

## BOOK REVIEW

Augusta Rohrbach. *"Truth Stranger than Fiction": Race, Realism, and the U. S. Literary Marketplace*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. Xvi + 153 pages. \$49.95.

In *"Truth Stranger than Fiction": Race, Realism, and the U. S. Literary Marketplace*, Augusta Rohrbach argues for a major new interpretation of the origins of American literary realism. Traditional treatments of the subject by critics such as Richard Chase and Edwin Cady have linked classic high realism with the work of W. D. Howells in the 1870s and 1880s; more recently, Sharon M. Harris, Joyce Warren, and others have called for a redefinition that acknowledges its earlier origins in women's writings. Rohrbach locates the origins of realism earlier, too, but in a surprisingly overlooked genre: the slave narrative, which, with its "use of authenticating details, money as a signifier of personal suffering, . . . [and] the use of dialect and a frank treatment of the body" (xiv) anticipates the principal conventions of realist fiction. Moreover, practitioners of this "humanitarian realism," as Rohrbach calls it, shared with the writers of slave narratives both a high-minded belief in the social purposes of literature and a canny sense of the demands of an emerging literary marketplace that allowed them to "do well" as they went about the profitable business of "doing good."

The first two chapters examine this process of establishing authenticity in the pages of William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* and in popular slave narratives. Beginning with the advertisements in *The Liberator*, Rohrbach shows that typography, appeals to social conscience, and claims of truthfulness served to constitute an actual as well as an implied community of like-minded readers. The demand for verisimilitude and authenticity that this audience brought to its consumption of slave narratives in turn fuelled strategies of authorship that promoted realism: a focus on money as a material signifier of slavery within the narratives; and a nearly obligatory inclusion of the portraits that formed part of the authenticating frame of most slave narratives. As Rohrbach shows, these much-discussed portraits served not only to identify the former slave by inscribing "the black body in the black text," as Robert Stepto has argued, but to "mark the former slave as author" (31)—and, in the case of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and William Wells Brown, the author as celebrity. Particularly interesting are the examples Rohrbach discusses of lesser-known authors like Eleanor Eldridge or Thomas H. Jones, who, unlike Douglass, emphasized rather than obscured the financial motives for their narratives and appealed directly for sympathy and aid; and the white authors such as C. G. Parsons who sought to cash in on the form by writing imitation slave narratives.

The new "market for the real" (50) created by the

popularity of slave narratives also encouraged the rise of authors such as Rose Terry Cooke. Cooke's use of dialect, authentic details, and a "frank treatment of the body" (56) comprises her humanitarian realism, according to Rohrbach, and her stories of abusive marriages, such as the horrific "The Ring Fetter," inevitably recall the abuses of slavery to readers trained in the conventions of slave narratives. Similarly, Cooke's late allegorical story "A Hard Lesson," whose protagonist breaks out in black spots until he is perceived as a black man, recalls the slave narrative in questioning the nature of racial identity. Although Cooke, the subject of nearly a dozen articles over the past ten years, is less obscure than *"Truth Stranger than Fiction"* seems to imply, Rohrbach shows that Cooke's reputation has suffered because of her didacticism and use of direct address, strategies for which modern critics have failed to develop the kind of sophisticated reading practices now applied to slave narratives. Like Cooke, William Dean Howells, the subject of Chapter 4, was keenly aware of his popularity and its constitutive elements, as Rohrbach shows through a study of photographs of the public and private Howells: the public Howells at his writer's desk versus the private Howells seated beneath a tree or pictured without his mustache; the impatient, lackadaisical youthful diarist versus the careful middle-aged businessman committed to keeping accurate accounts of his authorship and travels, accounts that Rohrbach interprets in specific, informative detail. Rohrbach shows convincingly that, like the authors of the slave narratives, Howells consciously created a persona to authenticate both his position as author and the realism of his works. More information about whether and where the photographs of the poses that Rohrbach describes as the private Howells circulated in the marketplace would be helpful, however. Periodicals of the time and popular books such as *Poets' Homes: Pen and Pencil Sketches of American Poets and Their Homes* (1879) show that both kinds of photographs of Howells circulated in the literary marketplace; for example, a photo feature in a 1902 *Harper's Weekly* contains both the iconic public author-at-desk pictures of Howells and seemingly private pictures of Howells at leisure, lying hatless under a tree—a fact that complicates but does not invalidate Rohrbach's point.

*"Truth Stranger than Fiction"* provides a final example of the roots of realism in slave narratives in its provocative and exciting reading of *The House of Mirth*. Defining the tragic mulatta figure through its four principal characteristics, including extraordinary physical beauty, a divided nature, an "unsuitability for slavery, and an inevitable death" (101), Rohrbach interprets Lily Bart as a tragic mulatta figure and the novel as a type of race fiction. Reading Lily in this fashion illuminates a number of

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4 Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," 171.

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the novel's features, including the inevitability of Lily's death; readers are invited to see traces of the slave auction in the tableau vivant and to equate, as Selden does, Lily's sapphire bracelets with slave manacles. For Rohrbach, "Edith Wharton is also a race writer," one whose purpose is to "record and criticize" (108) and whose novels "turn on the kind of cultural code switching that often formulates the most crucial aspects of identity in what is usually considered race writing" (113). In conflating race and class, or in coding race in the language of class, Wharton addresses but leaves open the question of whether identity is inherent or socially constructed, itself a familiar concern of tragic mulatto and mulatta stories. That Wharton strategically analyzed this "racial topoi" (110) as part of her shrewd assessment of the marketplace and deliberately "turned to this style of representation" (104) to engage middle- or working-class readers who might otherwise be put off by the rarefied details of Lily's plight is simply stated as a fact, although evidence of her awareness of these forms is not established. Yet documenting Wharton's actual knowledge of such texts may be beside the point, for the real focus is the ways in which Wharton uses this trope of race to talk about class, and, equally significant, the ways in which contemporary critics like Rohrbach use both current discourses of and historical perspectives on race to talk about Wharton. Reading the well-researched, insightful, and always interesting "*Truth Stranger than Fiction*" resembles nothing so much as watching the missing pieces of a puzzle drop into place to reveal a newly altered and strangely exciting picture in place of what one has always known, whether the original portrait bears the familiar lineaments of Edith Wharton or the roughly sketched and lopsided outlines of American realism.

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