American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions. Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby, eds. New York: Columbia UP., 2012. p/bk 400 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-15617-2. Price $35.00.

American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions is an ambitious volume. It seeks to redress the longstanding assumption that literary aesthetics is antithetical to political considerations, while at the same time exploring this argument through essays on a wide array of canonical American authors, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry James, Hart Crane, Ralph Ellison, and Philip Roth. Tying these diverse authors together is the central claim that formalism does not preclude a cultural perspective on literature. The introduction by Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby opens with an attempt to contain the notoriously vague topic of aesthetics at the heart of this claim. What comes through most clearly in this initial effort to frame the collection is that previous models - whether dialectical (Adorno, Jameson), ahistorical (the New Critics), or deconstructionist (Walter Benn Michaels, Wai-chee Dimock) - are incapable of satisfying the need for an interpretive methodology that integrates aesthetic concerns. Although Weinstein and Looby make a good case for the inability of previous authorities to address their concerns, they shy away from proposing a unified aesthetic theory of their own. Instead, they leave it to the heterogamous essays that follow to illustrate the rich possibilities that have begun to emerge in the wake of ideology critique.

Many of the essays in this collection are excellent stand-alone studies of the authors in question, and deserve to be read for that merit alone. Whether and to what degree they help the reader to appreciate the state of aesthetics in American literary studies or provide new avenues for this kind of interpretation is much less certain. In most cases, individual essays take what has become the traditional author + problematic approach that tends to skirt (rather than address) aesthetic questions. To take one of the finest essays in the collection as an example, Dorothy Hale's essay on Henry James examines the relationship between subjectivity and James' defense of "characterological autonomy" on aesthetic grounds. In contrast to Fredric Jameson's claim that James' novels exhibit an ideological mirage of the free subject, Hale convincingly argues that "James' use of point of view bestows upon [his characters] a full subjectivity indistinguishable from our

own." (238) The application of aesthetics to problems of subjectivity is interesting and worthwhile, although in the end it is not clear what this methodology contributes to the development of a broader aesthetic for American literature. Should the Jamesian representation of interiority and "characterological autonomy" be taken as indicative of a central problem within American literature; and if so, in what way?

Taken as a whole, the essays in *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions* leave unanswered key questions about the boundaries between canonical literary studies and other fields that also traditionally address aesthetic concerns. Some of the essays deal with non-canonical figures in American literature, but none addresses the role of minor literature in the establishment of canons of taste. Likewise, several essays incorporate different media into their discussions, and yet the reader does not get a sense of the aesthetic differences (if any) between these media and literary texts. Perhaps most significantly, the volume as a whole does not make clear the role of philosophy in its reconsideration of aesthetics. Many of the essays deploy some kind of philosophical or theoretical framework for their discussion, but the collection does not provide a systematic analysis of the conceptual history of aesthetics. Admittedly, this would be a difficult task for a single volume, but it also indicates the depth and complexity of the problem of literary aesthetics today, a depth that gives the collection much of its value.

The essay that probably comes closest to providing a general outline for a new literary aesthetics is Nancy Bentley's "Warped Conjunctions: Jacques Rancière and African American Twoness." Her focus on Rancière allows her to take full account of the history of aesthetics that Rancière builds into his own theory. His claim that perception (literally aesthesis) creates the conditions of possibility for the cultural forces he calls "the political" provides a solid foundation from which to assess the relationship between aesthetic representations in literature, and the political framework in which characters and other elements of literary form interact. (8) Bentley uses Rancière's philosophical program to reflect directly on the shifting state of American literary studies. If a renewed concern with aesthetics needs to avoid ideology critique and abstract formalism, then we are left with the need for a broadly interlocking set of approaches to the question of aesthetics.

In the afterword Charles Altieri brings up many of these points, but in the process he perhaps dismisses too hastily the volume's extraordinary merit as a barometer of the revived interest in aesthetic questions. This fact alone makes this collection an invaluable read for students of American literature.

Works Cited

Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics.* London: Continuum, 2004. Print.

Wilson Kaiser
Edward Waters College