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Review of Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems

Richard Menke

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Richard Menke's study draws illuminating connections between the development of literary realism and the revolutionary changes which the nineteenth century saw in methods of communication and information management. Innovations such as the Penny Post, the telegraph, photography and wireless communication all raise fundamental questions about the representation in media both of the material world and of human subjectivity and social interconnection. Menke's discussion of these provides the context in which he examines how novelists grapple with similar issues, and he thus offers fresh new ways of thinking about realism as a self-conscious representational practice and about how the novel form develops along with media technologies as the century progresses. Menke demonstrates how fiction 'could begin imagining itself as a medium and information system in an age of new media' (3) but also suggests ways in which novels themselves anticipated and even shaped subsequent developments in the communication and management of information.

The introductory chapter explores some of the changing conceptions of information which arose with the advent of new technologies. In particular, Menke explores the problematic relationship between raw information and real human knowledge, a relationship thrown into question by developing media which could disseminate information at greater speed, in larger quantities, and over wider distances than ever before. Subsequent chapters trace the changing conceptualizations of information in novels and communication media. Trollope's *The Three Clerks* (1858) draws analogies between the Post Office's structure and operation and Trollope's own mode of fictional realism. Like the postal system, realist novels aim to accommodate a diversity of human relations within a coherent, organizing framework. Indeed, when we consider the striking similarities, which Menke reveals, between William Mulready's elaborately decorative design for the Penny Post's prepaid envelopes and the wrappers of the weekly parts of *Nicholas Nickleby*, the analogies between fictional form and postal medium seem closer than ever. Charting the advent of electrical communication technologies, Menke reads the telepathic exchange between Jane Eyre and Rochester as analogous to the transmission, enabled by telegraphy, of seemingly disembodied information from remote sources, and he thus usefully points to the conceptual overlaps between telegraphy and mesmerism as possible scientific paradigms underpinning this moment in the novel.

The implications for fiction of these developments in electrical communication provide the conceptual focus for the rest of the book. Menke argues that for Mrs Gaskell the telegraph, to which she refers in a letter of 1859, represents a metaphor for neutrality and objectivity in realist writing but at the same time raises questions both about the role of the writer as mediator and the reader as interpreter. Intriguingly, Menke then turns to *A Tale of Two Cities*. In the brutal execution, or, rather, literal disembodiment of Sydney Carton at the end of the novel, and in the retrospective description of his imaginary inner monologue as he mounts the scaffold, Menke finds an analogy with the deracinated and disembodied information of telegraphy. Later texts, such as Trollope's 'The Telegraph Girl' (1877) and James's *In the Cage* (1898), manifest a still keener awareness both of the telegraph as medium – a medium which may
distort and mislead as well as communicate – and of the role of telegraphists themselves in interpreting, and perhaps dangerously reshaping, information. For Menke, these tales therefore also reflect their own realist procedures, foregrounding ways in which fiction mediates and shapes reality, rather than simply reflecting it. Kipling’s 1902 story ‘Wireless’ takes this interrogation of realist assumptions still further: there, the remote transmission of messages, now by a telegraph without even the tangible connection of wires, makes information transfer seem more problematic than ever, and this is reflected in the story’s gesturing towards the essential artificiality of its own apparent verisimilitude.

Menke’s discussion of George Eliot centres primarily on ‘The Lifted Veil’. He points convincingly to parallels between Eliot’s description of Latimer’s first vision – of Prague – and a contemporary mass-produced photograph of the city by William Henry Fox Talbot. Unlike the Dutch realist paintings which Eliot praises in Adam Bede, Menke argues, both of these representations of the city are produced by the relaying of information, whether photographic or visionary, without the intervention of subjectivity or human sympathy. Latimer’s story presents us with the prospect of an insight which is able to penetrate both future time and the hidden subjectivities of others, yet the quantity and clarity of information with which he is bombarded resist any effort to convert it to real knowledge or understanding. Menke reads this as Eliot’s meditation on the power of her own realist vision but also on the limits of the realist enterprise, which threatens to overwhelm human consciousness with the profusion of its representations. He thus offers a useful exploration of Eliot’s tale as part of her much wider concerns as a novelist, and draws fascinating new connections between the text and contemporary technological developments. A possible objection here is that, in drawing contrasts between ‘The Lifted Veil’ and Adam Bede, Menke describes the latter simply as a ‘conventionally realistic novel’ (139), and thus underplays the sophistication with which it explores complex personal relations and motivations, and reflects on its own realist methods. The brief analogies drawn between Latimer and the narrator of Middlemarch, too, are useful but perhaps underemphasize the sheer fluidity of character and social interactions with which we are presented in that text.

Nonetheless, this book offers significant new ways of thinking about the relationships between nineteenth-century technology and literary realism. It combines fascinating accounts of the Victorians’ changing communication systems with a thought-provoking engagement with theories of realism and nuanced, inventive readings of individual texts. It thus represents an important contribution to the study of Victorian literary history and material culture.

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