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Aleatory Realism: Reflections on the Parable of the Pier-Glass

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Aleatory Realism: Reflections on the Parable of the Pier-Glass

Matthew Beaumont

Abstract

This article challenges the simplistic conception of realism sponsored by postmodernist thought, through a re-engagement with those moments in George Eliot's fiction in which she reflects self-consciously on realist representation. After re-examining the opening of *Adam Bede*, which is notable for its experimental attitude to realism, the article proceeds to a discussion of the famous metaphor of the pier-glass sketched in *Middlemarch*. This metaphor, the article contends, offers a glimpse of a realism beyond realism, in which the realist aesthetic collapses, and reality appears instead in the form of unmediated, unprocessed matter. The article identifies this inchoate, almost unthinkable form of representation, which it associates with the perspectival device called anamorphosis, as 'aleatory realism.'

In the intellectual climate of the last few decades, a climate that can most conveniently be identified with the name 'postmodernism,' realism has been almost programmatically marginalised. Postmodernism, which might be defined in telegraphic form, after Terry Eagleton, as "the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge" (13), has made an impatient attitude to realism seem almost compulsory for critics. In particular, the more militant postmodernists have crudely caricatured realism, both as a philosophical disposition and as an aesthetic, claiming that it assumes a fundamentally unproblematic relationship between reality and its representations. In one especially influential account of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard even insisted that realism, which he audaciously located "between academicism and kitsch," is defined precisely by its intention "to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art" ("Answering" 75). Realism, for him, is an unsophisticated, fatally empiricist form that is simply too ham-fisted to grasp the philosophical problems it spontaneously poses. So, although specialist scholars, especially critics of nineteenth-century literature like George Levine, have stubbornly continued to explore its historic importance, realism has come to seem hopelessly simple-minded to most intellectuals in the humanities. It is as if Roland Barthes' brilliant critique, in the late 1960s, of what he called the "referential illusion," and his concomitant attempts to decode the "reality effects" that literary texts evoke in order to certify their claims to verisimilitude (148), has served as a pretext, not so much for rethinking realism in relation to poststructuralist insights about narrative convention, as for forgetting about realism altogether.

The concordance of "Names and Terms" in one representative *Companion to Postmodernism* is in this respect revealing. It slides seamlessly from an entry on "Readerly texts" to one on "Reed, Ishmael," silently suppressing the significance of realism, either as a positive or a negative phenomenon (Sim 296). In its entry on "Representation," furthermore, it makes no reference to realist aesthetics, though it does identify the "denial of 'reality' itself as such" as a prominent feature of poststructuralist thought (297). If textbooks on postmodernism do allude specifically to realism, they tend to impugn the concept both for its ingenuousness and its disingenuousness. *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader*, for example, contains a concise anthology of terms in which realism is identified as "the antithesis of postmodern practice." On the one hand, realism is simple-minded: "From the postmodern position realism is inadequate because it implies an unexamined relationship with some prior reality." On the other hand, it is duplicitous: "In so far as realism pretends to offer an unproblematic representation, it is in fact the most deceptive form of representation, reproducing its assumptions through the audience's unexamined response to an apparently natural image or text" (Wheale 51). This definition caricatures realism—in consequence it no doubt caricatures "the postmodern position" too—as an exercise in illusionism that is at once naïve and intellectually duplicitous. It implies that all realism is a species of *trompe l'oeil*, an act of representation that, in replicating empirical reality as exactly as possible, dreams of attaining a complete correspondence to it. It is a conception of realism that at the same time overstates its mimetic ambitions and dramatically undervalues its ability to exhibit and examine the formal limitations that shape it.

It is certainly not a conception of realism that can reasonably be inferred from the experience of reading a canonical realist fiction such as George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859). For *Adam Bede* radically rethinks the realist aesthetic even as it reaffirms its author's absolutely firm moralist commitment to the realism that she discerned in John Ruskin's criticism; that is, to "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" (*Selected Critical Writings* 248). Openly and restlessly conscious of its rhetorical strategies throughout, as the famous disquisition on the democratic avocation of realism in Chapter 17 makes apparent, Eliot's novel is supremely self-reflexive. It illustrates Levine's claim that "realism makes the difficulties of the work of representation inescapably obvious to the writer" (16). It is thus a meditation on both the necessity and the impossibility of what Eliot mischievously calls the obligation "to creep servilely after nature and fact" (*Adam Bede* 177).

The opening paragraph of *Adam Bede* is exemplary in this respect. In establishing the foundations of the historical reality that she is about to reconstruct, Eliot at the same time renders them utterly unstable:

With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799. (7)

Here, Eliot explicitly establishes a contract with the reader, as the opening sentences of all fictions must at least implicitly do: "This is what I undertake to do for you, reader" (7). This contract, though, is the stuff of a solicitor's nightmare, because it is interlarded with contradictions that are expressly designed to leave the reader confused. Is the reader to expect a kind of fantasia of the past, as the reference in the first sentence to those "far-reaching visions," which seem to evoke the "vague forms, bred by imagination" that she vehemently dismisses in the account of Ruskin, indicates? Or is the reader to expect instead a representation almost as solid and tangible as a three-dimensional stage set, its concrete forms attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, as the image of the "roomy workshop" in the third sentence suggests? Is the narrator a sorcerer or a carpenter? That image of the single, globular drop of ink, which acts both as a microscopic lens and as a convex surface that resolves the phenomena it reflects into the most fantastical shapes, implies that the past, and specifically the 18th June 1799, is the object both of scientific intellection and the necromantic imagination. The novel's experiment in representation appears to be as closely related to the spiritual séance as to the scene of empirical science.

The narrator's contract with the reader, deliberately confusing on all these counts, in a double sense contains the inherent contradictions of realism's attempt to reconstruct or resurrect a past that has effectively been lost, a past that, under the conditions of industrial and agrarian change characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century, is no longer empirically available. And it mischievously exploits the alienated conditions of production and consumption that prevail in mid nineteenth-century literature—even as it is self-evidently unsettled and upset by them. Specifically, it attempts to negotiate the increasingly anonymous character, in a rapidly expanding literary marketplace, of the relationship between writer and reader. For a book's readership, atomised as it has become, can no longer confidently be identified as a definite constituency. The consumer of nineteenth-century fiction, like the individuals that comprise the sorcerer's casual audience, is a "chance comer." The producer is therefore forced by the same token to perform acts of illusionism in order to attract an audience, like some magician standing in the souk perhaps, or like someone simply selling an ordinary commodity in the marketplace. Eliot's formal games, in the opening paragraph of *Adam Bede*, can thus be understood, in the context of this changing relationship (a context that is ultimately that of the transformations of industrial capitalism itself), as an attempt precisely to maintain the openness, the experimental value of realism, as it shapes its readership. The concept of realism that Eliot operates is a distinctly dialectical one, then, in addition to an openly democratic one. It is a dynamic force field

rather than some static phenomenon. It accommodates “vague forms” as well as concrete ones, and, as Eliot’s late fiction such as *Daniel Deronda* (1876) testifies, it activates social visions as well as social facts.

In the light of this, Eliot’s notion of realism appears to be poorly served by a definition like the one proposed in *The Postmodern Arts*. (No doubt the formulation “*in so far as* realism pretends to offer an unproblematic representation, it is in fact the most deceptive form of representation,” is an implicit admission that the claim that this book makes about the form is finally simplistic and unconvincing). The unreliability of the familiar opposition between realism and modernism or postmodernism that some commentators still expect to obtain can in fact be tested in relation to the opening of *Adam Bede*. For the first paragraph of Eliot’s novel, in all its self-consciousness, might be said to resemble a modernist or postmodernist fiction, if in the current critical climate this did not necessarily imply that its formal qualities are interesting only to the extent that they anticipate later literary developments. It is important not to fall into the trap of congratulating a realist novel for being proto-modernist or proto-postmodernist largely on the grounds that it has demonstrated an intuitive, if ultimately fumbling understanding of its own formal limitations. That said, the beginning of *Adam Bede* is remarkable for its self-reflexiveness: it emphasises the materiality of writing; it foregrounds the illusionistic character of representation; and it directly, playfully addresses the reader. It is thus scarcely less sophisticated, in its cautious, self-conscious attention to the difficulties of realist representation, than the first chapter of *Jacob’s Room* (1922), often described as Virginia Woolf’s first modernist fiction, which is also stained—and sustained—by a drop of ink from a pen (3).

Eliot’s experimental attitude to the demands of realist narrative requires a concept of realism that escapes its limited definition in terms of a passive, positivistic reflection of banal social reality—in terms of what Woolf bemoaned in her diary as “this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner” (*Diary* 209). It might be more productive, as Fredric Jameson has argued, “if we can manage to think of realism as a form of demiurgic practice; if we can restore some active and even playful/experimental impulses to the inertia of its appearance as a copy or representation of things” (*Signatures* 162). *Adam Bede*, the product of both sorcery and carpentry, so to speak, demands to be understood in these dynamic terms, as a form of demiurgic practice, albeit one that aspires, as Eliot puts it, to offering “no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves” in the author’s mind (*Adam Bede* 177). It resists postmodernist attempts to limit it to an act of mechanical reflection, insisting that “the mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused” (*Adam Bede* 177).

In the space that remains, I propose to analyse one more classic passage from George Eliot in order to illustrate the importance of rethinking realism, in opposition to postmodernism, though in the spirit, perhaps, of a certain post-structuralism, by examining again the tropes it uses to conceptualise itself in the nineteenth century. I hope to demonstrate that in *Middlemarch* (1871-72), another quintessentially canonical realist fiction, Eliot at one point invokes, and at the same instant exorcises, what might be characterised as a realism beyond realism. This realism beyond realism is not so much implemented as briefly glimpsed in *Middlemarch*, in the famous “parable” of the pier-glass sketched in the opening paragraph of Chapter 27:

An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. (217)

The realism that Eliot practises in *Middlemarch* is one that organises social reality according to the perspective of the omniscient narrator, who serves, like the lighted candle, to resolve it into a series of

concentric circles that render it comprehensible. It is the principal function of this narrator, as Elizabeth Ermarth has persuasively claimed, to enforce the ideological consensus on which realism is predicated: “The genial consensus of realistic narration implies a unity in human experience which assures us that we all inhabit the same world and that the same meanings are available to everyone” (65). In the absence of this perspective, however, social reality is nothing more than a chaos of indiscriminate scratches, minute and multitudinous. The consensus collapses, and reality appears instead in the immediate, that is, unmediated, form of unprocessed matter. The image of the pier-glass thus momentarily conjures up the appalling prospect of a realism of the Real, a realism that represents, or posits at least, precisely that which is absolutely resistant to representation. The mirror is defective not simply because, as for Eliot in *Adam Bede*, its outlines are disturbed and its reflections faint or confused; it is defective because its entire surface is arbitrarily crosshatched by meaningless scratches. Here is a realism of sheer contingency. I intend to call this inchoate, almost unthinkable form of representation ‘aleatory realism.’

In order to adumbrate this concept, I must first explore the idea of anamorphosis, a pictorial device used by some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painters, for I believe it provides the most productive means of thinking about alternatives to the linear narrative perspective conventionally associated with so-called classic realism.¹ Anamorphosis, taken from the Greek meaning to transform or form again, is a technique for producing pictorial images that contradict or derange the logic of linear perspective. According to its first theorist, Jean-François Nicéron, the point of anamorphic art was to generate figures “which, away from the predetermined view-point, seem distorted and nonsensical, but seen from the proper view-point will appear correctly proportioned” (*La Perspective curieuse* [1638]; cited in Baltrušaitis 164). Anamorphosis effectively offered sixteenth-century painters and their successors a pictorial language with which to articulate both the ambitions of the emergent realist aesthetic and its limitations. I contend that an anamorphic perspective offered nineteenth-century novelists a comparable opportunity for probing the possibilities of realism in literature.

I am not the first critic to make this contention. In an article on “plot pattern” in nineteenth-century fiction, Ilya Kliger has for example recently made suggestive use of the formulation “anamorphic realism.” Anamorphosis, according to Kliger, is “a truth discourse in narrative fiction [which] refers to the process whereby an illegible textual instance, something altogether incomprehensible to the hero, emerges as the very truth-object for which the hero has been looking elsewhere” (296). In my reflections on realism, I am less interested in the epistemological implications that this “illegible textual instance” retrospectively has for the reader’s conception of character and plot than in its existential challenge, so to speak, to the logic of omniscient narration. The anamorphic vision of reality evoked by the image of the pier-glass is equivalent to one of those elements in the classic realist text that, according to Colin McCabe, “escape the control of the dominant discourse in the same way as a neurotic symptom or verbal slip attest to the lack of control of the conscious subject” (19).

One sixteenth-century painting is particularly important for the development of anamorphosis, and I want to explicate it quite carefully before returning to Eliot’s metaphor of the pier-glass. *The Ambassadors* (1533), housed in the National Gallery in London, is Hans Holbein the Younger’s famous double portrait of Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve. It is, manifestly, a meditation on the intellectual and artistic accomplishments of Europe in an epoch of imperial expansion. The luxuriously robed table that stands at the centre of the composition, framed by the casually posed forms of the French ambassadors themselves, is heaped with exquisite objects pertaining to the disciplines of geometry, astronomy, mathematics and music. Holbein deploys the comparatively recent techniques of oil painting both to spiritualise these objects and to underline their materiality. His obsessive reproduction of the different textures that define them, which enables the spectator to appraise them sensuously, as well as simply visually, is an attempt to mime the combination of expensive materials and specialist, skilled labour that constitutes them, and so to represent their status as commodities. As John Berger once pointed out, in the sixteenth century, oil paintings “had to

be able to demonstrate the desirability of what money could buy” (91). But in addition to demonstrating that the objects they so patiently depicted were commodities, oil paintings increasingly advertised themselves as commodities. Holbein thus celebrates the commodity status of painting itself even as he claims that realist painting is the supreme medium for sanctifying the accoutrements of secular authority.

So Holbein identifies the spectator standing before this portrait as someone for whom the consecrated objects that solicit his attention from the centre of the composition, and the cultural values indelibly inscribed in them, are in the end purchasable, possessable commodities. It does so partly via the spectator’s identification with Dinteville and Selve: the spectator stands opposite the table situated between them, so that he completes a triangular relationship that seems to institutionalize his inclusion in the social sphere that they occupy and that he aspires to. Their coolly inclusive gaze, which is levelled at the spectator so as to seem both seductive and faintly defiant, reinforces the sense that he is a tolerated presence in this sphere. Holbein’s painstaking reconstruction of the three-dimensional space inhabited by the ambassadors, which is based on an elaborate application of perspective, as the geometric patterns on the mosaic floor most obviously indicate, also contributes to this process of identification, because it extends the sense of effortless command that these statesmen emblematised to the spectator himself. In the virtual space mapped out by this composition the spectator is transmuted into a proprietor, someone who is potentially in command of its constituent objects.

At this point, the analogy between realist painting in the sixteenth century and realist literature in the nineteenth century probably begins to emerge more clearly. Realist art—the development of which is inseparable from the rise of Renaissance humanism—is linear in its approach to representation. It unifies time and space, creating the impression that reality is knowable and can be directly apprehended, by positing a singular, stable spectator. Realist fiction functions in a comparable manner. To recapitulate Ermarth’s point, “fictional realism is an aesthetic form of consensus, its touchstone being the agreement between the various viewpoints made available by a text” (ix-x). Realist literature constructs its narrator, and by extension its reader too, as the site at which this consensus about what can be identified as objective, in fictional terms, is imaginatively co-ordinated. It is in this respect that it is like realist painting, which exploits the laws of perspective to position the spectator at the point at which it is possible to achieve an illusion of objectivity. In both cases, the apparent identity, the supposed meaningfulness, of the empirical world is reinforced. “The consensus of realism,” Ermarth confirms, “produces in literature a rationalization of consciousness analogous to the rationalization of sight evident in realistic painting” (4).

But to reconstruct Holbein’s portrait as I have done above is to ignore its most strikingly incongruous element: the smeared image that, famously, slices across the picture’s surface and inauspiciously ruptures its perspective. The philosopher of science Bruno Latour has vividly described its distortive impact on the spectator’s relationship to the painting:

If the attendants at the National Gallery of London allow you to kneel down at the painting’s left side, your face as if touching the varnished pigment, this unidentified flying object will appear to be a skull—the accepted symbol of the many *memento mori* painted at the time. But then, how will the fiery Ambassadors appear? As a grotesque and distorted medley of bright and meaningless shapes. If the Ambassadors are straightened up, the skull is skewed. If the skull is rectified, the two Frenchmen are slanted, fleeing away like flying saucers. (16)

The image of the skull introduces into the composition an optic that is fundamentally incompatible with that of the stable spectator constructed by the laws of perspective. For, in order to reconfigure the incomprehensible image as one that is mimetic of a recognizable object, the spectator must scrutinise it from an angle that violently disfigures the ambassadors and the instruments that symbolise their achievements. In forcing the spectator into the contorted, almost abject posture that Latour describes, Holbein deliberately undermines the illusion of solid, three-dimensional reality that he has so carefully organised. The composition is dramatically decomposed, and the ideological assumptions on

which it had been premised, in particular the assumption that the economic and symbolic forms of capital it depicts can in some uncomplicated sense be claimed, or attained, are completely upset. From this perspective, the anamorphic perspective, reality itself appears as a meaningless, anarchic smear. The death's head thus makes the cultural and political ambition to which the spectator had initially accommodated himself seem meaningless. It does so not by emblematically reminding the spectator of death, as in the conventional inclusion of a *memento mori* (the minutely detailed death's head ornament on Dinteville's hat does this, and the abstractness, and hence inadequateness, of its allusion to death is underlined by the fact that it is practically imperceptible). Instead, the skull that slants across the surface of Holbein's painting aggressively defamiliarises and radicalises the tradition of the *memento mori*. Its superficial abstraction is in fact an index of its concreteness, its almost excessive immediacy. For it introduces the idea of death at the level of form as opposed to content. The spectator is forced physically to transform himself, even to abase himself, in the face of this death's head. The monstrous, distorted skull does not represent so much as enact death's ontological interruption of life.

As I have intimated, the perspectival device used by Holbein to distort the death's head in *The Ambassadors* is named anamorphosis. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, the most authoritative modern commentator on this trope, has emphasised its philosophical as well as optical importance for the history of representation. Anamorphosis, he notes, "plays havoc with elements and principles; instead of reducing forms to their visible limits, it projects them outside themselves and distorts them so that when viewed from a certain point they return to normal" (1). An anamorphic image posits the coded presence of an almost unrepresentable alternative reality that momentarily obtrudes on reality as it is ordinarily understood, thereby rendering the latter oddly arbitrary and ontologically inconsistent. Holbein's skull, for example, is metonymic of a domain in which the commodities that advertise the ambassadors' economic, political and symbolic capital have neither exchange value nor use value. From an anamorphic perspective, the empirical reality that this painting appears so painstakingly to reconstruct is emptied of signification. Reality as it is ordinarily understood must in this portrait compete with an almost completely incompatible alternative that threatens to be even more compelling. The effect of anamorphosis, philosophically speaking, is therefore an extreme relativisation. Anamorphic perspective radically subjectifies the act of seeing, and so exposes the fact that linear perspective, dependent as it is on the mythical idea that there is one motionless point from which the subject can adequately perceive the object, is itself far from objective. It is an immanent critique of perspective.

It is because it constitutes a signal challenge to the idea of a stable subject, as to a singular, linear perspective, that the idea of anamorphosis has recently proved attractive to some anti-humanist philosophers. In the 1970s, influenced by the publication of Baltrušaitis's monograph about anamorphic art, which had appeared in Paris in 1955, both Lacan and Lyotard produced books that used *The Ambassadors* for the cover. Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973) reproduced the image in its entirety in order to argue that Holbein uses the anamorphic perspective of the "gaze," identified with *objet a*, to make visible "the subject as annihilated" (88). And Lyotard's *Discours, Figure* (1971), which discusses the painting as an exemplum of his thesis that the representational planes of paintings are necessarily non-identical to themselves, reproduced a detail of the anamorphic skull when it appeared in its second edition in 1978 (376-9).

More recently, Slavoj Žižek has brilliantly elaborated Lacan's comments on *The Ambassadors*. He emphasises that the anamorphic stain that obtrudes into the composition is a "phallic" detail that denatures Holbein's "idyllic surface scene." The "true meaning of the picture" is revealed, according to him, once the anamorphic image, glanced from a lateral perspective on the threshold of the room in which it is exhibited, has acquired the contours of the skull. And this "true meaning" is "the nullity of all terrestrial goods, objects of art and knowledge that fill out the rest of the picture." He continues:

the "phallic" element of a picture is a meaningless stain that "denatures" it, rendering all its constituents "suspicious," and thus opens up the abyss of the search for a meaning—nothing is what it seems to be,

everything is to be interpreted, everything is supposed to possess some supplementary meaning. The ground of the established, familiar signification opens up; we find ourselves in a realm of total ambiguity, but this lack propels us to produce ever new “hidden meanings”: it is a driving force of endless compulsion. The oscillation between lack and surplus meaning constitutes the proper dimension of subjectivity. In other words, it is by means of the “phallic” spot that the observed picture is subjectivized: this paradoxical point undermines our position as “neutral,” “objective” observer, pinning us to the observed object itself. (90-91)

The scratched surface of the pier-glass in *Middlemarch*, to return to my example from nineteenth-century literature, is the equivalent of Holbein’s anamorphic skull in *The Ambassadors*. Eliot’s image of the mirror is, in Žižek’s terms, the “phallic” spot on the novel’s canvas that provides a kind of portal into a “realm of total ambiguity.” It is the smear that radically subjectivises its representation of reality, undermining the omniscient narrator’s claim to be neutral and objective. Abruptly, it opens up a perspective that enables the reader to glimpse a reality repressed by “the established, familiar signification” of the realist aesthetic; a reality that is purely contingent, aleatory.

The almost unthinkable logic of Eliot’s parable of the pier-glass, as J. Hillis Miller has put it, is that “what is ‘really there’ has no order whatsoever, but is merely random scratches without pattern or meaning” (140). And Eliot cannot of course countenance this. As Miller emphasises, “the idea that reality is chaotic, without order or form, and the corollary that any order it may appear to have is projected illicitly by some patterning ego” is, officially at least, contradicted both by Eliot’s celebrated metaphors for the organic unity of social life, like the web, and by “the generalizing, rationalizing, order-finding activity of the narrator throughout the book” (140). Unofficially, though, *Middlemarch* momentarily admits the idea that reality is chaotic. And Miller too patently cannot countenance this idea. “It would seem hardly plausible,” he rather plaintively protests, “to say that reality for Eliot is a chaotic disorder.” In an effort to console himself for the sense of existential homelessness that Eliot’s metaphor induces, he adds:

It might seem more likely that this is an irrelevant implication of the parable, an implication which has by accident, as it were, slipped in along with the implications which are “intended.” A decision about this must be postponed. (140)

Miller likes to think that the shocking philosophical implication of the parable of the pier-glass is purely accidental (though revealingly he also leaves open the possibility that it is deliberate). I prefer to think that, even if she finally forecloses the idea that reality is chaotic, because she cannot accept its philosophical, its existential implications, Eliot nonetheless flirts for an instant with the experimental potential of an aleatory realism. She recognises that the anamorphic stain that the metaphor of the mirror constitutes also paradoxically frames the novel’s representation of reality. In Žižek’s language, it is “the heterogeneous element that must remain an inert, nonsensical ‘blot’ if the rest of the picture is to acquire the consistency of a symbolic reality” (95).

Perhaps what I am here calling aleatory realism, which is in the end the formal possibility of representing reality as meaningless, as something “minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions,” is comparable to what Jameson, in some recent comments on the prospects presently open to the realist aesthetic, has enigmatically described as “existential realism”:

This mode is predicated on what used to be called the death of the subject, or more precisely, the effacement of the individual personality or character, its survival in an impersonal consciousness beyond identity and individuality. Here narrative withdraws from the outer person into an impersonal and anonymous confrontation with situation and things, a blank third-person narrative in which only a pure present of time and space is registered, yet a pure present which includes velleities and intentions, movements and gestures, flashes of memory and bits and pieces of the larger projects, familiar glimpses of routine and repetition: but only insofar as the edges of all those dimensions are visible in a present of time. Existential realism thus offers the satisfactions of experience without any of the perspectives that might have been drawn on to interpret or indeed to change it; yet as a narrative mode it is clearly not inseparable from the empirical reality of the older realisms, and, while no longer subjectivist, is perfectly consistent with experimental variation and with the positing of alternate pasts or futures. (“A Note” 270-71)

Existential realism, in Jameson's formulation, is the acceptable, practicable face of the aleatory realism I have postulated. It is the attempt to reproduce those multitudinous, minute scratches in a readable form, that is, as "a pure present which includes velleities and intentions, movements and gestures, flashes of memory and bits and pieces of the larger projects, familiar glimpses of routine and repetition." It is a realism beyond realism, to be sure, since it deliberately supersedes narrative, at least in a linear or concentric form; but it nonetheless remains a realism, because it uses an anamorphic perspective to confront precisely the question that Lyotard claimed classic realism constitutively avoided, "the question of reality implicated in that of art."

Notes

¹For a more extensive discussion of this idea, see Beaumont.

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