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Review of Realist Vision

Peter Brooks

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Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 272.

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In 1884, Émile Zola wrote the preface to the catalogue for a retrospective exhibition of Édouard Manet's paintings. 'Forget ideas of perfection and of the absolute', the author implored: 'don't believe that something is beautiful because it is perfect, according to certain physical and metaphysical conventions. A thing is beautiful because it is living, because it is human'. While few today would dispute the intrinsic beauty of Manet's works, Zola's defense was necessary in its day; Manet's oeuvre constantly defied physical and metaphysical conventions of the Salons, critics, and public and was commonly charged with depicting ugliness in an unaccomplished manner.

In fact, the work of justifying realism's aims is never done. Peter Brooks seeks to 'make the case for realism' in his excellent latest work, defending it against criticism which claims that 'notions of representation that thinks of itself as an accurate designation of the world, are naïve and deluded' (6). Central to his argument is the visuality of realist genres, and that his approach comprises fiction *and* painting is an indication of his commitment to viewing the realist project as spanning disciplinary boundaries. Brooks turns to the usual suspects to make his claims – Balzac, Zola, Eliot, Courbet, and Manet – but also extends his reading to Caillebotte, Henry James, Joyce, Proust, and others. It is a welcome and much-needed expansion that acknowledges that the arts evolve in relation to each other, and without particular regard for national or generic borders. Because of the intellectual generosity implicit in his approach, what results are readings that open up the canonical versions of these canonical realist texts, and expand the boundaries of the high-Realist genre itself.

Part of his task is to defamiliarize the very strategies of realism; rhetorical or visual or narrative strategies that have become so ingrained in western art production and its analytical machinery that they seem transparent. Brooks achieves this effect by first accepting as a basis the idea which gives so many scholars pause: that no matter how sincere an artist's intention to duplicate reality faithfully, the result will only ever be an exercise in pretense. Brooks moves away from the binary distinction of truth/falsehood and instead considers what *is being made* in the works. If all realist texts and images are efforts of pretending, Brooks notes that 'it is how you pretend that counts' (6; 229), and nineteenth-century realists 'pretended' with characters and environments of daily life – elements theretofore excluded from artistic realms. This rise of the common coincides with other surges (social, philosophical, industrial and scientific), resulting in a new way of seeing, and, as provided by realists, new objects to see.

George Eliot is a primary British example of this tradition, and thus a primary element of Brooks's book: *Daniel Deronda* is his case study of choice because the novel offers examples of both Victorian and realist visuality through Gwendolen's story and an attempt to move beyond that visuality through Deronda's story. Brooks considers Gwendolen as a visual object both *within* the novel (for Daniel, for admirers, for herself in the mirror) and *without* the novel (for the reader). In addition to the visual, or coacting with it, realism is defined in *Daniel Deronda* through Eliot's careful and deliberate delineation of the circumstances that lead Gwendolen to make the choice of marriage to Grandcourt. Eliot makes the reader see, and by seeing, understand – if not excuse – Gwendolen's actions as a necessity; it is the only option

for a woman of no means, whose family is perched on the precipice of financial and thus social ruin. These descriptions make present to the reader conditions that may otherwise remain unseen or unacknowledged: 'it is important, Eliot believes, that the reader understand all the extenuating circumstances pleading for Gwendolen' (99).

For all of the showing that occurs in the 'Gwendolen' novel, Brooks suggests that the 'Daniel' novel is where Eliot 'explodes' the Victorian novel in addition to 'achieving' it (111). For as Gwendolen's novel is visual, *Deronda's* novel moves into the oral and the aural – the spoken and the heard, and suggests what is unrepresentable. Brooks notes, 'Daniel's novel as he pursues Mirah's identity, and his own, enters a world where the visual is discounted in favor of voice – in a religious tradition that rejects the graven image, that disfavors representation and favors revelation' (105-106). When, in a passage Brooks quotes, Gwendolen experiences a 'great movement of the world' and enters into her own life, Brooks links her explosion to that of the novel itself, a movement into a 'realm beyond representation' (109).

Eliot's work is not alone in this movement beyond the traditional novelistic boundaries. Realist texts and images may move beyond the representable through their very depiction of the common and quotidian; they 'show us the interest, possibly the beauty, of the non-beautiful' (8). Making that argument, Brooks knows, requires addressing the criticism that has railed against realism since its earliest incarnations – that the claim to represent reality is at its base a declaration of bad faith or, at least, disingenuousness. In his chapter on Eliot, Brooks addresses the criticism of *Daniel Deronda* in the same way he addresses this larger criticism of the realist project: 'To complain with so many critics that the novel splits into its two parts is merely to reiterate Eliot's intention' (111). Close examination of authorial and artistic claims regarding the realist urge will indicate that none believed it was possible or desirable to offer an empirically objective duplication of reality in his or her art. Zola spoke of nature being screened through the artist's temperament; Eliot pledged to be faithful to reality as it 'mirrored itself in [her] mind'. Complaining then, that realism does not duplicate reality is 'merely to reiterate' the artists' intentions. Furthermore, Brooks notes that 'great literature is precisely that which sees around the corner of its own declared aesthetic' (20), a prescience that is evident in *Deronda*.

Exploding the limitation of conventions and moving beyond their own 'declared aesthetics' is possible in realist works because of their unique relation to the visual – they desire to show, to replicate, and to play with our ideas of ourselves. Brooks concludes with a re-rendering of a basic tenet of realism. Since fiction and painting necessarily involve pretending, and since 'it's how you pretend that counts', realists must pretend with a unique set of goals and ideologies. Indeed their goal is not to recreate the real, but instead to 'maintain an accurate relation to the real' (215), and it's that *relation* that allows for representing the human world, for representing its limitations, and for suggesting a way beyond them.

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