AARON MATZ


Reviewed by Pamela Gilbert

Realism depresses, and absolute realism depresses absolutely. Such, in essence, is the stated main argument of Aaron Matz’s first book. In the mid-to-late Victorian period, he contends, realism and satire shared aims: to describe the world in realistic detail was also, inevitably, to expose its absurdities. Thus satire and realism dovetail, becoming one, and by the end of the period are indistinguishably both biting and hopeless.

After a brief foray into Augustan satire (principally Swift) and into a George Eliot who is read more darkly than usual back from Theophrastus Such through the earlier novels, the argument on realism moves into fairly well-charted territory. Hardy and Gissing are interrogated as the usual suspects of late Victorian realism. A chapter on the British reception of Ibsen is a welcome bit of novelty, but then we return to a predictable arc with Conrad. This is a fairly traditional way of explaining how late Victorian realism evolves into conventionally dark modernism, but the argument begs the question of realism’s definition. Once one defines realism as evolving toward a naturalist vision, and defines Gissing and
Hardy as the principal practitioners, there is really nowhere to go but toward a joyless and Juvenalian destination.

It is interesting, and not incidental, that all Matz’s examples after Eliot are male. We might continue to find a more forgiving, sympathetic, or even religious realism in some of the many other artists of the period. Some of these artists, such as Olive Schreiner, might even have supported Matz’s argument in ways that would have opened it up to wider possibilities. The project, oddly, is one that might have been written decades earlier, without disturbing an earlier canon’s prejudices. Moreover, Hillis Miller casts a long and not fully acknowledged shadow here: when Matz observes that the “loss of faith in progress” is the “central fact of satirical realism” in the period (32), or notes that “Jude the obscure vacillates between suggesting that God is absent and declaring that God is unnervingly present, in the form of cruelty,” (44) I feel haunted by Miller’s *The Disappearance of God*.

Matz states that he wishes to “correct … a general critical reluctance to face the true polemical and censorious quality of nineteenth century realism” (x). But it is difficult to say who he is targeting here. While he often cites Ian Watt or early George Levine, he ignores the work of Caroline Levine, and other later critics. In fact, though his Introduction quickly gestures toward more recent scholarship on realism and art, Matz brings few recent critics into dialogue. Also, by defining
realism as a “tragic” mode of “austerity” (xii) that “relinquishes any hope of correction” (xiv), he eliminates from “satirical realism as I describe it” (xii) most of Victorian literature, including the later Trollope and the early Thackeray.

This move exemplifies the weakness of the book’s principal stated argument: its circularity. Indeed, after 172 pages of pursuing this tightly focused argument, Matz himself acknowledges its narrowness. “Sometimes,” he says, “retrospect affords too suspiciously precise a literary-historical calendar” (174). There are always “new realisms,” he observes, and the novel, he incisively notes, is a form particularly invested in “always staking out and then colonizing its own new terrain of the real” (174). Here for perhaps the first time, Matz recognizes and highlights the first part of the principal contribution of the book, which is twofold. What is most valuable here, he indicates, is not his own argument about realism but his careful historical detailing of the novelists’ and critics’ own intense and metacritical awareness of the limits within which they sought to represent “reality” and the aesthetic and moral stakes of the efforts in which they were engaged. (In this sense, Matz’s work is very much in the tradition of George Levine’s The Realistic Imagination. Secondly, though Matz insists that his book is a history of realism, not of satire, he usefully derives the later Victorian satiric vision from its natural ancestry in the Augustan period.
Those two contributions prompted me to like the book--for I did like it, very much. I liked it because Matz’s vision is so much more erudite and capacious than his argument always seems to reflect, and because ultimately, he is less interested in making an argument about realism itself (whatever that might be) than about how certain of its artists and critics understood it. That is a less grandiose task, but perhaps finally a more satisfying and valuable one. The readings and the literary history here both carry and exceed the scope of his stated argument. And in that regard, his work is very good indeed: well written, persuasive, and deeply attentive to the text. Matz has a commitment to respecting his material, letting it speak, contextualizing it richly and humanely. Moreover, since good studies of Victorian satire are scarce, especially outside the more humorous satire of Dickens or *Punch*, he opens an important discussion.

Further, Matz usefully reminds us that even the mid-Victorian literature of sympathy could be infused with an ironic distance and cold intelligence that we tend to associate with a later vision. Few of Eliot’s critics have dealt in depth with *Theophrastus Such*, and they have generally downplayed or ignored the short stories, especially “Brother Jacob.” Matz also reminds us even though Celia seems narrow and unsympathetic in taking Casaubon’s physical ugliness as the key to his character, she turns out to be a better judge of it than is the idealistic Dorothea. Stressing satire’s persistent focus on skin as a metaphor for and perhaps
index of the real, Matz’s reading of this “fetishization of surface” (14) is fresh and persuasive. Likewise compelling is his reading of Eliot as an heir of the Augustan satirical tradition and his argument that satire complicates the polarity offered by Dickens, who in general carefully separates his sentimental objects from those of his satire. When Matz insightfully observes that “satirical realism levels the field, such that satire and sympathy are always interpenetrating” (23), he lays a strong foundation for his subsequent readings of the later authors.

The Hardy chapter feels the least fresh, perhaps because there is simply no surprise left in the argument that Hardy’s vision is dark. But Matz’s careful reading of Hardy’s engagement with Swift takes us beyond the obvious, and beyond the puzzlement of Victorian critics’ disbelieving revulsion at little Father Time’s fratri-/suicide, to Hardy’s own conscious—and, as Matz notes, “terminal”--engagement with the limits of genre and form. The Gissing chapter, with a long reading of (of course) *New Grub Street*, is in many ways the richest and most rewarding, as we see Matz at the top of his form. The chapter on Ibsen’s reception in England, which will bring news to many readers, is both informative and well-handled: though Matz relies on Gosse’s reading of Ibsen (see, for example, p112), he complicates it with Nordau and some discussions of Ibsen’s idealism. Besides relying more exclusively than other chapters do on Victorian criticism, this chapter shifts from fiction to drama, which inevitably opens the topic of realism to a
broader discussion than does fiction alone. The chapter remains a bit self-enclosed, and does not clearly develop or advance the insights of the earlier chapters. But as Matz leaves behind the more doctrinaire argument of the preceding chapters, he stakes out a broader terrain. In his truly brilliant and enjoyable reading of Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* as a “new departure” and “experiment” acknowledged as such by the author, Matz argues that Conrad pushes “irony until it begins to dissolve” (169), when it “paradoxically …yield[s] a strange and unexpected sympathy” (170).

In brief, Matz’s readings of individual authors offer both pleasures and insights, and his overall arguments do not fail to engage (and sometimes provoke) the reader. Though he limits his argument to British fiction, his range of literary reference—especially to French literature-- is relatively broad, and his book makes a substantive contribution to the study of satire, a much neglected form. Finally, this book showcases a formidable critical talent at work, and we will look forward to seeing more of it in years to come.

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