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Katherine Kearns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

The modern man carries inside him an enormous heap of indigestible knowledge-stones that occasionally rattle together in his body, as the fairy tale has it. And the rattle reveals the most striking characteristic of these modern men – the opposition of something inside them to which nothing external corresponds, and the reverse.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*

Realism at Zero Degree

I shall acknowledge before the fact the circle within which the argument at hand is premised: it is the assumption that realism is an essentially pragmatic mode whose predication of character as something enacted, partially but inevitably, within environmental restrictions is designed to reveal an imperiled ecological system of soul and society; this assumption is coupled with the intuition that there is also in realism an alternative energy, perhaps in direct consequence of its shouldering of ethical and social responsibility, that is sufficient to destabilize the reformist agenda at hand.¹ Recognizing that “character” is produced by both intrinsic and extrinsic imperatives, sensing that these imperatives are brought inevitably into stark relief in a world moving toward technologization, realism addresses itself with a degree of pragmatic efficiency to the problems at hand. But it does not do this blithely, because it concedes before the fact that the realist’s “duty” must be felt as a dangerous imperative by all but saints and unregenerately self-satisfied philanthropists. Those realists in between these extremes will

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

suffer from their willing engagement with the real, as they apprehend – by virtue of opening their eyes to the world – that their “duty” must make itself manifest at two oppositional levels: as an ideal and unwavering concept and as a constant negotiation within a complex world of work (their own and others’) and language (their own and others’) and desire (their own and others’).

Conducted within the sphere of daily life, duty will come up against desire, because one who turns from generalities to look intimately at people will run the risks and enjoy the pleasures of voyeurism. One who looks is likely to discover that it is not only in ideal forms – beauty, truth, goodness – that pleasure lies; one has but to look to find that love does indeed pitch its mansions in Crazy Jane places, and, recognizing this, one recognizes the erotic in a most basic and non-idealistic way. James speaks directly to the charged field in which the novel performs its obligations: “In the English novel (by which . . . I mean the American as well), more than in any other, there is a traditional difference between that which people know and that which they agree to admit they know, that which they see and that which they speak of, that which they feel to be a part of life and that which they allow to enter into literature.”² There is, in other words, a subtextual message in realism’s songs of experience affirming that duty shares an affiliation with domination, that pain shares an affiliation with pleasure, that both the body and the body of the text are *there* with a sufficiency that exceeds any idealisms or mundanities one might impose to contain them. (It is no wonder that hysteria flourishes, both as illness and as diagnosis, in the latter half of the century, no wonder that Anna O. comes up with the talking cure, for the hysteric is the enriched allegory of this taut multiplicity of desire and control, and of the multiple, and often oppositional, levels of the real.) “Duty” unravels under close inspection into threads of altruism and self-servedness, an intuition regarding itself that realism embodies in an entire series of bogus do-gooders and other hypocrites; though necessary, the realist’s duty will also be felt as necessarily suspect, because a non-idealized, non-aestheticized vision of things will also comprehend itself as such.

And thus duty will also come up against language; all semantic equations become increasingly complex under this burden of sightedness, and one cannot but be ambivalent about a disorder that is also, at the same time,

INTRODUCTION

an enrichment. As Eliot says, “one word stands for many things, and many words for one thing; the subtle shades of meaning, and still subtler echoes of association, make language an instrument which scarcely anything short of genius can wield with definiteness and certainty.” Yet to divest language of its “fitful shimmer of many-hued significance,” “its music and its passion . . . its vital qualities as an expression of individual character, . . . its subtle capabilities of wit” would be to deprive it of “everything that gives it power over the imagination,” to make it “deodorized and non-resonant,” “algebraic.”³ The realist author articulates multiple obligations: a duty to faithful representation, a duty to the truthful treatment of material, a duty to the everyday and the ordinary, and so on. But that author speaks these obligations into a discursive field felt as both enriched and disorderly, a place where ideal containers – words as well as concepts – have begun to burgeon with fitful, multiplicative, and contradictory particulars.

And so the realist’s duty, that which the author enacts artistically in the work of writing, will come up against Art as well, or, more particularly, up against all formalized and aestheticized images of things that, when actually seen in their particularities, will prove themselves to be neither formally nor aesthetically consistent. “It is much handier to get at books than to get at men,” says Howells.⁴ Realism has it in mind to see beyond forms traditionally recognized as aesthetically permissible, and in particular it would scrap the pastoral as that which has costumed a vast body of work and otherwise under-dressed people in preposterous clothes. “Idyllic ploughmen are jocund when they drive their teams afield; idyllic shepherds make bashful love under hawthorn-bushes; idyllic villagers dance in the chequered shade and refresh themselves,” says Eliot, whereas the real thing is not jocund nor merry nor beautiful nor light nor effervescent. “The selfish instincts are not subdued by the sight of buttercups,” she says. “To make men moral something more is requisite than to turn them out to grass.”⁵ But realism wants more than merely this un-costuming, which is easy enough to achieve with a microscope or a photograph or a scalpel. (Sade sardonically prefigures the realist’s suspicion of the ornamental in his eroticizing of the ugly and the old, as well as the beautiful and the young body. In his surgical fantasies of treating skin as merely one more layer to be penetrated or removed, or to be stitched, reshaped, and otherwise refurbished for more utilitarian purposes, he writes another version of Car-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

lyle's story.) Realism would at once divest artistic vision of its habit of prettiness and give to art the right to paint and to write about that which is not pretty, *and* it would implicate one so thoroughly in this realness as to bring one to more genuine and immediate feeling (again, an affiliation with Sade): "We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness," says Eliot.⁶

The realist aspires to do what Barthes says that the realistic artist most particularly fails to do: to exit the loop whereby not only art but also language and desire feed off of art, and in so doing to bring art to the service of the immediately real, the contingent, and the unformalized, which is to say that the realist embraces the possibility of translating unmediated sensations into words, an attempt as problematically complex when it is believed to have been effected as when, more often, one feels that it has failed. The English painter, says Eliot, paints his idylls while "under the influence of idyllic literature," and by extension one may assume that the writer recapitulates the painter's landscape as well; realism's premise is that one must learn to speak an art that is not itself filtered through art.⁷ This may, of course, be impossible. Barthes says in *S/Z* that "the 'realistic' artist never places 'reality' at the origin of his discourse, but only and always, as far back as can be traced, an already written real, a prospective code, along which we discern, as far as the eye can see, only a succession of copies."⁸ But, fishing up that metaphysical red herring "reality," this formulation begs the question whether or not one *can* exit the already written real.

My point is not to assert that realism succeeds where Barthes says that it must fail, but rather to argue that realism is not so complacent nor so decorous nor so ingenuous as its recent reputation would suggest; it is not so much estranged from desire as attuned to it, so much so that, to use Eliot's suggestive words in *Adam Bede*, "desire is chastened into submission."⁹ It buys its pragmatism at the standard price, which is to purchase one's ability to deal with things at the level of their human effect by giving these same things up as "reality" in any self-contained sense. "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have," says Peirce's pragmatic maxim, for "then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

the object.” This is realism’s intuition of how to proceed – and thus metonymy necessarily prevails – but it is also a form of abnegation, a claiming of performative efficiency within a system in which other forms of verifiability have already begun to fail.

I do not mean by this to suggest that realist authors are philosophical pragmatists, that is, that they yield up all metaphysical illusions in order to formulate a philosophy of practical effects. I do mean that at one level they choose to write in order to teach the lessons of what it means to function humanly within a world increasingly oriented toward orderly, large-scale productivities and that their hope is to communicate generally to others; they have not willingly entered in any extended way into any of the secret or limited discourses whose codes systematically alter the terms for their initiates, and they are not primarily in the business of that obfuscation meant to betoken a tortured soul beset by inner demons.¹⁰ They cannot (and they know that they cannot) afford to yield to the seductions of existentialist reverie, although it is clear that they apprehend the instability of their psychic position relative to the world; nor can they succumb completely to a formalism that would accommodate, contain, but not arrest, “the perpetual exfoliations of personality” one suffers while progressing toward death.¹¹ This open declaration of my choice to focus on realism’s often-noted pragmatic engagement with how the material world and character interact is an attempt to facilitate communication on this matter of how I perceive realism, at one level, to work; the choice reproduces both the impulse behind realism and the methodology of realism, as I see it. The reader may, equally in realism’s spirit, choose to enter temporarily the terms of this particular contract.

At the heart of the realist’s conscious agenda is a desire and an expectation to communicate effectively using the shared markers of materiality. Realism cannot begin if it has its back up; rather, it must assume a willing and competent audience that will know at the opening gambit the rules of this most everyday of language games (this is not the premise of, say, high modernist poetry or fiction or experimental film or avant-garde art). Realism, like life, depends on the kindness of strangers, or, to appropriate Donald Davidson’s term, it embraces the “principle of charity” by which a reasonable understanding is achieved and translation is more or less successfully effected.¹² A quotient of suspended disbelief, amnesia, and illogic

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

is built into the equation and accommodated accordingly. Realism's faith in materiality is problematized by a post-Kantian suspicion that these markers are compromised, delusory artifacts of one's own blind insight and the *Weltanschauung* that tinctures the productions of the ego; it is not so compromised, however, as to have become immured in irony and obfuscation. Like those road markers buried in snowdrifts in *Wuthering Heights*, materialities might still be of some value if one could only imagine seeing them clearly again. (Unlike the similar markers in *Women in Love* that would have led Gerald Crich away from death in the snow, these are not rejected before the fact as useless for finding one's way out of the labyrinth of inchoate loss.¹³) One is meant simultaneously to *trust* the material tautology of a given realism, its artifacts, its events, its influences, even as one recognizes the insufficiency and distortions of the data provided. Realism brings language (as we do even now) before what Davidson calls "the tribunal of experience," despite intuiting the quixotic nature of the enterprise.¹⁴ When asked why, the realist might anticipate Austin's attitude about sufficient evidence: "Enough is enough, enough isn't everything."¹⁵ Logically, conceding to a temporary reality is like being a little bit dead (or undead), but experientially we all, most of the time, accommodate competing assumptions about the world's place relative to self – even if we reject, on philosophical, logical, psychoanalytic, and political grounds that there is a self, and even if we have, philosophically, given up "the world" and "reality" as workable terms. Realism was and continues to be the literary embodiment of this opportunism.

Realism's willingness to appeal on a need-to-know basis to the tribunal of experience is then to be held separate from the notion of absolute or ideal "Truth," which it typically keeps in mind, but more or less bracketed; in using this double vision it shares the premises of a nineteenth-century historiography that mandated, as Humboldt said, "the exact, impartial, critical investigation of events" coupled with an intuitive reading of the "inner causal nexus" and the "inner truth" of these facts in time.¹⁶ This combination requires delicate balance, for the novelist knows that language will want to have its fancy say. As George Eliot says in *Adam Bede*, "falsehood is . . . easy, truth . . . difficult," "even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings – much harder than to say something fine about them

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

which is *not* the exact truth.”¹⁷ When one dons the hair shirt of an artistry that will draw “faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence,” when one forthrightly chooses to “turn, without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels” to ordinary old women eating plain food in a plain room, one tacitly suggests that a small but exact “truth” will take the place of Truth, just as history will take the place of History.¹⁸ Eliot articulates – and does so from *within* her novel – realism’s intuition of a double-sided truth, and in so doing she predicts the critical coin toss that will follow. On one side lies that which is historically verifiable because materially evident and artifactual, an external matter based in trade – of goods, of words, of ideas, of affections. And on the other lies that which is also true, often antithetically so: the hyperbolic, ontological truths that taunt externalities as meager and insufficient. The critical discourse calls heads or tails and proceeds accordingly, but the realistic texts themselves perform a less unilateral message.

Realism, often charged with blind-siding social, political, and epistemological complexities, with throwing its considerable materialistic weight against all that would challenge or suborn the status quo, manages nonetheless to communicate its sense of itself as a bifurcated and inadequate accommodation of any holistic reality. Depending on their predispositions, the critics may see this either as information freely if somewhat covertly given or as an unconscious truth extorted from an ingenuous text or a repressed text. Critics and marketing strategists who subscribe to the latter may thus promote realism as both fictional and true all at once: like the madman, incompetent as regards the really real, whatever the hermeneutic integrity of its visions, while, again like the madman, unimpeachable in its communication of a historical reality. Thus we see a paperback edition of *Adam Bede* using a fragment from the critical preface by Stephen Gill as promotion copy: “‘Reading the novel,’ ” says the cover, “ ‘is a process of learning simultaneously about the world of Adam Bede and the world of *Adam Bede*.’ ”¹⁹ In this marketing strategy, fictional realism shares a space with texts produced within the asylum – Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903), for example. Realism is said to tell a (historical) truth despite itself even as it does not tell the truth, just as Schreber is said by the psychoanalysts to speak with absolute accuracy and precision about paranoia through a language he himself perceives as telling another kind of

Cambridge University Press

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Katherine Kearns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

true story, that of his visions and visitations. Barthes makes the justification for analytic intervention explicit in his charge against the historians, a group that unambiguously asserts what the realists have been accused of claiming more obliquely: “a privileged ontological status” in which “we recount what has been, not what has not been, or what has been uncertain.” “To sum up, historical discourse is not acquainted with negation . . .,” says Barthes. “Strangely enough, but significantly, this fact can be compared with the tendency which we find in a type of utterer who is very different from the historian: that is the psychotic, who is incapable of submitting an utterance to a negative transformation. We can conclude that, in a certain sense, ‘objective’ discourse . . . shares the situation of schizophrenic discourse.”²⁰ For those who, for any number of reasons, ranging from the Althusserian to the ornamental, see realism itself as “a radical censorship of the act of uttering,” this critical intervention may be used as a recuperative strategy.²¹

Yet however its intentions in the matter are read, realism does supply two histories for the price of one, one of them fictional, the other “real,” but united inextricably in the detailing and circumstantialities to which modern historiography would also commit itself. Implicitly resistant to the grand narrative of Truth, while nonetheless in the service of a truth that is “historical” in proportion to its evidential materialities, the realistic novel eschews metaphysics at the level of practice. Gill’s observations about *Adam Bede* are also more generally applicable, for the realist novelist reveals a world that is “simultaneously a real world, historically placed, specifically realized, accurate in verifiable detail, and a fictional one, artistically ordered by a *knowable* author.”²² This is not, of course, to argue that an articulated or fully realized skepticism about metaphysical absolutes necessarily motivates this diminution of terms in the nineteenth century; as Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* makes clear, both exegetically and through its own practice, one’s acceptance of the necessary existence of Truth may in fact authorize a homely and dedicated empiricism, a preoccupation with craft over Art. Paradoxically, this metaphysical conviction may free one to assert that “history itself must be taken as it is; we have to proceed historically, empirically.”²³ A sense of contingency, that which overrides, for Hegel, the “professional” historian’s “*a priori* historical fiction” with its

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Katherine Kearns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

idiosyncrasies, may flourish within a system whose overarching formal integrity remains intact.

Unlike the productions of historiography, however, fictional realism's oxymoronic status ensures that both the realist's faith and the reader's faith in the judicial body – that which moderates the acceptable and the unacceptable, the sane and the insane, the real and the unreal – will be overtly contractual, contingent on the reality under scrutiny. One who reads very closely will see that the circle of fictional truth enacts its laws precisely by co-opting materialities into its representational bias through a system of synonymous elaborations, into the grammar of its given system of representatives,²⁴ whereas the “ordinary” reader – which is to say the reader whom realism so famously leads by the nose²⁵ – will respond to any number of less subtle warnings that realism throws out about its partiality. The ordinary reader – which is also to say the reader who engages these novels responsively, for pleasure (not so simple or domesticated an emotion as it often has been said to be) – is likely to feel realism's textual topography as rough, uneven. The *experience* of reading, which the critical discourse smooths out, translates at least as much anxiety as complacency in regard to the real: In realism, one is given to understand, in understanding the contractual and consensual nature of a given reality, that there is always a possibility that the terms will shift, that the bank in which one has deposited one's life savings will fail, that the currency may change. (As if to bring this point home quite literally, Gaskell shakes Cranford to its core with the bank failure that ruins Miss Mattie Jenkyns; *Cranford*, so devoted to the ordinary, the daily, and the non-hyperbolic as to become emblematic of realism's modest purview, must turn to the devices of romance – the long-lost and exoticized brother – for rescue.) Realism suffers from – is, in fact, in some ways activated by – the fear that *Frankenstein* makes literal: that one's own (horrifying, eye-opening) tribunal of experience may be obviated as madness in another court, that both the imperative to produce a given reality and the reality itself will, when presented before another judiciary body, be seen as phantasmatic. The imminently tangible monster, oversized as it is, potentially may be held not to exist in an alternative assize.

The realistic novel's preoccupation with lawyers, court cases, and trials

Cambridge University Press

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Katherine Kearns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

reflects this apprehension of a reality that must be pled into existence. Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), very early on, predicted realism's intuition of a world in which appearances might pose the most fundamental contradiction to the realities of the case at hand, and in which one's status would define whether or not, and how, one could be heard in court. The differend communicates itself variously in realism, which refines the degrees and kinds of victimization with an interest virtually Sadeian.²⁶ The eighteenth-century game of baiting lawyers, whose only competition as objects of derision were tailors and doctors, gives way in novels of realism to a generally more sober view of the judiciary: One thinks not so much of buffoons, but rather of coldly sinister barristers, of life-and-death matters, of trials of the falsely accused (Justine, in *Frankenstein*, for example, or James Wilson, in *Mary Barton*) and the equally horrific trials of the "guilty" ones (Hetty Sorrel, of *Adam Bede*, for example, who cannot, by definition of the childishness that propelled her into disaster, account for herself; only her seducer, the young squire entered into his inheritance, may plead her case successfully, the irony of which should not go unnoticed).²⁷ Realism both intuits and performs its own contingency, and it forces the question of what it is that constitutes the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. For Truth, systemically perceived within a given set of materialities, becomes something else, something, in fact, that contributes its mite to the ultimate subversion of the grand narrative, Truth: Like the word "realism" itself, such a word used within the necessary contextualities of a physical environment announces itself as already problematized.

Actuated under a pragmatic willingness to forget competing versions and extraneous details, whatever it might imply about its own metaphysical accuracies, realism is not then overly distracted with Truth or the absence thereof (its authors may or may not themselves be distracted, but such difficulties are not allowed to override the syntagmatic momentum within the text); it cannot afford to go either to the extreme of idealism – Truth in the Platonic sense – or to that of positivism – Truth as a finite condition to be reached through accumulation of all relevant detail. In her guise as Aletheia, truth makes a lovely seduction toward allegory and thus to exile in the "country of the blue," where one wakes to a good conscience but to a very small coterie of like-minded idealists.²⁸ An alternative anatomizing will lead one to the paradox of observation: The act of gathering details