RACHEL TEUKOLSKY


Reviewed by Elyse Graham

Rachel Teukolsky’s interesting and valuable book charts the life of formalist aesthetics in British writing about the visual arts in the later nineteenth century—before the famous date on formalism’s birth certificate, 1910. The author keeps close to facts and evidence, faithfully maps her local studies onto a larger picture, and supplies abundant leads for further exploration. Oxford University Press has made the book a pleasure to handle, with beautifully laid-out sections and abundant, finely chosen illustrations.

Teukolsky builds her work upon what she sees as two under-examined areas in nineteenth-century studies. Of the first she notes that, while a host of studies have already traced in Victorian art and literature the growth of formalism avant la lettre, most of these have focused on close readings of artworks themselves. Teukolsky proposes to focus instead on the writings of the period’s art critics and scholars. As she shows, despite the reputation the Victorians still bear for judging art by its moral content, their arbiters of taste often championed standards of evaluation that, if their publishing dates were nudged across the century divide, we would readily describe as a kind of formalism (6).

Furthermore, she argues, this kind of formalism engaged the viewing public as well. Though viewers treated exhibitions as entertainments and marketplaces, they did not represent some lower circle of sleepy popular taste. On the contrary, market forces encouraged the spread of formalist values. If professional and popular ways of interpreting art sometimes diverged, they also shared important sympathies; and part of Teukolsky’s achievement is the care and clarity with which she recreates a world that both of these modes occupy, sometimes intertwining, sometimes parting forcefully (20).
The second supposed gap in the field is less convincing. Among this book’s pleasures is the loving and careful attention it gives to the rich but strangely neglected (in modern scholarship) prose genre of art writing. During the publishing boom of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, as Teukolsky notes, art writing was an ambitious and popular nonfiction category, a place for high stylists to test their skill and for specialists to market their knowledge: “More than simply ‘word painting,’ as Victorians described the artful phrasings of John Ruskin and Walter Pater, art writing functioned as part of a broader literary phenomenon that stretched back to the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, in which popularizers and reviewers disseminated increasingly specialized bodies of knowledge for a lay audience in a common language. Art specialists produced texts for middle-class audiences in a variety of new professional roles—as bureaucrats in museums and galleries, as newly appointed professors of fine arts at Oxford and Cambridge, as art dealers or late-century connoisseurs, and, not least importantly, as professional art critics in Victorian periodicals” (15).

The living, professional world in which these figures moved and wrote is what Teukolsky proposes to keep before our eyes, for this, she says, is the crucial element that has dropped out of critical interpretations of their works. By reading Ruskin and Pater, she says, as though they wrote without current debates in mind, we miss important aspects of their thought: “Although many Victorian art writers contributed to the rise of the aesthetic idea of a private, subjective, autonomous, and quasi-religious response to visual form, \textit{The Literate Eye} will show how these values actually arose from very public, contingent debates and specific moments in Victorian cultural history” (16).

The point is sensible—context matters—although it could be stronger with a touch more reservation. Most readers accept as a matter of course that the more ambitious critics write for two audiences, one in the present and one in a timeless future. If Pater did not intend for his articles to last, it was a little perverse of him to spend, as he did, about a year writing each one. But Teukolsky’s claim is not just that we don’t pay enough attention to art writing; she says that when we do read works in the
This is only a small framing issue, however. The individual chapters show off Teukolsky’s strengths, allowing her to marshal battalions of facts to offer new insights into the institutions and uses of Victorian art criticism.

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The book starts with the profession’s most formidable exemplar, John Ruskin. The first chapter uses Ruskin’s breakout work of criticism, *Modern Painters* (1843-60), as the frame for an ambitious exploration of contesting models of aesthetics and epistemology on the early Victorian scene. Using sources ranging from newspapers to scholarly treatises to reconstruct the background noise of aesthetic discourse during the years of *MP*’s early volumes, Teukolsky shows how Ruskin, as he composed new volumes, continually redrew his ideas and arguments in order to engage with the latest debates and developments in the field.

Many of these developments were scientific: this was a period when the tidy, rationalized grids that had ruled Enlightenment models of nature and perception were ceding place to new schools of thought that emphasized such messy values as contingency and subjectivity. While the Ruskin who loved laws and rules quietly favored the older models, he felt moved to denounce Enlightenment painters in favor of the stormy subjective vision that “modern painters” such as Turner depicted. En route, he became a powerful and prescient voice for a new sensibility in art. In the contradictions that break up the larger flow of this extended critical work, Teukolsky says, we can see “the emergence of an unsettling aesthetic modernity, in which art was forced to respond to new epistemologies that threatened to dismantle older, universalist systems” (27).

The second chapter shifts the frame to show the jobbing, ink-smudged world of writers who reviewed art for the papers. As Teukolsky shows, the growth of the middle-class reading public and the swelling tide of periodical literature carried art criticism out of the private study and into the arena of
professional writing. Teukolsky sets the major case study at the Great Exhibition of 1851: she argues that professional writers who reviewed the Exhibition, acting as eyes on behalf of their readers, enacted on the page a mode of observation that we can now understand as a forerunner of formalism. Whereas amateur records of the event—popular fiction, poetry, mass-market journalism—tend to judge the artworks on display using “more immediate qualities like its narrative, symbolic, or literal elements,” professional art writers, seeing themselves as instructors and guides, adopted the cool and distant attitude of a magistrate or a scientist, presenting “a more detached view based on the object’s formal elements” (99).

But this detached perspective, Teukolsky says, sprang not only from the professional desire to strike a tone of authority. In portraying the proper academic sensibility, art critics also took cues from the ways in which the Exhibition’s organizers organized and classified the displays. Thus the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce trained the “expert eye,” which in turn sought to train the eyes of the visiting public: “Authors styled as experts,” Teukolsky writes, “advocated for a specific kind of rational seeing, a mode of disciplined looking associated with science, especially natural history. This gaze attempted to fit objects neatly into the Exhibition’s intricate classificatory system in the same way that 18\textsuperscript{th}-century naturalists sought to categorize the natural world” (71).

The third chapter aims to link the rise of a self-conscious avant-garde in the late nineteenth century with the commodity culture of the day. Led by Walter Pater, Teukolsky argues, the writers and artists of the Aesthetic movement raised the most self-aware arguments yet for defining art in terms of pure form and eventually developed into a party sustained by ironies. Their popular success made the ethereal creed of art-for-art’s-sake a powerful brand for selling accessories and housewares; meanwhile, paradoxically, a philosophy that privileged the individual’s lonely ecstasies before Beauty provided politically minded members of the group with the framework for notions of a collectivist future.
“Pater’s essays capture one of the defining ironies of aestheticism, that a philosophy devoted to the sublimely individualistic experience of art emerges, in the later 1870s, as the basis for a group identity, a commodity fashion, even a utopian politics” (101).

Teukolsky traces the origins of the Aesthetic movement from the Pre-Raphaelites, who formed a bridge between the ideas of John Ruskin and what would become the experimental art culture of the fin-de-siècle. The younger Pater came under the wing of several artists from this group, including its charismatic leader, Dante Rossetti, and the recalcitrant younger brother, the poet Charles Swinburne. In fact, Swinburne’s prose style gave Pater a model for his own art writing of the 1860s, as Pater joined and quickly took the lead of a small but electrifying school of experimentalist critics. Their criticism looked out on the gallery world through a radically subjective, even psychedelic, lens, seeking to dramatize the experience of art as a state of inspired ecstasy that could then provide a model for the experience of life. The meaning of life and art came down alike, for these narrators of a dawning age of materialism, to the play of sensation upon the individual sensibility: to effect for its own sake (105). Pater’s 1873 volume of critical essays, *The Renaissance*, helped make these ideas famous.

Before long the props and postures of the Aesthetic movement invaded popular fashion, shaping the lines of female silhouettes, drawing-room chairs, and college wags. Artists within the movement largely supported this move into the mainstream, believing that their program for aesthetic revolution could help give rise to new and more perfect forms of social existence. Pater’s own essays showed increasing interest in analyzing social movements, as Teukolsky notes, such as “the rituals of mass worship, the history of mythmaking, as well as the schools of art history” (103). One of these essays, “The School of Giorgione” (1877), which appeared in the second edition of *The Renaissance*, becomes the unifying device for the larger argument. While Pater famously declares in that piece that “all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music,” Teukolsky wants to reveal beneath those words a quite different layer of meaning with a “distinctly political cast.”
It turns out that during the time when Pater was writing the piece, the newspapers were still assessing the recent opening of the first permanent exhibition space for Aesthetic art, the Grosvenor Gallery. “This event served as a lightning rod for critics to dispute the merits and faults of aesthetic versus academic art,” Teukolsky says, citing journalistic battles whose casualties would result in the famous 1878 trial *Whistler v. Ruskin* (110-15). In her reading, “The School of Giorgione” was Pater’s characteristically gnomic and subdued way of jumping into the fray, folding into his praise of an artist from an earlier cultural revival an ideal image of aesthetic education that could easily fit the revival movement of the present: the space of art as a quiet place, beautifully furnished, where languid young men and women mingle in separate solitudes or in private discussion—a space strikingly similar, Teukolsky notes, to the Grosvenor’s own quiet rooms (126).

Sometimes the grain of the argument is so fine that the author risks losing sight of the larger picture. For instance, she makes much of the frequency with which critics of the time described the artists of the Aesthetic and Pre-Raphaelite movements (“with Rossetti at the helm”) as “schools.” The interest of the term *school* lies in her claim that the term denoted, at the time, “offensive or exclusive partisanship”; this would allow her to show that applying it to this group was a way of flagging their dangerous leanings toward collectivist politics: “At Whistler v. Ruskin, the lawyer twice asked Albert Moore whether ‘he was a member or disciple of a popular school of art,’ as though it were a suspicious aesthetic clique” (122). (Pater’s application of the term to Giorgione then takes on a larger significance.) But the identification of these artists as a group can hardly have been such a loaded rhetorical gesture. For one thing, the artists in question had already done it themselves: the Pre-Raphaelites called themselves a brotherhood, published a journal, and even drew up a manifesto. How much more can be done to signal partisanship? Nor was the term *school* itself new or particularly charged in art criticism: for decades, French critics had been innocently writing about *l’école réaliste*, *l’école hollandaise*, and others.
Likewise, the suggestion that a fatal incongruity lies in the creation of a commodity market for Aesthetic products (Morris paper, patterned china) seems a little anachronistic. “The commodification of aestheticism,” the author writes of this development, “is all the more ironic because one of the movement’s driving impulses was to critique the mercantile values of bourgeois culture, turning instead toward more ‘exquisite’ experiences and objects. Satirists delighted in the contradiction” (132). But in their own writings, Aesthetic critics and artists adopt a generally welcoming attitude toward material culture; sensible influence is a valuable instrument of self-improvement, which is why, in his American lectures, Oscar Wilde exhorted his listeners to surround themselves with graceful and elegant things. The Aesthetes did not want to empty the marketplace, merely to change what was being sold. Even Ruskin, certainly not of their party but an admired influence, would probably not have been distraught had his writing caused a surge in the market for jewelry with handmade pieces.

The fourth chapter takes us further into the world of design, examining the arts-and-crafts collectives of the 1880s and 1890s. As Teukolsky argues, the designer-craftsmen in these guilds viewed their stylized patterns as an expression of their political goals for a handcraft, communitarian existence. Their writings thus represent another Victorian model of abstract or formalist values in art, placed in this case in the service of social progress.

A second thread follows the influence these designers took from the blossoming field of natural science, and specifically from Charles Darwin. The Victorian science writers who promoted Darwin’s theory of natural selection supported their arguments in part, she says, through seductive appeals to the aesthetic sense. The long lens of evolutionary change showed nature to be a readable album of beautiful designs; and William Morris and his colleagues used these biological patterns as an important inspiration in their work, seeing in them an endorsement in Nature’s own script for their progressive social programs. (Thackeray had parodied this kind of optimism in 1852: “We were beasts, and we can’t tell when our tails dropped off: we shall be angels; but when our wings are to begin to sprout,
In the final chapter, we come definitively into the modern era of formalist criticism, into the company of Bloomsbury and Roger Fry. Teukolsky recasts the theories of Fry and his epigone, Clive Bell, in the light of Victorian culture, arguing that they drew for their articulation of formalist principles of art on terms and ideas that had belonged to anthropological science in the 19th century.

Fry’s formalist aesthetics, she says, began when Western scholars started coding “primitive” ethnological artifacts—not all of which had been artworks in their native cultures—as art. Exhibitions and textbooks framed these objects as part of a timeline of human progress, where the masks and figure drawings of primitive cultures come before the elaborate sculptures and frescoes of advanced civilizations (206). Fry and Bell aimed not to challenge this chronology, but merely to reverse its points of value, giving the abstract forms of tribal objects pride of place over the styles on view at the Royal Academy: “they realigned the values within the hierarchy of cultures to elevate their preferred style, so as to make formalism, ‘significant form,’ the new representative achievement of Western culture” (209). As with Pater, the analysis here centers on a representative article of Fry’s, a discussion of “Bushman Paintings” that appeared in the Burlington Magazine in 1903.

A few factual errors about Fry and his circle appear. For instance, the author at one point implies that Fry made his income, a little unscrupulously, as an art dealer, selling the public the avant-garde works that his exhibitions and writings commodified (199). In fact, Fry relied on his work as a freelance writer and lecturer to keep the bills paid; he considered writing a miserable chore and resented its necessity. The author also cites the founding of The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs, which Fry co-edited starting in 1909, as evidence of the rising influence of high culture on the middle class: “the creation of a magazine dedicated to connoisseurs and collectors points to the increasing availability of these identities to middle-class readers” (199). According to Fry himself or to someone writing on his behalf, however, the Burlington Magazine was conceived as something close to a
“journal on purely scholarly lines,” rather like the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in France: a serious journal for professionals in the field (“The Burlington Magazine,” *The Athenaeum* 3935 [28 March 1903]: 409). Its intended audience did include amateur collectors of art, but most of its readers were likely professional dealers, art historians, and critics.

The discussion of Fry also highlights an absence that makes itself felt, although less strongly, in the other chapters: the British proto-modernists’ relationship with France. Though it may be captious to ask why a book on British modernism doesn’t include Paris, Teukolsky could usefully have paid at least slightly more attention to the influence of French art and art writing on the English writers she treats. The avant-garde lineage she traces was overwhelmingly, unapologetically Francophile. The very expression “art for art’s sake” (as the author mentions in passing) comes from Swinburne’s translation of the French phrase *l’art pour l’art* (105). As evidence of Pater’s debt to the Pre-Raphaelites, the book also notes that “Rossetti is one of the few contemporary painters Pater names in his essays” (120). True, and Rossetti is also one of the few Englishmen Pater names in his essays; they abound, however, with references to French art and literature. As for Roger Fry, he mounted his famous exhibition at the Grafton Gallery precisely to introduce the British public to the works of Cézanne, Matisse, and Manet. Yet Teukolsky’s acknowledgement of Fry’s passion for French art, which generated some of his most influential criticism in his studies of Cézanne, effectively begins and ends with these lines: “the smooth transition from British art theories to American abstract painting created the illusion that modernist French art spontaneously inspired certain critics to discover the universal truth of formalism. In this chapter, however, I contextualize modernist formalism by examining how the writings of Fry and Bell on post-impressionism shared a certain continuity with earlier Victorian discourses—specifically, with debates within late-Victorian anthropology about the art of so-called ‘primitives’” (193-4).

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The book as a whole is a real achievement. The connections it draws between high art and
visual cultures in the sciences and elsewhere are sophisticated and often surprising, and the arguments maintain firm grounding in documentary sources.

A few small weaknesses remain, however. In the opening chapter on Ruskin, which implies that prevailing critical opinion regards him “as an unabashed moralizer, valuing art not for any detached appreciation of beauty but instead for the alleged political rectitude of its producers” (25), he sounds not so much like the Ruskin to be found in comprehensive studies of him but rather like the Ruskin used as a foil in studies of other figures or other subjects. In places such as this, Teukolsky could have more fully defined the critical context of her study, particularly since she is urging us to re-examine the cultural context of Victorian writing about art. At one point, for instance, she argues that too few scholars now recall that Ruskin wrote his first book in order to defend Turner against harsh newspaper reviews. “Ruskin’s choice of Turner as his battleground,” she writes, “plants him squarely within the public debate; his *Modern Painters* is one long response to the art journalism of the time. It is easy to forget that many of the famous Victorian art treatises, which are often read in isolation today, were originally published in the periodical press” (30). But how often do Ruskin scholars—or Victorianists, for that matter—actually forget this point?

Nevertheless, when art critics of this period are situated within the arena of public debate, their identities as journalists can recast even further what we know about the conditions of their writing. The art critic of 1870 looked out, as Teukolsky says, upon a bustling landscape of “real-world events”; but to swing the window around is to see the professional world of deadlines, editors, and rivalries within which he worked. Surely the genres and audiences of the publications for which critics write influence—especially at first—their choice of subjects and style of argument. How might it shape our understanding of Roger Fry to see that while he wrote, intellectual and literary activity were becoming subject to forms of professional discipline quite different from what his Victorian predecessors had known? Does it make a difference that Pater positioned himself as a writer for the
Westminster Review rather than the Times?

In fact, the book’s early references to the explosion of new professional roles for creating specialized literature about the arts—in academia, gallery and museum administration, and above all, professional criticism—initially made me think it was heading in this direction. Literary institutions, after all, are not simply distribution mechanisms: they can exert queer pressures on the writers who seek to rise in them.

This is among the best comprehensive treatments of Victorian art criticism I’ve read. The value of its contributions would be evident even with fuller detail on the academic debates in which the author is intervening, rather than large signposts—which are of use, I know, to readers outside the field and belong to the expectations of the genre in which she is writing herself. I hope that in her next book, Teukolsky takes a leaf from the critics she surveys and places more trust in the independent power of her personal voice.

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