

## Reviews

ELAINE FREEDGOOD, *Worlds Enough: The Invention of Realism in the Victorian Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xxiv + 152. \$35.

*Worlds Enough: The Invention of Realism in the Victorian Novel* makes one thing abundantly, necessarily, freshly clear: realism is messy, crammed with oddities, generated by ruptures, and the result is a world-widening Victorian novel. In this slim but packed and meaningful book, Elaine Freedgood issues a corrective to any view of Victorian realism as a literary baseline, too coherent to be formally inventive and too conservative or closed-off to be radical or global. In rewriting a history of the realist novel that reclaims the form as productively untidy and with porous borders (both formally and geographically), Freedgood dismantles a coherent Victorian realist aesthetics that she convincingly claims never really existed. With an approach that values “provisional critical assemblages” (p. x) over tidy narratives or canons, *Worlds Enough* walks its readers through two new histories of Victorian realism: first, a history of Victorianism and Victorianists, revealing how late-twentieth-century scholarship invented a theory of realism that prizes formal coherence and that a wider view of the nineteenth century fails to support; and second, a deliberately varied (because historically varied) series of fresh snapshots of Victorian realism in all its productive disarray.

This study begins by charting a self-consciously “selective” (p. x) yet still compelling history of how Big Victorian Realism came to be. Freedgood selects as her starting point a view of the Victorian novel as, according to nineteenth-century critics espousing Aristotelian values and desiring a more dramatic form, “not yet great” (p. 11). Henry James echoes this complaint later in the century, and the lament crops up again in the 1950s and 1960s scholarship of Dorothy Van Ghent and Barbara Hardy, who generally seek less omniscient narration and more tragedy in the imperfect Victorian novel. *Worlds Enough* marks 1968, and the publication of J. Hillis Miller’s *The Form of Victorian Fiction: Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope*,

*George Eliot, Meredith, and Hardy* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968) as a turning point, arguing that thanks to Miller's approach, along with the novel and narrative theories of Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, D. A. Miller, and Fredric Jameson, a newly standard Victorian realism emerges that is no longer dramatic but now necessarily diegetic and driven by narration—including J. Hillis Miller's notion of "collective" omniscient narration—as well as, equally importantly, a theory of narration. By the 1970s and 1980s, these approaches recast the Victorian novel as "great and realistic" (p. 22).

With a series of case studies, *Worlds Enough* offers an alternate history, reapproaching realism in the Victorian novel without assumptions of unity or diegetic wholeness, but rather with an eye for chaos and ontological instability. At times, Freedgood seems to resist defining "what we call realism" (p. 34)—she generally associates the concept with authenticity or typicality—but the slight indeterminacy of realism in this study also drives home the point that realism was not a formally coherent system, with a unified theory or aesthetics. Metalepsis emerges in *Worlds Enough* as a productive technique for recognizing and generating cracks within any seemingly orderly system. Building on Genette's foundational concept of metalepsis as an intrusion or transgression—the term Freedgood favors most is "rupture"—across diegetic levels, metalepsis becomes here an expansive tool that imagines new worlds and threatens ontological collapse of existing ones. Not unlike her use of realism as a productively capacious theoretical container, in Freedgood's hands metalepsis crops up in a myriad of forms: "denotational metalepsis" (p. 34), "bibliographic metalepsis" (p. 77), "a kind of divine metalepsis" (p. 81), to name a few. Fruitfully unchained from a solely narratological definition, metalepsis in *Worlds Enough* unlooses a messier Victorian novel that was always already ruptured because realism, in this compelling account, is itself metaleptic, defined more by its fissures than any fantasy of stability.

In an organizational act that echoes the realist novel's productive porosity, Freedgood's case studies bundle multiple novels, often alongside extra-novel genres, together. The at-times dizzying effect reiterates the central point that the realist novel never stays inside its own lines (or perhaps never drew those lines in the first place). In the initial case study on denotation, Freedgood takes us on a tour of maritime fiction filled with references to seafaring lingo that "the landlubber reader" (p. 45) will not understand. As I, certainly a landlubber, read Freedgood's eye-opening history of ballast (generic

material held in a ship to keep it appropriately weighed down when not filled with other cargo), I recognized my own readerly inability to attach denotative meaning to seafaring references. They are empty for me, just as Freedgood says they will be, and the metalepsis of the factual into the fictive produces not revelation or invitation but instead opacity as the rupture “gestures toward a real that we cannot visit” (p. 47). The realist novel points outside of itself but does not provide all the information we need to get there, or even fully define where “there” is.

If “ballast” defies signification, epigraphs and footnotes multiply meaning and, as Freedgood argues convincingly in her case study on paratexts, resist any sense of a watertight diegesis. In one of this chapter’s fascinatingly winding threads, Freedgood links bird footnotes—a partridge footnoted in Catharine Parr Traill’s *Canadian Crusoes*, a glossary note on the Philippine hornbill in José Rizal’s *Noli Me Tángere*, Edward Said’s scholarly footnote on a mynah bird in Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*—and we land, ultimately, at a twenty-first-century website of a feather-jewelry maker. These footnotes bring us outside the novel, like “ballast,” but not to nowhere but to everywhere because generating knowledge becomes, for Freedgood, yet another form of metalepsis.

Omniscient narration—a central component, in Freedgood’s account, of the late-twentieth-century invention of realism—crops up all over *Worlds Enough*. In the case study on omniscience, Freedgood centers on Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, where the narrator’s omniscience, often doing aristocratic rather than democratic work, sidelines the limited perspectives of her “literally and subjectively poor characters” (p. 55). Freedgood envisions how, by not relaying these characters’ innermost workings, the novel imagines a future space where the characters can do this self-revealing work themselves, in their own words. Freedgood’s account of free indirect discourse as intertextual recycling—of words that circulate as things (in her inventive reading of the novel’s valentine-turned-poem-turned-gun-wadding), of words we read, and of ourselves—is particularly fresh and captivating.

The final two case studies attend to worlds that seem distinct—historically real and fictionally unreal—but repeatedly crash into one another in the realist novel. The case study on “hetero-ontologicality” insists that historical references within the fictional diegesis—a historical person, say, Lord Mohun, shows up as a bleeding character in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *The History of Henry Esmond*—function as ruptures; these historical persons made fictionally contingent

become metaleptic, and recognizing them as such allows us to read the “what if” (p. 104) into both historical events and the novel’s imagined proliferation of worlds. Freedgood’s primary example, G. A. Henty’s Mutiny novel, *Rujub, the Juggler*, renders a fictionalized historical person alongside fictional characters participating in historical events, and the effect multiplies the “ontological and narrative spaces” envisioned by the novel (p. 111). Freedgood’s final case study, on reference, comes at a similar question of adjacent worlds but with a different genre entry point: here, the oft-written but little-studied Victorian ghost story reveals how a world that peppers the real alongside the fictional should feel metaleptic precisely because metalepsis grounds the work of realism. Realism, according to Freedgood, “tries to naturalize” our readerly position as we linger between two levels—invisible and visible, disbelief and belief, fictional and referential (p. 124). Just as “the ghost story makes all resolutions optional” (p. 132), the reader of the ghost story or the realist novel, like the liberal subject, must practice disbelief and form belief, persisting with neither fully resolved.

The case studies bundle texts across geographic borders, and in her conclusion Freedgood makes an explicit case for a more global Victorian realism: the form of Victorian realism invented in the late twentieth century pits a supposedly standard Western center against an aberrant non-Western periphery, and the aesthetic and formal racism of this false narrative of novel history requires a long-overdue overhaul. *Worlds Enough* executes one such necessary and effective corrective. As Freedgood’s commitment to metaleptic de-centering and interpretive ruptures makes clear, this study refuses to confine its close readings to the texts alone and instead pushes us to see ourselves as readers who are equally impacted by and complicit in the literary techniques and aesthetic ideals of the Victorian realist novel: omniscient structures govern our own lives, footnotes insist on our metaleptic production of knowledge, and the novel’s “hetero-ontologicality” vaults us into imagining other worlds, and not just fictional ones but ones that involve us, too. If ruptures define and generate Victorian realism, then, as *Worlds Enough* teaches us, we cannot contain the Victorian realist novel in a problematically Western bubble nor can we stash it behind us as a standard of the past, because Victorian realism is really wonderfully messy and still crashes, metaleptically, into our own world.

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