Winters on Paraschas (2013)


*Catherine Winters, Simmons College*

Threatened by the suggestion that Realism was nothing more than an imitation of life, and squeezed financially by copyright laws, Realist authors strived to present their works as original and unique products. In *The Realist Author and Sympathetic Imagination*, Sotirios Paraschas explores the strategy of the authorial double, particularly as conceived by Honoré de Balzac and George Eliot. The double, usually an artistic character other than a writer, was engaged to mirror the author’s work by accessing the thoughts of other characters and manipulating their actions. While these doubles, such as Latimer in *The Lifted Veil*, have significant “sympathetic imagination” when it comes to their fellow characters, they tend to be detached from the reader and often create distance because of their professed repugnance for their peers. This irony ultimately results in novels that become allegories of their own creation as they reaffirm the author’s role as indispensable to the work. Having set up this theory, Paraschas, with an eye to the history of copyright and its effects on authorship and the literary marketplace, goes on to show how Balzac, Eliot, and Charles Baudelaire enact such doublings.

Focusing on Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot* and Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil* in the first half of the monograph, Paraschas brings up for scrutiny the essential nature of emotional involvement. While Balzac’s and Eliot’s narrators do seem to desire the reader’s sympathy, they fear that the truth of their stories is not enough to gain it. Paraschas shows how Goriot, Vautrin, and Latimer simultaneously elicit and undermine the reader’s sympathy, primarily due to their relationships with other characters, whether that be their indifference, as with Goriot, or the narrator’s own disgust for others, as with Latimer. Additionally, though both novels have characters who can read the minds of others, they are not emotionally linked to their subjects. Vautrin can peer into the souls of his companions, but this ability is due to his lack of emotional involvement, while Goriot, who is more sympathetic to the reader, is blinded by his extreme emotional attachment to his daughters. It is precisely the lack of emotional attachment that confers intuitive powers upon Protean characters such as Vautrin. At the same time, authors also read minds, becoming, through their work, the multitude of characters they present, thus calling into question the status of their characters: observers or creations? Ultimately, these doubles and their presentation showcase the novel as a work of art.

Paraschas sees the authorial double as innately connected to writers’ financial situation; as copyright laws came into being at the end of the nineteenth century the authorial double began to decline because the legal recognition of the artists’ work as an original creation of the mind and worth protecting changed the cultural attitudes surrounding Realism. Yet the relationship between author, work, and finances varied within the field. While Balzac often portrayed himself as the orchestrator of his novels, artistically, economically, and legally, Baudelaire compared himself to a prostitute. Baudelaire’s *Le Spleen de Paris*, while not a Realist text, engages in discussion of the author’s role in the commodification of literature. Although he connects the artistic work to the author as if it were one of his limbs, Baudelaire does not stand behind the inalienability of the work. He thus makes the creation of poetry impossible from a market standpoint. Balzac and Eliot were much more hopeful about the situation, though Eliot suffered from a very real fear that her work would not be interpreted as a work of art because of its verisimilitude. After the Liggins Affair, in which a man named Liggins took credit for two of Eliot’s novels, she was concerned with identifying her artistic endeavors as her own unique work. The relationship between Deronda and Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda*, which Paraschas refers to as “the transmigration of souls” (146), exemplifies such concerns. Ultimately, though both Eliot and Balzac sought to create fiction that was true to life, they were also aware of their tenuous place in the marketplace and reasserted their role as author through the creation of authorial doubles.

Paraschas’s monograph offers insight into the techniques used by Realist authors to counter criticism that they were merely copying from life. Overambitious at times, the argument occasionally strays from Eliot and Balzac to illustrate secondary points, such as Baudelaire’s relation to the marketplace or Gide’s techniques in *Les Faux Monnayeurs*, and to move past the double to a novel-within-a-novel. Such a profusion of examples, while revealing the author’s erudition, occasionally dilutes the main argument. Nonetheless, the wealth of information ultimately allows the reader to appreciate the extensive research behind this critical analysis, and makes the volume extremely useful for understanding the attitude of early nineteenth-century Realists and their attempts to present verisimilitude as art.

*Volume:* 43.3–4

*Year:*
• 2015