

ULLA HASELSTEIN, ANDREW GROSS, and MARYANN SNYDER-KÖRBER, eds., *The Pathos of Authenticity: American Passions of the Real* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2010), 294 pp.

*The Pathos of Authenticity: American Passions of the Real* is a superb collection of essays from a conference in 2007 at the John F. Kennedy Institute at the Freie Universität Berlin, edited by Ulla Haselstein, Andrew S. Gross, and MaryAnn Snyder-Körber. Dealing mostly with the post World War II period, it is a rich and indispensable volume of literary and cultural essays by mainly German scholars (with the addition of three Americans) that I hope receives a wide audience in Europe and beyond.

The subject of authenticity has had a history in American studies going back, as the editors point out, to Lionel Trilling's 1972 *Sincerity and Authenticity*, based on his Norton Lectures at Harvard. There, Trilling posits a turn from an ideal of "sincerity," where the feelings are congruent with the expected decorum of social expression, to a later mode of "authenticity" in the Romantic period, in which the true self, the inner self, is in rebellion against the limiting function of society. That Trilling was one of my teachers when I was an undergraduate at Columbia had, I think, nothing to do with my own subsequent interest in the subject, but who knows? I remember reading *Sincerity and Authenticity* in the early eighties with admiration, but also thinking that we were running on rather different tracks. The editors call these two approaches to authenticity the subjective and the objective, and I was clearly in the latter, as I focused my attention on the relationship between aesthetic forms, material objects, and a civilization dominated by the machine, positing a historical turn from a culture of imitation in the late nineteenth century to a twentieth-century culture in which the values of authenticity prevailed in moral and aesthetic terms. When I ventured to write *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940*, the cut-off date was, in my own mind, at least, provisional, with plans to carry the subject forward at a later time. Now, seeing the work gathered here, I am struck by the new and stimulating angles taken by the contributing scholars, whose work has been, quite properly, generated along different axes than my own and Trilling's, not least because it deals largely with the contemporary period.

Put another way, these essays are largely concerned with American culture post-Holocaust and even post 9/11. In fact, the reverberations of these two historical events (so different in scale and meaning) inform in one way or another nearly all of the essays in this volume, demonstrating the malleability of the concept of authenticity yet at the same time demonstrating its centrality to an understanding of post World War II culture, even in its multidimensionality. But editorial efforts to structure the multiplicity of American culture during these years can be difficult if not suspect: if Modernism, as the editors suggest, was marked by a nostalgia for authenticity, then postmodernism (after 1960, let's say) is marked by a culture in which everything is assumed to be false, fake, pseudo; meanwhile, the period after 9/11, it is proposed, is characterized by the traumatic end of irony, and the end of postmodernism. This division is certainly neat and therefore appealing; but surely the postwar period is far more complexly inter-layered than this schema suggests, and an argument could be made for the simultaneity of nostalgia, irony, and trauma. In another effort to impose order, the editors have divided their contributions into five categories: "Authentic Objects-Real things"; "Trauma"; "Ethics of Authenticity/Authentic Ethnicity"; "The Pathos of Religious Experience"; and "Authenticity and Autobiography," and these categories are useful, though in some cases the placement of essays seems somewhat arbitrary.

But let's accept that any editorial order, in a set of diverse papers coming out of a conference, will be something of a rhetorical gesture, and the reviewer is as challenged as the editors to find a better way of presenting this material. So let me say, more factually,

that nine of the fourteen essays deal with contemporary fiction, framed within the problematics of authenticity; the others deal variously with material culture, visual culture, and religious and philosophical trends. What does strike me, looking at these as a whole, is two major themes. The first, we might say, is the persistence of trauma throughout this long period from the end of World War II through the decade after 9/11, when the search for authenticity is distinguished by an obsession with objects, with things that connect us with the past and with one another. This subject is dealt with in different ways in Bill Brown's post-9/11 meditation on "the Lost Object"; in Barbara Tischleder's wide-ranging essay on Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*; in MaryAnn Snyder-Körber's Barthesian exploration of the NY Times series of portraits of Twin Towers victims; and in Erika Doss's adroit examination of security narratives emerging out of "Terrorism Memorials."

The other major strain in the collection revolves around the issue of authenticity and ethnicity, which arises during the post-War years in terms of the valorization of ethnic experience that emerges in the writings of new ethnic writers who are establishing a vocal presence on the grounds of their 'authentic' otherness; and it comes through in the irony and disguise, the caricatures and self-caricatures of ethnicity that have been an equal part of this cultural awakening. Thus Catrin Gersdorf deals with ethnic and culinary culture in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meat*; Sabine Broeck explores the ambiguities of whiteness in Anthony Giardina's *White Guys*, anchoring her analysis in a sophisticated sociological matrix; Ruth Mayer deals with narratives of blackness in Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing* and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*, showing how they both invoke and dispel claims of authenticity; Ulla Haselstein examines James Welch's *The Heart Song of Charging Elk* as a complex revision, an "alternative version" of Neihardt's classic *Black Elk Speaks*; Andrew S. Gross brilliantly explores John Berryman's self-creation as an "Imaginary Jew" as an act of ethnic imitation, seen in relation to the antisemitism of Pound and Eliot and also in relation to contemporaneous theories of prejudice in Bettelheim and Janowitz.

The volume concludes with two more general essays on aspects of authenticity in contemporary religious behavior (Gary Lease) and in the philosophical pursuit of liberal authenticity (Gunter Leypoldt's acute analysis of Rorty and Fish). And these are followed by two pieces that act as a powerfully ironic coda to the volume: Peter Schneck's penetrating study of the "fakeness" of JT Leroy's fictional autobiographies, and Hanjo Berressem's study of Brett Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park*, in which authorship enters an endless loop of self-reference and accident, textual creation and autobiography.

Clearly the issue of authenticity, in its multifaceted manifestations, is still very much with us, defining our sensibilities and our realities. And clearly we have not-pace Roger Rosenblatt's pronouncement following 9/11 that henceforth irony is dead-come into some new post-ironic world on the other side of it. Irony may indeed be our only sanity. And for this I offer as evidence a passage from Jonathan Franzen's recent *Freedom*, in which the author's hapless and angry hero is kept awake at night by an existential angst that seems definitive of our time:

This fragmentation. Because it's the same problem everywhere. It's like the internet, or cable TV-there's never any center, there's no communal agreement, there's just a trillion little bits of distracting noise. We can never sit down and have any kind of sustained conversation, it's all cheap trash, the authentic things, the honest things are dying off. Intellectually and culturally, we just bounce around like random billiard balls, reacting to the latest ransom stimuli.

To which his buddy randomly replies, "There's some pretty good porn on the internet."

Philadelphia

Miles Orvell