

To Clumsy Life at her Stupid Work - Henry James

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1. Imitation and Representation

To narrow down so vast a theme as 'realism and reality' it might be best to begin with painting, to us humans so dependent on vision the most visual and therefore the most representative of arts, at least in the period before the advent of photography. The problem of realism and reality is nothing less than the relationship between the creator and the created, the artist and his subject, mind and matter. It is obvious from the outset that the topic is a philosophical one, a major, if not the major topic in the entire history of western metaphysics. But to avoid most of that we will focus in on the change from the old view of art as the faithful depiction of what is assumed to be 'given' to the newer view of reality as no longer a given but a creation, the Sartrean view that a perceiver 'creates' his vision in the very act of perceiving. There has been much debate on how that immense change in world-view or perceptual consciousness came about, but we may simply observe that the old view has not and may not ever completely disappear, and we may associate this older view with the term realism. We do not do so in disparagement, for no less a thinker than Nietzsche has said that 'all good art has deluded itself into thinking it is realistic', showing that the term, which has since fallen into bad odor due to reasons we shall presently consider, was once a term of praise. But Nietzsche's verb 'deluded' also contains the hint of realism's future loss of faith; he is suggesting that it is not quite possible to be realistic, and here (as elsewhere) he proved to be prophetic. One way of defining modern art is its wholehearted rejection of the old realistic view of the world to be created.

In one of his letters, Van Gogh discusses the way a good painter paints things as he feels them rather than in a dry analytic fashion. What the painter tries to do, he says, is to make of 'incorrectness, deviations, remodelings, or adjustments of reality something that may be 'untrue' but is at the same time more true than literal truth'<sup>1</sup>. Here is the attempt by a proto-modernist painter to draw an explicit distinction between interpreted reality and literal reality (whatever that may be). Van Gogh's distinction is between a

real (not realist) artist and an academic, presumably second-rate, painter, taking the modernist position that reality is best represented by a necessary distortion rather than a studied imitation. The subject must, as it were, be tampered with to better capture the elusiveness of the real.

The surrealist painter René Magritte painted a pipe and titled his work Ceci n'est pas une pipe, the point being that a work of art is one thing and what it represents is quite another<sup>2</sup>. This may seem obvious, but maybe it is so because we have become accustomed to the idea. The traditional point of view is that there is a connection between the real world and the artistically represented one and the connection is of one thing imitating another. In the Republic, Plato is concerned with putting artists in their place by a mimetic theory of art. In this theory, art is imitation and is therefore inferior, twice removed from reality since it is an imitation of an imitation, the noble term of 'reality' being reserved only for the Platonic Ideas. He may have held this view because classical art is unabashedly imitative, originality being a Post-Romantic obsession. Against Plato's view of art, imitation can be seen to have certain advantages and need not necessarily be slavish imitation. A trivial thing can become significant if it is singled out for notice and then fashioned into a statue or painting, or recorded in a work of literature. Of course, not everything will be recorded, for what would be the point of total duplication? The advantage of an imitation is precisely in its selective discrimination. By exercising selection, by calling attention to certain aspects and omitting others, the artist ensures that the imitation becomes available for use and is not lost in the stream of life's endless detail<sup>3</sup>.

It may be argued that in itself imitation is not a bad thing, but only becomes so when a creative element is lacking<sup>4</sup>. As suggested above, all the classical poets and artists thought it perfectly correct to write and fashion works based on the same mythological themes. So great a poet as Sophocles is supposed to have said that all Greek drama was nothing more than 'slices from the great banquet of Homer'. And we can make nothing of the medieval masters' endless annunciation, nativity and crucifixion scenes unless we acknowledge that imitation had been thought of as a noble and not a base activity until recent times. Even now, we recognize that there is a virtue in faithful representation when we say a portrait is a 'good likeness' or a novelist or playwright has a 'good ear' for dialogue. The skill here, however, is not in recording exactly what people say or look like, as the result would be a useless copy, but is manipulating the material so as to represent it. Representation

involves distortion if it is to be artistically 'true', as Van Gogh was at pains to point out. Distortion implies omission, addition and mutation, what J.P. Stern in his study of realism calls an 'offering of what was there in the first place, literally a re-presentation'<sup>5</sup>.

To aim at a definition of realism, then, we must not see it as simple imitation, though imitation is an important part of the realist's method if he is to be convincing, but as a kind of representation. Realism in this view is a version of reality being offered up for perusal. As a strict reproduction of the object would be useless as a work of art, realism does not and cannot claim to be more than a version<sup>6</sup>. Stern argues convincingly that the term realism is more than a mere period term.<sup>7</sup> He calls it a 'mode of writing' that is perennial, although it has its recurrent waves of fashion. In this wider sense of mode or disposition, we can easily discern elements of what most people call 'realistic' in all periods or genres of literature.

## 2. Realism and the Novel

To Henry James's question on fiction, 'where is the interest itself, where and what is its center', the critic Malcolm Bradbury replies, in an essay on the novel and reality: 'The correct answer is some variant of the word 'form', which is to say an intensity of authorial consciousness or control so sharp that story and character lose some of their compelling dominance, and more abstract entities or weavings, which we call "pattern" or "design" or "consciousness" take their place'.<sup>8</sup> Harry Levin in his study of French realists observes that this shift from story and character to authorial consciousness, or as he puts it, the change of the novel's center from characters to the mind of the novelist was decisively made by Marcel Proust.<sup>9</sup> These critics are calling attention to how the novel has become transparently and, in the case of modern fiction, willingly self-conscious, so that the focus of the tale has shifted from the tale itself to the mechanics of narration. In 19th century novels, the story is narrated more or less straightforwardly, even taking into account the convolutions of a narrator like Conrad's Marlow, which is anyway a transitional case. By 'straightforward', I mean that time and history are respected, although, as we shall see, they may be distorted, and the focus of the language is on the object, i.e. the story and the characters realizing the action. Whether there is a narrator outside the stream of action or he be a character himself, his consciousness, while it may affect how the story is told and therefore how we do perceive it, is not in itself in question.

To make another analogy with painting, we can say that representational (realistic) pictures invite the observer's attention to the subject on the canvas; the technique, even when brilliant, is a vehicle through which the subject lives, the painter's vision being subordinated to the completest expression of the image. If we take on the other hand the kind of abstract work no one would call 'realistic' we observe the creative process itself, which is often the very subject of the painting, as if the painter's mind has been projected onto the canvas. Modern literature, as one branch of modern art, has in general tended toward non-representation and a preoccupation with form 'in tactics of presentation through the consciousness of characters rather than through an objective or a materialistic presentation of material'.<sup>10</sup> The point is that what modern art is concerned with is itself, not consciousness as demonstrated through the characters in society and coming up against the material world. This shift marks an evolution toward a more creative and less passive relationship between reader and writer that goes a long way to explain why modern literature is often so difficult to read. The reader has to almost divine the psychological state of the artist to deal with the violence of his gaps and juxtapositions. Modern poets, for their part, not so much dazzle the reader with metaphorical nuggets and reams of metrical expertise, as offer (some might say 'hurl') a challenge to participate in the making of the poem.

The reference to poetry has a direct bearing on our subject, for with the breakdown of realism in modern literature, there has been an increase in the 'contingency of fiction' or a lack of necessity in logical structure or plot, 'which is validated' through symbols and hidden figures, linguistic recurrences and elegancies of form'.<sup>11</sup> The lack of a story line and the flattening out of characters, which would have been anathema to a 19th century novel but are so typical of 20th century fiction, is made up for by a 'poeticizing' of the novel's structure and linguistic resources and a 'new kind of self-awareness, an introversion of the novel'.<sup>12</sup>

In poetry, Chaucer is often cited for his 'realism', the term being applied in the broader sense above, to the true-to-life feeling his characters evoke even when depicted in stylized verse. For a modern example, we may take Wilfred Owen's poem 'Pro Patria Mori', where a realistic description of a First World War gas attack is employed as an antidote to the classical poet Horace's famous patriotic line. Where Chaucer's purpose is often comic, Owen's is bitterly satiric, but the mode of both poets is 'realistic'.

Realism usually carried along with it its own purposes, which helps to explain why poetry is not its natural medium. Even when descriptive, poetry, especially lyric poetry, has its eye on a significance beyond what is being described, as is seen in the intricate, closely-observed descriptions of Wordsworth or Keats.

In talking about purposes, Professor Stern gives us a handle in his characterization of realism as 'a mode, not just a style',<sup>13</sup> and cites Kafka's matter-of-fact style-wedded to a fantastic mode-as an example of what is not realistic. We might cite, too, the stories of Borges and the novels of Beckett as example of modern post-realist writers who achieve their effects almost by a parody of realism. And in Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is only nominally a novel, realistic details are piled sky-high, but their treatment and purpose we feel are alien to realism. The work achieves its uniqueness through the insistence on consciousness, so that it is consciousness that illuminates objects rather than the other way around. The tyranny of objects in this 'monument to banality' is an elegant and elaborate joke.

As a clue to why the novel is the form especially suited to the realist mode, we can again refer to Stern: realism is a writer's 'singularly direct way of taking issue with historically and socially formed expectations of his readers'.<sup>14</sup> Poetry has always been the form that explores the solitary experiences, the feelings, the more cosmic relationships. Novels have been particularly concerned with men as social beings. Stern has pointed to the substance that the realistic mode shapes and re-presents: history and society, the two interlocking abstractions that serve to describe and suggest the world as inhabited by human beings. History and society in their largest senses are the principal concerns of the novel, perhaps because it is the only form loose and flexible enough to accommodate all that these two terms imply.

The novel has been not only an exploration and explanation of history and society but an attempt, necessarily lost in straight historical prose, to discover and place the individual within the socio-historical context. The very rise of the novel has been perceived as an artistic development related to the rise of the idea of the factual and fictional.<sup>15</sup> Since the novel has a 'need to establish its credit with the reader on the basis of some form of recognition, some basic appeal to veracity',<sup>16</sup> it must do this in a realistic mode, for 'the less empirical the exercises, the harder it is to do, for the basis on which assent is being sought alter: the novel is less an abstract articulation of our historical,

cultural and social situation'.<sup>17</sup> I don't wish to beg the question here, but the thing works both ways: a novel is realistic because it treats socio-historical themes, and it treats socio-historical themes in order to appeal more convincingly to veracity, i.e. to be more realistic. Realism imposes 'a balance between public and private meanings'.<sup>18</sup> Where modernists like Kafka, Borges and Beckett show themselves to be non-realists is precisely in the upsetting of this balance.

### 3. Public and Private

A community is normally the stage for the action of the 19th century realistic novel and it is within a community, even the very restricted one of Jane Austen, that individuals find their meaning and values.<sup>19</sup> There is always a fine balance between individual and community, especially in the English novel, so that the characters seem to be in their natural element.<sup>20</sup> Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, an American novel published in the last year of the 19th century, may serve as an example of an extreme type of realism where the world itself, the community, may become too dominant and the characters almost secondary, so that they seem to follow the events without full exercise of their wills and are swept along by a kind of determined destiny. One strategy of the realistic novelist in his claim to be credible and true-to-life is to recreate a community, or a piece of one, to represent the whole, where his characters can work out their destinies and conflicts within a given situation. Let us examine how this happens in a 19th century French novel.

In Gustave Flaubert's *L'Education Sentimentale*, place is an integral part of the story. Although this novel relates the coming into the world of a jeune homme and the steady loss of his Romantic illusion, the reality side of the story is embedded in the dense texture of events and descriptive detail. Every café, every salon, park, carriage, dress, or mantelpiece is identified and minutely described: 'The narration detaches itself sharply from the characters, while lingering suggestively over the setting'.<sup>21</sup> Even the precision of the symptoms described for the disease of Frédéric's son has been admired.<sup>22</sup> The political events that form the background for the hero's travails are constantly present in the conversations in the novel and occasionally erupt into the foreground of the action. For all these details, we are quite sure that the author did his homework

even when we were not told how hard he actually worked. He is said, for example, to have read and annotated twenty-seven books for the details of the 1848 revolution, which are depicted in about ten pages of the novel (although in a crucial section of it).<sup>23</sup>

The descriptions of the physical objects and places, as well as the narration of political events, are not only important for the setting, what we can call the geographical and historical credibility of the tale, so important to realism, but also for the working out of the novel's theme. Besides the 'appeal to veracity', the details must be able to be justified with relation to the work itself for it to be a convincing work of art. Madame Arnoux's furniture and trinkets, for example, are lovingly regarded on many occasions by passionate Frédéric. When these things are put up for sale and their owner gone away, Frédéric is forced by the vindictive Mme. Dombreuse (his other mistress Rosanette also turning up to witness his discomfiture) to be present at the auction where his true love's things are pawed over and handed around by prospective buyers (he feels) as if they were the pieces of her body. The memories that the things evoke are crushing to his spirit and greatly contribute to his sense of loss, especially in the presence of the two mistresses he has gained, but who have given him little solace for the longings of his heart.

The political events are especially relevant to the theme of disillusion. Frederick Engels admitted that the Second Republic had lapsed in 'absence of all illusion, of all enthusiasm',<sup>24</sup> which is part of the explanation Professor Levin offers for the feeling of ennui in all Flaubert's works. Frédéric has been disappointed in his dream of being a great painter and writer, in his possession, by marriage to the widowed Madame Dambreuse, of a huge fortune that he makes plans to spend even before he knows of the disposition of the will, and in finally his brief fantasy of being a patriot until he sees and is disgusted by the appearance, smell and behaviour of the rebellious mob and is himself held up to ridicule in the scene of the lecture hall. The accurate rendering of the political events makes the private events more credible by contrast and puts them thematically in their place; so much so, in fact, that the author was worried that his 'background would eat up (his) foreground',<sup>25</sup> that Frédéric would be less interesting than Lamartine. This, of course ceases to be a problem now, as most readers don't know who Lamartine was; one must have a notion of 19th century French history to understand the references without the aid of footnotes. But Flaubert was concerned to make his hero's story coincide in its important points with the important historical events.<sup>26</sup> Frédéric

is worried only about the arrival of Mme. Arnoux, whom he has planned finally to seduce, when demonstrations are rocking Paris, and he is off on an idyllic trip to Fontainebleau, appropriately 'lingered' over, while the insurrection is going on in Paris. These correspondences, of course, are deliberate. They are illustrations of how the great public events cannot undermine the banal fantasies of him who has been called the first anti-hero. The realist treatment of public and private is given a particular twist in these instances so that the reader becomes convinced of the novelist's vision. Most people do not, in fact, care awfully much what is happening around them as long as their private world goes untouched. Private obsessions are clung to at all costs and not permitted to die, except naturally with the passing of time.

Disillusionment for Frédéric comes, understandably, not through a consideration of the significance of his life but through a steady accumulation of experience reflected on only retrospectively, which is the sum and outcome of his 'sentimental education'. Finally, 'private and public frustrations have converged',<sup>27</sup> Stern pays tribute to the novel's skill at dealing with the realist relationship between public and private, when he calls the novel 'one of the highest points in realism's creative awareness that no personal relationship, amorous or any other, can subsist beyond the privileged moment without a network of interpersonal, public bonds'.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. The Shape of Characters: Types and Individuals

In a famous distinction from his lectures on Aspects of the Novel, E.M. Forster divided fictional people into 'round' or 'flat' characters. Flat characters have only 'one dimension' (or rather two), are 'constructed round a single idea or quality' which makes them not only easy to recognize when they come on the scene but easy to remember when they leave it.<sup>29</sup> Flat characters were once called 'humours' and are still referred to in criticism as 'types',<sup>30</sup> but Forster does not mean thereby to disparage them: flat characters are as necessary to a story as round ones, especially in comedy, for they are instantly recognized by their 'appropriateness'. Nevertheless, it is a bit surprising to find that Forster thinks the characters of Dickens' nearly all flat. He puts this down to the author's 'immense vitality' so that the characters, as it were, 'borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own'.<sup>31</sup>

Forster mentions Pip of Great Expectations in this connection, saying that Pip 'attempts roundness', presumably not



attaining it, and a reader at once rebels at the judgment. Perhaps what Forster means is that Pip is a character 'who can be expressed in one sentence', something like this: Pip is oppressed by the circumstances of his life, both his upbringing and his connection with Magwitch and Estelle, but he remains to the end motivated by the expectations held out to him. So perhaps it is more through the intricates of a masterful plot and a heavy reliance on the creation of an oppressive atmosphere that Pip's story is told than through the delineation of changes in his character. The marsh scene at the beginning of the novel and the decaying house of Miss Havisham create this mood under which Pip labors, as well as being representative of the theme of imprisonment that runs through the book.<sup>33</sup>

However we construe Pip's shape, the minor characters of Great Expectations, from Pip's sister, Mrs Gargery, and the hypocritical Pumblechook to the unfeeling Jaggers, and Wemmick who has divided his life between work and his 'castle', the evil Orlick, and the pathetic Miss Havisham with her young charge Estelle who has ice instead of a heart, are all perfect illustrations of the memorable impression that flat characters give, of how they can fill out, as it were, a story with the life of our recognition. The characters may furnish comedy, thus fulfilling another necessary function even in a tale as dark as Great Expectations, but we may say that they 'round out' the story with their presences, make it work, add touches of life to the social criticism in the book's treatment of courts and criminals and oppression in general, which made so exacting a critic as Bernard Shaw regard the novel as 'consistently truthful, as none of the other (Dickens) books are.'<sup>34</sup> Like Frédéric, Pip's disillusionment with life at the book's end is the result of the thwarting of false hopes, but whereas Flaubert catalogues his hero's frustrations relentlessly, Dickens shows Pip's by leading on the reader to share in Pip's mind and then reversing the momentum through dramatic turns.

In L'Education Sentimentale, we find a whole cast of characters approaching types, who help to throw the pathetic hero's 'education' into relief. We have, to give a partial list: Martinot, maker and manager of money; Cisy, dilettante aristocrat; Hussonet, the Bohemian; Pellerin, the frustrated artist; Sénécal, the dogmatic Socialist; Dussardier, the honest workingman; Rosanette, the fickle courtesan. All of these characters act and can be predicted to act in accordance with the foregoing epithets. All are invariably 'busy' characters, active in one scheme or another and touching the hero at irregular intervals throughout his career, deflecting him back

and forth in his moral confusion.

The main characters of the novel, however, cannot be so easily explained. Frédéric's boyfriend Deslaurier, alternately affectionate and disloyal, forever poor, ambitious, is a lawyer on-the-make who serves in his frustrated dreams of power as a foil for Frédéric's own frustrated dreams of romantic fulfillment. Madame Arnoux, who in real life has been identified as a woman Flaubert himself was obsessed with, was married to a man that is portrayed as Arnoux in the novel, a character who is more complicated than all the others just named. Although he is in the way of Frédéric's (and presumably the author's) consummation with his wife, he is in some ways an admirable character, generous and open-hearted, despite the 'wheeler-dealer' life-style that brings him down.

All of these characters, flat or (tending to roundness) help to define Frédéric, 'fill him out', as it were, as he himself, an indolent romantic youth longing for great deeds, is devoid of those inner resources vital to great purpose and, in his case, even sufficient to shake him loose from an obsession for an unattainable woman. It is Frédéric who exhibits the futility of the ceaseless activity of the other characters. The novel has been called the anti-Bildungsroman,<sup>35</sup> since the hero's education is nothing more than the loss of his youthful illusions. In the beginning he is on his way home after finishing school, full of the possibilities of the future, a melancholy Romantic figure he has fashioned from the reading of novels. At the end, he is a middle-aged man talking with Deslauriers of the youthful time they ran away from a brothel as the happiest time of their lives, presumably the time when they were last innocent of the world. The novel, indeed, is about the romantic's clash with the real world, which makes it so beautifully representative of the realistic novel.

The illusions of this Romantic temperament are centered on the person of Mme. Arnoux and all she promises to Frédéric's longing soul. It is fitting, then, that when they meet anticlimactically, after all is over and the flame reduced to a sentimental candle, he feels something like revulsion at her eventual availability. It was the woman from afar he worshipped. This central frustration is neatly paralleled, as discussed above, by Frédéric's political illusions and those of his friends, in which, as Professor Levin notes, neither left nor right is spared. The 'interpersonal, public bonds' suggest both the way the other characters define Frédéric in his vacillating, mostly indifferent, patriotism, and the importance of the socio-political events in the carrying out of the story. The endless money deals and legal transactions (it is no accident that

Deslaurier is a lawyer, Frédéric himself a failed law student and Arnoux a speculator) are as frequent and obtrusive as Frédéric's philandering. The real world of money — of deals, payments, pay-offs, debts, fortunes won and lost — constantly break into Frédéric's dreams of unlimited wealth and romance, the two dreams respectively represented by the two mistresses Rosanetter and Mme. Dombreuse: the first, frustrated sensual desire transferred from the true object (Mm. Arnoux); the second, fabulous riches, frustrated by false hopes concerning the will.

##### 5. Time and Distance: Distortion of the Real

If we accept that realism is a 'close dovetailing of piecemeal meanings'<sup>36</sup>, an ordering in sequence and in detail of the myriad facts of a life or an event, then we cannot escape the paradox of the unreality of any method wishing to represent the real. If imitation is not to degenerate into mere duplication, which, we have said above, would be useless for any purpose, it must distort the given in order to control the reader's perception of what happened. The most obvious example is the representation of a life, that of Frédéric, or David Copperfield, or Pip, where a few hundred pages proposes to tell the tale of a character's complete life. Not only are most of the daily activities of the character omitted in the story, though they may be suggested or described by one or another scene, but even the significant happenings of the life are taken at a variable focus, speeded up or slowed down for the psychological effect on the reader. Real time and literary time, then, have only a psychological correspondence. Again 'real' time is a knotty philosophical problem which we cannot go into here. Even in real life, time doesn't always run according to the clock but takes on contours of its own in accordance with our mental states. My point is the relation between an episode in a person's life and the length of time it takes to read about it: 'real' time and represented time.

In literature, 'the author generally exploits the possibilities of varying the time-ratios for the purpose of throwing the contextual centrality of certain fictive periods into high relief against the background of other periods belonging to the total time span of the sujet'.<sup>37</sup> This over-technical language just seems to mean that some passages or scenes in novels are more important than others, and these are therefore treated at length out of proportion to the time they represent in the novel's action. In

Trollope's Phineas Redux, for example, the trial takes up several chapters and is narrated in great detail. This is yet another distortion of time in fiction. Even within the context of the novel, certain scenes take precedence over others and the time devoted to them is naturally greater than other less important material. This is one more example of how a realistic novel may distort mundane reality in favour of a 'fictive' reality; that is to say, the reality of the novel distorts the reality of fact in order to better represent it. Here we are merely recapitulating the old definitions of art, still the most basic, of art as 'artifice' (in Greek the word for 'art' is technê, from which comes our word 'technique'). It is ever the lovely paradox of artistic creations that they offer an illusion as the key to perceiving the real.

A scene in a novel may stand for a series of similar scenes or part of a character's life, or even his whole life in miniature. And even the most leisurely realistic novel, chock full of background descriptions and supporting information, occasionally telescopes a time sequence into a single occasion, what Henry James calls a 'discriminated occasion',<sup>38</sup> his word 'discriminated' standing for the above quotation's 'throwing into high relief', or as we may simply say, 'making it stand out'.

Yet another distortion of the mundane, clock-paced world of real life, is referred to by A.A. Mendilow's concept of the 'fictive present' as 'one point in the story which serves as the reference'.<sup>39</sup> Significant moments occur only when they are so marked by those living or observing them; most of our lives seems to be taken up by moments in which nothing special happens and which we do not especially take notice of. What gives life its trivial quality, or at least the common feeling of insignificance people feel much of the time, is just this endless series of 'undiscriminated occasions'. This may account, too, for a loss of the excitement and feeling of significance we experience when reading a good novel. We have the author to point out, nay, to arrange for us the big moments in the dull march of the years, which is like the feeling we have when we discriminate these moments in our own lives — for once, the clock seems to stop, or slow down, and we see highs and lows in what was probably experienced as a series of endless, dull scenes.

Besides the distortion of time in fiction, we should concern ourselves briefly with distortions caused by the author's point of view. This breaks down into two related problems: the persona telling the tale and the persona's distance from his subject. Again, the difference is between what is perceived and how it is

perceived. One person tells a story in a different way from another. Each has his own unique contribution, whether of personality or privileged observation. An author can limit the reader's perception by telling the story in the voice of one of the character's, in the first person, or he can taken on the voice of the omniscient narrator and go more deeply into the minds of all the characters. The point of view will determine the language he uses and the information he may disclose. As most realistic novels are concerned with giving us the maximum of information, a life or lives in their completest form, the usual choice is a third person, omniscient author. Indeed, some writers have made a fetish of not getting in the way of the characters and letting them speak for themselves. Flaubert has said that 'the artist should be in his work like God in creation, invisible and omnipotent; we should feel his presence everywhere but we should nowhere see him'.<sup>40</sup> It should be observed that even Flaubert does not do what he says he ought to do. He cannot help nudging his characters with remarks and making general statements on occasion that serve to tie together some threads of the particular. We can see how this is done very astutely in George Eliot's Middlemarch. The author's own remarks on the characters often neatly summarize what their words and actions reveal in the novel's social context. Here's how Eliot describes Dorothea before her marriage to Causabon:

... she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects...<sup>41</sup>

and afterward, as appealing to the young Will Ladislaw:

... she was not coldly clever and indirectly satirical, but adorably simple and full of feeling. She was an angel beguiled...<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to this occasional stepping into the story, we have the other extreme of the author's completely guiding and even controlling the reader. Tom Jones is the classic example and serves as a contrast once again to the typical realistic novel. Realism uses what Sterne calls a 'middle distance' which 'places individual people and their institutions on one working perspective ("gets them all into the picture" at any one time in history)'.<sup>43</sup> As the realist is greatly concerned with making his work correspond to reality, i.e. imitate it in the creative not the slavish sense, he needs to establish a distance that will give him the best perspective for credibility. This has usually been somewhere in the middle

ground, far enough to take in the whole sweep of events and close enough to describe the lives of 'real' individuals. If he steps back too far 'the details of recorded reality become mere trends or "waves of history"'<sup>44</sup> and he focuses in too close, as Joyce seems to sometimes in *Ulysses*, the details may become too important in themselves. For whatever the pretensions of the great realists to reproducing 'real life', their stories usually point up a moral, the piling up of details and the representation of believable characters serving the function of making the moral stick. The perspective of a given tale, like its time sequence, is determined to a certain extent by what the tale is trying to illustrate, which is really saying nothing more than that thematic considerations determine technical ones.

#### 6. How Real is Realism?

We have reviewed realism's many strong points. It is a mode which allows for correspondences between the individual and the social, the public and the private. It believes in the moral value of an illustrative tale, told from life. It has a 'continuity of meaning within an achieved form'; i.e. it both collects the necessary details for credibility and arranges them in comprehensible order, using the author's skill at observing and arranging as well as astute judgment as to significance, a balanced 'synthesis of description and assessment'.<sup>45</sup> It emphasizes character and is capable of creating three-dimensional ones of a type modern literature might envy. Nearly every one of its methods has been found wanting and been abandoned for others. If we ask why, we will nearly always come up with an answer that questions realism's relation to reality.

One of the reasons why realism, or any literary mode for that matter, might find the representation of reality difficult is that life itself is very stubborn: its very shapelessness resists being molded into significant form. '...Art does not take to "life" as a very natural subject...even autobiography is not, except to the naive eye, more "about" life than any other genre. Its method of being about life, its tone, its conventions, differ; that is all.'<sup>46</sup> Here we might substitute 'realism' for 'autobiography': the point is that realism is a genre, not necessarily more suitable for conveying real life than any other genre. In other words, 'all fiction is fiction'.<sup>47</sup> Realism, in fact, is no longer the major mode in modern literature. This is so because we no longer have the

naive idea that the Truth can be told by giving enough of the facts. To modern sensibilities the truth is more elusive.

Modern philosophical conceptions have become more sophisticated; the 'naive realism' (for such is the term) of older philosophical systems both rationalist and empiricist, but especially the latter, have suffered under the blows of later analyses, and the discoveries of natural scientists have demonstrated that things are not what they seem to be. To quote a contemporary poet, 'Cloudy, cloudy is the stuff of stones'. Common sense, while still a good guide to everyday life, has nothing to do with the upper reaches of theory. As the most receptive agents of cultural and intellectual change, writers and artists have absorbed these findings and been influenced by them in their art. One recent consequence has been the blurring of the traditional distinction between 'art' and 'life' or fact and fiction, so that we are no longer certain that art imitates life or life imitates art, an idea that is reflected in a modern novelist's remark that one of the difficulties of writing fiction today is that modern life throws up daily characters and situations that are the envy of any novelist. We are not as sure, as men were in the 19th century, of a steady progress toward a greater elucidation of the world, as even the natural scientists have begun to admit. More and more information may disclose more and more mysteries.

Nor is the course of history any consolation. Two world wars and the holocaust have rightly shaken our confidence. Realism cannot cope with these things adequately because they are probably beyond reason, and to distinguish between the real and the fictive, 'a solid world view is necessary'.<sup>48</sup> A solid world-view, except for Christians and Communists, is just what the 20th century does not have. It is no accident, then, that in Communist states realism is the only kind of art that is permitted. This seems curious, since Trotsky himself said that 'Artistic creation, no matter how realistic, has always been and remains symbolist'.<sup>49</sup> We can assume that Trotsky's view is a result of his superior sensitivity to literature,<sup>50</sup> but perhaps he means that certain actions or certain characters 'stand' for all others, and while the depiction of these certain actions and characters may be realistic, they are not imitations of anything specific. By this interpretation, Trotsky would mean that specificity of realism is illusory, for it is only through what is apparently specific that the realist portrays the general truth.

That realism should be inadequate to portray the events of our time is apparently paradoxical, since 'the realistic convention

depends on a perspective (=a set of meanings) both stable at any one time and also changing from age to age'.<sup>51</sup> The realists thought everything was worthy of interest, unlike the classicists and romancists, who thought the subject had to be beautiful.<sup>52</sup> But, as Professor Levin points out, the ordinary had to be made extraordinary if, as in Flaubert's novel, the extraordinary were to be ignored by the hero in favor of the ordinary, and if, in modern literature's parody of realism, Joyce were 'to construct a monument to banality by utilizing the utmost resources of reality'.<sup>53</sup>

If realism depends on a convention, 'the conventions of symbolism arise from so single a stable perspective, and it is this instability that modern literature exploits'.<sup>54</sup> The novels of William Faulkner deal with the eternal verities but not from a stable perspective, either in form or outlook. It is, in fact, the stable perspective of the past in conflict with the new tendencies that furnish much of the tension in Faulkner's work, the conflict between Quentin and Jason in The Sound And The Fury or the Sartoris and the Snopeses in many of the novels. Faulkner's method hasn't much in common with realistic narrative techniques. In The Sound And The Fury and Absalom, Absalom, time is not only not respected it is made mock of. The uncertainty of arriving at the truth is mirrored by a method that shows how difficult it is to do so. Events are gone back into circles, seen from before and behind, speculated on and observed, filtered through diverse sensibilities.

L'Oeuvre la plus réaliste ne sera pas celle qui peint la réalité, mais qui...explorera le plus profondément possible la réalité irréelle du langage.<sup>55</sup>

'Realism' redefined in a modern context is not realism as we have been discussing it. In the second part of this paper, it was mentioned that problems and preoccupations with language and form are peculiar ('though not exclusively) to modern literature. Nineteenth century realism, however, took language for granted as a vehicle for telling a story that was more important than the telling. What was said, not how it was said, was the realists' concern, although, of course, in the practice of composition these two aspects of creative work the writers did not separate. A useful distinction that may help to explain the two approaches is to call the connection between the real and fictional worlds 'representational' or 'illustrative'.<sup>56</sup> Representational, as we have argued, tries for a 'replica' of reality, and illustrative is symbolic, reminding us 'of an aspect of reality rather than (conveying) a total convincing impression of the real world to us...'<sup>57</sup> The illustrative, then, is opposed to realism, which is why it utilizes types rather than 'factual' mimesis. Modern literature's return to type characters is



a recognition for 'literary works which project some generalized and therefore intellectual connection between the specific characters, action, and background of their fictional worlds and the general types and concepts which order our perception and comprehension of actuality'.<sup>58</sup>

The modern obsession with 'la réalité irréelle' of language is a reflection of our belief that what counts in novels is 'not the representation of reality but the shaping of the rendered experience'.<sup>59</sup> 'Rendered' rather than 'raw' experience is the stuff of fiction, since raw experience would imply 'some kind of experience undisturbed and unmodified by mind or feeling'.<sup>60</sup> Not only does the unreal reality of words impose restraints on a realist's ambition, but reality itself is elusive: unable to be coaxed into revealing itself, reality must be imposed upon. As we have seen, the shaping or distorting of time and space, the dimensions of the characters, and the narrator's distance are all elements of formal shaping and control that the mode of realism uses to evoke the real. The direct intervention of the author implied in constant modulation of the narrative voice is a repudiation of the narrative distance necessary to realism and the view of realism as 'la copie des choses'. The old techniques are 'deeply involved in the shared assumptions of the (writer's) culture'<sup>61</sup> and are seen as inadequate in a world where, as Sartre says, 'things become detached from their names'.<sup>62</sup> Language has become its own subject.

The trend toward a preoccupation with language, of course, went along with a realization that there was a basic contradiction in the realistic mode, a contradiction that we have touched on here and there and which nearly every critic of realism discusses, and that is the contradiction between imposed form or structure and the basic resistance of formless life to shape itself into facts. This explains in part the movement of modernism away from realism, for 'the struggle to sustain meaning and pattern within the limits of realistic style, subject, structure, and theme became almost unbearable, and the novel slowly but inevitably shifted its focus inward and receded from the social and contingent'.<sup>63</sup> Contrivance became an end in itself and 'the artist inevitably became the new hero of fiction'.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, we should briefly look at realism's conventions, for realism is, after all, just one more conception. It 'art does not take to life as very natural subject, almost any pre-existent convention suits art better', as (art-critic) E.M. Gombrich has suggested'.<sup>65</sup> Realistic novels differ from the life they purport

to represent in that they order what is formless. The resolutions of such novels are inevitably 'unrealistic', which is partly explained by the difficulty of ending up any novel in a plausible way without too obviously tying the ends together to make things come out neatly. When a novelist hopes to show reality 'as it is', his intention, we might suspect, is trying to do something beyond holding up the proverbial mirror to real life, for, again, what would be the use of that? There is a moral purpose lurking behind the dissembling details of realistic fiction, as there is in other kinds. And in addition to this moral purpose — for what could there be for the novels of Jane Austin or George Eliot if not a moral purpose<sup>66</sup>? (though not in any crude pulpit sense) — there are assumptions that constitute 'a set of meanings'.

Other assumptions that realism shares are: that 'ordinariness is more real — at least more representative and therefore truthful — and heroism, that people are morally mixed rather than either good or bad, that the firmest realities are objects rather than ideas or imaginings'.<sup>67</sup> In this succinct formulation is the 'set of meanings' that makes realism possible and that gives it its claim to be more representative of 'real life' than other modes. Each of these items raises philosophical problems we cannot go into here; it is enough to note the difficulty of any approach avoiding having even unconscious assumptions about the world, since the writing of any period of literature shares the assumptions of that period even while, in the greatest works, transcending them. The great novels of the 19th century, or of any century, are both of their time and beyond it.

Let us wind up our inquiry by noting one more short-coming of realism which it shares with other literary modes, which is fair after all, since we have been suggesting that realism is just one more mode, incomplete in itself and therefore untruthful for a total rendering of life. Forster discusses a short list of the 'main facts' of human life — birth, death, food, sleep, and love — and notes that fiction has only seriously dealt with the last.<sup>68</sup> Birth and death are not susceptible to careful study since they cannot be experienced, only reported second-hand. Eating and sleeping, while major human activities, are usually treated perfunctorily. If we except Finnegan's Wake (which few can read), there are no novels about people sleeping, and food is employed in fiction mainly for its social importance, which in life is secondary to its biological use. Only love is treated at length and with the seriousness it deserves, as it is a subject that can be approached from within and without, psychologically and socially, spiritually and sexually.

Forster's point is just how much is left out of the novel that is essential to real life. Any mode that claims to present life 'as it is' has to face the fact that large and essential portions of life are handled as if they didn't exist.

Put for all its failings to be more 'realistic' in the sense of corresponding more closely to real life than other modes of literature, realism has not claimed, as we started off saying in the first part of this paper, to be anything more than a version of reality. If we take realism, then, as one more possibility of representing life in words, a mimetic mode that has its own peculiar strengths and weaknesses, we can admire its achievements without taking too seriously its more excessive claims. In the end, 'all fiction is fiction', or all novels are fabrications, and the special fabrication of realism is an art that conceals art. Hence, the narrative distance, the consistent point of view, the richness of character, the accuracy of rendering in time and space, the use of an unobtrusive technique are the methods of realism that aim for concealment. Modernists are positive show-offs by comparison.

Reality has its own laws, inscrutable even as we draw near to disentangling them, for they are tenaciously irreducible to the imposition of human order. Even mathematics, which claims to give the exactest representation of physical reality, shows by its barren formulae more what we do not know than what we do. Its equations are an ingenious, convoluted confession of ignorance. Literature uses words, redolent with human experience and cultural connotation, whose very inexactness is the strength of its human connection. Literature is in its own way determined to explore the knowledge of life and perhaps even offer suggestions, show us what is happening and sweeten the pill. 'Dulce et utile' remains an ideal, but the pleasure and usefulness that readers find in novels are the main ingredients of even those books that are claimed to be most 'realistic'.

NOTES

1. , Quoted from The New York Review of Books, April 5, 1979, my italics.
2. TIME, March 5, 1979.
3. J. P. Stern, On Realism, p. 66.
4. Ibid., p. 71.
5. Ibid., p. 67.
6. Ibid., p. 70.
7. Ibid., p. 52.
8. Malcolm Bradbury, 'The Open Form: The Novel and Reality', from Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel.
9. Harry Levin, The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists, p. 460.
10. Bradbury, 'Phases of Modernism The Novel and the Twenties' , op. cit., p. 85.
11. Bradbury, 'The Open Form...', p. 6.
12. Bradbury, 'Phases of Modernism...', p. 82.
13. Stern, op. cit., p. 80.
14. Ibid., p. 77-78.
15. Robert Scholes, The Nature of Narrative, p. 58; see also Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel. Professor Levin says, throughout The Gates of Horn, that the novel is a distinctively bourgeois art form, which is part of the reason for its decline in recent times.
16. Bradbury, op. cit., p. 10.
17. Ibid., p. 24.
18. Stern, op. cit., p. 84.
19. Bradbury, ''Persuasion: Moral Comedy in Emma and Persuasion, op. cit., p. 55-59.
20. Rf. remarks of Prof. Linklater. This idea is also implied in the quote from Stern above.
21. Levin, op. cit., p. 230.
22. Ibid., p. 219.
23. Vide translator Robert Baldick's introduction to Penguin edition of Sentimental Education.
24. Levin, op. cit., p. 215.
25. Baldick, op. cit., p. 10.
26. Ibid.
27. Levin, op. cit., p. 228.
28. Stern, op. cit., p. 101.
29. E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (Pelican edition), p. 73.

30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., p. 76.
32. Ibid., p. 73.
33. Elizabeth Drew, The Novel, A Modern Guide To Sixteen English Masterpieces. (Laurel edition), p. 193-196.
34. Ibid., p. 207.
35. Stern, op. cit., p. 102.
36. Stern, op. cit., p. 83.
37. Meier Sternberg, 'What is Exposition?' A detailed discussion of time in fiction.
38. The Art of The Novel, p. 323, quoted in Sternberg's essay, p. 83.
39. Time and The Novel, p. 65, quoted in Sternberg's essay, p. 50.
40. Baldick, op. cit., p. 10 ff.
41. George Eliot, Middlemarch (Penguin edition) p. 30.
42. Ibid., p. 241.
43. Stern, op. cit., p. 122.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., p. 175.
46. Helen Vendler, review of 'Robert Lowell: Life and Art' by S. G. Axelrod, New York Review of Books, Feb. 8, 1979.
47. George Levine, 'Realism Reconsidered', p. 237.
48. H. Levin: v. also 'shared notion of reality', George Levine, p. 237.
49. Quoted in H. Levin, op. cit., p. 467.
50. See Irving Howe, Trotsky (Modern Masters series).
51. Stern, op. cit., p. 157.
52. H. Levin, op. cit., p. 455.
53. Ibid.
54. Stern, loc. cit.
55. Roland Barthes, quoted in Stern, p. 165.
56. Scholes, op. cit., p. 84.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., p. 103.
59. G. Levine, op. cit., p. 238-39.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Quoted in Levin, op. cit., p. 450.
63. G. Levine, op. cit., p. 249.
64. Ibid., p. 255; footnote 16.
65. Vendler, loc. cit.
66. G. Levine, op. cit., p. 236.
67. Ibid.
68. Forster, op. cit., p. 57-63.