



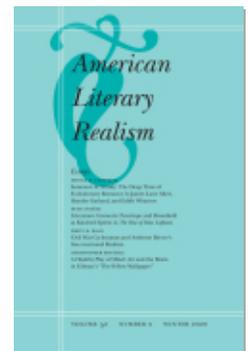
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Danger and Vulnerability in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Crash and Burn by Jennifer Travis (review)

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(Review)

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As a committed apologist for the agrarian tradition (citing Aldo Leopold and Wendell Berry in his afterword), Beers is concerned with honoring the working relationships people have with the land that he believes offers the “best chance for a rewarding and fulfilling life.” Perhaps overly idealistic, Beers’ sentiments nonetheless invite environmental humanists to take a closer look at the role such a way of life can play in mitigating the Californication that has come to characterize much of the U.S. West and the nation at large. In doing so, we’re reminded of the power that literature can have in reshaping the ways we think, talk, and act about the spaces and places we call home.

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Danger and Vulnerability in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Crash and Burn. By Jennifer Travis. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2018. 173 pp. Cloth, \$90.00.

In *Danger and Vulnerability in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Jennifer Travis illuminates the ways in which nineteenth-century Americans formulated their ideas about personal and collective vulnerability and risk. She explores the interrelationship of progress and technology, while considering how men and women perceived elements of danger in the world they inhabited, dangers intensified by their experience of speed, precarity, and an increasingly mechanized world. As Americans sought greater mobility, which they associated with autonomy and saw symbolized by the railroad and later by the automobile, they also developed related fears of injury, both physical and emotional, that “fanned the anxiety” of those who rode these conveyances or who read about disasters.

Over the course of five chapters, Travis examines fiction and non-fiction prose by Southworth, Spofford, Chopin, Glasgow, Dreiser, Crane, and DuBois. To define the formulation of risk and to enhance her commentary on both literary and popular writing, Travis incorporates newspaper accounts of train crashes and urban conflagrations as well as insurance adjusters’ analyses of the effects of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. She discusses the emergence of tort law and its demand for accountability, explicating the ways that developments in statistical analysis supported concepts of accountability and determined differing valuations of human life and loss. Travis extends her discussion to highlight the ways in which attitudes toward vulnerability affected social policy, especially during times of disaster. She demonstrates how the most vulnerable paid the price of society’s

acceptance of “creative destruction,” placing emphasis on rebuilding and renewal despite human cost and dislocation, a pattern that she traces into the twenty-first century in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Sensitive to the ways in which gender influences attitudes toward and responses to danger and risk, Travis analyzes representations of train engineers and fire fighters (both almost exclusively male) as they assume, at least for a time, heroic stature, defying danger and risking life or debilitating injury to save others. In contrast, as women ventured beyond the domestic sphere, their interactions with modern transportation expose them to dangers that emphasized their vulnerabilities and lack of control, not only in the public sphere but in their domestic relations. Race, too, creates a dividing line between heroic esteem and public rejection, an issue that Travis foregrounds in her reading of Crane’s “The Monster” and in DuBois’ challenge to racist statistical analysis and his rejection of such statistical assumptions in “The Comet.”

Throughout the volume, Travis considers how writers give voice to cultural insecurities and how individuals and social groups respond to them. She closes by suggesting that “how we recognize our shared and particular vulnerabilities will be a final measure of our collective futures.” Overall, this is an insightful and informative analysis accompanied by a useful bibliography. In some places, multiple references to other scholars’ work unnecessarily distance the reader from Travis’ own sound insights. More attention to editing and to reviewing galleys would have produced a more polished volume.

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Mark Twain and Philosophy. Edited by Alan H. Goldman. New York: Roman & Littlefield, 2017. 264 pp. Paper \$19.95.

The conversation between philosophy and literature is interesting and often insightful even if it sometimes can be a difficult straddle. When I submitted what was ultimately published as *The Pluralistic Philosophy of Stephen Crane* (1993), the editor of the first press returned my manuscript saying it was “insufficiently literary”; a second press said, in effect, the opposite. So Goldman and his colleagues are to be commended for an insightful volume of fifteen essays that embraces both poles of the philosophy-literature dialogue.

Goldman’s collection begins with a reprinting of Jonathan Bennett’s seminal and probing examination of “The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn.” Bennett’s piece has sparked lots of controversy and interesting comment—it also has had legs. It first appeared in *Philosophy* some forty plus years ago!