

American Literature in the Age of Mass Culture

NANCY BENTLEY, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870–1920* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2009), pp. 376, cloth, \$59.95.

For some time, the study of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been structured by the assumption that high culture was separated from mass culture by a “great divide.” According to this story, elite writers of the period watched the rise of new commercialized forms of entertainment and communication with alarm, fearing the capacity of these forms to fracture and disperse a unified public sphere. In *Frantic Panoramas*, Nancy Bentley complicates this account, arguing that relations between elite and popular cultures were far more tangled and uneven than scholars have previously acknowledged. She shows how high literature was drawn to the vertiginous energies of the emergent commercial culture even as it criticized the attendant changes in cultural perception, expressivity, and civic order. In doing so, she brings fresh insight to the era’s most well known authors while also providing a prehistory of contemporary debates about the fate of the literary in a world saturated with myriad forms of audiovisual media.

The period covered by *Frantic Panoramas* saw the rapid rise and proliferation of such mass cultural forms as the cinema, circuses, amusement parks and Wild West shows, burlesque, and the tabloid news. In their power to captivate large and diverse audiences, these commercial enterprises threatened to eclipse literature as a source of authority and a model for the bourgeois public sphere. Many of the era’s elite authors and social commentators saw the norms of public reason, which had been the provenance of high culture, dissolving as the public was increasingly drawn toward new forms of entertainment and sources of information. Much as these authors responded with a predictable combination of alarm and displeasure, *Frantic Panoramas* demonstrates that they also came to recognize the communicative possibilities of the new mass culture, absorbing its themes and structures into their work even as they sought to discourage readers from embracing its seductive power. Bentley explores the impact of these changes within four cultural projects: literary realism, African American letters, American pragmatism, and Native American intellectual life. She proposes that these diverse undertakings are unified by their attraction to the powers of reasoned analysis. As they contend with the inevitable appeal of the new mass culture, they register deepening incongruities between aesthetic reflection and liberal conceptions of public reason.

Bentley’s title comes from a scene in William Dean Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes* in which the protagonist, Basil March, confronts “the frantic panorama of New York” (Bentley 291). This is a fitting choice, given that Howells is a paradigmatic figure throughout the book. In Bentley’s analysis, Howells’s novels reflect the tensions between his distaste for the commercial sphere and his admiration for its ability to address a diverse public. He believed that realism, with its capacity to envision a unified social body, could serve as an antidote to the disturbing fragmentation and disunity of the public sphere. Although Howells was deeply critical of the values and aesthetics of the new mass culture, Bentley contends that he was also deeply engaged with its forms, eventually acknowledging that it might bring citizens together more effectively than high arts and literature. Howells used realism to uncover what rival cultural forms concealed and distorted. For example, Bentley observes that Howells, who condemned the tabloid coverage of divorce trials, includes the

representation of a lengthy and dramatic divorce in his novel *A Modern Instance*. Where novel and tabloid differ, she argues, is in the purpose of the representation. Howells does not seek to exploit the account of divorce for easy thrills but to help the discerning reader attain mastery over the distortions of mass culture that would equate divorce with entertainment. Juxtaposing Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* with P. T. Barnum's *Struggles and Triumphs*, Bentley proposes that, despite their differences, both authors fashioned their texts as handbooks for emulation. But where Barnum's version unabashedly celebrates his rise to success, Howells's story of upward mobility aims to expose its protagonist's poor taste. Howells seeks to educate the reader by inviting him or her to sympathize with Lapham, but only by disavowing identification with his crude desire for wealth and social capital.

Howells's concerns about mass culture were shared by many important African American authors of the period; however, their skepticism came from a rather different source: an awareness of its capacity to flood the world with degrading images of blackness. Black authors saw all too clearly how the minstrel show's unleashing of desire and impulse could easily bleed over into the violence of the lynch mob. As a result, they scrutinized mass culture with a greater sense of urgency than their white counterparts. The problem, as they saw it, was not that mass culture threatened to erode public reason, but that it magnified the troubled status of black people in the public arena. Charles Chesnutt shared Howells's belief in the power of realism to coalesce a civic imagination. However, he also recognized the racial limits of realist analysis. In *Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt shows how mass audiences are drawn to experiences of the real promised by wax museums, Wild West shows, and Old South scenes that were too often reliant on inflammatory images of blackness. As he saw it, the discourse of social fact and type endorsed by literary realism could not be completely divorced from the mass desire for these forms of racial realism. The problem of mass culture was thus not that it masked and obscured, but that it was too real, producing negative images of blackness that, in turn, became part and parcel of the social world. While Chesnutt excelled at producing realist plots and style, Bentley claims that such black authors as W. E. B. DuBois, Sutton Griggs, James Corrothers, and Pauline Hopkins rejected realism as overly restrictive, turning instead to romance as a way to articulate social knowledge. Within the domain of the fantastic and the counterfactual, these writers found that they could address the topic of race through substitutions and displacements in time and space.

The changes in perception and value that seemed to threaten literary realism provided the raw material for pragmatist philosophy. By prioritizing lived experiences over systemic thought and emphasizing the worldly verification of concepts, pragmatism made its proponents more receptive to the new mass culture than some of their peers. Bentley proposes that although no one associated with this philosophical school wrote about mass culture directly, the pragmatists were engaged in a complementary project that sought to radically expand what could count as public reason. William James's *Principles of Psychology*, for instance, takes sensory experience and pleasure as an index of pragmatic truth, exceeding the bounds of public meaning as it is defined by traditional literary culture. Bentley turns to DuBois to reveal the underside of the pragmatists' optimism about the possibility of shared public meaning. Like the pragmatists, DuBois was attentive to the significance of feeling and affect. He also believed that the African American masses possessed collective knowledge. But he asked how a public could be consolidated if black people were excluded from civil society. Bentley suggests that the fragmented and fissured structure of *Souls of*

Black Folk reflects DuBois's perception of the tensions between the literary dream of human equality and the brutality of existing historical realities.

For Native American authors and intellectuals of the period, mass culture presented a different set of challenges. Bentley notes that the culture industry emerged in tandem with loss of native sovereignty. As the diplomatic standing of native people vanished, representations of the Indian exploded in popular culture. In this context, Bentley shows how native intellectuals sought to conceive a "post-diplomatic expressivity." A scene from P. T. Barnum's *Struggles and Triumphs* illustrates how mass culture emerged in the wake of failed diplomacy. Barnum brags about an incident in which he cruelly exploited a delegation of Indian chiefs who were on their way home from meeting with Abraham Lincoln in Washington, DC. After inviting them to appear before an audience as honored guests, he took advantage of their ignorance of English by saying disparaging things in a tone that led them to believe he was expressing praise and admiration. Of course, his stunt allowed audiences to mock the chiefs as they sat there, oblivious to the insult. But Bentley argues that it also exposed and theatricalized the realities of U.S. Indian policy, which made a mockery of Indian efforts at diplomacy. She couples this episode with a speech delivered by Simon Pokagon at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbia Exposition, in which he recast the meaning of progress by showing its destructive consequences for his people. Although the context made it unlikely that he would be taken seriously, Bentley claims that his performance evoked the possibility that white and native people could possess a shared public meaning. Leaders like Standing Bear and Geronimo also grasped at this ideal, understanding that offering themselves as figures of mass publicity could function as a form of political currency, allowing them to express the interests of a given Indian nation and to articulate alternative understandings of justice. While these performances did little to help their people at the time, Bentley argues that they bequeathed an alternative sense of justice to later activist readers like Leslie Marmon Silko.

The emergence of mass culture meant something different again for the era's women writers. During this period, women entered the public sphere in unprecedented numbers, finding new forms of employment, visibility, and means of self-representation. Bentley argues that within literary realism, women characters provided opportunities to explore what it meant to be a subject in public. Henry James ends *The Bostonians* by banishing Verena Tarrant from public while simultaneously acknowledging that his characters live in a public world where the female image thrives and proliferates. Women authors who used realist methods, such as Constance Fenimore Woolson, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Murfree, Celia Thaxter, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, were disparagingly associated with local color or regionalism. In this context, many of the more accomplished regionalists turned to scientific methods as a means of securing their literary authority as well as observing and dissecting the social world. For an author like Kate Chopin, scientific self-reflection led not to detachment—as it did for many of her male contemporaries—but to a new awareness of the body and its sensations. Chopin saw potential in mass culture where others saw the threat of anarchy and delusion. Moving away from the rural scenes of her earlier work, stories like "A Pair of Silk Stockings" and "An Egyptian Cigarette" show how mass objects and experiences provide her characters with access to different states of consciousness. Where Howells feared the capacity of desire to eclipse intellectual discernment, Chopin acknowledges its potential to be publicly expressive and potentially communicative. Edith Wharton is another important figure in Bentley's study, an author who transformed the

feminized genre of domestic fiction by elevating analysis over sympathy, discipline over identification. Bentley claims that Wharton was a penetrating critic of mass culture while also being inspired by its energies. At a moment when film studios and amusement parks were exploiting the excitement of high-speed chases, explosions, and crashes, Wharton incorporated a very modern sense of risk into her fiction, the “possible crash” lurking just below the surface of social routine.

Frantic Panoramas is a masterful book, brimming with information and argument that make it as dizzying to read as the new mass culture it describes. Bentley is an astute critic who appreciates the complexity of her subjects, refusing to simplify for the purpose of streamlining an argument. At times the multidimensionality of her analysis gives the book a chaotic feel, but this is also a sign of depth and thickness. If *Frantic Panoramas* has a flaw, it is that it conceptualizes “mass culture” in such a broad and expansive way that it is hard to pin down. Bentley does offer a rather inchoate definition late in the book, where she describes mass culture as “a formation of commercial publics able to recognize and articulate experience that exceeded what was intelligible to the bourgeois public sphere (modeled as it was after a middle-class reading public)” (261). What she means by “a formation of commercial publics” is elusive. Over the course of the book, this formulation comes to signify so many different things—from new technologies and modes of communication and entertainment to styles of affect and perception—that it is easy to lose sight of a common thread that binds all of these readings together. And yet this desire to grapple with the myriad forces that put late-nineteenth-century literature on the defensive is also what accounts for the book’s richness and intricacy.

After reading *Frantic Panoramas* it is difficult to accept the premise of a “great divide” between elite and popular cultures in the binary terms that have guided so much of the scholarship on this period. In complicating these key terms, it offers new perspectives on the era’s major literary figures and aesthetic and philosophical concerns. But its significance extends beyond the decades named in its title, for it shows how the questions that provoked authors of this period are our own. By Bentley’s account, this period inaugurated a “post-literary” era that forever changed the relationship between literature and public discourse. *Frantic Panoramas* thus lends historical depth to the work of contemporary critics struggling to understand the status of shared public meaning in an environment saturated by mass cultural forms and to locate a place for literature within the social world.

RACHEL ADAMS, *Columbia University*

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