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Peter Mudford

Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator by John Rignall
(Routledge, 1992)

The problem of vision, of what the artist or writer sees, is among the most fascinating of the links between literature and painting, which separates them both from music. Vision itself implies something seen which cannot be separated from an inner quality of how it is seen. The I seeing and the eye seeing involves a synthesis which again distinguishes them both from the camera. The presence of this 'magic' which resists analysis has obsessed artists as frequently as critics, and led them to reject what seemed incapable of completion. A poem, according to W.H.Auden, was never finished, only abandoned. T.S. Eliot found in every attempt to use words a 'new attempt, and a different kind of failure.' For the painter—and it is from Velasquez' *Las Meninas* that John Rignall's book begins—the problem is often stated by the inclusion of the figure in the painting who observes the painter; or by mirrors which reflect the scene being painted, so that we, the observers, can never forget the painter observing himself, and what he or she observes. The wit of Magritte's painting springs from his conjuring with this problem, as in the example of the artist who is working on a portrait of a woman who still has only one arm, except that at second glance he appears to be painting a model who is one-armed. In every portrait, and in every novel, there must always be the shadow of a self-portrait, of that whole process of selection which constitutes—to use Goethe's word—the charm of the subject, in which another eye would find no special or obsessive interest. Observation of the world—however keenly, however sharply—is always an act of self-contemplation. When Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra set out to walk the streets and note the qualities of people, they also set out to note the qualities of themselves as lovers.

Among the many merits of John Rignall's original and absorbing book is that he sets out to explore specific examples of this problem, through the figure of the strolling spectator—the flâneur, 'the strolling habitué of the boulevards who observes the life around him with a lively but detached curiosity, and is apparently endowed with an instinctive ability "to seize everything in a single glance and analyze it in passing"'. This figure separated from the crowds on the *grands boulevards* both by his powers of observation, and by his economic independence from them, however precarious, reflects the position of the realist novelist who sees and knows. Or as the character from Balzac, whom John Rignall quotes, expresses it more interrogatively: 'Voir n'est-ce pas savoir?' In this question much is summed up about the content, and finally the form of the novel. It questions what the novelist sees, and the completeness of his or her form of seeing. Even Tolstoy whose clear-grained eye with its enormous literalness has a Homeric detachment saw life from the perspective of an aristocratic landowner which meant not knowing what it was like to be a peasant. As John Rignall points out the knowledge which comes from seeing also involves a complicity with it. The strolling spectator however much he feels himself to be alienated or detached from the scene he surveys is a part of it, just as the author in his study or the painter in his studio is part of what he is depicting. In the same way we as readers are complicit in the act of reading; and are for a time absorbed into what we are reading.

Dickens, for example, can spell-bind his reader with his reflection that 'every human creature is...a profound secret and mystery to every other'. But this is itself a deeply enigmatic reflection on the novelist and his art, which seeks to pluck the heart out of that mystery, and engage the reader with the feeling that he or she knows how it really was. Realist fiction, John Rignall shows, wrestles with the problem of seeing and knowing, but also with not knowing. The omniscient author is never omniscient in the sense that some critics would have us believe; and this book illustrates the very different ways in which the fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth century reflects through the figure of the *flâneur* the uncertainty implicit in what is being seen. The omniscient author is not at all the reactionary figure he is sometimes taken to be. However he or she struggles to find a form which will reflect life whole, what will emerge as George Eliot knew is 'scenes from provincial life'. Vision is always partial. By taking the figure of the *flâneur* as a focal point, John Rignall has succeeded in mapping transitions between realist and modernist fiction in a way which illuminates the art of the novel. The sense of mastery and control displayed by Balzac's knowing observers and young men on the make proves, John Rignall argues, to be illusory, and to reflect the precarious balance between omniscience and uncertainty in Balzac himself: seeing is not quite the same as knowing.

In following his strolling spectator through particular works by Dickens, Flaubert, George Eliot and James, John Rignall also traces the increasing relevance of Nietzsche's critique of modern man, with a gulf between his inner life and the world of action: he has himself become like a 'strolling spectator' of history who increasingly disappears into the life of the city of which he is so insignificant and anonymous a part. For Dickens and James the act of walking the streets of London was a source of their power as artists, a means of penetrating it imaginatively (though they used what they saw in very different ways); but for Conrad in *The Secret Agent*, Rignall argues, London has ceased to have any coherence; he presents 'characters whose visual perceptions are divorced from any larger understanding of their condition'. This blindness in the characters is inseparable from the black hole into which Conrad's art keeps falling, where 'true wisdom is not certain of anything in this world of contradictions'. Precarious omniscience has given way to Marlow's attempt to explore the heart of darkness, or to discover the real Jim—a task as dark at the centre as Jim's attempt to know himself. At times in Rignall's account the figure of the *flâneur* seems to have gone through so many metamorphoses, that the term seems marginally appropriate to the fictions being discussed. But the development of his argument as it relates to the problem of vision—to what the artist can see and know, whether in his own reflection of himself as artist and man, or in his keener eye for observing the world in which he lives is an enriching and acute account. The transition from George Eliot's determination to concentrate all the light that she can command on 'unravelling certain human lots and seeing how they were woven and interwoven' to the nightmare of Sartre's 'nauseating contingency of existence', with its unresolved antinomies, is admirably described. Through the figure of the *flâneur* John Rignall traces continuities in fiction, but also—and more importantly—questions the meaning of vision in the modern and post-modern consciousness. In order to see it may be necessary or even inevitable that the world of action is pushed to one side; but that too means a very partial way of seeing.