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Elegy

Duncan F. Kennedy

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CHAPTER**I****Representation and the rhetoric
of reality**

The notion of representation plays a prominent role in aesthetic criticism. The relational sense of the term, that of 'representing', 'standing for', opens up a characteristic disjunction, expressed as between 'art' and 'the world', or 'literature' and 'life'. Another characteristic distinction generated by the term is that between the 'means' and the 'object' of representation. The capacity of representational art to elide these disjunctions, indeed the projection of this on occasions as an ideal of such art, is remarked upon in the story of Pygmalion in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Pygmalion creates an ivory statue with such skill that he comes to think of it as a flesh-and-blood woman, 'to such an extent does artistry lie hidden by means of its own artistry' (*ars adeo latet arte sua*, 10.252). From the perspective of semiotics (the discourse of the sign, which also invokes representation as a foundational concept in its assertion that a sign 'stands for' something else), Roland Barthes has treated in detail of the means by which a text can draw attention away from itself as text so as to create the 'reality effect', the sense of direct contact with the real.¹ Contrariwise, the distinction between means and object can lead to emphasis on the former (formalism), as the represented object recedes whilst the medium turns itself back on its own codes and conventions and engages in self-reflexive play. As is the case with all terms projected as autonomous opposites, these distinctions are open to deconstruction, but generate meaning to the extent to which, in what ways, and to what ends, they are kept distinct. Texts work within such distinctions, even when they endeavour to collapse them. Criticism and its object, often projected as separate, can also be seen as operating

¹ Barthes (1974).

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within similar assumptions and implicated in the same discursive strategies, by viewing them as two examples of 'the same thing', as, say, 'kinds of writing'; their very projection as separate instances of discrete phenomena can be one of the means whereby this complicity is disguised.

The terms of this discourse of representation are much in evidence in current discussion of Roman love elegy. In the Introduction to his *Latin Poets and Roman Life*, Jasper Griffin locates himself within this discourse and adopts a particular perspective:

This book aims to illustrate and clarify the relationship between Augustan poetry and the world in which it was produced and enjoyed. Many readers of Augustan poetry have difficulty with an obvious and central feature: the highly polished verbal style and the brilliant metrical expertise are accompanied by highly stylised conventions of situation and attitude. Yet behind the conventional devices – the pastoral scenes, the songs sung outside closed doors, the Greek myths – the reader feels the presence of emotional truth. How is this effect produced, and what is the relation of the finished poem to the raw stuff of life?²

The particularly sharp distinction drawn here between 'poetry' and 'the world' generates its own problematic, the 'relationship' between the 'means' (the highly polished verbal style, the highly stylized conventions of situation and attitude, the conventional devices, the finished poem) and the 'object', which is also the ostensible *object*, the end, of the enquiry, the raw stuff of life, the achievement of which is signalled by the term 'presence'. The verbal texture of the poetry is thus presented as a barrier; Griffin's text holds out the hope of passing through that barrier to achieve a direct experience of reality. Drawing attention to the problems posed by the formal texture of Augustan poetry serves to suppress the involvement of Griffin's own text in the rhetorical strategies of representation he seeks to describe: under what circumstances will we be deemed to be in the 'presence' of 'reality'? At what point will the verbal texture of Griffin's own text claim to have elided itself?

In the course of discussing 'Augustan poetry and the life of luxury', Griffin asks of Horace, *Odes* 1.17: 'Is this musical *fête champêtre* a transparent fiction?'³ He thinks it is not, and that 'we can trace it through a less exalted stylisation to reality'. Adducing *Odes* 2.11.13ff., he

² Griffin (1985), ix. ³ Griffin (1985), 20.

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remarks: 'Here we are less grand: here alone in the *Odes* the low word *scortum* appears . . . Yet the ingredients are all the same: a girl, music, drink, in the country.' As further evidence, it is stated that:

we come down to realism in Ovid's account of the holiday in honour of Anna Perenna, *Fasti* 3.523 ff.: on the banks of the Tiber,

plebs venit ac virides passim disiecta per herbas
potat, et accumbit cum parc quisque sua

'The common people come and lie about on the grass and drink, each man stretched out with his girl' . . . This unromantic and plebeian scene is, presumably, 'realistic' enough, and shows that one could have a picnic in Augustan Italy without becoming a poetical fiction.

The progressive condescension ('Here we are less grand'; 'the low word *scortum*'; 'we come down to realism'; 'this unromantic and plebeian scene is presumably "realistic" enough') tends to associate reality with, and seeks to find it in, the *plebs*, the common people. But Griffin resists using the word 'reality' here, preferring for the moment 'realism' and 'realistic', the latter betraying some anxiety by its enclosure within inverted commas. When the 'reality effect' is working, the text seems to be elided and the reader seems to belong to the world depicted; conversely, the invocation of the term 'realism' indicates, albeit expressed as a residual awareness of the act of representation, both a sense of fascination for what is depicted and of being an observer rather than a participant, of 'seeing', perhaps, rather than 'being present'. The works of Petronius and Juvenal, which are often held to depict a world peopled by lower social groups and viewed from their perspective, are constantly praised for their 'realism'. Critics who use the term project themselves as interlopers, however much they enjoy the temporary frisson of seeing how the other half lives from the safe confines, and through the window, of a racy textual vehicle. The milieu of Augustan poetry is, by contrast, characterized as predominantly aristocratic, and the world it depicts as viewed from that perspective. 'The poem then', Griffin concludes as he safely returns to *Odes* 1.17, 'is not a fantasy in no relation to life, a "dream", but a stylised and refined version of reality.' In the word 'refined', which seamlessly combines the discourses of artistic and social differentiation, Griffin finds the reassuring sense of 'presence' which licenses the use of

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the master term 'reality'. And curiously, those very conventional devices which were projected as a barrier to reality are now coming to take on the role of reality, a critical position Griffin is elsewhere very keen to distance himself from when he discusses 'Genre and real life in Latin poetry'.⁴ Curiously too, the act of emphasizing the fundamental difference between the musical *fête champêtre* and the plebeian picnic, the difference which is held to constitute reality, has involved the projection of the two as instances of the same thing . . .

The strategy of grounding 'reality' in a discourse of social and aesthetic differentiation whilst the author coalesces with a point of view emerges again when Griffin turns to contemplate the pleasures of nakedness. Discussing devices to justify the representation of naked women (the bath and the presence of molesting satyrs are the examples adduced),⁵ Griffin observes that 'the application to the nude of some trappings of mythology could make a great difference to its respectability', and points to Alma Tadema's Roman ladies in the bath and Lord Leighton's Greek nudes to suggest the similarity of Victorian practice.⁶ He suggests a similar dignifying function for Propertius' use of the Judgement of Paris to suggest the beauty of Cynthia in 2.2.13–14:

cedite iam, divae, quas pastor viderat olim
Idacis tunicas ponere verticibus

Yield now, you goddesses, whom once the shepherd saw undress
on Mount Ida

He adduces the parallel of *Ars* 1.247–87 as Ovid drawing 'the frank moral from the story that, as Paris looked the goddesses over thoroughly before making his choice, so his male readers, too, should look carefully before choosing a girl', which leads immediately to the following reverie: 'the picture of a Roman man about town, running an eye over the girls on offer in some louche establishment, is almost tangibly present'.⁷ The rhetorical strategy underpinning the discourse of 'reality', culminating in the phrase 'almost tangibly present', is by now familiar. The perspective adopted (explicitly figured in terms of 'running an eye over') is that of a 'man about town' visiting 'some louche establishment' – overtly male,

⁴ Griffin (1985), 49. ⁵ Griffin (1985), 103. ⁶ Griffin (1985), 104.

⁷ *luce deas caeloque Paris spectavit aperto, cum dixit Veneri 'vincis utramque, Venus'.* ('Paris viewed the goddesses in broad daylight when he said to Venus "You beat them both, Venus".') ⁸ Griffin (1985), 105.

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overtly privileged. But what Griffin holds out to us here is not reality but, explicitly, a *picture*, another representation, just as, in retrospect, the musical *fête champêtre* of Horace, *Odes* 1.17 was a stylized and refined *version* of reality. The rhetoric of 'reality' is invoked and manipulated to justify another representation, the object of which is in this case the body of a lower-class female. A discourse of constraints, of 'respectability', *enables* a representation, encoding a particular ideological perspective, in the text of Griffin no less, according to his assertion, than in the works of Alma Tadema or Lord Leighton.

Maria Wyke, in analysing reading practices that seek to look 'through' the texts of elegy to a 'reality' of what she terms 'flesh-and-blood' women, also locates herself within the discourse of representation. Again, the relational structure of the term 'representation' defines the problematic, 'a need to determine the relation between the realities of women's lives and their representation in literature'.⁹ Granting that the poetic technique of elegy tempts its readers to suppose that to some degree its female subjects reflect the lives of specific Augustan women (and thus suggesting that poetic technique and reading practice have colluded to produce a congruence of past and contemporary perspectives), she argues that 'realism itself is a quality of the text, not a direct manifestation of a "real" world', and that 'to create the aesthetic effect of an open window onto a "reality" lying just beyond, literary works employ a number of formal strategies that change through time and between discourses'.¹⁰ Thus Cynthia's reproaches in Prop. 4.7 are 'replete with apparently authenticating incidentals such as a busy red light district of Rome, worn-down windows, warming cloaks, branded slaves, ex-prostitutes, and wool work'.¹¹ Sensitive to the way that the strategies of realism and the invocation of that term render the rhetoric of 'reality' problematic, she nonetheless acknowledges the legitimizing power of the term as she warns that 'the realist devices of the Propertian corpus map out only a precarious pathway to the realities of women's lives in Augustan society'.¹² Other pathways are explored only to be rejected, for example finding 'parallel portraits of the female outside the poetic sphere',¹³ such as Sallust's Sempronia or Clodia Metelli; but 'these are on the level of representations, not realities – any comparison tends to be a comparison between two forms of discourse about the female'.¹⁴ 'So persuasive have

⁹ Wyke (1989a), 25.¹⁰ Wyke (1989a), 27.¹¹ Wyke (1989a), 32.¹² Wyke (1989a), 33.¹³ Wyke (1989a), 37.¹⁴ Wyke (1989a), 38.

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these discourses on the female been', she continues, 'that they have often been taken for truth.'¹⁵ In the course of her meticulous search, 'representation' has taken over the rhetorical space which 'reality' was presumed to occupy. The 'flesh-and-blood *woman*' produced by one reading practice is significantly replaced by the 'female *form*' of another: the written women of elegy are 'to be read as signifiers of moral and political ideologies'.¹⁶

The increasing concentration on means rather than object raises a crucial question that can be framed in terms of the 'reality effect': where does it stop? Any assertion that a particular statement in a text represents reality is open to the counter-assertion that it is an instance of the reality effect, that what is *represented* as reality is precisely that, another representation. Within a discourse of representation, increasing formalist emphasis on 'means' at the expense of 'object' produces disturbances within the rhetoric of reality and contamination of categories assumed to be discrete: what were assumed to be different turn out to be instances of the same thing, and *vice versa*. The 'conventional devices' which were initially presented as a barrier between 'life' and 'literature' start to take on the role of 'reality'; if the notion of representation is recuperated under these circumstances, it leads to a reversal of categories: 'life' imitates 'literature'. A favourite Ovidian motif, of course,¹⁷ incorporated into the *persona* of the Ovidian lover who, in the received critical tradition, 'takes on the role(s)' of his elegiac predecessors.¹⁸ Griffin presents us ostensibly with a Propertius who models his lover's behaviour on the lifestyle of Antony; but Antony's *lifestyle* turns out to be modelled on the 'role' of the dissolute man of action represented in literature.¹⁹ As the formalist turn is pressed, the opposition between 'life' and 'literature', from which the traditional discourse of representation takes its bearings, starts to fall apart and categories become unstable to the extent of being inverted: 'life' and the practices assumed to constitute it (the musical *fête champêtre*, songs sung outside doors etc) become 'texts', discourses we inhabit; rhetoric is 'reality', *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, the man is the style, and reality is experienced as a network of representations – seemingly endless, for any representation of reality is open in turn to representation as an instance of the reality effect. However, although the categories have been destabilized, we do not therefore stand outside the discourse of

¹⁵ Wyke (1989a), 40. ¹⁶ Wyke (1989b), 128.¹⁷ Cf. e.g. *Ars* 2.313, 3.155, 164, 210, *Met.* 11.235–6.¹⁸ See Davis (1989). ¹⁹ Griffin 1985, 32–47.

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representation. The relation of 'standing for' has not been excluded or foreclosed: the discourse of reality becomes the locus for the construction and contestation of ideologies of class, gender and so on; the network of representations now 'stands for' ideological differences. But ideology in turn is not a thing-in-itself: the term 'ideology' is itself precisely determined by the notion of 'perspectival representation' . . . The reader will by now be getting the picture, that 'things' are never *just, simply, merely* what they seem 'to be', that the 'thing-in-itself', presumed to be an object of representation, becomes in the process itself a representation.

Griffin and Wyke each have their story to tell of Roman love elegy, each producing a textual construct at once itself a representation and itself open to representation. My representation of their texts as 'stories' may seem initially paradoxical, but it does enable further leverage to be exerted on the rhetoric of reality. For in their search for the 'raw stuff of life' and the 'realities of women's lives' at Rome, they invoke the notion of, and inscribe themselves within, a discourse of history, which seeks to ground itself in the actuality of the past; but it is here that the challenge textuality offers to the rhetoric of reality is at its most acute. History constitutes itself as a heuristic discourse by generating, amongst other distinctions, one between the past and the present, the object of history being to recapture the absent past: the past is thus represented as different from the present. But its means of doing so is textual: history fashions *representations* of the past, which create the illusion of reality and make the past 'present'. There is nothing outside the discourses of history by which representations of the past can be checked, no independent access to historical actuality. There is no escape in an appeal to so-called '*Realien*', for they too are open to being represented not as things-in-themselves, as the historicist might wish, but as textually constituted, signifiers never identical with themselves. Hard historicism, which in its purest form would wish to show the past 'as it really was', posits the independent existence of extratextual 'facts', a process of reification rhetorically underpinned by the employment of metaphors that, in speaking of '*hard facts*', '*material practices*', '*flesh-and-blood women*', '*the raw stuff of life*' and so on, offer immediate and sometimes somewhat sinister sensual gratification. Hard historicism attempts to maintain its position in the face of the textualist emphasis that all 'facts' are discursively constituted as such, all 'events' are always already 'under description' (which is not, incidentally, to deny the actuality of the past but to suggest the process of its discursive organization). In striving to

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represent the past 'as it really was', to make the past 'present', historicism gestures towards a non-perspectival objectivity despite textualist assertions that history's characterizing structure is teleological,²⁰ that events are discursively selected, shaped and organized 'under the shadow of the end',²¹ that, far from being disinterested, history does precisely make the past 'present' in the sense of accommodating the past to present interests. At its most occlusive, historicism creates 'objective' representations of the past that in their 'immediacy', 'relevance' or 'presence' serve to throw back consoling or affirming self-images; but as textualism encroaches, the distinction between past and present becomes less clearly demarcated, and depictions of the past become more overtly representative of the present. If historicism achieved its aim of understanding a culture of the past 'in its own terms', the result would be totally unintelligible except to but that culture and moment. And arguably not even to that, for a culture is articulated at any point by the contested historicity of its constitutive terms. Far from past being made 'present', it would be rendered totally foreign and impenetrably alien.²² History cannot present the past in its own terms; it must act to some extent as a translator, an interpreter. The past, even if ostensibly represented as 'different', must also at some level be represented as the 'same'.

History is inextricably locked into the projection, under one guise or another, of 'extratextual realities', and as hard historicism is obliged to soften under the pressure of textualist awareness and critiques, the practice of history reforms itself. As its 'facts' are acknowledged to be textually constituted and its representational devices and modes become visible as such, so rhetorically it creates fresh reifications whose textuality is not immediately apparent, as in 'ideologies'. Realist modes of representation are jettisoned in favour of experimental styles, whilst realism migrates so as to inform other discourses such as sociology or anthropology (or to blur the barriers between them, creating a mixing of genres)²³ – until the next textualist challenge comes along.

The issue of limit and control now becomes pressing, for the anxiety that formalist or textualist approaches raise most starkly is: at what point are such analyses to be *stopped*? At what point *will* they be stopped, since they *can* (apparently) be pressed to the point where categories collapse into an undifferentiated textuality? There lies, we are told, silence or

²⁰ See Attridge, Bennington and Young (1987), 9.

²¹ Kermode (1966), 5. ²² See Felperin (1990), 14.

²³ See chs 2, 4 and 5 below on the work of Halperin, Winkler and Veyne respectively.

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madness. Every discursive intervention (including the Nietzschean) attempts or effects a closure of a sort with greater or lesser success, figured in the (illusion of) fulfilment of the desire which informs the intervention. Pygmalion creates a statue; the story 'ends' with it becoming a 'real' woman. However, a sign 'stands' not for reality, but for another sign in a continuing chain of signification. A statue stands for the female body, but the female body is a signifier in its turn; and so on. It is the function and effect of rhetoric to efface itself, to dissolve the distinction between 'illusion' and 'reality' (*ars adeo latet arte sua*). The object of such rhetorical persuasion may be its exponent no less than its audience. Pygmalion's statue 'becomes' a 'real' woman; her 'reality' is beyond question because she 'represents' nothing beyond the fulfilment of his desire. If the female body is the 'object' of representation in Griffin's text, the female form proves too large for the end he wishes to impose. The capacity of signifiers to signify sooner or later evades our control, except in our fantasies; but our sense of control is created *in our stories, in our pictures, in our representations*. But it is always open to others to tell their stories in their way. Beyond the ostensible *object* of representation, reality as represented by Maria Wyke becomes the locus for the construction and contestation of ideologies of class, gender etc. She seeks in 'ideology' a closural term, but it provides not the destination that the rhetoric promises, but only another resting-place. Closure is provisionally imposed, and the term 'reality' comes into play, when we assert that something stands only for itself, seemingly circumscribed and reflecting our will to control, when the application of a term is deemed a sufficient description, when the verb 'to be' is invoked, an identity asserted, and we say that something *is* something, the 'be-all and end-all'. But just as it looks as though history is set to collapse into an undifferentiated textuality, it comes back with a vengeance and issues its own challenge, that the term 'textuality' itself has a history, that it organizes its discourse teleologically to celebrate its own triumph, that it 'proves' its case by writing . . . history. Just as history 'ends up' (that is, finds the closure it requires to remain usefully operative) talking textuality, so textuality 'ends up' talking history, though always striving to retain the guise of one or the other. Sooner or later (the issue may be represented as one of *deferral*), the contradictions within a term become disabblingly obtrusive and can only be resolved by recourse to an appeal to another term to which the first is ostensibly opposed.²⁴ Thus

²⁴ See ch. 5 below on 'history' and 'aesthetics' in the work of Veayne.

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'difference' at some level invokes 'sameness' (recall the musical *fête champêtre* and the plebeian picnic), and *vice versa*. The purest of 'textualizing' definitions of history, 'a kind of storytelling towards the present, a textual construct at once itself, an interpretation and itself open to interpretation',²⁵ turns out on further inspection to be the most historicizing as well. For to define, to set within limits, to impose closure, to inscribe in a teleological framework, is to historicize.

Textualism allowed to run loose, we are assured, turns all distinctions into undifferentiated textuality, even the reification by which textuality is congealed into texts. Historicism allowed to run loose renders unintelligible even the historical moment it seeks to represent. If the impossible were to happen, if either were to be brought to its 'logical' conclusion (and this can be represented as a possibility only insofar as the terms are projected as extratextual realities), meaning would indeed cease: a text could never reach either horizon without there being total noise or total silence. But the horizon constantly recedes as one approaches, and we are left circumnavigating another hermeneutical circle. Invoking the word 'indeterminacy' is a fine way of making the flesh creep, or creating a warm glow; but its utterance as a meaningful term should offer immediate reassurance, or disappointment, that we haven't got to that stage, and won't, so long as it can create those effects. So, we are not faced with a choice – textuality *or* history – but must live with them both, for it is only in the making and manipulation of such distinctions that meanings can be generated – to the extent to which, in what ways, and to what ends, such terms are kept distinct. Distinctions are often represented as *determining*, but they can also be represented as *enabling*.

There can, then, be no representation without accommodation, no interpretation without appropriation; but equally, there can be no appropriation without interpretation, no accommodation without representation. Any reading, any act of interpretation of a text (of whatever description), is analysable in terms of on the one hand a hermeneutics, which seeks out an originary meaning for a text, and on the other the appropriation of the text by, and its accommodation to, the matrix of practices and beliefs out of which the reading is produced, including the role of the text in the authorization of those beliefs and practices which inform the reading. In establishing its desired goal, the closure to which it is ideally directed, an interpretation sets up a series of distinctions which

²⁵ Fulperin (1990), 159.