ADVENTURES IN REALISM

EDITED BY MATTHEW BEAUMONT

Praise for *Adventures in Realism*

"Every new generation of critics and scholars must come to terms in its own ways with the paradoxes of realism. Realism is a period style, but at the same time it is a perennial motive in literature, art, film, and other media. Realism purports to represent things as they are, or were, but at the same time it is a constitutive set of conventions that tells people in a given time and place what is to be taken as real. This distinguished collection of essays brilliantly articulates these paradoxes for our own time."

J. Hillis Miller, University of California at Irvine

"What a wonderfully wide and deep and pushing inspection of realisms (and irrealisms) in history, in theory, in practice. Here's realism, then and now, cannily philosophized, politicized, feminized, psychologized. Here are so many of realism's practitioners, its aesthetic friends and enemies, the missionaries and also the scoffers, being heard and watched as they engage with their chosen media – novels, plays, paintings, photographs, films, buildings. It is, I think, as serious, engaging, educating a look at the large realist project as could well be assembled."

Valentine Cunningham, Corpus Christi College, Oxford

"*Adventures in Realism* is an exciting and necessary book. It collects together a stunning array of essays that, both individually and as a whole, show why we need to consider the nature and importance of realism. The volume encourages us to think through the concept both in relation to its mid-nineteenth-century origins, and today's philosophical discussions; to see it both as manifested in specific literary or artistic forms and as a more abstract way of figuring our place within the material world. Matthew Beaumont should be congratulated in placing his contributors into such effective dialogue with one another: in doing so, he has returned realism to the center of historical, aesthetic, and political debate."

Kate Flint, Rutgers University

For Michael and Joanna Beaumont

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Contents

Illustrations

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Foreword

Rachel Bowlby

Poor old realism. Out of date and second-rate. Squashed in between the freshness of romanticism and the newness of modernism, it is truly the tasteless spam in the sandwich of literary and cultural history. Compared with other long-established members of the cast of critical players, it has recently been having a really bad press. First, in the sad sense that no one has been arguing about it. The number of critical books on realism from the past couple of decades can be counted on the fingers of one hand; but try doing that with the stars that come before and after it: romanticism still gets a high billing, as it has for some while, but modernist studies, in particular, have expanded far beyond the capacities of any individual bookshelf, leaving realism behind as their dingy Victorian relation, moldering in an unilluminated corner. The corollary of this no-press bad press is the more obvious kind. For secondly, when realism does get mentioned it is usually in the form of a passing, knee-jerk dismissal of it as something self-evidently without interest, not to say a bit dumb. Realism normally comes stuck with one of a set menu of regular adjectival accompaniments, and whether it's gritty, or vulgar, or kitchen-sink, or photographic, the standard formulations reinforce the way it is seen as itself formulaic, something we already know about and need have no interest in exploring: it is predictable and simple, and serves only as the foil (or the cling-film) for showing up the more exotic or more complex courses that are always to be preferred to it. Nowhere is this clearer than in the regular scorn for realism's crudely "linear" narratives, its naively "omniscient" narrators, and – worst crime of all – its facile assumptions of linguistic "transparency," all of these being qualities that are quite untransparent and unanalyzed in their own meaning but essentially

damning in their aim. Found a realist work that doesn't fit the stereotype? No matter, the virtues must be to do with its anticipation of modernist experimentation or else its continuing romanticist exploration of subjectivity.

Thus it comes about that realism today, poor old realism, has a doubly "understudy" status. It rarely plays a critical part in its own right, instead serving as the simple straw man whose role is only to show up the authentic and original literary or critical action occurring elsewhere. And it is under-studied, not much seen as a worthwhile, let alone an exciting topic for teaching and research. There are several ironies in the set-piece devaluation of realism as being without intellectual or aesthetic interest. First, the gesture elides the historical significance of realism (and, for that matter, of other movements to which it is negatively contrasted), instead treating the positive qualities of formal innovation as transhistorically valid and homogeneous. This is to ignore the historical variability of aesthetic criteria, or that of criteria for considering the subversive or stabilizing effects, politically or psychologically, of particular kinds of art; the overlapping or separation of these various kinds of criteria is itself also, of course, a matter of historical variation. It is also to ignore the multiplicity of realisms in realism's own primary time (as well as before or since).

Realism was the focus of an international artistic movement beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The first attested use of the word is in French – *réalisme* – in 1826; before long it was everywhere. The concept was hotly debated both in practice and in theory, between painters, novelists, and critics of every kind; and it underwent various kinds of more or less marked development or modification, most notably in its French modulation into the "naturalism" of the latter part of the century, with its posture of exposing the dirtier realities that realism had itself failed to show. Finally, the valorization of non-realist "-isms" – modernism above all, since that is the one whose historical inception follows chronologically right after the period of realism – depends on just the kind of straightforward and ideologically laden linear narrative that is ostensibly relegated to realist history. The obviousness of the story in which "make it new!" supersedes and surpasses "show and tell" is itself a simple narrative of the kind that the pro-modernism critics automatically associate with stupid old realism.

This downgrading of realism is all the odder at a time when the popularity of "reality TV" gives a new focus to the question of why people might enjoy looking at images of life going on in its tedious passage through real time. Zola claimed that his naturalist novels were "experimental," in the sense that his method was to put together a set of character types

in a particular, well-documented social environment and then watch what would happen. Dumping a bunch of "personalities" into a tropical rain forest or a big house on the outskirts of London is in one way the actualization of this: they are real people doing real things with real bodies, and the producers and viewers all get to watch what really and truly does happen. But the social situations of reality TV are quite unlike the elaborately researched *milieux* of Zola's novels. Every viewer is aware that the reality out there is contrived. This is not these people's normal world, and to preempt the boredom that might otherwise ensue, for participants and viewers alike, things must be got to happen through infantilizing tests and games and ejection rituals. Zola, on the other hand, represented his role as socially therapeutic, likening the naturalist novelist, in an essay from 1880 on "Le Roman expérimental," to the surgeon cutting out the infections in the body of society (Zola 1971: 57–97). However overstated in its pretensions, this demonstrates a will to change as well as to show: to "tell the world" in both senses. Recording that world's undersides and its unknown corners was not just a matter of pandering to readers' curiosity or voyeuristic pleasure (though the novels were often taken to be doing only that).

Admittedly, part of realism's negative-image problem lies with the label. Even in the early days, it was often refused by those whose own artistic credos or practices might seem closest to what card-carrying realists were advocating. Baudelaire and Flaubert both disliked the term, yet in his prose manifesto *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Baudelaire argues for the aesthetic value of representing everyday urban sights – places, people, and fashions – in all their triviality and ephemerality; while *Madame Bovary* (1857) is ranked as one of the landmarks of realist narrative, focusing as it does on the obscure life of a discontented provincial doctor's wife. Realism was in the spirit of the democratizing movements of the nineteenth century, bringing into literary or painterly view common worlds of experience that had previously been aesthetically unseen, disregarded, or out of bounds. The extension of the constituencies of political representation went along with an extension of the fields of artistic representation. Ordinary people were portrayed going about their working daily lives – as rural laborers or factory workers or coal miners or office clerks or servants. Middle-class women like Emma Bovary were shown going about their bored, daydreaming daily lives; the eventlessness and *ennui* of their existences are one subject of a narrative that then, from the inside, gets its readers involved in the woman's own search for diversion. In the English industrial novels of the 1840s by writers such as Dickens and Gaskell, the necessary narrative "event" within an otherwise repetitive routine

is typically provided by a strike that has the effect of exacerbating and personalizing the underlying class tensions, in Gaskell highlighted and sensationalized by cross-class sexual tensions as well. Realist writers have struggled since with the difficulty of reconciling the wish to represent the real-life dullness of nothing much ever happening "out of the ordinary" with the need to maintain some sort of narrative interest (or readerly awakeness): the *Big Brother* problem in history.

Like the American slave narratives that were trans-Atlantically contemporary, European realist novels typically had consciousness-changing or educational aims. After moving to Manchester, Elizabeth Gaskell sought to make middle-class southerners like herself aware of the hard reality of working people's lives in the northern mill towns they had never visited. George Eliot pleaded eloquently for the moral benefits to be gained from a combination of faults-and-all realism with authorly affection. In *Adam Bede* (1859), she argues that the writer should represent ordinary folk not grand ones, and not idealize but show them neither better nor worse than they really are: thus an extension of the range of *milieux* and characters available for representation is associated with an equivalent extension of truth-telling. This commitment to the ethical and subjective values of "sincerity" and "sympathy" – two favorite Eliot words – was joined to a desire to use the novel to take the measure of recent and ongoing social changes with the would-be detachment of a scientific observer. Eliot's novels are generally set a few decades before the present, producing a historical distance that can be harnessed to an appearance of sociological objectivity: with the sureness bestowed by hindsight, characters and occupations can be represented as emerging or fading types.

Ironically, Eliot's mid-novel argument for realism itself makes use of the kind of debunking comparisons that are so prevalent in demotions of realism. Not only does she tell us how and why she favors the truthful depiction of ordinary lives; she tells us as well how much it is preferable to the "lofty" style she caricatures as what she is rejecting:

> "This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!" I hear one of my lady readers exclaim. "How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice. You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things – quite as good as reading a sermon."
>
> Certainly I could, my fair critic, if I were a clever novelist, not obliged to creep servilely after nature and fact, but able to represent things as they never have been and never will be. . . . But you must have perceived long ago that I have no such lofty vocation . . . (Eliot 1996: 175)

The mockery of pseudo-elevation – the lady critic, the idealizing sermon, and the lofty vocation – is crucial to the counter-assertion of an honest, plain-speaking compulsion to follow "nature and fact" (with its uneasy combination of an old and a markedly contemporary term, this conjunction itself marks a passage from one kind of literary ground to another). Throughout the nineteenth century, we find realist novels peppered with internal polemics that set out their own projects in contrast to the kinds of literature that they are rejecting. In George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), for instance, a defense of an evidently Gissingesque realism is dropped into a drawing-room conversation between two mature feminists:

> What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists? They won't represent the actual world; it would be too dull for their readers. In real life, how many men and women *fall in love*? . . . Not one married pair in every ten thousand have felt for each other as two or three couples do in every novel. There is the sexual instinct, of course, but that is quite a different thing. (Gissing 1977: 58)

Here the argument for realism is not just an abstract protest against idealism, countered by the modern appeal to the biological reality of a human "sexual instinct"; it is also pragmatic. The misadventures of a young girl who has got pregnant are attributed confidently to her mistaking novelistic fantasy for reality: "This Miss Royston – when she rushed off to perdition, ten to one she had in mind some idiot heroine of a book" (Gissing 1977: 58).

Such examples suggest that realism can never be simply codeless in its claimed replication of reality (for a discussion of *Adam Bede* in relation to this point see Bowlby 2006). It is always presenting a particular theory of what will count as a picture of reality, and it is always attached, if only by counter-positioning, to rival forms of artistic representation that it is out to replace. Arguably, this must be minimally true of any presentation of a new aesthetic program, which is rhetorically bound to stake out its territory by going beyond existing conventions and identifying them as such. In his mid-1950s manifesto for the *nouveau roman*, the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet topped this idea with a radically realist twist. He did not just argue that all new art forms present themselves in opposition to previously or currently dominant ones, but that all new literature is in fact a new form of realism, a new way of imagining reality. And this is an ongoing, repeated process, since representational styles must needs be always changing – they pass their tell-by date. First, because any form becomes hackneyed once it is normal and established;

also, because the world itself does not remain the same, so that the tools for telling it need to change with it; and lastly, the point that Robbe-Grillet stresses most strongly, and in relation to Kafka in particular, because new realisms themselves create new ways of seeing reality (Robbe-Grillet 1972: 171–83).

From this point of view, it is possible to see how the writers we think of as anti-realist modernists might themselves be included in a history of new realisms. Erich Auerbach made Virginia Woolf the closing and culminating example in his magisterial history of what the subtitle grandly calls "The Representation of Reality in Western Literature" – and did so with the political aim of making the daydreaming Mrs. Ramsay into the paradigm of a fragmentary, drifting kind of subjectivity whose universality might be a way of bringing together otherwise different and divided nations and cultures in the aftermath of World War II (Auerbach 1974: 525–53). Woolf's own essays about literature repeatedly make use of a polemical opposition to those she dubs "materialist" writers, like Arnold Bennett, whose obsession with the notation of fact and detail she dismisses as not, after all, a true rendering of reality. In "Modern Fiction" (1919), after an extended critique of the Bennett-style novel, she writes: "Look within and life, it seems, is very far form being 'like this'" (Woolf 1993: 8). Reality is being relocated – moved "within" – but the right representation of reality, or "life," is the aim, just as it would be for an avowedly realist writer.

In Woolf's version of the structure whereby a new aesthetic is presented as a new realism ousting another one, the psychological reality shows up as manifestly superior and more complex only through a simplifying parody of the "external" world of a Bennett novel. It is a commonplace of literary history that nineteenth-century realist novels were all about the observable world out there, until the early twentieth century discovered, post-Romantically and sometimes psychoanalytically, that the mind was the novel's reality after all. But the overarching outside-to-inside story of the movement, if not progress, of realist representation is itself another of those straightforward narratives of the type derided by realism-simplifiers; behind it (or before it) lies a much more complex history of the relations between subjectivity and realism. In *Adam Bede*, for instance, there is already a subjective view that is modifying the standard realist analogy of the objective mirror on the world: "I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind" (Eliot 1996: 175). This allows both for the contribution of subjectivity and for the acknowledgment that this particular mind, "my mind," may reflect things differently from others.

Woolf's argument against Bennett's external details might seem to fit the "external to internal" historical pattern. But again, once you look closer the simple separation disappears. After the "Look within" sentence, "Modern Fiction" continues with a famous general declaration, expanding "within" to appear as a type of chaotic mental multiplicity whose source is external: "The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms . . ." (Woolf 1993: 8). Woolf shows a mind overpopulated with the impressions it has received from outside – "from all sides." There is a sort of ceaseless bombardment in which the individual – mind rather than body – seems both vulnerable and passive. This is a highly distinctive picture of psychological reality (by way of Walter Pater, it owes something to Baudelaire's much more hedonistic receiver of transient urban impressions in *The Painter of Modern Life*). But its complex internal world is, nonetheless, externally derived.

Woolf's "'like this',", in quotation marks, refers to her own rhetorical question – "Is life like this?" – about Bennett's allegedly life-unlike novels. But the phrase acknowledges the representational gap that provides the opening for realism. Life may be "like" this, but it never *is* this; the power or the pleasure of the story or image that convinces us of its lifelikeness depends on a knowledge of that difference. Yet at the same time such a theoretical separation of life – or reality – and its likenesses is perhaps too reliant on a residual model of separation between a world out there (or in here, "within") and the words to say it or images to show it. Our reality is already, in large measure, a representational one, both verbally and visually. This is not only because of the media that visibly and audibly surround us – in print, on screens, in the airwaves – but also because of our own modes of communication. "Likely" or realistic stories, with their own always changing conventions for what comes across as plausible experience, are circulating all the time between mutually modifying private and public forms. In reality, as part of our reality, we are constantly representing and recording, hearing, overhearing, retelling, or reconstructing our lived realities and our views of the world – in conversation, in writing, or with images. And the forms in which such communication takes place are themselves always changing. In 1950, the British novelist Henry Green could declare that dialogue was the novel's obvious future, since "we do not write letters any more, we ring up on the telephone" (Green 1992: 137). In the 2000s, against all expectations, we are writing letters again – even if we now call them emails – and writing them several times a day, just as the middle classes used to do before

the telephone was in common use. And we are also phoning and texting, again all day and everywhere, producing more and more words and using these stylized and specialized forms of distance communication to make up what our lives are "like" and to take in "myriad impressions" of "others" (Woolf's hail of impressions appears today as nothing other than an overfull inbox without a spam filter).

Merely as speaking, conversing animals, then, we are already "in" realism, living a life that includes ongoing attempts to represent it "like" it is to others and to ourselves; thinking about "real" realism can help us to reflect upon this predicament. Realist works can disturb or please or educate us by showing reality as not what we think we know, by showing realities we have never seen or dreamed, or by making speakable realities that might previously have seemed only idiosyncratic or incommunicable. It is time for realism to be put back into the critical picture, center-stage.

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Acknowledgments

Introduction:
Reclaiming Realism

Matthew Beaumont

> Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue that must be handled and explained as such – as a matter of general human interest.
>
> <div align="right">Bertolt Brecht</div>

In a useful collection of historical documents about realism in literature that he compiled almost half a century ago, George J. Becker complained that "the subject of realism is not especially congenial to the critics of our day" (Becker 1963: 3). He grumbled that one type of critic in particular – not perhaps ideologically opposed to realism, like those that strategically promoted the modernist movement – had nonetheless "become bored with it and finds that this subject, always rather obvious and simple-minded, need no longer engage the subtle mind of the literary scholar" (Becker 1963: 3). Becker might have been thinking of formalistic critics like Northrop Frye, for whom realism was in some fundamental sense anti-literary: "One of the most familiar and important features of literature," Frye had declared in his famous *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957, "is the absence of a controlling aim of descriptive accuracy" (Frye 1990: 75). Becker's complaint also proved to be prophetic, though. In the succeeding decades, philosophers and critics both opposed to realism and simply uninterested in it continued to replicate, and indeed to reinforce, the attitude that he had characterized. In an influential essay from 1982, for instance, Jean-François Lyotard collapsed realism into a superficial conception of mimesis, loftily insisting that it "always stands somewhere between academicism and kitsch"; realism's "only definition,"

he concluded, "is that it intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art" (Lyotard 1984: 75).

Overstating the matter a little, then, it might be claimed that, in the intellectual climate that has characterized the decades since Becker's statement, a climate that can most conveniently be identified with the name "postmodernism," realism has not really been an issue at all. Postmodernism, defined in telegraphic form as "the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge," has made an impatient or apathetic attitude to realism seem acceptable (Eagleton 2003: 13). Militant postmodernists, examples of whom I discuss more fully below, have crudely caricatured realism, claiming that as an aesthetic it assumes a fundamentally unproblematic relationship between reality and its representations. They have themselves risked assimilating reality to its representations – the world to the word – almost completely. In this intellectual climate, it could be said, realism has been an issue not even for literature, the discipline in which, confined as it often is to the field of nineteenth-century fiction and its adjacent territories, it has most comprehensively been cantonized. Although specialist scholars have continued to explore its historic importance, realism has come to seem obvious and simple-minded to most intellectuals in the humanities. It is as if Roland Barthes's brilliant critique, in the late 1960s, of what he called the "referential illusion," and his concomitant attempts to decode the "reality effects" that literary texts evoke in order to certify their claims to verisimilitude, became a pretext not for rethinking realism in relation to poststructuralist insights about narrative convention so much as for not rethinking realism at all (Barthes 1989: 148).

But it might equally be claimed that, at least in its philosophical implications, realism is perpetually at issue. Realism in this inclusive sense can briefly be sketched as the assumption that it is possible, through the act of representation, in one semiotic code or another, to provide cognitive as well as imaginative access to a material, historical reality that, though irreducibly mediated by human consciousness, and of course by language, is nonetheless independent of it. This comprehensive definition of realism cannot ultimately be separated from its specific significance in literature and other art forms. Aesthetic debates about realism are inevitably imbricated in philosophical debates. "To investigate realism in art is immediately to enter into philosophical territory," Terry Lovell wrote in 1980, "– into questions of ontology and epistemology: of what exists in the world and how that world can be known" (Lovell 1980: 6). It is also to

enter into political territory, because the form in which these questions are answered at a particular time necessarily shapes the relationship of intellectuals both to the historical past and to the future into which, potentially at least, the past opens up; and it consequently determines whether intellectuals feel that it is their task, as Karl Marx famously put it, to interpret the world or to change it too. It needs to be added, though, that if thinking about realism inescapably raises political questions it does so most insistently at times when the philosophical assumptions on which it is premised appear to be threatened. It is thus because of and not in spite of the fact that, roughly since the 1970s, realism has come to seem philosophically compromised, as a result of the institutional entrenchment of the anti-realist elements of poststructuralist thought, that it is at present of peculiar importance for criticism. In *Adventures in Realism*, therefore, it is quite deliberately handled and explained, as Bertolt Brecht's polemical formulation from 1938 puts it, as if it mattered.

One consequence of the tendency among militant postmodernist ideologues to police realism has then been to repoliticize it. The demotion of realism in the lexicon of contemporary cultural theory, and its partial disappearance from it, can rapidly be measured by consulting some of the innumerable dictionaries, primers, readers, and companions to postmodernism that fill the shelves of university libraries and bookstores. For it is in the pages, margins, and interstices of these introductory texts, so assiduously marketed at students, that a kind of academic ideology can be seen to adhere – one that the chapters that comprise this book seek to dislodge rather than to help cement. In the *Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, for example, there is absolutely no reference to realism either as a literary and cultural form or as a set of philosophical assumptions, as if it is an ideological embarrassment. This seems anomalous in spite of the notorious difficulties associated with finding an adequate definition of the term "realism" – which Roman Jakobson once summarized in a comment on "the extreme relativity of the concept of 'realism'" (Jakobson 1987: 25). The section on "Names and Terms" in this *Companion to Postmodernism* stutters from an entry on "Readerly texts" to one on "Reed, Ishmael," and an uncomfortable but revealing silence about realism can momentarily be detected at this point (Sim 2005: 296). Furthermore, in its entry on "Representation," this concordance makes no allusion to realist modes of representation, though (politely if not especially helpfully) it does mention the "denial of 'reality' as such" that is characteristic of poststructuralist thinkers (Sim 2005: 297).

When introductory textbooks on postmodernism do allude specifically to realism they tend to impugn the concept both for its ingenuousness

and for its disingenuousness. *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader*, for example, contains a concise anthology of terms in which realism is identified as "the antithesis of postmodern practice." On the one hand realism is simple-minded: "From the postmodern position realism is inadequate because it implies an unexamined relationship with some prior reality." On the other hand it is duplicitous: "In so far as realism pretends to offer an unproblematic representation, it is in fact the most deceptive form of representation, reproducing its assumptions through the audience's unexamined response to an apparently natural image or text" (Wheale 1995: 51). This definition caricatures realism – in consequence it no doubt caricatures "the postmodern position" too – as an exercise in illusionism that is at once naïve and intellectually dishonest. It implies that all realism is a species of *trompe l'oeil*, an act of representation that, in replicating empirical reality as exactly as possible, dreams of attaining a complete correspondence to it. It is a conception of realism that at the same time overstates its mimetic ambitions and dramatically undervalues its ability to exhibit and examine the formal limitations that shape it.

It is certainly not a definition of realism that can reasonably be inferred from the experience of reading a canonical realist novel such as George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) – to return to an example that is adduced by a number of contributors to this collection, notably Rachel Bowlby in her Foreword. For *Adam Bede* radically rethinks the realist aesthetic even as it reaffirms its author's absolutely firm moralist commitment to the realism that she discerned in John Ruskin's criticism, that is, to "the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality" (Eliot 1992: 248). Openly and restlessly conscious of its rhetorical strategies throughout, as the disquisition on the democratic avocation of realism in chapter 17 makes apparent, Eliot's novel is supremely self-reflexive. It illustrates George Levine's claim, in the chapter he contributes to this volume, that "realism makes the difficulties of the work of representation inescapably obvious to the writer." *Adam Bede* is a meditation on both the necessity and the impossibility of what she mischievously calls the obligation "to creep servilely after nature and fact" (Eliot 1985: 177).

The novel's opening paragraph is exemplary in this respect. In establishing the foundations of the historical reality that she is about to construct, Eliot at the same time renders them utterly unstable:

> With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes
> to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what

I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my
pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter
and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of
June, in the year of our Lord 1799. (Eliot 1985: 7)

Eliot quite explicitly establishes a contract with the reader, as the open-
ing sentences of all fictions must at least implicitly do: "This is what
I undertake to do for you, reader." This contract, though, is the stuff of
a solicitor's nightmare, because it is so carefully interlarded with contra-
dictions that are expressly designed to leave the reader confused. Is the
reader to expect a kind of fantasia of the past, as the reference in the first
sentence to those "far-reaching visions," that seem to evoke the "vague
forms, bred by imagination" that she vehemently dismisses in the account
of Ruskin, indicates? Or is the reader to expect instead a representation
almost as solid and tangible as a three-dimensional stage set, its concrete
forms attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, as the image of
the "roomy workshop" in the third sentence suggests? Is the narrator a
sorcerer or a carpenter? That image of the single drop of ink, acting like
a microscopic lens as much as a miniature reflective surface containing
magical properties, implies that the past, and specifically June 18, 1799,
a date of strangely indeterminate millennial significance, is the object both
of scientific intellection and the necromantic imagination. Is the novel's
experiment in representation like that of empirical science or else like some
enigmatic spiritual séance?

    The narrator's contract with the reader, deliberately confusing on all
these counts, in a double sense contains the inherent contradictions of
realism's attempt to reconstruct or resurrect a past that has effectively been
lost, a past that, under the conditions of industrial and agrarian change
characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century, is no longer empir-
ically available. And it mischievously exploits the alienated conditions
of production and consumption that prevail in mid-nineteenth-century
literature – even as it is self-evidently unsettled and upset by them.
Specifically, it attempts to negotiate the increasingly anonymous char-
acter, in a rapidly expanding literary marketplace, of the relationship
between the writer and the reader. For, atomized as it has become, a book's
readership can no longer confidently be identified as a definite constituency.
The consumer of nineteenth-century fiction, like the individuals that
comprise the sorcerer's casual audience, is a "chance comer." The producer
is therefore forced by the same token to perform acts of illusionism in
order to attract and seduce an audience, like some magician standing in
the souk perhaps, or like someone simply selling an ordinary commodity

in the marketplace. Eliot's formal games in the opening paragraph of *Adam Bede* can thus be understood, in the context of this changing relationship, a context that is ultimately that of the transformations of industrial capitalism itself, as an attempt precisely to maintain the openness, the experimental value of realism, as it shapes its readership. The concept of realism that Eliot operates is a distinctly dialectical one, then, in addition to a democratic one. It is a dynamic force field rather than some static phenomenon. It accommodates vague forms as well as concrete ones, and, as Eliot's late fiction such as *Daniel Deronda* (1876) testifies, it activates social visions as well as social facts (not that "social facts" themselves are self-evident at this time).

In the light of this, Eliot's notion of realism – like that of almost all the realists, operating across the spectrum of artistic representation, that are assessed in this collection of essays – appears to be poorly served by a definition like the one proposed in *The Postmodern Arts*. (No doubt the formulation "*in so far as* realism pretends to offer an unproblematic representation, it is in fact the most deceptive form of representation," is an implicit admission that the claim that this book makes about the form is finally simplistic and unconvincing.) The unreliability of the familiar opposition between realism and modernism or postmodernism that some commentators still expect to obtain can in fact be tested in relation to the opening of *Adam Bede*. For the first paragraph of Eliot's novel, in all its self-consciousness, might be said to resemble a modernist or postmodernist fiction, if in the current critical climate this didn't necessarily imply that its formal qualities are interesting only to the extent that they anticipate later literary developments. It is important not to fall into the trap of congratulating a realist novel, or painting, or photograph for that matter, for being proto-modernist or proto-postmodernist, largely on the grounds that it has demonstrated an intuitive, if ultimately dim-witted understanding of its own formal limitations. That said, the beginning of *Adam Bede* is remarkable for its self-reflexiveness: It emphasizes the materiality of writing; it foregrounds the illusionistic character of representation; and it directly, playfully addresses the reader. And it is thus scarcely less sophisticated, in its cautious, self-conscious attention to the difficulties of realist representation, than the first chapter of *Jacob's Room* (1922), often described as Virginia Woolf's first modernist fiction, which is also stained – and sustained – by a drop of ink from a pen (Woolf 1992: 3).

Consequently, Eliot's experimental attitude to the demands of realist narrative requires a concept of realism that escapes its limited definition in terms of a passive, positivistic reflection of banal social reality – in terms

of what Woolf bemoaned in her diary as "this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner" (Woolf 1980: 209). It might be more productive, as Fredric Jameson has argued, "if we can manage to think of realism as a form of demiurgic practice; if we can restore some active and even playful/experimental impulses to the inertia of its appearance as a copy or representation of things" (Jameson 1992: 162). *Adam Bede*, the product of sorcery and of carpentry, so to speak, demands to be understood in these dynamic terms, as a form of demiurgic practice, albeit one that aspires, as Eliot puts it, to offering "no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves" in the author's mind (Eliot 1985: 177). It resists postmodernist attempts to limit it to an act of mechanical reflection, insisting that "the mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused" (Eliot 1985: 177). It is susceptible instead to Levine's richly suggestive, dialectical definition of realism in *The Realistic Imagination* (1981):

> Realism exists as a process, responsive to the changing nature of reality as the culture understood it and evoking with each question another question to be questioned, each threatening to destroy the quest beyond words, against literature, that is its most distinguishing mark. (Levine 1981: 22)

Eliot's novel is, however, precisely the sort of text that, in a celebrated article in *Screen*, published in the mid-1970s, Colin MacCabe identified as an example of "classic realism"; the sort of text that is supposedly incapable of exploring reality in its contradictoriness, because "it fixes the subject in a point of view from which everything becomes obvious" (MacCabe 1974: 16). It allegedly suffers from just the kind of inertia or formal stasis to which Jameson refers. In this connection, Eliot's opening paragraph would be a case in point – if its deliberate attempt to problematize the historical novel's act of representation can momentarily be forgotten – because it seems to locate the narrator, like a sorcerer, at some transcendent point outside the fictional world that it constructs (though in chapter 17, making a Thackerayan joke, the narrator casually remarks that she talked to Adam Bede in his old age). It appears to promise, at once ingenuously and disingenuously, that it can render Mr Jonathan Burge's roomy workshop completely obvious.

The influence of MacCabe's formulation was quickly felt in the departments of literary and cultural studies. Catherine Belsey, for instance, in a provocative and often fascinating book, *Critical Practice* (1980), which

helped to disseminate the concept of classic realism, and indeed to pop-
ularize poststructuralist criticism in the UK, identified it quite explicitly
as "a predominantly conservative form," and the label stuck (Belsey 1980:
51). Belsey offered this account of classic realism:

> Realism is a culturally relative concept, of course, and many avant-garde
> movements have successively introduced formal changes in the name of
> increased verisimilitude. But the term is useful in distinguishing between
> those forms which tend to efface their own textuality, their existence as a
> discourse, and those which explicitly draw attention to it. Realism offers
> itself as transparent. (Belsey 1980: 51)

In this passage a deprecating attitude to realism can even be detected
in the concession that Belsey makes in relation to those avant-garde move-
ments that have reinvented the characteristic techniques of the realist
aesthetic. She implies that, by successively introducing formal change in
the name of increased verisimilitude, the avant-gardes have operated on
it from the outside, and strategically, so that it can no longer be called
realism – like technicians refining an instrument to the point at which it
doesn't resemble its original, archaic form. She thus excludes the possi-
bility that these nameless avant-garde movements, deliberately inhabiting
and interrogating the representational problematic of realism, tactically
transformed it from the inside, in response to a historical reality that is
in a state of constant, sometimes continuous, sometimes discontinuous,
dialectical development. Even as she accepts that realism is "a culturally
relative concept," that is to say, Belsey explains it formalistically, and
handles it as a static object: "Realism offers itself as transparent."

Realism is still frequently admonished for its simple-mindedness, its
lack of self-conscious sophistication. Perhaps the most dramatic example
of the custom that I have identified, of depicting realism as a dangerous
amalgam of the philosophically innocent and the ideologically decep-
tive, at least in the introductory literature on postmodernism, is Joseph
Natoli's *Primer to Postmodernity*. There, "classic realism," although con-
ventionally associated with the rise of liberal humanism in the nineteenth
century, is disarmingly identified instead with the characteristic theology
of the Middle Ages. In particular, realism is defined in relation to the
medieval conviction "that there was a sort of transparent pane of glass
between what we said about the world and what was in the world, between
word and world, between representation and reality" (Natoli 1997: 13).
Realism is from this perspective, one might think, to one's relief, almost
inconceivably outdated. In actual fact, disquietingly enough, it remains,

according to Natoli, an almost atavistic tendency in contemporary intellectual life, where it is no longer naïve so much as dangerous. It is "very much in play today," he warns the reader:

> Classic Realism is the preferred approach of both marketing and politics. A transparently obvious and "it goes without saying" context is sought in both enterprises, the one to get you to choose *their* product from the shelves and the other to get you to vote for *their* candidate in the voting booth. (Natoli 1997: 14)

This argument – which might in part be premised on Belsey's interesting and rather more specific claim, itself no doubt derived from Roland Barthes's argument in "The Rhetoric of the Image," that advertisements "possess all the technical properties of realism" (Belsey 1980: 49) – does at least have the advantage of making realism seem a matter of general human interest again. It radically misunderstands the formal and conceptual logic of realism, though, and the mechanisms through which, in literature and art, it generates its particular effects. For it collapses realism into "common sense," in its most degraded meaning, as if realism as both an aesthetic and philosophical disposition is only capable of replicating the crassest ideological assumptions about reality – as if it is not so much "a predominately conservative form" as an innately, a quintessentially conservative form.

"Classic Realism," Natoli concludes in his *Primer to Postmodernity*, is "the mind-set that allows us to think that pictures of the world are not pictures but the world itself" (Natoli 1997: 21). This highly simplistic definition is an extreme instance of the anti-realist impulse in postmodernist discourse. The contention that it is instead the mind-set that allows us to think that pictures of the world are in some uncomplicated sense reflections of the world is a more common as well as a less implausible one. The chapters of *Adventures in Realism* have, however, been compiled in opposition to both these opinions, and in the implicit belief that postmodernism, and the anti-realist assumptions that it has sponsored, is no longer quite so dominant as it became at the end of the last century. The decline of postmodernism can be inferred, to cite one symptomatic case, from the fact that Angela McRobbie, who once hailed the utopian promise of postmodernism, has recently offered a kind of recantation. "There remains a sharp sense now," she confessed in 1999, the year in which the anti-capitalist movement emerged, "that postmodernism was primarily a Western phenomena [sic] which latched onto notions of hybridity and movement, uncertainty and 'loss of faith,' but which

left relatively untouched and intact those people who remained behind" (McRobbie 1999: ix). She added that her deepening conviction that postmodernism had ignored those who do not possess the practical resources necessary for participating in its cosmopolitan game had "sent me back towards a new kind of materialism, one which attempts to connect the large scale changes with the small scale cultural economics and livelihoods upon which so many people now depend for a living" (McRobbie 1999: ix–x). This is not an isolated testimony, and indicates a certain cautious retreat in academia from some of the more extreme postmodernist positions.

Adventures in Realism represents an introduction to realism in literature, photography, painting, film, and in aesthetics and philosophy, from the nineteenth century on; but (as should already be evident) it also represents an intervention in a field of intellectual debate that has for some time been shaped by an anti-referential, an anti-realist consensus. Its chapters are to be read as arguments and not simply as summary statements of the themes that are explicated in them. So if the volume has been conceived in a spirit of historicism, it speaks both explicitly and implicitly to the present (in this respect at least, it emulates the criticism of Erich Auerbach and Georg Lukács, the most important champions of realism in the last century, though both of them have recently been neglected). The collection is for strategic as well as pedagogic reasons heterogeneous: it reconfigures the history of realism from the perspective of a number of different disciplines and in a number of different registers, so that the reader can encounter and reconnoiter realism not as some formal or generic category of largely scholarly interest, but as a kind of force-field in which political, philosophical, and practical questions, as well as aesthetic ones, can be thought out. The presence in the book of essays on the tradition of so-called critical irrealism, for example, and on the Lacanian concept of the Real, should underline the fact that this volume is an invitation to rethink realism.

Collectively, the book's interest could be said to lie in the privileged role that realism has played in the ongoing attempt, over the course of the past two hundred years, to solve certain problems of representation generated by the emergence and the consolidation of capitalist modernity. For this reason it is structured according to a roughly chronological order, from the epoch of classical realism in the nineteenth century, through the modernist revisions and critiques of this paradigm, to the present moment. It also is structured, again loosely, in terms of an uneven development across the disciplinary categories it addresses, from literature, especially the novel, through the visual arts, including film, to

more theoretical discourses, among them feminism, psychoanalysis, and philosophy – though in the final chapter Jameson revisits the nineteenth-century novel, and its relation to the modernist novel, before briefly sketching out a possible future for literary realism. *Adventures in Realism* is not simply a docile or quiescent introductory companion to realism; for if it is designed to be historically and theoretically informative, it is also a provocative plea for the contemporary importance of realism as an issue that, in Brecht's minatory statement, is not only for literature.

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Chapter 1

Literary Realism Reconsidered: "The world in its length and breadth"

George Levine

Realism seems to be struggling back to some of the respectability that it lost, at least among highbrow writers, early in the twentieth century – though in a considerably weakened form and under the scrutiny of skeptical eyes. After the 1960s, the little credit that realism still had seemed to have been exhausted entirely by the radically anti-realist arguments of much modern literary theory, according to which the very notion of representing "reality" in any credible way was taken as reprehensible *naiveté* or simple bad faith. For the modernists, Virginia Woolf's marvelous essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1923), dramatized the aesthetic (and psychological and even moral) inadequacy of realist attempts to register things as they are in all their particularity as opposed to exploring interiority and the mysteries of the self. For the postmodernists, some of the animus against realism can be traced in three important essays by J. Hillis Miller, two of them on George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and one on Dickens's *Sketches by "Boz*," each of which meticulously argues, though in different ways, that reading these texts literally as coherent representations of reality misses almost entirely how the language of the books works and the ultimate impossibility of realistic representation (see Miller 1974, 1975, and 1971). Neither of these famous Victorian, insistently realist texts turns out to be really realistic. Nor can any literary text be. Beyond its epistemological problems, it is also suggested in recent discussions, English realism is always an act of "containment," of "naturalizing"; it is not a disinterested rendering of things as they are but a strategy

to keep under control their disruptive possibilities. The contradictions and impossibilities exposed by epistemological questioning turn out to have large social and ideological implications – and, from the perspective of much recent theory, not good implications.

I do not want to fight the old fights again – in part because they are old fights and in part because I agree in significant part with the critiques. But in resisting the common-sense notion of realism that they try to demystify, they inadequately appreciate the distinctive virtues of realism and the interest and complexity of its workings. If it is true that realism as a full representation of the real must fail in any absolute sense, given the nature of the medium itself and the inevitable limits of human knowing and perspective, there are ways in which the efforts of realism – so brilliantly analyzed by Auerbach as a strong democratizing force with roots as deep as the Bible and Homer, and so strongly defended by Lukács – continue to matter and to require not passive recording but strenuous art. Once the necessary demystifying takes place; once the limits of the mode are laid bare; once the epistemological and ideological problems and disguises are recognized, realism remains an important, even a necessary mode of literary art.

Given, however, the vastness of the topic and of the debate, I would like here, after laying out some of the general grounds of the conversation about realism, to consider a few of its important, characteristically recurrent elements. And I will try to do this by taking most of my examples from a single novel, *Vanity Fair*, which has managed to survive the aesthetic and ideological wars as both an eccentric and an exemplary realist fiction. I want not to explicate the book but to look at some fragments that can help suggest the limits, the problems, and the power of nineteenth-century English realism. Bringing the discussion down from broad generalities about epistemology and ideology through a close look at exemplars of realistic technique and subject matter can tell us a lot about what makes realism interesting and important still.

Some General Characteristics

To begin, then, with the general, "realism" is a word that begs so many questions that it seems absurd to talk about it as though it were susceptible to full definition. It is not simply that literary "realism" descends from a strange, even paradoxical history, moving from what might be called absolute idealism, which posits the reality of universals (and the implicit unreality of the particulars that we would now identify as the real), to

empiricism, which posits the only knowable reality as that which we can acquire from "experience," and, in the late form of logical positivism, to dismissal of Platonic universals as "nonsense." Realism is in its very nature a paradoxical form. The more strenuously empiricism pushes against an epistemology that makes ideas more real than matter, that insists on (divinely) inherited knowledge, that gives first place to intuition and imagination, the more clear it becomes that realism always depends, more or less surreptitiously, on the mind as much as on "external nature." Perhaps ironically, therefore, realism has always tended to contain (in both senses of the word) idealism of some form or other, threatening to slide into what emerged in the late nineteenth century as an almost absolute solipsism, Walter Pater's thick wall of personality through which no real voice ever pierces. "Experience," it turns out, is always of one's sensations, not of the things out there that supposedly trigger them. The external is really internal, and realism's increasing turn to interiority, to throwing the drama inside, as Henry James put it, is almost an epistemological inevitability.

The paradox of realism's implication in idealism is matched by another one: realism, rather than being an anti-literary mode, or at least a mode that depends not on literary tradition but on things as they are, is of necessity a thoroughly literary mode. The urge to reality takes shape, consistently, in response to literary precedent, to the "cloud-borne angels, . . . prophets, sibyls, and . . . the heroic warriors" against which George Eliot, in the famous chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, sets "an old woman bending over her flower pot." The realist novel is similarly antagonistic to the romantic heroines whom Charlotte Brontë exposes as empty vessels, and to the romantic resolution in marriage that Thackeray deromanticizes in Dobbin's marriage to Amelia. In every gesture toward the real, in every mock-heroic simile, from Fielding through Thackeray and Trollope, there is an echo of some literature that has imagined a very different reality. The satirical denial of early, often quixotic, literary modes becomes a kind of signature of realism, which then in its very mockery invests the old literary forms with new importance and marks its own anti-literary procedures as self-consciously literary. This literariness is a mark of realism's self-consciousness, but it tends to be driven by a strong moral impulse (as well as an aesthetic one). For the realist, there is a lot at stake in getting it right, and it is no accident that realism tended to be the dominant narrative mode of a Victorian England in which perhaps the greatest of all virtues, greater than sexual propriety, was truth-telling. Observing things as they are, even with quasi-scientific detachment, displaces false representations with authentic ones, and forces readers out of delusions

that lead to moral disaster – Don Quixote's, or Emma Woodhouse's, or Emma Bovary's, or Pip's, or even Amelia Sedley's.

Lurking in realism is an element of earlier kinds of narratives, exemplary tales, for example, or allegory, what Michael McKeon has described as a "pedagogical end," that is, the teaching of precept by example (McKeon 200: 610). As McKeon points out, that pedagogical end becomes less central to narrative in the long history of realism, but among the Victorians, while overt pedagogy is increasingly abjured – George Eliot claims that she will not let her stories lapse "from the picture to the diagram" – the pedagogical end is absorbed into a decades-long parable that demonstrates, both in form and in subject matter, the ethical importance of finding out the truth and telling it. These things, says George Eliot half-mockingly about the famous looking-glass metaphor in *Middlemarch* (1872), are a parable. Realism, then, even as it struggles out from the traditions that helped found it, is paradoxically an attenuated form of non-realistic narrative practice.

Realism's giddying self-contradictory condition is confused yet further by the fact that it has one consistent commitment, the very hard work of trying to reach beyond words to things as they are. This work must always be in process because the way things are changes, as does the culture's understanding of the way things are, and because things look different from different perspectives. What holds realism together in its flexibility and changefulness is the fact that it is always also committed to the common-sense notion that what we see – not our words or our ideas – is "really there," that the physical world is not a Cartesian dream but is really real. Realism, in this connection, is the commitment to register the external real and then (or at the same time) the interiority that perceives and distorts or penetrates it.

The argument that, as Rosalind Coward and John Ellis put it, realism treats language "as though it stands in for, is identical with, the real world," and treats the signifier as identical to a (pre-existent) signified is only partially true (see McKeon 2000: 595). But even if it were true it need not have the consequences that much poststructuralist theory implies. That is, realism's effort to stand in for the world can hardly be unself-conscious, naïve, or self-deceived. Realism makes the difficulties of the work of representation inescapably obvious to the writer; it makes inevitable an intense self-consciousness, sometimes explicit, sometimes not. No writer attempting to reach beyond words can fail to be struck by the work words do and cannot do, and therefore no such writer can fail to recognize the degree to which the creation of illusion is essential to the realist process. Realism *is* illusory, just as representational art is illusory, finding ways to

suggest depth and three dimensions on a two-dimensional canvas, finding strategies by which to create the sense of light, as the impressionists did, just by *not* making the brush strokes look like the thing being represented (see Ermarth 1983).

William Galperin describes Jane Austen's narrative practice, conventionally taken as realistic, as self-conscious in the very texture of its language and designed to resist passive recording of the way things are, or are conventionally taken to be (Galperin 2003: 44–87). And although Galperin treats Austen's best writing more as critique of realism than "realistic" in any of its popular senses, it seems to me that what he describes so effectively in Austen is a central characteristic of almost all interesting realist practice, and does not exclude Austen from the realism that followed upon her work among the Victorians but puts her dead center. While of course there are many "realist" novels that seem simply to plunge in, tell their stories, describe their little worlds, and worry not at all about the nature of the perspective from which the story is to be told, or the problematic nature of the reality being described, realistic fiction is on the whole required to think about itself. If the world of the novel is to be represented as real (itself, of course, an oxymoronic condition), the first thing that has to be got straight is the difference between "reality," whatever we decide that is, and a work of literature, and the degree to which what is represented is being shaped by the author. That is to say, the realist novel has got to face the fact that it is a fiction, that it is made up – something that Thackeray does strenuously, if erratically, in *Vanity Fair*.

A comment of Northrop Frye's seems to me fundamental here: "The realistic writer soon finds that the requirements of literary form and plausible content always fight against each other" (Frye 1963: 36). This is both self-evident and in some ways radically subversive of any pure realist enterprise – Biffin's, for example, in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891). As Biffin himself knows, his vast and ambitious work in progress, "Mr Bailey, Grocer," will be virtually unreadable, an austere record of everything in the very ordinary life of Mr Bailey. Biffin describes how he would, for example, represent the banal conversation between two lovers he hears in the street: "I am going to reproduce it verbatim without one single impertinent suggestion of any point of view save that of honest reporting. The result will be something unutterably tedious. Precisely. That is the stamp of the ignobly decent life. If it were anything but tedious it would be untrue" (Gissing 1985: 174).

It is a cheat that Gissing finally allows Biffin to complete the manuscript – how could he ever have reached the end of these tedious registrations of the real? When Frye talks of the tension between literary

form and plausibility, he implies a fundamental tension between character and plot in all realist texts. Biffin's realist novel will have no plot. Trollope distinguishes his own work from the "sensation novel," a subgenre in which the workings of plot and the discovery of how it will come out tend to create the driving energy. But for Trollope, the true work of the novel is "observation," and the true interest of the writer (and the readers) is in the characters. He argues that in reading a sensation novel, one wants to know what will happen next, but a Trollopean, realist novel is interesting not because of plot, which can seem an arbitrary authorial imposition rather than intrinsic to the life and characters it is representing, but in the characters themselves.

While, ironically, nineteenth-century realist fiction can seem plot heavy in spite of its "realism," its "detailism" is, in fact, yet more characteristic. Novels that register the particulars of the material world strive to lessen the sense of manipulation. Insofar as the duality holds, detailism works toward plausibility and away from form, plot works toward it. Thus, on the one hand, one has the "large loose baggy monsters" of which James complained, and on the other, one has the stunning formal precision of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), which meticulously organizes and balances events and sustains itself through the energies of romance. Nineteenth-century realism, as we can understand it today, leans toward the scrupulous construction of social and historical context as it impinges on the lives of characters. In its fullest form, Biffin's "Mr Bailey, Grocer," it produces apparently artless art, without regard for the requirements of literary form.

But this tendency of realism to formless and plotless detailist representation of character further compounds the paradoxes at the heart of the realist enterprise, for in order to write such tedious stuff, Biffin must sustain the most austere, ascetic artistic commitment, giving his life to the writing of a book whose authenticity guarantees that it will be a commercial failure. But given the distinction between art and realist representation, narrators must remain alert, perhaps not to the potential tediousness of their work but to the difference between what they can narrate and what is out there to be narrated. Biffin could never have finished that book. The plausible has no beginning and no end.

Such problems of representation require that the realist novel be attentive to the question of perspective. The great mid-nineteenth-century developments in free indirect discourse come in realistic fiction, and precisely because of the felt inadequacy of strictly omniscient representation of "reality" – among other things, the danger of a voice too authoritative, too unBiffin-like, in determining the readers' judgments and understanding; and because of the necessary doubts authors might have about the power

of omniscience really to be omniscient, or of the novel to contain all that is out there to be represented. Free indirect discourse is an ingenious compromise between first person narration, whose limits and unreliability have been part of novelists' problems since *Pamela* (1740), and full omniscience. Free indirect discourse has turned out to be the best mode by which an author can "disappear," and give the impression that what unfolds on the page simply happens naturally. On the other hand, it allows interiority without constricting the reader to the full bias of the characters' desires and prejudices, and without the falsity of representation of thought registered inside quotation marks, as though the mind works in the rhetorically imposing way that stage representation requires. Moreover, free indirect style encourages the reader to be an active participant in the narrative rather than a passive receiver of "facts" and judgments, and thus further gives the sense that the narration is like life, in which there are no omniscient narrators to help us decide what to think about what we experience. Free indirect discourse is a remarkably devious invention, creating the illusion that consciousness is being rendered without authorial intervention, and that the language is the strictest representation, Biffin-like, of the workings of a real character's mind.

Omniscient narrations are far less illusory. If, on the one hand, they can be described as monologic as opposed to dialogic, constrained by a single consciousness rather than revelatory of the free play of alternative voices, on the other, they do not disguise the presence of a narrator, and in realism, it follows that openness about the fact of the presence of a narrator makes a narration more "true," if, from the point of view of literary modernists, less artistically effective. There is a certain irony that James, who was so self-consciously creating and theorizing the "art" of the novel, was so strongly committed to sustaining its illusions that he required the writer to delude readers into believing that they were in direct contact with the real. Consider how upset James gets at Trollope's habit of admitting he is writing a novel right in the middle of a novel: "He took a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, a make-believe" (James 1984: 1343). The worst sin a realist artist can commit, apparently, is to confess that he or she is making up a story.

Ironically, then, the naïve Victorians were perhaps more sophisticated about novel theory than James himself: in an almost postmodern way, they create their worlds while being intensely and often explicitly self-conscious about the medium through which they are doing it, and worrying not at all that the efforts at illusion will be undercut by overt exposures of the devices by which the illusion is being created. Who, among novel

readers, does not know he or she is reading a novel? In the long run, it is not clear whether Jamesian modernism or Trollopean Victorianism is more "realistic," but it is also unclear which requires greater art.

The Example of *Vanity Fair*

There is no novel more self-conscious about the fact of its illusionism, about the difference between the claims of art and the claims of plausibility, about the inadequacies of omniscient representation in the efforts toward authentic representation of the real, than *Vanity Fair* (1848). The narrator's representation of himself as a puppet master and of the characters as puppets is well known. But the narrator also appears as an "I" *in* the book, someone who, we are told quite late, has actually met Becky in Germany. If the characters are puppets, they are odd puppets, or it's an odd narrator; it becomes necessary, for any sort of consistency, to think of "puppets" as a metaphor, although, famously, there is a concluding vignette in which the "author" is putting real puppets back in a box. Yet the narrator not only meets these puppets in Germany; some of them provide him with information he needs to tell the story. Early on, in yet another guise, the narrator asks, "as a man and a brother," "to step down from the platform, and talk about" the characters he has been introducing (Thackeray 2003: 90). And in a move that might be recognized from Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), he pauses to tell "us" – and the "us," the readers, are very much part of the text – in what other ways "we might have treated this subject." He goes on to describe other literary forms that he has, on consideration, rejected (Thackeray 2003: 59). In the role of omniscient narrator, he sometimes abdicates but then selectively loses his power to know everything, claiming that he is unable to tell us what have been the motives of his characters. If any narration can be taken to be unstable and inconsistent, the narration of *Vanity Fair* is it.

The inconsistency is compounded by the fact that *Vanity Fair* is a persistently ironic book. In the great Cervantean tradition, and in keeping with Thackeray's earlier work and the original title of the novel, "Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society," *Vanity Fair* satirizes almost everything, using literary devices to counter literary devices, exploding conventional ways of writing a novel, even ending on a note that pulls the rug out from under any of us who, led by the conventions of comic romance, or comic realism, expect and wait hopefully for the marriage of Dobbin and Amelia. When that marriage comes, the possibilities of romance are long since gone, and even a touch of bitterness enters the prose:

> He has got the prize he has been trying for all his life. The bird has come
> in at last. There it is with its head on his shoulder, billing and cooing close
> up to his heart, with soft outstretched fluttering wings. This is what he has
> asked for every day and hour for eighteen years. This is what he pined after.
> Here it is – the summit, the end – the last page. (Thackeray 2003: 804)

The climax, then, arrives as the book announces (metaphorically) that
it *is* a book and that we are on the last page. As literature and life are
conflated and comment on each other, the satire edges toward contempt,
and its intensity raises the stakes. It is not only Amelia who makes an
unsatisfactory bride; marriage as an institution is implicated, and perhaps
more seriously yet, the marriage plot itself is called into question, as well
as the conventions of formal closure. Part of the irony of the passage is
that, just as it is announcing it has arrived at "the last page," it is develop-
ing the conventions that will dominate realism. That is, it creates its
reality by satirizing conventional literary form. The genre of realist fiction,
which in England began and was sustained for the most part by the comic
tradition that concludes the drama in marriage, increasingly tends to treat
marriage not as an ending but as a beginning. Thackeray helps, boldly,
to initiate this change: Becky marries Rawdon early on and the book
explores many marriages with an ironic, one might almost say, embittered,
tone. Twenty-five years later, George Eliot would make the very substance
of perhaps the greatest English realist novel two marriages – that between
Dorothea Brooke and Casaubon, which happens within a few chapters
of the start of *Middlemarch*, and that between Rosamond and Lydgate,
which happens not much later. The drama of James's *The Golden Bowl*
(1904), a book that is at once closely tied to the traditions of Victorian
realism and distinctly modernist in mode, really begins with the marriage
of the Prince with Maggie Verver.

Thackeray's ironic comment on Amelia and Dobbin's marriage has large
implications for the form of realist fiction, but it has also a biting ethical
energy to it. It is not only a reaction to the obvious fact of the anguish
of Thackeray's own marriage. It is angry about romantic illusion itself;
it is angry about conventions of representation that take romantic love
seriously. It is contemptuous of the happy ending, for it is clear that the
requirements of literary form rub hard against the requirements of real-
istic representation as Thackeray understands the real. Any ending within
a self-consciously realist text is going to be arbitrary; there can be no real
conclusion. But Thackeray intimates this without allowing his book to
answer to realism's potential shapelessness, for he uses the conventional
ending even as he satirically employs it to undercut the convention.

The morally satisfying comic ending of *Vanity Fair* is, however, an
illusion. Becky Sharp, the "villainess" (for many readers the real heroine
of the book), lives outside the punishment of poetic justice, even though
she has probably murdered Amelia's brother. Her life goes on beyond
"the last page." And another and different sort of novel begs to be
written, Biffin-like, or perhaps James-like, exploring the interiority of a
Dobbin who no longer loves his wife but is gentle and good to her, and
of an "Emmy" who knows that this is the case. In refusing the satisfac-
tions of closure, Thackeray is implicitly affirming the importance of the
realist enterprise; in rejecting the comic ending and the possibility of a
satisfactory conclusion – "Which of us is happy in this world?" the book's
final paragraph asks (Thackeray 2003: 809) – Thackeray turns away from
the literary forms that give spine and structure to his own enormous book
and arrives at what might be seen as the ultimate attitude of the realist,
something like contempt for the impossible enterprise of writing realist
novels.

Thackeray's very individual, somewhat tired and disillusioned relation
to his writing can be taken as a useful metaphor for the tendencies of
realism. Insofar as the realist aspires to tell the truth, both author and
reader must be perpetually disillusioned, for it is impossible not to be aware
of limits to both transparency and comprehensiveness. What I said in
The Realistic Imagination seems still to the point of realism now: "to take
seriously any set of particulars is to falsify" (Levine 1981: 154). Inclu-
sion implies exclusion. The focus on any character or set of characters,
any object or set of objects, implies a denial of the importance of the
characters or objects not described; but for Thackeray and the realists,
implicitly, every object and every character is worthy of attention. To
follow out the democratic impulse that Auerbach detects as funda-
mental to the development of realism would be to move to a narrative in
which there are no focal figures but every figure would gather the fullest
sympathetic and imaginative attention. There is, then, a moral implica-
tion to these kinds of exclusions, as, for example, when the narrator
notes how doctors would pay more attention to Amelia's son, Georgy,
than to others: "did they sit up for the folks at the Pineries, when Ralph
Plantagenet, and Gwendoline, and Guinever Mango had the same juve-
nile complaint? Did they sit up for little Mary Clapp, the landlord's
daughter, who actually caught the disease off little Georgy?" (Thackeray
2003: 451). Significantly, these "characters" appear nowhere else in the
novel; they are other novels not written, of which the author, who will not
write those novels, wants to remind us. As the narrator of *Middlemarch*
forcefully does remind us, there are other sensibilities than that of our

hero or heroine: "Why always Dorothea?" (Eliot 1994: 278). That is the realist question, thick with ethical implications, and it is a question that, in other ways, Thackeray is always asking.

Theme and form, in realism, play into each other – the questions of how much of reality can be represented, about whether reality can ever be represented at all, are thematized in *Vanity Fair* as they often are in other realist texts. But virtually every page plays out, in one way or other, problems that characteristically emerged in nineteenth-century realist fictions – problems clearly related to what Franco Moretti, following Karl Mannheim, describes as the collapse of status society (Moretti 1987). Formal changes in literary narrative were tied closely to the economic and social transformations that were changing the face of England through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. McKeon has argued that "questions of truth," epistemological ones, or "questions of virtue," social ones, had everything to do with the generic instability that helped produce and sustain the realist novel as a form (McKeon 2000: 383). We can see in *Vanity Fair* that Thackeray worries about questions of virtue, for contemporary social change implied reconception of fundamental categories of being – of religion and individuality and selfhood and privacy and public life and education and class. Most critically, as Moretti suggests, "the world of work changes at an incredible and incessant pace" (Moretti 1987: 4). It was hard to be a "realist" at the time without making the question of the protagonist's vocation critical to the drama. In a genre addressed to a new middle-class audience, the question was less "Whom will I marry?" than "What can I do?" "What can I do?" echoes remarkably among the protagonists of a large number of Victorian novels. Although Thackeray focuses in his novel on a world aspiring to the condition of aristocracy, much of the narrative depends on the fact that Becky Sharp must make a living. She tries to make it the old way, by marrying up, but she just misses, and thus for hundreds of pages her story is devoted to her quest for money.

The other side of the question of vocation is the question of inheritance, which had a long life in pre-realist genres, and which survives well into the nineteenth century. Inheritance in Victorian novels is often the key to the crossing of classes, which is one of the central preoccupations of Victorian fiction. Becky counts on inheritance in the first half of the novel and worries about what "to do" only after it's clear that the inheritance will not come her way. Amelia spends much of the book living with the consequence of being disinherited. All of these issues are entangled with questions of class and vocation just because they are manifestations of the new instability of class status – in the reshuffling of the

orders of power in nineteenth-century society, money and class came to
be fundamentally separate categories, even while the fundamental attitudes
of a hierarchical society remained in place.

All of these almost obsessive preoccupations of realist fiction – their
relation to the ethical, their relation to the practice of accurate representa-
tion, and their relation, finally, to literary form – cause a fundamental
crisis in realist practice. This crisis, which, I would argue, leads to realism's
constant formal transformations (the place of marriage in the narratives,
for example, or the shift to focus on characters' interiority, or the move
away from comic toward tragic form), is a peculiarly secular one. The prob-
lems with which the realist novel engages are, as the title "Vanity Fair"
suggests, secular problems. The realist novel is predominantly a secular
form, in which the implicit order of the world inferable from traditional
comic and tragic and epic forms can only be achieved in worldly terms.
The achievements of traditional comic form depend on an implicit
faith that justice and meaning are built into the world, and that the imbal-
ance and hierarchical nature of the social order can be justified by the
transcendent world beyond. Virtue could be rewarded because virtue *was*
rewarded in a just and divinely ordered world; success could go with comic
conclusions because success was not contaminated by worldly corruptions.
But almost all of this was slowly, inexorably changed and complicated
by the development of new economic and social orders in which money
was displacing class status as the chief mark of success.

Conceiving a world in which money displaces class, and in which
social status is fluid, the realist novel becomes fundamentally secular. The
critical question for protagonists becomes how to get money, although
that question is frequently displaced and disguised. In the story of Fred
Vincy in *Middlemarch*, we have an encapsulated form of the kind of prob-
lem with which realistic fiction persistently engaged. For Fred begins
life by assuming an inheritance which he does not receive. One kind of
life-narrative immediately transforms into another: what is it that Fred can
do to earn the money he will need to survive and succeed (and win his
beloved's hand)? *Middlemarch* makes the subject of his narrative, then,
the question of work itself.

Money becomes the pivot, implicit or explicit, on which nineteenth-
century realist fiction turns. Certainly, whatever the ostensible issues,
there can be no success in the world of Victorian realism without money,
however disguised its sources. Absence of money is the fundamental fact
of Amelia's story after the death of George, and all the pathos and ten-
sions of that story depend on money's absence. But when the question
of virtue is tied to the question of money, the realist novel is faced with

ethical (and formal) problems that it often tries to evade. It is one of the ironies of English nineteenth-century realism that while money is essential for success, and therefore for the comic ending, the quest for money (beyond what is necessary for survival, and sometimes even then) is unequivocally a mark of shame, corruption, evil. Outside the novels of Anthony Trollope, this apparently excessive generalization is almost universally true. An essential question inside the realist novel, often not articulated explicitly, is whether it is possible for a protagonist to sustain the moral virtues that the culture admires and at the same time achieve success.

The concepts of intrinsic virtue and of some ultimate possibility of moral justice depend on the sense that moral order is built into the world and that, in the long run, worldly troubles are compensated for through divine oversight and presence. The world, otherwise, is both an ethical and aesthetic catastrophe, rather like the world without God that John Henry Newman imagined in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864):

> To consider the world in its length and breadth, its various history, the many races of man, their starts, their fortunes, their mutual alienation, their conflicts; and then their ways, habits, governments, forms of worship; their enterprises, their aimless courses, their random achievements and acquirements, the impotent conclusion of long-standing fact, the tokens so faint and broken of a superintending design, the blind evolution of what turn out to be great powers or truths, the progress of things, as if from unreasoning elements, hot toward final causes, the greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain hung over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion, that condition of the whole race, so fearfully yet exactly described in the Apostle's words, "having no hope and without God in the world," – all this is a vision to dizzy and appall; and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery which is absolutely beyond human solution. (Newman 1967: 217)

What Newman describes in this exhausting catalogue of the conditions of this world is Vanity Fair itself – a vision to dizzy and appall. Many Victorian realists, perhaps most brilliantly and strenuously George Eliot, tried to imagine into the secular world the sort of moral order that Newman here describes as impossible. Thackeray's response to this horrific vision is to make comedy and satire; but, beyond that, to leave each of us corrupted and, as the narrator concludes, unsatisfied.

Despite many apparently realist narratives that affirm the most pious and religiously correct visions of reality, the realist novel was fundamentally

secular, rendering a world like that which Newman describes without Newman's religious dismay at the absence of the transcendental. *Vanity Fair* is a good representative of nineteenth-century realism just because it so doggedly insists on confining its narration to the doings of "Vanity Fair." While the very determination to do that, and the invocation of Bunyan, can reasonably enough suggest the possibility of a divine if hidden presence in the world, Thackeray's novel treats religion as it treats commercial culture – it is simply a fact of this lower world. Certainly, the book's clergy are totally worldly figures. Questions of class, of commercial success, of social climbing, of "how to live on nothing a year," of hypocrisy, and of inheritance are its true, and secular, concerns. The narrator closes the door on Amelia's prayers because, he claims, these are not the province of Vanity Fair, but it would be no stretch to suggest that Thackeray refused to represent that kind of piety just because it would change the nature of the novel.

Secularity, Money, and Virtue

To pursue this argument for the secularity of the novel, I want to take off from a line of Becky's that might help focus the problems of realism I have been discussing. In chapter 41, as she rises toward the high point of her career, she reflects on the way in which the entirely virtuous Lady Jane, having inherited a large sum of money, conducts herself. "I think," Becky reflects, "I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year." The omnipresent, though rather elusive narrator then comments: "And who knows but Rebecca was right in her speculations – and that it was only a question of money and fortune which made the difference between her and an honest woman" (Thackeray 2003: 490). This seems innocuous enough – that is, only a piece of Becky's cynicism and of Thackeray's irony. But Becky's comment, if taken in another way, might represent a fundamental conflict in realism's conception of character and in its relation to the scrupulously detailed and historically precise world in which realist characters move. And the narrator's comment might, ironically, be taken as quite literal.

So there is a double irony here. The first is the narrator's commentary on Becky's reflection, which seems to imply that qualities of character do *not* depend on circumstance. But the more telling irony is that the narrator's ironies might not be ironic at all. Realist practice, throughout its literary life, is to insist on the context in which characters move, on history, on social context. That supertext of realism, *Middlemarch*, for

example, is subtitled "A Study of Provincial Life." Here the question of secularity looms large, for realism is the mode that reads character into the conditions of ordinary life, the life of Vanity Fair, and makes drama of their apparent everydayness, of their problems in making a living, of their relations with their neighbors, of the things that they have and want, of their domesticity. Every character in a realist novel must be read in relation to the circumstances of his or her life.

Vanity Fair is particularly careful to describe the circumstances, and it makes much of what happens in the story dependent on the great historical moment of Waterloo and the defeat of Napoleon: Amelia's father loses his fortune because of the war, Amelia loses her husband in it; and major characters are all tested against the event, which is never directly represented. Becky emerges from Waterloo positively Napoleonic, but who Becky is depends on where she comes from, who her parents were, what class she belongs to, what possibilities are open to a young woman without wealth, and of course what is going on in Europe at the time she comes of age. Part of what evoked disgust from many readers of *Vanity Fair* was just the cynical sense it intimated (even while resisting it with ambiguous ironies) that Becky is at least partly right and the narrator is not being ironic.

Even if we assume that the novel shares the cultural revulsion from the idea that character is not integrally and permanently itself, that it is not either intrinsically virtuous or intrinsically evil, and that money can be determining of goodness, Thackeray's realistically observant way of handling the issues raises questions. His narrative reveals what he may be ironically disparaging in his comment on Becky's thought. Becky's way of thinking about virtue, which many readers did in fact take as Thackeray's, was repellent to many. On the other hand, when George Eliot made the same point in another way, and as a central theme of her novels, she was taken with the greatest seriousness. One of the most famous lines in all of Eliot's novels comes near the end of *Middlemarch*, when she asserts, "For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (Eliot 1994: 838). This is Becky in a more solemn, less personal mode. The fact that Eliot's novels, like a large proportion of realist novels, have no intrinsically evil people in them (except perhaps Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda* [1876]) is a reflection of this sense of character. Mr Farebrother, the gentle and generous clergyman in *Middlemarch*, tells Dorothea: "character is not cut in marble – it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing, and may become diseased as our bodies do" (724). The bad guys in George Eliot's fiction, like Tito Melema in *Romola* (1863),

or even Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede* (1859), go bad largely because of circumstance. It is true that realism, as manifested in Thackeray and Eliot, tends to hold to the idea of an intrinsic self that may be pushed and strained by circumstance but that is nevertheless whole and integral. But all strong realists understand that circumstance can become decisive. And thus Becky's reflections, which ought to be further evidence of her corruption and the shallowness of her moral sense, take on great significance for realist texts, including *Vanity Fair*. She writes like a novelist in many parts of the book, and here she is even thinking like a novelist, a realist, secular one.

Nor is it an accident that Becky's reflections take her to money as the determining circumstance. Becky acknowledges to herself what the society won't admit, that virtue is somehow closely tied to money, and that money is the key element in the secular world. The focus on money, in fact, is the firmest mark that realist fiction is fundamentally secular. The fluidity of money is the counterpart to the new fluidity of "status" in the worlds represented by nineteenth-century realist fiction; its power to corrupt corresponds to the vision of the material world that Newman shows us. It is what displaces an ordering god, for it is the condition of success, the condition of the happy ending. The difference is that realist novels either avoid confronting the ways in which money works to build success or they exonerate their protagonists from concern for money – by allowing them to have it all along, to inherit it, or to demonstrate that, although they have acquired it, they don't care for it and would never compromise themselves to retain it. The heroes of Victorian novels are notoriously weak and ineffectual precisely because a strong hero would have to be successful in the capitalist game of money, where Scrooge-like figures are more likely to be in control. Becky Sharp might have been portrayed as another kind of heroine, someone who having led a difficult and penurious childhood struggles up to success, like Jane Eyre. But Becky is allowed to be seen pursuing money, and in the shadiest of ways, and that pursuit marks her as the wicked mermaid, the "monster" whose "hideous tail" flails unseen under water.

The work of the realist, to represent things as they are, and in this case the workings of an economy that is ruthless and selfish, leads to a recognition that things as they are do not include the moral and just distribution of rewards. *Vanity Fair* does not often allow for the form of comedy: it does not provide those resolutions in union and community that are traditionally marked by marriage and the marriage plot; but perhaps most important, it does not allow active people to avoid the contamination and even corruption that engagement with the economic order entails.

Hapless and affectionate as Amelia is, her sentimental passion for Georgy, as it causes strains with her mother and father, is itself morally strained. Most early nineteenth-century realist texts rely on endings with marriage to indicate the fair distribution of justice, but this often strains the commitment to realist probability. Much of the power of *Vanity Fair* as a representative realist novel derives just from its energetic mocking of this tradition. But in the 1840s *Vanity Fair* was unusual. If David Copperfield's first marriage was inadequate, the second one would be just right. Adam Bede and Dinah finally come together despite Adam's mistaken fascination with Hetty Sorrel. These endings suggest an ultimate meaningfulness in a secular world that seems marked by Newmanian disorder and meaninglessness, and for the most part, in the comic tradition of early nineteenth-century realism, the world, though threatening, does not become malicious or indifferent.

Religious order increasingly breaks down, however, as realist fiction continues to explore the possibilities available to "ordinary," Biffin-like characters. One might read the tensions that this struggle produced for the very form of Victorian fiction through the lens of Max Weber's theory in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). While that theory has been rethought and criticized since its first publication, it doesn't for my purposes matter very much whether it correctly diagnoses the relation between religion and capitalism in the nineteenth century. Many English nineteenth-century novels test out the Weberian thesis before the fact. Weber argues that the ascetic virtues that Calvinist religion required turn out to be precisely the virtues that are required for success in a capitalist economy. One of the central features of the "Protestant ethic" that Weber discusses is just that it shares the Victorian novel's distrust of money. Ironically, this ethic produces financial success in large part because practicing Calvinists did not work in order to acquire money but because work and self-sacrifice were intrinsic to the protestant calling. "Work while it is called Today," says Thomas Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*, referring to John: 9: 4, "for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work" (Carlyle 1937: 197). So in a Weberian narrative, the most successful capitalist would turn out to be like the protagonists of Victorian novels, that is, uninterested in money, perhaps contemptuous of it, but interested in the work itself. In a Weberian scenario success and virtue would be two faces of the same coin.

George Eliot makes a gesture at this way of thinking about "success" in the character of Caleb Garth in *Middlemarch*. Caleb is capable and generous and loves his work but cares not at all for money and distrusts those who pursue it. The word "business" becomes his sacred icon. And

he makes a great success of his work. In his life, at least, virtue and
secular success come together. But it is no accident that his work is both
pre-capitalist and unique. More important, Caleb's story is almost incid-
ental in a novel that carefully plots the failure of piety, and even of
talent, because of the pull of money. The true ascetic, pious Protestant
who rules as moral despot over Middlemarch is Bulstrode, whom Caleb
distrusts, and who we discover has long been corrupted by money. Realist
novels in effect test Weber's thesis, and in forcing a detailed attention to
the lives and methods of its central characters consistently dramatize the
incompatibility between Protestant morality and worldly success. Such tests
of characters' engagement with money and power make it increasingly
difficult for the realist novel to sustain its aspirations to comic form.

   The movement in late Victorian fiction from comic to tragic form in
realism is then only partly the result of the influence of French realism
on the English. It is an almost inevitable consequence of a fundament-
ally secular reading of the world in which money becomes the condition
for protagonists' success. Thomas Hardy, for example, was hostile to
naturalism, but wrote novel after novel in which the ingredients of class
struggle and the problem of work figured as importantly as in earlier
Victorian novels. But in not a single book does he represent a strong male
figure who manages to remain both successful and virtuous. Victorian
realism turns upside down in Hardy as he self-consciously imagines his
characters in a world so totally secular that it becomes, at times, almost
demonic. "The President of the Immortals," for example, in *Tess of the
d'Urbervilles* (1891), presides over Tess's fate, so that even at that late date
in the history of nineteenth-century realism the ironic tradition in realism
is at work. Rejecting the possibility of the transcendent and of the ideal
– in fact, plotting his stories, like that of Angel Clare, around the disast-
rous consequences of attempting to live the ideal – Hardy keeps the very
literary and ideal qualities of realism alive. Tess is after all a "pure woman"
and the President of the Immortals is a modern version of God.

   Realism, throughout the nineteenth century, remained an ambivalent
and often self-contradictory mode. It was most consistent in its deter-
mination to find strategies for describing the world as it was. It was
inconsistent because every artist's conception of what the world was
like differed and because the world changed from moment to moment,
generation to generation. But it was consistent, too, in addressing ethical
issues raised by developments in contemporary economy and society. So
it regularly failed to find a satisfying way to represent an active and virtu-
ous protagonist who achieves success without being corrupted along
the way. It struggled to reconcile success and virtue, but was too honest

as a literary mode to accomplish that easily. Its commitment to close observation of the details of society and the context in which characters move helped to destabilize the conception of selfhood and character on which the Victorian novel built its greatest successes. In the world of realism, as in the world that Charles Darwin was representing to his culture, everything is in flux, including character.

Vanity Fair is most interesting in its anticipatory exploration of realism's ethical and aesthetic problems. What contemporary readers found disgusting and disturbing about its worldliness are some its most interesting virtues, its concession that we are all compromised and partly corrupted by money, its implication that behind the secular world there is no force for order and justice, its refusal of the happy ending because it will not reconcile success and merit (or not quite), its delicious indulgence in the things of this world, and the cynicism that powers its satire.

Reconciling probability and literary form in a world gone secular is ultimately the greatest challenge to the realist sensibility. Hardy, resisting the label of naturalist or realist, argued that his books were not at all "reality," but pursuits of the design in the carpet. In the ambiguous status of realism, it should be enough to say that it remained throughout its long career a very literary mode, one which even now often tries to disguise its literariness, partial in its representations, and therefore vulnerable to the kinds of critiques I invoked at the start of this chapter. But it is a mode that by virtue of its commitment to getting it right is in constant flux, changing its conception of the real with the movement of time, re-imagining character and even selfhood, both in the context of the social conditions in which it must live and through the kinds of experiments with interiority that mark its history from Austen, to Eliot, to James, to Woolf and Joyce. Its very weaknesses – its failure, for example, to imagine strong male protagonists, or its tendency not to consider the details by which protagonists do make money and achieve power, its exploitation of coincidences to achieve what a thorough pursuit of probability could not – these and others are also marks of its remarkable aspirations and indications of its extraordinary achievements.

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Chapter 2

Realist Synthesis in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: "That unity which lies in the selection of our keenest consciousness"

Simon Dentith

I think we should all read nineteenth-century novels, but we shouldn't try to write them.

<div align="right">Jeanette Winterson</div>

Some Definitions, in Which Little is Defined

Discussions of the nineteenth-century realist novel have been afflicted by questions of epistemology. This seeming paradox – for what kind of a claim is made by the word "realism" if not an epistemological one? – is nevertheless defensible. For "realism" understood as the mere epistemological dimension of all writing (or indeed all utterances) is clearly at once inescapable and inadequate as a measure. It is inescapable because all utterances (and realist novels are at least this) occur in a shared material and social world, and are meaningless outside of this context – in this regard "realism" is a way of referring to their inescapable pragmatic location. This is as true of those genres which transgress the canons of everyday plausibility and verisimilitude as it is of those which conform to them rigorously, for all utterances make sense by virtue of the way in which they

position themselves in the world inhabited by both speaker and listener, or writer and reader. To this extent "realism" is a form of deictic anchorage, an acknowledgment that the force of an utterance is dependent upon its location in (or assertion of dislocation from) the world we all inhabit. Another way of describing this is to say that "realism" – the inevitable effort to locate an utterance in the real world – is an aspect of the effort to make sense of an utterance, a phase in the hermeneutic process. Our understanding of what we read is dependent on our prior comprehension of the world to which the text we are reading alludes; the reader who mistook *The Lord of the Rings* for a real history of the earth would not be misunderstanding the internal logic of the text but would rather be showing ignorance of some fundamental facts of geography and history.

A consideration of realism in this bare epistemological meaning is thus an inevitable aspect of any negotiation with any text, relying, to varying degrees, upon the reader's immersion, across multiple dimensions, in the material and social world. But it is also inadequate as a measure of a text or utterance, because these do not exist solely in the dimension of knowledge. When Stendhal or Thackeray refers to the Battle of Waterloo in *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839) or *Vanity Fair* (1848), or when London, Paris, or St Petersburg figures as a massive presence in the novels of Dickens, Balzac, or Dostoevsky, these are not neutral matters of historical allusion, but carry complex evaluative attitudes with which the reader has to negotiate, across many more dimensions than mere epistemology. It is pointless, therefore, to judge texts solely in the dimension of knowledge – to ask of them only "Is this real?" – when to do so is to attend only to a condition of their meaningfulness and not the complex meanings that they carry.

The rough working definition of the realist novel with which I will be operating, therefore, is not grounded on any effort at tight epistemological guarantees, but rather asserts that realism is best understood as a set of conventions, certainly, but ones whose knowledge claims I do not wish to challenge. In general terms, these conventions demand that the narrative and characterizations within the novel conform to broad canons of plausibility, and are conducted within modes that do not step beyond the necessary foreshortening and heightening that all art requires. This is a wide definition, but it still excludes many of the modes that the nineteenth-century novel draws upon: romance, Gothic, and melodrama. These modes, too, can give access to the real; what Peter Brooks refers to as the "legible symbolic configurations" of melodrama allow writers to "configure" or make visible moral and psychological realities in vivid ways (see Brooks 1976). But they are not realist even in the broad sense

that I wish to give to the term, since they move outside our shared rough-and-ready understanding of how the world works.

Realist novels, understood in this catholic way, are not always "realist" through and through; they often contain elements of melodrama, romance, or simply heightened and symbolically charged writing that invite a different negotiation on the part of the reader to make sense of them than other elements of the text. For example, even in *Middlemarch* (1872), the most sustained attempt at realism in English of any novel in the nineteenth century, George Eliot can write in a way that shifts into the melodramatic; when the miser Peter Featherstone dies, for instance, he does so "with his right hand clasping the keys, and his left hand lying on the heap of notes and gold" (Eliot 1965: 354). This draws upon an aesthetic which is morally emblematic rather than realist. Many other novels, which are quite properly thought to be predominantly realist in mode, equally include within themselves writing conducted in other modes. Indeed, sometimes this becomes part of the claim to realism of the novel, when it incorporates and then parodies or repudiates what it asserts to be falsifying genres, notably romance. This is in fact one of the founding gestures of the novel form, made by Cervantes in *Don Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century; in the nineteenth century this gesture is widely repeated in the writing of Jane Austen, W. M. Thackeray, and George Eliot.

Equally, many novels which are not predominantly realist can include within themselves phases or moments of realism; an example is Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), a novel premised upon the wildest coincidences, and conducted in large part in the modes of melodrama and Gothic. Yet Dickens was also at pains to assert the documentary truth of aspects of the novel, which takes inexperienced readers into areas of London that they are presumed to be ignorant of, in passages that insist on the reality of the world to which they are being introduced. Novels such as this require readers to be capable of switching rapidly between modes, and thus to be able to negotiate confidently the manner in which the differing sections of the text offer themselves.

Some of the definitional difficulties of the word "realism" spring from its complex history; Raymond Williams in *Keywords* (1976) provides a brief and accessible account of these complexities. Where in medieval philosophy "realism" was a doctrine which posited the real existence of the fundamental categories, and thus saw the phenomenal world as in some way less "real" than its underlying forms, by the nineteenth century realism had come to mean a belief in the reality of that phenomenal world and in the capacity of the human mind to know it. Nevertheless, traces of

that older meaning persist in the belief that an authentic realism will be
able to find ways of representing more profound or underlying forces at
work in human social and individual life than mere attention to surface
accuracy of detail permits. It is certainly a profound problem throughout
the nineteenth century for novelists to find ways of including in their
narratives some sense of the wider and relatively impersonal forces which
are propelling the lives of their characters. In addition to these strictly
epistemological matters, realism has also had a moral or ideological
meaning: a belief that one's expectations and calculations about human
possibility should be bounded by actualities. In this sense to be a "real-
ist" is to be someone who is prepared to accept the limits of the actual.

 These definitional complexities can be better understood by compar-
ing the work of two English novelists, one, Jane Austen, from the begin-
ning of the nineteenth century, and the other, Charlotte Brontë, who
was writing at mid-century. In one way the former is much more a nar-
rowly "realist" writer than the latter, in her determination to obey notions
of verisimilitude, and to reproduce the manners, habits, and expectations
of the social class from which she herself was drawn. In addition, she
is also morally "realistic" – accepting the limits of the world she actually
inhabits. Charlotte Brontë, by contrast, writes unbalanced, morally utopian
novels which teeter off into romance, melodrama, and the Gothic, and
in which wildly implausible coincidences and spiritual affinities dominate
the plotting. Yet she also is far more profoundly realist than Jane Austen,
in that far more of human life is present and represented in her texts:
extremes of depression, passion, and isolation, certainly, but also a much
fuller feeling of human presence and intensity than in Austen.

 I am using realism to mean here the capacity to provide a vivid impres-
sion of the presence and interaction of people in all their intensity and
complexity, and thus the pressure of a personality across its whole range.
This is much more a matter of the texture of the writing than to do with
questions of the plotting and narrative arrangements, the areas of novel-
writing where "plausibility" is most usually discussed. In the following
quotation from *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Elizabeth is visiting her old
friend Charlotte, who has married Mr Collins, who had first proposed
to her. The married couple is showing her around their newly furnished
house:

> Elizabeth was prepared to see him in his glory; and she could not help fancy-
> ing that in displaying the good proportion of the room, its aspect and its
> furniture, he addressed himself particularly to her, as if wishing to make
> her feel what she had lost in refusing him. But though everything seemed

neat and comfortable, she was not able to gratify him by any sigh of repent-
ance; and rather looked with wonder at her friend that she could have so
cheerful an air, with such a companion. When Mr Collins said anything
of which his wife might reasonably be ashamed, which certainly was not
unseldom, she involuntarily turned her eye on Charlotte. Once or twice
she discerned a faint blush; but in general Charlotte wisely did not hear.
(Austen 1985: 191–2)

In a passage such as this, the reader certainly gets a vivid sense of the inter-
actions between these people, of the potential awkwardness and comedy
of the scene. Elizabeth's consciousness of the moral obliquity of Collins,
her "involuntary" efforts to include Charlotte in this consciousness, and
Charlotte's refusal to do so while all the time displaying "a faint blush"
to indicate that she sees it very clearly – all this is made present to the
reader. The scene also demonstrates Austen's moral and social realism;
Charlotte has married Collins not because she loves him but because she
has made a careful calculation that he is the best that she can realistically
obtain given the hand she has to play in the marriage market. Character
and social situation are sharply and plausibly portrayed in Austen's writ-
ing, but within relatively narrow limits: not only does she address a narrow
social range, but, given that range, character is conceived as operating
especially at the level of moral psychology.

In *Jane Eyre* (1847), by contrast, though the plot is at times highly
implausible, Charlotte Brontë gives a quite different sense of the inter-
action of one person upon another. In the following scene, for example,
Jane is in a carriage with Rochester after she has agreed to marry him;
he has taken her on a shopping trip to buy a new wardrobe. She is unhappy
about the relative position of power that his wealth places him in, given
her own poverty; she has, however, learned that she might become the
heiress of a distant relative:

"It would, indeed, be a relief," I thought, "if I had ever so small an inde-
pendency; I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr Rochester, or
sitting like a second Danae with the golden shower falling round me. I will
write to Madeira the moment I get home, and tell my Uncle John I am
going to be married, and to whom: if I had but a prospect of one day bring-
ing Mr Rochester an accession of fortune, I could better endure to be kept
by him now." And somewhat relieved by this idea (which I failed not to
execute that day), I ventured once more to meet my master's and lover's
eye, which most pertinaciously sought mine, though I averted both face
and gaze. He smiled, and I thought his smile was such as a sultan might,
in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had

enriched: I crushed his hand, which was ever hunting mine, vigorously, and
thrust it back to him red with the passionate pressure. (Brontë 1982: 297)

This is actually quite as "realist" as Jane Austen's text in acknowledging
the economic dimension to the inequalities of power between male and
female lovers: Jane is resisting both Rochester's munificence toward
her (which she sees as an expression of his power) and the particular
sexual ideal which he wishes to impose on her – she can "never bear being
dressed like a doll," or indeed "sitting like a second Danae with the golden
shower falling round me," an allusion to the way that Jove disguised one
of his many sexual exploits. The dependency that he wishes to impose
on her is captured especially strongly by the image of Rochester as a
"sultan" bestowing gifts on one of the members of his harem – a conceit
which is pursued further in the dialogue that follows this quotation. The
final sentence of the extract is especially forceful in giving a sense of the
dynamics of the interchange between the two characters: Rochester's hand
"vigorously" hunting Jane's, and her physical crushing of his hand and
thrusting it back to him "red with the passionate pressure." This gives a
strong sense of the immediate physical attraction of Rochester toward Jane,
of her acknowledgment of this, and yet her passionate resistance to it. In
short, the scene powerfully conveys the interaction of the two characters,
in a way that allows us to see the imbrication of economic, class, gender,
and erotic impulses in the balance and pressure of each personality upon
the other. This too is a kind of realism, and suggests a capacity to artic-
ulate the multiplicity of human feelings – what happens between people
– outside of Jane Austen's range.

It would be possible to see the contrast between Austen's and Brontë's
writing as no more than the stylistic or even temperamental difference
between two writers; all writers, after all, have particular habits and
idiosyncrasies which permit them the insight of their blindness. But
equally we can say that the expansion in range between Jane Austen
(writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, heir to a relatively
rich but still short tradition of eighteenth-century prose writing) and
Charlotte Brontë (writing at mid-century with a fuller tradition of neo-
classical and romantic prose to draw upon) is a minor but still significant
transition in an Auerbachian progression: as the nineteenth century pro-
gressed, a fuller and richer synthesis of human self-understanding became
possible, permitting the richer mimesis that *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* (1853)
represent in relation to *Pride and Prejudice* and even *Mansfield Park* (1814),
for all their formal perfection. Something like this view, though not
necessarily couched in Auerbachian terms, must surely be the central case

to be made in relation to the nineteenth-century realist novel: that it represents a historically specific but still generically persuasive synthesis in which the multiple aspects of human life in society can be held together. The scope of the realist novel, understood in this sense, will be explored shortly.

The term "realist novel" is often used to allude indistinguishably to the whole range of nineteenth-century novels: from Jane Austen and Walter Scott in English through to George Gissing and Henry James; from Stendhal and Balzac through to Zola in French; from Gogol through Dostoevsky and Tolstoy to Chekhov in Russian; and to the great American realist writers such as Dreiser and Crane at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. A narrower group of novels emerges from more programmatic commitments to "realism" as an aesthetic and, in some cases, social and political doctrine. The battles over the term are fought out in differing idioms and at different times in the national contexts in which the novel plays a central cultural role. Thus in France the writings of Flaubert, the Goncourt brothers, and Zola from the 1850s to the 1880s represent phases of a militant cultural politics centrally concerned with questions of realism. In Britain over the same period, but in a very different idiom, matters of "realism" are central to the fictions of George Eliot, Thackeray, and, later, Gissing and Hardy. The end of the century in America saw the emergence of the realist novels of Norris, Crane, and Dreiser, written in the midst of sharp struggles over the terms "realism" and "naturalism" – important distinguishing terms, but subordinate, for my argument, to that catholic sense of "realism" with which I began. In all these different contexts, the writing that materialized understood itself and its tasks in very different ways. Yet in all instances there was an effort both at concentration and expansion: a concentration that involved the repudiation of falsifying genres, and an expansion into areas of social and personal life that had previously been excluded from the ambit of the novel.

One striking aspect of these debates is that the programmatic commitment to "realism" or "naturalism" is always accompanied by an effort to extend the social range of the novel, along with a rejection of what are seen as the misleading or delusive genres that preexist the writer's own version of realism (as Rachel Bowlby points out in the Foreword to this volume). There is in fact a remarkable connection between genre and social class, most visible in the manifestoes for their own realism in the novels of Thackeray and George Eliot. In *Vanity Fair*, for example, one essential claim of the novel is that it is directed to ordinary middle-class life, and that it therefore needs to repudiate the genres of popular fiction that predominated in the 1830s and 1840s – notably, the Silver

Fork novels of aristocratic life, and the Newgate novels which offered a fantastic version of the criminal underclass. In this respect, Thackeray, by including brief parodies of these genres, is repeating one of the founding gestures of the realist novel since *Don Quixote* – establishing its own realist credentials by parodying the misleading genres that precede and surround it, just as Jane Austen had done thirty years previously, in establishing the realism of *Northanger Abbey* (1818) by including within it a parody of the Gothic novel. But in Thackeray's case there is a class claim as well as a generic one: sober realism, devoted to the ordinary and unedifying prosaicness of mundane existence, is the mode best suited to a novel of middle-class life. In *Adam Bede* (1859), as other contributors to this volume have noted, George Eliot also sought to provide a manifesto of her own realist practice, which in the same gesture rejected idealizing modes of writing, and sought to enlarge the scope of the novel to include those strata of rural social life that had previously been excluded from it, or had appeared only in picturesque walk-on roles.

Émile Zola's militant adoption of "naturalism," as announced in his manifesto "Le Roman Experimental" of 1880, combines in a different way a refusal of idealist and what he calls "metaphysical" writing with a commitment to the study of social life and its balance of forces, extending as he does so the range of the novel to social strata hitherto treated only incidentally. As Sally Ledger elaborates in her chapter on "Naturalism," Zola's novels thus seek to expose the root causes of social life in the same way as a scientist sets out physical phenomena for appropriate intervention. "Naturalism" is allied in his case to a militant secularism, where the appropriate contrasting term is "supernaturalism." In a similar way the novels of Norris and Dreiser (those of the former explicitly inspired by Zola) made the extension of the social range of the novel, and the commitment to naturalism, in the same gesture. In my rough-and-ready definition of realism, I asserted that it required the novel to conform to broad notions of plausibility. What these repeated efforts at extending the social range of the novel suggest is that "plausibility" is itself a matter of negotiation, and that one of the tasks of realism is constantly to extend the reader's willingness to accept as plausible ways of life and of character that had not previously been the topic of serious novelistic consideration.

Novels don't always conform to the manifestoes that announce them, and Eliot's and Thackeray's works, no less than those of Zola, rely upon narrative modes that take them beyond the "realism" or the "naturalism" that they announce. As we have seen, many novels with genuine claims to "realism" also were written in the nineteenth century, outside these

militant and sometimes iconoclastic currents. In that respect a tight definition of "realism" seems to me to be undesirable. Yet a large claim can nevertheless be made on behalf of the realist novel understood in these non-prescriptive terms: that it represented for the nineteenth century a powerful exploratory device, which allowed societies to explain themselves to themselves in flexible and comprehensive ways. This, then, is one way of thinking of "realism" – not that it can be defended in some tightly managed epistemological argument, or that it prescribes one kind of writing over another, but that it is a way of acknowledging the shared social space that writer and reader inhabit.

The Scope of the Realist Novel

Two twentieth-century critics, Raymond Williams and Georg Lukács, expressed views along these lines most cogently, and it is therefore useful to continue this discussion via a consideration of them. Both of these critics invoked the nineteenth-century realist novel as part of their own cultural politics; that is to say, for both of them the exemplary genre of the previous century was used to indicate the problems of that form's successors. Doubtless this skewed their understanding and presentation of the realist novel; however, it also forced them to foreground particular aspects of the novel that would not perhaps otherwise be so visible.

In a chapter in *The Long Revolution* (1961), Williams makes a persuasive case for the nature of the nineteenth-century synthesis as being one which permits a simultaneous emphasis upon the individual and upon the social order from which the individual emerges. This is an unstable synthesis in Williams's view; different writers are likely to slip into undue emphasis on one side of the equation or the other, so that novels get written which are either damagingly focused on the individual as moral centre (*Jane Eyre* is a prime example) or alternatively veer off toward social reportage. But in the highest examples of the form, a synthesis is managed which permits both an unequivocal sense of the moral irreducibility of individual lives, and at the same time of individuals' necessary immersion in, and emergence from, a whole social order or way of life.

There is a sense of inevitability to quoting *Middlemarch* as the novel which most clearly demonstrates the kind of synthesis for which Williams contends, especially as Eliot's own self-understanding in that novel indicates a notion of self and society upon which Williams's own understanding is ultimately based. Nevertheless, Eliot's great novel, described by George Levine in the preceding chapter as the "supertext of realism," does indeed

provide a striking instance of a text which simultaneously gives an extra-
ordinary sense of a whole social order, and of the distinctive individuals
who plausibly emerge from its myriad and contradictory currents. In the
following couple of paragraphs, for example, Dorothea has joined a
roomful of representatives of the gentry, mainly her family and their
connections, as they look down at the mourners gathered for the funeral
of Featherstone, a prosperous but miserly farmer who was not at all the
social equal of the onlookers:

> But for her visitors Dorothea too might have been shut up in the library,
> and would not have witnessed this scene of old Featherstone's funeral, which,
> aloof as it seemed to be from the tenor of her life, always afterwards came
> back to her at the touch of certain sensitive points in memory, just as the
> vision of St Peter's at Rome was inwoven with moods of despondency. Scenes
> which make vital changes in our neighbours' lot are but the background
> of our own, yet, like a particular aspect of the fields and trees, they become
> associated for us with the epochs of our own history, and make a part of
> that unity which lies in the selection of our keenest consciousness.
>   The dream-like association of something alien and ill-understood with
> the deepest secrets of her experience seemed to mirror that sense of
> loneliness which was due to the very ardour of Dorothea's nature. The
> country gentry of old time lived in a rarefied social air: dotted apart on their
> stations up the mountain they looked down with imperfect discrimination
> on the belts of thicker life below. And Dorothea was not at ease in the
> perspective and chilliness of that height. (Eliot 1965: 360)

A passage such as this gives a sense of the rich specificity of a per-
sonality, and its own irreducible history. Yet it also indicates how that
history is inextricable from the social order from which it emerges –
suggested in this instance by the scene itself, in which the members of
the gentry class stand at a window and look down upon the members of
the social class immediately below them. Dorothea's sense of herself, and
of the profoundest aspects of her personal history, is absolutely bound
up with her interactions within a specific social order. This is indeed the
very topic of the passage, and is discussed in an associationist vocabulary
that asserts a "unity" in the formation of a consciousness, binding self
to the world – more narrowly, the social world – in unavoidable ways. To
that extent the assertion that "scenes which make vital changes in our
neighbours' lot are but the background of our own" is no more than a
preliminary statement of the case; Dorothea's feeling of moral isolation
is mirrored to herself in the visible enactment of her social isolation as she
peers down on "the belts of thicker life below." The profoundest quality

of an individual personality is realized in this instance by the nature of the social relationships that form it.

The confidence with which George Eliot moves in and out of the narrative of this passage (and throughout the novel) also bears upon the question of realism. In the second sentence of the first paragraph she shifts into a vocabulary of confident generality – the first person plural of "our" and "us." She thus generalizes from Dorothea's experience into assertions which she assumes can be shared by herself and her reader. The novelist is in effect seeking to negotiate with the reader for agreement about the wide applicability of the scene she is describing, assuming in this instance a relation of shared agreement that some aspects of Dorothea's experience can indeed be taken as representative or generally true. Elsewhere in her writing she has to work much harder across barriers of class and historical distance to secure the generality or typicality of the experiences she seeks to describe. But throughout her novels the truthfulness of her fictions – their capacity to be taken as fairly representative of our shared human lives (whether these lives are presumed to resemble or to diverge from those of her readers) – has to be constantly negotiated, subjecting her characters and her reader in turn to various degrees of irony, sympathy, presumed solidarity, and careful discriminations of typicality.

It may be felt that in this passage the solidarity between writer and reader is too readily assumed, suggesting that the plausibility of the passage is premised upon shared values that do not have the universal validity that is assumed. It is certainly the case that *Middlemarch* is historically specific – that is to say, that the remarkable ambition of the book, to portray the multiple affiliations of a whole social order while simultaneously giving a sense of the specificity of the individual experiences which make up the web of social life, can only have emerged at a moment when history at once permitted the perspective to encompass the social totality, and yet also produced a social order that would be in some sense encompassable. George Eliot's relationship with her readership is an aspect of that particular historical moment, that possibility of moving into and out of shared social and historical experiences. The remarkable synthesis represented by *Middlemarch* and, in different ways, by some other nineteenth-century realist novels, nevertheless remains generically exemplary even beyond its historical moment of origin.

If Raymond Williams describes the synthesis of the nineteenth-century novel in terms of its capacity to give equal weight to the individual and the social, Georg Lukács defines it in a cognate but significantly different way – as the capacity to represent at once surface and depth, to show, that is to say, both the detail and complexity of human lives, and the

social and historical forces that underlie them. The ancient ambiguity in the term "realism" – its reference to the underlying categories rather than their mere phenomenal appearance – reappears in this account, since the capacity of the realist novel to be authentically realist lies in its ability to represent those social, historical, and economic forces that are more profound than surface forms. It is above all in the notion of "typicality" that Lukács can indicate the interconnectedness of the profound underlying forces of social life with their realization in the specificity of actual, complexly realized, characters. "Typicality" for Lukács does not mean mere statistical averaging; rather it denotes the capacity of a characterization to concentrate within an individual figure the most telling and profound characteristics of the social trends of a whole epoch. It is through such typical figures that the interconnection between the profounder forces of social life and the actualities of living, breathing people is established, and through them also that the realism of the novel is guaranteed.

Lukács's constant reference points are to the great classics of the European tradition, seeing in the novels of Balzac and Tolstoy especially the realization of these aesthetic ideals. Thus the figure of Lucien de Rubempré in Balzac's *Illusions Perdues* (1836–43) is a typical figure for Lukács not because his destiny is statistically representative – on the contrary, Lukács is at pains to argue that narrow notions of "averages" and carefully plotted cause and effect are absent from Balzac's writing. Lucien's typicality, and that of his fellow townsman David Séchard, consists in their capacity to express the profound contradictions of post-Napoleonic France, whereby the heroic ideals of the revolutionary bourgeoisie are destroyed by the actualities of capitalist society. The massive density with which Lucien's life is realized does not obscure, but rather illuminates, these fundamental contradictions in the bourgeois social order of early nineteenth-century France.

Williams and Lukács suggest ways, then, of conceiving the nineteenth-century realist novel which give substance to its ambition to provide, in the words of the Goncourt brothers in 1864, the "moral history of our time" – though Lukács had his own reasons, as we shall see, for repudiating the manner in which the Goncourt brothers themselves went about fulfilling this ambition in the novel *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864), which this remark prefaces. From the accounts of the two critics, the novel emerges as the form which is able to hold together aspects of human lives which are readily understood in separation: the individual and society; the striking complexity and density of social life along with a sense of its underlying moving forces; the connection, in the words of *Bleak House* (1853), between "many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who,

from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together" (Dickens 1975: 272). The realist novel's capacity to correlate these multiple axes of understanding is a matter both of the architectonics of the book (its capacity to be more than the "large loose baggy monster" of Jamesian caricature, but to hold its disparate parts in significant relation), and also of the closest detail of its prose: the capacity of Eliot, Stendhal, Balzac, or Tolstoy to give their readers a sense, as they read, of engaging with characterizations that are both locally persuasive of sharply realized individuality and also suggestive of the social histories from which they emerge.

The terms of this realist synthesis evidently vary from writer to writer. George Eliot's meticulous plotting of cause and effect, in the context of the densely realized particularities of a social milieu, proposes a notion of society as the accumulated habits and beliefs of those who make it up; among these possibilities and constraints new generations must make their way in simultaneous alliance and rejection. Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme* undertakes an account of early nineteenth-century Italy, caught between the political reaction of the *ancien régime* and the emancipatory possibilities of the French revolutionary and imperial armies. At a profound level the extraordinary adventures and sufferings of the hero are to be seen as exemplary of the social and political order of reimposed "legitimacy." Human life and motives appear in this account ineluctably tied to the social state in which they are acted out, but that social state is itself conceived in terms which are "political" in the sense of reflecting the political order which is ordained upon society from above. A striking contrast, but still within the domain of a realism broadly conceived, is provided by Émile Zola's *Germinal* (1885); here, there is a striking intensity with which the conditions of the miners are realized and the whole narrative of oppression, strike, and sabotage is related. This mass of powerful and minutely rendered material is underlain by an explanatory schema which suggests that this whole way of life is created, or can be accounted for, by capitalist ownership on the one hand and the operations of heredity on the other. These three widely varying novels all nevertheless suggest how the realist synthesis might be realized, for all the incompatible ways in which they understand their underlying or totalizing explanatory gestures, or the very different idioms in which they provide a sense of the people about whom they write.

The nineteenth-century novel provides a further way of understanding the relationship of part to whole, which we could crudely designate as "spatial" rather than historical or social; or better, which recognizes a spatial dimension to the social and historical axes of understanding

foregrounded by Lukács and Williams. The work of Franco Moretti in
the 1990s introduces this dimension conveniently (discussed more extens-
ively in Josephine McDonagh's chapter in this volume). In the European
nations of the nineteenth century, and in North America, the novel was
one of the ways of constructing the national imaginary, the "imagined
community" which is the necessary conceptual counterpart to the mater-
ial realities of nation-states: capital cities, borders, centers of government
and administration, roads and railways, shipping lanes, educational sys-
tems. All these brute material realities appear, in the novel, charged with
affective valuations, as the characters in them move or fail to move from
country to city, from province to capital, from school to career, and invest
their movements with apprehensions, longings, hopeful anticipations, or
defeated resignation and bitterness. This is most evident in the journeys
made by the protagonists of the *bildungsroman* as they make their way
from province to capital: the map of province and capital visible in a novel
like *Great Expectations* (1861) in England, or *Illusions Perdues* in France,
is charged with complex and ambivalent sentiments to do with class, indi-
vidual success or failure, and familial affections. "A map of the world that
does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at," Oscar Wilde
remarked in 1891 (in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism"). Equally we
could say that a map of Britain should include the journeys of David
Copperfield and Jude Fawley; a map of France should include those
taken, or failed to be taken, by the protagonists of Balzac and Flaubert;
and one of Russia should show the trajectories of Raskolnikov and Anna
Karenina.

   The realist novel is thus one of the ways in which capital is tied to
province; it contributes in this way to the specifically national imaginary.
But it is also true that the novels which remain "provincial" provide,
inadvertently or by design, maps of local social realities undergoing
transformation. For example: one of the great transformations of the
nineteenth century – perhaps the most important in world history, indeed
– is the move from predominantly rural societies to predominantly urban
ones, a change pioneered in Britain, which had a majority urban popula-
tion by 1850. This massive change, achieved initially by migration from
country to town, appears in the novel as an affective social history in which
"country" and "town" are charged with powerful personal associations and
memories. Thus in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), a character
recalls her childhood home in the Lake District before she migrated to
Manchester for better wages:

> "I never seed such a bonny bit anywhere. You see there are hills as seem to
> go up into the skies, not near, may be, but that makes them all the bonnier.

I used to think they were the golden hills of heaven, about which my mother sang when I was a child.

> Yon are the golden hills of heaven,
> Where ye sall never win.

Something about a ship and a lover that should hae been na lover, the ballad was. Well, and near our cottage were rocks. Eh, lasses! Ye don't know what rocks are in Manchester! Gray pieces o' stone as large as a house, all covered wi' moss of different colours, some yellow, some brown; and the ground beneath them knee-deep in purple heather, smelling sae sweet and fragrant, and the low music of the humming-bee for ever sounding among it. Mother used to send Sally and me out to gather ling and heather for besoms, and it was such pleasant work! We used to come home of an evening loaded so as you could not see us, for all that it was so light to carry. And then mother would make us sit down under the old hawthorn tree (where we used to make our house among the great roots as stood above the ground), to pick and tie up the heather. It seems all like yesterday, and yet it's a long long time agone . . ." (Gaskell 1970: 69–70)

To be sure, this is social history mediated by Wordsworth, as the lakeland landscape is remembered via childhood association and scraps of ballad. It nevertheless affords a vivid affective geography; it acknowledges the economic forces which have driven the character's migration from this upland peasant life to that of an industrial worker in the new factories of Manchester, and provides a sense of the perceptions and feelings associated with that transition, from one who has undergone it. The novel's history of this new urban center – it is subtitled "A Tale of Manchester Life" – is thus constructed out of the meanings and valuations that its inhabitants impart to its growth in relation to the older world which surrounds it.

Both Karl Marx and George Eliot admired *Mary Barton*, though perhaps for different reasons. The former admired the novel as one which exposed the reality of British working-class life under capitalism; the latter especially admired the first half of the novel, in which the full and patient account of Manchester life is most apparent – in fact it served as a model for her writing in *Adam Bede*. The latter half of Gaskell's novel moves out of this painstaking realism and moves into a more melodramatic mode, as a way of dramatizing, and to an extent resolving, some of the tensions and contradictions of the social life explored in the novel. In this respect *Mary Barton* is typical of many nineteenth-century novels in being formally diverse, and incorporating into themselves modes of writing – melodrama, romance, comedy of manners, didactic tales – which shift them out of the realist mode.

I have drawn upon the vocabularies of Lukács, Williams, and Moretti to suggest a way of understanding the realism of the nineteenth-century novel: not in narrowly epistemological terms, as though it were possible to generate a guarantee for its truth-to-life from its internal procedures, but rather as a whole mode of understanding social and individual life, which combines the widest sweep of history and national geography with the most minutely realized detail of material and affective existence. Though all novelists differ profoundly in the ways that they conceive of and achieve these striking combinations, there is enough in common for it to be legitimate to call this a realist synthesis.

The realist synthesis nevertheless remains historically specific; and at the end of the nineteenth century it became unsustainable. Lukács understood this as a breakdown: starting at mid-century with Flaubert, and gathering pace with Zola's naturalism, the novel increasingly became fixated upon the technically accomplished representation of the phenomenal world in a manner that obscured the underlying forces at work in society. This led him to juxtapose realism and "naturalism" as sharply antithetical, whereas my elastic definition of "realism" has allowed me to see naturalism as a particular version of the wider and more encompassing term. Since some important distinctions emerge from these debates, I will conclude by pursuing the Hungarian critic's objections to the "technical" developments in the novel at the end of the century; after all, the substance of these matters remains crucial even if the Marxist idiom in which Lukács couched them no longer has the resonance that it once had.

Lukács was in turn misguided, correct, and undialectical in his assessment. It seems perverse to exclude from the realist canon the work of Émile Zola, who is very careful to insist, in a novel like *Germinal*, upon the underlying economic forces – he names them "capitalism" – that are driving the changes he describes there, at the same time as providing, with emphatic detail, an account of the lives of the miners in which their full specificity as people is made apparent. Having said as much, however, he was surely right to see naturalism as a forerunner of the many experiments in novel-writing in the early twentieth century which we can refer to in a shorthand way as "modernist" – most visible in the history of the English novel in the transition from those of Henry James through to those of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce (though none of these novelists has the polemical edge or scientific pretensions of naturalism). These developments varied widely, but they certainly allowed a remarkable expansion in the capacity of novels to accommodate, and to make present to readers, the subjectivities of their characters.

Lukács was unhistorical in simultaneously asserting that the realism he championed was only possible because of the phase of development of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century, and lamenting its passing when that phase of history appeared to conclude at the century's end. He was surely also undialectical in dismissing these transitions as somehow a failure in realism; not only because much of this writing permitted a massive extension in realism if conceived in "psychological" terms, but also because these new techniques (which are never just technical matters, but always encode social relationships) in turn point to some wider synthesis, doubtless yet to be realized, in which psychological and social realities can be resynthesized. Such a possibility could only occur given some currently unanticipated turn in the social world that writers and readers jointly inhabit; short of this, the nineteenth-century realist novel must stand testimony as one historical possibility, which cannot be simply copied, in which the complexities of social and personal life are held together in meaningful relation. The ways in which this might be realized in a mediatized world are, of course, going to require radically different aesthetic solutions from those of the nineteenth-century realists.

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Chapter 3

Space, Mobility, and the Novel: "The spirit of place is a great reality"

Josephine McDonagh

Location, Location, Dislocation

Fiction invariably presents a world that in its spatial dimensions approximates our own. Its locations, however, have not always been identifiable. Often they have been suspended, like Robinson Crusoe's island, in an imaginary nowhere. But from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the classic period of literary realism, places in fiction have tended to have clear geographical markers, and texts have been admired for the way in which they convey an authentic "feel" for the sites they depict. With the emergence of place as a key constituent of realist narrative, literary texts that conform to readers' realist expectations begin to exude what is often referred to as a "sense of place."

This chapter examines the representation of place in British realist novels. The conventions for representing place in narrative fiction, through depictions of distinctive landscapes, customs, and dialects, have their roots in the fictional form of the national tale, as well as in folkloric and anthropological writings of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Trumpener 1997: 128–57). Their cooption into the realist novel as it becomes the dominant form of fiction in the nineteenth century loosely coincides with a major social change, that is, the vast extension of demographic mobility that took place after the end of the Napoleonic wars. State-financed schemes for pauper emigration to the colonies, which

were first introduced in the late 1810s, marked the beginning of a phase of mass emigration from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales that continued throughout the century. Such schemes, however, accounted for only a small percentage of the total traffic of emigrants which left Britain during this period to go to and fro across oceans and borders, and of the internal migrants, whose journeys were diverse and multifaceted, seasonal and temporary (Erikson 1994; Johnston 1972). Moreover, during this time the map of Britain itself was redrawn under the pressure of administrative and legislative changes: for instance, the Reform Acts (1832 and 1867) reformulated the boundaries of voting constituencies, and the New Poor Law (1834) dramatically changed the basis of entitlement to poor relief, redefining the nature of belonging (Feldman 2003). The experience of inhabiting a new and unfamiliar world was thus a widespread one, and extended even to those who stayed at home.

This convergence of historical factors – the emergence of the realist novel with its preoccupations with place and the dramatic increase in population mobility – suggests that the "sense of place" produced by narrative fiction may have had a heightened role in mediating, or even making, readers' relationships with the world. But what precisely was that role? Many critics have suggested that the emphasis on traditional and rural places in the nineteenth-century novel is an expression of a nostalgic longing for a lost world in the context of demographic and social change. But if this is the case, how did such novelistic representations shape people's understanding of the more transient world which they inhabited? Approaches to the novel that see place merely as a backdrop to action tend not to grasp the complex operations of spatial representation in the literary text, and the reciprocal ways in which these seep out into the world. On the other hand, phenomenologists of space, such as Gaston Bachelard and Georges Poulet, who were in turn inspired by the philosopher Martin Heidegger, have paid attention to the nuanced ways in which literary texts encrypt the intermingling of inner psychological or affective spaces with outer spaces of, for instance, the home (Bachelard 1969; Poulet 1964; Heidegger 1971). But following Heidegger, who was "beguiled by the dream of . . . a culture rooted in one place" (Miller 1995: 55), such approaches tend to focus on unchanging and universal spaces, and have had surprisingly little to say about movement in space. It is the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre whose work provides the most promising way of analyzing the kinds of social spaces that are produced by a population in motion. His work has already been adopted by critics of modernist and postmodernist literature and culture (Soja 1996; Thacker 2003). It is also helpful for analyzing the cultural work of classic realism.

To say that realist texts give us a sense of the world that we live in affirms the familiar and self-evident fact that realist texts perform ideological work. But the claim here is larger than that. The representation of places within the novel is part of what critics following Lefebvre have called the "social production of space." Literary realism, I suggest, is an important component of a spatial regime that, according to Lefebvre, both is produced by and produces our interactions with the environment and each other. Places in literature are thus not merely markers that connect the literary text to the world that is evoked, as a sort of index to reality. Rather the representation of places is part of a more profound shaping of the world that encompasses our perceptions, conceptions, and experiences of "reality" itself.

According to Lefebvre, space is produced dialectically in people's multiple interactions with each other, the environment, and the state. Because of this, the conception of space not only changes across time, but is also, as Andrew Thacker puts it in his lucid account of Lefebvre's work, "inherently composite" (Thacker 2003: 18). The terms "perceived," "conceived," and "experienced" or "lived," evoked in the preceding paragraph, relate to the three different modes of spatial interactions that constitute the conceptual triad that is the core to the theory. The first, *spatial practice*, or perceived space, refers to the ways in which our daily routines and the institutions that govern us produce – or "secrete" (*secrètent*) – space: for instance, that produced by the built environment which divides our activities between work and leisure, or the many forms of bureaucracy that organize us. Second are *representations of space*, conceived space: these are "the space(s) of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers" (Lefebvre 1991: 38), the two-dimensional forms – maps, plans, and diagrams – that "codify" space through signs and symbols. Finally there are *representational spaces*: "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users,' but also some artists and perhaps of those, a few writers and philosophers" (Lefebvre 1991: 39). Although it is, as he puts it, "passively experienced," it is appropriated and transformed through the imagination. All three kinds of spatial production are at work at any one time, and in any single arena. Take for example the experience of an emigrant arriving in a new country. Spatial practice would refer to the way in which bureaucratic processes of the immigration office, the checking of passports and of documentation as borders are crossed, the passing from one system of rules and regulations into another, would structure the emigrant's experience; the representation of space would be the maps that the emigrant may possess, the graphic outlines of a new terrain sketched

by government surveyors or speculators for the purposes of emigrant settlement; and the representational space would be the emigrant's own experience of the arrival, as recorded in, for instance, his or her letters home. The three layers intermingle: no single one encapsulates the sole "truth" of the experience, or its sole spatial form.

Lefebvre's attention to the complexity of spatial experience makes it a rich analytical tool for understanding not only the heterodox experience of space that finds its way into the texture of literary representation, but also for seeing the way in which such representations interact with the broader production of the "real." While the analytical categories he names are complex and sometimes difficult to fathom in the context of specific examples, they nevertheless provide a good starting point for interpreting the multiple meanings of space evoked by texts. In the first part of the essay I consider some of the ways in which the expansive and adaptable form of the realist novel works in tandem with other genres, such as tourist guides and emigration handbooks, to produce a sense of place at this time of increased mobility. In the second part of the essay I look at the kind of space that is "secreted" by nineteenth-century realism. Here Lefebvre's term "abstract space" will be useful for understanding its particular characteristics and for tracking its modification in the transformed world of the early twentieth century. One interesting offshoot of such an approach is that it allows us to see continuities between nineteenth-century realism and the experimental aesthetics of high modernism, continuities that are sometimes effaced by theories of realism that emphasize the modernist rejection of nineteenth-century realism. In the final section I will return to the question of mobility, which I shall suggest is both the condition of modernity and the precondition of the classic realist text.

Reading at a Distance

The late decades of the nineteenth century saw the publication of a flurry of topographical guides inspired by the recently deceased novelist Charles Dickens. Serving a growing tourist industry, works such as Percy Fitzgerald's *Bozland: Dickens' Places and People* (1895) or T. Edgar Pemberton's *Dickens's London* (1876) presented a marketable mixture of descriptions of places cited in Dickens's novels, together with sites from the author's life. In the preface to one such work, the author, Richard Allbut, gives a typical rationale: the characters of Dickens's novels, and Dickens himself, have become "part and parcel of our home associations" (Allbut 1886: iii). What could be more satisfying, therefore, than to visit

the real locations of the author's life and fictional worlds? Precipitating an uncanny slippage between the reader's affective experience, the world of the text, and the built environment of the city, this tourist literature participated in building a profound relationship between world and text: rather than "the airy nothing" of the imagination, fiction is considered to be a substantial presence that encapsulates and colonizes the readers' own world (Allbut 1886: iii).

The literary tourist guide is an interesting symptom of the way in which literature in general and fiction in particular cooperated in the construction of everyday reality for a late nineteenth-century reading public. Inverting what is perhaps a more predictable relationship between fiction and real places, in this instance Dickens's novels are held not to reflect the world they represent, but rather to substantiate a real world of feeling that, in turn, implicates London within it. London, the city, is thus the frame through which readers reenter the world of their own emotions and memories: as Allbut goes on to suggest, it instills nostalgia for childhood reading, and a sympathetic identification with other people. Sites hitherto unfamiliar to the implied reader, the tourist, overlay and usurp the familiar places of home. The tourist is by definition from elsewhere – often from America and the colonies, judging by the advertising that interleaves these guides. Allbut evokes Macaulay's image, made initially in 1840, and by now a cliché, of the New Zealander, who at some later day will "meditate over the ruins of the city" (Allbut 1886: iv; see also Skilton 2004: 1–3). In this apocalyptic vision of the end of empire, all that will remain is the spectral traces of former feelings, a nostalgic longing for a lost world impressed in the shards of a decaying city.

The trend for literary tourism that the Dickens guides exemplify began much earlier than this. From the first decades of the nineteenth century, enthusiastic readers of Wordsworth had made pilgrimages to the Lake District. Seeing the landscapes of Wordsworth's poetry enabled traveling readers to relive past emotions, recollected in the tranquil repose of the tourists' leisured gaze. Such tourism put into practice the ambitions of the poetry itself, albeit in a commodified way, for as Wordsworth's work enshrined his own affective relationship to particular places, bringing about an expansion of his sympathetic feelings for others, the tourist, by extension, could repeat this experience of human enlargement. While tourists felt that they shared in Wordsworth's topographical experiences, however, their relationships to these very landscapes were necessarily mediated by the poet's written text, and their own past scenes of reading. As they perused the sites of the Lake District, what they saw and experienced interwove affective and aesthetic responses of past and present and of various and

distinct geographical locations. This complex mix fueled a belief that in the moment of contemplation of a particular spot on the landscape, the visitor transcended himself and his place so as to share the feelings, sensibilities, and impressions of the poet. An act of appropriation, the tourist's gaze made the landscape ethereal and insubstantial, an empty space of inherited feelings and abstracted sympathies, mixed with a melancholic longing for a lost self.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this melancholic tinge, literary tourism caught on: from Wordsworth's Lake District, through Scott's Borders and the Brontës' Yorkshire moors, to Dickens's London, the map of readerly destinations rapidly grew. And it shadowed the development of the realist novel. Thomas Hardy took particular pains to make the fictional world correspond to the real world, famously producing maps which translated his invented Wessex into the counties of modern England. He later revised his novels to comply with the maps he had produced to illustrate them, exemplifying the kind of reciprocation that Lefebvre had in mind (Gatrell 2003; Miller 1995: 19–21). Then again, Elizabeth Gaskell's famous biography of Charlotte Brontë of 1857, which described a visitor's arrival at the Brontës' vicarage in Haworth, inspired many tourists to repeat the journey. But as Juliet Barker has pointed out, tourists that did so were greeted by a very different scene from that described: not an isolated or primitive spot, but a small industrial town showing all the signs of nineteenth-century progress (Barker 2002: 13–24). This discrepancy did not stop the trail, for tourists accommodated the difference, or turned a blind eye. Thomas De Quincey, when asked by a tourist the shortest route to the Lake District, replied un-obligingly that the shortest route was never to have left London at all (De Quincey 2003: 135). De Quincey appeared not to understand the complex economy of tourist travel, in which the effect of leisured timelessness is its product and ultimate purpose. But he did recognize its solipsistic nature, the fact that the tourist goes to see something that he or she already knows or has already read, so that the journey is redundant or self-canceling, the destination already displaced by the literature that describes it.

If the literary tourist sets out to see what he or she has already seen through reading, so too in another way does that other traveler of the nineteenth century, the emigrant. Printed texts for travelers – tourists and emigrants – swamped the literary marketplace, schooling the geographical imagination of the general reader. Such books were primarily conceived as a source of practical information, but as we have seen in the case of tourist guides, they had other, more profound effects. This is particularly the case with emigrants' manuals. For example, the late 1820s and early

1830s saw the publication of a vast body of works on emigration to Canada, titles such as A. C. Buchanan's *Emigration Practically Considered* (1828), William Cattermole's *An Address to Persons who Entertain the Wish to Better Themselves by Emigrating to Canada* (1832), or Robert Mudie's *The Emigrant's Pocket Companion* (1832). Designed to stimulate emigration, they were also an emigrant's first encounter with a new land. Hybrid in form, they formed compendia of other published works, containing statistical information, economic theorizing, and practical advice. They provided descriptions of terrain, information about climate, agriculture, flora and fauna, prices of land, numbers of inhabitants, and practical tips for travel: what to bring, what to wear, how to build a shelter when you arrive. They also contained maps and charts, sometimes (depending on the audience addressed) aesthetic appreciation of the scenery, as well as travelers' anecdotes, and often letters from emigrants to their friends and relatives at home, always telling of initial hardship and eventual prosperity. Dramatic tension was gained through narrating the hazards of emigration – the trials of the journey, the intemperate climate, wild animals and extreme natural conditions, and the unscrupulous people waiting to exploit the traveler. But in the end all dangers would be dispelled, the new land made as familiar as home.

The literature of emigration aimed to reduce the strangeness of distance. In practice its effects were odder than this. A highly repetitive and self-reflexive body of literature, endlessly referring back to other books and pamphlets, these self-authorizing works created an ephemeral landscape possessing the eerie qualities of a textual invention. Moreover, the familiar markers of home are present in the colonial landscape, but in a distorted fashion. Old place names in new and unlikely relation to each other (Leeds next to Oxford, London by York, Cambridge near Gloucester, and so on); and picturesque landscapes from home relocated in the new environment. Emigrants' letters constantly allude to chance encounters with former neighbors and friends now dispersed across the Canadian wilderness. The dimensions and distances of the colony are distended versions of the old. The new landscape assumes the affective topography of a dream: overlaid with memories of a lost world, a memorial to a lost homeland.

These practical guides to places for tourists and emigrants have the effect of making landscapes ethereal and ghostly. And they both inform and are informed by the novel. In diverse and complex ways, the novel assisted migrant people as they attempted to settle in new terrains. Sometimes, for instance, it borrowed directly from the literature of emigration. The most explicit example of this is provided by *Bogle Corbett* (1831) by the

Scottish writer John Galt, whose stated intention was to "give expression to the probable feelings of a character upon whom the commercial circumstances of the age have had their natural effect" (Galt 1831: iii). This three-volume novel doubles as a practical guide to emigration, complete with appendices of statistical information about Upper Canada. As a literary figure, Galt is known today as the author of a series of novels about Ayrshire in Scotland, collectively known as *The Tales of the West* (1820–6), which were admired at the time for their descriptions of local characters and customs, and which stimulated a degree of literary tourism itself. Galt called these novels "theoretical histories," declaring his affiliation with writers of the Scottish Enlightenment who developed a style of anthropological writing that explained the gradual and progressive development of societies (Costain 1976: 344–8). But Galt was also a colonial entrepreneur involved in the early settlement of Canada. He spent the period between 1826 and 1829 in Canada as Superintendent of the Canada Land Company, collecting geographical and demographic information. Much of this information finds its way into *Bogle Corbett*, as he reworks the narrative techniques of his earlier Scottish novels to present a realistic and practical story about colonial settlement.

Bogle Corbett narrates the colonial adventures of its eponymous central character. Like an emigrants' guide it emphasizes the values of individual enterprise as well as the need for community building. Thus Corbett, who in volume three leads a group of Glaswegians across the Canadian wilderness, curbs their individualistic and acquisitive tendencies by gathering them together and telling them a parable about the birth of a community. With his message about the virtues of collective labor ringing in their ears, they pull together and build their own town. In this conscious moment of myth-making, the act of story-telling is both pedagogic and performative. A similar episode occurs in Galt's autobiography when he describes the founding of the city of Guelph in 1827, in which he played a leading role. In this episode he again emphasizes the symbolic aspects of settlement. In a long and hyper-dramatic account, he makes ritual out of random events: a group of men go into the forest on St George's Day; they get lost and encounter a confusing assortment of solitary natives and squatters; and when they finally find the desired spot they begin to cut down a tree. The sound of chopping echoes in the silence of the wood; and finally, with "a crash of accumulating thunder, as if ancient nature were alarmed at the entry of social man into her innocent solitudes, with his sorrows, his follies, and his crimes," the tree falls (Galt 1833: II: 59). The emphasis on the clearing of the wilderness is something that Galt will return to repeatedly, often drawing attention to a figurative use of the

term "clearing" as a noun. It is as though the landscape has to be not only rebuilt, but rethought, and re-remembered. Just as the emigrants' guide overlaid the colony with memories of home, Galt's heavily symbolic account of the founding of Guelph projects onto the wilderness a new collective memory.

Both Galt's autobiographical and novelistic accounts of the founding of towns stress the way in which the land is purposefully appropriated through overlaying symbols, and telling new stories. Acts of settlement thus entail cultural work that bears many similarities to that of the novel. In the migratory context of the nineteenth century, the descriptions of places and people's relationships to them that are characteristic of realist fiction more often enact forms of appropriation than reflection. Take for example the account of a communal reading of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) in a camp of recent emigrants, by the Californian writer Bret Harte (1836–1902), in a poem entitled "Dickens in Camp" (1870). Here the landscapes of home are projected over the new terrain:

> . . . as he read, from clustering pine and cedar
> A silence seemed to fall;
>
> The fir-trees, gathering closer in the shadows,
> Listened in every spray,
> While the whole camp with "Nell" on English meadows
> Wandered and lost their way. (Harte 1923: ll. 19–24)

Itself a powerful source of memories of the homeland, Dickens's novel enables them to gain a sense of belonging in an alien environment, even if, paradoxically, in so doing they "wandered and lost their way." Harte suggests the complex and heightened ways in which, in the context of migration, people's memories are mediated by fiction, and their experiences of place inflected by those memories. To this extent realism participates in a process of colonization: not mimesis, but occupation.

Realism and Abstract Space

According to Lefebvre, social life in the modern era, that is from the eighteenth century, is dominated by a homogenizing form of space produced by capital accumulation which he names abstract space. Lefebvre writes:

> [Abstract space] functions "objectally." As a set of things/signs and their formal relationships: glass and stone, concrete and steel, angles and curves,

full and empty. The signification of this ensemble refers back to a sort of super-signification which escapes meaning's net: the functioning of capitalism, which contrives to be blatant and covert at one and the same time. (Lefebvre 1991: 49)

Lefebvre has in mind the art and architecture of the modernist period, its concrete and steel structures and its predilection for phallic forms. But many of its formal aspects are evident in the architecture and city planning of an earlier period. Take, for instance, the town of Guelph that Galt founded in the clearing in the Canadian wilderness. Galt was heavily involved in the planning of this town, drawing plans and designing buildings. The plan was based on a geometrical conception: a radial and a grid plan superimposed on one another, emanating in a fan from the central point of the cut-down tree. Galt's vision incorporated steepled churches on every hill, and schools dotted around the town. In this way, the built environment was designed to foster community, but it also had a regulatory function, exercising moral control over the people. In his account of abstract space, Lefebvre identifies three "formants," or aspects, which "imply one another and conceal one another": the *geometric formant* – the space of Euclidean geometry; the *optical formant* – a space in which the visual gaze dominates all other senses; and the *phallic formant*, whose "only immediate point of reference is genitality: the family unit, the type of dwelling . . . fatherhood and motherhood, and the assumption that fertility and fulfilment are identical" (Lefebvre 1991: 49–50). All of these formants are in some way evoked in the structure of Guelph. The awful "crash and . . . thunder" of the falling tree that Galt records in his autobiography as the symbolic moment of foundation conveys a sense of the violence that, according to Lefebvre, is a "constant threat [to] and . . . occasional eruption" in abstract space (Lefebvre 1991: 57).

We might also identify the characteristics of abstract space in nineteenth-century literary realism: the emphasis on the visual, the preference for metaphors of pictorial representation that dominate nineteenth-century realist texts, the grid-like uniformity that realist narrative projects over its terrain, not to mention the structural centrality of marriage and the family. George Eliot's definition of realism in *Adam Bede* (1859), already cited by several contributors to this volume, demonstrates many of these aspects, evoking visual metaphors, and comparing fiction with paintings, mirrors, and the visual display of the courtroom (Eliot 2001: 164–6). The phallic formant is manifested in the central theme of the novel – the policing of desire and the implementation of patriarchal law, through the

expulsion of the fallen woman, Hetty, and the marriage and domestica-
tion of the woman preacher, Dinah. The novel concludes with a sun-
drenched scene of happy family life, with Dinah coming out of the house
to gaze at the horizon. Although Dinah's eye extends laterally, our view-
point as readers is vertical: we look down on the scene from above, and
dwell on the roof of the house, and the upward expanse of the walls.
In Lefebvre's terms, these are the spatial reference points of "genitality."

Thinking about literary realism in terms of abstract space is a useful
critical maneuver. For instance, it allows us to see the extent to which
the "sense of place" discussed at the beginning of this essay, and for which
realist fiction comes to be admired, is a projection onto the homogenous
regularity of abstract space. It is not the link to the "real" place – the
index to reality – which it appears to be. Rather it is a supplement, an
added accessory that punctures the evenness of homogenous space with
a flash that *gives the effect of* familiarity or recognition.

It therefore seems significant that "sense of place" in novels is frequently
staked on factors that are outside the immediate limits of the text. Often
the ability of a narrative to convey a "sense of place" is related to the
author's own place of residence, and, even more so, to his or her place of
birth. Being "native," it seems, gives an author higher powers of descrip-
tion, a greater ability to evoke the true spirit of place. For instance, the
fact that George Eliot was born in the rural Midlands, and lived a rea-
sonably secluded life there for the first thirty-one years of her life, was
considered by her early biographers to be of greater importance in her
development as a novelist than her later life spent in London, touring
continental Europe, and mixing with the most prominent writers and
intellectuals of her time. John Cross's *Life of George Eliot* (1885) is most
conspicuous in this selective reading. His work is interspersed with pic-
tures of the houses in which she lived, giving primary place to engravings
of Griff, her childhood home in Warwickshire, that emphasize its rural
location. Such a strategy endorsed a reader's sense that the worlds des-
cribed in her novels were the real worlds that she had herself inhabited.
So too with the Brontës and Hardy: in each case the realism of the
fiction is intensified and authenticated not only by vivid depictions of a
landscape and a way of life within the literary work, but also by what is
known of the author's own relationship to that place. Biography, and
in particular biography that emphasizes a writer's local "roots," especially
when these were rural and "traditional," becomes a pledge of authentic-
ity, an anchor of realism.

There is, of course, a certain nostalgia implicit in this version of realism,
the sense that a text is most realistic when the world that it evokes is

in some senses a lost or part-forgotten world – echoing the nostalgia that we saw in tourist literature. This is evident in George Eliot's influential definition of realism in "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), a review of works by the German sociologist W. H. Riehl, in which she projects a vision of an organic, unchanging traditional society onto the homogenizing and empty forms of realist representation, or Lefebvrian abstract space. The crucial point in the essay is the claim that "reality" resides in the quiet country life, rather than the hustle and bustle of the unreal city. In making this claim Eliot elides a way of life (traditional, rural, in which customs do not change over many generations) with a form of representation of that way of life (primarily, recounting the small details of everyday life in the context of the physical environment – a form of representation that Eliot will appropriate in her own fiction). This provides the basis of what she terms "incarnate history," an account of the past that maintains "social vitality," where this is held to reside in the organic relationships between people and traditional places. Riehl blends a mode of description, a form of analysis, and a political prescription with a conservative social vision of an unchanging, hierarchical, and "organic" society (Eliot 1963: 129). The ideological significance of this becomes clear later in the essay. After the European revolutions of 1848, Eliot explains, Riehl's work corrected the mistaken views of those who attempted to realize political visions on the basis of "abstract democratic and social-istic theories." In so far as the 1848 revolutionaries grounded their ideas on knowledge of the "actual life of the people," they did so on the basis of a restricted and unrepresentative group: "factory operatives." For such ideologues "the small group of Parisian proletaires or English factory-workers (substituted for) the society of all Europe, – nay the whole world" (Eliot 1963: 129). Like Eliot, Riehl sees the origins of a good society in the natural environment of the countryside; urban, industrial places, by contrast, can only produce social groupings that are deracinated and alienated, and, by extension, ways of life and modes of representation that are essentially "unrealistic."

The distinction between, on the one hand, an analysis that understands societies as an organic product of a natural environment, and, on the other, one that emphasizes the deracination and disaggregation of people in urban and industrial contexts, is repeated in ways of thinking about realism that recur throughout the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In one, the presupposition is that the aim of realism is to make people at home in the world; in the other, it is that its object is to explain why people are at odds with the world. As Esther Leslie points out in her essay in this volume, the latter position motivates the Modernist debates about

realism, inspired by German writers such as Brecht and Simmel, in which the realist work of art is seen as a spur to political activism. Through techniques of "defamiliarization," the work of art conveys the alienation of individuals, their dislocation from their environment. Hence the Modernist interest in states of exile and homelessness, in which the condition of not being at home is the basis for the experimental realist aesthetics of writers such as Joyce and Woolf. While both positions share assumptions about the primacy of relations between people and their environments, what is decisive in these very different visions of the realist enterprise is location: the country or the city. It is not merely that place is the authenticating detail of realist representation; the kinds of place described tend to determine the mode of representation and the parameters and rationale of the realist project.

Lefebvre's abstract space thus allows us to place nineteenth-century realism and its rural associations alongside modernist theories of urban alienation, without preserving the separation that is enshrined in much thinking about realism. Rather than seeing the experimental aesthetics of Modernist works as a reaction against the consolatory form of classic realism, we may perceive classic realism as a form of resistance against the alienation of modernity. In this account, then, "sense of place" is part of an armory of defenses that shields people from the disaggregating effects of abstraction.

Realism and Mobility

With these points in mind, I want to return to the question of mobility. Population mobility was crucial for Britain's expanding economy in the nineteenth century. But it is an aspect of social life that is curiously under-represented in nineteenth-century realist texts. For instance, emigration is rarely the central topic of the nineteenth-century novel (*Bogle Corbett* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* [1844] are interesting exceptions to this); more often it occurs as a plot resolution (as in *Mary Barton* [1848]) or a minor subplot (as in *David Copperfield* [1850]). Moreover, while critics of the novel have recognized that the mobility of characters is a central component of realism, usually this is understood as a metaphor for social or economic mobility, or moral development (Said 1975: 94–7; Ermarth 1998: 55–64).

Ermarth goes so far as to identify an "ethic of mobility" that is at work in the novel, but she pays surprisingly little attention to the dynamics of movement itself. A rare exception to this pattern is provided by Franco

Moretti who analyzes the places that figure in nineteenth-century novels, showing the way in which geography determines narrative form by establishing a dynamic of distance and proximity, concealment and revelation (Moretti 1998; 2005). Moretti supports his readings with a series of maps, a cartographic turn that transforms novels into the *representations of space* that Lefebvre considered "codified" space through signs and symbols. But for Lefebvre, space in literary texts is "everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about" (Lefebvre 1991: 15). It has a complexity that exceeds the rather two-dimensional model that Moretti derives.

How is mobility registered in the realist text? In a banal way, mobility opens up space, even creates it. Through distancing readers from the represented worlds of literary texts, it produces the obsessive fascination with local places that dominated the British novel from the nineteenth century onward. But nevertheless, in realist texts, mobility seems somehow unrepresentable, a kind of excess that cannot be incorporated within the fabric of realism. Take, for example, George Eliot's classic realist text, her novella, *Silas Marner* (1861). The central character, Silas, the pale-faced weaver, displaced from his community of workers in an industrial town, moves from city to country. Viewed as an automaton by the villagers, his mechanized labor, evoked by the hum of his loom, is a ready metaphor for his lack of human relationships, his alienated urban condition, and is given further representation in his strange medical condition, through which at key moments in the plot he falls into a cataleptic trance. By the end of the novel, however, through the agency of a golden-haired child who by chance toddles into his house one day, Silas becomes a full member of the rural community, settled and rooted in the traditional English village. The general outline of the text supports Ermarth's notion of the "ethic of mobility": Silas's movement from town to country endorses a sense of moral progress from a state of alienation to that of a fully integrated member of a rural community. But for all this, the message of the text, confusingly, seems to work actively to suppress or erase movement. Indeed *Silas Marner* reverses the historical pattern of migration; rather than move from country to city, in this case the proto-industrial worker moves, as it were, backward from town to country, from the flux of the town to the stability of the countryside. Moreover, the folkloric culture that Eliot is at pains to describe in the village is an expression of indigenous rural Englishness (in the Rainbow Inn, the Harvest supper, the Christmas dance), in which the evidence of former layers of immigration is barely suppressed. For example, the tune played at the Christmas dance is "Over the Hills and Far Away," which triggers the memory of one

character that, on hearing it, his father would habitually say: "Ah lad, I come from over the hills and far away" (Eliot 1878: 157). And the ghost story told by villagers in the pub, which precedes Silas's dramatic entrance on the fateful night of his burglary, is a story about the ghost of a London tailor who moved to Raveloe and went mad. Rather than a pure, autochthonous English culture, Raveloe presents a strange mixture in which the customs of everyday life are interwoven with memories of migration, haunted by a sense of exile, a coming from elsewhere. A fable of assimilation within English communities, *Silas Marner* tells a story in which English culture is admired for covering over the patterns of mobility with a dream of always having been there. Eliot's English rural culture is one in which migration is a barely remembered, romanticized trace from "over the hills and far away."

For a twentieth-century writer such as D. H. Lawrence, however, questions of mobility press more openly on the project of realism. The inheritor of the organicist and rural tradition that emanates from George Eliot, Lawrence was also alert to the complications of representing places in a world dramatically changed by steam travel, modern warfare, and mass emigration. Like earlier writers, he valued the way in which a text might evoke an authentic sense of place. But in the context of a world in which people move more quickly and numerously, and are unlikely to live in their place of birth, attention to place shifts away from a preoccupation with nativity. Instead it is absorbed into a primitivist vision in which natural landscapes possess an autochthonous energy which can be relayed through the work of art. The author is thus no more than a conduit of this earthy, physical force.

In Lawrence's critical writings, therefore, writer and location are often elided. Take, for instance, his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923). While claiming to be the "midwife to the unborn homunculus" of a new national literature, his attention continually slips from the authors of American literature, who are the subject of the study, to the landscapes that they describe (Lawrence 2003: 11). "Every continent has its own great spirit of place," he writes:

> Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality. The Nile valley produced not only the corn, but the terrific religions of Egypt. China produces the Chinese, and will go on doing so. The Chinese in San Francisco will in time cease to be Chinese, for America is a great melting pot. (Lawrence 2003: 17)

Lawrence's vocabulary oscillates between science and something like spiritualism. The "vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation" evoke overtones of the séance, as though places were deceased humans emitting traces of a past existence, the residue of a former life, on the landscape in which they reside. It is these traces that will be embedded in a work of art, guaranteeing its authenticity and attachment to the real. Here place is more important than authorship, and makes a more decisive contribution to the work of art. But the claims that Lawrence makes are complicated by the fact that the literature with which he is concerned in this work is the literature of a settler nation made up of immigrants. Much of this essay is preoccupied with the relationship between American literature and its European ancestry, American writers and their European "masters." The word "polarized" in the first sentence of the passage cited, repeated in the second as the abstract noun "polarity," draws attention to the jarring tension that resides in the very notion of a location. He intends "polarized" to mean "magnetized," in the sense that "every people" is magnetized, or mesmerized, by its locality. But to be "polarized" also means to be divided between extremes, and thus reminds us that the geographical allegiances of settler peoples may well be to the land of their birth, and that their "homeland" may not be the place of habitation. For Lawrence, therefore, the relationship between person and place combines attraction as well as alienation, belonging and exile, and these are woven together into the uneven fabric of representation. The emphasis in his account on terms that evoke notions of the expulsion of matter from the body – of "effluence" and "exhalation" – underlines this point: Lawrence's "spirit of place" is disjecta, vomit even, a violent disgorging that repeats the alienation of the inhabitant, "disjected" from his homeland.

For Eliot mobility is absorbed into an account of a place – its customs, its folklore, its rituals; for Lawrence its effects are conceived in more visceral ways, as a set of symptoms on the body of the migrant, which are projected onto the landscape. In both cases, mobility is turned into metaphor, rewritten and reinterpreted, and diverted. These two examples suggest something of the way in which mobility acts as the concealed trauma at the heart of individual identity in modern society, a trauma which realism attempts to heal. To read mobility simply as a metaphor for social or moral development, therefore, is to miss the complexity and profundity of spatial production in literary realism. Although the two meanings of the English word "secrete" (to exude and to make secret) are not evoked by Lefebvre's French term *secrète*, that double meaning nevertheless resonates here. If realism "secretes" space, it does so by making secret

the mobility that produces it. Mobility, as the condition of modernity, I suggest, is both the concealed provocation to and secret subject of realism.

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Chapter 4

Naturalism: "Dirt and horror pure and simple"

Sally Ledger

> Realism, according to latter-day French lights, means nothing short of sheer beastliness; it means going out of the way to dig up foul expressions to embody filthy ideas; it means . . . the laying bare of social sores in their most loathsome forms; it means the alternation of the brutal directness of the drunken operative of today with the flabby sensuality of Corinth in the past. In a word, it is dirt and horror pure and simple.
>
> National Vigilance Association

Defining Naturalism

Bestiality, sexuality, and the decline of Western culture: all were central to the fears and fantasies of those late nineteenth-century cultural conservatives who protested against *fin-de-siècle* avant-gardism. Avant-garde culture of the *fin de siècle* was produced by the numerous "new" cultural formations of the period: the "new realism," the "new science," the "new woman," the "new journalism," the "new drama," the "new socialism," and so on. The collective effect of this embrace of the new was to provoke a vicious rearguard action, typified by the National Vigilance Association's diatribe against modern culture.

The National Vigilance Association, one of a number of self-appointed British guardians of the late nineteenth century's sexual and social mores, responded to Henry Vizetelly's publication of Émile Zola's novel *La Terre* (1887) by circulating a transcript of the trial and conviction of the elderly publisher, along with numerous, repetitious excerpts from newspaper accounts of Zola's novel and its English publisher. In the late nineteenth

century "realism" and "naturalism" were interchangeable terms, and it is without doubt the naturalist literary school – led by Zola – to which the Vigilance Association was responding in 1889. While nineteenth-century realism found its classic expression in the mid-century fiction of Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert in France and George Eliot in England, literary naturalism can quintessentially be identified in the *Rougon Macquart* series of novels by Émile Zola in *fin-de-siècle* France, in works of fiction by George Gissing, George Moore, and Arthur Morrison in late nineteenth-century England, and by Stephen Crane and Theodor Dreiser in the USA. Generally speaking, what the mid-century realists and late-century naturalists had in common was a fundamental conviction that art is essentially a mimetic, objective representation of an outer reality, in contrast to the imaginative transfigurations favored by the earlier Romantics. This led both realists and naturalists to write about the ordinary and the close to hand, and to a preoccupation with what can broadly be termed social representations. In some respects late nineteenth-century naturalism was an intensification of mid-century realism, more determinedly producing a quasi-photographic, documentary, scientific account of social reality. In this sense naturalist fiction had much in common with the late-Victorian literature of social exploration such as Andrew Mearns's *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883), W. T. Stead's "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" column in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1885), and, in a more social-scientific manifestation, Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1889).

Naturalism was not simply a distillation of realism, though. For whereas the nineteenth-century realist writer purported to sustain an attitude of detached neutrality – as in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), for example – the naturalist writers imposed a very specific view of mankind onto their fictional narratives. Fictional realism can be described in general terms as an aesthetic mode; literary naturalism was more specifically an aesthetic doctrine and recognizable school. In this way it was a more limited, narrower project than nineteenth-century realism.

Naturalism was an attempt by Zola and others to apply to the writing of literature the methods and discoveries of nineteenth-century science. Darwin's theory of evolution – classically expressed in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and more directly in relation to humankind in *The Descent of Man* (1871) – was without doubt the single most important factor in the development of the naturalist school. One of the major implications of evolutionary theory is that humans, instead of being a divine creation, are only slightly above the level of animals; another is that animal (and human) life is a continuous struggle. It was the evolutionary underpinning of Zola's

novels that so disturbed the writer of the National Vigilance Association's pamphlet in 1889: the pamphlet's horror at Zola's preoccupation with the "lower" species of the alcoholic urban underclass and at the "beastliness" of his writing leads us directly to literary naturalism's roots in nineteenth-century scientific theory.

Alongside evolutionary theory, concomitant theories of heredity were likewise influential on the development of naturalist fiction in the late nine-teenth century. Zola declared himself a "humble disciple" of Hippolyte Taine (1828–93), who acted as a kind of nineteenth-century go-between between science and literature (Lethbridge 1998: ix; Furst and Skrine 1971: 17–18). Taine argued that human behavior has three main determinants: heredity, environment, and historically determined social conditions. The tension in Taine's work between the hereditary, environmental, and his-torical determinants of human behavior is crucial to a political understand-ing of the project of late nineteenth-century literary naturalism. For if the poverty, brutality, and drunkenness of the urban poor that formed the subject-matter of so many late nineteenth-century naturalist novels were to be understood as part of an hereditary condition, then any inter-vention by social or political reformers was doomed to failure. But if the condition of the urban poor could partly at least be explained by the (social and economic) environments in which they were forced to live, then the work of the social reformers took on a more positive political hue. Heredity theory was simultaneously a cause for alarm and an excuse for political complacency among the late nineteenth century's ruling classes: alarming in that before them was the specter of hereditary violence, drunk-enness, and brutality; productive of complacency in its implication that nothing could be done politically or socially to assuage the conditions of the poor.

Zola's naturalistic works of fiction characteristically fix their quasi-scientific novelistic lens on the metropolitan poor, many of whom are either brutalized, alcoholic, or both. His selection of the metropolitan poor as the subject-matter for his *Rougon-Macquart* series of novels (1871–93) accords with the contemporary Social-Darwinist view that the urban poor were closer in evolutionary terms to the lower animals than their social betters. Social Darwinism was similarly harnessed to imperialist think-ing in the period, when the "Scramble For Africa" was justified by the positioning of colonized peoples as racially primitive and occupying a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder (Ledger and Luckhurst 2000: 315–41).

Zola's two manifestos of literary naturalism make explicit his aims as a novelist. The first of these was his Preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin* in 1868 in which he announced:

> I chose to portray individuals existing under the sovereign dominion of their nerves and their blood, devoid of free will and drawn into every act of their lives by the inescapable promptings of their flesh. Thérèse and Laurent are human beasts, nothing more . . . I had only one aim, which was: given a powerful man and an unsatisfied woman, to seek within them the animal, and even to see in them only the animal. (Zola 1995: 1–2)

In the figure of Thérèse Raquin "the animal" translates into voracious sexual passion, and it was partly the naturalists' willingness to contemplate female sexuality in its rawest form that so enraged cultural conservatives. In the sexualized climate of the *fin de siècle*, with Decadent and New Woman writers persistently challenging both gender boundaries and normative sexual mores, Zolaesque naturalism was understood by its opponents as a further manifestation of cultural degeneration.

In Zola's second naturalist manifesto, *The Experimental Novel* (1880), the novelist more explicitly explores "the idea of literature determined by science" (Zola 1963: 162). There he declares: "I believe that the question of heredity has a great influence in the intellectual and passional behavior of man. I also accord a considerable importance to environment" (Zola 1963: 173). It is to the tension between heredity and environment in Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877), the seventh novel in the *Rougon-Macquart* series, that I now turn my attention.

Fictional Naturalism: Zola's *L'Assommoir*

L'Assommoir tells the tale of a laundry woman, Gervaise Macquart, who falls on hard times, takes to drink, and dies in abject poverty. *L'Assommoir* ("club," "bludgeon," "grogshop," "bar") is set in a Paris slum ironically called the "Goutte d'Or" ("Drop of Gold"), in a neighborhood between the Sacré Coeur and the Gare du Nord close to where Zola himself lived. In 1875 he had made several journeys into the area, filling his notebook with observations of the neighborhood and its people (Baguley 1992: 11): the documentary emphasis of his naturalistic project is clearly illustrated by Zola's explorations and recording of his experiences. In his preliminary "sketch" of the novel its author stated the main social aims of his work:

> Show the milieu of the people and explain by this milieu the way of life of the people; how it is that, in Paris, drunkenness, the dissolution of families, of fighting, the acceptance of all kinds of shame and misery, arise from

the very living conditions of the workers, from the hard grind, the over-
crowding, the neglect, etc. . . . A terrible picture which will convey its own
message. (Baguley 1992: 11)

It seems here at least that Zola accounts for the plight of the people
he describes through the environment in which they live, implicitly
announcing his novel as driven by a politics of reform. In 1872, in an
article in *Le Corsaire* addressed to the French government, a socialistic
politics is announced:

If he slips, if he rolls into drunkenness, it is your fault. Do you not want
him to be stupid, drunk with ignorance, like an animal? So he enters a bar,
turns to the only joy that he has at hand, takes it to excess, because you
close up his horizons and because he needs a dream, even if it is the dream
of intoxication. (Baguley 1992: 12)

The text of *L'Assommoir* is politically much more ambivalent than Zola's
extra-novelistic pronouncements might lead us to expect. The fictional-
ized inhabitants of the Goutte d'Or are by and large presented as a pass-
ive mass, altogether lacking a political consciousness or sense of agency.
As David Baguley has put it:

There had been barricades in the rue de la Goutte d'Or in 1848, and the
very bars in which Zola's workers drink themselves into a stupor were
frequently the scene, particularly towards the end of the Second Empire, of
clandestine political meetings. Zola's Goutte d'Or seems totally impervi-
ous to even the news of the strikes that were taking place elsewhere in
Paris, the public disturbances and the political propaganda which were
widespread under the Empire, the improvements in working-class educa-
tion and awareness at that time. (Baguley 1992: 17)

From the very start of *L'Assommoir* its protagonists, including Gervaise
Macquart, its heroine, are linked through association with the lower
animals. In chapter 1, as Gervaise looks out of the window of their squalid
hotel room, anticipating the return of her sometime lover Lantier, she
can "see groups of butchers in bloodstained aprons hanging about in front
of the slaughterhouses, and occasionally a stench [comes] to her on the
cool breeze, a pungent smell of slaughtered animals" (Zola 1998: 6). Men
and animals merge as, seemingly deprived of volition, they are swallowed
up by the jaws of the modern city:

She watched men, animals, and carts flowing in an uninterrupted stream
. . . It was like the trampling of a herd, a mob which would stop

suddenly, spreading out and overflowing on to the roadway, a measureless procession of men going to work . . . and the throng went on being swallowed up by Paris, sinking into it, never ending. (Zola 1998: 7)

What could be a political crowd of workers (described here in characteristically bourgeois terms as "a mob") merges with the merely instinctual "herd."

The laundry woman herself – by far the most sympathetically presented figure in the novel – is presented in close proximity to basic human bodily functions and fluids. As Gervaise sorts out her customers' dirty linen she is unresponsive to her assistant's "dirty-minded" "washerwomen's jokes about every hole and every stain she came across" (Zola 1998: 141). Her intimacy with her clients' collective and individual biology is, though, made manifest:

> She didn't have to stick her nose into Monsieur Madinier's flannel waistcoats, either, to know that they were his; the man stained anything woolen, his skin was so greasy. And she knew other details, very personal things about how clean everyone was, about what was underneath the silk skirts that neighborhood women wore out in the streets . . . (Zola 1998: 142)

Gervaise Macquart is intermittently "filled with tremendous revulsion" (Zola 1998: 142) by her proximity to the bodily functions of others; and her quest, repeated throughout the novel even long after it can plausibly be sustained, is to rise above and overcome the material squalor of the slum environment in which she is forced to live: "to be able to get on with her work, always have something to eat and a half-decent place to sleep, bring up her children properly, not to be beaten, and die in her own bed" (Zola 1998: 421). It is a simple – in bourgeois terms an unambitious – quest, but one which the novel demonstrates to be unattainable. Whether its unattainability is to be explained by the depraving social and economic conditions of the Parisian slums, or whether Gervaise, Coupeau, Bijard, and the rest are hereditarily doomed to moral depravity, pauperism, and early death, is the central political question of the novel. While Gervaise attempts to rise above the squalid material conditions of the Goutte d'Or, her own biological organization is simultaneously shown to link her to it. In alighting on a laundry woman as his central protagonist Zola selected a city type associated with sexual laxity, and her easy compliance with her husband's drunken sexuality is didactically condemned:

> She relaxed in his arms, dazed by the slight vertigo from the piles of wash-
> ing and not in the least put off by Coupeau's boozy breath. And the smack-
> ing kiss they gave one another full on the mouth, surrounded by all the
> filth of her trade, was like a first step along their slow decline into depravity.
> (Zola 1998: 144)

The whole series of *Rougon-Macquart* novels concerns itself with the
rise and fall of an ill-fated family in Second-Empire France and the work-
ings of the laws of heredity in that process. Gervaise has a heavy burden
to bear from her past: conceived in drunkenness (in the first novel of the
series, *The Fortune of the Rougons* (1871)) her limp is attributed to the
physical brutality of her father's love-making: "Time and again her
mother had told her about the nights when Macquart came home blind
drunk and made love so brutally that he almost broke her bones, and
certainly she, Gervaise, with her gammy leg, must have been started on
one of those nights" (Zola 1998: 39). Gervaise is, by her own account,
"like her mother, a tireless worker who'd died in harness after serving as
a beast of burden to Père Macquart for over twenty years." Socially and
physically, then, Gervaise's familial inheritance is not only bleak but
seemingly inescapably determined. Her desperate desire not to inherit
her parents' alcoholism is bravely sustained through most of the novel's
chapters; but events – her abandonment by Lantier, Coupeau's injury,
his idleness and spendthrift habits, the family's mounting debts and the
threat of imminent starvation – finally overcome her. Gervaise's plunge
into the temporary release offered by alcohol in chapter 10 comes as no
surprise to the reader.

Environment and circumstance are, without doubt, partly held to
account in *L'Assommoir* for Gervaise's eventual insanity and death: when
her social and domestic circumstances are secure during the first four years
of her marriage to Coupeau, all goes well. But the influence of heredity
theory remains strong in the novel. As Coupeau lies dying from *delirium
tremens*, his physician is keen to know whether his parents drank; that
they did confirms his diagnosis of hereditary alcoholism.

It is the sympathetic warmth of Gervaise and her inclination toward
good – in short, Zola's willingness to present her as a moral character
rather than as a physical organism merely – that are pitted against the
biological determinants of heredity in *L'Assommoir*. When Gervaise
comes across the dying Lalie Bijard, the novel oscillates between a dis-
turbingly clinical naturalist preoccupation with the physical state of the
child's near-dead body and a powerful current of sympathy that derives
from Gervaise's point of view. Here as elsewhere in the novel familial

history repeats itself in an apparently endless cycle of hereditarily determined trauma. Of the dying Lalie, Gervaise reflects that "it was certainly the fault of that ferocious brute her father, if he was losing this treasure. After kicking the mother to death, hadn't he now just murdered the daughter!" (Zola 1998: 401):

> Gervaise, meanwhile, was trying not to burst into tears. She reached out with her hands, wanting to comfort Lalie, and as the ragged sheet was slipping off she pulled it right down, intending to remake the bed. The poor little body of the dying child was thus exposed. Lord Jesus, what a heart-rending, pitiable sight! The stones themselves should have wept. Lalie was quite naked, with only the remnants of a bodice round her shoulders to serve as a nightgown; yes, quite naked, the nakedness of a martyr, bleeding and tortured. There was no longer any flesh on her, her bones poked through her skin. From her ribs to her thighs thin purple weals reached down, where the whip's bite had left its vivid imprint. . . . On her right leg there was a gash that hadn't healed, some nasty wound that must have reopened each morning as she hurried round doing her chores. She was nothing but a bruise from head to toe. Oh, what a butchery of childhood . . . People in churches venerate martyred virgins whose naked flesh is not so pure. Gervaise . . . tried to say some prayers. (Zola 1998: 401)

Set against the naturalistically portrayed biology of Lalie's putrefying body is a set of transcendent categories: the secular martyr, the appeal to "Lord Jesus," the insistence on the Romantic category of childhood that has been subjected to the "butchery" of male working-class violence. Spontaneous and earnest as the appeals are, coming as they do from the sympathetic viewpoint of Gervaise, the highly conventional categories from which they derive are demonstrably unable to assist Lalie Bijard and her kind in a material sense. Lalie dies and her tiny siblings are left to the brutal care of their drunken father.

What is subversive in the passage quoted above, and throughout *L'Assommoir*, is the refusal of domesticity as a corrective to social and economic meltdown. Gervaise's and Lalie's attempts to order and humanize their environment through attention to domestic detail fail here and throughout the novel. As Lalie dies Gervaise characteristically attempts to tidy the child's bed but, distracted, she instead unwittingly displays the full naked horror of her suffering to the reader's view. It is significant too that Lalie's open wound has, we are told, been aggravated by the domestic "chores" that she dutifully performs each day in her squalid apartment. In mid-century realist fiction such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) or Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848), respectable working-class

domesticity is often presented as a refuge from the assaults of social and economic breakdown. Naturalist fiction typically resists the fictional comforts of that same trope.

Notwithstanding the humanity with which Zola presents Gervaise Macquart, she, like others about her, is by the end of the novel reduced to the level of a lower species. Traumatized to the point of insanity after having witnessed her husband's death from *delirium tremens*, "all she did was pull faces like a monkey that's broken loose from its cage, and what she got for that was cabbage stumps thrown at her by kids in the street" (Zola 1998: 439). Having contemplated but rejected suicide – driven on by hunger, a basic biological need – Gervaise is, at the close, reduced to a mere putrescence, a dead animal in its "hole":

> She rotted to death, as Lorilleux put it. One morning there was a bad smell in the corridor and people remembered that she hadn't been seen for two days; they found her in her hole, already green. (Zola 1998: 439)

At the time of publication *L' Assommoir* was simultaneously attacked as a dangerously socialist intervention and as an assault on the working classes (Lethbridge 1998: xv). While the conservative critic writing for *La Gazette de France* condemned the author of *L'Assommoir* as "the leader of the literary Commune," Arthur Ranc, himself a Communard, anonymously writing for *La République française*, attacked what he regarded as Zola's "Nero-like scorn for the people" (Baguley 1992: 16–17). This political ambivalence is characteristic not only of Zola's naturalist fiction but of Gissing's, Morrison's, Crane's, and Dreiser's too.

Theatrical Naturalism: Ibsen's *Ghosts*

While the fictional school of literary naturalists chose for their subject-matter the urban working classes of the late-nineteenth-century city, theatrical naturalism, led across Europe by Henrik Ibsen, instead directed naturalism's dissecting gaze towards the middle classes. *Ghosts*, Ibsen's quintessential naturalist tragedy, laid bare the sordid realities of late-nineteenth-century bourgeois domestic life at the very moment that Zola was disclosing his account of the domestic depravities of the Parisian slums. Published in 1881, *Ghosts* was quickly banned across most of the European continent, its account of inherited syphilis and its perceived attack on the traditional bourgeois family proving too much for most national authorities. Its London premier was put on by the newly formed

Independent Theatre Company in 1891, ten years after it was written. It only survived one performance, and the outpouring of critical venom it aroused has scarcely been equaled in theater history. Over five hundred articles appeared on the subject of the play and in one of the most vituperative of them, published in the *Daily Telegraph*, it was famously described as "a loathsome sore unbandaged . . . a dirty act done publicly . . . a lazar house with all its doors and windows open" (Ledger and Luckhurst 2000: 128). While Ibsen tried to distance himself from Zola, the plays of his middle period have a lot in common with Zola's project – in their unblinking realism, their debt to heredity theory, and their negotiation of sexuality. It was mainly at the French novelist's prompting that *Ghosts* got its first Paris performance in 1890.

Ghosts is the story of a woman, Mrs Alving, who leaves her husband but is then persuaded, by a cleric with whom she is in love, Pastor Manders, to return home. She bears her morally depraved husband a son, Osvald, who turns out to have inherited his father's syphilis. While it was its subject-matter that drew critical ire from the establishment and allied it to Zola's literary school, the significance of Ibsen's naturalist plays to the development of modern drama in the twentieth century inheres in his commitment to the quotidian. Ibsen's detailing of the stage set at the start of Act One of *Ghosts* now seems unremarkable, but in 1881 it had a distinctly modern effect in the European theater:

> A spacious garden-room, with a door in the left-hand wall and two doors in the right-hand wall. In the centre of the room is a round table with chairs around it; on the table are books, magazines and newspapers. Downstage left is a window, in front of which is a small sofa with a sewing-table by it. Backstage the room opens out into a slightly narrower conservatory, with walls of large panes of glass. In the right-hand wall of the conservatory is a door leading down to the garden. (Ibsen 1991: 27)

The spaciousness of the garden room, the books and the magazines, all suggest the readily knowable comfortable bourgeois status of the Alving family. The realistic effect was essential as far as Ibsen was concerned. "The effect of the play," he wrote, "depends a great deal on making the spectator feel as if he were actually sitting, listening and looking at events happening in real life" (Sprinchorn 1964: 222).

Significant too were the new demands that Ibsen's naturalist drama made upon actors. For most of the nineteenth century the standard acting style had been melodramatic. Coded physical gestures were made to display heightened emotion in what was a highly stylized mode of theatrical

performance. As the theater theorist Konstantin Stanislavsky put it early
in the twentieth century:

> Some of these established clichés have become traditional, and are passed
> down from generation to generation; as for instance spreading your hand
> over your heart to express love, or opening your mouth wide to give the
> idea of death . . . There are methods for expressing all human feelings and
> passions (showing your teeth and rolling your eyes when you are jealous,
> or covering up the eyes and face with the hands instead of weeping; tear-
> ing your hair when in despair) . . . (Innes 2000: 11–12)

It was this histrionic acting method that may account for the failure of
early attempts at dramatic naturalism, such as Zola's stage adaptation of
Thérèse Raquin (Innes 2000: 12). Stanislavsky's subsequent development
of the more naturalistic character method of acting was an imperative
demanded by Ibsen's spearheading of naturalist theater in the late nine-
teenth century.

Ibsen's theatrical naturalism is closest to Zola's literary project in its
exploration of heredity and in its challenge to bourgeois sexual mores.
At the time of the play's action, Mrs Alving's main project is the open-
ing of an orphanage built in her husband's name. Anxious that her son
Osvald should inherit nothing from his dead father – not even his money
– Mrs Alving spends her dead husband's fortune on the orphanage. The
play bleakly demonstrates, though, that while economic and even social
inheritance can to some extent be surmounted, one's biological inher-
itance is inescapable. When he was a child, we learn, Mrs Alving had
physically removed Osvald from his father's influence, thereby ensuring
that he led a morally temperate life as he grew up, at the same time as
having him schooled in her own progressive and forward-looking social
ideals. What Osvald is unable to escape, though, is the organic disease
that afflicted his sexually dissolute father – by the play's close it has become
evident that the young artist is dying from syphilis.

Max Nordau, the Jeremiah of late-nineteenth-century European culture,
noted that Ibsen had read Prosper Lucas's treatise on the first principles
of heredity, written in 1847 (Nordau 1895: 350). Ibsen's biographer,
Michael Meyer, has confirmed that in a general way heredity theory was
much discussed by the Scandinavian community in Rome while Ibsen lived
there, and points out that J. P. Jacobsen had translated Darwin's *Origin
of Species* and *The Descent of Man* into Danish while in Rome, and that
it was quite possible that Ibsen would have had access to this (Meyer 1971:
299). The hostile Nordau was correct in his assessment that "heredity is
[Ibsen's] hobby-horse, which he mounts in every one of his pieces. There

is not a single trait in his personages, a single peculiarity of character, a single disease, that he does not trace to heredity" (Nordau 1895: 350). Notwithstanding the determinism of heredity theory, *Ghosts* is radical in its challenge to conservative cultural ideology. For one of the ironies at the heart of the play is that Osvald's contagion derives not from Paris but from his ostensibly respectable married father. Late-nineteenth-century degeneration theorists such as Max Nordau routinely alighted upon French Decadence and European cultural avant-gardism in general as the source of the social and moral canker that they identified in *fin-de-siècle* culture. Ibsen begged to differ. In *Ghosts* the source of moral and physical decay is not to be found in the sexually exciting Parisian metropolis where Osvald's artist friends don't bother to get married, but in the respectable bourgeois fjordlands outside Bergen in Norway.

The establishment's vehement critical reaction to *Ghosts* substantiates the play's radically subversive status, but such a status is nonetheless undermined by the fact that Osvald Alving is forced to return to the prison of the bourgeois family to die defeated. Many of Ibsen's plays deal with young people's attempts to break with the past and with tradition, and many of them fail. Osvald's failure has rather more to do with biological inheritance than with social oppression, even though the former clearly serves in the play as a metaphor for the latter. Osvald inherits syphilis from his dissolute father, and also inherits his alcoholism and his predisposition to make sexual advances to dependent social inferiors. In a comparable way Captain Alving's illegitimate daughter Regina appears to have inherited her mother's weakness for such sexual advances, and her future at the close of the play, with the offer of what seems to amount to "hostess" work at a home for retired seamen, is arguably as determined as Osvald Alving's descent into paralysis.

Heredity theory has a politically disenabling effect on Ibsen's drama, halting the tide of modernity which the Nora Helmers, Rebecca Wests, and Osvald Alvings of his middle-period plays otherwise undoubtedly represent. At the *fin de siècle*, the Darwinian theory of evolution, which at the mid-century had manifested itself, to freethinkers at least, as a theory of progress, had itself degenerated into a theory of inheritance, with socially deterministic, politically stifling results.

Gendering Naturalism

One of the striking things about naturalist fiction and drama at the *fin de siècle* was the frequency with which title figures or central characters were

female. In the field of fiction examples include Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*
(1867), Gervaise in *L'Assommoir* (1877), and *Nana* (1880), George
Moore's *A Mummer's Wife* (1885), Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*
(1893), and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900). In the theater one thinks of
Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House* (1879), Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*
(1886), *Hedda Gabler* (1890), and Rita Allmer in *Little Eyolf* (1896),
Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888), and Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* (1901)
and Nina in *The Seagull* (1895). What is significant is perhaps not so much
the number or the centrality of female characters in naturalist literature
of the period but, rather, the way in which female experience is presented.
As Christopher Innes has put it in his account of late-nineteenth-century
naturalist theater: "Their views are given equal weight to those of the
men in the plays. Indeed, since in general the women assert themselves
in opposition to the male-dominated society ranked against them, their
voice predominates" (Innes 2000: 18). Innes notes the "intrinsic con-
nection between Naturalism and the movement for female emancipation"
at the *fin de siècle* while regretting the relative dearth and lack of success
of naturalist female playwrights at the period (Innes 2000: 19). While it
is true that few naturalist women playwrights enjoyed success in the late
nineteenth century, the same is not true of those women writers of New
Woman fiction who exploited the techniques of literary naturalism for their
own feminist ends.

The naturalist literary project became nothing less than a cultural
battleground between male and female avant-garde writers in *fin-de-siècle*
Britain. In one respect late-nineteenth-century literary naturalism was –
in a pincer movement with literary modernism – an ideological project
that pitted itself against the rise of what its exponents regarded as a
feminized mass culture. The classical expression of this position can be
identified in George Moore's clarion call for greater explicitness and less
censorship in English fiction, *Literature at Nurse* (1885), in George
Gissing's novel written against mass culture, *New Grub Street* (1891), in
Hardy, Besant, and Linton's demand for greater "Candour in English
Fiction" (1890), and in Basil Ransome's rant against "a feminized, a ner-
vous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases, and
false delicacy" in Henry James's *The Bostonians,* first published in 1886
(James 1967: 334). The project to re-masculinize literary culture at the
fin de siècle had, though, rather unexpected results. For the female writers
of New Woman fiction responded to Moore's and Hardy's call for an
earthier form of realism by adapting naturalist aesthetics to their project
of female emancipation. Writers such as Sarah Grand, in *The Heavenly
Twins* (1893), and George Egerton, in *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894),

boldly embraced naturalism's commitment to discussing sexual desire and sexual disease. The runaway success of their books meant that one of the direct results of a literary movement that had as one of its central aims the re-masculinization of literature was that late-nineteenth-century fiction actually became even more strongly associated with women than before. As the critic for the *Athenaeum* sneered: "Now every literary lady is 'realistic' and everybody says 'How clever! How charming!'" (Miller 1994: 17).

The gendered contestation of naturalism was equally fierce in the late-Victorian theater. George Bernard Shaw was intensely aware of the challenges that women posed to the London theater of the 1890s, reflecting that "we cannot but see that the time is ripe for the advent of the actress-manageress, and that we are on the verge of something like a struggle between the sexes for the dominion of the London theatres" (Archer 1895: xxix). Shaw, a great admirer of Elizabeth Robins, acknowledged that her productions of Ibsen in the 1890s were harbingers of a gender revolution in the theater industry (Powell 1998: 79). Ibsen's uncompromisingly naturalistic new drama made a major impact not only on the London stage but also on a number of female playwrights who wished to follow his example. While George Bernard Shaw and Arthur Wing Pinero blended their social realism with the theatrical mode of the society comedies with which a middle-class London audience would have been familiar and comfortable, some of the female playwrights of the *fin de siècle* were uncompromising in their adherence to the theatrical naturalism that had been announced by the arrival of Ibsen's plays in London in the 1890s.

Eminent amongst such naturalistic plays is Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell's *Alan's Wife*, first conceived in 1892 and performed in 1893. Robins and Bell disguised their authorship of the play from Herbert Beerbohm Tree, whom they hoped would put it on at the prestigious Haymarket Theatre – despite his avowal, when Robins had described her playwriting ambitions to him, that he had "never . . . read a good play from a woman's hand" (Powell 1998: 83). This opinion was shared by a majority of the more eminent literary men of the 1890s. When Robins told Henry James of her desire to write plays he had reacted "with a start, and a look of horror" (Robins 1932: 144–5). Notwithstanding such opposition, Robins and Bell's play was staged on May 2, 1893 at Terry's Theatre, London, by J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre Company. Taking as its central dramatic subject a working-class woman, in some respects *Alan's Wife* is more nearly allied to Zola's and Gissing's fictional naturalism than to Ibsen's dramatic naturalism; the exploration of maternal love and sexual desire that is at the play's center is, though, straight out of Ibsen.

The play's debt to late-nineteenth-century science – a eugenic discourse on the survival of the fittest is pivotal to the dramatic narrative – likewise allies it to the project of literary naturalism.

Alan's Wife, like the London production of *Ghosts* a year before, caused a critical furor. As Robins herself put it, "controversy raged round the authorship of the play, and ink continued to be spilt on the dreadfulness of the theme" (Robins 1932: 118). While Robins and Bell's embrace of naturalist aesthetics failed to achieve for them either the theatrical success of Henrik Ibsen or the notoriety enjoyed by Émile Zola as leader of the school, their play is striking in its modernity. The modernity of literary naturalism is indeed crucial to an understanding of its significance to *fin-de-siècle* European culture. Greeted with horror by traditionalists and with emancipatory glee by bohemians, socialists, and feminists, in Britain the work of Ibsen and Zola exploded a conception of "Victorian" culture that had only recently begun to assert itself. Long before Lytton Strachey attacked the straw-dog conception of Victorianism in his *Eminent Victorians* (1918), the project of literary naturalism contributed to the formation of a cultural avant-garde that was a major precursor to literary modernism in the twentieth century.

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Chapter 5

Realism before and after Photography: "The fantastical form of a relation among things"

Nancy Armstrong

The adage that "seeing is believing" both incorporates and obscures a contradiction that began to shape human perception with the onset of photographic realism. Most obviously, the statement indicates that we may infer the truth of a person, thing, place, or event from direct visual evidence of that person, thing, place, or event. At the same time, "seeing is believing" also implies that visual evidence can persuade us that something exists when in fact it does not. Take the apocryphal account of the opening of a film by the Lumière brothers, where the audience reportedly fled the theater convinced they were seated in the path of an oncoming locomotive, a belief quickly dispelled when no train in fact came roaring through the theater. To understand fully this paradox – without which the late modern world is simply unimaginable – we must go back to the moment when certain images first became capable of calling objects into being, even in cases where those images had clearly cut their ties to the material world. Indeed, the movie industry still counts on this duplicity – realism without a reality – to market films whose appeal depends on special effects.

Occurring during the mid-nineteenth century, this moment, which corresponds to the development of photographic technology and its rise to the status of a medium second only in popularity to print, coincides with a new, culture-wide rationale for colonial expansion that created what is today known as "the West." Rather than simply advancing business and

trade, the European nations felt an obligation to bestow on less developed populations the blessings of education, personal hygiene, sexual morality, and other culture practices that regulate biological life. The relationship between these two major strands of modern cultural history is anything but coincidental. During the Victorian period, the new technologies of visual representation we now call photography made it possible for Western Europe to produce a picture of the world that positioned the metropolitan observer both above and at the center of a vast array of exotic peoples. Photography aided and abetted the spread of empire by placing colonial populations along a developmental timeline extending from people classified as primitive and implicitly degenerate to those who were contrastingly modern and progressive. By virtue of its ability to reproduce the same image many times over, photography produced a picture of the world that insinuated itself between observers and objects observed and transformed both. Over the past century, photographic technology also proved itself capable of eluding the Western colonial powers and generating alternative realisms. As peripheral populations learn to stage themselves for and against observers in Europe and the United States, we have been forced to abandon a relatively static model of imperial centers and colonial peripheries for a picture of the world sufficiently fluid to incorporate multiple perspectives and undergo conceptual inversion.

The Mimetic Fallacy

To understand the simultaneous emergence of photographic technology in England and France in 1839, we must examine the moment when sensation became the only reliable basis of knowledge, and the sense of sight assumed priority over all other senses. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), John Locke argued that what we know depends on what we see. He made the case so persuasively and to such a receptive readership that his model of the visually empowered individual eventually succeeded in dividing the cultural universe between observer and object observed. In order to take issue with Locke, those who challenged his definition of reason conceded this basic principle. Thus from Adam Smith's model of sympathy and Marx's essay on the secret of the commodity fetish to Freud's definition of "the uncanny," Foucault's panopticon, and late-twentieth-century film theory, the reigning models of subject–object relations all presuppose the distinction between spectacle and spectator and so maintain the foundational categories of bourgeois realism. This foundation was shaky from the start.

To authorize information that comes into the mind directly from the external world, Locke went to great lengths to distinguish the kind of information derived directly from material phenomena from less reliable information that was not. Thus, he explains, if I "frame an *Idea* of the Legs, Arms, and Body of a Man, and join to this a Horse's Head and Neck, I do not make a *false Idea* of any thing . . . . But when I call it a *Man*, or *Tartar*, and imagine it either to represent some real Being," then "I may err" (Locke 1979: 393). Should it try to pass itself off as good information, such information could be accused of putting the mimetic fallacy into play. In this case, the image does not imitate an object that already exists but instead tries to convince us that something exists when it actually doesn't. There is ample evidence to suggest that during the long eighteenth century, as Lockean epistemology took hold, spread throughout the Anglophone world, and came under critical scrutiny, the growing credibility of the mimetic model was accompanied by increasing suspicion that the mimetic fallacy might indeed be at work. This in turn produced a culture-wide demand for unmediated images, images whose fidelity to objects could not be disputed. Thus I do not hold the invention of photographic technology responsible for all the problems that ensue when we are willing to take a putatively transparent image for an object. Instead, I regard the wild proliferation of transparent images for which Victorian England is known, and the image-dependency these images instilled in consumers across Europe and the United States, as consequences of the Enlightenment belief that visual perception gave individuals conceptual mastery of the world around them.

In his effort to dispel the notion that human beings are born with innate ideas, Locke famously describes the mind as "white Paper, void of all characters, without any *Idea*s" (104). Then, switching metaphors, he proceeds to pose the question of the century: "How comes [the mind] to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the busy and boundless Fancy of Man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of Reason and Knowledge?" (104). The answer he provides is even better known than the question that prompts it. Having created a "mind" wiped clean and emptied out of both divine and inherited wisdom, Locke can offer what was in his day a radically materialist definition of knowledge. Most of our ideas come into the mind from outside, through the senses, in the form of information that he calls "sensation" (105). As sensations accumulate, the mind transforms them into ideas of shape, color, texture, size, and so forth. Sensations that spring from the ideas of objects intermix with and often pass for sensations derived directly from objects, as when we see a globe of uniform color and

automatically know that it is not only red but also round. When it comes to visual information, we are especially prone to mistake such mental inferences for pure sensation, Locke explains, "Because Sight, the most comprehensive of all our Senses," tends to subsume other sensory information (146). Secure in the belief that what we see actually exists on the other side of that image, we are quite likely to deduce other properties of an object from its image alone.

Once filled with a certain number of sensations, the mind begins to perceive its own operations. Locke identifies this capacity for self-reflection with the faculty of judgment – a capacity, in his words, that "Man has wholly in himself" (105). We depend on this intrinsic faculty to distinguish information that originates in objects from information that would reverse the priorities of thing over image and convince us there is something where no such object exists. To transform sensations into ideas, Locke explains, the mind arrives at an abstraction or type from particular members of each species, so that when we next encounter an object that more or less fits the type, we tend to see pretty much what we expect to find there. He regards such "Copies of those Originals [to be] imperfect and *inadequate*" (378). It is difficult enough to remain faithful to our actual sense of the thing while classifying and arranging it on the "white page" of the mind; this difficulty is compounded when we abstract that information for purposes of sharing it with other people. Language is the product of such abstraction (159, 163). The "Imperfection that is naturally in Language" (490) tends to be so bad, he contends, that the definitive qualities of "a *Horse* or *Cassowary* will be but rudely and imperfectly imprinted on the Mind by Words, the sight of the Animals doth it a thousand times better" (519). Only when assured that our "Ideas . . . agree to the reality of things" can we rely on getting accurate knowledge of the world (372). This model of human understanding proved as tenacious as it did persuasive.

During the long eighteenth century, as Raymond Williams tells the story, England saw a revolution in print culture that authorized a group of people who adhered to the cardinal principles: 1) that intelligence was acquired rather than innate; 2) that good information originated in direct sensory encounters with the world; and 3) that language could either convey accurate knowledge of the external world or seriously mislead us (Williams 1961). This much is rather well established. What cultural historians seem reluctant to address is why and how the very class that authorized this brand of empiricism began to invert the priority of object over image and to reshape the material world through mass visuality. The principle of mimesis, as Locke used it, equates believing with seeing in

order to ground belief in the sensory perception of material objects. But he was also acutely aware that in so equating believing with seeing, he was opening up the possibility that certain kinds of information could substitute for direct experience. Looking back at the eighteenth century from the perspective of the full-blown commodity culture that emerged in England during the nineteenth century, we can observe that culture transforming the relationship between seeing and believing that Locke endorsed to precisely the relationship he cautioned against. Two examples provide a clear indication of just how mimetic realism gave rise to a culture whose power to expand itself rested on the mimetic fallacy.

First is the rather sudden proliferation of publications that claimed to provide anyone who could read and was willing to spend a modest amount on the new magazines with knowledge equivalent to that acquired by touring other countries. Or so claimed the *Gentleman's Magazine*, which first appeared in 1731 and inspired about 300 imitators in England and still others in British North America. Reviewing the first 50 years of its publication, editor John Nichols observed, "the inestimable value of a periodical on the plan of the *Gentleman's Magazine* must be obvious to every man conversant with the world" (Nichols 1818: III, 1, lxx). The plan in question was to provide readers with information about the "medical arts," "the rudiments of every science," history, fiction, poetry, essays, religious controversies, travel, the customs of other peoples, the proper conduct for men and women, antiquities, parliamentary business, and current political issues (III, 1, lxx). By providing so many readers with a second-hand version of an elite education, the *Gentleman's Magazine* had no intention of compromising the knowledge that distinguished men of genuine breeding. Indeed, Nichols claimed that he was merely elevating the literate population of England over "the torpid Greenlander, the indolent Turk, the placid Hindoo, the ferocious Cossack, the stupid Negro, and more flippant French, and the self sufficient Chinese" (III, 1, lxvii). The ensuing boom in this kind of periodical literature suggests that public faith in mimesis itself inverted the relationship of copy to original, as desire for a direct sensory experience enlisted and expanded the print medium that offered strictly second-hand access to that experience.

This same principle worked perhaps even more effectively in and through images. By the end of the eighteenth century, printers had at their command a process of wood engraving and mechanized printing that would make it as cheap to print pictures as words. But it was only in the 1830s that British culture offered much in the way of printed illustrations for mass consumption. According to Patricia Anderson, this situation changed abruptly in 1832, when The Society for the Diffusion

of Useful Knowledge first published the *Penny Magazine* (Anderson 1991: 49). The illustrations that figured so prominently in this publication drew from many sources, all with limited audience appeal: chapbooks, quasi-journalistic depictions of famous people and sensational crimes, children's primers, political cartoons, and the broadsides that often decorated the interior of pubs. Taking advantage of the new print technology, this periodical not only circulated such images more widely than ever before; the *Penny Magazine* also worked to consolidate variations, rendering them as a familiar set of types.

Operating on the assumption that artisans, engineers, and prosperous workers could take in more information with less difficulty from pictures than from words, this magazine made illustration so integral to knowing that seeing and knowing were equated in a way rivaled only by direct experience. The *Penny Magazine* offered illustrations designed to provide useful information about the world – including animals, foreign places and customs, as well as contemporary celebrities, copies of well-known works of art, and detailed plans of scientific and mechanical devices. The new kind of illustration inserted the image between words and things, as if to say that images came closer than verbal description to objects themselves. Verbal description supported this view. By discussing images as if they were objects – the length of the flamingo's neck, for example, or the style of a particular painter – the *Penny Magazine* invited readers to respond to the image as if to an object in the world. It invited them, further, to respond to writing as if to the abstractions we create in converting actual sensations into knowledge of such things. The practice spread to such weekly newspapers as the *Graphic* and any number of publications directed toward readers better educated than those initially targeted by the *Penny Magazine*. By so objectifying the contents of Locke's mental storehouse, the new kind of illustration substituted one abstraction for many individual sensations and so converted an emphatically inductive way of knowing into an unwittingly deductive way of seeing.

Image and Empire

To track the modern concept of mimesis from its beginnings in Lockean realism to the complete and pervasive inversion of induction that informs photographic realism, we need to identify the suppositions that accompanied the new technology: 1) that unmediated access to the natural world was equivalent to knowledge; 2) that only certain images could provide such access; and 3) that only those cultures with special imaging

technologies could provide their members with conceptual mastery of all they surveyed. These assumptions combined in the cultural logic of a new imperialism. In the tradition of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the British readership saw its mission in the colonies as reproducing, if not gentlemen, then bureaucrats, soldiers, servants, and local officials, none of whom were English, all of whom were better off for imitating the English model. To appreciate the contribution photography made to this process, we must consider the properties unique to the English calotype.

In contrast with the French daguerreotype, which produced but one image at a time from the light rays bouncing off a given object onto photosensitive material, the calotype process made a negative copy that could be reproduced many times over, each reproduction as good as the next. The difference between copy and original was absolutely clear. Neither the negative nor the reproductions that transformed the negative into a recognizable image could be called original; that status was reserved for the subject-matter that the new technology transformed into images. This capacity to produce many copies from a single negative reinforced the idea that what the photograph copied had to be there before its image could be transferred onto paper. As the next best thing to a direct encounter with the world, seeing a photograph was soon considered an especially efficient way of knowing an object. And if the same image could be reproduced any number of times, then virtually any number of viewers could in theory share much the same image of the world.

Rather early in the nineteenth century, according to Jonathan Crary, optical science and Romantic aesthetics began to think of the senses as embedded in a highly individuated physical body subject to mood swings, moments of great intensity, inattentiveness, hallucinations, and a variety of outside pressures. The eye was no longer the organ that Locke had once conceptualized as a sensory receptor that simply saw whatever was out there to be seen and saw it in approximately the same way from one individual to the next (Crary 1990: 137–8). In comparison with the eye, the camera seemed relatively neutral and impervious to such influences – just what was needed to standardize what people saw, so that anyone with access to photographic images could indeed see the world much as anyone else did. An ever-expanding readership consequently learned to imagine themselves within a composite picture of types based on race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, and so forth; differences that photography inscribed on the bodies of those so classified.

In reproducing an object as a negative image, the English calotype also reproduced and consolidated visual information made familiar to literate populations through lithography, wood engravings, fiction, treatises

on the physical and moral condition of the poor, travel literature, and accounts of colonial exploration. The calotype did so overtly and without any pretense to do otherwise. Indeed, judging by the images that Henry Mayhew includes in his epic study of *London Labour and the London Poor* (1849), some of which were drawn from photographs, engravings were probably considered more accurate representations of such subject-matter than photography at the time. Yet within relatively few decades, photography was the only visual medium that could serve as direct evidence of a crime, could memorialize the face of a loved one, preserve buildings slated for demolition, or familiarize English observers with the many different peoples within the empire. Key to its documentary status was photography's ability to take whatever had already been pictured in the most artificial and stereotyped way and provide that subject-matter with material detail. Photography could thus do to the sordid, the exotic, and the private pockets of nineteenth-century life what the human eye could do to the most accessible of public spectacles. It could provide observers with visual information antiseptically free of the smells, noises, and physical contact to which they would ordinarily be exposed in the remote corners of experience.

Stereographs come in pairs of transparent images, each of which reproduces exactly the same object at just about the same time from a slightly different angle. The lens of the stereoscope superimposes the two, much as the brain superimposes the two images of a single object produced when we look at that object with both eyes. Seen through the lens of the stereoscope, two flat images converge to form what would appear to be one three-dimensional object. When he identified the sensations that come from contact with the material world as the building blocks of human understanding, Locke not only distinguished outside from inside, he also used sensations to relocate the outside on the inside, so that the modern individual would carry around a mimetic model of a world both divided into rational categories and hierarchized. In reproducing sensations as images, photography endowed that inner world with a kind of materiality that could be shared across class and language barriers. The differences among kinds of images soon mattered more than the likeness of word or image to thing.

Francis Galton made the logic of the new relationship of images explicit (Galton 1883). On the assumption that inborn tendencies and hereditary traits within the body determined what kind of life an individual would live, he used the camera to subdue those features specific to an individual in favor of the type or category to which that individual belonged. His camera could superimpose no less than twelve exposures

of different individuals from the category, say, of criminals or Jews, in a
multilayered portrait that dissolved individual idiosyncrasies into abstract
criminal and Jewish types. What Galton sought to produce deliberately,
amateur and studio photographers accomplished without giving it all
that much thought. Rather than the infinite variety of objects represented,
they intuitively produced visual types as they reproduced a very limited
variety of shots. As a result, countless images began to pile up around
certain sites, congealing the ideological contradictions of the moment into
implicitly hostile states of being that nevertheless combined to form
an internally coherent world. These images sought out and laminated them-
selves to other media and genres – the painted portrait, the lithographic
and woodcut illustration, the gnarled and rustic subject-matter of the
picturesque tradition – and transformed those images into a vast visual
order that radiated out from the European metropolis.

Figure 5.1 *Portrait of a Young Lady* (1888). Fredric Hollyer. Photograph
courtesy of Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research
Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

This was not so orderly a process as my account so far suggests but one that followed fad and fashion and achieved its result through sheer repetition. In collaboration with other forms of verbal and visual representation – city novels, exhibitions, sociological studies, travel narratives, and newspapers, to name but a few – photography produced a model of the world that may not have been especially true to life but was indeed both finite and completely legible. To make this point, I have selected five images, each of which could be replaced by countless examples of similar subject-matter shot in much the same way, so that the shot itself, rather than the particularities of its subject-matter, predisposed observers to place virtually anyone within one of a limited number of categories based on that individual's physical appearance.

From these examples, we can extrapolate an observer who consumed many different images shot in a finite number of ways. This observer consequently saw him or herself in a world made of other modern individuals (Figure 5.1), criminals (Figure 5.2), folk (Figure 5.3), aborigines

Figure 5.2 Female Criminals. Thomas Byrnes, *Professional Criminals of America* (New York, 1886).

Figure 5.3 *Reverend James Fairbairn and Newhaven Fishwives*
(c. 1845). Robert Adamson and David Octavius Hill. Photograph
© National Portrait Gallery.

and exotics (Figure 5.4), and the nondescript poor whose signs of back-
wardness automatically linked them either to the happy aborigine or the
incarcerated criminal (Figure 5.5). Within a single frame, two of these
images reproduce the generic difference between the individual subject,
reading a book or gazing off into the future, and those populations that
viewers regarded as exotic objects that can't be considered individual sub-
jects. Such an observer still resembled the Enlightenment individual who
formed his ideas about the world on the basis of sensory information. By
the early twentieth century, however, as John Roberts's chapter makes
apparent, photography had turned that model completely inside out.

Rather than a proliferation of photographic types and genres to match
the increasing heterogeneity of visual information, an ever-increasing sup-
ply of new faces and exotic objects fueled a counter-tendency to portray
all such visual information in one of several well-established genres.
As photographic subject-matter increased in scope and variety, the way
of seeing that subject-matter acquired clearer generic distinctions and greater
predictability. The distinction between the portrait of a loved one and

Figure 5.4 *Andaman Islanders, Bay of Bengal, India.* Photographer unknown, c. 1860s. Photograph courtesy Tozzer Library, Harvard University.

that of a criminal became as obvious as that between the individuality of a celebrity and the anonymity of an aborigine. In each case, the one portrait offered a normative image and the other a recognizable distortion of English modernity. The sheer repetition of photographic images reinforced visual stereotypes already circulating in the culture, while the unruly details that necessarily crept in with each new image lent that image a kind of realism that subtly renewed, updated, qualified, and occasionally challenged the category it substantiated. In this completely roundabout way, photography began to offer visual proof that the terms in which Europeans saw the world were grounded in actual differences among the people and things of that world. This empire of images is perhaps best illustrated by the art of "combination printing," a technique developed to combine shots of different subjects, at different times, and in entirely different places into a single, seamless print (Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.5 *The Cheapside Flower Seller. 1d. a Bunch* (1894). Paul Martin. Photograph courtesy of Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Figure 5.6 *Two Ways of Life* (1857). Oscar Gustave Rejlander. Photograph courtesy of the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television/Science and Society Picture Library.

The combination print suppressed the uneven power relations among the various elements supplying the photographer's subject-matter and resituated those elements, each with the same exactness of detail, within the formal arrangement of the image.

There is reason to believe that a distinctive form of pleasure spurred on the production of more and cheaper photographs. The pleasure I have in mind is the pleasure that accompanies a visual experience when it provides observers with a sense that they are not only under observation and subject to classification but also outside and above the spectacle observed. For Timothy Mitchell, this form of pleasure accounts for the enormous popularity of Egyptian exhibits in such cities as Paris, London, and Copenhagen (Mitchell 1992). The visitor to such an exhibit saw only bits and pieces of the city he would see if he were actually to visit Cairo. The exhibit reorganized these bits and pieces so that Cairo existed outside and apart from viewers as a spatial field over which they had surveillance. Much the same pleasure no doubt explains the extraordinary popularity of Sir Henry Morton Stanley's lengthy and detailed account of his journey through darkest Africa (Stanley 1878). Long dependent on native guides to negotiate the unfamiliar terrain of Africa and baffled by much of the visual information he received, Stanley allows this information to pile up as he moves through a landscape over which he seems to lack conceptual control. The celebrated success of his discovery of David Livingstone on the shore of Lake Tanganyika in November of 1871 is omnipresent in the book whose very existence testifies to the fact that Stanley lived to tell the tale of his adventure. Thus the reader knows from the outset that the visual detail that accumulates as Stanley retraces his steps will magically sort and arrange itself as a map that puts that reader in a position where he or she can enjoy an overview revealing how all the pieces fit together. This way of knowing Africa, as Stanley himself implies, is one that can be experienced only in retrospect and through the mediation of a strategic realism. According to Michel de Certeau, this is the difference between tactics and strategy: we use tactical knowledge to negotiate hostile territory, from a position within that territory, where it is impossible to know from one moment to the next what factors are in play; we use a strategy, on the other hand, when we control a territory from a position outside and above it, which allows us not only to understand the principle organizing that space but also to use that principle to our advantage (de Certeau 1984: 34–9). It is reasonable to assume that viewers who could not explore the remote regions of empire got much the same pleasure without any of the peril, when they looked at photographs of local people and situated each variety of man, on the basis of certain visual features, within a differential system of types.

This pleasure was double-edged. The human subjects of ethnographic photography displayed precisely the visual features that Europeans could not display if they wanted to belong to modern European culture. The imaging of empire reached out to include increasing varieties of other people as components of a periphery that placed them imaginatively within empire and yet outside and in potential opposition to the metropolitan centers. Such a composite image could not maintain for long the distance between those who belonged inside and those outside of modern culture. The very concept of periphery itself implies what Étienne Balibar describes as "a fluctuating combination of continued interiorization and 'internal exclusion'" (Balibar 1991: 42–3). V. Y. Mudimbe uses a similar notion of cultural oscillation to define the so-called periphery as neither a purely "premodern" and "underdeveloped" space nor one where the premodern has been successfully appropriated and transformed in European terms (Mudimbe 1988: 4). Thus the practice of turning certain subjects into undesirable objects within this world was destined to generate both anxiety and pleasure, compelling English subjects to repeat the gesture of keeping those aspects of their own imaginary world outside the domestic sanctuary and at bay.

On the Terrain of Images

One can make sense of the debate between modernism and postmodernism in terms of where each stands in relation to the mimetic fallacy. In "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret," Marx arguably described the commodity in photographic terms, when he argued that we imagine but do not actually see a commodity. Mass production obscures the traces of its production – by whom, how, and to what purpose it was made. The commodity effaces the difference between image and object in order to assume a position in a differential system of visual signs, where it is impossible to distinguish original from copy. As a result, the human relations that arise from making and exchanging such products consequently acquire "the fantastical form of a relation among things" (Marx 1990: 165). Picking up where Marx left off, modernism condemns mass culture for confusing images with objects and fabricating a limited representation of the world as a result. Modernism condemns pictorial representation in particular for having substituted a superficial, bourgeois vision of the world for the world itself. According to modernism, it was up to artists to "make the stone feel stony," as Viktor Shklovsky once put it (Shklovsky 1990: 6), or to probe the real Mrs Brown, as Virginia

Woolf proposed, beneath the stereotypical surface of Victorian realism (Woolf 1928). The truth that modernists sought, whether in the material world of objects or in the unconscious recesses of the modern subject, was a truth obscured by visual images. To restore access to the pre-Victorian elements of subject and object, these artists devised technical procedures for getting beyond conventional surfaces.

But while modernism set out to find a world that presumably existed before the onset of mass mediation, the techniques developed for recovering what had been lost with its rise were definitely post-photographic. Convinced that the truth it sought lay buried alive under an accumulation of misrepresentations, platitudes, and stereotypes, modernism represented itself as a salvage operation that could establish contact between mind and language mirroring the Enlightenment relationship between mind and object. Modernism set about to stage aesthetic encounters that would shock the reader/viewer into new sensations. One could argue that, in so doing, modernism tried – like each of the various forms of realism I have discussed – to market itself on the basis of its opposition to a false realism. Postmodernism scoffs at any such claim to mimesis on the grounds that neither subjects nor objects have an essence other than what may be inferred from mediation. This is especially true of those essences we consider outside and prior to mediation. Thrash, kick, and rail against the limits of mass visuality as they might, from a postmodern perspective, modernists were caught in the logic of the mimetic fallacy. On the basis of conviction arguably fostered by photography, they proposed to put us back in contact with an authentic world beyond the surface.

Postmodernism takes its cue from popular culture, the fact that audiences had been thronging to theaters in order to be pleasantly terrified by images that clearly lack a referent in the world. Nor does postmodernism fail to notice that popular photography continued its work unimpeded by the charges that modernism had leveled against it. Photographs continue to furnish our homes and punctuate our lives both as individuals and in aggregate. We can now send or receive such photographs directly by cell phone and post them on a webpage. It is daily becoming more difficult to ignore the fact that satellites orbit the globe in order to transmit images for surveillance as well as entertainment purposes. Thus the same medium that was supposed to arrest the flow of modern life – providing Western bureaucrats and intellectuals with some sense of control – has obviously slipped its harness. Respectable couples make and market their own pornographic movies. Colonial subjects who were once photographed now own cameras. They can record themselves demonstrating in the streets for the international media as easily as they

can take photographs of themselves and their families for strictly personal consumption.

Once you put a camera in someone's hand, that person is transformed as profoundly as the subjects he or she photographs or, more likely, records in a video format. As images, individuals become objects to themselves in place of the other. Witness the videos of young men and women pausing before the camera to memorialize the moment they are about to become suicide bombers. Transferred onto cards, these images take on an uncanny new life as other children collect and trade them. Never mind that the bomber has been blown to bits, his image acquires a capacity to reproduce itself in others, as they aspire to become that type. By the same token, the image of Osama Bin Laden remains curiously alive and active in instigating a holy war against Western imperialism even while the person himself is in hiding. In the hands of such subjects, images can compensate for the lack of material advantages and momentarily create a level playing field. But do these images succeed where modernism failed to get past the platitudes of bourgeois hegemony and make us feel the stoniness of the stone – the thing itself? Obviously not. What is at stake is *not* access to reality itself, whatever that may be, so much as the authority to say whose realism will prevail, whether violence is the work of zealous martyrs or the result of U.S. imperialism. Under these conditions, our awareness that there is no there there – no locomotive behind the image on the screen – should not inspire cynicism.

Rather than yearn for a lost object that never existed beyond word and image, at least not in the pure state that modernism imagines, postmodernism relinquishes the *a priori* being of both subject and object. Postmodernism understands that the theater and objective of power has shifted from the material world to what can only be called the terrain of images; it would have us understand that over the course of three centuries, images have become in some sense more primary than the world they represent. Postmodernism acknowledges that under these conditions, the mimetic fallacy is true mimesis after all. Now, as in Austen's day, the term "realism" still applies to forms of mediation that seemed to offer the observer direct contact with the object viewed. In our day, however, the term has acquired the secondary meaning of a form of mediation that offers only a symbolic and culturally relative version of the real. "Realism" in this contrary sense challenges the idea of realism as a mode of representation – invariably containing visual evidence – that accrues to itself the authority to say what is real. As a result, it can be argued, "realism" is undergoing yet a further permutation whereby the term will refer to mediation that obstructs access to the material world, offering a strategic map instead.

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Chapter 6

The Realist Aesthetic in Painting: "Serious and committed, ironic and brutal, sincere and full of poetry"

Andrew Hemingway

The Nineteenth Century: The Rise of Realism and Naturalism

Roman Jakobson's well-known strictures on the terminological confusions around realism, written in the early 1920s, apply as much to the visual arts as they do to literature. In both colloquial and scholarly usage it may denote "the illusion of an objective and absolute faithfulness to reality" (Jakobson 1978: 39), but it also refers to artworks associated with the various aesthetic credos that took the word as a flag, or had it applied to them as a label, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This confusion can be avoided if one adopts the alternative term "naturalism" to refer to the general idea of pictorial verisimilitude – a usage exemplified, for instance, in E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1960) – with the proviso, of course, that this should not be confused with the variant of the realist aesthetic that it also denotes. Realism and pictorial naturalism (in all its complex varieties) are connected in shifting and mutable ways, but not in the way of simple truthful picturing that unreflective usage suggests.

Jakobson understood that "the illusion of an objective and absolute faithfulness to reality" was precisely an illusion, not a genuine case of resemblance. Rather:

> The methods of projecting three-dimensional space onto a flat surface are established by convention; the use of color, the abstracting, the simplification of the object depicted, and the choice of reproducible features are all based on convention. It is necessary to learn the language of painting in order to "see" a picture, just as it is impossible to understand what is spoken without knowing the language. (Jakobson 1978: 39)

The linguistic analogy is misleading, in as much as it occludes the analogical character of the pictorial sign and the related human capacity for what Richard Wollheim calls "seeing-in" to two-dimensional marks (Wollheim 1987: 46–75); but otherwise Jakobson's point stands.

While Gombrich consistently emphasized the role of convention and did important work in showing how it operated, he was also the most prominent exponent of the view that the particular conventions of the Renaissance system, if not actually natural signs, at least have a privileged relationship with universal processes of human perception, so that "perspective is the necessary tool . . . if you want to map precisely what anyone could see from a given point, or, for that matter, what the camera could record" (Gombrich 1982: 281). Given that the camera (and the camera needs to be kept distinct from the photograph here) is the tool of a particular culture, and that its construction – and that of related optical drawing instruments – was determined by the needs of an established form of picture-making in which mathematical perspective was part of the *doxa*, it cannot stand in for nature as Gombrich implies it does when he slips from eye to camera. Because photographic signs are indexical or motivated, this does not establish a relationship of resemblance. Moreover, if in certain special circumstances naturalistic pictures can be deceptive and produce genuine illusions, this is not the normal experience of viewing them. All the devices that produce the effect of resemblance – that is, the various "parts of painting" such as drawing, chiaroscuro, color, composition, and facture – are highly coded, as any familiarity with artistic processes or traditional academic theory shows. More importantly, what Gombrich did not adequately register was that Renaissance naturalism was profoundly ideologically charged, and was as much a determinant of the way the world is perceived as an effect of it. It was precisely the apparent naturalness of the established naturalistic codes that permitted some of the more interesting and challenging nineteenth-century realist works

to produce their disjunctive and unsettling effects – sometimes leading to the charge that they were "unnatural."

"A new art is appearing, serious and committed, ironic and brutal, sincere and full of poetry," the novelist Champfleury declared in *Grandes figures d'hier et d'aujourd'hui – Balzac, Gérard de Nerval, Wagner, Courbet* in 1861 (Champfleury 1973: 166). The formulation of realism as a critical concept in painting, as in literature, had begun in France in the 1830s, and, in relation to both, it stood for an art grounded in the direct observation of natural and social realities rather than one based on earlier art. Indeed, articulations of the realist aesthetic in the novel and in painting were interlinked, with writers such as Champfleury, Duranty, and Zola functioning as ideologues of what were perceived as kindred tendencies in the visual arts, and realist painters taking up modern themes and motifs to which the novel had given a kind of aesthetic validation through the way it made the aspirations and strivings of commoners a proper subject of serious art, implying a degree of social egalitarianism unthinkable in courtly societies and before the advent of a broad middle-class readership (see the chapters by Levine, Dentith, and Ledger in this volume). Having said that, the theory of nineteenth-century realism was not an elaborate matter and offered no developed theory of the sign. Realism stood for an exact and unedited representation of nature, for truth and contemporaneity. It represented a materialist approach to the world, to some even a pictorial equivalent to positivism. Crucially, it represented a rejection of the ideal, so central to the value system of academic theory, and a corresponding valorization of the mundane and ugly (Weinberg 1937: 97–114). It was this privileging of the commonplace and low that made realism seem democratic at a time when the extension of bourgeois democratic rights was still a revolutionary proposition in France, as elsewhere. However, in that context it was at most tepidly socialistic, and even the novels of social propaganda produced in considerable number under the July Monarchy in France did no more than seek to prompt sympathy for the sufferings of the poor and to disseminate progressive ideas.

If realism stood for an approach to the painting of the contemporary world that treated ordinary experience (rather than the doings of the rich and great) as the proper realm of art, then there were clearly abundant inherited materials from which such an art could be made. The emergence and growing importance of the independent genres of portrait, landscape, still-life, and genre painting itself (small scenes of everyday life), in both northern and southern Europe, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, was one sign of the fact that painting, like the other

arts, increasingly served secular functions. When Champfleury defended Gustave Courbet's first major work, *After Dinner at Ornans* (1848–9) at the Salon of 1849, he described it famously as "a genre painting of natural size"; and he would associate both it and its yet more ambitious successor, *Burial at Ornans* (1849–50) with seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish genre paintings, with life-size figures of beggars and cripples by Velázquez and Murillo, and with group portraits by Van der Helst and Rembrandt (Champfleury 1973: 154, 163). This was both an attempt at validation but also a tacit acknowledgment of the stylistic and formal codes from which Courbet's art was built.

We think of the realist novel as a quintessentially bourgeois form, at least in its origins and most significant accomplishments. In relation to what has been said so far, this raises two questions, namely the relations of the formation of the bourgeois world-view in its longer process of development to (a) perspectival naturalism and (b) the emergence of the lesser genres. Both questions have a problematic heritage in the history of art, in that the answers given to them from scholars thinking within the Marxisms of the Second and Third Internationals were essentially teleological in their assumption that a vulgar philosophical realism is the central principle of all progressive thought and, correspondingly, of all progressive aesthetics. But putting such assumptions aside, the questions remain valid. The non-Marxist Erwin Panofsky had already argued in the 1920s that the invention of mathematical perspective in the fifteenth century corresponded to a radical shift in both epistemology and cosmology, whereby infinity ceased to be an attribute of God alone, and became a quality of a de-theologized space subject to the rule of mathematics. Implicitly, at least, perceived reality was reduced to the phenomenal, and the divine became "a mere subject for human consciousness," so that religious art is once and for all taken out of the realm of the magical (Panofsky 1997: 65–6, 72). That perspectival representation was the product of a culture in which the main patrons came from a commercial class for which measure and mathematics were crucial to their livelihood and view of the world has been persuasively argued (Baxandall 1974: 86–102), but that in its fifteenth-century form it implied a proto-Newtonian conception of infinite space seems improbable given the metaphysical outlook of Renaissance patrons. It appears more likely that the invention of so-called "scientific" perspective was one of a mix of ideological ingredients that in the long term contributed to the mechanistic model of the universe that emerged in the Scientific Revolution, a model that in its Newtonian form was also not a product of secular thought but which contributed to a kind of secular hollowing out of religious belief from within.

Given that the Dutch Republic was the leading capitalist society of the seventeenth century, it is not surprising that it should also constitute what came to seem the preeminent forcing ground for a realist style. Not only was it a predominantly Protestant nation without a courtly aristocracy, but the production of paintings was governed primarily by a market constituted from bourgeois and better-off artisans, who wanted paintings as domestic furnishings. This led to the large-scale production of easel pictures, often modest in scale, and to increasing specialization in the genres of still-life, landscape, everyday scenes, and portrait. However, this was not, of course, a secular culture, and while the stylistic naturalism of Dutch painting is non-heroic and eschewed the ideal, it none the less represents a pre-Enlightenment conception of the natural world as basely material and fallen from grace. Seventeenth-century Dutch art embodies the contradiction between a culture characterized by increasing opulence and the display of goods, and the need to contain such display within the normative framework of Christian beliefs perceived as indispensable to social order – hence its moralizing ethos. Moreover, it was a society dominated by an increasingly conservative commercial oligarchy that still relied on relatively medieval forms of governance, not a bourgeois democracy. In the following century, the position of Hogarth – whose most interesting work was grounded primarily on Dutch models – was not dissimilar in many respects, but eighteenth-century Britain had something far more approaching a combative bourgeois culture than the Dutch Republic, even if social divisions were not yet clearly drawn in class terms. Hogarth's "modern moral subjects" are unthinkable without the literary example of the contemporary novel, and he conceived his art to function in relation to the institutions of the nascent bourgeois public sphere. It is deeply misleading to position Hogarth within a genealogy of progressive bourgeois realists that extends through Goya, Géricault, and Daumier, and ultimately points towards a socialist art, as Frederick Antal did in his otherwise great study of the artist (Antal 1962). The fact that for Hogarth the representation of the low was inextricably linked with the comic and with an overt moralizing marks his distance from the aesthetic of realism proper. None the less, the way in which the cultural strategies through which bourgeois hegemony was accomplished encouraged artists to project a modern art critical of contemporary life and manners should be acknowledged.

The origins of realism as a democratic aesthetic go back to salon criticism of the 1830s, and by the time Courbet and Jean-François Millet made the aesthetic controversial during the Second Republic there were a number of artists producing work that could fall into the category. The staple subject-matter of painters such as François Bonvin and Philippe

Auguste Jeanron was small-scale genre scenes of rural, domestic, and artisanal labor, and before he took up Courbet, Champfleury had already hailed Bonvin as one of the "school of young painters" who opposed the principles of a retrograde Romanticism (Champfleury 1973: 119). But other artists besides Courbet understood that the academic hierarchy of genres could now be side-stepped and so began to exhibit genre subjects on the scale of history paintings, examples being Jean-Pierre Alexandre Antigna's *The Fire* (1850) or Isidore Pils's *The Death of a Sister of Charity* (1850) (Weisberg 1980: 125–7, 265–6; 108–10, 305–6). Both works were bought by the state from the 1850–1 Salon, and the artists became prominent among the group of "official realists" who enjoyed the patronage of the Second Empire administration. That this would-be progressive regime, headed by a man who, as Marx put it, looked on himself "as the patriarchal benefactor of all classes," should patronize a naturalistic painting of modern life that effectively endorsed the ideological clichés of the "bourgeois order" he was committed to defending is profoundly consonant (Marx 1968: 177); and in the 1850s the state sponsored a kind of consensual realism to counter the radical connotations of Courbet's and Millet's more troubling works (Boime 1982).

By contrast, Courbet broke with the essentially timid political perspective of literary realism and of most contemporary pictorial realism in his large-scale representations of ordinary people drawn from the ranks of the rural bourgeoisie and peasantry, painted in the unflattering manner of provincial portraiture. If genre painting had conventionally mocked the vulgar manners and low morals of commoners to confirm feelings of superiority in those higher up the social hierarchy, Courbet's great pictures of the late 1840s and 1850s seemed more like boorish plebeian statements at the expense of the traditional artistic values the bourgeoisie generally espoused – part of those "self-deceptions that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles," to quote Marx again (Marx 1968: 97). Although Courbet's politics at the time of the 1848 revolution and in the period of the Second Republic were bohemian and radical republican more than they were socialist (Clark 1973: 47–9), the label of socialism clung to him from the salon of 1850–1 onwards, and it was one that from that point he accepted. Champfleury insisted on the bourgeois subject-matter of his art partly to ward off the charge, insisting that "painting, no more than music, had the exposure of social systems as its mission" (Champfleury 1973: 166, 162). In his so-called "Realist Manifesto" of 1855 Courbet distanced himself from "the trivial goal of *art for art's sake*," and at the same time characterized his work in essentially romantic terms as an expression of

"the reasoned and independent consciousness of my own individuality" (quoted in Rubin 1980: 80). But while his art was not conventionally didactic or illustrative of a social doctrine, Courbet did see the manifestations of his own individual perceptions of the contemporary world in Proudhonian terms as being instructive of a philosophical materialism with political correlates (Rubin 1980; Proudhon 1865: 224–5).

Courbet's individualism is manifested most blatantly in his grandiose self-commemorations *The Meeting (Bonjour Monsieur Courbet)* (1854) and *The Studio of the Painter: A Real Allegory Determining Seven Years of My Artistic Life* (1855). But in fact most of Courbet's major works of the period 1848–55 had been in some degree portraits – *After Dinner at Ornans*, *Burial at Ornans*, and *The Village Maidens* (1851) all including depictions of the artist's family, friends, and acquaintances. It was partly in their physiognomic particularities that their refusal of the ideal and their testimony to contemporary realities lay. But the individual also stood as a type – as Champfleury pithily observed of the *Burial at Ornans*, it was "the representation of a burial in a small town," and at the same time represented "*the* burials of *all* small towns" (Champfleury 1973: 176). The presentation of the individual as a type within an essentially portrait idiom was to be even more central to the work of the great American realist Thomas Eakins, twenty-five years Courbet's junior, who based his art on similar sources, and made a comparable rejection of the ideal in favor of a positivistic conception of painting as a vehicle for the telling of social truths.

Figure 6.1 *Burial at Ornans* (1849–50). Gustave Courbet.
Réunion des Musée Nationaux. Photo RMN/©Hervé Lewandowski.

Style is a question both of the "what" and the "how" of representation. Courbet and Millet were representatives of a much wider trend among French artists and writers in their focus on subjects from rural life. This trend was essentially a reflex of anxieties among the urban bourgeoisie, a class that provided an avid market for a mythical imagery of an unchanging rural order in which work appeared as undertaken either willingly or fatalistically and social relations were hierarchical and harmonious – an imagery that offset the fears prompted by a sullen and potentially insurgent urban proletariat (viewed as inescapably dirty, diseased, and degenerate) and reassured its audience that away from the cities the national racial stock was actually healthy and robust. Most rustic paintings and novels catered nicely to this myth, but some of Millet's works, *The Gleaners* (1857) and *Man with a Hoe* (1860–2) among them, seemed directly to challenge it through their emphasis on the remorseless back-breaking character of rural work, and their depiction of the peasant as a primitive type – not ennobled by labor but prematurely aged and brutalized by it. Far more intractable were Courbet's life-size figures in such works as the *Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair* (1849–50). The top-hatted bourgeois in this picture made palpable the class divisions within rural society, divisions further brought home by contrast through the ragged faceless proletarians of *The Stonebreakers* (1849; destroyed), which was exhibited alongside it in 1850–1.

The contrasting reception of works by Courbet and the Second Empire's official realists confirms Jakobson's point that the ambiguity around the meaning of realism arises because it denotes both "*the tendency to deform given artistic norms conceived as an approximation of reality*" and "*the conservative tendency to remain within the limits of a given artistic tradition, conceived as faithfulness to reality*" (Jakobson 1978: 41). In relation to the first of these, Courbet's realism reveals another general truth, namely that it is not when the sign appears to provide transparent denotation that it functions as realist in the most interesting sense, but when it maintains a measure of awkward opacity. Courbet's demonstrative palette-knife application of paint and vigorous brushwork produces an insistent sense of the material quiddity of things, which at the same time affirms the social reality of what he depicts. Moreover, in some of his major works he utilized flattened structures that – as some contemporaries noted – evoked the naïve and primitive forms of the popular woodcut prints that circulated among the French peasantry. Thus in the *Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair* the cattle and figures on horseback appear about to slide out of the picture into our space, and the man in town-dweller's garb with his pig seems on a collision course with them in a *tour-de-force* of gaucherie.

The achievement of Courbet's great works depended – in both their production and their reception – on the particular circumstances of the 1848 revolution and the counter-revolution that followed. Without any recourse to political iconography or symbolism, they dramatized the relationship between art and the popular in a way that was, in the context, revolutionary. Later naturalistic paintings of rural life such as Jean François Raffaelli's *The Family of Jean-le-Boîteux, Peasants from Plougasnou, Finistère* (1876), or Léon Lhermitte's *Harvesters' Wages* (1882), for all their seriousness and intensity, were not radical (Weisberg 1980: 201–2, 307–8, 301–2). This was partly a matter of occasion and intention, but it was also because, unlike Courbet's best work, they offered the viewer an instant and immediate recognition. To shake consciousness into a new perception of things, as Jakobson put it, "the ideogram needs to be deformed. The artist-innovator must impose a new form upon our perception, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before" (Jakobson 1978: 40). This sounds more like a modernist criterion than a realist one, and in fact what it points to is that realism was not only the forcing ground for the modernist outlook, but that its continuing viability would depend partly on the infusion of modernist devices. In other words, the realist effect is contingent; and what was once realist in Jakobson's first sense is eventually likely to become realist in his second sense; and what works as realist in one social situation may not work in that way in a different one, even when contemporaneous.

Courbet had positioned the signs of modernization in the rural, but for most of his contemporaries they were more obvious and palpable in the industrial and urban – and, with regard to the latter, especially in the drastically reordered Paris of the Second Empire. The leading painter of industrial subjects in mid-nineteenth-century France, François Bonhommé, precisely illustrates the thesis of official realism outlined above, in that his highly accomplished drawings and oil paintings of the mining and industrial plant at Le Creusot and his murals for the Écoles des Mines (now lost) were commissioned by the entrepreneur Eugène Schneider and the Second Empire regime respectively. In both cases the works function as paeans to industrial progress, in which workers, including children, are simply the busy drones of the capitalist hive (Weisberg 1980: 71–80; 270–1). Significantly, the greatest painting of industrial labor of the period, Adolph Menzel's *The Iron Rolling Mill* (1872–5), was not the fruit of any such propagandistic commission – although it was bought straightaway by a banker and quickly entered the Prussian state collection (Keisch and Rieman-Reyher, 1996: 379–85).
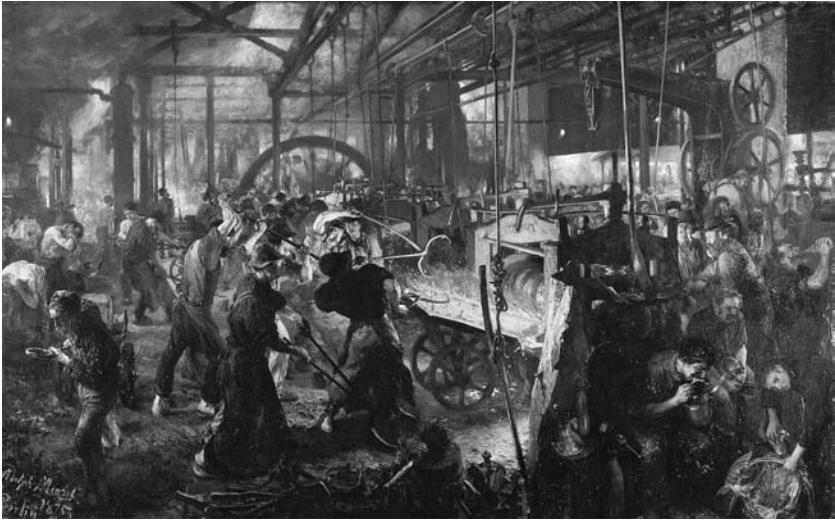
Figure 6.2 *The Iron Rolling Mill* (1872–5). Adolph Menzel 158 × 254 cm.
Courtesy of bpk/Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
Photograph: Klaus Goken.

In contrast to Bonhommé's distanced figures placed within orderly perspective recessions, in Menzel's painting the effluvia of industry, the frenzied actions of the workers, and the burning mass of iron threaten to overpower the layout of receding orthogonals, suggesting powers beyond those that industrial rationality can contain. Moreover, the transformation of nature through labor is tellingly counter-posed with the reproduction of life in processes of washing (left) and eating (right), in a way that graphically suggests what is embodied and used up in industry's products. The scene is framed by two figures – the man pulling the ingot to the left and the woman bending to the right – both of whom seem about to enter our space, and who confront us with an unflinching eye and rudely announce their class difference. It is hard not to see the knife clutched in the fist of the man seated next to the woman as intimating a potential threat. The pincers that form the lighted motif at the center of the composition are graphic symbols of the struggle to control natural forces, but their parting claws also suggest the breaking of chains.

The pictorial equivalent to literary naturalism might seem to be Impressionism, and certainly some kind of equivalence was seen at the time, not least by that movement's foremost ideologue, Zola (Zola 1974).

But the analogy is in important ways inexact, in that the naturalist novelists assumed a position of dispassionate scientific observation towards social realities – however belied this may have been by their sometimes lurid visions of working-class life. Impressionism, by contrast, had no encyclopedic ambitions in terms of its social scope and often seemed as much concerned with denoting the subjective phenomena of individual visual perception – through novel viewpoints and the use of small brushstrokes that gave effects of light priority over those of form – as with objects themselves. Works that match far better Zola's concern with the description of a gamut of class and occupational types were those produced by the official realists of the Third Republic, such as Victor Gabriel Gilbert's large paintings of Les Halles, or Henri Gervex's murals for the Salle de Mariage of the town hall in Paris's Nineteenth Arondissement – although the writer regarded Gervex as a capable opportunist whose technique betrayed his training with the academic painter Cabanel (Weisberg 1980: 217–21, 292–3, 294). It was inevitable that the art of Courbet's perceived successor as head of the realist school, Edouard Manet, was grounded in the experience of Paris, but, like Impressionism more generally, its iconography centered primarily on new types of urban and suburban leisure activity, as, for instance, in the prosaic scene of lower middle-class gallantry depicted on a monumental scale in *Argenteuil, les canotiers* (1874) (Clark 1984: 164–73). With his *Bathers* (1853) and *Demoiselles des bordes de la Seine* (1857), Courbet had shown that the realist effect could be generated through images that implied uncomfortable truths about the gender relations of bourgeois society as much as about those of class, although in fact what was at issue was always both. Manet followed this pattern in his most challenging works, such as *Olympia* (1863) and *Un bar aux folies-bergère* (1882), in both of which the spectator is placed in a position where they must meet the blasé look of a working-class woman, who, in the case of the first appears as a naked prostitute, and in the second as a morally ambiguous waitress in a *café concert*. Courbet's technique powerfully signifies the materiality of things through chiaroscuro and a workmanlike impasto, but Manet's does not. His suppression of conventional half-tones reduces modeling to a summary denotation of shadow, which prompted contemporary critics to say of *Olympia* that it resembled "une gravure d'Épinal," the kind of popular woodcut that had also been associated with Courbet's style (Zola 1974: 88). In later works such as *Argenteuil, les canotiers*, his increasingly bright palette and assertive brushwork, partly derived from the techniques of outdoor painting, gave the picture surface an emphatic presence as an object of sensual pleasure in its own right.

Impressionism, which effectively encompasses a range of stylistic, formal, and iconographic options, had no single relationship with realism. That relationship seems most straightforward in works by Gustave Caillebotte, such as the impressively uningratiating *Le pont de l'Europe* (1876), but in most Impressionist landscape paintings, despite the unconventional and mundane subjects, that grating confrontation with the ugly that was central to the realist aesthetic is palliated by the seductive brushwork and rococo palette. This is a measure of the aestheticism that was interlocked with realism for many of its foremost pictorial and literary exponents, and was linked with a stance of aristocratic dandyism in some cases. The point is illustrated precisely in the work of Edgar Degas, a friend of the Goncourt brothers, who regarded Zola's encyclopedic conception of realism as "puerile." Degas's art is one of exquisite formal refinement, increasingly executed in fragile media and calculated for small exhibitions and private rooms, rather than the public spaces of the salons, as Manet's major works still were. It is full of acute observations of the specific social types that tended to interest the Parisian *flâneur*, such as those that peopled the ballet, theater, *café concert*, and brothel. But Degas's social distance from his subjects, who are predominantly female, is manifested in the caricatural physiognomies, ungainly postures, and emphasis on figures yawning and scratching or otherwise behaving in ways that to the bourgeois viewer were inescapably marks of vulgarity. Once again, as in earlier modes of genre painting – and it is significant that Degas had copied the engravings after Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (1735) – the comic denotes social distance, and an attitude of disdain that is simultaneously *haut-bourgeois* and misogynistic. Like Flaubert, whose novels he read repeatedly, Degas took the challenge of modern art to be the rendering beautiful of phenomena he regarded as intrinsically ugly.

On the surface at least, Impressionism remodeled genre painting as a painting of modern life, in the process stripping it of overt narrative and moral content. As such, it provided an exemplar for a range of urban realisms whose typical form was an illustrational imagery of the experiences of the modern city, and which may be exemplified by the work of Walter Sickert in Britain, and by that of the Ashcan School and its latter-day followers, such as Edward Hopper and the Soyer brothers, in the United States. In both these instances, realism was also signified by a rejection of the chromatic palette of Impressionism, and a renewal of chiaroscuro as a way of denoting the intractable materiality of things. Although such art could be more or less sympathetic to working-class life and politics, no less than Degas's it tended to be an essentially voyeuristic mode of representation.

The Twentieth Century: The Realist Aesthetic under Duress

The process by which realism was transformed from a bourgeois aesthetic into one associated particularly with the working-class movement is a complex one. In the late nineteenth century the type of painting that seemed to have strongest links with socialism and anarchism, at least in Belgium, France, and Italy, was Neo-Impressionism. This was partly because Neo-Impressionist and cognate Divisionist techniques were understood as an application of scientific method to the problems of depiction and expression, and this complemented the positivistic conception of progress attractive to many in the socialist and anarchist movements. That this conception of progress had a quasi-mystical dimension – in that it posited a model of social perfection that was seen also as the goal of natural evolution – helps to explain why some Neo-Impressionist artists, such as the highly talented Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, slipped between images of modern life and labor and portentous symbolist motifs, with no sense of incongruity. In any case, in this period before endemic divisions in the working-class movement were hardened by the First World War and Bolshevik Revolution, socialist doctrine was far more pluralistic than it was to be after the triumph of Stalinism, and artistic radicalism was correspondingly more diffuse.

The appropriation of realism by the Bolshevik left in the twentieth century came to entail a fundamental recasting of the doctrine, namely a stripping away from it of the principle of art for art's sake and the romantic conception of artistic individualism, which had been necessary correlates for many of its nineteenth-century exponents, and its transformation into a crudely instrumentalist creed for the most part. From within the pattern of thinking that eventually issued in Socialist Realism, such attitudes could be understood only as a limitation of "bourgeois" individualism that should be superseded through identification with the collective force of the proletariat as the standard bearer of human progress (see chapter 8 of this volume). This position was already clearly articulated in one of the foundational texts of this kind of Marxist aesthetics, Georgii Plekhanov's *Art and Social Life* (1912), and led to the dangerous conclusion that "the powers of any true artist today are greatly enhanced if he identifies with the great emancipatory ideas of our time." Plekhanov reduced art's value to a question of its "content," and had no sense of either the relationship between form and cognitive effect or of that between aestheticism and art's promise as a sign of non-alienated labor (Plekhanov 1953: 224, 178, 181).

Realism, as we have seen, was most interesting when it worked "to surprise" men and women "in the dishabille of their consciousness," as Proudhon unforgettably put it (Proudhon 1865: 203). But this function became that much more difficult from the late nineteenth century onward as a result of the increasing technical possibilities of still and motion photography, which could be seen as forms of prosthesis that transformed the human sensorium and made traditional techniques of painted representation appear little short of obsolescent. This conclusion seemed to be confirmed by the invention of modernist devices that offered dramatically new ways of making strange the pictorial image. Almost all forms of naturalism now functioned in Jakobson's terms as "*the conservative tendency to remain within the limits of a given artistic tradition, conceived as faithfulness to reality*," and some modernist artists, such as Fernand Léger and Stuart Davis, would claim that the modernist approach to the picture surface as a relatively autonomous arrangement of colors and forms was in fact a truer realism than perspectival illusionism: a realism of the object, as opposed to realism of the subject, as Léger put it. However, to detach art so completely from its function of "picturing and imaging knowledge," as Trotsky called it, is to transform the meaning of realism in such a way that the term loses its value (Trotsky 1960: 137).

In these circumstances, realism could only be revivified through a dramatic redrawing of some of the conventions of naturalism that once again associated art with the ugly and comic. The most sustained experiment of this type occurred in Weimar Germany under the label of what was broadly called *Neue Sachlichkeit* (Hermand 1977), a term that extended to developments in literature, music, photography, architecture, and design. Considering the size and militancy of the German working-class movement and the sophistication of Marxist thought in Central Europe, it was overdetermined that the relationship between the left and realism would be thrashed out there with more intensity than anywhere else, although no theorist of pictorial realism emerged equivalent to Lukács for literature (Hoffmeister and Suckow 1978: 80–96). The scale and ferocity of German fascism also increased the stakes. However, *Neue Sachlichkeit* was not a tendency of the left as such. Indeed, although the Nazis loathed the movement, one of its major representatives, Franz Radziwill, became an NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers Party) member, and several others, such as Rudolf Schlichter, moved between left- and right-wing politics.

The role of Expressionist artists in the revolutionary events in Germany of 1918–19 revealed the utterly unrealistic notions of revolution associated with the movement, and brought home their distance from the

working class and their dependence on the art market. *Neue Sachlichkeit* was in part a registering of these lessons. In painting, it marked a return to more conventional naturalistic techniques after the experimentalism of Expressionism and Cubism. However, this was not simply a conservative regression, and despite the rhetoric of some of the artists concerned the relationship between this style and modernism was often quite complex. Rarely was there a reprise of the secure verities of the standard perspective box, and in none of its varieties did the style represent a replay of the models of nineteenth-century naturalism represented by artists such as Menzel, Leibl, and Liebermann. Not only did such models seem outmoded, they corresponded with a more uncritical model of human nature and prospects than that current among the *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists, many of whom had been traumatized by witnessing the mechanized slaughter of trench warfare. While the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* implied a kind of blasé accommodation with social realities after the stabilization of the German economy in the mid-1920s, with the concomitant expansion of mass production industries, the spread of a Fordist model of economic organization, and the growth of advertising, it was applied to a wide spectrum of loosely naturalistic art that suggested attitudes ranging from a tough-minded Communist vision of degraded urban realities to complex feelings of *ressentiment* toward the bourgeois social order and a revulsion from its perceived depravities that often took misogynistic forms.

These attitudes inevitably had different stylistic concomitants. The former is well represented in Schlichter's stunning *Portrait of Margot* (1924), in which the solidly modeled figure of a prostitute is placed against a city space made up of juxtaposed fragments of walls and facades, reminiscent of the devices of the Italian *Scuola Metafisica*, all painted in dull umbrageous tones. This setting, together with the lack of atmospheric relationship between figure and environment, produces an effect of the uncanny and of a harsh alienated world. Coolness of style matched with a view of humanity that did not accord well with the Communist movement's idealization of the proletariat. Even such a militant-looking work as Gilles's *Ruhr Battle* (1930), which depicts Ruhr workers defending themselves in 1920 after the Social-Democratic government sent in the Reichswehr and Freikorps to suppress the 50–80,000 strong "Red Army" (actually made up of workers with varied political affiliations) that had helped block the Kapp–Lüttwitz Putsch, suggests desperation as much as heroism. It seems to foretell the proletariat's imminent defeat in the open mouth and staring eyes of the nearmost figure, a reading reinforced by the shallow claustrophobic composition which gives the spectator a feeling

of being hemmed in – literally forced into a corner – behind the flimsy barricade.

Otto Dix, who had shown himself an adept in Expressionist and Futurist devices between 1912 and 1919, claimed in 1927 that extending the subject-matter of painting to new areas led to a "heightening of forms of expression whose essence is already present in the Old Masters" (Herzogenrath and Schmidt 1991: 219). Although this is true, it was Expressionist primitivism that partly underpinned this turning back to late Gothic artists such as Cranach, Dürer, Grünewald, and Baldung Grien, who were seen to represent a specifically Germanic style of intense naturalism. Expressionism also underlies the combination of gauche drawing, distorted anatomy, and anti-naturalistic color in works such as his *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* (1926); and Cubism lies behind the truncated forms and upturned planes of his triptych *Metropolis* (1927–8).

In effect, these modernist devices work within the more traditional aspects of the style to render them unfamiliar and grotesque, an effect reinforced by the unappealing surfaces of the paintings. As its title suggests, *Sylvia von Harden* is a variation on the realist trope of the typical portrait. But unlike earlier realist and naturalist portraits, this and related works by Dix seem more caricatural and questioning images of the type as such than images of individuals who embody it. Similarly, *Metropolis* is an urban satire that falls in a line of descent from Hogarth, but mixes the modern moral subject with stylistic forms that were associated with late medieval

Figure 6.3   *Metropolis* (1927–8). Otto Dix. Staatsgalerie Stuttgart/Bridgeman Art Library. © DACS 2007.

images of a sinful humanity. Dix and George Grosz (who initially came together in the context of Berlin Dada) were effectively moralists who heightened the traditional methods of caricature with Expressionist and Futurist devices.

However, there is a grating ugliness about this art that lifts the comic out of the realm of the laughable. Although Dix's personal outlook was more anarchist than socialist, grounded more in Nietzsche and Stirner than Marx, he was an artist of working-class origins with a long war service, who associated consistently with the intellectual left and in 1924 was a member of the so-called Rote Gruppe of artists connected with the KPD (Herzogenrath and Schmidt 1991: 95–9, 273). The hideously mutilated figures of veterans, mixed among the prostitutes in the side panels of *Metropolis*, give an inescapable class dimension to the display of bourgeois decadence at its center. Moreover, as the Nazis well understood when they condemned his art as "degenerate," the overwhelming horror of works such as *The Trench* (1923; lost, presumed destroyed) and the polyptych *War* (1932) could only be understood in the circumstances as an attempt by Dix to shock his audience into an awareness of the consequences of modern warfare for ordinary soldiers. Dix's 1936 painting *Flanders (After Henri Barbusse "Le Feu")* takes its motif from a French communist writer and links up to a passage in his most famous book that invokes the principle of international fraternity amongst the masses.

The shadow of technological obsolescence lay over this art and partly explains its strident effects. In *Die Kunst ist in Gefahr*, a short book of 1925 compiled with the assistance of Wieland Herzfelde, Grosz observed:

> The twilight of art began with the invention of photography. Art forfeited its right to report the world. The romantic longings of the masses are satisfied at the movies, where they can get their fill of love, ambition, the exotic unknown and nature. (Grosz, Heartfield, Herzfelde 1987: 39)

How "laborious and antiquated" painting seemed by comparison. Grosz presented artists with a Manicheaen choice. Either they would have to join "the ranks of architects, engineers and ad men whom the industrial powers employ and the world exploits," or they should become "a depicter and critic who critiques the face of our time, becoming a propagandist and defender of revolutionary ideas" (Grosz, Heartfield, and Herzfelde 1987: 40, 59–60). Either way, the choice was a form of *Tendenzkunst* (politically oriented art). The series of books of reproductions of his drawings that Grosz published in the 1920s with the Malik Verlag, such as *Das Gesicht der herrschenden Klasse* (1921), *Abrechnung*

folgt! (1923), and *Ecce Homo* (1923), can be understood at one level as a radical updating of Hogarth's instrumental conception of graphic imagery to meet these new conditions. Also Hogarthian are the "modern historical pictures" in a Futurist-Expressionist idiom that Grosz had initiated with *Dedicated to Oskar Panizza* (1917–18) and took up again with works such as *Pillars of Society* (1926) and *Eclipse of the Sun* (1926), which he conceptualized in the mid-1920s as a kind of "synthetic realism." What is at work here is a conception of realism more as a question of an effect than as an intrinsic characteristic of the way realities are pictured, an attitude which brings Grosz close to Brecht, with whom he would later collaborate in the Piscator Theatre. However, despite Grosz's initial lionization as a communist artist, the mordant character of his satires in the end placed him at odds with an increasingly bureaucratized Stalinist cultural apparatus, which wanted more heroic-looking and optimistic images of the militant proletariat and a more directly accessible realism than Grosz's aesthetic could encompass. His Verist portraits such as *Max Hermann-Neisse* (1925) seemed exclusively centered on bourgeois types, while the "synthetic realism" of his modern history pictures were over-intellectual and lacking in proletarian optimism (McCloskey 1997: 104–47). In effect, as the codification of Socialist Realism in the following decade would demonstrate, for the most part the international communist movement did not want a critical realism, in Jakobson's sense, any more than the French Second Empire regime had. It wanted a conservative naturalism premised on a naïve realist epistemology, as Brandon Taylor explains in his chapter. This does not mean, however, that Communist artists, and especially those outside the USSR, always acceded to this requirement.

The disjunctive juxtapositions and ambiguous shallow spaces of Grosz's "modern historical pictures" corresponded in some degree with the effects of the photomontage form as developed by his fellow Berlin Dadaists (on realism and photomontage see Roberts's chapter in this volume). But they remained hand-crafted easel paintings conceived for the bourgeois art market. A far more radical strategy for gearing art to a mass audience and at the same time deploying the devices of photography was developed by the Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros, also a maverick communist. To Siqueiros it was clear that both still photography and the cinematic apparatus had transformed sensory experience in ways artists had to acknowledge in their practices if they wanted to speak to the masses. Through the camera, Siqueiros reconceived the mural painting as activating a "polydimensional scenic space" in ways adapted to a "dynamic spectator," so turning it into a mass spectacle – or at least that was the

hope. The culmination of these experiments, which were informed by his friendship with Sergei Eisenstein and his collaboration with the Spanish photomontage artist Josep Renau, was his *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* – a collective work realized in 1939–40 in the stairwell of the Mexican Electrician's Union Building in Mexico City.

The image, which is painted in nitrocellulose on four walls and runs through two floors, is partly constructed of images lifted from documentary photographs in newspapers and magazines, but it also deploys cinematic devices in multiple perspectives, different angles of vision, and striking juxtapositions of scale. The extraordinary conjunction of caricatural and photographic motifs was intended to function as a *Portrait of Fascism*, and in this regard it is akin to Grosz's "modern historical pictures" such as *Pillars of Society* – although the mural was later altered at the insistence of the union leadership and the message tempered, hence the change in title (Hurlburt 1989: 232–45; Ramírez 1997).

In a statement of 1939 written while *Portrait of Fascism* was in execution, Siqueiro observed:

> We spoke of a realism coming to affirm that all new true realism should be documentary and dynamic. For this route I consider that photography in and by itself constitutes our most important ally . . . We considered that all the tradition of art belonged to us, but of this the most immediately useful was that which would become a part of the political functional character of our effort; this is: the commercial poster, photography, documentary photography, cinematography, photomontage, etc. Helped by these elements we would sacrifice, even throttle, all traditional esthetic impulses. (quoted in Hurlburt 1989: 238)

Siqueiros's hopes for a thoroughly modernized realism were not to be realized, and certainly could not be within the framework of the international communist movement, which would become even more hostile to artistic experiment in the postwar period. His insight that photography and cinema had fundamentally changed the individual's apprehension of the world was, like Walter Benjamin's in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility" (1935–6), essentially optimistic, premised on the assumption of a critical working-class consciousness and a mass political movement of the left. However, when the cold war supremacy of abstract art in the West was challenged in the 1960s, and figuration reentered experimental painting in the form of Pop Art, the artists concerned could make no such assumption. Their art integrated photographic imagery not as a way of revitalizing traditional skills – for

the most part they accepted the modernist shibboleth of pictorial flatness
– but more as the subject of the painting. In effect, the second nature
of media imagery, advertising, and consumer wares replaced the world
of human action as the object of depiction, at best referring to that
world at one remove. Such art seemed entirely lacking in the element of
critical judgment that much *Neue Sachlichkeit* art so evidently posited,
and to some on the left it appeared no more than a celebration of the
fetishized surface of late capitalist society, which in some of its aspects
Pop Art undoubtedly was (Kuspit 1976). However, the work of some
of the better artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol (in the
early part of his career), and James Rosenquist, used collage devices to
cut into those reified surfaces and arguably produce a kind of critical real-
ist effect. Nonetheless, the seemingly blasé style of Pop's appropriations
of mass imagery makes it seem an art premised on far more circum-
scribed notions of enlightenment than those that underpinned most
earlier realisms.

This is partly to say that the realist aesthetic has generally presupposed
a notion of progress. The difficulty of sustaining such an artistic project
in the late twentieth century is illustrated by the work of Leon Golub,
arguably the greatest realist painter of that period. While Golub's work
is grounded in the currency of photographic imagery, unlike that of the
Pop artists, its knowing and complex references to artistic traditions and
its distinctive performative paint surfaces proclaim a far more humanistic
model of artistic agency. By comparison with the embattled proletarian
figures of Gilles or Siqueiros, or even the downtrodden workers of Grosz,
Golub's images of class, spread across huge mural-scale canvases, are bleak
indeed. Golub pictures class in some of its most degraded contemporary
aspects: his images of the working-class instruments of imperialism and
racial oppression illustrate how the deprivations of class are internalized
by working-class men and then acted out in machismo and the com-
pensatory sadism of misogyny and racial abuse. As John Roberts has
put it, his work is pervaded by "an intractable sense of human failure"
(Roberts 1992: 244). The affinities between Golub's work and the tradi-
tion of history painting, together with its classical simplicity and formal
allusions to ancient wall paintings, seem to intimate that what is being
depicted is simply immutable and recurrent impulses to barbarism in the
human species. But the contemporaneity of dress and weaponry works
against this, as do the insistent references to the culture and imperialist
politics of the United States. Golub's works show how difficult the goal
of pictorial enlightenment known as realism has become. But it also shows
it remains a possibility.

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Chapter 7

Interrupted Dialogues of Realism and Modernism: "The fact of new forms of life, already born and active"

Esther Leslie

The various modernist innovations in style and form were intimately connected to contemporaneous political, social, and technological developments, which were seen to bring about a crisis in the very notion of reality. This chapter assesses the fate of realism in the experimental works across the arts during the years of modernist experimentation of the twentieth century, insisting that they radically re-conceive the realist project rather than aborting it altogether. In various important contexts, Modernism and Realism are in dialogue, even if, later, certain forces, notably those ranged against experimental art in the name of audience-friendly, politically expedient realism, interrupt, deny or suppress that exchange.

Revolutionary Realisms

Georg Lukács delivered a lecture in 1955 titled "Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?" (Lukács 1963). Having most decidedly plumped for Mann, the panoramic and clear-headed bourgeois realist, over Kafka, the chronicler of alienation, confusion, and modern bureaucracy-inspired horror, Lukács set up a seemingly unbridgeable distinction between the formal

tendencies that the two writers represented: modernism and realism. For Lukács, realism is the sole literary mode capable of representing the true image of society, because it strives to represent it in its totality and demonstrates the importance of conscious human rationality in determining history. Modernism, by contrast, does not clarify relationships and motive forces. Rather, through its fragmentation of form, its irrationalism, pessimism, or subjectivism, it contributes to the process of mystification of social actuality and reification of the social world. But Lukács's sense of the gulf between modernism and realism was certainly not shared by all. From various perspectives, though largely stemming from the political Left, and in relation to differing art forms, arguments were made for realist modernism, modernist realism, or modernism as realism.

Lukács's assertion of the non-realism of modernism was a restatement of a position he had defended in the late 1930s, when a series of debates among intellectuals connected to the revolutionary Left took up the question of realism. Ernst Bloch, for example, in supposing that "authentic reality is also discontinuity," defended the expressive capacity of the modernist tendency Expressionism (Bloch 1980: 22). Far from being irreal and irrational, Expressionism mirrored modern experience within capitalism. Modern experience is fragmentary. We experience the world in bits and pieces because we are alienated, because the world and our selves are split in multiple ways. Capitalist social relations prevent us being complete individuals. Modernist art, in re-mediating that fragmentariness, produces a historically authentic mirror of experience. To that extent, it is an art of the real.

Lukács was unconvinced. He was sure that, at a deeper level, capitalism does indeed form a unified whole, despite appearances, for, as Marx claims, "the relations of production of every society form a whole" (Lukács 1980: 31). The proper function of art is to present objective reality without any subjective, conceptual statements. Lukács rejected "external" reportage and "internal" psychologism, preferring instead an objective subjectivity of "typical characters," with fully rounded personalities. Only such well-formed characters are fit for the steely task of changing the world, inside and outside the literary text. Cervantes, Shakespeare, Balzac, Tolstoy provide models, for they consciously strive to represent society as totality and their protagonists act rationally in a recognizable world. The tradition handed down to the present by progressive epochs of the past formed a set of norms to be honored. According to Lukács, the last progressive epoch had been the era of the bourgeoisie on the rise, grasping for political power up until the middle of the nineteenth century. The struggle had compelled the bourgeoisie to have an objective

and wide overview of reality. This is reflected in its cultural productions, which emerge from a coherent aesthetic formulation of the world in the theory and practice of realism.

In his contribution to the debate, the playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht identifies a contradiction between Lukács's commitment to writers of the nineteenth century and the claim that their work should serve timelessly as a guide to proletarian or socialist writers in the twentieth century. The social and technical reality of capitalism, Brecht argues, is now too different to enable the translation of previous aesthetic forms into the contemporary. If historical reality has changed, then art forms must change too. Brecht poses a number of questions: "Are writers confronted by a dehumanised man? Has his spiritual life been devastated? Is he driven through existence at an intolerable pace? Have his logical capacities been weakened? Is the connection between things now no longer so visible?" (Brecht 1980: 69). If the answer to these questions is yes, what use is turning back to the Old Masters, crafting a rich life of the spirit, stretching out the pace of events by a detailed and ponderous narrative and bringing the individual back to the center stage. The historical forms of individuality that provided the keystone of assertive bourgeois ideology are now superseded and not of use in an epoch of mass politics. To reassert them is to evade the project of realism, which, for Brecht, better takes its cue from the technological and social exigencies of the moment. To work with those new exigencies demanded experimentation (while remaining popular and drawing on popular forms such as cabaret and circus), and it required communal modes of reception, appropriate to mass, class society. Brecht defines realism not as a formal matter, for it is useless to determine the realism of an artwork by comparison with other artworks; rather it is a political matter, and the arbiter of art's realism is its comparison with life itself.

> Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society/unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power/writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up/emphasising the element of development/making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it. (Brecht 1980: 82)

Brecht had previously been able to test the effectiveness of his own practice when called up before the German censor in relation to his film project *Kuhle Wampe* (1932). In a note on the meeting, called "A Small Contribution on the Topic of Realism," Brecht detailed how the censor

had fully understood the film's intent in portraying the suicide of an unemployed man. The censor objected that it presented the suicide as not the aberrant act of an unhappy individual, but, because of its refusal to flesh out the character, made it seem to be the fate of an entire social class, driven through economic circumstance to suicidal measures. Brecht and the rest of the film company were rumbled. The political force of the film, visible even to "a policeman," came through in its disassociated and mechanized acting style, and not in its efforts to present fully rounded individuals (Brecht 1974).

Enthused by Brecht's dramatic practice and theory, Walter Benjamin developed a theory of realism that depended on the formal innovations of modernism and the technical aspects of film. In 1934 Benjamin described how Dada "stressed the authentic: combated the illusion" (Benjamin 1991b: 183). Dada countered art's illusioning, just as Cubism had tentatively done, by its incorporation of the actual matter of social existence into art: cigarette butts, tickets, wrappers, newspapers, and so on. The illusional nature of art came under attack the more fragments of the (non-art) world found their way into it. Art's relationship to reality is, quite literally, reconfigured. But combating illusion is not the same as developing a realist aesthetic. A realist aesthetic was undertaken more cogently in film. In film everyday social matter provides the raw material, as an objective physical and social world imprints itself on film stock, even if that film is thematically a fairytale confection. Projected on screen and arranged through editing and special effects, this filmed social matter is alienated from its normal positioning in life. To this extent, film is, for Benjamin, an art of the real, while at the same time estranging that real through film-specific techniques. Through estrangement, film simultaneously presents and counters the illusion of the real, thereby extending "our comprehension" of the actual scientific and social "necessities that rule our lives" (Benjamin 1992: 229).

Photography likewise presented the possibility of a new realist aesthetic (see the chapters by Armstrong and Roberts in this volume). Photography has a direct, reflectional relationship to the world. It promises its viewers objectivity – the word "lens" in various European languages is some form of the Latin word *objectus* – in German, *Objektive*, in French, *objectif*, in Italian, *obiettivo*. This "objectivity," a technological by-product, is guarantor of historical faithfulness. Benjamin is influenced by Surrealism's assertion of an indexical relationship between photography and reality: the visible world imprints its traces on artistic products – sometimes quite directly, as in Man Ray's Rayographs. Photography provides two realities from different times: the time of the photograph's taking and the time of its appearance: reality (*Wirklichkeit*), in the form of a "tiny flash of

co-incidence," lets historical time resonate in the affiliation between image and viewer. The mechanical analogical basis of photography captures a moment in time indexically-iconically and exports it into the future. Photography brings objects closer, presenting them for inspection. It is in this sense that photography becomes a site to locate evidence, a "scene of the crime (*Tatort*)" (Benjamin 1979: 256). This "place of action" is where historical processes have actually taken place. This is photography's social basis: it allows the divulgence of truths about the structure of reality, which, under capitalism, exerts a hurtful pressure. Photography gives aesthetic expression to the wounds of human alienation, in order that they might be made amenable to "curative" analysis by the "politically educated gaze (*politisch geschulten Blick*)" (Benjamin 1979: 251). But Benjamin recognized the danger that photography might just blankly reflect the real, and not generate any cognitive potential. He quoted Brecht:

> As Brecht says: "the situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or A.E.G. tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations, – the factory say – means that they are no longer explicit. Something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed." (Benjamin 1979: 255)

Realism approximates reality not by mirroring its external contours, but by enstaging it, making explicit the aspects that fetishized existence and ideology submerge. To this end, Benjamin recommended the practices of John Heartfield (discussed at greater length in this volume by John Roberts). Supplementing the photograph with montage and captions cuts into its mirroring of surface reality to produce something constructive. This recommendation of a critical practice was a response to the modish photography of Benjamin's day as represented by the art movement *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Objectivity. New Objective photographers emphasized the relationship between photography and reality. Photography is seen to give us access to the real, persisting world. Photographer Wolfgang Born wrote in 1929:

> The discovery of reality is the mission of photography. It is not incidental that the very process of taking a photograph involves the use of technology. The nature of this medium is intrinsically adapted to the structure of the contemporary worldview; its objective way of registering facts corresponds to the thinking of a generation of engineers. Today the camera can unfold its finest virtue – truthfulness – without hindrance. (Phillips 1989: 156)

The new style of photography in the 1920s appeared realistic to contemporaries, in contrast to impressionistic art photography, whose soft and muted edges were out of keeping with the contemporary reality of glossy, rigid surfaces of steel and glass. The new realism depicted in the photographs is one of industrial products, heavy industry, the machine, the new architecture, new commodities, and an interest in the serial principle of mass reproduction. For New Objective photographers, the whole world is beautiful, and it demonstrates this, notes Benjamin critically, by lavishing any soup can with cosmic significance, while unable to grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists. The photographs are like advertisements (and sometimes were advertisements), the objects depicted are fetishized (Benjamin 1979: 254). The left-wing intelligentsia had launched a number of "intellectual booms," Benjamin complained, from Activism to Expressionism to New Objectivity. All translated revolutionary reflexes into objects of distraction, amusement, and consumption. Expressionism raised its arm with a clenched fist made of papier mâché. Then came its antithesis, New Objectivity, flaunting emptiness, its feelings flogged long ago. In snapshots, the isolated, frozen, and disconnected moments are just so much material that turns experience into camera booty (Benjamin 1979: 253).

Realism and Sobriety

But New Objectivity deserves to have its claim to realism examined. New Objectivity was an art movement that arose in mid-1920s Germany, specifically in Berlin, as well as other urban centers in Germany. Apart from photographic work, there was a significant body of paintings. New Objective painting repeats some of the stylistic, formal, and visual moves of New Objectivist photography: sharp focus, a fascination with aesthetic aspects of technology, and an inquisitiveness about things and objects, apparent in the use of the close-up. The German term *Neue Sachlichkeit* has been alternatively translated as New Sobriety, New Matter-of-Factness, or New Realism. *Neue Sachlichkeit* was not the only term that was used at the time to describe this particular trend in art. Other contenders were, in translation, neo-naturalism, magic realism, verism, and neo-realism. In part this variety of labels reflects a variety of quite divergent trends. It is not a homogeneous body of work. New Objectivism had geographical particularity: in Dresden a cynical attitude reigned, while Munich was more classically oriented, Berlin more socially critical, and Hanover more naïve and magical.

The name *Neue Sachlichkeit* was coined by G. F. Hartlaub in 1923. Hartlaub intended to mount an exhibition by those artists who remained – or who had once more become – avowedly faithful to positive, tangible reality. The work included in the exhibition was seen to indulge in a renewed contact with the object world, after Expressionism's excesses. A post-Dada Georg Grosz anticipated the themes in 1921:

> I am attempting to present an absolutely realistic picture of the world. [. . .] Lines are drawn on an individual, photography-like basis [. . .]. Stability, structure, efficacy once again . . . control over line and form is being reintroduced. [. . .] The functionality [*Sachlichkeit*] and clarity of an engineer's drawings present a better model than the uncontrollable wafflings of Kabbala and metaphysics and religious ecstasy. (Michalski 1994: 29–33)

Among its most regularly used motifs were level crossings, telephone wires, bridges, gasometers, factories. Even its still lives suggest mechanical and technological motifs in piercingly precise presentations of frozen life, with inorganic depictions of nature. Aesthetically the work signified the resumption of conventionally realist modes of painting: figuration, perspective, detail.

The exhibition – which took place in 1925 – elicited a contribution from Franz Roh (Roh 1925). This theorized the new painting under the title "Post-Expressionism: Magical Realism, Problems of Recent European Painting." Roh composed a chart comparing New Objectivity and Expressionism in a series of oppositions. He noted New Objectivity's sober objects, compared to the ecstatic objects of Expressionism. Expressionism is seen to repress the object while New Objectivity emphasizes the object. New Objectivity is representational and contemplative, strict, puritan, and static, not deformed, excessive, and dynamic, like Expressionism. Expressionism is warm and rough, New Objectivity, cool to cold, smooth, worked over. In Expressionism the process of production is obvious, in New Objectivity the work process is expunged in pursuit of pure objectification. Expressionism uses diagonal, acute angles, and pushes outward from the frame. New Objectivity composes with right angles, and these are parallel to the frame in which the image is poised. New Objectivity counters the Expressionist exuberance of unlimited possibilities with an attitude toward reality that indicates constraints. Expressionism's style was visionary, subjective, and the marks of artistic facture, artistic subjectivity, and artistic presence were obvious. In New Objectivity's paintings the environment is shown as shorn of illusion, seemingly objectively, and so smooth that it eradicates all traces of brushwork. New

Objectivity is faithful to the outlines of objects, with an acuity of focus across the surface regardless of position in the illusioned depth. Objects are isolated from their context, in a static compositional structure, comprised of an accumulation of details rather than an organic whole. Its realism is based in its sobriety. By implication Expressionism is intoxicated, which means that its vision is distorted. It is "under the influence" of political mania, or psychic delusion, its clear perception challenged just as is that of a drunkard or a drug-taker. The "sachliche" attitude of *Neue Sachlichkeit* is, by contrast, sober, unfiltered, clear-sighted, and unbiased. Its lack of expression becomes a marker of its apparently bald truthfulness to current conditions. Correspondingly, its subject-matter focused on the prominent forces in contemporary society. Its predominantly urban subject-matter depicted scenes of consumerism, the infringements of technology into human life, and slick modern interiors with consumer durables. Some paintings emphasized features of the contemporary social situation. In 1932 Hanover painter Grethe Jürgens wrote:

> We are discovering an entirely new world [. . .]. Unemployed people, tramps or beggars are painted, not because they are "interesting characters" . . . or through a desire to appeal to the sympathy of society, but because one suddenly realizes that it is in these people that the most powerful expression of the present time is to be found. (Michalski 1994: 137)

New Objectivity – both in its form and in its content – has been viewed as connected to the historical, social, and political moment into which it emerges. Late in the fall of 1923, a new government in Germany introduced economic measures to halt the infamous inflation of the first phase of the Weimar Republic. The Dawes Plan – which consisted of American credits and investments – was instituted in 1924 in order to re-stimulate the economy. The "second phase" of the Weimar Republic was a phase of stabilization, lasting until 1929, when the worldwide depression hit, signaled by the Wall Street Crash. For five years, a dollar-sun rose over Germany. Henry Ford, the American industrialist, a car manufacturer, put out his bestseller, *My Life and Work*, in 1923, and it was rapidly translated into German. Ford stressed the notion of objectivity, synonymous, for him, with efficiency, functionality, rationality. The language of objectivity, rationalism, functionalism, Americanism, is widespread in Europe in the 1920s. A frequently voiced argument of the time insisted that class-conflict and class-struggle were over, because bosses and workers now recognize a common interest in the efficient management of industry. Ford visioned industry as a system that could operate without friction if it is

managed efficiently, objectively, and scientifically. US capital exports not only the outlay for productive capacities but also, apparently, an ideological effluent, which seduces fractions of society, especially some intellectuals: turning them into proponents of objectivism, urbanism, rationalism, and technology, and diverting them from apocalyptic or revolutionary pursuits. Well-managed capitalism could last for ever. New Objectivity takes its place – squarely and unblinkingly – in this new (if not lasting) environment, whose tenor was so different to the years of instability, war, and revolution, which had given rise to Expressionism.

New Objectivity proposed a new focus on objects. But there was another component to objectivity. It implied value-neutrality. On the one hand objectivity, *Sachlichkeit*, might suggest the project of a straight reflection of external reality, a photographic representation; on the other hand it undoubtedly, in many artists' work, denotes an attitude, an objective demeanor, which discloses the truth about reality, an approach to reality which is un-idealizing and cuts through mystifications, ideologies, falsity. Commentators often attached the descriptors "cynical," "cool," and "detached" to the works of New Objectivity. The works were seen to provide a rejection of humanism, a refusal to play the game of art as utopia, a negation of art as escapism, and a palpable cynicism about humanity, at least the current humanity. Its realism counterposes itself to "ideal-ism," in the sense of idly pursuing ideals beyond what exists. New Objective literature coolly renders anti-utopias – as written, for example, by Alfred Döblin, Hans Fallada, or Erich Kästner, in a non-sentimental, emotionless reportage style, with precision of detail and veneration for "the fact." New Objective literature was compared to a court witness statement.

But is this negativity, this cynicism, above all a sign of political non-commitment, of a refusal for a critical, social position for art? Walter Benjamin saw it that way and, for all the radical glamour that adhered to it on account of its being the latest fashionable art movement, he deemed it a reactionary formation. Benjamin argues that New Objectivity – despite, or because of, its attitude, its irony, bitterness, and detachment – represents a straightforward affirmation of the status quo, an accord with a reality left untouched. A gesture of affirmation can be detected in painting's use of traditional forms of oil painting and composition, because what these procedures ultimately do – unlike the Dadaists and the photomontagists – is refuse any engagement with political questions around art institutions and audiences. (New Objective literature, by contrast, did aspire to reinvent literature as a democratic-critical form appropriate to an audience familiar with mass media.) More generously,

though, New Objectivity might be seen to use detachment and coolness in order to portray a historically specific experience of alienation. New Objectivity, in as much as it is cool and sober, can be seen as a legitimate and appropriate attempt realistically to portray city life with its anonymity, its impersonality. The portrayal of detachment and matter-of-factness could be seen as potentially critical, as a portrayal of the real experience of alienation, of a degeneration of human or humane relations. In 1928 Alfred Neumeyer observed how the spatiality of the paintings has little in common with centralized perspective (Michalski 1994: 60). What on the surface appears to be a post-Expressionist return to perspective order collapses under closer scrutiny. Various perspectives underlie many of the pictures. At least two spatial layers are seamlessly connected, producing a disjunction that evokes in the viewer an intimation of dis-ease, out-of-jointness, not-quite-right-ness. Indeed, Roh's original name for the painting style described the specific realism as "magical," indicating an uncanny aspect that adheres to it: for Roh, Magical Realism hoped to show the wonder of matter, the extraordinary capacities of the world, thereby rendering it, in typically avant-garde fashion, anew. The term lost out to New Objectivity. However, the apparent claims of New Objectivity – its oft-voiced claim to an objective recording of the surface – can be undermined. Surface recording gives way to a more structured rendition of the world, which is less a mirroring and more a portrayal of operative social forces and moods. It was also in this vein, though more explicitly, that George Grosz and Otto Dix as Verists developed a form of realism in their work in which bitter themes are realized with hideously realistic details. Detailed realism is taken to the point of exaggeration of recognizable features; it is not so much reflection as revelation of underlying, masked, unpleasant truths.

Benjamin Buchloh sees nothing progressive in New Objectivity's return to realistic representation. The restitution of the real signals for him an epoch of reaction (Buchloh 1981). Buchloh constructs his case in the following way. In 1912–13, a highpoint in modernist experimentation was reached. Malevich's *Black Square* (1913), the "zero of form," was the last word in abstraction and the questioning of representation, and Duchamp's Readymades presented the ultimate devastation of the pretensions of the bourgeois gallery system. Subsequently, certain artists resurrected representational strategies in their work, restoring traditional visual codes of recognizability. Visual and spatial ordering systems that had defined pictorial production since the Renaissance, and which had decomposed in the course of the nineteenth century, were reinstituted. Buchloh inquires: Is there a causal connection, a mechanical reaction,

by which growing political oppression necessarily and irreversibly generates traditional representation? Does the brutal increase of restrictions in socio-economic and political life unavoidably result in the bleak anonymity and passivity of the compulsively mimetic modes that are prevalent, for example, in European painting of the mid-1920s and early 1930s? Buchloh's argument finally suggests a more practical and generational basis to the shift. Older artists decided to reinstate the profession of painting as skill, to reinstate the gallery and the myth of genius. They idealized the past and craft – in opposition to the practices of Dada and Duchamp and all those who had dismantled art, often in the name of political and social revolution.

Constructing Realism Soviet-style

Art had been subjected to an extensive challenge in the years around the Russian Revolution of 1917. Indeed, the dismissal of oil painting and of straight photography as both inadequate for investigating the contradictory and dynamic nature of reality in an age of the masses took its cue from Soviet experimentalism in the years immediately following the Russian Revolution of 1917. In the news "isms" of Constructivism, Productivism, and Suprematism, questions of realism were explored and redefined. Indeed, in this context of a thorough overhaul of aesthetics and politics, "abstraction" could be a realism.

In August 1920 Naum Gabo issued "The Realistic Manifesto" with his brother Antoine Pevsner. Five thousand copies of the manifesto were produced, and some were pasted up as posters around Moscow to coincide with an exhibition of the two brothers' works. The manifesto recognizes the new exigencies and possibilities made available by technological and scientific development. Gabo writes of the growth of human knowledge with its powerful penetration into the mysterious laws of the world. But also apparent is acknowledgment of a new political culture, which is seen to demand a new artistic culture. Gabo calls this the new Great Style. He writes:

> The blossoming of a new culture and a new civilization with their unprecedented-in-history surge of the masses towards the possession of the riches of Nature, a surge which binds the people into one union, and last, not least, the war and the revolution (those purifying torrents of the coming epoch), have made us face the fact of new forms of life, already born and active. (Gabo 1974: 7)

Gabo goes on the attack against what he views as residual but still oper-
ative artistic tendencies, such as Naturalism, Symbolism, Romanticism,
and Mysticism, forms that are nourished by impression and external appear-
ance. Gabo rejects all forms of figurative expression as an appropriate means
for representing the new: "No new artistic system will withstand the pres-
sure of a growing new culture until the very foundation of Art will be
erected on the real laws of life" (Gabo 1974: 8). The "real laws of life"
are space, time, and natural forces. For Gabo, this is an ultimate physical
reality underlying everything. Gabo continues:

> *The plumb-line in our hand, eyes as precise as a ruler, in a spirit as taut as
> a compass . . . we construct our work as the universe constructs its own, as the
> engineer constructs his bridges, as the mathematician his formula of the orbits.*
>
> *We know that everything has its own essential image; chair, table, lamp,
> telephone, book, house, man . . . they are all entire worlds with their own
> rhythms, their own orbits.*
>
> *That is why we in creating things take away from them the labels of their
> owners . . . all accidental and local, leaving only the constant rhythm of the
> forces in them.* (Gabo 1974: 9)

Gabo renounces color as inessential and accidental. Only the light-
absorbing material body is a reality of interest. The line is rejected.
It does not occur in nature, insists Gabo. The line is not to be used des-
criptively, but only as a marker of the direction of forces and rhythm.
Reinforced by the science of engineering, Gabo renounces volume
and mass, affirming in their place depth and planes. Gabo's aesthetic
demands combine the science of engineering with the utilization of new
materials. The Eiffel Tower, built in 1889, is a building reliant on the
properties of iron, which has been divided into small sections and riveted
together. Like the steel and glass architecture to follow, the strength of
the Tower is not a result of its mass. Similarly Gabo's constructions explore
the properties and constructive possibilities of new materials such as
plastics, aluminum. Gabo employed new transparent materials, which min-
imized associations, allowing instead attention to the form in space. Reality,
asserts Gabo, is dynamic, kinetic, spatial, and temporal. Art must be too.
It is made of the same stuff as life. Indeed, there is no separation between
art and reality. The artwork has its own reality, because the artwork accesses
and utilizes the same dynamic and temporal forces as life itself; indeed,
it purifies these natural physical laws, by experimentation. In the early 1920s
Gabo's fascination with space, time, and movement led him to incor-
porate motors into his pieces – such as "Standing Wave" (1919–20) made
of a steel rod and an electric motor. Gabo criticized Italian Futurism,

calling it and Cubist tendencies in art new delusions, for their formal innovations amounted to the attempt to depict movement in static media such as painting and sculpture. Gabo incorporated *real* movement into his pieces.

Gabo's realist project raises some interesting questions for realism. Traditionally, realist works have been works that are representational, recognizably figurative, even if the claims to realism have been differently grounded. Gabo is not representational. Gabo is not accurately representing the external world in a mimetic artistic image. More than that, traditionally Gabo's work would be termed abstract – which might be taken to mean unrepresentative, insignificant (in its fullest sense – i.e., not signifying), not identical to anything other than itself as art-object. Gabo himself did not favor the word abstract – he preferred the word "absolute." Paul Wood, in "Realisms and Realities," notes how realism is usually contrasted with "a sense of the Modern," which is "subjective," "individualistic," "distorted," or "abstract" (Wood 1993: 253). This gives rise to the conventional assumption that there is an opposition between the realistic and the abstract in twentieth-century art:

> Yet the very notion of "abstract" art is as problematic as the notion of an art of "realism." That pair of conventional assumptions (equating "realism" with "realistic"; and the consequent sense of "realism" as the opposite of something called "abstraction") obscures any sense of the density, and indeed interest, of the diverse historical debates over realism. It diverts attempts to address the problems that the various actors in the historical debate did try to face. (Wood 1993: 254)

Modernism rejuvenated debates around representation and the depiction of the real. Realism cracked open to reveal various ways of incorporating "the real" or "reality" into art. New forms – Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism – staked out their claims to being realist styles. It was clearly not the realism of the nineteenth century but a realism appropriate to the dynamic, fractured, simultaneist, montaged, complex reality of modern life. Just before the beginning of World War I in 1914, Gabo visited Paris, where he saw examples of Cubism. Gabo operates in a context in which debates on what constitutes realism in art have already moved far beyond the notion of realist tendencies that offer a window on the world.

In the Russian context, Gabo had a precedent for redefining realism, or the potential for a realism that is nonrepresentational, in the work of Kasimir Malevich. In 1915 Malevich wrote of Suprematism: "Painting is paint and colour . . . such forms will not be repetitions of living things in life but will themselves be a living thing. A painted surface is a real,

living form" (Malevich 1968: 19). Malevich wrote this statement in 1916 in "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: the New Realism in Painting." For Malevich primary forms revealed by the exercise of intuitive reason – notably the square – are not secondary to the actual forms of the world but are their equivalent. In contrast to the faulty realism of figurative painting, a mere copy of a preexisting and texturally superior reality, the forms of Suprematism coexist with natural forms. Malevich's realism is specific to painting. Art is reality, not a copy of reality. The autonomy of art is the ground of its realism, and the resulting representation is abstract.

Gabo's work was set to particular political uses once he emigrated to the USA in 1946. In the first major American art magazine article on Gabo, his work was juxtaposed with several pages of Socialist Realist painting. Gabo's later theoretical writings on Constructivism recuperate what he regards as the genuine constructivist project by arguing that, far from being a realism, or a utilitarianism that re-conceptualizes art for political ends, his sculptural work involved explorations of form, executed on the basis of art's autonomy, its independence from political values. Gabo allowed his work to be interpreted as a form of abstractionism and in so doing encourages a theoretical reinstatement of the division between realism and abstraction. From the other direction too, Socialist Realism, discussed in detail in Taylor's chapter in this volume, closed the door on the exchange between realism and modernism, in an epoch when the divisions hardened.

Conclusion

This essay began with comments on Lukács's affirmation of realism as particularly adequate to the representation of capitalist totality and its motive forces. While Lukács's aesthetic is not synonymous with doctrinal Socialist Realism, it has some affinities with it, and both conceive a common adversary in modernism. The antithesis that Lukács establishes between Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka does nothing to challenge the hardening into opposite camps of realism and modernism and it ignores the nuanced exchanges between these positions as indicated here in a series of avant-garde movements from Constructivism onwards, in visual culture, and, to a lesser extent, in literature. As seen here, theories of the relationship between the world evoked in literature and the world outside it have proposed varying types of realism, from Lukács's model of totality to Bloch's fragmentary and psychological realism, from Brecht's

dramatic realism with its use of popular forms and vernacular to Alfred Döblin's montaging of the debris of reality (bus timetables, newspaper reports, scientific literature) into a panoramic social realist novel.

Literature has words, paper, and print as its matter, but the materiality of the book has rarely been drawn into the formal debate on realism. Books are perceived as vehicles for words. Words are the tools that conjure up mimesis of the outside world. Spoken language (and some instances of written language, such as signage, documents, and letters) is the only external matter that translates, seemingly unaltered, into the reality illusion of the text. It is not so in visual culture. Here, for the avant-garde movements, the very matter from which art is made physically signifies engagement with reality (working on and with matter, be that paint or bronze or glass or plastic). Art's labor on the world is specific: like literary composition it is conceptual, but it is more directly physical. The art-object takes its place in the world as unique item – or, after the modernist embrace of mass reproduction, as challenger to uniqueness. In either case, its very form encounters questions of its own existence in the world. Literature is different, in that it is largely a conveyable medium and the matter of the text can appear essentially unchanged in different editions and formats (as book editions, serial, spoken word, webpage). It seems that art's intractability has allowed it to become a realm for extending debates on what constitutes realism in art.

From this perspective, the incorporation of everyday matter makes Dada a type of realist practice (at least according to Walter Benjamin), while clear-eyed concentration on the object-world in New Objectivity – and working paint in such a way as to render that reality smoothly and coolly – presents a reformulation of figurative realism, which, contra Lukács, has something quite ahuman or impersonal about it. But it is in the explorations of the Russian avant-garde, after the revolution, that realism is most thoroughly reinvented (indicating perhaps why it needed to be so thoroughly re-reinvented a decade later in accord with the aesthetic doctrine of Socialist Realism, with its insistence on circumscribed "representative," "typical" subject-matter depicted in comprehensible forms). The modernist reformulation of realism is connected to the wave of possibility opened up by changed political contexts and to perceived shifts in technology and science, meaning that reality itself is reconceived and re-mediated. Reality is taken hold of and reformed in conscious political gestures and it is penetrated by new technologies, including those of representation, which re-convey its technicized contours to mass audiences. The use of movement, space, time – forces and aspects present in the non-art world – makes art, for the Constructivists, a cogent scientific

investigation of reality, and thus a superior form of realism. Furthermore, for Malevich, the very purity of art's forms allows it to present an ideal reality, for it is not simply a reproduction but is the thing itself. Realism collapses into reality in an absolute abstraction. Realism is as flexible as the reality it attempts to mirror – and never more so than in revolutionary times.

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Chapter 8

Socialist Realism: "To depict reality in its revolutionary development"

Brandon Taylor

Socialist Realism presents paradoxes for anyone interested in Western art and literature. Though never a style, or a school, or a movement, as a creative method it remains largely unknown in Western Europe for the simple reason that only a few of its novels have been translated, distributed, and read, and because very few of its better paintings, sculptures, graphic works, and films have been seen in Western museums and cinemas. The formal collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has had the effect, after a fairly brief explosion of interest, of dampening intellectual curiosity about its ideas and principles. In addition, the aesthetic principles that drove Socialist Realism not only in Soviet Russia but in other Eastern bloc countries up until the end of the cold war remain unexplored and hence largely misunderstood.

The epithet "Socialist Realism" appeared in print only gradually, first in the literature journal *Literaturnaya gazeta* (Literary Gazette) and then in the visual arts journals *Za proletarskaya isskustvo* (For Proletarian Art) and *Brigada khukdozhnikov* (Brigade of Artists) in 1932. It was not until an alleged meeting between Stalin and Soviet writers including Maxim Gorky in the fall of that year that its broad principles were formulated. And it took further debate in the art and literature journals before the term was defined in contrast to the principles of Western modernism and most world literature, at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934. In hindsight it is remarkable that Socialist Realism first emerged as a method applicable to the literary arts. This priority can be

taken as reflecting an older tradition of nineteenth-century Russian classic writers of the order of Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov, combined with a utilitarian strain in nineteenth-century critical writing from such revolutionary democrats as Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, and Chernyshevsky. Indeed, when Andrei Zhdanov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, addressed the 1934 Congress with his notorious speech "Soviet Literature – The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature," he was able to associate what he believed was the pessimism, nihilism, and disjointedness of literature in the capitalist countries with the crisis of capitalism itself, especially its failure to resist the darkest cultural consequence of capitalism, namely fascism. The Socialist Realist work of literature, Zhdanov announced, is by contrast optimistic – not in a subjective way but "because it is the literature of the rising class of the proletariat, the only progressive and advanced class." Soviet literature is already strong "because it is serving a new cause, that of socialist construction." Hence the Socialist Realist writer or artist was able to depict not merely "objective reality" (that was being done, said Karl Radek later in the Congress, by the likes of James Joyce) but "to depict reality in its revolutionary development" (Gorky et al. 1977: 20–1).

The combination in a single formula of the principle of "depicting reality" at the same time as showing it in its "revolutionary development" lies at the very center of the Socialist Realist method, and may be said to contain not only the kernel of the method's success but the virus that caused its later degeneration and sorry decline. The principle of an openly tendentious literature and art goes back to the October Revolution and the perceived need on the part of the Bolshevik Party to address, if not to determine, the activities of the nation's writers and artists in the crisis conditions that then prevailed. It goes back even further if we remember (as the Bolsheviks surely did) Lenin's 1905 pamphlet "Party Organization and Party Literature," in which he had urged: "Down with literary supermen! Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, a 'cog and screw' of the single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically conscious vanguard of the entire working class." However, Lenin had also said that "scope must undoubtedly be allowed for personal initiative, individual inclination, thought and fantasy . . . the literary side of the proletarian Party cause cannot be mechanically identified with its other sides" (Lenin 1905: 45–6). That antithesis proved to be central to the Socialist Realist debate – and the two principles were never to be satisfactorily reconciled. Thus for the first decade after 1917 the Party was more or less happy to see vigorous competition among different outlooks and different groups, and made no

formal declaration in favor of any of the three principle candidates – the
Proletarian Culture movement or *Proletkult*, several kinds of experimental
modernists and so-called "left" artists, and the highly advanced techni-
cians and theorists of the Formalist school (not to be confused with later
Western formalism). It is sometimes overlooked that the Party for most
of that first decade showed a degree of neutrality as between strict Party
adherents (who did not, it was recognized, always make the best writers
and artists) and unaligned or "fellow-traveler" artists, as Trotsky first used
the term in his polemical *Literature and Revolution* of 1923.

   And yet by 1925 the picture was changing. Two events in particular
stand out. The formation in January 1925 of the Russian Association
of Proletarian Writers (*Rossiiskaya assotsiatsiya proletarskikh pisatelei*, or
RAPP) consolidated the principle of "Party literature" and provoked
ideological clashes with other organizations that were more confronta-
tional than at any time since the death of Lenin in January of the previous
year. In promoting romantically inflected historical writing containing
popular heroes – a good contemporary example would be Alexander
Fadeev's novel *The Rout* (1925–6), set in the Civil War on the Far Eastern
front – RAPP turned its back on "experimental" literature and especially
Formalism. The second event was the Central Committee's lengthily
debated Resolution dated June 1925, "On the Party's Policy in the
Field of Literature," which was careful to balance support for proletarian
writers with the interests of fellow-traveler and leftist groups; this would
perhaps ensure that RAPP would not fall prey to *komchvanstvo* or "com-
munist boasting," that is, the smug assumption of superiority in the arts.
There must, said Nikolai Bukharin, the probable author of the Resolution,
be a "tactful and considerate attitude" to fellow-traveler writing, of
"patient assistance" in helping them achieve broad allegiance "to the
side of communist ideology" (Taylor 1992: 33). RAPP had already clashed
with the theory of "factography" or "the literature of fact" advanced
by the leftist group Novyi LEF, while inviting derision from the latter
on account of its interest in individual psychology at the expense, so
Novyi LEF said, of a broader impulse to reform the aesthetic and political
consciousness of the historically mobilized masses. The proletarian
writers had also argued with the much smaller Literary Center of the Con-
structivists (*Literaturnyi tsentr konstruktivistov*, or LTsK) for its cham-
pioning of literary dynamism, machine-mindedness, and rationality – and
for its obsession with "Americanization." Such conflicts, and the language
used publicly to perform them, tell us two things immediately: that the
aggressive stance taken by RAPP aimed at achieving cultural rectitude by
defaming its opponents to the point where (so it hoped) they would stop

writing, split up, or join other factions; but also that conflict of this kind was still possible in the mid-1920s and betokened a degree of tolerance by the Party towards different artistic positions. For the moment, the type of literature championed by RAPP – it would later be called Socialist Realist literature – could coexist with experimental writing, with humor, criticism, and even "absurdism," as in the fiction of Daniil Kharms, in an atmosphere of mutual competition and debate. But the tensions between the different tendencies would soon grow. Since all groups were broadly sympathetic to the spirit of the October Revolution and wished to work within the parameters of what each called "realism," the frequently over-nuanced positioning that now erupted took on a significance that far transcended the needs of purely literary debate.

A Contest of Ideas

A particular policy reversal, or set of reversals, was about to unfold. In the period 1926–8 it was taken for granted by the leading proletarian writers that a measure of "psychological realism" was essential in what they called "the period of the rapid transition to socialism." Their thesis was simply that the transformation of social life under the guidance of the Communist Party required a complete reeducation of humanity in all its cultural habits, including everyday thoughts and emotions and its attitudes to all the practical as well the most abstract matters of socialist life. In terms of the Party's political priorities as expressed at the Fifteenth Congress of December 1927 – the electrification of the country, the industrialization of agriculture, the defense against capitalist restoration, and the struggle against bureaucracy – the way should be prepared by reshaping people's psychological and emotional dispositions both as they were and as they could and should become. The influential critic Vladimir Ermilov considered Levinson, the hero of Fadeev's novel, to exemplify the so-called "harmonious" Soviet man who held his mind and his will, his ideology and his instincts, in perfect balance – relatively free of idealization and pervaded by a genuinely heroic and romantic spirit. In this and similar works, the extent to which an individual psychologically embodied and characterized his class, how he feels, believes, and introspects, became important literary qualities. Even the momentary defeats and setbacks of the novel's protagonists should be, and in this case were, faithfully set out. Tolstoy rather than the much darker Dostoevsky was the model to follow. Literary "realism" at this juncture had to be progressive in its climaxes and resolutions, without being either merely saccharine or implausible.

In the visual arts a similar position was reached by 1927. Amid the economic, administrative, and military chaos of the months and years after 1917 three major artistic tendencies could be detected. The artists who had pioneered avant-garde practices before the Revolution – frequently in association with experimental poets – were convinced that technical devices such as abstraction, fragmentation, and what Viktor Shklovsky would call "semantic roughening" were consonant with revolutionary politics and the rise of a new culture. Some Suprematists, Constructivists, and Productivists had even joined the Party as if art and the practice of politics were the same activities in a different form. After all, they inwardly or overtly reasoned, Bolshevik politics and avant-gardist art each required the end of bourgeois easel painting (landscapes, still-life, portraits) as well as breaking the grip of subjectively "expressive" style and the dominance of the private market for art. The criteria of artistic "realism" for these artists were changing just as reality was changing, and would continue to change. Another post-Revolutionary tendency had comprised "fellow-traveler" artists and groups who were in various ways mindful of the desirability of combining stylistic modernity with Soviet subject-matter, and many of them had looked hopefully to Western pioneers for inspiration. Among these groups, Four Arts followed Cézanne, while Bytie (Being) broadly followed the Impressionists. Zhar-Tsvet (Color-Heat) aspired to what they called "compositional realism" (little of their work has survived). Members of Makovets were mystical landscapists. The New Society of Painters (*Novoe obshchestvo zhivopistsev* – their acronym NOZh also means "knife") comprised former leftists who felt pulled towards a center position. Likewise OSt (*Obshchestvo khudozhnikov-stankovistov*, or Society of Easel Painters) devoted themselves after 1924 to stylistically reconciling modernist easel painting with images of revolutionary life and especially industry: the widely admired paintings of Alexander Deineka, Yuri Pimenov, and David Shterenberg belong to this group. The very existence of these "fellow-traveler" painters at least until 1927 is likewise evidence of the relatively open atmosphere of the New Economic Policy or NEP period as well as of the energy and vitality of Soviet visual culture throughout most of that decade.

But there was a third tendency that was in some respects the contrary of the other two. It comprised older artists associated with the *Peredvizhniki* (or Association of Traveling Art Exhibitions), who had been the leading anti-academic and social realist painters of the 1860s and who had largely gone to ground in the turmoil of 1917. Already in the early months of 1922 the Bolshevik government had admitted the need for greater Party discipline as well as a pragmatic approach to the market

(others would call that pragmatism "backsliding"). The 47th exhibition of the *Peredvizhniki*, held in February 1922, was projected "under the spontaneous influence of the ideas of the populist movement," claiming their first task as being "to give the people a living, intelligible art which faithfully reflected their life." In the words of its catalogue it claimed to "reflect with documentary accuracy, in genre, portrait and landscape, the life of contemporary Russia, and to depict the whole working life in its multi-faceted national character" (Taylor 1992: 161). In point of fact several critics had condemned the show for its sentimental approach to the Russian countryside and for generally failing to adapt itself to the new Revolutionary life. The works of now-forgotten painters such as Vasilii Baksheev, Petr Kelin, and Alexei Korin were said to be merely nostalgic for the past – in Vladimir Makovsky's case the 1880s or even earlier. The older Nikolai Kasatkin, wrote the poet Gorodetsky, "in his severe, Spartan manner gives us truthful pictures of working life. This method of realism, on condition of technical improvement, may lead the Peredvizhniki to great and useful work." A further condition of success would be "a persistent study of the life and existence of our working and peasant class" (Gorodetsky 1922).

That aspiration to "documentary accuracy" was already in 1922 a creative method in the making. The young painter and adherent Pavel Radimov was already in conversation with the artists Alexander Grigoriev and Evgeni Katsman (ironically the brother-in-law of Kasimir Malevich). They formed a new organization named the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (*Assotsiatsiya khudozhnikov revolyutsionnoi Rossii*, or AKhRR) that issued a Declaration in May of that year, comparable with the platform of RAPP and echoing the sentiments of the *Peredvizhniki*, but with the central emphases changed. It is not widely known that, in his role as Commissar for War, Trotsky (who would later become the darling of Western Marxism) approved not only the AKhRR Declaration but welcomed AKhRR's plans to dedicate a forthcoming exhibition to the Red Army (Bown 1998: 72). The exhibition contained portraits of Trotsky (by Filipp Malyavin as well as, quite possibly, the Cubist Yuri Annenkov), as well as more sober paintings and sculptures on the theme of "the life and customs of the workers' and peasants' Red Army" in a style that attempted to be simultaneously descriptive and celebratory. The catalogue records such titles as "In the Barracks, Reading," "Buildings of the Staff College," "The First of May," and the like (Taylor 1991: 164). The AKhRR Declaration meanwhile claimed the task of artists to be "to set down in artistic [*khudozhestvennye*] and documentary [*dokumentalnyi*] form the revolutionary impulse of this great moment of

history," the October Revolution having "aroused the consciousness
of the masses and of artists, the spokesmen of the people's spiritual life."
In the wake of the Revolution, the older art groups existing before the
Revolution (including the *Peredvizhniki*) "had lost their meaning . . . and
continue to exist only as circles of people linked together by personal con-
nection, devoid of any ideological basis" (Bowlt 1976: 266–7). Much of
the work of AkhRR could be called "Socialist Realism" by another name.

   The artistic postures of RAPP and AKhRR thus mirrored each other
and were certainly the favorites for the Party's approval by the time of
the 1927 announcement of the First Five Year Plan. No doubt the import-
ance of optimistic literary narratives to the former corresponded to the
drive for narrative painting effects in the latter. As one theorist of the
1920s, Alexei Sidorov, is quoted as saying, "formal searches – later. In
times such as these we need to begin with content" (Bown 1998: 89).
What is no less remarkable is the insistence of the AKhRR Declaration
that "documentary" portrayal should be combined with the "revolutionary
impulse" of Marxist history – given that while "documentary" refers to
what exists now, the very idea of the "revolutionary impulse" implies a
future that can be imagined and pictured, even if it could never be finally
achieved. Here again were the principles of Socialist Realism in embry-
onic form. Indeed, it is conceivable that, but for the collapse of the
capitalist system in Western Europe and America in 1926 and the rise
of fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain, the Soviet Communist Party
would never have had to isolate these formulations and harden them
into the hegemonic "method" for the arts that Socialist Realism would
soon formally become. In the 1932 statement of Ivan Gronsky, of the
Organizational Committee of the Union of Soviet Writers, the task was
to "portray truthfully our reality that is in itself dialectic": "the basic method
of Soviet literature is the method of Socialist Realism" (Ermolaev 1977:
144).

The Policy Emerges

It is also arguable, given that the Soviet experiment was not supported
internationally, that the country chose a path of self-isolation in indus-
try, agriculture, and the arts that, against its Slavic and Eastern backgrounds,
could only lead to the distortions and the censorship that were to fol-
low. A sudden swing to the "right" politically during 1927 led to the
announcement of the Five Year Plan for industry and agriculture which,
if successful, would allow Soviet Russia to "catch up and overtake" the

failing capitalist nations and demonstrate the superiority of the Soviet way. Next, the already ruthless Stalin group, by now having ousted both the internationalist Trotsky and the gradualist Nikolai Bukharin, as well as the other one-time allies Zinoviev and Kamenev, for a time promoted an internecine class struggle in industry and agriculture that seemed to require an almost rabid self-proletarianization in line with a more general denigration of technical specialists and other "experts" who assumed a status above the general working mass. The counterpart in the arts was that writers, painters, sculptors, and dramatists would renounce "individualism." For painters this meant the stigmatized technique of easel painting – it would need to be replaced by the communal enterprises of photography (non-experimental) and graphics (non-aesthetic). Already by 1929 publishing houses were being directed as to the topics their writers should pursue – broadly those of the Five Year Plan. Writers would need to applaud the "achievements" of the Plan (most of them bogus) and become a "shock-worker" or a *rabkor* (worker-correspondent) while engaging in collective novel-writing on construction sites and in factories.

Figure 8.1 *Worker-Correspondent* (1925). V. Perelman.
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Meanwhile non-affiliated groups were subject to rhetorical denuncia-
tion unless they proletarianized themselves thoroughly and threw in their
lot with AKhRR or RAPP. Something similar took place in the other arts:
it was a far cry from the apparently liberal dispensation of 1925.

In terms of the language of art, it is significant that throughout this
period a claim to "realism" remained a precondition of virtually any artis-
tic or literary credibility at all. A few examples will suffice. In June 1929
the already half-disgraced former Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly
Lunacharsky claimed that the proletariat "will prefer realism for a long
time yet over any kind of artificial stylization." A textbook for use in
art schools published in 1930 called for what it termed a "new realism"
that could be called either "constructive realism," "synthetic realism," or
"dialectical realism" – each adjective pointing to something more than
was implied in "documentary" by itself. Also in 1930, the fervently pro-
letarian magazine *Isskustvo v massy* (Art to the Masses) editorially insisted
that visual art "actively organize the consciousness of the viewer, reveal-
ing actuality and the means of revealing actuality in images," given that
only "realistic art" could "organize not only feelings but consciousness
also." Even the leftist formation Oktyabr (October) appealed to "prole-
tarian realism" while castigating "the vulgar realism of imitators, the real-
ism of stagnant individual life . . . static, naturalistic realism" – they meant
AKhRR and RAPP. It fell finally to the influential ideologue Ivan Matsa
early in 1931 to urge that "realism" be de-adjectivalized and made
directly dependant on an artist's worldview. Realism, Matsa claimed, "is
always a class-bound understanding of actuality and the transmission of
this actuality" (Bown 1998: 119). The Soviets were surely correct in point-
ing to the fact (as they frequently did) that artists in the capitalist West
regularly claimed "realism" to mean merely individual or subjective
truthfulness. And yet in the Soviet case the definition of "realism" had by
this time become a battleground of ideological postures and ideas. There
was a distinct danger that the term would lose its meaning altogether.

In the sense that the term "realism" was becoming evacuated, the ground
was already being prepared for intervention by the Party itself – a not
untypical tactical move in the turbulent factional politics of the time.
The decisive move came in June 1931. Now Stalin made a speech to a
conference of business leaders, abruptly rejecting the policies of radical
egalitarianism and wage-equalization and suddenly rehabilitating the
technical intelligentsia, including the outlawed "bourgeois specialists," while
elevating the importance and status of a new administrative class. In the
field of culture this could only mean that highly trained as well as obedi-
ent masters of their craft – painters, sculptors, writers – were now strongly

back in favor. The explanation usually given is that the Party's impatience at the sluggish situation on the collective farms, as well as the slowdown in the production of actual works of art and literature, fed by an increasingly fanatical urge for social and cultural hegemony, gave rise to a demand for resolute action. It was a state of affairs that led directly to the April 1932 Decision "On The Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations," which accused the warring proletarian organizations of "narrowness" and abolished them all in favor of a single administrative system. The justification given was that writers and other artists needed protecting from "elitist withdrawal and loss of contact with the political tasks of contemporaneity," while the Party more than ever needed to mobilize those sympathetic to "the tasks of socialist construction" (see Taylor 1992: 182).

In fact in the visual arts but not in literature, the formation of a nationwide Union of all artists was delayed for a full 25 years. While the 1934 Writers' Congress defined the method for the literary arts, for visual artists a so-called *orgkomitet* or organizing committee for the projected union was not formed until 1939 – and the outbreak of war in Soviet Russia in June 1941 delayed any further organization until as late as 1957. At the same time it is true to say that the work of almost all Soviet visual artists in the 1930s depended upon official commissions scrutinized by, or devolved from, an interim body, the all-powerful Moscow Union of Artists or MOSSKh. Most of these so-called *kontraktatsiya* were for Soviet-inflected still-lifes and landscapes destined for schools, hospitals, workers' clubs, railway stations, and the like, while the better artists were paid handsomely for undertaking grim representations of Party Congresses (often with the personnel rearranged), high-ranking individuals, and events perceived as significant in the affairs of "socialist construction" as well as in the history of Bolshevism going back to the Revolution and Civil War.

A particularly interesting critical problem for Socialist Realism, never satisfactorily solved by its creative method, concerned the qualities, literary or visual, with which artists should endow their socialist heroes and heroines. Should the builder of socialism be a joyous and smiling worker, confident and purposeful, or should he or she show signs of struggle, determination, and grit? Should women builders of socialism be portrayed differently from men? To what extent should they be individualized, prey to their feelings and disappointments, and to what extent should they be meritorious stereotypes that could be easily recognized and emulated? Nikolai Ostrovsky, to take a timely example, wrote *How the Steel Was Tempered* between 1930 and 1934 from a basis first in RAPP and then

in the early days of the Union of Soviet Writers. The novel concerns Pavel, a young Bolshevik, during his induction into the Kotovsky Cavalry in the Civil War, after which he is wounded and writes a novel about his sterling commitment (an instance of "art about art" in a truly unfamiliar form). However, the novel's subject is not in fact Pavel but his determination to overcome difficulties in the service of militant communism, and to serve the Party in whatever way he can. Likewise the dominant tendency in the visual arts was to depict the heroes of socialism as smiling and confident enthusiasts – not as individuals but as exemplifications of strength of mind, spirit, and will. Serafima Ryangina's painting *Higher and Higher* (1934), with its pair of audacious workers high above the Russian countryside, was but one attempt to portray courage and purposeful work. It was still criticized in *Izvestiya* for its "chocolate-box sweetness," for making the building of socialism look like an afternoon outing (Bown 1998: 169).

Another important feature of the creative method of Socialist Realism was that the system was administered largely by artists themselves – many

Figure 8.2 *Higher and Higher* (1934). S. Ryangina.
Museum of Russian Art, Kiev.

of them of great talent – who hence took on the mantle of court painters
to the leading Party elite and who were decorated by them in the man-
ner of generals during a successful military campaign. The painter Georgi
Ryazhsky was not only one of the best portrait and figure painters of his
generation, but a police agent. Alexander Gerasimov headed the Union's
orgkomitet from 1939 as well as being Stalin's obedient portraitist.
Alexander's namesake Sergei Gerasimov (no relation) held the chairmanship
of MOSSKh after 1940 while continuing to paint at the highest level of
national recognition (Bown 1998: 135–6). Meanwhile Isaak Brodsky com-
bined his duties as Rector of the Leningrad Academy of Fine Art from
1934 with a role as the leading photorealist painter of his day. Brodsky
produced a series of credible paintings of Lenin in various poses and activ-
ities, and in so doing succeeded in appropriating the photograph's claim
on "reality" while retaining painting's aura as a traditional embodiment
of artistic virtue and skill – he painted industrial subjects with impressive
attention to historical detail as well as to photographic texture (Taylor
2000). Photography was obviously central to Socialist Realist art since
the mannerisms of the photograph, such as subservience to visual per-
spective and the rational construction of light, were among the cardinal
qualities demanded by painting's "documentary" style. The problem of
how "the real" could be captured by bourgeois easel painting had been
a central concern of the earlier avant-garde. Here was one "solution" offered
by Socialist Realism.

   It remains controversial whether Socialist Realism could produce
important works of art under conditions of rigid bureaucratic oppression
and control. The increasing isolation of Soviet writers and artists would
take an immensely heavy toll. Poverty, imprisonment, and even death at
the hands of Party in the late 1930s were not unknown, and there is
no escaping the verdict that, taken as a whole, Socialist Realism emascu-
lated the imagination of dozens of creative artists and writers from this
time up to the end of the cold war in the 1980s – a full 50 years. With
the aid of the conceptual triumvirate of *partiinost* (Partyness), *ideinost*
(ideological content), and *narodnost* (literally "peopleness") to govern the
production of works of art and the entire system of privileges, sanctions
and *kontraktatsiya*, Socialist Realism became a conformist manner that
could do little to account for fantasy or the irrational (unless Soviet soci-
alism is itself judged to have been irrational, in which case "Socialist
Surrealism" might be the better term). For instance, Arkadi Plastov's
Collective Farm Festival of 1937, constructed in a triangular composition
showing Stalin in portrait form at the summit, provides a frankly men-
dacious account of collective farm life amid the terrors and deprivations

Figure 8.3 *Collective Farm Festival* (1937). A. Plastov. Russian Museum,
St Petersburg.

of the later 1930s and can only be accounted for as a fantasy projection
of what life might one day become. And yet many would agree that the
writings of Mikhail Sholokhov (*And Quiet Flows the Don* (1929), *Virgin
Soil Upturned* (1932), *The Fate of a Man* (1957)) or the paintings of Boris
Ioganson (*Communists Under Interrogation* (1933), *In An Old Urals
Factory* (1937)) are by any measure works of the highest artistic quality
– while the war years 1941 to 1945 saw the creation of propagandistic
imagery of unquestionable creativity, value, and purpose.

Reassessments

There are many reasons why the years leading up to and following
the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 should have prompted such a
widespread reassessment of Socialist Realist literature and art. The cold
war saw largely dogmatic opposition to Soviet culture except among the
few diplomats, enthusiasts, and students of Soviet life who visited the great
museums of Moscow and St Petersburg or who learned the language
sufficiently to read the classics of the genre. Before 1985 few Western art
historians visited Eastern Europe, and the art of Socialist Realism did not

come within the scope of their training or even their curiosity. The American critic Clement Greenberg had famously referred to the Peredvizhnik painter Ilya Repin as a purveyor of kitsch – but since Repin's work had not been seen on the Western exhibition circuit, few at the time could contradict him (Greenberg 1939). Even by 1980 scarcely a single work of Socialist Realism had entered a Western museum, and none had been offered for sale (or for that matter sought) during the years of political stand-off. It was not until the mid-1980s that a courageous avant-garde group in Western Europe would conduct a thought-experiment to discover whether critical modernism and Soviet Socialist Realism could be brought together – and whether the resulting forced marriage could ever amount to more than a "monstrous stylistic détente" (Harrison 1991: 129–49).

Yet, as Soviet society fell apart following the ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev after 1985, its artworks were placed under renewed scrutiny both in the West and in Russia itself. As archives and museum stores opened, verdicts on the artistic achievements of the previous half-century veered predictably between nostalgia, mockery, indifference, and genuine inter-est – the latter response being for a time characteristic of Western post-modernists steeped in theories of cultural mixing, historical and cultural nonlinearity, stylistic heterogeneity, and even the visually bizarre. Among the more serious reassessments are Igor Golomstock's *Totalitarian Art* (1990) for its provocative assimilation of Soviet Russia, Maoist China, and fascist Germany to a single "totalitarian" cultural model, and for his insistence that in all three cases the aesthetic was predicated upon a quasi-religious elevation of a single individual, the Party leader, from whom all ideas, inventions, and achievements were claimed to flow (Golomstock 1990). My own *Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks* (1991 and 1992) traced the policy changes in the USSR after 1917 as having determining effects on the diversity of the first Soviet decade (Taylor 1991, 1992). In 1992 there appeared in English Boris Groys's *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, advancing not difference but continuity between the highly valued experimental art of the Russian avant-garde and the politically vanguard productions of Socialist Realism (Groys 1992). Groys's provocative argument was that Socialist Realism was formulated "by well-educated and experienced elites who had [by 1930] assimilated the experience of the avant-garde and been brought to Socialist Realism by the internal logic of the avant-garde itself, which had nothing to do with the actual tastes and demands of the masses." Taking from the avant-garde such slogans as "life-building," "construction," even "realism," the administrators of Socialist Realism, according to Groys, took the avant-garde's desire for social

transformation and merely reinvented its means. In common with the avant-garde, the Socialist Realists looked not for passive reflection of reality but the "transformation of consciousness" as a whole. Distancing itself from naturalism, it intensified its search for "reality" in the typical – defined not as the social average but as "the vital sphere in which is manifested the Party spirit of realistic art." According to Groys, Socialist Realism can even be said to have courted abstraction in the form of a dream of an unrealized and perhaps unrealizable future – a "super-sensual" reality understandable only by those familiar with the appropriate codes, and not on the basis of correspondences with evident reality (Groys 1992).

At the same time, ambitious exhibition curators in Europe and America were mounting traveling exhibitions that placed major set-pieces on show for the first time, with scholarly publications to match. These included "Stalin's Choice: Soviet Socialist Realism," New York, 1993–4; "Agitation for Happiness: Art of Stalin's Epoch," St Petersburg, Düsseldorf, and Turku, 1994; and "Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators 1935–45," London, 1995–6. At the end of the decade, Matthew Cullerne Bown published his monumental *Socialist Realist Painting*, the most complete account to date of the "creative method" in the visual arts as it evolved during its rise, dominance, and eventual decline (Bown 1998). Eschewing the totalitarian model, Bown provided detailed accounts of Socialist Realism's many debates about artistic form, as well as the work of individual artists across a wide geographical and chronological perspective.

A final paradox then is that Socialist Realism first came to be investigated beyond the borders of Russia only after the demise of the state that had supported it. To some degree freed from its political stigma, it could now be revealed as a fascinating and even major episode in the story of twentieth-century literature and art. The creative method that was born in the aftermath of the October Revolution is not easily translatable into the terms of today's art, nor of today's art history – but it can remind us of the circumstances in which the categories "socialist" and "realism" were once brought together.

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Chapter 9

Realism, Modernism, and Photography: "At last, at last the mask has been torn away"

John Roberts

We live in a culture where ideological petitioning is quite obviously dominant and yet its effects go strangely unnoticed and unrecorded. The aggressive advertisement, the emotive charity image, and the slick political campaign, for instance, are designed to persuade us of the rightness, moral strength, or goodness of a particular commodity, service, or ethical position. Indeed, so ubiquitous is this framework of persuasion that what might be called its "appellative" functions (its powers of engagement and enticement) have largely become invisible, or rather, are now perceived to be innocuous across different social domains. This is because the intrusiveness of the appellative image is so identifiable with the "creative charge" of capitalism, and, therefore, with novelty and excitement, that it is associated with the democratic choice and the encouragement of the consumer itself: we cannot know what informed choice we might make unless we are petitioned, first and foremost, creatively as choice-conscious consumers. It is crucial, therefore, if choice and democracy are to be sustained on such free-market lines, that the "biddableness" of the citizen-as-consumer, their susceptibility to ideological influence, is identifiable on this basis – that is, not identified with the lures of passivity, but with a process of autonomous and retroactively informed reflection and judgment.

At the height of Louis Althusser's influence in the 1970s this biddableness was designated, under the postwar expansion of the media and mass

culture, as the ruling template of what he called ideological interpella-
tion or "hailing" (Althusser 1984). Ideology worked under these condi-
tions precisely because it hailed the subject in a beautifully self-fulfilling
moment of motile self-identification: "Yes, now I think about it, I am
that person whom you think I am;" "I didn't hear you at first, but now
I know you were addressing me;" "I didn't know my own desire." The
limitations of this position as a theory of interpellation needn't detain us
here. (Such motility implies that the subject is interpellated as a *preformed*
"innocent," so to speak.) But, suffice it to say, what increasingly distin-
guishes the dynamic of mature capitalism is this very appellative func-
tion of the commodity as the source of democracy, as the life of the
commodity expands into all areas of human production and consumption.
The reign of the commodity-as-image and the commodity-as-sound are
designed, precisely, then, as an interlacing system of hailing. Indeed, not
to be hailed constantly in a multitude of ways, is not to be cathected to
the pleasures of biddableness, to the distinction of being singled out, and,
consequently, is to feel a draining of subjectivity and desire, so familiar
among those redoubtable urbanites who profess to be bored by the coun-
tryside and nature. Yet if hailing, petitioning, and appellation are the inter-
subjective ground of "everyday" industrial and urban experience, the idea
that these forms of interpellation are exercises in the systematic reorien-
tation of subjectivity are met with outright skepticism. In fact, hailing,
petitioning, and appellation, advertisers and public relations experts alike
argue, are the wrong words altogether. There is no concerted or systematic
attempt to make the consumer/subject more biddable, or biddable in any
way: people have every right to reject or turn away from the sound and
words and images of market culture, as, indeed, many do. In fact – these
representatives of the advertising industry declare – advertisers find it harder
and harder to make people look and listen for any length of time these
days, in order, or as you say, to "make them more biddable."

This denial is very familiar. Under capitalist relations the notion that
desire and social attentiveness are structured through the forces of appel-
lation is rendered, as a matter of course, as opaque as possible, for fear
of linking desire to the idea of its *controlled* production and therefore to
the possibility of consumer coercion. However, this fear is not because
those involved in the mass management of desire see this process as essen-
tially corrupting or alienating, and therefore feel in need of some ideo-
logical veiling – although there are many no doubt in executive positions
who do favor such a posture. But, rather, because the appellative is judged,
generally, in the end, to be that which produces consumer *satisfaction*,
and therefore that which drives the creativity of markets, no process of

manipulation or misrepresentation is held to be taking place. The meeting of needs through the market is a transparent process, it is asserted, and this, exactly, is why it constitutes a successful system.

The distaste for the notion of biddableness on the part of these managers, then, derives from its too close connection to the idea that "free consumers" are being persuaded to make their choices on the basis of various exoteric vested interests. In fact, it is the very opposite that applies: through the splitting of desire in consumption, the subject's experience of consumer choice is exercised as the possible free play and endless mutability of identity. Since the early 1990s this link between the mutability of desire and the dynamic of consumption – largely developed in postmodernist cultural studies in the 1980s – has become the ruling orthodoxy of the advertising and PR worlds (see Boltanski & Chiapello 1998; and Frank 2001). The capitalist sensorium, the new theorists of management and retailing explain, is a phantasmagoric staging area for multiple and shifting identities.

A revealing displacement takes place then. Although persuasion, appellation, petitioning are functional to the operation of the system of commodity exchange, because the market is held to secure the multiplicity of desire, in the end "consumer choice" is judged to be free of the coercive effects of persuasion, appellation, and petitioning. It is no surprise, therefore, that these rhetorical forms are subject to extraordinary levels of policing when they operate outside of the direct selling of commodities. Once they are disconnected from the direct selling of commodities, they are, in fact, deemed to be *antithetical* to the interests of democracy. That is, in the area of national broadcasting, for example, the language of persuasion, appellation, and petitioning is subject to strict codes of ideological propriety in which an argument *for* something is always subjectivized as the personal opinion of the person who delivers it. This is not only to suggest that a contrary argument might immediately follow, but that petitioning for something is an inherently unstable and untrustworthy business. But, more significantly, across other domains of the market and of the state, where the publishing or broadcasting of views and opinions opposed to prevailing government doxa is heavily scrutinized, persuasion, appellation, and petitioning are run into the ground. That is, they are considered to be crude and vulgar forms, monological and one-dimensional once they threaten perceived notions of "balance" and "fairness." This is why a certain reflex prevails across the institutions of bourgeois culture: persuasion, appellation, and petitioning are held to be ideologically precarious and suspect precisely because they are seen to be *failed* forms of democratic speech. Their bid to challenge and influence

is judged to be essentially coercive, and therefore, whatever compelling effects and moments of reason they do produce cannot in the end be trusted. Persuasion, appellation, and petitioning are, in short, rhetorically deceitful; and where pursued systematically are deemed to be marginal and perverse.

Propaganda, Partisanship and Art

This dismissal of persuasion, appellation, and petitioning as a language of constraint is perhaps at its most vociferous in art, where such speech forms – particularly since the demise of revolutionary culture in the late 1920s – have been identified with the debased character of propaganda. In this sense, debased and failed speech is speech in which "free creativity" is subject to external "interference" and "distortion" or "noise." Since the 1930s, modernism has made something of a virtue of this in its long-standing dispute with realism. Where propaganda fails, it is argued by modernists, is in its identification of the truth of the artwork with a singular and univocal position. As a consequence the multiplicity and instability of the real is channeled into a predetermined interpretive framework – *in fine* propaganda differs from "art" inasmuch as it arouses partisan forms of identification, in contrast to art, which secures the spectator's or reader's extended powers of reflection, securing the autonomy of spectator or reader. This distinction has become very commonplace, and today, remains largely accepted and unexamined given how no one – least of all those involved in the domain of art – wants to be thought of as crude or monological. Yet, even at the height of the debate between modernism and realism in the 1930s, when the notion of propaganda had some powerful allies, the debate on propaganda was subject to a very narrow and highly dualistic account of its own forms. This was largely because Stalinism made it impossible for propaganda and appellation to free up their internal complexities in relation to modernism – given the way they were forced to do so much reactionary and instrumental political work. Thus, the broader split between realism and modernism in the intervening period has suffered as a consequence.

In the following, I return to the question of propaganda and partisanship, as part of a wider discussion of the debate between realism and modernism in the 1920s, in order to examine the place of persuasion, appellation, and petitioning in the fraught relations between modernism and realism, before Stalinism, and the counterforce of modernism, had produced an irrevocable shift in the content of the debate. In other words,

I want to look at that moment when persuasion, appellation, and peti-
tioning were a constitutive part of modernism's relationship to realism
and realism's relationship to modernism; and, as such, I will examine the
part this relationship played in the formation of a public and contest-
atory political culture. I want to do this by focusing on two exemplary
works: Ernst Friedrich's extraordinary antiwar polemic *Krieg dem Kriege*
[*War Against War*] (1919), and Kurt Tucholsky and John Heartfield's
anti-nationalist *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* [*Germany, Germany,
Above All*] (1929).

What is exemplary about these works, and what makes them highly
valuable for a discussion of realism and modernism, is that they use the
versatile and, for then, novel modernist form of the photo-text book to
produce a partisan, appellative speech. The ways in which they do this
are superficially different. Tucholsky and Heartfield's book is clearly
indebted to the widespread debates on montage in the 1920s and demon-
strates a sophisticated relationship between image and text; Friedrich's
assimilation of early montage is certainly no less sophisticated – it is
undoubtedly conversant with the new graphics and modernist, in particu-
lar expressionist, modes of address – but it draws on the visceral authority
of the photographic document to produce an unyielding and stomach-
churning confrontation with German militarism. Yet, both embrace cor-
ruscating irony and a caustic deflation of their photographic and textual
materials that identifies them as shared emanations of, and reflections on,
the postwar Dada spirit, in which no image is held to be exempt from
the liberating effects of chiasmus and inversion. Indeed, the irony and
deflation of the image in Friedrich's book stands as direct precursor to
Tucholsky and Heartfield's more openly playful and fictive denunciation
of interwar German culture. Despite the traumatic and violent nature of
the images in Friedrich, the dominant trope in his captions is invariably
ironic displacement, a strategy that Tuchlosky explores and extends
through a range of fictional voices in *Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles*.

Both photo-books, then, are shaped by a similar kind of imperative: to
reduce the militaristic, nationalistic, and imperial self-images of the age
to an appropriate level of bathos, in order to deny the authority of the
bourgeois state and bourgeois culture in their control over what is or
what is not in the public and national interest. In this respect, despite
the Dadaesque encoding of both books, their modes of attention and
ways of organizing their materials are overwhelmingly indebted to the
partisan content of the classical realist text: the real is veiled by bourgeois
interests, and it is the job of the artist and spectator to break through
this veil.

Classical Realism and Modernism

I use the concept of "unveiling" here because it seems to link both the collective impulse of most classical realist production from the mid-nineteenth century (the deflation and disclosure of bourgeois custom, tradition, ritual, and ideology, as contingent, oppressive, partial) and the explicitly ironized modes of later accounts of realism in modernism. This is very different, then, from assuming, in the usual critiques of the classical realist text, that the classical realist text "shows things as they really are" and therefore assumes to know, transparently, what the real is. This view tended to be adopted by critics of classical realism, such as Colin MacCabe, at the height of the conventionalist realist critique of classical realism in the mid-1970s (MacCabe 1974). For MacCabe "classic realism" is unable to deal with the real as contradictory and secures the spectator/reader in a position of unreflective or pure specularity. What is depicted or described is held – by producer and viewer/reader alike – to be the result of an unmediated process of transcription or recovery. In this sense the producer masks or denies his or her subjective and interrogatory role by identifying the real with what is taken to be self-evident. I prefer the concept classical realism here, therefore, in order to distinguish it from MacCabe's notion of "classic realism," insofar as the authorial position of the classical realist text is certainly not as uniformly closed as he makes out. The classical realism of both Courbet and Manet, for instance, adopts and subverts the dominate conditions of bourgeois specularity. In many of their paintings their use of awkward spatial relations, discrepant details, and underworked areas of facture produce a discomforting pictorial dis-arrangement of the classical tradition.

Yet, admittedly, "unveiling" for Friedrich, Tucholsky, and Heartfield has little to do with the tradition of Courbet and Manet and late-nineteenth-century social realism. In Friedrich's and Tucholsky and Heartfield's work the unveiling of bourgeois specularity is not defined by the narrative interpellation of the (bourgeois) spectator, whose power and propriety are exposed through a chain of counter-symbolic disruptions and interruptions, as in Manet's *Olympia* (1863). Here the male bourgeois spectator is confronted with a deflation of an idealized image of his own desire: the substitute of the naked working-class prostitute for the liveried courtesan, of *grisette* for *cocodette*. In the epoch of the photograph, in contrast, the critical work of the counter-symbolic is brought to bear through the medium of photography itself and its powers of disclosure. The cognitive impact of photography's indexical relationship to the world shatters realist painting's fictive reinventions and disruptions of the real.

In this sense photography and its modernist uses in the first two decades of the twentieth century achieve two things simultaneously. Firstly, through photography's unprecedented reportorial role, photography diminishes the requirement, as in realist painting, to encode anti-bourgeois meaning through the reordering or displacement of bourgeois appearances; and secondly, this reportorial role becomes identifiable with the subject of its disclosure. Thus photographs of exploited workers or the war dead are not just symbols of exploited workers or the war dead, but veridical evidence of exploitation or the effects of war, and therefore represent claims *on* the real and not simply an expression of the artist's identification with his or her subject-matter. This penetration of photography *into* the real, so to speak, represents a huge ideological and cognitive transformation in how realism is theorized and defended in the first decades of the twentieth century. Photography brings to realism and the "unveiling" of bourgeois ideology the "speech" of the subject of representation. This is why Walter Benjamin was so taken by the democratic and revolutionary implications of photography: photography doesn't just enable a counter-symbolic recoding of bourgeois culture, but, through the heightened texture of everyday appearances, it is able to give enunciative form to the proletariat and the dominated (Benjamin 1982). And, essentially, one of the driving forces of this process of disclosure is the unprecedented arrival into realism of the archive, or counter-archive.

We tend to think of the initial meeting between modernism and realism in terms of the impact of montage. It is montage, it is stressed, that defines the crisis of painterly realism and establishes the new art (Teitelbaum 1992). Photomontage's disruption of temporal unity, its capacity to render appearances simultaneously, and its powers of critical juxtaposition represents the epochal impact of mechanical reproducibility on the craft of representation. This understanding is certainly important and shaped advanced thinking on culture in the 1920s and 1930s. But what is equally important in the meeting between realism and modernism – and perhaps even more so – is the photographic archive. For it is the photographic archive that both underwrites montage as a strategy of nonidentity (the collation of disparate images and the presentation of contradictory materials), and, crucially, reinforces the indexical disclosures of the photograph. That is, it is the collecting of images, specifically those that lie outside of the normal channels of communication, and therefore outside of prevailing bourgeois notions of what is truthful and acceptable, that drives the veridical claims of photography on the formation of modernism. In this respect the archive becomes the motor of the new image-relations, insofar as its emphasis on the collecting of images as

"evidence" establishes a non-subjective basis to the relationship between artistic authorship and extra-artistic reality. The artist's powers of expression are, for the first time, identifiable not with the rendering of a scene (or scenes) in "imagination" from drawings or photographs, but with the selecting and ordering of extant photographic materials themselves. From this perspective the impact of the accumulated image transforms the conventional identification between realism and the singular genre image. Realism now enters the diegetic realm of film (of the storyboard and the sequence). But more significantly it also enters an illicit and hidden world of extra-artistic "information." The realism of the artist is increasingly committed either to recovering photographic documentation of events and people that are restricted, or for private or professional use, and to the taking of photographs of a heterodox, oppositional nature itself.

But it is the former that has a heightened efficacy here, because of the general inaccessibility of the artist and photographer to many areas of social experience. Thus, the idea that the "real" is protected or hidden away in state or professional photo-archives becomes a defining site of conflict for the new art as the photo-document exerts its veridical influence on modernism. What the state and various professional bodies want to keep hidden, or want to deny the existence of, begins, therefore, to determine the *imaginary* content of realism: realism is not simply what we know to be common experience, but is excluded from public culture; but that which is held to lie beyond the world of customary and tangible appearances in the realm of theoretical abstraction. And this is why Friedrich's *Krieg dem Kriege* and Tucholsky and Heartfield's *Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles* are so exemplary. The modernism of both books is defined by these counter-archival imperatives. Both books draw on various state and press archives and the collections of various individuals in order to produce an extensive photographic sequence of people and events. As Friedrich makes clear in his acknowledgments at the end of *Krieg dem Kriege*, this can be a risky and clandestine process:

> My hearty thanks are due to Comrade Arthur Wolf, the Association of Proletarian Free Thinkers in Leipzig, as also to our sympathiser Rötteher, of the publishing house "Friede durch Recht" in Wiesbaden, for the large number of photographs supplied. Other pictures have been taken from the "Freie Welt" (organ of the Independent Socialist Party of Germany), which has unfortunately stopped publication. Thanks are also due to many sympathisers who have placed pictures at my disposal but whom I unfortunately cannot mention by name. (Friedrich 1980: 250)

In this regard the relationship between modernism and realism in these books turns less on the use of montage against the counter-archive or on the use of the counter-archive against montage, than on the archival presentation of the photographic document as a form of montage itself. In montage theory in the 1930s, Sergei Tretyakov called this – or something close to it – "sequential montage," or the "systematic analytic sequence," montage as a series of nonlinear photographic elements (cited in Buchloh 1987: 102). And Friedrich and Tucholsky and Heartfield adopt this approach. The counter-archival presentation of the photographic document operates as a space of cross-referenced and interrelated image and text.

It is important, then, that we address how the counter-archive-as-montage works in these books – how, in their respective ways, they construct the appellative subject and partisan spectator and reader. What is striking about *Krieg dem Kriege* is that its counter-archival structure is directed resolutely towards shaming the apologists and defenders of imperialist war and German national interests. In combining deflationary texts with harrowing images of destruction, death, and violence perpetrated during World War I, Friedrich allows no space for doubt or qualification on the part of the viewer. The violence and death are relentless: corpses on the battlefield, corpses piled up in trenches, corpses in various states of *rigor mortis*, naked corpses in a state of advanced decay, mass graves, starving children, hanged soldiers, hanged conscientious objectors, hanged deserters, hanged priests, hanged Bolshevik sympathizers, and, in the final pages, the brutally injured and disfigured faces of front-line survivors. These latter images – taken from a hospital archive – are the appellative core of the book. Their gruesomeness – jaws missing, cheeks missing, gaping holes where mouths should be – quickens the senses, forces the viewer to look and look away at the same time, and, as such, turns the book into something that is physically intrusive and abhorrent. These are images that usually no one sees, just like the victims themselves, who remain hidden away in hospices and sanatoriums. That these photographs have been passed on to Friedrich is an incendiary act; and indeed the culmination of the book represents a powerful confrontation with the forced invisibility of the wounded or disabled soldier after the termination of hostilities. Thus, this is also the point where modernism "breaks down" in the book, the point where the unassimilable, even traumatic content of the photographic document reasserts itself. These images step outside of the montaged frieze of violence and the relentless catalogue of death to produce a visceral shock to the viewer. Such head-wounds historically have largely been absent in the representations of war, even down to the hyper-realistic effects of

contemporary combat movies such as Steven Spielberg's 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan* (see Roberts 1998). This has much to do with the way the head is protected as a site of expressiveness; to show the head violated is to doubly denigrate the body, stripping it of all human integrity. Here Friedrich openly confronts this denigration, producing a succession of images that generate a massive flow of empathy from viewer to soldier, from the living to the dead. And in this sense this is the partisan heart of the book: war and imperialism produce the living dead, produce monsters, and it is the job of propaganda to make this palpable, unacceptable, irredeemable, even if it means reducing these victims to the status of grotesques and the artist and writer to that of the "hysteric." This is a realism of "unveiling," then, that identifies truth with the inability of the capitalist state to protect the body of the worker; and consequently, this sequence of images remains one of the most haunting, challenging, and poignant in the twentieth century, as compelling and unlookable at now as they were in 1919.

John Heartfield and Kurt Tucholsky do not apply these strategies or use such images. Accordingly the demands of realist "unveiling" do not produce the same kind of overwhelming partisan effects. There is nothing in *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* that matches Friedrich's polemical excavation of the state and press photo-archive and its corrosive confrontation with the viewer and reader. Yet, nonetheless, *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* is clearly a work of counter-archival and polemical realism. Most of the deflationary and critical work is done, however, in Tucholsky's texts that accompany each photograph. These run from a few lines to a few pages, and stretch from the presentation of sardonic asides and commentaries to the development of elaborate stories in which imaginary voices support and enunciate the image. Much of the book focuses, therefore, on the absurd or discrepant relationship between image and text. For instance, underneath the image entitled *Gefrorenes Blut* [*Frozen Blood*], an exterior shot of the neoclassical Armory in Berlin, Tucholsky writes: "If you should pass this building, remember that hundreds and thousands of tortured human bodies cry out to the heavens, behind the colored cloth, the uniforms, the coats of arms" (Heartfield and Tucholsky 1972: 71). It is thus largely mundane images of the "Germanic everyday" that Heartfield chooses for Tucholsky to "underwrite" or write against, for these provide a kind of flattened or prosaic ground for Tucholsky's exposures and polemics or elaborate fictions.

In this respect, the writing can be divided into two main rhetorical operations: on the one hand, the writing discloses the hidden or unbidden

content of an image, as in *Gefrorenes Blut*, or it builds a story from an image by extrapolating from its contents, as in *Der Mann, der nicht gut hört* [The Man, does not hear good]. Next to a photograph of cheering people at a political meeting, an old soldier, cynical, misanthropic, anti-socialist, and a perfect recruit for the new Nazi party, continually complains that he "don't hear so good" (Heartfield and Tucholsky 1972: 136). Overall this interplay of fictional voice and satirical or polemical disclosure produces a multitude of correspondences or non-correspondence between photograph and text, text and text, in which fictive and non-fictive speech are played off against each other. The result, therefore, is not so much a social document of interwar Germany, in which the authors seek to disclose the contradictions and divisions of Germany through the generic exposure of what remains unexposed (a strategy that runs through many social-reform photo-texts books of the period); it is instead a counter-archival confrontation with the conflictual *self-images of Germanness*. That is, throughout, the overriding feeling is that, although the book's images have been selected by Heartfield for their ideological suggestibility – most of the photographs were taken from press archives and from his own wide-ranging collection – they do not seem to be part of any shared reality between the authors and their depicted content. The rhetorical impact, rather, is one of disconnection and arbitrariness, a phantasmagoria, as if they were dissociating themselves from any veridical status the images might possess as images of interwar Germany and "homeland."

The outcome is that the selection of the images and the written responses to them appear to be an expression of the authors' fundamental alienation from their content. We might call this ironic distance, but it is not quite the ironic distance employed by Friedrich. Because, although empathy certainly exists in Tucholsky's writing, what distinguishes his writing is an unwillingness – or inability – to possess the image and its extra-representational reality in an expressive, sensuous fashion. Despite Friedrich's angry and sardonic encounter with German militarism and imperialism, Friedrich manages this because of the way in which the photographic document in *Krieg dem Kriege* remains, generally, a site of universal empathy with the historical victim. In *Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles*, there are plenty of historical victims, but the reality of this is always mediated by the realities of what lies outside, beyond, or on the margins of the image of Germaness: proletarian struggle. Thus what distinguishes both the polemical disclosures and the stories is the repeated reference to what is deemed missing from the phantasmagoric reality of the new Germany: a new class-consciousness. Tucholsky repeatedly

takes on the voice of a worker from inside or outside of the photograph: "I am a worker . . . Fifty days out of the year, I work not myself"; "The manual worker is equal to the intellectual worker. The former cannot plan the tower on paper" (Heartfield and Tucholsky 1972: 38, 217). Or he speaks in the name of workers' interests in response to the photograph, whether it depicts workers or not: "A worker's ear gets to know silence only in prison, in solitary" (Heartfield and Tucholsky 1972: 119).

The encounter between realism and modernism in *Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles*, then, in the final analysis, despite the caustic tone shared with Friedrich, is somewhat different to *Krieg dem Kriege*. The place of the classical realist text in Heartfield and Tucholsky is subject to an internal scrutiny and displacement, thereby transforming the ideological function of "unveiling" central to the counter-symbolic function of the classical realist text. What preoccupies Tucholsky and Heartfield is not the exposure of bourgeois interests or the furthering of proletarian interests through the judicious use of the singular partisan voice of proletarian struggle (the Party, the class-conscious worker), but a multiplicity of subject positions in which proletarian struggle is rendered immanent to and emergent from the real as a dialogic space of disparate, cynical, and conflicting voices. This places *Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles* into the realm of fiction proper, and in particular modernist fiction. Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) threads its intertextual presence through the book. As in *Ulysses*, the speaking voice is multiple and autonomous rather than the subfusc expression of a dominant and omnipotent narrative voice. This establishes the partisan voice in the text as subject to a range of different speech-forms. Or rather, the partisan voice itself becomes multiple. This means the reader is placed in the position of someone who overhears, in the sense that the clatter of voices in *Ulysses* move in and out of the text as diegetic fragments. This in turn gives the appellative function of *Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles* a distinctively clamorous character, in a way that is familiar from a lot of post-Dada modernist art and writing. The nonlinear structure and multiple speech-forms become a kind of template of urban and modern discontinuity, contingency, and fracturedness. This is not what preoccupies Friedrich, where his task is to be direct and focused: to make imperialism, militarism, and nationalism as monstrously palpable as possible. Thus although Friedrich ironizes his archival images – seeks to separate them from their official or state functions – he does not ironize his position as commentator and interlocutor.

This, then, is the crucial difference between the displacement of the classical realist text in *Krieg dem Kriege* and in *Deutschland, Deutschland,*

über alles. In *Krieg dem Kriege* Friedrich does not allow his authorial voice to detach itself completely from the veridical claims of the real; he is our authorial guide to the trauma of the photographic archive. "At last, at last the mask has been torn away" (Friedrich 1980: 23). Tucholsky and Heartfield, on the other hand, are our deflationary guides to the phantasmagoria of the archive. Exaggeration and chiasmus intervene in order to separate the authors from their materials. This sets in place a more explicit conflict in the book between the new modernism (with its multiple-partisan voice and sequentiality) and the residual commitment to the classical realist text. Indeed, this tension is made explicit in the foreword. "We want as much as possible to extract the typical from snapshots, posed photographs, all kinds of pictures. And all the pictures together will add up to Germany – a cross section of Germany" (Heartfield and Tucholsky 1972: 3). This direct defense of the veridical truth of photography is, of course, not out of place in the new modernism. After all, the epistemological separation of realism from modernism doesn't really emerge until the mid-to-late 1930s. Nevertheless, the espousal here of photography's unalloyed truth-telling powers appears to contradict the way the voices in the book deliberately drain these powers of their stability and positivism.

These differences, then, in the counter-symbolic "unveiling" of the classical realist text reveals how fluid the relationship between realism and modernism was at the point of photography's emergence into the space of the partisan rewriting of the image in the 1920s. In Friedrich, modernism (irony) is a way of disconnecting the photograph from its dominant state functions, in the name of representing the class interests of the proletarian war dead as a whole. In Tucholsky and Heartfield, modernism is the means whereby official photography is rendered incapable of representing the class interests of the proletariat, and, therefore, has to be constantly and creatively reinscribed, even when the image appears, as in images of labor or struggle, to speak in the name of those interests. In this sense there is a wider ideological tension that unites these books. Although both works rely on the veridical powers of photography, the realist effect of their realism, its distinction from any claims to it as a transparent process, is achieved precisely through their textual, partisan interventions or re-articulations, that is, through the ironizing strategies of modernism, and, in the case of Heartfield and Tucholsky, through their explicit identification of themselves as "the re-authors" of the photographic image. The relationship between appellation, partisanship, and propaganda is here, therefore, a more intricate matter than we might first assume.

Partisanship and Modernism

In an attempt to sort out some of the confusions around partisanship and art, the art historian Arnold Hauser wrote an article in the late 1960s entitled "Propaganda, ideology, and art." In this Hauser follows Marx and Engels in arguing that value in art is itself a form of partisanship, irrespective of whether authors believe themselves to be partisans for a given set of values or ideological position or not. Consequently, for Marx and Engels, partisanship is not a coded term for a defense of "progressive content." Art, rather, is itself partisan, given that the character of the production and consumption of art is a social process through and through. That is, as Hauser says, art "always speaks for somebody to somebody and reflects reality from a particular social standpoint so as to be seen from that standpoint" (Hauser 1971: 131). This is even the case for those whose work appears ideologically "neutral" or reticent, or is avowedly "nonpolitical." The category of partisanship, then, is a way of insisting on the social conditions of authorship, and not the presence or absence of prescribed political content in works. In this its relationship to propaganda and politics needs to be clarified. All artworks are partisan, insofar as they are advocates for a particular class position, a particular set of values or ideological interests. As such, all artworks might be construed as being acts of propaganda for these values and interests – even if the artwork eschews the direct rhetoric of persuasion, the work nevertheless propagandizes for these interests. In this sense propaganda and partisanship are another way of talking about how art, by the very nature of its social conditions of production, is embedded in, and expressive of, an appellative process. As Hauser insists:

> Partisanship in art is legitimate not only because artistic creation is relentlessly involved in practical life, but always because art never just portrays but always seeks at the same time to persuade. It never just expresses something, but always addresses someone. (Hauser 1971: 131)

This is a broad definition of partisanship and propaganda, and, as such, Hauser uses this definition to wrest the idea of propaganda from a debased notion of anti-form or corrupted form. Propaganda is not, to borrow my terminology from the opening of this chapter, an example of failed speech – or rather the speech of the failed artwork – but the undisclosed social space in which the traditions of art contest and negotiate their social position and modes of address. However, this is not to say that art-as-propaganda cannot exhibit the characteristics of failed speech

– the idea of propaganda is not immune to its detractors' criticisms – but rather that the voice of the partisan and the voice of the nonpartisan are not internally separable.

In this respect, this unwillingness to distinguish between the partisan and nonpartisan is useful in reassessing the boundaries of realism and modernism at the point of their exchange and interfusion in the 1920s and 1930s. For, if by the late 1930s the partisan becomes a simple-minded cognate of realism, and the nonpartisan a simple-minded cognate of modernism – insofar as the partisan is assumed to be an unreflective or unthinking advocate of failed speech [as in Greenberg 1986]), in the photo-texts of Friedrich and Heartfield and Tuchlosky partisanship is shown, in an emergent light, to be the explicit *work* of modernism. This is why it is hard to talk about "modernism" and "realism" as discrete categories at all in relation to their work. Their photo-text books are certainly identifiably realist in their effects, given their insistence on art's powers of ideological "unveiling"; but they are also modernist insofar as they insist on authorial ironization as key to this process of unveiling. In this light it is perhaps more appropriate to talk about these works as producing a new hybrid form of artistic production in which modernism steps up to ironize the claims of realism (here defined by the residual traumatic content of the photographic index) and realism steps up to ironize the claims of modernism (the postponement of meaning). And perhaps this is what defines the historic avant-garde at the moment of its politicized, diegetic use of photograph and text. What characterizes the production of art in the epoch of its extended technological reproducibility is that the making of meaning is rendered visible as a partisan process of re-inscription and re-narrativization, leaving "realism" and "modernism" redundant as separate categories and processes. The partisan voice, therefore, becomes constitutive of the production of meaning as a social activity.

This space of the partisan voice, however – as I have stressed – is now thoroughly de-politicized in its continuing identification with failed speech. As a consequence, contemporary cultural debate and praxis have been pushed back into a pre-avant-garde world, in which the realist legacy is re-identified with propaganda and the legacy of modernism with art's autonomy. In this respect, one way of reading the emergence of post-modernism culturally is as a massive onslaught not just against the avant-garde notion of art-as-social-praxis, but against the way in which in the meeting between realism and modernism the historic avant-garde struggled to establish a new kind of authorial relationship to the appellative content of image and text. This is why the avant-garde is not simply a place where the traditional functions of art were dissolved into social praxis,

but also the terrain of realism's and modernism's mutual transformation and interrogation.

Classical realism is, essentially, an aesthetic program based on the representational inclusion of the social cultural practices and labor of the peasantry and working class, and, concomitantly, the deflation of the social prestige and authority of the bourgeoisie (see Hemingway's chapter in this volume). In this respect, from 1848 to the early 1900s, this aesthetic and social program broadly sought to establish a cross-class spectatorship: on the one hand, a bourgeois spectator who was in a position to empathize with proletarian life and its exclusions in order to petition for the amelioration of its most damaging effects and consequences; and on the other, a proletarian spectator who was able to see their interests as a part of newly emergent democratic polity. In the period of the historical avant-garde from 1917–39, the Russian Revolution shattered this "balancing" act, insofar as it destroyed the bohemian and petit-bourgeois artistic base of this process of accommodation. The representation of the real was no longer a means of bringing bourgeois experience and proletarian experience into some kind of common connection, but of transforming the movement of the real itself in the collective interests of working-class experience and emancipation. Inevitably realism as program of social-democratic inclusion became redundant, as the revolutionary transformation of the relations of cultural production radically transformed the conditions of spectatorship and interpellation. Workers, for the first time, are appealed to as the agents of the real, just as workers are included into the processes of artistic production, meaning that the anti-bourgeois function of classical realism became largely inert and academic. The outcome is that realism's counter-symbolic function is replaced by what might be called a praxiological one: the production and reception of art are actively fused as a practical, interventionist process.

Friedrich's and Heartfield and Tucholsky's photo-texts enter this fledgling post-realist realist space, insofar as both works treat the partisan strategies of their work – the *work* of the text and image – as a form of praxis. Yet this praxiological thrust of their art is not to be confused with the instrumental dissolution of artistic autonomy inherited from (postwar) conservative readings of realism. *Kriege dem Kriege* and *Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles* are not works that privilege pedagogy or politics above artistic form. On the contrary, partisanship-as-praxis here is framed in the spirit of modernism. That is, the work of art as an autonomous, authored artifact and its ideological insertion in the world are judged to be inseparable and indivisible. Classical realism in the age of its high-bourgeois production, then, was never so tendentious about the politics

of form, precisely because the painting or the novel always spoke to an imaginary working class from a sphere of petit-bourgeois distance from the practices of working-class life; and this is why many leading post-revolutionary artists, such as Brecht, understood what was at stake polit-ically in this critique of classical realism and the defense of art-as-praxis: the drawing out of the partisan speech immanent to the artwork becomes the conditional base for a new kind of cultural democracy. Partisanship is not the mark of anti-form and the demagogic failure of speech, but the site where the conditions of "modernity" are continually tested and remade.

In summary, then, what is important about this period of the early avant-garde is that it represent a time when the separation of the partisan and nonpartisan breaks down, allowing realism and modernism to infect and redefine each other. This interrelation of identities has much to do, of course, with the fact that the avant-garde transfiguration of modernism and realism exists in a culture in which bourgeois hegemony was not, as yet, congruent with a nascent mass culture and the disappearance of appellation into the functions of the commodity-form. As Henri Lefebvre put it in the late 1960s, the European bourgeoisie in the 1920s and 1930s "lost control" of culture and the public sphere – an unprecedented experience for the capitalist ruling class (Lefebvre 2000). This is easily misunderstood. This is not to say that the left in Europe was at any point during this period in control of the main centers of bourgeois culture, or that Friedrich, Tucholsky and Heartfield, and other artists and writers did not suffer extreme censorship, physical intimidation, and relentless den-igration. By the mid-1930s and the rise of fascism, Tucholsky was dead and Heartfield and Friedrich were in exile, as were many other leading modernists. But, rather, that in the wake of the Russian Revolution and its cultural prestige, and the upsurge of working-class and independent cultural institutions, artists and writers were in a position to speak directly from an explicit class position without the mediation of mass cultural insti-tutions. They therefore did not have to allegorize their own partisanship and working-class interests. This is why after World War II there was such a concerted effort by the Allies to separate out the partisan condi-tions of this culture: either by identifying them as a state-sponsored form of failed speech, namely Stalinist socialist realism; or, less aggressively, by limiting realism, as an antidote to the asocial excesses of modernism, to a localized, provincial language of communality. Postmodernism is the long-drawn-out codification of this expulsion and domestication of real-ism, on the grounds, paradoxically, of a modernist, textualist critique of classical realism. But the postmodern praxiology of the text and the art

institution exists in a world that has visited total ruin on the partisan and appellative as the agency of cultural democracy. Hence what remains distinctive about *Krieg dem Kriege* and *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*, and much other postclassical realist avant-garde art of the time, of course, is that they show us that this separation between appellation and democracy was not always so. Indeed, the interrelationship between appellation, partisanship, and artistic autonomy is revealed to be the very site and life of public culture.

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Chapter 10

Cinematic Realism: "A recreation of the world in its own image"

Laura Marcus

"In the last analysis," the film critic and theorist André Bazin wrote in an essay on "Theater and Cinema" (1951), "the problem before us is that of realism. This is the problem we always end up with when we are dealing with cinema" (Bazin 1967: 107). If the question of cinematic realism is also its problem, this is in part because of the fundamental paradox at the heart of film. It "reproduces" an existing reality, the material and phenomenal world, but the "movement" which, from the outset, was seen to define film as "the moving image" is in fact an illusion – a trick of the eye that renders still images as moving ones. "Realism" and "illusionism" are the poles around which the history of film has been structured, but we might rather think of them as, at a number of levels, profoundly interrelated. As Robert Stam notes, "cinema conjugates the realistic and the fantastical," deploying both the realism of an objective "monstration" (literally, "showing") and the "magic" of montage and superimposition, which opened up new dimensions of time and space (Stam 2005: 13). Cinema came into being, moreover, at the close of the nineteenth century: a period in which, in the literary, the visual, and the more broadly cultural sphere, questions of "realism" and "naturalism," and the relationship between the two, as well as issues of realism as social content or as formal style, had become of central significance.

There are many contenders for the position of founder of the film medium, but the figures that have become most firmly established in this role are the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès. Their different,

ostensibly opposed, modes of film-making have been seen as the two primary tracks along which cinema developed, with Lumière's *actualité* ("current event") films (early examples of which include *The Arrival of a Train at a Station*, *Baby's Breakfast*, and *The Card Game*) represented as the originators of cinematic realism, and Méliès, who began his film career as a magician with a fascination for automata, positioned on the side of "trick film" and cinematic illusionism. On the one hand we have Lumière's *Arrival of a Train* (1895) (in which we see, in a single shot, a train coming into a station, and passengers disembarking), and on the other Méliès' *Voyage à travers l'impossible* (1904), in one sequence of which a train (clearly a model) goes on a fantastical journey, rising into the sky and crashing into the sun.

In recent decades, however, the division between these two modes of cinematic representation has been questioned and even reversed. Méliès made many actuality as well as trick films, while a popular convention in film exhibition was to play with the projection, running film backwards; in this way a film such as Lumière's actuality *The Demolition of a Wall* (1896) was turned into a trick-film, as the rubble built itself back up again. In more complex ways, it has been argued that the capturing of a moment of "real time" in the actuality film created an "uncanny" effect, whereby the past haunted the present, in the representation of what was now utterly past. At the same time, Méliè's trick and fantastical films can be understood not in opposition to realism, but as exploring, exposing, and making marvelous the workings of filmic artifice, and creating an interplay or dialectic between fantasy and realism. For Jean-Luc Godard, Lumière filmed like an impressionist painter, while Méliès documented what turned out to be the future in sending his characters to the Moon (Stam 2005: 13).

These complexities also lie at the heart of the early reception of cinema. In his highly charged account of viewing the Lumières' first films in Russia in 1896, Maxim Gorky described the filmic world as "the kingdom of the shadows . . . It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre" (Adair 1999: 10). For many of cinema's first spectators, the realism or "indexicality" of early films, combined with their unlifelike absence of sound and color, seems to have provoked, in the film historian Yuri Tsivian's words, "the uncanny feeling that films somehow belonged to the world of the dead" (Tsivian 1994: 6). For early commentators who celebrated the new medium, film's "realism" was a cause for wonder, and the very quality of cinematic realism was readily transformed into the *unreality* of representations with the power to simulate life. Cinema's realism is its magic, and its magic is its realism.

The Hidden Life of Little Things

In one of the first book-length studies of film, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), the German-born Harvard psychologist Hugo Munsterberg explored the true development of the cinema as a departure both from the theater and from the reproduction of reality. Film, he argued, possessed unprecedented abilities to produce "rapid change of scenes" and to be "simultaneously here and there," while the development of techniques such as the close-up "leaves all stagecraft behind." Most significantly, it is in the act of film spectatorship that depth and movement, which film both possesses and lacks, come into being: "*They are present and yet they are not in the things*" (Munsterberg 2002: 78). Munsterberg's arguments foreshadow later developments in the philosophy of film and, in particular, debates over the illusory nature of filmic motion, with its implications for questions of perception and cognition.

Munsterberg's celebration of film as an overcoming of reality, and his insistence on the part played by inner processes in creating the filmic world, might seem to mark him out as an anti-realist. It contains, however, significant elements – including a neo-Kantian focus on the aesthetic autonomy of "the photoplay" and its removal from practical interests – which anticipate elements of more recent realist film theories. For the philosopher Stanley Cavell, for example, cinema creates a world which is not only complete without us, but predicated on our absence from it. As Cavell writes:

> I was led to consider that what makes the physical medium of film unlike anything else on earth lies in the absence of what it causes to appear to us; that is to say, in the nature of our absence from it; in its fate to reveal reality and fantasy (not by reality as such, but) by projections of reality, projections in which . . . reality is freed to exhibit itself. (Cavell 1979: 166)

For Cavell, our exclusion from the reality projected on to the screen is a form of distancing held to be indicative of more general forms of estrangement from the modern world; in this sense, his model of cinematic realism and representation is a diagnosis of our times. His account of film is, however, as powerfully represented in his concept of reality's freedom "to exhibit itself." It is this dimension of *The World Viewed* that comes closest to the responses of a number of modernist writers to cinema, including and especially Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson; these became intertwined with the vision of a world perceived without a self and with explorations of the interplay of presence and absence, or,

in the film theorist Christian Metz's phrase, "the presence of an absence" (see Metz 1982). In her short story "The Garden" (1924), Dorothy Richardson represented both childhood consciousness and the workings of memory in cinematic form: "Pretty *pretty* flowers. Standing quite still, going on being how they were when no one was there" (Richardson 1989: 21). This play with authorial absence and presence is at the heart of Woolf's essay "The Cinema" (1926), in which she described the different "reality" of early films: "We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it . . . Beauty will continue to be beautiful whether we behold it or not" (Woolf 1994: 349). In the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Woolf produced a literary equivalent to the cinematic aesthetic, not only by using visual images to express emotion and by animating objects into nonhuman life, but by presenting reality itself as if in the absence of the perceiving subject.

For Woolf, as for Cavell, cinema, despite its powers to produce the effect of movement, is conceptualized as essentially photographic. The stress on the photograph as the technological and phenomenological basis for film's recording of physical reality is at the heart of realist film theory, and is based on the view that photographic images are "indexical" signs. The concept of indexicality was developed in the work of Charles Peirce who argued that "photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are . . . in certain respects . . . exactly like the objects they represent," corresponding "point by point to nature" (Wollen 1972: 123–4). Such a model of the photograph's relationship to reality as one of "physical connection" was fundamental to the theories of André Bazin, who (along with Jacques Doniol-Valcroze) founded the highly influential periodical *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1951, seven years before his early death. The whole body of Bazin's work (mostly written between 1944 and 1958), his English translator Hugh Gray writes, is based on "an affirmation of the objectivity of the cinema in the same way as all geometry is centered on the properties of a straight line" (Bazin 1967: 5).

For a number of cinema's detractors, writing at the medium's birth, filmic "realism" was identified with literary naturalism, in the alleged mutual inability of the two forms to select from and compose the welter of details that make up the phenomenal world; and photography and film were negatively contrasted with painting. In his essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1924), Bazin argued that photography freed painting from its "obsession with likeness":

> Painting was forced, as it turned out, to offer us illusion and this illusion
> was reckoned sufficient unto art. Photography and the cinema on the other

hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism . . . All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence. (Bazin 1967: 12–13)

The absence of man is identified with the camera's mechanical mediation of the world: "For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent" (Bazin 1967: 96). For Bazin, the relationship between the photograph and the object is defined as that of a fingerprint, an imprint or a mold, a "tracing" of an object or person through a lens which takes a "veritable luminous impression in light," and which should be understood as "a kind of identity" rather than "mere resemblance" (Bazin 1967: 96). The cinema takes photography a step further, in that it "makes a molding of the object as it exists in time and, furthermore, makes an imprint of the duration of the object" (Bazin 1967: 97). The film aesthetician Rudolf Arnheim, writing in the 1930s, had based his arguments for film as an art on a refutation of the assertion that film is nothing but the mechanical reproduction of real life (Arnheim 1933: 17), while Bazin, and other theorists in the realist tradition, sought to show how profound were the ontological implications of what Walter Benjamin had termed "mechanical reproducibility" (Benjamin 1968).

Bazin represented the "evolution" of the cinema as an ever-increasing realism. In his essay "The Myth of Total Cinema" (1946), he noted the "utopian" aspirations of the early inventors of pre-cinematic and cinematic technologies, whose ideas, he argued, were more significant than, and often preceded, their basic technical discoveries. The precursors of cinema were more like prophets, and the guiding myth which inspired the invention of cinema was "an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time" (Bazin 1967: 21). It is in this context that early cinematic machines, such as Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope, were imagined as developing into perfected technologies able to represent a world indistinguishable from material reality. For Bazin, each new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, "take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented!" (Bazin 1967: 21).

Whereas for most film historians the radical break came with the coming of sound in the late 1920s, Bazin noted that sound was very much part of the early imagining of cinema. In his arguments, the significance of the sound image lies in the ways in which it carried film towards a greater realism: "the talkie sounded the knell of a certain aesthetic of the language of film, but only wherever it had turned its back on its vocation

in the service of realism" – by deploying, for example, "metaphor and symbol in exchange for the illusion of objective presentation" (Bazin 1967: 38). The cinematic "realists" include, for Bazin, the directors F. W. Murnau, Erich von Stroheim, Robert Flaherty, Carl Dreyer, and Jean Renoir. Renoir, Bazin argued, "forced himself to look back beyond the resources provided by montage and so uncovered the secret of a film form that would permit everything to be said without chopping the world up into little fragments, that would reveal the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them" (38). In the period after 1940, Bazin argued, there was a "regeneration of realism," which he located in the "spatial realism," including the "long take" and "deep focus" cinematography of Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, and William Wyler. Bazin also championed the neo-realism of the Italian cinema of this period, exemplified in the films of Vittorio de Sica and Roberto Rossellini. In all his writings on cinema, Bazin tended to exclude those film styles and genres that did not conform to his realist aesthetic, overlooking, for example, the centrality of *film noir*, which inherited so much of the German Expressionist tradition, in the 1940s, and arguing that an Expressionist film such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* should be seen as theatrical rather than essentially cinematic.

For Bazin, the distinction between the realism of the traditional realist artist, such as Émile Zola, and that of the neorealist film director is that the first analyzes reality into parts which he then reassembles into a synthesis, determined by his "moral conception" of the world, "whereas the consciousness of the neorealist film director *filters* reality" (Bazin 1971: 98). The influence of Henri Bergson's philosophy can be detected here, as throughout Bazin's writings, with its emphasis on the flow of existence, and the hostility towards a "cinematographic" model of consciousness which segments space and time (as, for Bazin, "montage" chops reality up into little fragments). Bazin's theories form part of a phenomenological tradition in which, as Ian Aitken notes, "analysis is based on a process of description, or reconstruction, which reveals the deep structures which would ordinarily escape notice, as human experience is driven on by more functional imperatives" (Aitken 2001: 180).

This dimension of Bazin's work connects it to the writings on film of Siegfried Kracauer and in particular to his late work, *Theory of Film: the Redemption of Physical Reality*, first published in 1960. Kracauer began from the premise that an understanding of cinema begins with exploration of the nature of the photographic medium – "along with photography, film is the only art which leaves its raw material more or less intact" (Kracauer 1965: x); though he also notes that films differ from photographs

in two respects – "they represent reality as it unfolds in time; and they do so with the aid of cinematic techniques and devices" (Kracauer 1965: 41). The raw material of the cinema – that which it is "uniquely equipped to render" and that by which it is animated – is "transient material life, life at its most ephemeral. Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions are its very meat" (Kracauer 1965: ix). The reality which cinema renders is thus, for Kracauer, profoundly imbricated with that of urban modernity.

For Kracauer, editing techniques such as the close-up do not necessarily detract from filmic realism, making the audience overly conscious of the cutting, as Bazin suggested, but have the potential to disclose "hidden aspects of the world about us," penetrating the world before our eyes (Kracauer 1965: 49). There are strong echoes here of the writings of the Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs, for whom the close-up revealed "the hidden life of little things" (Balázs 1952: 54), as well as Walter Benjamin's comments on film in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction":

> By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. (Benjamin 1968: 236)

Photography and film thus both reveal the true lineaments of reality, and open out onto an unprecedented vision of the world. For Kracauer, cinema should, Dudley Andrew suggests, "be an expression not of man's but of the world's meaning, in so far as man can see it" (Andrew 1976: 114).

The Feel of the World

In "The Cinema," Virginia Woolf charted the evolution of the cinema from early actualities to literary adaptations: "The picture-makers seem dissatisfied with such obvious sources of interest as the passage of time and the suggestiveness of reality . . . They want to be improving, altering, making an art of their own – naturally, for so much seems to be within their scope" (Woolf 1994: 349). Her account chimes with those of later film theorists. Thus Jean-Louis Comolli, for example, argued that

early cinema was developed as a means of accurately reproducing reality, with visual codes imposed in accord with dominant late nineteenth-century cultural perceptions of the real world (Comolli 1977). Such an interpretation of realism was, as Woolf suggested, short-lived, overtaken both by fictional representations and by an increased manipulation of reality. This occurred, as Paul Willeman has written, "in the name of greater realism by action on the pro-filmic event: camera movement, editing, lighting, i.e. by the use of cinematic codes" (Willeman 1977: 49). Commercial cinema began to deploy these techniques in the name of an increased realism, while political cinema, in the Soviet Union in the 1920s in particular, sought the representation of a "new reality." "Reality" was now understood as a "reality-effect," constructed by the new cinematic codes.

The work of the Soviet film theorists and film-makers Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov is of central importance here, as is the nature of the disagreement between the two. Vlada Petric has suggested that the debates revolved around the problem of staged and unstaged cinema. For Eisenstein, who began his career in the theater, and for whom literature remained an extremely important point of reference, stylization and expressive shot compositions produced "a conscious and active remaking [*perekraivanie*] of reality, not so much reality in general, but every single event and each specific fact." By contrast, Vertov saw such methods as incompatible with the "recording of facts, classification of facts, dissemination of facts, and agitation with facts" (Petric 1987: 49).

Where Eisenstein insisted that the impact of the film image on the viewer depended on its stylization both before and after the shooting, Vertov expressed his belief in the camera's power to "unveil those aspects of the filmed event which otherwise cannot be perceived" (Petric 1987: 51). Vertov, along with other Soviet film-makers, including his fellow Constructivists Esther Shub and Alexei Gan, was committed to the "Film-Truth" principle. Even a film as reflexive and experimental as *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) was, Vertov argued, "only the sum of the facts recorded on film, or if you like, not merely the sum, but the product, a 'higher mathematics' of facts" (Vertov 1984: 84). It represented, in his account, film's freedom from "the tutelage of literature and the theater," and opposed "'life as it is,' seen by the aided eye of the movie camera (kino-eye), to 'life as it is,' seen by the imperfect human eye" (84–5). Cinema's vocation was, he argued, to capture "the feel of the world," by substituting the "perfectible eye" of the camera for the "imperfect" human eye (Vertov 1984: xxv). For Vertov, documentary films and fictional films were two separate genres, whose means of expression should not be mixed. Eisenstein, on the other hand, used nonprofessional actors

in staged and fiction films, selected on the basis of "typage" (the appropriateness of their physical appearance to the parts they were playing), as well as other conventions of documentary film.

The arguments between Eisenstein and Vertov do not, ultimately, represent consistently held and clear-cut positions, in large part because both men were involved in film-making during turbulent years in the Soviet Union (during which it became increasingly necessary for film-makers, like the writers and painters discussed by Brandon Taylor in this volume, to conform to principles of "socialist realism") – and their positions were shaped accordingly. The complexities of Eisenstein's film theories, and their changes over time, also make it difficult to situate his ideas firmly in the camps of either the "anti-realists" or the "realists." His theories of "montage" (a term drawn from engineering, which he defined as "assembling") were at the heart of his aesthetics and politics, and began with his model of the "montage of attractions," subsequently developed into the idea that each element of the film should be in a dynamic relationship both to other filmic elements and to the spectator, who would play a crucial role in the final determination of meaning. The focus would thus appear to be strongly on the constructed nature of reality and on the historical and cultural specificity of "realism."

In the 1930s, Eisenstein, as Aitken notes, "became increasingly driven by a desire to ground his work in the theoretical principles of Marxist dialectical materialism" (Aitken 2001: 33). His conceptual commitments were to both a "unifying principle" in the film work and "the dialectical principle of contradiction," as well as to the integration of the compositional aspects of the film (pictorial and narrative) with its political and social themes. In his final works and writings, Eisenstein developed "a theory of cinematic spectatorship, authorship and film form in which the state of ecstasy transports the spectator into the heart of reality itself, as film-maker, film and spectator become fused into an organic whole" (Aitken 2001: 43–4). This represented a form of symbolist realism, deriving from Eisenstein's attempt to find his own symbolist approach to socialist realism.

The writings and films of the Soviet film-makers, including Dovzhenko and Pudovkin as well as Vertov and Eisenstein, were formative influences on the documentary film-makers and theorists who came to prominence in Britain in the 1930s, including John Grierson, Humphrey Jennings, Paul Rotha, and Basil Wright. The term "documentary" has been defined as "the creative treatment of actuality": Rotha's gloss on the term in 1936 was "the use of the film medium to interpret creatively and in social terms the life of the people as it exists in reality" (Rotha 1936: 5). It was first

used in a filmic sense by Grierson in 1926, when he wrote of Robert
Flaherty's *Moana*: "Being a visual account of the daily life of a Polynesian
youth, [the film] has documentary value" (Grierson 1966: 11). Grierson,
who was the prime mover in the British documentary film movement,
was initially strongly influenced by both Flaherty and Eisenstein. For
Bazin, Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), with its representation of
a seal-hunt in "real time," was valuable precisely because it eschewed
"montage by attraction" (Bazin 1967: 27). Grierson, by contrast, sought
to bring together Flaherty's representations of the natural world with
the dynamic editing and symphonic structure of Eisenstein's *Battleship
Potemkin* (1925). The two modes are combined in Grierson's *Drifters*,
a film on the Scottish herring fisheries, made in 1929 under the aegis of
the Empire Marketing Board. *Drifters*, Grierson wrote, "is about the sea
and about fisherman, and there is not a Piccadilly actor in the piece":

> The life of Natural cinema is in this massing of detail, in this massing of
> all the rhythmic energies that contribute to the blazing fact of the matter.
> Men and the energies of men, things and the functions of things, horizons
> and the poetics of horizons: these are the essential materials. And one must
> never grow so drunk with the energies and the functions as to forget the
> poetics. (Grierson 1966: 20)

For Grierson, the power and the poetry of the cinema resided largely
in its images. The "movie mind," he wrote, "has to feel its way through
the appearances of things, choosing, discarding and choosing again . . .
seeking always those more significant appearances" (Aitken 2001: 167).
Here again we see the influence of Béla Balázs, for whom film could express
a poetic reality existing beyond, but only comprehended through, empir-
ical reality.

In an article on "The Course of Realism," Grierson traced a now fam-
iliar path, with its negative spin on the "feminization" of cinema, from early
actuality films to trick films and commercial cinema: "The scarlet women
were in, and the high falsehood of trickwork and artifice was in, and the
first fine careless rapture was over" (Grierson 1966: 70). The inaugural
realist impulse of film was occasionally glimpsed, Grierson suggested, in
the "fresh air" of early Danish and Swedish cinema and in the American
Westerns (a genre he admired), in which "there was some reflection of
ordinary life in the drama . . . contacts with the real thing" (Grierson 1966:
71). Until the early 1930s, however, actuality film was, he argued, for
the most part confined to the newsreel that, once unmoored from the
present of its representations, "seem[s] now of only the evanescent and

the essentially unreal . . . mistaking the phenomenon for the thing in itself, and ignoring everything that gave it the trouble of conscience and penetration and thought." The change came with the *March of Time*, an American newsreel of the mid-1930s, which won for cinema "the elementary principles of public discussion" (Grierson 1966: 72).

Grierson represented both the newsreel and the nature film as occupying easier territory than the "realist showing" of the group of film-makers which included "Ruttmann for Germany, Flaherty for America, Eisenstein and Pudovkin for Russia, Cavalcanti for France, and myself, shall I say, for Britain" (Grierson 1966: 74). The greatness of Flaherty's films, Grierson argued, was, however, profoundly compromised by the studio system and the demands of commercial cinema, which introduced a "synthetic spectacle," and "brings the film [*Elephant Boy* (1937)] to an artificial, different plane," one which failed to realize "the full perspective of reality." More successful, in Grierson's account, were the "city symphonies" so central to European cinema of the 1920s and early 1930s, exemplified here by Ruttmann's *Berlin* and Cavalcanti's *Rien que les Heures*, both "day in the life of a city" films. The British documentary effort, Grierson wrote, tended to be "less aesthetic and more social in its approach." In the films that followed *Drifters*, "from the idyllic pictures of Scottish shepherds to the complex and more difficult cross-sections of shipyards, airlines, radio services, weather forecasts, night mails, international economics etc. etc. we relied similarly, beyond renter and exhibitor alike, on the people, and their superior taste in realism" (Grierson 1966: 77).

The question of realism continued to be at the heart of some of the most significant mid-twentieth-century developments in film. These include the pictorialist, naturalist, and impressionist cinemas of France in the 1920s (in which interpretations of the "naturalism" of Zola played a pivotal role), extended in the "poetic realism" of French cinema in the late 1930s (identified with directors including Jean Renoir, Marcel Carné, and Julien Duvivier). The neo-realism of Italian cinema in the 1940s had a profound impact on other world cinemas, in particular Brazilian film, and a more diffuse influence on later European realist cinemas, including the French "New Wave" of the 1950s and 1960s (exemplified by the films of Godard, Truffaut, and Chabrol) and the "New Wave" and "social problem" films of 1960s Britain, which intersected so strongly with the fiction and drama of the period.

Italian neo-realism, which emerged in the years immediately following the liberation of Italy in 1943–5, was exemplified by the films of directors including Rossellini, de Sica, and Visconti. Central characteristics

of neo-realism included a preference for location filming and the use of nonprofessional actors; an attentiveness to everyday reality; a concern with the life of the popular classes in the aftermath of war; and an articulation of hopes, and fears, in relation to the possibility of political renewal after the years of fascist dictatorship (Nowell-Smith 1996: 87).

The strongest influences on Italian neo-realism were the "poetic realism" of French pre-World War II cinema (a somewhat nebulous movement, whose "realism" tended to be studio-created and in which visual style played a dominant role) and the conventions of documentary film. As the French film-critic Georges Sadoul wrote, after viewing Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945) in 1946: "This work, made with almost no money and no means, brings more to the cinema than two hundred recent Hollywood films, despite their unlimited capital and technical resources . . . A new realism is born, which owes much to newsreels, the journalist's investigations, the work of the documentary film-makers" (Forgacs 2001: 9). David Forgacs suggests that the film's reception as quasi-documentary was influenced as much by the immediacy of the events which *Rome Open City* reconstructed as by its style: events which took place in Rome during the first months of 1944, when the city was under German occupation. It was shot partly on location, and used local extras and untrained actors, while its focus on the urban scene remade, in newly political and dramatic terms, the genre of the "city symphony" that had helped to define concepts of film realism for an earlier generation. The film was the first of a trilogy that included *Paisà* (1946) and *Germany Year Zero* (1947): here too Rossellini filmed ruined cities in their actual state. As the Italian script-writer and novelist Cesare Zavatini wrote: "Neorealism has perceived that the most irreplaceable experience comes from things happening under our own eyes from natural necessity" (Williams 1980: 30).

Bazin's extensive writings on neo-realism, and in particular on de Sica and Rossellini, are indicative of the extent to which Italian neorealist cinema shaped the debates about film realism which dominated film theory in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Realism took on a new urgency in the 1940s: "postwar film realism emerged from the smoke and ruins of European cities; the immediate trigger for the mimetic revival was the calamity of World War II" (Stam 2000: 73). Claims such as Zavatini's for the value of the real were, however, increasingly met by an equally strong affirmation of the constructed nature of film reality. The argument was staged again on the pages of influential journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma* which, in 1955, recorded an interview between the French film-maker Eric Rohmer and the theorists Comolli, Pascal

Bonitzer, Serge Daney, and Jean Narboney. "What is remarkable about the discussion," Christopher Williams has remarked, "is that the interlocutors agree about nothing at all" (Williams 1980: 244). "If it is true," Rohmer argued, "that the other arts have driven us away from the world, then the art of the cinema has brought us back to it." For the *Cahiers* interlocutors, on the other hand, the act of looking at "things" in the film "for a length of time will eventually make them say increasingly different things. So we are left confronting 'the concrete of the film' and not the 'concrete of the world'." "A film," Rohmer countered, "does not deliver a translation of the world for us to admire, but, rather, through the translation, it delivers the world itself" (Williams 1980: 255).

Realism in Theory

Debates about realism were to the fore in the British film journal *Screen* during the 1970s, with essays by Raymond Williams, Colin McCabe, and others. Paul Willeman argued strongly against Bazin's "absolutist" approach, and constructed a two-stage model of filming, in which the act of filming "disjoins and reassembles an object or a series of objects which produces a clearly readable meaning which it did not necessarily possess prior to the operation" (Willeman 1977: 42). The approaches of *Screen* theorists were informed by Soviet film theory, theoretical Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, the work of the Frankfurt School (in particular Walter Benjamin), and the writings of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's upholding of modernist "alienation effects" and theatrical "distantiation" (between actor and part, actor and spectator) in the service of a penetration of the ideological mask of realist conventions (and, indeed, in the name of a more truthful representation), was also favorably contrasted with Georg Lukács's critique of modernist subjectivism and reflexivity and his defense of nineteenth-century realist fiction (see Leslie's chapter in this volume). Arguments developed in the spheres of theater and literature were thus applied to film, with the concept of the "classic realist" text extended to Hollywood cinema in particular. Roland Barthes's structuralist decodings of cultural mythologies and his concept of "reality effects" were also a central influence, informing approaches to "the classical Hollywood film": "By effacing the signs of production, dominant cinema persuaded spectators to take what were really nothing but constructed effects as transparent renderings of the real" (Stam 2000: 143). The aspects of Hollywood cinema which were held to be particularly complicit in this illusionary realism included editing techniques and

codes which smoothed over transitions in time and space, and from shot to shot, working towards continuity, implying subjectivity, and absorbing the spectator in the narrative frame. These then became those aspects of film disrupted and rejected by the alternative, feminist, experimental, and counter-cinemas of the period.

The concept of a "dominant" cinema has, in recent decades, been challenged in different ways by multiculturalist and postcolonial perspectives on film. The opening up of film studies to world cinemas has led to an increased awareness of the multiplicity of representations and realisms. The 1990s, for example, saw the flourishing of an Iranian cinema which has drawn on the work of the neorealists to produce a "realism tempered with poetic sensibility and reflexive experiment" (Armstrong 2005: 84); while an intermingling of documentary and fiction has been characteristic of much "Third World" cinema.

The "Dogme 95" cinema of Denmark was an attempt to reinvent film along the lines of Lumière's realist aesthetic. Dogme's "Vow of Chastity" included the rules that shooting must be done on location, with props natural to that location, and with the film taking place in the "here and now." The rules may to some extent have been a publicity stunt, or even a parody of an artistic "manifesto," but they are indicative of the extent to which the presentation of "reality" is no longer seen to be in conflict with a cinematic avant-garde. There has also been a return to, or reinvention of, documentary cinema in North America and elsewhere, while (as Rachel Bowlby suggests in the Foreword) "reality TV" simulates "real life" and the performance of reality in ways that raise new questions about spectatorship, voyeurism and participation, and truth and reality effects.

The question of film realism has also taken a number of different theoretical turns, including a return to earlier positions and theories. There has been a striking resurgence of interest in the "phenomenological" and "ontological" realisms exemplified in the theories of Bazin, Kracauer, and Cavell. A concern with narrative, and with textual analysis of filmic narratives, appears to have ceded to a fascination with the ontology of film and the philosophical implications of the cinematic apparatus. A century after the emergence of cinema, there is a marked critical desire to recapture and comprehend the "uncanny realism" of film at its birth. Such approaches to film are also strongly influenced by Henri Bergson and his interpreter Gilles Deleuze, for whom realism "no longer refers to a mimetic, analogical adequation between sign and referent, but rather to the sensate feel of time, to the intuition of lived duration, the mobile slidings of Bergsonian *durée*. Film restores the real rather than represents it" (Stam 2000: 259).

The association of "realism" with automation and the simulation of "life" has also led to a new concern with "mimesis." In his writings on Charlie Chaplin, Bazin noted the ways in which "Charlie" attempted to hide from the violence of the world by means of camouflage, as an insect conceals itself by becoming as one with its environment. Bazin's insight has been extended in the recent interest in a form of realism as imitative life, redefined through the terms of automatism, the machine–body nexus, and the leveling of the distinction between the body and the object. The equation of "modernism" in the cinema with avant-garde and experimental film has been supplemented by an interest in "modernist mimesis," including the ways in which a writer such as James Joyce replicated cinematic representation, in his explorations of gesture and the minutiae of the everyday and in the intensity of his focus on the object-world.

The fascination with cinema's origins, and with film's "uncanny realism" and the implications of its machine-apparatus, has arisen at the point at which theorists have turned to models of "post-cinema," in an age of globalized digital media and digital theory. The shift in media technology from "analog" (in which a machine converts physical quantities into images and sounds) to "digital" (which represents the process of transformation as information or data, subsequently converted back into an analog signal) must inflect our understandings of "realism" and "reality effects" in ways that are still unfolding. "Film" now exists on a continuum, and intermeshes with an array of visual, aural, and informational technologies. Yet the shift would not seem to herald the end of cinema. The current situation, as Stam notes, "uncannily recalls that at the beginning of cinema as a medium . . . Then, as now, everything seemed possible" (Stam 2000: 318). Thus we look back to cinema's origins in realism and in magic to understand our own present.

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Chapter 11

The Current of Critical Irrealism: "A moonlit enchanted night"

Michael Löwy

Realism and Irrealism

The concept of "critical realism" has a long tradition in Marxist and radical literary studies. One can trace its origin to the scattered but insightful remarks made by Marx and Engels themselves on Balzac, Dickens, and other authors – novelists admired for their gift for documenting the reality of bourgeois society more perceptively than "all the professed historians, economists and statisticians," as Engels put it in his letter to Margaret Harkness in April 1888 (Marx and Engels 1973: 115). It is Georg Lukács who more systematically (though also more dogmatically) developed the aesthetic theory of critical realism, represented according to him by the great classic literary tradition, from Honoré de Balzac to Walter Scott, and from Leo Tolstoy to Thomas Mann. There is much relevance in the concept of critical realism, but it tends to become exclusive and rigid. Too often – and this certainly applies to Lukács's application of it – realism appears as the only acceptable form of art, and the only one that can have a critical edge in relation to contemporary social reality.

Are there not many nonrealist works of art which are valuable and contain a powerful critique of the social order? In other terms, is there not a category of literary and artistic creation that could be identified as "critical irrealism"? This formulation obviously does not exist in any dictionary, and nor is it a component of any established literary terminology, but I would argue that it is helpful in describing a vast arena of

the literary landscape that has been neglected, despised, or ignored by (most of) the partisans of critical realist aesthetics. Of course, there is an element of provocation and irony in manufacturing this expression, but it has I think a deeper relevance.

What do I mean by *irrealism*? Obviously it is conceived as the counterpart to realism, in the ordinary meaning of the word for aesthetics. In order to define the former term, then, it is necessary briefly to survey the conventional definitions of the latter term – not according to the specific theoretical arguments of one scholar or another, but in the established use of the word, codified by dictionaries and encyclopedias. Interestingly enough, the main scholar writing on the history of realism, Erich Auerbach, did not try to define the word in his classic work *Mimesis* (1946): in the epilogue to the book, he explains that he has deliberately avoided any attempt at systematic description or theoretical elaboration of the term "realism." In fact, Auerbach does refer to some characteristics of modern realism – such as addressing daily life, in its historical context, as the subject of serious, problematic, and even tragic presentation – but this stops short of any substantive definition (Auerbach 1946: 494, 496).

According to the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995), "paintings, films, books, etc., that try to represent life as it really is are in the artistic tradition of realism." One could therefore argue that paintings, films, books that *do not* try to represent life as it really is belong to the realm of irrealism. Irrealist works of art can take various forms: gothic novels, fairy tales, fantastic stories, oneiric narratives, utopian or dystopian novels, surrealist art, and many others. Usual definitions of realism insist on the importance of "precise detail." According to the *OED*, realism in its most common usage is "the close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise details of the real thing or scene." Similarly, Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* (1981) defines realism as "the theory or practice in art and literature of fidelity to nature or to real life and to accurate representation without idealization of the most typical views, details and surroundings of the subject." This emphasis is, however, potentially misleading: it is not the "details" that distinguish realist from irrealist works. For instance, in a fairy tale such as "Sleeping Beauty," most of the concrete details are precise and "accurate," but the story is certainly not realistic: its fundamental logic is not that of "fidelity to real life"; it is founded on a logic of the imagination, of the marvelous, of the mystery or the dream. Of course, all these definitions of realism presuppose that such a thing as an "objective" natural and social reality, independent of human subjectivity, exists – a presupposition that, in contrast to many postmodernists, I share. This

does not mean that subjective aspects – culture, ideology, individual feelings – do not enter, necessarily, into our perception or knowledge of this "objective" reality, not to speak of its literary or artistic representation.

In *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1956), first published in the United States as *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle*, Lukács too defines "the literature of realism" as one that aims at "a truthful reflection of reality"; but he employs a much narrower concept of this "truthful reflection," since he rejects as belonging to "modern anti-realism" some of the most important authors of the twentieth century: Joyce, Kafka, Musil, Proust, Faulkner, Woolf, and others (Lukács 1971: 23). It is because of their "subjectivism" – which consists in "exalting man's subjectivity, at the expense of the objective reality" – that this modernist literature is "anti-realist" (24). Lukács's discourse is exceedingly dogmatic in its exclusion of "subjectivism" from realist literature – as if art, in all its forms, was not necessarily "subjective." Moreover, it is seriously corrupted by typical Stalinist arguments, for instance the astonishing claim that modernist works of art based on the subjective feeling of *angst* cannot avoid "guilt by association with Hitlerism and the preparations for atomic war" (81). This argument is not only politically and aesthetically absurd, but has a sinister resonance, since "guilt by association" was a standard Stalinist argument in the Moscow Trials of the 1930s. Lukács's book has little in common with his brilliant early Marxist writings, such as *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Indeed it is probably one of his most unconvincing essays, but Lukács's culture and intelligence are such that even his weakest writing raises interesting questions. It was ferociously criticized by Theodor Adorno, in an essay entitled "Extorted Reconciliation" (1965), which defends the modernist authors and rejects Lukács's viewpoint that true art should be the "reflection of objective reality" – or the "copy (*abbildung*) of empirical reality" – as a fetishistic adherence to vulgar materialism (Adorno 1965: 153).

What I understand as irrealism has little in common with Lukács's concept of "anti-realism" – not only because most of his "subjectivist" authors are not foreign to realism, but also because irrealism does not oppose realism. It describes the absence of realism rather than an opposition to it. To some extent, the concepts of realism and irrealism should be considered as "ideal-types" in the Weberian sense: that is, as entirely coherent and "pure" epistemological constructions; in contradistinction to empirical literary texts, which tend to be an "impure" combination of both realism and irrealism. In fact, there is hardly an irrealist work that does not contain elements of realism, and vice versa. Moreover, many important literary *œuvres* – Franz Kafka's novels and tales for instance – defy

such classifications. They establish themselves in a no-man's-land, a border territory, between reality and "irreality." Kafka's writings do not follow the classical realist cannon, because of their disquieting oneiric atmosphere: the author seems to erase – silently, discreetly, unnoticed – all distinction between dream and reality. Take for example the astonishing fragment from 1915 found in his *Diaries* (Kafka 1954: 422–3) in which the main character dreams that an ancient knight plunges a sword into his spine, and then awakes to discover that a great and ancient knightly sword has indeed been thrust in his back. He is saved by his friends, who, standing on a chair, slowly pull it out, millimeter by millimeter. This marvelous confusion between dream or nightmare and reality is also present, in a less direct form, in his novels, like *The Trial* (1925). According to Lukács, Kafka's "vision of a world dominated by *angst*, and of man at the mercy of incomprehensible terrors" is typical of modernist anti-realism – "an essentially subjective vision is identified with reality itself" (Lukács 1971: 36, 52). What Lukács does not seem to realize is that Kafka's visionary power flows precisely from this subjective approach, which, without being either "realist" or "anti-realist," illuminates social reality from the inside (see Löwy 2004).

Of course, not all irrealist literature or art is critical. Fairy tales can for instance be quite conformist in their ethical and social values. The term "critical irrealism" can be applied to *œuvres* that do not follow the rules governing the "accurate representation of life as it really is" but that are nevertheless critical of social reality. The critical viewpoint of these works of art is often related to the dream of another, imaginary world, either idealized or terrifying, one opposed to the gray, prosaic, disenchanted reality of modern, meaning capitalist, society. Even when it takes the superficial form of a flight from reality, critical irrealism can contain a powerful implicit negative critique, challenging the philistine bourgeois order. The word "critique" should in this context not be understood as relating to a rational argument, a systematic opposition, or an explicit discourse; more often, in irrealist art, it takes the form of protest, outrage, disgust, anxiety, or *angst* (the feeling so thoroughly dismissed by Lukács). Sometimes, as in utopian fiction, the critique is only present indirectly, through the idealized images of a different, nonexistent reality.

Most – or at least a very substantial part – of critical irrealist art belongs to the tradition of Romanticism, and to its later manifestations such as Symbolism and Surrealism. This has to do not only with its characteristic literary style but also with its social, political, and philosophical outlook (Auerbach did not, for example, consider the Romantic novels of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as realistic, because their view of social reality

was too much determined by his belief in Natural Rights [Auerbach 1946: 413]). The relationship of Romanticism and critical irrealism is best defined by what might be called an "elective affinity." In order fully to define critical irrealism it is therefore necessary to discuss the meaning of Romanticism as a cultural phenomenon.

Romanticism

The established view of Romanticism is based on the apparently obvious assumption that it is a broadly literary movement dating from the turn of the nineteenth century. In his celebrated book *Natural Supernaturalism* (1973), for example, M. H. Abrams asks "what can properly be called Romantic." His answer is that the major Romantic figures are those poets "who came to literary maturity during the crisis precipitated by the course of the French Revolution," namely Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schiller, and Hölderlin (Abrams 1973: 427–8). This assumption is doubly wrong: first, although of course it has an important literary component, Romanticism is much more than a literary phenomenon; and second, it did not come to an end either in 1830 or in 1848. Romanticism is a worldview (in the German meaning of *Weltanschauung*) which manifests itself in all spheres of cultural life: literature, poetry, art, religion, philosophy, political ideas, social theories, historiography, and the social sciences. Its history extends from Rousseau to the present, from the second half of the eighteenth to the beginning of the twenty-first century. One could encapsulate its concept (*Begriff*) in this formulation: Romanticism is a cultural protest against modern, capitalist civilization in the name of values and ideals drawn from pre-modern, pre-capitalist societies. This nostalgia for an idealized past can take conservative or reactionary forms but also revolutionary ones, ones in which the aim is not a *return* to the pre-modern times so much as a *detour* through the past to a utopian future. Rousseau is himself a good example of this revolutionary Romanticism, as are William Morris or Gustav Landauer (see Löwy and Sayre: 2000).

The Romantic opposition to capitalist-industrialist modernity does not always challenge the system as a whole, but rather reacts to a certain number of its features that are experienced as inhuman or particularly repellent. The following are thematic constellations that most frequently appear in Romantic works:

1. *The disenchantment of the world*. In a famous passage of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels observed that "the

most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism" from the past had been killed by the bourgeoisie, "drowned . . . in the icy water of egotistical calculation" (Marx and Engels 1975: 6: 487). Some 70 years later, Max Weber noted in a celebrated talk, "Science as a Vocation," (1919) that:

> The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the world." Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendent realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. (Weber 1994: 302)

Romanticism may be viewed as being to a large extent a reaction on the part of "chivalrous enthusiasm" against the "icy water" of rational calculation and against the concomitant disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberung der Welt*) – leading to an often desperate attempt to re-enchant the world. From this standpoint the German Romantic poet Ludwig Tieck's famous reference to "die mondbeglanzte Zaubernacht" ("the moonlit enchanted night") can be read almost as the philosophical and spiritual program of Romanticism. It contains, at least implicitly, a critical attitude towards the disenchanted modern world, illuminated by the blinding sun of instrumental rationality.

Religion – both in its traditional forms and in its mystical or heretical manifestations – is an important means of "re-enchantment" chosen by the Romantics. But they also turned to magic, to the esoteric arts, sorcery, alchemy, and astrology; they rediscovered Christian and pagan myths, legends, fairy tales, and gothic narratives; and they explored the hidden realms of dreams and the fantastic – not only in literature and poetry but also in the visual arts, from Henry Fuseli and William Blake to Max Klinger and Max Ernst. The connection to critical irrealism is obvious.

2. *The quantification of the world.* As Max Weber understood it, capitalism was born with the spread of merchants' account books, that is, with the rational calculation of credits and debits. The ethos of modern industrial capitalism is *Rechenhaftigkeit*, the spirit of rational calculation. Many Romantics felt intuitively that all the negative characteristics of modern society – the religion of the god Money (Thomas Carlyle called it Mammonism); the decline of all qualitative, social, and religious values, as well as of the imagination and the poetical spirit; the tedious uniformization of life; the purely "utilitarian" relations of human beings among themselves and

with nature – stem from the same source of corruption: market quantification.

3. *The mechanization of the world*. In the name of the natural, the organic, the living, and the "dynamic," the Romantics often manifested a deep hostility to everything mechanical, artificial, or constructed. Nostalgic for the lost harmony between man and nature, enshrining nature as the object of a mystical cult, they observed with melancholy and despair the progress of mechanization and industrialization, the modern conquest of the environment. They saw the capitalist factory as a hellish place and the workers as damned souls, not because they were exploited but because they were enslaved to the machine.

4. *Rationalist abstraction*. According to Marx, the capitalist economy is based on a system of abstract categories: abstract work, abstract exchange value, money. For Max Weber, rationalization is at the heart of modern bourgeois civilization, which organizes all economic, social, and political life according to the requirements of instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and bureaucratic rationality. Finally, Karl Mannheim shows the connection between rationalization, disenchantment, and quantification in the modern capitalist world. According to him, "this 'rationalizing' and 'quantifying' thinking is embedded in a psychic attitude and form of experience with regard to things and the world which may itself be described as 'abstract'." He contended that this rationalism "has its parallel in the new economic system" oriented towards exchange value (Mannheim, 1986: 62).

    The Romantic opposition to rational abstraction is often expressed as a rehabilitation of *non-rational* and/or *non-rationalizable* forms of behavior. This applies in particular to the classic theme of Romantic literature: *love* as a pure emotion, a spontaneous attraction that cannot be reduced to any calculation and that is in contradiction to all the rationalist strategies of marriage – marriage for money, marriage "for good reasons." There is also a revalorization of intuitions, premonitions, instincts, feelings – terms that are intimately associated with the orthodox image of Romanticism.

5. *The dissolution of social bonds*. The Romantics are painfully aware of the alienation of human relationships, the destruction of the old "organic" and communitarian forms of social life, the isolation of the individual in his egoistic self, which taken together constitute an important dimension of capitalist civilization, centered on urban life. St Preux in Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloise* (1761) is only the first in a long line of Romantic heroes who feel lonely, misunderstood, unable

to communicate in a meaningful way with their fellow men, and this is the case especially at the center of modern social life, in the "urban desert."

Several of these themes can be found in critical irrealism: in fact, to a large extent, this artistic current is inseparable from the broader stream of the Romantic movement; and its critical attitude towards the modern industrial society is often inspired by the characteristic *topoi* of Romantic protest. In the twentieth century obviously, irrealist art assumes forms which are different from those of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's extraordinary film *L'Age d'or* (1930) is a good example of a new, Surrealist form of critical irrealism: in a dream-like succession of images, bourgeois conventions, the social order, and the established religion are mercilessly torn to pieces, while eroticism and *amour fou* are immoderately celebrated. Some of the scenes – such as the love-making couple that disturbs a pompous official ceremony, or the throwing out of the window of a bishop, a burning tree, and a giraffe – have become classic images of Surrealist black humor. The ironical and subversive power of this irrealist piece was such that it triggered a political and cultural scandal and was consequently censored by the police for half a century.

The Irrealist Tradition

In what follows I will discuss a few examples of irrealist works which have as one of their central critical themes the nightmare of a totally mechanized life. If the dominant ideology of bourgeois society, from the Industrial Revolution onwards, celebrated the virtues of economic progress, of technology, mechanization, and automation, and of the unlimited expansion of industrial production and consumption, these artists voiced a radically dissident attitude. This applies too, incidentally, to some Romantic authors that are habitually described as realist, like Charles Dickens. In his industrial novel *Hard Times* (1854) he describes the dreadful fate of the workers forced to adapt their movements to the uniform rhythm of the steam-engine's piston, "which worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness" (Dickens 1965: 22). This poetical image, congruous with the novel's Romantic celebration of the circus, is of course scarcely realistic, since even the maddest of elephants could not sustain a movement as deadly monotonous as a steam machine.

Let us begin our brief survey of critical irrealist works with some of the fantastic novels or *Märchen* written by the great German Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffmann. Curiously enough, Lukács hesitated in classifying Hofmann as "anti-realist": in his novels, "realism in detail goes hand in hand with a belief in the spectral nature of reality;" however, "with Hoffmann the supernatural was a means of presenting the German situation in its totality, at a time when social conditions did not as yet allow a direct realistic description." This is of course questionable, since other contemporary German writers, such as Heinrich von Kleist, achieved direct realistic description, while several Romantic authors from England and France – where social conditions were more advanced, according to Lukács – also deployed supernatural elements in their writings. Hoffmann's world, argues Lukacs, is "for all its fairly tale, ghostly ambience – an accurate enough reflection of the conditions in Germany" (Lukacs 1971: 52). One can agree that Hoffmann's fairy tales relate to the social conditions in Germany, but one cannot, by any stretch of the word, define them as "realist." They create a fantastic, supernatural, imaginary world, which contains a typically Romantic protest against the emerging bourgeois society.

A striking example is *The Sandman* (1816), one of Hoffmann's most famous and popular *novellas*, and a piece which, thanks to Offenbach's operetta *Les contes d'Hoffmann* (1881), has become a sort of modern myth. It is the sad story of a young man, Nathanael, who falls in love with Olympia, a perfect, dancing, singing, life-sized doll manufactured by two disreputable characters, Professor Spalanzani and Mr Coppelius, the diabolical Sandman that had haunted Nathanael's childhood and killed his father. Fascinated by the marvelous puppet, which he mistakes for a living creature, Nathanael declares his love for her, takes her in his arms in order to dance with her, and even kisses her ice-cold lips. His friend Siegmund tries to warn him that, in spite of her beautiful features, Olympia is "soulless," and that her eyes are "utterly devoid of life." Convinced of her artificial nature, Siegmund insists: "She is strangely measured in her movements, they all seem as if they were dependent upon some wound-up clockwork. Her playing and singing have the disagreeably perfect, but insensitive timing of a singing machine, and her dancing is the same" (Hoffmann 1967: 32). Desperately in love with Olympia, Nathanael rejects this friendly warning, and continues to adore, and to court, the automaton, until the day when the two perverse magicians quarrel and tear their masterwork into pieces in front of her lover. Nathanael becomes totally mad and kills himself. In a commentary on Hoffmann, Walter Benjamin observed that his tales are based on an

identification of the automatic with the Satanic, the life of modern man being "the product of a foul artificial mechanism governed by Satan from within" (Benjamin 1980: 644). The tale is irrealist insofar as only thanks to supernatural powers could the two diabolic manufacturers create a puppet so perfect as to be mistaken for a living beauty by an oversensitive and innocent young man. And it is critical in so far as it gives form to the Romantic *angst*, or rather terror, of the modern process through which everything, including human beings themselves, is becoming mechanical.

In a lesser-known tale, significantly titled "The Automaton" (1814), Hoffmann describes a mysterious (perhaps supernatural) automaton in Turkish costume, who answers, with oracular insight, questions from the public. The Turk seems to have some link to a strange (perhaps supernatural) Professor X, the owner of an astonishing collection of music-playing automata. One of the heroes of the tale, Lewis, gives free rein to his feelings of terror towards such artificial constructions, in a way that seems to act as a direct comment on the events described in *The Sandman*:

> The fact of any human being's doing anything in association with those lifeless figures which counterfeit the appearance and the movements of humanity has always, to me, something fearful, unnatural, I may say terrible, about it. I suppose it would be possible, by means of certain mechanical arrangements inside them, to construct automata which would dance, and then to set them to dance with human beings, and twist and turn about in all sort of figures; so that we should have a living man putting his arms about a lifeless partner of wood, and whirling round and round with her, or rather it. Could you look at such a sight, for an instant, without horror? (Hoffmann 1967: 95)

Combining realistic detail with a fantastic atmosphere of supernatural forces, Hofmann's critical irrealist tales gave voice and form to the deep-seated Romantic rebellion against the industrial/capitalist mechanization of life.

Almost exactly one century later, Franz Kafka wrote a short story, "The Penal Colony" (1914), which was inspired by similar feelings. This disquieting piece is, like so many of Kafka's writings, simultaneously and inseparably realist and irrealist. It describes, in highly realistic terms, a purely imaginary machine, which has been invented by the commander of a penal colony in order to torture and execute prisoners by writing on their body the sentence that has condemned them. The whole narrative turns around this deadly appliance, its origin, its social and political meaning, and its automatic functioning – there is no need to move it by hand, since "the apparatus works entirely by itself" (Kafka 1996: 165). The other

characters in the story play a role only in relation to this central device. The machine, whose "each movement is calculated with precision," appears, more and more, during the explanations of the officer in charge of the execution, as the main character of the story. It does not exist in order to execute or torture a person; it is rather the victim who is there for the apparatus, to furnish it with a body on which it can write its masterpiece, a bloody inscription illustrated by "a very great number of ornaments" (Kafka 1996: 175). The officer himself is only a servant of the machine, one who finally sacrifices his life to this insatiable Moloch. A mechanical entity manufactured by human beings, the automaton ultimately becomes a fetish that dominates and destroys them. The story clearly belongs to the Romantic tradition of protest against the growing and sinister power of modern machinism.

Of which human-sacrificing machine was Kafka thinking in particular? "The Penal Colony" was written in October 1914, three months after the beginning of World War I. The war was for Kafka a mechanical process in two ways. Firstly, in so far as it was an industrial conflict, to an unprecedented extent; it was the first war in which the confrontation of *killing machines* had such an important role: in a document that he wrote in 1916, a call for the building of a hospital for nervous illnesses produced by the war, Kafka observed that "the enormously intensified role of machines in the war operations today generates the most serious dangers and suffering for the nerves of the soldiers" (Kafka 1976: 764). Secondly, the world war itself functioned like a blind system of violent gearwheels, a murderous and inhuman mechanism escaping any human control.

In spite of all his criticism of the Prague writer, Lukács acknowledged that "the diabolical character of the world of modern capitalism, and man's impotence in the face of it, is the real subject-matter of Kafka's writings" (Lukács 1971: 41). The problem, according to Lukács, is that, instead of realism, Kafka uses an allegorical method, and in allegory, as Walter Benjamin (who is quoted by Lukács) emphasized, "the *facies hippocratica* of history looks to the observer like a petrified primeval landscape" (77–8). Lukács is right to insist that allegory is not a realistic style, but if it is able to convey "the diabolical character of modern capitalism," the *facies hippocratica* of history, why should it be so disqualified? "The Penal Colony" is precisely a remarkable example of the powerful insights on the sinister side of reality offered by an allegorical literature.

A few years later, in his celebrated novel *Brave New World* (1931), Aldous Huxley provided a new artistic expression for the Romantic *angst* of mechanization. This brilliant dystopia is irrealist not because of any supernatural presence – as in E. T. A. Hoffmann – but simply because it

describes an imaginary future world which does not exist anywhere. Many details of the book were undoubtedly inspired by tendencies that already existed in modern society at this time, but all of them are products of the imagination that do not have any accurate or simplistic correspondent in reality. To give a familiar example: the glorification of industrial manufacture, of machinery, is so great in this imaginary society that Henry Ford became the God or the Prophet of the Brave New World. The ancient prayer to "Our Lord" is replaced by "Our Ford," the sign of the cross by the letter T (as in Ford's famous flyer model), and the historical chronology is divided in two periods: B.F. ("Before Ford") and A.F. ("After Ford"). In one of the chapters, Mustapha Mond, the chief Controller of the "New World," explains the historical role of the new prophet: "Our Ford . . . did a great deal to shift the emphasis from truth and beauty to comfort and happiness. Mass production demanded the shift. Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning, truth and beauty can't" (Huxley 2004: 210). The reason why traditional religion had to be replaced by the cult of "Our Ford" is one of logical coherence: "God isn't compatible with machinery and scientific medicine and universal happiness. You must make your choice. Our civilization has chosen machinery and medicine and happiness" (205). The critical/ironical intention is obvious, but the Ford-religion imagined by the author does not pretend to "represent life as it really is." The same applies to other aspects of this extraordinarily "advanced" – in terms of scientific-technical performance – civilization. For instance, children are not conceived by sexual relations, but manufactured in a biological plant, and destined to become members of distinct social castes. At the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre, mentally different individuals are produced, in a rigid hierarchy which descends from intelligent Alpha to semi-moronic Epsilon; their embryos are placed in bottles and those disposed in racks: "each rack . . . was in a conveyor traveling at the rate of thirty-three and a third centimeters an hour." The result is a series of identical human (?) "products": "standard Gammas, unvarying Deltas, uniform Epsilons" (22). Huxley's dystopia does not pretend to reflect, reproduce, or faithfully describe existing reality: by inventing an irreal world, he critically illuminates the present, confronting it with the possible results of its worst tendencies. While E. T. A. Hoffmann was terrified by the confusion between the living human bodies and the soulless mechanical artifacts, Aldous Huxley fears the industrial chain-production of human beings, thanks to the unlimited power of modern technology. Both, however, participate in the Romantic protest against the mechanization of life, and both create an irrealist narrative which powerfully conveys their *angst*.

These anxieties can be found not only in literature, but in the plastic arts and in cinema. One striking example of cinematographic critical irrealism, which has much in common with *The Sandman*, is Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927). In this remarkable picture, certainly one of the masterpieces in the history of cinema, a terrifying mechanical underworld inhabited by masses of enslaved workers is ruled by an elite of rich owners, living comfortably above the surface. Several of the subterranean laborers become victims of the monstrous machinery, which appears, in one of the most impressive scenes, as a sort of pagan idol claiming human sacrifices. The only hope of the modern slaves is a young woman, Maria, who preaches them love, social justice, and self-emancipation; but she is replaced, in a sinister elitist conspiracy, by a clone, an automaton manufactured by a perverse scientist. The artificial doll, in appearance identical to Maria, instigates the workers to blind violence, almost leading to catastrophe, in the form of the flooding of the subterranean world. The plot concludes with a – highly artificial – "happy ending," but the images of the terrifying and murderous Power Plant, and of the diabolical puppet replacing the angelical Maria, are extremely powerful and suggestive, and have become, as much as E. T. A. Hofmann's Olympia, part of the modern mythical imagination.

Conclusion

The above examples refer to the issue of mechanical de-humanization, but there are obviously many other aspects of modern bourgeois/industrial civilization which constitute the object of the anger, the protest, and the fear of nonrealist artists. Critical irrealism is not an alternative, a substitute, or a rival to critical realism: it is simply a different form of literature and art, which does not attempt, in one way or another, to "reflect" reality. Why choose, as Lukács vainly tried to urge us to do in 1956, between Kafka and Thomas Mann, between "an aesthetically appealing, but decadent modernism, and a fruitful critical realism" (Lukács 1971: 92)? Are not both of them fruitful, albeit in distinct manners and using distinct methods? Cannot critical irrealism be conceived as complementary to critical realism? By creating an imaginary world, composed of fantastic, supernatural, nightmarish, or simply *nonexistent* forms, can it not critically illuminate aspects of reality, in a way that sharply distinguishes itself from the realist tradition?

I would plead for the introduction of the concept of critical irrealism, because it permits us to define a large and important territory

in the aesthetic sphere and gives it a positive content – instead of merely ignoring it or relegating it to the *tenebrae exterioris* of realism. Adepts of the realist cannon often seem to consider nonrealist art as a residual category, a dustbin of aesthetics into which one must dump all irrelevant, unimportant, or inferior works, disqualified by the lack of the most important requisite of accomplished art: "fidelity to real life." This is a serious mistake, not only because it leaves out important works of art, but because it is blind to the capacity of critical irrealist art to help us understand and transform reality.

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Chapter 12

Psychoanalysis and the Lacanian Real: "Strange shapes of the unwarped primal world"

Slavoj Žižek

The *Lamella*

The Lacanian Real . . . The first image that arises on hearing these words is a monstrous Thing, too traumatic for our eyes, blinding like Plato's sun. Jacques Lacan himself provides the supreme example of such a Thing in his myth of the *lamella*:

> Whenever the membranes of the egg in which the foetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken, imagine for a moment that something flies off, and that one can do it with an egg as easily as with a man, namely the *hommelette*, or the lamella.
>
> The lamella is something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba. It is just a little more complicated. But it goes everywhere. And as it is something – I will tell you shortly why – that is related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality, it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal – because it survives any division, any scissiparous intervention. And it can run around.
>
> Well! This is not very reassuring. But suppose it comes and envelopes your face while you are quietly asleep . . .
>
> I can't see how we would not join battle with a being capable of these properties. But it would not be a very convenient battle. This lamella, this organ, whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ – I can give you more details as to its zoological place – is the libido.

> It is the libido, *qua* pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, or irre-
> pressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life.
> It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact
> that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction. And it is of this that
> all the forms of the *objet a* that can be enumerated are the representatives,
> the equivalents. (Lacan 1977: 197–8)

Every word has a weight here, in this deceivingly poetic description of
lamella (which can be translated as "hommelet," a condensation of "man"
and "omelet"). Lacan imagines the *lamella* as a version of what Freud
called a "partial object": a weird organ which is magically autonomized,
surviving without the body whose organ it should have been, like a
hand that wanders around alone in an early Surrealist film.

Lamella is an entity of pure surface, without the density of a substance,
an infinitely plastic object that can not only incessantly change its form,
but can even transpose itself from one to another medium: imagine a "some-
thing" that is first heard as a shrilling sound and then pops up as a
monstrously distorted body. A *lamella* is indivisible, indestructible, and
immortal. More precisely, it is *undead*, in the sense that this term has
in horror fiction: not the sublime spiritual immortality, but the obscene
immortality of the "living dead" who, after every annihilation, recompose
themselves and clumsily go on. As Lacan puts it, *lamella* does not exist,
it *insists*: it is unreal, an entity of pure semblance, a multiplicity of appear-
ances which seem to envelop a central void. Its status is purely fantas-
matic. This blind indestructible insistence of the libido is what Freud called
"death drive," and one should bear in mind that "death drive" is, para-
doxically, the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immort-
ality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, for an
"undead" urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and
death, of generation and corruption (see Žižek 2006: 62). This is why
Freud equates death drive with the so-called "compulsion-to-repeat," an
uncanny urge to repeat painful past experiences which seems to outgrow
the natural limitations of the organism affected by it and to insist even
beyond the organism's death – again, like the living dead in a horror film,
who just go on. This excess inscribes itself into the human body in the
guise of a wound which makes the subject "undead," depriving him of
the capacity to die (like the wound on the ill boy's stomach in Franz
Kafka's "A Country Doctor"): when this wound is healed, the hero can
die in peace.

For any avid cinema-goer, then, it is difficult to avoid the feeling that
one has already seen all this. Lacan's description not only reminds one

of the nightmare creatures in horror movies; more specifically, it can be read, point by point, as describing a movie shot more than a decade after he described the *lamella*, Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). The monstrous alien in the film so closely resembles Lacan's *lamella* that it cannot but evoke the impression that Lacan somehow saw the film before it was even made. Everything Lacan talks about is there: the monster appears indestructible; if one cuts it into pieces, it merely multiplies; it is something extra-flat that all of a sudden flies off and envelops your face; with infinite plasticity, it can morph itself into a multitude of shapes; in it pure evil animality overlaps with machinic blind insistence. Scott's alien is effectively libido as pure life, indestructible and immortal. To quote Stephen Mulhall, "the alien's form of life is (just, merely, simply) life, life as such: it is not so much a particular species as the essence of what it means to be a species, to be a creature, a natural being – it is Nature incarnate or sublimed, a nightmare embodiment of the natural realm understood as utterly subordinate to, utterly exhausted by, the twinned Darwinian drives to survive and reproduce" (Mulhall 2001: 19).

Beyond representation as it is in its monstrosity, *lamella* nonetheless remains within the domain of the Imaginary, although as a kind of limit-image: the image to cancel all images, the image that endeavors to stretch the imagination to the very border of the irrepresentable. As such, *lamella* stands for the Real in its most terrifying dimension, as the primordial abyss which swallows everything, dissolving all identities. This is a figure which, in its multiple guises, is well known in literature, from Kurtz's "horror" at the end of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) to Pip in Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) who, cast to the bottom of the ocean, experiences the demon God:

> Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; . . . and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. (Melville 1986: 525)

This Real of *lamella* is to be opposed to the other mode of the Real, the *scientific* one. For those used to dismissing Lacan as just another "post-modern" relativist, this might come as a surprise: Lacan is resolutely anti-"postmodern," opposed to any notion of science as just another story that we tell ourselves about ourselves (compare Norris's chapter in this

volume). He is opposed to the idea that science is a narrative whose apparent supremacy over other – mythic, artistic, etc. – narratives is only grounded in the historically contingent Western "regime of truth" (to use a term rendered popular by Michel Foucault). For Lacan, the problem is that this scientific Real "is precisely what we completely lack":

> We are totally separated from it. . . . We shall never totally clarify the relation-ship between those beings-of-language /*parletres*/ that we sexuate as man and those beings-of-language that we sexuate as woman. (Lacan 2005: 93–4)

The idea that sustains this passage is much more complex than it appears. What separates us, as humans, from the "real Real" targeted by science? What makes it inaccessible to us? It is neither the cobweb of the Imaginary (illusions, misperceptions), which distorts what we perceive, nor the "wall of language," the Symbolic network through which we relate to reality, but *another Real*. This Real is for Lacan the Real inscribed into the very core of human sexuality. "There is no sexual relationship," according to Lacan (see Lacan 1998: 1–13): human sexuality is marked by an irreducible failure; sexual difference is the antagonism of the two sexual positions between which there is no common denominator; and enjoyment can be gained only against the background of a fundamental loss. The link between this loss and *lamella* is clearly indicated in the passage which opened this essay: the myth of *lamella* presents the fantas-matic entity that gives body to what a living being loses when it enters the (symbolically regulated) regime of sexual difference. Since one of the Freudian names of this loss is "castration," one can also say that *lamella* is a kind of positive obverse of castration: the non-castrated remainder, the indestructible partial object cut off from the living body caught in sexual difference.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the Lacanian Real is a much more complex category than the idea of a fixed trans-historical "hard core" that forever eludes symbolization. It has nothing to do with what Immanuel Kant called the "Thing-in-itself," reality the way it is out there, independently of us, prior to being distorted by our perceptions. "This notion is not at all Kantian," insists Lacan; "if there is a notion of the real, it is extremely complex and, because of this, incomprehensible, it cannot be comprehended in a way that would make an All out of it" (Lacan 2005: 96–7).

How, then, are we to introduce some clarity into this conundrum of the Reals? Let us begin with Freud's dream of Irma's injection (Freud

1991: 180–99) – selected by him to open his *magnum opus*, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). The "latent thought" that this dream expresses is Freud's feeling of guilt and responsibility for the failure of his treatment of Irma, a young woman and one of his patients. The dream's first part, Freud's confrontation with Irma, ends with Freud looking deep into Irma's throat. What he sees there renders the Real in the guise of the primordial flesh, the palpitation of the life substance as the Thing itself, in its disgusting dimension of a cancerous outgrowth. The dream's second part, the comic conversation among the three doctors, Freud's friends, who offer different excuses for the failure of the treatment, ends up with a chemical formula (of trimethylamine) writ large. Each part thus concludes with a figuration of the Real: first, the Real of *lamella*, of the terrifying formless Thing; second, the scientific Real, the Real of a formula which renders the meaningless functioning of nature. The distinction hinges on the different starting point: if we start with the Imaginary (the mirror-confrontation of Freud and Irma), we get the Real in its imaginary dimension, the horrifying primordial image that cancels the imagery itself; if we start with the Symbolic (the exchange of arguments between the three doctors), we get language deprived of the wealth of its human sense, transformed into the Real of a meaningless formula.

This, however, is not the end of the story. To these two Reals, we have to add a third Real, that of a mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable "something" that makes an ordinary object sublime – what Lacan called *l'objet petit a*. There is, in science fiction horror movies, a figure of the alien opposed to that of the irrepresentable and all-devouring monster of Scott's *Alien*, a figure immortalized in a whole series of films from the early 1950s whose most famous representative is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). An ordinary American, wandering somewhere in the half-abandoned countryside after his car has broken down, goes for help to the closest small town. Soon, however, he notices that something strange is going on there. People behave in a strange way, as if they are not fully themselves. It becomes clear to him that the town is already taken over by aliens who have penetrated and colonized human bodies, controlling them from within. For although the aliens look and act exactly like humans, there is as a rule a tiny detail which betrays their true nature (a strange glimpse in their eyes; too much skin between their fingers or between their ears and heads). This detail is the Lacanian *objet petit a*, a tiny feature whose presence magically transubstantiates its bearer into an alien. In contrast to Scott's alien who is totally different from humans, the difference here is minimal, barely perceptible.

The Lost Object

The melancholic, according to Freud, is not aware of what he has lost in the lost object. In order to understand this point it is necessary to introduce the Lacanian distinction between the object and the (object-)cause of desire. While the object of desire is simply the desired object, the cause of desire is the feature on account of which we desire the desired object – some detail of which we are usually unaware and which we sometimes even misperceive as an obstacle, in spite of which we desire the object. This gap between object and cause helps to explain the popularity of *Brief Encounter* (1945), the classic British melodrama about an illicit affair, in the gay community. The reason for its popularity is not simply that the furtive encounters of the two lovers in the dark passages and platforms of the railway station resemble the way that homosexuals were compelled to meet in the 1940s. Far from being an obstacle to the fulfillment of gay desire, these features effectively functioned as its cause: deprived of these undercover conditions, the gay relationship loses a good part of its transgressive beguilement. What we get in *Brief Encounter* is not the object of the gay desire (the couple is straight) but its cause. No wonder, then, that gays often express their opposition to the liberal policy of fully legalizing gay couples: what sustains their opposition is not the (justified) awareness of the falsity of this liberal policy, but the fear that, being deprived of its obstacle/cause, the gay desire itself will wane.

From this perspective, the melancholic is not primarily the subject fixated on the lost object, unable to perform the work of mourning on it; he is, rather, the subject who possesses the object, but has lost his desire for it, because the cause which made him desire this object has withdrawn, lost its efficiency. Far from accentuating to the extreme the situation of the frustrated desire, of the desire deprived of its object, melancholy stands for the presence of the object itself deprived of our desire for it. Melancholy occurs when we finally get the desired object, but are disappointed at it. In this precise sense, melancholy (disappointment at all positive, empirical objects, none of which can satisfy our desire) is the beginning of philosophy. Take the example of a man who has lived in a particular city all his life but is finally compelled to move elsewhere. He is, of course, saddened by the prospect of being thrown into a new environment. What actually makes him sad though is not the prospect of leaving the place which was for long years his home but the much more subtle fear of losing his very attachment to this place. What makes him sad is the fact that he is aware that, sooner or later, he will integrate himself into a new community, forgetting the place which at the moment

means so much to him. In short, what makes him sad is the awareness
that he will lose his desire for (what is now) his home.

The status of this object-cause of desire is that of an *anamorphosis*: a
part of the picture which, when we look at it in a direct frontal way, appears
as a meaningless stain, acquiring the contours of a known object when we
change our position and look at the picture from aside (see for example
Žižek 1991: 90–1). Lacan's point is here even more radical: the object-
cause of desire is something that, when viewed frontally, is nothing at
all, just a void – it acquires the contours of something only when viewed
sideways. The most beautiful case of this in literature occurs when, in
Shakespeare's *Richard II* (1595), Bushy tries to comfort the queen, wor-
ried about the unfortunate king, who is on a military campaign:

> Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows
> Which shows like grief itself, but is not so.
> For sorrow's eye, glazèd with blinding tears,
> Divides one thing entire to many objects,
> Like perspectives which, rightly gazed upon,
> Show nothing but confusion; eyed awry,
> Distinguish form. So your sweet majesty,
> Looking awry upon your lord's departure,
> Find shapes of grief more than himself to wail,
> Which looked on as it is, is naught but shadows
> Of what it is not. (II. ii. 14–24)

This is *objet a*: an entity that has no substantial consistency, which is in
itself "nothing but confusion," and which acquires a definite shape only
when looked upon from a standpoint distorted by the subject's desires
and fears. As such, as a mere "shadow of what it is not," *objet a* is the
strange object which is nothing but the inscription of the subject itself
into the field of objects, in the guise of a stain which acquires form only
when part of this field is anamorphically distorted by the subject's desire.

The most famous anamorphosis in the history of painting, that of
Holbein's *Ambassadors* (1533), concerns death (Lacan 1977: 85–90).
When we look from the proper lateral standpoint at the anamorphically
prolonged stain in the lower part of the painting, set among objects
of human vanity, it reveals itself as the death skull. Bushy's consolation
can be read together with Richard's later monologue, in which he locates
Death in the void in the middle of the hollow royal crown, as the secret
master-jester who lets us play a king, who allows us to enjoy our author-
ity, only to pierce our ballooned shape with a needle and so reduce us
to nothing:

> For within the hollow crown
> That rounds the mortal temples of a king
> Keeps death his court; and there the antic sits,
> Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
> Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
> To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,
> Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
> As if this flesh which walls about our life,
> Were brass impregnable; and humoured thus,
> Comes at the last, and with a little pin
> Bores through his castle wall, and – farewell, king! (III.ii. 160–70)

It is usually said that Richard finds it difficult to accept the distinction between "the king's two bodies," and to learn to live as a common human being divested of the royal charisma. However, the lesson of the play is that this operation, simple and elementary as it appears to be, is ultimately impossible to perform. Why? To put it succinctly, Richard starts to perceive his "kingness" as an effect of anamorphosis, as a "shadow of nothing"; but getting rid of this unsubstantial specter does not leave us with the simple reality of what we effectively are – as if one cannot simply oppose the anamorphosis of charisma and substantial reality, as if all reality is an effect of anamorphosis, a "shadow of nothing," and as if what we get if we look at it "straight on" is therefore a chaotic nothing.

What we get once we are deprived of symbolic identifications, or "demonarchized," then, is nothing. The "Death" figure in the middle of the crown is not simply death, but *the subject himself* reduced to the void. This is Richard's position when, confronted with Henry's demand to resign the crown, he effectively replies "I know no I /to do it/!" Bolingbroke asks him whether he is "contented to resign the crown," and Richard replies:

> Ay, no. No, ay; for I must nothing be;
> Therefore no no, for I resign to thee.
> Now mark me how I will undo myself.
> I give this heavy weight from off my head,
> And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
> The pride of kingly sway from out my heart. (IV.i. 200–5)

This apparently confused reply to Henry's request relies on a complex reasoning, based on a brilliant exercise in what Lacan called *lalangue* (a neologism which some translate as "llanguage": language as the space of illicit pleasures that defy any normativity: the chaotic multitude of

homonymies, word-plays, "irregular" metaphoric links and resonances). It plays with three different ways to write (and understand) what we pronounce as "ay, no, no, ay." Richard's words can be read simply as a redoubled refusal, accompanied with the exclamatory "ay." Or, if we understand "ay" as "I," they can also be read as a refusal, but this time based on a denial of the very existence of the I; that is, as a condensed form of "I (say) no (because there is) no I to do it." This same point can be made also in the third reading, which understands it as (a homophony of) "I know no I": "You want me to do it, but since you want me to be nothing, to undo myself totally, who am I to do it? In such a situation, there is no I to do it, to give you the crown!"

What all this amounts to is that, for Lacan, the Real, at its most radical, has to be totally de-substantialized. It is not an external thing that resists being caught in the symbolic network, but the crack within the symbolic network itself. Apropos the notion of the Real as the substantial Thing, Lacan accomplishes a reversal which is ultimately the same as the passage from the special to the general theory of relativity in Einstein. While the special theory already introduces the notion of the curved space, it conceives of this curvature as the effect of matter: it is the presence of matter which curves the space, i.e., only an empty space would have been non-curved. With the passage to the general theory, the causality is reversed: far from *causing* the curvature of the space, matter is its *effect*, i.e., the presence of matter signals that the space is curved. In a manner exactly homologous to Einstein, for Lacan the Real – the Thing – is not so much the inert presence which curves the symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies in it), but, rather, an effect of these gaps and inconsistencies.

This returns us to Freud who, in the development of his theory of trauma, changed his position in a way strangely homologous to Einstein's shift from the special to the general theory. Freud started with the notion of trauma as something that, from the outside, intrudes into our psychic life and disturbs its balance, throwing out of joint the symbolic coordinates which organize our experience (think about a brutal rape or about witnessing, or even being submitted to, some torture). From this perspective, the problem is how to symbolize the trauma, how to integrate it into our universe of meaning and thus cancel its disorienting impact. Later, Freud opted for the opposite approach. His analysis of "Wolfman," his famous Russian patient, isolated as the early traumatic event that marked his life the fact that, as a child of one and a half years, he witnessed the parental *coitus a tergo* (see Freud 2002: 235). However, originally, when this scene took place, there was nothing traumatic in it: far from shattering

the child, he just inscribed it into his memory as an event the sense of which was not clear at all to him. Only years later, when the child became obsessed with the question "where do children come from" and started to develop infantile sexual theories, did he draw out this memory in order to use it as a traumatic scene embodying the mystery of sexuality. The scene was thus traumatized, elevated into a traumatic Real, only retroactively, in order to help the child to cope with the impasse of his symbolic universe (his inability to find answers to the enigma of sexuality). In exact homology to Einstein's shift, the original fact is here the symbolic deadlock, and the traumatic event is resuscitated to fill in the gaps in the universe of meaning.

The Neighbor

For Lacan, the Real with which psychoanalysis deals is the Real of the abyss of subjectivity itself. For Lacan, who here follows Freud, this abyssal dimension of another human being – the abyss of the depth of another personality, its utter impenetrability – first found its full expression in Judaism with its injunction to love thy neighbor as thyself. For Freud as well as for Lacan this injunction is deeply problematic, since it obfuscates the fact that, beneath the neighbor as my mirror-image, the one who is like me, with whom I can empathize, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of someone about whom I ultimately do not know anything – Can I really rely on him? Who is he? How can I be sure that his words are not a mere pretence? In contrast to the New Age attitude, which ultimately reduces my neighbors to my mirror-images, or to the means on the path of my self-realization, Judaism opens up a tradition in which an alien traumatic kernel forever persists in my neighbor – the neighbor remains an inert, impenetrable, enigmatic presence that hystericizes me. The core of this presence, of course, is the neighbor's desire, an enigma not only for us, but also for the neighbor himself. For this reason Lacan's *Che vuoi?* does not simply enquire, "What do you want?"; it asks, "What's bugging you? What is it in you that makes you so unbearable not only for us, but also for yourself, that you yourself obviously do not master?"

The temptation to be resisted here is the ethical domestication of the neighbor – as in the example of Emmanuel Levinas and his notion of the neighbor as the abyssal point from which the call of ethical responsibility emanates (see Levinas 1985). What Levinas obfuscates is the monstrosity of the neighbor, monstrosity on account of which Lacan applies to the

neighbor the term Thing (*das Ding*), used by Freud to designate the ultimate object of our desires in its unbearable intensity and impenetrability. One should hear in this term all the connotations of horror fiction: the neighbor is the (Evil) Thing which potentially lurks beneath every homely human face. Think about Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), in which the father, a modest failed writer, gradually turns into a killing beast who, with an evil grin, attempts to slaughter his entire family. No wonder, then, that Judaism is also the religion of the divine Law which regulates relations between people: this Law is strictly correlative to the emergence of the neighbor as the inhuman Thing. That is to say, the ultimate function of the Law is not to enable us not to forget the neighbor, to retain our proximity to the neighbor, but, on the contrary, to keep the neighbor at a proper distance, to serve as a kind of protective wall against the monstrosity of the neighbor.

The neighbor is the ultimate organ without a body. As Rainer Maria Rilke put it in his *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910):

> There exists a creature that is perfectly harmless; when it passes before your eyes, you hardly notice it and immediately forget it again. But as soon as it somehow, invisibly, gets into your ears, it begins to develop, it hatches, and cases have been known where it has penetrated into the brain and flourished there devastatingly, like the pneumococci in dogs which gain entrance through the nose . . . This creature is Your Neighbor. (see Žižek 2006: 114)

It is for this reason that finding oneself in the position of the beloved is so violent, traumatic even. Being loved makes me feel directly the gap between what I am as a determinate being and the unfathomable X in me which causes love. Lacan's definition of love, "Love is giving something one doesn't have . . . ," has to be supplemented with ". . . to someone who doesn't want it."

Is this not confirmed by our most elementary experience when somebody unexpectedly declares passionate love to us? Is not our first reaction, preceding the possible positive reply, that something obscene, intrusive, is being forced upon us? In the middle of Alejandro Iñárritu's film *21 Grams* (2003), Paul, who is dying of a weakened heart, gently declares his love to Cristina, who is traumatized by the recent death of her husband and two young children. When they meet the next time, Cristina explodes into a complaint about the violent nature of declaring love:

> You know, you kept me thinking all day. I haven't spoken to anyone for months and I barely know you and I already need to talk to you . . . And

there's something the more I think about the less I understand: why the hell did you tell me you liked me? . . . Answer me, because I didn't like you saying that at all . . . You can't just walk up to a woman you barely know and tell her you like her. Y-o-u-c-a-n-'t. You don't know what she's going through, what she's feeling . . . I'm not married, you know. I'm not anything in this world. I'm just not anything. (Arriaga 2003: 107)

At this, Cristina looks at Paul, raises her hands, and desperately starts kissing him on the mouth. So it is not that she did not like him and did not desire carnal contact with him. The problem for her was, on the contrary, that she *did* want it. The point of her complaint was: What right does he have to stir up her desire?

Fyodor Dostoyevsky was aware of this dimension. His short story "A Gentle Creature" (1876) is the narrative of a middle-aged pawnbroker, a broken man, one haunted by a humiliating experience of avoiding a duel, who marries a poor young girl. Hating the world, he takes his revenge on her, gradually breaking her down through detailed procedures of disciplining and cold refusal of any direct human contact. After a traumatic experience of attempted murder (the girl puts the gun to his head, but cannot pull the trigger), the man belatedly discovers his love for her, starts to kiss her feet, cries and repeatedly embraces her. It is at this point that she kills herself, jumping through the window to the street below . . .

> What else could it mean but that she was beginning to regain her self-composure completely, that she was already beginning to believe that I would *let her alone*. "I thought you'd *let me alone*!" that was what she had said on Tuesday wasn't it? Oh, the thought of a ten-year-old girl. And she did believe that everything would really remain *as it was*. She believed that she'd always be sitting at her table and at mine, and that the two of us would go on like that till we were old. All of a sudden I came up to her as her husband and a husband wants love! Oh, how blind I was! Oh, what a frightful misunderstanding! (Dostoyevsky 1992: 255–6)

Crucially, she doesn't kill herself because of her loveless cold life; she is able to accommodate herself to this. What she cannot bear is the idea that, once she has been placed in this position, her husband will develop a true passion for her, brutally invading her intimate space.

It is from this abyss of the Other as Thing that we can specify what Lacan means by what he calls the "founding word," statements which confer on a person some symbolic title and thus makes him or her what they are proclaimed to be, constituting their symbolic identity: "You are

my wife, my master . . ." This notion is usually perceived as an echo of the theory of *performatifs*, of speech acts which accomplish in their very act of enunciation the state of things that they declare (so that when I say "This meeting is closed," I thereby effectively close the meeting). However, it is clear from the passage which opens this chapter that Lacan aims at something more. *Performatifs* are, at their most fundamental, acts of symbolic trust and engagement. When I say to someone, "You are my master!" I oblige myself to treat him in a certain way and, in the same move, I oblige him to treat me in a certain way. Lacan's point is that we need this recourse to performativity, to the symbolic engagement, precisely and only insofar as the other whom we confront is not only my mirror-double, someone like me, but also the elusive absolute Other who ultimately remains an unfathomable mystery. The main function of the symbolic order with its laws and obligations is to render our coexistence with others minimally bearable: a Third has to step in between me and my neighbor so that our relations do not explode in murderous violence.

It is against this background that one can understand why Lacan speaks of the *inhuman* core of the neighbor. In the 1960s, the era of structuralism, Louis Althusser launched the notorious formula of "theoretical anti-humanism," allowing, demanding even, that it be supplemented by *practical humanism* (see Althusser 1990: 219–47). In our practice, we should act as humanists, respecting the others, treating them as free persons with full dignity, creators of their world. However, in theory, we should no less always bear in mind that humanism is an ideology, the way we spontaneously experience our predicament, and that the true knowledge of humans and their history should treat individuals not as autonomous subjects, but as elements in a structure which follows its own laws. In contrast to Althusser, Lacan accomplishes the passage from theoretical to *practical anti-humanism*, i.e., to an ethics that goes beyond the dimension of what Nietzsche called the "human, all too human," to confront the inhuman core of humanity. This does not mean only an ethics which no longer denies, but fearlessly takes into account, the latent monstrosity of being-human, the diabolic dimension which exploded in phenomena usually covered by the concept-name "Auschwitz" – an ethics that would be still possible after Auschwitz, to paraphrase Theodor Adorno. This inhuman dimension is for Lacan at the same time the ultimate support of ethics.

Perhaps, the best way to describe the status of this inhuman dimension of the neighbor is with reference to Kant's philosophy. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant introduced a key distinction between negative and indefinite judgment. The positive judgment "the

soul is mortal" can be negated in two ways: we can either deny a pre-
dicate ("the soul is not mortal") or affirm a non-predicate ("the soul is
non-mortal"). This difference is exactly the same as the one, known to
every reader of Stephen King, between "he is not dead" and "he is undead."
The indefinite judgment opens up a third domain which undermines the
distinction between dead and non-dead (alive): the "undead" are neither
alive nor dead, they are precisely the monstrous "living dead." And the
same goes for "inhuman." "He is not human" is not the same as "he is
inhuman." "He is not human" means simply that he is external to
humanity, animal or divine, while "he is inhuman" means something thor-
oughly different, namely that he is neither human nor inhuman, but marked
by a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as
humanity, is inherent to being-human. And perhaps one should risk the
hypothesis that this is what changes with the Kantian philosophical revolu-
tion: in the pre-Kantian universe, humans were simply humans, beings of
reason, fighting the excesses of animal lusts and divine madness; while
only with Kant, the excess to be fought is immanent, it concerns the very
core of subjectivity itself. So when, in the pre-Kantian universe, a hero
went mad, it meant that he was deprived of his humanity, that animal
passions or divine madness took over. With Kant, madness signals the
unconstrained explosion of the very core of a human being.

Fantasy and the Real

How are we to avoid the traumatic impact of being too directly exposed
to this terrifying abyss of the Other? How are we to cope with the anxety-
provoking encounter of the Other's desire? Here fantasy enters: for
Lacan, *fantasy provides an answer to the enigma of the Other's desire*. The
first thing to note about fantasy is that it literally teaches us how to desire:
fantasy does not mean that, when I desire a strawberry cake and cannot
get it in reality, I fantasize about eating it; the problem it poses is rather,
how do I know that I desire a strawberry cake in the first place? This is
what fantasy tells me. This role of fantasy hinges on the deadlock of our
sexuality designated by Lacan in the paradoxical formula I cited above,
to the effect that "there is no sexual relationship": there is no universal
formula or matrix guaranteeing a harmonious sexual relationship with
one's partner. On account of the lack of such a formula, every subject has
to invent a fantasy of his or her own, a "private" formula for the sexual
relationship – the relationship with a woman is possible only inasmuch as
the partner fits this formula. Recently Slovene feminists reacted with great

outcry at the publicity poster of a large cosmetics factory for sun lotion, depicting a series of well-tanned women's behinds in tight bathing suits, accompanied with the logo "Each has her own factor." Of course, this publicity was based on a rather vulgar double-entendre: the logo ostensibly referred to the sun lotion, which was offered to customers with different sun factors so as to fit different skin types; however, its entire effect was based on its obvious male-chauvinist reading: "Each woman can be had, if only the man knows her factor, her specific catalyst, that which arouses her!" The Freudian point regarding fantasy would be that each subject, female or male, possesses such a "factor" which regulates her or his desire. A woman, viewed from behind, on her hands and knees, was the "factor" of Wolfman, Freud's most famous patient (see Freud 2002). There is nothing uplifting about our awareness of this "factor": it is uncanny, horrifying even, since it somehow depossesses the subject, reducing her or him to a puppet-like level beyond dignity and freedom.

However, the thing to add immediately is that the desire staged in fantasy is not the subject's own, but the *Other's* desire, the desire of those around me with whom I interact: fantasy, the fantasmatic scene or scenario, is an answer to "You're saying this, but *what is it that you effectively want by saying it?*" The original question of desire is not directly "What do I want?" but "What do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What am I for the others?" A small child is embedded in a complex network of relations, and he serves as a kind of catalyst and battlefield for the desires of those around him. His father, mother, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, fight their battles around him. The mother, for example, sends messages to the father through her care for the son. While being well aware of this role, the child cannot fathom out precisely what sort of an object he is for the others, what the exact nature of the games they are playing with him is. Fantasy provides an answer to this enigma: at its most fundamental, fantasy tells me what I am for my others. This intersubjective character of fantasy is discernible even in the most elementary cases, like the one, reported by Freud, of his little daughter fantasizing about eating a strawberry cake: what we have here is by no means the simple case of the direct hallucinatory satisfaction of a desire (she wanted a cake, and didn't get it, so she fantasized about it). The crucial feature is that, while voraciously eating a strawberry cake, the little girl noticed how her parents were deeply satisfied by this spectacle, i.e., by seeing her fully enjoying it. What the fantasy of eating a strawberry cake really was about was her attempt to form such an identity (of the one who fully enjoys eating a cake given by the parents) that would satisfy her parents, that would make her the object of their desire.

Since sexuality is the domain in which we get closest to the intimacy of another human being, totally exposing ourselves to him or her, sexual enjoyment is for Lacan Real: something traumatic in its breath-taking intensity, something *impossible* in the sense that we cannot ever make sense of it. This is why a sexual relation, in order to function, has to be screened through some fantasy. Recall the love encounter between Sarah Miles and her illicit lover, the English officer, in David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter* (1970): the depiction of the sexual act in the midst of the forest, with waterfall sounds supposed to render their subdued passion, cannot but strike us today as a ridiculous *bric-à-brac* of clichés. However, the role of the pathetic sound accompaniment is profoundly ambiguous: by way of emphasizing the ecstasy of the sexual act, its exemption from prosaic everyday reality, these sounds in a way derealize the act, they deliver us of the oppressive weight of its massive *presence*. A small mental experiment is sufficient to make this point clear: let us imagine that, in the middle of such a pathetic rendering of the sexual act, the music is suddenly cut out, and all that remains is quick, snappy gestures, their painful silence interrupted by an occasional rattle and groan, compelling us to confront the inert presence of the sexual act. The paradox of the scene from *Ryan's Daughter* is that the waterfall sound itself functions as the fantasmatic screen obfuscating the Real of the sexual act. Real sex needs some fantasmatic screen. Any contact with a real, flesh-and-blood Other, any sexual pleasure that we find in touching *another* human being, is not something evident, but something inherently traumatic, and can be sustained only insofar as this other enters the subject's fantasy frame.

A final crucial complication needs, however, to be added: if what we experience as "reality" is structured by fantasy, and if fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real, then *reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real*. In the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is at the side of reality, and it is in dreams that we encounter the traumatic Real. It is not that dreams are for those who cannot endure reality; reality itself is for those who cannot endure (the Real that announces itself in) their dreams.

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Chapter 13

Feminist Theory and the Return of the Real: "What we really want most out of realism . . ."

Helen Small

Mais c'était surtout aux heures des repas qu'elle n'en pouvait plus . . .
<div align="right">Gustave Flaubert</div>

One absorbing moment among many in Erich Auerbach's classic study of realism comes when he analyzes a paragraph from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). It's a passage he has once before commented on in print, but "in view of the time and place of . . . publication (Istanbul, 1937)," he wryly judges it "unlikely" that the earlier essay will have reached his current readers (Auerbach 2003: 482). Here, then, is one of those politically and emotionally charged points in *Mimesis* when the prose registers the pressure of Auerbach's situation at the time of writing: his forced departure from a teaching post at Marburg in 1935, when the atmosphere of intolerance produced by Nazi racial laws became unsupportable, to take up a position teaching Romance literatures at Istanbul State University. (*Mimesis* was published in Switzerland one year after the war's end.)

Madame Bovary marks, for Auerbach, a transitional moment in French nineteenth-century realism. In Flaubert, he comments, realism departs from the grand passion, the "fiery," "uncritical" temperamentalism of Balzac, and becomes impartial, impersonal, objective. Witness the presentation of Emma Bovary's dissatisfaction with married life in Tostes:

Mais c'était surtout aux heures des repas qu'elle n'en pouvait plus, dans cette petite salle au rez-de-chaussée, avec le poêle qui fumait, la porte qui criait, les murs qui suintaient, les pavés humides; toute l'amertume de l'existence lui semblait servie sur son assiette, et, à la fumée du bouilli, il montait du fond de son âme comme d'autres bouffées d'affadissement. Charles était long à manger; elle grignotait quelques noisettes, ou bien, appuyée du coude, s'amusait, avec la pointe de son couteau, de faire des raies sur la toile cirée.

(But it was above all at mealtimes that she could bear it no longer, in that little room on the ground floor, with the smoking stove, the creaking door, the oozing walls, the damp floor-tiles; all the bitterness of life seemed to be served to her on her plate, and, with the steam from the boiled beef, there rose from the depths of her soul other exhalations as it were of disgust. Charles was a slow eater; she would nibble a few hazel-nuts, or else, leaning on her elbow, would amuse herself making marks on the oilcloth with the point of her table-knife.) (Auerbach 2003: 482–83)

Auerbach's commentary on this vignette is directed not so much at the banality of Emma Bovary's everyday reality (though he is good on that: the "cheerlessness, unvaryingness, grayness, staleness, airlessness, and inescapability" that oppress this young wife of a provincial doctor coming to understand that this is all life is offering her) as at the alienation of narrative perspective. *Mimesis* draws our attention to Flaubert's filtering of the bored wife's sensibility through his own intelligence and articulacy. This passage does not give us *what* Emma feels *as* she feels it, Auerbach observes. It gives us rather the writer's representation of what she might readily agree that she feels, had she the maturity, and the intelligence, and the literary sensibility to recognize it – were she, in other words, an ironist and not (as she thinks of herself) a romanticist.

Auerbach, in short, reads *Madame Bovary* as an ironic portrait of a woman not in possession of her own capacity for irony, a capacity we should, however, understand to be latent in her – the table-knife stabbing at the oilcloth (not that Auerbach labors the point). This is his commentary:

Le poêle qui fumait, la porte qui criait, les murs qui suintaient, les pavés humides – all this, of course, Emma sees and feels, but she would not be able to sum it all up in this way. *Toute l'amertume de l'existence lui semblait servie sur son assiette* – she doubtless has such a feeling; but if she wanted to express it, it would not come out like that; she has neither the intelligence nor the cold candor of self-accounting necessary for such a formulation. To be sure, there is nothing of Flaubert's life in these words, but only Emma's; Flaubert does nothing but bestow the power of mature expression upon the material which she affords, in its complete subjectivity. If Emma could

do this herself, she would no longer be what she is, she would have out-grown herself and thereby saved herself. (Auerbach 2003: 484)

Mme Bovary, ce n'est pas Flaubert, in short.

One could quarrel with the fine detail of Auerbach's reading. Arguably, he does not quite get the full spectrum of the woman's aliena-tion: that hint of a restless "watching me being me" quality in Emma Bovary, whose yen for a more poetic life is (Flaubert suggests) always somehow theoretical – rooted in skepticism, and (like everything she does) pursued with an eye to personal profit (e.g., Flaubert 1992: 34, 37). But as an account of narrative point of view it is astute, and as an indirect comment on realism and gender it is, like much of the critical comment-ary in Auerbach's study, tantalizingly suggestive without ever committing itself to direct explication. Not that one would expect an explicitly fem-inist reading from a philological study of mimesis published in 1946 – but Auerbach is intriguingly subtle on what would become the terrain of later feminist literary criticism. He puts his thumb securely on the prob-lems that stand in the way of any attempt (and there have been numer-ous attempts) to extrapolate from *Madame Bovary* large claims about feminism's necessary antagonism to the real: the problem of who owns Mme Bovary's dissatisfaction, and, relatedly, the problem of whether Flaubert's narrative point of view can be said to yield a politics at all.

It is a "mistake," Auerbach correctly sees, to take Emma's boredom with her reality, and, especially, her all too real husband, as exclusively belonging to her own sensibility. Like every other aspect of her subject-ivity, her dissatisfaction is a writerly fabrication of what that subjectivity *might* be, and at times (apparently) what Flaubert thinks it *should* be, but isn't – or can't confidently be said to be. Damp tiles and sweating walls and the smell of boiled beef are stand-ins, makeshift symbols ("as it were") for sources of discontent which must be larger and more diffuse and more abstract than their vivid specificity pretends. When the narrative tells us, a little further on, that Charles's blunt fingers, torpid cast of mind, and common manners (*les doigts aussie carrés, l'esprit aussi lourd, les façons si communes*) revolt his wife, we can understand these to be, Auerbach agrees, "paradigmatic causes of Emma's aversion, but they are put together delib-erately by the writer, not emotionally by Emma." Flaubert "arranges" these three sources of offense "as if they were three shocks which Emma felt one after the other." Auerbach continues:

This is not at all a naturalistic representation of consciousness. Natural shocks occur quite differently. The ordering hand of the writer is present here,

deliberately summing up the confusion of the psychological situation in the direction toward which it tends of itself – the direction of "aversion to Charles Bovary." (Auerbach 2003: 485)

Disgust, Auerbach implies, is not a manifestation of emotional intelligence on Emma's part, not an unconscious or subconscious critique of the reality she is offered. It is a reduction of "countless confused impressions" to the "unnatural" deliberateness of narrative form and the false clarity of a diagnosis of cause. *Mimesis* exhibits, in short, a zero sum tendency to give much credit to Flaubert, rather less to his character, and very little to the historical women whose real experience makes that character plausible.

Realism and the Politics of the Academy

There are quite distinct routes a critic trained in feminist theory up to about 1990 might be expected to have made to this disarming of a feminist politics, at (one might have hoped) a modern literary point of origin, in Mme Bovary's dissatisfaction with the real. One route would have been to charge Flaubert, and Auerbach too, with the so-called classic realist's familiar complicity with the ideology he represents and may appear to subvert (a road much traveled in old-style Anglo-American "representations of women" criticism). Michèle Roberts offers a version of that reading of Flaubert in her preface to the new Penguin translation of the novel, when she describes the implied author as disconcertingly both on Emma's side and apparently intent on scuppering her: he shows us a woman "at her window, gazing longingly out," a woman who knows (or believes) she can't buy the "power and freedom and choice and ease of movement" available to men, so buys "blue glass vases and new curtains" and dominates her lover instead. But Flaubert also makes us feel the allure of these material things in earnest; and he turns us into sexual voyeurs on the woman; and he finally murders her, because a woman who "steal[s] masculine power and masculine privilege . . . cannot be allowed to live" (Flaubert 1992: x).

A more historicist response would be to see in Flaubert's novel a political problematization of the very category of realism – one which involves gender, but is not confined to gender. There is a provocation to a feminist analysis along those lines in Sartre's hostile reading of Flaubert – a reading subjected to astute critique in Dominic LaCapra's *Mme Bovary on Trial* (1982). For Sartre, Flaubert was an exemplary instance of the

false advertising that was literary "realism" in France after 1848. For Sartre, as La Capra deftly summarizes him:

> The puzzle is how people at the time could identify as realistic what had such a different incentive. The animus of pure art was a systematic derealization of reality and an impossible attempt to realize the imaginary. It was no simple and anodyne doctrine of escape from an uncongenial world. It was rather a hate-filled ideology which was suicidal and genocidal to the core. . . . A passive and "feminine" vindictiveness excluded all possibility of active confrontation with the sources of alienation in the real world. (LaCapra 1982: 83–4)

A Marxist–feminist reading of a certain kind would have wanted to think harder about the role of gender in Sartre's reading of realism here. For Sartre, *Mme Bovary, c'etait Flaubert* – only with the radically altered implication that Emma Bovary's predicament expresses not only the alienation of women but the collapse of the whole revolutionary project into antihuman nihilism. Flaubert's novel is not merely an attack on the bourgeoisie (if that were so, it might be "a trojan horse with progressive implications"), but an assault on "the human being in general" (LaCapra 1982: 83) – via the woman.

A third likely route for pre-1990s feminist criticism would involve psychoanalytic attention to the role of fantasy in making and breaking the conventions of literary realism. Again, that route is well evidenced by feminist criticism of Flaubert through the 1980s (for a good example see Schor 1985: 5–28). This kind (or rather, these kinds) of psychoanalytic criticism tended to be implicitly hostile to realism, aligning the feminine with the disruption of realist conventions, and the moral and social assumptions they were seen to encode, and (especially under the influence of "French feminism") celebrating the plurality and excess of the "feminine" Imaginary over the "masculine" Symbolic. ("The Real" as a specifically psychoanalytic term, had, with retrospect, a surprisingly minor presence in pre-1990s feminist critical readings.)

The trouble with setting up such alternative routes for alternative feminisms on the subject of Flaubert, or any other realist writer, is that the geography of feminist theory on which those alternatives depend is no longer, if it ever was, an adequate description of the field. Feminist theory cannot in the early twenty-first century be divided with much profit into Anglo-American (broadly realism-friendly) feminism in one room, Marxist or "left" feminism in another (split, broadly with and against, Lukács on realism), and psychoanalytic cum poststructuralist influenced

feminism (broadly unfriendly to realism) in yet another. The understanding of feminist theory, and what should be done with it, has changed fundamentally since the 1980s, as has the understanding of realism. Feminist literary criticism is now, in the main, more strategic, more eclectic in its methods, and more diffusive: it typically provides one element within or alongside other kinds of progressivist critique rather than pursuing a discrete (or ghettoized) sense of political interest. As importantly in the current context, realism is no longer automatically taken to mean "classic realism," as the essays in this volume attest.

But perhaps the most marked change in the way literary and cultural critics have tended to approach the question of "realism" since the early 1990s has been the expansion of the terrain of debate out from what was a fairly narrow base in formal and historical analysis of "classic" literary realism and its modernist and postmodernist successors to involve broader philosophical considerations of realism. Debates about whether, and on what terms, a literary text can claim to represent reality are now increasingly presented as only one manifestation of much more fundamental arguments about whether or not some things are mind-independent (on these arguments see Norris's chapter in this volume). So what feminist critics, in common with other contemporary literary and cultural critics, are often debating, when they are discussing realism, is not just whether the representation of reality in a text by Flaubert or Eliot or Joyce or Duras rests on an assumption that the world is empirically knowable; they are also debating whether there are independent standards for judging the correctness of truth claims about the world, about experience, or about morality. The danger is that the term "realism" now too easily slips its moorings, sliding between the genre-specific/technical meanings it has for literary analysis and the differently exacting definitions required for various kinds of philosophical discussion. And there is a clear additional risk that the claims made about literary realism will become grossly over-inflated. (Few philosophers will accept that the literary and philosophical meanings of "realism" can be made commensurate.) The gain, if that slippage is controllable, will be that an odd form of pressure on the term "realism," that has more to do with the politics of the profession of literary and cultural criticism than with the objects of its study, may become much less a feature of our dealings with realism than it used to be.

For if literary "realism" today is generally understood to embrace a wide spectrum of literary genres and modes, and to hold a relatively modest place in the range of philosophical debates one can have about the nature of the real and our access to it, then we are also in the main more

self-conscious, as readers and academics, about our collective investments in "realism" as a way of giving shape to certain of our critical and professional aspirations. Bruce Robbins pointed out in the early 1990s that realism has, at least since Arnold, been a means to defining antagonistically our sense of shared critical and professional purpose. A ritualistic whipping post for those claiming philosophical and political sophistication, "realism" used to be "what we have told ourselves we exist by not being" (that is, supporting) (Robbins 1993: 227). Surveying the field at that moment of intense cross-disciplinary engagement between literary theory and the philosophy of science, and with at least two decades of work by George Levine and others complicating (or re-complicating) critical understanding of literary realism, Robbins could see that this oddly blatant "strawmanism" was on the way out, and encouraged it on its way. But he identified a strong remaining tendency to enlist the term realism into our efforts to define "common values, common purposes, community: all of them often associated with (epistemological) realism, but also separable from it." "What we really want most out of realism," Robbins suggested, is not "a 'correspondence' theory of truth," but a way of formulating consensus (Robbins 1993: 228).

The Return to the Real

Feminist criticism's investment in attacking realism for supposed naivety and, more especially, ideological bad faith is, as that analysis suggests, now largely *passé*: necessary perhaps in its moment, invigorating certainly, but it has little to tell us politically in the early twenty-first century that we don't already know, and little to tell us about literary forms and methods that we shouldn't be moving, quickly, to complexify or debunk. On the other hand, feminist criticism and theory plainly have an ongoing share in realism as a means to expressing common values and purposes. One of the most marked patterns in feminist theoretical writing over the past decade has, indeed, been what Hal Foster has called, influentially in another context, "the return of the real." As in the field of the visual arts (Foster's subject), that return has taken many forms, with some of them still prioritizing an anti-foundationalist hostility to realism, but more and more of them wanting to make robust distinctions between an antifoundationalist view of the constructedness of social facts and an acknowledgment that some phenomena exist independent of human observation – as "brute facts," in John Searle's terminology (Searle 1995; and see Bérubé 2000).

As a prominent feature in the broad landscape of feminist theory, the return of the real is easily documented. In feminist criticism's recent fascination with prosthetics, the medicalized body, and futuristic technologies of the self, one can see analogies with what Foster describes as a pushing of illusionism to the point of the real – and, conversely, pushing the real to the point of illusion: not covering up the real with simulacral surfaces, but "*un*covering it with uncanny things," estranging everyday things, making the habitual and cozy eerie. The allure of Kristeva on abjection (Kristeva 1982) – the violated body, whose reality affronts the placid surfaces of the conventionalized "real" – may now be waning a little. Recent work in that field is at least warier than was formerly the case of glamorizing the broken body; warier too of repeating Kristeva's problematic blurring of agency in the term abjection (that which abjects; that which is abjected).

A more sophisticated return of the real has occurred in the context of poststructuralist feminism, particularly in its psychoanalytic guise, which has seen an increasingly explicit and complex theorization of "the real" (not to be confused with "reality"). The principal philosophical/theoretical models remain Freud and his definition of "the real" as unconscious Desire, or what he called "Das Ding"; Kristeva, whose account of the symbolic denotes the real as "that which cannot be uttered as such"; and above all Lacan, who provides the most extensive and idiosyncratic development of the Freudian real. For Lacan, "the Real" includes Freud's definition of psychic reality as unconscious desire and its related fantasies, but also "an idea of morbidity, or *reste* (vestige), or *part maudite* (doomed or accused part)" (Roudinesco 1997: 217). The Lacanian Real is not repressed but, in Žižek's formulation, "foreclosed or 'primordially repressed,'" not exiled from the symbolic but "constitutive of the very order of symbolic historicity" – "in other words, the Real *qua* Thing stands for that X on account of which every symbolization fails" (Žižek 1994: 199; see also his essay in this volume). To use the familiar poststructuralist terms, every signifier's value can be determined only by its difference from all the others, *ad infinitum*. (For attempts to think through the implications of this account of the Real for the theorization of sexual difference, see Copjec 1994, Žižek 2005, and Becker-Leckrone 2005.)

The most interesting aspect of the feminist return of the real is better described as a return *to* the real: an explicit retreat, in many quarters, from hostility to the real, or ironic denaturalizing of the real, as supposed means to dislodging the power of the real. In this guise, the revival of feminist interest in epistemic realism has to be understood as part of a wider concern, especially on the political left, to "decouple antifoundationalist thought

from progressive cultural analysis and policymaking" (Bérubé 2000). Critics who, in the 1980s and 1990s, advocated irony, parody, and performative repetition of the real as the main weapons in a progressivist critical armory, have for some time now been tempering that move, or replacing it entirely, with more direct critique of the cultural and political forces which validate some versions of the real and block others. Donna Haraway's rethinking, in "Situated Knowledges," of her earlier claim that a feminist politics should work not with the category of "woman" but with an "ironic political myth" of the self as cyborg is an early and much-cited example (Haraway 1991: 149). "My problem and 'our' problem," she writes, in a now famous passage, "is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world" (Haraway 1991: 187). The rhetoric shows the strain of that wished-for yoking of the "radical contingency" view with fidelity to a 'real' world" ("real" held out in tweezers – George Eliot in nanny's uniform demanding "a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts"). But awareness of the difficulty has itself helped to galvanize philosophical argument, both for feminism and more widely, in the years since.

The concept of "situated knowledge" was for a time, during the mid-to-late 1990s, pretty much pervasive in feminist criticism – a leading instance of the refurbishment of realism that happened as a consequence of increased dialogue between literary critics and philosophers of science in the decade. The problems it often brought with it are deftly diagnosed by Amanda Anderson in her chapter on "Realism, universalism, and the science of the human" in *The Way We Argue Now* (2006). By way of an example of the revalidation of realism through the idea of situated knowledge claims, Anderson offers Satya P. Mohanty's *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* (1997). Mohanty's reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is a key move in his pursuit of a "postpositivist realist alternative" to postmodernist constructivist views of experience and identity. His claim is that authentic political understanding and social knowledge on the part of individuals, such as he sees represented in Sethe and Paul D, must take the form of local and contingent experience, rather than resting on essentialized views of identity. Knowledge of this kind, he argues, will be specific to time, place, context, but it will be nonetheless dependable as long as it remains "supported by the proper conjunction of experiential insight and confirming objective analysis of the true social interests of the interpreting agent" (Anderson 2006: 104).

Anderson sees this attempt to define a new epistemology that will be at once subjective and objective, and simultaneously contingent and universal, as muddled thinking:

> It is unclear whether the insight of the situated agent is securing the reliability of the knowledge, or the confirming account of objective social conditions is validating the insight of the situated agent. While Mohanty would doubtless reply that the two are mutually determining, that he means to identify a dialectic, the point remains that Mohanty wants to doubly secure the subordination of interpretation to explanation, first by appealing to the epistemic privilege of the oppressed, which is situated, yet contains the possibility for objective reliability, . . . second, and somewhat contradictorily, by appealing to the need for an extrinsic explanatory account to ratify the standpoint in the last instance. (Anderson 2006: 105)

Moreover, she observes, Mohanty has no means of explaining "how such achieved knowledge might become a reason for action on the woman's part" – how, that is, we can get from "fact" to "value" (Anderson 2006: 105). To all this one might add that what Mohanty describes as experiential *knowledge* is more often than not going to turn out to mean *feeling* – and any attempt (feminist or otherwise) to validate feeling as a mode of knowledge has some hard questions to answer about the definitional collapsing of the one thing into the other. At this point in our collective political history, as Simon Blackburn remarks in a wittily astringent review of Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought* (2001), we badly need an account of political emotion which can discriminate between emotion and judgment; we need no encouragement to see them as the same thing.

I take Anderson's own desire to stand back from attempts to appropriate a new, critical version of scientific realism on behalf of feminism and allied political movements – and her wish to resist any possible temptation to denigrate or foreswear scientific realism (Anderson 2006: 112) – as one facet of an ongoing interest in moving beyond the professionally galvanizing use of realism that Robbins identified in 1992. That is, I take it as an attempt to resist the idea that realism must be, in itself, politically motivated or motivating in some ways and not others. If that is right, it is a welcome move, an overdue one, in the history of feminist theory's relations with the term realism.

Does it have support from elsewhere? There are some signs of agreement, or rather of a comparable move away from pressing realism into the service of political consensus, but in a very different quarter: namely,

Judith Butler's most recent writing on gender theory. Butler's contribu-
tions to feminist theory, subsequent to the hugely influential *Gender Trouble*
(1990), constitute probably the single most influential version of the move
to reconsider irony, parody, and performative repetition as not the only,
and not a sufficient, response to the category of the real. Her advocacy,
in *Gender Trouble* itself and since, of the power of camp and drag to
denature and deauthorize the "reality" of sex has been a major contribu-
tion to anti-foundationalist thinking about gender – primarily because,
more than anyone, she has exposed the error that persists in most self-
described anti-foundationalist writing about sex and gender: the error
of defining gender's constructedness in relation to the supposed uncon-
structedness of sex. Biological determinism, of various more and less soph-
isticated kinds, underwrites not only moral foundationalism (its obvious
counterpart), but cultural anti-foundationalism (its supposed opposite).
With hindsight, it is perhaps not surprising that *Gender Trouble* was often
misread by its early critics (including many admirers) as a purely per-
formative account of gender, unhooked from any consideration of the
material conditions in which gender is enacted.

Butler's restatements of her position since have repeatedly sought to
head off that error by acknowledging that cultural fantasy has real effects.
Here, for example, are her summary reflections, in *Undoing Gender* (2004),
on cultural fantasy and the "reality" of gender:

(A)   What operates at the level of cultural fantasy is not finally dissociable
      from the ways in which material life is organized.
(B)   When one performance of gender is considered real and another false
      . . . we can conclude that a certain ontology of gender is condition-
      ing these judgments, an ontology (an account of what gender *is*) that
      is also put into crisis by the performance of gender in such a way that
      these judgments are undermined or become impossible to make.
(C)   The point to emphasize here is not that drag is subversive of gender
      norms, but that we live, more or less implicitly, with received notions
      of reality, implicit accounts of ontology, which determine what kinds
      of bodies and sexualities will be considered real and true, and which
      kind will not. (Butler 2004: 214)

What interests me most about this is the complex understanding of the
real on which it depends. It is an understanding that carries with it an
awareness of Freud's and Lacan's accounts of the real (written about more
directly by Butler in "Competing Universalities" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek
2000)). But Butler is directly confrontational in *Undoing Gender* on the
generally understood non-cooptability of the psychoanalytic accounts of

the real into our standard accounts of cultural "reality." One can phrase this as a problem with the definition of culture: the notion of culture as it conventionally operates within contemporary cultural studies, and the idea of culture as transmuted, for Lacan, into the "symbolic," are (as she writes) "often understood as hopelessly opposed" enterprises. One can also phrase it as a problem with contemporary theoretical approaches to realism. Any attempt to understand the "inalterable and eternal" rules by which desire is regulated in the symbolic has, she observes bluntly, "limited use for a theory that seeks to understand the conditions under which the social transformation of gender is possible" (Butler 2004: 44).

Acknowledging this definitional opposition – one she sees running like a fissure through contemporary sexuality and gender studies, dividing queer critique from non-queer critique, and poststructuralist psychoanalytic feminism from a residually structuralist psychoanalytic feminism – Butler sets out to persuade her readers that "the distinction between symbolic and social law cannot finally hold, that the symbolic itself is the sedimentation of social practices, and that radical alterations in kinship demand a rearticulation of the structuralist presuppositions of psychoanalysis, moving us, as it were, toward a queer poststructuralism of the psyche" (Butler 2004: 44). That is, she sets out to persuade us, through an appeal to actual changes in kinship structures on the one hand, and a re-description of the symbolic structures of the psyche on the other, that the division of feminism between two understandings of culture, and two understandings of what we mean by the term "real," can and should be healed.

This may look, on the surface, like the latest step in an ongoing pattern for feminist theory: defining our hopes of consensus through our invocation of the term "real," just as we have done, so often in the past, through our invocations of the term "realism." The move from "realism" to "the real" could, from that perspective, be just a sign of our growing collective sophistication. Same dance, better footwork. And were it true, it would not obviously be a bad thing. Wanting to frame a common sense of values, aims, purposes is a laudable professional aspiration and if it invites the response that it is hopelessly utopian, or a superficial rhetorical gesture ("I want to persuade you all; I know that's not possible"), then the response does not have to be merely dismissive. But something more knotty than that, politically and philosophically, is going on in Butler's essay. She is trying to persuade us of two not-obviously compatible things: on the one hand, a more thoroughgoing anti-foundationalism in our understanding of the operations of the psyche, and on the other a progressivist critique of real-world constraints on sexuality and gender through the

regulatory medium of the law (regulations on gay speech in the military, restrictions on lesbian and gay adoption and single parent adoption, etc.).

Butler is, of all contemporary feminist critics, the one who has had to work hardest to resist critical reduction to "a politics of sexual self-expression" (Soper 1995; and see Robbins 2000). In this book, she also appears newly resistant to enlistment of a different kind: enlistment into that comfortable professional and readerly community that Nussbaum notoriously charged her, in a hostile review for *The New Republic*, with being too quick to assume. *Undoing Gender* ends with a short and sur-prisingly edgy chapter on the disciplinary disseminations of philosophy. Butler reflects, explicitly, on her own passage from philosophy into comparative literature and women's studies, and on how far it has and has not been representative of general developments within academe. Her intellectual conclusion is optimistic: she sees the changes philosophy has undergone in other branches of the humanities (critical theory, cultural studies, comparative literature, etc.) as a good thing for philosophy – a making strange of philosophy to itself, the bondsman looking back at the lord. But her institutional analysis is anything but complacent. Where, she asks, "do we see job advertisements that emanate jointly from philosophy and sociology departments that seek to find someone who is versed in the philosophical and cultural problem of modernity in the context of slavery and its aftermath? . . . [W]hen was the last time you heard of a philosophy department joining with a German department in a search, looking for someone who works in German romanticism, including Kant, Hegel, Goethe, Hölderlin?" (Butler 2004: 249). That recognition of the institutional constraints within which we all still work makes her final word on realism, in this book at least, an acknowledgment of how far we have still to go before we can assume consensus on what we are doing now, and on what our collective intellectual future should be.

Conclusion

I began with Emma Bovary's non-possession of her own hostility to reality as (in Auerbach's reading) a redefining moment for nineteenth-century realism. The core of this essay has been discussion of recent feminist theory's voluntary relinquishment of hostility from its dealings with realism and (non-equivalently, but now relatedly) its dealings with the real. I've charted, with necessary sketchiness, the signs of feminism's recent engagement with both realism and the real on terms other than antagonism or parody or irony. Very recent criticism (I've suggested) has

made efforts also to press beyond its own persistent interest in "realism" as a means to achieving critical consensus. I want to end by going back to Auerbach, in part because I do not want *Madame Bovary* to be merely a springboard here for my own hopes of establishing consensus about the current state of feminist theory; in part because I am struck by how awkwardly Auerbach's classic text on realism sits with this accent on the professional motives shaping our critical interest in realism.

Auerbach sees, with admirable acuteness, the decentering of dissatisfaction in *Madame Bovary* from what we might want to think of as its rightful center in Mme Bovary herself. He also sees, with a less clear view of its political effects perhaps, that this is a characteristic of all realism, and not just Flaubert's twisting of it: specific evidences of the real may be "paradigmatic" but that very fact disqualifies them from being sufficient expressions of reality. So Emma is doubly disqualified from political consciousness: one, because she simply isn't bright enough, as Flaubert presents her; two, because a paradigmatic representation of "her" causes for dissatisfaction (three things that disgust her) shows too plainly the arranging hand of the writer. The dissatisfaction must, then, be his and not hers. The obstacle in the way of a true diagnosis of dissatisfaction, and a true representation of Emma, is, however, not Flaubert's (arranging, meddling) hand, but the necessary incompleteness of any representation of a life.

That necessary incompleteness, as is well known, was the liberating principle behind Auerbach's critical enterprise. "It all unmistakably comes down to personal effort," Edward Said concluded, in his introduction to the 2003 reissue of *Mimesis*. He was commenting on – defending, indeed – Auerbach's confessed method of "letting [him]self be guided by a few motifs which I have worked out gradually and without a specific purpose, . . . trying them out on a series of texts which have become familiar and vital to me in the course of philological activity" (Auerbach 2003: 548). What intrigued Said was the confidence Auerbach possessed in his own experience and his own values: the willingness to surrender to his own sensibility, supported, on the one hand, by a realization that no one person can possibly synthesize the whole of modern life; on the other, by a belief that our experience of order and meaning in reality is, finally, a product of our own subjectivity. What stops *Madame Bovary* from being political enables Auerbach to be critical – and enables, specifically, his cavalierness with what are now highly sensitive, highly politicized terms. There is, as Said comments, "something impossibly naïve, if not outrageous" from an early twenty-first century standpoint in Auerbach's readiness to use without demurral terms that have filled libraries with

disputation: terms like "Western," "reality," "representation" (Auerbach 2003: xxxii).

Knowing, as we do now, a great deal more about the circumstances of Auerbach's writing – they were much less intellectually isolated than he implied (see Apter 2003) – it would be possible to read *Mimesis*, for all its intellectual subtlety and power, as a pious fraud upon the profession. The exiled critic, piecing together the anatomy of realism, shoring up his own literary culture against his ruins, was in fact at the hub of European philology, working alongside men and women who helped to shape the fields of literary criticism and comparative literature in ways which still have influence and value for us now. "Personal effort" was not the whole story.

Taking a hard line against Auerbach on these grounds would be a crude use of the critical history of realism in the service of a possible new, but not especially valuable, "progressive" consensus. The recovered reality of Auerbach's writing situation is, I want to suggest, better taken as a reminder that the specifics of lives and histories over which realism has (historically changing) claims of representation place everyone involved with them – critic as much as author or character – at a remove from the realities they testify to. The remove, that is, of necessary partiality. The opening of this essay offered an allegory in which the most influential critic of realism in the twentieth century established for himself, or for criticism, a freedom from contextual constraints, from the real itself, that resembles both Flaubert's ironic distance from Emma and Auerbach's illusory alone-ness in Istanbul – his freedom simply to indulge his subjectivity as he liked. Thanks to Apter and others, we can now return Auerbach to the domain of contextual constraint, and see him as an object of our own realist gaze.

This curved logic applies also to the profession of criticism. Realism is not only now the object to be demystified but an active agent in demystification, which has to be used on ourselves even as we continue to try to analyze it. Now that feminist critics are no longer scattered and lonely voices but a sizeable professional body, and now that feminist criticism belongs not just to feminist critics but to a significant proportion of the whole professional community, the time may have come for accepting that our situation is no longer analogous to Emma Bovary's discontent, nor even to Flaubert's irony. We have, collectively, achieved the advantage of a critical consciousness that is the beneficiary of both those things, but that now knows its own discontents and has a large measure of authority with which to address them.

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Chapter 14

Realism and Anti-Realism in Contemporary Philosophy: "What's truth got to do with it?"

Christopher Norris

The Current Debate

The issue between realism and anti-realism has a long pre-history that includes most of the salient episodes in Western post-Hellenic philosophical thought. At various times it has been a chief topic of debate in metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, ethics, and (more recently) philosophy of language and logic. Thus realists have confronted a range of opponents on a range of different philosophical terrains, from the Platonist doctrine of transcendent (supra-sensory) "forms" or "essences" to Lockean radical empiricism, Berkeleian idealism, Humean skepticism, Kant's attempt to trump all these through a theory of "transcendental idealism" conjoined with "empirical realism," and a whole array of latter-day (e.g., phenomenalist, descriptivist, and "strong"-constructivist) variants. Sometimes the protagonists may appear to switch sides, or at any rate to switch labels, as for instance when empirically minded philosophers of mathematics reject the realist ("Platonist") idea of a realm of objective mathematical truths or of abstract entities – numbers, sets, classes, etc. – which are somehow conceived as existing quite apart from our methods of proof or discovery-procedures. Still the debate may fairly be said to turn on a few basic issues which continue to divide realists from anti-realists as they have for the past two millennia and more. Michael Devitt puts the realist case in

the simplest possible and least controversial terms – "least controversial," that is, for anyone *except* a convinced anti-realist – when he defines "commonsense realism" as the belief that "tokens of most observable common-sense physical types objectively exist independently of the mental" (Devitt 1991: 24). To which he might have added: independently of our various beliefs, theories, paradigms, conceptual schemes, preferential descriptions, and so forth.

Thus, according to the realist, the universe and all its furniture – from electrons, atoms, and molecules to galaxies and supernovae – must be thought not only to exist but also to exert its various powers, properties, causal dispositions etc., irrespective of our various statements or beliefs concerning it. Those statements and beliefs are *true* (objectively so) just to the extent that they pick out real-world objects, processes, or events and just on condition that they predicate the right sorts of property. Otherwise they are *false* (objectively so) even if they are borne out by the best evidence to hand or to the best of our currently available knowledge. Thus our statements should be thought of as "truth-bearers" which acquire their truth-value from the way things stand in reality, or from the existence of those various "truth-makers" (at whatever point on the scale of magnitude from microstructural to astrophysical) which may very well lie beyond our utmost powers of epistemic grasp. In other words, the objectivity of truth is a matter of its "verification-transcendent" character, or the fact that it holds quite apart from our various proof-procedures, sources of evidence, or methods of empirical enquiry. So the statement "there exists another solar system like ours in some region of the expanding universe beyond our furthest radio-telescopic reach" is a statement that cannot be verified or falsified by any means at our disposal, but which, all the same, we can know to possess an objective truth-value (true or false) despite this lack of evidence (see Soames 1999). So likewise with mathematical statements concerning well-formed yet unproved (or unprovable) theorems which the realist will take to be valid or not in virtue of the fact that mathematical truths are objective and hence in no way restricted to the class of those for which we happen to have found some adequate proof-procedure. This argument extends to issues in philosophy of history and other such areas of discourse where – according to the realist – we can make any number of perfectly intelligible but unverifiable statements (such as "Tony Blair's left eyelid twitched imperceptibly as he uttered the last word of his first House of Commons statement committing British troops to the 2003 invasion of Iraq") which are true or false as a matter of fact despite our possessing no evidence either way.

Such is at any rate the realist case in its basic metaphysical form, a case which is then very often filled out with various kinds of epistemological or causal-explanatory content. Thus scientific realists will also want to say (like Devitt) that the physical sciences afford us knowledge of the world and its properties, causal powers, microstructural attributes, and so forth; that this knowledge exhibits genuine progress despite occasional setbacks or wrong turns; that such progress comes about through our increasing depth-explanatory grasp of just those salient properties and powers; and that scientific realism is the only theory which can account for all this – along with the manifest success of science in various fields of endeavor – unless by invoking some kind of miracle or massive cosmic coincidence (see Boyd 1984). They will therefore reject any version of the argument (whether in its Berkeleian idealist or latter-day positivist, phenomenalist, or "constructive-empiricist" guise) which holds that we had much better avoid such metaphysically over-committed realist talk and instead make do with whatever is given in the way of direct empirical evidence plus covering statements which wisely refrain from invoking "causal powers," "laws of nature," or suchlike occult forces (see van Fraassen 1980). For, according to the realist, this is just another version of the old disreputable strategy by which early-modern thinkers like Copernicus and Galileo were persuaded to bring their theories into line with the dictates of orthodox religious faith. That is to say, it adopts a line of least resistance which "saves the (empirical or phenomenal) appearances" while declining to venture any theory or hypothesis concerning the reality "behind" those appearances, such as – for example – might issue in the statement "the earth revolves around the sun rather than the sun around the earth." Nor will the realist be much impressed by various contemporary updates on this line of argument, whether they come from philosophers of science – like Pierre Duhem (Duhem 1954) – whose thinking still bears a very marked theological slant; or else from those – among them constructive empiricists like Bas van Fraassen (van Fraassen 1980) – who consider it just a matter of plain good sense and sound scientific practice.

Thus van Fraassen allows that we can safely treat as "real" those objects and events that fall within the range of unaided (technologically unassisted) human observation or whose magnitude, velocity, or other parameters are not such as to render them invisible to the naked eye. Otherwise – as regards (say) atoms, molecules, or the rotation of remote galaxies – we should rather take a sensible empiricist line and treat them as more-or-less useful posits which may indeed figure crucially in our current-best theories but whose reality (and the truth of our statements concerning them) remains a moot question. Indeed van Fraassen sees

nothing but a foolish display of "empty strutting" and "courage not under fire" in the realist's affecting to take greater risks through such bold conjectures while in fact standing to lose no more than does the sober constructive empiricist if those conjectures should eventually turn out to conflict with the empirical evidence (van Fraassen 1985: 255). On the contrary, the realist responds: this is truly a case of "nothing ventured, nothing gained," since if science is to make progress then it can come about only through the willingness to offer depth-explanatory causal hypotheses that go beyond the strict empiricist remit and which *do* therefore run that additional risk. Moreover, there is no making sense of the advancement of scientific knowledge to date were it not for the typical pattern of change by which a duly cautious, empiricist approach to issues concerning (say) the existence of atoms and other microphysical entities has at length given way to a realist conception borne out by more powerful techniques of observation or more adequate means of theoretical grasp.

Of course, it is always possible at any stage for hard-line positivists like Ernst Mach (or constructive empiricists like van Fraassen) to adopt a skeptical stance and decree that we should not – on pain of "metaphysical" error – lend credence to claims that go beyond the evidence of unaided human observation (Mach 1893). However, in that case they will invite the realist response that such an argument is both grossly anthropocentric (equating what exists with what happens to fall within the range of our perceptual modalities) and based on a naively empiricist appeal to the supposed self-evidence of the senses. For if one thing has emerged from recent work in neurophysiology and cognitive psychology it is the fact that even our most "direct" observations are shaped or informed by a vast amount of preconscious interpretative processing (see, for example, Young 1987). Still, this need not be taken to entail – on the standard Kuhnian account (Kuhn 1970) – that scientific realism lacks any kind of credibility since observations are always theory-laden and theories always underdetermined by the best empirical evidence. Rather it allows for just the opposite conclusion, that these merely contingent limits on our knowledge have *no bearing whatsoever* on the issue as to whether those theories and observations are capable of yielding true statements with regard to the nature and structure of physical reality.

Thus the truth-value of statements such as "every acid is a proton-donor" or "the charge on every electron is negative" depends entirely on the way things stand with respect to acids, protons, electrons, or charge characteristics, and is wholly unaffected – so the realist will argue – by any past, present, or future best-possible state of knowledge concerning them (see Putnam 1975). That is to say, if true then their truth-value holds as a matter of *a posteriori* necessity, or of their having been first discovered

through some process of empirical enquiry, but then holding good in virtue of just what it is (in any world physically compatible with ours) to be an *acid*, a *proton*, or an *electron* (Kripke 1980). And if false then their falsehood is again a matter of their failing to capture some objective truth about the structure of microphysical reality, as for instance might just conceivably turn out to be the case if our whole current notion of subatomic structure were shown to be radically misconceived and terms such as *proton* and *electron* were thus proved altogether void of referential content. Moreover, this argument also applies to those various past theories which we now take to have turned out either true, false, or partially valid in light of our current-best scientific thinking, but whose ultimate truth-value is decided *not* by whatever epistemic standards we currently bring to bear but by the question whether or not they correspond to the way things stand in objective reality. Of course, the convergent realist will hold that we *can* have pretty good warrant for believing that science must indeed be on the right track at least with regard to the great majority of those theories, truth-claims, and postulated referents ("atoms," "electrons," "protons," etc.) that have managed to survive and play a continuing role in the development of scientific knowledge. Also she will put the case that this claim is strongly borne out by our most reliable or well-tried procedures of hypothesis-testing, abductive reasoning, or inference to the best causal explanation. Still the skeptic may reject that case as one which simply ignores his "argument from error," i.e., his point that a great many past theories – like Aristotle's with regard to "natural place" or Priestley's with regard to "phlogiston" – once had (or seemed to have) just as good a range of evidence in their support.

Such an argument will scarcely convince the realist who can then point out that we have more than adequate grounds from the record of long-run scientific progress since Aristotle and Priestley to conclude that they were demonstrably on the wrong track and that later theories (incorporating oxygen, Newtonian gravity, or Einsteinian space-time curvature) are all that is needed to rebut the skeptic's claim. However, that claim can never be refuted so long as the skeptic sticks to his guns and refuses point-blank to accept that any such selective treatment of the "evidence" from scientific history can back up the case for a realist worldview which inherently transcends our furthest capacities of proof or verification.

Dummett's Anti-Realism

It is at this point that epistemological skepticism shades off into the kind of metaphysical anti-realism that typifies the writings of Michael

Dummett and others who deny the existence of objective truths (see, for example, Dummett 1978). On their account, quite simply, it cannot make sense to assert that unverifiable statements – such as those concerning remote astrophysical events or unproven mathematical conjectures – *must* have some objective truth-value despite our inability to determine that value by any means at our disposal. Rather those statements must be taken as belonging to Dummett's "disputed class," that is to say, the class of non-bivalent (neither true nor false) statements which lack assignable truth-conditions since they lie beyond our furthest powers of epistemic grasp. This follows from Dummett's Frege-derived doctrine that "sense determines reference," coupled with his likewise Fregean principle that the meaning of a sentence is given by its truth-conditions, and also with his Wittgenstein-influenced idea that those conditions are established, in turn, by the rules that apply for its correct usage within some recognizable language-game or communal "form of life" (Dummett 1978). Thus, according to Dummett, there are two crucial tests for "warranted assertibility" with respect to any given such sentence, namely that (1) we should be able to *acquire* it (together with its operative truth-conditions) through exposure to its usage in the right sorts of epistemic circumstance, and (2) we should be able to *manifest* our grasp of those same conditions by uttering the sentence just as and when we are suitably placed to apply them. Which is also to say that the criteria for truth are coextensive with those for warranted assertibility, or again – what amounts to the same thing – that there is no room in Dummett's philosophy for the existence of objective truths.

Thus, in the case of mathematics, "the platonist [realist] metaphor assimilates mathematical enquiry to the investigations of the astronomer: mathematical structures, like galaxies, exist, independently of us, in a realm of reality which we do not inhabit but which those of us who have the skill are capable of observing and reporting on" (Dummett 1978: 229). However, this cannot be so, Dummett argues, since the mathematician can assign a truth-value only to theorems for which she possesses some adequate proof-procedure or at any rate sufficient grasp of the problem to know what would count as an adequate proof. So when applied to as-yet unproven theorems like Goldbach's Conjecture – that every even number is the sum of two primes – this doctrine requires that we abstain from asserting that they *must* be objectively true or false despite our present (or perhaps our ultimate) inability to determine the issue one way or the other. Or again, to reverse Dummett's metaphor: when applied in the astrophysical context (for example, as concerns the statement "there exists another solar system like ours in some epistemically inaccessible region

of the expanding universe”), it requires that we treat such statements as belonging to the “disputed class” and hence as lacking any objective (albeit to us unknowable) truth-value. This follows, on Dummett’s anti-realist view, from the straightforward *impossibility* that we could ever have grounds for asserting either of the disjuncts, that is, adequate evidential or epistemic warrant for declaring that one or the other *must* be the case despite our not knowing which.

The same goes for well-formed but unverifiable statements with regard to the course of historical events, such as “Mark Antony scratched his left ear unnoticed three times during the Battle of Actium.” For in this case also – Dummett maintains – any utterance of a statement which lies beyond our utmost powers of verification must *ipso facto* fail the bivalence (either-true-or-false) test. This is *not* just to say, obviously enough, that we are in no position to judge whether the statement is true or false since we don’t have any evidence that could possibly settle the issue. Rather it is to claim that the lack of such evidence precludes us from venturing even the assertion that this statement is *objectively* true or false unbeknownst to us and despite the non-existence of eye-witness accounts, documentary sources, or other such (elsewhere reliable) means of ascertainment. Thus any “gaps in our knowledge” are also “gaps in reality” to the extent that “reality” *just is* what is knowable by the best methods to hand or whatever we can justifiably assert to fall within the scope of our proof-procedures, investigative methods, epistemic capacities, and so forth (see Dummett 1978: 358–74). In which case the realist must stand convicted of philosophic error and a kind of metaphysical hubris if she ascribes an objective truth-value to statements (like those instanced above) which belong to the Dummettian “disputed class” and are hence simply not candidates for truth or falsehood of whatever kind.

In short, Dummett’s is a form of global anti-realism premised on a verificationist epistemology and – logically prior to that – on a theory of meaning which entails the non-existence of unverifiable truths since any statement that fails to meet his criteria must by very definition exceed the bounds of warranted assertibility. This is why objections from the realist quarter tend to focus on Dummett’s leading idea that philosophy of language has taken over from epistemology as the basis for any adequate theory of knowledge and truth (see Devitt 1991). Thus, according to Dummett, the dispute about realism “concerns the notion of truth appropriate for statements of the disputed class; and this means that it is a dispute concerning the kind of *meaning* which those statements have” (Dummett 1978: 146). And again: “the whole point of my approach . . . has been to show that the theory of meaning underlies metaphysics.

If I have made any worthwhile contribution to philosophy, I think it must lie in my having raised this issue in these terms" (Dummett 1978: xl). To which his opponents typically respond that this is to get the matter backwards, since the issue with regard to scientific realism (or realism more broadly construed) is one that cannot possibly find an answer in any theory of meaning adopted (like Dummett's) on sheerly *a priori* or "metaphysical" grounds.

Michael Devitt speaks for this realist opposition when he asks "What has truth to do with realism?" and responds: "on the face of it, nothing at all," since "*realism says nothing semantic at all* beyond, in its use of 'objective,' making the negative point that our semantic capacities do *not* constitute the world" (Devitt 1991: 39). And is there not indeed something preposterous (in the literal sense of that term) about a doctrine which takes certain highly debatable theses in the theory of meaning and deploys them as them as the basis for a yet more dubious interpretation of the realism issue? After all, as Devitt pointedly remarks:

> Realism is an overarching empirical (scientific) theory or principle. It is initially plausible. It is supported by arguments that make no appeal to theories of language or understanding . . . What firmer place could there be to stand than Realism, as we theorize in such undeveloped areas as those of language and understanding? In contrast, the poor state of theories in those areas, whether verificationist or not, makes them a bad place from which to start theorizing, particularly in determining overarching principles about the nature of reality. (284)

Besides, what sense can it make to speak of "discovery" (whether with respect to mathematical, scientific, historical, or other kinds of truth) unless there is *something there* to be discovered – rather than constructed or somehow brought into being – through our various investigative methods and procedures? In the case of mathematics, according to Dummett, we are confronted with a choice of metaphors: "the platonist compares the mathematician with the astronomer, the geographer or the explorer, the intuitionist compares him with the sculptor or the imaginative writer; and neither comparison seems very apt" (1978: xxv). All the same it is clear that Dummett opts for the latter (intuitionist) approach, not only as applied to mathematics (where truth is restricted to just that class of theorems or statements for which we can construct an adequate proof), but also as concerns scientific, historical, and other areas of discourse. Hence his remarkable suggestion – albeit hedged around with various protective caveats – that past events might in some sense be "brought about" by a change

in our present state of knowledge concerning them or (perhaps) by the efficacy of prayer as a means of retroactively deciding the issue in the case of past events whose outcome is as yet unknown (see, for example, Dummett 1978: 319–32). This raises the question as to how far Dummett's anti-realist metaphysics is informed by certain theological precepts with regard to the limited purview of human knowledge and the doctrine that all things are possible to God. From a realist standpoint, conversely, it will look more like a failure to grasp the determinate (objective and unalterable) truth-value of statements concerning past events and a consequent well-nigh miraculist faith in the human power to decide what *shall* or what *should have* happened in accordance with our wishes and desires.

Also there is the problem – on Dummett's anti-realist account – that scientists or mathematicians in search of some explanatory theory or proof-procedure must strictly be taken not to know what they are looking for until they come up with an adequate means of verification. After all, it can scarcely be thought that mathematicians who worked on a solution to Fermat's Last Theorem during the three centuries when that theorem remained beyond reach of any adequate (decisive) proof-procedure must therefore have had no grasp of what it meant – or what would constitute the truth-conditions for their statement – when they declared "Fermat's Last Theorem is true." That is to say, enquiry cannot even make a start unless the enquirer possesses some idea of those operative truth-conditions *in advance* of achieving the wished-for result. Dummett effectively turns this argument around so as to allow that a statement may indeed qualify for ascription of bivalent truth or falsehood just so long as we know what would (counterfactually) remove it from the "disputed class" even though we don't yet possess the means to carry such a proof right through. But, again, this makes truth dependent on our future-best *conceivable* methods of verification, rather than accepting (as the realist would have it) that truth is verification-transcendent and in no sense constrained by the scope and limits of human epistemic grasp. What the realist maintains is that truth-conditions for well-formed statements of the disputed class have enough in common with other, less problematical cases to give us at least a fair working knowledge of what would constitute a proof of Goldbach's Conjecture or other such (as yet) unproven theorems. Thus we know what it means – what would have to be the case – for those statements to turn out true (or false) even though that knowledge falls short of Dummett's requirement, i.e., the ability to manifest a grasp of some adequate proof-procedure. In the same way we know pretty much what kinds of evidence would count as verification of the

statement about Mark Antony despite our being in no position to establish their truth or falsehood.

For the realist, therefore, it is a fallacy to argue from the lack of epistemic warrant for asserting this or that to be the case (for instance with regard to Goldbach's Conjecture or the statement "there exists another solar system like ours in some epistemically inaccessible region of the expanding universe") to the claim that such statements lack an objective truth-value. This argument will go through only on condition that truth is epistemically constrained, that is to say, coextensive with our scope of knowledge or capacity to determine the issue in any given case. Of course, the anti-realist may stand firm and insist – like Dummett – that it follows from a number of strictly irrefutable premises in the philosophy of language and logic. However, they will then be committed to a doctrine which even Dummett, in his more cautious moments, seems unwilling to take on board at full skeptical strength. For if indeed it is the case that any "gaps in our knowledge" must also be construed as "gaps in reality" then there is simply no escaping the conclusion that reality *just is* whatever happens to lie within the bounds of our various proof-procedures, investigative methods, documentary sources, and so on. Thus Dummett-style anti-realism is a thesis that cannot be safely confined, as his defenders sometimes suggest, to certain technical issues in the philosophy of language and logic, or certain larger "metaphysical" claims which none the less leave us perfectly at liberty to adopt any kind of approach (whether realist or anti-realist) that best suits the topic or the "area of discourse" concerned (see Wright 1987). Rather it is a global thesis which if followed through consistently, in accordance with the logic of Dummett's position, obliges us to think that truth cannot possibly be held to transcend the scope of present verifiability or (at the limit) of idealized epistemic warrant. In short, it amounts to an *a priori* veto on the realist argument that there might (indeed must) be a great many truths – about mathematics, subatomic physics, remote astronomical events, unrecorded historical facts, and so forth – which in no way depend on our possessing the resources to assign a determinate truth-value to any statements or hypotheses concerning them.

Further Challenges and Realist Rejoinders

Dummett's is therefore the most extreme of a range of positions in present-day epistemology which likewise reject the realist appeal to verification-transcendent truths or to the existence of entities, objects, or

events that elude our best efforts of perceptual or cognitive grasp. Such is, for instance, van Fraassen's constructive-empiricist idea that we cannot (or should not) suppose the reality of anything that lies beyond the limits of unaided human observation, whether by reason of its being too small, too remote, or too transient and fleeting to show up without the use of some advanced technology (van Fraassen 1980). Van Fraassen's argument differs from Dummett's in so far as he takes it to follow from epistemological considerations rather than from a theory of meaning with wider metaphysical bearings. However, they are agreed in rejecting the basic realist claim that truth is *not* epistemically constrained and hence that the truth-value of our statements is fixed by the way things stand in reality quite apart from any issue with respect to the operative scope and limits of human knowledge. To which the realist will surely respond that this is a strangely skewed philosophical perspective and one that gets the whole issue completely back-to-front. Thus, as Devitt roundly declares:

> It is a mistake to start building a metaphysics from epistemology or semantics. The realism issue should be settled first. Failing to do so is one of the most pervasive and serious aberrations of the realism debate . . . To suppose that we can derive the right metaphysics from epistemology or semantics is to put the cart before the horse. (Devitt 1991: 284)

Another way of making this case would be to say that Dummettian anti-realism is essentially an update on certain long-familiar skeptical themes, one that goes a more technical way around in asserting the non-existence of a mind- or language-independent reality. To be sure, there are passages in Dummett's writing which might appear to qualify that doctrine to the point where it counsels nothing more than an outlook of epistemological caution with respect to statements of the disputed class, or a policy of wise restraint as regards the range of our various ontological commitments. However, this reading goes against those other, more typical passages where Dummett speaks of "gaps in reality" corresponding to gaps in our knowledge, or where he puts forward his thesis concerning the (at least) in-principle possibility that the course of "past" events should be somehow retroactively influenced by subsequent changes in the kinds of construal we place upon them.

No doubt it is the case that such arguments are strictly irrefutable so long as one accepts the skeptic's basic premise, i.e., that if truth (as the realist maintains) is objective or verification-transcendent then by very definition it stands beyond our utmost powers of epistemic grasp (see Williams 1996). Such has been the stock-in-trade rejoinder to realism by

skeptics of various persuasions, starting out with those ancient Greek thinkers whose opinions were reported by Sextus Empiricus and continuing via Berkeley, Hume, and others to the present-day debates that I have summarized here. Very often the response has been to fall back on some heavily qualified version of the realist case, as for instance in Hilary Putnam's retreat from his early espousal of a strong causal-realist position to his later adoption of an "internal" (i.e., framework-relativist) quasi-realism, and thence to a range of pragmatist, "naturalized," or "commonsense"-realist approaches which attempt to head off the skeptical rejoinder by exploring different ways of closing the gap between truth and epistemic warrant (see, for example, Putnam 1975: 139–52). Thus Putnam has striven to avoid the kinds of doctrinaire "solution" represented on the one hand by Dummett's metaphysical version of the case for anti-realism and on the other by van Frassen's radically empiricist approach. However, such efforts to redeem a scaled-down version of the realist case in the hope of winning over or appeasing the skeptic will always end up by yielding crucial argumentative ground which the skeptic can then reoccupy without making any like gesture in the opposite direction. That is to say, skepticism will always have the last word if this debate is conducted according to rules which the skeptic has effectively laid down in advance. Those rules are (1) that the "problem of knowledge" in its global form should be treated as central to any such debate; (2) that nothing counts as evidence in favor of a realist solution unless it meets this global challenge; (3) that truth is epistemically constrained since the idea of objective (recognition-transcendent) truth-values must render them forever unknowable; (4) that any argument from scientific "progress" (for example toward deeper or more adequate causal explanations) in some given field of enquiry will always automatically be trumped by arguments like these; and (5) – Dummett's most distinctive contribution – that the theory of meaning is definitionally prior to the issue of realism as construed in more familiar (ontological or epistemological) terms. From all of which it follows – on the skeptic's view – that realism in epistemology and philosophy of science is an unsustainable position since it fails to deliver an adequate response to any of the above objections.

    At this point the realist will do best to refuse those terms for debate, and remark once again that such arguments acquire their seeming logical force only from a systematic inversion of the order of priorities that normally (and properly) applies in our thinking about issues of knowledge and truth. Thus metaphysical anti-realism of the Dummett variety involves a commitment to the strongly counterintuitive idea that the world and all its constituent objects, events, properties, and so forth, must

somehow be dependent for its very existence on the scope of our knowledge concerning it or the range of statements to which we can assign verifiable truth-values. Of course, the anti-realist can put this case and defend it against all comers by insisting that the theory of meaning is "logically" prior to the issue about scientific realism since – as a matter of sheer self-evidence – we have to know what we are talking about before we can talk about it with any assurance that our statements make sense. However, there is no valid argument from this fairly uncontroversial point in the philosophy of language to the far more contentious (indeed insupportable) claim that any statement which eludes our best proof-procedures or which exceeds the bounds of verifiability must *ipso facto* belong to the "disputed class" and hence not be a candidate for truth or falsehood. Such an argument can be refuted simply by remarking that a vast range of erstwhile unproven or speculative statements with respect to mathematics, subatomic physics, astronomy, history, and other areas of discourse have since been subject to more rigorous methods of enquiry and assigned a definite truth-value. No doubt the anti-realist can readily accept this point so long as he takes it to involve nothing more than the claim that our epistemic criteria (or standards for warranted assertibility) are constantly changing with the advent of new knowledge or more advanced investigative methods. Thus his thesis finds room for the idea that some statements which once belonged to the disputed class have since graduated out of it while others – say, those at the cutting edge of present-day speculative physics – must remain neither-true-nor-false to the best of our current knowledge and hence neither-true-nor-false *sans phrase*. But this is a logical nonsense, so the realist will argue, since it is just as much the case now as in the past that truth and falsity have *nothing to do* with what happens to fall within our epistemic range at any given point in time. Rather they concern the question as to whether our statements are objectively true or false, a question that may be settled in the long run by some advance in our knowledge but which might be unresolvable by any means at our present or even our future-best disposal.

Such might turn out to be the case, for instance, with regard to Goldbach's Conjecture. All the same, it would be surely be wrong to conclude that the statement "every even number is the sum of two primes" is neither true nor false *just because* we cannot prove it, any more than a mathematician who asserted "Fermat's Last Theorem is true!" before Andrew Wiles came up with his proof must be thought to have uttered a statement void of objective truth-value. And even if Wiles's now celebrated proof should at length turn out to contain some disputable premise or some hitherto unnoticed flaw, this would still not affect the

theorem's status as a matter of objective truth or falsehood. Such examples can be multiplied across the whole range of the formal, theoretical, and applied sciences, as for instance with the statement "the integer formed by 317 repetitions of the digit 1 is a prime," or "the charge on every electron is negative," or "a superstring is as much smaller than an atom as an atom is smaller than the solar system," or "the four-color theorem [in the topology of maps] is true," or Euler's conjecture (since proved by Cauchy) that "the number of vertices of any polyhedron, minus the number of edges and plus the number of faces, equal two" (see Gardner 1996: 286–7). The first of these is a recent discovery in number-theory, the second a basic (perhaps definitional) truth in subatomic physics, the third a conjecture at the furthest limit of current speculative physics, the fourth a statement that has now been verified but only with the aid of advanced computing resources that might just be subject to doubt, and the fifth a highly ingenious proof that is found convincing by most qualified mathematicians. Thus in epistemic terms they can fairly be said to span the whole range from mathematical certainty to good (though not decisive) probative warrant and thence to what some – in the case of superstring theory – would at present regard as a case of speculative license far in excess of any rational (let alone empirical) grounds for assent.

However, such comparisons have absolutely no bearing when it comes to the question of these statements' objective truth-value as opposed to our certainty (or lack of it) with regard to that truth-value. For they are all of them both meaningful and well-formed, i.e., framed in just such a way as to specify their operative truth-conditions or what must be mathematically or physically the case in order for somebody who utters one or other of them to have made a true or a false statement. Moreover, those conditions must be taken as tenseless or as holding irrespective of our best state of knowledge at this or that time of utterance. For, as Martin Gardner pointedly remarks, "few people would want to say that this number [that formed by 317 iterations of the digit 1] became prime only after it was proved to be a prime. The sentence . . . was true in the days of Pythagoras. Only recently did mathematicians *know* it to be true" (Gardner 1996: 466). And of course any statement of Pythagoras's theorem would likewise have been true even if uttered before Pythagoras produced his elegant proof and at a time when nobody could claim epistemic warrant for asserting it. Thus Dummett's anti-realist approach to the philosophy of mathematics can be seen to involve a tensed application of the truth-concept which is just as inappropriate in this context as it is when applied to issues in the philosophy of history. That is to say, it lends "logical" support to his curious idea that mathematical truths are

somehow *created* through the process of (so-called) discovery, just as past events can be somehow affected by subsequent changes or revisions in our state of knowledge concerning them. Indeed, as I have argued, this whole anti-realist line of approach in recent philosophy of language and logic can perhaps best be seen as a technical variant on themes that have long been standard fare not only among skeptics but also among philosophical idealists from Berkeley to Bradley and McTaggart.

To make this point is not of course to argue – as if through guilt-by-association – that the idealist link is sufficient to refute or discredit that line of approach. After all, as Dummett himself brings out, there are issues in current analytic debate that the Oxford idealists raised with great acuity albeit in a very different philosophical idiom (Dummett 1978: 351–7). But it is to put the case that any logico-semantic argument for anti-realism which displays this marked idealist character and which leads to kindred conclusions must therefore inherit the same range of problems that idealism has to confront. Chief among them is the problem of explaining why a doctrine that flies so plainly in the face of all our best everyday and scientific evidence should none the less be taken as a standing reproof to any version of the realist argument. And the same applies to those other, on the face of it less doctrinaire kinds of approach – like van Fraassen's program of constructive empiricism – which claim to occupy a middle-ground position with straightforward commonsense backing but which still push a long way toward just that ultimately skeptical conclusion. For in this case also the argument requires a willingness to treat certain highly debatable theses as somehow trumping any counter-argument from the evidence of scientific history to date. Thus it has to ignore (among other things) the fact that a good many erstwhile speculative statements with respect to the atomic or subatomic structure of matter were true even at a time when their degree of epistemic warrant would have to be rated close to zero. Or again, it is committed to denying that astronomers were right – inferentially justified – in claiming to deduce the existence of a so-far unobserved planet, Neptune, from observed perturbations in the orbit of Uranus.

Such examples are many and varied, from Darwin's "unjustified" conjectures concerning the mechanism of natural selection (later borne out by the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics) to Einstein's theory of General Relativity during the short period before Eddington's famous 1919 expedition to observe the solar eclipse and thus determine the effect of gravitational fields on the passage of light near neighboring massive bodies. What they all have in common – from a realist viewpoint – is the virtue of posing a straightforward choice between inference to the best

causal explanation and a doctrine that willingly forgoes such resources for the sake of avoiding any dubious appeal beyond the supposed self-evidence of "direct" perceptual warrant. That is to say, the constructive empiricist – like the anti-realist – must be seen as electing to place more trust in a philosophic theory concerning the scope and limits of human cognitive grasp than in any argument that could possibly be offered with regard to our knowledge of the growth of scientific knowledge. Thus the chief difference between Dummett's anti-realist and van Fraassen's constructive-empiricist approach is that the former derives from a theory of meaning premised on jointly Fregean and Wittgensteinian grounds while the latter is staked on a notion of human perceptual powers as the ultimate criterion of epistemic warrant. Each has the merit – on its own stipulative terms – of involving no "metaphysical" commitment to the truth of any statement that exceeds the scope of warranted assertibility (Dummett) or the extent of our empirical knowledge (van Fraassen). Yet each has the surely decisive drawback of failing to explain how scientific knowledge could ever have achieved any kind of rational or causal-explanatory advance beyond the limits laid down by a strict adherence to this narrowly prescriptive program.

Quantum Mechanics: The Nemesis of Realism?

No doubt it is the case, as Imre Lakatos wrote (freely paraphrasing Kant), that "history of science without philosophy of science is blind" while "philosophy of science without history of science is empty" (Lakatos 1978: 102). One important role for philosophy of science – whether as an academic discipline or as the result of scientists reflecting self-critically on their own practice – is to question those various standing assumptions about method, validity, inductive warrant, causal explanation, and so forth, that can otherwise act as a block to scientific progress. Hence Einstein's early espousal of a Mach-inspired positivist outlook which enabled him to put forward the theory of Special Relativity without unduly forcing the issue with regard to any putative reality "behind" the mathematical equations or "beyond" the empirical data when subject to this radically heterodox construal (see Einstein 1954). Positivism offered a strategic line of least resistance which eased the passage to wider acceptance of a theory that would otherwise – when first advanced – have met with even greater obstacles in the way of intuitive or "commonsense" belief. To this extent Einstein, like Newton before him, saw the clear advantage of adopting an approach that claimed only to save the empirical appearances and

which eschewed any further ontological commitments. Such had like-
wise been the position taken by Copernicus and Galileo concerning the
heliocentric hypothesis, though in their case it resulted more from the
pressures of enforced doctrinal adherence than from any philosophical choice
in the matter. Some recent thinkers (like Pierre Duhem) have continued to
maintain this strict empiricist approach as a means of reconciling science
with the dictates of orthodox religious faith, that is to say, of a doctrine
which sets firm limits to the scope and ambitions of scientific knowledge.
Others (van Fraassen among them) have sought to derive it from straight-
forward reflection on the nature of scientific enquiry and the futility of
venturing "metaphysical" claims that stray beyond the bounds of empir-
ical warrant. In Dummett's case there is room for debate as to whether
his theological beliefs might have played some motivating role in the con-
struction of an anti-realist approach that purports to follow from purely
linguistic or logico-semantic considerations but which ends up by placing
such sharp restrictions on the scope of legitimate truth-seeking enquiry.

At any rate these versions of the positivist argument for "saving the
(empirical) appearances" have one thing in common despite their other-
wise diverse range of supporting arguments. This is their failure to take
due account of Lakatos's second maxim, namely (to repeat) that "philo-
sophy of science without history of science is empty." For if there is one
lesson that emerges clearly from the history of science to date it is the
fact that significant advances have most often come about through a
willingness to go beyond the "evidence" narrowly (i.e., empirically) con-
ceived and to offer causal hypotheses or instances of reasoning to the best
(most adequate) explanation which could have no place in the model
of scientific method proposed by adherents to the strict empiricist or
verificationist approach. Such was at any rate Einstein's position by the
time of his highly charged debates with Bohr concerning conceptual
problems in the interpretation of quantum mechanics (Einstein et al.
1935). Thus Bohr, Heisenberg, and other advocates of the orthodox
("Copenhagen") doctrine took a strongly positivist line, one which in
principle rejected the idea that state-descriptions should be construed as
referring to some objective quantum "reality" aside from the existing range
of observational results, predictive hypotheses, or available measurement-
data (Bohr 1958; Heisenberg 1949). Such realist assumptions could
only lead to a sharpening of all the well-known dilemmas – wave/particle
dualism, quantum superposition, remote superluminal (faster-than-light)
interaction between widely separated particles, etc. – which would then
create insoluble problems for what was, in their view, a perfectly adequate
empirical theory. On the contrary, Einstein maintained: any theory that

raised this skeptical outlook to a high point of philosophic dogma and which failed to offer an intelligible picture of the objective reality behind quantum appearances was *ipso facto* an "incomplete" theory and one that self-evidently stood in need of supplementation by some alternative (realist) account of what underlay and explained those appearances. Nothing could be further from the Machian positivist approach that Einstein had adopted in his earlier work as a means of overcoming the conceptual resistance which he and other thinkers at first experienced in grasping the principles of Special Relativity.

Of course, the mere fact that Einstein came around to this way of thinking will cut no ice with its various opponents, whether orthodox quantum theorists, global anti-realists, or van Fraassen-type "constructive empiricists." Thus they will argue, first, that the appeal to authority is always a dubious tactic; second, that the realist case for "hidden variables" is still very far from having gained acceptance outside a small minority of quantum theorists; and third, that *even if* that case were at length borne out then it could only be in consequence of some future advance in our powers of empirical observation-measurement, and would therefore constitute no kind of argument against their general position. However, this misses both the main points about realism as applied not only to issues in the interpretation of quantum mechanics but also to our knowledge of objects and events in the macrophysical domain. One is the strictly ontological point that what renders our statements true or false is *not* (as the orthodox theorists would have it) a matter of their epistemic warrant – of whether they happen to fall within the compass of empirical verification – but rather their correspondence (or lack of it) to the way things stand in physical reality. Such was the burden of Einstein's rejoinders to Bohr when he denied that the orthodox quantum mechanics theory could lay any claim to "completeness" if it conspicuously failed – or dogmatically refused – to acknowledge the objective character of scientific truth. The second point is closely related but has more to do with the epistemological rather than the ontological case for realism in philosophy of science. Thus, as Bohm and others have argued, there is something highly dubious (even irrational) about erecting various conceptual problems with the orthodox theory into a full-scale creed with punitive sanctions attached for anyone who seeks to resolve those problems by offering an alternative (objective or causal-realist) account (see, for example, Bohm 1957). At any rate there is room for doubt when anti-realists or constructive empiricists cite the example of quantum mechanics as a knock-down argument against any case for the existence of objective or verification-transcendent truths.

My own view – as will surely be evident by now – is that philosophy of science took a wrong turn when some of its most influential exponents opted for a verificationist approach with support from certain regional developments in philosophy of language (Dummett) or empiricist philosophy of mind and knowledge (van Fraassen). The result has been a widespread skewing of the issues which indeed – as Devitt says – "puts the cart before the horse" by treating some highly questionable philosophic theses as capable of raising genuine doubts with regard to some of the best-tried methods and procedures of the physical sciences. Though few would go so far as Richard Rorty in counting realism a world well lost for the sake of our new-found descriptivist freedoms, still there are other, more cautious types whose approach can very easily be pushed in that direction by taking their arguments just a stage further (Rorty 1991). It is an odd situation, sure enough, but one that has occurred so often before in the history of philosophy's dealings with science as to constitute something like business-as-usual for those whose vocation it is precisely to raise such skeptical doubts.

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Chapter 15

A Note on Literary
Realism in Conclusion

Fredric Jameson

The theorization of realism is a contradictory project, doomed, if not to failure, then at least to the constant branching off of paths that lead nowhere, all the while leaving a rich undergrowth of local detail in their wake. This is so, I believe, because realism is essentially an epistemological category framed and staged in aesthetic terms (see Jameson 1992: 158–77). It is a contradiction which can, however, be reformulated in a productive way, as a tension to be solved and resolved over and over again, in a series of fresh innovations.

The present speculation will indeed start from the premise that by definition realism does not want to become a paradigm of any kind: a form, a tale-type, or even a genre. Even the realisms appealing to social typicality must begin with the promise of immediacy, of a contact with a unique and contingent reality: a specific and unrepeatable conjuncture, a subject's intense singularity, the unmistakable flavor of a region, an unexpected historical event. These are, to be sure, impossible requirements, which necessarily give rise to a series of realist ideologies down through literary history, which for the most part eschew the metaphysics of immediacy for the overturning or undermining of preexisting narrative stereotypes, mostly of an idealist or romantic variety (the Quijote syndrome).

It may be best initially to see this process in terms of reification, where some new attention to scene and to the present proves incompatible with the reifications of the older tale or story types, in which general images of the various shapes of a reified destiny were vehiculated. Thus the story or tale will select this or that reified turn of events – a comic *quid pro quo*, a tragic accident, an ironic outcome, the woman scorned, the braggart given his comeuppance, and the like – as the reified narrative form

along which to string a set of contingent exemplifications, in such a way that the actual story becomes a mere example or illustration of the type, that is to say, of a destiny. It is precisely against just such a reification of destinies that the realist narrative apparatus is aimed, which reaffirms the singularity of the episodes to the point at which they can no longer fit into the narrative convention. That this is also a clash of aesthetic ideologies is made clear by the way in which older conceptions of destiny or fate are challenged by newer appeals to that equally ideological yet historically quite distinct notion of this or that "reality," in which social and historical material rises to the surface in the form of the singular or the contingent.

Such is then the way in which all the great realists have thought of their narrative operations as an intervention in the "superstitious" or religious, traditional, conceptions of life, and as the striking of a blow for truth ("reader, this is not a fiction") which is still part and parcel of the whole Enlightenment secularization of the world. But in each historical situation, the claim for truth will be a somewhat different one; the overall strategy or argument for realism in general and as such (the word only really enjoys a brief currency around the mid-point of the nineteenth century) is nowhere near as durable and as powerful as its modernist equivalent, in which notions of formal innovation are able to be transferred from one generation to another over what turns out to have been a period of about a century.

But now it is time to observe that, despite this attack on the very system of the genres, as the realists find it still in place when in the early eighteenth century they begin their work in various national situations, realism as a formal strategy gradually begins to form new genres in its own right: hardening over, as it were, in a few tale-types which become predictable and recurrent throughout its history, until the modernists undertake to subvert and destroy those in their turn.

I will enumerate four of these new realist genres without by any means claiming that they are the only new subgenres characteristic of realism. These are the *Bildungsroman*, the historical novel, the novel of adultery, and naturalism (taking this last to be a somewhat different and more ambiguous combination of a plot type and a mode). The ideological hesitations and compromises of the *Bildungsroman* have been too extensively documented by Franco Moretti for me to have to dwell on it here (Moretti 1987) – save to say that his analysis raises for me another question about realism which turns on its ontological commitment to the status quo as such. This is not so much an overt political commitment (although the personal conservatism of most of the great realist novelists can be

demonstrated biographically) as it is an artistic one: realism requires a conviction as to the massive weight and persistence of the present as such, and an aesthetic need to avoid recognition of deep structural social change as such and of the deeper currents and contradictory tendencies within the social order. To acknowledge the imminence of some thoroughgoing revolution in the social order itself is at once to disqualify those materials of the present which are the building blocks of narrative realism, for from the revolutionary perspective they become mere appearances or epiphenomena, transitory moments of history, a sham calm before the storm, habits which are merely those of an ephemeral social class and which are about to be swept away forever. Realism can accommodate images of social decadence and disintegration, as already in Balzac; but not this quite different sense of the ontology of the present as a swift-running stream. I have argued elsewhere at some length that this structural bias is visible in the satiric portraits all the great realists offer of intellectuals, a discrediting of all such radical commitments to history, to change, and to social reform (Jameson 2006).

But the *Bildungsroman* also suggests a different reason for this unexpected reemergence of genre within a narrative mode seemingly dedicated to replacing such reified forms by a different kind of representation. For the young man of the *Bildungsroman* is as it were an instrument for the exploration of the new possibilities of bourgeois society, a kind of registering device, the establishment of a laboratory situation in which those possibilities can be acted out before our eyes. The protagonist is then not exactly a new social type, but rather a recurrent space in the new society which offers the way in for the new realist narrative.

The other three generic possibilities are to be regarded in the same way. The historical novel isolates the new sense of history emerging at the time of the French Revolution, a historicity which determines the very emergence of modern historiography from the older chronicles and corresponds to the new dynamisms of capitalism after the industrial revolution. One can, to be sure, argue that all great realist novels are in some sense already historical ones: and Balzac's are already always situated in dated historical time as well as in a specific region or named space, while the others, even if they are not officially about past time, eventually become historical documents on the very strength of their – dare I say it? – realism.

Thus one can argue, as Lukács does, that the realist novel is already itself profoundly historical, its new sense of everyday life now transforming the latter from the static sketches of custom or folkloric urban scenes into a sense of change – destruction, rebuilding, ruins, scaffolds, new and unrecognizable quarters, a feeling which will famously become ever more

pronounced when one gets to Baudelaire and Haussmann (Lukács 1983).
It is a feeling of change, already present, imminent, threatening, some-
times warmly anticipated, which will be underscored in any number of
ways: debts accumulating and the interest fatally coming due, as every-
where from Balzac to Galdós; the crises of inflation; aging and the
generations; changes of regime; the notations of fashion (it being under-
stood that change is inherent in the very concept of fashion) – the exter-
nal forces buffeting the stability of the married household and the
domestic foyer. This is then the historicity already present and active within
the new everyday, and offering the secondary stimuli of the narrative
construction, impelling the central plot forward like an uneasy, restless
element through which it must move. The historical novel as a specific
subgenre then constitutes something like a hypostasis of this inner his-
torical reality: isolating the virus of historical change as though in a Petri
dish and attaching this "history in a pure state" to something like the
images d'Epinal which bourgeois households hang on their walls. As
we have noted already, the intersection between daily life and the great
historical Event – most often political rather than economic – is one of
the marks of the new historicity of the realist novel. It is as though the
historical novel reverses this intersection and follows the historical Event
through to the various intersections with private life rather than the other
way round. This specialized form obviously has other determinants,
which we cannot deal with here.

   As for the novel of adultery, Marcuse has observed that it is the
very space of negativity in nineteenth-century bourgeois life (Marcuse 1955).
Women, not yet fully absorbed into capitalism, and the vehicles of unpaid
labor, are more likely narrative occasions for revolt and resistance than
men. The latter, unless they are young and dissatisfied (thereby becom-
ing the narrative occasions for the *Bildungsroman*), are more likely to be
absorbed into the dynamics of business, and by way of success to open
up the paradigms of the mass-cultural bestseller, as in Zola's Octave
(in *Le bonheur des dames* (1883)) or Maupassant's *Bel ami* (1885).
(Masculine failure is rather the province of naturalism, as we shall see in
a moment.) But women cannot be successful in this sense (unless domes-
tic contentment and satisfaction is considered to be something positive,
at which point the woman character falls to the second rank of minor
character and of Dickensian foil or Mediterranean matriarch). The novel
of adultery (taken in the largest sense) is thus a unique space in which
the negation of the social order can be narrativized in the person of this
other half of "mankind": it is paradoxical and even a contradiction
that women figures, like the great dancers of nineteenth-century ballet,

become the great stars of the nineteenth-century novel – only compare Madame Bovary to the ineffectual Frédéric, or Anna Karenina to the vacillating Pierre! – a situation in which the role of the adulteress is the negative or privative one of showing that there is no place for them in bourgeois society and its most faithful expression, the bourgeois novel, in the first place!

As for naturalism, it will then be the literary slot assigned to the fourth great player in nineteenth-century society – alongside the young man, the political "world-historical individual," and the woman, naturalism opens a space for the worker, and along with him the more heterogeneous population of lumpenproletarians and outcasts generally. The perspectival distortion of this new naturalist subgenre can be measured by comparing naturalism with the accounts of the poor in Dickens or Victor Hugo, in which the threat of collective *déclassement* is not present (despite Dickens's own personal childhood trauma). Philanthropy and its pity and sympathy turn out to be quite distinct from this panic as it confronts a sinister and radically different space. Yet is it appropriate to characterize naturalism as a subgenre of realism? Certainly its relations with realism have been much debated, and as a form of the category of the naturalist novel it does not quite seem "on all fours" with that of realism: where the stereotype of the latter involves social observation and the detailed rendering of urban settings, the naturalist text, with its *nostalgie de la boue*, seems rather to breathe a kind of *Stimmung* or affect associated with pessimism or melancholy; to the point where Deleuze's association of naturalism with the surrealism of Luis Buñuel, with its shuddering symptoms of the unconscious and of deep impersonal volcanic forces, offers a welcome twist on these old theoretical debates (Deleuze 1992: 123–33).

But, again, is the naturalist movement and the unique expressivity its texts seem to breathe to be associated with a specific plot-line in such a way that it can be classified as a subgenre? My proposition is that naturalism's various and quite distinct exemplifications all share in a more general narrative paradigm, which could be described as the trajectory of decline and failure, of something like an entropy on the level of the individual destiny. And this is a phenomenon to be sharply distinguished from whatever representations of death or finitude are to be found in the mainstream realist novels. For this falling curve of the naturalist narrative shares in that more general late nineteenth-century ideology which Marc Angenot has described as a simultaneous belief in progress and conviction of decadence and well-nigh biological deterioration, which expresses itself socially in the panics about degeneracy and widespread decadence (see Jameson 2004). Here a peculiarly contradictory vision is articulated

in which the dynamic of capitalism is registered as progress (in urbanism, technology, business, civilization) at the same time that the deepest social anxieties take the form of an omnipresent perception of entropy on all social levels.

It is important for the understanding of naturalism, however, to identify this curiously contradictory ideology as a class perspective, reflecting the bourgeoisie's doubts of its own hegemony and its fears of a rising working class, of immigration and the populations of the colonies, of the overwhelming competition from the other imperial nation-states, and finally of its own inner loss of nerve. What stands at the center of the naturalist narrative paradigm is the perspective of the bourgeoisie and its vision of the other (lower) classes. Nor is this a purely epistemological matter: for included in this collective "point of view" is a desperate fear: that of *déclassement*, of slipping down the painfully climbed slope of class position and business or monetary success, of falling back into the petty bourgeoisie and thence on into working-class misery itself. Indeed, the very perspective of misery with which the observing bourgeoisie envelops its image of lower-class life (in naturalism almost indistinguishable from marginality) expresses that anxiety of imminent decadence and decline, the condition into which Gervaise sinks back and from which Hurstwood saves himself by suicide. This middle class and the way in which it realizes its fantasies in the form of a clear-cut narrative paradigm is a better and more striking example of the relationship between class and literature than any of the vaguer and more triumphalistic expressions of the trajectory of the "rising" class in the Balzacian success stores (themselves intermittent – Rastignac wins off-stage, as it were – and winning conviction only by the multiplicity of tales of failure that accompany them): for this reason, naturalism is far more class marked and localized than realism in general, and strikes the reader as far more specialized than the latter to the degree that the public no longer shares those particular *fin-de-siècle* terrors.

What the special case of naturalism also suggests is that, in an era of the differentiation of the various reading publics and of the increasing fragmentation of a general bourgeois reading public into a multiplicity of more specialized readerships (for whom the "niche" production of more differentiated subgenres is designed), the other three basic realist narrative paradigms will themselves be reified and become more distinct subgenres, with a tendency to find themselves degraded into mass-cultural forms and versions. At the same time, they become targets for the defamiliarizations of the various emergent modernisms, which stigmatize their conventions in the form of satire or absorb and sublimate their

narratives into generalized allusions, transforming what were still narratives in the heyday of realism into so many synchronic literary connotations.

It is thus instructive to reread *Ulysses* (1922) as a compendium of these residual realist narrative lines and as an extraordinary new combinatory play with such residues. The presence of the *Bildungsroman* is the most obvious of these well-nigh extinct remnant forms, inasmuch as Joyce had explicitly walked Stephen through that form in his way to the brief teaching stint in Conglowes. We do not have to decide whether a later Stephen will fail in his pretentious *symboliste* literary ambitions or become Joyce himself, for the perspective of the single day radically interferes with the temporality of the older form which it effectively cancels, while leaving its negation behind as a trace.

It cannot be said that *Ulysses* is a parody of the *Bildungsroman* even if one takes the revisionist view that Stephen is a caricature and not to be estimated by his own manner of gravity and self-consciousness. Yet it is a diversion of that older form into a new combination, in which the novel of adultery is also inserted. Indeed, if, supplied with the final point of view of Molly – and strengthened by the evidence of Brenda Maddox's *Nora*, which makes it clear that this book is not the mere writing of a male but rather a collaboration in which Nora's own voice very much has its share (Maddox 1988) – *Ulysses* can be seen as modernist after-image of *Madame Bovary* (1857) itself. That Molly stands as a cruder (yet more artistically gifted) version of the protagonist, and Mr Bloom as a more comical, yet more sympathetic version of Charles, may be obvious: but if one takes Blazes Boylan to be a version of Rodolphe and Stephen of Léon (always admitting that the latter's ultimate courtship is only realized in Molly's – and Bloom's – fantasies), then the entire complex of Flaubert's novel is as it were copied onto *Ulysses* and amalgamated into it in much the same way an old pair of blue jeans is pasted onto a Rauschenberg canvas; or better still, the way one photographic perspective is distorted by its anamorphic reproduction. Here the narrative of *Madame Bovary* has been projected onto another kind of plane surface, and the resultant segments then added into the new construction in various ways. It is as though Flaubert's realism survived in the form of a ruin, which a new (modernist) building then incorporated, as allusion, as memory, as museum piece, as derisory potsherd.

As for the historical novel, to be sure *Ulysses* is doubly a historical novel, in Joyce's own setting (eighteen years before publication) and for us, as a memorial to the prewar colonial metropolis in general. But two dates mark it internally and externally: from the outside it is less the unexpected event of World War I, which is unsuspected by the characters (though

not by us), a war in which Irish regiments fought for the crown; but more especially that other utterly unanticipated event (in part itself a reaction against the War) which was the Easter Uprising in 1916. Internally, deep history is embedded not only in Stephen's prehistory (which exists outside the book, in other books, so that it can be taken by us as external historical fact), but also in the fitful glimpses of the central European and Palestinian past of the Jews in Mr Bloom's reveries (the Hungarian 1848 was always a model for Irish patriots).

But what is centrally marked in the text as a different dimension of time is the anarchist violence of the Invincibles, the assassination in Phoenix Park twenty years earlier, which survives in the public sphere of gossip and rumor, and of folk memory, and which is resurrected in the form of one of the ancient survivors of the guerrilla band, who makes an appearance in the cabman's shelter late at night and late in the book. Here history intersects, not with the present, but with the past; although it can be said that the governor general's procession (relayed by Woolf in the form of the king's limousine in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)) marks the imperial presence around which the administration of the colonial city, if not its real society, is organized. The newer postcolonial readings of *Ulysses* have served to translate it back into this subgenre of the historical novel far more effectively than did the earlier standard mythical ones (as, for example, in Cheng 1995: 151–218).

And this is perhaps the moment to observe the way in which genre is itself hypostasized and projected outside the novel by the *Odyssey* parallels: the synchronic structure of the single-day novel does not really allow us to read Stephen's brief contact with Bloom in any really familial or psychoanalytic way, whatever the latter's fantasies. That "theme" is, however, projected out of the novel into an unwritten narrative version, which is seized and absorbed by the Odysseus/Telemachus plot and as it were projected, reified, out into legend, much as humans were frozen and lifted into the stars' constellations in ancient times. The *Odyssey* parallel preserves the diachrony of these interpersonal situations as it were, *pour mémoire*, while we are reading and observing them in a quite different dimension: it is as though generic structure, no longer current or available, were acknowledged only as a memory from the distant epic past. And this is then a reified generic essence in which both later subgenres of realism – the *Bildungsroman* and the novel of adultery – find their place, historicity itself floating above the text in the form of the ancient catastrophe of the Trojan War.

Naturalism, as we have said, is not exactly a subgenre of realism, but Joyce's debt to the naturalists has often been evoked, in the lower-class

status of most of his characters as well as in the uncensored urban detail
and the journey through a nightmarish underworld or *bas fonds* (see,
for instance, Levin 1960). I would myself prefer to evoke a naturalist per-
spective in the suggestions of a temporal prolongation and in Bloom's
presentiment of his own future and decline (which I have discussed in
Jameson 1982).

Such is then the afterlife of the subgenres that emerge from realism
and that modernism cancels and preserves all at once, very much in the
Hegelian spirit of *Aufhebung*. But I want to conclude with another tend-
ency at work within the triumphant realist paradigm, and that is its increas-
ingly episodic character, which will eventually mark the supersession of
plot by scene, of imagination by fancy, and of narrative by a kind of non-
narrative perceptuality. A reversion to beginnings no doubt, in one sense:
for the novel is an omnibus form cobbled together out of heterogeneous
materials, chief among which is the sketch (as Dickens called it) or Balzac's
physiognomie, the newspaper columns on the various and colorful sights
of the big city, the journalistic observation and notation which adds
to the very density of the narrative text itself. But with serialization, this
centrifugal tendency is then once again intensified; and the instalment,
with its recurrent internal dynamic and its relative autonomy, encourages
a tendency once again to break up the continuity of the narrative or story-
telling process.

We may call this new tendency one towards autonomization; here what
Luhmann called differentiation is at one with reification itself as process
(Luhmann 1996). But where in poetry reification results in the increas-
ing transformation of language into objects, as in Baudelaire's strict
forms, in the novel it can better be detected, not only in the emergence
of descriptive set pieces, but even more in the tendency of the secondary
characters to move forward and to eclipse the relationships of the main
characters around whom narrative itself is chiefly organized and Imagina-
tion invested and rehearsed (see Woloch 2003). The Spanish novelist Benito
Pérez Galdós (1843–1920) – the very Shakespeare of nineteenth-century
realism – offers the supreme illustration of this process whereby the novel
becomes a kind of tour around the secondary characters of the city and
its narrative space: at least, insofar as the city's most fully realized and
externalized form of the narrative space towards which the realist novel
tends. Here again *Ulysses* casts a privileged light backwards on the older
form, whose multiple plots and intersections prove to be something like
narrative cities in their own right.

Modernism thus inherited the residues and the remainders of realism
– its discarded plot formations – and used them in a very different kind

of construction. Is this to say that we can identify nothing today which survives of an older realist impulse? This would be an astonishing development – particularly in the light of the general perception that postmodernism is somehow less hermetic and difficult than modernism itself, and that in it we witness the revival of all kinds of recognizable plots and situations that used to be classified in terms of realism as such. Yet that is to reckon without the appropriation of those same realistic residues and remainders by mass culture: it is the traces of mass culture that we "recognize" in the newer forms and not the aspiration to immediacy that the older realisms always seemed to embody.

Two other possibilities need to be explored in conclusion, the most substantial being the vocation of any realism to explore the hitherto unsaid and unexpressed, and to bring figuration to what has always been excluded from public representation (Jameson 1992: 167). Unfortunately, in postmodernity, the informational and the communicational is itself a kind of universal virus, colonizing whatever has remained unconscious or unformulated and translating it at once into forms and tropes which are long since catalogued and codified in advance. It is not clear what can resist this kind of media assimilation; yet the objections to it are strangely reminiscent of those directed to an older imperialism which accused it of speaking for its subjects and appropriating their positions by way of a kind of bureaucratic ventriloquism, thereby forestalling the formation and emergence of any conceivable new paradigm.

The other possibility or future for realism – though it is already realism's present and the model of most of what still survives as serious literature today, in the omnipresent commercialization of the public sphere – is what I will call existential realism. This mode is predicated on what used to be called the death of the subject, or more precisely, the effacement of the individual personality or character, its survival in an impersonal consciousness beyond identity and individuality. Here narrative withdraws from the outer person into an impersonal and anonymous confrontation with situation and things, a blank third-person narrative in which only a pure present of time and space is registered, yet a pure present which includes velleities and intentions, movements and gestures, flashes of memory and bits and pieces of the larger projects, familiar glimpses of routine and repetition: but only insofar as the edges of all those dimensions are visible in a present of time. Existential realism thus offers the satisfactions of experience without any of the perspectives that might have been drawn on to interpret or indeed to change it; yet as a narrative mode it is clearly not inseparable from the empirical reality of the older realisms, and, while no longer subjectivist, is perfectly consistent with experimental

variation and with the positing of alternate pasts or futures. To what degree it is still useful to call this narrative apparatus realism is a matter for personal and political decision, and also for the evaluation of future results.

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Index