

ROBERT DIXON

REVIEW

Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988. 228pp. \$39.95.

Lynda Nead begins her study of the representation of women in Victorian Britain by a process of dense textual quotation. The cover of her book reproduces J.R. Spencer Stanhope's oil painting, *Thoughts of the Past* (1859), in which a prostitute is suddenly confronted with memories of her lost innocence. The opening pages continue the process of quotation: in 1857, a public health journal warns of the dangers of infection posed by prostitution to the general public; in 1860, a weekly review castigates painters and its own readers alike by asking why it is 'that the most interesting class of womanhood is woman at her lowest degradation?'; in the same year, an evangelical journal uses its review of the painting of a dead prostitute to condemn the low standard of public morality. In this way, Nead not only introduces her subject, but also foregrounds her own post-structuralist assumption that cultural meanings are constructed semiotically, and circulate in and around networks of texts. *Myths of Sexuality* is not just another study of 'images of women' in the nineteenth century; it is also a book which raises theoretical questions about its own method of discourse analysis, and which goes some way toward solving the problems with that approach arising from the earlier work of Michel Foucault and Edward Said.

There have, of course, been numerous studies of Victorian morality: Steven Marcus set the fashion in the mid 1960s with *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid Nineteenth Century England* (1966). But, as Nead argues in her introduction, these earlier studies were based upon a 'reflection' theory of art: they assume that an image or text is a more or less straightforward reflection of the 'real' world, which it is the task of the historian to describe or reconstruct. This method of analysis was extremely weak from an interdisciplinary point of view, having no way of explaining the relationships between different kinds of texts — paintings, poems and scientific monographs, for example — other than by their reflection of a common 'reality'.

Lynda Nead's approach, by contrast, is a mode of discourse analysis which derives from the work of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976; transl. 1981), Foucault showed the images and texts dealing with gender and sexuality do not simply reflect the 'real', but actively construct social meanings

—definitions of the norms of sexual and moral behaviour deemed appropriate to men and women which play an important role in the maintenance of class hegemony. The discourse analyst seeks not to describe the ‘reality’ depicted in texts, but to trace these cultural meanings across the network of discourses, or specific realms of language use, in which they circulate.

Nead is also indebted to Roland Barthes’ concept of myth, which she invokes in the title of her book. In *Mythologies* (transl. 1976), Barthes defined representation as a mediation of the real world through culturally specific codes and conventions which offer themselves as reality. Representation depends precisely upon the absence of the thing that is represented — women, the working class, a colonised race — which it replaces with the familiar codes and conventions of a dominant discourse. The function of myth in Barthes’ sense is the ‘naturalisation’ of these meanings; it turns culture into nature. Cultural meanings acquire the status of ‘truth’ not by their reference to ‘reality’, but through the process of *intertextuality* — the circulation of meanings and definitions in a network of discourses, such as medicine, literature, painting, psychology and so on. When representation is understood in these terms, the cultural historian is able to deconstruct the ‘truth’ status of myth by posing a number of questions: not, are these meanings true or false?; but, what meanings are produced and how? what is their social function in maintaining class and gender norms? whose interests do these particular representations serve?

Nead’s answers to these questions are complex and richly suggestive for students of literature, art and history. Her argument is essentially that Victorian definitions of gender and sexuality functioned to maintain middle class ideologies of respectability and the separation of the public and private spheres, and to uphold these middle class values as essential to the well being of the nation and empire as a whole. Through their circulation in a variety of discourses, these class-specific ideologies were made to seem natural and universal — the way things naturally and inevitably are.

Nead’s study of the myth of the doomed prostitute is one of several case studies in the process of intertextuality, and gives some idea of the range of interdisciplinary research required by discourse analysis. The prostitute occupied a key position in the semiotic definition of respectable femininity, representing the Other against which virtuous womanhood was defined. The respectable woman was held responsible for the purity of the home, in itself an index of the moral health of the nation. Her semiotic Other is the prostitute, a flexible category capable of defining any woman who transgressed the code of bourgeois morality. The respectable woman and the prostitute were constructed in terms of

difference: one represented the health of the private sphere, sexual restraint, morality and female dependence; the other signified woman's improper intrusion into the public sphere. As a sign of social disorder she was to be feared and controlled. One way in which this threat was regulated was the myth of the prostitute as a social victim, which took the form of a narrative of her fall from respectability, her moral and physical decline and eventual death.

Nead analyses numerous discourses that were involved in the circulation of this myth. Through their professional journals, physicians and surgeons contributed to the representation of the prostitute as an agent of disease whose ill health and physical decline were assumed to be natural, inevitable and irreversible. The emerging disciplines of social science confirmed the truth of the myth by their weight of empirical data: statistics, interviews, case histories. Scientific inquiry constructed 'authentic knowledge' of the lower orders in the same way that exploration and anthropology colonized the new world. Through its battery of empirical techniques, social science made the prostitute 'visible' to science, constructing her in terms of an established code of representation. This knowledge was ratified in literary texts, such as Thomas Hood's poem *The Bridge of Sighs* (1844), and in visual representation, such as the illustrations to Hood's poem by John Everett Millais and Gustave Dore.

It is one of the great strengths of Nead's book that although she gives full acknowledgement to the power of such myths, she is also aware that they were subject to constant negotiation. Underlying this awareness is Gramsci's definition of hegemony as a form of ideological control that needs to be constantly reaffirmed: 'hegemony is not just a question of the imposition downwards of a ruling-class ideology, but involves a more complex and active set of procedures' (36). As Nead argues, the values of the middle class were in themselves diverse, and met with constant opposition and negotiation: 'There was no wholesale acceptance of the mythology; the truth of the narrative was contested, the image alone could not guarantee its interpretation' (187). The myth of the doomed prostitute, for example, was widely challenged after the late 1850s. One of the first medical texts to do so was Acton's *Prostitution Considered In Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects* (1857). Acton compares the prostitute with 'her sister, who perhaps is the married mother of a family, or has been a toiling slave for years in the overheated laboratories of fashion' and finds that the effects of prostitution are often less damaging to health and beauty than 'the cares of a family and the heart-wearing struggles of virtuous labour' (148).

Nead's range of scholarship is such that she is able to recreate a sense of the discursive network in which definitions of gender were

constructed and contested, thereby illustrating the post-structuralist principle that 'meaning is not a fixed entity deposited within the text during its production, but a consequence of its reception' (68-9). Her case studies of the reception of paintings, such as Augustus Leopold Egg's *Past and Present*, are particularly revealing. *Past and Present* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1858, but contemporary reviewers were unable to agree on its meaning, or even the narrative it purported to tell. By opening this disagreement to scrutiny, the discourse analyst is able to reveal the conflicts and contradictions that dominant moral discourses conceal. *Past and Present* tells the story in three separate panels of a respectable woman's adultery, her fall from grace, the suicide of her husband, and the subsequent destitution of her children. Critics **were unable to agree on the details of this story because the fact of the wife's adultery seemed to conflict with the 'fact' that middle class women are sexually passive.** As numerous medical texts of the period testified, respectable women were not naturally libidinous, though submissive and dutiful to their husbands. Because of this contradiction in dominant representations of respectable womanhood, reviewers were forced to invent a reason for the adultery: the woman was clearly a victim of seduction!

In each of her case studies, then, Nead gives full play to the negotiation of meaning that surrounds texts, as well as the incoherence that lies within. But she has not managed to overcome one of the most serious methodological problems currently affecting discourse analysis: the fact that it can reproduce precisely the mode of domination and repression characteristic of the texts it deconstructs by failing to give voice to the 'other' of representation. This moral dilemma has become most apparent in recent years in the specific field of colonial discourse.

The problem goes back at least to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1981), itself inspired by the work of Foucault. In that book, Said showed that representation constitutes others as subjects by projecting outwards one's own systemic codes, so that they are inscribed on the territory of the other. In this way, the Orient was inscribed with a textual network that made it visible in terms familiar to the west while 'muting' the Orient itself. The problem with analysing discursive networks like *Orientalism* is that the historian can inadvertently reproduce that 'mutedness' by remaining within the dominant texts and failing to give an evidential voice to the other of representation. This is to reify discursive representation at the expense of the material reality that has been represented. Benita Parry has recently made a similar criticism of the work of such politically sensitive critics as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. To conclude, as Spivak does in her work on the discourse of sati, that 'There is no space (in discourse) from where the subaltern woman can speak' is to make the moral error of confusing discourses of repres-

entation with material realities. 'Thus, while protesting at the obliteration of the native's subject position in the text of imperialism, Spivak in her project gives no speaking part to the colonized, effectively writing out the evidence of native agency recorded in India's 200 year struggle against British conquest since the Raj.'¹

Her analysis of Abraham Solomon's painting *A Contrast*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1855, is an exemplary display of the way discourse analysis can question the truth status of cultural meanings by revealing their internal contradictions; but it typically fails to give a speaking part to the other of representation. Respectable women were defined in terms of their dependency, delicacy, fragility and their economic dependence on their husbands. These characteristics were defined semiotically by opposition to the image of working class women as healthy, robust and actively involved in the world of work beyond the domestic sphere (29). Solomon's canvas, accordingly, is divided into two parts. On the right, nearer the land, and therefore to culture, a party of middle class holiday-makers assist an invalid woman convalescing by the sea in a bath chair. She gazes up at her husband who offers her protection not only from the elements, but also from the working class women in the other section of the composition. The fisherwomen are picturesque, healthy, robust and economically productive. But they also introduce a sense of threat, a menace which suggests an underlying class fear. As always, Nead is diligent in pursuing the ambiguities that surround this image, but her interest remains within the field of middle class representation: as she observes, 'such images indicate the opinions and interest of the hegemonic class and the interpretation of working-class respectability from above' (37). But these definitions were also productive, often through resistance, of working class cultural identity, which is given no speaking part in Nead's analysis. She is certainly not in the business of writing history from below, as has been achieved with great success in Robert W. Malcolmson's *Life and Labour in England 1700-1788* (1981). In her analysis of another painting in which a fallen middle class woman is depicted by conventions associated with the working-class prostitute, Nead observes that 'the working classes were perceived by the middle classes as an "other" order' (76). They also remain 'other' in her book.

Only once in this long and detailed book does Nead go outside the network of middle class texts to give voice to the other of that representation. It is the voice of a prostitute who gave evidence that was incorporated into Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-2): "we often do marry, and well too", she told the interviewer; "why shouldn't we, we are pretty, we dress well, we can talk and insinuate ourselves into the hearts of men by appealing to their passions and their senses" (154). It is a pity that more of this kind of evidence did

not penetrate Nead's reconstruction of the textual network, for it is here that the material lives of working class women and prostitutes can surprise us — they lived not only within, but also *against*, the discursive networks that rendered them visible to the middle class. Dominant structures of representation require deconstruction by confronting them with their own internal conflicts and contradictions; but they must also be confronted by another knowledge — in this case the lived experience of the working class women and prostitutes whose voices were silenced in the nineteenth century discourses Nead examines, and to whom she continues to deny historical agency.

NOTE

- 1 Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review*, 9 (1987), 27-58.

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REVIEW

Reba Gostand, *Brisbane Expo.sed*. Boolarong Publications, 1988.

It used to be a boring feature of Australia's cultural cringe to allege that our way of life had no sense of tradition and that our cities had no sense of social consciousness and artistic excitement or even of pop cultural uniqueness. Reba Gostand's cheerful and cheeky book *Brisbane Expo.sed* refutes this snobbish complaint.

Brisbane Expo.sed strings together a myriad of quotations from forty different novels that have the city of Brisbane as their setting. Some of these novels are by highly acclaimed authors and include *Harland's Half Acre* and *Johnno* by David Malouf, *The Slow Natives* by Thea Astley, *Bliss* by Peter Carey, *Pushed from the Wings* by satirist Ross Fitzgerald and a selection of novels by Vance Palmer, Thomas Shapcott and Jessica Anderson. There are also some very lively quotations from less well-known authors who are clearly worth reading.

The quotations are thematically organised to create a mosaic of pictures that show a unique, Brisbane lifestyle. The weather, flora and fauna including mozzies, sandflies, rodents and reptiles, political manoeuvres in the capital of a police state, union-bashing, prestige-