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The Realist Author and Sympathetic Imagination (book review)

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PARASCHAS, SOTIRIOS. *The Realist Author and Sympathetic Imagination*. London: Legenda, 2013. ISBN 978-1-907975-70-7. Pp. 223. 60 €.

Studies of realism often exhibit a tendency to make it vanish, seeing it as merely pre-modernism, or express astonishment when it emerges as a sophisticated form of writing—two tendencies that Paraschas seeks to avoid. The main contention of his insightful monograph, part of the Studies in Comparative Literature series, is that a particular configuration of elements (the sympathetic imagination, the authorial double and his potential for expressing the aesthetic, economic, and legal standing of the author) is specific to nineteenth-century realism. The realist author is seen as a

contradictory figure, a celebrity subservient to publishers and the public in a newly industrialized literary marketplace, and the owner of his work divested of his property by imperfect copyright laws, playwrights adapting his novels for the stage, and sequel-writers. This combination of a conspicuous yet precarious status with a self-effacing attitude meant the realist author carefully orchestrated his presence and absence both inside and outside his work. An authorial scenario corresponding to this strategy of “screened presence” was embodied in a certain type of fictional character, the “authorial double”—a plural, Protean, chameleonic character who could enter the minds of his fellow characters through a process of imaginative identification, thus resembling the author in his faculty of the “sympathetic imagination” (13). Comprising an introduction and two parts of three and four chapters respectively, the first two chapters are devoted to elaborating several early versions of authorial plurality: theories of Shakespeare as Proteus, Diderot’s *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1830), and Friedrich Schlegel’s notion of irony put into practice by E.T.A. Hoffmann. Both chapters conclude that in eighteenth-century theories of the sympathetic imagination, sympathy and emotional identification with the characters are associated with the reader, and are viewed as a defect, while the sympathetic imagination is unsentimental, detached and expressed by characters resembling the author. Chapter 3 shows how authorial doubles respond to new challenges posed to the author in the nineteenth century by the increasing commodification of literature and by inadequate protection offered by copyright legislation. The authorial double is seen as a means by which the realist author claims the work as his own. Chapter 4 follows the development of the figure of the authorial double in Balzac’s *La peau de chagrin* (1831), *Gobseck* (1830), and the Vautrin trilogy, while chapter 5 views the description of the sympathetic imagination in terms of prostitution and the *flâneur* in Baudelaire’s prose poems as essential to the understanding of this realist authorial scenario. Chapter 6 argues that the use of the sympathetic imagination in George Eliot’s last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), corresponds to a fundamental fear about the alienability of her work. The last chapter treats the decline of this configuration at the end of the nineteenth century and concludes with André Gide’s *Les faux-monnayeurs* (1925), considered a retrospective evaluation of the realist authorial scenario that signals its demise. This fascinating study views realist fiction in a new light, as a vitally important art form springing from unique conditions of production.