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Author

Duncan, Ian

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Realism

IAN DUNCAN

I - IMMANENCE

REALISM achieves critical mass in 1856, the year George Eliot turns to writing fiction. She and George Henry Lewes read volume three of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, in which the *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first use of the word to denote a representational code in art or literature. Writing in the *Westminster Review* in April, Eliot comments: "The truth of infinite value that [Ruskin] teaches is *realism*—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality."¹ Eliot's essay "The Natural History of German Life" (hereafter NHGL), published in the same journal three months later (two months before Eliot begins "The Sad Fortunes of Amos Barton"), opens with a meditation on realism, although Eliot doesn't use the term.

Lewes does, in an 1858 essay, "Realism in Art: Modern German Fiction," which elaborates the aesthetic principles outlined in NHGL and developed by George Eliot in the famous seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*. For Lewes, realism is not antithetical to idealism (a fallacy that disables most German efforts in the novel) but is the authentic mode of expressing it; it is "that legitimate form of idealization which consists in presenting the highest form of reality."² The head of Christ by Titian has "its profound significance and idealism in the wonderful reality of the presentation; the head is more intensely human than any other representation of Christ, but the humanity is such as accords with our highest conceptions." For this, a photographic fidelity to external appearances is not enough. Realism also requires the artist's investment of sentiment, "sympathy with the internal life."³ Ethical as well as

aesthetic, realism's sympathetic transaction recognizes a universal humanity latent within our individual, everyday selves.

2 - MEDIATION

Realism's goal is recognition: not just of a world composed of contingent, particular phenomena but of the immanence of the ideal in the real—"truth and beauty" in "definite, substantial reality," "beauty in . . . commonplace things."⁴ Victorian realism is a representational technology of mediation: between the actual and ideal, particular and general, individual and species. This distinguishes it from the "formal realism," posited on a primacy of individual experience, which drives the eighteenth-century "rise of the novel" according to Ian Watt, whose influential thesis may have weighed too heavily in accounts of nineteenth-century practice.⁵ Victorian realism models the scientific technique of induction, eliciting general laws from the interaction of "thoughts and things," described by William Whewell in his disciplinary synthesis *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences*.⁶ George Levine has pinned George Eliot's realism to her "Positivist idealism" and the scientific method of Lewes and John Tyndall.⁷ More recently, Catherine Gallagher has argued that the conception of novelistic character as a mediating figure between particular individual and general type is crucial to the rhetoric of fictionality in the regime of realism; and that George Eliot's novels press this rhetoric to an affective limit—articulating a yearning for particularity as embodiment, shared between character and reader, in countercurrent to the reach for the ideal (truth and beauty) through the local empirical case.⁸

Some of the more compelling accounts of realism have described its mediation as operating between the individual and what Lewes and Eliot (after Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer) called the "social organism" or "social medium." Where Daniel Defoe's novels predicate their realism upon a protagonist's alienation or isolation, in Watt's account,⁹ nineteenth-century fiction socializes reality—as Franco Moretti has argued with reference to key realist forms, the Bildungsroman and free indirect discourse.¹⁰ For Georg Lukács, the great works of European realism articulate a dialectical relation between the individual life and its social totality via the invention of a new characterological figure, the historical type.¹¹ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth makes the case for realism as a technology of "consensus," analogous with Renaissance pictorial vanishing-point perspective, which aligns individual subjectivities within

a unified virtual space.¹² And Rae Greiner's account of "sympathetic realism" defines sympathy as a formal operation, rather than affective content, through which the imagination composes a shared continuum of feeling and cognition amid the unknowable minds of others, in a modern "society of strangers."¹³

3 - HUMANITY

What if we consider the human rather than the social as the totality invoked by Victorian realism? Admiring Titian's Christ for its realization of an exalted idea of humanity, Lewes reiterates the displacement of the religious sense from the divine to the human argued in the landmark works translated by George Eliot at the outset of her career: David Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*. The human and the social often stand synecdochally for one another, in an equation established in Scottish Enlightenment philosophical anthropology—a critical juncture in the genealogy of British realism, as Greiner shows in her discussion of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.¹⁴ Sociability became a bulwark of human exceptionalism once "man" was fully embedded in natural history, since sociability was the engine of progress in that uniquely human adventure, the perfectibility of the species. It provides a humanist frame for Lukács' Marxism, in which "the unbroken upward evolution of mankind" proceeds upon "the organic, indissoluble connection between man as a private individual and man as a social being."¹⁵ But this premise of the new anthropology was contested at its foundation, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's denial that sociability was a fundamental constituent of human nature in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. A little over a century later Charles Darwin would mount an assault from the other side, arguing in *The Descent of Man* that the "social instinct" was not only intrinsic to human nature but also prior to it, shared by other animals, so that its byproducts, morality and conscience, could no longer count as uniquely human faculties. Flourishing between Rousseau and Darwin, realist fiction claimed as its scientific analogue "the history of man," as George Eliot writes at the opening of *Middlemarch*, "and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time."¹⁶ Realism's mediation between individual life and species being charges both with ontological solidity. Victorian realism is thus indeed, as Ermarth argues, the literary equivalent of vanishing-point perspective, a repertoire of techniques to secure the human at the center of reality in place of God: at the same time that the Victorian natural sciences are

rewriting reality as radically inhuman, in spatial and temporal scale, in historical direction.

4 - HUMANISM: LIBERALISM

The “problem of justifying distinction in a world that presumes common humanity beneath surface differences is central to the moral economy of mid-nineteenth-century realism,” writes John Plotz, provocatively characterizing the realist novel as the genre of “liberal guilt.”¹⁷ In *Bleak Liberalism* Amanda Anderson mounts a strong defense of the liberal politics of Victorian realism’s work of mediation—reconciling a tragic or satiric (“bleak”) knowledge of injustice and suffering with an efficacious sympathy. Assimilating to this argument works that are formally quite different, *Bleak House* as well as *Middlemarch* and *The Way We Live Now*, Anderson pitches her case for a unified liberal aesthetic of Victorian “high realism” against ideological formations that are historically outside it (closing upon us now).¹⁸

It remains crucial, nevertheless, to acknowledge tendencies within Victorian realism that push against this broadly liberal aesthetic. Darwin’s work constitutes a horizon of Victorian realism in the sense not only of a fulfillment of its logic but of a limit at which the formation begins to disintegrate, insofar as Darwinian natural history dethrones man from nature’s center and history’s end. As other categories—notably “life”—take humanity’s privileged place, the field of representation admits potentials of the inhuman and posthuman, as Elizabeth Grosz argues in her philosophical reflections on Darwin and Henri Bergson.¹⁹ Near the end of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea’s epiphany of “involuntary, palpitating life”²⁰ opens onto a new totality that enfolds the human but also exceeds it and ultimately, in the stream of evolutionary time, dissolves it. “Judging from the past,” writes Darwin, “we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity.”²¹ We see why provincial life has become the topos of Victorian realism: it offers a protective enclosure for the history of man, a sanctuary of slow time, within which the mysterious mixture may remain, or seem to remain, stable.

As for *Bleak House*, populated by grotesque life-forms in the process of speciation (although not on Darwinian principles), its division of the narrative splitting the grammatical components (first versus third person, past historic versus present tense) of realism’s core technique, free indirect discourse: Dickens’s novel effects a denial at the level of form of that world held in common—a shared social universe, a singular humanity—that is realism’s premise. “The word *humanity* strikes us as strangely

discordant, in the midst of these pages; for, let us boldly declare it, there is no humanity here,” Henry James complains of a later Dickens novel (*Our Mutual Friend*): “[Humanity] is in what men have in common with each other, and not in what they have in distinction. [Dickens’s characters] have nothing in common with each other, except the fact that they have nothing in common with mankind at large.”²² Dickens’s insight gains force on the far side of Victorian realism’s project of anthropomorphic salvage.

NOTES

1. [George Eliot], “Art and Belles Lettres,” *Westminster Review* 65 (April 1856): 626.
2. [G. H. Lewes], “Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction,” *Westminster Review* 70 (October 1858): 274.
3. Lewes, “Realism in Art,” 274.
4. Eliot, “Art and Belles Lettres,” 626; *Adam Bede*, ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 162.
5. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).
6. William Whewell, *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences: Founded upon their History*, 2 vols. (London: J. W. Parker, 1847), 2: 17, 24.
7. George Levine, “George Eliot’s Hypothesis of Reality,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35, no. 1 (1980): 1–28, 2–4.
8. Catherine Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” in *The Novel, Vol. 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 336–63; “George Eliot: Immanent Victorian,” *Representations* 90, no. 1 (2005): 61–74.
9. See Marina MacKay, “The Wartime Rise of *The Rise of the Novel*,” *Representations* 119, no. 1 (2012): 119–43.
10. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987); “Serious Century,” in *The Novel*, Vol. 1, ed. Moretti, 364–400.
11. Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, Gorki and Others*, trans. Edith Bone (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964).
12. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

13. Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 18–19.
14. Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism*, 17–23.
15. Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 3, 8.
16. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 3.
17. John Plotz, “Is Realism Failing? The Rise of Secondary Worlds,” *Novel* 50, no. 3 (2017): 426–35, 427.
18. Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 46–77.
19. Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 11–25, 26–35.
20. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 788.
21. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, ed. William Bynum (London: Penguin, 2009), 436.
22. Henry James, review in *The Nation*, December 21, 1865, in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 471.



Religion

ILANA M. BLUMBERG

“WHAT ‘religion’ turns out to be in a given time, place, writer, or text when not constituted in advance” by any critical theory is often “revelatory,” says the postsecular critic Lori Branch.¹ Nowhere is this truer than in the mid-century prose of such writers as George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, and John Stuart Mill, whose varied uses of the term “religion” reveal a word itself in transformation, at times referring backward to an established social and spiritual order of Christian practice and belief while, more often, projecting toward a future order of moral and psychological orientation still in the making. In 1888, Mary Augusta Ward sought to catch the extraordinary activity compressed in