

REALISM AND THE ENGLISH NOVEL

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Critical discussions of the English novel and of its realism once tended to treat these two separate subjects as one, as if presuming that verisimilitude was somehow the condition to which all novels aspired, and that the emergence of the English novel was tantamount to the emergence of a fully-fledged narrative realism. Realism was simply taken for granted as the aesthetic norm for the novel. Such discussions implicitly identified the scope of 'realism' with the scope of 'the novel'; the term 'realism' functioned primarily as a term of praise rather than as a tool of analysis. In such a context, moreover, the term 'realism' has tended to mean widely different things, depending on what qualities a particular interpreter associated with it. For example, some of the qualities more or less casually assumed to be evidences of realism include, to name a few, particularity, circumstantiality, humble subject-matter, viewpoint, chronology, interiority, externality. While each of these qualities does have some importance in realism, none of itself explains the realist convention.

Recently, things have changed. Under the influence of novelists like James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, John Hawkes and Vladimir Nabokov, Claude Simon and Alain Robbe-Grillet, Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez, and under the influence of theoretical writing based on the work of Saussure, Heidegger, Foucault and others, discussion of English realism has adopted a more self-conscious historical and theoretical vantage point. From this perspective earlier discussions seem to take for granted the very things that most require investigation, which is to say questions concerning exactly what primary values and assumptions the realist convention entails.

A key text, one that represents both a culmination of the first kind of discussion and a turn toward the second more philosophical kind, is Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (1959). Watt continues the tradition of equating verisimilitude with emphasis on 'particulars' and on 'circumstantial' evidence, but he also considers the implications for these features of realism of Locke's philosophy and of wider social changes including new priorities of individualism and of privacy. The fact that his discussion remains valuable thirty years

after its publication testifies to the quality and importance of his argument; on the other hand, the fact that his argument does not venture into a wider discursive context seriously limits the value of many of his generalizations.

A fuller estimate of English narrative realism as a cultural achievement begins with this recognition: that verisimilitude, like any other aesthetic convention, is an abstraction. The 'lifelikeness' of realism depends upon a particular set of rules for the disposition of concreteness and detail, as well as of value and questions of ultimate concern. Because the realistic convention distracts attention from its artificiality it may be in fact one of the most artificial of all conventions. In any case, verisimilitude, or realism, or the illusion of lifelikeness, is no simple or natural expression; on the contrary, it is a highly artificial and highly achieved effect.

Analogies with other art forms and other modes of description help to demonstrate the profoundly abstract as well as the profoundly consequential character of realistic narrative conventions. It is demonstrable, for example, that realistic narrative belongs to the same descriptive conventions that made possible the painting and architecture of the Renaissance and the empirical science of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Ivins, 1938, 1964; Edgerton, 1975; Ermarth, 1983). In other words, realism in narrative is a temporal variant of a certain cultural formulation that became evident centuries earlier in the spatial versions of painting, architecture and geometry.

A familiar and immediately accessible instance of spatial realism is the technique of single-point perspective that co-ordinated pictorial space so as to produce a common horizon for all potential perspectives. As opposed to the space of medieval painting, which was either a frankly virtual space for icons or a quasi-representational space fractured by competing vanishing points, the space of Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, and the entire company of Renaissance painters was a homogenized, neutral medium in which mutually informative measurements could be made and in which the logic of spectator awareness was absolute. All perspectives in the realistic frame agree, or in other words, achieve a consensus which is tantamount to the creation of a common horizon and a common medium. From any spectator's viewpoint—either the one arbitrarily assigned by an artist to viewers or any others potentially available in the representational space—an invariant logic of relationships could be grasped that extended to infinity and thus had the value of universal truth. This is the convention that reigned, in Western European painting at least, from the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries.

This technical achievement in painting belonged to the shift associated with the rediscovery of classical models in the Renaissance, a shift that changed not only the content but the entire

method of understanding. One could say that the most important thing about the rediscovery of classical learning was as much the act of rediscovery as it was the creation of models. The act of historical awareness ran through the era from Piero della Francesca to Erasmus like a bolt of energy and opened the horizon, both in space and in time, to exploration and conquest. From this breathtaking effort emerged the modern idea of history: the view of time as a neutral, homogenous medium like the space of pictorial realism in painting; a time where mutually informative measurements can be made between past, present and future, and where all relationships can be explained in terms of a common horizon. In realistic painting sight is rationalized by a pictorial space that extends from here to eternity without encountering any disturbing fractures. In realistic narrative a different faculty is involved and a different medium, but the same formation inheres. In realistic narrative, that is, consciousness is rationalized by a narrative time that extends from here to eternity without encountering any disturbing fractures. All temporal perspectives, however widely dispersed, 'agree' in the sense that they do not contradict; in this powerful sense they achieve a consensus that is tantamount to the creation of a common horizon in time and hence of the power to think historically.

The narrative convention of realism took considerably longer to emerge than did the similar convention for space. It took several centuries in England— from the beginning of the Reformation in the early sixteenth century to about 1800, when the scientific and mathematical implications of the new learning had finally become broadly evident. By a massive capillary action through every social institution in England, this historical awareness produced a rationalizing of consciousness which we still take for granted today and which still informs our institutions.

The nineteenth century was the era of historical genres like autobiography and history, and the period in which the new sciences of geology, biology and sociology produced their powerfully unsettling influence on religious belief through various histories of the earth, of the human species, and of social order such as those published by Lyell, Darwin and Comte. The nineteenth century was also the era of the historical novel. Just as Piero della Francesca and his contemporaries rationalized the faculty of sight by organizing space according to a common horizon, so the novelists of the nineteenth century rationalized the faculty of consciousness by organizing time according to a common horizon, a horizon maintained by the narrative process itself, with its reflex from present to past.

It is this narrative convention, and not any more local effect of lifelikeness, that makes realistic effect possible. Precision of detail in itself has no realistic qualities; as Alain Robbe-Grillet

says, speaking of Kafka, ‘nothing is more fantastic, ultimately, than precision’ (1961, p. 165). Rather, realism belongs to the management—one might almost say the administration—of perspective in time so that a common medium of events is maintained from the beginning of a narrative to the end. Any detail or event or perspective that cannot be assimilated in this overall temporal structure—for example, a too-conspicuous pattern, a major historical improbability—compromises the realistic effect.

The key feature in this convention of narrative temporality is the much-discussed, so-called omniscient narrator or what I suggest we think of as ‘the narrator as Nobody’. Although this narrator sometimes addresses readers in personal tones, more generally it remains disembodied and indistinguishable from the narrative process itself, almost like a power of the past-tense rather than anything more individualized. At this level of awareness distinctions between individual sites of consciousness, whether of author, reader or character, seem less important than the power to slide between them; realistic narrative characteristically draws reader attention to various instances of this power of transition.

Such narrative consciousness literally *constitutes* historical time in the narrative by threading together into one system and one act of attention, a whole series of moments and perspectives. Thus the continuum of time and the continuum of consciousness literally appear inseparable, functioning together as the medium of events. The shuttle back and forth between past and future along an essentially linear but not chronological temporal sequence at once homogenizes time in the way single-point perspective homogenized space, and in the same gesture that process rationalizes consciousness in the same way that single-point perspective rationalized sight, confining it to a horizon common to all perspectives and extending to infinity.

In realistic narrative and painting, in other words, a fundamental and powerful idea takes shape: the idea that the medium of creation extends from the wall or the page into our actual space and time and, potentially, to infinity or as far as our own creative courage may take us. In addition, this aesthetic invitation comes inscribed with a promise that the realistic convention gives us a power of generalization that will enable us to subsume or eradicate whatever is inexplicable or mysterious. In a convention that extends to infinity the rationalized powers of human attention, no atrocity need remain unexplained, no mystery unsolved, no mistake unrectified.

Many nineteenth-century novels comment most powerfully on the strain involved in sustaining this particular ideal of consciousness while, at the same time, they insist on the necessity and even the heroism of it. They do this primarily in two ways: first by forcing readers to cope with

problems in the management of the narrative temporality itself; second, and more modestly, by thematizing in various ways this problem of sustaining a common time. The major English realists are nineteenth-century writers and their deployments of the characteristic conventions of realism vary widely. There are what might be called centrist writers like George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Meredith, and even Thackeray who maintain pretty consistently the historical conventions of realism. Then there are writers like the Brontës and Dickens (especially the early Dickens) who, to varying degrees, qualify realistic conventions because they emphasize the dependence of realistic agreements and of common, historical time upon a sustaining Providence that possesses the power to suspend them (Vargish, 1985).

But the potential range of variation within the realistic convention is great. Early in the nineteenth century we find Walter Scott, the under-sung father of realism, who sustains the historical continuum in considering politics and the social order at the same time as his style renders those subjects almost as epic or heroic legend; and, at the same period, we find Jane Austen, who undertakes the domestic subject-matter congenial to the consensus of realism, with its emphasis on common time and common understandings, but who at the same time often employs a narrative temporality that has more in common with Defoe and Richardson than with the historical generalizations of realism.

Late in the nineteenth century the temporal horizon of realism becomes strained. In the novels of Henry James, for example, the narrative often focuses mainly on the stress, difficulty and importance of achieving precisely that communication between one consciousness and another that realism invites us to take for granted. Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad further disturb the rationalizing consciousness of realism—and its associated valorization of individuality and uniqueness—with patterns that supersede individual will or with mysteries or brutalities that exceed the system of rational explanation and, in some cases, arise directly from it. In their work the values of memory and anticipation, of projection and perspective become impossible or take on a sinister tinge.

A close look at the management of narrative temporality reveals at once the crucial feature of realistic fiction, the power of consciousness to sustain, at a certain level of transcendence, a perpetual mediation. In Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857), for example, the narrative process shuttles back and forth between this individual and that, this place and that, overcoming the various separations created by individual, social, spatial or temporal difference, and binding together into one act of attention a collective group that hardly sees its collective identity. *Barchester Towers* is a

novel about a community where individuals seem incapable of mediating their own affairs and where, consequently, opportunists and nitwits hold sway. Everyone is so discreet and so ingenuous in Barchester that they seem prepared to credit even the most preposterous rumour rather than ask a direct question or two. The ones capable of real directness in the novel are the narrator and the phenomenal Signora Neroni, both in different ways disengaged from the community.

The narrator, for example, is capable of saying things like this: ‘Miss Stanhope was a clever woman, able to talk on most subjects, and quite indifferent as to what the subject was’ (chap. 9); or (speaking of Signora Neroni and Obadiah Slope) ‘Her hand in his looked like a rose lying among carrots’ (chap. 27); or even ‘Eleanor had no such self-knowledge’ (chap. 24). This kind of commentary provides a site, a mediate region where reader and narrative consciousness join to supervise a particular history. In *Barchester Towers*, as in other realistic novels, the standard set by narrative consciousness is one measure of character awareness. The Signora maintains her special status in the text partly by her ability—unique in Barchester—to express herself in a spirit similar to that of the narrator’s, as for example when she asks the odious Obadiah, ‘Which is it to be with you, Mr Slope, love or money?’ (chap. 27). The power to take this kind of perspective is tantamount almost to a form of self-consciousness, exactly what in Barchester nobody has, except, of course, the narrator who *is* nobody in the sense of having no individual or concrete embodiment in the narrative. The burden of the plot is to show how the various Grantleys, Thornes, Hardings and Quiverfuls come closer to the saving acts of mutual recognition—in short, how they come to that objective awareness of their mutual relations which the narrator and reader (and occasionally the Signora) have had all along.

In this as in any realistic novel almost any passage demonstrates the narrative consciousness at its largely invisible work. Although the so-called narrator is most conspicuous at those moments when it delivers a prejudiced comment or overt interpretation, these are not its only or even its most powerful moments. The true power of the narrator is the abstract, non-individualized, transcendent power of mediation. By incorporating in a single mnemonic sequence all the variety of particular life, especially what seems isolated or unrelated, the narrator maintains as a perpetual possibility that social communion, with all its extensions of individual power, that remains unachieved at the level of plot. This potential for communion is most obvious to readers who necessarily operate with the narrator’s perspective and consequently with an awareness of the possibility and power of transition from one perspective to another. At this level of attention the narrator must be conceived not as an individual so much as a power of transition itself, something frequently indistinguishable

from the power of the past tense. In this power of transition lies the implicit possibility of those connections, those meetings of minds, those reunions that so often seem lacking in the plot. The narrative consciousness shows by its very mediation that what seems unrelated in fact is not and that events or persons widely separated in time or space still have mutual relevance and their actions mutual consequences. As readers we know this simply because no event, no moment escapes the mediating awareness that, from its vantage point in the indistinct future, acts invisibly but perpetually to co-ordinate various moments into a sequence where their meaning emerges comparatively, over time. For this narrative consciousness every 'present' event is also already a past event and thus implicitly contained in a controlled pattern of significance. Although disagreement may break out here or there in Barchester, agreement reigns in the narrative process itself: agreement not about anything so trivial as church appointments or engagements, but rather about the potential for connectedness between what seems but is not separate and unrelated. It is this power of collective—or, more accurately, *collected*—perception that creates realism's common horizon in time and its rationalization of consciousness.

The historical narrator is so fully achieved an effect, so far from inadvertent an effect in realism that the values maintained by this narrative medium often receive explicit thematic statement. Dickens's novels are an especially luminous example because one of his constant themes is the saving power of mutual consciousness to overcome separation. Unlike Trollope, Dickens expands his circuit of consciousness far beyond the private understandings of narrator, occasional character, and appreciative reader to the point that he often qualifies his realism in the process. The entire *world* is galvanized by consciousness in Dickens, furniture included; the circuit of communion runs through the whole social universe. While Dickens's narrator—and this holds true even for a first-person narrator—generally remains as unpersonified as Trollope's, his characters often find themselves in a condition of social and psychic detachment that resembles the helpless lucidity of the realistic narrator; and such characters are often referred to in Dickens as 'nobody'.

Many examples spring to mind, all of them characters who have in some way reached a margin of social consciousness and who often find that trip tantamount to death (literally the end of time): in *Bleak House* (1852–3) such 'nobodies' are Inspector Bucket, or Esther, or Nemo—literally no name; in *Little Dorrit* (1855–7), Miss Wade, Pancks and Arthur Clennam are all referred to as 'nobody', and all have terrible problems of social consciousness and conscience, problems that in Clennam's case are often couched in terms of keeping track of the time. In his last complete novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5), Dickens develops most fully the theme of 'nobody'. The main figures

in the double plot, Eugene Wrayburn and John Harmon, both become somebody by becoming Nobody. Harmon returns in disguise like a modern Odysseus to the place that is his but in which he remains invisible until he can come back recognized: 'I am nobody', he says to Mr Boffin, '...and not likely to be known' (chap. 8). Harmon, though not dead as first thought, still remains 'unrecognized' and, so far as his social identity is concerned, unrecognized is as good as dead.

Our Mutual Friend makes it painfully clear how this mysterious detachment of consciousness entailed by a loss of social identity is actually a *saving* fracture because it preserves the consciousness from untenable contradictions entailed by multiple social identity or from the hard impositions of unenlightened materialism. The price of consciousness is disembodiment because in Dickens's world embodied consciousness always, fatefully finds itself trapped in the hopeless limitations of a hierarchical class structure. The transcendence entailed by the reflex of consciousness produces prodigious strains in individual experience. In Trollope we are so glad of the power that transcends Barchester that we practically welcome the strain. In Dickens, especially late Dickens, the strain is a saving necessity, but a necessity none the less and not entirely a pleasure, conducted as it is at the margins of society and often at the margin of temporal existence.

George Eliot's narrator avoids the margins of historical march in favour of the middle. Her narrating consciousness is not holistic like Dickens's, nor does it deal with totalized structures or with absolute values. The narrative consciousness is a kind of generalized historical awareness, often hardly distinguishable from the reader's own, a power of transition between minds and moments, an implied historical awareness that makes the realistic series possible. Like Trollope's narrator, hers sometimes inches toward personification with this or that prejudiced remark and sometimes remains a totally disembodied power of putatively 'neutral' reporting; but her narrator is much more a deliberate and complex feature of the history than is Trollope's. From her earliest writing it is clear that this medium of perception itself and not any more limited representation was her primary focus. There are very few writers who make more accessible to inspection that internal conversation of consciousness whereby awareness shifts incessantly from point to point, from moment to moment bearing its filaments of shared meaning.

George Eliot's novels thematize this power in various ways. Many of her novelistic agendas and crucial plot moments turn on the difficulties and powers of making public the private dialogue. The act of confessing, for example, has tremendous power because in confession the private shuttle of consciousness goes public, enlarging its context and the scope of its rationalizations. George Eliot's narrative consciousness, unlike the one in Dickens, finds no dead ends in the world of

material embodiments because for her even material embodiments are half ideas: products of human effort and tradition over time, and the essential medium of what is highest and best. Because in George Eliot's novels institutions only exist through individual enactments and choices, institutions never take on a life of their own, as they do in Dickens, or run like juggernauts over helpless individuals. Disembodied consciousness is more to be feared than institutions in George Eliot because of the powerful solipsism that can be engendered by those private rationalizations. Characters like Arthur Donnithorne, Tito Melema, Mrs Transome, Nicholas Bulstrode, Rosamond Vincy and Gwendolen Harleth create those narrative cruxes for which George Eliot is well known: cruxes where various characters either accept or avoid that all-powerful moment when they can say, in the spirit of Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett, 'until this moment I never knew myself' and, with that step, begin to adjust their private rationalizations with wider ones.

That snap of recognition is less grand and permanent in George Eliot than it is in Austen. Rosamond Vincy's case differs from Elizabeth Bennett's partly because Rosamond's world contains no secure hierarchy of virtue in which to locate but presents instead a vast range of relevancies over which even the narrator's consciousness presides sceptically, hypothetically, and constantly seeking new extensions. George Eliot's egoists, like Dickens's characters, are too encumbered by flesh and blood and daily living; but unlike Dickens's more evanescent narrator, hers provides for a complex populous universe of metaphoric articulation: a kind of flexible, provoking, sustained awareness that holds together into a single medium the roll and pitch of the temporal sequence and is essentially coextensive with it.

Recognizing this narrative medium as a major signifying element provides rich opportunities for resolving some problems that have vexed interpreters of Victorian novels over decades. Examples include, first, what has appeared to be the excessive virtue of characters like Dorothea Brooke and Daniel Deronda; the allegedly gratuitous or 'intrusive' presence of the so-called 'omniscient' narrator; and what Percy Lubbock (exploiting Henry James) called the 'loose, baggy' quality of nineteenth-century novels ([1921] 1957). Over-altruistic characters like Dorothea and Deronda demonstrate—quite explicitly once the narrative medium becomes a comparative model—that too much selflessness produces paralysis or worse and that altruistic dispersal is not much more desirable than egoistic centrality. The epigrammatical comments made by narrators seem 'intrusive' only if they are seen in isolation from the rest of the narrative medium which moves like tides between extremes of particular consciousness on the one hand and, on the other, a generalized or collected awareness without individual definition. The loose, baggy quality of Victorian novels is

not a symptom of incomplete art but, on the contrary, a necessity of the logic of realism which discovers its forms not in individual cases but in a series and over time.

While we take the historical medium for granted when we read a realistic novel, what we are really doing is accepting and reinserting the belief—and it is no more nor less than an arbitrary and breathtaking act of faith—that it is our powers of collective agreement that literally make possible historical continuity. In the realistic medium, a contradiction is merely an incompletely grasped relationship, and one that implicitly may be resolved at a higher level of understanding. The consciousness required for transcending particulars in this way is everywhere in general and nowhere in particular: linked with individual awareness at various points but always exceeding them. The power of this consciousness is nobody's power: at once human and unspecific, powerfully present but not individualized. In realistic novels our sense of a network, a system of relationships, a balance between parts of an immense and complex and always changing social entity emerges precisely in the reflex from one moment and one consciousness to another. The narrative consciousness of realism is literally engendered by the very sequence that, in its more limited personal voice, it interprets.

This flexible and composite narrative medium, one always controlled from a vantage point in the future of the events being narrated, literally maintains by this ceaseless relay the medium of time itself, just as the single-point perspective in Renaissance painting co-ordinates all angles of vision into a common horizon. In narrative, this co-ordination is distributed over a sequence and depends on a collected consciousness to maintain it, a more intangible feat perhaps than the visual co-ordinations of realistic space, but equally powerful in extending to infinity the human capabilities it thereby inscribes.

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