What are the consequences of documentary fiction and its claims of "truth" for literary studies? . . . What are the formal and political issues raised by literary journalism: namely, the problematics of capturing "realism," the desire for the objectivity of "experience," the dangers of manipulation and propaganda, the narrative problems inherent in the documentary synthesis of bringing together the culture in a comprehensible whole? (220)

The ability to actualize such a paradigm shift, Dow optimistically suggests, is within reach, and *Narrating Class in American Fiction* can be seen as one "literary" step, among the several "journalistic" studies today, toward that goal of drawing literature and journalism closer together.

Narrating Class in American Fiction is indeed a fine book, but not without its minor flaws, in particular the manner in which Dow structures several of his chapters. Chapter five on Le Sueur, for example, reads like two separate chapters fused together. After nearly twenty pages on *Salute to Spring*, which ends in a conclusion that we think is to this chapter, we are launched into another lengthy subchapter of twelve pages on her literary journalism. Like many in the book, this digression is not without interest. In it, Dow refutes Robert Boynton's claim that the public-private divide was initially bridged by these writers Dow discusses in this book and not, as Boynton claims, by the "close-to-the-skin" reporting of the New New Journalists. But this subchapter reads more like a separate article on Le Sueur's literary journalism than a conclusion to this chapter of the book or as a transition to the following two chapters on Hurston and Smedley and on Agee.

This criticism, it should be reiterated here, is minor in a work of such quality. *Narrating Class in American Fiction* responds confidently to the glaring need not only in literary studies for class-based analyses that moves beyond issues of capital and material production but also in literary journalism studies for textual criticism written by literary scholars that complements the work already done by journalism scholars. With a foot firmly planted in both disciplines, Dow sets out a path here that other literary scholars of journalistic nonfiction would be advised to follow.