

Introduction

Luisa Villa

Università degli Studi di Genova, Italia

A concept pertaining to aesthetics and handed down by a time-honoured critical tradition harking back to Plato, 'mimesis' comes to us today as fraught with a cluster of new (or rediscovered) meanings and implications – the result of intense multidisciplinary work in the last three decades. They branch off in all sorts of directions – from the realm of historical anthropology to neuroscience – while the idea of mimesis as imitation, which has often been taken to imply a naïve mirroring relationship between the artistic or literary image and a pre-existing original, gives way to more dynamic conceptions: mimesis as *creation* of similarities (out of ineradicable diversities), world-making (out of the chaotic pressure of the non-mediated present), fictional identification (with the otherwise wholly impervious 'other'), and the balancing of stabilization and transformation crucial to processes of cultural transmission. Besides, and of more immediate concern for teachers and university lecturers: as a quintessentially human praxis and as a form of knowledge based on personal experience and rooted in bodily perception, mimesis as it is being shaped nowadays may provide a conceptual tool suitable to articulating our perplexities at educational institutions where MOOC platforms and depersonalised testing seem poised to supersede human interaction.¹

In literary and cultural studies the discourse of mimesis and its cognates intersects a good many areas. In connection with the concept of *imitatio*, mimesis has long been at the core of traditional concerns with rhetoric, genre and style as well as with questions of influence and, more recently, anxieties thereof. By way of 'identification', 'mimicry', 'masquerade', 'parody' and cognate concepts, mimesis has

1 Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf's monograph ([1992] 1995) provides a high-profile historical approach to the notion of 'mimesis', its history, multiple implications and relevance not just to the study of the arts and literature but to contemporary philosophy, historical anthropology, and studies of cultural transmission. Reflections generated by the belated publication of its Italian translation have helped me understand some aspects of the mimetic's current topicality and update my awareness of the wider scientific debate thereon (Cappelletto, Griffero, Portera 2019). For a very useful survey of the relevance of mimesis to contemporary theory and criticism see Potolski 2006.

come to play a considerable role in critical approaches to literature concerned with the constructed or performative quality of identity, a notion that figures prominently in gender, race/postcolonial, and theatre studies. More to our point, as traditionally positing the question of representation (be it true or false, enlightening or misleading) in terms of its relationship with 'nature' or 'life', mimesis has been almost coterminous with the aesthetic notion of 'realism'. Indeed, in spite of sustained deconstructive and post-modern assaults on the notion of 'reality', the question of fictional 'realism' has never been relinquished by academics, and even after the turn of the millennium has attracted high-profile scholars like Peter Brooks or Fredric Jameson. The fiction-imitation nexus - with the similarities between 'fictional worlds' and 'real' ones, or 'fictional' characters and 'real' individuals, and the historical-anthropological issue of the functions of 'fiction' - has likewise engaged distinguished theorists and critics, Catherine Gallagher's research work on "the rise of fictionality" (2006) being perhaps most notable in our field of inquiry.

In short, though the term 'mimesis' may not be especially fashionable in contemporary criticism, the 'mimetic' remains central to literary studies, entwined as it is with the question of the status, uses and misuses of literary and artistic creativity. Indeed, as Hans Blumenberg once remarked, "at no time in the history of Western Aesthetic theory has there been any serious departure from the tendency to legitimize the work of art in terms of its relation to reality" (1977, 30). The present climate is hardly likely to be conducive to theoretical revolutions in this respect. The supersession of the practice of reading by visual consumption (of fiction, information, etc), the obtrusive proliferation and dissemination of 'disreputable' fictions (fake news, and pseudo-anecdotal and pseudo-informational texts aimed at advertising products or purveyors of services), the shrinking of literary departments, the pressure to abandon historical approaches to literature for others more immediately marketable as 'public engagement', make it all the more compelling to investigate, debate and ultimately enhance literature's special purchase on the real. The recent lively critical debate over the notion of realism and its usefulness in the critical understanding of contemporary world fiction amply testifies to this (see Esty, Lye 2012; Dalley 2014; Goodlad 2016).

The present thematic section of *English Literature* was conceived within this context. It is by and large concerned with 'questioning the mimetic' in the Victorian novel, although the call for articles envisaged a wider range of potentially relevant subjects: the relationship between fictional and non-fictional narrations, the integration of factual reference in fiction and the fictional tampering with non-fictional data (such as occur, for instance, in historical novels), the interaction of the 'realist' novel with other genres or representational modes (such as melodrama, the Gothic, allegory, satire), and nineteenth-century

theoretical reflections on narrative mimesis. The project included the examination of such 'transitional' fictions as were produced in the early part of the century, when the profile of the nineteenth-century 'realist' novel (with the connected readerly expectations) was still on its way to being consolidated.² The fact that the Journal did not receive proposals clearly related to this particular area of interest testifies to the enduring marginality of the late romantic-early Victorian transition in the nineteenth-century fictional canon. Thus, much room is left for further research into those aspects of the 'mimetic' approach to 'reality' that characterise the Romantic and early Victorian age, also in their intermingling with other forms of fictional representation. Having said that, the collection of articles here included contribute to highlight the diversity of approach to the question of 'mimesis' and the 'effects of reality' in Victorian fiction and other literary forms, and its significance in the complex relation between aesthetics and the socio-historical and cultural contexts.

Ann-Marie Richardson's *The Kingdom Where Nobody Dies: Shirley's Caroline Helstone and the Mimicry of Childhood Collaboration* tackles the intersection of facts and fiction in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849). Eschewing the critical issues related to the novel's engagement with the Luddite movement and other socio-historical questions (connected with class, gender and political alignment), the article focuses on the way traumatic biographical facts (the loss of three siblings/co-authors between September 1848 and May 1849) get inscribed into the fictional text, and especially on how they inflect the characterization (and the plot-strand) of its co-protagonist Caroline Helstone. Richardson's emphasis is on the mediation provided by Charlotte's siblings' textual productions – inclusive of diaries and (published and unpublished) letters. Special attention is granted to Branwell's contribution to the Angrian saga and some of his poetical works, and Anne's governess novels *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). A rich web of inter-textual references to the Brontës' corpus is brought to bear on *Shirley* highlighting the nuanced 'mimicry' (imitation and variation) by which they are put to use in the new narrative. This impressively underscores the 'elegiac' quality of the novel (and its connection with the painful realities of life) while at the same time testifying to the always-already fictionalised quality of the writer's access to her own biographical experience.

² 'Silver-fork' novels (with their penchant for satire and *roman-à-clef*) and 'Newgate' novels (drawing on, and messing about with, historical or pseudohistorical accounts of criminals' lives, deeds and judicial retribution) – large understudied narrative corpora highly characteristic of the 1820s-1830s – together with freak works like Pierce Egan's popular urban narratives (*Life in London*, 1823) or Disraeli's extravagant historical novel *Venetia* (1837) evince a pronounced tendency to cross the border between fiction and non-fiction in ways that seem to await thorough investigation.

Likewise addressing a highly canonical text and author but pursuing a wholly different contextual approach, Gail Marshall's *Adam Bede, Realism, the Past, and Readers in 1859*, focuses on George Eliot's first published novel with its humble protagonist and painful rural story set in the early years of the century. It is of course of some relevance, in our context, that Eliot's early realist poetics - with its pronounced ethically *engagé* profile - is explicitly articulated in the novel, in chapter XVII, "In which the story pauses a little". Marshall is not interested, however, in analysing Eliot's shaping of her own authoritative stance *vis-à-vis* the perplexities of the 'mimetic', the derivation of her programmatic statements from Wordsworth and the Romantic/idealistic tradition, or their proximity to Ruskin's 'doctrine' of realism. Her article focuses on the year 1859, and her aim is to highlight *Adam Bede's* brand of 'realism' by conjuring up a number of contextual facts mostly pertaining to the contemporary burgeoning leisure industry. They include competing forms of cultural entertainment (preachers, public lectures and readings, theatrical performances, dioramas, etc.) that Eliot's novel had to face in the week it became available to the public; advertisements of recently published novels and contemporary concerns expressed at such a profusion of light literature; the Queen's overly optimistic speech delivered on 3 February 1859 (two days after *Adam Bede's* publication), and her diary entries of the period recording the theatricals she attended - which appear to have been unlikely to increase the sovereign's own 'realism' (that is, her "grasp on the conditions of her country"). In thus surveying her chosen field, Marshall makes us intensely aware of the ambitiously innovative quality of *Adam Bede*, of the unusual concentration and "committed, empathetic investment" it demanded of its readers, and ultimately of the odds against which the novel succeeded in conquering the general public and became the most widely reviewed fiction of that year.

Silvana Colella's *The Disappearing Act: Heritage Making in Charlotte Riddell's Novels* takes us on less familiar ground. Riddell is certainly non-canonical. Her special insertion in the marketplace of literature was predicated on the representation of commercial modernity and the lives of men of business - with their struggles and failures, hopes and anxieties, joys and sorrows. This choice violated expectations regarding what was suitable subject-matter for novelists in general, and women novelists in particular - the meddling with petty economic and financial questions being regarded as low and gross, and certainly most unladylike. In fact, Riddell's deliberate commitment to the representation of the 'prose' of average business life may be viewed as paralleling George Eliot's choice to recount the annals of "unfashionable families", be they the Poysers in *Adam Bede*, or the Tullivers and the Dodsons of *The Mill on the Floss* - "which

even sorrow hardly suffices to lift above the level of the tragic comic" (Eliot [1860] 1981, 272). Both might well rate as Auerbachian breakthroughs in realism (see Auerbach [1953] 2003): George Eliot focuses on the recent, fast-receding rural and provincial past as a sedate antidote to the inauthentic metropolitan present inhabited by herself and her audience; her lesser-known colleague privileges the hectic dynamics of metropolitan life, "mimetically reproducing the quick tempo of urban modernity". Colella's article, however, more specifically investigates Riddell's focus on the City of London, her narrative deployment of 'facts' pertaining to its topography and history, her growing concern with its vertiginous transformation, her dismay at the "impermanence of the built environment" and the loss of practices, traditions, institutions, which nowadays go under the cumulative label of "intangible heritage". Colella's argument starts from the tension between, on the one hand, the modernist progressive ideology underlying Riddell's investment in the vagaries of contemporary commercial life and, on the other hand, her articulation of the fledgling discourse of heritage, itself one of the products of Victorian modernity. It is one of her key-contentions that the skilful rhetorical balancing of such diverging issues contributed to the 'self-validation' of Riddell's narrative voice. On the other hand, by analysing Riddell's use of the evocations of the past as an integral part of her mimetic representational mode, Colella underscores its performativeness as generator of 'heritage value' and participant in the making of 'heritage' as "an actively constructed understanding" about the past and its significance.

Rebecca Hutcheon's *George Gissing: A Story of English Realism* takes us to the late Victorians. As one of the young novelists that started writing fiction in the late Seventies, Gissing was a participant in the avant-garde temper of his time. He belonged to a new generation of authors dissatisfied with the representational and marketing strategies routinely associated with the Victorian novel: they looked at continental models for inspiration, discussed realism, naturalism and 'the art of fiction', and waxed polemical about the circulating libraries, censorship and 'Mrs. Grundy'. Gissing's early letters to his siblings show his awareness of these new trends, and his deliberate participation in the new climate, with his desire resolutely to address an adult (not a family) readership, and extend the gamut of what was deemed representable in British fiction. He never became conspicuous, however, for militant aesthetic pronouncements and has been perceived more as a belated Victorian than as a forerunner of Modernism, the specific accessories of his position in-between these two epochs still awaiting full elucidation. Rebecca Hutcheon's article sets out to cast light on Gissing's transitional position, concisely recalling the terms of his reception by early twentieth-century authors, comparing and contrasting it with some of Gissing's

own reflections on 'realism' (which he never naively mistook for an objective representation of the social or material world), and eventually zooming in on some passages of *Demos* (1886), which she close-reads to determine if and how Gissing "practice[s] what he preaches". *Demos* is an industrial novel which quietly subverts the narrative structures (and connected readerly expectations) of the Victorian strand of fiction it mimics. Largely leaving subject-matter in the background, Hutcheon chooses here to focus on the "uneasy tension between diegesis and mimesis", the subtle rhetorical construction of seemingly 'objective' descriptions, the narrator's intrusions that shift "the narrative mode from description to comment" and the use of free indirect discourse that blurs the boundaries between character and narrator - neither to reinforce the narrating voice's control over its materials, nor modernistically to curtail "the role and authority of the narrator via increased focalization", much rather to elude responsibility for the narrator's opinions and generalization. To put it otherwise: Gissing was no naïve subscriber to what he himself perceived as the 'old' convention of the omniscient narrator; he believed that the novelist's representation of the world could at best be "a bit of life as seen by *him*", an objective achievable by "hinting" and "surmising" rather than by striving for mimetic exhaustiveness (Gissing 1991: 320). But he was not fully at ease with the actual practice of such early-modernist tenets, and his fictions were negotiated in-between competing literary fashions and personal inclinations. Henry James, on the other hand, famously made the subjective 'point of view' the linchpin of his narrative theory and mature praxis, skilfully balancing selection and inclusiveness, his characters' subjective take on the world and his narrator's cool impartiality.

Indeed, as Gary Totter's *The Problem of Completeness in Henry James's "The Spoils of Poynton"* recalls, 'completeness' was to him a feature of the successful fictional work: it had to do with its internal economy of parts and whole, and its constructed typicality - not a quality pertaining to its immediately matching 'life'. The latter is not representable in non-mediated (naively mimetic) terms, coming to us as it does - James would say - in "confusion" and "splendid waste". James would often look to art objects and art collections, and their way to arrange selected details/objects to achieve their aesthetic effect, for 'analogues' to fiction; and critics have often mined the inter-art vein to get new insights into his fictions. Totter especially chooses to draw on James's reviews of art exhibitions in counterpoint with the vicissitudes of the Poynton art-objects, while he construes the plight of the protagonist's psychological investment in the integrity of the collection in the light of fetishism, phantom limbs and concentrated *versus* distracted gaze. His argument confirms those readings of the novel that underscore the meta-fictional significance of its sensational

denouement: the bonfire of Poynton with its (emphatically celebrated, but hardly described) contents – with Fleda’s unmitigated frustration at the end – is construed as a diegetic literalisation of James’s distance from nineteenth-century (Balzac-like) realism with its pronounced visual cathexis on material objects, and its unmanageable urge to mimetic ‘completeness’.

Alertness to the mediated, selective and constructed quality of fictional ‘realism’, however, or inter-textual involvement with other art forms were hardly the preserve of *fin-de-siècle* high-brow novelists. As Carolyn Williams’ *Tableaux and Melodramatic Realism* authoritatively recalls, during the nineteenth century melodrama was endowed with a comparable sophisticated self-awareness. Her chosen focus is here on the tableau, the still picture that momentarily freezes the action allowing for fuller recognition of its salient implications. What Williams is especially bent on demonstrating is the “metatheatrical self-consciousness” the tableau articulates and shares with its audience, for instance in its reproduction of well-known paintings “to certify the realism of the action on stage” or in the prompt perception of its proximity with photography and the latter’s potential for validating represented reality. Throughout Williams highlights how the study of melodrama’s formal features has much to offer to the questioning of the novelistic ‘mimetic’, recalling the narrative deployment of the tableau by Victorian novelists and tantalizingly hinting at the structural similarities between the tableau and free indirect discourse. In the very useful “Coda” to her survey, Williams concisely situates her line of argument on the melodrama-novel connection within the larger context of contemporary theories of novelistic realism. The idea that melodrama’s representative strategies are incorporated in realist novels, or even that melodrama can be viewed as the nineteenth-century realist novel’s ‘internalised other’ is well-established in contemporary theory. Her special line of argument is that nineteenth-century melodrama was endowed with its own specific brand of realism. It had, that is to say, its distinctive take on aspects of social and individual life that novelistic realism was likewise addressing through different representational strategies.

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