ABSTRACT

STUART WARNER HUBBARD. Through a Glass Darkly: Translating Performance and Selfhood in Richard Yates’s Revolutionary Road
(Under the direction of Professor Michael Grimwood.)

Richard Yates’s first novel Revolutionary Road (1961) tells the story of a bright young couple, Frank and April Wheeler, who fail to realize their potential and blame the suburbs, each other, and society-at-large for their unhappiness and thwarted dreams. As the marriage unravels, they spiral deeper into a pattern of bitterness and denial—until the story ends in April’s death by a self-induced abortion.

At its core, Revolutionary Road addresses the conditions under which one can maintain one’s authenticity in a society that rewards scripted performances. Throughout the novel, Yates attempts to locate the fine line between sincerity and hypocrisy, between madness and authenticity. Yates employs several terms to subtly highlight the correlation between performance and authenticity. George Steiner’s theory of translation provides an excellent methodology for study of Richard Yates’s Revolutionary Road. Picture windows, rehearsed performances, and abortion generally denoted the same objective referents to Yates’s contemporaries that they denote today, but the significance of these items—like the significance of all items—changes over time within any culture.

Using Steiner’s methodology, I examine two seemingly unrelated terms in the novel—the picture window and rehearsed performance—in order to explicate the layers of subtext within Yates’s novel that most readers would have understood more readily in 1961 than now.

To understand Yates’s meaning requires our consideration of Revolutionary Road within the context of U.S. literary culture in 1961. Thus, we must translate Yates’s novel in its socio-political context in order to appreciate fully why Yates asserted that “a girl dying from a self-induced abortion was a perfect metaphor for the [nineteen] fifties.”