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Reading and Writing the Reading Room

Roomscape: Women Writers in the British Museum from George Eliot to Virginia Woolf. Susan David Bernstein. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. 231 pp.

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<1>In this “gendered history of reading in space” (11), Susan David Bernstein revises a central claim of one of *Roomscape*’s central figures to show that “a room of many haunted by many others” had the capacity to “generate creative forms of reading and writing” (21) for a variety of women writers in the later nineteenth century. By contrast with both the model of genius-in-isolation earlier forged by George Eliot and the privacy that Virginia Woolf cast as foundational for a literary career in her time, the writing women who frequented the Reading Room of the British Museum in the last decades of the century pursued their knowledge-making activities through their common participation in a shared public space. In “question[ing] the overdetermined value of privacy and autonomy in constructions of female authorship” (1), *Roomscape* effectively demonstrates an innovative way of framing — and doing — late Victorian feminist literary history. And by showing how the Reading Room, as “a haunted house of books and readers” (14), “facilitated various practices of women’s literary production” (1), Bernstein herself makes an important contribution to the “collective endeavor” spanning “different realms of knowledge” (23) in which her subjects engaged.

<2>Reading a wide range of evidence from floor plans to card catalogues, entrance applications to personal letters, visual representations to poetry and fiction, *Roomscape* puts methodological issues front and center. In her introductory chapter, Bernstein identifies four key categories of analysis, or “a quadrilateral algorithm” (3), that provide an integrated framework for exploring the Reading Room as a space that changed over time. Historically speaking, the democratizing impulse of a large, free, accessible library, situated within one of London’s most affordable neighborhoods, generated a relatively open and genuinely diverse hub for intellectual activity in which both women and men could participate. It refutes, in other words, Woolf’s characterization of the Reading Room as a patriarchal space where the narrator of *A Room of One’s Own* encounters evidence only of “the mental, moral and physical inferiority” of her sex: as Bernstein rightly observes, it is the Oxbridge library to which Mary Beton or Mary Seton is barred access, whereas she glides right through “the swing-doors” of Bloomsbury’s national institution.(1) In theoretical terms, following Michel Foucault as well as Walter Benjamin’s work on arcades, Bernstein considers the Reading Room as a heterotopia that “accumulate[s] relations of past and present in a fixed physical environment” (18). Such a site made possible the imagining of the past — and even the future — for and by those who worked there, from George Eliot to Olive Schreiner and well into the next century. Bernstein notes, too, the way in which the space itself

changed: first in 1857, when the domed room opened; then again in 1907, when its redecoration included the names of members of "the male literary canon emblazoned underneath the dome" (157); or with the rapid demise of the two rows designated "For Ladies Only." Her third category, the literary, emphasizes in part the occult and paranormal dimensions of representations of readers and writers under the dome, deploying Jacques Derrida's concept of "archive fever" — in which what is missing from the archive or the library haunts those who subsequently inhabit the space as an experience of loss — to create a context for reading a range of representations that situate the ghostly presence of the past within the dome. Finally, Bernstein establishes the scope and limits of what she calls "catalogical knowledge," garnered from the admittedly incomplete and partial "lists of signatures or indexes of titles" (26) and other resources that she has been able to access, generate, and analyze. She not only observes that "[t]he archive that preserves also selects and represses" (31), but also uses her findings to correct and complicate some of the conclusions that have been drawn about the character and content of the library's holdings and the reading writers who worked there. That the round room was itself "both public and enclosed, both interior and exterior" (3), becomes a key factor in *Roomscape*'s intricate analysis of the networks of women and men whose literary and institutional labors both required and encouraged them to congregate beneath its dome.

<3>In her second chapter, Bernstein emphasizes the "exteriority" achieved by and through those networks, in considering women's work as translators. Women translators at the library, she suggests, themselves enact a kind of translation by their presence across and within nominally public and private spaces. In one of the chapter's extended examples, she shows that Eleanor Marx completed the first English rendition of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1859), published by Henry Vizetelly in 1886; translated Amy Levy's *Reuben Sachs* (1889) into German; and taught herself Norwegian to translate several plays by Henrik Ibsen: all while moving within a network of colleagues and connections centered in Bloomsbury, where she also lived. In another fascinating example, Bernstein explores the career of Constance Black, who after her marriage to Edward Garnett — himself a child of the museum, as son of the erstwhile Reading Room Superintendent who retired as the Museum's Keeper of Printed Books — translated the great Russian novelists into English, and thus became the conduit for their immensely important influence on late-Victorian and early-modernist writers, including Woolf and Katherine Mansfield (63). But before her marriage, Black engaged in other forms of translation, including her contributions to the first volume of Charles Booth's *Labor and the Life of the People* (1889) and her position as the librarian at the People's Palace in the East End: this "cross-class translation work" (59) also enabled her to cross a gendered line at a moment when librarians were almost always men. Along with her sister Clementina, the novelist, journalist, and trades-union organizer, and their close friend Levy, whose own varied translations Bernstein brings to light, Constance and many others used the Reading Room as a site for connecting with cultural workers across differences of class and gender position.

<4>Similarly crowded with interesting figures whose careers have been obscured by Woolf's focus on "the great," Chapter Three examines the mentorship practiced by Constance's father-in-law Richard Garnett in the interests of a wide variety of women poets in the Reading Room. It focuses especially on how Garnett "used his own institutional position to foster precisely the kinds of exteriority that emerging writers most needed" (86), including Christina Rossetti, A. Mary F. Robinson, Mathilde Blind, and Levy. Situating her discussion in relation to both other

heterosocial sites of contact, such as Robinson's Bloomsbury salon, and the contemporary production of biographies and anthologies by and about women poets, Bernstein suggests that Garnett facilitated such research projects as Levy's inquiry into Rossetti's poetry, and that his own writing about Rossetti, Levy, and Blind for the *Dictionary of National Biography* — edited for ten years by Woolf's father Leslie Stephen — reflects his investment in their careers. This chapter culminates in a careful reading of the extant correspondence between Garnett and Blind, who achieved what Bernstein calls a mutual mentorship, in discussing not only her poetry and research — she produced the very first biography of Eliot, published in the "Eminent Women" series — but also their reading of other poets' work and Garnett's own poetry.

<5>In its final two chapters, *Roomscape* turns back to Eliot, then forward to Woolf, appraising their decidedly less enthusiastic responses to the Reading Room. Each eschewed its exteriority (albeit for different reasons) under the pressure of what Bernstein calls "dome consciousness." Distinguished by a deft reading of *Romola* (1862-3), the fourth chapter traces the "interlocking network systems through which Eliot moved and engaged with books, manuscripts and people" while working on that novel to produce "a geography of her reading and writing practices" (114). While the Reading Room was one point in that system, Eliot preferred the London Library as a lending institution, sought to buy (rather than borrow) the books she needed for her research into Savonarola's Florence, and of course traveled to Italy with George Henry Lewes to carry out her archival work. She thus visited Bloomsbury's "panopticon of unwanted visibility" (120) always with Lewes at her side and only when he could not otherwise provide her with the information that she needed. As Bernstein notes, Eliot's preference for privacy over exposure suggests that as for Thomas Carlyle, main mover behind the creation of the London Library, and for Woolf, whose father became that library's president in 1892, "reading and writing are valued as solitary acts, best pursued in the privacy of one's own home" (135). If Eliot's avoidance of the Reading Room has an obvious biographical referent in her unconventional liaison with the married Lewes, then it also casts her own salon at the Priory as a kind of compensatory mechanism.(2)

<6>In Chapter Five, Bernstein identifies a comparable "reluctance about public sphere exteriority" (153) in the early part of Woolf's career. Drawing on both *Jacob's Room* (1922) and the second chapter of *A Room of One's Own* (1929), she also speculates, however, that the physical features of the Reading Room itself provide "corollaries to the recycling and meandering style of thinking and researching and writing Woolf pursues" (157), in a formation she terms "cartwheel formalism" (156). Systematically deploying her own extensive catalogical knowledge to challenge Woolf's claim that traces of literary women were entirely absent from the Reading Room, Bernstein shows, for example, that "the shelves of the gallery, according to the 1886 catalogue, did hold books by George Eliot and all three Brontë sisters, as well as many other volumes by women who wrote about women" (165); the continuing presence of women's writing and women writers under the dome thus belies Woolf's vision of the room as a patriarchal space. Putting Woolf's partial and strategic view especially into dialogue with Levy's varied representations of the Reading Room, *Roomscape* posits instead a way of experiencing this heterochronic space as occupied by the ghostly presences of past readers and writers: Levy's story, "The Recent Telepathic Occurrence at the British Museum" (1888), registers the haunting of readers and writers as a mode of knowledge that exceeds rational processes. In a brief coda, Bernstein documents for our posterity the ongoing presence of important women scholars and creative artists in the years before the Reading Room closed for good in 1997, here following

Levy in performing the sort of homage to a vanished but not forgotten past that Woolf's writing strategically refused to engage.

<7>Even in the organization of its materials, *Roomscape* helps to revise the version of late-Victorian women's literary history that Woolf's writing, deliberately or not, did much to promulgate, for as numerous other scholars have also shown, the decades between Eliot's death and Woolf's emergence were indeed chock full of writing women who took advantage of new possibilities for mobility and autonomy to carve out active careers conducted in communal contexts. By placing these figures at the forefront, Bernstein decenters both the earlier Eliot and the later Woolf, who come to look a bit more like exceptions to a pervasive general rule, and invites us instead to consider the frequently feminist collectivities of the intervening generation as providing an alternative model to the solitary autonomous genius. Although *Roomscape*'s departure from conventional chronology might be disorienting for some readers, the resulting gains, both methodological and theoretical, more than make up for it — not least by demonstrating the continuing relevance, across time and space, of keeping our ears and eyes trained on the past in the interest of shaping our collective future as feminist scholars.

This review was solicited by the Editors-in-Chief.

Endnotes

(1)Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005), 29, 26.(^)

(2)For more on the Priory salon, see Kathleen McCormack, *George Eliot in Society: Travels Abroad and Sundays at the Priory* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013).(^)