

greatly to our understanding of the novelists' references to the arts. Throughout her argument Byerly is particularly good at synthesising the critical work of other literary scholars and theorists. Her sophisticated interpretation of the novelists' use of the arts as a textual strategy for promoting their own views of art's social and moral function offers a fine model for examining other Victorian writers. Largely unaddressed, however, is the treatment of literary art as authentic discourse. While Byerly's chapters rarely engage the social or cultural conditions that shaped Victorian artists' interest in the "real," her descriptions of how the arts were performed and appreciated in the nineteenth century are significant and engaging. Still, one might question whether establishing the autonomy of artistic modes of representation is necessary in order to distinguish the novel's moral effects from those of other realistic discourses like science or journalism.

George Levine

Modernist writers tended to write off realism. The increasingly aesthetic and yet austere commitments of modernism manifested themselves in part through a deep distrust both of the possibility and of the usefulness of realism—a mode that had marked much European narrative, and with increasing intensity, down to the end of the nineteenth century. Lukacs's brilliant and often wrongheaded celebration of realism, against modernism, remained a minority position except in the early century tradition of socialist realism. But post-war left-oriented and Marxist-inspired theory also abandoned realism; Brecht and the intensely modernist (and left-oriented) Frankfurt School went well beyond representationalism; and realism became even more suspect under the regime of French post-war theory. There is no such thing as realism, the argument goes, as the very possibility of representation is put to question.

Certainly since the 1960s it has been impossible to make a serious case for realism without recognising that it is not what it seems, or tries to seem: a direct representation of things as they are. Yet realism has kept reasserting itself, if not as a style (and it keeps doing that, too), then as a disturbing subject for critics and scholars. There is already a long tradition of scholarship that has attempted to rewrite realism's history in the light of our current critical suspicions. Since the 1960s traditional realists of the nineteenth century seem always to have known the impossibility of their enterprise. Realists, in the glow of modernist thought, have not only always recognised the art (and artificiality) of their work, but have struggled brilliantly, with a deep understanding of their medium, to create the impression of the real out of the impossibilities of language and art. Critics like Harry Levin, Robert Alter, Northrop Frye, Ian Watt, and Michael McKeon, among many others who have preceded or worked outside of post-structuralist theoretical positions, have rethought realism inside a history of genres, or cultural history, or new forms of aesthetic sensibility.

Byerly's study seems to me to work out of that tradition, bringing it into contact with some post-structuralist thought, but most important, seeing realism in its ambivalent relations to its sister arts, particularly music, painting, and theatre. Her argument is built on the assumption, which she effectively confirms through her careful

readings, that virtually all realistic narratives invoke these arts either as a kind of natural evocation and confirmation of the reality they describe, or as false representations against which their own truthfulness is to be understood and judged. Hers is a richly productive extension of the strongest tradition of criticism of realism in part because it takes her beyond the epistemological issues around the question of representation that have tended to dominate discussions. Those issues, of course, remain present, but the epistemological crisis is almost a given. What matters is how realism achieves its authenticity as art, while making ostensible claims about its reliability as representation. So Byerly discusses helpfully the relation of realistic narratives to the arts, the ways in which those narratives, by way of establishing its relationship to the arts, carves out moral spaces and then, in her account, slides into an almost antithetical aestheticism.

Byerly begins with a crucial, paradoxical recognition: that realism's authority to represent the real depends on its authority as art; thus it cannot afford to seem, as it were, too natural. So she poses the question: "How can art evoke reality while acknowledging its difference from the real world?" (2). It is a question that leads her to the heart of nineteenth-century realism by way of a thoughtful study of romantic and Victorian attitudes towards the arts. She traces the shifting allegiances of realists (beginning with romantic poets) to different arts. Music slides, among the romantics, from a spontaneous natural effusion to an artifact and thus lays the foundation, Byerly claims, for Victorian narrative realism. In works by Charlotte Brontë, William Thackeray, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy she finds both examples of the uses of the arts and a kind of symbolic narrative that moves from the Victorian moral aesthetic to aestheticism itself.

So the book has a trajectory, almost a teleology, arguing that the historical development of realism's preoccupation with the arts leads virtually inevitably to aestheticism. The special realistic effect of the evocation of the arts in Victorian realism suddenly disappears as the aesthetes too invoke those arts. Whereas, Byerly has claimed convincingly, realist evocation of the arts almost always set those passages off as distinctive, differentiated from "the underlying reality it purports to reflect," aesthetic allusions in aesthetic narratives "are woven into the texture of the narrative."

Byerly has wanted to argue that the tension between art and reality always threatened to undermine realistic narratives. Certainly the extremely self-conscious Thackeray, about whom Byerly writes with real originality, came close very often to subverting his own realist enterprises. But he sets up a clear distinction between the merely theatrical—the condition of most of the dwellers in vanity fair—and reality, and then partly subverts it, famously in *Vanity Fair* by parading himself as puppet master. Forcing readers into the experience by implicating them in the spectacles of vanity fair, he uses the arts to force discrimination between the merely theatrical and the truth, to move aesthetic issues to moral ones.

Each of the chapters traces another set of developments in the relations between art and realism; each tends to set up a polarity between an authentic and an inauthentic artfulness. So with the Brontës, and in a rather different way with George Eliot, Byerly notes how the novels distinguish between types of theatricality—a male theatricality, which tends to be used for control, and a female theatricality, which tends to be expressive of inner feelings.

It is easy enough to quarrel with some of Byerly's readings and with the implicit teleology of her narrative. But certainly she is right that realism has always had a complex relation to the arts and is, as she claims, trapped by a tension between the need for immediate relationship with the real world and the need for the authority that only art can give. In tracing the transformation of these aesthetic preoccupations from realism to aestheticism, she makes an important contribution to the study of realistic narrative and, perhaps, to the development of modernism.

Taking Hardy as a key transitional figure who regards the arts not as "artificial" but as "natural manifestations of reality," Byerly argues that Hardy achieves what the others strove for, a "reconciliation of 'realism' and fiction" (183). While this seems to me to be largely correct, it doesn't seem to me that it is quite for the reason Byerly is seeking to affirm. Hardy believed, as the narrator says somewhere in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, that the world is a "psychological phenomenon." He does not, however, mean that the world yields to or is simply created by the mind. The mind gives whatever meaning there is in the world, but the world rather cruelly and obdurately does its job, whatever fictions we create. Art for Hardy is the fortress against the brutality of nature. Art is natural because there is, from the perspective of human consciousness, nothing else. But a realist narrative always ironises its own art, and certainly the ideals and art of its characters.

Nevertheless, the narrative Byerly gives us is a valuable one and provides yet another modification of our sense of realism, that persistent and impossible mode, that keeps asserting itself through the mechanisms of the art that belies it.

Response

Alison Byerly

It would be entertaining to write the sort of response one reads all too frequently in the "Letters" section of book reviews: "Professor X has completely failed to grasp the intricacies of my argument, if indeed he has actually read my book at all." However, the lucidity and generosity of the three reviews at hand make such a course impossible. I appreciate the care each author has taken to read the book carefully and do justice to its argument even when taking issue with aspects of that argument. Although the approaches of the three reviews differ, they share a willingness to look at the broad outlines of my thesis, rather than getting caught up in disputing specific readings of specific passages, which no doubt they could have done. I will try, in turn, to comment primarily on the general questions that seem to me to be generated by the reviews, both individually and collectively.

George Levine's review provides a useful starting point by situating my project in the context of the critical history of realism. He points out that realism was "rendered suspect" by post-structuralist theory, and that recent approaches take for granted that realism is "not what it seems, or tries to seem." His wry statement that "since the 1960s, traditional realists of the nineteenth century seem always to have known the impossibility of their enterprise" underlines the extent to which my study is necessarily a product of a particular time and place. Nevertheless he supports my claim that the