

AMERICAN REALISMS IN THE POST-POSTMODERN PERIOD

by

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(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

In a critical essay that accompanies the presentation to my committee of my first novel, *Hapsburg*, I discuss the evolution of American literary realism from the nineteenth century to the present day, with special attention to the ways the artistic conventions of contemporary realist fiction may be linked to the institutional pressures of degree-granting creative writing programs.

INDEX WORDS: Literary realism, creative writing, American novel, regionalism

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AMERICAN REALISMS IN THE POST-POSTMODERN PERIOD

In his 1989 essay “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast,” Tom Wolfe professes to be shocked that his contemporaries had not yet produced “a big realistic fictional novel” (46) about some of the defining historical events and social movements of their generation and that “young people with serious literary ambitions were no longer interested in the metropolis or any other big, rich slices of contemporary life,” (47) but had cloistered themselves within the academy and turned instead to experimental / post-realist modes such as absurdism and magical realism, leaving all the really good material to the journalists. Though his detractors dismissed the essay as a self-congratulatory piece of fluff meant to promote his recent novel *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe’s criticism of the literary landscape of the 1980s now seems rather prescient; few books meeting his criteria have appeared in the intervening quarter-century. Yet, paradoxically, realism is in fact the *dominant* mode in literary fiction today, especially that associated with university-affiliated creative writing programs, if not the kind of realism Wolfe championed, or enacted in his own work.

What do I mean by literary realism? Certainly “realism” is to a large extent in the eye of the beholder. Intentionality is a crucial, if problematic, dimension of realism; that the author made a good-faith effort to show some facet of “reality” is typically assumed, and the merit of the work will often be judged in part by how well readers feel he or she did so. Details are employed to reassure readers that the invented people are moving about within a place and time that has extratextual material existence. Invented places are modeled on some notion of the

typical within a given context, be it suburbia, the New South, the rural Midwest, or a Florida retirement community. Street names, pop culture references, landmarks, or historical events “prove” that if the people and events of the story didn’t actually exist, *they very well could have*. The realist writer presumably hopes to achieve a reaction similar to that of Flannery O’Connor’s neighbor, who reportedly told the author that “them stories just gone and shown you how some folks *would* do” (90). Realist work places invented people in existing social frameworks; that their subsequent actions seem plausible given our knowledge of how people “usually” act or famously have acted in the past is a requirement. Realist writers are armchair sociologists and psychologists; they find human behavior endlessly fascinating and attempt to set up situations that will allow for interesting or revealing permutations. Some poets and fabulists find their work tedious, and some literary critics relish pointing out all the ways that it’s facile or wrongheaded. But aficionados find realist fiction interesting in the way that life and people are deeply interesting; as E. M. Forster puts it in *Aspects of the Novel*, one of its chief pleasures is that, unlike in life, “people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed” (32).

Literary realism has been so influential in American fiction that it may not even appear to be a particular “school” of literature anymore; many of its characteristic features have become so normalized as to have become invisible to most readers. It doesn’t need Tom Wolfe or any other booster to perpetuate itself. But when the movement first burst onto the Anglophone literary scene in the mid-1800s, how revolutionary it was.

Accounts of the birth of modern realism often cite a parallel shift in the visual arts, when French painters in the 1850s moved away from painting idealized, neoclassical images that

reflected traditional, “timeless” conceptions of beauty and morality and began to capture the contemporary world as they saw it, with dirt, with poverty, with sexuality, and with all the impurities that previous arbiters of taste sought to exclude. *Realisme*, some called it. Surely one of the most shocking iterations was Gustave Courbet’s 1866 oil *L’Origine du Monde* (*The Origin of the World*), which presents a realistic close-up of a woman’s genitals, the title daring the prudes of said world to object. More characteristic are paintings that depict common, contemporary people, often members of the lower classes, going about their everyday tasks. These mundane scenes, unlovely in the conventional sense, provided an important corrective at a time when the art world was dominated by history paintings and romantic, exotic fantasies and raised important questions about the purpose and proper subject of art. Bringing the world as the artists experienced it onto the canvas was shocking; daring; an idea whose time had come.

For the literary rebels who hoped to accomplish a similar revolution on the page, the enemies were largely analogous to those found in the visual arts. Romanticism in fiction, with exotic or historical settings and an expressivist tendency toward exaggeration; sentimental, moralistic idealism; and escapist tales of adventure and romance dominated the literary mainstream. In America, before the Civil War, most books available had been imported from Britain or were pirated copies of British works (Barrish 8). The literary publishing that did take place here was largely dominated by well-to-do New Englanders who subscribed to the “genteel” tradition, which according to David Shi, “endorsed the eighteenth-century neoclassical assumption that the arts should esteem the beautiful, revere the past, reinforce social stability, and uphold a chaste morality” (16). This moral conservatism was expressed in statements like poet James Russell Lowell’s dictum “Let no man write a line that he would not have his daughter read” (qtd. in Shi 16). In terms of style and structure, this work generally did not deviate

meaningfully from literature produced in western Europe; other than in setting, it was not recognizable as distinctively “American” in the way that later literature would be. Yet on both continents, life was changing at a breakneck speed as the industrial revolution transformed social relations, technology upended the limits of what had seemed possible, and scientific and philosophical breakthroughs called “timeless” religious and moral certainties into question. As the U.S. expanded its borders, the elite northeastern perspective that dominated literature became increasingly unsatisfactory as a sole representation of the nation’s character. Many years later, Philip Roth would remark about his own time that “the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. . . . The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist” (120). For his nineteenth-century counterpart, the case must have seemed much the same.

Content, therefore, may be the most crucial element of what we call “realism.” To fit in the admittedly broad category of realism a work must delineate some recognizable aspect of relatively contemporary social life with a minimum of fantasy, idealization, or blatantly counterfactual depictions of historical figures or events. (The past may be presented, on the condition that all detail has been meticulously researched and “checks out” to those keeping track at home.) And despite its current reputation as rather staid and tepid, historically realism has often been positioned as thrillingly oppositional as artists working within this mode force readers or viewers to confront truths that had been excluded from accepted social discourses: that war is often experienced as meaningless and horrifying; that good, conscientious people are not always able to transcend poverty even through hard work; that even outwardly “respectable” women experience sexual desire; that deep suffering has always managed to exist amid national

prosperity; that stereotypes fail to capture the humanity and complexity of any given social group. What taboos make invisible must be made visible whenever possible. Conventional wisdom must be made to answer. From this perspective, the traditional stance that art should primarily celebrate the good and the beautiful constitutes a willful and corrosive blindness that threatens the common good rather than protecting it.

For those who do desire art to be inspirational and uplifting, realism (in the nineteenth century and today) can appear dour and negative. So much suffering! So many affairs and accidents and betrayals! So much ugliness! Yet realism has often been employed with blatantly reformist aims by artists hoping that by forcing audiences to confront reality their works can incite more long-lasting social uplift. Other artists are often driven by a compulsion to tell the truth about life and the world as they see it, however tragic or unlovely. (I realize there are those who find these agendas grandiose or priggish.) In short, moral seriousness is another important component of realism.

Precursors to the realist movement existed in America; “domestic,” usually sentimental, novels for women often depicted marginalized people as well as aspects of life the genteel “idealists” looked wincingly away from, and they often included the kind of detailed rendering of clothing, food, and interior spaces that would become a hallmark of realist literature. Published slave narratives gave voice to a previously silenced class of Americans and showed the atrocities slaves experienced as well as the day-to-day particulars of plantation life. Transcendentalist writers mingled their faith in unseen realms with democratic values and praise for the quotidian. But the most startling, transformative American work appeared with Walt Whitman, the self-described poet of the body and poet of the soul, who believed that “The true poem is the daily paper” and stuffed reality hand over fist into his landmark *Leaves of Grass* (as

exciting today as it was at its appearance) and brought the latent realist tendencies of the Transcendentalists into full bloom as he enthusiastically set to capturing the “blab of the pave” and of a dazzlingly wide spectrum of American experiences. “By rooting romantic idealism in an affection for everyday realities, Whitman became the most potent catalyst for change in nineteenth-century American culture,” Shi argues (29). This shift took place in a time when the American public was deeply interested in the fact-finding missions of scientists, journalists, and explorers, when “everyday realities” had become deeply interesting.

But while the ground had already been laid for realism in American literature, the first really important realists were European. French critics had been discussing the idea of realism since the 1830s, but the term “realism” would first be widely used in literary criticism in the 1850s when they applied the concept to work by Gustave Flaubert, Ivan Turgenev, and other authors who seemed to be working from the same impulses that drove painters such as Courbet and Jean-François Millet. Jane Austen, Honoré de Balzac, and others would be retroactively claimed by later critics and writers who saw them as aligned with the modern realist project. This work was followed with interest by the more sophisticated of the American literati, but the realist movement would not truly begin to flower in the U.S. until the 1870s.

Realism in the “Age of Realism” (1865-1914): The Art of Depicting Nature as It Is Seen by Toads

Most scholars agree that the first proto-realist novel in the U.S. was Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills*, which appeared in 1861 and showed readers the harsh conditions immigrant laborers experienced in an American factory town with significantly less sentimentalism than previous works about social problems such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s

Uncle Tom's Cabin, though in other respects it conformed to many of the conventions of earlier nineteenth-century fiction. John W. De Forest's 1867 novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* depicted Civil War battles in harrowing detail, providing another important link in the chain and offering an unusual fictional alternative to the revisionist histories being published in novel form that helped promote the romantic "myth of the Lost Cause" which glorified the war and the Confederacy's role in it. By depicting difficult or unpleasant facts about American life, realist literature played an important role in stimulating debate about contemporary issues.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, survivors were forced to come to terms with the unprecedented carnage and destruction that had taken place and to re-envision the national identity of the restored Union. One manifestation of this cultural soul-searching was a new interest on the part of the reading public in literature that showed how everyday life unfolded for members of the diverse regional subcultures that comprised the nation. The wildly popular "local color" movement that flourished in the decades following the war introduced audiences to ordinary but charming denizens of rural Maine, the Louisiana bayou, the wild Midwest, and almost every conceivable regional designation, with an emphasis on the cadences of local dialects and on the mores and customs that made those groups unique. "Regular," often humble, people became the heroes and heroines of this genre of fiction, supplanting the fantastical characters of romantic narratives, and the small triumphs and tribulations of their lives were delineated with compassion and humor, though frequently with more sentiment and less plausibility than a diehard realist might prefer. The celebration of American idioms also helped foster an indigenous literary tradition less beholden to precedents set in Europe.

The local color genre, which continued to be popular through the turn of the century, primarily unfolded through short stories published in newspapers and magazines, but its emphasis on ordinary people was carried through in the developing tradition of the American realist novel and in realist short stories with aspirations to high art. While the revelation of ugly or unjust social conditions remained an important strain in nineteenth-century realist fiction, the joys and sorrows of “average” people living outwardly quiet lives would become the great subject of American realism. Thus, as Richard Chase argues in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, character became the primary focus, rather than action. More important than what happens is how the people involved *feel* about what is happening and what the events mean to them, and the emotional drama is generated from this personal significance rather than from an externally exciting plot (though many realist novels do feature externally exciting plots). The central conflicts of realist fiction nearly always concern ethical dilemmas in some shape or form.

One of the most prominent literary figures of the so-called “Age of Realism” was William Dean Howells, who is a household name today only among scholars of American literature but was a celebrity in his own lifetime and a lightning rod in the debate over realism that raged in the late nineteenth century. Howells himself wrote several well-received realist novels, most notably *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889) (the former focusing on the fluctuating fortunes of a paint mogul and the latter on Gilded-Age political unrest in New York City), but he also played an important role in championing realism through his position as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1871 to 1881 and as a prolific critic who introduced American audiences to new works by Russian, French, and Scandinavian realist writers; maintained close friendships with realist authors in his own country such as Mark Twain and Henry James; and promoted a younger generation that included Stephen Crane and Hamlin

Garland. To Howells, the ability of realist literature to introduce readers to vastly different “types” of people and invite them to empathize with those unlike them was an important virtue of the genre. In his widely read essays, he called for “democracy in literature,” which wishes to know and to tell the truth, confident that consolation and delight are there; it does not care to paint the marvelous and impossible for the vulgar many, or to sentimentalize and falsify the actual for the vulgar few. Men are more like than unlike one another: let us make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity. (639)

To thinkers like Howells, fiction provided an opportunity to educate readers on the scope of human experience, to contribute to the project undertaken jointly with the flourishing young fields of sociology, anthropology, and psychology of scraping away the myths and falsehoods that obscured the truth of what life was really like.

For realists during this period, the social sciences provided an important model, and while writers sought to make each of their characters convincingly individuated they often followed social scientists’ tendency to treat people as representatives of types—the left-leaning laborer, the nouveau-riche striver, the spoiled daughter of privilege or hopeful son of the tenements. Nineteenth-century realists often pile up detail upon detail in placing characters within their social context, noting all the minutiae of their dress, possessions, home décor, and mannerisms in order to help readers recognize the class of people they’re dealing with, in a process akin to what anthropologist Clifford Geertz would later call “thick description.” “Tell me what you have,” Honoré de Balzac had once said, “and I will tell you what you think.”(qtd. in Shi 33) Importantly, in realist works these details do not necessarily hold symbolic or thematic

significance, though they may possess great resonance; the revelation of a character's personality or social milieu is most important.

For packing as much detail as possible into a work, the third-person narrative perspective tends to be most congenial, as a first-person narrator may not be able to convincingly notice everything the author would wish readers to see, and this mode dominates the realist fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (though notable exceptions, such as *Huckleberry Finn* certainly exist). "Realist writers often shift back and forth between several varieties of third-person narration within a single chapter, or sometimes even a single paragraph," explains Phillip J. Barrish in reference to this period. "In realist fiction, the most characteristic version of third-person narration is 'limited' narration, followed closely by 'omniscient' narration" (51). (Limited narration confines itself to the perspective of one or more characters.) Third-person narration contributes to the impression of objectivity that many nineteenth-century realist authors cultivated; it also allows authors to track the lives of multiple characters who may not be privy to each other's experiences.

A plethora of precise detail (which partially accounts for the daunting length of many nineteenth-century realist works) is necessary not only for characterization but for the creation of what Henry James has called "the air of reality," and often these details are employed by realists for no narrative purpose at all other than to burnish their fictional worlds and enhance the sense of realness. In his famous essay "The Reality Effect," Roland Barthes cites Flaubert's description in "A Simple Heart" of a room in which "an old piano supported, under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons" (qtd in Barthes 141) and analyzes the way a statement like this functions. "...If, in Flaubert's description," he writes,

it is just possible to see in the notation of the piano an indication of its owner's bourgeois standing and in that of the cartons a sign of disorder and a kind of lapse in status likely to connote the atmosphere of the Aubain household, no purpose seems to justify reference to the barometer, an object neither incongruous nor significant, and therefore not participating, at first glance in the order of the *notable*.... (142)

After parsing other examples of this phenomenon, Barthes concludes that many details within realist works are superfluous in themselves but for their effect of enhancing the illusion of truth by providing a sense of the “*having-been-there* of things” and are interchangeable with infinite other possible details (147).

For Barthes, this convention is but one dimension of the problematic nature of realist literature's claim to represent truth (more on this later). But for Henry James, one of the masters of this mode, “truth in detail” is paramount, as he argues in his own seminal essay “The Art of Fiction”:

One can speak best from one's own taste, and I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel—the merit on which all its other merits . . . helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life. The cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process, form, to my taste, the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist. They are his inspiration, his despair, his reward, his torment, his delight. It is here in very truth that he competes with life; it is here that he competes with his brother the painter in *his* attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the

human spectacle. . . . All life solicits him, and to “render” the simplest surface, to produce the most momentary illusion, is a very complicated business. (12)

As we see here, even one of the most brilliant literary theorists of the nineteenth century tends to accept the premise that accurate “rendering” of the outward particulars of “the human spectacle” is not only possible, but integral to conveying truth to readers. That an “air of reality” is necessary to fiction has become so ingrained in most writers and readers of literary fiction today that it is rarely up for debate outside the small number of writers who consciously reject this convention and the critics who are versed in and subscribe to postmodernist theories of narrative (more on those later), but we would all do well to remember that other alternatives exist.

Previously in this essay I have used the phrase “modern realism”; by this I am referring to the fact that various forms of realism are known to have existed in western literature since at least the classical period. (Erich Auerbach’s landmark critical study *Mimesis* discusses some of these incarnations.) Aristotle, one of our most enduring literary theorists, wrote in his *Poetics* that the impulse to represent the world through art is a fundamental human desire. “First,” he wrote, “the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated” (7). *Mimesis*, or imitation, has been a central feature of western literature since its documented history begins; authors and storytellers have consistently sought to create the illusion of life in their tales. But prior to the Enlightenment and the later dawn of modern realism (the kind we know now), mimesis was often used in service to fantastical or spiritual stories, in which humans interacted with gods or dragons or spirits. Only in the past two hundred years would restriction to observable and agreed-upon facts of the material world become a precondition of realism.

As this suggests, what's considered "realistic" is very much tied to the zeitgeist of the time. David Shi has shown that along with the influence of European literature, Americans' preoccupation with "facing facts" in the nineteenth century informed the development of some of that period's most exciting fiction. Scientific breakthroughs that challenged Christianity's account of the world's origin, age, and processes forced believers to modify their understanding of the way God acted in the world and made unbelief a more tenable position. Questions of ethics and morality seemed less black and white. In keeping with the emphasis on observable reality, modern realism has been overwhelmingly secular in orientation, a tendency that dismayed its detractors and stimulated intense debate in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Donald Pizer, one of the foremost experts on American literary realism, explains that

At the center of the debate over realism (and later naturalism) there lay a not uncommon nineteenth-century conflict between religious faith and doubt, a conflict that was seldom introduced openly but that nevertheless underlies a good deal of the language in which the debate was conducted. Much of the diction that pertained on its surface to such literary matters as characterization, plot, and tone also pointed to an author's presumed religious beliefs—to his faith or doubt in a divine creator who provided man with a soul as well as a body and thus with a capacity to aspire to a life of ideal fulfillment. (7)

Thus, to critics such as Hamilton Wright Mabie, who deplored the work of realists whose scientific conception of their art led them to limit their purview to the external realities of undistinguished lives without attaching their stories to any of the larger truths about humanity or the divine that Mabie felt underpinned all true works of genius, literary realism was tantamount to "practical atheism applied to art" (67). This sentiment was echoed by Maurice Thompson, who accused realist writers of "unbelief in ideal standards of human aspiration," as promoted by

Christian morality (125). “Shall we credit our own civilization with an appetency for the *Kreutzer Sonata*, *Leaves of Grass*, and *Madame Bovary*?” he demanded. “Have we moved no farther than this during these centuries of Christianity?” (126) As realist fiction increased in popularity in the 1880s and 1890s, these laments of the genteel continued in the pages of sundry prominent magazines. Ambrose Bierce’s 1911 *Devil’s Dictionary* sardonically echoes some of these objections in its definition of realism as “The art of depicting nature as it is seen by toads. The charm suffusing a landscape painted by a mole, or a story written by a measuring-worm.”

Many realist writers saw themselves as “diagnosing” ills of society and difficult facts of the human condition, but their opposition sneered at this conceit. “To reform conduct we must educate life,” wrote Thompson. “If a man is suffering from blood-poisoning, we do not cure him by local treatment; we try to cleanse his whole system. Ethics must regard the collective body as one patient whose disease is constitutional. The quack doctor panders to a maudlin weakness of chronic invalids. So in art, a certain school of quacks, like Ibsen and Tolstoi, fatten upon the liberality of hysterical souls” (125). The effect of realism on those who took it seriously could only be the degradation of society. Likewise was Howells’ promotion of the depiction of various types of ordinary people, which anticipated the multicultural values of the late twentieth century’s literary scene, cause for dismay among critics of realism. Wrote Mabie,

Realism is crowding the world of fiction with commonplace people; people whom one would positively avoid coming in contact with in real life; people without native sweetness or strength, without acquired culture or accomplishment, without that touch of the ideal which makes the commonplace significant and worthy of study. To the large, typical characters of the older novels has succeeded a generation of feeble, irresolute,

unimportant men and women whose careers are of no moment to themselves, and wholly destitute of interest to us. (64)

Democracy was well and good in theory, but one would not want too much of it in one's literature.

Even among realist writers, controversy existed about how much reality was too much, with sexuality standing as a flashpoint. Many realists hailed from middle-class backgrounds and middle-class readers formed the bulk of the audience for realist fiction; even writers such as Howells who argued passionately for truth in art could simultaneously see plots concerning sex as sordid and prurient and advise that they be avoided. The specter of Émile Zola, the scandalous French author who championed an off-shoot of realism that would become known as naturalism, loomed large over the realism wars. Literary naturalists were highly interested in the “drives”—for sex, for power, for money—that informed human behavior and the forces—of nature, of social class, of family—that pressed upon human lives, and they often focused on the extremes of experience such as criminality, addiction, and illicit sex. For many younger writers at the end of the nineteenth century, the realists who had scandalized their contemporaries a decade or two earlier were far too genteel themselves, and more taboo topics became fair game in American literature. “The extent of all reality is the realm of the author's pen,” wrote Theodore Dreiser in defense of the artist's right to explore issues of sexuality; “and a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down, is both moral and artistic whether it offends the conventions or not” (927). Putting this conviction into practice, Stephen Crane wrote of a young woman whose destitute upbringing in a New York City tenement leads her to prostitution (*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* [1893]); Frank Norris wrote of a dentist whose marital strife over money leads him to beat his wife to death (*McTeague* [1899]); Dreiser himself wrote of a pretty farm girl who moves

to Chicago to seek her fortune, and becomes the mistress of two different men before finding success as an actress (*Sister Carrie* [1900]). By the end of the century, Howells' work seemed quaint and out of touch.

In scholarly discussions and college literature surveys, "American Realism" belongs to the period roughly spanning from 1865 to 1914 (various start and end dates have been offered, so I am here electing the simplest division). This is the age that claims such masterpieces as *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), *The Awakening* (1899), *The House of Mirth* (1905), and numerous others, and saw an explosion of writing by members of previously unrepresented groups who wished to share their own perspective on the American experience. Wonderful stories by Sui Sin Far, Abraham Cahan, Zitkala-Sa, Charles Chesnutt, and Kate Chopin challenged the northeastern white Protestant conception of national identity that threatened to erase other voices. In Europe, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, George Eliot, Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and Émile Zola wrote works that would be read around the world.

Realism(s) After the Age of Realism: 1914 and Onward

The aforementioned periodic designation is somewhat misleading, however. If "Realism" ended sometime before or around the beginning of the First World War, how do we characterize the work of Sinclair Lewis, John Updike, or Eudora Welty? Where do William Styron, Saul Bellow, and James Baldwin fit in? Could Ernest Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald be called realists?

It's complicated. In the early twentieth century, the writers we'd now call "modernists" rejected many of the conventions and theories promulgated by the realist writers of the previous century. William Dean Howells became a figure of scorn. "Realism in literature has had its run,"

Ezra Pound, that great pronouncer, pronounced (qtd. in Shi 291) as in all the branches of the arts practitioners clamored to “make it new.”

Yet, at heart, many of the critiques of nineteenth-century realist fiction boiled down to the idea that *it was not realistic enough*. The early decades of the twentieth century were a great period of literary experimentation, during which writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner expanded the boundaries of what fiction might look like, but many of the innovations that took place were attempts to depict reality more accurately than previous literature had by presenting it in new ways. As artists and intellectuals became aware of new models of consciousness and the mind promoted by psychologists such as William James and Sigmund Freud, and new understandings of how we perceive time and space as promoted by scientists like Albert Einstein and philosophers like Henri Bergson, earlier literary realists’ use of omniscience, apparent faith in the possibility of objectivity, and heavy emphasis on surface reality began to seem facile and misguided.

“The new physics, philosophy, and psychology trumpeted the same basic message: reality was not what it seemed,” explains David Shi (283). In response, authors began exploring the subjective experience of reality and experimented with new modes of presentation that might better capture human thought. The celebrated “stream of consciousness” technique came into fashion as the radically unstable narration of novels such as *Ulysses* (1922) and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) mimicked the fits and starts of the mind in action. As interiority became an increasing preoccupation, the omniscient perspective was more often rejected in favor of the first-person or a very “close” third-person mode. Irony emphasized the gap between apparent realities and the true relations that they obscured. Plots became even looser and new taboos were found to break—masturbation, menstruation, defecation, and “deviant” sexual behavior entered

the pages of European and American literary fiction. Dream and myth were taken seriously as dimensions of human thought just as “real,” if not more so, than a catalogue of the possessions displayed in a drawing room or the scents of a New York slum.

In the nineteenth century, realist writers competed with the new technology of photography when composing visual descriptions; now, the cinema stood indisputably triumphant in its ability to “render” the external world. Film provided inspiration for prose writers, and many authors consciously experimented with filmic approaches, importing the concepts of “panning,” “jump cuts,” and “montage” into their narrative technique. Jazz music and other popular new forms of entertainment reflected a more modern sensibility and introduced new idioms. After the shocking destruction of World War I and after the continuing urbanization and undreamed-of technological advances, nineteenth-century morality no longer seemed adequate. American life had changed dramatically; inevitably, American fiction evolved along with it.

But to what extent did it evolve away from realism? In 1921, Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* and Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* competed for the Pulitzer Prize. After her 1918 realist masterpiece *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather would publish eight more novels between 1922 and 1940, to much acclaim. In 1939, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (most precisely a work of naturalism) used reportage and a magisterial perspective to illuminate the real-life plight of rural Americans displaced by the Dust Bowl. The genre of the literary short story as promulgated in high-brow glossy magazines and literary quarterlies during the mid-twentieth century remained predominantly realist in orientation. While it opened up new avenues for fictional experimentation and left as its legacy a strong emphasis on craft and style, the modernist movement did not ultimately transform American fiction in the way it did American poetry; no

technical shift parallels the Copernican revolution that the triumph of free verse was. Still, while realism generally prevailed, it no longer stood as a critical cause-célèbre. People just *did* it. The “realism wars” had been won—the genteel strain of romantic idealism that had been positioned as its chief alternative had been steamrolled by the nightmare of modernity, to survive only in commercial fiction and the movies. (American fiction, realist or otherwise, has always displayed romantic tendencies, but that’s a subject for another essay.)

But while this historical and critical context is necessary, I am ultimately less concerned with scholarly designations—we could debate, for instance, whether *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) or *The Great Gatsby* (1925) ought to be labeled “realist” or “modernist”—than with considering the survival of some of the specific impulses of the first wave of American realism into the nineteenth-hundreds.

Other challengers to it would emerge; the black humor tradition, as manifested in works such as Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961), thumbed its nose at conventional fiction; lyrical, poetic fiction that did not demand verisimilitude engaged readers’ imaginations; Southern writers with their seeming preoccupation with what many Northerners considered “grotesque” reintroduced a romantic / gothic sensibility into serious U.S. fiction. But all the while, for good or ill, realism remained the mainstream of our national art.

“It Works in Practice, But Does It Work in Theory?”: Realism and the Academy

By the 1960s, this came to seem problematic, even direly so, to some writers and critics. In Europe, “structuralist” literary theory and the drive among avant-garde writers to develop a *nouveau roman*, or “new novel,” had generated fresh debate about the problems of realism. In 1967, John Barth influentially asserted that “a good many current novelists write turn-of-the-

century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary topics,” writing as if Borges and Kafka and Beckett had never lived (“Literature of Exhaustion” 66). In 1974, Ronald Sukenick took this sentiment even further, pronouncing that “The form of fiction that comes down to us through Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Hemingway is no longer adequate to capture our experience. Either the novel will change, or it will die” (402). These so-called “postmodernists” and others experimented in their fiction with new modes of presentation and narrative strategies as they wrestled quixotically to overcome “the literary clichés of the formula of plot, character, and social realism” (Sukenick 402) and to respond to a media-saturated world in which “reality” itself seemed fundamentally unreal. Their output can thus be partially understood as “theory in practice” (Nicol 32). This period also saw a growing interest in magical realism, which had captivated the readers of Latin American authors such as Jorge Luise Borges, and in absurdist fiction and drama, a tradition which had been flourishing outside the mainstream for several decades. Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and other experimentalists wrought strange and marvelous tales that flamboyantly rejected the conventions of realism, which had come to seem dull and played-out.

One common postmodern strategy, popularized by influential European authors such as Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet, was to expose the fictionality of fiction itself, often in playful ways. Like the Philosophy 101 professor who draws a picture of a chair on a chalkboard and asks his students what it is in order to blow their minds by informing them that it’s not a “chair,” it’s “chalk on a chalkboard,” many postmodernist writers delighted in breaking the fictional frame in various ways in order to draw attention to the fact that a narrative is ultimately just words on a page. Consider the opening of Barth’s most famous story, “Lost in the Funhouse”:

For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is *a place of fear and confusion*. He has come to the seashore with his family for the holiday, *the occasion of their visit is Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America*. A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, *which in turn* is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases as well as the customary type for titles of complete works, not to mention. Italics are also employed, in fiction stories especially, for “outside,” intrusive, or artificial voices, such as radio announcements, the texts of telegrams and newspaper articles, et cetera. They should be used *sparingly*. If passages originally in roman type are italicized by someone repeating them, it’s customary to acknowledge the fact. *Italics mine*. (“Lost in the Funhouse” 72— Italics Barth’s)

This tendency toward self-reflexivity, which can also be seen in the work of many of Barth’s contemporaries, reflected a growing sophistication among American and European intellectuals in thinking of the relationship between language and reality. Structuralism as an intellectual movement urged thinkers to uncover the underlying relationships and hierarchies that create meaning in literature and in life and to consider the ways that realities or seeming realities are constructed through language. The French philosopher Michel Foucault was particularly influential in his analysis of the ways language practices may be used to control and contain people for institutional purposes. Roland Barthes’ essays on literature highlighted the complex web of associations and cultural practices that go into reading and understanding a text. “A work of literature, Barthes noted, is, after all, nothing but an assemblage of signs that function in certain ways to create meaning,” explain Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (54). This philosophy, which dominated the French intellectual scene in the 1960s and proliferated in American literary

studies, was succeeded by theories alternatively labeled “poststructuralism,” “deconstruction,” and “postmodernism,” which questioned even more radically the relationship between reality, thought, and language.

Parsing the nuances of these highly complex philosophies is outside of the scope of this essay, but suffice it to say, realist literature’s pretension to representing the world does not come off well in this paradigm. For writers influenced by structuralist and poststructuralist thought, the challenge of coming up with fictional alternatives that avoided simplistic conceptions of social systems and of reality provided a thrilling mission.

Still, realism refused to lie down and die. While the fabulists were busy fabulating, literary journalism began to flourish as a genre in the 1960s as writers applied techniques of realist fiction—lavishly detailed scenes, directly presented dialogue, and emphasis on character psychology and development—to meticulously reported, stylishly written stories. In 1961, Philip Roth lamented what he saw as “a voluntary withdrawal of interest by the fiction writer from some of the grander social and political phenomena of our times,” turbulent times in which “the inevitable end is destruction, if not of all life, then of much that is valuable and civilized in life” (124; 131). If young fictionists did not heed this clarion call and rush out to pen realistic, socially engaged novels, “New Journalists” such as Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion were willing to pick up the slack, artfully documenting the strange, turbulent era in the pages of edgy popular magazines like *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*. Truman Capote’s “nonfiction novel” *In Cold Blood* (1966) and Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) stunned the reading public and inspired a new literary movement. Thus, literary *nonfiction* carried on the legacy of nineteenth-century realism during the years when it was unfashionable in fiction. That this movement largely took place outside academia is not insignificant.

In 1966, Saul Bellow told his *Paris Review* interviewer that “the development of realism in the nineteenth century is still the major event of modern literature” (n.p.). Another “major event,” already in progress at the time of Bellow’s interview is obvious only in hindsight: the increasing role of university creative writing programs, which must be an essential factor in any literary history of the latter half of the twentieth century.

The prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa formally opened its doors in 1936, when only a few creative writing programs were in existence. Wallace Stegner earned a master’s in creative writing there (before the workshop officially began) and then went on to found Stanford’s creative writing program in 1945. Flannery O’Connor studied her craft there, as did many notable mid-century poets. John Cheever and Kurt Vonnegut taught at Iowa during a span of years when Raymond Carver and John Irving attended as students. Philip Roth taught there for two years in the early 1960s before moving to a teaching job at Princeton, and T. C. Boyle received his MFA there in 1974 and PhD in 1977. Others in the long list of notable alumni include Sandra Cisneros and Michael Cunningham. In the 1940s only a few graduate creative writing programs existed; by 1975 there were 52, by 1984 there were about 150, and by 2004 there were more than 350 programs, some of which now grant doctoral degrees in addition to the MFA (McGurl 24). Today, a preponderance of the literary fiction published in prestigious quarterlies and reviewed in taste-making publications such as the *New York Times Book Review* is written by graduates of these institutions.

In the workshops, realist fiction flourished as well, if in a somewhat different vein than Tom Wolfe and his ilk were exploring. In his seminal literary history *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Mark McGurl argues that while creative

writing programs appeared as a response to the “new hospitality to self-expressive creativity on the part of progressive-minded universities willing to expand the boundaries of what could count as legitimate academic work, the founders and promoters of these programs more than met the institution halfway, rationalizing their presence in a scholarly environment by asserting their own disciplinary rigor” (129). This manifested itself in a strong emphasis on “craft,” influenced heavily by the modernist movement and the theories of the New Critics, who believed among other things that good art was incompatible with left-wing political agendas (like, say, drawing attention to the exploitation of rural Americans displaced by the Dust Bowl). McGurl also shows that over time the “Program Era” saw various shifts in values in terms of what is and is not considered appropriate to write about. Questions of how to ethically depict “the Other” in fiction were contended as multiculturalism became an important concern within the humanities, and technical aspects of “voice” and perspective have become politicized (or, perhaps, as writers became more conscious of how these choices were always political). “Write what you know” became an old saw, if one that continued to be played. Ultimately, the production of fiction had not only to be philosophized in terms of aesthetic and moral value but in terms of academic rigor.

Realism in the Program Era

Correlation may not necessarily prove causation, but surely the academic training of so many writers is relevant to the particular brand of realism we see most often today in literary fiction, since many of its characteristic features seem to be direct responses to the various charges of sloppy thinking and wrongheadedness leveled against nineteenth-century realism, as regards, for instance, point of view. After the rise of cultural studies in the academy (which has been largely salutary), the use of a godlike omniscient perspective can now seem not only presumptuous, but

even a little aggressive. To this, I would add that postmodern interpretive strategies have likely also contributed to shaping current conventions of literary realism, as creative writing students are also trained to be scholars of literature by taking seminars other than workshops and therefore cannot maintain innocence toward the various implications of their own texts. Fiction writers affiliated with universities must legitimate themselves through their technique, but they must also maintain an appropriate scholarly identity, and some types of work are more conducive to this than others (e.g. conceptual poetry). One of the central risks of realism is that the writer's vision of reality might be exposed as false, biased, clichéd, ignorant, et cetera, which could jeopardize his or her cultural capital in the academic world.

As anyone who studied English in the past twenty or thirty years now knows, *any way of seeing is also a way of not seeing*, as Kenneth Burke so famously put it. Realist fiction is no more or less limited in this sense than any other type, despite authors' best intentions, but it is open to closer scrutiny in that it tacitly claims to represent existing material relations and societal conditions. As an example, we could consider the aforementioned Wolfe; though his nineteenth-century-style novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) is in many ways excellent, it's curious that when employing multiple points of view to explore how a racially-charged crime creates a media storm that affects a New York City mayoral race, Wolfe didn't include any sections from the perspective of any of the black characters involved. For many readers, this omission is grave enough to preclude seeing any value in the novel. On the other hand, it's not difficult to imagine that if Wolfe had written a chapter from the perspective of, say, the black pastor Reverend Bacon, he would have received criticism similar to that leveled at William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), which was initially celebrated, but quickly came under fire for what some readers saw as its lapses into negative racial stereotypes and for the liberties Styron

took with the historical record. A 1968 volume of essays, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, sought to refute Styron's portrayal of Turner and of African American cultural history; this book ignited an intense debate that undoubtedly shaped the way ethnicity has been portrayed in literature and discussed in criticism since. Readers and critics have become much more attuned to the biases authors may bring to their work when writing about people of other cultures, the opposite gender, or any other aspect of identity that diverges from the writer's own background. Writers seem to have become more conscious about avoiding cultural insensitivity (with some egregious exceptions, of course).

To me, much contemporary realist fiction seems to reflect a collective anxiety to hedge against these dangers by voluntarily adopting certain limitations, resulting in a general shift toward depicting small slices of life with a strong emphasis on subjectivity (as opposed to, say, *The Grapes of Wrath*, or *War and Peace*). I would argue that it is primarily the "bigness" in Tom Wolfe's "big realistic fictional novel" that has been rejected. For a variety of reasons (not least the format of the workshop), the short story is the primary genre of "program" fiction and is the basis of many graduates' careers. Considerations of length demand restriction in scope, especially given that the scenic method is paramount. But there also seems to be a tendency to restrict the emotional register and avoid the melodramatic, sentimental, or bizarre (unless the story is ironic); "realism" seems to be construed in many of these works as "the average" or "the typical." Interestingly, this focus on the average is reminiscent of William Dean Howells' influential conception of realism, but with the important difference that the sociopolitical context of the ordinary lives depicted is much less frequently an explicit concern. The fiction published in the most prestigious journals and honored with prizes or inclusion in anthologies is more often

than not limited to the domestic sphere and to the private sufferings of individuals, and employs a restrained, often detached tone.

One of the most important characteristics of today's realist fiction is limited omniscience; the most typical modes of narration now seem to be first-person or a third-person point of view that is closely associated with one or a few characters if the work sees inside the characters' heads, or a cinematic treatment that only allows characters' psychology to be implied through action and dialogue. The expansive, magisterial perspective rejected by modernist writers in the early twentieth century has never quite returned; that we can know nothing but what our own consciousness and experience teaches us is pretty much taken as a given. Yet it's interesting to consider the extent to which this view seems to inform fictional practice, in that the project of fiction has traditionally been understood as the act of imaginatively entering other lives and revealing more than could be known about real people or events. Sometimes the purview is limited to one group, as when Wolfe enters the minds of white characters only, or Toni Morrison very deliberately tells her stories through the perspectives of black characters, depicting white people only through their eyes. It is, of course, inevitable that the perspective be focused in some way, but writers in recent decades seem to be more self-conscious about the implications of their narrative choices. There are certainly notable authors who continued to favor the sweeping omniscient perspective of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century realism, such as Wolfe, John Irving, or T. C. Boyle. But this seems to have become rarer in realist fiction with artistic aspirations, even if it continues to thrive in less-respectable commercial fiction; a strictly limited purview seems to have become a defining dimension of today's realism.

Some authors opt to impose even more stringent limits on the narration. Literary critic Anis Shivani notes, interestingly, how much of today's fiction is written from the child's

perspective, as if its writers “haven’t progressed to the adult stage enough to write from the adult’s sensibility. Romanticism, existentialism, stoicism, nihilism, all are forbidden modes of perception; only a constricted bourgeois realism, steeped in paralysis and grief, is accepted” (18). There is also a preponderance of fiction adopting the voice of a conspicuously “unreliable” narrator, which can perhaps be read as a trope for the unreliability of *all* narrators, and work written from the perspective of adults who have had limited access to formal education. It’s hard not to wonder whether this is related to the fact that writing from the perspective of a highly-educated, presumably mentally healthy adult who is not overtly distanced from the author (Saul Bellow’s Herzog, for instance) and who expresses sincerely-held values might open the author’s own morals and intellectual abilities to criticism. The reputations of once-eminent authors such as Bellow, John Updike, Norman Mailer, and Philip Roth have certainly suffered as society changed and their favorite characters came to be seen as misogynist buffoons. Now, protagonists who are well-educated and mentally “typical” are generally mild-mannered and affable, and loath to expressing views strong enough to generate controversy (unless the protagonist is overtly characterized as an antihero). As the tirelessly grumpy Shivani puts it,

The conventions of literary fiction are that the bourgeois hero (more likely the heroine) be vulnerable, prone to shame and guilt, unable to fit the pieces of the larger puzzle together, and on the same banal moral plane as the “average reader”: *sympathetic*, in other words, someone we can “identify with,” who reflects our own incomprehension of the world, our helplessness and inability to effect change. (12)

Bad behavior can be shown, but an array of devices must be deployed to convey that the author does not condone it. (Though as novelist Jonathan Dee notes, “creating characters that are easily mocked and then mocking them does not carry an exceptionally high degree of difficulty” [5-6].)

The use of “limited” or unreliable narrators seems to be a way to safely push back against current conventions of realism without the author being accused of distorting reality or sharing a character’s reprehensible views.

Much of today’s celebrated short fiction reflects the strong influence of Raymond Carver’s fictional technique, which many critics describe as “minimalist,” though a better term might be “miniaturist,” a label often affixed to the work of Ann Beattie. This mode of fiction is often markedly understated, and rather undramatic in situation. This is not necessarily a defect. Carver’s story “Careful,” for instance, depicts a man who wakes up one day to find that his ear is plugged with ear wax and he cannot hear out of it. His wife, who is estranged from him due to his severe alcoholism, visits his sad-sack apartment and removes the wax from his ear with a hair pin. This story is surprisingly moving in its depiction of the main character’s helplessness and confusion. Beattie’s “Janus” depicts a real estate agent who is curiously obsessed with a beautiful bowl that she carefully places in each house she shows. At the end of the story, it is revealed that the bowl was a gift from the woman’s former lover, who left her when she would not commit to leaving her husband and ending her “two-faced” behavior. Each of these very “small” stories is masterful. Alice Munro, Bobbie Ann Mason, Jhumpa Lahiri, and countless others also write wonderful short fiction in this mode, but a cursory review of current literary journals and anthologies will reveal that a great number of bland and inconsequential imitations are published each year as well.

One of the more obvious problems with the dominance of this kind of realism is that it is often the realism of middle-class people to whom very little happens. Husbands and wives bicker; adults realize that their parenting style is inappropriate; neighbors behave outrageously; college students have awkward romantic encounters at parties. People realize that despite their

comfortable lives, they do not feel fulfilled. The conflict in these stories often involves maladjustment induced by some kind of loss or trauma, and the plot moves forward as the characters react to these feelings. This trope has venerable precedents; it encompasses nearly all of Hemingway's heroes, Holden Caulfield, and most of the inhabitants of Winesburg, Ohio, to name just a few. Unfortunately, too many of its incarnations are dull and static, and privilege style over substance. Anis Shivani laments that

[contemporary American fiction's] scope is restricted too much to the trivial domestic sphere. It promotes grief, paralysis, inaction: a determinism for the post-politics society, where ideology has no place. Mired in appreciation of beautiful (or rather prettified) language for its own sake, without connection to ideology—although that is an ideology of its own, and perhaps the most corrosive and debilitating ideology of all—serious fiction writing today has lost any connection with a wide, appreciative readership. (12)

A realism that only reflects the typical, as conceived as comfortably middle-class (and usually white) is a serious distortion. Shivani also raises the important point that, collectively, it is inherently politically conservative, regardless of authorial intention, in that its focus is typically too narrow to reveal the larger social and institutional implications of the characters' lives. Characters might encounter ignorance or bigotry, but usually only as manifested in an isolated social encounter. Effecting any kind of meaningful change in their lives or in the world is unthinkable, and rebellion rarely rises above the level of the grand, futile gesture.

This seeming tendency to play things safe also frequently manifests itself in an emotional flatness I find off-putting; restraint and “unflinching acceptance” à la Hemingway and Carver seems to have become contemporary realist fiction's default setting. Perhaps this just fundamentally *is* realistic and reflects what Frederic Jameson describes as the collective “waning

of affect” in “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (61). Jameson posits that

As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean, not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings—which it may be better and more accurate to call “intensities”—are now free-floating and impersonal, and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria. (64)

On the other hand, it could also reflect the defensive posture of the “hip smirk” that David Foster Wallace describes in “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” which I feel can also be linked to writers’ need to maintain an academically informed brand of intellectual credibility.

Wallace argues that

flatness, numbness, and cynicism in one’s demeanor are clear ways to transmit the televisual attitude of standout transcendence—flatness is a transcendence of melodrama, numbness transcends sentimentality, and cynicism announces that one knows the score, was last naïve about something at maybe like age four (181).

Jonathan Dee discusses the apotheosis of this trend in his essay “Ready-made Rebellion: The Empty Tropes of Transgressive Fiction,” finding that in recent fiction positioned as shocking or transgressive, “what is intended to be shocking in each case is not the cruelty itself so much as the lack of affect and reflection that surrounds both the deed and its aftermath” (4). He sees this as a form of intellectual laziness, arguing that “Imaginary people doing things for no reason at all: it’s a default position some artists try to legitimate by insisting that the empty space at the

center of their work is not something they are actively creating but something they are courageously exposing” (4). I think this statement could easily be applied to a much broader array of fiction featuring affectless protagonists; in a significant portion of “program” fiction, this “empty space” is the damage done by grief or the meaninglessness of modern life, a trope that has become a commonplace.

Lastly, I will note that many of the works coming closest to Wolfe’s ideal of the big realistic fictional novel are set in the past, which allows authors a safe distance from which to judge their characters’ actions in light of what we know now. This is not to devalue these novels’ importance, but there is a surprising dearth of serious fiction set explicitly in the present and dealing directly with such shifts as the Internet revolution, the War on Terror, the Obama (or even Bush) presidency, or the pervasive unemployment affecting an entire generation. I wonder whether the conscientiousness of writers in universities has unintentional negative effects on our fiction; to maintain our status within the academy, it’s important to be on the right side of history, theory, craft, etc. When writing realistic fiction, limiting our subjects to what we can be somewhat confident we know (the personal lives of people demographically like us, well-documented historical events) is safest, and to many writers probably feels most honest. Yet realism that exclusively grapples with the easily manageable is rather stultifying, and the mode is not currently particularly vibrant as a whole, though wonderful exceptions like Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* (2002), Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011) make a case for why realist fiction remains a worthwhile endeavor.

It would be perverse to argue that any writer “should” write in a certain mode or use certain techniques, or to speculate on any individual writer’s personal motivations for his or her

artistic choices. But I do think that the aforementioned patterns should be interrogated, since they seem to suggest that certain values have become reflexive, putting contemporary realism in danger of becoming irrelevant. What is to be done? Ought we to pen sentimental morality tales based on current events and written in the third-person-omniscient voice? Honestly, I don't know. And I am sufficiently steeped in postmodern theory to realize the folly of suggesting that revisions to realism can make it more "truly" "real," i.e. less constrained by influence, culture, history, tradition, ideology, etc. Yet one of the more exciting aspects of realism is that the modernist imperative to "make it new" happens organically as the world changes, regardless of innovation in technique. New generations see the world in new ways, society reorganizes itself, history happens.

As perplexed academics in the late twentieth century looked back at the decades since postmodernist fiction and theory had appeared on the scene and tried to account for the persistence of realism, a reassessment of some of realism's merits was in order. Perhaps it wasn't so naive and passé after all, some of them found. As Malcolm Bradbury put it in a paper presented at a 1991 conference on "Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction," the postmodernist canon, which had largely been dominated by white males, presented a narrative that was inadvertently disempowering to many people:

[T]here was little appeal to new feminist writers in the idea of a literature of exhaustion; the notion that all stories had been used up or the tradition been completed, leaving the writer with a pastiche narrative kitty, was hardly of great importance to writers who believed that their stories were yet to be told. This had a double meaning for black women writers, who had good reason to see a double sense of exclusion; and it is thus appropriate that some of the most important and central writing of the decade has come

from them. So it has from other groups who felt the need for speaking out: gay and lesbian writers, American-Indian writers, Hispanic writers and others from alternative traditions. (22)

Even if realist narratives are twice-removed from reality (“reality”?), versions of the world filtered first through one person’s limited understanding and then again through the imperfect medium of language, they may still hold the power to move readers and to allow them to see the world and other people in new ways. Realist writing is much more imaginative than its nineteenth-century critics allowed, and readers need not accept a simplistic or naturalized conception of reality to value what realist fiction has to offer. Perhaps our understanding of the world is constructed through institutional hierarchies of power and mediated through language, but this doesn’t render *Anna Karenina* or *Go Tell It on the Mountain* uninteresting. Perhaps they can even nudge the doors of our perception open another fraction of an inch as we see how others construct their own worlds.

So for those of us who wish to add our own voices to the great realist project, all we can really promise to do in our own work is write about aspects of the world we find compelling, and attempt to do it with some artistry and honesty and commitment. In the words of the endlessly quotable “Master,” Henry James, “A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say” (8). I find rather inspiring the late David Foster Wallace’s speculation that

The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of “anti-rebels,” born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the

childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. . . . The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “How banal.” Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity. (192-93)

There is, of course, room for all kinds of writing, but I think that it would be salutary to revisit largeness as an aesthetic aim—of scope, of emotion, and of action.

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Epilogue: Hapsburg

Of course it’s all well and good to manhandle the history of American literary realism into a ten-thousand word précis and make some pronouncements on the course I hope its future takes, but the occasion of this address is the presentation to my dissertation committee of my own novel, a project I have been grappling with for the past few years (with several interludes into other lengthy works—a novella, a long-form work of narrative journalism on the first gay dance at the University of Georgia, a serialized fiction story for the local alt weekly, a hundred pages of another novel that will probably be better than this one). *Hapsburg* is closer to being done than it ever has been: it’s eighty thousand words long; it has a beginning, middle, and end; most of its major events have been sketched. Come summer, I hope it will be ready to send into the world.

What is its relation to reality? It’s not autobiographical, though I’m sure it says more about me than I would wish to reveal, and some of its incidents were inspired by real-life experiences of myself and others. That some of its seams are still showing makes me hyperaware of how unreal it all really is, how much I’ve failed to imagine.

The characters are inventions and composites, and there are aspects of the plot that may be somewhat melodramatic, but what I do hope bears a closer relation to reality is the setting and its power over the characters. “Hapsburg” is a fictional town in an unnamed Midwestern state, but it has a strong resemblance to my own hometown in North Dakota (which since I conceived of the story several years ago has actually been doing better than Hapsburg is, as the Bakken-formation oil boom infuses industry into the state), at least as I experienced it. As a bookish, socially awkward young person with secret delusions of grandeur, I hated living there and moved to southern California the summer after I graduated from high school, and my life has taken a trajectory that makes it unlikely I’ll ever live there again, but I return at least twice a year to see my family and now appreciate the place in a new way, seeing value I didn’t see before. Now I look forward to my visits.

My personal story about growing up in a small town isn’t very original; it’s the experience of most people who end up enjoying the privilege of publishing their stories of small-town life. What became more interesting to me was what it would be like to live in such a town into adulthood and to be more or less at peace with it. Thus, *Hapsburg* is to some degree a kind of speculative fiction or alternate history. I also became more interested in the story of the town itself, which shares many similarities to that of other small towns in this region of the country. My understanding was enriched by reading works like Osha Gray Davidson’s *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America’s Rural Ghetto* (1996) as well as the illustrated history of my own hometown published on the occasion of its centennial and edited in part by my grandmother.

So, *Hapsburg* is fundamentally a regionalist novel. Importantly, to me at least, it’s a regionalist novel set (more or less) in the present; it’s not an elegy for a mythic lost era of pastoral splendor or agrarian harmony. There’s a lot that’s harsh about Midwestern life and

there's a lot about my home state's culture that makes me mad, but I don't think fifty or a hundred years ago things were better. To me, the dark humor of Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and *Main Street* feels very contemporary, despite the early-twentieth-century slang and the newness and prosperity of the towns they depict. Those works, along with Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and Larry McMurtry's *The Last Picture Show* moved me very deeply and made me see my own town and my own life as part of a larger whole, though one that I am less able to synthesize into an academic hypothesis. When my novel is truly finished, I hope it will express some of what I feel. I do feel unsatisfied with most contemporary representations of the region, since to me they too often fall into the familiar gestures of sentimentalizing, stereotyping, mocking, or elegizing. Certainly there are factors that set the region apart from other parts of the U.S., but its denizens do have TV, malls, internet access, cell phones, and so on. They have NPR, state and local Democratic parties, and art museums, along with the farms and trucks and guns and jello salads. Large numbers of the population graduate from the Midwest's various excellent Research 1 universities. Not everyone who lives there is stoic and self-effacing.

I also hope the characters ring true. None of them quite model ideal standards of conduct or human aspiration, but I care quite a bit about them and hope that readers might too.

Guinevere, the protagonist and narrator, is in some respects an antiheroine. Her flaws are fairly obvious. But I never had the intention of writing people the way I wish they would be or think they should try to be. I hope my portrayal of the people of Hapsburg reflects in some small measure the complexity and ineffability of real human beings.

In sum, I hope that in its own way *Hapsburg* does some of the things that some of the realist novels I love do, and I hope it contributes at least a little to realism's great ongoing

venture of documenting the endless diversity of human experience. Many scholars have pointed out that William Dean Howells never quite managed to achieve in his own fiction the wonderful effects he attributed to realism. I doubt I do either, though I hope my abilities will improve as I go on. Even if my academic training has taught me that notions such as “authenticity” are only constructs and that truth and falsehood are linguistic conceits, the idealism of the nineteenth-century realists resonates with me. Any attempt at rendering the world will inevitably fall short, but I still believe there’s some nobility in trying.

To quote Henry James one last time, “We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.”

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