

On Seeing and Being Seen in the Eighteenth Century

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Unlike last year, no one, consistent theme emerged as dominant among the nearly sixty books we reviewed for this year's Kenshur Prize. Simply in terms of number of works, empire remains perhaps the most discussed topic within eighteenth-century studies. But it is, by now, less a single topic than it is a lens for exploring many others: cosmopolitanism, consumption, citizenship, international jurisdiction, strangeness, and sustainability—to name just a few. Our interests are, seemingly, global. Our eighteenth century is almost invariably "modern." As the list above would seem to indicate, it is the century that invented the concerns that dominate us even to this day.

Within this crop of books, then, one might come to Hanneke Grootenboer's *Treasuring the Gaze: Intimate Vision in Late Eighteenth-Century Miniatures* with tiny—one might even say miniature—expectations. As a phenomenon, the taste for eye portraits was comparatively short-lived, lasting only a few decades. It was decidedly not international. And it was confined, necessarily, to the wealthy. As such, it might seem less of a "taste" or "vogue," and more of a "craze," or even a "fad"—comparable to bell-bottomed pants during the 1970s or acid-washed denim jackets from the 1980s or plaid shirts from the 1990s. Before encountering this book, I probably had heard of the eye portrait phenomenon—either as a footnote somewhere, or perhaps as the trailing sentence in a paragraph describing the cultural importance of the portrait miniature. But I had certainly not heard *about* them. According to current historiographical practices, fads (such as this one) are footnotes to history rather than history proper, suggesting no paradigm shift or dialectical synthesis, and telling us really nothing about the way we live today.

Without understanding its fads, however, we risk misinterpreting the period that we study. *Treasuring the Gaze* is no mere work on the phenomenology of vision in Romantic culture, or the architecture of the gaze, or even the panoptic bent of late eighteenth-century Britain. Of those things, we have many, many fine accounts. Rather, the story of the eye portrait enables us to access something different and ineluctably foreign: the pleasure not of gazing but of being gazed upon in late eighteenth-century Europe. As Grootenboer puts it, in one particularly memorable passage:

If the eye picture functions as a stage on which we project a series of actions, then one of the actions is our *being seen* by the eye. And here the fundamental difference between portrait and eye miniatures can be further drawn out: the eye does not stand in (the way the miniature face represents the actual body), but is an image of a gaze that functions like a spotlight on the miniature's stage... Obviously there is magic attached to the eye miniature; it functions like a magic ball in which one sees reflected not so much the other person, or one's requited love, but oneself, as being *seen* (43).

The "magic" of the eye portrait is one in which basic distinctions between self and other, between observer and observed, become confused or even lost. This is not the eighteenth

century as Charles Taylor might have described it: as the period marked by the rise of the Lockean “punctual self,” in which psychic boundaries between individuals are reinforced from birth. Rather, this is the eighteenth century as Melanie Klein, and (more silently) Freud, might have described it: a period characterized by atavistic confusion, where the totemic connection between two people can never be fully eradicated. If, within Grootenboer’s account, the eye portrait stands as chief artifact of this world, then its chief deity is Lord Byron, gazing back at us somehow, even as we attempt to assimilate him to the status of object.

Long ago, Terry Castle described the “new” eighteenth century thus: “not so much an age of reason, but one of paranoia, repression, and incipient madness, for which Jeremy Bentham’s malign, all-seeing Panopticon, grimly refurbished by Foucault, might stand as a fitting, nightmarish emblem.”¹ I suggest that we locate *Treasuring the Gaze* within this realm, within an eighteenth century that was more self-deluded than self-assured, more neurotic than enlightened. This eighteenth century is perhaps no longer “new”—Castle’s quotation is, after all, more than twenty years old. But it seems very much alive, in the pages of *Treasuring the Gaze* and in other recent monographs like Simon Dickie’s *Cruelty and Laughter*, Miranda Frances Spieler’s *Empire and Underworld*, and another previous winner of this prize, Vanessa Agnew’s *Enlightenment Orpheus*. For such studies the eighteenth century is a recalcitrant period, guided precisely by its sense of stubborn unmodernity.

¹ Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.