

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 43

Issue 1 *Engaging the Pastoral: Social, Environmental, and Artistic Critique in Contemporary Pastoral Literature*

Article 23

February 2019

Ilai Rowner. *The Event: Literature and Theory*. U of Nebraska P, 2015.

Dane Stalcup

Wagner College, dane.stalcup@wagner.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>

 Part of the [Continental Philosophy Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [German Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Stalcup, Dane (2018) "Ilai Rowner. *The Event: Literature and Theory*. U of Nebraska P, 2015.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 1, Article 23. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2078>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Ilai Rowner. *The Event: Literature and Theory*. U of Nebraska P, 2015.

Abstract

Review of Ilai Rowner. *The Event: Literature and Theory*. U of Nebraska P, 2015. xv + 311 pp.

Keywords

review; theory; event

Ilai Rowner. *The Event: Literature and Theory*. U of Nebraska P, 2015. xv + 311 pp.

Marcel Proust's narrator in *Time Regained* loses himself in the streets of Paris one night during World War I as an air raid carried out by enemy forces darkens the city. As this violent event alters the atmosphere of the capital and shocks its residents, Proust's narrator also observes another event, the Baron de Charlus's willing participation in an act of sadomasochism in a brothel occupied by other men of esteem. This prohibited sexual occurrence would not take place without the distraction of the air raid. Charlus's fulfillment of violent desire depends on the historical happening. This same balance emerges in Proust's literary rendering of these incidents, according to Ilai Rowner in *The Event: Literature and Theory*. Rowner argues that Proust's narrative relies on a rhythmic equivalency between the two acts: the destructive bursts of sound from the air raid synthesize with the violent sounds of pain and pleasure in the brothel. Violence from above becomes indistinguishable from the violent beats of sadomasochism below.

However, Rowner suggests that neither the air raid nor the brothel scene alone constitutes the literary event in modern literature. Rather, the literary event in Proust, as in Louis-Ferdinand Céline, T. S. Eliot, and Marguerite Duras, among others, occupies this in-between space where two happenings enter a plane of indistinguishability, a notion Rowner borrows from Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, among other texts. The rhythm of the text is therefore indistinguishable from the rhythm of the observable events it depicts. The literary event is "the intersection between the real and words in a continual state of potentiality" (Rowner 189). Moreover, such an event arises as the reader engages with the text. Drawing heavily from twentieth-century critical theory, Rowner thus positions the liminal space between writing and reading as the condition that prefigures literature itself.

The Event offers a series of elegant analyses of textual occurrences in which discernable events, such as the murder in the café in Duras's *Moderato Cantabile*, become indistinguishable from the actions and words of characters, such as the affair between Duras's Anne and Chauvin. Rowner explores how actions and their textual representation dissolve into other actions and words by way of an author's style. The literary event emerges from this stylistic dissolve, as the reader observes how one occurrence finds its double in another occurrence. Incidents in a text evaporate into a liminal zone of potential, rather than actual, happening. The literary event thus forms from a place of possibility; it is the haunting of a tangible incident by its double, its potential occurrence. Rowner adopts the latter concept from Jacques Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy* and "A Certain Impossible Possibility." In fact, Rowner references modern critical thought, from Martin Heidegger to Maurice Blanchot, Derrida, and Deleuze, throughout his conception of the event. As such, Rowner structures his own event—his book—around a series of chapters

that balance, but also blend, close readings of twentieth-century literature with impressive, if at times cumbersome, discussions of modern critical theory.

Additional analyses of several classic works provide examples of alternative literary happenings. For example, in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter*, Rowner identifies authorial style as a literary event. In this letter, a fictional scholar of the seventeenth century abandons his intellectual pursuits as he realizes that words inadequately express logic and meaning. Chandos's epiphany is the first event; the second event is another realization that a potential, yet unseen body of work resides within the scholar's powers. Chandos's abandoned work and its double—this possible, but nonetheless uncreated work—disappear into each other. Hofmannsthal's stylistic formulation of this disappearance becomes the event of the letter: "literary style simultaneously captures and generates imperceptible movements of being that remain senseless" (x). Via a reading of Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* and *The Book to Come*, Rowner observes that such events also prefigure modern literature. As Orpheus turns to look at Eurydice, he loses her forever and, having failed, disappears into myth itself. Yet he affirms the essence of poetry as he leaps into the unknown, allowing poetic language to become a place of un-seeable, un-hearable possibility. Orpheus's night in Hades in search of Eurydice now mutates into an eternal night of literature in a mystic void. The evaporation of the artist into pure abstraction is the myth's event. In Homer, Ulysses survives the Sirens' music because, as Rowner suggests, their song was always impossible to hear. The music's movement is an ongoing cycle towards its beginning; the song is a theoretical abstraction of the possibility of music rather than something one hears. Homer's narrative is a "never-ending navigation toward the inaccessibility of the song" (92). Song evaporates into the text as the event of music's potential unbecoming dissolves into Homer's poetic fabric.

The event operates through a cycle of encounters between sameness and difference, a notion Rowner supports through Blanchot, but also through a reading of Derrida and his philosophy of the coexistence of presence and absence. Yet Rowner most vividly bolsters his theory of the event through the possibility of multiple virtual differences always in motion, as conceptualized by Deleuze. The event is the convergence of these virtual differences, of "language and bodies, corporeal and incorporeal, words and things" (127), as in Duras and Proust, but also Céline's *Fable for Another Time*, where sexual violence at the street level again merges with an aerial assault over Paris during World War II. Such is the event in Eliot's "Little Gidding," in which another air raid morphs into the apparition of a dead author. Like Proust's narrator, the poem's speaker beholds this occurrence with simultaneous marvel and dread as he meanders through the desolate, diverging streets of London, the geographical equivalence of the poem's narrative development. In Proust, Eliot, and beyond, layers of text, flesh, violence, and

ambience simultaneously decompose and regenerate into new literary entities of unending potential. *The Event* challenges readers to disappear into unknown regions of literature. Rowner asks that we, scholars and students of literary theory as well as lovers of literature, reconsider the very idea of what happens. For that which does not happen might actually be the event.

Dane Stalcup
Wagner College