

## CHAPTER I

*Augustan satire and  
 Victorian realism*

## LIMITS AND ENDINGS

In the last years of the nineteenth century, English critics found themselves reaching a tentative consensus: the school of fiction called “realism” was finally coming to an end. Imported mostly from France, later propagated by disciples of Zola and French naturalism, debated endlessly in the British press, so-called realism had – in the span of only ten or twenty years – conquered the landscape of English fiction and become the dominant mode. But it was now in decline, the victim of its own excesses.

Edmund Gosse, omnipresent critic of the era, ascribed this decline to “The Limits of Realism in Fiction”: this was the title of his 1890 essay, later published in the 1893 collection *Questions at Issue*. Realism to Gosse largely meant Zolaesque naturalism and its progeny, full of rules and dogma: “it is to be contemporary; it is to be founded on and limited by actual experience . . . to paint men as they are, not as you think they should be.” But as Gosse’s title announced, and as he reiterated throughout the essay, this kind of writing had hit a wall. “There are limits to realism, and they seem to have been readily discovered by the realists themselves . . . in trying to draw life evenly and draw it whole, they have introduced such a brutal want of tone as to render the portrait a caricature . . . in their sombre, grimy, and dreary studies in pathology, clinical bulletins of a soul dying of atrophy, we may see what the limits of realism are.”<sup>1</sup> Gosse was wariest of those novelists adhering most closely to the rigid edicts of doctrinaire naturalism, but he was also voicing skepticism about all the fin-de-siècle fiction that trafficked in the grimy, destitute, ugly quarters of contemporary life. These quarters had now been occupied, subjugated. Realism of this sort had nowhere further to go.

Gosse was not alone in expressing such misgivings. The more dismissive Oscar Wilde, who had always enjoyed flaunting his sneering distaste for realism, cheered the movement’s demise. In the 1891 “Critic as Artist,”

Wilde wrote sarcastically of realism as of a day whose sun had finally set: “Yesterday it was Realism that charmed one. One gained from it that *nouveau frisson* which it was its aim to produce. One analysed it, explained it and wearied of it.” In “The Critic as Artist” Wilde called his bugbear “tedious realism,” in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* “vulgar realism.”<sup>2</sup> For Wilde the limits of realism had been reached from the start. But even observers more sympathetic to the idea of realist fiction worried about its abuses and dissipations. In “Reticence in Literature,” published in *The Yellow Book* in 1894, Arthur Waugh praised “the realistic movement in English literature” and championed “the duty of the man of letters to speak out, to be fearless, to be frank.” But he cautioned that “we ought, too, to be able to arrive instinctively at a sense of the limits of art, and to appreciate the point at which frankness becomes violence, in that it has degenerated into mere brawling, animated neither by purpose nor idea.”<sup>3</sup> Waugh was sounding a familiar anxiety, heard throughout English criticism of the period: realism had grown so frank that it had turned aggressive, so blunt as to become destructively bleak.

This book is concerned with endings: with the end of the Victorian novel, and along with it the end of its governing paradigms of realism. My view of realism depends on a certain theory of direction or sequence. On the far side of realism, in this view, lies satire, just as on the far side of satire we are likely to find realism. Satire and realism are two ways of understanding literature’s relationship with the world it represents. The first has to do with a moral attitude toward that world: satire isolates conditions or truths in order to chastise the mankind responsible for them. Realism has generally been understood as an expository or demonstrative stance – or posture, or method, or (like satire) attitude – that is interested in those same truths, in those same conditions, without necessarily operating on the assumption that it has set forth to mock them.<sup>4</sup> But when realism blurs into satire, its expository method becomes indistinguishable from its censorious essence. This blurring marks an extremity in the development of realism, in that realism marches toward satire but finds in it its own outermost boundary of representational possibility. In the following chapter I call Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* “terminal,” but in truth virtually all works of satirical realism, especially those under examination here, are terminal as well.

My central premise is that nineteenth-century realism developed into satire and thereby engendered its own decline. But this is not to say that the fusion of these two modes was a fact of late Victorian literature alone. On the contrary, satire and realism have always existed in close proximity:

indeed, each has always been embedded in the other. Some of the earliest works of Western satire – Juvenal’s, for instance – depended on an intense verisimilitude in representation and a realist directness in transmission; while English novelistic realism, as Ronald Paulson and others have demonstrated, emerged in large part out of a tradition of satire and satiric conventions in the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> And so my opening chapter has two main tasks. One is to examine these longstanding affinities of satire and realism, from Juvenal to the nineteenth century, in order to understand how late Victorian satirical realism was, in fact, a decisive fusion of two modes that had always been in such close proximity. The second task is to examine the more direct roots of late nineteenth-century satirical realism in the fiction of mid-century, notably in the work of George Eliot. But I tackle these two things together, rather than sequentially, since an examination of Eliot’s fiction leads naturally to the long ancestry of satirical realism that stands in the background of her writing.

The subject of the interconnections between satire and realism has been mostly ignored in the history of literary criticism. One fine exception is a short 1955 essay by John Lawlor, “Radical Satire and the Realistic Novel.” Lawlor begins with English Augustan satire and focuses on Swift, whose writings seem to reject what might once have been, in the hands of Horace or Dryden, one of the principal assumptions of satire: that it could serve a corrective purpose. Some kinds of satire exposed a folly in order to instruct the reader that it was a vice – and that it should be avoided. But from Swift, according to Lawlor, we can no longer expect such comforts:

We have an explanation of our insensibility and incapacity to alter. It is an answer that takes us beyond correction. The satire becomes radical, for it brings into the light the comfortable assumption that we can see our folly, let alone amend it. The inquiry is now to ask what is man’s nature, in light of the evidence, including the evidence of satire itself? In *Gulliver’s Travels* Swift writes a satire that at once ensures that we shall inescapably see ourselves, and is at the same time a satire to end all notions of “correction” . . . What blindly resists the assaults of corrective satire unfolds to the radical inquiry: and if we pass beyond contempt into objective appraisal, a new territory is decisively entered. We move from satire to what may be called, with suitable qualifications, Realism.<sup>6</sup>

In a very rapid two pages, Lawlor then pursues his logic to Flaubert and *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert’s fiction is something beyond satire: a diagnosis of an “unchanging condition,” with no possibility for the correction native to earlier forms of satirical writing. Satire’s telos lies in the realist novel, which depends on an expository method but dismisses the flat

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expectation that the depiction of human life can teach any cohesive or coherent lesson.<sup>7</sup>

Lawlor's argument is appealing and persuasive. And his emphasis on Swift and Flaubert is particularly apposite to my canvas here: these are the two writers who stand most prominently in the historical background of this book.<sup>8</sup> But Lawlor's scope is frustratingly narrow. It stops with Flaubert, as if the question of realism and satire somehow ended with *Madame Bovary*. What this brief overview does not take into account is the abiding coexistence of these two kinds of literature, and especially the increasing intimacy of this coexistence during the later years of the nineteenth century. Realist fiction can indeed be understood as the heir to the satiric tradition. When satire's corrective order begins to wane, we can recognize its enduring energies in the rather less rigid forms of the nineteenth-century novel. But it is no less true that realist fiction also seems to have its terminus, and that we might identify this point as something better named satire. A hyperrealism becomes satirical just as a radical satire becomes realistic. If this kind of logic seems vertiginous, it is only proof of the profound kinship of these two traditions – and of Alvin Kernan's reminder, in *The Plot of Satire*, that "we should not think that a genre distinction is an airtight category."<sup>9</sup> Indeed such porousness becomes only more marked over time. Genres emerge and blur into one another, especially upon the fading of other genres, and upon the expiration of earlier paradigms. Satire and realism are both genres of lateness: they come necessarily *after* other modes and traditions have been exhausted, and in some sense they are expressing the impossibility of writing in that earlier way – in the case of satire, epic; in the case of realism, fantasy or high romanticism – any longer.<sup>10</sup>

My history therefore concentrates on the final decades of the nineteenth century, and embodies a theory of limits and finality.<sup>11</sup> But no study of satire and realism in late Victorian literature can avoid English realism's central, archetypal figure: it must pass through the fiction of George Eliot. This chapter will largely focus on her writing as an exemplary prism through which we can study some of the tendencies and problems of Victorian realist representation – especially realism's connection to satire. It is her fiction that helps connect the Augustan satiric tradition to the realism of the *fin de siècle*. In many ways her writing prefigures the fiction of Hardy and Gissing and Conrad: novelists who could not forge a realism impervious to the censorious forces of satire. Like them, she was often ruled by a satirical temper that the past century of criticism has overlooked or misunderstood.

## THE HUMAN COMPLEXION

Satire and realism are both fundamentally representational modes: both depend on the connection between what they describe and the referents of those things or persons or situations that we know from the world we inhabit. From satire we expect that the transmogrification of the referent into the description will be an act of judgment. Something in the world is to be scorned; the negative form it takes in satire will be confirmation of the attitude we should hold toward that thing. From realism we typically expect some kind of satisfactory verisimilitude or plausibility. If the represented form veers too far from what we know it to look like, or be like, in our experience, we will deem it to be non-realist or even anti-realist. Both satire and realism therefore put extraordinary pressure on the detail, on the shape and precision of the representation in its particularity, whether as a clue toward judgment in satire (the first thing we learn about *Candide* is that he has a gentle countenance; therefore he is a naïve fool), or as an index of lifelikeness or familiarity in realism (Anna Karenina's shining grey eyes, in her first appearance, evoke an erotic intensity that we are meant to recognize from experience). Detail and texture, especially the detail or texture of the visible, is the crucible of representation in each mode. Specificity in description is not the mere ornamentation of something else but a focus in itself, a guide and a gauge.

We praise George Eliot for precisely this kind of richly imagined and deftly executed detail in portraiture and representation: the crisp and bleak precision of the avenue of limes outside Dorothea's window in *Middlemarch*, for example, or the meticulous narrative camera that zooms in and out from the hands and eyes of the people around the gambling table in the opening scene of *Daniel Deronda*. When we talk about George Eliot's "realism" we can mean many things: her sympathetic imagination for ordinary people, her creation of a vast panorama of society. But we mean this too, that she sees objects and textures with a subtle and thorough vision, and that her fiction manages to evoke the grain of ocular and palpable experience in a way superior to most other writers.

Frequently Eliot is quite self-conscious about this kind of descriptive rigor and realism, nowhere more than in the famous chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*. Nowhere is her position on novelistic practice and attitude more comprehensively articulated; and, of course, no passage from her fiction has therefore attracted so much attention from scholars interpreting Eliot's own theory of realist representation.<sup>12</sup> The chapter later evolves

into a discussion of Mr. Irwine and Adam, but at first it announces itself as an autonomous statement of purpose, an apologia that could be slotted anywhere in *Adam Bede* – and indeed just about anywhere in Eliot's fiction.

The chapter revolves around Eliot's comparison of her fiction to Dutch genre painting. Like the Dutch painters, she wants to redeem and reclaim the kind of people that other writers might deem unworthy of representation: the "more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people" leading a "monotonous, homely existence." The narrator mockingly imagines an "idealistic friend" who would object to paying any attention to this sphere of existence: "what a low phase of life! – what clumsy, ugly people!" the friend might say. But Eliot insists on training her eye on the ugly, "without trying to make things seem better than they were."

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.

Her lesson seems clear. George Eliot's fiction, like the canvases of those seventeenth-century painters, will not paint such people for the purpose of scorning them. Ugliness does not equal loathsomeness; these pages are very plain in specifying that "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."<sup>13</sup>

And yet it is hard to ignore, at this critical moment in *Adam Bede*, how much Eliot lingers on all this ugliness, on all the unsightly things about the human form. These "irregular noses and lips," these "rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces" clearly hold a certain fascination for her, even beyond their ostensible purpose of directing us toward the faculty of sympathy. Above all Eliot seems drawn to the unpleasant color and texture of the human complexion. Those "dingy complexions," as she reminds us here, are not startling exceptions. They are a shared human trait – and indeed she will return again and again, throughout the cycle of novels that *Adam Bede* inaugurates, to the basic facts of surface reality, as represented by our common skin. The image appears even earlier than *Adam Bede*, in brief glimpses in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, where the Baronet's complexion in "Mr Gilfil's Love Story" "looked dull and withered," and where a Welshman in "Janet's Repentance" is defined by his "globose figure and unctuous complexion."<sup>14</sup> In the later fiction, complexion develops from an occasional image into a wider theme. *The Mill on the Floss*,

for example, makes a point of the divide between Maggie's dark skin – which is distasteful to her mother – and the fairer Dodson complexion. The opening chapter of *Felix Holt* presents Mrs. Transome gazing at herself in the mirror, where she sees “the dried-up complexion, and the deep lines of bitter discontent about the mouth” and immediately thinks, “I am a hag!”<sup>15</sup> And in *Middlemarch* the ugly pallor and unevenness of Casaubon's skin serves as a warning of the repugnant person beneath it. In the novel's second chapter, Dorothea and Celia argue about the man who has just visited the Brooke house, and who will soon woo the elder sister.

When the two girls were alone in the drawing-room alone, Celia said—

‘How very ugly Mr Casaubon is!’

‘Celia! He is one of the most distinguished-looking men I ever saw. He is remarkably like the portrait of Locke. He has the same deep eye-sockets.’

‘Had Locke those two white moles with hairs on them?’

‘Oh, I dare say! when people of a certain sort looked at him,’ said Dorothea, walking away a little.

‘Mr Casaubon is so sallow.’

‘All the better. I suppose you admire a man with the complexion of a *cochon de lait*.’<sup>16</sup>

In the end, of course, it is *Celia* who is right. Eliot is not teaching us here the error of judging someone on the basis of his skin: she is indicating a repulsive personality, to be revealed gradually, by a repulsive complexion, which can be detected immediately. Indeed Casaubon's complexion turns up repeatedly in *Middlemarch*, always a source of nausea for Celia but a subject of great interest to the author. In the following chapter, we are reminded that the younger sister “did not like the company of Mr Casaubon's moles and sallowness” (23). And in a famous passage much later in the novel, after Casaubon and Dorothea have come back from their honeymoon, Eliot returns once again to her persistent theme:

One morning some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea – but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungred like the rest of us. (271–2)

As so often happens in George Eliot's fiction, the ground here shifts quite suddenly beneath the reader. We have been trained not to like Casaubon

very much; his ugly moles and sallow complexion have been reliable emblems of his generally distasteful character. But for the moment the narrator seems to undercut this very equation – all young skins will grow old; and anyway we can hold out hope that even a mole-spotted complexion might mask an intense consciousness. The human skin appears to serve as some kind of terrain upon which a conflict of realism is to be waged. Nothing is more plainly superficial: skin is pure surface, the perfect subject for a realist description of straightforward, physical fact. And yet Eliot is ambiguous about its interpretive or symbolic value. At times complexion points the way to a kind of satire, where moles are meant to provoke our distaste; at others we are warned not to let it obstruct our path to sympathy. But as the *ars poetica* in *Adam Bede* suggests, and as the familiar, sustained imagery of the larger oeuvre seems to corroborate, our shared complexion – greasy, dingy, pallid – is nonetheless quite significant in our basic processes of perception. And it is, evidently, essential to fiction's lifelike and credible representation of ordinary human life.

Not everyone in George Eliot's fiction looks exactly like this, of course. Most of her heroines have clear skin; in *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen Harleth's complexion is supposed to be particularly attractive. Nor does Eliot's focus on complexion – ugly or otherwise – make her unique in the tradition of the Victorian novel. Dickens, for instance, might also note the quality of his characters' skin: Uriah Heep's sweaty hands are the most memorable example. But we do not get the sense with Dickens, as we do with Eliot, that the representation of complexion figures so prominently in the machinery of realist technique and method – that it is suggested to be so fundamental a component of how we see, and how a novelist controls what we see. To encounter this kind of vision so often in Eliot's fiction is to discover a certain descriptive logic. She will show people in their everyday reality and therefore describe what they look like; she will be faithful in this description and therefore acknowledge that these people often have ugly skin. This novelist so renowned for the complex psychology of her characters, for the great moral ordeals of Hetty Sorrel and Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth, is also committed to the comprehensive and credible delineation of surface. And if that surface is exposed to be prosaically ugly, some readers are likely to object. Ruskin's 1881 view of *The Mill on the Floss* is instructive in this respect. Eliot's novel was "perhaps the most striking instance extant of this study of cutaneous disease," Ruskin claimed, referring to the kind of fiction that depicted "the blotches, burrs and pimples" of vulgar daily life.<sup>17</sup>



A descriptive fixation like this can evoke the close-ups of Flaubert: Emma's shoulders at the beginning of *Madame Bovary*, for example, glistening with a few drops of sweat; or the reverse image of her corpse at the end of the novel, where her eyelashes are sprinkled with a sort of white powder and a viscous pallor covers her eyes.<sup>18</sup> But Eliot's persistent focus on the human skin has a strange tendency to recall a less likely forebear: Jonathan Swift. Swift cannot be said to enlist the precision of detail as a tool in a larger quest for verisimilitude in representation. And yet certain moments in *Gulliver's Travels* are eerily prescient of nineteenth-century realism's focus on the individual complexion. Gulliver's voyage to Brobdingnag provides the perfect scenario for Swift's oddly proto-realist visions: Gulliver, suddenly tiny, finds himself looking at immense humanoid figures; he can therefore see detail as never before. And just as George Eliot says that an authentic look at the "majority of the human race" yields the reality of "dingy complexions," so Swift tells us that Gulliver's microscopic vision will expose that same ugliness. This is a major theme of part II of *Gulliver's Travels* from its opening pages. Soon after Gulliver arrives on the island, and is taken in by a farmer, he witnesses the family's baby suckling at a nurse's breast. The incident yields one of the book's most harrowing visions.

I must confess no Object ever disgusted me so much as the Sight of her monstrous Breast, which I cannot tell what to compare with, so as to give the curious Reader an Idea of its Bulk, Shape and Colour. It stood prominent six Foot, and could not be less than sixteen in Circumference. The Nipple was about Half the Bigness of my Head, and the Hue both of that and the Dug so varified with Spots, Pimples and Freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous: For I had a near Sight of her, she sitting down the more conveniently to give Suck, and I standing on the Table. This made me reflect upon the fair Skins of our *English* Ladies, who appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own Size, and their Defects not to be seen but through a magnifying Glass, where we find by Experiment that the smoothest and whitest Skins look rough and coarse, and ill coloured.

I remember when I was at *Lilliput*, the Complexions of those diminutive People appeared to me the fairest in the World: And talking upon this Subject with a Person of Learning there, who was an intimate Friend of mine; he said, that my Face appeared much fairer and smoother when he looked on me from the Ground, than it did upon a nearer View when I took him up in my Hand, and brought him close; which he confessed was at first a very shocking Sight. He said, he could discover great Holes in my Skin; that the Stumps of my Beard were ten Times stronger than the Bristles of a Boar; and my Complexion made up of several Colours altogether disagreeable: Although I must beg Leave to say for my self, that I am as fair as most of my Sex and Country, and very little Sunburnt by all my Travels.<sup>19</sup>

This is one of Swift's favorite devices: to expose an ugly truth by altering perspective. (It is the kind of distortion that Alvin Kernan identifies as the "magnifying tendency" of satire, or what Erich Auerbach, referring to Voltaire's method, calls "the searchlight device.")<sup>20</sup> Throughout Gulliver's stay in Brobdingnag, we are constantly reminded how ugly things are when seen from up close. A glimpse of the Queen eating is for Gulliver "a very nauseous Sight," since all the food is so grotesquely amplified; he is overwhelmed by the excrement of flies, visible to him but not to the natives, whose "large Opticks were not so acute as mine in viewing smaller Objects" (90–3).<sup>21</sup>

But nothing is as loathsome to Gulliver as the skin of the Brobdingnagians. Soon he comes across a sight similar to the child nursing at the breast: "There was a Woman with a Cancer in her Breast, swelled to a monstrous Size, full of Holes, in two or three of which I could have easily crept, and covered my whole Body. There was a Fellow with a Wen in his Neck, larger than five Woolpacks; and another with a couple of wooden Legs, each about twenty Foot high" (96–7). The fundamental horror of Brobdingnag is the horror of having to look too closely at the giants' complexion – and therefore the horror of having to contemplate our own. "Their Skins appeared so coarse and uneven," Gulliver remarks again later, "so variously coloured when I saw them near, with a Mole here and there as broad as a Trencher, and Hairs hanging from it thicker than Pack-threads; to say nothing further concerning the rest of their Persons" (103). To see in detail, says Swift, is to see the ugliness of the real. This is the lesson of the second part of *Gulliver's Travels*.

But this cutaneous disgust is not restricted to Gulliver's voyage to Brobdingnag. It marks the later sections of the book as well, such that the human complexion ends up exemplifying Swift's much more universal misanthropy. In the voyage to Laputa, for example, Gulliver's education in the history of mankind evokes a despair expressed in altogether familiar terms:

it gave me melancholy Reflections to observe how much the Race of human Kind was degenerate among us, within these Hundred Years past. How the Pox under all its Consequences and Denominations had altered every Lineament of an *English* Countenance: shortened the Size of Bodies, unbraced the Nerves, relaxed the Sinews and Muscles, introduced a sallow Complexion, and rendered the Flesh loose and *rancid*. (185)

And in the darkest section of *Gulliver's Travels*, the concluding voyage to the Houyhnhnms, it is the flesh of the Yahoos that embodies their