

Introduction

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*The ravens hawking from tree to tree, not you, not you,
Is all that the world allows, and all one could wish for.*

Charles Wright

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotions of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

George Eliot

The hardest thing in the world is not to be you. Literature tests out the difficulty and challenges it. However self-preoccupied we become, however much our fictions call out to us as commentaries on ourselves, or as more or less fantastic reflections of the writers themselves, literature demands an exercise of the aesthetic and ethical imagination that gives us the rare opportunity not to be us. The experience of entering mentally into the strange terrain of otherness, of overhearing other selves, opens up alternatives to ourselves. It is like hearing the ravens hawking from tree to tree announcing their absolute difference, announcing a world you never made, that runs without reference to you, that is full of beings that don't know of you, who guide their lives unconcerned about whether you find them beautiful or annoying or even irrelevant. And yet, like those hawking ravens, they glimmer with a sense of independent consciousness,

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of awareness of the world, and in their absolute difference are therefore related to you after all.¹

There has been much talk in recent years about the ways in which the “self” is merely a construction, no stable thing but a concoction of each moment as it is lived. In some ways this has to be right – in fact, even some distinguished Victorians, like John Stuart Mill and W. K. Clifford, believed it. Think about the difference between you then and you now, about the fact that our cells are decaying and being replaced even as we read these words, about the contradictions one discovers in one’s own beliefs and actions, about how we perform ourselves differently to different people, even to ourselves, about the multiple ways in which we think of ourselves from moment to moment – say, white, Jewish, professional, lover, father, liberal, cynic, unbeliever, cheese-lover, adulterer, friend, teacher, liar, good guy, writer, critic, coward, bird-lover, duck-eater, failure, success . . . And yet with all the variations and all the contradictions, every morning we wake up being us. The “self” affirms itself in the very continuity and ordinariness of our lives.

While we are used to thinking of contemporary literature in particular as dramatizing the instability of self and the artificiality of the conception of “self,” it might be argued that literature’s most distinctive characteristic is its apparently non-utilitarian capacity to resist the self’s demands and register the reality of otherness.² No literature has ever been more intent on this project than the literature of Victorian realism. The deep moral

¹ In his famous essay, “What is it like to be a bat?” Thomas Nagel argues that consciousness is a condition of the very question. That is, “the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism.” *Philosophical Review*, LXXXIII, 4 (October 1974): 435–50. The “relation” of that raven to us lies just in the condition of consciousness, that is, the condition that makes it necessary to imagine that there is something it is like to be that organism. Consciousness is the condition of thinking about the absolute difference between us and others, and it is the condition of aspiring somehow to overcome that difference. It may, however, be a condition of consciousness that the other cannot be really known. It can be guessed. It can be “imagined” as a fiction. It can be aspired to. The raven is probably not actually saying “not you,” though it is saying something. Its unintelligibility is the sign that turns its meaning for the poet into “not you, not you.” This essay is also discussed in the essays included here, “The heartbeat of the squirrel,” and “Real toads in imaginary gardens.”

² I say “apparently” here because there is an interesting school of biological criticism that sees literature as serving an evolutionary function after all, most particularly the function of creating a sense of community and connectedness. That function has, on this argument, been an indispensable condition of the evolution of the human species. See, in particular, David Sloan Wilson, *Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin’s Theory Can Change the Way We Think About Our Lives* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2007). Wilson concludes a chapter on the arts in this way: “Science is often thought to rob the arts of their importance and vitality. How ironic that evolutionary theory leads to a conception of the arts as such an important part of our ‘social physiology’ that they can even be regarded as vital organs” (p. 193).

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energy to know and to respect – maybe even love – otherness is at the heart of the enterprise of Victorian literature, which I have been studying and caring about for fifty years. Locating that energy, understanding it, has led me into the byways of epistemology, into obsessing about objectivity, into worrying the relations between knowledge and morality and between morality and faith, and into an unrelenting preoccupation with “realism” itself, and its relation to the aesthetic. The efficient and final cause of all these essays is this ethical question of self and otherness, and of the extraordinary singular qualities of literature that make possible conceptions of otherness. To think through this question in relation to the enormous field of Victorian literature, where it takes on new urgency, I have been led to consider, at times, the literary and scientific culture out of which it came – sometimes in abstract considerations of epistemology, ethics, science and objectivity, but always in concrete engagement with the literature, particular manifestations of the Victorian preoccupation with the insistence of the self and the need to engage with an otherness that transcends the self.

For the Victorians, the problem of learning to live with and understand strange and even frightening others in a world from which the God who was thought to have created all that abundance and variety of differences was being expelled was particularly urgent. Everyone recognized that encounters with difference, most particularly in urban settings, were increasing, and increasingly worrying. Even a fable as rural and apparently simple as George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* focuses on the question of how to assimilate into a homogeneous community an alien and frighteningly incomprehensible figure, and dramatizes the mutual transformations that full engagement with otherness might entail.

This was the central project of Victorian realism, which managed to achieve great popularity by producing an enormous *dramatis personae* – Dickens’ eccentrics, Browning’s liars, hypocrites, criminals, lunatics, artists, lovers, Thackeray’s vain and banal egotists, Charlotte Brontë’s unbeautiful heroines, Meredith’s contortedly self-conscious protagonists and Trollope’s remarkably various cast of characters – politicians, clergymen, spinsters, doctors, lower nobility, clerks, artists, scoundrels. The works in which these characters figure do not normally address abstract questions of epistemology directly, but behind the particularized, elaborated personal dramas larger issues loom. Literature in general but Victorian literature in particular defies the limits implied by the dominant empiricist epistemology for which knowledge is limited by the boundaries of our selves. The novels, with few exceptions, implicitly affirm a more

expansive epistemology, one in which the boundaries between epistemology and ethics, between knowing and acting, are blurred.

Dramatizing the recognition that there are ways of thinking, feeling, desiring and suffering that we haven't experienced and have trouble understanding, Victorian fiction implicitly links epistemology and ethics. Tennyson's touching adolescent self-consciousness (as in "Supposed Confessions of a Second Rate Mind"), Dickens' efforts to embrace the poor and outcast, Gaskell's focus on the working class in the early novels, Browning's dramatization of alien consciousnesses, Arnold's efforts to see the object as in itself it really is – all these are symptoms of a powerful Romantic (or post-Romantic) self-consciousness that, via Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats and Byron, had become the focus of literary attention and value and that often sought to turn against itself. They were symptoms of the intensifying realization that the insistent self was threatening, even tyrannical, and hostile to the demands of a satisfying and, indeed, moral life, particularly in a society that was quite literally transforming almost daily. So there was (and is) also a sense that we all of us are likely to have at one time or another of the great relief it would be not to be the self that we went to sleep with and that accompanies us through our days, and to see and feel with others' eyes and sensibilities. This is the ideal of Victorian realism. As an ideal, of course, it isn't always fulfilled. It was always hard to achieve, and the effort often disguised (from writers and readers alike) the degree to which the sympathy for difference was another version of the effort to assimilate difference to sameness, others to self.

The Victorians, as Matthew Arnold famously wrote, "between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born," felt the threat of what Ralph Barton Perry was to name, early in the twentieth century, the "egocentric predicament." Many of them surely also felt the need in this newer world to thrust themselves beyond themselves and learn to live with the otherness that constituted the life of the metropolis and of an increasingly mobile society in which the satisfactions of feeling oneself to be part of a community or a group were inevitably challenged. If Dickens and Gaskell and George Eliot strained to make us recognize our not-selves and share their feelings and understand their desires, they were also alert to how extraordinarily difficult this was. Perhaps, in the end, it was impossible, but at one's best, in one's art, there is always the struggle to know what it is like to be the other, what it is like to be a raven even as the raven, in every dark feather, announces its difference. How not to be you but to be a raven? How to see the world as does the raven, or Tennyson's eagle, staring down at "wrinkled seas"? How to soar with unfluttering wings and

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call out, hawk coarsely, the fact of one's presence? And at times then, perhaps increasingly through the century, as strategies for psychological representation became more elaborate and more central, it became possible to recognize that however deep one penetrated into the being of another, one might have to stop with the simple act of recognizing it, and valuing its life even in its impenetrable difference.

These essays, then, are concerned with questions of art, particularly realist art, as, among the Victorians, questions of art were entangled with ethical questions and with questions of knowledge, what it was possible to know, *how* one might "know," whether one *could* know. Knowing, in these works, is virtually always part of a larger ethical project that entailed sympathy, empathy, and the fullest possible encounter with the not-self – the vast tangled bank of otherness that constituted both the nature Darwin described and the new, capitalist, industrial society, moving rapidly, changing ceaselessly, insisting on an individualism that separated each from each and broke down traditional communities. Thus, they are all concerned with epistemological and ethical problems as they move from abstract argument to literature, and with these problems as a means to making us feel the urgency of the not-self, its importance, even when it escapes out of the corners of our eyes into an unknowable life, but a life after all.

It is not that the new science suddenly introduced to modern consciousness the overwhelming abundance of life that composed the natural world, but that previously that abundance had by and large been domesticated by a more or less formally elaborated natural theology, which explained the abundance and those vast strange differences by reference to a divine plan and to its implications for the human. But understood in entirely naturalistic terms, and investigated so as to reveal yet more difference and variety, the abundance of life forms both estranged and embraced their curious human observers. Estranged because the strangeness of each new species seemed to have nothing to do with human interests and desires; embraced because Darwin's theory quite literally connected us all. If Christianity had long insisted that we should love our neighbor, Darwin turned our neighbors into literal family, and thus wound the bonds of connection within diversity yet tighter. "Probably," said the ever cautious Darwin, "all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some one primordial form, into which life was first breathed."³

³ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946; facsimile edition), p. 484.

But in connecting us to all other living creatures that theory also defamiliarized even the most ordinary form of life, and made the work of understanding it, sympathizing with it, becoming it, all the more difficult as it became all the more urgent. The intense scrutiny of things as they are that became the hallmark of Victorian fiction and, to a certain extent, of all its literature and art, implied a new kind of reverence for life, a recognition that radical difference was a condition of all being and that wherever one looked there was a life to be valued.

So Browning's Lippo Lippi puts the case for the realism to which much Victorian art aspired:

The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
 Changes, surprises, – and God made it all!
 –For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
 For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
 The mountain round it and the sky above,
 Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
 These are the frame to? What's it all about?
 To be passed over, despised? Or dwelt upon,
 Wondered at? Oh, this last of course! – you say.
 But why not do as well as say, – paint these
 Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
 God's works – paint anyone and count it crime
 To let a truth slip . . .
 We're made so that we love
 First when we see them painted, things we have passed
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
 And so they are better, painted – better to us,
 Which is the same thing. Art was given for that . . .

The Victorian artist, then, is committed to report the world as he (or she) sees it, in trust that, even if not comprehensible, it becomes something beautiful and valuable simply in being seen. Behind this vision of art Lippi still has his God, and perhaps Browning does too. It is God who invests all this abundance with value and justifies Lippi's determination to record the unideal. Even Darwin, we have seen, talks about life being "breathed" into the ur-form of all organic life.

But the great Victorian trick was to be Lippi's kind of realist without God behind the veil of matter – to feel the sacredness of each individual life without invoking the sacred. Lippi's kind of vision reveals abundance and makes the ordinary thrilling. Take away from behind all that abundance a divinely intentional being, leaving only the multiple forms of life and nature, and you have much of the struggle and the interest of

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Victorian literature. Victorian realism, in the very effort to affirm, as Browning has Lippi affirm, the overriding presence of a Divine Creator, takes Lippi's kind of risks to tell the truth, even when that truth is painful, distinctly unDivine, and even ugly. And the consequence of this is that the "Creator" fades increasingly into the background; characters have to be shaken into consciousness of Him, and the world described, willy-nilly, tends to be profoundly secular after all.

The Victorian practice of realism foregrounds abundance and variety; and while few of its practitioners were entirely ready to forego the designer behind the scenes, that foregrounding tended toward a pervasively secular vision. Realist writers, like the Designer behind the scenes, needed to play out their narratives on the entirely naturalistic terms that Darwin required to explain his world and upon which Lippi irreverently (and reverently) insisted. Lippi's reverence for the ordinary survives the disappearance of his God, and the literature by and large moves away from religion, making Lippi's invocation of God a last defense, and ultimately an unnecessary one, for the practice of seeing that which was traditionally ignored with clear eyes – seeing it and sympathizing with it or simply valuing its difference.

Realism plays out the struggle to come to terms with the otherness of most life without the kind of domestication that natural theology provided for students of the natural world. And realism, cast in fictional narratives which feature things and people "we have passed a hundred times" without noticing, forces on its practitioners and on its readers the epistemological problems with which Victorian scientists had to contend all the time: from what source does our knowledge derive? And how can we trust it? Literature reminds us that every narrative is related from a point of view, and therefore that even the "we" who we are is only a story, a self-story, told from some singular point of view. Although that point of view must inevitably shift as we move from place to place, from moment to moment, as we age, as our senses develop or decay, we are stuck with seeing and valuing the world *only* from the points of view available to us. There are limits to where finite consciousness can take us. There is a taste of us in our mouths and the world comes to us soaked in memories of how it has been to us before, how it is not like the before that we know. The guilts we felt the night before we feel again after consciousness returns. We are vain and want to look better than we do and recognize those old blemishes in the mirror and see, sometimes with a shock, that we do resemble our dads or mothers. We are we, and satisfied as some of us may be with that "we," with the selfness of our selves, there is certainly a part of us to which art appeals that seeks the not-self, or at least seeks to

expand the self by recognizing the otherness of others, and caring about it. It is just the tension around selfness, and the passion for telling the truth about the world, devil take the hindmost, that gives to Victorian literature – for me at least – its particular and continuing attractiveness.

The “objective,” third-person mode of writing novels that tended to dominate in the nineteenth century would seem to be a way of ducking the epistemological problem. But there are inescapable authorial “intrusions” even in the most objective and apparently unselfconscious rendering of narratives, and a great part of the history of Victorian fiction relates to the various efforts and devices by which narrators registered their self-consciousness about the partialness of *any* representation, about the threatened opacity (of the writing self) blocking out real entrance into otherness. The Victorian preoccupation with the egotism that writes self-aggrandizing stories is a necessary part of its realism. It is not only Meredith’s “Egoist” who attempts to make the world rotate around his desires and vanity.

We may take the most cynical, the most adaptationist view of human nature and behavior and still recognize that the effort to transcend the limits of the self and of that restricting point of view derives from – or constitutes – an urgent moral sense, and is as intrinsic to our being as any strategy of survival our genes have generated. This, certainly (though perhaps described in different language) was a central motivation of Victorian literature. And it is clear that Victorian science depended on the possibility of transcending the limits of the egocentric predicament, of finding a way to register, with full confidence, an objectively constituted reality – once again, devil take the hindmost. The struggle to see from someone else’s point of view is a struggle that literature enacts in almost all of its incarnations and that science, as a trustable practice, required. It is the “objectivity” of art.

The egocentric predicament reaffirms itself, or threatens to do so, in the vast body of Victorian literature and cultural commentary, as in its philosophy, and has its most famous articulation in the solipsism intimated in Walter Pater’s famous “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, which might be taken, in one respect, as the great climax of Victorian moral realism and at the same time its antithesis: “Experience . . . is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without.”⁴ The power of this passage is, ironically, in its precise

⁴ Walter Pater, *Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1888), p. 248. See Carolyn Williams’ important discussion of the ways in which Pater’s argument actually stops short of solipsism, *Transfigured World: Pater’s Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). See also my own *Dying to Know*.

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representation of the emotional implications of what might seem a merely philosophical argument: our knowledge is limited by the limits of our own personality and consciousness. The passage makes readers “feel” the threat and the “isolation” of this way of thinking; it is not a way of thinking so much as a way of being and feeling. And this example can thus suggest that literature resists, even in its most dogged pursuit of the most painful kinds of experience, the very self-enclosure that its preoccupation with point of view and perspective threatens.

The struggle of Victorian literature, by and large, was the struggle to get outside those thick walls of personality, to find a way to enter the beings of others and feel what they feel, know what they know, be what they are. In this way, the practice of Victorian realism ran parallel to the dominant practices of the science that was transforming the world all around it.⁵ For literature (and perhaps more widely for the culture at large) the struggle was theorized and formulated by George Eliot (and, to a certain extent, by Browning’s Lippi), who made clear that for her, knowing was a moral enterprise. Knowing, and saying truthfully what one had come to know, was one of the highest moral ideals of the culture, and for nobody more than for George Eliot. She sought to combine knowing and feeling in an art that recognized, affirmed, and valued the hard unaccommodating actual and fought through the relentless appeals and limits of the self. The job was, as Matthew Arnold described the work of the critic, to see the object as in itself it truly is. The job of the artist was, as George Eliot put it movingly in *Adam Bede*, “to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind,”⁶ a formulation – whatever its commitment to rendering objective reality precisely – that must remind us of how for the most dedicated and sophisticated of realists, that thick wall of personality about which Pater wrote hovered ominously over “reality.”

That faithful account, however, was not merely a report, but a means to valuing life and others ostensibly different, unsympathetic and unappealing. “Depend upon it,” George Eliot wrote in her first story, “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton,” “you would gain unspeakably if you would learn with me some of the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out

⁵ A classic, indispensable article describing nineteenth-century scientific practice will be alluded to frequently in the essays that follow. But it is worthwhile introducing it here: Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston, “The Image of Objectivity,” *Representations*, 40 (Fall, 1992): 81–128.

⁶ *Adam Bede*, ch. xvii, 175 (Oxford World Classics, 1996).

through dull grey eyes, and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tones.”⁷ Knowledge is a condition of sympathy, if no guarantee of it, and epistemology links immediately to the ethical. To know the world objectively seems to require scientific detachment; but the detachment that George Eliot seeks is in the interest of – and makes possible – the valuing of the ever elusive other. The artist puts herself on the line. She will try to tell the truth as if “I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.” To misrepresent is to commit perjury and to be, therefore, punished by the (moral) law. Literature takes out a social contract.

It is a “social” contract. It is binding regardless of whether or not there is any transcendent force at the origins, or hovering over the workings of the world. The question of from where the moral force that makes the contract derives permeates Victorian discourse, over both science and literature. From whence does it derive and, if not from God, does it have any binding force: what is to sustain society and the many representatives of it that Victorian realism describes if there is no ultimate binding law beyond what nature itself, so devastatingly described by John Stuart Mill in his book, *Nature*, could imply? The great resurgence of religious activity among the Victorians suggests something of how enormously difficult it was for the Victorians to come to terms with that naturalistically described world that science was so successfully describing and that increasingly secularizing world that the literature was intimating. Variety, abundance, difference, otherness, in such a godless world, might well be not a great natural gift, but threatening, even terrifying.

II

Looking back over the work of a quarter of a century, I recognized that my preoccupation with these issues, though in a series of essays written independently and at different times, constructed a sustained argument, through various explorations of different aspects of these problems. It all started with George Eliot, perhaps the most theoretical and intellectually consequent of the great imaginative writers. Her formulation of “moral realism,” and her thinking about the philosophical, aesthetic, and ethical implications that I have been discussing, resonated for me well beyond the Victorians. The quiet urgency of her manifesto, quaint and unliterary as it might seem in the twenty-first century, was appropriate to

⁷ *Scenes of Clerical Life*, “The sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton,” ch. v, p. 67 (Cabinet Edition, William Blackwood and Sons) Edinburgh nd.