WOMEN ON STAGE IN THE NOVEL: GEORGE MOORE AND HENRY JAMES

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In a recent interview for the *New Statesman* Glenda Jackson explained why she has excised all traces of her acting past from her life as a member of parliament: "I was deemed to be either an airhead or a prima donna," she says. "Acting—however much people pay it lip service—is not taken seriously." This may be true in the political circles in which she now moves, but it is not true everywhere, and has not always been true in the past. There are times and places when acting has been considered as serious work for women—as artwork in performance. In the late Victorian novel, for example, it became possible to represent women's acting as a creative and productive activity. The topos of woman on stage appears surprisingly often in the period, and the actresses described are by no means always like Zola's Nana, who couldn't sing, couldn't hold herself well, "mais . . . ça ne faisait rien, que'elle avait autre chose" (43). There is also an important group of female fictional characters who are shown becoming artists (just as their real-life precursors and models, Rachel and Melba, became widely recognised as substantial artists [See Stokes 771-93 and Hone 208-09 on Moore and Melba]). The novels that represent these women are of interest both because they concern the way in which women could be seen as artists, and because they demonstrate the relation of Victorian concepts of art to what Paul Ricoeur has called the "narrative structure of the person" (113).

We are accustomed to the idea that domesticity is the chief option for women in the nineteenth-century novel. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth says in her volume on the *English Novel in History* that "women's production is for the most part simply excluded from the realm of value" (139). No doubt this is generally true; but there are exceptions, and the theatre represents one important possibility for young ladies who have fallen on hard times and need money. It is, of course, by no means universally affirmed as a suitable life for a young lady: Mirah Lapidoth in *Daniel Deronda* insists that the theatre is a "hard," "unloving," and "disorderly" world (181); Maria Edgeworth talks of Lady Delacour in *Belinda* as "like a spoiled actress . . . over stimulated by applause, and exhausted by the exertions of supporting a fictitious character" (10-11). It is often emphasised that it would be more difficult to make an impact in the real theatre than in the family charades or *tableaux vivants* that feature in the social life of the bourgeoisie (in, for example, *Daniel Deronda* [43-44] or Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* [103-07]). But the theatre or opera house nonetheless attracts women in novels, women such as Gwendolen Harleth, or Dreiser's Sister Carrie, or Willa Cather's Thea Kronberg from *The Song of the Lark*—not to speak of Du Maurier's rather more raffish Trilby.

Since the nineteenth century insists so frequently upon self-effacement and public modesty as defining qualities for women, those who succeed as performers may well be seen as anomalous creatures—even monstrous. Henry James's Miriam Rooth affirms that "a girl had to be a kind of monster to wish to go on the stage" (138). The

actress Vashti, whom Lucy Snowe sees in *Villette*, is "something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. . . . It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral . . ." (339). But against the stigma of monstrosity there are counter-indications that the theatre and opera house constitute worlds in which women might achieve success, and a certain self-fulfillment. "Do nothing better," Herr Klesmer says in *Daniel Deronda*, "No, my dear Miss Harleth, you could do nothing better—neither man nor woman could do anything better" (217). And as Harriet Hawkins has pointed out in her discussion of the prima donna in the novel, Daniel Deronda's mother can admit that she is something of a failure at personal relationships, but deny her monstrosity, and announce with some pride: "I was the Alcharisi you have heard of: the name had magic wherever it was carried" (543).

Around the representation of these women artists, however (particularly the representation of women artists by men), problems do undoubtedly revolve. Oscar Wilde reduces them to a simple dichotomy. Dorian Gray sees Sibyl Vane act and says "She is a genius." Lord Henry Wotton replies, "My dear boy, no woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex" (192). Lord Henry may be taken here to represent widespread opinion, the banal currency of masculine exclusiveness; but I wish to put such opinions aside for the moment, and focus instead on the opposite standpoint of this dichotomy, on what it means to think, as Dorian does, that a woman can be an artist of genius—especially within the theatre. In what follows I should like to enquire exactly how women are represented as actresses, and what are the implications of their representation. In particular I concentrate on two late-nineteenth-century novels, Henry James's *The Tragic Muse* (1890) and George Moore's *Evelyn Innes* (1898). If women are to be represented as performers, certain decisions have to be made. Who will describe their performances? What will count in the performer's actual work? And what can we learn from the rhetoric used to describe these women on stage?

Henry James's *The Tragic Muse* is a novel with double and intersecting plots: one about a young English politician, Nick Dormer, who decides to give up politics and become a painter; the other about a déracinée young woman, Miriam Rooth, an aspiring actress, who lives in Paris with her sentimental and slightly disreputable mother. Miriam is taken up by a British diplomat, Peter Sherringham, introduced to a famous French actress, Madame Carré, and helped to undergo training for the theatre. Peter falls in love with Miriam, and wants to marry her (as we might expect); but (as we might not quite expect) Miriam refuses to give up her acting career and become a diplomat's wife. A large part of the novel is concerned with the history of Miriam's improvement from a brash young girl in Paris to a polished and triumphant actress, playing Romantic verse drama and Shakespeare on the British stage. Since this is early James, the focalisation of the narrative often shifts: James does not, however, give us Miriam's view of her own performances. Although so much of the novel is about Miriam, its narrative technique is to describe Miriam as seen by the men around her. (Edmund Wilson complained that James fails to show us the inside of Miriam Rooth because "he does not know . . . what the insides of such people are like" [qtd Graham 104]; but this seems rather to miss the point of James's focalisation through a reflector.) We might expect Sherringham to be the chief reflecting consciousness, and to see Miriam through his

eyes, and in her early rehearsals, that is what happens. When she triumphs in the theatre, however, we see her major performances chiefly through the eyes of the more detached observer, the politician/painter, Nick Dormer.

A woman's performance on stage is, then, described in *The Tragic Muse* as seen by men, and not as seen by an expert in the theatre, but as seen by a sympathetic amateur who can register the effect as it might be on a general, if not anonymous, audience. George Moore's *Evelyn Innes*, on the other hand, is more simply centred on an opera singer, one who has been trained in her childhood by her father to sing church music. Evelyn Innes feels stifled by the smallness of her father's musical world, and runs off with a rich music lover, Sir Owen Asher, who arranges for her to receive a training in Wagnerian opera. Owen thinks it would not be right to marry Evelyn while she is still performing, but intends to do so once she has retired. Meanwhile, however, she falls in love with a young enthusiast for Celtic art and music, Ulick Dean (based, it is generally agreed, on W.B. Yeats). She has a steaming love-affair with Ulick (including sex in the dressing room in the intervals of *Tristan and Isolde*), and then, plagued by her religious conscience, drifts back to the church, singing in the convent chapel and giving up both Sir Owen and her international career.

If James's Miriam Rooth is seen largely from the outside, Moore's Evelyn Innes is seen often from the inside. This is Moore's first attempt at a "psychological novel," giving us what he praised in D'Annunzio's work: "the ceaseless chatter of the soul," and "the vague, undefinable yet intensely real life that lies beneath our consciousness" (Noël 273; 275). An impersonal narrator appears sometimes, but for much of the novel we move forward through interior monologue and represented thought. Thus, while James simply takes us to the theatre to focus on Nick Dormer watching Miriam, one of the key representations of Evelyn Innes on stage is done through her "drowsing" thoughts as she lies in bed, planning her performances:

> [A]s she drowsed she thought of the article [Ulick] had written about her Margaret, and it was the desire to read it again that awoke her. Stretching out her hand, she took it from the table at her bedside and began reading. ... Like every other Margaret, her prayer-book was in her hand when she first met Faust; but she dropped it as she saw him, and while she shyly and sweetly sang that she was neither a lady nor a beauty, she stooped and with some embarrassment picked up the book. ... "It is by ideas like this," [Ulick] said, "that the singer carried forward the story, and made it seem like a real scene that was happening before our eyes." (157-59)

Ulick has been brought in, and again it could be said that we are being given an amateur male observer as reflecting consciousness; but the slight confusion of past tenses makes it unclear how much of this is directly from Ulick and how much is mediated through Evelyn's own recollections. The account goes on: "The paper slid from Evelyn's hand. She could see from Ulick's description of her acting that she had acted very well; if she

had not, he could not have written like that. But her acting only seemed extraordinary when she read about it" (160).

The problem of the male "gaze" and its relation to a dominant patriarchal ideology cannot, then, be dismissed in considering these descriptions; but in narrative terms it is equally important to note that as accounts of performances they do need to show some kind of public endorsement. The artworks these women artists create are defined (as always in the case of the theatre) by their evanescence, and only fixed insofar as they are experienced and recalled by an audience. The novelist could of course use an omniscient narrator (or, in Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth's term, a "Nobody narrator") to do this. The narrator in *Trilby*, for example, describes the voice of Svengali from the reactions of a generalised "one": "one felt it to be not only faultless, but infallible; and the seduction, the novelty of it, the strangely sympathetic quality! How can one describe the quality of a peach or nectarine to those who have only know apples?" (211). But this mixes narrative levels, and brings in the problem of authorial intrusion: Du Maurier shifts quite soon to a focus on one of the characters, Little Billee, and his response to Trilby's performance.

Moreover, if the triumph of an actress who is a significant character is to be shown, it will also need to be integrated into the personal relations of the plot. Thus even if a male "gaze" provides the focalisor for *The Tragic Muse* and *Evelyn Innes* at the point where performance is taking place, it would be reductive to suggest (when the plot as a whole suggests otherwise) that the representation of performance is simply determined by patriarchal ideology. The descriptions are there in the novel, after all, as part of a wider strategy, to register appreciation of the autonomous skills and achievements of the women observed.

We may well ask, however, what exactly the novels focus upon in describing performance. What is assumed to construct or constitute a performance? Both these novels emphasise that despite the rather louche life-style associated with a successful artist, a good deal of hard work is involved. What happens on stage is not produced by accident. Evelyn is always reading opera scores, studying her roles. Miriam knows many languages and many poems and is ruthless about finding a good teacher. The physical side of acting is presented slightly differently, since James places Miriam first within a tradition which no longer means much to us: that of the theatrical pose. Although she starts by speaking badly, Madame Carré says "the head's very good" (86), while Peter Sherringham watches "Miriam and her attitude" (90). Theatrical attitudes link Miriam with the famous portrait by Gérôme of Rachel as "La Tragédie," and the portrait by Reynolds of Mrs Siddons, and Miriam herself is fascinated by the way a French actress holds her arms (Tintner 83-85; Booth 73-75). Beyond this Miriam is constantly involved in role-playing—changing herself to fit the situation, presenting facets of her personality which confuse those around her. The instability and experimental nature of her public self will contribute to her stage work. Most importantly, with good teaching she discovers how to use her voice. In Moore's *Evelyn Innes* there is more direct concentration on the singer's voice, though Owen also notes that "[Evelyn] had beautiful teeth and hair, and he liked her figure, notwithstanding the fact that her shoulders sloped a little—perhaps because they did slope a little" (15).

When he is taking her to her music teacher in Paris, Owen thinks: "She was a rather tall and strongly-built girl, but the Wagnerian bosom was wanting" (133). The body as instrument is thus detached slightly from the personal identity of the actress in both cases; but we are spared the kind of extraordinary objectification we find in Du Maurier's *Trilby*, where Svengali takes his opera glasses and looks into Trilby's mouth: "Himmel!" he says, "The roof of your mouth is like the dome of the Pantheon; there is room in it for 'toutes les gloires de la France'" (50).

James had a serious and deeply considered program for the actors of his time, which Miriam's career reflects. He complained that the London theatre is "smothered in scenery, the interpretation scrambles off as it can" (*Tragic Muse* 134-35). In his theatrical criticism he admired instead the Paris theatre which he saw as continuing an educated, intelligent tradition, based on an ability to speak the verse: "Such art, such finish, such grace, such taste, such a marvellous exhibition of applied science" (*Scenic Art* 4). He most disliked the kind of acting he associated with Ellen Terry and Henry Irving in London. Ellen Terry's manner of dealing with speeches, he thought, was weak: "she giggles too much, plays too much with her fingers, is too free and familiar, too osculatory" (143). In France, on the other hand, James decided that "the actor's art, like the ancient arts and trades, is still something of a 'mystery'—a thing of technical secrets, of special knowledge" (121). In *The Tragic Muse* Peter Sherringham—obviously standing in for James at this point—has a vision of "a great academic artistic theatre, subsidised and unburdened with money-getting rich in its repertory, rich in the quality and the wide array of its servants" (307). Miriam, for all that at first she is crude and ignorant of technique, represents the possibility of seriously considered and achieved art, based on a training within a richly developed theatrical tradition.

George Moore is not quite so directly concerned with an agenda for the opera, though *Evelyn Innes* plays heavily on the contrast between the ancient music sponsored by Evelyn's father (which trains her voice in one way), and her performances in Wagner (which lead her to a new power of projecting emotion, and yet cause her to lose perfect pitch). Rather than offering one alternative as the path for music, Moore seems eager to open up various possibilities. Wagnerism is portrayed as a key artistic movement of the modern period, but Moore wishes also to suggest the appeal of other kinds of music.

We can, then, suggest that for both writers acting is strongly associated with something learned and practised—actresses do not (like Dreiser's Sister Carrie [164-69]) suddenly get chosen for a starring role without any training or experience, and then enjoy immediate success. Acting is not simply a question of tricks, theatrical business and gorgeous costumes. The training in voice and movement leads on to an ability in role-playing. The artist has, as James says, an "idea" (*Tragic Muse* 423). This idea relies, for Miriam Rooth, on a fundamental honesty about her art, and for Evelyn Innes on a process of self-discovery. The reflection of life in acting, and acting in life (a relation which still underlies popular narratives of theatrical life, like the film *Shakespeare in Love*) is shown to be fruitful in these novels only when it rests on a groundwork of tough preparation.

If acting is generally considered with such seriousness, we might ask finally how it is represented on the most local level. What can we observe from the rhetoric of the

descriptions? Miriam Rooth's triumph in the theatre is, as we have noted, reflected through Nick Dormer:

> Nick had often heard more applause, but had never heard more attention. . . . [I]t was easy to feel a fine universal consensus and to recognise everywhere the light spring of hope. People snatched their eyes from the stage an instant to look at each other, all eager to hand on the torch passed to them by the actress over the footlights. It was a part of the impression that she was now only showing to the full, for this time she had verse to deal with and she made it unexpectedly exquisite. She was beauty, melody, truth; she was passion and persuasion and tenderness. She caught up the obstreperous play in soothing entwining arms and, seeming to tread the air in the flutter of her robe, carried it into the high places of poetry, of art, of style. And she had such tones of nature, such concealments of art, such effusions of life, that the whole scene glowed with the colour she communicated, and the house, pervaded with rosy fire, glowed back at the scene. (423)

This is description as hyperbole, the gift of praise ("contredon sémiologique, sous forme d'un texte") that Philippe Hamon has suggested is characteristic of traditional literary description (11). We can point up some of its specific characteristics by contrasting it with the description of Sibyl Vane in Wilde's *Dorian Gray*. Sibyl's theatrical context is given in detail: the play is *Romeo and Juliet*; there is "a young Hebrew" at the piano; Romeo has "corked eyebrows" and "a figure like a beer-barrel"; Sibyl as Juliet has "a little flower-like face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose" (195). It all makes a confusing mixture, but even the comparisons are concrete. James by contrast is highly abstract: we are not told what the play is, or anything about what Miriam is wearing, the scenery, the other actors, or even what the scene she acts consists in. The hyperbole borrows traditional rhetorical forms: a series of triads ("a rhetorical pattern that seems to be especially attractive" according to Randolph Quirk [1473]): beauty, melody and truth are linked to a triad of affect—passion, persuasion and tenderness. The first triad connects Miriam to Romantic neo-Platonism, with echoes of Keats. The terms used are "axiologic" (i.e. to do with values), and, if presented directly as the narrator's statement, might have seemed naive or a little difficult to accept. Because they are Nick's represented thoughts they become subjective valuations—and yet also, as axiologic (in Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni's phrase) they are "subjectivity objectivised" [subjectivité objectivisée] (82). The first triad was of single abstract words; the next is joined by conjunctions; the next by prepositions "of poetry, of art, of style"; and then there is a phrasal triad: "such tones of nature, such concealments of art, such effusions of life." The satisfactory closure of each triad is pushed on to another longer triad, to suggestions of supreme talents and transcendent art, but then contained finally within a mutual

relationship between artist and public: the glow of satisfaction glows back the "colour she communicated."

Nick's response represents a "fine universal consensus." A slightly different view is given by Peter Sherringham's meditation on Miriam and her art:

> Miriam had never been more present to him than at this hour; but she was inextricably transmuted—present essentially as the romantic heroine she represented ... He saw things as a shining confusion, and yet somehow something monstrously definite kept surging out of them. Miriam was a beautiful actual fictive impossible young woman of a past age, an undiscoverable country, who spoke in blank verse and overflowed with metaphor, who was exalted and heroic beyond all human convenience and who yet was irresistibly real and related to one's affairs. (425)

Again the hyperbolic description is abstract, with emphasis on transcendence. Here the transcendence is through paradox or oxymoron: "shining confusion" and the "monstrously definite." The transcendence is such that it overcomes the flow of time through an act of fictional presentation: Miriam is a "beautiful actual fictive impossible young woman." Her role is both actual *and* fictive. If our sense of personal identity, of a person as a person, is only possible through a prospect of time, Miriam here breaks that condition. At the high moment of the drama she is a single punctual representation of the self: acting, she is most herself: in confusion, she is definite.

The closure of James's novel will bring success for Miriam as actress. For George Moore's novel, on the other hand, closure is an uneasy break; Evelyn gives up the public stage and sings in a convent. (The sequel on Evelyn's later life in the convent is entitled *Sister Theresa*.) There is a similar emphasis, however, in Moore's novel on the possibility of transcendence in Evelyn's performances, and on the realisation of the personal through acting. Ulick sees Evelyn as Isolde: "Rapture succeeded rapture, and the souls of the lovers rose nearer to the surface of life. In a shudder of silver chords he saw them float away like little clouds towards the low rim of the universe" (291). The stage scene is thus converted to a symbolist picture—which allows Evelyn's singing to function as a secret code for her real relationship with Ulick.

> [Ulick] listened, not so much to the music itself as to its occult significance regarding Evelyn and himself. And as Isolde's grief changed from wild lament for sensual delight to a resigned and noble prayer, the figure of ecstasy broke with a sound as of wings shaking, and Ulick seemed to witness a soul's transfiguration. He watched it rising in several ascensions, like a lark's flight. For an instant it seemed to float in some divine consummation, then, like the bird, to suddenly quench in the radiance of the sky. (295)

Imitating Wagner's example in his use of melody, Moore believed that novelists should use an uninterrupted flow of narrative in their novels, and not insert descriptions: "a novel had better be all narrative. . . . Description is narrative" (qtd Cave 141). The singing in *Evelyn Innes* is thus described through symbolic personal narrative. The experience of sound has been transferred to a visual imagery loaded with religious connotations—harps, divine consummations etc. (The lark's flight suggesting Shelley here, as James suggested Keats.) It is an abstraction from the reality of the stage and the story of the opera, but an abstraction that also allegorises Ulick's personal relations with Evelyn.

Evelyn's ability to communicate the personal through her performance is repeatedly emphasised by Moore. Her acting embodies "that personal accent without which there is no life" (274). She conveys the personal because in playing a role she makes it embody her own life history (what we might now classify as Stanislavsky's technique).

> She simply went on the stage, and once she was on the stage she could not do otherwise. She could not tell why she did things. Her acting was so much a part of herself that she could not think of it as an art at all; it was merely a medium through which she was able to re-live past phases of her life, or to exhibit her present life in a more intense and concentrated form. (160)

The passionate embodiment of this technique, the conjunction of art and life it involves, lies behind the extraordinary scene where Evelyn takes Ulick to her dressing room in the interval, draws "her mortal lover into the depths," and into a "world of miraculous happiness [where] he surrendered himself" (294). It sounds a slightly unlikely fantasy of the way opera singers behave between acts, but here Evelyn represents, like Miriam Rooth, "actual fictive impossible young woman" – a conjunction of artist and emotion, of passionate body and transcendent spiritualised beauty. And however perfect this is, it is impossible to sustain such moments. Evelyn will go on to a different kind of singing when she goes to the convent (where she has rather less opportunity for sex in the intermissions). "She had learnt the art of being herself on the stage" (161). In the convent she will find music with "a severe dignity of line" (450). She pours her voice into the song, but not to achieve the personal: "Her lips seemed to achieve sculpture" (450).

In conclusion, I should emphasise that there are no doubt other ways of reading these two deeply interesting and heterogeneous texts. I do not offer what I have suggested above as definitive interpretation. I am prepared to accept that symptomatic readings could bring out a variety of meanings I have neglected. (And a fuller account would need to include George Moore's *A Mummer's Wife* as well as James's *The Bostonians*, which are also about performers.) I am interested here in what David Bordwell has called "middle-level concepts," a "poetics of effects" (271-73), looking, in Bordwell's terms, at how texts are "Making Meaning," and at what we can in turn make of that. Some recent critics seem to have found ways of devaluing or dismissing their

portrayal of actresses, and the suggestion of a creative role for women. In her recent discussion of *The Tragic Muse*, for example, Shelley Salamensky has completely ignored Miriam and the theatre, and decided that the title of the novel more properly applied to another character, Gabriel Nash, since he bears some resemblances to Oscar Wilde (275-81). Terry Eagleton has dismissed *Evelyn Innes* as "an excessively cerebral piece of work, shorn of the density of social texture of the naturalistic fiction, marked by a callow ethereality which hardly transcends the consciousness of its own characters" (223). I am not sure what the last clause of this sentence could mean in textual terms, what Eagleton thinks is transcending what; but it is difficult to avoid the implication that Eagleton's regrets about the lack of a "social texture" are being used as an excuse not to take the problems of a female performer seriously.

I have tried to show that we can more profitably read these texts, *The Tragic Muse* and *Evelyn Innes*, as examinations of women artists within the performing arts (an examination that other and more popular novels such as *Sister Carrie*, *The Song of the Lark* and *Trilby* also open up, though in rather less interesting fashion). If Oscar Wilde allowed Lord Henry Wotton to mock women as artists, the writers I have been concentrating on do not. The art of the actress within the late Victorian novel has become for them not only a way of earning money, of reforming the theatre, of earning social position and fame, but a form of creative activity—one that combines the presentness of emotional experience with a suggestion of a fully realised personal identity. Acting (like fiction) can be taken to suggest the richness of a life story—James's "actual fictive"—that can be apprehended at one stroke.

If we ask exactly why the nineteenth-century novel is so interested in actresses, there are no doubt many possible answers, but one important one is that the creative actress represents what James calls "supreme exhibition" (490). She breaks gender boundaries, since, *The Tragic Muse* affirms, she exemplifies the characteristics "that any artistic performance requires and that all, whatever the instrument, require in exactly the same degree" (216). Within the novel her performance on stage raises in a new way the problems of the life story and of personal identity which (as Paul Ricoeur reminds us) remain as a teasing if finally insoluble complexity, but which are nonetheless posed for us, with differing degrees of subtlety, by any extended narrative.

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