

Miles Orvell. **The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940.** Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989. Pp. xxvi + 382. Foreword by Alan Trachtenberg, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$37.50 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

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If the phrase "the real thing" reminds you at once of the old Coke ad and (after a moment) of a Modernist slogan, then you will immediately see the point of this book. Miles Orvell casts his study of American culture along the "dialectic between authenticity and imitation" to write what he calls "a history of cultural forms." Orvell argues that the concept signaled by the phrase "the real thing" is central to nineteenth and twentieth century American culture, but that an important shift occurred around 1900. Whereas the nineteenth century "culture of imitation" celebrated replicas of all sorts, a "culture of authenticity" developed around the end of the century in reaction to mainstream culture, establishing the aesthetic vocabulary of modernism. The genesis of this "counterthrust" was partly the need to replace outworn aesthetic conventions, but it also was a response to the changing technological environment, and an inquiry into the meaning of the machine, through forms that "emphasized underlying structures, fragmented shapes, and detailed textures." From the scientific world flowed a growing realization of uncertainty and instability; caught between "the recognition of chaos and the dream of order," the artist and intellectual gave birth to the "modernist culture of authenticity, . . . with its consuming effort to restore contact with real things," in a way that recognized the new scientific reality.

Orvell elucidates this cultural dynamic by combining "high" and "low" cultural forms across literary, visual, and material genres, to reach what he calls a "systemic understanding" of American culture. The result is a book that synthesizes an impressive range of material, from Victorian parlors and Sears catalogues to Frank Lloyd Wright, Henry James and James Agee (the twentieth century range is decidedly along the "high" end of the spectrum). The book's three-part structure follows the before-and-after pattern of the argument. Orvell opens with Part One, a preliminary chapter on that "touchstone and inspiration" for twentieth century writers and artists, Walt Whitman, whose reinvention of poetry took as its central metaphor the new technology of photography. Parts Two (on the nineteenth century) and Three (on the twentieth) are organized along a parallel of triads: first material culture, "architecture and design and household furnishings"; then photography, as standing midway between material concreteness and the image-making art of literature; and finally literature, "because writers have characteristically articulated the concerns of society with sensitivity and due complexity."

Part Two, "A Culture of Imitation," opens with a discussion, in Chapter 2, of the Victorian's "hieroglyphic world," the dense system of decorative signs that characterized American middle and upper classes during the decades following the Civil War, when the search for higher status meant the purchase and display

of machine-made consumer goods that imitated higher-priced handmade goods. Chapter 3 demonstrates how the same ethic of imitation was followed in photography, then understood as illusory, presenting not reality itself but a deliberate and consciously shaped simulacrum which was intended to represent or typify reality. Chapter 4 deals with the debate over literary Realism in the 1890s, with particular attention to Henry James, William Dean Howells, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane, through an insightful discussion of the problem of representation as it moved from the studio to the street.

Part Three, "Inventing Authenticity," turns to the twentieth century, with its growing sense of disconnection between the senses and the "real world" of science, technology and factory production. In Chapter 5, Orvell follows the response to this by designers, particularly Gustav Stickley of the Arts and Crafts movement; by the architects Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, in their efforts to do "thing through things" and create a fusion of science and art; and Lewis Mumford, the design critic who attempted to mediate between an idealized past of craft and essential form, and a future of mechanized efficiency. Orvell details both the survival of the craft ideal, and its subordination to a marketplace dependent on planned obsolescence. In this climate it was the artists whose search for "authenticity" was less trammelled by the forces of commerce. In Chapter 6, Orvell focuses on photography, following the new approach initiated at the turn of the century by Alfred Stieglitz, who frankly accepted and exploited the camera's authenticity as a machine rather than a facsimile of "normal" vision. As a machine, the camera seemingly could represent a reality more intense, more authentic; this goal remained consistent with the scientific and optical way of seeing that Stieglitz pioneered, to the "objective" mode that sought to document—or expose—the social reality of the 1930s, as in the work of Walker Evans. Chapter 7 follows a parallel in literary art, from William Carlos Williams's effort to restore contact with reality through the materiality of words, to John Dos Passos's "reinvention of Whitman" in the trilogy *U.S.A.*, to James Agee's effort towards a total reproduction of reality. Literature and photography come together in Orvell's extended discussion of Agee's and Evans's collaborative work, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), in a fascinating examination of the tension between words and images in their power to define the "authentic."

Orvell closes with an epilogue that engages the demise of the "real thing" in the "junkyard" of postmodernism, which celebrates artifice and irony even while the pursuit of authenticity continues in the popular culture taste for crafts, "organics," and (mass-produced) "natural" products. Orvell's emphasis, however, remains throughout on the producers of high culture; he focuses, for instance, on Evans's attempts to *reproduce* the "antiworld of folk commerce," not on the "antiworld" itself, nor the ideology which made it seem so peculiar a source of authenticity. Orvell offers an essentially depoliticized view of the events he discusses, as when he positions the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in the 1920s as an act of "nostalgia" for the preindustrial past, turning it into "a museum of crafts and social harmony for the edification of the industrial urban public" by a culture anxious to take stock of its disappearing past (p. 196). Compare this with Jackson Lears's pointed treatment of the same event, found in the important 1988 volume edited by J.S. Becker, *Folk Roots, New Roots*;

Lear highlights the implicit ethnocentrism in this, and other, creations of an imagined homogeneous Anglo-Protestant past, in the same decade that saw nativist agitation and restriction of immigration.

While Orvell does not focus specifically on folk objects, this book does provide a detailed and wide-ranging discussion of the circumstances which led to a nostalgic idealization of the American past and the motivations for labeling folk items as valuable. His discussion of the process underlying their valuation will be of interest to folklorists and to students of the emergence of an "American" culture, who may wish to follow through some of the political and ideological implications suggested by Orvell's predominantly aesthetic treatment.

Janet Egleson Dunleavy and Gareth W. Dunleavy. **Douglas Hyde: A Maker of Modern Ireland.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Pp. xii + 475, bibliography, index, photographs, illustrations. \$35.99 cloth.

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Considering their subject matter, biographies of Douglas Hyde (1860-1949), Irish folklorist, poet, playwright, essayist, professor of literature and first president of Ireland, cannot fail to be interesting to students of Irish folklore, history, literature and politics. And the fact that Hyde's life was intertwined with an era of cultural revival and nationalism which spawned movements such as Home Rule, the Land League, the Gaelic League and the Irish Literary Theater, makes chronicles of his life and times worthwhile reading for all folklorists interested in the interrelationship of nationalism, land, language, and culture.

Hyde, who grew up in the West of Ireland's County Roscommon as a member of the Anglican Protestant Ascendancy, spent much of his boyhood socializing with his lower class Irish-speaking neighbors who introduced him to the Gaelic language and oral traditions. This early exposure to native Irish language and lore significantly affected his life's work. He was the first to publish collections of Irish folklore in Gaelic and he wrote poems and plays in Gaelic. He was dedicated to establishing Gaelic (alongside English) as an official language of Ireland. To Hyde, Irish culture and language were inextricably linked. He felt that the Irish language was the key to Irish heritage and that the imminent extinction of the language would mean the loss of generations of oral tradition. He further believed that if the Irish people were educated about their heritage and made to feel proud of it, they would develop a sense for a unique Irish identity (lost when English rule imposed the English language and customs upon Ireland), which would help them achieve nationhood and the capability of Home Rule.

The authors' rendition of Hyde's life is a rather detailed one which includes a study of Hyde's intellectual and psychological development as an adolescent. On the basis of the diaries which he began to keep in his early teens, and whose entries were sometimes in English and sometimes in Gaelic (and sometimes in