

Reviews

LUCY HARTLEY, *Democratising Beauty in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Art and the Politics of Public Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 296. \$99.99.

Lucy Hartley's densely packed and deeply intelligent *Democratising Beauty in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Art and the Politics of Public Life* is filled to the brim with moving pieces that are, for the most part, intricately and tightly interlocking. Hartley is interested in what she suggests was the rise of "a new language for speaking about beauty" that occurred across the nineteenth century, as linked to "emerging democratic ideals" (p. 2). She is interested in how a succession of male writers including Charles Eastlake, John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Edward Poynter, William Morris, and John Addington Symonds participated in the architecture of this new language through their shared investment in the idea that the arts were a potent force, and one with the potential to educate the public and, consequently, to advance the public good. She is interested in the proposal that a nineteenth-century focus on "interest" replaced an eighteenth-century emphasis on virtue as the center of debates about aesthetics and ethics, and in how this rise of "interest" challenged existing assumptions about "the common good." And she is interested in the idea of "interest" itself, and in what was its "shifting set of meanings" across the period (p. 3). As Hartley points out, "interest" has evolved to have both an objective connotation of economic right or reward and a subjective, more psychological suggestion of personal "concern, attraction or curiosity"; the term can denote a personal stake or it can suggest a more outward-looking orientation, meaning "to be involved and attentive, to engage with something and stay with it because it matters and can make a difference" (p. 228). And because of what was an especially free slippage back and forth between all of these connotations in the Victorian period, Hartley argues that to chart a conversation around interest is to chart ideas about democracy, the beautiful, and the public good, and ultimately to map the emergence of a new theory of civic life and engagement, or "a new intellectual and

cultural history of nineteenth-century Britain from the perspective of art and art writing in the context of the politics of public life" (p. 6).

If it sounds like a lot, at times it certainly is, and there are moments in this complex and fulsome study where it is easy to lose sight of how all the parts add up, or how a given strand of the historical argument about development and evolution is tracking. This is especially the case when Hartley begins to overlay onto all of the above a discussion of her subjects' variable and complex relationships with recurrent historical epochs (e.g., the Medieval, the Renaissance) and artists (e.g., Raphael, J.M.W. Turner). In particular, a strength of the project—its fascinating investigation into the many lives of "interest" as a Victorian term and idea—can sometimes threaten to become a liability, and, at a number of points, the multitudinous meanings and nuances that Hartley advances for this term proliferate and risk crowding one another into confusion. Overall, however, it is a testament to Hartley's impressive control of an impressively dense set of materials that the study for the most part moves forward with a sense of vigor and direction.

After an introduction in which she lays out the pieces of her argument and positions her study in special dialogue with J.G.A. Pocock's examination of virtue in *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975) and Albert Hirschman's economic account of interest in *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), Hartley divides her work into five chapters. Each of these focuses on one (or in the case of Poynter and Morris, a pair) of art writers, and each takes up the twin questions, first, of how its subject(s) understood the relation between beauty, art, democratic values, and a democratic society; and second, how his (or their) construal of "interest" mediated or was used to express this understanding.

A chapter on Eastlake begins with the debates over an 1843 contest to redecorate Parliament because, as Hartley points out, these debates represented "an attempt to resolve the problem of the relation between national and universal interests" and focalized new ideas about "the purpose of art and the kind of 'advantages' it produces—and for whom" (p. 19). A second chapter, on Ruskin, works through a far-ranging body of criticism starting with the first volume of *Modern Painters*, and it positions Ruskin as a creator of "new publics for art" both through his "appeal to enlightened interest" and, more practically, through his critical reach and a series of public lectures aimed at helping the public feel proprietary toward art (p. 67). In Hartley's

estimation, Ruskin joins Eastlake in imagining beauty as a challenge to “established hierarchies even while it sustains them” (p. 232).

Chapters on Pater, on Morris and Poynter, and finally on John Addington Symonds follow and advance the case for what Hartley identifies as “rival interpretations of beauty” to Eastlake’s and Ruskin’s (p. 14). In the chapter on Pater, Hartley departs from the interesting claim that “the essays in Pater’s Renaissance series contribute to the debate about beauty even though they do not . . . impart a theory of beauty” (p. 110), and she explores the contours and implications of Pater’s emphasis on a self-interested relationship to art. Her chapter on Poynter and Morris acts in some sense as a bookend to the chapter on Eastlake inasmuch as it examines debates about interest that were once again occasioned by public decoration, now of the refreshment rooms at the South Kensington museum (today’s Victoria and Albert). Her final chapter, on Symonds, looks at Symonds’s own efforts, in his long history of the Renaissance and an essay on Walt Whitman, to reconcile the idea of art for art’s sake and the idea of art as an important adjunct to democratic politics. A helpful and brief conclusion begins with the opening of the Tate Britain in 1897, and positions that space as “a beginning and an ending for the debate about beauty” that Hartley has been mapping, inasmuch as the gallery was intended to bolster interest in national art but was founded thanks to private patronage rather than public investment (p. 230).

Across these chapters it might have been nice to hear a little bit more, and more systematically, about gender. As Hartley rightly notes in her introduction, a slate of recent books, including works by Hilary Fraser and Jongwoo Jermei Kim (and, I would add, John Paul Kanwit and Meaghan Clarke), have drawn renewed attention to the number of female artists and writers on arts who participated in the broader conversation about beauty, inclusivity, and the notion of “universal” or “national” aesthetics. And it is easy to begin to wonder what, for example, Elizabeth Eastlake might have to say about the kinds of schemes and notions her husband put forth. I also would have liked to hear more about how (or if) some of the ideas Hartley is untangling played in the popular press—that is to say, in the raft of print sources that sprang up in the second half of the century to court the democratizing audience Hartley identifies. To what extent did readers who would have read middle-brow publications beyond the *Art Journal* or *Punch* encounter the philosophizing Hartley unpacks? But both of these choices of omission are understandable in a book that seeks to do so much, and most of it with intricate, higher-order philosophy and theory. It is also worth saying that while Hartley could

have included more on the propagation of these ideas in print culture, she is, throughout, nicely attentive not only to the nuances of the essays, lectures, and other writings she is working with, and their many apparent contradictions, but also to the context and practical reach of the prose sources she works with, and this is a particular useful aspect of her study. For many of her sources, indeed, she rightly draws attention not only to their intended audience but also to the actual audience they were delivered in front of or are likely to have reached in published form, and she looks at places of oration, sales figures, and other ways of assessing dissemination.

One also wonders if packing even more material and ideas in would have taken away some of the room allowed for one of the most suggestive and portable aspects of *Democratising Beauty in Nineteenth-Century Britain*: its prod to think not only about how ideas about beauty and democracy intersected in the Victorian period, but also about how this confluence can and should continue to look today, in the present day's own rapidly reshaping democratic societies. "The notion that beauty might function as a tool of or proxy for democracy is considered both implausible and alluring," Hartley writes on her final page, "it is implausible because the aesthetic sphere had not tended to be viewed as all that relevant to the political sphere, and it is alluring insofar as an interest in beauty might enable aesthetic enfranchisement and contain the promise of social and political enfranchisement" (p. 233). The Victorians could not quite figure the requirements for all of this out. Hartley's provocative and probing study makes me wonder: can we?

DEHN GILMORE

California Institute of Technology

NATHALIE VANFASSE, *La plume et la route: Charles Dickens, écrivain-voyageur*. Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2017. Pp. 295. €20 paper.

Thanks in large part to the work of Michael Slater and John Drew, we now have print and online access to a huge cache of Charles Dickens's journalism. It extended from his earliest days as a writer of theatrical reviews and election hustings to his late musings about the state of Britain as an "Uncommercial Traveller." But we are only at the beginning of thinking about the manifold relationships between Dickens's nonfiction writing and his novels.