suaded not only by Anderson’s arguments, but also by her example. Nevertheless, as an instance of literary study at a time when people, especially young people, read less and less imaginative literature, the book gives me pause. It is certainly true that my own graduate school experience was frustrating because it so often went without saying or arguing that liberalism was craven and conservatism, evil, but it was more frustrating because we so seldom discussed literature as such. If Anderson persuades literary theorists to agree that we are free as human beings to reason toward a better understanding of things, perhaps the first topic of conversation could be a literary one.

Shakespeare and Mimesis
Aaron Urbanczyk


Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, first championed the notion that literature is *mimesis*, an argument suggesting literary texts represent the type of reality in which human persons live and act. When considered as mimesis, literature, which is paradoxically fictional, can and does illuminate the human condition because it is intimately linked to the type of environment and actions typical of the human person. The more authentically mimetic a literary work is, the more we see our humanity magnified in it. In these two books, Nuttall saves both Shakespeare studies and the classical concept of mimesis from being hopelessly fragmented by two of the fashionable ideological juggernauts of the late twentieth century: structuralist and post-structuralist linguistic theory on the one hand, and the New Historicism on the other.

*A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality* was first published in England in 1983. It serves two distinct but related purposes: it is a polemical foray into the arena of contemporary literary theory, and it also offers a series of brilliant close readings of several of Shakespeare’s plays. Nuttall deliberately places his book in conversation with Erich Auerbach’s magisterial *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (initial publication, 1946). Auerbach was perhaps the most influential figure in comparative literature in the twentieth century and remains to this day a prominent theorist of mimesis. Auerbach’s book impressively surveys European literary figures ranging from Homer to Virginia Wolf, carefully studying how each uses language to represent certain dimensions of human experience. Nuttall’s book similarly addresses the theoretical dimensions of mimesis, but through the lens of one figure: Shakespeare.

In one sense *A New Mimesis* is a dated book; in another sense, it speaks powerfully to the state of literary studies today. Literary theory at present still operates under the powerful influence of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language which, in the 1980’s, were current and highly influential (even today the name Jacques Derrida is still murmured with great reverence in English departments across the country). *A New Mimesis* was written during the heyday of

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“high theory” in literary studies, and seeks—with much success—to explode the vacuous tenets of what have come to be known as “structuralist” and “post-structuralist” poetics. The structuralists generally maintain that all elements of human experience, including language and literary expression, are reducible to a system of signs, and such signs are purely arbitrary in meaning. According to this view, words derive their significance only from their relation to each other. Thus a word is not meaningful because it necessarily refers to something in the world; it is meaningful because it stands in relational contradistinction to other words. Language is, for the structuralist critic, an enclosed, self-referential system cut off from reality, and the work of the literary critic is to demonstrate that literary language is simply a linguistic edifice wherein words and groups of words stand in structural opposition to each other (which explains Jacques Derrida’s famously bizarre assertion that “there is nothing outside of the text”). The “post-structuralist” critic advances the argument of the structuralist in a nihilistic direction: language is not a coherently recognizable self-referential system of signs after all; rather, there are no stable systems of language because words never successfully refer to anything. In fact, in the “post-structuralist” view, a word’s attempt to signify meaning only leads to an infinite regression of unsuccessful attempts at signification (one word refers to another, which refers to another, ad infinitum). Literary criticism thus construed becomes an almost gleeful exposition of how the text implodes from within and actually means, essentially, nothing—it only demonstrates the infinite “play” of language’s non-referential status (e.g. Derrida’s famous “deconstruction” school of literary theory). Post-structuralism is one of the key theoretical pillars of what became known as the “postmodern” critique of language and culture.

In the first two chapters of *A New Mimesis*, Nuttall strenuously argues against the structuralist notion that language is cut off from reality. This section of the book is one of the most concise summaries and refutations of structuralist and post-structuralist literary theory available, and is highly recommended to advanced students and teachers of literature. Nuttall rigorously opposes the “collective cultural solipsism” of structuralist theory; he argues that regardless of the highly structural, arbitrary, and conventional nature of language, there still must be some reality which it takes as its reference point (a theory he wittily describes as the “objectivist correlative,” modifying a phrase from T.S. Eliot). Essentially, Nuttall engages modern literary theorists on their own terms and doggedly defends the classic Aristotelian doctrine of mimesis—the doctrine that literary language can, and does, refer to the reality we experience as human beings. In Nuttall’s view, mimesis means that language doesn’t naively “stand in” for reality (as if a word equals an object in the world); rather mimesis implies that language and its conventions probe reality and explore it. At times we find our literary language is adequate to the task of exploration when it helps us understand our human experiences; at other times we find our language falters and fails to do justice to the world it tries to signify. As the subtitle of the book suggests (“Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality”), Nuttall maintains Shakespeare is perhaps the greatest practitioner of mimesis in human history.

In chapters three and four of *A New Mimesis*, Nuttall turns to Shakespeare, arguing the Bard’s plays are preeminent examples of the speciousness of convoluted linguistic literary theories. On the contrary, Shakespeare’s plays are quintessentially mimetic. Nuttall deftly demonstrates how Shakespeare’s dramas are not only situated in the rich fabric of *real* human cultural experi-
ence; they also transcend the accidents of history and probe the universal human condition. In his readings of Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, The Merchant of Venice, Othello, and Henry IV, Nuttall adopts what he calls the “Transparent” method of literary criticism to advance an “anthropological” reading of Shakespeare. By “Transparent” criticism Nuttall simply intends that he shall discuss Shakespeare’s characters as if they were actual human persons, persons that we could relate to as readers (which he contrasts to the “Opaque” method of treating literature as merely an instance of linguistically self-referential forms—the type most commonly practiced by professional critics). This shocking notion, that literature is about humanity and that readers and critics can relate to it as such, is simply a return to a sensible humanist criticism in the classical Aristotelian tradition. Yet Nuttall knows, as do most students who have taken a college course in English in the last thirty years, that reading literature as if it spoke to the human condition has been roundly denounced by the hegemony of structuralist, post-structuralist, and post-modern criticism. Apparently Nuttall remained unconvinced that the “signifying word” never conveys a “signified reality” and that there is “nothing outside of the text”; he had spent too much time in the vast mimetic forest that is Shakespeare to believe such nonsense.

As a single-volume introduction to the plays, Shakespeare the Thinker has few rivals. Nuttall’s approach here is broader in scope, as he seeks to reach the generally educated reader. The book is, thus, much less technical and theoretical than A New Mimesis, although not light in substance or analysis. Nuttall’s lifetime of immersion in Shakespearean scholarship, analysis, and textual erudition is evident on virtually every page (as is his overall literary erudition, which is staggering), and this volume is as instructive to college professors and professional Shakespeareans as it is to the uninitiated first-time reader of Shakespeare.

In the introduction, Nuttall provides a wonderfully concise and substantive analysis of what is known (and what is largely conjecture) about Shakespeare’s life, and the remainder of the work proceeds to analyze each of Shakespeare’s plays in loosely chronological order. In the world of academic publishing, there is never a shortage of new scholarship about Shakespeare, but this book is refreshing and unique in its scope and its thesis. In recent decades, many texts about the Bard have been driven by what are thinly veiled and painfully narrow ideologies: Shakespeare was or wasn’t a racist; Shakespeare celebrates homosexuality or denounces it; Shakespeare was or wasn’t a feminist; Shakespeare’s texts are or aren’t Marxist allegories; Shakespeare was a radically liberating or narrowly oppressive “post-colonial” dramatist; and so on ad nauseam. Nuttall attempts something much more difficult in Shakespeare the Thinker. He closely reads Shakespeare’s plays not through the lens of one narrow argument; rather, he analyzes Shakespeare to demonstrate the now-scandalous concept that Shakespeare is a “creative intellect” who thought, and thought seriously, about all things human. Thus his readings freely range in scope and emphasis, including how Shakespeare understands politics (see Nuttall on the Henry VI trilogy, Coriolanus, Macbeth and King Lear); human psychology and subjectivity (Nuttall on A Comedy of Errors, Richard III, and Hamlet); how men and women viewed themselves in ancient cultures (Nuttall on Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra); gender, love, and sexuality (an omnipresent theme in Shakespeare brilliantly expounded by Nuttall); the intersection of race and culture (Nuttall on Othello and The Tempest); and religion (another omnipresent theme in Shakespeare capably explored by Nuttall).
Shakespeare the Thinker also has a mildly polemical dimension to it. In A New Mimesis Nuttall refuted structuralist and post-structuralist literary theory; in his most recent volume he stubbornly opposes the reigning literary ideology: New Historicism. The New Historicism, often associated with the work of the prominent Harvard critic Stephen Greenblatt, assumes that a literary work of art is in fact a complex fabric of historically embedded discourses. The New Historicists argue that the literary work both influences and is influenced by the cultural discourses in which its author is immersed, though in reality such criticism tends to treat the work in a highly deterministic fashion (e.g. the author is merely the uncritical mouthpiece for the prominent cultural views of his time). Nuttall will have none of this. He is convinced of a scandalously simple and sensible thesis: Shakespeare is a “creative intellect” who is highly intelligent, truly singular in the immensity of his artistic talent, and (perhaps most importantly for this book) genuinely capable of thinking well beyond the confines of his own Elizabethan world about the human condition. In calling Shakespeare a “thinker,” Nuttall concedes that the bard is “not a systematic philosopher; he is a dramatist”; yet Shakespeare “shares with the major philosophers a knack for asking fundamental [. . .] questions.” This leads Nuttall to the convincing conclusion that Shakespeare is the “philosopher of human possibilities”; Shakespeare understands the complexity of humanity and probes it at a fundamental level. Nuttall shares with Harold Bloom (author of Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human) the notion that Shakespeare precedes us all in thought; whatever we have thought of, we can be sure Shakespeare is clever enough to have already anticipated it in his art. The shining success of Shakespeare the Thinker lies in Nuttall’s always-deft illustration of Shakespeare’s gift as a “creative” thinker. Nuttall shows us that confining, ideological, or even heavily univocal readings of the meaning of Shakespeare’s plays always seem inappropriate, not because Shakespeare (or Nuttall for that matter) is a relativist and meaning doesn’t exist, but because Shakespeare’s thought has an overabundance of imaginative significance. The sensitive critic of Shakespeare, as Nuttall demonstrates over and over in his close readings, seems to find that the Bard has always included another layer of complexity in his art that resists the urge of the critic to create a Procrustean bed of meaning. In the final analysis, Nuttall’s thesis in Shakespeare the Thinker satisfies because he affirms what Shakespeare affirms: literature is about humanity, and while the human condition really means something, this condition is also really and almost infinitely complex in its lived reality. Thus Nuttall helps us see anew what all great Shakespeareans have asserted: we are never done reading and understanding the rich and complex art of “the boy from Stratford.”

Competent scholarly guides to Shakespeare do not frequently come along. In A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality and Shakespeare the Thinker, A.D. Nuttall leaves as his legacy a brilliant collection of close readings of Shakespeare’s plays, and in the process separates the chaff from the wheat in the vast (and confusing) meadows of modern literary theory. For this he should be roundly thanked.