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SATIRE IN AN AGE OF REALISM

As nineteenth-century realism became more and more intrepid in its pursuit of describing and depicting everyday life, it blurred irrevocably into the caustic and severe mode of literature better named satire. Realism's task of portraying the human became indistinguishable from satire's directive to castigate the human. Introducing an entirely new way of thinking about realism and the Victorian novel, Aaron Matz refers to the fusion of realism and satire as "satirical realism": it is a mode in which our shared folly and error are so entrenched in everyday life, and so unchanging, that they need no embellishment when rendered in fiction. Focusing on the novels of Eliot, Hardy, Gissing, and Conrad, and the theater of Ibsen, Matz argues that it was the transformation of Victorian realism into satire that granted it immense moral authority, but that led ultimately to its demise.

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For Elaine Blair

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... to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom,
and the reason of things,
and to know the wickedness of folly ...
Ecclesiastes 7:25

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Preface

This book is about the antagonistic tendencies of realist representation. My focus is on the period commonly regarded as the pivotal era of realism in literature, the second half of the nineteenth century. But the book aspires to something larger too: a new understanding of genre, in which two modes normally considered discrete are instead seen to be interpenetrating.

Satire exists to isolate a condition or a sector of human life and hold it up for ridicule. Realism, in its nineteenth-century literary sense, is a method or an attitude seeking to represent experience, especially everyday experience, without implausibility. But toward the end of the Victorian period these two modes blurred into one another beyond easy division. The fiction and criticism of the era imply that to describe the world in starkly realist detail – to pursue and to represent facts and conditions without euphemism – *is* to expose this same world's essential folly and error. Realism cannot help being satirical, since its method of exposure is also a mode of attack; but satire must also be realistic, for it must persuade us that our failings are so entrenched in everyday life, and so extreme, that they need no embellishment or fantasy when transmuted into fiction. The result is something I name *satirical realism*, in which human beings are portrayed with nuance – and yet are objects of ridicule simply for being there.

We usually think of satire as a decidedly non-realistic kind of literary expression. Aristophanes's chorus of frogs, Rabelais's bawdy giants, Swift's talking horses: these all seem very far from the painstaking efforts in persuasive detail that we associate with *Middlemarch* or *Madame Bovary*. Such mockery does not seek verisimilitude; it is representational, but we cannot say that it represents what is recognizable, that it tries to evoke common experience. We usually think of realism, meanwhile, as a fundamentally non-satiric tradition in the history of literature, and in the history of nineteenth-century fiction in particular. George Eliot's scenes

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of modest life encourage us to understand her characters and to forgive them, not to scorn them. Realism in this view must be aligned not with satire but with sympathy, satire's opposite.

That division is wrong. This book aspires to correct what I see as a general critical reluctance to face the true polemical and censorious quality of nineteenth-century realism. In this great era of the liberal and tolerant novel, the most forceful energies of the satiric tradition were in fact transmitted through realist channels. As the novel developed in audacity and frankness, it could take up the great tasks of pre-novelistic satire but carry them out even more rigorously. The exposure of folly and the disparagement of human error were no longer the province of the fantastical or boisterous style of Rabelais, or the elegant neoclassical forms of Molière; they were now subject to the more austere method of Gissing and Ibsen. It was realism, with its harsher, blunter, and ultimately more credible procedures and vocabulary, that finally assumed the mantle of the satiric heritage. Irreverent condemnation, scornful and profoundly angry censure: these could now be lodged much more effectively, for they were now disguised as representations of the world as it really was. And in a sense they were far more alarming this way, since their equation of the ridiculous and the real made it hard to imagine a sphere different from the one represented. When fiction demonstrates realistically, and convincingly, that all is indeed vanity, then it denies us the succor that we might otherwise wish that it would provide.

I am writing about several things: satire's longstanding kinship with what I call realism; satire's realist form in the nineteenth century; realism's tendency toward censure and aggression in the late Victorian years. This third subject is my main one. My aim is to write a history of realism, not of satire; I am concentrating on the nineteenth century and especially its later phases, not (for example) on the eighteenth century and its already much-studied satiric tradition. But the pursuit of realism in literary criticism presents a kind of Zeno's paradox: as you inch closer and closer the thing seems to remain always just out of reach. Realism is better understood as an aspiration or elusive promise than as a fixed point: the study of representation is like the problem of closing a narrowing but stubborn gap. The very belief in literature's mimetic quality is one you hold or reject; if you hold it, that conviction is an act of faith that propels your reading and interpretation. Surely this is a major reason for the vastness of the scholarship on literary realism. We write about literature and the real because we believe in the fundamental union of the two, but since it can never be proven we hope our criticism will corroborate its very existence on the horizon.

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This vastness looms over every study of realism. First, there is the question of period: can we limit a book about literary realism to the nineteenth century, or should we look back at least to the 1700s, as Ian Watt does, and maybe forward to the present day? Second, of course, is the problem of what we mean by realism – if our emphasis should fall on the visual, the procedural, the literary-historical, the world-historical, the political, the sociological, or maybe something else altogether.

I am following many other critics in concentrating on the second half of the nineteenth century. But in doing so I do not want to take for granted that the fiction of these years, in retrospect, seems somehow more realistic than that of any other sequence of a few decades of literary history. Instead I am insisting, throughout the book, on the question of realism as it existed *as* a question in the late Victorian period. This is why my focus is on the 1880s and especially the 1890s – these were the years when this idea or movement or school had the greatest dominion over English fiction and criticism, and when the term itself was in such constant currency. Every chapter that follows is informed by my concern for what “realism” meant to the writers in question: why Hardy went so far out of his way to reject it as “an unfortunate, an ambiguous word”; why Gissing returned constantly and anxiously to what he called “the place of realism in fiction”; why English critics clashed for years over whether Ibsen’s plays were “realistic”; why Conrad was wary of being faithful to any “dogmas of realism” though sometimes seemed rather intrigued by them. This consideration of late Victorian views of realism, however, is only half of a two-part process. How – for these writers – “realism” became intertwined with something more accurately called “satire”: this theme then shapes every chapter of this book. And every one of these chapters considers how the *critics* of the era, struggling to interpret such an intrepid and aggressive form of representation, relied so heavily on the two ambiguous words that together provide the title of this book.

My emphasis on the 1880s and 1890s means that I largely avoid those Victorian novelists most often understood to be satirists: Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope (to say nothing of the earlier, and in many ways foundational, satirical novelist Austen). In part this is a choice informed by past criticism: the satiric quality of those novelists has been widely studied before. But it’s a choice also fueled by my particular focus on the realism inherent in satire, and the notably dark kind of fiction I associate with Hardy and Gissing but not with Dickens and Trollope. Satirical realism – a kind of writing that is satirical precisely *because* it is relentlessly

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realist – conceives reality as a sphere that is uniformly subject to censure, not selectively, as in Dickens or Trollope. Satirical realism is a mode of austerity, not of Dickens’s boisterousness or Trollope’s lively panoramas. It is a tragic and not a comic mode. “The way we live now” is a fine phrase for satirical realism, but *The Way We Live Now* is not a work of satirical realism as I describe it in the following chapters.

Thackeray is a more difficult case, and he surfaces in my chapters on Hardy and Gissing, but it is exactly my point to begin my history after his death – once “realism” became something novelists could not ignore or circumvent – and, in particular, after Dickens’s career was mostly over. Despite the proto-realist sensibility of some Dickens novels, and despite his fiction’s residence in the same working-class spheres we find again in Hardy and Gissing (and which are so important in my evaluation of their realism), my writers were forging an art that set itself apart from Dickensian narrative and characterization, even when they were indebted to his example. I acknowledge this simultaneous debt and distance; and in the chapters that follow, especially those on Gissing and Conrad, I evaluate Dickens as a foil, a kind of contrapuntal figure, who only throws into greater relief the satirical realism of the writers in question. In a sense Dickens is one of the central figures of this book, but only as a shadowy counterexample. As will be clear throughout the book, there is an essential reason for my focus on the late nineteenth century, the era after Thackeray and Dickens: my point is that novelistic realism had by this point reached a phase that it *understood* to be late; it had traveled far enough along its own arc to blur into satire.

A related subject is the question of historical analysis. I am tracing a shift in the tenor and character of realism; to what extent can that shift be explained by social and political circumstances in Victorian England? This is an especially difficult question for my study of the hybrid mode *satirical realism* in particular. *Realism* I usually associate with the specific and the local, while I typically argue that *satire* – at least the wide-ranging and essential satire that I am examining – is a fundamentally ahistorical, context-resistant mode of writing. Satire tells us the same, continuous truth about mankind’s folly; realism articulates it in new ways. This book is therefore historically aware without being historically determined. Specific extra-literary Victorian topics – especially population, poverty, and urbanism – are pivotal themes throughout these chapters; and I have benefited from the work of such historically focused critics as Catherine Gallagher and Patrick Brantlinger. But I also believe that satire’s caustic energies usually resist historicizing, and that the satirical realism of the

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writers in question – particularly Hardy, Gissing, and Conrad – is precisely what connects them to the tragic satirical tradition that preexisted the Victorian era. Many studies of nineteenth-century realism have focused on its interest in social reform; none has really taken up its later surrender to the inevitable truth of human error, its relinquishing of a reformist ideal. Satirical realism, as I argue throughout this book, is a non-corrective, a post-corrective, form of satire. And so the key is to keep one eye alert to the historical circumstances that give rise to despair or censure, all the while keeping the other focused on the long view, on how satire seizes upon present conditions only to articulate a much broader and shared human situation: on how it zooms out from the local to the universal.

The problem of period, and periodization, also brings with it the question of international scope. A very similar book could be written about the same subject in French literature. That study would surely center on Balzac and especially Flaubert; it might culminate in the antagonistic quality of Zola's naturalism and ultimately the satirical realism of Céline, who is *sui generis*. Most stages in this French study would be moved a few decades earlier than the points on my arc here. But I have decided to write a history of English realism in particular, infused though it is with the strong presence of the consummate satirical realist Flaubert. My chapter on Ibsen focuses on the Norwegian's reception and interpretation in England, and as part of the specifically late Victorian debates about the workings and purposes of realism in literature. The dual, interpenetrating subjects of this study are, for now, too immense to confront beyond the margins of the English tradition.

Second, the problem of what we mean by realism. This, of course, is what I am trying to address on every page of this book. But I can begin by providing some orientation here, and by explaining where my energies are, and are not, directed. There are a few main strands in the scholarship on realism, several major ways of approaching the subject. The first is the study of realism's relation to the visual. The very term "realism" (to refer to creative representation, rather than scholastic philosophy) comes from nineteenth-century art criticism, and some of the most penetrating studies of literary realism have focused on its connection to the visual arts. The art-historical scholarship of E.H. Gombrich and Linda Nochlin, among others, has been very influential in literary studies; two of my own mentors, Peter Brooks and Ruth Bernard Yeazell, have recently written about the relations between literature and painting. I have benefited from scholars who have examined certain interconnections between realism

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and the visual (Kate Flint) or related questions of perspective (Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth). A second major line in the tradition stresses the political dimensions of realism: this line begins with the Marxist theory of Georg Lukács, passes through his critics Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno, and continues through the recent work of scholars like Terry Lovell and Harry E. Shaw. A very closely related sequence is the tradition we inherit largely from Raymond Williams, and which has passed through Patrick Brantlinger and Franco Moretti, among others: the study of nineteenth-century literature through the lens of sociology, the sociology of literary forms, often taking the shape of cultural studies. (Ian Watt's work may be said to inaugurate another generous strand of this tradition.) Williams, especially, figures prominently here. Another central approach to realism emphasizes its connections to science; Gillian Beer and George Levine are the key writers in this tradition. Finally, there is the largely formalist line that descends from Erich Auerbach, and which informs so many contemporary studies of literary realism.

I am indebted to all these critics and traditions, and in the chapters that follow I often address the visual-optical, the sociological, the scientific, the formalist, and especially the political dimensions of realism. But if there is a single term to describe my approach to the subject it is undoubtedly *moral*, as long as we understand this word in its negative sense: I am evaluating the tendency of realist literature to be a strangely tragic protest literature, to represent people and things and conditions in a lifelike manner in order to expose their profound errors and failings. I am interested in the way a novel or play can seem at once detached and quite angry, neutral and yet partisan, objective but derisive, realistic and satirical. Satirical realism is a fundamentally moral kind of literature relying on a detachment or coolness that adroitly gives the impression of verisimilitude. It is dissent and description simultaneously. But satirical realism does not dissent in order to correct: it judges existing reality against a standard that reality can never achieve, and so it relinquishes any hope of correction. If it has been a virtually ignored tendency in the work of many of the greatest writers of the late nineteenth century, then I intend this book as a sort of corrective in its own right.

All translations from the French are my own. Other citations in translation – notably of Ibsen – are attributed in the text.

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This book is dedicated with love and ardor to my wife Elaine Blair, my best reader.