

## Reflections on Literary Realism from Postmodernist's Perspective

Xin-yan LI

Basic Dpt., Zhengzhou University of Science & Technology, Zhengzhou 450000,  
China

2314571@qq.com

**Keywords:** Realism, Postmodernism, Politics, Institutionalization.

**Abstract.** Out of date and second-rate. Squashed in between the freshness of romanticism and the newness of modernism, it is truly the tasteless spam in the sandwich of literary and cultural history. Compared with other long-established members of the cast of critical players, it has recently been having a really bad press. First, in the sad sense that no one has been arguing about it. The number of critical books on realism from the past couple of decades can be counted on the fingers of one hand; but try doing that with the stars that come before and after it: romanticism still gets a high billing, as it has for some while, but modernist studies, in particular, have expanded far beyond the capacities of any individual bookshelf, leaving realism behind as their dingy Victorian relation, moldering in an unilluminated corner. The corollary of this no-press bad press is the more obvious kind. For secondly, when realism does get mentioned it is usually in the form of a passing, knee-jerk dismissal of it as something self-evidently without interest, not to say a bit dumb.

### Realism As an Undetermined Literary Term

Realism normally comes stuck with one of a set menu of regular adjectival accompaniments, and whether it's gritty, or vulgar, or kitchen-sink, or photographic, the standard formulations reinforce the way it is seen as itself formulaic, something we already know about and need have no interest in exploring: it is predictable and simple, and serves only as the foil (or the cling-film) for showing up the more exotic or more complex courses that are always to be preferred to it. Nowhere is this clearer than in the regular scorn for realism's crudely "linear" narratives, its naively "omniscient" narrators, and – worst crime of all – its facile assumptions of linguistic "transparency," all of these being qualities that are quite untransparent and unanalyzed in their own meaning but essentially damning in their aim. Found a realist work that doesn't fit the stereotype? No matter, the virtues must be to do with its anticipation of modernist experimentation or else its continuing romanticist exploration of subjectivity. Thus it comes about that realism today, poor old realism, has a doubly "understudy" status. It rarely plays a critical part in its own right, instead serving as the simple straw man whose role is only to show up the authentic and original literary or critical action occurring elsewhere. And it is under-studied, not much seen as a worthwhile, let alone an exciting topic for teaching and research. There are several ironies in the set-piece devaluation of realism as being without intellectual or aesthetic interest.

First, the gesture elides the historical significance of realism (and, for that matter, of other movements to which it is negatively contrasted), instead treating the positive qualities of formal innovation as transhistorically valid and homogeneous. This is to ignore the historical variability of aesthetic criteria, or that of criteria for considering

the subversive or stabilizing effects, politically or psychologically, of particular kinds of art; the overlapping or separation of these various kinds of criteria is itself also, of course, a matter of historical variation. It is also to ignore the multiplicity of realisms in realism's own primary time (as well as before or since). Realism was the focus of an international artistic movement beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The first attested use of the word is in French – *réalisme* – in 1826; before long it was everywhere. The concept was hotly debated both in practice and in theory, between painters, novelists, and critics of every kind; and it underwent various kinds of more or less marked development or modification, most notably in its French modulation into the “naturalism” of the latter part of the century, with its posture of exposing the dirtier realities that realism had itself failed to show. Finally, the valorization of non-realist “-isms” – modernism above all, since that is the one whose historical inception follows chronologically right after the period of realism – depends on just the kind of straightforward and ideologically laden linear narrative that is ostensibly relegated to realist history. The obviousness of the story in which “make it new!” supersedes and surpasses “show and tell” is itself a simple narrative of the kind that the pro-modernism critics automatically associate with stupid old realism.

### **The Trend of Downgrading of Realism**

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

Admittedly, part of realism's negative-image problem lies with the label. Even in the early days, it was often refused by those whose own artistic credos or practices might seem closest to what card-carrying realists were advocating. Baudelaire and Flaubert both disliked the term, yet in his prose manifesto *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Baudelaire argues for the aesthetic value of representing everyday urban sights – places, people, and fashions – in all their triviality and ephemerality; while *Madame Bovary* (1857) is ranked as one of the landmarks of realist narrative, focusing as it does on the obscure life of a discontented provincial doctor's wife. Realism was in the spirit of the democratizing movements of the nineteenth century,

bringing into literary or painterly view common worlds of experience that had previously been aesthetically unseen, disregarded, or out of bounds. The extension of the constituencies of political representation went along with an extension of the fields of artistic representation. Ordinary people were portrayed going about their working daily lives – as rural laborers or factory workers or coal miners or office clerks or servants. Middle-class women like Emma Bovary were shown going about their bored, daydreaming daily lives; the eventlessness and ennui of their existences are one subject of a narrative that then, from the inside, gets its readers involved in the woman's own search for diversion. In the English industrial novels of the 1840s by writers such as Dickens and Gaskell, the necessary narrative "event" within an otherwise repetitive routine in a particular, well-documented social environment and then watch what would happen. Dumping a bunch of "personalities" into a tropical rainforest or a big house on the outskirts of London is in one way the actualization of this: they are real people doing real things with real bodies, and the producers and viewers all get to watch what really and truly does happen. But the social situations of reality TV are quite unlike the elaborately researched milieux of Zola's novels. Every viewer is aware that the reality out there is contrived. This is not these people's normal world, and to preempt the boredom that might otherwise ensue, for participants and viewers alike, things must be got to happen through infantilizing tests and games and ejection rituals. Zola, on the other hand, represented his role as socially therapeutic, likening the naturalist novelist, in an essay from 1880 on "*Le Roman expérimental*," to the surgeon cutting out the infections in the body of society (Zola 1971: 57–97).

However overstated in its pretensions, this demonstrates a will to change as well as to show: to "tell the world" in both senses. Recording that world's undersides and its unknown corners was not just a matter of pandering to readers' curiosity or voyeuristic pleasure (though the novels were often taken to be doing only that).

Throughout the nineteenth century, we find realist novels peppered with internal polemics that set out their own projects in contrast to the kinds of literature that they are rejecting. In George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), for instance, a defense of an evidently Gissingesque realism is dropped into a drawing-room conversation between two mature feminists: What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists? They won't represent the actual world; it would be too dull for their readers. In real life, how many men and women fall in love? . . . Not one married pair in every ten thousand has felt for each other as two or three couples do in every novel.

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

### **The Changeable Realism as a Literary Term**

From this point of view, it is possible to see how the writers we think of as anti-realist modernists might themselves be included in a history of new realisms. Erich Auerbach made Virginia Woolf the closing and culminating example in his magisterial history of what the subtitle grandly calls "*The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*" – and did so with the political aim of making the daydreaming Mrs. Ram

say into the paradigm of a fragmentary, drifting kind of subjectivity whose universality might be a way of bringing together otherwise different and divided nations and cultures in the aftermath of World War II (Auerbach 1974: 525–53). Woolf's own essays about literature repeatedly make use of a polemical opposition to those she dubs "materialist" writers, like Arnold Bennett, whose obsession with the notation of fact and detail she dismisses as not, after all, a true rendering of reality. In "Modern Fiction" (1919), after an extended critique of the Bennett-style novel, she writes: "Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'" (Woolf 1993: 8). Reality is being relocated – moved "within" – but the right representation of reality, or "life," is the aim, just as it would be for an avowedly realist writer. In Woolf's version of the structure whereby a new aesthetic is presented as a new realism ousting another one, the psychological reality shows up as manifestly superior and more complex only through a simplifying parody of the "external" world of a Bennett novel. It is a commonplace of literary history that nineteenth-century realist novels were all about the observable world out there, until the early twentieth century discovered, post-Romantically and sometimes psychoanalytically, that the mind was the novel's reality after all. But the overarching outside-to-inside story of the movement, if not progress, of realist representation is itself another of those straightforward narratives of the type derided by realism-simplifiers; behind it (or before it) lies a much more complex history of the relations between subjectivity and realism. In Adam Bede, for instance, there is already a subjective view that is modifying the standard realist analogy of the objective mirror on the world: "I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind" (Eliot 1996: 175). This allows both for the contribution of subjectivity and for the acknowledgment that this particular mind, "my mind," may reflect things differently from others. Woolf's argument against Bennett's external details might seem to fit the "external to internal" historical pattern.

But again, once you look closer the simple separation disappears. After the "Look within" sentence, "Modern Fiction" continues with a famous general declaration, expanding "within" to appear as a type of chaotic mental multiplicity whose source is external: "The mind receives a myriad impression – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms . . ." (Woolf 1993: 8). Woolf shows a mind overpopulated with the impressions it has received from outside – "from all sides." There is a sort of ceaseless bombardment in which the individual – mind rather than body – seems both vulnerable and passive. This is a highly distinctive picture of psychological reality (by way of Walter Pater, it owes something to Baudelaire's much more hedonistic receiver of transient urban impressions in *The Painter of Modern Life*). But its complex internal world is, nonetheless, externally derived. Woolf's "'like this,'" in quotation marks, refers to her own rhetorical question – "Is life like this?" – about Bennett's allegedly life-unlike novels. But the phrase acknowledges the representational gap that provides the opening for realism. Life may be "like" this, but it never is this; the power or the pleasure of the story or image that convinces us of its life-likeness depends on a knowledge of that difference. Yet at the same time such a theoretical separation of life – or reality – and its likenesses is perhaps too reliant on a residual model of separation between a world out there (or in here, "within") and the words to say it or images to show it.

## **Conclusion**

Our reality is already, in large measure, a representational one, both verbally and visually. This is not only because of the media that visibly and audibly surround us – in print, on screens, in the airwaves – but also because of our own modes of communication. “Likely” or realistic stories, with their own always changing conventions for what comes across as plausible experience, are circulating all the time between mutually modifying private and public forms. In reality, as part of our reality, we are constantly representing and recording, hearing, overhearing, retelling, or reconstructing our lived realities and our views of the world – in conversation, in writing, or with images. And the forms in which such communication takes place are themselves always changing. Merely as speaking, conversing animals, then, we are already “in” realism, living a life that includes ongoing attempts to represent it “like” it is to others and to ourselves; thinking about “real” realism can help us to reflect upon this predicament. Realist works can disturb or please or educate us by showing reality as not what we think we know, by showing realities we have never seen or dreamed, or by making speakable realities that might previously have seemed only idiosyncratic or incommunicable.

## **References**

- [1] Becker, George J. (ed.) (1963) *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [2] Bowlby, Rachel (2006) “Family Realisms: Freud and Greek Tragedy.” *Essays in Criticism* 56:2, 111–38.
- [3] Eliot, George (1996) *Adam Bede*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Gissing, George (1977) *The Odd Women*. Ed. Arlene Young. New York: W.W. Norton.