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Review of Realism, Representation, and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature

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Alison Byerly, *Realism, Representation, and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature*
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Dr Alison Byerly's concern is with the use in their fiction by four Victorian novelists of art works, performative as well as representational, experienced by the characters as well as metaphors within the larger narrative frame, works both real and invented — the Vatican's antique Cleopatra/Ariadne in *Middlemarch*, for example, as well as the Agamemnon charade of *Vanity Fair*. Byerly sees this process as intimately bound up with 'realism' (the term is commonly offered to us in inverted commas) and with the self-consciousness of her chosen novelists: Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy. This process, in turn, points up a paradox (one which is helpfully true) that while the rise of realism in the nineteenth century 'shows how highly the Victorians valued art's mimetic capacity' (1), yet Victorian novels are 'famously self-conscious about their status as artifacts' (2). The novelists faced the question of how art can 'evoke reality while acknowledging its difference from the real world' and resolved it through their 'obsessive analysis and display of art's many guises' (2). Byerly's book attempts to account for the way in which Victorian novelists were able simultaneously 'to deplore and exploit the idea of the aesthetic' (3). At her conclusion, Byerly claims both that the artistic episodes of these novels 'are not in fact separate episodes, but exist in the same ontological space as other events in the world of each novel' (191) and that 'the allusions to art that pervade the Victorian novel play a central role in constructing the indefinable ambience we call "realism"' (184).

Clearly, we are revisiting, often with interesting or engaging inflections, territory often visited before, and where the use of the unfamiliar (Thackeray's 'Going to See a Man Hanged' and *Flore and Zephyre*, for example, both usefully deployed) offers new vistas. Yet is the concern with 'realism' one that impedes rather than promotes, since the perceived problem (that the representation of art in art will destroy the surface realism) is not one that troubles me in the way it does Byerly? The Victorian novelists are able both to delight in their 'own artifice' (Byerly's phrase), as when Thackeray imagines Jones in his club reading the very number of *Vanity Fair* we are reading, and to revel in engaging the reader, emotionally and intellectually, with the created world, even while ironizing and doubling, admitting 'both/and' rather than 'either/or', just as Byerly herself notes Brontë does by ending *Jane Eyre* not with Jane, but with St John Rivers. Is the self-consciousness of the Victorians so at odds with that realism and is their realism so new a thing? And did the Victorians really 'deplore' as well as 'exploit' the ideas of the aesthetic? If to 'deplore' is a reaction, say, to the cheapness of theatricality as against the depth of the dramatic (a distinction excellently made by Byerly, drawing upon an observation of Fanny Kemble's), nonetheless the Victorians were also well versed in artifice: if they had not all read Jane Austen (or reading her, had disapproved as Charlotte Brontë did), yet they knew Fielding's consciousness of audience and artifice: of low chapters that the polite reader may skip, of the implied reader, and the use of epic, whether comic in *Joseph Andrews* or complexly allusive to the *Aeneid* as in *Amelia*.

To be self-conscious need not destroy engagement, even if it threatens certain kinds of low mimetic realism, while deplorable aesthetic experiences may play wonderfully into the reading experience. Miss Schwartz's song in *Vanity Fair* (an example cited by Byerly) is feeble indeed, but its aesthetic quality hardly demonstrates her unfitness to be George Osborne's wife — rather, the attention it receives demonstrates that she has money, while we (the engaged reader) hope that Miss Schwartz who has a good heart will *not* marry George Osborne, — a man unfit to be anyone's husband. My questioning points up certain parts of Byerly's overall conceptual framework with which I have difficulty. Is 'realism' the aim of Victorian novelists in the four-square way she seems at times to espouse? Is the aesthetic representation destructive of realism? Is a doubtful aesthetic object (a theatrical display; a feeble song) more likely to close down rather than open out the reader's experience? Further, does not the representation of art in a novel (art in any art work) actively engage the reader by a process of self-consciousness that enlivens rather than destroys?

Certainly, Byerly's argument allows her to explore interestingly a key question, that of authenticity, and to suggest the exploration and excitement in the enterprise of the novelists themselves. Yet she comes back, also, to a distinction between the art work represented and the art work in which the representation is offered, that remains problematic to the reader, not of the novel, but of this study. 'Art, these novelists admit, is a very risky business. But the confession removes their own art from the precarious realm of the aesthetic and places it in the world of the "real": a stable region where the testimony of neutral observers like themselves helps to keep the government honest' (13). This is a fine statement, yet one that begs questions (in the true sense of the phrase): where are these 'admissions' and 'confessions'? what are 'neutral observers', what is 'honest government', in such a context?

The book begins by a survey of Romantic aesthetics, seeking to establish particularly through response to the Picturesque and to music a Romantic hierarchy of the arts that the Victorians drew upon. The three succeeding chapters deal with the novelists (Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë, linked through theatricality, share one), and a Coda considers a perspective shift on the arts in the work of the Aesthetic movement and in particular in Wilde and Pater. The opening chapter, broadranging, perceptive, draws on a wide range of criticism and scholarship, though not always discriminating between authors or when they wrote. Nor do we or Byerly need, surely, the authority of Carolyn Merchant to accept that 'Nature is conventionally described as female' (when was it any other? Spenser has 'great Dame Nature' and she was Edmund's 'Goddess') nor of Jonas Barish to know that anti-theatrical prejudice began in *The Republic*. This said, the discussion of the Picturesque, some of it necessarily familiar, is interesting as a survey and as a consideration of how it persuades (Byerly's word is 'forces') us to look at natural scenes as if they were art, while musical allusions 'force' us to perceive the art of music as the expression of Nature. The conclusion here, on the Romantics' new hierarchy of the arts and particularly on the Picturesque as a refuge from history and on music, which becomes the 'dominant analogue' since it is able 'to represent both art and nature' (36), are usefully provocative. There seems, though, some contradiction in the establishment of this hierarchy, since if the Picturesque is found wanting because it sought to be free of history and narrative (by the Romantics and, I take it, by Byerly), yet music, now elevated, is declared to be 'unbound by historical contingency' (41). Nor is it clear in the later discussion how this hier-

archy held good for the Victorians nor that it is a helpful tool in approaching the Victorians, where certainly we move from theatre with Thackeray and Brontë to music with George Eliot, but do not necessarily, in the authors' own perceptions or in the readers', move 'up'. Particularly interesting in this opening is a discussion of Wordsworth and the language of the theatre: as throughout the book, if there is much to dispute or question, in such passages there is yet the reward of engagement and stimulation.

Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë are examined as examples of 'Masterpiece Theatre'. The focus is on *Vanity Fair* and *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. In these two authors, Byerly suggests, all arts collapsed into a dyad that contrasts 'false' art with 'true' (51; so where is the hierarchy?) and, as touched on above, Byerly usefully draws on Fanny Kemble's distinction between the dramatic (true) and the theatrical (false), going on to conclude that the 'consciousness of being looked at, is the defining feature of "theatrical" art' (54) — hence, Becky's roles are not reflections of an inner reality, but deliberate distortions of it ('theatrical' rather than 'dramatic'; 55): though, as Thackeray makes clear, those roles are also unconscious revelations of that inner reality, since 'theatrical', if aesthetically bad may nonetheless be a true though unintended exposure of one's self. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray, then, uses ideas of theatricality to create a multiplication of perspective within the text that both exposes the inconsistencies of Thackeray's characters and destabilizes the position of his audience (56). This revisiting of familiar territory is given a lively emphasis by consideration of the interplay of text and illustrations: both Thackeray's drawings as illustrator direct, including those with theatrical sense of audience and that wistfully sad self-portrait (as Clown, though, not as Byerly's 'Harlequin') — and Thackeray's provision of Becky's 'illustrations' to her letters. So the readers of words and pictures are not simply taught, but made to understand their own complicity in the performances. Again, if that conclusion is hardly new (and an obvious one to Thackeray himself, who knew his Fielding well), the route taken allows us to renew acquaintance with the text and be reminded (what is not always obvious in current editions) of how, in a novel originally subtitled *Pen and Pencil Sketches*, the text is dramatically framed by and interacts with its illustrations.

In turning to Charlotte Brontë, Byerly explores how patriarchal values of domination and display are used and challenged. If Becky's theatricality distorts her inner reality (or, at least, refracts it, so that we have to 'read' it differently from the way in which it is offered to us), then for Brontë the horror of theatricality is that it leads an actor to act against herself (86-7), under the command or requirement of the male and the male gaze. Crucial here is Lucy Snowe's appearance in the school play and her response to Vashti's performance, as well as the sense of drama and audience when Lucy moves, drugged, through the *Villette* night, an object who has become the unseen (and therefore empowered) audience. Lucy's performance for M Paul is seen as successful 'dramatic' expression, as against 'theatricality', while Vashti's performance 'seems to transcend its status as representation to achieve a reality of its own' (103). Yet, prompted by Byerly's discussion, surely there are other issues here. What is shown by Lucy Snowe's 'acting' (the qualification seems necessary) or by Vashti's? Lucy's performance is untheatrical (to use Fanny Kemble's terminology), yet is it dramatic? It emphasizes, by peculiarity of costume, that Lucy refuses to be subsumed into illusion, an illusion which might be condemned as theatrical, yet which is crucial if drama is to be an art. Lucy defies art

(as she — and Charlotte — defy foreign customs, food, religion, people): she will be herself, even when she is supposed to be acting, and so defeats art's purpose. In showing herself, she makes it only too clear how aware she is of audience, of gaze (by no means an exclusively male one), and of how she will always try to conceal what she really is, to be always the actor. Lucy is supremely conscious, a fact emphasized by her constant self-abnegation, of being looked at, whether in schoolroom or on stage, and so should (potentially) be the most theatrical and false of beings, if we accept Byerly's idea. Vashti seems supremely opposed to this refusal to act: she subsumes herself into the part, so possessed (the images are diabolic) that she gives up self. As Byerly says, 'Vashti's performance seems to transcend its status as representation to achieve a reality of its own' (103). And yet is this the only truth about Vashti? Lucy seems peculiarly disturbed, because while Vashti's performance is beyond that of her fellow actors, it allows those that can see (Lucy is such a seer) that Vashti reveals herself rather than creating an alternative reality: beyond the theatrical and the dramatic, beyond a sense of perfected illusion, another figure gives itself up, the true Vashti who, consciously or not, willingly or not, reveals herself to the truly perceptive (who but Lucy?) as simultaneously pure ego and diabolical. She too will not surrender the self, as acting demands. In her very different way, she is an oppositional image that reveals to Lucy a truth of herself. Lucy is only rescued from her epiphanic horror by mob hysteria as the cry of 'fire' breaks up the audience's indulgence in theatricality.

Some of Byerly's most interesting discussion comes when she deals with George Eliot, even if it again calls in question her earlier setting out of a new hierarchy in the arts and if at times it slips into broad claims that cannot be supported, as earlier on 'elite' (20 and note) or here on George Eliot as a *pioneer* of literary realism (106); and, again, that class was fixed in the nineteenth century (112); that Dorothea is 'upper-class' (116); or (in an interesting discussion of portraiture) that the 'high cost of portraits made them available only to the very wealthy' (111), thus ignoring the provincial painters, the miniaturists, or the patrons in Du Maurier's cartoon reproduced here (110), who may be well-to-do but are certainly not 'very wealthy'. Byerly makes a distinction between what George Eliot's characters make of the arts and what the novel as a whole or George Eliot makes of them. The characters seem to accept a hierarchy of the arts (visual art as a detached and static simplification; theatrical as a dangerous deception of the self and others; musical as alone capable of representing truth); yet Eliot herself seems to ignore the apparent hierarchy, as Byerly makes clear when exploring, for example, Gwendolen's theatrical aspirations. Byerly's well-sustained claim on this, that Eliot wants to *prevent* us from endowing each art with the primary social value it is given by her characters, seems at odds with those Romantic hierarchies; nor does her concentration on modes of representation that are 'present' only metaphorically (though she takes full account of, for example, the Vatican Cleopatra/Ariadne) seem consistent with her claim that these artistic episodes exist in the same 'onotological space' as other action in the novels (191).

Good if familiar things are said about how Hetty, Rosamond, and Gwendolen 'all willingly adopt a pictorial mode of self-definition that enables them to substitute appearance for reality', whereas Dorothea 'tries to make something of herself' (114). On Gwendolen, Byerly makes the neatly perceptive contrast with *Vanity Fair* that where Thackeray's charades are 'a moral revelation', Eliot's function as 'an audition that Gwendolen does not even realize she

has failed' (129). Gwendolen is also crucial to Byerly's discussion of music, where she is necessarily counterpointed to Klesmer and Mirah. Byerly makes the point that George Eliot is aware of a deep ambivalence about music in nineteenth-century England: is it essentially domestic, a commodity for relaxation, despised when professional, or is it the most profound of all the arts and the nearest mode to a way of (cultural) salvation? At the end of *Daniel Deronda* the novel exults music, yet even Mirah is a figure that calls its meaning in doubt, a questioning that the novel itself seems to support.

This, then, is a book that opens out possibility in looking at the representation and use of the arts in some nineteenth-century novelists. The opening discussion of hierarchy is promising, if not followed through in terms of history, narrative, and contingency, and many of the examples are sharply and wittily explored. The comparisons (between Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë or between Thackeray and George Eliot) yield fresh insights, though elements of both Byerly's overall and detailed arguments seem not fully worked through. It stands as a book too often uncertain in external detail, unnecessarily seeking endorsement through proof of extensive secondary reading, yet capable of striking and persuasively detailed readings of its chosen novels. To complement Byerly's reproduction of a Du Maurier cartoon by reference to another, it is 'excellent in parts'.

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