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978-0-521-15272-3 - Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism: Through the Looking-Glass

Katherine Kearns

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Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism argues for realism as a mode committed to depicting the imperiled ecological system of soul and society. More specifically: realism, Kearns argues, suggests to its readers that social and political and economic reforms are inextricably tied to spiritual well-being. In the process of trying to communicate that suggestion, realism enters into a kind of considerate conversation with its readers that – through the slip-page endemic to language – rapidly works to destabilize, even undermine, its own assumptions. Thus realism, in addition to bearing the burden of its own reformist agenda and the duty of character enactment within a restricted environment, is charged with an alternative energy that can be seen at the same time to disrupt and to enrich its generic, formal bounds.

In keeping with the exploration of these conflicting energies, Kearns takes on an assemblage of British and American novels – *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Blithedale Romance*, *Hard Times*, *The Awakening* – whose inclusion in the realist genre deliberately defies critical convention. Fantastic, ambiguous, brokered between the real and surreal, these texts illustrate the complex ways in which realism warred with its own principle of certainty. Kearns's radical revision of realism thus works not just to demonstrate how such unlikely texts fit into the realist world, but conversely to reveal unsounded depths in mainstream realism, to perturb still more profoundly our acceptance of literary genera.

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For Nick and Max

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The largest elephant in the world except himself
to be seen here.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and
Abuse of History* (attributed to
Jonathan Swift)

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Acknowledgments

It may be that only closet nihilists feel compelled to talk about realism, and that they talk about the real in order to bring words back to some testamentary force. To speak of realism is to enforce a conviction of reality's presence through the very medium – language – that has been deprived of its intercessional status as a bridge between materiality and spirit and made instead to stand as evidence of an estrangement from the world of things. The critical and artistic discourses of realism say two truths simultaneously: “There *is* realism,” they say, and in so saying they betray a repressed conviction of nothingness. Talking about the real is a way to stay in the world, to keep alive the loved objects whose loss one fears, and to keep at bay the all-too-peremptory externalities that threaten to turn spirit to machinic deadness. Not the least of the benefits of my own engagement with realism has been this chance to script a performance that writes a sort of modest optimism into being. That this recuperation is not an entirely arbitrary or Pollyannaish undertaking is a truth proven to me every day in the goodwill of my friends, colleagues, and family.

I would like to thank the institutions that have facilitated my research and the many friends and colleagues who have encouraged and supported my work. Northwestern State University provided funds to help in my research and enthusiastic support of my year's tenure at the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University. My reading-group companions in Natchitoches, Louisiana, kept my ideas alive and my thoughts more or less in order: Darrel Colson, Clayton Delery, and most especially Art Williams sustained a conversation long after most others had fallen to heavy course loads and other overwhelming obligations. My other Louisiana friends and colleagues – Gail and Michael Henry, Gwen and Charles Coker, Rodney

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