

Book Review

**Ileana Marin. *Victorian Aesthetics of Erasure in Fiction and Illustration*.
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The printed version of any text is remarkable for its neat, clear aspect and for the untroubled manner in which it transmits its message. This finite product contrasts strongly with its previous manuscript versions that often contain blotches, erasures and cancelations of various sorts. Yet, they are done precisely with an aesthetic purpose. The unkempt appearance of the manuscript page indicates the author's creative struggle to find the right expression, to reach perfection. Erasure also points to the author's endeavour to strike a balance between his desires and the readers' expectations; as such it situates itself in a space of negotiation, where the author makes a compromise between being truthful to their art and being successful on the reading market. Ultimately, what is preserved and what is revised or left out depends on the specificity of an era that dictates cultural norms and conventions.

Ileana Marin's book *Victorian Aesthetics of Erasure in Fiction and Illustration* is an astute and invaluable exploration of the rationale of erasure in the manuscripts of four leading Victorian writers: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope. By employing an interdisciplinary approach, Marin focuses on the occurrence of erasure related to key aspects of Victorian writing, such as publication in serialized format, the use of illustration and its rapport with the text, and the collaboration between writer and artist. As the act of writing is a complex process whereby imperfect or undesirable chunks of text are canceled out and replaced with better variants, reading erasure signifies recovering (lost) traces. Like a committed detective, Ileana Marin aims to discover what was suppressed from the text and why. In other words, her purpose is to investigate the Victorian writers' motivations to give up a part of their creation, and to unveil the hidden meanings entailed in cancelations. Marin's thesis is that this canceled material is highly relevant for the Victorian mentality and aesthetics; deciphered cancelations can throw a new light on the writers' dreams, hopes, fears and professional aspirations. However, this mission is challenging because sometimes cancelations prove to be illegible or outright inaccessible, as the illustrations attached at the end of this book demonstrate. To combat these difficulties and offer a successful reading of cancelations, Ileana Marin backs up her thorough study of Victorian manuscripts by drawing upon an impressive body of secondary sources.

The book's scope is harmoniously balanced as it weights both female and male authorial voices, experimented as well as novice writers, presence or absence of illustration, radical along with mild forms of erasure; it consequently manages to capture many essential elements of Victorian novel writing and deal with their associated problems. Thus, in the chapter dedicated to Charlotte Brontë, Ileana Marin addresses a singular form of erasure, excision by scissors. Brontë's radical cancelations were meant

to hide her true sexual identity from publishers and readers alike. Brontë was unwilling to display her first-hand writings about physical appearance and the humiliations endured as a governess. Her excisions related to the discrimination against women were meant to contest gender and intellectual inequalities. Like her heroine Lucy Snowe from *Villette*, Brontë also rebels by means of writing, indicating by her cuts the difficulties and pains of becoming an acclaimed female writer. In addition, her excisions in *Villette* appear as a result of experimenting boldly with internal monologue and first-person narrative. Having analyzed Brontë's pattern of cancellations, Ileana Marin identifies the Jane Eyre complex, which consists of "the author's contradictory desire to reveal and conceal personal, even intimate or offensive, occurrences in her own life" (60). Moreover, Ileana Marin judges the effect of the numerous excisions, pointing to a narrative line characterized by fragmentation and juxtaposition, and demonstrates convincingly Brontë's preference for authorial control rather than smooth narrative.

George Eliot's challenges were of a somewhat different nature, as she published her novel *Romola* in monthly installments and accompanied by Frederic Leighton's illustrations. Consequently, her insertions and exclusions were meant not only to respect the quantitative requirements of the serialized format (a painstaking task, for Trollope and Dickens as well), but also to avoid 'complete disclosure' and create suspense for readers by the end of an installment. Cancellations were often triggered by Eliot's uncertainties as she was writing a historical novel for the first time. Nonetheless, as Marin highlights, most cancellations reveal Eliot's effort to construct a powerful heroine capable of overshadowing the historical character of Savonarola. *Romola* emerges as a real feminine force with a strong impact on the life of the community. Refuting common critical assumptions, Ileana Marin argues extensively that Eliot does not emulate masculine models in portraying her protagonist, but rather defines *Romola*'s heroism in feminine terms. Another original contribution is Ileana Marin's discussion of Eliot's multiplot structure. Unlike Dickens who preferred a linear sequencing of events, Eliot used what Marin calls 'radial serialization', that is, a disjunct, non-chronological progression of narrative threads. Apart from creating a sense of unity between past, present and future, this compositional strategy delineates *Romola* as "a landmark for the others, the center towards which or around which the other characters revolve" (131). Marin's line of argument is highly persuasive in the chapter about Eliot and runs more smoothly than in the Brontë one, which is all too natural. Unlike Brontë's cancellations by excision, Eliot's were most often legible, which afforded our author more freedom of interpretation.

Turning her attention to the Victorian star Charles Dickens, Ileana Marin dwells at length on the writer's shrewd experimentation with the visual aspects of the text. After troublesome collaborations with the illustrators George Cruickshank or Hablot Knight Browne, Dickens decided to cancel illustration altogether in *Great Expectations* and compensate for its absence by exploiting the iconicity of the written text. Ileana Marin spots reversed ekphrasis, frequent repetitions, name-play and other compositional strategies that give the novel its unique flavour. The delicate autobiographical issues and the multiple cancellations of the ending are other important topics treated wittily in the book. Dickens wanted to protect his private life, secure his reputation and offer his

readership what they needed. Tailoring the text for public reading was a form of cancelation that satisfied both Dickens' financial necessities and public expectations. Of particular interest is Ileana Marin's discussion of the idea of respectability, which was characteristic of Victorian mentality and to which Dickens paid special attention in *Great Expectations*; Marin's detailed and outstanding interpretation of Biddie's letter, to which she attaches its due importance, is an illuminating moment in the analysis of the novel.

The last chapter is dedicated to Anthony Trollope, the writer who, unlike Dickens, thrived on his collaboration with the illustrator John Everett Millais. Trollope's manuscript of *Orley Farm* is less emended by comparison to that of other Victorian writers. As such, whereas in the Dickens chapter Marin insists on the graphic elements of the text, here she chooses rather to focus on the symmetry between the writer's text and the artist's illustrations. Millais' perfect rendition of Trollope's textual descriptions determined the latter to cancel passages that would have seemed otherwise redundant and urge his readers see the illustrations as mandatory completions to his narrative. Ileana Marin maintains that these images inspired Trollope and moulded the creation of subsequent characters, functioning thus as ekphrasis.

Apart from their different motivations, all four Victorian writers often cancelled long comments or negative statements, that is, whatever seemed to them excessive, exaggerated and overly dramatic. As Ileana Marin rightly demonstrates, erasure had in all cases a strong regulatory role, indicating the writers' self-control. Similarly, in the analysis of all manuscripts, Marin identifies and interprets at length compositional strategies such as ekphrasis, metatextuality and self-reflectivity, which are essential in understanding the writers' rapport with their texts, with other texts and with themselves as well. Finally, for all Victorian writers, writing fulfilled a cathartic function; out of the dynamics of writing and erasing authors emerged more mature and skilled, gaining their well-deserved fame within Victorian literature.

Preceded by elaborate philosophical considerations, Ileana Marin's analysis of the Victorian manuscripts explains proficiently strategies of erasure. Yet, the book could have benefited from a more solid historical background regarding gender and class realities typical of the nineteenth century. Since Marin highlights Brontë's and Eliot's preference for authorial control in their writings, a discussion about the status of women in general and the female writer in particular at that time would have been relevant. Up to the adoption of the consequential *Matrimonial Causes Act* (1857) and *Married Women's Property Act* (1870) for instance (a period which corresponds with Brontë's and Eliot's lifespans), Victorian British women had very limited possibilities of controlling their property and earnings, or of leaving marriages; they enjoyed basically no freedom and were at the hands of their husbands. Writing under pen names, both Brontë and Eliot wanted earnestly to gain their existence as female writers. Both refused to comply with Victorian norms regarding marriage (Eliot leading a 'scandalous' life and Brontë refusing a marriage proposal that was against her principles). Ultimately, both gave power to the woman in their novels (Brontë using a male name for her heroine in *Shirley* and Eliot turning Romola into a community leader). So, their need for authorial control and their desire to empower the woman emerged precisely in response to these historical realities. Therefore, a feminist critique would be welcome, though it is understandable why the

author chooses not to engage in it; dealing with two male and two female writers, Ileana Marin probably wants to maintain an equilibrium in her study and avoid prioritizing one gender group. Similarly, the book does not say explicitly whether Dickens cancelled material in terms of quality as well when he tailored *Great Expectations* for the cheap edition. That is, it would have been interesting to know if he simplified the language and vocabulary in order to make them more ‘accessible’ to his target audience, the working class that boosted his revenues. As Aileen Fyfe notes, the mid-nineteenth century witnessed the development of a mass readership that was not homogenous and publishers not only lowered book prices in order to reach the working class, but also focused on “literary accessibility, making sure that the language used was as clear and simple as possible” (56).

Apart from these few critical observations, Ileana Marin’s study is praiseworthy in all respects. The book keeps the reader actively engaged and introduces them to each new chapter by fine transitions, which expose clearly similarities and differences between the studied Victorian writers. Marin discusses extensively the relationship between writer and artist, demonstrating that the impact of the collaboration was often mutual. Similarly, Ileana Marin brilliantly analyzes the relationship between text and illustration, either weighing the symmetry between them or signaling disparities with their underlying reasons. She sews up her research by bringing into discussion important issues, such as copyright laws, payment practices or technical innovations; the wealth of secondary literature that Marin employs is accompanied by her original insights that often combat or complete previous viewpoints. The book is addressed to any serious researcher who wishes to know more about the leading Victorian writers. That is, to those who are eager to study beyond what is commonly known on the subject, through Ileana Marin’s lens.

Works Cited

- Fyfe, Aileen. *Science and Salvation: Evangelical Popular Science Publishing in Victorian Britain*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004. Print.
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