INTRODUCTION

Realism and the Novel: A Global History

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> "A good novel is a genuine event for theory"
> – Roberto Schwarz, "Objective Form," 22

V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* tells the story of its eponymous hero's desire to achieve that paragon of bourgeois stability, a house of his own. Explicitly contrasted to the communal living of his in-laws, this goal is tied to a similarly bourgeois ideal of individuality. And given the centrality of writing to the text – another of Biswas's ambitions is to be an author – we can add a third term to the text's meditation on the conditions of the subject in the "developing" world: the novel, generally understood to emerge out of the historical nexus tying property in land to property in the self that is at the heart of Biswas's dream. Mr. Biswas, we might say, would like to take up residence in Henry James's house of fiction. But if the novel's meta-theoretical interests align it with our conception of modernism, its defining impulse is fundamentally realist. The novel is largely the story of lost illusions, of the continual frustration of all Biswas's ambitions by the world in which he tries to realize them. *Biswas* thus sets in motion two contradictory ideas: The first is the general incompatibility of European ideals in colonial spaces; the second is the realist novel's ability to register this incompatibility. What the novel seems to reject at the level of content, it nevertheless embraces at the level of form.

Repeated references to Mr. Biswas's reading habits, most of which suggest the lifelong disappointment he will have to endure, reinforce the theme of incompatibility. The one exception is when he discovers the "solace" of Charles Dickens, the only canonical realist writer mentioned in the text:

> Without difficulty he transferred characters and setting to people and places he knew. In the grotesques of Dickens everything he feared and suffered from was ridiculed and diminished so that his own anger, his own contempt

> became unnecessary and he was given strength to bear with the most difficult part of his day: dressing in the morning, that daily affirmation of faith in oneself, which at times was for him almost like an act of sacrifice. (359)

This moment neatly captures several of the major themes of *Realism and the Novel: A Global History*. The first is the importance of the realist novel for the postcolonial world, not only in the form of *Biswas*, but also for the characters inside the novel. Novels, that is to say, may come from elsewhere – all of Naipaul's examples are English – but the experiences they generate are multifaceted, producing despair alongside connection. We observe, here, the semi-autonomy of literature, which allows for forms of identification that are both tied to – and yet also, in some measure, distinct from – the larger historical context in which these texts circulate.

Equally striking, however, is that what releases Biswas from his own sense of inadequacy is precisely the element of Dickens's work that might, at first, seem the least realist: what Naipaul calls his "grotesques" or what we can also name "caricature." The force of the passage lies in the difficulties Biswas has in maintaining the particular form of subjectivity he most desires, a dilemma he also sees as driving the characters in Dickens. And if Biswas's basic problem is the result of colonial modernity – of the dislocations Naipaul spent a career disparaging – might we not say the same of Dickens? The postcolonial realist novel, that is to say, allows us to see something we might not have otherwise recognized in the novels it supposedly mimics. When *The Empire Writes Back* – to use Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's epigrammatic phrase – it simultaneously suggests the enduring relevance of the realist impulse while asking us to reexamine what we thought we knew about its basic structures.

Realism and the Novel takes up this charge as it navigates a path between two conceptual pitfalls. The first is the tendency to read the European origins of the novel in isolation from the rest of world, taking national novelistic traditions – the French and English cases above all else – as paradigmatic for the novel form, which is then imitated as it travels across the globe. But just past the Scylla of Eurocentrism lies the Charybdis of alternative modernities. Here is Fredric Jameson describing the idea, in relatively scathing terms: "Whatever you dislike about [the standard Anglo-Saxon model of development], including the subaltern position it leaves you in, can be effaced by the reassuring and 'cultural' notion that you can fashion your own modernity differently" (*Singular Modernity* 12). Lest this seem overly critical, we should turn directly to Jameson's footnote: "The position here . . . is that all paths to capitalism are unique and

'exceptional', contingent and determined by a unique national situation" (218). These lines are from *A Singular Modernity*, where Jameson describes a world economic system that is one but unequal, singular but variable. If Eurocentrism overestimates Europe's autonomy, then the idea of alternative modernities is its ironic mirror image, producing a similarly false vision of national and regional autonomy belied by the structures of global capital. The specificity of the national situation, in other words, must also be articulated to that country's location in the larger world. (This too, we might say, is a realization granted us by the realist novel, whose work, as we shall see, is continually to connect the individual with the larger social order in which he/she gains meaning).

Realism and the Novel is structured to grasp both sides of this dialectic, recognizing the realist novel as, in part, a European invention, while tracing its transformations as it moves across the globe. At the same time, the collection brings the periphery into its conceptual architecture. Not enough, then, Franco Moretti's law of literary evolution, where the peripheral novel is the result of a triangulation of local form, local content and imposed form.[1] The powerful consequence of this law – which makes the French and English novel's seemingly autonomous development the exception, rather than the rule, the periphery of world literature rather than its center – needs to be pushed further to see how the forms imposed by the French and English were never autonomous creations in the first place but, rather, were produced through Europe's interactions with the rest of the world. The periphery, that is to say, was present at the realist novel's birth; realism's defining ideas – nation and sentiment, individualism and liberalism, and, as Edward Said has definitively shown, family and property – are themselves conditioned by the colonial encounter.[2]

The volume is divided into four sections that alternate between conceptual understandings of realism's characteristic concerns and forms and concrete investigations of realism's movement through time and space. The first, "The Realist Novel: A Timeline," begins with realism's eighteenth-century origins before moving through its canonical homeland in the nineteenth century and across the twentieth. The second section, "Realism's Keywords," outlines some of the key concepts that undergird realism as a literary mode, while the third, "The Forms of Realism," takes up a few of realism's subgenres. In the final section, "The Locations of Realism," the collection traces realism's movement across the world. Indeed, if literary forms arise in certain times and places, these forms are

[1] See "Conjectures on World Literature." [2] See Said, *Culture and Imperialism.*

nevertheless altered by their movement into new historical places and moments. *Realism and the Novel* tracks this process by describing realism's emergence *and* its transformation, noting its relationship to economic and social history while also acknowledging the semi-autonomy of literary forms, whose cross-cultural movements are related – but never entirely reducible – to the movements of goods and capital. Our collection, in other words, is as attentive to realism's formal qualities as to its imbrication in social and political contexts.

What this means, in part, is that though we are interested in how the realist novel is implicated in the larger project of imperialism, our goal is not a demystifying one. Realist novels produce real knowledge of the world. Sometimes the realist novel seems an imposition; at other times it provides solace. Some of our chapters investigate the novel within a particular national tradition, while others show how those traditions were shaped by larger global forces. What emerges is a vision of the realist novel as a multifaceted enterprise, a form that is always in dialogue with other genres and whose central concerns are themselves various – at times coercive, at other times sustaining. Similarly, though the realist novel is, throughout the volume, understood to be conditioned by developments in world capitalism, this does not lead to a rigid determinism. Whatever purchase the realist novel has on the world around it derives *precisely* from its relation to the conditions out of which it emerges. Even the utopian impulse articulated in many of our chapters is itself a direct result of the forces that shape the novels we discuss. Like all literary forms, the realist novel embodies a set of contradictions – between autonomy and determination, the individual and the community, empirical description and sentimental appeal – that can't be resolved by recourse to an ideal type. Instead we must look to the specific constellation of these ideas in particular works of literature. *Realism and the Novel*, then, aims to be a literary history above all else, meaning the social and historical concerns we address – most often, though not exclusively, the structures of empire – are embedded in the texts themselves.

Realist Form

With these ideas in mind, let's return to Charles Dickens, or rather to Raymond Williams's reading of both Dickens and the realist tradition more generally, taking from Williams's work some basic claims about the realist novel as well as a particular kind of reading practice that guides the work in our volume. Looking back, in *The English Novel*, at a crucial

period of English fiction – "those twenty months, in 1847 and 1848, in which these novels were published: *Dombey and Son, Wuthering Heights, Vanity Fair, Jane Eyre, Mary Barton, Tancred, Town and Country, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" – Williams describes "a crisis of experience," registered in the form of these canonical realist texts (9, 11). "Customary ways broke down or receded," creating an "important split between knowable relationships and an unknown, unknowable, overwhelming society" (11, 15). Realism's new ways of seeing – what Williams calls its "exploration" of "the substance and meaning of community" (11) – arose in response to the "new and unprecedented civilization in which it took shape" (19). Realism, that is to say, was a conscious formal response to the upheavals generated by nineteenth-century industrialization, the same upheavals, broadly speaking, that Naipaul sees as the cause of his characters' insecurities and inadequacies. Here is Naipaul's alter ego in *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh describing colonial modernity in Naipaul's characteristically (T. S.) Eliotic terms:

> It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfilment only with the security of their own societies and the landscape hymned by their ancestors. (38)

What Naipaul here decries, Williams sees in a more dialectical fashion. Dickens's description of the railroad in *Dombey and Son*, for instance, shows us both "pride" in its power, as well as the way this power overrides "all other human habits and purposes" (43, 44). Deep disorder, in Williams's argument, produces new ways of seeing alongside distress, as we can observe in his description of precisely the same element of caricature that provided Biswas's solace:

> As we stand and look back at a Dickens novel the general movement we remember – the decisive movement – is a hurrying seemingly random passing of men and women, each heard in some fixed phrase, seen in some fixed expression: a way of seeing men and women that belongs to the street. There is at first an absence of ordinary connection and development. These men and women do not so much relate as pass each other and then sometimes collide. . . . They speak at or past each other, each intent above all on defining through his words, his own identity. . . . But then as the action develops, unknown and unacknowledged relationships . . . are as it were forced into consciousness . . . But they are of the kind that are obscured, complicated, mystified, by the sheer rush and noise and miscellaneity of this new and complex social order. (32–33)

Caricature – the fixed expressions and habits of speech of Dickens's most memorable creations – is, here, a condition of the new civilization in which his characters find themselves. It is, simultaneously, a formal principle of Dickens's fiction and a specific response to an increasingly alienating world. These highly individualized characters are not, then, positive instances of the liberal subject but rather examples of the difficulties created by the transformations in nineteenth-century social life. And yet even through the blur of an urban landscape, new connections emerge. Alienation, that is to say, is never total; what is alienating is also, in some measure, enabling. Old relationships persist, even if in altered form. Unknowable communities are transformed into knowable ones through the agency of the realist novel. We might see Naipaul, then, as the inheritor of these Eliotic and Dickensian strands, finding despair both in the unknown new world and the one all too painfully understood.

Williams does not, in his comments on the realist tradition, name imperialism as one of the forces to which it responds. But when we read his account of Dickens through the eyes of Biswas we can see a relationship between disorder at home and disorder abroad. In each case, the result of this disorder is a transformation not only in the structure of the subject but also, and centrally, in that subject's relationship to its community, a relationship that is at the heart of the realist novel. Williams is again helpful:

> When I think of the realist tradition in fiction, . . . the balance involved . . . is perhaps the most important thing about it . . . it offers a valuing of a whole way of life, a society that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, and at the same time [it] values the creation of human beings who, while belonging to and affected by and helping define this way of life, are also, in their own terms, absolute ends in themselves. Neither element, neither the society nor the individual, is there as a priority. The society is not a background against which the personal relationships are studied, nor are the individuals merely illustrations of aspects of the way of life. (*Long Revolution* 321–322)

To specify the dialectical relation between individual and society as *the* core of the realist novel is to resist at least two dominant critical trends. The first sees the realist novel as the domain of the liberal subject; the second reads the realist novel as a form of social coercion, dedicated to the preservation of the social order at all costs. What Williams shows us is that you can defend the individual without ignoring the social order that constructs it, even as that social order is also the place within which the individual finds his/her meaning. Realism's genre-defining pull toward

socialization is not only interpellation, then, but also the construction of a common culture.

Of course, years of poststructuralist critique have suggested otherwise. Indeed, though it is, perhaps, no longer a requirement to begin a discussion of realism on the defensive, it is nevertheless worth insisting on the formal properties of a literary form once maligned as naïve in its representational effects and coercive in its social aims.[3] This naivety was tied, as in the exemplary work of D. A. Miller, to the repressive structures of bourgeois society, in a critique that can be traced back the modernists, whose discussions of the realist novel generally dismissed it as a form to be overcome in order to truly perceive reality anew.[4] Immediately we observe a paradox: realist form rejected in the name of a truer realism! This idea might, itself, be offered as one of realism's defining structures; realist novels typically proceed by debunking an earlier understanding of the world in the name of their superior representational lens. We can think, here, of the place of sentiment in the realist novel, the consistent object of realist satire, even as it is also a key element of its representational structures. Or we could name *Madame Bovary*, which has given us the eponym for an escapism conditioned by illusory romances.

I raise *Bovary* explicitly, for in its status as exemplary modernist *and* realist novel, it suggests the entanglement of these two terms in the critical discourse surrounding the realist novel. This divide is easily described: on the one side, form, innovation, style, interiority; on the other, content, reflection, social critique. Aesthetics versus politics, then, or more simply modernism versus realism. Joe Cleary has written eloquently about this particular topic, tracing the ways in which this opposition was hardened by the Cold War, the West claiming a modernism shorn of social critique in opposition to a Socialist Realism seemingly devoid of aesthetic sensibility.[5] Complicating matters are the terms themselves: realism, an epistemological ideal masquerading as a literary period, to paraphrase Jameson, modernism awkwardly tethered to a time period that, definitionally, has no end.[6] This

[3] For excellent discussions of the history of this critique as well as eloquent refutations of its assumptions see, among others, Esty and Lye, as well as Beaumont.

[4] I refer, of course, to *The Novel and the Police*. For a discussion of the place of the modernists – and, above all, their critics – in the dismissal of realism, see Stasi, *The Persistence of Realism*.

[5] Cleary, "Realism after Modernism."

[6] The claim appears in many places (as the following quotation suggests). "Realism, as I argued elsewhere, is a hybrid concept, in which an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal" (*Antinomies* 5).

critical inheritance runs through our collection even as the essays consistently work to question it.

One way they do so is to insist on the formal complexity of realism, which, in turn, allows us to be more precise about its structures. To schematize, we can observe first that the realist novel is tied to modernity. Indeed, though prose works have existed throughout history and though scholars such as Margaret Doody have named even ancient Greek prose works as novels, the novel, here, in this volume, will primarily refer to a genre that developed across the European eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that was, in its origins, defined by what Ian Watt long ago named "formal realism." For Watt, this realism is tied to "particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places," telling stories that develop over time and that, in developing, alter their protagonists (31). And these prose texts arose due to a set of conditions we might broadly label "modernity." This basic story has acquired much nuance over the years – the realist novel emerging, for instance, in dialogue with the romances that preceded it, alongside developments in print journalism, or in tandem with shifts in capitalism and the kinds of speculative mindsets it encourages – but the fundamentals have, in some sense, remained unchanged.[7] For our purposes here, I will suggest that novels are realist when they devote considerable energy to constructing what Roland Barthes referred to as "the reality effect," the sense that what we are observing is, in some measure, a representation of the world in which we live; they do so, in order to convey the "balance" between society and the individuals who compose it. *Realism, for this volume, then, names a set of formal responses to modernity, ones that are invested in the construction of a reality effect whose conceptual core articulates a relationship between a set of individuals and their defining social conditions.*

Emphasizing realism's formal qualities allows us to better specify what happens when it moves across the globe. For forms, precisely by virtue of being formal, are able to persist past the moment of their origins, even as they bring with them elements of the social order out of which they emerged. What results when these forms travel is a complicated encounter between whatever elements we imagine them to contain *intrinsically* and the new time and place to which they are brought. It is as important, then, to attend to the national situations within which forms arise as it is to proceed with an awareness of the larger world history that conditions

[7] In order of appearance: McKeon, Davis's *Factual Fictions*, and Gallagher.

them. Indeed, the claim, here, is that this history is embedded in the forms themselves.

Part of this history concerns the modes of representation the novel finds when it enters new terrains. It might, for instance, encounter a highly developed prose tradition – as happened when the European novel was brought to East Asia. Or it might find, as it did in Africa, forms of oral culture as the primary means of cultural transmission. There might be multiple prose traditions representing the world, as was the case in South Asia, even if none could be said to be entirely realist in aim. And it might travel to social worlds – such as those of the Caribbean or Latin America – where reality fails to match its particular formal structures. These encounters produce the characteristically hybrid forms of novels throughout the world. But what I want to insist here is that the realist novel has *always* been in dialogue with other forms of representation. Take, for instance, *Don Quixote*, often seen as one of Europe's first novels, its critique of chivalric romance giving us a classic instance of the realist impulse articulating its representational superiority via a critique of previous forms. And yet *The Quixote* is also, in its own way, a romance, devoting large sections of the text to the recitation of precisely the kinds of stories found in other works of the period. Generic multiplicity, then, alongside formal innovation: Might not *The Quixote* be understood, in part, as a critique of the realist impulse it also seems to instantiate? At the same time, when, in the novel's second part, Quixote encounters a book of his own exploits we seem to have found ourselves transported, without warning, to the postmodern period, the novel betraying the hyper-awareness of its own textuality characteristic of works written under late capitalism. How to square these multiple versions of Cervantes's text with one another – versions that seem, simultaneously, to be about the text itself *and* our reading practices?

A preliminary answer begins with a simple claim that I have already articulated: Realist novels are varied in their means of representation. The residual Gothic elements within *Jane Eyre*, the dual narrative structure of *Bleak House*, the uneasy combination of sentiment and documentary realism in *Mary Barton*, the persistence of magical or supernatural elements in works by Amitav Ghosh: Realist novels are more formally diverse than we have historically given them credit for.[8] At the same time, what we observe in the twists and turns of our reading of the *Quixote* is the

[8] Elaine Freedgood, in *Worlds Enough*, has recently discussed the tendency to reify the Victorian novel as formally consistent in order to then highlight the experimental messiness of the novels that both preceded and followed it.

historical and contextual nature of our own critical categories. No one, quite obviously, could have called *Don Quixote* postmodern until the invention of the term in the twentieth century. Similarly, no one in the seventeenth century understood *The Tempest* to be about colonialism. Historical change transforms the texts that precede us. Our understanding of realism, in other words, *is always* conditioned by our sense of other periods and styles. We get closer to specifying what realism is by comparing it to other modes.

Threaded throughout this volume, then, is an understanding of realism as a form that provides a set of resources for novelists to work with and against, often in combination with other aesthetic structures. Realism might, for some, seem a capitulation to a particular form of Western rationality, an argument made, in part, by magical realist texts by Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, or Isabel Allende. Or realism might be the best way to describe those oppressed by capitalist rationality, as in works by Richard Wright or Mike Gold or Storm Jameson. In neither case is there a direct line from form to politics. Realism is never only one thing, never either reactionary or progressive; neither are those forms which would disrupt it. What matters, instead, is to situate realist novels in their particular contexts, to note how they respond to local realities and pressures and to observe the way realist elements are constellated within particular works of fiction with other elements that we might, after the Warwick Research Collective, name "irrealist" or, more simply, "modernist." *Realism and the Novel: A Global History* does not, then, aim to be exhaustive. We do not seek to describe, as in Moretti's monumental edited collection, the novel in as many of its incarnations as can fit in five volumes (or two in English translation). Our more modest ambitions are announced by the indefinite article. This is *a* history, telling one version of the novel's story.

The Essays

Our collection begin with Rebekah Mitsein's rejection of the idea that "the formal affordances of the novel" somehow disallow a "meaningful engagement with the world outside of Europe," a critique that rings throughout the volume (17). Whether in Mitsein's reading of the non-European texts with which the eighteenth-century novel developed in dialogue or in Jennifer Yee's account of the absent presence of empire in nineteenth-century French realist novels, these essays defy the view that realism must have a closed national space in which to operate. Patrick Parrinder, similarly, shows the persistence of realism in texts that, across the