Chapter Three

Realisms: The British Novel in the Nineteenth-Century
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1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the complexity, slipperiness, and elasticity of the term “realism.” Although realist fiction is undoubtedly committed to a historical particularity, as a form of mimesis, realism can never be identical with that which it represents, since its tools, i.e., language/words, can never function as flawless, objective mirrors. The serious artistic treatment of ordinary people and their experience, linear plots, omniscient narrators, round characters are, of course, elements associated with a realistic mode of representation. Yet, the British nineteenth-century realist project is not explicit, and British realist writers seem to exploit narrative techniques in ways that acknowledge the impossibility of a hundred percent objective representation and even question the nature of reality.

Learning objectives:

✓ Ability of students to perceive the complexity and elasticity of the concept of realism.

✓ Familiarization of students with the term “realism” in art and the narrative conventions of realism in literature.

✓ Exposure of students to the idea of realism as an oxymoronic or utopic term as well as to various critical responses to it.
2. Cinderella’s Foot in the Real World

Charles Perrault, *Cinderella*, from Andrew Lang, *The Blue Fairy Book*

“I wish I could. I wish I could.” She was not able to speak the rest, being interrupted by her tears and sobbing.

This godmother of hers, who was a fairy, said to her, “You wish that you could go to the ball; is it not so?”

“Yes,” cried Cinderella, with a great sigh.

“Well,” said her godmother, “be but a good girl, and I will contrive that you shall go.”

Then she took her into her chamber, and said to her, “Run into the garden, and bring me a pumpkin.”

Cinderella went immediately to gather the finest she could get, and brought it to her godmother, not being able to imagine how this pumpkin could help her go to the ball. Her godmother scooped out all the inside of it, leaving nothing but the rind. Having done this, she struck the pumpkin with her wand, and it was instantly turned into a fine coach, gilded all over with gold.

[...]

a few days later, the king’s son had it proclaimed, by sound of trumpet, that he would marry her whose foot this slipper would just fit. They began to try it on the princesses, then the duchesses and all the court, but in vain; it was brought to the two sisters, who did all they possibly could to force their foot into the slipper, but they did not succeed.

Cinderella, who saw all this, and knew that it was her slipper, said to them, laughing, “Let me see if it will not fit me.”

Her sisters burst out laughing, and began to banter with her. The gentleman who was sent to try the slipper looked earnestly at Cinderella, and, finding her very handsome, said that it was only just that she should try as well, and that he had orders to let everyone try.

He had Cinderella sit down, and, putting the slipper to her foot, he found that it went on very easily, fitting her as if it had been made of wax. Her two sisters were greatly astonished, but then even more so, when Cinderella pulled out of her pocket the other slipper, and put it on her other foot. Then in came her godmother and touched her wand to Cinderella's clothes, making them richer and more magnificent than any of those she had worn before.

Is there any piece of writing that can seriously and convincingly claim to have nothing to do with realism? Fairy tales, one could readily reply, as they rely on the element of the supernatural and feature fantasy characters like elves, giants or fairies. In the first excerpt above, for example, Cinderella’s fairy godmother in Charles Perrault’s familiar story provides the magic solution to her problem by transforming a pumpkin into a golden carriage and enabling Cinderella to attend the royal ball and meet the prince. So far in the story, we know for sure that the narrative defies logic and depends on the reader’s trust in fantasy. Yet the “poor-girl-gets-handsome-prince” happy ending of the story is a chilling reminder of a harsh reality associated with women’s subservient role in Chinese history, as the second excerpt quoted above suggests. If Cinderella’s tiny foot (the only foot in the kingdom which fits into the glass slipper) is the only indicator that allows the prince to recognize her as the most appropriate bride, this unique characteristic originates in the Chinese practice of foot-binding which first began in the days of the Song dynasty (960-1279) and was not banned until as late as 1911. Small feet, or “lotus feet,” were both a symbol of beauty in China, and also a sign of submission: as their feet were bandaged tightly for years during childhood to prevent growth, women suffered severe pains and were forced to stay inside the house. Read in this light, Perrault’s fairy tale actually encloses another very realistic tale with a tragic ending: the violent custom of literally maiming women’s feet and training them to become obedient wives.
In the spectrum of fiction, genres like biography, the historical novel or realism would normally be diametrically opposed with diaries, science fiction, or fairy tales; it is important to understand, however, that all kinds of writing incorporate realistic elements and are, therefore, to a larger or smaller extent, affiliated with realism.

3. **Le Réalisme: Realism in Art**

Although, as mentioned above, every piece of writing bears some connection to an external reality, realism as a movement in art and literature was established in the middle of the nineteenth century. The first appearance of the term is associated with the French novelist Champfleury (1820-1889) who endorsed it during the 1840s. It was, however, the French painter Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) who actually established the term, when in 1855 he opened a solo exhibition which he called *Le Réalisme*. This display of his works, which took place outside the grounds of the official Universal Exhibition in Paris, was triggered by the fact that the committee of the Universal Exhibition had rejected two of his major paintings. The paintings which Courbet exhibited were a real shock to the critics and the bourgeois audience of the time; they initiated a revolution in art, as they broke away from his contemporary anti-modern nostalgia and the academic high art which, from 1400 to 1800, had been dictated by Renaissance theories of idealized painting. Courbet steered away from mythological themes and rejected the gravity, rigidity, and austere heroism of Neoclassicism or the extreme emotionalism of Romantic painting.

The tendency to return to classical antiquity and view the present through the prism of the past, for example, is clearly evident in Jacques-Louis David’s 1799 painting *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*. The horror of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, a period during which David had been imprisoned as a supporter of Robespierre, is reflected in a scene from Roman history. The theme of the painting, which refers to the Sabine women intervening in order to put an end to the battle between the Romans and Sabines, suggests that the painting can be read as an indirect appeal to the people for putting an end to the atrocities of the revolution. In his 1830 romantic painting, *Liberty Leading the People*, Eugène Delacroix also mythologizes the present by personifying liberty as a bare-breasted woman leading the people forward over the bodies of the fallen. Although the central figure in the painting shows characteristics of an actual fighter and woman of the people with a bayonetted musket in her left hand, she is also an allegorical goddess figure bearing the emblem of a new era in her right hand, the tricolor flag of France.
It is exactly this idealism represented in the art of classical mythology that Courbet is opposed to when, in his realist manifesto, he denies “the possibility of historic art applied to the past.” “Each epoch,” he writes in an open letter to his students in 1861, “must have its artists who express it and reproduce it for the future. An age which has not been capable of expressing itself through its own artists has no right to be represented by subsequent artists. This would be a falsification of history.” As an artist of the historical present, Courbet focuses on everyday and ordinary subjects and presents them in an uncomplicated and direct
manner, as “painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist of the representation of real and existing things.” He wanted to be the pupil of no one but nature and present real people not idealized type characters. Along with Courbet, a number of nineteenth-century artists, like Jean-Francois Millet, Ivan Shishkin, Franz von Lenbach, or Thomas Eakins, pushed the limits of what was at the time thought of as acceptable in art, as they focused on the base and rough aspect of life, the working class, rural or urban life, busy streets and crowd scenes, and presented human nature and the nude body with unprecedented bluntness.

Consider, for instance, Millet’s 1857 painting The Gleaners: its central characters are three female figures caught in a rather awkward pose as they bend to gather grain left by reapers. What is striking here is not only the emphasis on the beggar women in the foreground, or the very pedantic and raw theme of the painting that would have brought the nineteenth-century viewers face to face with a harsh reality they probably wanted to overlook, but also the fact that the painter ascribes a certain elegance and grace to their back breaking labour. And, in the process of doing so, it is almost as if Millet’s painting is contributing to the democratization of art. Courbet himself admitted being influenced by the anarchist philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon who introduced materialist social thought to France in the 1840s, at the same time Karl Marx’s early writing appeared. “Let us humble ourselves,” Proudhon urges artists in Du principe de l’art et de sa destination sociale (“The Principle of Art and its Social Destination”) “beneath the weight of our unworthiness. It is really not such a trifling thing to be able to show us as we are. In all these respects, I dare say that, aside from the finish of the execution, […] the painting of Courbet is more serious and higher in its aim than almost anything that the Dutch school has left” (204). “Art,” he concludes, “has the objective of leading us to the knowledge of ourselves by the revelation of all our thoughts, even the most secret ones, of all our tendencies, of our virtues, of our vices, of our ridiculousness, and in this way it contributes to the development of our dignity, to the perfecting of our being. It was not given to us to feed ourselves with myths, to intoxicate ourselves with illusions, to deceive ourselves and lead ourselves into evil with mirages as the classicists and romantics would have it, as well as all the sectarians of a vain ideal, but rather, to deliver ourselves from these harmful illusions by denouncing them […]” (225).

You can read here Gustave Courbet’s Realist Manifesto

Image 3.3 Jean-Francois Millet, The Gleaners (1857).
In his picture *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* (1854), Courbet likewise brings art down to the level of the everyday and the ordinary. As the title of the painting suggests, it simply involves the painter walking across country in his working clothes with his painter’s tools on his back and greeting his friend and patron. There is nothing elevated here in the poses of the figures, the tramp-like artist they salute, or the flat and uninspired rustic background. And, although, of course, a twenty-first-century viewer would detect nothing shocking in this painting, in 1854, *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* was a blow against middle-class pretentiousness and artistic decorum. Courbet’s aim was to dissociate art from the superficial propriety and the clichés of academicians and assert the value of persistent artistic sincerity and boldness. In his pursuit of truth, he realized that the eye of the painter needed to refocus and invest on the raw, base, and crude working material that life provided, for life, after all, originates in nothing else but expendable flesh. Courbet makes this explicit in his uniquely provocative painting, which even today still has the power to stun or alarm, *The Origin of the World* (1866). This painting, with its extraordinary angle and the close-up view of the female genitals and part of the upper torso of a woman lying with legs spread, is sharply contrasted with the refined and idealised nudes of the past. With exceptional audacity it proclaims that it is exactly in the hitherto vulgar and offensive aspects of human life and the world where truth can be traced.

*You can see here Courbet’s painting The Origin of the World*

*Image 3.4 Gustave Courbet, Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet (1854).*
4. Realism and the Novel

4.1 Feudalism and Medieval Romances

Realism is inextricably bound with the genre of the novel which reached a peak in England in the eighteenth century and which is, in turn, largely associated with the rise of the middle class. As artistic and literary production depends on the political, social, economic and cultural context of a certain time and place in history, it is crucial to examine the conditions that contributed to the spread and dominance of this new mode or representation.

The novel was born with the birth of capitalism in Europe and the new bourgeois class that led to an increase of literacy and the growth of a large, widely distributed reading public. This new form of realistic writing came as a reaction to the medieval romance and its courtly descendants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and reflected the changes in the new social system that succeeded medieval feudalism. In feudal societies, power rested on a warrior nobility (the lords) who owned the land (fiefs) and granted permission to the vast majority of the population (vassals or serfs) to cultivate the land. In exchange for the land and the protection that the lord offered, the serfs were obliged to serve him in a slavish way. The life of serfs revolved around paying fees and taxes to the lords in the form of manual labour in the fields (ploughing, harvesting, digging, etc.). Serfs had no personal rights and little control over their lives, and it was impossible for them to change their status in a society characterized by social rigidity and intellectual conservatism. Moreover, the main concern of the ruling class in feudalism was to maintain the ownership and preserve the status quo; consequently, the few elect that could read wanted a literary genre that would promote and exalt the values and principles of the aristocracy.

Chivalric romances, the dominant genre of medieval aristocracy, project an idealized world and offer a substitute living through an escape into a pseudo-world of courtliness, adventure and gallant knights with superhuman powers who complete quests successfully and win the favour of the lady they are in love with. By presenting an improved, almost perfect picture of the world, romances carried the readers away from the problems of their everyday reality and urged them to ignore their hardships and distress. As romances borrowed mostly from myths and fairy tales, they also had a strong didactic tone and depended on a very static moral code. Ethical issues are oversimplified, as the world is divided into evil and good forces that are in constant battle, characters are either wholly sound or wholly wicked, and the complexity of human behaviour is overlooked.
4.2 The Rise of the Middle Class

Apart from the mighty aristocracy who owned the land during the Middle Ages, as we have seen, another class, the bourgeoisie, began to appear from the eleventh century, especially in the newly developed urban areas of the twelfth century (boroughs). The term “bourgeoisie” originally referred to people who had the rights of citizenship and political rights in a commercial city. They were merchants, craftsmen, or artisans, whose interests clashed with those of the feudal landlords who kept insisting on higher rents in an effort to sustain their power and exploit all classes inferior to them. As this newly rising class of merchants and artists longed for trade independence and autonomy of thought, they rebelled against the rigidity of feudalism and its unchanging emphasis on static property relationships and, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, developed into the revolutionary class that deposed feudal order.
The bourgeoisie’s demand for commercial rights, personal liberty, and the ownership of property ignited the English Civil War (1642–51), the American War of Independence (1775–83), and the French Revolution (1789–99). In England, this new progressive class was associated with the organizing of the New Model Army, the trial and execution of King Charles I, the exile of his son, Charles II, and the replacement of English monarchy with, at first, the Commonwealth of England (1649–53) and then the Protectorate (1653–59) under Oliver Cromwell's personal rule. Consequently, the bourgeoisie rejected older forms of literature, like the medieval romance and its idealism that aimed at strengthening the ruling class, and sought more objective means of representation which corresponded to the changes in the social order and the needs of the new class. In the eighteenth century, as the bourgeoisie gained in strength, the novel gained in popularity.

Image 3.6 Charles Landseer, Cromwell Reading a Letter Found in Charles’s Cabinet, after Naseby (1851). The Battle of Naseby on 14 June 1645 marked the victory of the Parliamentarian New Model Army over the Royalist Army and was a significant turning point in the English Civil War.
4.3 The Characteristics of the New Genre

While the bourgeoisie rejected the romance, a genre committed to promoting the feudal system and obscuring its limitations by offering readers an ideal substitute for their own lives, they embraced the novel as a new form of prose writing that promised to tell the truth about their everyday reality. Although, of course, prose fiction had appeared long before the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century, there was at the time a striking preference for “true” stories narrated in an unbiased objective mode. This shift from poetry (the genre that predominated during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) to prose can be justified when one bears in mind that, despite the fact that prose is considered to be plain and simple, it is actually a more sophisticated and persuasive form of writing. In prose, the spontaneous intuitive emotion of poetry is replaced by conscious restraint, as stories strive to represent a consistent portion of external reality.

The realism of the novel, furthermore, is attuned to Enlightenment thought and the conviction that the truth can be discovered by the individual through a process of rational thinking. This thesis has its roots in the influential French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) who laid the foundations for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rationalism and the modern belief that truth can be achieved only when one relies on individual experiences and dissociates oneself from past thought and literary traditionalism. But the most ardent advocate of “direct realism” or “common sense realism” was the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710-1796) who opposed any form of idealism and insisted on the existence of an external objective world, independent of the perceiving mind. Reid’s “commonsense school” called for realistic approaches in art and literature since for positivists an external, objective, material reality actually existed. Another key figure in nineteenth-century thought was the French philosopher Auguste Comte, whose works had a major influence on Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill and George Eliot. Comte was the founder of the epistemological perspective of positivism and the discipline of sociology, as he highlighted the importance of both the physical sciences (like mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy), as well as the most complex science of human society.

In its pursuit of truth, the prose fiction of the eighteenth century displays a marked trust in individual narratives, base and low characters, everyday themes, and detailed depictions of the material world. That which distinguishes the eighteenth-century novels of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, or Lawrence Sterne, for instance, from previous types of literature is a rejection of traditional historical themes or plots that relied on myths and legends (as in the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton, for example, who borrow their plots from writers of ancient Greece and Rome), and the introduction of individualized characters involved in particular circumstances and in many cases facing ordeals which they fail to deal with successfully.

The characters of novels are given a realistic name and surname (like Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, Clarissa Harlowe, Pamela Andrews, Elisabeth Bennet, David Copperfield, Becky Sharp, etc.) rather than historical or general type names that carried fixed predetermined qualities (like Galatea, Aphrodite, Mr. Badman, Mrs. Malaprop, etc.). And even when they are suggestive of the character’s overall behaviour (as in Mr. Allworthy, Robert Lovelace, or Mrs. Sinclair), they still appear as common everyday-life names. These ordinary people are in most cases coming from the lower strata of society and have nothing epic or heroic about them; they have more flaws than virtues, are more cowardly than valiant, and more often than not make human mistakes. William Makepeace Thackeray’s 1847–48 novel, *Vanity Fair*, very tellingly subtitled *A Novel Without a Hero*, echoes the novel’s bias against superhuman heroes and heroines and collective tradition, as well as its predilection for individualism and novelty. At a time when the word “original” was redefined and obtained its modern positive meaning, the novel fractured its ties with the past and opted for freshness.
It is significant that the trend in favour of originality found its first powerful expression in England, and in the eighteenth century; the very word “original” took on its modern meaning at this time, by a semantic reversal which is a parallel to the change in the meaning of “realism”. We have seen that, from the medieval belief in the reality of universals, “realism” had come to denote a belief in the individual apprehension of reality through the senses: similarly the term “original” which in the Middle Ages had meant “having existed from the first” came to mean “underived, independent, first-hand”; and by the time that Edward Young in his epoch-making Conjectures on Original Composition (1759) ailed Richardson as “a genius as well moral as original”, the word could be used as a term of praise meaning “novel or fresh in character or style”. (14)

Notice, for example, how one of the earliest eighteenth-century novels, Daniel Defoe’s 1722 Moll Flanders, proclaims its distance from romances that preceded and claims veracity in the Preface that frames, what is supposed to be, the true account of the life of the eponymous Moll. The full title of the novel (The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, &c. Who was Born in Newgate, and during a Life of continu'd Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife
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(wheretof once to her own Brother), Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich, liv'd Honest, and died a Penitent. Written from her own Memorandums) announces that the book is not fiction, but the memoir of a disreputable woman of low origin. As the story is purported to be a detailed account of the life of a real person and refer to real-life events, it is considered necessary by Defoe to conceal the true names of characters; and since the story is narrated by Moll herself, a former convict in Newgate prison involved in a variety of scandalous illicit adventures (such as deceit, whoredom, thievery, felony, incest, etc.), its style is slightly altered in order not to shock the reader. Moll’s memorandum, as Daniel Defoe explains in the preface, her original account of her eventful life, is presented as it is, with just a minimum retouching for the sake of decency. The external author in this case has functioned as an editor of a “true” real-life and incomplete narrative, for, as Defoe explains, “nobody can write their own life to the full end of it, unless they can write it after they are dead.”

Daniel Defoe, Moll Flanders

The Author’s Preface

The world is so taken up of late with novels and romances, that it will be hard for a private history to be taken for genuine, where the names and other circumstances of the person are concealed, and on this account we must be content to leave the reader to pass his own opinion upon the ensuing sheet, and take it just as he pleases.

The author is here supposed to be writing her own history, and in the very beginning of her account she gives the reasons why she thinks fit to conceal her true name, after which there is no occasion to say any more about that.

It is true that the original of this story is put into new words, and the style of the famous lady we here speak of is a little altered; particularly she is made to tell her own tale in modester words that she told it at first, the copy which came first to hand having been written in language more like one still in Newgate than one grown penitent and humble, as she afterwards pretends to be.

The pen employed in finishing her story, and making it what you now see it to be, has had no little difficulty to put it into a dress fit to be seen, and to make it speak language fit to be read. When a woman debauched from her youth, nay, even being the offspring of debauchery and vice, comes to give an account of all her vicious practices, and even to descend to the particular occasions and circumstances by which she ran through in threescore years, an author must be hard put to it wrap it up so clean as not to give room, especially for vicious readers, to turn it to his disadvantage.

We cannot say, indeed, that this history is carried on quite to the end of the life of this famous Moll Flanders, as she calls herself, for nobody can write their own life to the full end of it, unless they can write it after they are dead. But her husband’s life, being written by a third hand, gives a full account of them both, how long they lived together in that country, and how they both came to England again, after about eight years, in which time they were grown very rich, and where she lived, it seems, to be very old, but was not so extraordinary a penitent as she was at first; it seems only that indeed she always spoke with abhorrence of her former life, and of every part of it.

As the novel embraced new plots and focused its lens on the portrayal of low life, it became indispensable to set the action and its agents in a specific spatial and temporal background. It is of crucial significance in realism that characters operate in a recognizable time period and live in environments that bear a close resemblance to real-life surroundings. Consider, for instance, the opening of Felix Holt, George Eliot’s 1866 social novel, set, as the narrator makes clear in the first sentence of the book, thirty five years before its publication, at the time of the First Reform Act of 1832. The novel focuses on the social change in rural towns
across England resulting from the political change the Act caused, as it gave the right to vote to all men owning property worth ten pounds or more in annual rent. In this detailed depiction of the old coach roads and an imaginary trip across the plain watered by the rivers Avon and Trent, Eliot invites the reader to get a view of the wider public life through the private perspective of her imaginary traveler. The profusion of images here is striking: acoustic (horns, bells, the shepherd’s cry), olfactory (honeysuckle fragrances), gustatory (bread and bacon), tactile (full-udderded cows milked, hoar-frost), and visual (purple blossomed, ruby-berried nightshades, scarlet haws, deep-crimson hips, brown leaves). It is though this plethora of sensory details that Eliot illuminates the central point made in this passage: before 1832, those boroughs the traveler passes by were “unrepresented in Parliament” and “corn laws” (the high tariffs on imported grains that had been established in order to protect English farm products from having to compete with low-priced products imported from abroad) were still unrepealed. And although the shepherd is unaware of all this, as his “solar system” cannot extend beyond his “master’s temper and the casualties of lambing-time,” it is through this meticulous depiction of the shepherd’s life that the reader can identify a specific time and place in history and relate them to a specific political context.

George Eliot, Felix Holt, the Radical

Introduction

Five-and-thirty years ago the glory had not yet departed from the old coach roads: the great roadside inns were still brilliant with well-polished tankards, the smiling glances of pretty barmaids, and the repartees of jocose hostlers; the mail still announced itself by the merry notes of the horn; the hedge-cutter or the rick-thatcher might still know the exact hour by the unfailing yet otherwise meteoric apparition of the pea-green Tally-ho or the yellow Independent; and elderly gentlemen in pony-chaises, quartering nervously to make way for the rolling, swinging swiftness, had not ceased to remark that times were finely changed since they used to see the pack-horses and hear the tinkling of their bells on this very highway.

In those days there were pocket boroughs, a Birmingham unrepresented in Parliament and compelled to make strong representations out of it, unrepealed corn-laws, three-and-sixpenny letters, a brawny and many-breeding pauperism, and other departed evils; but there were some pleasant things, too, which have also departed. *Non omnia grandior aetas, quae fugiamus habet*, says the wise goddess: you have not the best of it in all things, O youngsters! the elderly man has his enviable memories, and not the least of them is the memory of a long journey in mid-spring or autumn on the outside of a stage coach. Posterity may be shot, like a bullet through a tube, by atmospheric pressure, from Winchester to Newcastle: that is a fine result to have among our hopes; but the slow, old fashioned way of getting from one end of our country to the other is the better thing to have in the memory. The tube-journey can never lend much to picture and narrative; it is as barren as an exclamatory O! Whereas, the happy outside passenger, seated on the box from the dawn to the gloaming, gathered enough stories of English life, enough of English labors in town and country, enough aspects of earth and sky, to make episodes for a modern Odyssey. Suppose only that his journey took him through that central plain, watered at one extremity by the Avon, at the other by the Trent. As the morning silvered the meadows with their long lines of bushy willows marking the water-courses, or burnished the golden corn-ricks clustered near the long roofs of some midland homestead, he saw the full-udderded cows driven from their pasture to the early milking. Perhaps it was the shepherd, head-servant of the farm, who drove them, his sheep-dog following with a heedless, unofficial air, as of a beadle in undress. The shepherd, with a slow and slouching walk, timed by the walk of grazing beasts, moved aside, as if unwillingly, throwing out a monosyllabic hint to his cattle; his glance, accustomed to rest on things very near the earth, seemed to lift itself with difficulty to the coachman. Mail or stage coach for him belonged to the mysterious distant system of things called “Gover'ment,” which, whatever it might be, was no business of his, any more than the most outlying nebula or the coal-sacks of the southern hemisphere: his solar
system was the parish; the master’s temper and the casualties of lambing-time were his region of storms. He cut his bread and bacon with his pocket-knife, and felt no bitterness except in the matter of pauper laborers and the bad-luck that sent contrarious seasons and the sheep-rot. He and his cows were soon left behind, and the homestead, too, with its pond overhung by elder-trees, its untidy kitchen-garden and cone-shaped yew-tree arbor. But everywhere the bushy hedgerows wasted the land with their straggling beauty, shrouded the grassy borders of the pastures with catkined hazels, and tossed their long blackberry branches on the corn-fields. Perhaps they were white with May, or starred with pale pink dog-roses; perhaps the urchins were already nutting among them, or gathering the plenteous crabs. It was worth the journey only to see those hedgerows, the liberal homes of unmarketable beauty—of the purple blossomed, ruby-berried nightshade, of the wild convolvulus climbing and spreading in tendril strength till it made a great curtain of pale-green hearts and white trumpets, of the many-tubed honey-suckle which, in its most delicate fragrance, hid a charm more subtle and penetrating than beauty. Even if it were winter, the hedgerows showed their coral, the scarlet haws, the deep-crimson hips, with lingering brown leaves to make a resting-place for the jewels of the hoar-frost. Such hedgerows were often as tall as the laborers’ cottages dotted along the lanes, or clustered into a small hamlet, their little dingy windows telling, like thick-filmed eyes, of nothing but the darkness within.

5. George Eliot’s Realist Manifesto

This physical concreteness and accumulation of material data, as well as the turn to the low and sordid aspect of life, manifest the closeness of realist fiction to the nineteenth-century realist paintings we have already examined and also to the Dutch and Flemish painting schools from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. The most ardent supporter of realism in nineteenth-century England, George Eliot, expresses her preference for the truthfulness of Dutch painting and in general this taste for the humble and the ordinary which has been one of the trademarks of realism. In Chapter 17 of her first novel, Adam Bede, published in 1859, Eliot’s narrator breaks for a moment the illusion of fiction in order to address her reader directly and defend her refusal to retouch and beautify the life she describes. Although her readers would have preferred her to improve facts and rectify the portrait of her “tasteless and indiscreet” characters, like that of Adolphus Irwine, the Rector of Broxton, the narrator insists on giving a “faithful account of men and things” and representing their complexity rather than simply casting them as either wrong or virtuous. Her aim is not to create a seamless version of the world, but to discover the splendor of coarseness and vulgarity and provide insight into the infinite potential that people have to surprise us (like Mrs. Green, the neighbor “who was really kind to you in your last illness, but has said several ill-natured things about you since your convalescence”).

It is not celestial angels, heroic warriors, or divine Madonnas that fascinate her, but old women with weather-beaten faces engaged in dull activities like scraping potatoes in a dingy kitchen full of tin pans and clusters of onions. In this realist manifesto, Eliot links her aesthetics with the aesthetics of Jan van Eyck, Pieter Brueghel, Jan Steen, Jan Vermeer, and numerous other Dutch and Flemish painters who were devoted to what she calls in The Mill on the Floss the most prosaic, “emmet-like” aspect of life (Book Fourth, Chapter 1). Like those past masters, Eliot discovers the poetry and tragic potential of people “irradiated by no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self renouncing faith” (The Mill on the Floss). There is grace and magnificence in the worldliness of a kitchen maid pouring milk from a jug (see Jan Vermeer’s The Kitchen Maid), or a disorderly assemblage of unattractive peasants absorbed in ungainly dancing (see Pieter Brueghel II’s Peasant Wedding Dance), as there is in the mundaneness of Eliot’s characters. Eliot’s candid pen scrapses off the veneer of artificiality and convention to disclose the “oppressive narrowness” (The Mill on the Floss) which lies in the very heart of life and which she adores.
Image 3.8 Jan Vermeer, The Kitchen Maid (1660)
George Eliot, *Adam Bede*

Chapter XVII
In Which the Story Pauses a Little

“This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!” I hear one of my readers exclaim. “How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice! You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things—quite as good as reading a sermon.”

Certainly I could, if I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, I might refashion life and character entirely after my own liking; I might select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective, the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath.

Sixty years ago—it is a long time, so no wonder things have changed—all clergymen were not zealous; indeed, there is reason to believe that the number of zealous clergymen was small, and it is probable that if one among the small minority had owned the livings of Broxton and Hayslope in the year 1799, you would have liked him no better than you like Mr. Irwine. Ten to one, you would have thought him a tasteless, indiscreet, methodistical man. It is so very rarely that facts hit that nice medium required by our own enlightened opinions and refined taste! Perhaps you will say, “Do improve the facts a little, then; make them more accordant with those correct views which it is our privilege to possess. The world is not just what we like; do touch it up with a
tasteful pencil, and make believe it is not quite such a mixed entangled affair. Let all people who hold unexceptionable opinions act unexceptionably. Let your most faulty characters always be on the wrong side, and your virtuous ones on the right. Then we shall see at a glance whom we are to condemn and whom we are to approve. Then we shall be able to admire, without the slightest disturbance of our prepossessions: we shall hate and despise with that true ruminant relish which belongs to undoubting confidence."

But, my good friend, what will you do then with your fellow-parishioner who opposes your husband in the vestry? With your newly appointed vicar, whose style of preaching you find painfully below that of his regretted predecessor? With the honest servant who worries your soul with her one failing? With your neighbour, Mrs. Green, who was really kind to you in your last illness, but has said several ill-natured things about you since your convalescence? Nay, with your excellent husband himself, who has other irritating habits besides that of not wiping his shoes? These fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people—amongst whom your life is passed—that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire—for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience. And I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this, in which we get up in the morning to do our daily work, that you would be likely to turn a harder, colder eye on the dusty streets and the common green fields—on the real breathing men and women, who can be chilled by your indifference or injured by your prejudice; who can be cheered and helped onward by your fellow-feeling, your forbearance, your outspoken, brave justice.

So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falseness is so easy, truth so difficult. The pencil is conscious of a delightful facility in drawing a griffin—the longer the claws, and the larger the wings, the better; but that marvellous facility which we mistook for genius is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion. Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings—much harder than to say something fine about them which is NOT the exact truth.

It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn, without shrinking, from cloud-born angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her—or I turn to that village wedding, kept between four brown walls, where an awkward bridegroom opens the dance with a high-shouldered, broad-faced bride, while elderly and middle-aged friends look on, with very irregular noses and lips, and probably with quart-pots in their hands, but with an expression of unmistakable contentment and goodwill. “Foh!” says my idealistic friend, “what vulgar details! What good is there in taking all these pains to give an exact likeness of old women and clowns? What a low phase of life! What clumsy, ugly people!”

But bless us, things may be lovable that are not altogether handsome, I hope? I am not at all sure that the majority of the human race have not been ugly, and even among those “lords of their kind,” the British, squat figures, ill-shapen nostrils, and dingy complexions are not startling exceptions. Yet there is a great deal of family love amongst us. I have a friend or two whose class of features is such that the Apollo curl on the summit of their brows would be decidedly trying; yet to my certain knowledge tender hearts have beaten for them, and their miniatures—flattering, but still not lovely—are kissed in secret by motherly lips. I have seen many an excellent matron, who could have never in her best days have been handsome, and yet she had a packet of yellow love-letters in a private drawer, and sweet children showered kisses on her sallow cheeks. And I believe there have been plenty of young heroes, of middle stature and feeble beards, who have felt
Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou

quite sure they could never love anything more insignificant than a Diana, and yet have found themselves in middle life happily settled with a wife who waddles. Yes! Thank God; human feeling is like the mighty rivers that bless the earth: it does not wait for beauty—it flows with resistless force and brings beauty with it.

All honour and reverence to the divine beauty of form! Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women, and children—in our gardens and in our houses. But let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy. Paint us an angel, if you can, with a floating violet robe, and a face paled by the celestial light; paint us yet oftener a Madonna, turning her mild face upward and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory; but do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world—those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions. In this world there are so many of these common coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. Therefore, let Art always remind us of them; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things—men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them. There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my every-day fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy. Neither are picturesque lazzaroni or romantic criminals half so frequent as your common labourer, who gets his own bread and eats it vulgarly but creditably with his own pocket-knife. It is more needful that I should have a fibre of sympathy connecting me with that vulgar citizen who weighs out my sugar in a vilely assorted cravat and waistcoat, than with the handsomest rascal in red scarf and green feathers—more needful that my heart should swell with loving admiration at some trait of gentle goodness in the faulty people who sit at the same hearth with me, or in the clergyman of my own parish, who is perhaps rather too corpulent and in other respects is not an Oberlin or a Tillotson, than at the deeds of heroes whom I shall never know except by hearsay, or at the sublimest abstract of all clerical graces that was ever conceived by an able novelist.

6. The Defective Mirror

The descent of realism to themes, characters and settings that had been considered by other movements in art and literature prosaic and uninspiring is interrelated with the mode of representation favoured in realism. It is not just the subject matter of realistic stories that is faithfully drawn from a real-life reservoir; the voice that narrates is also directed towards objectivity and aims at achieving the detached approach of the scientist who observes the world rather than that of a partial commentator who guides the reader towards certain conclusions. The writer in realism strives to abstain from partialities or personal prejudices that would make him or her steer away from facts. In tune with eighteenth-century philosophies of Enlightenment and nineteenth-century positivism that acknowledged experimental investigation and observation as the only sources of knowledge, the realist writer, like a methodical and impersonal scientist, is supposed to observe the world and document facts, holding up a mirror to reality and offering to the reader a slice of truth. The mirror became a key metaphor in nineteenth-century realism, as it best defined the role of realist literature and art. The French critic Fernand Desnoyers very characteristically writes in his 1855 declaration “On Realism”: “I demand for painting and for literature the same rights as mirrors have” (quoted in Becker 82).
Yet, the mirror image, even for nineteenth-century writers, was a crude simplification. Evidently, the medium of literature could never function as the flat surface of a looking glass that simply generates copies of the world. George Henry Lewes, another fervent proponent of realism, philosopher, and critic of literature, was well aware of this, when in 1858, he argued that, since every mode of representation presupposes a medium, representation is always bound to and “limited by the nature of its medium” (493). Lewes’ life-long partner, George Eliot, honestly declares the limitations of her medium when, in her realist manifesto, she speaks of a “defective” mirror. Like a witness in the courtroom, who is bound by oath to tell the truth, Eliot on the one hand vows to “give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in [her] mind,” while on the other hand she confesses that, in the mirror of her mind, “the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused.”

The defective mirror image has been crucial in the theory of realism, as it reveals the paradoxical nature of the term: its potential to convey a faithful picture of reality but also its failure in performing this task successfully. No matter how hard a writer may strive for objectivity, if the world is always filtered through his or her mind, it will always be coloured by his or her personal perspective. Even the writer who makes the most compelling and sincere effort to monitor and document reality with the impartiality of a scientist is always involved in processes like selecting his or her data, deciding about the order in which they will be presented, transmitting them to the reader through the voice of one (or more) narrator(s), and employing language in order to do so. Eliot’s defective mirror, in an interesting way, anticipates twentieth-century criticism of realism, as we will see later on in this chapter, and is also proof that the approach of nineteenth-century realists is not naïve or ignorant of the complications that the “I am a camera” metaphor had. Even in photography, which developed at around the same time, in mid-nineteenth century, and promised unprecedented correctness and precision, the personal shortcomings of the person behind the camera could not be eliminated. In her study Fiction in the Age of Photography, for example, Nancy Armstrong has shown how certain poses for portraits of women, criminals, or native people in nineteenth-century photography were utilized to suggest their inferiority and promoted discriminatory sexist or racial views. Eliot’s recognition of the subjective fallibilities of the author manifests that her insistence on realism is anything but artless or unstudied.

7. Literalism, Photographic Realism, Materialism

Unlike romances that present an idealized version of the world, as we have seen already, realist fiction is committed to truth. It is exactly this devotion to truth, a much contested term among philosophers, that renders realism such a complex and hard to define concept. In his 1970 book, Realism, Damian Grant distinguishes between scientific and poetic truth and the two contrasting and complementary approaches to it: the empirical and epistemological method of scientists, which he technically refers to as “the correspondence theory,” and intuitive perception, which is associated with “the coherence theory.” In the former case, it is taken for granted that there is a factual reality which exists a priori and can be captured through careful observation and meticulous reproduction of a simulacrum that corresponds to an external original reality. The artist here is conscientiously loyal to an external world already there; his or her conscience, in other words, protests when external reality is neglected. In contrast, in the latter case, the task of the artist is not to seize, but to discover
and release the truth, by consciously trusting his or her instinct and imaginative abilities. Truth here is created and need not correspond to any preexisting world, but cohere and make sense as the artist is self-aware of realism and its ontological status (physical existence).

A number of critics have conflated realism with the conscientious manner of mimicking appearances, so it has often been alleged that realism’s strength rests on a work’s power of illusion. Since Plato’s Republic, a work which initiates the idea of mimesis in Western culture in 380 BCE, art has been characterized as an imitation of the real world. In book seven of the Republic, Plato presents his well-known “allegory of the cave,” according to which truth resides only in ideas. Human beings are like prisoners chained in a cave sitting with their back to its opening and watching the reflections of the real world on its walls. Although they can observe only shadows of the things that happen outside the cave, they believe that what they see is the real world, as this is what they have known since birth. When, in very rare cases, a prisoner breaks his [sic] chain, Plato claims through the voice of Socrates, he [sic] can look at the sun directly and catch a glimpse of the real world. This is the true philosopher, for the real world is the world of ideas, not material things, and it is only philosophers that can approach it. In contrast to philosophers, who reach truth, artists in Book Ten of the Republic can only produce “phantoms,” shadows of the things they imitate, or, more precisely, shadows of shadows, as, like all mortals, artists too are captives in this cave and perceive only reflections. All they are able to do is mechanically reproduce replicas of people, animals, plants and everything in heaven and earth, in the manner of a mirror that automatically sends out duplicates of shadows. Artistic representation, twice distanced from truth and a threat to knowledge, is in this sense a superfluous, histrionic, inferior and harmful activity and artists should be banned from Plato’s ideal city, in order for artistic contamination to be eliminated.

Plato’s theory of art as mimesis has left an indelible mark on Western aesthetics and accounts for the Western attachment to realism throughout the centuries. It also explains the reduction of realistic representation in certain cases to literalism or photographic realism, a mode directly related with the correspondence theory of realism discussed above. This obsession with imitative exactness is best reflected in the classical tale of the two ancient painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius, recorded in Pliny’s Natural History, who

Image 3.10 Anonymous Engraving of Pliny’s Tale of Zeuxis and Parrhasius (ca 1610).
are competing with each other over who can produce the most lifelike and convincing painting. Zeuxis is overconfident that he has won the match, as the bunch of grapes he has painted has fooled even the birds that flew down to nibble them. Parrhasius takes him by surprise, however, when Zeuxis attempts to draw the curtain he thinks is covering Parrhasius’ painting and discovers that it is nothing but a painted veil. This *trompe-l’oeil*, as it is called in French, technique of depicting objects or people in three dimensions in order to deceive the eye, is resonant of Plato’s mimetic function of art and has been much in vogue throughout the history of painting, murals, sculpture or architecture.

The technique of trompe-l’oeil is evident also in 3D Street Art which is gaining much popularity in our days. It presents startling views that delude the viewer into believing that there is a third dimension in a two-dimensional drawing, as in the artwork posted here.
In literature, the medium of representation is language and, therefore, correspondence to the material world is less evident than in the visual arts. As Edgar Allan Poe observed while commenting on the Daguerreotype process which was the origin of modern photography:

All language must fall short of conveying any just idea of the truth, and this will not appear so wonderful when we reflect that the source of vision itself has been, in this instance, the designer. Perhaps, if we imagine the distinctness with which an object is reflected in a positively perfect mirror, we come as near the reality as by any other means. For, in truth, the Daguerreotyped plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands.

When conscientious realism contests with photography in presenting a simulacrum of reality, it very often degenerates into literalism, photographic realism, or, what Virginia Woolf has called, “materialism.” In her 1925 essay “Modern Fiction,” Woolf attacks the slavish insistence on accuracy which smothers life and which is epitomized in the novels of the Edwardian writers of the late nineteenth century. Writers like Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), John Galsworthy (1867-1933), or H. G. Wells (1866-1946) focus exclusively on the external material world, but real life escapes them, she argues:

So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?

Their characters may live in perfectly constructed houses, but they are really dead, choked by the conglomeration of innumerable trivial details, while their true spirit has eluded the writer. This is justified in the extensive quotation inserted in Woolf’s essay from Arnold Bennett’s novel *Hilda Lessways*. The exhausting description of the view from the main character’s window and all the tedious information about houses, rents, Victorian economics, terraces, etc. are mere digressions from the truth.

**Virginia Woolf, from “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”**

But then he [Arnold Bennett] begins to describe, not Hilda Lessways, but the view from her bedroom window, the excuse being that Mr. Skellorn, the man who collects rents, is coming along that way. Mr. Bennett proceeds:

“The bailiwick of Turnhill lay behind her; and all the murky district of the Five Towns, of which Turnhill is the northern outpost, lay to the south. At the foot of Chatterley Wood the canal wound in large curves on its way towards the undefiled plains of Cheshire and the sea. On the canal-side, exactly opposite to Hilda’s window, was a flour-mill, that sometimes made nearly as much smoke as the kilns and the chimneys closing the prospect on either hand. From the flourmill a bricked path, which separated a considerable row of new cottages from their appurtenant gardens, led straight into Lessways Street, in front of Mrs. Lessways’ house. By this path Mr. Skellorn should have arrived, for he inhabited the farthest of the cottages.” One line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description; but let them pass as the necessary drudgery of the novelist. And now—where is Hilda? Alas. Hilda is still looking out of the window. Passionate and dissatisfied as she was, she was a girl with an eye for houses. She often compared this old Mr.
Skellorn with the villas she saw from her bedroom window. Therefore the villas must be described. Mr. Bennett proceeds: “The row was called Freehold Villas: a consciously proud name in a district where much of the land was copyhold and could only change owners subject to the payment of 4 fines,’ and to the feudal consent of a ‘court’ presided over by the agent of a lord of the manor. Most of the dwellings were owned by their occupiers, who, each an absolute monarch of the soil, niggled in his sooty garden of an evening amid the flutter of drying shirts and towels. Freehold Villas symbolised the final triumph of Victorian economics, the apotheosis of the prudent and industrious artisan. It corresponded with a Building Society Secretary’s dream of paradise. And indeed it was a very real achievement. Nevertheless, Hilda’s irrational contempt would not admit this.” Heaven be praised, we cry! At last we are coming to Hilda herself. But not so fast. Hilda may have been this, that, and the other; but Hilda not only looked at houses, and thought of houses; Hilda lived in a house. And what sort of a house did Hilda live in? Mr. Bennett proceeds: “It was one of the two middle houses of a detached terrace of four houses built by her grandfather Lessways, the teapot manufacturer; it was the chief of the four, obviously the habitation of the proprietor of the terrace. One of the corner houses comprised a grocer’s shop, and this house had been robbed of its just proportion of garden so that the seigneurial garden-plot might be triflingly larger than the other. The terrace was not a terrace of cottages, but of houses rated at from twenty-six to thirty-six pounds a year; beyond the means of artisans and petty insurance agents and rent-collectors. And further, it was well built, generously built; and its architecture, though debased, showed some faint traces of Georgian amenity. It was admittedly the best row of houses in that newly settled quarter of the town. In coming to it out of Freehold Villas Mr. Skellorn obviously came to something superior, wider, more liberal. Suddenly Hilda heard her mother’s voice” […] But we cannot hear her mother’s voice, or Hilda’s voice; we can only hear Mr. Bennett’s voice telling us facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines.

Woolf best exemplifies the modernist critique of realism, which began with the fin-de-siècle writers, and gained vigor in the first decades of the twentieth century. In the late Victorian period, for example, Oscar Wilde’s aesthetic philosophy rejected realism as philistine materialism. The purpose of art, Wilde provokingly declares, is not to echo life, but to lie about life, not to show us its morbid revolting face, but to retouch it according to the ideal of beauty. In his dialogue, “The Decay of Lying” (1889), Wilde seems to take sides with Plato’s views on the artificiality of art; unlike Plato, though, he claims that artistic lies are the apex of beauty, delight and pleasure. For Wilde, it is not art that should be committed to life, but life that should imitate art. In the early twentieth century, along with Woolf, a whole range of modernist writers, like Joseph Conrad, E. M. Foster, James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, or D. H. Lawrence (to name but a few), questioned the doctrine of realism. As they wrote at a time when science underlined its limitations and uncertainties, when both material and psychological reality was elusive, and absolute truths were pronounced dead, modernists derided both the realists’ exertion to attain truth and their means of achieving this goal.

Virginia Woolf, from “Modern Fiction”

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.
8. “Tell All the Truth, but Tell it Slant”—: The Paradox of Realism

Even seen from the perspective of twentieth-century modernists, however, the excerpt from Arnold Bennett’s novel which Woolf quotes from is not representative of a variety of nineteenth-century novels whose attitude towards reality is anything but unsophisticated. Let us consider, for example, the rawest case of representational realism that finds its expression in nineteenth-century fiction. This is Mr. Gradgrind’s reiterating decree in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*: “Now, what I want, is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life.” The students in Mr. Gradgrind’s factual school, trained to perceive the world through “a pair of scales and the multiplication table always,” are mere vessels filled to the brim with “imperial gallons of facts.” Deprived since birth of anything that would nurture their imaginative flair and brought up without nursery rhymes or fairy tales, his students learn that everything is to be calculated in numbers and explained through statistics. Hence the model definition of a horse which consists only of dull factual information and numbers. Here it is, forced on them by the model student in Mr. Gradgrind’s class in the second chapter of *Hard Times*:

“Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.”

In his classroom aesthetics also, students are instructed that any trace of fancy needs to be expelled. According to Mr. Gradgrind’s factual philosophy, animate or inanimate things must be locked in their denotative meanings and any effort to “misplace” them must be crushed from the roots. We cannot paper our walls with horse images or decorate our carpets with flowers or our china with butterflies, Mr. Gradgrind reasons nonsensically, as quadrupeds can never trot the sides of rooms in reality, insects never perch on tableware and flowers would wither if people put tables and chairs on them.

**Charles Dickens, *Hard Times***

**Chapter II**

“Very well,” said this gentleman, briskly smiling, and folding his arms. “That’s a horse. Now, let me ask you girls and boys, Would you paper a room with representations of horses?”

After a pause, one half of the children cried in chorus, “Yes, sir!” Upon which the other half, seeing in the gentleman’s face that Yes was wrong, cried out in chorus, “No, sir!”—as the custom is, in these examinations.

“Of course, No. Why wouldn’t you?”

A pause. One corpulent slow boy, with a wheezy manner of breathing, ventured the answer, Because he wouldn’t paper a room at all, but would paint it.

“You must paper it,” said the gentleman, rather warmly.

“You must paper it,” said Thomas Gradgrind, “whether you like it or not. Don’t tell us you wouldn’t paper it. What do you mean, boy?”

“I’ll explain to you, then,” said the gentleman, after another and a dismal pause, “why you wouldn’t paper a room with representations of horses. Do you ever see horses walking up and down the sides of rooms in reality—in fact? Do you?”

“Yes, sir!” from one half. “No, sir!” from the other.

“Of course no,” said the gentleman, with an indignant look at the wrong half. “Why, then, you are not to see anywhere, what you don’t see in fact; you are not to have anywhere, what you don’t have in fact. What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact.” Thomas Gradgrind nodded his approbation.

“This is a new principle, a discovery, a great discovery,” said the gentleman. “Now, I’ll try you again. Suppose you were going to carpet a room. Would you use a carpet having a representation of flowers upon it?”
There being a general conviction by this time that “No, sir!” was always the right answer to this gentleman, the chorus of No was very strong. Only a few feeble stragglers said Yes: among them Sissy Jupe.

“Girl number twenty,” said the gentleman, smiling in the calm strength of knowledge.

Sissy blushed, and stood up.

“So you would carpet your room—or your husband’s room, if you were a grown woman, and had a husband—with representations of flowers, would you?” said the gentleman. “Why would you?”

“If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers,” returned the girl.

“And is that why you would put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots?”

“It wouldn’t hurt them, sir. They wouldn’t crush and wither, if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy—”

“Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn’t fancy,” cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. “That’s it! You are never to fancy.”

“You are not, Cecilia Jupe,” Thomas Gradgrind solemnly repeated, “to do anything of that kind.”


“You are to be in all things regulated and governed,” said the gentleman, “by fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don’t walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don’t find that foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use,” said the gentleman, “for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste.”

The girl curtseyed, and sat down. She was very young, and she looked as if she were frightened by the matter-of-fact prospect the world afforded.

“Now, if Mr. M’Choakumchild,” said the gentleman, “will proceed to give his first lesson here, Mr. Gradgrind, I shall be happy, at your request, to observe his mode of procedure.”

Mr. Gradgrind was much obliged. “Mr. M’Choakumchild, we only wait for you.”

So, Mr. M’Choakumchild began in his best manner. He and some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters, had been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs. He had been put through an immense variety of paces, and had answered volumes of head-breaking questions. Orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody, biography, astronomy, geography, and general cosmography, the sciences of compound proportion, algebra, land-surveying and levelling, vocal music, and drawing from models, were all at the ends of his ten chilled fingers. He had worked his stony way into Her Majesty’s most Honourable Privy Council’s Schedule B, and had taken the bloom off the higher branches of mathematics and physical science, French, German, Latin, and Greek. He knew all about all the Water Sheds of all the world (whatever they are), and all the histories of all the peoples, and all the names of all the rivers and mountains, and all the productions, manners, and customs of all the countries, and all their boundaries and bearings on the two and thirty points of the compass. Ah, rather overdone, M’Choakumchild. If he had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more!

He went to work in this preparatory lesson, not unlike Morgiana in the Forty Thieves: looking into all the vessels ranged before him, one after another, to see what they contained. Say, good M’Choakumchild. When from thy boiling store, thou shalt fill each jar brim full by-and-by, dost thou think that thou wilt always kill outright the robber Fancy lurking within—or sometimes only maim him and distort him!
It is, however, exactly this uninspired bland attitude that Dickens’s novel cauterizes. Although *Hard Times* is realistic to the bone in the sense that it refers to a very particular time period in England and deals with some hot debates of the mid-Victorian period (like the “Condition of England Question,” the educational system and utilitarianism), the mode of representation selected by Dickens deviates from realism and borrows from a variety of other genres.

On the one hand, *Hard Times* focuses on some very characteristic aspects of mid-Victorian England. The classroom scenes in the beginning of the novel, for instance, are distinct echoes of the teaching system in schools: in huge classrooms, about one thousand students were arranged in a military way and controlled by monitors and a monitor-general; students had numbers and were taught to memorize blocks of factual knowledge in a mechanical way. The setting of the novel also, Coketown, is an exact copy of the monotonous, hellish industrial cities which were mushrooming at the time and dehumanized their inhabitants. Moreover, the part of the plot referring to the mill workers and their combining in unions faithfully demonstrates the conditions of the working class people: as an aftermath of the *laissez faire* or Free Trade economic system of the time (that was based on the assumption that the government should not interfere at all with the running of factories), the poor were prey to exploitation by capital owners. Dickens’s effort to be precise about the world he described is evident in the unprecedented emphasis he gave to observation as recorded in his letters. We know for example that he had visited Preston, a textile-manufacturing town in the North of England in order to collect data and form an opinion about trade unions and the weavers’ strike that broke out there in 1853, a year before the publication of his novel.

On the other hand, this dry, oppressive, deadly statistical life in the novel is very robustly resisted by both the voice that narrates and the style of narration. The narrator is avowedly not recording the real-life situations the novel refers to in an objective way as, throughout the novel, he attacks the system of political economy, utilitarianism and self-interest, and invites the reader to form an opinion and take sides. His language is loaded with metaphors and compressed and becomes most of the times invasive and rhetorical, making polemical and didactic proclamations, as in the excerpt below:

Utilitarian economists, skeletons of schoolmasters, Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used-up infidels, gabbler s of many little dog’s-eared creeds, the poor you will have always with you. Cultivate in them, while there is yet time, the utmost graces of the fancies and affections, to adorn their lives so much in need of ornament; or, in the day of your triumph, when romance is utterly driven out of their souls, and they and a bare existence stand face to face, Reality will take a wolfish turn, and make an end of you.

In a paroxysm of rage here, the narrator imagines all preachers of facts being devoured and demolished by their own creed which has taken the monstrous shape of a wolf. This grotesque image points towards the very characteristic reliance of the narration on genres diametrically opposed to realism, such as the gothic, fairy tales or melodrama. The novel abounds in exaggerated characters who bear a close resemblance to ogres, witches, fairies, dragons, old women on broomsticks, etc., and have names indicative of their qualities in a restoration-comedy fashion (Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. M’Choakumchild grind and choke the imagination of innocent children, Mr. Bounderby is a bounder, i.e., a wicked person). To a considerable extent, it also borrows from the popular theater, pantomime and circus slapstick in order to reveal the truth to the reader. It is through the mouth of the clownish circus owner, the always half-drunk and cross-eyed Mr. Sleary, that the ultimate truth is revealed to us in a ludicrous, hardly recognizable, lisp: “People muth be amuthed. […] You muth have uth, Thuquire”. The gist of the novel, “people must be amused” as they can’t live without the circus, is pronounced in a hilariously amusing way. In its effort to attack factual reality, Dickens’s novel sacrifices realism to impossible plot coincidences, incoherent characters, theatricality, artificiality, and melodramatic tableaux, and has for this reason been accused by various critics of failing to represent the condition of the working people. George Bernard Shaw has characterized Dickens’s depiction of the workers’ union leader, for example, “a mere figment of middle-class imagination. No such man would be listened to by a meeting of English factory hands” (338).

You can read [here](https://www.henryjames.org/james/essays/the-real-thing) Henry James’ short story “The Real Thing”
Yet, despite these departures from the real, *Hard Times*, is an invaluable portrait of industrialized England, the devastating effects of political economy and the predominance of utilitarianism. It is an excellent case of how truth does not necessarily lie in the real, a theme that intrigued Henry James, another key figure in nineteenth-century literary realism. In his short story “The Real Thing”, published in 1892, James puts forward exactly this question of simulation/imitation versus creation of truth in art. The first-person narrator and painter in the story finds it impossible to be inspired by the declining but genuinely aristocratic Monarchs, or to use them as models for his painting of upper class life. The Monarchs are “the real thing,” the real gentleman and the real lady, and, as such, are always trapped in the same thing and can only stand for the class of people they belong to. However, “meager little” Miss Churm with her “freckled cockney” and “whimsical sensibility” has infinite potential of being metamorphosed into anything the artist wants her. The fact that the drawings the painter makes of the Monarchs will always look exactly like them is precisely their defect. Miss Churm’s portraits, conversely, can signify everything: “from a fine lady to a shepherdess.” In a metafictional flash of frankness, the narrator/painter confesses his perverse, as he calls it, “innate preference for the represented subject over the real one: the defect of the real one was so apt to be a lack of representation. I liked things that appeared; then one was sure. Whether they were or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question.”

James’ story provides proof that the realists’ pursuit of truth, even their trust in the external world, does not necessarily mean that their writing is reduced to a scrupulous mechanical mirroring of material actuality. Like modernist writers, realists too are aware of the elusiveness of life, the power of the imagination and the importance of overcoming the subservient attachment to trivialities. Most nineteenth-century realists acknowledge the shortcomings of their means and, as a result, depend on their imagination. This fact highlights the continuities rather than the breaches between realism and modernism. If realists still believed there was a truth to be told, they knew well that the only way to do that was, in Emily Dickinson’s words, to “tell it slant.”

9. Translucency vs. Polysemy in Language

What makes circuitous journeys in literature inescapable and perplexes realistic representation even more is the fact that the tool of a writer is language. Although it is generally defined as a complex system of signs that enables communication, language is often an inadequate method of interaction or even a cause of misconceptions. Conceptions of language have changed throughout the centuries, and since the role language plays in literature is decisive, it is important to trace the key moments in its trajectory. The English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) formulated his theory of language in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which prevailed throughout the eighteenth century and set up the basis for consequent empirical theories of language. According to Locke, “men came to use spoken words as the signs of their ideas” (Book III, Chapter 2, section 1); although these words are selected by people arbitrarily (at that time, the word “arbitrarily” meant “dependent on human choice”, not “randomly”), in Locke’s theory, there is a great dependence of words on ideas and words are perceived as flat surfaces, transparent glass through which we get a sight of the actual world.
This view of language was dominant in the nineteenth century as well, but it was by and large contested by twentieth-century structuralist and poststructuralist linguists. The seminal Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) challenged the referential function of language and its ability to allow entrance to the real world. For Saussure, the sign is the basic unit of meaning and comprises the signifier/the word image and the signified/the mental concept. The signified and the signifier are inseparable and form a unity. Like Locke, Saussure also believes that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, i.e. random, but for him, words acquire meaning through their relationship to other words, not because they represent things in the actual world. Language, in other words, is a closed system of signs in which meaning is produced from the interrelationship between the signs it contains. This is clearly evident in contrasting concepts; beauty, for example, cannot be perceived irrespectively of its binary opposite, ugliness, in the same way that presence is dependent on our understanding of absence, farness is dependent on closeness, right is dependent on wrong, originality on banality, democracy on absolutism, and so on and so forth.

Saussure’s structuralist definition of language as a system of interdependent entities would seem to conflict with realist writing which professes to represent an accurate picture of the outside world. And, of course, the poststructuralist approaches that followed in the second half of the twentieth century complicated things even more. The idea of the unity of the sign, for instance, is rejected by the French controversial psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), who spoke of the open-endedness of signs. For Lacan, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is never a one-to-one relationship, as words can never be perceived outside a certain context. Furthermore, we should bear in mind that words are always perceived by human beings, and since perception inevitably involves memory, the same signifiers are perceived differently by different people. The denotative meaning of a word, even in cases where a word has multiple, varied, and/or conflicting definitions, can be traced in a good dictionary. Its connotations, however, are countless and depend both on the linguistic context in which the word appears and on the myriad associations the word may have for each individual who reads, hears or speaks it.
To have this point further illustrated, let us consider the following excerpt from Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. As this passage relies chiefly on the technique of showing (i.e. presenting to the reader the characters’ direct words in dialogue) and scanty telling, (i.e. narratorial commentary), except in the last paragraph, it would be reasonable to conclude that this part of the story is presented objectively to us through the voice of a non-interfering narrator. A company of three, Edmund Bertram, his cousin Fanny Price, and their friend, Miss Mary Crawford, have been walking around the wood park of a large mansion they are visiting and come to rest for a while on a shaded bench. Edmund and Mary talk about how exhausted Fanny must be, while Mary decides that she must explore further. Edmund argues with her about the dimensions of the wood, and the two set off to calculate the distance by walking about it. Meanwhile, Fanny is persuaded that she should stay behind and wait for them. There appears to be nothing vulgar or provocative either in the conversation between the characters here or in the narrator’s comments at the end, and Jane Austen is perhaps the last nineteenth-century writer one would consider capable of offensive language. It is, however, passages like these in Austen that have generated a whole school of criticism delving into her bawdy humour and subversive potential, like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” (1991) or Jillian Heydt-Stevenson’s *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (2005).

Indeed, if we contemplate the connotative meanings of words, like “ha-ha,” for example, and relate them to the context of the story and the characters of the novel, it becomes clear that in this scene the filter through which events are transmitted to us is not really transparent. According to the dictionary definition, ha-has are walls or other boundary markers set in a ditch so as not to interrupt the landscape. It is exactly these rigid borders, i.e., her very confined role as a nineteenth-century woman, that unruly Mary wants to cross over, and it is only via very suggestive references to the geography of the place that this is inferred. There’s no direct mention here of Mary’s subverting gender stereotypes, claiming the pleasure of a female sexual gaze, or experiencing sexual satisfaction; but all these lurk around her desire to engross Fanny’s horse, look through iron gates, and reach to the bottom of the wood right by the side of the ha-ha. In this apparently objective recounting of three characters resting on a bench and engaged in well-bred conversation, Jane Austen actually sabotages all nineteenth-century propriety rules as her heroine wittily and stealthily takes the initiative to be in places which immobilized Fanny is prevented from entering.
Chapter IX

A few steps farther brought them out at the bottom of the very walk they had been talking of; and standing back, well shaded and sheltered, and looking over a ha-ha into the park, was a comfortable-sized bench, on which they all sat down.

“I am afraid you are very tired, Fanny,” said Edmund, observing her; “why would not you speak sooner? This will be a bad day's amusement for you if you are to be knocked up. Every sort of exercise fatigues her so soon, Miss Crawford, except riding.”

“How abominable in you, then, to let me engross her horse as I did all last week! I am ashamed of you and of myself, but it shall never happen again.”

“Your attentiveness and consideration makes me more sensible of my own neglect. Fanny's interest seems in safer hands with you than with me.”

“That she should be tired now, however, gives me no surprise; for there is nothing in the course of one's duties so fatiguing as what we have been doing this morning: seeing a great house, dawdling from one room to another, straining one's eyes and one's attention, hearing what one does not understand, admiring what one does not care for. It is generally allowed to be the greatest bore in the world, and Miss Price has found it so, though she did not know it.”

“I shall soon be rested,” said Fanny; “to sit in the shade on a fine day, and look upon verdure, is the most perfect refreshment.”

After sitting a little while Miss Crawford was up again. “I must move,” said she; “resting fatigues me. I have looked across the ha-ha till I am weary. I must go and look through that iron gate at the same view, without being able to see it so well.”

Edmund left the seat likewise. “Now, Miss Crawford, if you will look up the walk, you will convince yourself that it cannot be half a mile long, or half half a mile.”

“It is an immense distance,” said she; “I see that with a glance.”

He still reasoned with her, but in vain. She would not calculate, she would not compare. She would only smile and assert. The greatest degree of rational consistency could not have been more engaging, and they talked with mutual satisfaction. At last it was agreed that they should endeavour to determine the dimensions of the wood by walking a little more about it. They would go to one end of it, in the line they were then in—for there was a straight green walk along the bottom by the side of the ha-ha—and perhaps turn a little way in some other direction, if it seemed likely to assist them, and be back in a few minutes. Fanny said she was rested, and would have moved too, but this was not suffered. Edmund urged her remaining where she was with an earnestness which she could not resist, and she was left on the bench to think with pleasure of her cousin's care, but with great regret that she was not stronger. She watched them till they had turned the corner, and listened till all sound of them had ceased.

10. The Dialogic Character of the Novel

10.1 Centripetal vs. Centrifugal Forces

Twentieth-century theories of language, as we have already seen, have enabled fresh readings of nineteenth century texts which, under the scope of the early twentieth-century modernist experimentation, had been devalued as static and monolithic. The most influential theory, however, which put forward a new understanding of the novel and instigated groundbreaking reconceptualizations of the genre was formulated by the Russian formalist theorist and critic of literature Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975).

According to Bakhtin, the principal characteristic of language is heteroglossia, the fact that language at all times consists of multiple layers which correspond not only to linguistic dialects, but also to socio-ideological languages related with factors like age, social groups, professions, gender, class, etc. “All words,”
Bakhtin writes, “have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour,” and no word can escape its contextual overtones which can be “generic, tendentious, individualistic” (293). Words can never simply reflect objects, but are always engaged in an interactive and antagonistic dialogue with them. In languages that are alive and developing, words travel towards objects. In doing so, they come upon other “alien” words that are already there in the objects and with which they intersect in order to create new meanings (Bakhtin 279). As a result, each word/voice speaks of its own way of seeing the world and from its own value system.

This is what makes Bakhtin reject definitions of language as a common unitary system of linguistic norms that lay emphasis on what he calls the centripetal forces of language. These forces aim at conquering variety in language and promoting a “concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization” (Bakhtin 271). Along with these centripetal forces, though, operate centrifugal forces that counteract unification and centralization striving for disunification and decentralization (Bakhtin 272). Consequently, every utterance is inherently heteroglot (many-voiced), since it embodies contradictory voices, and dialogic, as these voices are involved in an incessant conflict. Meaning, for Bakhtin, can be produced only by the word’s interaction with other words in certain contexts.

Michael Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*

At the time when major divisions of the poetic genres were developing under the influence of the unifying, centralizing, centripetal forces of verbal-ideological life, the novel—and those artistic-prose genres that gravitate toward it—was being historically shaped by the current of decentralizing, centrifugal forces. At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and the buffoon spectacle, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all “languages” and dialects; there developed the literature of the *fabliaux* and Schwänke of street songs, anecdotes, where there was no language-center at all, where there was to be found a lively play with the “languages” of poets, scholars, monks, knights and others, where all “languages” were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face. (272-73)

What is crucial in our discussion here is Bakhtin’s perception of the novel as a dialogic genre par excellence. Novels are distinct from other literary genres, he argues; unlike epics, which endeavor to abolish diversity, novels embrace diversity. They are by nature polyphonic, artistic orchestrations of multiple voices, as prose writers can distance themselves from the language of their own work and celebrate multivocality. Unlike the epic poet, the novelist has no fear of the unfamiliar meanings and tones of words and therefore feels no urge to eliminate them. Novelists, Bakhtin writes, do not “speak in a given language,” they speak “through language,” like a ventriloquist that can juggle diverse voices and trick you about their source. This polyphonic quality of novels can function at a number of levels. In a more elemental way, it may refer to the different voices of the characters in the novel, their different dialects, sociolects or idiolects. In a more complex way, it may have to do with the variety of genres from which a novel is borrowing or the variety of points of view filtered through the voice of the narrator(s).

10.2 The Novel as a Hybrid Genre

Let us consider first the polyphonic aspect of the novel as far as genre is concerned. Bakhtin perceives the novel as an all-enveloping and ever-developing genre, unique in its capacity to ingest and devour other genres while still maintaining its status as a novel. Its idiosyncratic structure can embrace, parody, and reformulate or “novelize” other genres (like drama, see for ex. Ibsen or naturalist drama), epic poetry (for ex. Byron’s *Don Juan*), or lyric poetry (Heine’s lyrical verse). The novel questions the fixed characteristics of well established genres, he argues, blends them with innovative elements, and achieves a wider and deeper perspective of ever-
changing, ever-unfolding reality. Heroes from medieval romances, for example, as has already been mentioned above, are metamorphosed into anti-heroic parodies in the novel. They are no longer one-sided but acquire new dimensions as their positive qualities are depicted along with the ridiculous, base and flawed aspects of their character. They make mistakes and learn from them, or refuse to learn, but in either case reveal to the reader a broader and more complexly rich view of life. It is in the nature of the novel to rely on other forms and at the same time expose their conventionality, reappropriate them, and in doing so enable fresh understandings of the world.

Bakhtin’s theory can prove to be very enlightening when exploring the British nineteenth-century novel, as its attachment to realism is mostly characterized by haziness and uncertainty especially when compared with the French nineteenth-century novel. Although both French and English novels of the time share the tendency to position characters and events in a real historical moment and direct their gaze towards the low and up-to-that-time neglected part of life, English realism is far more indirect and complicated, as the influential literary critic George Levine has shown. This is largely due to the fact that most major novelists of that century are still under the insistent influence of romanticism. Enlightenment thought with its trust in rational scientific knowledge has left an indelible mark on the eighteenth-century novel, but in the nineteenth century such models of perception are always pervaded by a Romantic critique of utilitarian thinking. This has been made clear in the previous reference to Dickens’s *Hard Times*, an industrial novel which assembles elements from melodrama, fairy tales or the gothic and presents the distilled truth through the voice of a clown. But the strong link to romanticism is evident in a whole range of authors affiliated with realism, like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, the Brontës, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is a realistic depiction of early-nineteenth-century society with residues of the archaic romance; Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* combines the domestic-realist governess fiction with elements from the Gothic and the romance; Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* relies heavily on the uncanny and Gothic romance; George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* anticipates the modern psychological novel; Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* blends realism with symbolism. The list is endless.

10.3 Point of View

It is not only genre that British nineteenth-century realism transforms, but narrative techniques as well. Although realism is dedicated, as we said, to representing social realities in an objective way, it is not ignorant of the fact that these realities are intricate and constructed. Consequently, the voice that narrates is in many cases split or unstable, and omniscience is recognized as an impossible task. Even the highly anti-romantic William Thackeray, a chief representative of the realist school, distrusts omniscient narrators and acknowledges their deficiencies. In his not so very well-known novel *The Newcomes*, which is an education in the Victorian era with its hundreds of references to Victorian poets, painters, politicians and events of the time, the narrator openly declares his inability to comprehend the minds of his characters and reach the depths of their hearts. There are, of course, other, more subtle, narrators who rather than reveal their intentions to the readers delight in carrying them off track. This is usually the case with Jane Austen’s ventriloquist narrators whose voice often mixes with the voice of the characters. We are often tricked into believing that the views which the narrator expresses are the views of an external non-involved observer, but Austen’s narrators recurrently adopt the perspective of certain characters in the novel without warning us. This kind of *stylistic contagion* (i.e., a case in which the way the narrator thinks is *infected* by the way a character thinks), or *literal endosmosis* (i.e., the two voices are like two liquids separated by a thin membrane which eventually breaks and allows them to merge), as it has also been called, is a precursor of the phenomenon of *Free Indirect Speech* encountered in modernist fiction par excellence.

Such a renowned “lie,” or case of Free Indirect Speech, can be traced in the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, which is presented to us as a universal truth supposedly announced by the narrator: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” The lack of inverted commas here, which would mark the beginning and end of someone else’s quoted words, makes us infer that this statement is expressed and supported by the narrator. Only when the readers get to the second paragraph, do they realize that what has been advertised as a world-widely accepted truth is actually the very limited perspective of certain people who live in a certain neighbourhood:
However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a
neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is
considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

Furthermore, the narrator very subtly draws together the word “truth” and the idea of fixity, a fact
which would make any cautious reader suspect that this truth is nothing but an obsession. As a result, this
initially “universal truth” is eventually reduced to an absurd fixation, especially when it is explained as the
conviction that newcomers are deemed “the rightful property” of the unmarried female population. Its
universality shrinks to an astonishing degree when in the rest of Chapter One, through the dialogue between Mr. and
Mrs. Bennet, we are led to conclude that this preposterous thought is stuck in Mrs. Bennet’s mind, the mother of five
girls, who is in desperate need of finding husbands for them. This chapter ends with the narrator’s very caustic
remarks about Mrs. Bennet: “She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper.
[…]. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news”. Such sarcasm
reasonably makes one wonder why the narrator would adopt her prejudiced perspective in the very first sentence
of the book.

The answer lies in the fact that for Austen, as for most British realist writers, truth is more complex than it
appears to be. Her narrator’s voice is in a sense undecided, as while it is rooted in the world it describes (the landed
gentry of early nineteenth-century England), it simultaneously undermines it through refined criticism and
irony. It is not accidental that Free Indirect Speech, a narrative device which was adopted systematically by
modernist writers in the early twentieth century, was first used consistently by Jane Austen in the early
nineteenth century. Both Austen and modernist writers, in different ways and degrees of course, distrusted
universal truths and perceived reality as flux rather than rigidity and permanence. Hence, their preference for
polyphony and the joining together of incompatible points of view.

### 11. Female Realism

Austen’s revisiting of “universal truths” is largely due to the fact that these truths nailed women down to very
limited roles. Her contribution to the novel is unique not only because it exploits the potential of narrative
voice and anticipates modernism, but, more importantly perhaps, because it establishes a female form of
realism. In the same way, antiheroes and the lower strata of society permeated fiction in the eighteenth
century, as we have seen, women gained momentum in nineteenth-century novels. This is not to suggest that
female characters were not there before, but for the first time women are represented by women and given a
voice of their own. Let us not forget that women were the major consumers and producers of fiction in the
nineteenth century. Inspired by her predecessor, Frances Burney (1752-1840), a writer who concentrated on
representing women’s social lives and struggles in a patriarchal world, Austen launches a tradition of novels
by women about women which was carried on throughout the century by writers like the Brontës, Elizabeth
Gaskell, and George Eliot.

For all these female writers, reality had up to that point been defined by male voices and was therefore
partial and prejudiced. Women had been misrepresented as weak, feeble and inconstant creatures locked in
feminine domestic sensibility. “Men have had the advantage of us in telling their own story,” Anne Elliot
protests gently in Austen’s last novel, *Persuasion*. “Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the
pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything,” Anne concludes. In the novels of these
nineteenth-century female writers, women are able to reason, express their views and take an active stance,
while their domestic concerns and affairs are recognized as an essential part of everyday reality. With these

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**Free Indirect Speech/Discourse/Style:**

This literary term refers to what Bakhtin calls “double-voiced discourse,” i.e. the
confusion of two voices, usually that of the
narrator and that of a character. In such
narrative passages, the third-person
narration is overrun by the style of a
character’s language (this can be evident
in the tone of voice, vocabulary, thoughts,
values or perspectives of the character)
without the external indication of inverted
commas. Although this style of writing
was first used consistently by Jane Austen,
it is extensively adopted by modernist
writers.
women writers, the novel acquires a new dimension, as it acknowledges domesticity as a central part of reality. Their witty, competent, passionate, persistent, independent, strong-minded, or educated female protagonists enable fresh insights into the world, life and history. While public or major historical events are either only indirectly alluded to or presented through the prism of female protagonists, concerns originally considered private (like marriage, love, parenting, housekeeping) come to the forefront and obtain political importance.

If we return for a moment to the example from *Pride and Prejudice* mentioned in the previous section, we can see how cautiously, almost imperceptibly, Austen engrafts on the novel the point of view of women, even silly and frivolous women like Mrs. Bennet. According to common sense and plot evidence, it is gentlemen or ladies in need (not in possession) of a fortune that are in want of a wife or a husband. It is indeed Mr. Wickham, Charlotte Lucas, and all the potentially impoverished Bennet girls who must desperately hit upon a good match in order to escape disgrace or misery. Yet there is truth in this introductory sentence when set within the early nineteenth-century context and seen through the prism of the social hierarchies of the time. A well-off gentleman belonging to the landed gentry, like Mr. Darcy, was indeed in need of a wife, if he were to set a proper example to the large parish he was in charge of and rule as a proper proprietor. It is his future wife, Elizabeth Bennet, who provides Mr. Darcy with the opportunity to be aware of his pride and reform his behaviour. Although the initial remark in Chapter One of the book conflates with the perspective of unintelligent and unwise Mrs. Bennet, it is not entirely discarded in *Pride and Prejudice*. Truth with Austen seems to broaden its spectrum in order to accommodate points of view that had up to that time been considered trifling and superfluous. So, a propertied gentleman like Mr. Darcy, the novel concludes, can accomplish his public mission successfully only if his private life is illuminated and enriched by a proper heroine like Elizabeth. Although she is silly Mrs. Bennet’s daughter, Elizabeth is well aware that her mother’s frivolous perspective alludes to the actual dangers that women of her class would have to face if not married to an eligible gentleman, and encapsulates traces of a “universal truth,” according to which women are a crucial and indispensable part of society.

12. Realism: Reactionary or Progressive?

We have argued so far that realism began as a genre that was affiliated with the rising middle class and focused on characters and aspects of life that had long been unrepresented or of minor significance in art and literature. The antiheroic voices of pedantic characters, or the uncouth lower classes, or even the unsophisticated female population that invaded eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature gave to it an air of democratization. Seen through the prism of modernism, however, in the first decades of the twentieth century, realism became synonymous with conservatism. At a time when almost all religious, philosophical and scientific dogmas were put into question, the lens of realism was too narrow and restrictive. For modernist writers and thinkers, realism, with its attachment to positivist thinking, was considered incapable of transferring the depth, complexity and confusion of modern experience.

During the interwar period especially, a group of German theorists, who were later labeled “The Frankfurt School,” began to consider Enlightenment and positivism as a form of dictatorship. For the sociologist/philosophers Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) or Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) for instance, bourgeois Enlightenment imposed a very limited and biased perspective that aimed at naturalizing and reinforcing the prevalent state of things. Consequently, realism’s trust in Enlightenment and rational thinking rendered it a conformist and reactionary mode. In a similar way, a number of critics in the second half of the twentieth-century accused realism of representing a simplified one-dimensional view of the world. According to the French literary theorist Roland Barthes (1915-1980), the world we encounter in realist fiction is “purged of the uncertainty of existence,” and the realist mode is too absorbed in documenting reality and too lost in concrete details (*Writing Degree Zero* 27). In *Critical Practice* (1980), a very influential and innovative book on the theory and practice of criticism, the British literary critic Catherine Belsey (1940-) also speaks of realism as a transparent medium that endorses the dominant status quo. In classic realism, Belsey contends, “The reader is invited to perceive and judge the ‘truth’ of the text, the coherent, non-contradictory interpretation of the world” (69).
Roland Barthes, from “The Reality Effect”

Resistance of the “real” (in its written form of course) to structure is very limited in the fictive account, constructed by definition on a model which, for its main outlines, has no other constraints than those of intelligibility; but this same “reality” becomes the essential reference in historical narrative, which is supposed to report “what really happened”: what does the non-functionality of a detail matter then, once it denotes “what took place”; “concrete reality” becomes the sufficient justification for speaking. History (historical discourse: *historia rerum gestarum*) is in fact the model of those narratives which consent to fill in the interstices of their functions by structurally superfluous notations, and it is logical that literary realism should have been—give or take a few decades—contemporary with the regnum of objective history, to which must be added the contemporary development of techniques, of works, and institutions based on the incessant need to authenticate the “real”: the photograph (immediate witness of “what was there”), reportage, exhibitions of ancient objects (the success of the Tutankhamen show makes this quite clear), the tourism of monuments and historical sites.

All this shows that the “real” is supposed to be self-sufficient, that is strong enough to belie any notion of “function” […]. (146-47)

Realism has also been attacked by postcolonial critics like Edward Said (1935-2003) or Gayatri Spivak (1942-) as a genre that promotes the imperialist project and is complicit with the dominant Eurocentrism of the nineteenth century. For them, the nineteenth-century novel reflects the notion that Europeans as a superior people undertook the noble task of civilizing what they thought of as inferior nations or races. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), a seminal work in postcolonial criticism, Said draws examples from mainstream eighteen-century, Victorian, and twentieth-century writers to argue that in the British novel, “the right to colonial possessions helps directly to establish social order and moral priorities at home” (73). In works by Defoe, Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, Conrad, Kipling, etc., colonial territories are in the centre or background of their plots either as sources of wealth or as repository of unwanted characters. Moreover, the colonial “other” is always a grotesque threat to social order, a fantastic monstrous impossibility which realist characters are challenged to confront and expel.

More specifically, Said invites us to consider a number of such cases in which the colonies are exploited both literally (the English invest on their affluent natural resources) and metaphorically (the English build their pre-eminence on the alleged inferiority of the natives). Said examines a number of examples drawn from the huge tank of the nineteenth-century novel. Abel Magwitch, for instance, from Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, is an ex-convict deported to Australia, who eventually becomes a colonial businessman, but is denied return to England although he finances Pip’s dream of developing into a successful English gentleman. Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester’s deranged West Indian wife in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, is exiled in an attic and censored for ever when burned alive, allowing Mr. Rochester to marry Jane, a sound English educator. The authoritative and powerful Sir Thomas Bertram in Austen’s *Mansfield Park* has made a fortune as a plantation and slave owner in Antigua, a fact which, Said argues, is conveniently silenced in the novel. And it is precisely realist representation, the critics of realism maintain, that mutes marginal and oppressed voices; if the genre of realism has promised the readers to convey the material and objective aspect of a certain historical time, then realism, they conclude, is committed to promoting the prevailing conventionalized modes of thinking and establishing a stereotypical image of society as recognizable and predictable.

Edward Said, from *Culture and Imperialism*

As a reference, as a point of definition, as an easily assumed place of travel, wealth, and service, the empire functions for much of the European nineteenth century as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction, very much like the servants in grand households and in novels, whose
work is taken for granted but scarcely ever more than named, rarely studied […], or given density.

To cite another intriguing analogue, imperial possessions are as usefully there, anonymous and collective, as the outcast populations […] of transient workers, part-time employees, seasonal artisans; their existence always counts, though their names and identities do not, they are profitable without being fully there. […] [They are] people on whom the economy and polity sustained by empire depend, but whose reality has not historically or culturally required attention. In all of these instances the facts of empire are associated with sustained possession, with far-flung and sometimes unknown spaces, with eccentric or unacceptable human beings, with fortune-enhancing or fantasized activities like emigration, money-making, and sexual adventure. Disgraced younger sons are sent off to the colonies, shabby older relatives go there to try to recoup lost fortunes […], enterprising young travellers go there to sow wild oats and to collect exotica. The colonial territories are realms of possibility, and they have always been associated with the realistic novel. Robinson Crusoe is virtually unthinkable without the colonizing mission that permits him to create a new world of his own in the distant reaches of the African, Pacific, and Atlantic wilderness. (75)

This, however, is an evaluation which fails to consider realism in all its dimensions. As we have seen in our analysis so far, realism does not turn a deaf ear to the weak and feeble (whether this involves categories like gender, class or race), nor does it favor monolithic readings. Modern insights of theory and criticism have allowed us to appreciate realist texts in all their complexity and throw light on the inconsistencies, ellipses, or subversions that are embedded in realist fiction. As Said himself plainly states in Culture and Imperialism, we must read “the great canonical texts, and perhaps also the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture, with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented (I have in mind Kipling’s Indian characters) in such works” (78). In the past few decades, such readings have indeed been attempted and have enabled readers to gain a clearer picture of realism’s experimental and dissident moments. Contemporary criticism in most cases focuses on examining how conflicting tendencies or centripetal and centrifugal forces in texts are engaged in a dialectic relationship rather than conflating realism with ideological and aesthetic conservatism. It is without doubt that the insistence of realism on precision or detail does not function as a means of sedating the readers and robbing them of their power to think and resist. In most realist fiction, despite the overriding references to an external materiality, the status quo is often questioned and the texts inspire an active reaction to social injustice, inequalities and wrongs.

If we return for a moment to the examples from Said’s book mentioned above, it becomes evident that when read in the context of the whole novel in which they appear, they constitute more complicated cases and not an unambiguous support of Eurocentrism, Englishness, or patriarchy. New South Wales, for instance, is only a vague background in Dickens’s story, but it has given Abel Magwitch the chance to reform himself and, most importantly, to support Pip’s great expectations. The half-Creole Bertha Mason is of course a threatening “Other” in Bronte’s novel; it is Bertha, however, who enables Jane to see the true face of Mr. Rochester and motivates her to assume a dynamic role in their relationship. The Bertrams may be apathetic to where their riches and status derive from, but the reference to the Antigua plantation is a clear allusion to slavery and Sir Thomas’ despotic character is not condoned in the novel. Even if most nineteenth-century novels offer an orderly ending that complies with the orthodox notions of gender, class or race at that time, more often than not these texts question them in explicit, implicit, and, quite often, unorthodox ways. One such striking case of an avant-garde ending can be traced in Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss. Maggie Tulliver’s death by drowning seems to be a just and suitable finale to the story of an unruly woman, “a mistake of nature,” as perceived by most of the characters around her. Maggie’s behaviour defies stereotypical definitions of women, especially as these were prescribed by the dominant Darwinian pattern of the mid-nineteenth century; she is more intelligent than her brother, “perversely” attracted by the frail and sick Philip Wakem, and too energetic to tame her passion for life. It is to be expected that Maggie must be discarded as an irregularity; her tragic death, however, signifies simultaneously her release from the confining pattern of marriage and reproduction. Water functions as a modernist symbol of cleansing and liberation in the novel and seems to be the natural element for amphibious creatures like Maggie. In this autobiographical novel, Maggie reflects her creator’s dual nature (George Eliot was the pseudonym of Marian Evans, who adopted a male
identity in order to publish her works), and like Marian Evans she seeks a place/element/space in which women are given the freedom to be creative and express themselves. The overflowing of the river comes as a blessing to Maggie who surrenders to its power without any agony at all. The “angry” river is, after all, an echo of the angry voice of a woman deprived of freedom. It is only when “the threads of ordinary association” are broken, when Maggie loses consciousness and enters this dreamlike unconscious state in which the past merges with the present that she finds relief. Although Eliot, as we have seen, is the most ardent representative of realism in Britain, her ending here anticipates the modernist tendency to perceive time as circular rather than linear, the modernist fascination with the dark unexplored aspects of the human mind, as well as the split self which invades modernist fiction.

George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*

**Book Seventh, Chapter V**

**The Last Conflict**

At that moment Maggie felt a startling sensation of sudden cold about her knees and feet; it was water flowing under her. She started up; the stream was flowing under the door that led into the passage. She was not bewildered for an instant; she knew it was the flood!

And without a moment's shudder of fear, she plunged through the water, which was rising fast to her knees, and by the glimmering light of the candle she had left on the stairs, she mounted on to the window-sill, and crept into the boat, which was left with the prow lodging and protruding through the window.

In the first moments Maggie felt nothing, thought of nothing, but that she had suddenly passed away from that life which she had been dreading; it was the transition of death, without its agony,–and she was alone in the darkness with God.

The whole thing had been so rapid, so dreamlike, that the threads of ordinary association were broken; she sank down on the seat clutching the oar mechanically, and for a long while had no distinct conception of her position. The first thing that waked her to fuller consciousness was the cessation of the rain, and a perception that the darkness was divided by the faintest light, which parted the overhanging gloom from the immeasurable watery level below. She was driven out upon the flood,–that awful visitation of God which her father used to talk of; which had made the nightmare of her childish dreams. And with that thought there rushed in the vision of the old home, and Tom, and her mother,–they had all listened together.

Oh, how welcome, the widening of that dismal watery level, the gradual uplifting of the cloudy firmament, the slowly defining blackness of objects above the glassy dark! Yes, she must be out on the fields; those were the tops of hedgerow trees. Which way did the river lie? Looking behind her, she saw the lines of black trees; looking before her, there were none; then the river lay before her. She seized an oar and began to paddle the boat forward with the energy of waking hope; the dawning seemed to advance more swiftly, now she was in action; and she could soon see the poor dumb beasts crowding piteously on a mound where they had taken refuge. Onward she paddled and rowed by turns in the growing twilight; her wet clothes clung round her, and her streaming hair was dashed about by the wind, but she was hardly conscious of any bodily sensations,–except a sensation of strength, inspired by mighty emotion. Along with the sense of danger and possible rescue for those long-remembered beings at the old home, there was an undefined sense of reconcilement with her brother; what quarrel, what harshness, what unbelief in each other can subsist in the presence of a great calamity, when all the artificial vesture of our life is gone, and we are all one with each other in primitive mortal needs? Vaguely Maggie felt this, in the strong resurgent love toward her brother that swept away all the later impressions of hard, cruel
offence and misunderstanding, and left only the deep, underlying, unshakable memories of early union.

13. Conclusion

Eliot’s projection into the future makes us realize that borders and definitions are there to be contested and broken. Let us remember that, although we traced the origins of realism as a movement in art and literature in the mid-nineteenth century, we have seen how this mode of representation was born long before that when the new middle class was beginning to gain power in Europe. Or, that although we identified the main characteristics of the genre to be linear plots, real-life characters, and the portrayal of low life, it has become obvious that this is not always the case. And, that although we defined the novel by contrasting it to the medieval romance, there are major realist texts that either borrow from the romance (or from a variety of other genres, like the Gothic, the grotesque or melodrama), or anticipate modernist techniques. We are closer to understanding realism if we perceive it as inherently dialogic and inevitably connected with what preceded or followed it. Like the novel, with which realism is closely affiliated, this mode of representation is also a hybrid: both an unattainable utopia and an omnipresent possibility. On the one hand, it is an impossibility, as a hundred percent objective representation of life is a ridiculous claim, since in art and literature there will always be a filter through which reality or a slice of it is transferred to the reader. On the other hand, it is a genre that permeates all writing, as it would be absurd to assert that there are works of art that have no connection to the real world. Eliot’s nineteenth-century image of the “defective mirror” has made it clear that realism is not a transparent genre that excludes the possibility of a critical stance towards the reality it depicts. In order to do justice to it, it would be more productive to approach realism as an inconstant and polysemous form of expression and explore it in all its diversity.

Re-cap:

- Realism was inspired by Enlightenment and positivist thinking.
- Nineteenth-century British realism is revealed to be a more sophisticated and experimental genre when read through the prism of modern theory.
- Realism is engaged in an incessant dialogue with modes of writing that preceded and followed it.
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