REVIEWS

***Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism: Through the Looking-Glass*, by Katherine Kearns. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.**

Most people teaching in the nineteenth century approach the subject of so-called nineteenth-century realism with some caution, aware of the pitfalls and the diversity of styles and texts that may be labelled as realism. As Auerbach so brilliantly demonstrated—in the climate of the Second World War when surely realism and its representation pushed at unthinkable boundaries—mimesis is intimately dependent upon its social and cultural context. The debate about realism was invigorated by the publication in 1981 of George Levine's classic study *The Realistic Imagination* which points to the basic paradox in literary realism: the multitudinousness of the external world which militates against the shaping power of the individual imagination or a single narrative focus, and the consequent "struggle to reconstruct a world out of a world deconstructing" (4). The review forum in this issue demonstrates that the debate is still a vigorous one which is basic to nineteenth-century studies of all kinds.

It was against the background of this debate on realism that I began Kearns's *Nineteenth-Century Realism*, and it was a chastening experience, oscillating between yea-saying and nay-saying at bewildering speed, moving backwards and forwards through the looking-glass, seizing on moments of lucidity as if they were life-rafts. Mixed metaphors, be damned. I grasped an early statement of intent, already with a sense that I was enmeshed in a game whose main card was called irony: "At the heart of the realist's conscious agenda is a desire and an expectation to communicate effectively using the shared markers of materiality. Realism cannot begin if it has its back up; rather, it must assume a willing and competent audience that will know at the opening gambit the rules of this most everyday of language games" (5). Quixotically placed at the beginning of the "Acknowledgments" is an even clearer—and more personal—statement: "It may be that only closet nihilists feel compelled to talk about realism, and that they talk about the real in order to bring words back to some testamentary force. To speak of realism is to enforce a conviction of reality's presence through the very medium—language—that has been deprived of its intercessional status as a bridge between materiality and spirit and made instead to stand as evidence of an estrangement from the world of things. . . . Talking about the real is a way to stay in the world, to keep alive the loved objects whose loss one fears, and to keep at bay the all-too-peremptory externalities that threaten to turn spirit to machinic deadness. Not the least of the benefits of my own engagement with realism has been this chance to script a performance that writes a sort of modest optimism into being" (ix).

Kearns opens up the debate considerably, however, in her primary recognition that our modern conception of the contingent status of language no longer permits us to read realism only within nineteenth-century terms and that an understanding of nineteenth-century literary realism may actually demonstrate that "communicational competence" (247) is possible while at the same time illustrating how little literature contributes to change in the world. Realism is mediatory; it negotiates at the same time as it

destabilises. By placing her argument so firmly within both centuries, Kearns validates both nineteenth-century and twentieth-century realism and its agenda of correction of and interaction with its environment—she talks puzzlingly of an "imperiled ecological system of soul and society" (1) which only really becomes comprehensible once you get past the narrow use of "ecological" we seem to have been stuck with.

The choice of texts to illustrate the argument is at first glance deliberately provocative and very personal. While the critical pronouncements on realism of both George Eliot and Henry James are referred to frequently, their novels are not central to Kearns's discussion. Rather she concentrates on six novels, none of which fit comfortably into any conventional program of realism: *Frankenstein, Wuthering Heights, The Blithedale Romance, Hard Times, The Awakening*. Her choice is justified—quixotically again—in the very first footnote: "I shall be violating a number of rules in my discussion of realism, the most immediately obvious violations being my generalizations across time . . . and space . . . I am trying to negotiate between analysis of literary realism as a mode of text production particular to time and place and analysis of literary realism as evidence of an epistemological positioning that exceeds the circumstantialities of time and place . . . Scrupulous attention to the specifics of each text would obviate any possibility for more generalized assertions; rather than take that road of continual and necessary qualification, I shall be rather willfully blithe" (249). This wilful blitheness (what a wonderful quality for a critic to have) results finally and importantly in the comment that realism is "a mode rather than a genre, for realism adapts itself so variously that its texts differ vastly from one another and have, as individual texts, a certain chimerical quality that is thoroughly confusing to the taxonomist" (247)—which is where I came in.

So, a difficult book which talks about communication in terms that are sometimes barely readable, but which at other times stimulates the imagination and the critical sense and illuminates possibilities in ways that are genuinely exciting (she bases a dense discussion of the ineffable, for instance, on Mrs Gradgrind's wonderfully poignant search for her pain). I may not be Alice, but I found the journey through the looking-glass both an exhilarating and a bumpy one.

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***The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, edited by Jonathan Freedman. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.**

The Cambridge Companion series focuses on major authors whose work and its critical tradition hold a significant place in literary history. The essays in this collection reinforce the point that over the last hundred years Henry James's work has featured prominently in literary criticism, not only being subject to different kinds of analysis but also being used to test, develop and debate them. In opening his introduction to the volume, Jonathan Freedman makes the point that "successive wave[s] of theoretical and critical practice . . . staked their claims and exemplified their style of interpretation by