

“Like an old Flemish interior brought into action”: Victorian Reviews of the Realist Novel and the Appropriation of Visual Arts Vocabulary

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Introduction

This article explores the link between visual culture and the criticism of the Victorian novel. The mid-Victorian period saw a surge in the publication of novels written in what has come to be regarded as the beginning of a realist tradition. The vast majority of these novels were written by women who frequently also worked as reviewers, since editors of periodicals considered them to be the most suitable commentators on a genre to which they contributed in such unprecedented numbers. Among the most influential women reviewers of the Victorian period were Geraldine Jewsbury, Margaret Oliphant and George Eliot. Drawing on their knowledge of Dutch, Flemish, and French realist painting as well as the principles of modern painting laid down by John Ruskin in particular, these reviewers appropriated the language of visual arts for their analyses of the nineteenth-century novel.

The relation between the novel and the visual arts has been the subject of many scholarly studies.¹ To my knowledge, however, there are no substantial studies of the relationship between the visual arts and the literary criticism of the nineteenth century. Thus, by breaking new ground, I aim to extend the study of the nineteenth-century visual imagination by linking the art of painting with the art of criticism of the novel. Furthermore, I aim to demonstrate the instrumental role of women reviewers in the development of a vocabulary of literary criticism that closely related to the visual arts in connection with a theory of the novel. In doing so, I hope to be able to counter voices like Hugh Witemeyer’s who argues that borrowings of visual arts vocabulary in Victorian book reviews are “often a symptom of poverty, mere dead metaphor and desperate cliché revealing only that Victorian literary criticism still lacked a sophisticated terminology of its own” (Witemeyer 4).

In the first part of this article, I examine the link between literature and the visual arts in a historical context, focusing on the most important concepts influencing this link, as well as elucidating the Victorian notion of vision. In the second part, I provide a brief introduction to the literary careers of Jewsbury, Oliphant and Eliot to describe their positions in the Victorian literary landscape and to pinpoint their contributions to the criticism, and thereby definition, of the Victorian realist novel. In the third and final part, I analyse Jewsbury’s, Oliphant’s, and Eliot’s reviews in regard to the usage of visual arts vocabulary.

Literature and Visual Arts

In the *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* of 13 November 1858, the critic reviewing Holme Lee’s novel *Sylvan Holt’s Daughter* commends the writer for devoting “all her energies to work successfully the two great modern inventions of novel-writing—the description of wild scenery, and the development of . . . character” (483). The reviewer further claims that “For scenery painting, Holme Lee looks to Miss Bronte [*sic*] as her model,” emphasising repeatedly that Lee does describe and

“has looked at the thing, and having observed it carefully, chooses the best words she can to convey the impression to others” (“*Sylvan Holt’s Daughter*” 483). Lee’s descriptions of landscapes and characters are real sketches and a testimony to her skills as a “word-painter” (“*Sylvan Holt’s Daughter*” 483). The concept of word-painting as an expression of “literary pictorialism” was originally used to describe the close relationship between painting and poetry (Witemeyer 1).² In the works of Romantic and Victorian poets such as William Wordsworth, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Lord Alfred Tennyson, word-painting, or the picturesque, is a central element, whereby the reciprocity between painting and poetry, the visual and the verbal, is demonstrated in different ways (Christ and Jordan xx). Poems are paired with pictures, poems are inspired by paintings, as much as paintings are inspired by poems, and, above all, poems abound in faithful visual descriptions particularly of nature commonly using the rhetorical device of ekphrasis (Wellek and Warren 125). This reciprocal relationship between the so-called “sister arts” of painting and poetry is informed by the aesthetic concept of “ut pictura poesis” (“as is painting, so is poetry”) first formulated by the Ancient Roman poet, satirist and critic Horace (65 BC–8 BC) in his *Ars Poetica* (c.19 BC) to reflect the belief that the main objective of both literature and painting was an imitation, or a mimetic representation, of human nature and actions. Since the Renaissance, Horace’s analogy has attracted much debate in particular with regard to the argument for the supremacy of one art over the other art as well as for the overall comparability of the two arts (Markiewicz 537). As George P. Landow argues, “throughout the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, poetry and painting had been juxtaposed as a means of defending the prestige of the visual art,” as “painting was the younger sister of poetry, trying to edge into social acceptability on the arm of an elder relation” (44). Similarly, in the nineteenth century—when Horace’s analogy was extended to include the new literary form of the novel as another art of word-painting—critics, as Witemeyer points out, “usually compared painting with the novel in order to dignify the latter, and to claim for [it] some of the prestige which painting had acquired since the Renaissance” (33). However, in Romantic poetic theory and the nineteenth-century art criticism of Ruskin, Horace’s dictum took on a new meaning, as poetry and painting were considered not as imitations but as equal expressions of human nature. In fact, for “Ruskin, painting and poetry [were] two forms of ‘language’ through which the soul of the artist expresse[d] its vision” (Witemeyer 34). This vision is to be understood in the sense of both what a person sees with the actual eye and what a person perceives and interprets with their emotions, mind and imagination. Thus, the notion of vision is crucial to understanding “the way the Victorians constructed experience,” as Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan maintain (xix-xx).³

Apart from using language to express both mental and physical images of experiences in nineteenth-century literature, the popularity of illustrations in periodicals serialising novels and of illustrated novels furnishes further evidence for the Victorians’ preoccupation with the visual and the close link between the literary and the visual arts.⁴ As Kate Flint remarks, these illustrations “could provide an interpretive gloss on the written word,” emphasising that the visual could thus either circumscribe or supplement “fiction’s appeal to the imagination” (4). Furthermore, as the traditional patronage system had been declining since the eighteenth century, not only writers but also visual artists were compelled to look for new avenues to attract a sufficient number of admirers and sponsors of their art. These avenues opened up in the form of public art exhibitions at galleries and museums set up by institutions such as the

Royal Academy of Arts (founded in 1768) or the Society of British Artists (founded in 1823). These new ways of exhibiting and promoting artworks also allowed the general public access to art, kindling broader interest as well as providing education. In addition, advances in printing technology enabled a wider audience to purchase art for their own homes and private collections.

The Literary Careers of Jewsbury, Oliphant, and Eliot

The significance of vision also applies to literary criticism, as demonstrated by Matthew Arnold, who defends his proposition about the important function of criticism in the nineteenth century by asserting that “the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, [is] to see the object as in itself it really is” (230). The appropriation of visual arts vocabulary can be found in the reviews of a vast number of literary critics of the Victorian period. Although Jewsbury, Oliphant and Eliot are women, I do not contend that the use of visual arts vocabulary in reviews was limited to women reviewers or to the three reviewers discussed in this article. The major reasons why in this article I focus on the works of Jewsbury, Oliphant and Eliot are: they are among the women reviewers with the most impact on this area of intellectual development, the usage of visual arts vocabulary is ubiquitous in their reviews of the Victorian novel, and all three of them were proponents of the realist novel. In order to provide an insight into Jewsbury’s, Oliphant’s, and Eliot’s influential roles as reviewers, a brief outline of their careers follows.

Geraldine Jewsbury (1812–1880) worked as a regular book reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, a weekly periodical published in London from 1828 to 1921 and covering a wide range of topics in literature, fine arts, music, theatre, politics and popular science. From 1849 to 1880, Jewsbury contributed a total of about 2,300 reviews of novels, books for children and the young, gift books, poetry, travel books, memoirs, biographies, Christmas books, cookery books, and books on household management. Unlike Oliphant and Eliot, Jewsbury did not review any books on the visual arts. She contributed fictional and critical writings to nine other periodicals and was a prominent novelist, publishing six novels between 1845 and 1859, and two children’s books in 1853 and 1856, respectively.⁵ In parallel to writing book reviews for periodicals, Jewsbury worked as a publisher’s reader for Richard Bentley & Son from 1858 until her death, composing over 700 reports, and less frequently for other publishers, including Hurst & Blackett, the publisher of her last three novels (Rosenmayer 328).

Margaret Oliphant’s (1828–1897) career as an influential literary critic as well as writer spanned an even longer period. Oliphant is mainly associated with *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, a monthly periodical chiefly publishing fiction and criticism from October 1817 to December 1980. Oliphant continuously contributed to this magazine reviews and critical essays of British, American, German, French and Italian novels, poetry, printed drama and biographies from 1854 to 1897. Her critical articles also appeared in fourteen other periodicals.⁶ Apart from her literary criticism, Oliphant wrote 98 novels, about 50 short stories, and other non-fiction including biographies, memoirs, travel books, and books on general as well as literary history. For Blackwood’s, she also edited a series of Foreign Classics for English Readers. Her autobiography was published posthumously for the first time in 1899.

Regarding both Jewsbury and Oliphant, it can be argued that their success as novelists was the springboard for their careers as literary critics, as they were both approached by the editors of the respective periodical for which they then became regular, long-term reviewers after the publication of their first novels. However, their literary careers progressed differently: Jewsbury stopped publishing fiction at the end of the 1850s, while her work as a reviewer and publisher's reader continued to increase. Oliphant, in contrast, seemed to find literary multitasking beneficial to her own fiction. In a letter to John Blackwood of 12 March 1874, she lists various titles that she is planning to review while writing two stories at the same time. Most remarkably, she compares herself to a painter: "I don't mind doing it [that is, reviewing other people's books], even if you don't publish it at all, for it seems the purpose of one of those little walks an artist takes away from his picture which he is in the act of painting—letting me see my more important work from a little distance" (Coghill 244–45). This comparison is not accidental, as Oliphant had a lifelong interest in the visual arts, which is also reflected in several *Blackwood's* articles in which she reviews art exhibitions, particularly those of the Royal Academy, and biographies of painters such as J. M. W. Turner.⁷

George Eliot's (1819–1880) career as a reviewer was much shorter than that of Jewsbury and Oliphant. From 1851 to 1857 she contributed 56 critical articles, fifteen of which included reviews of British novels, to the *Leader*, a radical weekly newspaper founded by G. H. Lewes and Thornton Leigh Hunt and published from 1850 to 1860, and the *Westminster Review*, a quarterly published from 1824 to 1914. For the latter she also functioned as assistant editor under John Chapman, proprietor of the *Westminster Review* from 1851 to 1893. During her assistant editorship, Eliot was responsible, among other things, for redesigning the book review section. She pioneered a model that helped increase the periodical's popularity and influenced the way in which other Victorian periodicals would eventually present their review sections (Dillane 48–52). At the same time, Eliot's particular attention to this section highlights her involvement in book reviewing and the importance she attached to this feature of a periodical. Eliot gave up her reviewing for economic, creative, and personal reasons. As her workload at the *Westminster Review* increased, so did her dissatisfaction with the lack of remuneration. Encouraged by G. H. Lewes, as well as the substantial payment for her first story of the *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1857, Eliot turned her attention to fiction and poetry. Her influence on the literature of the Victorian period as a critic was supplanted by her influence as a praised novelist and a poet.

Reviews of the Realist Novel

In their reviews of novels, all three women develop a set of key themes that they utilise for their critical analyses. These key themes include genre, representation of reality, character, plot, the purpose of fiction, story and unity of structure as well as style and novelistic skills.

Regarding the link between the visual arts and the novel, these reviewers make direct comparisons with painters. Before entering the London periodical culture, Eliot published five articles grouped together as "Poetry and Prose, From the Notebook of an Eccentric" in the *Coventry Herald and Observer* between 4 December 1846 and 19 February 1847. It is significant for her later reviews that in the second "Poetry and

Prose” article, entitled “How to Avoid Disappointment,” she reveals her affinity for painting and painters. Her thoughts on the creative process behind painting a picture echo the creative process of writing a novel, especially in regard of the unity of structure and the relation of the whole to the parts, and vice versa, as well as the purpose of the painter and that of a novelist. Eliot’s analogy is laden with visual culture vocabulary, as she writes:

I love to think how the perfect whole exists in the imagination of the artist, before his pencil has marked the canvass [*sic*],—to observe how every minute stroke, every dismal-looking layer of colour, conduces to the ultimate effect, and how completely the creative genius which has conceived the result can calculate the necessary means. I love to watch the artist’s eye, so wrapt and unworldly in its glance, scrupulously attentive to the details of his labour, yet keeping ever in view the idea which that labour is to fulfil. I say to myself,—this is an image of what our life should be,—a series of efforts directed to the production of a contemplated whole, just as every stroke of the artist’s pencil has a purpose bearing on the conception which he retains in his mind’s eye. ... We should all have a purpose in life as perfectly recognized and definite as the painter’s idea of his subject. (Pinney 17–8)

Similar to Oliphant’s comparison of herself to a painter, Eliot takes the painter’s approach to his work to exemplify anyone’s approach to life; this also includes the novelist and his approach to his work. Charles Kingsley is one novelist who takes this approach in his *Westward Ho!*, so that Eliot claims that he is a painter who has “a vehement, daring manner of painting” characters and scenes although the “art of the book suffers a little” from Kingsley’s secondary purpose of using this novel “for his own objects as a churchman” preaching his doctrines to the reader (“*Westward Ho!*” 474–75). Oliphant also offers an analogy between painter and novelist when she classifies Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s body of works in the same way as Raphael’s pictures are classified as belonging to the painter’s early and late periods (“Bulwer” 227). In drawing this analogy, Bulwer-Lytton, the novelist, is accorded the same status as Raphael, the painter. In fact, in Oliphant’s literary as well as art criticism the comparison between the visual and the literary art is never employed in order to dispute the standing of either art or to claim superiority of one art over the other. Rather, such comparisons help elucidate her descriptions and opinions. Like her comparison between the novels of Bulwer-Lytton and the paintings of Raphael above, she thus describes the paintings of George Dunlop Leslie as the chief examples of “the Pamela, or Sir Charles Grandison period,” that is, she reverses the analogy (“Art in May” 757).⁸ On the level of fictional characters, Mr Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* reminds Oliphant of “one of those Hogarth men, whose power consists in some singular animal force of life and character” (“Modern Novelists” 557). Similarly, Charles Reade’s novel *The Cloister and the Hearth* evokes a picture by Hans Memling (c.1430–1494), a medieval German-born Flemish painter of portraits and religious works (“Charles Reade’s Novels” 510). In Oliphant’s opinion, Reade has an imagination that is so plentiful that “like a medieval painter, he enriches every inch of his canvas with its own special story” (“Charles Reade’s Novels” 510). Like one of Memling’s masterpieces, *The Cloister and the Hearth*:

has one lovely, almost abstract ideal group—not indeed the divine child and mother—a human mother and child; but the background behind and around is

full of an infinite variety of scenes, the life of a man in that masterful and violent age, drawn with the quaintest realism—and the life of a woman beset by a woman's trials and difficulties, which are less changeable. On every little slope of the landscape there comes an independent picture. ("Charles Reade's Novels" 510–11)

Thus, the pages of a novel are like the painter's canvas to be brought alive and filled with representations of people and their environment. Above all, Oliphant points out that these representations are to be realist pictures. Jewsbury likewise compares one of Anthony Trollope's novels with the work of a painter. She commends *Castle Richmond* by saying that "There is breadth of treatment, as painters call it, which gives a firmness and reality to the story, as well as to the people and things of which it treats" ("*Castle Richmond*" 681). From these exemplary remarks it can be concluded that, for the three reviewers under discussion here, the purpose of using the analogy between literature and painting is the representation of reality, or more precisely the truthful representation of human nature. All three reviewers, however, qualify the relationship of fiction to real life and emphasise that fiction should not be mistaken for fact. The appropriation of visual arts vocabulary also underpins that a novel is art, that is, something other than real life (see also Byerly 2). For example, Oliphant formulates the principle of representing general truths and a form of selected realism in fiction as follows:

It is not the vocation of the novel-writer to startle us [the reader] with exaggerated events, which are only true because they have happened, but to order his world on the general principles of nature as the outer world is regulated—to keep his eye on the broad truths of existence, instead of the special and distorted realities of some individual life; in a word, indeed, to be true to nature, and leave fact to the expositions of a less ambitious art. ("Bulwer" 230)

The key themes that Jewsbury, Oliphant, and Eliot most frequently analyse to explore a novel's capacity to represent reality while appropriating visual arts vocabulary are summarised comprehensively by Jewsbury in her review of Eliot's novel *Silas Marner*. The themes include: characterisation, the depiction of human nature and actions, and scenes and landscapes, always for the purpose of arousing the reader's interest and sympathy. Jewsbury writes about the novel that:

the characters are all well and firmly drawn, worked up from within, instead of the mere outward semblance being given. They are not described, but the leading idea, the key-note to their nature is given, and the human actions that follow impress the reader with all the truth of reality. ... Dolly Winthrop ... is an excellent and racy sketch of a good woman, not exaggerated into a caricature The sketch of this small, obscure sectarian community [of Lantern Yard] is as carefully finished and skilfully drawn as if it were to be a leading feature of the book, and yet it is not dwelt upon too much in detail, nor at too great length. It is in excellent proportion, and it is true to the life and spirit. One of the merits of this tale is, the truth of all the details and local colouring; there is nothing left slovenly. ... There is no over-colouring nor striving after effects. Silas Marner is a weaver, and neither says nor does anything beyond what is strictly probable and natural, yet he takes a hold on

the reader's sympathy, by the truth with which the inward working of his life is laid bare. The author touches and treats all the characters from their own point of view, and with something of the tender love with which everybody regards himself. No character, however insignificant, or thing, however trivial, but is drawn with the feeling of its own personality strong within it; the author judges nothing, but understands everything. The scene in the village alehouse is finished like a Dutch picture—so is the scene where the ladies are dressing for the New-Year's-Eve merry-making. (465)

Jewsbury thus shows that Eliot is a novelist who is very skilled in word-painting, brilliantly capitalising upon the Victorian readership's demand for, as well as susceptibility to, the visualisation of mental and physical images to render a realist representation of the novel's characters and scenes. In particular Jewsbury describes how Eliot succeeds in making the invisible ("the inward working" of Silas's life) visible. With her interpretation, Jewsbury enlivens Eliot's words, thereby intensifying the reader's experience.

As a critic, Eliot herself outlines some key elements of "a good novel" by providing an example of the opposite to highlight especially, as Oliphant suggests above, that the major flaw of the novel under discussion is the indistinct, generalised depiction of characters. She writes about William John Conybeare's novel *Perversion; or, the Causes and Consequences of Infidelity* that:

It has not the elements of a good novel. The story is uninteresting; the character-sketching is approximated [*sic*], coarse, and often feeble; the satire is without *finesse*; there is little appeal to the emotions; and the power of dramatic representation is entirely absent. ... The situations and characters are all treated in a superficial, conventional style. ... Mr. Buzzard, the newspaper editor, Miss Fife, the strong-minded woman, and Dr. Grobman, the materialistic physician – are drawn in that sketchy, generic fashion, which may tell in an article, but is quite ineffective in a novel. The portraits of the "Tractarian," "Recordite," and "Millenarian" clergymen, are more special studies, and are painted, we imagine, with all the gusto of fraternal dislike. ("Belles Lettres and Art" 259)

Eliot thus underlines that in order to achieve a realist representation of human nature, novelists, like painters, have to not only draw upon their experience, but above all observe their subjects carefully and refrain from generalisations. This notion is strongly informed by the principles of Ruskin, as is evident in Eliot's review of volume 3 of his *Modern Painters* where she declares: "The truth of infinite value that he [Ruskin] teaches is *realism*—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality" ("Art and Belles Lettres" 626). In Eliot's opinion Jewsbury, as a novelist, has the necessary power of observation to produce a valuable realist novel that stands out from the usual productions. In her review of *Constance Herbert*, Eliot commends Jewsbury thus:

An easy, agreeable style of narrative, some noble sentiments expressed in the quiet, unexaggerated way that indicates their source to be a deep spring of

conviction and experience, not a mere rain-torrent of hearsay enthusiasm, with here and there a trait of character or conduct painted with the truthfulness of close observation, are merits enough to raise a book far above the common run of circulating library fiction. (“Belles Lettres” 64:294)

Endowed with the necessary skills, a novelist is thus able to depict characters and scenes that are analysed by means of visual arts terminology. All of the three reviewers in the focus of this article repeatedly use expressions such as painted, drawn, touched, treated and shaded as well as a study, portrait, picture and sketch to describe characters and scenes, thereby invoking clear imagery in the mind of the reader of their reviews. For example, Jewsbury finds that the “character of Miss Grisell Randal [in Holme Lee’s novel *Hawksview*] is an excellent sketch” (81), while in *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*, Mrs Wood displays her “power to draw minutely and carefully each character, with characteristic individuality in word and action” (119). An example of the vivid visualisation of human nature is provided in Oliphant’s *Lucy Crofton*, as Jewsbury describes the novel’s vividness and draws attention to its realism:

It is a piece of home painting, very nicely touched. ... The secret of this very slight and simple story giving pleasure is, that the personages are painted not in black and white, but in flesh colour, as human nature should be. There is no affected or exaggerated sentiment in the story, it all rings true; the inner hidden life of the wife, and the sorrow of her bereaved motherhood, into which her husband, kind and good as he is, cannot enter, is touched with a skill and delicacy that attests its truth, whilst it keeps clear of becoming wearisome or morbid. (93)

For Oliphant, the critic, the early Charles Dickens seems to have been one of the best word-painters, as her April 1855 omnibus review of his works abounds in visual arts vocabulary to compare his characters and scenes to paintings. A brief summary of characters in Dickens’s *Hard Times* is thus expressed:

Stephen Blackpool and his womanly pure-hearted Rachel are beautifully sketched; there is distinctness and identity in Louisa, perfect reality and truth in Tom, who represents a large class of whelps, and a very clever outline in Mr. James Harthouse. We can make nothing of the impossible Sissy, but we have no doubt that Mr. Sleery’s company of horse-riders are drawn to the life. (“Charles Dickens” 454)

Emphasising the importance of seeing and the ability to visualise one’s observations, Eliot gives credit to L. S. Lavenu, the author of *Erlesmere*, for having “a sense of character and an eye for characteristics; she knows what she means to paint, and her touches, though not always felicitous, are laid on with a firm hand” (“Belles Lettres” 66:578). Likewise, for Jewsbury, the author of *The Lady of Fashion* “has a firm touch in drawing scenes of domestic interiors, and the colouring is true without exaggeration. There is acute observation, with great power of reproduction” (104). Another evocative scene of domestic life is painted by Charles Reade. Like Oliphant above, Jewsbury reviewed Reade’s *The Cloister and the Hearth* and drew associations with paintings similar to those of Oliphant’s: “The description of the little town of Tergou, in Holland, ... and the account of their [the parents of the

leading character] domestic life, are like an old Flemish interior brought into action. ... [Catherine and Elias] look like a pair of portraits by Cranach" (576).

In contrast to these positive reactions, Eliot also discusses an example of a novel where the author fails to paint incidents and scenes so as to provide a truthful representation of reality. The failure is based on the author not having employed observation and experience, which are fundamental for the natural development of scenes and characters on the page through dramatic presentation rather than mere description. This tenet is outlined by Eliot in her review of *Kathie Brand* by Holme Lee, who proved to be a "word-painter" with her novel *Sylvan Holt's Daughter*, but did not succeed in displaying the same skills in her previous novel. Eliot states:

Instead of vividly realizing to herself the terrible scenes, and vividly representing them either through their typical details or through the emotions which such scenes would inevitably raise in the mind of the sensitive spectator, the author *writes about* them, does not *paint* them. We feel that she was not present at either—she has not made them present to us. The reader sees nothing beyond the author's intention to produce an effect. An artist would have suffered this imagination to dwell on such scenes until, aided by his knowledge, either direct or indirect, the principal details became so vividly present to him that he could describe as if he saw them, and we should read as if we saw them too. ("Belles Lettres" 67:321)

Thus, Eliot makes explicit that the purpose of painting scenes as well as characters is to make themselves act out dramatically. In order to realise this dramatic presentation, a novelist should adopt the mode of narration of showing rather than of telling.⁹ As a result, the reader is able to share and relate to the novelist's observations, experiences and emotional responses, to own and engage with them. This also relates to Eliot's credo of sympathy and the moral purpose of art. As a novelist, she reiterates what she had already described as a critic:

If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally. ... The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures. (Haight 3:111)

Hence, the moral purpose of art consists in the text enabling the reader to acknowledge what is different in others and to understand and thus tolerate it. The concept of sympathy—as all three reviewers explored in this article understood it—is, at core, not an authorial position but a readerly one. Rather than describing a method for the *composition* of fiction, it refers to a process that allows the reader to maximise their *experience* of the text. This implies that the reader is an active agent in making the text work as a piece of the art of fiction.¹⁰

Conclusion

As all of the reviews that I have discussed demonstrate, it is vital for a good novel to affect the readers, stimulate their interest, broaden their minds and provide them with food for their visual imagination—just as the novels succeeded, or failed, in doing so for these three reviewers when they read them. A final example of a novel that

perfectly achieves this is Anne Thackeray Ritchie's *Village on the Cliff* reviewed by Oliphant:

The story is pleasant, the characters true to nature, but the style is simply exquisite. The reader lingers over it as over a picture; the gleams of sweet colour move and change about, and flash out upon him, the lights are lighted, the dew falls, he knows where the poppies are growing in the field, and how the boats lie on the beach, and is familiar with the reflections that shine out of all the bright surfaces in the Norman farm-kitchen. The picture is so fine, so delicate, and clear, that it moves him with that curious delight in itself which only things perfect produce. ("Novels" 279)

In fact, Oliphant again uses the word "painter" instead of novelist or author throughout this review—a very explicit way of expressing the analogy between fiction and painting. Victorian reviewers are able to employ this analogy because of the contemporary notion of vision and preoccupation with "seeing." The reader, who is not entirely ignorant of painting, is enabled to visualise the narrative, whereby "a new dimension of richness and complexity [is added] to the novel by extending the potentialities of fiction to include the representational characteristics of the visual arts" (Meyers 1). Moreover, the analogies drawn in the reviews reveal how the reviewers themselves received and transformed the visual arts in their literary criticism. They read the novels with their eyes and mind. The imagery represented and evoked in their reviews is an expression of their experience and understanding of the text. By employing visual arts vocabulary, these reviewers convey what their minds saw and what emotions the novels they reviewed triggered in them, thereby describing how these novels as works of art relate to life and human nature. Beyond the mere visualisation, using visual arts vocabulary and evoking visual images aids these reviewers in defining the novel as an art form and substantiating its equal status among the other literary genres by developing a set of key themes that serve as the basis for a theory of the novel.

Notes

¹ See for example Byerly; Flaxman; Meyers; and Witemeyer.

² See also Hagstrum.

³ In the past two decades, the number of studies discussing the Victorian notion of vision from many different angles has continuously grown. In *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, for example, Kate Flint focuses on contemporary art criticism and explores the tension between "outward and inward seeing," that is, between "observation, on the one hand, and the life of the imagination on the other" (2). Flint thereby highlights the question of the reliability of the eye and the subjectivity of the interpretation of what is visible and invisible.

⁴ This close link is also demonstrated by the partnerships between novelists and illustrators, most prominently that of Charles Dickens and George Cruickshank (see for example Cohen).

⁵ The other nine periodicals to which Jewsbury contributed articles are *Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine*, Dickens's *Household Words*, the *Westminster Review*, *Temple Bar*, *Fraser's Magazine*, the *Ladies' Companion at Home and Abroad*, *Ladies' Cabinet*, the *New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, and Anna Maria Hall's [Mrs S. C. Hall] *Juvenile Budget*.

⁶ Some of these periodicals are *The Spectator*, the *St. James's Gazette*, the *St. James's Budget*, the *Contemporary Review*, the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Fortnightly Review*, *Fraser's Magazine*, *Good Words* and *Macmillan's Magazine*.

⁷ See for example "J. M. W. Turner, R. A.;" "Art in May;" "The Royal Academy."

⁸ George Dunlop Leslie (1835–1921) studied at the Royal Academy and became a full Royal Academician in 1876. His works were exhibited at the annual show of the Royal Academy from 1859 onwards.

- ⁹ See Lubbock (62) and Booth (8). Earlier than Lubbock and Booth, G. H. Lewes had formulated the distinction between showing and telling in his review of the novels of Jane Austen as follows: "...instead of *description*, the common and easy resource of novelists, she [Jane Austen] has the rare and difficult art of *dramatic presentation*: instead of telling us what her characters are, and what they feel, she presents the people, and they reveal themselves" (105).
- ¹⁰ Also Ruskin, Alexandra Wettlaufer argues, "believed reading to be an act of envisioning where the reader takes a proactive role in the production of meaning" (247).

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