REVIEW FORUM

***Realism, Representation and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, by Alison Byerly. Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.**

ARTFUL REALISM

James A.W. Heffernan

Alison Byerly's rich, stimulating, wide-ranging, and admirably compact new book raises a provocative set of questions. If the Victorian novelists aimed to be realistic, why do they so often refer to the arts of music, painting, theatre, and—in Hardy's case—architecture? If these references implicitly compare the novelists' own verbal handiwork to specific works of visual or musical art, do they not "threaten to sabotage the realist claim to unmediated representation"? (2) Byerly's answer is twofold. First, she suggests, artworks "framed" within works of literature seem alien and artificial and thereby make the surrounding text seem more real. But second, and paradoxically, insofar as artworks are said to represent the world that is also represented in the language of the novelist, they help to certify the reality of that world. Instead of representing the totality of the real world and asking their verbal worlds to be measured against it, the Victorian novelists, we are told, used artworks as independent witnesses, so that "the representations [of artworks] themselves attest to the presence of an ontologically prior world" (6).

This approach to literary realism drastically reformulates George Levine's argument that realistic fiction is characterised by self-consciousness, by its "awareness both of other literature and of the strategies necessary to circumvent it, and—at last—its awareness of its own unreality."[1] Byerly argues that Victorian literary realism repeatedly flaunts its consciousness of other arts (not just of literature) and exposes their falseness in order to show—by contrast—its own authenticity: "the novel, witness to the potential dangers of our attempts to represent and manipulate reality, gets off scott-free" (7).

If we ask how a novelist can expose the falsity of a non-literary art even while using the representational powers of that art to confirm the existence of what the novel represents in words, the answer seems to lie in the distinction between false and true art. While both presumably testify to the *existence* of their referent, true art alone is a reliable witness. Hence originates the fascinating ambivalence with which Victorian novelists treated the other arts, using them by turns to signify artificiality and authenticity.

The shift from one to the other is paradigmatically exemplified in this book by the shift from the picturesque aesthetic to the art of song in romantic poetry. While the romantic turn from pictorial to musical analogies is an oft-told tale, Byerly offers her own version of it. "The picturesque," she writes, "ultimately represents a static,

---

[1] *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981): 15.

ahistorical, elitist mode of vision that is associated with the power of the male gaze over a feminised Nature. [But] . . . music [is] the voice of female Nature; it represents authentic feeling, communicated in a wordless yet powerful form that transcends historical contingency" (15). Music is here defined as nature's natural voice. While the picturesque is "found art," nature aestheticised into a painting, musical tropes naturalise art, turning a human or natural phenomenon (a solitary reaper, a bird, the wind) into a singer whose "original discourse" authorises the poet to sing and thus to embody both nature and art.

This way of defining the Romantic turn from painting to music is suggestive but also problematic. Given its preoccupation with ruin, can the picturesque be wholly ahistorical? (The whole of Wordsworth's meditation on his personal history in "Tintern Abbey" is subtly and powerfully informed by his awareness of a ruined monument that had been canonised as picturesque by the time he first saw it.) On the other hand, if the picturesque is faulted for its "ahistorical" aestheticism, why should the Romantic poets or anyone else find authenticity in a music that "transcends historical contingency"? If "found art" is bad, are the Claudes and Poussins that travellers like William Gilpin discerned in English scenery any more objectionable than the "high requiem" that Keats claims to have heard in the song of the nightingale? Soaring claims for transcendence and authenticity sometimes land us on slippery ground. While music may seem to transcend art because of its invisibility, it is not only temporal but also (as Byerly admits) material in its audible vibrations, and when Keats turns from the song of the nightingale to the figures on the urn, one could argue that he is transcending both the temporality and materiality of the bird's song for the silent music of sculpture: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter." But do we know if the urn is more or less transcendent than the nightingale, or if the eternal stasis of the figures sculpted on the urn signifies transcendence or agonising entrapment? Given Keats's negative capability, the answer to the latter question is probably both, and "both" seems more likely than "either" when we try to explain Romantic sublimity in terms of either visual or musical art. Wordsworth does indeed salute the sublimity of sound, as Byerly notes, when he commends its power "To breathe an elevated mood, by form / Or image unprofaned" (1805 *Prelude* 2.324-26). But the passages of greatest sublimity in *The Prelude*—the Simplon crossing and the view from Snowdon—*combine* verbal pictures with the "voice" of nature, as if to suggest that sublimity cannot be bounded by any one art. In fact the first passage on sublimity in *The Prelude*—the passage on the boat-stealing episode in Book 1—offers us a moving *picture* of boundaries crossed.

Byerly's own picture of the ways in which Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, William Makepeace Thackeray, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy use painting, music, theatre and architecture in their novels is remarkably comprehensive and precise. While all of these novelists seek to distinguish false art from true, and while they take unequivocal aim at the fashionableness of the picturesque, at theatricality, and at the musical performances of women bent on exhibiting their social status and marketability, each used the arts in his or her own distinctive way. Thackeray, for instance, "uses the trope of theatricality precisely to show the interpenetration—the inseparability—of fiction and reality" (64); Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe (in *Villette*) exemplifies "dramatic" acting in the vaudeville episode because she is—says Byerly—"completely self-absorbed" and thus

capable of expressing "genuine feelings" (101); and "music" in the novels of George Eliot "has a spiritual authenticity that she would surely not claim as an attribute of all music in the real world" (145)—especially of the music made by characters such as Rosamond in her quest for a husband or a lover.

Wide-ranging as she is in her treatment of Victorian literature (even George Eliot's verse drama *Armgart* plays a cameo role in her argument), Byerly sometimes gains her breadth at the expense of depth. In her chapter on George Eliot, for instance, she curiously declines to investigate Eliot's use of specified artworks such as the ancient sculpture of the reclining *Ariadne* ("then called the Cleopatra") to which Naumann compares Dorothea in Chapter 19 of *Middlemarch.* Taking the *Ariadne* as simply a generic work of visual art, Byerly argues that Dorothea breaks the frames that others would impose on her; the variability of the human form, as Ladislaw says (echoing Lessing), cannot be caught in painting, and Naumann should not presume to use a woman of Dorothea's class as a model. But Byerly misses a paradox noted by Amy Richlin: while art emerges from the conversation between Will and Naumann as a means of petrifaction or exploitation, Will has joined Naumann in viewing Dorothea as yet another beautiful object in the sculpture gallery, and the act of imagining her in a picture makes him conscious of his own desire for her. Hence art "functions as an agent of change in Will, thereby becoming a vehicle for narrative dynamism."[2]

To resist Byerly's argument at certain points is not, I hope, to understate the value of her book as a whole. It is simply to say that her book provokes—and should provoke—the kind of spirited debate which this kind of forum seems designed to elicit. She has tackled an immensely complicated topic with admirable lucidity. In explaining how art and nature interact in Romantic poetry, in Victorian fiction, and finally in the aestheticism of Pater and Wilde, she has also enlarged our understanding of just what constitutes "realistic" representations in literature and of the crucial role played by all of the arts in the literature of nineteenth-century England.

Patricia O'Neill

In well-documented chapters on the novels of Charlotte Brontë, William Thackeray, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, Alison Byerly shows how nineteenth-century writers represented the arts of painting, music, theatre, and, in Hardy's case, architecture, in order to examine the relations of art to life. Those relations were important to Victorian novelists because, in depicting the common life, they had to confront cultural assumptions about the truth or falsehood of literary representation. According to Byerly the novelists' invocation of multiple arts within the novels asks the reader to understand the relative value of their representational abilities "not against external reality but

---

[2] "Beside the Reclining Statue: Ekphrasis, Narrative, and Desire in *Middlemarch.*" *PMLA* 111 (1996): 1125. Richlin also notes that Ariadne's situation parallels that of Dorothea. Abandoned by their respective lovers (Theseus and Casaubon), both women are about to be rescued by new lovers (Bacchus and Will Ladislaw) (1126-27). In addition, the juxtaposition of the Dorothea with the sensuous figure of what was then (circa 1829) called the Cleopatra suggests a latent sensuality in Eliot's nunlike heroine (1125-26).