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Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer

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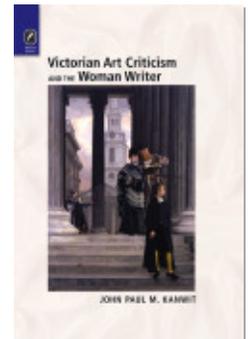
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“I have often wished in vain for another’s judgment”

MODELING IDEAL AESTHETIC COMMENTARY IN
ANNE BRONTË’S *THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL*

In her 1850 “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,” Charlotte Brontë explains why she and her sisters adopted pseudonyms: “We had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise” (52–53). Bias against women authors was widely recognized in the Victorian period, but Charlotte cites a more specific problem: the dearth of fair criticism for women. Charlotte complains that women’s writing is judged based on the writer’s identity rather than on the merits of the work itself and that women writers tend to receive empty praise that betrays the critic’s disdain. Charlotte’s strategic use of a pseudonym eventually gained her productive criticism if not immediate publication; writing as Currer Bell, she submitted *The Professor* (not published until 1857) to Smith, Elder, and Co. and received in 1847 a useful letter in return:

It declined . . . to publish that tale, for business reasons, but it discussed its merits and demerits so courteously, so considerately, in a spirit so rational, with a discrimination so enlightened, that this very refusal cheered the

author better than a vulgarly-expressed acceptance would have done. ("Biographical Notice" 53–54)

Against the "prejudice" and "flattery" that women artists often experienced, Charlotte defines in the "Biographical Notice" several features of ideal criticism, especially the requirements that it be reasonable, educated, and "courteously" phrased.

Unlike Charlotte, Anne Brontë wrote very little about her artistic practice outside of her preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Therein, Anne complains that even writing under her pseudonym of Acton Bell failed to gain *Tenant* the sort of rational criticism that Charlotte received concerning *The Professor*. Instead, *Tenant* received either praise "greater than it deserved" or "asperity . . . more bitter than just" ("Preface" 3). Anne hoped that critics would objectively read *Tenant* as a truthful representation distinctly different from the works of Currer or Ellis Bell ("Preface" 5). However, many contemporary reviewers lumped the works of the three authors together.¹ Once Charlotte revealed the identity of the sisters in her 1850 "Biographical Notice," critics assumed that *Tenant* was simply modeled on *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*, a notion that was often repeated in the twentieth century. Other nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics further questioned Anne's status as a realistic artist by claiming that her inclusion of Helen Huntingdon's long diary in the middle of *Tenant* was an unthinking mistake. Charlotte herself undercut Anne's claim to realistic art by claiming that her subject was—against Charlotte's explicit advice—too closely based on the Brontës' family life ("Biographical Notice" 55).

More recently, Margaret Mary Berg, Antonia Losano, and others have demonstrated that Anne was an artist consciously different from her sisters, especially in her representation of an independent woman painter, Helen Huntingdon, who develops toward a more realistic style.² However, despite this recent attention to Helen's painting and, more generally, to resurrecting Anne as the intellectual and artistic equal of Charlotte and Emily, aesthetic commentary in Anne's novels remains underexamined. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as well as *Agnes Grey* reveals that Anne shared with Charlotte a vision of ideal external criticism as both educated and rational, criticism that is best exemplified by *Tenant*'s Gilbert Markham. But Anne also suggests, primarily through Helen's writings in her diary, that the artist is sometimes best served by her own commentary. Against the Victorian stereotype that equated serious criticism with an external male voice, Helen

objectively assesses both her own artworks and those of others. Through Helen's selective use of aesthetic commentary, Anne Brontë provides an implicit answer to complaints that she either failed to heed any artistic advice or that she did not understand her own aesthetic choices in *Tenant*.

As has been well-documented, the Brontës were very knowledgeable about the visual arts, a fact that informed key scenes in their novels. In *The Art of the Brontës*, Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars detail how Anne, Charlotte, and Emily gained this knowledge—primarily from romantic drawing manuals; from their art instructor, John Bradley; and from their artist brother Branwell. Alexander notes that Charlotte and her sisters were not simply passive receivers of art; they “were often critical [in their juvenilia] of the forced association between text and picture, occasioned by the poetry or prose being commissioned to accompany an already completed engraving” (15). In other words, the Brontë sisters early on demonstrated attentive and unconventional aesthetic interpretations that they later hoped to find among readers of their novels. Charlotte, for example, followed “the art reviews she had read in the pages of *Blackwoods*” in critiquing such engravings for their uses of perspective and the picturesque (Alexander 15). Sellars writes of Anne, “We have no documentation of the writer’s personal views on art but we can attempt to interpret them by reading her novels and by scrutinizing the small number of her drawings still in existence” (134). As I will shortly illustrate in more detail, Anne’s novels demonstrate her view of ideal aesthetic commentary as informed by both an extraordinary knowledge of artistic technique and a willingness to question conventional symbolic interpretations.

In contrast to Anne, we know much about Charlotte’s aesthetic views, especially on nineteenth-century art criticism as well as on her sisters’ novels. Charlotte read and enjoyed William Hazlitt’s essays (Wise 3: 88, 174). Like her biographer Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte was very familiar with John Ruskin’s more famous works, including *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *Modern Painters*. Writing to W. S. Williams (the reader at Smith, Elder, and Co.) in July of 1848, Charlotte expressed her enthusiasm about Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*, Volume 1 (Wise 2: 240). Given Charlotte’s excitement about reading Ruskin, and her willingness to communicate her views of him with acquaintances outside the family, it seems likely that she would have shared *Modern Painters* with her sisters as well. Helen Huntingdon’s evolution to more realistic art further suggests that Anne was familiar with the Ruskin school of criticism.

Moreover, Charlotte had Anne explicitly in mind in her July 1848 letter to Williams, as she immediately follows her comments on Ruskin with her

worries that negative reviews of *Tenant* have "depressed" Anne (Wise 2: 241). There are parallels as well between her views of Ruskin and of *Tenant* in this letter. Praising Ruskin's style—"there is both energy and beauty in it"—she opines that *Tenant*, by contrast, "had faults of execution, faults of art" (Wise 2: 240–41). Though Charlotte states in a letter to Williams dated August 14, 1848 that all three sisters are still working on their "art," she clearly viewed *Tenant* as a novel inferior to Anne's earlier *Agnes Grey* (Wise 2: 241, 243). Charlotte's 1850 "Biographical Notice" confirmed her discontent with *Tenant*'s subject as "an entire mistake. . . . She hated her work, but would pursue it" (55). Though Charlotte complains elsewhere in her "Biographical Notice" that critics assess women's art based on the personality of the writer, she seems to make this same mistake here, conflating the novel with the dourness that she saw in her sister. Charlotte suggests that *Tenant* is, in effect, devoid of novelistic art; the book is a mere sermon or documentary designed to warn readers about the evils of debauchery. Perhaps most damaging to Anne's artistic reputation, Charlotte describes her sister's writing as drudgery, not as an artistic process. For Berg, though Charlotte's "passage stresses Anne Brontë's willful determination to use art as a vehicle of moral instruction, the impression that it ultimately conveys is that of a writer at the mercy of a compelling force [personal experience] which she cannot resist and which prevents her from choosing a saner alternative by submitting to the authority of her sister's 'reasonings'" (10). Charlotte places herself in the "Biographical Notice" as the sort of rational reader that she found at Smith, Elder, and Co. after submitting *The Professor* and complains that Anne failed to heed her warnings, thereby sacrificing her artistic practice.³

Though Anne did not write directly about nineteenth-century aesthetics aside from her preface to *Tenant*, her novels contradict Charlotte by showing that she did understand the difference between the repetition of mere personal experience and the process of discovery that creates successful art. In *Agnes Grey*, Anne provides a model of unbiased artistic critique that can lead to such artworks. This aesthetic commentary seeks to ignore monetary value, gossip about artworks, and even family ties to the artist. Anne contrasts the ideal aesthetic commentator with Rosalie Ashby, who evaluates paintings based merely on these superficial considerations. Inviting Agnes to Ashby Park, her new home after marrying Lord Ashby, Rosalie remarks that Agnes will see there "two fine Italian paintings of great value . . . I forget the artist . . . doubtless you will be able to discover prodigious beauties in them, which you must point out to me, as I only admire by hearsay" (174, chap. 21). Rosalie's assessment is clearly not based on the

careful interpretive work that Anne expected readers to bring to her novels. For Rosalie, the paintings are simply another possession, like her poodle and even her own child (173–74, chap. 21). In many respects, Rosalie appears as the typical nineteenth-century character who betrays her superficiality though her inability to appreciate art. Yet Rosalie is also distinctive in recognizing her interpretive shortcomings and in pointing to Agnes as a better model. Though we have few examples in the novel of Agnes commenting on art, her ability, in Rosalie’s words, “to discover” something new by actually looking “in” artworks suggests features of this interpretive model. This process of discovery is equally important in *Tenant* and contradicts Charlotte’s claim that Anne viewed artistic production as mere drudgery. As we will see, superficial characters in *Tenant* lack even the ability to discern their betters in aesthetic perception, suggesting a pointed social critique of the Regency rakes in that novel and of the Victorian tendency to discuss art merely because it was fashionable to do so.

Like Helen Huntingdon in *Tenant*, Agnes Grey’s sister Mary successfully paints for money. Also like Helen, Mary does so out of necessity—ostensibly so that her ailing father can “spend a few weeks at a watering place” (*Agnes Grey* 7, chap. 1). Mary’s mother encourages the plan: “Mary, you are a beautiful drawer. What do you say to doing a few more pictures, in your best style, and getting them framed, with the water-colour drawings you have already done, and trying to dispose of them to some liberal picture-dealer, who has the sense to discern their merits?” (7–8; chap. 1). Mrs. Grey’s comments are notable for several reasons. First, the picture dealer must be “liberal,” that is, willing to accept paintings for sale from a woman artist. Mrs. Grey does not propose hiding Mary’s identity as Helen does in *Tenant*; she hopes that Mary’s paintings will be judged by “their merits” and not by the artist’s sex. Moreover, Mary would have been identified as a woman artist not only by her name but also by her feminine medium of watercolors (Losano, “Professionalization” 25n). Helen’s decisions to hide her identity and to paint in the masculine medium of oils surely made *Tenant* more threatening to Victorian readers than *Agnes Grey*. Unlike Helen, Mary does not actually support herself or her family, as the Greys ultimately do not need the money (Mary’s father encourages her to keep the money). By contrast, Helen supports herself through her painting in *Tenant*, suggesting Anne Brontë’s own growing assurance as a novelist and her desire to subvert stereotypes about women’s independence.

Mrs. Grey’s comments about Mary’s art are most significant because of their critical acuity. Mrs. Grey does not judge Mary’s art based on the fact that Mary is her own daughter but on their merits as aesthetic objects. In

this sense, Mrs. Grey functions as the sort of ideal critic and reader that both Charlotte and Anne Brontë sought. Mrs. Grey demonstrates her objective appraisal of her daughters' art by contrasting her praise of Mary with her more qualified comments to Agnes: "You draw pretty well too; if you choose some simple piece for your subject, I dare say you will be able to produce something we shall all be proud to exhibit" (8, chap. 1). The implications here seem fairly straightforward: Agnes is good enough to hang something up (if perhaps only in their own home) but not talented enough to earn money. Though we never find out if Agnes might have sold her paintings if she had followed a different career path (Mrs. Grey's comments solidify Agnes's plan to become a governess), we do know that Mrs. Grey was right about Mary, who later "had good success [in selling] her drawings" (48, chap. 5). Mary's more successful drawing career is not solely due to her talent but also to hard work, which contrasts with Agnes's much more distracted practice. Agnes remarks, "Mary got her drawing materials, and steadily set to work. I got mine too; but while I drew, I thought of other things" (9, chap. 1). As we will see, Mary's commitment to hard work allies her with the similarly successful Helen Huntingdon in *Tenant*, which suggests the value that Anne Brontë attached to this virtue in aesthetic production.⁴

Both Mary in *Agnes Grey* and Helen in *Tenant* lack access to the sort of external, public aesthetic commentary that Charlotte Brontë valued in her artistic career, and so they must seek more private sources. For Mary, it is her mother who determines the merit and marketability of her work. For Helen, artistic insights are first developed through personal reflections in her diary. Elizabeth Langland usefully asserts that Helen's diary mitigates the "soft nonsense," or unrealistic niceties, that Anne Brontë hoped to avoid in writing *Tenant* (Brontë, "Preface" 3). Unlike the constant gossip that Helen experiences upon moving to Wildfell Hall—gossip that is "without identifiable authority" and "mindless"—writing in the novel "suggests both thought and authority" (Langland, *Anne Brontë* 122). Helen develops her aesthetic "authority" through her written reflections on her art. Writing allows Helen to judge her artworks objectively based on form, technique, and artistic conception. Moreover, Helen's writing prompts her (and readers) to consider the symbolic significance of her paintings, which is less important to her career but central to her growing awareness of herself and others. Helen's decision to establish independence by leaving her husband and painting for a living was the most outwardly shocking aspect of *Tenant* for contemporary readers. Yet it is Helen's critical mind, as expressed through her commentary on art, that helps her improve her painting and

therefore her earning potential. Helen paints for a living only during a brief section of her life after she manages her escape from Arthur Huntingdon and before his death allows her to reassume the station of a lady. However, Helen writes about her paintings throughout her long diary, both before and during the period in which she paints for a living.

While circumstances force Helen to sell her paintings, she early on expresses professional motivations in her diary by hoping to reach a broader audience. Scholars have commonly identified two phases in Helen's painting career: amateur and professional (Losano, "Anne Brontë's Aesthetics" 53), but this division is blurred when we examine Helen's early writings on her art. Helen begins her diary by imagining that her art may one day do more than simply distract her: "If my productions cannot now be seen by any one but myself and those who do not care about them, they, possibly, may be hereafter. But then, there is one face I am always trying to paint or to sketch, and always without success; and that vexes me" (123, chap. 16). Arthur Huntingdon, the owner of the face she is trying to draw, is one possible audience for her art. But Helen is aware that this infatuation impedes access to an even larger, more astute audience. Her many portraits of Arthur are personal, not public, works, as her later mortified reaction to Arthur's discovery of them indicates. Even in writing about these portraits of Arthur, Helen assesses them critically, noting that her efforts are "always without success" (123, chap. 16). To be sure, Helen's infatuation with her subject may be part of the reason for her self-critique, but she is equally exacting in assessing other artworks at this point in her career.

Helen's writing on an early landscape painting that she intended to be her "master-piece" (150, chap. 18) demonstrates a critical knowledge of formal artistic terms:

The scene represented was an open glade in a wood. A group of dark Scotch firs was introduced in the middle distance to relieve the prevailing freshness of the rest; but in the foreground were part of the gnarled trunk and of the spreading boughs of a large forest tree, whose foliage was of a brilliant golden green. . . . Upon this bough, that stood out in bold relief against the sombre firs, were seated an amorous pair of turtle doves, whose soft sad coloured plumage afforded a contrast of another nature. (150, chap. 18)

Helen's command of such formal concepts as "middle distance," "foreground," and "bold relief" shows that she is a serious artist prior to selling her paintings. While early-Victorian commentators often described

paintings in terms of narrative significance, Helen presages later, professional critics in focusing on form as well as on the story told by the painting. These formal terms suggest that Helen’s painting before her marriage is not merely a woman’s accomplishment, and thus it may be too simple to assume that she becomes a professional only when she makes money. Moreover, Helen’s command of painterly technique indicates that Anne Brontë was more knowledgeable about novelistic form than those who have critiqued *Tenant* have commonly believed. In a famous remark that influenced twentieth-century views of the novel, the Irish novelist and critic George Moore (1852–1933) wrote that “almost any man of letters” would have advised Anne to let Helen tell her story directly rather than interrupting the story with Gilbert’s reading of Helen’s diary (253).⁵ But Anne seems in *Tenant* conscious of both formal features and overall aesthetic effect. Helen considers her landscape in total as “somewhat presumptuous in the design” (150, chap. 18). Helen suggests through this comment that she understands the distinction between art and life. For Losano, “A ‘presumptuous design’ hints at the intervention of the artist into the realities of nature, the presence of conscious aesthetic form rather than systematic copying from nature” (“Anne Brontë’s Aesthetics” 56). In emphasizing aesthetic design over mimesis, Anne Brontë here seems well aware of how to avoid the problem that Charlotte and other critics supposedly identified in her novels—that is, that they were too much like Anne’s own life.

Through her heroine, Anne seems equally conscious that art should communicate certain ideas through an original composition. Helen writes in her diary, “I had endeavoured to convey the idea of a sunny morning. I had ventured to give more of the bright verdure of spring or early summer to the grass and foliage, than is commonly attempted in painting” (150, chap. 18). Even at this supposedly preprofessional stage in her career, Helen’s verbs indicate awareness of her own artistic inadequacies in reaching for the uncommon. This gap between ideals and execution—a recurring problem in Victorian aesthetics—is similarly represented in *Jane Eyre*. Jane remarks of the paintings that Rochester examines, “My hand would not second my fancy; and in each case it had wrought but a pale portrait of the thing I had conceived” (157, chap. 13)—an opinion seconded by Rochester: “You have secured the shadow of your thought; but no more, probably” (158, chap. 13). Losano notes that Jane’s ekphrasis “emphasizes the process of painting rather than the product” (*Woman Painter* 116). By contrast, Helen’s written commentary aims at—and eventually helps achieve—a more finished product, which suggests a difference in aesthetic philosophy between Anne’s novels and those of Charlotte. Instead of emphasizing

the process of artistic creation, Anne hoped that her novel would represent successful likenesses of real, if sometimes undesirable, characters (“Preface” 3).

Helen’s writings about her landscape thus demonstrate her early awareness of artistic ideas and formal execution. But her commentary also shows the importance of symbolic and narrative interpretations, which often underscore Helen’s emotional connections to her paintings. A central part of Anne’s aesthetic philosophy, one wrongly critiqued by Charlotte as unconsciously expressed, was that art should be informed by lived experience and feeling. Naomi Jacobs remarks that Helen’s diary in general allows her to express “all the rage and frustration she must suppress when with other people. She mentions several times that the writing ‘calms’ her” (213). While Jacobs has Helen’s married life specifically in mind, her observation about Helen’s ability both to steady herself and to express feelings through her writing is equally applicable during her courtship with Huntingdon. These feelings are prominently expressed through symbolic descriptions of her landscape painting. Most obviously, the “amorous pair of turtle doves” in the painting suggests a connection to Helen’s infatuation with Arthur Huntingdon (150, chap. 18).

But Helen’s adjectives also imply a warning, which Helen may only realize subconsciously at this point in her life; the turtle doves’ “soft *sad* coloured plumage” indicates the perils that await young couples in love (150, chap. 18; emphasis mine). The turtle doves are “too deeply absorbed in each other” to notice the young girl kneeling before them. This absorption in each other and ignorance of their surroundings suggests narrative significance; the birds are unaware of anything that might threaten their future happiness. The young girl does not provide a better model of attention; her “pleased” and “earnest” gazing show that she does not understand the troubles that await the turtle doves; she will likely make the same mistakes in her own love life (150, chap. 18). As Brontë notes in her preface, the novel as a whole is a warning to young women taken with dashing young men, with symbolic and narrative descriptions of artworks serving to reinforce this message in powerful ways. Brontë suggests that Helen should have read her painting for its negative symbolic connotations as well as for the possibility that the story begun by the painting could end badly.

In contrast to the novel’s ideal mode of interpretation—that is, closely examining form, symbolism, and narrative—Arthur Huntingdon “attentively regard[s] [Helen’s landscape] for a few seconds” (Helen wryly remarks) while trying to court her (150, chap. 18). Huntingdon’s cursory attention to Helen’s painting indicates a pervasive problem in Victorian aes-

thetics, particularly as more and more artworks were available to the public eye. In a lecture delivered at the 1857 Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition, which I discuss more fully in the next chapter, Ruskin argues, “The amount of pleasure that you can receive from any great work, depends wholly on the quantity of attention and energy of mind you can bring to bear upon it” (*Works* 16: 57–58). Similarly, in her preface to the second edition of *Tenant*, Anne Brontë writes that early critics of the novel have read the novel “with a prejudiced mind [or have been] content to judge it by a hasty glance” (3). Huntingdon demonstrates the kind of superficial appraisal about which Ruskin and Brontë worried, a method of looking unlikely to unravel even the simplest artworks. But Huntingdon is not simply marked as a superficial character because of his inability to appreciate art; more specifically, he fails to use the interpretive tools advocated by the novel. Instead of considering Helen’s technique, formal features, and symbols, Huntingdon remarks on the landscape in clichéd terms:

Very pretty, i’faith! and a very fitting study for a young lady.—Spring just opening into summer—morning just approaching noon—girlhood just ripening into womanhood—and hope just verging on fruition. She’s a sweet creature! but why didn’t you make her black hair [that is, like Helen’s]? . . . I should fall in love with her, if I hadn’t the artist before me. (150, chap. 18)

Helen’s technical as well as symbolic description of her painting demonstrate the limits of reading the painting on a merely iconographic level, “searching for particular symbolic motifs and assigning significance to various visual elements in her picture” (Losano, “Anne Brontë’s Aesthetics” 51). Moreover, Helen’s decision about the figure’s hair—“I thought light hair would suit her better” (151, chap. 18)—suggests just one of the ways in which Huntingdon’s biographical reading is amiss. Huntingdon’s association of the painting’s subject with Helen demonstrates a particular challenge that women artists and art critics faced in commentary on their work: not only did they struggle with the general lack of attention that Ruskin describes, but they also had to deal with the sexual interest of male viewers, including that from Ruskin himself. Responding in 1886 to a letter in which the artist and art critic Emilia Dilke acknowledged her intellectual debt to him, Ruskin highlights her sexuality over her status as the foremost authority on French art history in Britain: “I am entirely delighted but more astonished than ever I was in my life—by your pretty letter and profession of discipleship. . . . I thought you at Kensington the sauciest of

girls” (qtd. in Israel 87). Helen escapes this kind of attention only upon first moving to Wildfell Hall.

In an earlier chapter titled “Further Warnings,” Brontë contrasts Arthur Huntingdon’s self-interested appraisal of art with Helen’s thoughtful and solicited commentary on the works of others. Because he is not romantically interested in Milicent Hargrave, Huntingdon “carelessly takes up” her drawings and casts each one aside without comment (136, chap. 17). Instead of forcibly taking another’s paintings—as Huntingdon does so often—Helen provides advice only when asked. She comments on Milicent’s paintings “with my critical observations and advice, at her particular desire” (136, chap. 17). Helen’s “critical” comments and “advice” oppose the mere flattery that women artists commonly experienced in the mid-Victorian period. Although we do not know exactly what Helen says to Milicent, we can guess that she provides expertise about the paintings’ form and ideas, as she does in remarks on her own paintings. Thus, Brontë may have imagined Helen as the sort of figure who could supply some of the rational and courteous criticism on women’s work that she found lacking. But Brontë represents both the value and limitations of such collaborations: while Helen remarks on Milicent’s drawings when asked, she never requests Milicent’s opinions, nor are her drawings ever described in the text, perhaps indicating that Milicent is not the same caliber of artist.⁶

A more significant problem is that Helen’s ability to provide critical commentary to Milicent is limited by her own infatuation: “My attention wandered from [Milicent’s] drawings to the merry group,” which included Huntingdon (136, chap. 17). Brontë here demonstrates that characters cannot be neatly divided between those who appreciate art and those who do not; though Helen provides a better model of attention than does Huntingdon, she too is distracted by her own love interest. Moreover, she initially fails to correctly interpret Huntingdon’s superficial social performances, suggesting her own lack of perceptive acuity. Notably, Helen’s diary helps her begin to “see” Huntingdon more clearly; she writes, “I do not think the whole would appear anything very particular, if written here, without the adventitious aids of look, and tone, and gesture, and that ineffable but indefinite charm, which cast a halo over all he did and said, and which would have made it a delight to look in his face, and hear the music of his voice, if he had been talking positive nonsense” (136, chap. 17). Surely, Huntingdon *is* speaking nonsense, and thus embodies the “soft nonsense”—the mere charming flow of words—that Anne Brontë eschews in her preface (3). Huntingdon appears in Helen’s description as a sort of villainous melodramatic actor with his overstated gestures and his thoughtless words,

a performance that requires little interpretation on the reader’s part. But while Helen partially acknowledges Huntingdon’s superficiality, she is on the whole taken with him.

Like her ekphrastic comments on her landscape painting, Helen’s later writings on Huntingdon’s portrait help her more accurately diagnose his flaws. After experiencing life with the increasingly degenerate Huntingdon and then escaping from him, Helen writes of his portrait, “Now, I see no beauty in it—nothing pleasing in any part of its expression; and yet it is far handsomer and far more agreeable—far less repulsive I should rather say—than he is now; for these six years have wrought almost as great a change upon himself as on my feelings regarding him” (377, chap. 44). Unlike what occurs in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the portrait itself has not changed. Rather, Huntingdon’s physical decline finally causes him to look like what he is—an ugly and vulgar man—a fact that Helen should have read much earlier in his portrait. Similarly to such later Victorian art commentators as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, Helen acknowledges the subjective role of the viewer in assessing art and nature. But, through her comments on her landscape and on Huntingdon’s portrait, she also implies that some interpretations better account for the real life that these artworks represent. Most prominently, art should be interpreted without the sort of romantic “charm” that clouded Helen’s initial appraisal of both Arthur Huntingdon’s social performances and her own portrait of him. As Brontë notes about “vicious characters” in her preface to *Tenant*, “It is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear” (4). Anne here responds to criticism of the first edition of *Tenant* that she went too far in portraying the depravity of Arthur Huntingdon and his friends, saying that they are depicted realistically even if readers might hope that such characters do not exist. Brontë suggests that readers have the duty to acknowledge realistic representations when they are rendered as such.

In noting *Tenant*’s basis in real characters, Anne seems to reinforce Charlotte’s critique that *Tenant*’s subject is merely based on Anne’s own family life (“Biographical Notice” 55). But Anne’s preface also speaks of the thankless and difficult labor inherent in her realistic artistic process: “I wished to tell the truth. . . . But as the priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it, especially as he that does so will be likely to incur more scorn and obloquy for the mud and water into which he has ventured to plunge, than thanks for the jewel he procures” (3). Realistic art, claims Anne, takes more work than simply copying real life or repeating more comfortable stories. As Alexandra Wettlaufer notes, Anne’s realistic artistic vision worked against Charlotte’s

attempts to romanticize the Brontë sisters: “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and its hero, Helen Huntingdon, participated instead in the ongoing construction of a new image of the female artist in the mid-century as neither accidental nor apologetic, but instead as a woman whose identity is deliberately chosen and defiantly located in an unromanticized world of contemporary reality” (225). Similar to Anne’s productive process, Helen describes how she must labor to improve her skills as she moves toward producing more realistic art as a means of financial support:

The palette and the easel, my darling playmates once, must be my sober toil-fellows now. But was I sufficiently skilful as an artist to obtain my livelihood in a strange land, without friends and without recommendation? No; I must labour hard to improve my talent and to produce something worth while as a specimen of my powers, something to speak favourably for me, whether as an actual painter or a teacher. (337, chap. 39)⁷

The sort of work that Helen has in mind here is clearly different from her earlier approach to art. But her consciousness and knowledge of its deficiencies are not new. As I have argued, it is this growing self-knowledge, expressed through writing, that enables Helen to paint for money rather than becoming what was more socially acceptable for a Victorian woman: “a teacher” (337, chap. 29).

If Helen’s early interpretations and paintings are made less successful by her infatuation with Arthur Huntingdon, her efforts to improve her painting through hard work are impeded by unsolicited comments and advances from Walter Hargrave. Helen sets up her easel in the library, which she believes will be private. Hargrave, however, interrupts Helen’s solitary painting with his superficial comments on art. Helen writes sarcastically, “Being a man of taste, he had something to say on this subject as well as another, and having modestly commented on it, without much encouragement from me, he proceeded to expatiate on the art in general” (338, chap. 29). Like Arthur Huntingdon and his lack of attention, Hargrave demonstrates a particular problem in Victorian aesthetics: a tendency for cultured individuals to talk about art merely because it was fashionable to do so. Also like Huntingdon, Hargrave’s primary interest in Helen is sexual; he cares little about her art. Yet Brontë’s primary point here is not about how to judge individual characters based on their appreciation of art but about how a woman’s art should be produced and interpreted. Helen’s writings and her sarcastic tone reveal Anne Brontë’s understanding and critique of the cultural as well as personal challenges that faced women

artists. In response to these challenges, Brontë suggests that a woman’s art is usually best produced and interpreted in solitude, without the distracting attentions of male viewers. Notably, Helen is best served at this point in her artistic career by her own diaristic writings, not by comments from any male viewers.

Helen’s move to Wildfell Hall helps her to avoid, for a time, the bothersome attentions of male suitors, and she there demonstrates her developing cleverness as an artist. Helen takes obvious satisfaction in painting for a living; her studio, she writes,

has assumed quite a professional, business-like appearance already. I am working hard to repay my brother for all his expenses on my account; not that there is the slightest necessity for anything of the kind, but it please me to do so: I shall have so much more pleasure in my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare, and household economy, when I know that I am paying my way honestly. (376–77, chap. 44)

Like Mary in *Agnes Grey*, Helen does not need to work for a living, as her brother would gladly support her. But Helen—in supporting herself fully—subverts Victorian gender norms to a greater extent than does Mary and influences another woman to at least contemplate independence. Weary of her mother’s entreaties to marry, Esther Hargrave tells Helen, “I threaten mamma sometimes, that I’ll run away, and disgrace the family by earning my own livelihood, if she torments me any more; and then that frightens her a little. But I *will* do it, in good earnest, if they don’t mind” (419, chap. 48). Helen counsels patience, but it is she who has abandoned a self-described “career” as a wife. As a painter, Helen gains a certain degree of power and freedom of choice. Her removal of Huntingdon’s portrait from its frame, a frame she will reuse for another saleable painting, symbolizes this greater control over her own affairs (377, chap. 44). Further, Helen deliberately conceals her identity: she signs her paintings with false initials and changes the names of places depicted in her paintings (43, chap. 5)—an indication of Anne Brontë’s knowledge of the period’s fascination with attribution, which was famously connected with her own authorship. Equally important as her growing professional control, Helen’s move to Wildfell Hall facilitates her more astute interpretations of paintings in her diary. It is only after escaping Arthur Huntingdon’s house that Helen is able to read his portrait as an indication of his depravity.

As it turns out, however, Helen becomes too isolated at Wildfell Hall. She can no longer comment on the art of others, and she finds that she

needs an outsider's perspective on her own paintings. Against critics who have argued that Anne Brontë erred in her narrative structure, Juliet McMaster posits the importance of both Helen's diary *and* Gilbert's narration: "As Helen's diary records the destruction of opposites [Helen and Arthur Huntingdon], the story of Gilbert Markham serves to restore our faith in the possibility of a relationship between a man and a woman that is one of equals who are capable of mutual accommodation and beneficial modification" (363). Such "accommodation" and "modification" are significantly expressed through Gilbert and Helen's conversations on aesthetics. Early in his narration, Gilbert indicates his perceptiveness in deciphering Huntingdon's character in one of Helen's portraits: "There was a certain individuality in the features and expression that stamped it, at once, a successful likeness. The bright, blue eyes regarded the spectator with a kind of lurking drollery—you almost expected to see them wink; the lips—a little too voluptuously full—seemed ready to break into a smile" (45, chap. 5). Gilbert here positions himself as an ideal reader of *Tenant* by recognizing this portrait as a realistic representation or "successful likeness." By contrast, early readers of *Tenant* failed to recognize that "characters [like Huntingdon] do exist" ("Preface" 4). Most important, Gilbert can read the portrait for Huntingdon's flawed character. Huntingdon's features are more than simply mimetic for Gilbert; the eyes and lips rightly suggest for him negative symbolic qualities in the way that they seem to wink and smile mockingly. In referring to his reader in the second person, Gilbert asks readers of the novel to imagine how the portrait would mock its viewer if it could move. We are thus encouraged to interpret the portrait the way Gilbert does, realizing that Huntingdon is "prouder of his beauty than his intellect" (45, chap. 5). Through Gilbert's interpretation, we are meant to understand that Huntingdon represents the certain threat to women that Anne Brontë implies he is in positing the existence of "vicious characters" ("Preface" 4).

To be sure, the autobiographical form of the novel (in the guise of his letter to Halford) allows Gilbert to "shape his past to portray himself in the most advantageous light" (Westcott 214), that is, to make himself look perceptive. But Gilbert's trick is ultimately Brontë's; by constructing her novel so that Gilbert can portray himself as an interpretive model, Brontë again demonstrates her consciousness of her own formal choices. Gilbert himself reinforces this attentiveness to form by writing about Helen's growth as an artist in specific, formal terms; the Huntingdon portrait is "not badly executed; but, if done by the same hand as the others, it was evidently some years before; for there was far more careful minuteness of detail, and less of that freshness of colouring and freedom of handling, that delighted and

surprised me in them" (44, chap. 5). Gilbert positions himself as a perceptive connoisseur in recognizing similarities among Helen's paintings while also noting specific improvements in her later works: "freshness of colouring and freedom of handling" (ibid.). Helen has moved beyond mere coloring and execution to a freer style that can express the larger concepts lacking in her earlier landscape. Like Helen in her comments on this landscape, Gilbert understands that good art is not simply the result of mimesis or "careful minuteness of detail." Rather, we should look for ideas that "delight" or "surprise," even if they are imperfectly rendered. These verbs, which describe Anne's conception of the effect of successful art on a perceptive viewer, provide an implicit answer to Charlotte's claim in her 1850 "Biographical Notice" that Anne's writing drudgingly copied actual life.

Helen's markedly different reactions to Gilbert confirm his status as someone who can help her further improve her paintings. Gilbert narrates that when asked "about some doubtful matter in her drawing[,] [m]y opinion, happily, met her approbation, and the improvement I suggested was adopted without hesitation" (64, chap. 7). To our knowledge, this is the first time in her life that Helen has sought or accepted another's suggestion on her art. Helen makes clear the importance of Gilbert's perspective: "I have often wished in vain for another's judgment to appeal to when I could scarcely trust the direction of my own eye and head, they having been so long occupied with the contemplation of a single object, as to become almost incapable of forming a proper idea respecting it" (64, chap. 7). Helen's contrast between mere fixation on the object depicted and the ideas expressed by the artwork demonstrate Anne Brontë's desire to go beyond the mere facts of her own family life in writing *Tenant*. Gilbert responds to Helen's worry about fixation: "That . . . is only one of the many evils to which a solitary life exposes us" (64, chap. 7). Helen agrees with Gilbert's remark, indicating that, though she values painting in solitude, she could learn to value such conversations with an equal in both intellect and perception.

Near the end of the novel, Gilbert appears to question his own perceptiveness by noting (in his letter to Halford) that he initially failed to understand the symbolic significance of the rose that Helen presents to him. Upon picking the "half-blown Christmas rose" and removing the snow from it, Helen remarks, "The rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of *them* could bear. . . . Look, Gilbert, it is still fresh and blooming as a flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals.—Will you have it?" (465, chap. 53). Because Gilbert does not immediately understand the rose's significance, readers are asked

to form their own interpretations, keeping in mind the previous significance of such symbols. The symbolism here seems straightforward: the rose represents Helen, who has been made stronger, though no less attractive, by her trials. In offering the rose to Gilbert she is offering herself as well; like the rose, she has unfrozen herself. Though he eventually holds out his hand and accepts Helen's gift, Gilbert hesitates to grasp the rose—in both literal and symbolic terms. However, Gilbert's hesitation in fact marks him as a more careful perceiver than Arthur Huntingdon, who too quickly (and wrongly) assumes symbolic understanding of Helen's paintings.

Moreover, Gilbert points out that the interpretive blockages in this scene are not his alone, as Helen misinterprets his actions: "Misconstruing this hesitation into indifference—or reluctance even—to accept her gift, Helen suddenly snatched it from my hand, threw it out on to the snow, shut down the window with an emphasis, and withdrew to the fire" (465–66, chap. 53). Gilbert again fails to understand the symbolism behind Helen's gestures, asking, "Helen! what means this?" (466, chap. 53). Helen complains, "You did not understand my gift," to which Gilbert responds, "You misunderstood me, cruelly" (466, chap. 53). Brontë emphasizes the importance of mutual understanding in this scene. In doing so, she suggests her duty to make her art clear as well as the necessity for readers to interpret the novel for both its lifelike and symbolic qualities. Helen reveals the meaning of the rose only after allowing Gilbert (and readers) time to decipher on their own: "The rose I gave you was an emblem of my heart" (466, chap. 53). Gilbert still does not grasp Helen's full meaning, as he needs to ask if he may have her "hand" in marriage. Gilbert remarks in his letter to Halifax, "Stupid blockhead that I was!—I trembled to clasp her in my arms, but dared not believe in so much joy" (467, chap. 53). Despite the initial confusion, Gilbert's point is that he has learned to interpret Helen's actions, complementing his ability to read her art for symbolic meaning.

This increased symbolic acuity, coupled with Gilbert's astuteness in formal matters, positions him as an ideal reader—not only of Helen's history, but also of the novel as a whole. The same can be said of Helen, who develops both her own symbolic interpretations and her aesthetic techniques. Given the interpretive models that *Tenant* itself provides, we should take Anne Brontë seriously as a significant contributor to the nineteenth-century discourse about aesthetics, including the differences between real life and its more figurative rendering in art. Read in this way, Anne Brontë can be seen as not just the equivalent of her sisters, but also as making her own distinct contribution to nineteenth-century realism.