



HAL
open science

Jessica Feldman, Victorian Modernism. Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience

Christine Reynier

► **To cite this version:**

Christine Reynier. Jessica Feldman, Victorian Modernism. Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience. Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens, 2011, 74 Automne, pp.252-255. 10.4000/cve.1426 . hal-04448485

HAL Id: hal-04448485

<https://hal.science/hal-04448485>

Submitted on 9 Feb 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens

74 Automne | 2011
Female Aestheticism
Comptes rendus

Jessica Feldman, *Victorian Modernism. Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience*

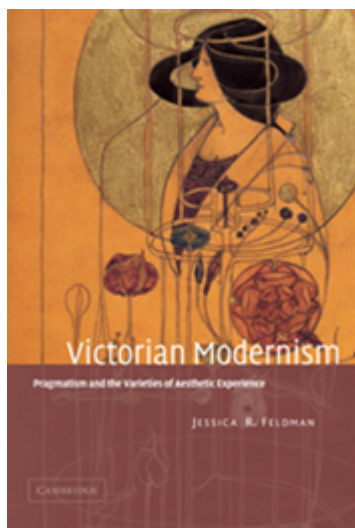
CHRISTINE REYNIER

p. 252-255
<https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.1426>

Référence(s) :

Jessica Feldman, *Victorian Modernism. Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* (2002)
Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2009. ISBN 9780521120906

Texte intégral



Afficher l'image



Jessica Feldman wishes to explore mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth-century literature in the light of pragmatism—mainly in the light of such philosophers as Charles Pierce, William James and John Dewey—, and to analyze the Victorian and the

Modernist period as one continuous period, “Victorian Modernism”, questioning both the periodization of literary studies and the definition of Modernism in terms of crisis and rupture. She also proposes to connect hitherto separate critical discourses such as those of sentiment, sublimity, domesticity and aestheticism, chronologically separate categories such as aestheticism and decadence or Pre-Raphaelitism and Abstractionism, and to connect the arts of various countries. She also shows how the public and private spheres—usually said to be masculine and feminine—have never been separate in Victorian and Modernist culture; how art is neither simply mimetic nor sleekly autonomous. Acknowledging that she is not the first to tread that ground, she sets to explore “the pleasurable swoons and feelings of reverence that sometimes occur as we experience art” instead of analyzing Victorianism and Modernism in terms of resistance, strife, loss and rupture, of economic, social and psychological *agon* and alienation. Her whole enterprise means to go beyond the dualism that haunts talk about art.

2 Starting from the opposing definitions usually given of “the aesthetic” in nineteenth and twentieth-century thought—“as a self-contained realm entirely apart from everyday concerns or reality, and as the whole of reality, the tendency to see ‘art’ or ‘language’ or ‘discourse’ or ‘text’ as constituting the primary realm of human experience”—she suggests the word aesthetics should be abandoned in favor of aestheticism—“the beliefs, customs, experiments, and actual creations in words and paint of nineteenth-century artists such as Ruskin and Rossetti”. Which leads her to analyze the relation between the works of art and the lives artists led. To make her point, she selects a poet and painter (Dante Gabriel Rossetti), a popular and domestic novelist (Augusta Evans), a scientist and philosopher (William James) and an art critic (John Ruskin), who having been read by the other three, provides the link between them all. The analysis is tentative, bearing mainly on nineteenth-century artists and not on twentieth-century ones and grounded on somewhat arbitrarily chosen authors. However the premises laid in the introduction are challenging and any reader interested in the period will be able to pursue the analysis for herself by focusing on other artists and testing the value of Feldman’s theory. As she writes, Victorian Modernism is, in the words of William James, a “live option” and her own goal is “to chart coherences that begin and end with critical scintillations, not solid blocks”.

3 The book itself is far from being a solid block, divided as it is into 4 chapters, each dedicated to a different artist and followed by “Meditations” on key concepts such as sentimentality, domesticity or sublimity. The first chapter, “A sweet continuance”, offers to re-read Ruskin taking into account his excesses and digressions as part of his method, a method of “exploration rather than system, of intricate and spreading mazes rather than hierarchical orderings”. Acknowledging Ruskin’s confusions as his insights and confronting the intricacies of his work with his life, Feldman first looks at the way the artist and critic interweaves, from juvenilia through *Praeterita* (1885), the conventional rhetoric of domesticity and sentiment while developing a notion of artistic impersonality that was to influence Yeats and Joyce, and she comes to understand impersonality as sublime sentimentality. Ruskin’s world thus provides a picture of Victorian Modernism in the making. Indeed, even if seen somewhat abstractedly at a distance, domesticity matters for him because it is infused with sentiment and sentiment itself is a necessary quality of true art. Feldman points out that for all his talk about sentiment, Ruskin resorts to a form of indirection to say what he feels, a pre-Eliotian form of impersonality: domestic images (homes scrutinized yet seldom entered) as well as clichés and conventions of sentimentality are read as expressions of personal feeling in abstract terms. Feldman then proceeds to show how Ruskin interweaves the traditions of sentiment and sublimity, a revised form of sublimity that can apply to Turner’s paintings of storms at sea as well as to pastoral scenes, mountains and cathedrals but also to mere hills and cottages, household objects and truths, that is, a sublimity of ordinary life. The chapter ends with a close-reading of *Roadside Songs of Tuscany* (1884–85), a rarely mentioned work in which Ruskin is shown to question the

unity of the self and the categories of high and low art, thus paving the way for Modernist literature.

4 The first Meditation is on “Aestheticism and Pragmatism”. Perhaps because of the ambiguities of some artists like Ruskin, Feldman remarks that aestheticism has been defined in many conflicting ways and its chronological limits are debated. It is often understood as centering on art for art’s sake and predicated on disinterestedness while pragmatists choose to explore the usefulness to artists and critics of the concepts of the purity, uselessness and autonomy of art. “Pure” beauty is often the target of marxist criticism but, Feldman argues, aestheticism will only be understood when we posit that beauty is dependent on dominant ideologies. As a pragmatist, she wishes to revise some critical standpoints and to draw the reader’s attention to the texts as such rather than as illustrations of critical viewpoints. She also points out that aestheticism exceeds the limits of the end of the 19th century.

5 Feldman then undertakes to demonstrate that sentimental domesticity was central to the aestheticism of D. G. Rossetti who not only decorated the interiors of his homes but also kept depicting domestic spaces and objects in his poetry and painting, fraught with tender sentiments. He thus created a domestic sublimity—eliciting sentiment in the audience and looking back to the 18th century tradition of sensibility—that relieved a life of pain and terror. The aesthetic values Rossetti defended would, according to Feldman, influence Modernism and *art nouveau* in France. She draws the portrait of a more balanced Rossetti, hovering between elitist separatism and popular participation, and revises his relation to women, pointing out that if he objectified women, he also celebrated female virtue.

6 The ensuing “Meditation” is on “domesticity”. For the Victorian Modernist, art and life are not categories apart but are brought together through the activities of domesticity, in the domus. The hawthorn vase in Rossetti’s paintings and the hawthorn vase he buys from his friend Murray Marks overlap in the artist’s experience. Experiences at home and aesthetic views are intertwined.

7 Wishing to connect English and American literature as well as elite and popular writings, Feldman focuses on Augusta Evans and her novel *St Elmo* (1866), which tells about the trials of a writing, scholarly woman. She appraises the shortcomings and strengths of this bestseller of the 19th century as well as its creation of a decadent domestic aestheticism, especially through its recasting of public history as private experience.

8 This is followed by a meditation on sentimentality. Although Victorian sentimentality is often seen in derogatory terms as debased art, Ruskin, Rossetti, Augusta Evans and William James explore sentimentality as a source of rich possibility and so will twentieth-century writers. Sentimentality is not always a sign of aesthetic weakness but can at times enable an artist to fly wide and high. Feldman argues that sentimentality is intricately connected with impersonality, artists like Ruskin preaching the need for heartfelt art while fearing to reveal themselves in their work. And challenging T. S. Eliot, she wonders whether in Victorian Modernism, the man who suffers can really separate himself from the mind that creates.

9 In the last chapter, Feldman turns to William James. The choice of the psychologist and philosopher stems from her desire to confuse the categories of art and philosophy as well as from the fact that James, according to Feldman, captures the spirit of Victorian Modernism: “its propensity towards interesting confusions, its pursuit of tender relations, and its certainty that our actual, lived, felt experience cannot and should not be separated from the work of art”. Like Ruskin, Rossetti and Evans, he worked as a pragmatist, with materials close to hand to respond to abstract philosophical questions through artistic undertakings. He was interested in the same topics as they were and especially, in domesticity and its relation to aesthetic experience, which he explored in his essay “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”, an essay that Feldman analyses at length.

10 The book closes on a meditation on sublimity. Challenging the assumption that the sublime remains constant over time, Feldman shows, basing her argument on Longinus

and Kant, that sublimity changes with Ruskin and becomes an experience of things both high and low. Ruskin thus paves the way for the twentieth-century sublime, the sublime of everyday life, a form of sublimity which can be linked with domesticity and ordinary life in true Victorian Modernist fashion.

11 Feldman's study is certainly rich and worth reading. Even if the whole book reads more like a collection of essays than a full-length study, even if the choice of the artists seems somewhat contrived and arbitrary, even if many ideas still await development, the book is compelling and thought-provoking. Going against the grain as it does, it does not mean to provide neat conclusions but undoubtedly gives food for thought.

Pour citer cet article

Référence papier

Christine Reynier, « Jessica Feldman, *Victorian Modernism. Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* », *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 74 Automne | 2011, 252-255.

Référence électronique

Christine Reynier, « Jessica Feldman, *Victorian Modernism. Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* », *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* [En ligne], 74 Automne | 2011, mis en ligne le 02 décembre 2014, consulté le 09 février 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cve/1426> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.1426>

Auteur

Christine Reynier

Université Montpellier III.

Articles du même auteur

Joseph Wiesenfarth. *Ford Madox Ford and the Regiment of Women. Violet Hunt, Jean Rhys, Stella Bowen, Janice Biala* [Texte intégral]

Paru dans *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 63 Printemps | 2006

Introduction [Texte intégral]

The Transformative Power of the Arts in Victorian and Edwardian Culture and Society

Paru dans *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 89 Spring | 2019

Michael Robertson. *The Last Utopians. Four Late Nineteenth-Century Visionaries and their Legacy* [Texte intégral]

Princeton & Oxford: Princeton UP, 2018, 318 p. ISBN-13: 978-0-691-15416-9

Paru dans *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 89 Spring | 2019

Martin Hipsky (éd.), *Modernism and the Women's Popular Romance in Britain, 1885-1925* [Texte intégral]

Paru dans *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 76 Automne | 2012

Droits d'auteur



Le texte seul est utilisable sous licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont « Tous droits réservés », sauf mention contraire.