Introduction

By rejecting reality – and this is not a form of escapism but an inherent quality of art – art vindicates reality.

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

_Fin de siècle_ American culture is often criticized for its refusal to distinguish between reality and fiction, between fact and artifact. “Reality television” programs hire crime and accident victims to reenact burglaries, fires, and dramatic rescues. “Fictionalized” biographies turn historical figures into novel characters by inventing thoughts and dialogue. Movies about current events go into production before the events themselves have reached a conclusion. Television commercials mimic the daily life of consumers, a life of comparing and choosing, with music and images that impart aesthetic glamour to the ordinary objects at hand. All of these things suggest a blurring of the boundary between art and reality that is sometimes linked to a commensurate blurring of moral boundaries. Our capacity to respond appropriately to real problems, some fear, may be deadened by excessive exposure to simulated reality. This makes it easy to feel a certain nostalgia for a time when reality commanded respect and art knew its place.

It is precisely because contemporary media are capable of a vividness that far exceeds what can be achieved through the written word that consumers have become somewhat suspicious of representations that threaten to supplant the reality they depict. The advent of “virtual reality” could immure us in purely subjective worlds, depriving us of interest in whatever common ground stands outside representation. It is with a shock of recognition, therefore, that we perceive Victorian qualms about their own most popular art forms. The rise of “realism” in nineteenth-century British literature and art shows how highly the Victorians valued art’s mimetic capacity. But the Victorians also saw that art could be turned from a reflection of reality into a substitute for reality; it could act as either
a powerful diagnostic tool or as a placebo. At the same time that they lauded the honest portrayal of ordinary life in art, the Victorians created museums and collections that segregated the objects of their aesthetic interest from the world of ordinary things. For art to retain its power and prestige, it had to be recognized as “art,” and not confused with anything else. (As others have pointed out, if art were functionally equivalent to reality, there would be no need of it.) At the same time, the artifact’s relation to the real world had to be perspicuous and authentic.

Victorian novels are famously self-conscious about their status as artifacts. While earlier novels often masqueraded as “real” narratives such as letters or journals, the Victorian novel sought credibility by admitting to its own artifice. Like the actor in the television commercial who admits, “I’m not a doctor, although I play one on TV,” the Victorian narrator reinforces his or her authority by disarming candor about the nature of his role. The world described by such a narrator is not the real world, but it is the next best thing to it.

The question faced by these novelists – how can art evoke reality while acknowledging its difference from the real world? – was, I will argue, resolved through their obsessive analysis and display of art’s many guises. This book confronts a stunning paradox in the classic Victorian realist novel. A “realist” novel, according to most conventional definitions, might be expected to exclude, even condemn artifice, while mirroring the most ordinary and natural of human experiences. And yet the arts assume a prominent place in so many of the Victorian novels usually labeled “realist” that their presence seems almost a defining characteristic of the genre. As we will see, the novels of Charlotte Brontë, William Thackeray, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy are filled with both explicit references to artworks that have a function within the narrative – portraits, caricatures, charades, musical performances – and metaphors that implicitly compare the novelist’s own representation to specific forms of art. Insistent reminders of the disjunction between art and life, these artistic references threaten to sabotage the realist claim to unmediated representation. Such persistent allusions to art must, it would seem, have a purpose beyond mere decoration in order to be worth the risk.

By disentangling the various meanings the Victorians attached to representation in all its forms, this book attempts to account for the way in which Victorian novelists were able simultaneously to deplore and exploit the idea of the aesthetic. At first, their novels seem wholly suspicious of art. In Thackeray’s Vanity Fair (1847–8) and Charlotte
Introduction

Brontë’s Villette (1853), for example, art possesses a dangerous power that can be easily exploited. Becky Sharp’s considerable talents are used only to deceive, yet she evades moral judgment by deliberately inviting aesthetic judgment of herself. Many of George Eliot’s and Thomas Hardy’s characters present themselves as art objects in order to disguise their human flaws, or use the mesmerizing power of music to entrap a listener who mistakenly equates musical expression with depth of feeling. But in spite of this apparent distrust of art, these writers often describe the novelist’s work as “drawing a picture,” “painting a portrait,” or “sketching a scene.” They illustrate characters and situations by referring to works of visual art and denote emotions through allusion to music. Although painterly terms were used conventionally by nineteenth-century literary critics, these novelists employ them not as mere elegant variations on words like “describe” and “represent,” but as a way of consciously invoking a non-literary mode of description and representation.

Artistic allusion has often been seen as a sort of literary dandyism, an old-fashioned and somewhat precious “dressing up” of a particular scene, character, or theme. Its most obvious function is to highlight a particular moment in the text. It also could be said to exhibit the author’s superior knowledge and taste. But “art” is not necessary to accomplish these goals. Other techniques of elaborate, lyrical description can intensify the reader’s perceptions; other realms of cultural discourse can verify the novelist’s expertise. It must be asked, then, what evocations of art accomplish that other forms of allusion do not.

It may seem strange to consider what, in this context, art is “there for,” since art is conventionally defined by its uselessness. It is customary to consider art to be anything that is created primarily for aesthetic appreciation, rather than something created to serve another function. Ordinary objects become artworks only when they are removed from their everyday use and displayed or commented upon as art. But as Theodor Adorno points out, the creation of art involves a “purposefulness” that contradicts the supposed purposelessness of its existence: “Art as akin to production cannot escape the question ‘what for?’ which it aims to negate” (Minima Moralia 226). Art forces us to take notice of its unique status as art, and to account for its presence. Artistic allusion in the novel attempts to confer on particular passages the autonomy and uniqueness of the artifact. No other form of cultural reference separates itself so decisively from the world in which it is embedded – even when this world is a fictional one.
While artistic allusions might seem like ostentatious displays of descriptive virtuosity on the narrator’s part, in fact they tend to efface the narrative voice: because a picture cannot directly assert anything, a narrative “painting” does not seem like part of the narrator’s commentary. It achieves a kind of independence from the narrative as a whole. Through this alterity the Victorian novel’s preoccupation with art actually reinforces its claims to realism. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, utterances or representations that are to be “taken as . . . fictive discourse” (Margins of Discourse, 48) can be separated from “natural discourse” by “an act of artistry no more strenuous than placing a frame around them” (xi). By framing a person or a scene as an artwork, the author separates it from the world of the novel, performing what Barthes would call an act of “découpage,” or cutting out (Image–Music–Text 69). The hole thus created in the text allows the image to escape into a different sign system, and by labeling this other world “art,” the novelist makes the world left behind seem more real. Françoise Meltzer’s definition of the literary portrait as “an insurmountable opacity,” a “radical otherness in the text” (Salomé 46), applies equally to the other artifacts and performances represented in the Victorian novel. Their primary function is to be ontologically different from the world in which we find them.

Realism itself grew out of the impulse to contradict: as George Levine explains in the classic modern study of Victorian realism, realism “defines itself against the excesses, both stylistic and narrative, of various kinds of romantic, exotic, or sensational literatures” (Realistic Imagination 5). Because it is based on the repudiation of literary genres, realism has always been difficult to characterize. Its Victorian founders were forced to rely on contrast with the movements they sought to negate. George Henry Lewes described realism as the antithesis of “Fablism,” while Thomas Hardy distinguished it from mere “copyism.” For George Eliot, realism meant not representing “things as they never have been and never will be,” while Charlotte Brontë warned that readers who expect “anything like a romance” will find that they “were never more mistaken.” And yet this sort of opposition is potentially reductive, leading to what J. Hillis Miller calls “the sterile oscillations of the traditional paradigm of realism” (“Literary Theory” 160). He points out that “criticism in this area tends to express itself in either/or dichotomies: either realism or vacuous, free-floating fiction . . . either the representation of some verifiable and objective truth, or the merely relative, some partial, subjective truth, therefore no truth at all” (155).
These sorts of distinctions can slice both ways. Recent theorists have tended to oppose “naive realism” to the elaborately self-conscious modern fiction that seems both more true to the ambiguities of existence and more truthful in its awareness of its own dependence on language. Realism thus becomes, in Bruce Robbins’ words, a “scapegoat term” that is useful in generating arguments because of the “blatant strawman-ism” that renders it an easy target (“Modernism” 227). Whichever side of the equation is valorized, the inadequacy of a simple opposition between true and false, real and unreal, is obvious. It is reflected in the use of the term “realistic” to denote things that seem real but are not, and the recourse to a neologism, “irreal,” by writers as diverse as philosopher Nelson Goodman and science fiction writer Philip K. Dick.

The literary problem parallels a larger philosophical debate. Just as realistic fiction can be regarded as a construction that depends on the relative status of its internal constituents, so our sense of the real world, some philosophers suggest, derives from our perception of the relation between key elements. But philosophical realism, like literary realism, seems to be plagued by “reductive dichotomies,” as N. Katharine Hayles has recently noted (“Constrained Constructivism” 34). Hayles suggests that “the binary logic of true/false” is inadequate to the spectrum of possibilities contained within the concept of mental representation, which permits things to be “consistent or inconsistent” as well as “congruent or incongruent” with reality: “Realism tends to elide the differences [among these terms] . . . assimilating not-false into true and not-true into false” (35–6). The philosopher Hilary Putnam has argued for the rejection of such dichotomies as “subjective/objective,” “projection/property of the thing in itself” and “power/property of the thing in itself” (Many Faces of Realism 28), but asks, “can one be any sort of realist without the dichotomies?” If belief in the stable presence of a real world means that one must be able, confidently, to label phenomena as real (objects) or unreal (projections), then a whole spectrum of experience becomes impossible to describe. Victorian novelists, however, wished to illuminate precisely this space, and meticulously rendered the ambiguity of perception by filtering it through the multifaceted prism of art.

The novelists studied here use the category of “art” to create a sphere of “radical otherness” within their texts, an artificial realm that is poised against an underlying “reality.” The world thus created, however, is multidimensional. The density, sophistication, and credibility of the fictional world depends, not upon a simple binary opposition between art and not-art, but upon the representational array created by the
novelists’ invocation of multiple arts. The association of literature with other “sister arts” was a common trope from the Renaissance onward, but such conventional allusions to painting or music claimed aesthetic similarity between a single art form and the art of poetry. Thackeray, Brontë, Eliot, and Hardy use a wide range of arts in combination, creating a complex system of aesthetic cross-referencing. Each art is eventually assigned a different moral value, creating a hierarchy of the arts that privileges music over what come to be seen as the more limited perspective of painting and the more deceptive mode of theatre. However, taken together, their collective gesture is to provide a coherent model of realistic representation. The juxtaposition of painting, theatre, and music in these novels has the effect of measuring the arts’ representational abilities not against external reality but against each other. The realism of the novelist’s own creation is evaluated within this framework, rather than in relation to an actual reality with which it cannot hope to compete.

The effect of “aesthetic cross-referencing” is to give coherence and unity to fictional worlds by constructing different levels of representation within them. This operation is similar to the way in which we make sense of the world around us, since, as Arthur Danto points out, “coherence is taken to be the defining property of reality” (Danto, Connections to the World 195). The process whereby we construct reality by “taking [ing] as true the largest set of self-coherent ideas” (Danto, Connections to the World 197) allows us to perceive fictional worlds, which are necessarily characterized by “incompleteness” (Pavel, Fictional Worlds 197), as nonetheless coherent, even robust. Here I attempt to unravel the process of “taking as true,” or, in Herrnstein Smith’s words, “taking as natural.” As these expressions suggest, our ability to extract a real-seeming world from between the cardboard covers of a book depends upon the apparently casual, almost unconscious, assumptions we make. Michael Riffaterre has suggested that “a metalanguage functions as if it presupposed the reality of the topics it glosses, when it actually presupposes the reality of the language in which these topics are broached” (Fictional Truth xvi). The artistic metaphors I examine function as just such a metalanguage. They become what Riffaterre calls “fictional indices,” tropes that “presuppose the real” (52). The novelist is exempted from the impossible task of describing the real world in all its complexity; instead, s/he describes representations that are judged accurate or inadequate as representations of a reality that is implied by their reference to it. The representations themselves attest to the presence of an ontologically prior world.
Introduction

The fictional worlds generated by these novelists are thus both coherent and autonomous. If they are so similar to the real world, how exactly do they differ from it? One could argue that the main difference, from the reader's point of view, is that they happen not to exist. The fact that a world can be represented through the novelist's language suggests merely that it could exist. However, the fact that a world is so fully constituted that it can be re-represented through allusions to other art forms suggests that it does exist. Of course, this suggestion need not be accepted. Clearly, belief in the existence of "Wessex," "Labasscour," or "Pumpernickel" would be a mistake. As Thomas Pavel suggests, "fiction cannot be strictly identified with metaphysically possible worlds" (Fictional Worlds 48). But these novels create, if not possible worlds, then plausible ones.

Nelson Goodman's suggestion that instead of asking, "What is art?" we should more properly inquire "When is art?" underlies my inquiry throughout. Within the contexts of these fictional worlds, I ask, when is art? And how do we know? And, moreover, why is art? What do these novelists gain that is worth the evident riskiness of reminding the reader how deceptive or inadequate art can be? All use particular forms of art to signal hypocrisy, self-delusion, deceit, or simply the difficulty of understanding a world of multiple consciousnesses and rendering it accurately. But this admission of art's failures does not render the novelist's own art more suspect: like the informant who fingers a fellow criminal, the novelist accommodates our sophisticated doubts about representation by forcing someone else to take the fall. The novel, witness to the potential dangers of our attempts to represent and manipulate reality, gets off scot-free.

Recent critics have tended to see the kind of framing or detachment I have described as an ideological rather than purely aesthetic gesture. Fredric Jameson suggests that such "aestheticizing strategy" (Political Unconscious 230) have the power, through a "process of abstraction and reification" (229), to transform a passage or scene into "an art-commodity which one consumes by way of its own dynamic" (230). If such passages are considered to be in some sense equivalent to actual artworks, then Pierre Bourdieu's claim that aesthetic "consumption" is "an act of deciphering... which implies the implementation of a... cultural code" (Distinction 23) would suggest that one function of artworks within a novel is to illustrate or even interrogate the process of cultural encoding. Bourdieu argues that the "pure gaze" is a "historical invention"
intended to disguise the fact that “aesthetic perception is necessarily historical, inasmuch as it is differential, relational, attentive to the deviations (déarts) which make styles” (4). Bourdieu insists that aesthetic judgment is a social act whose purpose is differentiation or distinction between classes. A novel that evokes artifacts, then, is able to create a multilayered social world by showing different characters’ participation in aesthetic judgment.

Of course, the novel may also be said to situate itself in relation to class through its deployment of artistic references. If artistic allusion is considered to be a kind of metalanguage, as I have suggested, then we must question whether it is what Bakhtin calls a “unitary language” that reflects “historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization” (Dialogic Imagination 270), or whether its presence within the narrative contributes to the novel’s “heteroglossia” (301), as it enters into dialogue with the text in which it is embedded. Mieke Bal suggests that “realism” is in conflict with a “textualism” that seeks to replace the “self-evident wholeness” of traditional realism with a “self-conscious construction of wholeness” (“De-disciplining the Eye” 509). She sees its “‘convention of unity’” as “a powerful ideological weapon because of the pressure it exerts on the reader to choose one interpretation over another . . . it encourages the projection of ‘masterplots’ that colonize or erase the marginal” (507). Aesthetic cross-referencing participates in this productive conflict: it is a form of “self-conscious construction” that creates a “self-evidently” coherent and autonomous fictional world. Ultimately, I would argue, the use of art in these novels contributes to a realism characterized by formal, but not necessarily ideological, coherence. The novelists’ self-consciousness about aesthetic representation is often paralleled by self-consciousness about social representation and the role of aesthetics in the constitution of culture.

This is the “singular anomaly” of the Victorian realist novel: the emphasis on aesthetics that is integral to its exploration of social and cultural values. Michèle Barrett has recently complained about the “marginalization of aesthetic questions in the interpretation of culture” (“Max Raphael” 40), and while she refers specifically to the application of aesthetic standards to texts of cultural interest, her comments apply equally to the need to examine aesthetic judgments that occur within texts themselves in relation to the culture they describe. It seems appropriate, then, for this book to answer the formalist question with which it begins – how do these artistic references function within these texts? – with the help of sources that illuminate relevant ancillary topics in
nineteenth-century British cultural development: the tension between the picturesque aesthetic and agricultural development; the tainted position of actresses in Victorian society; the xenophobic response to foreign musicians in England; the competition between traditional parish choirs and modern church organists in rural society; the connection between public executions and other forms of spectacle. Victorian novels not only describe, they enact the process whereby the drawing of aesthetic boundaries takes on moral and political dimensions.

The representational play afforded by the Victorian use of multiple arts was set in motion by Romantic explorations of painting and music as alternative models for poetry. In chapter 1, “The Picturesque Aesthetic and the Natural Art of Song,” I argue that the Romantics used first metaphors of painting and then metaphors of music to blur the boundary between nature and art, breaking down those time-honored categories in a way that would allow the Victorians to recast the problem as an opposition between “real” and “false.” The picturesque descriptions that appear in the works of Leigh Hunt, William Lisle Bowles, Thomas De Quincey, and the early Wordsworth treat natural scenes as a kind of “found art” whose apparent origin in nature authenticates the feelings that they metaphorically describe. But while the picturesque presented itself as a purely aesthetic mode of perceiving landscape, it was subverted by a political agenda that ultimately destroyed its nostalgic claims to ahistoricity. Later Romantic writing used the picturesque as a form of critique, and finally replaced it with music, a fully engaged mode of artistic communication that involves living bodies that sing and are penetrated by song.

The leap from a non-mimetic art like music to Victorian “word-painting” might seem a large one. But by using music to represent a literature that was both grounded in nature and an autonomous form of art, the Romantics laid the foundation on which realist novels would be built. Unlike the picturesque aesthetic, the musical aesthetic developed in the later poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats does not attempt to deny its temporality. Emanating from the land – its winds, waters, and birds – it transcends material contingency as it transcends language itself. Music, like the picturesque, works to elide the difference between nature and art, but by weighting a different end of the equation. While the function of picturesque tropes is to aestheticize nature, the function of musical tropes is to naturalize art.

The Romantic empowerment of art rendered it both fascinating and
dangerous to the Victorians. The myth of genuine self-expression embodied in the poetic ideal of music seemed problematic to early Victorian novelists, who saw a social world constituted not by authentic expression but by deliberate hypocrisy. Chapter 2, “Masterpiece Theatres: Art as Spectacle in William Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë,” traces the transformation of the essentially aesthetic questions raised by the Romantics into cultural questions about the relationship between artistic representations and social reality. The novels of William Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë use art – all of the arts, including music – as a metaphor for the social façade that is too easily mistaken for inner truth. Art’s relation to reality in these novels is often characterized as “theatrical”: that is, art signifies a deliberate effort to “make up” people and situations, disguising their true import. The public danger implicit in the coerciveness of the theatrical spectacle, vividly rendered in Thackeray’s essay about the hanging of the murderer Courvoisier, is reflected in the novels’ emphasis upon the perils of representation.

Theatre is not the only art that is guilty of theatricality. In *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Villette*, overtly theatrical performances are paralleled by equally deceptive instances of singing, dancing, and drawing. By invoking all of these arts, Thackeray and Brontë suggest that the crucial difference is not between one medium and another, but between false art and true. While the Romantics compared the formal capabilities of different media and genres, Thackeray and Brontë shifted attention from the beauty or accuracy of an “imitation” to its authenticity, a quality more dependent on the artist than on the medium. This deflection was crucial to the development of the novel, a form constantly beset by directives about what it could and could not represent. By freeing the arts from the positions they had long been assigned on the basis of their formal capabilities, Thackeray and Brontë initiated the development of a new artistic hierarchy, one based on moral, rather than aesthetic, considerations. Their separation of the world into layers of truth and illusion was the first step toward realism in nineteenth-century English literature.

George Eliot, who was interested not only in how we represent ourselves to the world but how we represent ourselves to ourselves, used the wide range of arts introduced into the novel by Thackeray and Brontë to set up a representational system that reflects the many strata of deception and self-deception that can separate inner reality from outer expression. Chapter 3, “George Eliot’s Hierarchy of Representation,” shows that in Eliot’s novels the association of individual charac-