A Reflection on Literary Realism: It's Length and Breadth

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Abstract. 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". 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".

Introduction

In a useful collection of historical documents about realism in literature that he compiled almost half a century ago, George J. Becker complained that "the subject of realism is not especially congenial to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 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" . 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".

Postmodernism

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. 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. 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".

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'".

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 . 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. 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". 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".

Realism Reclaimed

Eliot quite explicitly establishes a contract with the reader, as the opening 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 contradictions 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 empirically 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 character, 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.

Conclusion

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.

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