

IN DEFENCE OF REALISM

Raymond Tallis

Edward Arnold

A division of Hodder & Stoughton

LONDON BALTIMORE MELBOURNE AUCKLAND

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This book is dedicated with my love to Edward and Mary Tallis without whom I should have had no access to reality.

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Note

I have referred to the reader throughout this book as 'he'. This is not because I believe that only men read books or that males are the only readers worth considering. I did experiment with 'he or she', 's/he' and 'he/she' but found the results at best clumsy and at worst distracting. And for a male writer to refer to the reader consistently as 'she' would be hypocritical pretence. And so I have conformed to normal usage, fully aware that behind linguistic use there is much extra-linguistic abuse. The fact that 'he' is the unmarked and 'she' is the marked form of the third person pronoun is directly connected with the marginalization of women and the implication that the male is the normal or canonical form of the human species – or of the common reader. Even so, I should prefer that my feminist credentials were judged by my ideas rather than by a nervous linguistic tic. If those who defend realistic fiction have natural allies, they are to be found amongst the ranks of the feminists.

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Aperture: The Realistic Novel under Attack

That realism is outmoded and the realistic novel a form that has had its day is a critical commonplace sufficiently widespread to be familiar to anyone who glances through the book reviews in quality papers – irrespective of whether he reads a novel from one year's end to the next. Not long ago, the popular idea was that the novel was on its death bed; but now we learn from certain quarters that only realism has died, while the non- or anti-realistic novel is flourishing. Such posthumous life as realism enjoys (so one current orthodoxy runs) is exemplified by the novels of middlebrow and best-selling authors – mere entertainers, some superior, others inferior. Outside of the novel, the true nature of contemporary realism is betrayed in the vulgar naturalism of television serials such as *The Archers*, *East Enders* and *Coronation Street*.

On the basis of such evidence, it is concluded that the realistic novel now serves only to sedate (that is to say, kill) the higher reaches of the mind, or (in the case of those readers whose minds lack such reaches) to kill time when the television has broken down or has become, as on a train journey, temporarily unavailable. Realism is cultivated either by an, admittedly talented, *arrière garde* or, more conspicuously, by talentless millionaire hacks who sell their worthless products in millions. It has been evicted from the Literature shelves and squats ingloriously (but lucratively) in paper-back bookstands on railway stations and at airports. It has, with a few striking exceptions, lost its literary function; and if it has any political function, it is to support the status quo, to collude with one version of reality and pass it off as if it were reality itself. The serious reader must look elsewhere, outside of realism, for instruments to sharpen his perception of the world and to heighten his awareness of the significance of things; even, paradoxically, for fictions with which to explore reality itself.

This is of course a parody of one – very influential – vision of the current state of fiction. It is not based upon observed fact. For the truth is that realistic fiction is very much alive and kicking, though realism seems to have conceded much of the experimental high ground. Realistic novels of a very high standard, as well as the rubbish, continue to be written and read. And realism continues to be appreciated – if the awarding of major literary prizes

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can be counted as a criterion. The great majority of novels short-listed for the Booker Prize are realistic.

So the facts are not entirely in favour of those who, like Michael Boyd, claim that the modern novel defines itself in terms of its rejection of the conventions of formal realism¹. Nevertheless, there are many critics who wish that the modern novel would behave in this way, believing that those who continue to write in the realist or naturalist traditions are 'like headless chickens unaware of the decapitating axe'.² Moreover, many of the acknowledged giants of contemporary fiction – Beckett, Pynchon, Barthelme, Borges and Marquez, to name a few – are committed to the creation of non-worlds, dream-worlds, word-worlds or anti-worlds. The works of the campus heroes of recent years are stepped in myth and fantasy. So-called science fiction is more often given serious attention as a literary form and its reputedly better practitioners, such as Moorcock and Le Guin, are considered appropriate for postgraduate research. At least one novelist, Doris Lessing, who began her career as a serious, if for some tastes rather dull and moralistic, practitioner of realism, took to writing 'space' fiction which, she has implied, is the only suitable mode for the contemporary novel. Even those writers who locate their fictions on earth and still have a use for characters drawn from daily life are apparently unashamed by implausibility. Nor are they criticized for this. Iris Murdoch, to cite an author who enjoys a very high critical standing, often relies heavily on improbable coincidences to keep her plots going. This particular failing reached its highest expression in her absurd *The Sea, the Sea* which won her the Booker Prize. Indeed, a modest degree of implausibility, along with other kinds of timid rebellion against 'realism', seems to metal the royal road to critical favour. This may be why many 'serious' novelists, in whose work formal experimentation is not especially evident, now include goblins, or unfortunates who are twice-born or undergo one or more reincarnations, lucky creatures with magic powers, and other implausibles in their casts of characters. The booming genre of 'black comedy' provides a favourite place of refuge for writers whose fictional fancy outstrips their imagination. Perhaps the most telling sign of the favourable climate enjoyed by piecemeal anti-realism is the way critics accept the most absurd of plots, which they retail with poker faces.

When the house of fiction is overrun by fabulists, by writers with their hands deep in what Philip Larkin called 'the myth kitty'; when even the least visionary of practitioners seem to trouble themselves less and less with precision and plausibility; when many intelligent critics see plausibility as a literary vice, a kind of confidence trick, ought we not concur with the growing body of opinion that realism is increasingly outmoded?

No we should not, if only for the reason that realism has not yet begun to

¹ Michael Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel: Fiction as Critique* (Toronto: Lewisburg Bucknell University Press, 1983) p. 9.

² Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York, 1967) p. 6.

exhaust its possibilities. If it seems to have done so, this is only because of a persistent tendency to confuse the *aims* of realism with certain techniques used to achieve those aims – techniques developed largely by the great nineteenth-century novelists. Understood as an attempt to do justice to, to express or to preserve, a piece of reality, realism is not the dead hand of the past but the challenge of the present and of the future. A defence of realism does not imply an opposition to experimentation. Quite the reverse; for it is precisely those most concerned to express reality with maximum fidelity who are required to be most daring in their experiments.

The increasing consensus, uniting literary journalists and radical academic critics, that realism is outplayed, is difficult to oppose because of the inextricable mixture of half-truths and whole falsehoods on which it is based. The present book is a continuation of an argument developed in an earlier work and I think a few words on the relationship of the two books may be helpful to the reader.

In *Not Saussure*, I examined the claims made by post-Saussurean thinkers about the relationship between language, the self and reality. In particular, I investigated the claim that words could not refer to a genuinely extra-linguistic reality. I was able to establish that most of the celebrated post-Saussurean assertions – ‘there is nothing outside of the text’; ‘all texts are about other texts’; ‘the world of words creates the world of things’, etc. – are based on serious misreadings of Saussure. These misreadings, and the often elementary philosophical confusions underlying them, have gone undetected because lost in opaque texts where key terms are strategically mishandled. Post-structuralists, in particular, find it useful to confuse or conflate the signifier with the sign, the signified with the referent, reference with meaning, verbal token with verbal type. The radical nominalism of the post-Saussureans is, in short, founded not upon Saussure but upon bad linguistics and even worse philosophy of language.

There are two reasons why it is important for the reader of *In Defence of Realism* to know what was established in *Not Saussure*. Firstly, he might otherwise think that, in the first two parts of the present book, where I deal with the case against realistic fiction, I have failed to take account of the quasi-philosophical arguments associated with structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers. Secondly, when, in the third part of the present book I ask the question, What if the ideas advanced by certain radical critics were true?, the ideas referred to are not only those discussed in the earlier parts of *In Defence of Realism*, but also those examined in *Not Saussure*. For the convenience of the reader, I shall briefly summarize these at the beginning of Part 3.

There are many reasons why critics may subscribe to the ideas that seem to provide a theoretical basis for hostility to realistic fiction. I discuss some of these in Part III, notably in Chapter 8, where I connect the attractiveness of these ideas with the critics’ loss of confidence in their traditional tasks of exposition, interpretation and evaluation. In particular, with the lack of

control of the PhD supply, many critics are depressed by the pandemic of interpretosis that has broken out in the republic of letters. Much criticism is surplus to requirement and the role of the critic seems in need of re-definition. The displacement of literary criticism by literary theory and of the latter by 'theory' has provided the longed-for solution, reviving a lost sense of purpose.

The contents of this book are organized as follows. In Parts I and II, I deal with some of the reasons that have been given for the widespread critical position that fiction should abandon its attempt to represent reality and that realism should give way to fantasy or to self-referential meta-fictions. Chapter 1 examines the historical and sociological reasons for asserting that, as 'reality is no longer realistic', realism is inappropriate. Chapter 2 investigates whether, since stories and experience, telling and living, are different, there can possibly be such things as true (or true-to-life) stories. Chapter 3 looks at the reasons for believing that the rise of the cinema has 'dealt a *coup de grâce* to a dying realism'. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 uncover the contradictions in the 'ideological' arguments against realism originating from Althusserian and other brands of Marxism. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 look at the relationship between critical theory and novelistic practice. In Chapter 7, we discover that no fictions as yet answer to the specifications that radical critical ideas would, if they were true, demand. Chapter 8 looks at the absurd and often self-defeating pronouncements of radical critics. Chapter 9 documents the necessary retreat from theory. In the fourth, and final, part of this book I discuss the nature of realism, its problems and possibilities, and try to indicate how much is lost when novelists abandon the attempt to 'represent reality'. A conciliatory postscript (Closure) suggests that the relations between realism and anti-realism may not be entirely adversarial and that anti-realism, although secondary, may serve to waken realistic fiction out of unquestioned assumptions and routinization of what were once revolutionary techniques.

This book, like *Not Saussure*, has been written in the belief that current trends in literary criticism represent a real threat to the development of fiction. Critics have often been wrongheaded but they have never before been so well-funded, so numerous and so naked in their ambition to expropriate the prestige of the creative writer. With the professionalization, indeed the industrialization, of literary criticism and the replacement of the Man of Letters by the Man of Signifiers, the risk that critics may actually pervert the course of literature is greater than ever before. It is unlikely that they will succeed in preventing great artists from doing what they do best; but they will make life more difficult for them. The republic of letters cannot be a more healthy place for being wrapped in a fog of bad philosophy and worse linguistics and such a fog can only slow the appreciation of true worth.

If there is such a thing as a literary morality – and I believe that there is – it consists at least in part of devoting the higher attention of one's more inspired moments to coming to grips with the reality that has oneself and others in its grip. It is in the name of this morality that I have tried to defend the novel – potentially the supreme adventure of human consciousness –

and to clear away some of the critical errors that have threatened to smother it. It is less for the sake of the artists that I write – they are well able to look after themselves – than for the sake of their readers; those who, like myself, felt their critical senses being bewitched by ideas whose strength lay not in their truth but in the confusing manner of their presentation.

PART I
THEORY (1)

Realism, Representation
and Reality

Is Reality no Longer Realistic?

Marvin asks Sam if he has given up his novel, and Sam says 'Temporarily'. He cannot find a form, he explains. He does not want to write a realistic novel because reality is no longer realistic.¹

The case against the realistic novel is usually developed in regions of discourse where the intellectual air is so thin that the mind, presented with ideas that are easy to recite or quote but impossible to think or imagine, can scarcely breathe. On the lower slopes of literary theory, however, homelier arguments are sometimes advanced in support of the claim that realism has had its day. Some of these stem from a consideration of the changing nature of reality itself. For there is now a widespread belief that twentieth-century reality is 'unreal' and that it is therefore unsuitable for realistic treatment. The conclusion does not, of course, follow – there is no reason why a novelist should not attempt to deal realistically with the sense of unreality – but it has been drawn often enough for the premise upon which it is based to warrant critical examination.

Philip Rahv² informs us that 'it is no longer possible to use realistic methods' without taking reality for granted – 'and this is precisely what artists cannot do *now*' (*italics mine*). Bernard Bergonzi³ believes that we are unable to write now as Tolstoy did

because we have no common sense of reality. We are saddled with all kinds of relativistic structures of consciousness. We do not believe in there being 'one reality' out there as undoubtedly Tolstoy did.

Even Gerald Graff, a hostile and sometimes penetrating critic of postmodern or ultra-modish critical postures, appears to accept, quite uncritically, that 'contemporary capitalistic reality' is qualitatively different from all that has preceded it, and that its essence is 'unreality'⁴. And he speaks elsewhere of

¹ Norman Mailer, *The Man Who Studied Yoga in Advertisements for Myself* (New York, 1959, London: Panther, 1970).

² Philip Rahv quoted in Damien Grant, *Realism* (London: Methuen, 1970) p. 4.

³ Bernard Bergonzi quoted in Grant, *op. cit.*

⁴ Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas and Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) p. 10.

'the kind of unreal reality that modern reality has become'⁵. He cites, without apparent protest a passage from the American novelist and critic William Gass in which it is suggested that

the world [has] become, for many novelists, a place not only vacant of Gods, but also empty of a generously regular and peacefully abiding nature on which the novelist might, in large, rely. . . .⁶

Literary journalists, *avant-garde* novelists and advanced critics, then, are united in the belief that contemporary reality is totally different from that of preceding centuries.

Different writers would give different answers as to what it is about twentieth-century reality that makes it no longer amenable to realistic treatment and why realism, which flourished in the nineteenth-century and was apparently able to respond adequately to its realities, should be quite unable to deal with the world that emerged a few decades later⁷. Certain themes, however, are sounded again and again: modern reality, we are told, is more horrible than anything that has gone before; it is more vast and complex; it is pre-digested, in a manner that has no historical precedent, by the organs of the mass media; human artefacts now intervene between man and nature to an extent not previously seen, so that the individual's environment is a rapidly changing man-made rather than a stable natural one. Not to be appalled by the complexity of the age, by the scale of its achievement and its cruelty, not to feel bemused by the unremitting assault upon the mind of the products of the mass media, is therefore to betray an insensitivity unworthy of a serious writer. Authors who feel defeated by a world that sprawls beyond their comprehension will be sure of the applause of critics if they exhibit this feeling of defeat. After Auschwitz and the more recent events in Kampuchea, the argument runs, can any man of feeling put pen to paper and hope to express what lies around him? When (to cast the argument in the usual journalistic terms) the world has a population of over 3,000 million, when science progresses at such a rate that ten years is a geological era, when the human race lives daily on the brink of destruction, can any individual, least of all a writer, believe that he is able to make sense of the world or that his sense of reality can withstand critical scrutiny? And when, every moment of the day, television and newspapers and the radio mediate between him and the reality, can any thinking artist trust his own perceptions? Is it not an infallible sign of stupidity to write as if one were at home in the world?

It is a peculiar but not uncommon kind of snobbery to believe that one lives in the worst of all historical eras – the most abominable, the least compre-

⁵Graff, *op. cit.* p. 80.

⁶Graff, *op. cit.* p. 10.

⁷There is a good deal of uncertainty as to when it was that reality became unsuitable for realistic treatment. Erich Auerbach, for example, seems to believe that even Flaubert (whom he agrees is a 'realistic writer') 'suffered from a lack of valid foundation for his work': *Mimesis*, translated by Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953) p. 551. See also the observations on Eliot later in this chapter.

hensible, the most rootless. Such a belief is a sure sign of an underdeveloped historical sense. Anyone with the scantiest knowledge of the past will know that the history of the world is largely the history of pain, injustice and chaos. As Nietzsche wrote, 'the whole of history is a refutation by experimentation of the principle of the so-called "moral world order"' ⁸. Men have always lived in dark times, though some have been more conscious of it than others; and certain individuals in every era have derived a perverse comfort from believing that they lived in the darkest times of all. Revolting cruelty is not a twentieth-century invention; nor is the application of technical advances to bestial ends. Moreover, the whole of 'reality' has never been within the grasp of an individual mind. Why should anyone imagine that it could or should be? How could one mind comprehend a world containing many millions of other minds? Human life has always been torn with extremes and extremes have always outreached the consciousness of a man with a pen in his hand. The Black Death was proportionately more destructive than the events at Hiroshima; or – to compare human acts with human acts – the Thirty Years War and the American Civil War were on a scale of horribleness comparable to that of more recent catastrophes. There is nothing intrinsically more revolting in the slaughter of a thousand Americans in a semi-religious ceremony at Jonestown in 1979 than the massacre of 80,000 victims in an Aztec religious ritual at Tenochtitlan many centuries previously. It is, therefore, no more a sign of moral or intellectual insensitivity to try to write a realistic novel in the 1980s than it was in 1922 or 1857.

If recent horrors seem more horrible than those of earlier centuries, it is only because they are apparently less excusable. They seem less excusable because we like to believe that the world is – or should be – more civilized than it was. This belief in turn derives from the idea that the material benefits brought by technology should make men less rapacious and cruel. Instead, all that has happened is that, in certain quarters, the appetite for power has replaced the drive for the necessities of life as a mainspring of behaviour; or, rather, that technological advance has allowed the latter of these appetites to dominate over the former. Cruelty as a by-product of the struggle for survival has been replaced by manifestly senseless savagery.

Contemporary reality shocks us more because we assess it against improved expectations of our fellow men. And, perhaps, also because its excesses and atrocities are more widely known. A massacre of children in Central Africa would have gone unreported in the western press in the nineteenth-century; and the appalling conditions endured by the labourers working on the Great Wall of China would have passed unremarked in some contemporary *Washington Post*. So the complacent, even self-admiring despair and cynicism of the well-heeled owes more to an all-too-easy apathy than to a profound appreciation of the history of the world.

⁸Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: The Viking Press, 1954) p. 660.

Some writers have concentrated less upon the mass evil of modern society than upon its complexity, multiplicity and discontinuity. Everyone is familiar with the claim that the present age is more fragmented than past ages. According to Graff, not only war but also

Modern technology . . . politics, commerce, social engineering, and journalism, which, by promoting continuous discontinuity and upheaval, have assaulted our assurance of reality⁹.

Moral, technological and organizational differences have combined to produce a contemporary reality that is metaphysically different from past realities. We, unlike our predecessors are 'saddled with all kinds of relativistic structures'. Unlike Tolstoy and his contemporaries we 'do not believe in there being "one reality" out there'.

These claims do not stand up to the briefest reflection on the phenomenology of human experience. Human consciousness has always been riven by discontinuities. To dwell merely on the physiological facts, the outside world has always been refracted through bodies that have had fluctuating and different neurophysiological and neuropsychological properties. Throughout history, human life has been marked by intermissions of consciousness itself: sleep, dreams, delirium, coma and epilepsy are scarcely creations of the twentieth-century. Individuals experience the world totally differently as neonates, as young adults or in advanced old age. The invention of the motor car or the micro-computer has not cut deeper into the continuity and the uniformity of an agreed-upon reality than do sleep or coma.

In fact, physiological and educational considerations suggest that inter-subjective reality is now likely to be *more* uniform in advanced countries. To focus upon just one small, but vitally important, aspect of history (at the risk perhaps of seeming to be absurdly specific in a realm of argument where facts are usually viewed with disdain or treated as irrelevant), there has always been a certain proportion of the population who are brain-injured and consequently profoundly alienated from an agreed-upon reality. This proportion is now lower, not higher, than it was in the nineteenth-century when realism was supposed to be at its appropriate zenith. For there is now a lower incidence of cerebral damage due to starvation *in utero*, to birth injury, malnutrition during critical growth periods or to accidents. The subjectivity of the brain-injured hardly belongs seamlessly with that of the non-injured in an unfragmented, collective reality. (It scarcely matters, from the point of view of the victim, whether the injury was the product of an organic fist being smashed into an organic face in an organic community, or whether it was the result of a more 'clinical' accident in a factory.)

To take a less extreme example, the destitute and starving do not participate in the same reality as the well-fed and well-heeled and the former, in those (affluent) countries where 'the unreality of reality' is most likely to be

⁹Graff, *op. cit.* p. 8.