

**THE REALIST NOVEL:
THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT
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Realism is a term that gained currency on the continent of Europe about the middle of the nineteenth century, to denote a new mutation in the development of prose fiction which had manifested itself a couple of decades earlier, i.e. around 1830. It was not, at that stage, a recognizable movement, as Romanticism had been, and it was only by analysing the kind of writing attempted by its major proponents that critics were able to give the term a definite meaning. Since the realistic mode affected almost every aspect of prose fiction, it is difficult even today to reduce it to a simple, all-encompassing formula; the most that can be done is to suggest a number of ways in which the realist novel, in France and Russia to begin with and later on in Germany, the Iberian peninsula and Italy, developed its particular form, distinct from what was taking shape simultaneously in Anglo-Saxon cultures. Not all the major European realists adhered to every one of these guidelines, and such prescriptions as can be deduced never formed a programme to be put into operation by a group of writers. But with hindsight one can see that, broadly speaking, there were certain overriding objectives that the major European realists had set their sights on, and that these differed in many respects from what their contemporaries in Great Britain and the United States were aiming for.

What in the first place distinguished them was the keen interest they showed in the broader political and social developments of their time. It was particularly in the work of the two French writers Stendhal and Balzac, who can be regarded as the ‘founding fathers’ of nineteenth-century realism, that this feature first became apparent, and for sound reasons: for France, more than any other country, had since 1789 been subject to a series of political and social convulsions, the full import of which was still, in 1830, far from certain; any novelist who could offer a convincing analysis of the contemporary state of society and could discern the significant trends of its future development could be sure of a wide readership, at any rate among the more thoughtful members of the public.

Stendhal, who came to the novel relatively late in life (he was 47 when he produced his first masterpiece *Le Rouge et le Noir*, 1830, translated as *Scarlet and Black*), had served an apprenticeship as a political journalist writing, from 1822 onwards, ‘letters from Paris’ for

publication in various London periodicals; but even if one discounts this experience, he had all his life been following with the closest attention the conflicting subterranean pressures that were to burst through the thin crust of ordered society in the explosion of the 1830 revolution. Written immediately prior to this event, *Scarlet and Black* illustrates all these contemporary currents: the struggles of the old aristocracy to reassert their authority after the catastrophic events of the earlier (1789) revolution; the current reactionary religious revival spearheaded by the Jesuits; and the new danger to social stability presented by the educated, ambitious but underprivileged youth of the country incarnated in his hero, Julien Sorel.

Balzac, who belonged to a younger generation than Stendhal, embarked on his career as a novelist at about the same date, and, not surprisingly, some of the themes developed in his work are identical with Stendhal's: notably that of the ambitious young man from the provinces who comes up to the capital determined to 'do or die'—Eugène de Rastignac in *Le Père Goriot* (1835; *Old Goriot*), Lucien de Rubempré in *Illusions perdues* (1837–43; *Lost Illusions*). But Balzac, a far more prolific writer than Stendhal and with more wide-ranging aims, decided at an early stage to structure his entire fictional output in order to provide a complete contemporary history of a kind no novelist had ever attempted before. He would deal with the whole of the social spectrum of his day, with every trade and profession, in the provinces as well as in the metropolis; there would be novels illustrating the kind of problems caused by the troublesome presence of the surviving veterans of Napoleon's armies, by the laws of inheritance and by the dowry system, by marriage and adultery, by business failures and successes; only the sufferings of the emerging proletariat failed to engage Balzac's attention. The general title he settled on for the series was *La Comédie humaine* (*The Human Comedy*), modestly echoing that of Dante's epic; but he died too soon to include in it all the novels he had planned. The grand design, however, encouraged his successor, Emile Zola, to embark on his own series, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, wisely limited to twenty novels, which dealt with a later period in French history, the Second Empire (1852–70).

In between Balzac and Zola came Flaubert, whose long, difficult novel *L'Education sentimentale* (1869; *The Sentimental Education*) attempted to present the same socio-political history of contemporary times, which in his case meant the period from 1840 to 1852, with the revolution of 1848 providing the centrepiece. Flaubert confined himself to the scene in the metropolis itself, as reflected in the often uncomprehending observations of his ingenuous hero Frédéric Moreau. Frédéric, who drifts through life aimlessly, has at his side his old schoolfellow Deslauriers, in whom one can recognize a variant of the same type of pushful *arriviste* as Stendhal had created in

Julien Sorel and Balzac in Eugène de Rastignac, though Deslauriers is less successful in love than the former and less successful in his career than the latter.

The second general principle evolved by realist novelists on the Continent, particularly in the second half of the century, can be enunciated as the downgrading of the plot. This does not mean that they avoided big subjects. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1863–9), which many claim to be the realist masterpiece *par excellence*, has the largest possible theme: what are war and peace if not the twin poles between which nations have swung from time immemorial? But, apart from the campaigns, victories and defeats for which the historical record vouches, the events that affect Tolstoy's characters have nothing out of the ordinary: old people die, young people fall in and out of love, get married and have children, the thoughtful meditate on the meaning of life, the thoughtless give themselves up to enjoyment; they all grow older, more sedate, more serious, as the years march on. In the plot of *War and Peace* there is nothing in any way exceptional; Tolstoy made of it an exceptional novel by the art with which he wove his epic story round dozens of lives, all distinct, all fascinating, because they were all, in their different ways, utterly human, truer than any biographer could make his subject.

More commonly, the realist selected a single life and made it the subject of the novel, offering the reader a humdrum story moving inexorably to a predictable ending. The first title Zola chose for his novel *L'Assommoir* (1877) was *La Simple Vie de Gervaise Macquart*. The book was a sensational success, an immediate best-seller, but there is nothing sensational in the story as such. We meet Gervaise in the beginning, a country girl newly arrived in Paris, poorly educated, knowing nothing but her original trade as a laundress. Her good-for-nothing lover has abandoned her and her two children and made off with all their money. But she finds work, regains her self-respect, and is courted by an honest workman, whom she eventually agrees to marry. For some years the little family prospers, another child is born to Gervaise, and she is in a fair way to achieving her modest ambition of running a laundry business of her own, when her husband Coupeau, a roofer, suffers a disabling injury at work. During his long period of convalescence, in which he is nursed devotedly by Gervaise, he contracts habits of idleness and starts drinking. Although Gervaise continues to prosper for a while, the drain on her resources by her now feckless and eventually hopelessly alcoholic husband drags her down to promiscuity and beggary. Coupeau succumbs finally to delirium tremens and Gervaise, abandoned by her children and spurned by her relatives, dies on the last page of hunger and destitution.

It is in every sense a 'simple life', with none of the strange twists, mysterious happenings or fateful coincidences of the kind one finds not infrequently in the Victorian novelists from Dickens to Hardy. To achieve realism, Zola decided from the start to dispense with all improbability and to maintain his hold over the reader not by surprising or intriguing him, but by drawing him into the fiction by giving him the impression of a flat, undramatized truthfulness. Zola had, of course, forerunners; he regarded Gustave Flaubert as his master here, Flaubert who, twenty years before, had written the prototype of the 'simple life' novel in *Madame Bovary* (1857). His heroine is taken from childhood through schooldays to young womanhood, spent at her father's isolated farm. To escape from a monotonous existence she accepts the first man who offers her marriage; in this new state, she promises herself she knows not what excitements and adventures. But Charles Bovary is dull, plodding, unambitiously following an unpromising career in a small Normandy village. Dissatisfied, Emma takes a lover, a local landowner for whom she is no more than one more mistress after a string of others; when he abandons her, she finds another lover, even less satisfactory, and starts compensating for the emotional poverty of her life by spending wildly, until finally her creditors foreclose. To avoid having to confess to her husband that she has reduced him and their only child to poverty, she ends her life by swallowing arsenic.

Similarly, at the other end of Europe, Tolstoy was writing his own variant on the same theme in *Anna Karenina* (1873–7). Once again we are invited to consider the fate of an attractive woman trapped in marriage to an unsympathetic husband, longing for love, imagining she has found it, experiencing the disillusionment of an irregular relationship, and finally taking the ultimate, desperate way out of her troubles (Anna throws herself under a train). It cannot be by chance that these two novels, together with Eça de Queirós's *Cousin Bazilio* (1878) in Portugal, Alas's *La Regenta* (1884–5) in Spain, and Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1895) in Germany, all centre on discontented wives guilty of some sort of 'indiscretion' and thereafter doomed to abandonment, ostracism and in extreme cases suicide. It is as though the realists, all over the continent of Europe, with one accord fastened on the predicament of the unhappily married middle-class woman as providing the obvious fulcrum of nineteenth-century tragedy. In England and America it was an almost impossible theme, as Hardy discovered when he published *Jude the Obscure* in 1895 and, discouraged by the fiercely hostile reception it was given, decided to write no more novels.

A major problem facing the realists was that of making such drab and depressing material sufficiently absorbing, while dispensing with such artificial aids as suspense, mystery and

excitement which their forerunners had not scrupled to introduce. Scott's deliberate concealment of the true identity of certain major characters in his novels—such as that of the lawless rabble-rouser Robertson in *The Mean of Midlothian* (1818), who emerges finally as the respectable heir to the Staunton estates—is designed to encourage the unsophisticated reader to press on to the end so as to discover the truth; and there are other 'mysteries', to do principally with the antecedents and earlier life of this or that character, all of which are finally unwrapped after having been carefully concealed from the reader by various contrivances. Scott was one of the few nineteenth-century British novelists who was read enthusiastically and, up to a point, imitated on the Continent: primarily by the romantics, but also by such proto-realists as Balzac, whose early work contains more than one instance of conscious manipulation of the reader's sensibility by the artful withholding of vital information until the last possible moment. Thus *Old Goriot*, perhaps Balzac's best-known novel, begins with a detailed and almost hypnotically convincing description of a particular Parisian boarding-house, the Pension Vauquer, and of its various inmates about whom we are told, however, no more than might be deduced by a keen-sighted observer lacking inside information. Minor mysteries arise even at this stage: why should Goriot, who some years earlier arrived to take the best rooms in the boarding-house, and whose dress and air of self-confidence proclaimed him a man of substantial private means, have now become so impoverished that he is relegated to the smallest, shabbiest room in the house? Why has he sunk into premature dotage and why is he still occasionally visited none the less by ladies dressed in the height of fashion and displaying every sign of affluence? Questioned indiscreetly, Goriot simply replies that they are his daughters, but no one believes him, and a fellow lodger, a robust middle-aged man going under the name of Vautrin, puts forward the plausible hypothesis that Goriot is an old voluptuary who cannot resist pretty harpies and has run through all his fortune to buy their favours. This is, however, far from being the true solution of the mystery, which it is left to Rastignac, a law-student of good family also lodging in the *pension*, to discover. Goriot had in earlier years, it seems, amassed a considerable fortune through trafficking in grains, and by settling extravagant dowries on his two daughters, had succeeded in marrying one of them into the aristocracy and the other to a wealthy banker. But Anastasie and Delphine, accustomed since childhood to having their every whim gratified, have continued to extort money from their father and so have reduced him to his present pauperdom. This particular mystery is cleared up for the reader about one-third of the way through the book, but there remains the mystery surrounding Vautrin, whose past is problematic but who is discovered towards the end of the novel to be an escaped convict whom the police have been trying to track down for years.

Keeping readers in the dark in order to whet their curiosity is not part of the realist tradition; it may have originated in Balzac's reading of Scott, as suggested, or in the stage melodrama, which was still, at the time *Old Goriot* was written, in the heyday of its popularity. In his later works, Balzac resorted to this device less and less frequently, relying instead on his ability to create powerful characters in the grip of some obsessive passion. Just as Goriot is consumed by an overmastering love of his daughters to the point of sacrificing all he possesses, so Balzac's other 'monomaniacs' (as they have come to be called) are driven on, devoured, and eventually destroyed by different dominating passions: avarice, in the case of Eugénie Grandet's father; scientific research (*La Recherche de l'Absolu*, translated as *The Search for the Absolute*); the collecting of art treasures (*Le Cousin Pons*); exorbitant sexual appetite, degenerating into paedophilia (*La Cousine Bette*); or simply the will to power (*La Rabouilleuse*, translated as *The Black Sheep*). But these children of Balzac's imagination, powerful though they undoubtedly are in their impact on the reader, can scarcely be accounted the typical creations of a realistic art. Characters in the novels of Flaubert, Tolstoy, Zola and other writers of the latter part of the century are invariably 'people of our sort', which does not mean of course that we see ourselves necessarily behaving as they do, but that we can understand only too well what makes them behave as they do. They are never extraordinary (it is precisely because Dostoevsky's four great novels all embody abnormal heroes that critics hesitate to classify him among the realists), and so in general their fates are never extraordinary. Instead of Julien Sorel, who models himself on Napoleon and does indeed succeed in racing to the top, but who before the novel ends overreaches himself, fires on his exmistress in church and is guillotined for the deed, we are much more likely to encounter a lucky scoundrel like Georges Duroy in Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* (1885) who, profiting by his sexual attractions, works his way up in the world of journalism and ends by marrying the daughter of a wealthy newspaper proprietor. Stendhal's *Scarlet and Black*, though full of accurate observation and perceptive social comment, has a fantastic plot; Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* rings true throughout, and Duroy's progeny, under the collective name of 'yuppies', is still around a century later.

What Flaubert in the first place, and his successors subsequently, introduced as a substitute for melodrama, suspense and larger-than-life protagonists, was the equivalent in literature of what philosophers would call determinism. Every folly that Emma Bovary commits has its roots in the circumstances in which she grew up and the temperament with which nature has endowed her. Flaubert devotes the whole of the sixth chapter of *Madame Bovary* to an account of her schooldays and adolescence, emphasizing how her reading of romantic novelettes had given her

the notion of a grand life and wild, exotic adventures for which, being of an imaginative disposition, she sees herself destined. Her subsequent marriage to a bumbling country doctor, devoted to her but manifestly incapable of providing her with the sexual thrills and material luxuries she craves, drives her to seek satisfaction through extramarital affairs and by adopting an extravagant lifestyle; and we have already seen how all this ends. Everything about Emma and her life is deducible from antecedent factors; the whole story seems predetermined, not however by some Aeschylean fate, like Hardy's 'President of the Immortals' who is said, on the last page of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), to have 'ended his sport' with the tormented heroine. This is how it was bound to end, we think when Emma writhes on her deathbed; whereas there are so many turning-points in Tess's story when, if matters had chanced to fall out differently, she would never have stabbed her lover, she would surely have escaped the gallows.

Much the same could be said of Gervaise in Zola's *L'Assommoir*, who has indeed been called a working-class Emma Bovary, though in her case it is less her upbringing and neglected education that cause her downfall than the dirty, overcrowded, drink-sodden slum in which her life is spent; the vapours of cheap brandy—vitriol as the workers call it—permeate the book and explain Zola's decision to call the novel *L'Assommoir*, the word being at the time a slang term for what in English would have been called a gin palace. But whether the determining factors are environmental or educational or a mixture of the two, the formula is most convincing when applied to a fictional biography of the type exemplified in the two French novels just mentioned and in others discussed earlier. Not all realist novels are of this kind. *Germinal* (1885), which now rates probably as Zola's masterpiece, covers only a year or two in the fortunes of a coalmining community in the north of France, and is concerned with the events leading up to a strike, the suffering it causes and the violence it gives rise to before its final collapse. Determinism plays a different role here: Zola's intention was to show how social conflicts of this kind, given the industrial and economic conditions of the time, necessarily followed some such pattern as he traced. The work might have turned into a dry economic treatise, but by enlisting the reader's sympathy for individual miners, their wives and children, and by showing at any rate some understanding of the difficult position of management, caught in the crossfire between workers and owners, he succeeds in infusing his account of the strike with a degree of human interest so that, in the end, both classes are seen as victims of a system that cries out for overthrow or at the very least radical amendment.

Germinal is perhaps an extreme instance of how far a work of realism dealing with crucial socio-economic questions could be taken without the author exceeding his brief and appearing in the guise of a social reformer. The English tradition, if one thinks of Dickens in *Hard Times* (1854) or *Bleak House* (1853) for instance, never required of an author that he adopt so neutral a stance, and it must be admitted that eventually, in the late 1890s, Zola did embark on a deliberate policy of using his pen not merely to analyse the social evils of his time but also to propound remedies. In so doing, he was knowingly breaking with the realist tradition in his country, which had set its face consistently against the overt advocacy of social reform in works of the imagination. Here we come up against the fundamentally different principles that guided writers on the Continent and in England and America, in the matter of authorial intervention. In *Scarlet and Black*, what Stendhal sought to portray was what he himself called a 'plebeian in revolt'. Julien is an unabashed careerist, prepared to adopt any expedient, moral or immoral, that will allow him to break through the barriers that separate him from 'the rich', whom he hates and envies to an almost equal degree; but what the author thought about him is far from obvious (whereas what the narrator in *Vanity Fair* thought of Becky Sharp, a rather similar creation, is only too clear), and what the reader will think about Julien depends on his or her values alone. The guidance the author offers is at best ambiguous; even when Stendhal launches into an explicit condemnation of Julien's conduct, one is never sure whether such sternness is not tongue-in-cheek. Similarly in Balzac's novels: a small minority could be classed as social treatises, but the greatest of them, whatever the social or moral questions they raise, eschew all opportunities to sway the reader to the author's point of view. Privately, in fact, Balzac professed the most reactionary political opinions; the paradox is, however, that Engels and after him Lukács, both Marxists, should have considered his analysis of the society of his time to be more enlightening, however unenlightened his outlook, than that of any other writer in the nineteenth century.

The novelist who illustrates most clearly the moral neutrality common to all the French realists is undoubtedly Flaubert, whose first published novel, *Madame Bovary*, might be mistaken for a denunciation of the institution of marriage as it existed among the less successful professional classes, especially in the remoter rural districts of France. Emma marries in order to escape from her widowed father's isolated farmstead; but she finds herself in this new condition without any occupation whatsoever. The housework is done by the servant, the child born to her is a disappointment and is put out to nurse; her husband is out all day and falls asleep over his supper when he returns; diversions such as balls and theatre-going are so infrequent as to constitute unique occurrences rather than habitual entertainments. Emma is excruciatingly bored and sees

her life stretching before her as a long corridor with no doors opening off to the magic garden she imagines lying beyond. Rodolphe, the local Lothario, makes her acquaintance just when her longing for an adventure has become almost desperate, and she succumbs without a qualm. Emma is not naturally vicious or corrupt; she is, it would seem, made so by the intolerable conditions to which marriage has condemned her.

Yet *Madame Bovary* has less claim to be regarded as a critique of the married state than *Anna Karenina*, where the institution is studied in three different case-histories: firstly, that of Oblonsky, perpetually faithless but whose infidelities are tolerated by his wife for the sake of appearances; then that of Anna, the adulteress, who differs from Emma in having a husband more concerned with his career than with her, and a child whom she adores (it is true that Seryozha is a bright little boy, whereas Emma's Berthe is a graceless little girl); and finally there is Konstantin Levin, who persists, in spite of rebuffs, in wooing Kitty and is eventually accepted: the marriage turns out to be as successful as perhaps a reasonable man and a sensible woman could expect. Tolstoy's disillusioned view of the institution of marriage can be pretty accurately gauged from these three examples; that of Flaubert could never be judged by anything we find in *Madame Bovary*. He shows, it is true, that Emma finds no lasting happiness in her affairs; in a famous phrase, he says of her towards the end of the second of them: 'Emma retrouvait dans l'adultère toutes les platitudes du mariage' (Pt. 3, chap. 6; 'Emma was rediscovering in adultery all the triteness of marriage'). On the other hand, he does depict her transported and transfigured by her first experience of seduction; after her return from that fateful ride in the woods with Rodolphe, we see her staring at herself in the mirror, amazed at the transformation of her appearance and repeating to herself: 'J'ai un amant! un amant!' (Pt. 2, chap. 9), and exulting at the idea as though she had entered into a second puberty; whereas Tolstoy shows Anna, after the same experience, sinking to her knees in shame, conscious only that she is now a 'fallen woman'. Which of the two scenes is the more realistic? Impossible to say, of course, since Anna is a different woman from Emma, and a novel is no reliable source for universal moral judgements.

But there is nothing to stop a novelist from allowing his own private judgements, moral or social, to peep through in the course of his narrative, either openly, as the Victorians tend to do, or slyly, with the most delicate of ironic wit, as Jane Austen does for instance in the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). For most of the nineteenth century and beyond, novelists writing in the English tradition have never felt any scruples about commenting, in general or in particular, about the various scenes, characters or incidents that they evoke in their fiction. Since, as André

Gide once remarked, there are no rules governing the novel, that most 'lawless' of all literary forms, one cannot rightly complain about this practice, except that when the writer's voice intrudes, the reader risks being distracted, even infuriated, if the views expressed strike him or her as wrong-headed or narrow-minded. Perhaps for this reason the continental tradition runs on the whole counter to it, especially in the Latin countries; it is possible that the tendency towards authorial intrusion is in some way connected with Protestant habits of considering fiction to be an idle pastime unless the voice of the preacher is audible every now and then.

Among the continental realists, especially after the mid-century, the only way we are made aware of the narrator is by the manner in which he writes. As Flaubert expressed it in a letter to a friend shortly after the publication of *Madame Bovary*: 'It is one of my principles that one must not write oneself into one's work. The artist must be in his work as God in creation, invisible yet all-powerful; we must sense him everywhere but never see him' (quoted in Allott, 1959, p. 271). Only very rarely does Flaubert comment directly on the behaviour of his characters, yet we can, if we read carefully, sense the judgements he is passing in the ironic twist by which he records their thoughts and feelings. Thus, at the end of a long, almost lyrical passage describing Charles Bovary's joys in the early days of married life, as he rides off to his work in the morning sunlight, he is said to be 'chewing the cud of his happiness like those who, after dinner, have still in their mouths the taste of the truffles they are digesting'. All the egoism of the thoughtless sensualist is in this unexpected simile, where sexual rapture is equated with the gratification of the gourmet, though there is no explicit condemnation of Charles. Sometimes the irony is not even directly expressed in the language used: as, later on, when Flaubert shows the couple side by side at night, Emma imagining her coming elopement with Rodolphe, Charles meditating on the years that lie ahead, thinking of his little daughter growing up and getting married in her turn, planning a future of quiet domestic felicity. Neither, of course, communicates these daydreams to the other. The narrator, being omniscient, knows what each is thinking, and by this juxtaposition of two minds filled with such divergent thoughts, he succeeds in conveying to the thoughtful reader not just the incompatibility of these two people inseparably yoked together, but also a moral judgement on each of them: Charles, good-hearted but incapable of even conceiving his wife's unhappiness, and Emma, dreaming her impossible dreams of sensual delights in exotic surroundings, caring nothing for husband and child, the indefensible egoist.

Flaubert's impersonality is, therefore, never absolute; in *Madame Bovary*, at least, he is never quite the insensate 'god in the machine' that it seems he would have wished to be. This

achievement was reserved for his disciple Zola, in *L'Assommoir*, a novel which, as we have seen already, was set in a working-class district in Paris and was, in fact, the first in any language to have a cast of characters belonging entirely to the artisan class. In his opening chapters Zola presents the scene, outlining Gervaise's desperate predicament in the same dispassionate tone he had used in half-a-dozen novels already. Shortly after, Coupeau is introduced, a cheerful, perky Parisian 'cockney'. His love-talk with Gervaise is inevitably interlarded with all kinds of colloquialisms and slang phrases which Zola, as an honest realist, transcribes; and when it comes to Coupeau's private thoughts, the same special vernacular of the Parisian working man is the natural medium in which to convey them to the reader. Finally, by a strange osmosis, this vulgar, bastardized French becomes the narrator's speech too; it could be said that Zola, as novelist, adopts it, but it would be truer to say that he bows out and passes the pen over to an anonymous witness in the crowd that surrounds Gervaise, some working-class commentator admiring her for her guts, deploring her weaknesses, heartlessly chronicling her fall into promiscuity and misery, and her final death. Conditions never allowed Zola to repeat the performance, since his later novels, though like *Germinal* they sometimes include working-class characters, also have middle-class, 'respectable' people playing major parts, so that the 'uniform style' he adopted in *L'Assommoir* was no longer appropriate. But the book remains the *ne plus ultra* of realist art—a novel without a narrator, a novel which *tells itself* and so is at once totally absorbing and as impersonal as a stone idol.

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