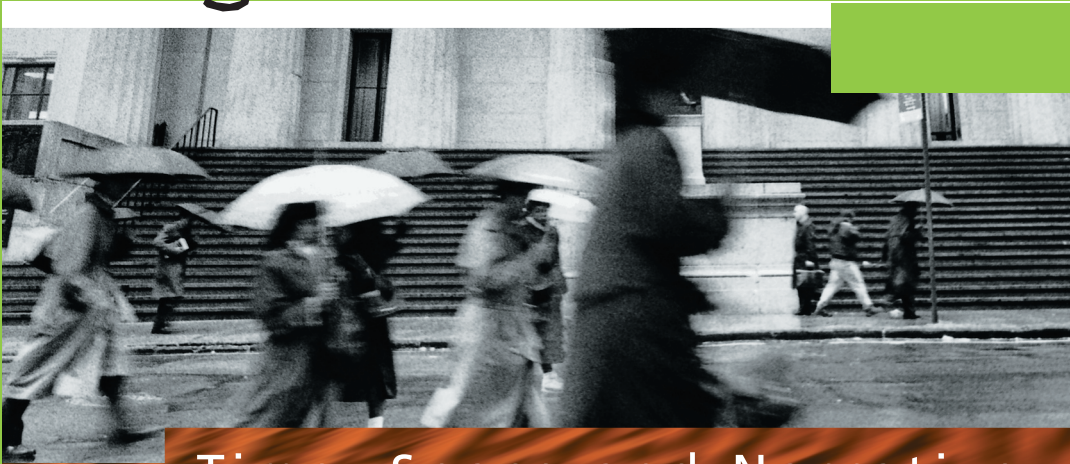
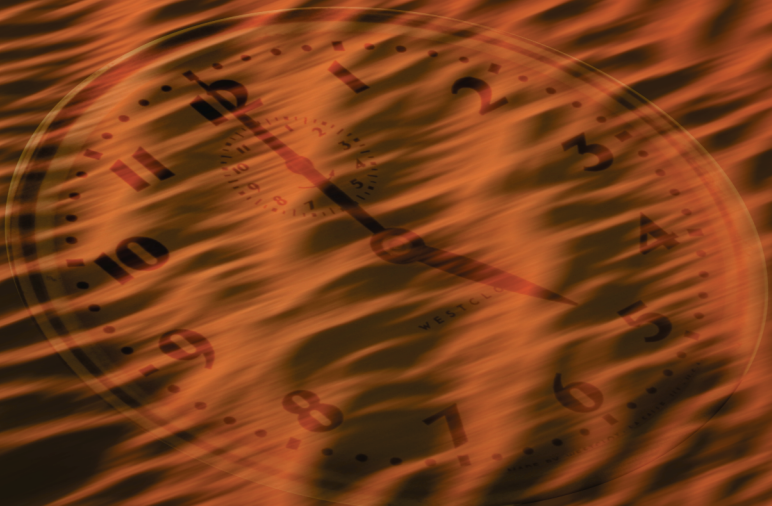


Realism and Consensus in the English Novel



Time, Space and Narrative



Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth

"A model of conceptual clarity. She has utilized her reading of modern theory in an independent way to construct a view of realism that is all the more impressive for being built out of such simple materials . . . As she goes, she knocks down one by one some revered assumptions about realism . . . An intelligent and forceful book."

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"A powerful analysis of the conventions of realism . . . Astutely analyzes the development of consensus as an operative process in the realistic novel, and Ermarth's readings of individual texts clearly and cleverly elaborate the formal conventions and historical elements that structure and distinguish these works."

Jeffrey Wallen, *Reviews in American History*

"Her writing is so clear that readers will find this book extraordinarily valuable."

Choice

"Elizabeth Ermarth's *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel*, now available in paperback, is by far the most impressive work on language and narrative technique, one of those rare, serene books whose lucid simplicity makes its argument appear at once obvious ('Of course!') and new ('Why didn't I think of that?'). There is, however, nothing thin or schematic here; the connection between realism and humanism is often assumed, especially in

poststructuralist writing, but Ermarth demonstrates their common genesis in the Renaissance by reference to art history, mathematics, and religious and philosophical texts. [A] combination of modest simplicity of style and stunning breadth of implication."

The English Association (Year's Review, 1987)

"She grounds these generalities both in the intellectual history (ranging from Foucault to Huizinga) that mark the first half of the book, and the sensitive readings that form the second half. The book is remarkably free from jargon, but never at the cost of simplifying its own argument: rather, Ermarth has a gift for the telling example . . . the quiet truth."

Hilary M. Schor, *Novel*

One of the strengths of the study is the way in which it combines wide-ranging cultural history, lucid discussion of theory, and astute close reading . . . Realist writing is placed in a cultural tradition going back to the renaissance, and an illuminating analogy is drawn between the use of perspective in Renaissance painting and the practice of realism, between the rationalization of sight in the former and the rationalization of consciousness in the latter. The role of the narrator is crucial in this process of rationalization and Ermarth arrestingly defines the typical realist narrator as "nobody", invisible and faceless, the projection of a collective consciousness, and in so doing she invaluablely refines and transcends the casual, conventional terminology of "omniscience".

John Rignall

Without a doubt, *Realism and Consensus* is one of the most important studies of the novel to emerge in the last several decades. Ermarth's seminal study offers a lucid account of the basic premises of realism, beginning with medieval art . . . The material on time and rhetorical sequence [is] especially good and out of the ordinary.

Diane Elam

Realism and Consensus in the English Novel

Time, Space and Narrative

Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth

Edinburgh University Press

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FOR
Thomas Vargish

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

My discussion of realism focuses primarily on the realistic novel, but it extends beyond the nineteenth century, the period in which the realistic novel flourished, and even beyond the scope of purely literary considerations. I assume that aesthetic forms reveal certain premises about human experience that are not exclusive to literature or even to art but common to a variety of modes and to a variety of disciplines. For example, the conception of time and space as common, neutral media is essential to empirical science as well as to verisimilitude in art. To establish the premises of realism, then, I resort to analogies with painting and to illustrations from geometry because the space intuitions evident in these arts provide suggestive new approaches to temporal realism in literature. By contrasting realistic with typological forms of art and by comparing different forms of realism I intend to locate the premises that are implied by realistic conventions.

In making such comparisons, I necessarily leap over centuries. I assume that premise and convention can best be illustrated by contrast, and that changes in premise and convention involve homeostatic cultural shifts that cannot be perceived except on a large scale. So, for example, while there are important differences between quattrocento painting and nineteenth-century literature, they are less significant for my purposes than what unites them. The informative contrast lies between medieval and post-Renaissance art rather than between two forms of realism, however widely separated in time. By looking at literary realism in such a context and by using necessarily generalized terms, I wish to locate the realistic novel in relation to a wider historical and intellectual tradition.

To summarize my theoretical discussion, I argue that fictional realism is an aesthetic form of consensus, its touchstone being

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the agreement between the various viewpoints made available by a text. To the extent that all points of view summoned by the text agree, to the extent that they converge upon the "same" world, that text maintains the consensus of realism; to the extent that such agreement remains unsupported or becomes impossible, to that extent the realistic effect is compromised. It is not only the presence of points of view that confers verisimilitude; it is their consensus alone that homogenizes the medium of experience and thus objectifies a common world.

Considered as a form of consensus, realism belongs to the mainstream of humanistic tradition since the Renaissance. Part One of this book (Chapters One, Two, and Three) takes up the dominant modern idea of time as it has developed since the Renaissance, and specifies its implications for an entire view of consciousness. The subsequent discussion (Chapters Four through Seven and the Epilogue) traces changes in realistic conventions using six major English novelists: Defoe, Richardson, Austen, Dickens, George Eliot and James. My purpose in each chapter is to clarify both the special powers of realistic conventions and also their particular limitations. I use *realistic* as a descriptive term, not an evaluative one, and I do not suggest that the changes in realism from Defoe to James represent some teleological development. These interpretive chapters dispel, I hope, any lingering superstition that realistic conventions are impoverished. One of my central themes, stated most succinctly in Chapter Three ("The Narrator as Nobody") concerns the increasing importance of the narrator as mediating consciousness in the realistic economy.

In explaining and extending my theoretical argument I do not intend to define realism absolutely, to impose prescriptive terms, or even to find a purely realistic novel. In exploring the relation between form and value, what interest me are questions of emphasis and degree, and of the way changes in degree become actual and even radical changes in kind of thought. Eventually I want to determine the extent to which any novel subscribes to realist premises by using realist techniques, and to what extent any novel qualifies those techniques and so limits those premises. Some novels and narratives (*Paradise Lost*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Tris-*

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tram Shandy, *Finnegans Wake*, *Hopscotch*, *Ada*, *The Faerie Queene*, the *Iliad*, to name a few) go about their business without depending on realistic conventions at all, or doing so parodically. In seeking to define the powers of realistic conventions I assume that realism is one convention, but not the only one.

In approaching such a vexed matter as the meaning of *realism* I naturally encounter problems of usage. Even though recent debate about realism has focused on the connection between convention and value, this new clarity has not dispelled a profound terminological confusion. Usage of *realism* differs widely depending upon what qualities a writer, often casually, isolates as essential to realism. Some familiar qualities of fictional realism, for example, are chronology, particularity, interiority, viewpoint, and everyday subject matter. While these usages do all partially describe realism, what they have in common has remained unclear. Furthermore, different discussions also create an odd fluidity between *realism* and other terms like *mimesis*, *narrative*, and *novel*. Sometimes *novel* and *narrative* include all fiction, at other times they exclude the likes of *Finnegans Wake* or *Ada*. Sometimes *narrative* generalizes what seems a more limited definition of realistic narrative.

Those recent studies that introduce new terminology in an attempt to sophisticate the mechanical language of point-of-view criticism sometimes create new problems of association and recall. Admittedly *omniscient narrator* and *distance* are inadequate terms, but the mind quails before such substitutions as *heterodiegetic*. Why *analeptic* instead of *flashback* or *proleptic* instead of *anticipation*? Does *narrativity* describe anything? These problems arise partly from translation, partly from the need to avoid the language of empiricism. But the enterprise, presumably, is to restore capacity to language and not so to reflect its arbitrariness as to become incomprehensible. Structural and semiotic criticism has been especially responsible for a proliferation of linguistic paradigms and terminologies echoing each other inharmoniously, not to say dumbfoundingly, without seeming to take each other into account.

Apart from terminology, the major difficulty with many sys-

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tematic approaches to literary realism is that they ignore history and, in so doing, tend toward a taxonomy that reduces the importance of linear succession. This is true regardless of allegiance to structural or semiotic theory. Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* and Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* both search for the units of narrative or for the positions of the narrator relative to character and reader. These searches achieve interesting and useful results, but only at a penalty—the penalty of necessarily speaking in terms of discrete states and architectonic combinations. The taxonomic approaches draw emphasis away from the treatment of linear time, which I consider the central problem of realistic fiction. Among the relatively few historical discussions of realism, Ian Watt's exemplary *The Rise of the Novel* stands out for its combination of theoretical and historical problems. Discussions of the novel like Lukács' *Theory of the Novel and Realism in Our Time* (despite their historical schematism), and more recently George Levine's *The Realistic Imagination* and Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson's translation of Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination*, are discussions that accommodate the diachronic qualities of literary realism better than does criticism derived from structuralist and semiotic categories.

The concern of semiotic criticism with “codes” and with modes of “discourse” clearly has value for a form like realistic fiction that makes so much of the plurality of worlds. But where semiotics reduces the continuous to the discrete, the realistic novel reverses that direction, moving against discreteness and toward the reconciliation of divergent codes. My discussion is thus doubly diachronic, involving historically based definitions concerning literary convention and also privileging the temporal dimension of fiction. My own methodology thus reflects the assumptions I discuss, and deliberately so, in order to allow the realistic convention to speak in its own voice as much as possible. I have learned from various critical approaches—history of ideas, phenomenological and reader-response criticism, formalism, semiotics, and structuralism—but neither my method nor my vocabulary belongs exclusively to any of these.

The term *realism* inevitably raises questions about referentiality

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and about the status of language. Realism, along with the values it presupposes, has entered the age of suspicion, and with this passage it has lost the linguistic innocence it may once have claimed (although, as George Levine suggests, *naïve realism* is largely a critical fiction). The language that appears referential, innocently pointing toward an objective world beyond it, can now be seen as opaque, self-reflexive, gesturing toward its own principles of operation. The referential word is a means; the reflexive word is an end. It will be clear from my discussion that I find both referential and reflexive functions at work in realism. This is an old problem, the reality of the word, and the current debate does humanists serious disservice when it urges separation of these two functions. Competition in critical discourse between referential and reflexive functions generates false problems of interpretation and masks a deeper problem, the one that stems from the tendency to universalize and naturalize one or the other as a norm for literature. It is not enough that a norm of reference (or reflexion) temporarily be assumed; it must be made absolute. Thus we have *realisms* of various types, such as *allegorical realism*. Realism becomes the property of all great art. It follows that nonrealistic art cannot be great. The same result occurs when self-reflexiveness becomes the valuable property. Used in this way either aesthetic norm becomes for the critic what the market seems to be for some economists: a means for naturalizing what would otherwise appear artificial and value-laden.

Realistic fiction is not the only kind, any more than representational politics is the only kind. But the difference between one kind of convention and others is no neutral matter. The values implied by realistic conventions are not immutable, eternal, grounded in the nature of things and beyond human responsibility or choice. They are grounded in collective assertion and are limited historically. By considering the premises of realism I intend to denaturalize them, to unhinge them from absolutes, and thus to restore them to their historical element.

When the heavens were a little blue arch, stuck with stars,
methought the universe was too straight and close: I was almost
stifled for want of air: but now it is enlarged in height and breadth,
and a thousand vortices taken in.

Fontenelle

In comparison with all these Infinities all finites are equal, and I see
no reason for fixing our imagination on one more than on another.

Pascal

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This book deals with the cultural event in Europe known as "modernity," and in particular with implications for human consciousness and enterprise of the various cultural activities that produced the characteristic, fundamental media of modernity, neutral time and neutral space. These constructs, and the complex cultural agendas associated with them, develop inseparably from certain powers of abstraction and projection that belong to the history of consciousness, and that have flourished in Northern Europe from the late fifteenth to the late nineteenth centuries.

A summary of my discussion and method can be found in the original Preface; a further word here will focus some issues raised by subsequent discussion of the book concerning key terms like "consensus" and "perspective," and particularly concerning the primary value of neutrality that realism establishes.

My interest in writing a book on realism first arose from my fickle admiration for work on both sides of an opposition. On the one hand, I admired realist art in general, particularly the painting of the Renaissance and seventeenth century and the narrative of the nineteenth century, both of which I had long studied and enjoyed and had in fact been taught to consider the apogee of art in general. On the other hand, however, I admired the non-realist art of the twentieth century which I found equally interesting and enjoyable, again, particularly in visual arts and narrative. Although I first intended to write about the anti-realist and implicitly anti-humanist agendas of contemporary writing and art, I realized early on that most discussions of "realism" were entirely inadequate. Either "realism" was treated as a norm of art to be accepted without discussion, or it was treated as a straw man set up for rejection; in short, this cultural argument between realists and anti-realists used the term "realism" variously as term of

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opprobrium or of praise, but rarely as something to be defined. One commentator might attack the "naïveté" of realism and another might defend its "truth," but neither did much to stabilize the term "realism" for the sake of conducting substantial exchange: a desideratum if something important was at stake.

As someone who believes that art is the most highly achieved expression of cultural values, I knew something important was at stake. The whole foundation of pictorial art as it had been established in the Renaissance had been largely abandoned around the turn of the twentieth century by the best and most creative artists, such as, for example, Gauguin, van Gogh, Picasso, Braque, Miró, Gris, Matisse, Mondrian and Klee. In what seemed to be similar ways, the whole foundation of narrative as history, something that the nineteenth century had broadly disseminated and that twentieth-century readers still valued almost universally, had also been largely abandoned by the best, most creative writers of the twentieth century, such as Joyce, Beckett, Borges, Cortázar, García Marquez, Robbe-Grillet, Duras, Hawkes, Nabokov. There was, furthermore, the politically stunning fact that much if not most of this creative work did not arise primarily from English-speaking cultures and languages or, if it did, was created by expatriates like Joyce or Nabokov.

This move beyond realist agendas has figured as well in film, where visual and narrative arts come together and where the most experimental and creative work has moved beyond John Ford or John Lucas to the kind of experimental editorial art that was part of the cubist and surrealist agendas of the early twentieth century, beginning with Dali and Buñuel and continuing to Rivette, Godard, Truffaut and the French New Wave and latterly to Kieslowski, Jost, Tarantino and the Coen brothers. In a word, the whole basis of art shifted around the turn of the twentieth century from representational values to something new and apparently at odds with those long-established values.

So I set out first to discover and to formulate what actually was at stake in the culture of representation and postponed the book on anti-realist narrative long enough to write a preliminary contextualizing study of realism. The project involved increasingly

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interdisciplinary work; it became a discussion of modernity, and of a particular grammar of perspective that informs the practices of modernity across a range of cultural dissemination, from painting to mathematics and from politics to narrative. A large historical horizon for discussing realism is essential for anyone interested in the complex codes of cultural life.

Realism and Consensus traces the development of a certain power of abstraction that was unavailable to feudal culture and that was delivered unevenly during several centuries across what was to become modern Europe. It thus involves a discussion of “modernity” that provides a basis for discussing “postmodernity” in ways that get beyond the usual flinging of epithets. My contribution to the discussion of postmodernity, that initiating study of anti-realism, eventually appeared as *Sequel to History* (1992) and is based on the arguments about modernity and history established in *Realism and Consensus*.

As I hope my original Preface makes clear, my purpose in *Realism and Consensus* is not to provide an apologia for realism any more than it is to provide an attack—both of which would leave most of the interesting things unsaid. Instead, my purpose is to consider realist art as a convention with certain powers and certain limitations, and one that belongs to a larger and historically intelligible cultural formation. The early and continuing welcome of this book by reviewers and by readers has meant a lot to me not least because it confirms my strong sense that interdisciplinary work keeps open doors that we, as teachers, authors, and citizens alike, allow to close at our peril.

The two epigraphs to the book from Pascal and Fontenelle mark the margins of response to the developing culture of representation that began to flourish during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially in parliamentary democracy and in empirical science. Pascal (1623–62) grasps that “the plurality of worlds,” as it was called by seventeenth-century cosmologists (astronomers and theologians), introduces a massive restructuring of value. In northern European countries especially, the Renaissance coincided with a religious Reformation (Luther in 1517, Henry VIII in 1535) that implicitly extended the Copernican revolution to culture by

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pluralizing what had been single. Where there had been one cosmic order of things, one center, one circumference, now there were two or more and thus the potential of a series running to infinity. What had been defined had to be redefined; what had been locked in was now open; what had been confirmed was now unsecured. Pascal remains unsure whether or not all this constitutes progress. It could be said that European culture is still responding to the impact of that era.

Fontenelle (1657–1757), on the other hand, writing a generation later than Pascal, became a major expositor of the Copernican revolution and is thrilled by the very problems that Pascal laments. What is at stake for both are precisely those “Infinities” that the humanist redefinition of space and time have made available for exploration and adventure. Realist painting and narrative, over a period of several centuries, inscribes those infinities, and their founding value of neutrality, at the basis of European consciousness, including representatives of that consciousness in the New World.

The first third of the book discusses the political practices and cultural values analogous to those being traced in detail through art and narrative. Several key terms in this discussion deserve mention here for a variety of historical reasons. The first set of reasons concerns the first edition of this book, which endured what must be a record number of typographical outrages. Two especially should be mentioned. First was the total blank of about twenty pages that appeared in at least some copies in the middle of Chapter Three—in other words, at the heart of the book’s argument. This apparently happened when the presses temporarily ran out of ink, and I only learned of it from annoyed recipients, in one case a distinguished scholar to whom a complimentary book had been sent and who wondered whether the blank was an error or a tactic. This mistake, like the other, was corrected in the second printing from which the present edition is taken, though I have never known how many library copies still contain this pointless vacuum, or how fully Princeton University Press made good on its promise to rectify and resubmit. The second outrage was the disfigurement of the key diagram in Chapter One. For

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reasons that remain entirely mysterious, a helpful publisher's assistant at Princeton felt authorized to redraw the camera-ready diagram, but in doing so omitted the crucial part of it, rendering it nonsensical.

The blank pages now belong to the history of carelessness. But a word is in order about the diagram whose point—lost through the omission of the several receding horizontal lines—is this: that a second contributing viewpoint potentially provides for pictorial space, not another competing vanishing point but, on the contrary, the essential means to establish a universally applicable grid, one that by implication extends to infinity. With only a single, frontal perspective in the frame, there is no guide to the mutual relations in the field, and thus no realism; with the second perspective, and by implication an infinity of perspectives, intersections materialize that sustain a single, common system of measurement for all spatial relations. Under this scheme, even things apparently widely separated in time or space become mutually informative: no longer part of separate and competing systems, but part of a common world measurable by universally applicable common denominators. Since its codification in the early fifteenth century and across the range of cultural practice from painting, science, and mathematics, to politics, economics, and music, this apparently simple device has stood behind many kinds of exploration beyond known worlds and many inspirations to map new territories. This grammar of perspective establishes realism in art and across a range of cultural practice, and it informs key terms in *Realism and Consensus* such as “consensus,” “perspective,” and “nobody.”

My use of the term “consensus,” it should be noted, indicates a formal agreement about the conditions of perception, not an agreement about this or that thing perceived. To agree about any particular (which party to support or whether something is wrong) remains secondary to the formal possibility of agreement itself. Whereas from Homer to Milton the universe presented various fixed and eternal definitions that were beyond control by mortals and that limited and shaped all mortal projects, the neutral media of modernity claim to present no such a priori obstacles to

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choice and development and precisely put all projects into human hands; in fact, they make possible the concept “human” as a species definition. That neutrality became visible first in spatial arts, especially architecture and painting, and later in more temporal arts of narrative.

The grammar of single-point perspective in realism erases contradiction by establishing neutrality in space and time. It establishes formal agreement which erases contradiction as a possibility; in other terms, realism maintains in a new form the classical principle of non-contradiction by providing common denominators (neutral time and space) that are so abstract and universal that they become constants by which everything can be measured. The grammar that produces these neutral media literally *objectifies* the world, rendering it One and The Same. The “objects” lovingly represented by realism are not the primary focus of the convention, but only carriers of the larger generalization by which it makes the world One, objectified, common to all alike. No difference is too great, no crime too egregious, to qualify the commonality of the world. What realism primarily “represents” is not the “objects” supposedly contained “in” time and space, but precisely the common denominators themselves, neutral time and neutral space: and particularly the power they confer to deliver mutual relevance even between the most disparate events or persons. How this neutrality is constructed is the burden of the first third of the book, while the rest explores how variously this convention of neutrality is maintained, including those fascinating marginal examples in eighteenth-century English narrative where realism appears incipient but insecure.

The term “nobody” arises directly from the discussion of single-point perspective as formal consensus. The neutral media of modernity are delivered by a certain grammar of perspective this book describes and locates historically.

In order to inhabit my usage of the term “nobody” in the chapter on “The Narrator as Nobody,” a reader must be willing to engage the hypothesis that realism and everything it stands for culturally—particularly the unifying and rationalizing power of its grammar of perspective—is only one among a variety of possible

ways of knowing and of formulating so-called "reality." It is in fact, and as the book argues, a cultural formation relatively unique in world history, belonging to a particular phase of European culture.

The power to agree about the foundations of perception is "nobody's" power in the sense that it belongs to no individual or set of individuals but instead to absolutely everybody. The formal agreement that objectifies the world does so by virtue of universal inclusion. Any and all perspectives would see the same world. The common-denominator world materializes only through that implicit and universal collaboration. It is a world not found in narratives by Milton or Homer, who each show cosmos riven by divine influence or partitioned by the Fates. The world of realism, on the contrary, is a world objectified by the very formal agreements that appear innocently to be standing witness; to "witness" is to participate in a construction of the world. This construction and the power of formal agreement essential to it did not exist before the Renaissance, and there are signs that it has reached some kind of cultural limit in the twentieth century. When I speak of perspective, then, what I want to keep in focus is not "individual" perspective, but a *perspective system*: it is the system that makes supposedly "individual" perspective meaningful, or even intelligible as such at all.

Neutrality is the key value inscribed by realism through its perspective system. "Linearity" and "sequence" are of secondary importance because they are features of all kinds of narrative, including entirely non-realist, unhistorical ones. Even a Borges story involves sequence and, therefore, linearity; a circular narrative, like Homer's *Odyssey*, is still linear in the sense that one thing follows another. It is, as Foucault has noted, the *nature of the sequence* with which we should be concerned. The important questions are, *how* do things follow one another and *why* are narratives constructed in that particular way? The nature of the sequence determines the act of attention. Although I do not successfully avoid the term "linearity" in the course of *Realism and Consensus*, I would be sorry to have contributed to the impression that once we have located "linearity," we have discovered something definite, least of all something "realistic." The

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litmus test of realism—it cannot be said too often—is whether or not a text, a painting, an architectural order, or a political structure encodes the value of neutrality through the use of a perspective system that creates universal common denominators, especially the media of modernity, neutral time and neutral space.

Taken as a contribution to the history of consciousness, this discussion of realism takes place in the overlapping margins of the great contemporary debate between modernity and whatever it is that comes after modernity, called post-modernity. I use both those contested terms as chronological indicators. “Modernity” is a short-hand term that historians have used to indicate the post-medieval European cultural world. “Post-modernity” acts in a similar way, to indicate whatever it is that succeeds modernity. In this margin between the modern and post-modern, it is possible to be aware of traditional commitments and still to recognize their limitations, established irrefutably by now in science and arts and in so many other ways.

The media of modernity, especially in narrative, give a certain privilege to a particular notion of consciousness as something that transcends particulars and assembles them. This privilege—Derrida in *Margins of Philosophy* calls it “the ether of metaphysics” (trans. Alan Bass, New York and London: Harvester, 1992)—is what post-modernity contests in its many different incarnations including in philosophy, but also in science, arts, and politics. In the multiplied landscapes of post-modernity, consciousness can only be defined in terms of differential systems, and not as something superior to them. And consciousness defined as Derrida does it, as “a determination or an effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but of *différance*,” is a consciousness that is anxious, unsettled, “beside itself” as it is in Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Freud, who “put consciousness into question in its assured certainty of itself” (pp. 16–17). But I fear Derrida mistakes the historical horizon indicated by this event in the history of consciousness: it is a mutation of traditions that are traceable to Renaissance and Reformation Europe and that did not exist for Plato and the Platonic tradition with which Derrida and post-structuralists generally concern themselves. Ancient culture re-

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mains remote in its assumptions from that of Christian Europe. The term “post-structuralism” helpfully differentiates between this work that takes the critique of Western metaphysics back to Plato and the work of “post-modernism” which takes the critique of Western culture only back as far as the beginning of modernity.

None of this, it might finally be noted, has to do with that “modernism” which, especially in its European manifestations, was powerfully influential but historically quite a local phenomenon around the turn of the twentieth century, roughly from the 1890s to the 1930s. That “modernism” is Janus-faced, and can be regarded as the phoenix-fire of modernity: a supreme abstraction of its fundamental values, and at the same time something that tips over toward postmodernity in its emphasis on language and on finitude.

Realism and Consensus establishes some characteristics of the culture of modernity, although it necessarily makes comparisons with medieval and even with classical arts and narrative. This culture of representation has its powers, and its limitations, and has produced much that we still take for granted as citizens of European, democratic, and capitalist societies. What we make of it in future depends entirely on what we understand about its past.

The selected bibliography includes cited works mainly. It does list a few texts such as narratives by Fielding, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Nabokov, Borges and others which, though they are not cited in the discussion, helped to formulate the problem. In one case I include a later essay of mine that develops the comparison initiated here between narrative and dramatic realism, that is, between the “nobody” narrator and Shakespeare’s audience. Given the interdisciplinary range of the project, my reading ranged widely in classical culture and literature from Hesiod to Euripedes, in medieval narrative such as those by Dante and Augustine, in Shakespeare’s history plays (especially both parts of *Henry IV*), in the history of politics and science in seventeenth-century England, and in other narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. All of these might be read according to the principles I establish in *Realism and Consensus*.

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The project is irreducibly interdisciplinary. My intention is not at all to achieve coverage according to a particular disciplinary agenda but, instead, to establish principles for reading the narratives produced by the humanist culture of representation. In selecting texts for discussion, my intention has been to open the door, not ransack the room, so the fact that I have not cited, say, *Mansfield Park* or *The Mill on the Floss* means only that I am intent upon constructing an argument with further application, not upon covering a limited field. Scott, Thackeray, the Brontës, Gaskell, Trollope, Oliphant, Meredith, and hosts of others might have been mentioned, some of them marginal and some of them thorough examples of realism. But all of them can be considered according to the terms the book establishes.

Thus, for example, I deal with Walter Scott's contemporary, Jane Austen, because I am concerned to show how very considerably her work is non-realist; but I do not deal with Scott's novels, even though they are perhaps the first realist novels, because the principles established by discussions in later chapters apply as well to his ground-breaking work. Almost single-handed in European literature, Scott invented realist narrative, that is, the form of history which provides the narrative counterpart of that neutral space in realist painting. With his first novel, *Waverley, or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814), Scott invented a new form for a new social order, and the result was immediate and continuing sensation in Europe and in North America, and admiration for his achievement not only in his generation but by successors like George Eliot, Trollope, and Virginia Woolf whom Scott profoundly influenced. The varnish on his immense originality may have darkened for us somewhat, but that stems in part from the fact that we have so completely absorbed the very narrative values that his writing did so much to establish.

My thanks to the many generous readers and critics of *Realism and Consensus*, and to the scholars who still make it a point of honour to read and acknowledge what other people have written; the bibliography records my effort to match theirs. A special thanks to Diane Elam, Jackie Jones, and John Rignall for their creative and

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essential contributions to the publication of this new edition. In a very few odd cases it has been impossible to recover some publication data, page numbers mainly; the relative completeness of the references is owing in part to the efforts of Clare Powne and Ann Sutherland at Edinburgh University Library, who so nobly came to the rescue during the final search; thank you, cavalry.

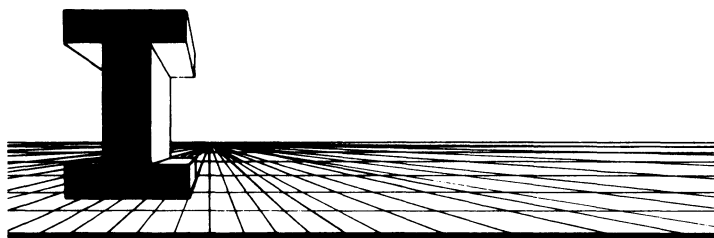
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A condensed version of the first two chapters appeared in *Critical Inquiry* and parts of Chapter Seven appeared in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* and *Victorian Newsletter*; the editors of these journals kindly gave permission to use this copyrighted material. The National Endowment for the Humanities provided support for writing during the summer of 1980. Elizabeth Carroll, Katherine Raab, and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, supplied invaluable assistance with the manuscript. My editors at Princeton University Press, Jerry Sherwood and Joanna Hitchcock, have been expert and resourceful, and I am grateful to them for their careful work and many kindnesses.



PERSPECTIVE
AND CONSENSUS

CHAPTER ONE

The Premises of Realism

Realistic conventions belong to a cultural tradition that took its direction from Renaissance humanism. Today the changing fortunes of realism are registering seismic cultural activity. Harry Levin puts the case succinctly: "Historically, as in other ways, the realistic approach has been exceptional and there have been hints at many levels that its epoch, which began with the Renaissance, will soon have receded into the past." The ideological import of such change has not been lost on critics who perceive the connection between realistic conventions on the one hand and, on the other, certain liberal and humanist traditions which still have enormous practical importance, and with which realism shares fundamental assumptions.¹ In Part One, I explore the connections between realism

¹ Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 468. Even critics like Robbe-Grillet and Lukács, who disagree on so much else, agree perfectly on this connection between realism and humanism. See Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Essays for a New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), especially the chapter on "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy," pp. 49-76; Georg Lukács, *Realism in Our Time*, trans. John and Necke Mander (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), especially "The Ideology of Modernism," pp. 17-46. Robert Scholes writes of the "ideological watershed" ending the epoch of realism and humanism in "On Realism and Genre," *Novel*, 2, no. 3 (Spring 1969), 269. Milan Kundera in the *New York Times Book Review* (8 January 1978) associates "the novel" with traditions of tolerance. W. J. Harvey, describing the liberal connections of "the novel," calls

and its *episteme* in order to discover, without lobbying for or against realism, what the powers and limitations of this aesthetic convention actually are.

My first three chapters provide an extended answer to the question: what does depth in fiction have in common with pictorial depth? We know what it means to speak of depth in space, but what, if anything, does that have to do with depth of character? We know what it means to speak of "depth perception" (meaning visual power) and "depth of perception" (meaning mental power), but what, if anything, do these ordinary locutions have to do with depth in realism? How is such depth possible in the temporal medium of literature? What does the narrator's controlling perspective have to do with the illusion of depth? And, most importantly, what values does the art of depth presuppose and confirm? In answering these questions I will begin by contrasting the realistic conventions evident in Renaissance art with earlier typological models, and then I will consider the use of perspective in time and the consequences of such a usage for individual consciousness.

The consensus of realism, I will argue, produces in literature a rationalization of consciousness analogous to the rationalization of sight evident in realistic painting.² When quattrocento painters began to use the single vanishing point to organize their pictures,

it "the distinct art form of liberalism," meaning "not a political view or even a mode of social and economic organization but rather a state of mind" (*Character and the Novel* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965], p. 24; see also p. 133). Robert Alter, like Levin, sees nineteenth-century realism as exceptional in the history of the novel (*Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* [Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1975]). Most useful essays on the connection between technique and value are Robbe-Grillet, *Essays for a New Novel* and Leo Bersani's two essays, "Realism and the Fear of Desire," *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), and "The Subject of Power," *Diacritics* (September 1977), pp. 2-21.

² The "rationalization of sight" is William Ivins Jr.'s phrase. In formulating my basic thesis about realism I am thoroughly indebted to his two charming and irreverent studies: *On the Rationalization of Sight, with an Examination of Three Renaissance Texts on Perspective*, Paper no. 8 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1938; rpt. Da Capo, New York, 1973); and *Art and Geometry: A Study in Space Intuitions* (1946; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964).

they made their chief formal principle the point of view of a single, fixed spectator: a graphic illustration long before Descartes of that primacy of individual experience over received truths that characterizes realism and that has its philosophical analogues in Cartesian epistemology. While quattrocento realism belongs in significant ways to an early Renaissance, intelligible more in terms of the twelfth century than the nineteenth, nevertheless the fifteenth-century appearance of depth in painting testifies to the presence of a cultural change with important implications for realistic fiction. Both forms of realism attempt comparable kinds of verisimilitude. Even the critical terminology proper to Renaissance realism—point of view, distance, horizon, depth—applies as well to realistic novels.

My thesis in this chapter can be stated briefly as follows: in realism, identity becomes series-dependent, which is to say that it becomes abstract, removed from direct apprehension to a hidden dimension of depth. In speaking of realistic identity I use the term *identity* to mean the oneness or the invariant structure by which we recognize a thing, by which we judge it under varying conditions to be the same.³ This conception of identity, with all it implies about the regularity of nature and the possibilities of knowledge, belongs to an empirical epistemology that was relatively unimportant to the Middle Ages and is being radically modified today; but it was current through the otherwise diverse period from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century. It is a conception of identity so obvious to us that we have ceased to see it as the convention it is, but it was not obvious in the Renaissance, and it took a long time to become common sense.

³ In classical mathematics two forms that were congruent achieved "identity." In modern mathematics identity in this sense cannot properly be said to exist at all, since the invariant qualities that constitute identity cannot be perceived except in a whole series of different aspects, and so the form of a thing thus "identified" is not congruent with any particular instance in the series that produced it. Properly speaking, perhaps, "identity" should always wear quotes in the era of humanistic and realistic premises to signal its problematic nature. I will avoid this typographical awkwardness, but in speaking of the modern period, and of novels in particular, I use the term "identity" in its new sense, as referring to something that is series-dependent and incongruent with any particular instance.

Discontinuity in Medieval Art

The unities of field and of identity that we have learned to take for granted and that are assumed in certain kinds of artistic, mathematical, or historical formulation have no significant role in medieval historiography, mathematics, and art. In those medieval disciplines, for example, time and space were conceived as discontinuous. A medieval historian treated time as one single field of influences that was without significant chronological organization.⁴ He saw in the record of events no unity of flow, no continuity of series, no inner dynamic that would give meaning to distinctions between past, present, and future. Within this static and discontinuous historical field the historian could draw interpretive generalizations from typological paradigms which would reveal congruences between events widely separated in time, without regard for what we would call their historical context. The successful French king, for example, was one who approximated the condition of Charlemagne in every detail of his legendary achievement, however remote Charlemagne's immediate concerns might have been from those of his successor.⁵ The unifying principles

⁴ See Gabrielle Spiegel, "Political Utility in Medieval Historiography: A Sketch," *History and Theory*, 14, no. 3 (1975), 322.

There were many developments in the Middle Ages that resemble the historical awakening during the Renaissance, enough in fact to make the term *renaissance* a locus of debate. Father Chenu writes of a new awareness of "universalism" in time, "a sense of continuity; the definition of constant causes this side of transcendent providence" (*Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968], p. 178), and Eugene Vance points to a new "consciousness of structure" in the twelfth century and in twelfth-century narrative, a development he associates with the resurgence of Aristotle and of logic ("Pas de Trois: Narrative, Hermeneutics and Structure in Medieval Poetics," in Mario Valdes and Owen Miller, eds., *Interpretation of Narrative* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965], p. 128). But logic was still not temporal logic, and the "law of continuity" formulated by Aristotle did not, as Lovejoy notes, assert "that the qualitative difference of things must similarly constitute linear or continuous series . . . still less that they constitute a single continuous series" (*The Great Chain of Being* [New York: Harper and Bros., 1960], pp. 55-56).

⁵ Gabrielle Spiegel, "The Reditus Regni ad Stirpem Karoli Magni: A New Look," *French Historical Studies*, 7, no. 2 (Fall 1971), 169-70. This is what Auerbach calls "medieval realism" (i.e., the medieval break with the Platonic doctrine of levels, which produced "completely different results" from the parallel