

Reviews

Klaus Benesch, *Romantic Cyborgs: Authorship and Technology in the American Renaissance*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. 246 pages; ISBN 1-55849-323-9; \$37.50.

The main title of *Romantic Cyborgs* might at first sight (mis)lead potential readers to overlook the fact that Klaus Benesch's book thoroughly grounded in the literary works of a number of American Renaissance "bestsellers": Hawthorne, Poe, Melville and Whitman and the less widely known Rebecca Harding Davis. On that basis alone it should awaken the interest of US literature teachers. However, because technology – as an important factor for culture – is too often neglected in the context of understanding literature, this book deserves interest for bringing this fact to the fore.

Benesch uses the term "cyborg" – unusual in a nineteenth century context – to "realign discourses" on the interfaces of technology and authorship in antebellum American literature – revaluing amongst other standard conceptions, the inanimate above the usual emphasis in Romantic binary thinking on the values of the animate or nature.

Is it reasonable, enlightening or confusing, one might well ask, to introduce the concept "cyborg" to label "various transgression of the biological that readers of American Romanticism repeatedly encounter" and to "use this strikingly oxymoronic term is mean to designate a variety of meanings"? Whether this IS striking or not, I find it hard not to take issue with the "backdating" of a rather postmodernly inflected term like cyborg and whether this term suitably or usefully covers Hawthorne's "mechanician-turned-artist figures", "Poe's narrative machinery", "Melville's cyborgian scrivener" and the "vampirish forces of early capitalist production" of Rebecca Harding Davis.

However, to reread especially American writing from that period as less anti-machinist, anti-modernist, technophobic or even ambivalent about the material progress of industrialization than often assumed is a very reasonable project. Given the specific climate within which writers like those Benesch has chosen worked the general admiration and enthusiasm for progress in society at that time is frequently overlooked – as is the extent to which creative writing addressed or even incorporated new attitudes to the nature of machinery.

Benesch does not claim that writers wholeheartedly approved of mechanization but that the fact that technology encroached on the body can be shown to have been absorbed and expressed at deeper, poetic levels as well as accommodated as part of the material reality of book-making and –selling: the "tainting" spheres above which authors are at times mysteriously assumed to have soared]

The struggles of Melville to survive economically between international book pirating and his failure to cater to popular cultural demands with *Moby Dick*, should be well-known, but as an expression of a dominant cultural-industrial complex rather than a personal author tragedy requires a change of focus, though not a revolutionary one, given directions already taken by new historicists whose efforts to place writers in their proper social and cultural historical reality has helped uncover their awareness of changes in the literary trade and their willingness to adapt to survive.

Benesch, however, claims that studies of the economic conditions and demands of the marketplace, resulting from technologically advanced means of production, lost sight of the symbolism of the machine as well as the individual achievement of authors. Retreating from ideological directions of past readings Benesch offers to revalue and establish authorship as a modern ideology imbedded within an increasingly technology-driven framework.

Romantic Cyborgs may not present itself with flashy new theorizing but is justly described, by Benesch himself, by using the term discourse realignment, and is a solid piece of work with more emphasis on engaging theories than on deep readings of the texts. Benesch relies on well-trodden pastures where texts and theories are concerned (Leo Marx is unavoidable when rereading technology and literature in this period), but the focus on cyborg and authorship ideologies makes it a suitably refreshing of familiar texts.

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Hans Bak, ed. *Uneasy Alliance: Twentieth-Century American Literature, Culture and Biography*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004. Costerus New Series 150. 360 pp; ISBN 90-420-1611-6; \$91.00.

The essays in this volume have been written as a tribute to G.A.M. Janssens at the University of Nijmegen, who for more than thirty years has been a pioneer of American literature in the Netherlands. Of the twenty-one contributors to the volume, almost two thirds teach at universities in the Netherlands, and many of them are former students and colleagues of Professor Janssens', who has reason to be pleased and proud of the range and quality of the legacy collected in this volume. The editor, the prolific Hans Bak, has also provided an umbrella under which the many disparate essays can be seen, in his invocation of Professor Janssens' inspirational practice as both scholar and literary *aficionado*: "Together [these essays] testify to the ongoing pertinence of an approach to literature that is open, undogmatic, sensitive and sophisticated and that seeks to do justice to the complex interaction and uneasy alliance of literature, culture and biography in twentieth-century American writing." While many books of the *Festschrift* variety will tend to be uneven and problematically *ad hoc*, the essays in this collection, which range far and wide across the landscape of American literature and other cultural manifestations, are generally extremely well-