**Envisioning Totality: London and Victorian Cosmopolitanism**

*Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century*. Tanya Agathocleous. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 266 pp.

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<1>Cosmopolitanism, as Tanya Agathocleous notes in *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century*, "has more often been associated with modernism than with Victorian literature," and recent literary studies of cosmopolitanism have tended to "abbreviate the longer history of literature's engagement with cosmopolitanism that a Victorian perspective brings into view" (172). Agathocleous illuminates this longer history by focusing on the genre of nineteenth-century urban realism and its depiction of London as a microcosm and epicenter of the global. This is because—*pace* Walter Benjamin—London, not Paris, was the capitol of the nineteenth century, at least in the view of writers such as Charles Dickens, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad, all of whom sought to represent the city as a means of representing the world. In Agathocleous's fascinating account, the great city of London, in all its sublime impenetrability, became a figure for the even wider incomprehensibility posed by global modernity.

<2>Recent critical debates about cosmopolitanism have focused on the concept's Enlightenment heritage and the extent to which Enlightenment universalism, as a disposition to the world, can be (or should be) salvaged from its history of oversight—namely race, class, and gender. "Bad" cosmopolitanisms, as Agathocleous sometimes calls them, articulate a universalist ideal that ignores the reality of power differences, and produce "moral and affective detachment" (187). Good or "new" cosmopolitanisms, by contrast, "attempt to imagine affiliations and human rights across national, ethnic, and racial boundaries while attending to the historical embeddedness of one's own position in doing so." These cosmopolitanisms, Agathocleous argues, "require an awareness of the inadequacy of the totalizing vision even while that ideal is being asserted" (120). *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* uncovers both "bad" and "good" cosmopolitanisms in nineteenth-century literary culture, but seeks above all "to move beyond the impasse between recuperative and skeptical views of cosmopolitanism by posing more open-ended questions: how do various texts create cosmopolitanism as a literary effect? What formal techniques were used to create the sense of global space? How has literature shaped our sense of the global over time?" (13).

<3>Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Agathocleous attends particularly to literary techniques associated with the "visual forms of the sketch and the panorama and their adaptations over the course of the century." Such a focus results in welcome attention to form throughout the study. The sketch and the panorama, Agathocleous argues, served "as the paradigmatic antithetical modes of cosmopolitan realism" (69). Both enact different aspects of a vision that takes in totality: the sketch implies completeness by classifying individuals according to "types," while the panorama implies completeness through its comprehensiveness. These two literary/visual perspectives are complementary rather than contradictory, Agathocleous argues: "the contending scales of miniature and gigantic, fragment and totality, are part of the same impulse to render the urban comprehensible" in order to "represent global space" (71).

<4>In its scope and organization, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* could be said to employ these two distinct perspectives as a means of grappling with its subject. The book is divided into two parts: Part One, "The Emergence of Cosmopolitan Realism," which includes two chapters, and Part Two, "Cosmopolitan Realism at the Fin de Siècle and Beyond," which includes three chapters. Part One traces the developing cosmopolitan perspective of nineteenth-century literature from a relatively panoramic perspective, ranging from William Wordsworth to 1890s periodicals, while Part Two offers more situated sketches of cosmopolitanism and urban realism at the turn of the century.

<5>The first chapter, which would certainly be a contender for the best one in the book, focuses on accounts of the Great Exhibition of 1851 as a synecdoche for London's cosmopolitan reach. In periodical discourse surrounding the Great Exhibition, Agathocleous shows, London "is a perfect location for the Exhibition" because both the city and the event "represent the world as a whole" (37). This chapter also offers a fascinating account of periodicals that emerged throughout the nineteenth century exemplifying various strains of cosmopolitan thought. *Cosmopolis*, for example, "an illustrious but short-lived periodical of the 1890s," envisioned "the public sphere as a global city with a multi-cultural, multi-lingual populace." It was published in several languages in a range of European metropolises, and "attempted to strike a balance between particular and universal subject-matter and objective and subjective perspective" (54). Another journal, *The Cosmopolitan Review* (1861), was committed to a Kantian version of cosmopolitanism that entailed commitment to "international dialogue" and the prospect of "world citizenship" (56). Agathocleous's excavation of this periodical discourse does crucial critical work in establishing the varieties of cosmopolitanism in Victorian culture.

<6>Other chapters of the book focus more explicitly on literary sources. Chapter Two describes "the emergence of cosmopolitan realism" in William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (published in 1850) and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53). Although Wordsworth seems a surprising addition to a book that is mainly focused on the fin de siècle, Agathocleous convincingly argues that *The Prelude* should "be seen as the progenitor of Victorian city literature's utopian strand." *Bleak House*, with its "telescopic philanthropy" and famously unappealing cosmopolite Harold Skimpole, is far more suspicious of the city and of the globe, but "engages in the formal project of cosmopolitan realism as a means to redeem its own pessimism" (73).

<7>The rest of the book focuses on the turn of the century. Chapter Three examines Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1888) and Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1885-86), arguing that in the mystery plots of both novels "the protagonists must attain a holistic view of London in order to see through its web of connections to the various 'truths' that they seek" (120). Sherlock Holmes achieves this totality of vision, and Hyacinth Robinson does not, but James's protagonist evinces a doubleness or "mixedness" of perspective that is emblematic of "good" cosmopolitanism, while Holmes's all-comprehending vision presumes "a culturally homogenous world" (142).

<8>The fourth chapter considers two texts first published in 1890: William Morris's utopian novel *News from Nowhere* and General William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out*. The texts make a seemingly unlikely pairing, since revolutionary socialists such as Morris typically disdained the Salvation Army, premised as it was on liberal meliorism and Christian futurity; *Justice*, for example, the Social Democratic Federation newspaper to which Morris at times contributed, questioned whether the Salvation Army "does not ultimately aggravate the evils it aims at remedying."(1) The pairing works convincingly, however, in that both *News from Nowhere* and *In Darkest England* demonstrate the collapse of realism's representational promise. As Agathocleous argues, the two texts "show how the underlying problem of cosmopolitan realism—its ambition to unite universalist and particularist views—had reached a point of *aporia*" at the end of the century (151).

<9>Moving beyond the nineteenth century, the fifth chapter describes how two early modernist novels—Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)— abandon "the totalized view of urban space as a figure for global community" that typified Victorian literary cosmopolitanism. Time, rather than space, becomes the organizing principle for conceptualizing large-scale community in Conrad's and Woolf's texts, yet in *The Secret Agent*, especially, totality becomes "a source of anxiety" (173). At the end of this chapter, Agathocleous speculates that Woolf's feminism accounts for her more optimistic approach: she, unlike Conrad, can "embrace the flux that accompanies global identities because of its prospective benefits to women and other 'outsiders' never fully included in the conceptions of national belonging whose disintegration Conrad contemplates with dismay" (200).

<10>Readers of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* may wish for more discussion of gender in a book about the promises and failures of universalism, but this last observation about Virginia Woolf suggests the usefulness of Agathocleous's study for thinking about Victorian gender. Cosmopolitanism promised inclusiveness and egalitarianism for a feminist writer like Virginia Woolf, but at the same time allowed a quasi-feminist writer like William Morris to depict "something akin to Hegel's world-spirit" as "depend[ing] on the structure of heterosexual romance" (160). It offered, in other words, a means of glossing over sexual inequalities as well as a means of correcting them. Nonetheless, there are moments when the book's lack of attention to gender can be conspicuous. In Agathocleous's reading of Sherlock Holmes, for example, she notes that Holmes "rel[ies] ultimately on the assumption of certain absolute … truths" (125). But if we take into account the Sherlock Holmes short stories, and not just *A Study in Scarlet*, we see how often these "truths" are undermined by the women who circumvent Holmes's detection—

women like Irene Adler in "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891) or the anonymous avenger in "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton" (1904).

<11>Fantasies of totality aside, however, a book cannot cover everything, and it is enough that Agathocleous's study opens up the discourse of Victorian cosmopolitanism for critics of Victorian gender. This is a first-rate study that breaks much new ground, and will be essential reading for scholars of Victorian nationalism, internationalism, and urbanism, with particular relevance for scholars of the fin de siècle. It is an excellent example of how formal literary approaches can yield fascinating political and philosophical insights.

Endnotes

(1)*Justice* 219 (24 March 1888): 2.(^)