

Birch on Castagnès (2017)

Castagnès, Gilles, editor. *Réalisme (1856–1857): journal dirigé par Edmond Duranty*. Classiques Garnier, 2017, pp. 478, ISBN 978-2-406-06376-6

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Writing in his and Margaret Cohen's edited volume of 1995, *Spectacles of Realism: Gender, Body, Genre* (Minnesota UP), Christopher Prendergast commented that one of the more curious aspects of the history of Realism was the simple fact that this history was "not yet over": "despite many modernist and postmodernist declarations of its death, the concept has an uncanny capacity for springing, Lazarus-like, back to life, returning again and again to the agenda of discussion" (1). Gilles Castagnès's new edition of the short-lived review *Réalisme* represents a case in point, and contributes a further chapter to the French history of this much-discussed idea. This is the first critical edition of *Réalisme* to be published, and it will doubtless offer researchers an invaluable insight into the literary and periodical culture of the Second Empire. *Réalisme* survived a mere six months, from the first issue of November 1856 to the final number of April/May 1857. Although the review was chiefly the work of Edmond Duranty (responsible, as Castagnès points out, for some sixty percent of the signed articles published in *Réalisme*), his contemporaries Jules Assézat and Henri Thulié played a significant role in its production. Castagnès's edition brings together all six issues, while the appendices include an early and unpublished number from July 1856. His notes are consistently meticulous and illuminating, and provide vital contextual detail.

To read *Réalisme* is to encounter a set of debates and discussions prominent at a particular moment in the history of the Second Empire. Articles focus on a number of concerns, including the state of the contemporary literary field, the nature of the novel form, developments in contemporary literary criticism, Realism, and the visual arts, and an array of miscellaneous items, published under the heading "nouvelles diverses." The figures discussed in its pages range from Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas père to John Constable—indeed, the latter is referenced in an engaging article attributed to one Louis Présurier. This, it transpires, is one of Duranty's many pseudonyms. While *Réalisme*'s first issue lists an impressive array of correspondents and collaborators—including such names as "Maximilien Béroest (Somme)" and "John Wegsters (Baltimore)" (99)—these turn out to be entirely fictitious. As Castagnès points out in his excellent introduction: "Le procédé peut paraître un peu gros, et pourtant nombreux sont ceux qui ont cru à une cohorte de correspondants fermement engagés dans la cause de la vérité et de la sincérité. Il faut dire que Duranty poussa le subterfuge jusqu'à varier son style en fonction des différents pseudonymes qu'il prenait, rendant même certains textes obscurs, ou passablement maladroits lorsqu'il s'agissait de prétendues traductions!" (14). If recent French writing on periodical culture has rightly explored the profoundly collaborative nature of journalistic production over the nineteenth century, *Réalisme* offers a case in which such collaboration is radically exaggerated. There was no band of international collaborators, no group of correspondents hailing from every corner of the French nation. As Castagnès has it, these practices were employed to suggest the existence of "une vaste communauté se retrouvant sous la bannière du réalisme" (14).

What then was the significance of *Réalisme* in its own time? Castagnès's assessment is rather bleak: "Il est difficile de dire quel fut exactement son impact sur le moment. Très faible, probablement" (24). But the review was not destined for oblivion, even after the final issue had been and gone. Castagnès explores the ways in which a number of Third Republic writers looked back to Duranty and *Réalisme*, highlighting the nature of the journal's influence on the Naturalist movement. Paul Alexis was a fan of Duranty in particular: "Il y a là tout le naturalisme en embryon" (27). And Alexis considered the editor of *Réalisme* to be one of the inspirations—the "patrons," as he put it—of his own periodical, *Le Trublot* (27). There, Duranty's name appears alongside those of Diderot, Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert. Zola too was effusive on the subject of *Réalisme*: "Pour moi, *Réalisme* est une date, un document très important et très significatif de notre histoire littéraire [...]. Mais faire du bruit n'est rien, la chose stupéfiante est que ces trois jeunes gens apportaient une révolution, formulaient tout un corps de doctrine" (28). It is not especially difficult to identify those moments in *Réalisme* of which Zola might have approved, for certain reflections on the nature of Realism offered over the course of the publication draw on a distinctly medical or quasi-scientific vocabulary. Thus, Henri Thulié writes of the role of the novelist in contemporary society: "Il fait pour la société ce qu'on fait pour les sciences, il analyse. Ne faut-il pas étudier anatomiquement et partie par partie tout corps organisé pour formuler sa physiologie? ... le roman est l'anatomie philosophique" (57). In drawing our attention to these lines of influence, and to the history of this publication more broadly, Castagnès not only points to the ways in which literary history has overlooked such figures as Duranty; his edition prompts us to investigate literary culture through the history of periodicals.

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