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Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel by David Kurnick (review)

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David Kurnick. *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel.*
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"Acting is slow and poor to what we go through within": Mirah's comment in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* could encapsulate the antitheatrical stance of the realist novel in its allegiance to psychological interiority (606). This vision of the novel tradition is one that David Kurnick's *Empty Houses* seeks less to destabilize than to frame with a social horizon: to perceive the collective "we" as an aspiration of the singular "within." Kurnick's radiant and rigorous book argues that the theatrical disappointments of William Makepeace Thackeray, Eliot, Henry James, James Joyce, and James Baldwin shaped their contributions to the "novel of interiority," inflecting their texts with a longing for the publicity of performance. This disposition to collective embodiment and social dynamism is indexed by a theatricality that Kurnick unlocks in two ways: "demetaphorizing" theater by examining these authors' concrete dramatic failures; and "dethematizing" theater by recognizing its formal manifestations within novelistic space. By restoring the theatricality, so defined, inherent in novelistic topoi ("vanity fair," "inward drama," the "scenic principle," "epiphany"), Kurnick identifies formal enigmas created by the blurring of narrative and dramatic codes (6). In what he envisions as a generic catachresis, theatrical and novelistic modes inflect one another indefinitely. The "novel intends the theater" but never coincides with it (119). This deferral summons a counterfactual imagination that Kurnick endorses as the literary's indispensable orientation.

The introduction commissions an array of methodological materials, making as careful use of theater theory and history as of novel criticism and narrative theory, although many of these positions are the targets of bracing critical housekeeping. Kurnick draws on a range of texts in social theory—notably Jacques Rancière's theater-inflected politics—and on the resources of queer theory, radicalizing his defense of the novel while modulating his more utopian claims. His method works in the wings, as it were, reading unfamiliar texts to re-evaluate canonical ones; attending to peripheral details with a suppleness that virtually establishes new analytical categories; and working at the verge of realism's concerns to bring theater to the novelistic foreground. The argument is intricately nested and wrought in vivacious and exhilarating prose.

The opening chapter reconciles Thackeray's distaste for "sham" with his passion for theatrical culture. Kurnick argues that theater in Thackeray works as an emblem of historical change, specifically the nineteenth-century recontouring of public space around private domesticity replicated, in dramatic circles, in the *Theatres Act* (1843). The melancholy jester narrating *Vanity Fair* (1847–8) registers a despondent protest at this diminution of "social promiscuity," a resistance on the part of theater to novelistic and domestic confinement (30). The device Kurnick terms "acoustics"—the evocation of an auditorium for, and shaped by narrative voice—guides magnificent readings of narratorial tone, alongside other representational strategies that trace the minituarizing

of fairground into puppet theater, public world into nursery, history into the domestic everyday. The corollary of this domestication—psychological interiority—is given shape in *Lovel the Widower* (1860), Thackeray's novelistic reprise of an unstaged play. Imagining this novel's interior monologue as a soliloquy to an empty house, Kurnick fashions a social genealogy for a voice poignantly aware of its marginality. Psychological realism, in this rotated view, "emerges as a container for an unaccommodated theatricality" (32). Interiority becomes a "narrative memorial" to "social obsolescence," omniscience a surrogate for "social placelessness," reading a solitary act acutely distant from social participation (66, 65). Taking Thackeray as broadly representative of realism, Kurnick thus identifies, at the heart of the Victorian novel, a performative desire that contains theater's social energies while reserving them for future activation.

This desire is given more idiosyncratic shape in a bravura examination of Eliot, focusing on her narrative experiments of the 1860s. Kurnick's aim is to analyze Eliot's later work against the formal and ideological challenges posed by *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), a generically uncertain text begun as a drama after *Romola* (1863), then abandoned and reworked in blank verse after *Felix Holt* (1866). Opening with a beautiful gloss on Eliot's own theorization of genre, Kurnick reasons that her demurral at identifying as "drama" a work that had relinquished the hope of performance need not typify an antitheatrical stance, a sublimation of theater's social origins into an abstract ethics of sympathy. His rich readings of *Romola* and *Felix Holt* pivot away from the critical timeline that sees Eliot turning to interiority as an antidote to the social, since the intermittent composition of *The Spanish Gypsy*, Kurnick demonstrates, disrupts the sense that her career invariably favored inwardness over collectivity. A narrative poem adapting the typography of a play script, *The Spanish Gypsy* develops an "ethics of exteriority," a depersonalizing theatricality that resists psychic legibility and broadens the contours of human community in line with a "collectivist theatrical imagination" (73). In this bold recuperation, *The Spanish Gypsy* makes visible theater's democratizing demand, which Kurnick strikingly transports to *Middlemarch* (1871–2), with its imagery of social multitudes pressing on psychic interiors; and to *Daniel Deronda* (1876), a novel read as aspiring to the condition of theater. If this final work follows the pattern whereby "novel" disciplines "drama," its visions of theatrical collectivity—including those of Deronda's mother, an actress—dissent from such a logic. Vividly conceiving the novel as a "show" and its characters as a "cast," Kurnick reframes Eliot's politics as aspiring to a theatrical democracy that would unsettle ethnic determinism, thwarting psychological interiority and readerly identification (102).

"Few events are commoner in the life of a dramatic author," G. H. Lewes once remarked, "than the failure of a play" (74). Given Eliot's sensitivity to reviews, her generic swerve away from drama seems a prudent escape from publicity. In consequence, Kurnick's interpretations work, with considerable brilliance, somewhat against the grain of her broader commitments. Things differ in the

case of James, the subject of the book's longest and most luminous chapter, who is central for the argument of *Empty Houses* both because he courted the theater more continually and because the sublimations of his chastening failures were key to his later technique. Yet it is to revise James's place in a triumphalist history of the novel, and critical consensus on its fascination with interiority and psychosexual normativity, that Kurnick enters onto the "awkward stage." This is no mere witticism: the contours of Jamesian theatricality are categorically unsettling, disrupting spectatorial and readerly isolation and eroticizing the possibility of social participation. Kurnick meticulously analyzes the experimental texts after the no-show fiasco of *Guy Domville* (1895), generic misfits that emphasize dialogue to the near exclusion of narration and offer sanctuary to a "phantom theater" within novelistic confines (112). Evaluating *The Other House* as both novel (1896) and theatrical adaptation (1909), Kurnick examines what he calls, following James, the "performance imaginary," a set of textual effects that maintain performance as a "desired but unachieved referent" (119). The first work is unperformable as theater yet riddling as novel, given its desire to be treated as a hypothetical play script; the second warped by its awareness of a purely textual fate. These uncertain "other houses," Kurnick suggests, expose conventions of theater viewing and novel reading and conjure a social world that could house as-yet-unrealized forms of interpersonal engagement.

This project is intensified in *The Awkward Age* (1899), "a blueprint for an impossible performance, and a scheme for a new form of community" (127). Lacking the clean lines of a marriage plot to partition its hazily underdescribed characters—all its focalizing "reflectors" are, so to say, dimmed—this novel forces us to consider a social setting without an orienting point of view, and to imagine a virtual public that might operate along similarly antipsychologizing and sexually permissive lines. The dazzling rigor of these readings enables Kurnick's more intrepid claim about late Jamesian style, namely that it recuperates the spatial grammar and collective logic of theater through "performative universalism," a blend of textural consistency and uniformly distributed awareness (144). Taking *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) as his example, Kurnick ventures that whatever their divisive involvements in the text, the characters embody a wider "collaborative energy" that runs alongside and upstages the novel's moral binaries (148). Undergirded by theatricality, Jamesian style registers a democratic pressure that anticipates a more just allocation of narrative space by revealing its contingent allotments, while recognizing the pathos of style's distance from a realizable politics.

Where Henrik Ibsen's naturalism is a foil for the analysis of James, its influence runs deeper in the case of Joyce. Detailing the movement's anti-theatrical rhetoric, Kurnick identifies the conjunction of psychic interiority and sexual identity as the naturalist credo that Joyce's work tacitly resists, as if recuperating the theater from "novelization." He mines Joyce's epiphanies for their commingling of generic and gender categories, showing that where epiphany fails in the task of social exposure, sexual "diagnosis" gives way to

more performative and permissive desires. A similar critique of the naturalist tactic of putting the psyche on stage is visible in *Exiles* (1918), the play text of which Kurnick reads against, rather than in tandem with Joyce's prurient compositional notes. With its unplayable gestures and stage directions, *Exiles* threatens to upstage theater—and psychosexual legibility—through textuality. *Ulysses* (1922) in turn draws on these possibilities of nonperformance, flirting with dramatic form and flattening dialogue, narration, and interiority to one textual plane. Kurnick explores the tension whereby sexual truths are undermined by the textuality of the "play" that Joyce inserts into *Ulysses*. He vividly conceives the "Circe" episode as a script confined to the "ineluctable modality of the legible"; the implied theater of Nighttown works to deprivatize sexual identity, registering a demand for embodied performance and a social world unanxious about sexuality's "truth" (189).

Kurnick's case studies reveal a dilation of attention to psychic interiority and its sexually normative correlates. His coda offers a compelling rereading of Baldwin as invested in both "legible psychosexual meaning" and in the "sexual as untellable," and so as assimilating the tradition of theatrical failure all at once (195). The trajectory of the argument thus finds social desire growing ethically more urgent and formally more oblique. Where in Thackeray and Eliot theater's "spatializations" open out within plot dynamics and figurative textures, in James and Joyce theatricality attaches to stranger effects of textuality, typography, and style. If Kurnick's method seems, on occasion, unduly oblique to our sense of these writers, what we are sensing is exactly the pressure exerted by his revisionary conjunction of form and politics. His designs for literature reside in stylistic and textual traces that are orthogonal to content and generic specificity. Indeed, Kurnick's "melancholy of generic distinction" troubles a corresponding distinction in criticism (9). This study has the rare quality of appealing to both theater and novel critics, and in bridging these worlds it enjoins us all to wider aspirations. Kurnick's recognition of the aesthetic's desire—however marginal—for collectivity will prove fortifying: *Empty Houses* deserves an attentive audience, precisely for the moving and measured ways in which it joins different areas of inquiry in an orientation that forsakes the reading room for the sociable streets.

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