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Henry James's "The Real Thing" and the Triumph of Simulacra

In Henry James's story "The Real Thing" (April 1892) the narrator-painter, working on illustrations for a book, is visited by "[a] gentleman and a lady" who wish to find employment as models. The artist instinctively feels they are somehow unfit for the job, but he decides to employ them, partly out of compassion and partly out of curiosity.

On the one hand, the Monarchs are considered by the painter to be "artistic": "'Oh yes, a lady in a book!' She was singularly like a bad illustration"; and Major Monarch says that in her earlier days she was even called "the Beautiful Statue" (207). In the eyes of the artist, "they gratified the general relish for stature, complexion and 'form'" (209). More importantly however, the Monarchs want to pass for "the real thing," genuine models of "a gentleman... or a lady" (210-11).

The Monarchs were, indeed, the real thing, as far as their descent, manners and appearance were concerned. It is striking, therefore, that the artist should be somehow skeptical about them:

But somehow with all their perfections I didn't easily believe in them. After all they were amateurs and the ruling passion of my life was the detestation of the amateur. Combined with this was another perversity – an innate preference for the represented subject over the real one: the defect of the real was so apt to be a lack of representation. I liked things that appeared; then one was sure. Whether they *were* or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question. (209)

Although the word "simulacrum" never appears in the text, while "copy" does, the distinction seems to be tacitly drawn. Naturally, the "represented subject" in the above quotation denotes a copy, expressly at least; but the narrator also subsumes "things that appeared" under that category, significantly slighting the question of their origin: "Whether they *were* or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question." The appearance of a thing which has no origin, which is an appearance *only*, and which is *not* a representation of an object, is a simulacrum; and it is the ascendancy of the simulacrum over the copy of which the narrator grows gradually aware.

His idea of an “excellent model” is personified by Miss Churm, who “being so little in herself... should yet *be so much in others*.... [S]he could represent everything” (211, emphasis added), and, later, Oronte: “a young man whom [he] at once saw to be a foreigner and who proved in fact an Italian acquainted with no English word but [the narrator’s] name which he uttered *in a way that made it seem to include all others*” (217, emphasis added).

There is indeed a quality in both models which makes them somehow interchangeable: not only can Oronte look like an Englishman, but also Miss Churm may well pass for an Italian woman; they both can represent virtually anything, but this is almost to say that they do *not* represent anything, for in the model-copy relation the situation is unthinkable. The distinction between a model and a copy seems to be shaken in the case of the perfect sitters; hence the necessity of introducing the term *simulacrum*.

According to Brian Massumi, simulacrum commonly denotes a copy “whose relation to the model has become so attenuated that it can no longer properly be said to be a copy.” The idea of a copy presupposes a reality that is represented through it, hence the world of copies-icons is simultaneously the world of representation. The world of simulacra, conversely, is freed from representation, since simulacra do not re-present any reality; rather they are “reality” in themselves.

In *The Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze analyzes the question of simulacrum in the context of Platonism. He declares that Platonic motivation of the theory of Ideas is a consequence of a will to separate the copy from the original; to distinguish “the ‘thing’ itself from its images... the model from the simulacrum” (Deleuze, *Logic* 253), appearance from essence, or, to put it differently, to recognize false pretenders (inauthentic copies).

It is important to emphasize that the simulacrum does not merely signify a false copy; rather, it undermines the very “notations of copy and model” (Deleuze, *Logic* 256). It does not actually enter the opposition between good and bad copies, since copies are always founded on resemblance, while simulacra are founded on dissimilarity. For Plato, however, resemblance was not an external relevance of the image to the thing, but of the image to the Idea of the thing. Hence the copy is a faithful image of something only if it is founded on its essence, if it is essentially, internally similar. Simulacrum, on the other hand, is

an image without resemblance [which] still produces an *effect* of resemblance; but this is an effect of the whole, completely external and produced by totally different means than those at work within the model. The simulacrum is built upon a disparity or upon a difference. It internalizes dissimilarity. This is why we can no longer define it in relation to a model imposed on the copies, a model of the Same from which the

copies' resemblance derives. If the simulacrum still has a model, it is another model, a model of the Other (*l'Autre*) from which there flows an internalized dissemblance. (Deleuze, *Logic* 258)

Having established the transcendent foundation with the Same as model and the Similar as copy, Plato initiated the metaphysics of presence which dominated philosophical fields for centuries. Yet, as Deleuze concludes, the reversal of Platonism was already incipient in Platonism itself, in the power of repressed simulacra. For Deleuze, Platonism is based on "the error of transcendence," that is, thinking difference as grounded on identity (the Same). According to Deleuze, there is no such foundation, as there is no ultimate truth or reality to be represented (Colebrook 76). In fact, there is no fixed being, whether human or inhuman, since everything is immersed, as it were, in the flow of becoming. Life is a continual "becoming-other" and the images are not copies of a reality but they *are* "real"; they are simulacra, images based on difference (becoming) rather than on similarity (identity).

Moreover, in the process of becoming Deleuze sees difference as the principle of life, a creative force which eternally repeats itself, always producing new powers of becoming. A copy cannot be based on difference, whereas simulacrum necessarily is. Instead of the production of replicas, there is constant repetition of difference, and "the only 'Same,' is the power of not remaining the same" (Colebrook 60). Identity, says Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, is only an effect generated in the process of the game of repetition and difference (22).

To return to James's tale, the difference between "the real thing and the make-believe" (215), that is, Mrs. Monarch on the one hand and Miss Churm or Oronte on the other, is one of variety, of – indeed – a *difference*:

At first I was extremely pleased with her ladylike air, and it was a satisfaction, on coming to follow her lines, to see how good they were and how far they could lead the pencil. But after a little skirmishing I began to find her too insurmountably stiff; do what I would with it my drawing looked like a photograph or a copy of a photograph. Her figure had *no variety of expression – she herself had no sense of variety.* (214, emphasis added)

Even more telling is the following passage:

I placed [Mrs. Monarch] in every conceivable position and *she managed to obliterate the differences.* She was always a lady certainly, and into the bargain was *always the*

same lady. She was the real thing but *always the same thing*. There were moments when I rather writhed under the serenity of her confidence that she **was** the real thing. (214, original emphasis in bold, remaining emphasis added)

The narrator's complaint that Mrs. Monarch is always the same and that she is able to "obliterate the differences" sounds oddly Deleuzean, since Deleuze aims to do the opposite, that is, to obliterate the Same and create difference.

After I had drawn Mrs. Monarch a dozen times I felt surer even than before that the value of such a model as Miss Churm resided precisely in the fact that what she did have was a curious and inexplicable talent for imitation. Her usual appearance was like a curtain which she could draw up at request for a capital performance. (215)

At this point, it is necessary to emphasize the ambivalence of the word "imitation," which directs one's attention to the concept of mimesis. The latter term comes from the Greek word *mimos*, mime, which means "a form of drama in which actors tell a story by gestures" (Cuddon 511) as well as an actor performing in such a drama. According to Zofia Mitosek, who traces the etymology of mimesis at the beginning of her book, the subsequent form of the word *mimos* was the verb *mimeisthai*, "signifying an action of imitating, playing somebody else, being similar. *Mimesis*... the latest form from the semantic group designated picture, image, imitation, reproduction" (15). She further clarifies the meaning of the term as "an action or procedure as a result of which an object or behavior comprises in its matter some aspects of form of another object or behavior, existing before and in another matter" (17). In relation to art, explains Mitosek, mimesis is a "creation of a work of art, of which aspects are similar to the form of objects external to that work of art" (17). Functioning on two levels, artistic imitation denotes both a process of producing a copy of an object and a relation of representation which is a result of the process. For instance, in a drama, a performance pertains to the process, being based on a finished text which itself is a result of mimetic practice (17).

Apparently, Miss Churm's imitation is not exactly of the same sort, since neither she as a model for the picture nor the picture for which she sat were actually copies, and the process involved was not representation but simulation. The very fact that she was able to "represent" everything undermines the very notion of *the represented*, a copy. In her case there cannot exist any internal resemblance to a model, for there is no model to be copied; and even if Miss Churm were to imitate Mrs. Monarch, she would simply lack the essential qualities of "a lady" – she was "vulgar" (218). The pictures were not representations or copies either. As the painter asserts, the models were not "discoverable in

[his] picture[s]," as opposed to the drawings taken from the Monarchs: "They saw a couple of drawings that I had made of the establishment [Oronte] and Mrs. Monarch hinted that it never would have struck her he had sat for them. 'Now the drawings you make from *us*, they look exactly like us,' she reminded me, smiling in triumph; and I recognized that this was indeed just their defect" (218).

The painter is confronted with two modes of reading the world, which can be expressed by the following formulas: "'only that which resembles differs' and 'only differences can resemble each other'" (Deleuze, *Logic* 14). As Deleuze declares, the former statement defines difference founded on prior identity or similitude, while the latter reverses the relation in such a way that the resemblance *and* identity become the product of a difference. In Deleuze's words, "[the] first reading precisely defines the world of copies or representations; it posits the world as icon. The second, contrary to the first, defines the world of simulacra; it posits the world itself as phantasm" (Deleuze, *Logic* 261-62).

The narrator evidently opts for the difference and repetition; he resists the Same and the Similar as personified by the Monarchs and welcomes simulation and simulacra in the persons of Mrs. Churm and Oronte. Interestingly, this also involves the rejection of the real as opposed to the unreal and simultaneous affirmation of the unreal as "realer than the real," to use Baudrillard's famous expression. The narrator's friend even claimed that the Monarchs "got [him] into *false* ways" (224) and by saying this he reversed the very opposition between the false and the true. In fact, the opposition is annihilated rather than reversed when one perceives that the Monarchs, though consistently referred to as "the real thing," are nonetheless presented as extremely artificial (the word "artistic" also connoting artificiality), and are rather flat as characters.

In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze writes that once "the simulacra rise and... affirm their rights among icons and copies" (262), the distinction between essence and appearance or copy and model stops operating, since it can function solely in the world of representation. Such a world, according to Deleuze and Baudrillard, does not exist. In the world of simulacra posited by them there is no original reality that can then be represented, and each event, as well as each image, is always already different from itself, an instance of simulation in the perpetual process of becoming.

Each thing or being "is" only its ability to transform, to become other than itself, and to generate false, masked images of itself. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze argues that masks are "the true subject of repetition," that "repetition is really what masks itself while it is constituted" (48-49), and that there is no original thing which is thus repeated: there are only masks, fake images, simulacra. Originality, just as identity, is rather an *effect* produced by simulation; the Same and the Similar are simulated – but this, main-

tains Deleuze, does not make them illusory; they are real as long as they are simulated. Illusion presupposes the real/true, and in the world of simulacra the division is invalidated. For him, both simulacrum and simulation *are* real – it is becoming and creating the difference (Colebrook 101).

The Nietzschean concept of the eternal return used by Deleuze is inseparable from the concept of simulation understood as “a process of disguising, where, behind each mask, there is yet another” (Deleuze, *Logic* 262), since it is in the eternal return that the reversal of representation and destruction of icons is ascertained. What returns eternally is difference:

Only the divergent series, insofar as they are divergent, return: that is, each series insofar as it displaces its difference along with all the others, and all series insofar as they complicate their difference within the chaos which is without beginning or end. The circle of the eternal return is a circle which is always eccentric in relation to an always decentered center (Deleuze, *Logic* 264).

No foundation and only difference: endlessly repeated, the proliferation of simulacra and the ruin of representation necessarily pertain to art as well. The world presented in a literary work of art is no longer a mirror reflection of reality, for the “reality” to be represented is missing. It cannot precisely be termed illusory, as that would necessitate the opposing term – true or real. As Baudrillard says, “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (2).

Literature does not, then, represent, it *creates* reality; it opens new possibilities of becoming and creates new meanings. In great literature (*minor* literature, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms) language is apparently a foreign element, liable to mutation and variation, a potential carrier of new sense and “the vehicle for the *creation* of identity rather than the *expression* of identity” (Colebrook 103-04). Minoritarian literature does not propose a unified image, either of a world or of the human being, but it always affirms the transformative power of difference. Language which is constitutive of literature is itself a flow of difference.

Great literature repeats; it does not imitate. Moreover, it does not repeat or reproduce the established surface structures, such as forms and rhythms. It is literary becoming that is repeated, which means reactivation of the forces that initially produced the work of art which is later repeated (Colebrook 119). Simply put, it means repetition of the cause, not

of the effect, which may actually mean abandoning the “original” forms absolutely. An example given by Colebrook illustrates the problem well:

More broadly, imagine if we were to really repeat the French Revolution. If we were to dress up in eighteenth-century costume, build a mock Bastille and re-enact the gestures, then we would only be repeating the surface form; there would be nothing revolutionary about this at all. If, however, we were to seize the revolutionary power, the demand for difference that opened the French revolution, then we would end up with something quite different, necessarily unpredictable because the first event was unpredictable. The history is true anachronism. Real repetition maximizes difference. (Colebrook 120)

Literature is, for Deleuze, an instance of his Nietzschean concept of the eternal return. It is again the difference only that returns, and it has the power of transforming and disrupting the literary tradition and the literary context. Therefore, the only constant in literature is always being different.

In James’s tale, always being different is opposed to being “real,” and, consequently, difference is forced into the domain of the unreal – of the simulacrum. However, as has already been mentioned, the supposed “real” is simultaneously rejected as something defective, something that, significantly, can lead one “into *false* ways.” Paradoxically then, the “real” Monarchs are somewhat *untrue* and are, in the eyes of the artist, more unbelievable than his false pretenders, Miss Churm and Oronte.

It is the question of remaining the same (“[Mrs. Monarch] was the real thing but always the same thing”) versus becoming other (the excellent sitters being always different from themselves) that is made conspicuous in the text. Through *not* remaining the same, or in other words, through repeating the difference, the simulacra, personified in the story by Miss Churm and Oronte, affirm their own existence, or, in fact, their very life. Since life is the constant flow of becoming, to remain the same is to refuse to exist, or to be unable to exist. Not only do the Monarchs fade away from the text, as it were; they also gradually disappear from life (literally, they lack the means of subsistence), yielding to the pressure of once repressed and now rising simulacra.

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