

Esther Summerson without giggles; and I have debated with students the merits of sensation novels – trash for me, “real” popular culture for them – when taught alongside George Eliot, Dickens, and the Brontës (also popular culture!). These novels *are* “generous, expansive, and deeply entertaining.”

Tellingly, amongst so much discussion that is brilliant here, that makes this “companion” a really necessary volume, the expansiveness is everywhere recognised and appreciated in all its complexity. But attention to the generosity of experience, and of narrative reflection on it, *and* any sense of how – and how much – these novels produced laughter and tears in their readers are rarely present. The disciplining of anarchic desires and the rage for order in a metaphysically homeless world command the attention of these readers. Kate Flint and Jeff Nunokawa do recognise how the romance form so deeply embedded in realism constructed narratives that articulated a basic need for a “happy ending.” For Nunokawa, this desire “is in no small part because of the sentimental education we receive from the Victorian novel and its afterlife in more recent narrative forms”; books like *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch* have been a crucial part in narrating “the secular scripture of desire” (125, 131). As Victorian novels give witness to their culture in all its complexity, they are clearly not losing their capacity to delight us. Contemporary readers do still respond to *Jane Eyre* and *Maggie Tulliver* as intensely as Nunokawa, and do still laugh at the performers in the Dickens world.

If the Victorian novel is the great signifying witness to the Age of Capital and “the defining literary genre” of the period (David 15), it is also a reminder that in an age that produced many competing forms of entertainment (and Simon Eliot lists them), this often expensive commodity managed to speak to Victorians in such numbers as to become the chief genre of the period. It is *their* “defining literary genre” and their popular culture. The generosity and laughter that it brought to readers are worth attention. The novels take us there as well.

RESISTING REALISM

Response by Deirdre David

In one way or another, each of these reviewers finds that most of the essays in the *Companion* skirt what Ian Watt, almost fifty years ago, so usefully termed “formal realism,” the narrative strategies that produce the verisimilitude we associate always with the novel form. Professors Bodenheimer, Freedgood, and Qualls pose cogent questions that should point us now, I think, in the direction of asking a grander, overarching one: why is it that current readings of Victorian fiction tend to skimp formal analysis in favour of thematic and political approaches grouped under the rubrics of gender, social class, and race? Bodenheimer asserts that “realism seems to stand for a way of reading Victorian novels we have rejected”: in our desire to celebrate transgression from what we see as dominant and repressive Victorian ideologies, we neglect to talk about how the multiple narrative strategies deployed by novelists actually make the formal arrangements, if you will, for what we name

transgressive. Implicitly, Bodenheimer attributes this disregard of “the variety of activities performed by nineteenth-century narrators” to a professional desire for critical fashionability. Watt’s “formal realism” has been tossed out in favour of cultural studies.

Less directly, Freedgood and Qualls also find the essays negligent in discussion of formal issues. Freedgood asks whether, some fifteen years down the road, the reigning categories of analysis deployed in this *Companion* will still be in place; to speak of reigning categories is, of course, to evoke in our minds those that have been deposed, and among those is aesthetic analysis. Qualls astutely notes that what is “rarely present” in this *Companion* is attention to how the Victorian novel is able to produce the astonishing results it does in its readers. Admitting without embarrassment to much laughter and many tears when reading Trollope and Eliot, Qualls points, in a sense, to what seems “real” about Victorian fiction, and thus to the verisimilitude of character and situation that define, in part, the maddeningly elusive term “realism.”

I’d like to suggest that the current shying away from discussion of realism and literary form in the Victorian novel exists for two reasons – one fairly simple and the other more difficult to talk about. First, for those of us who have been thinking and writing about the Victorian novel for some thirty years, or, to put this more directly, since the early nineteen seventies when feminist readings first got going, it was an eye-opener to encounter essays that dealt with menstruation and Maggie Tulliver in the Red Deeps, an exhilarating rush to read, later in the decade, the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar that elaborated the barely suppressed anger of nineteenth-century women writers. What’s more, the late nineteen fifties’ dissection by Raymond Williams of English culture and society licensed those of us who had leanings in that direction, to embark on class-based readings of the Victorian novel that tried to go beyond thematic isolation of things such as the city, education, crime, the law, and so on. And as the seventies advanced, the influences of Deconstruction, the Frankfurt School, and Michel Foucault led to fresh ways of seeing Victorian fiction as both linguistic object and cultural product. With the proliferation of postcolonial novels and the emergence of postcolonial theory in the nineteen eighties, race joined gender and social class in a ruling triumvirate of analysis.

It’s not difficult, then, to see why Victorian aesthetics and the affiliated topic of realism got left behind. Feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial approaches seemed liberating to a generation of graduate students trained mostly in formal analysis, and in showing how the Victorian novel expressed dominant ideologies of gender, social class, and race, some of us downplayed the importance of literary form itself in the production of those ideologies. To be sure, over the past thirty years many distinguished critics have never ceased to write about realism (one thinks immediately of George Levine, Alexander Welsh, and of course, Rosemarie Bodenheimer), yet, as the reviews suggest, it seems relegated more to the undergraduate classroom than tackled as an important object of theoretical analysis.

The second, and much more complicated reason for this relegation, is that talking about realism and literary form is, in fact, rather scary. Even with the most

skilful attention to those things that Bodenheimer labels the “activities” of Victorian novelists (satire, irony, parody, melodrama, free indirect discourse, juxtaposed stories, and so on) there remains something mysterious about how realism actually works. Consider two brilliant moments in Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* – one that reduces this reader, at least, to tears of laughter and the other, well, to tears. Both can be cleverly dissected but their full effect, in my view, eludes a full accounting.

Flora Finching, a generous, good-hearted woman and once the object of Arthur Clennam’s boyish affection, has, over a period of some twenty years, become quite large and given to quaffing brandy with her breakfast tea, ordinary enough qualities in an affectionate widow living with a father described by Dickens as “a selfish, crafty imposter.” Flora’s most astonishing quality is her gift for narrative free-association. There is insufficient space here to render the superb absurdity of her speech (everything she says is delivered entirely without punctuation, except for the delicious moments when she must catch her breath, something Dickens usually indicates with a comma). Here’s a fragment (Flora’s description of her past relationship with Clennam): “we were all in all to one another it was the morning of life it was bliss it was frenzy it was everything else of that sort in the highest degree, when rent asunder we turned to stone in which capacity Arthur went to China and I became the statue bride of the late Mr. F.” “To paint the emotions of that morning when all was marble within” is beyond her, she concludes. Like so many of Dickens’s characters, Flora is real enough, yet she’s also beyond real. Tipsy, silly, and almost frighteningly over the top in ways that many of Harold Pinter’s characters go beyond the point of plausibility. I’d venture to say it’s easier to do a gender or class-based reading of Flora (enslaved to her father, himself a despicable greedy landlord and oppressor of decent working-class folks like the Plornishes) than it is to gather and analyse the facets of Dickens’s art that have created her. I’m suggesting we’ve become both lazy and reliant on thematic categories, sluggish even in our reluctance to do the hard work of formal analysis so splendidly practiced by J. Hillis Miller in his meticulous dissection of the opening paragraph of *Bleak House*.

The closing of *Little Dorrit* is, perhaps, the most tear-inducing of all of Dickens’s endings. With Flora Finching in fluttering attendance, Amy and Arthur marry, in the dusty city church where Amy Dorrit’s birth was registered and where she slept one night, shut out after curfew from the Marshalsea. They go “quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward, and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar.” At this point in a fairly long career of teaching and writing about Dickens, there are tears when I finish *Little Dorrit*. And why? Because one feels the past suffering of Clennam and Amy Dorrit, because through Dickens’s language one knows the sinister vitality of the street into which they make their way. Yes, it’s to do with Dickens’s superb skills as a storyteller, his journalist’s observation of the street, his incisive depiction of the workings of mid-Victorian society governed by Merdle-like ambition and capitalistic greed, his own never-erased memories of childhood unhappiness and visits to his parents in the Marshalsea prison. But add it all up and what do you have? A scene

that makes you cry because you feel it's real. At the risk of mystifying the novelist's art, I'd say there's something mysterious about Dickens's achievement here, and we tend to put aside what is mysterious in favour of readings that assure us we have a confident critical grip on things. Bodenheimer, Freedgood, and Qualls challenge us to tackle the mysterious and the fiction of the real.

Deirdre David
