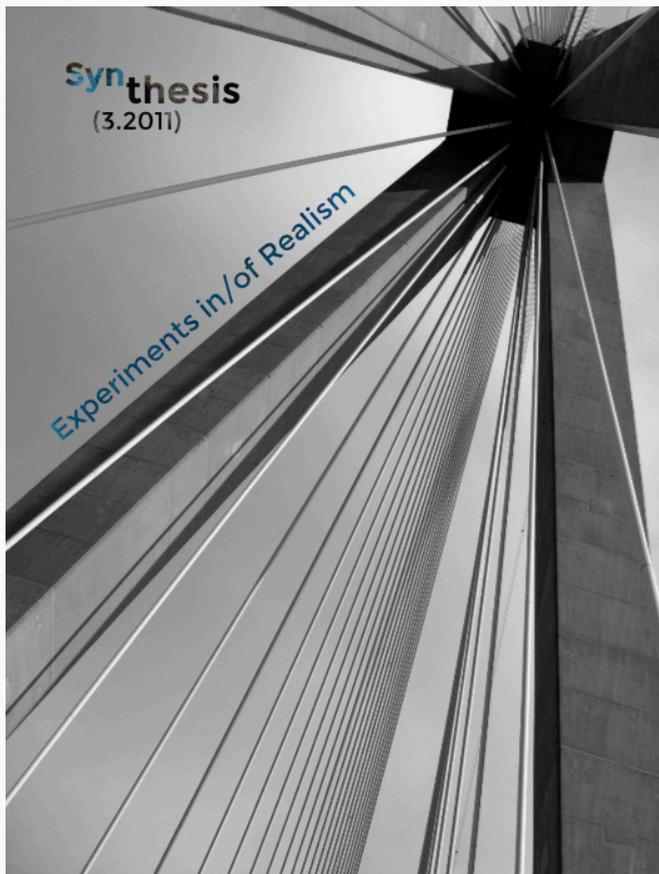


## Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 3 (2011)

Experiments in/of Realism



### Realism's Concealed Realities

*Josie Billington, Philip Davis*

doi: [10.12681/syn.16871](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16871)

Copyright © 2011, Josie Billington, Philip Davis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

# Realism's Concealed Realities

Josie Billington and Philip Davis

## Abstract

Challenging hostile characterisations of realism, this article argues that nineteenth-century realist fiction achieves a double loyalty: loyal to the subject matter of ostensibly mundane reality but loyal also to how life might be in the truer reality of a world in better shape—a world often hidden distortedly within this one, confined inside people too small and compromised to help re-shape it. As a consequence, the article seeks to show that, in its hidden or apparently tiny subtleties, realism has been more radically experimental with reality than it has been given credit for. Its immanent realist metaphysic, established in place of a lost or unattainable primary reality, demanded new formal agility to reach or express the “really real” not otherwise accessible to ordinary human perception or available to characters themselves. Yet realism’s technical innovations were so undemonstratively faithful to their medium as to risk being obscured and unacknowledged within it.

In his preface to *The American*, Henry James concluded that the imperative to experiment in fictional representations of life belonged to “the art of the romancer” not that of the realist. “The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another...Our general sense of the way things happen...abides with us indefeasibly, as readers of fiction, from the moment we demand that our fiction shall be intelligible.” It is “romance alone,” James goes on, which, by “standing for the things...we never *can* directly know,” offers “experience liberated...disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it” (473-75).

This essay will argue firstly that, for all James’s saying on that occasion, the real ultimately represents what still we cannot wholly know. Secondly, that one neglected achievement of nineteenth-century realism was its honouring simultaneously of “the way things happen” and the way things *do not* or (in a fallen world) *cannot* happen, but might or should have. For, in literary realism, intimations of unknown or other lives are not merely the creatures of romantic imagination operating in isolation from mundane, encumbered experience: rather they are often found to be implicit within ordinary reality, as lost, untriggered, yet still vital, possibilities that define the real beyond its mundane appearance. In addition, the essay will explore realism’s experimental loosening of the strictures of linear prose, so as to make room for myriad levels of reality too dense for easy knowledge. It will consider, further, how these innovations have been almost inevitably overlooked as a consequence of their occurring secretly or hiddenly, like the very phenomenon of plural realities they disclose, inside the exigencies of prosaic temporality.

What the authors of this essay call ‘realism’ deliberately involves the use of the same word ‘real’ in two ways. Firstly, to denote the aspect of literary realism which comes closest to what is meant by ‘realism’ in life—the obstacles, that is to say, that constitute limitation as per the reality principle in Freud or as in the Fall. This is allied with the Jamesian view of the mundane reality we cannot possibly not know. Secondly, to signify the ‘really real’ or the ‘moment of reality’ which the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion signifies by *o*—the ultimate reality that “does not fall in the domain of knowledge or learning save incidentally”; it can be ‘become’ (its presence can be recognised or felt), but it cannot be ‘known’ except in the moment or happening of experience (Bion 26). That becoming is registered in the realist novel as the most potent form of its acknowledgement, in lieu of easy knowingness. For the nineteenth-century theologian H. L. Mansel, this Kantian distinction between phenomena (things as they are known to us) and noumena (things as they are in themselves) was itself indirect evidence of the relationship, indeed the reciprocal independence, of everyday and ultimate reality. It is the very limitation of our knowledge which creates an apprehension of a reality, an unknowable *o*, absolutely separate from them (Mansell 62). Realism, we wish to argue, works analogously. Apparently bound to the limiting framework of common language and ordinary event in a fallen, secular world, it creates a field *inside* its mundane human material out of which the really real can ‘incidentally’ emerge. In this reading, realist prose is a medium for immanent disguise of the poetry, the potential, secretly buried beneath its ostensibly indiscriminating continuities, with the power to reveal that concealment at sudden moments of transcendent reality.

As a template for what we mean by literary realism's secular version of the Fall—(typically, a protagonist's growth out of youthful fantasy and boundless aspiration into a mature second life of pressing demands and restricted choice or possibility)—we start with Levin, in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, referring, where appropriate, to the original Russian.

“At every step,” Levin finds, three months into his marriage, “he felt like a man who, after having admired a little boat going smoothly and happily on a lake, then got into this boat” (*Anna Karenina* 479). It is only after the first matrimonial quarrel with his wife that Levin “understood” [понял] “clearly for the first time what he had not understood [“понимал”<sup>1</sup>] when he had led her out of the church after the wedding”: “He understood [понял] not only that she was close to him, but that he no longer knew where she ended and he began. He understood [‘понял’] it by the painful feeling of being split [‘раздвоения,’ literally ‘division’—‘раз’—into ‘two’—‘двое’] which he experienced at that moment” (*Anna Karenina* 481-82; *Complete Works* vol. 11 65).

Paradoxically, the split Levin experiences inside his marriage is the sign that one plus one has now become two together, the emergent realisation of which is betokened in the Russian by the bewilderedly repetitive certainty of “он понял” (“he understood”). The second life or second ordering is not an abandonment of unattainable perfection so much as a rediscovery of the ideal of primary union in a corrected, truer form—as though what Levin gets is only distinct from the cliché he expects in so far as it is now translated into the ‘really real’ version of itself. That character proposes (a), and life disposes (b)—in that order—is the austere benign life-system which the very shape of this prose, with dogged literalism insists upon (and which our notation here highlights):

[a] He was offended at first, [b] but in that same instant he felt that he could not be offended by her, that she was him. [a] In the first moment he felt like a man who, having suddenly received a violent blow from behind, turns with vexation and a desire for revenge to find out who did it, [b] and realizes that he has accidentally struck himself, that there is no one to be angry with and he must endure and ease the pain. (*Anna Karenina* 482; *Complete Works* vol. 11, 65).

Significantly, ‘understand’ [‘понял’] is not repeated in the sentence above but transposed to a more profoundly involuntary recognition—‘убеждается’ (Tolstoy, *Complete Works* vol. 11, 65), translated as ‘realizes,’ and meaning ‘persuaded’ or ‘certain of’ at the level of earnest conviction or powerful belief. Realisation happens at a deeper level *inside* Levin (and in the very middle of each sentence) when he finds himself the less able to get outside or ahead of the non-negotiable sequence of experience, thus:

[a] Natural feeling demanded that he vindicate himself, prove to her that she was wrong; [b] but to prove that she was wrong would mean to upset her still more and make the breach that had caused all the trouble still wider. [a] One habitual feeling urged him to shift the blame from himself to her; [b] another, stronger one urged him quickly, as quickly as possible, to smooth over the breach and keep it from growing bigger. [a] To remain under so unjust an accusation was tormenting, [b] but to hurt her by vindicating himself was still worse. [a] Like a man suffering from pain while half-asleep, he wanted to tear off, to throw away the sore spot and, [b] coming to his senses, found that the sore spot was himself. (*Anna Karenina* 482)

While the ‘a’ clauses stubbornly defend Levin’s original, and still primary, sense of his own separate and absolute identity, the ‘b’ clauses swing back six times to invalidate those first impulses, saying to Levin “*This is marriage—no longer being single.*” “The first stone against which the pride of egoism stumbles is the *thou*, the *alter ego*” (Feuerbach 82). Marriage, for Levin, is at once the ego’s stumbling block and its (painful) liberation from egoism: the real discovery of another’s presence turns an ‘I-it’ experience of the world to an ‘I-thou’ direct *relation* (“to hurt her...was still worse...the sore spot was himself”), thus substituting the redeeming wholeness of reciprocal being for subject/object duality (Buber 62). In his Bakhtinian reading of the Tolstoyan novel, Gary Saul Morson discusses Tolstoy’s “absolute language”: he cites as example the “proverbial” beginning of *Anna Karenina* (“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” [1])—statements which “although [they are] part of the work...are neither part of the story nor of its narration.” “In the midst of a novel,”

Morson goes on, “which insofar as it is a novel renders all of its language conditional, Tolstoy attempts to make statements that are completely non-novelistic. ... [Thus] Tolstoy’s absolute statements are involved in self-contradiction” (16-17, 19-20). But in the mid-life of the novel, for Tolstoy as for George Eliot, those absolutes (often posed provisionally anyway as provocative generalities) and their conditioning or cancelling contradictions exist simultaneously within the *same* sentence as incontrovertibly as they exist within the same man—two world-views within one tight reality. What Morson goes on to call “the surrounding language” of the novel (20)—which in fact is its realism—is created precisely out of the tension *between* the supposed or naïve idea (a), the modifying real (b), and, within the latter, the hidden ideal (o), re-emergent within the texture of existence. The clause and sentence sequencing literalise Levin’s repeated mistakes in order to honour their necessity as well as their authenticity. For, Levin cannot get to ‘b’—nor ‘o-in-b’—without first starting from ‘a, since he needs his strenuous over-commitment to the wrong ideas in order honestly to find out that they are wrong. In that way those ideas become subdued to life’s shape and contours, still jostling in relation with his hurt and resistant self-impulses.

The following passage offers an English equivalent to Levin’s troubled struggle to adapt to a second life of circumscribed reality. Here in Dickens, as in Tolstoy, the sense of a lost primal reality is not so much banished from the apparently settled secularism of Victorian realism, as forced back down into the interstices of ordinary life. In this (and the subsequent example), we include instances of the original manuscripts since they help to lay bare the levels which realist prose hides within itself at the very point of sentence-composition.

Entering life’s second stage, David Copperfield confesses to himself that his marriage, though not a dramatic disaster, is not the perfection he had hoped for either:

The old, unhappy feeling pervaded my life. It was deepened, if it were changed at all; but it was as undefined as ever, and addressed me like a strain of sorrowful music faintly heard in the night. I loved my wife dearly, and I was happy; but the happiness I had vaguely anticipated once, was not the happiness I enjoyed, and there was always something wanting.

In fulfilment of the compact I have made with myself, to reflect my mind on this paper, I again examine it, closely, and bring its secrets to the light. What I missed, I still regarded—I always regarded—as something that had been a dream of my youthful fancy; that was incapable of realization; that I was now discovering to be so, with some natural pain, as all men did. But that it would have been better for me if my wife could have helped me more, and shared the many thoughts in which I had no partner; and that this might have been; I knew.

Between these two irreconcilable conclusions: the one, that what I felt was general and unavoidable; the other, that it was particular to me, and might have been different: I balanced curiously, with no distinct sense of their opposition to each other. (*David Copperfield* 568)

In contrast to Levin’s before/after, a-to-b sequence, this passage is pitched in middling uncertainty, between the romantic youth of so-called fancy and the disappointed adulthood of so-called realisation, between what all men must naturally relinquish and what nonetheless might have been different for me. At once defined from outside as the norm of a married man, yet still left unsatisfied, unsettled and undefined, David Copperfield’s life is, he fears, the world of the sanely second-best, still haunted by what seems primary and yet impossible.<sup>2</sup> This would be the Jamesian mundanity which, alas, we cannot not know. In the course of writing, Dickens deleted some words now illegible that came after “wanting,” then added the definitive temporal word “always” (“there was always something wanting” [MS, v.II A, 144]), as if writing into linear prosaic temporality that extra dimension that seemingly can never now exist within it and yet cannot be wholly banished. A further sign that these co-existent worlds or levels cannot be accommodated within the straightforward momentum of successive prose sentences is at the end of the second paragraph, where, twice in the manuscript Dickens made and then re-made the decision to end this new second paragraph with the delayed main verb and the inverted syntax of “I knew.” The fact that “I knew” is not even the end of a chapter, let alone the book, only the end of a paragraph, means that the next paragraph implicitly says that the life which is the subject of that knowledge still goes on regardless of the knowledge. It signifies, in an act of written

attestation, that the knowledge of what is missing in a life is both permanent and unavailing. But the key revision Dickens momentarily tracked back to include in the midst of writing on was the painfully added clause—"and that this might have been" (MS, v.II A, 144). This inclusion is not mere wistful wish-fulfilment but the robust uncertainty of lost possibility: "the things that never happen, are often as much realities to us, in their effects, as those that are accomplished" (*David Copperfield* 668). The old ideal type of a partner who could completely share one's thoughts haunts the text. Thus to find room for the painful admission of a lost primary reality within and behind this half-disappointingly ordinary one, is to have a thought which ostensibly may do no good at all—in fact may only add to the pain—but nonetheless corresponds to a real truth waiting to be released and realised.

For Mansel, the very experience of limitation implies something on the other side of itself, the very inadequacy of conceptualisation pointing to some higher truth, of which the realized inadequacy indicates the existence but does not make known the substance. Here David's haunting by a secret other life is confessionally acknowledged in the act of writing in lieu of living. On the one hand, he cannot speak to his partner; on the other, he does not (like Levin) pray to God; instead he can only write, putting his mind onto paper. Confession here fills a personally registered gap between the theological on the one side and the social on the other, reaching a deep inner level which has no home, yet which remains sensed within experience.<sup>3</sup> The whole experiment of realism might be regarded less as an attempt to transcribe reality than an effort to find space for some bigger quality that lies behind it all, for something strange within the ostensibly familiar, something unobvious within the apparently safe. And in this effort so-called 'higher concepts' are the wrong place to start. The really real inheres, loyally to the medium, in its details.

Watch a realist novelist dealing in the greatest issues, via the tiniest details, in a passage which starts back at a moment of primary loss—indeed, separation of the kind which, for Freud, made sense of all subsequent inchoate yearning (Freud 260). Here, in Mrs Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, Molly's father, the widowed Dr Gibson, finally gets around to announcing to her his decision to re-marry:

"I've been in great perplexity for some time; but at last I've taken a step which will, I hope, make us both happier."

"You're going to be married again," said she, *helping* him out with a *quiet dry* voice and *gently* drawing her hand *out* of his.

"Yes. To Mrs Kirkpatrick—you remember her? They call her Clare at the Towers. You recollect how kind she was to you that day you were left there?" (114; emphasis added)

Already there is not just one event here but, from the beginning of the scene, two, three, four, or more. Thus, in the second paragraph, the sentence which Molly says *for* her father—out of instinctive tenderness for the vulnerability of his "I hope" as he tries to speak for them "both"—is also the cruel blow she receives *from him*. And our italics show how the prose discloses the ambivalences and contradictions taking place at different levels of voice and hand. In some primal paradisaic world, the chronology of thoughts, events, feelings would be in step with their ontological importance. In the fallen second world of realism, one thought, one event, one time gets overlaid with another. The clue to this richly confused overlap is one instinctive and delicate insertion made at the time of writing—let the reader try to guess where it is in the following:

She did not answer. She could not tell what words to use. She was afraid of saying anything, lest the passion of anger, dislike, indignation—whatever it was that was boiling up in her breast—should find vent in cries and screams, or worse, in raging words that could never be forgotten. It was as if the piece of solid ground on which she stood had broken from the shore, and she was drifting out to the infinite sea alone.

Mr Gibson saw that her silence was unnatural, and half-guessed at the cause of it. But he knew that she must have time to reconcile herself to the idea, and still believed that it would be for her eventual happiness. He had, besides, the relief of feeling that the secret was told, the confidence made, which he had been dreading for the last twenty-four hours. He went on recapitulating all the advantages of the marriage; he knew them off by heart now. (*Wives and Daughters* 114)

The inserted word was “half-” (in the opening sentence of the second paragraph [Gaskell, MS 171]). The revision is prompted in part by “alone” at the end of the previous sentence which, like a line ending in poetry, leaves Molly stranded in her own paragraph. Mr Gibson’s fully “guessed” meaning of her silence too easily and readily cancels or closes the gap which opens up between father and daughter at the paragraph-division, thus producing the sudden adjustment. Yet “half” is produced in attentive, *en passant* acknowledgement of what the paragraph division really signifies. Molly *is* and *is not* alone. Her father is there, still, in that nearby next paragraph, while he nonetheless inhabits temporal continuities (“She must have *time...still* believed...*eventual* happiness”) which her own paragraph of youthful threshold-experience seems to have left behind for ever. “The hours spent in its perusal seem like actual hours spent,” said Henry James of this novel, admiringly.<sup>4</sup> To translate this aspect of the novel’s formal temporality into literary theoretical terms, ‘scenes’ of this kind seem to realise an equivalence between the time of the thing told (story time) and the time of the telling (narrative time).<sup>5</sup> Yet, what that tiny micro-event of syntax really does, is to add in and thereby honour a fuller, more complex, paradoxically more whole reality than can be straightforwardly incorporated into ongoing linearity. While the successive paragraphs appear to follow on in time, in fact, in the life they depict, they happen simultaneously (and in the same space, for all the language of the breaking of land). That this father and daughter are both together and apart in time, sharing the moment but never wholly sharing how it feels, is the richly nebulous life matter these paragraphs undemonstratively disclose. Here the real cannot not be known, it is true, but cannot be wholly known either: hence “half-guessed,” which makes its sympathetic criticisms of both Mr Gibson’s wisdom and of Molly’s despair, the life of the novel being bigger than either. At such moments the accumulation of complicated human *content* is almost too much for the habitual, conventional and institutional *forms* in which it is contained. Here, at the end of this scene, is another deft and quietly devastating example of this prose, sensitive to its own unfolding shape and literally creating space for the deep, primary human material that emerges in the very midst of its going on. “I think it is better for me to go away now,” says Mr Gibson at the close of this scene. “We may say things difficult to forget”:

“I will come again tomorrow. Good-by, Molly.” For many minutes after he had ridden away—long after the sound of his horse’s hoofs on the round stones of the paved lane, beyond the home-meadows, had died away—Molly stood there, empty shading her eyes, and looking at the ^ space of air in which his form had last appeared. (Gaskell, MS 173)

With the tiny insertion of “empty,” the father is put back inside that space of air, as loss. Like Dickens’s added clause—“and that this might have been”—the word opens up recesses of being that will neither be realised, fulfilled, nor concluded but will be a part of Molly’s reality on earth as surely, and as incommensurately, as her father will return tomorrow.<sup>6</sup> Realist prose is the best model of how, as humans go on horizontally, there is still amid the ongoing, something that belongs to a different dimension too often neglected or left behind. Realism at such times is a mode of attention to human life so loyally exact as to have reproduced the very size, shape, and “space” of that extra dimension as it occurs within the ordinary continuum. Such loyalty is in recognition that any over-insistence of the importance of such matters would be to lose the subtlety of their reality.

The overlapping density of the realist novel, we are arguing, is not the consequence of the *lack* of a single idea amid the loose bagginess<sup>7</sup> of indiscriminate detail. Rather, implicit in realism’s complexity, there are too many thoughts, meanings, and levels at a time for any one idea sufficiently to represent their reality. Only particular concrete examples can reveal this subtlety. Thus, in the following silently related passages from *Little Dorrit*, we find once again the language of fractions of the real. When, “with a wonderful air of benignity and patronage,” Mr Dorrit explains to Arthur Clennam that he is “Father of the Marshalsea” and that his daughter Amy was born here, “[Arthur] felt himself quite lost in wonder at the manner of the man, and that the probability of his daughter’s having had a reserve as to her family history, should be so far out of his mind”:

She filled his glass, put all the little matters on the table ready to his hand, and then sat beside him while he ate his supper. Evidently in observance of their nightly custom, she put some bread before herself, and touched his glass with her lips; but Arthur saw she was troubled and took nothing. Her look at her father, half-admiring him and proud of him, half-ashamed for him, all devoted and loving, went to his inmost heart. (*Little Dorrit* 68)

It is part of the rich fullness of this passage that “all” in the last sentence should seem to add up to *both* more *and* less than those two “half” measures which are gathered into it: for Amy’s devotion to her father exists unconditionally as an anterior precondition of her pride in him, on the one hand, *and* in loving resistance to the shame she feels, on the other—a shame which, nonetheless, in the replacement of one preposition with the other (“of” becoming “for”), is also an aspect of love. The syntax has to be finer than the vocabulary via which it is worked, in order to keep faith with all that is achieved or resisted by Amy *through* the midst of the common human material in which the predicament exists. For here the words “love,” or “home,” “family,” like “father” and “daughter,” are simultaneously letting down *and* retaining all that those words should mean in terms of the great human types and templates.

Yet so much of the silent power and plenitude generated out of this already saturated human matter comes from the witness, in Clennam, to the fine, cruel pain of Amy’s observances. This is no straightforward quasi-narratorial third-person view. In fact, the passage is a brilliant virtuoso example of what Andrew H. Miller regards as one of nineteenth-century realism’s great experiments: its twofold mission to “represent second-person relations between its characters (friendships and marriages) and cultivate in its readers diverse desires to form analogous relations with particular characters.” Miller writes: “Without dispensing with either third-person or first-person perspectives, the novel ... give[s] special weight to second-person reactive perspectives [or “relations”] with their I-you-me structure” (Andrew H. Miller 73, 77). The cumulative pain of this passage emerges because Amy’s (devoted and demonstrative) second-person relation to her father is involuntarily influenced here (in the intensification of shame, pride, and love) entirely by Amy’s silent second-person relation to Clennam. More, the reader is increasingly drawn into second-person engagement with Clennam, when—as father embarrasses daughter further by applying to Clennam for money—the prose now modulates into free indirect discourse as if itself to go to Clennam’s “inmost heart”: “To see her hand upon his arm in mute entreaty half-repressed, and her timid little shrinking figure turning away, was to see a sad, sad sight” (*Little Dorrit* 69). “To see...to see”—twice over, but differently. For the witness, in his very sympathy with the young girl’s pain, cannot help thereby adding to it (“turning away”), as well as to his own (“sad, sad”). The direction of this prose becomes suddenly vertical, the accretion of feeling in that literal pile-up of words, halts the narrative line, as if to lift out the underlying human source-place, in defiance of its attenuation in a dwindling linear narrative of lost possibilities. More, the overburdening pressure of feeling stretches almost to breaking point the technical resources of this sentence: it does not follow the usual habit of free indirect mode in seeming to hover *between* first and third person, but, by virtue of the operation of the passive voice, appears to *incorporate* them in an I-you-me and, virtually, *he* perspective. That last barely tolerable “sight” is lifted almost into transcendence—as though Clennam were now momentarily occupying the place where God used to be, even as, via the operation of second-person relations beyond the confines of the book, it goes to the witnessing reader’s own “inmost heart.”

Even so, the accumulating meaning of this scene does not simply gather and rest here. For, in this novel especially, it is a meaningful inversion of perspective which becomes, almost dizzyingly, the means of overcoming the limitation of individual human scope and vision.<sup>8</sup> Amy and Clennam have not only to see with each other’s eyes: rather, when they and their fortunes change places, and now Clennam is confined in the debtors’ prison, they have also to see one another as having taken up each other’s previous places. When Amy offers to Clennam her fortune as an escape from his degradation, Clennam says that acceptance might have been possible “in the bygone days when this was your home and this was your dress”:

"I am disgraced enough, my Little Dorrit. I must not descend so low as that, and carry you—so dear, so generous, so good—down with me. GOD bless you, GOD reward you! It is past." He took her in his arms as if she had been his daughter. (*Little Dorrit* 634)

In taking Amy to himself, Clennam absorbs the pressure of all the reserves of unpurged feeling which the passage cited above, and the novel as a whole, has barely held within *itself*. The words "as if"<sup>9</sup> seem to explode with that dense material from the novel's cumulative past. In stepping into the role of feeling guardian, the embrace does not so much fulfil as stand in for all the things Clennam believes he *cannot* be to Amy—not lover, not God, not quite father, actually. Yet at the self-same time it *does* make up for all that her own father was not, should have, and "might have been." At such moments, it is the novel's half-events, picked up across the implicit vital memory of the whole work, which now come together to form more than the sum of themselves separately: these tightly packed, silently charged moments of gathered memory are like an explosive bursting of reality out of and beyond itself.

To apply (as critics too often routinely do) the ideology and conceptual discourse of patriarchal-political power structures to such instances is wholly to miss the point: namely, that in the realist novel people like Amy and Clennam are always both too much, and too little for the meanings they generate or sustain, to be adequately explained by any tidy thought *about* them.<sup>10</sup> For realism's human beings are like experiments in what is too amorphous or contradictory for static reasoning, models of thinking-out life in struggling practice or of immanently thinking *into* the most primary and least tractable human relations: parenthood, love, family. It is how the so-called domestic ideology of realism hides within itself a thorough-going and sometimes perilous testing of the most exacting primal realities, bringing apparently conventional characters or thoughts to the very edge of what they seem, even to themselves, to represent.

Brigid Lowe has recently shown that "subversive" readings of realism, which patronisingly concede that "though novels may be oppressive, *we* can make something of them despite their best efforts," thereby exclude the "converse realisation that the past might be just as capable of opening up perspectives on our views that, without its guidance, *we* might not have sufficient distance upon ourselves and *our* own era to grasp" (8-9). Likewise, this essay wishes to expose the narrowness of contemporary criticism's categories of the real—chiefly, gender and social politics—with their potential to ruin appreciation of the art-form which is the best working model for a life not containable within simple limiting categories. Where, for example, in the following passage, politicised sceptical readings might see a form of evil patriarchy hidden within domestic innocence, we as believers in the realist project, see almost the reverse—something greater transcending the terms within which it is operative, as spirit within letter. The non-conformist minister, Mr Benson, in Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth* finds himself defending to his sister Faith, on religious grounds, what he also believes, in his deepest religious self to be a sin—Ruth's conceiving a child out of wedlock. "Then sin appears to me to be quite distinct from its consequences," he says to his sister, Faith.

"In the eye of God, she is exactly the same as if the life she has led had left no trace behind. We knew her errors before, Faith." "Yes, but not this disgrace—this badge of her shame!" "Faith, Faith! Let me beg of you not to speak so of the little innocent babe, who may be God's messenger to lead her back to Him. Think again of her first words—the burst of nature from her heart! Did she not turn to God, and enter into a covenant with Him—"I will be so good"? Why, it draws her out of herself! If her life has hitherto been self-seeking, and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin,—will be purification." He was very much excited; he was even surprised at his own excitement; but his thoughts and meditations through the long afternoon had prepared his mind for this manner of viewing the subject. (*Ruth* 119)

Benson's rejoicing in the birth of Ruth's baby is a religious paradox: the disaster in Ruth's *first* life is also the saving gift and triumph of her *second*—namely, that she is become a mother. Benson has not

one single or simple belief under which to categorise the situation but *two* powerful thoughts, at once inextricable and yet hardly compatible, the good-in-the-bad. "It is only by the habit of representing faithfully all things that we can truly learn what is beautiful and what is not," said John Ruskin, in opposition to religious idealism in art. "The more a painter accepts nature as he finds it, the more unexpected beauty he discovers in what he at first despised" (58). Realism's rich inclusiveness of vision is precisely analogous to Ruskin's naturalist ideal: by not excluding and not selecting, realism implicitly trusts that the contrary pulls amid its density will produce between them something humanly less definable and less predictable than simple good or bad, making for the personal individual achievement which is re-creative of a real morality. For this is Benson acting more like Christ than like a Christian—the Christ who surprised his over-literal disciples when he would not condemn the woman taken in adultery or blame another who poured precious ointment on his head instead of selling it to help the poor. Something like grace overcomes ethics narrowly conceived. In thus transcending its own limitation, and going beyond an over-clear agenda or over-determined theoretical principle, the human response in praxis nevertheless recovers what the now over-rigidified principle originally stood for. The greatest realists never take the real for granted, but discover higher or prior significances buried within it at moments of "surprised" revelation such as Benson's, where human thinking almost exceeds its own power in the world.

But as our preceding examples have demonstrated, reality, when it is most real, often cannot be fully acknowledged by those who hold or represent it. In such cases, as we saw in *Little Dorrit*, the burgeoning reality seeks a witness of itself and a home for its thought in another character.

Realism's most strenuous witness—and arguably its most risk-taking experiment—was the voice or language we call 'George Eliot' articulating what we have called the hidden but bigger things and what she calls, famously, in *Middlemarch* "the roar on the other side of silence" (*Middlemarch* 182). It is the language of rescue work, speaking for what goes on more implicitly, in between the lines, in other realist novelists such as Mrs Gaskell. What goes on implicitly in *Middlemarch* itself calls for 'George Eliot,' lest readers should miss the really real hidden within the mundane. It is not that she is preaching or explaining, but rather as though she hears the characters crying unconsciously for understanding. And her novels also register what it might cost her characters to achieve for themselves that level of understanding which is almost superhuman in the language of 'George Eliot.' So it is in that earned level of consciousness reached by Dorothea in *Middlemarch* when, after her first marital quarrel with Casaubon, she "conceive[d] with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the light and shadows must always fall with a certain difference" (*Middlemarch* 208). Dorothea is at once one of the two people within the marriage and a third at the apex of consciousness between them. Soon she will have to take that third-person understanding, as of a 'George Eliot,' back down into her ordinary self again, hoping it can make some difference when she goes back to Casaubon rather than desert him. But here it marks nineteenth-century realism's 'epochal' emergence from 'moral stupidity'—even though the moment is as humanly lonely as it is enlarging, loss as much as gain, for in the recognition of shared equivalence of wife and husband comes the certainty that, together in that marriage, the couple are also mutually sundered. George Eliot's language is as steeped in relativism as any postmodern fictional experiment yet without the latter's perspective of sceptical irony to defend against the experiential reality of it.

George Eliot does not want her knowledge to stand in place of that of her characters: it does so only because of the limitations of reality. It would be better if 'George Eliot' could be re-embodied in those characters for whom she stands as proxy. For her knowledge exists *for* those characters, on their behalf, just as also it exists for fear that the readers of realism miss the really real within it. That is why *Daniel Deronda* exists rather desperately after *Middlemarch* as the riskiest experimental version of all that is at stake in the fight for the real.

Here is a final example of what is at issue in achieving what Bion called *o* in the midst of the secularised mundane. In this scene from Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, the visionary Daniel becomes for the

egotistical Gwendolen a monitor, close to “the strongest of all monitors” (384) we ourselves might identify as George Eliot, but here made flesh inside the novel, existent as the preserver of Gwendolen’s better self when she hardly realises she has one. “You say I am ignorant,” says Gwendolen. “But what is the good of trying to know more unless life were worth more?” “Life *would* be worth more to you,” Deronda replies: “some real knowledge would give you an interest in the world beyond the small drama of your personal desires”:

“Is there any single occupation of mind that you care about with passionate delight or even independent interest?”

Deronda paused, but Gwendolen, looking startled and thrilled as by an electric shock, said nothing, and he went on more insistently—

“I take what you said of music for an example—it answers for all larger things—you will not cultivate it for the sake of a private joy in it. What sort of earth or heaven would hold any spiritual wealth in it for souls pauperised by inaction? If one firmament has no stimulus for our attention and awe, I don’t see how four would have it. We should stamp every possible world with the flatness or our own inanity—which is necessarily impious, without faith or fellowship. The refuge you are needing from personal trouble is the higher, the religious life, which holds an enthusiasm for something more than our appetites and vanities.”

“I will try. I will think,” says Gwendolen, at length.

They both stood silent for a minute, as if some third presence had arrested them,—for Deronda, too, was under that sense of pressure which is apt to come when our winged words seem to be hovering around us. (387-8)

The “religious life” which Deronda urges on Gwendolen is barely separable from the austere secularism urged by realism—the necessity of living meaningfully within the limits of the real. Live, says Deronda to Gwendolen, as if small were large, secondary were primary, in order to find something—anything—inside mundane reality which makes it tolerable, better, or worthwhile. Where David Copperfield feared second-best, Deronda urges it upon Gwendolen for her own sake, in willed resistance to the sexual pressure that offers a (contextually) wrong ‘might have been’ or potential second life between them, yet which is powerfully and mutually felt in the “as if” of “some third presence.” “The ‘As if’ world...the world of the ‘unreal’ is just as important as the world of the so-called real or actual (in the ordinary sense of the word); ...The world of the unreal, becomes finally for us a world of values” (Vaihinger xlvii). That is why it is still, even here, George Eliot herself who makes a “third” force, summoned as she characteristically is in order to give tangible reality and articulate “presence” to feelings which often cannot be acknowledged (without damage) by humans themselves—feelings which nonetheless paradoxically belong to them and which seem to call for articulation in others, if those to whom they belong must deny them. Often regarded as bespeaking a didactic, moralistic, and rigidly lofty view from above, in fact George Eliot’s voice conscientiously inhabits the precarious space *between* or the indistinct processes *inside* characters rather than operating all too knowingly from on top or outside of them. Yet neither free indirect discourse nor the so-called omniscience of author-narrator are of course truly ‘there,’ really existent, for the characters themselves in any sense. Both articulations offer the experience of a character’s life, says D. A. Miller, as she or he can never quite live it.<sup>11</sup> The characters do not know of an author; they rarely hear or see their own hidden thoughts as a reader does—and that is not merely fictive naivety or simplistic convention in realism. It is a belief in what is there even when—especially when—humans cannot realise it as characters within life. One of the most extraordinary and audacious experimental achievements of literary realism is its creation of a medium which produces belief in what is at once there and *not* there. Even within her own writing, like an interpretative character inside her own novels, ‘George Eliot’ is *the* great reader of realism. We should read as she wrote: that is the model and the legacy she offered. ‘George Eliot’ existed to avoid the predictable neglect of realism which her work itself both feared and ironically was later to suffer from.

This essay has argued that realism’s disclosure of the ‘really real’ emerges from its unstinting immersion in the fallen (and partially obfuscating) version of the world which is represented in the medium of prosaic reality. It is not political compromise, artistic cowardice, or loss of vision that leaves realism amidst such mundanity. Rather, nineteenth-century realism exists in between its

unwillingness to conclude that reality is intrinsically disappointing, and its equal refusal of the fantasy of ready access to a higher reality which too easily redeems common life. In offering this difficult but honourable holding-ground for a secular world, a holding-ground in which realism does double loyalty to how things seem to be and how they might or should be, the great realists knew that there were no easy escapes, solutions, or short-cuts. "If I were to try to say in words," Tolstoy wrote of *Anna Karenina*, "everything that I intended to express in my novel, I would have to write the same novel I wrote from the beginning" (Christian, vol. 1, 296). This is not merely a stubborn, unshaped, and untidy literalism. What Tolstoy's statement really means is that the apparently messy art of the realist novel exists as a default model for life in its over-brimming, amorphous, steeped-in-itself resistance to a language of explanation which would be simply inadequate to its reality. The realist novel's implicit and redeeming intuition is that, in the words of Bion,  $\circ$  cannot be permanently contained within any definitive theory about it:

In mathematics, calculations can be made without the presence of the objects about which calculation is necessary. This is not possible the moment the conditions for  $\circ$  do not exist. ...Any formulation felt to approximate to illumination of  $\circ$  is certain to produce an obstructive rigidity. (Bion 1, 81)

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "понимал" is the imperfect of "понял."

<sup>2</sup> A version of this discussion can be found in Davis 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> It is a key insight of George Eliot's realism that while "the old rigid form of confession" has gone, the morality has not: instead it turns subterranean, becomes psychology (see *Adam Bede* 162-74).

<sup>4</sup> See Henry James, *Nation* (1866), quoted in Easson 463.

<sup>5</sup> See Genette 33-35.

<sup>6</sup> This example is also discussed in Billington, *Faithful Realism* 68 and Billington, "Watching" 232.

<sup>7</sup> Henry James's characterisation of the realist novel of course in Preface to *The Tragic Muse*: see James 515.

<sup>8</sup> According to Nagel, "I ordinarily view the world from a certain vantage point, using the eyes, the person, the daily life of [myself] as a kind of window. But the experiences and perspective...with which I am directly presented are not the point of view of the true self, for the true self has no point of view and includes in its conception of the centerless world [myself] and his perspective among the contents of the world. ...The basic step which brings it to life is not complicated...it is simply the step of conceiving the world as a place that includes the person that I am within it—conceiving myself from outside...so I can step away from the unconsidered perspective of the particular person I thought I was" (61-63).

<sup>9</sup> See quotation from Vaihinger, page 33 in this article.

<sup>10</sup> Monica F. Cohen's account of Little Dorrit's "stick-figure emotional constitution," "depsychologised characterisation" and "vapidness," as the novel's "domestic priorities...impoverish Little Dorrit's personality" (106) seems itself to impoverish the novel's rich human content in the service of a politicised interpretation.

<sup>11</sup> See D. A. Miller 60.

### Works Cited

Billington, Josie. *Faithful Realism*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2002.

- . "Watching a Writer Write." *Real Voices on Reading*. Ed. Philip Davis. London: Macmillan, 1997. 224-35.
- Bion, Wilfred. *Attention and Interpretation*. London: Maresfield Library, 1970.
- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. 1923. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1970.
- Christian, R. F., ed & trans. *Tolstoy's Letters*. 2 vols. London: Athlone Press, 1978.
- Cohen, Monica. *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Davis, Philip. *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.
- Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. 1850. Ed. Andrew Sanders. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- . *David Copperfield*. MS. Forster Collection. 6 vols. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- . *Little Dorrit*. 1857. Ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Easson, Angus ed. *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Eliot, George. *Adam Bede*. 1859. Ed. Valentine Cunningham. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- . *Daniel Deronda*. 1876. Ed. Graham Handley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- . *Middlemarch*. 1871-2. Ed. David Carroll. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig von. *The Essence of Christianity*. 1841. Trans. Marian Evans [George Eliot]. 1854. New York: Harper Torchbooks 1957.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Civilisation and its Discontents." *Civilisation, Society and Religion, Pelican Freud Library*. Ed. Albert Dickson Vol. 12. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985. 243-340.
- Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Ruth*. 1853. Ed Alan Shelston. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.
- . *Wives and Daughters*. 1864-66. Ed. Angus Easson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.
- . *Wives and Daughters*. MS. Gaskell Collection 877. John Rylands Library, U of Manchester.
- Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- James, Henry. *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism*. Ed. Roger Gard. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Lowe, Brigid. *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An Alternative to the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*. London: Anthem Press, 2007.
- Mansel, H.L. *The Limits of Religious Thought Examined in Eight Lectures*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: John Murray, 1859.
- Miller, Andrew H. *The Burdens of Perfection*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008.
- Miller, D. A. *Jane Austen, or, The Secret of Style*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.

Morson, Gary Saul. *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in War and Peace*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1988.

Nagel, Thomas. *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.

Ruskin, John. *Modern Painters Vol III*. 1856. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. 39 vols. London: George Allen, 1903-12.

Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*. 1873-77. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

—. *Complete Works*. Ed. M.B. Hrapchenko. 22 vols. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia, 1978-85.

Vaihinger, H. *The Philosophy of "As if": A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*. Trans. C. K. Ogden. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber, 1924.