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Investing in Realism: An Interview with Bruce Robbins

by
Anna Despotopoulou

Anna Despotopoulou: The study of realism as a literary term and as a conscious attitude towards narrative has always encountered definitional difficulties. These difficulties often stem from the acknowledgement of the illusionistic nature of reality represented in texts as well as of the filtering that reality undergoes in the process of its reproduction. What in your view contributes to the definitional difficulty regarding realism nowadays? And by extension, where would you trace the beginning of realism? Aren't all texts in some sense realistic texts?

Bruce Robbins: The big division that I am haunted by is the division between realism as a period term and realism as a mode, and I come back to that again and again, and it leads into different kinds of difficulties. One of the most interesting questions these days, at least in the States, has to do with periodisation in general and whether you can do it in the same way on a global scale in a non-Eurocentric way as we used to do it back when realism seemed to have a very clear place within a European literary history. Within Europe, you had romanticism before realism, then you had naturalism after realism; it all seemed very clear. But can you still tell that story as anything other than a local story? It works for France; it works for Britain; you have to change it again for America, which is slower. But when you think about realism on a global scale, that story doesn't work any more. This difficulty is part of a general question about periodisation: can you talk about the Chinese novel, the Japanese novel, Third World novels, and fit them all into the same pattern? It is already hard enough to talk about realism as a mode which repeats in different periods, but talking about it as a clear period term really doesn't seem to make much sense.

That's a conversation that could be focused on Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946) since Auerbach in a sense does both things himself. On the one hand realism for him is Balzac and Stendhal, firmly connected to a particular European moment. At the same time it is something like a mode which really goes back to Homer and the Bible as two different ways of representing reality. So Auerbach gives you a condensed image of all the difficulties; they are all there in maybe the greatest book written about the question of realism ever. And interestingly much of the attention recently to that book and to Auerbach has been about the problem of fitting it into a non-Eurocentric history. It now matters that the book was written in Istanbul away from European libraries, influenced in a way by its decentredness, and therefore looking at the realist tradition in a way that maybe would not have been possible had Auerbach been comfortably at home in Germany in his library etc.

That said, realism is a set of conventions, *and* realism is a kind of a democratic social project, and you have to say both things at the same time. One of my thesis advisors was Harry Levin, whose theory of realism was really a conventional one rather than a period-based one. He dated the beginning of realism with Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and saw it as a persistent critique of the conventions of romance. Each successive stage of realism was a critique of the conventions of the previous stage. Realism wasn't approximation to the truth of social reality; it involved critiques of previous conventions. And therefore it is not a linear progression. That makes sense to me. When I say that realism is conventional I am thinking, for example, what could be more conventional than the idea of being able to look into the soul of another person? One of the reasons we love realism is its dependence on the convention of omniscience, which is actually the least realistic thing in the world: the idea that we can actually see inside other people. Novels let us do that in a way that we can't do it in reality. In real life we judge from external signs, while in realism it is OK for the author to open up the soul of characters to tell us things that we couldn't ordinarily know.

A. D.: That was a controversy but also an issue that greatly troubled writers at the time of high realism, wasn't it? The question whether the realist text should or should not probe the mind of the characters. I am thinking of what James wrote about Balzac in 1902, that his novels are full of concrete surfaces which suffocate what James called "the larger ether, the diviner air," the consciousness (356). Realist writers, in particular, were intensely concerned with the question of balancing inside and outside. George Eliot's story "The Lifted Veil," with its exploration of telepathy

and prevision, seems to raise this problematic: how can a narrator reach and represent a person's thoughts and feelings? Do you need to be telepathic in order to achieve such omniscience?

B. R.: Exactly, what could be less realistic than omniscience? So you give omniscience to somebody, as a supernatural characteristic, and then you look at it. Yes, though it is her most anti-realistic text, it is a text *about* realism. My own prejudices about the controversy (prejudices, in the sense that the reasons one is for or against realism are quite arbitrary, and I am no different in this sense from anyone else) are these: I do think that the project of trying to describe the world we live in, by whatever technical means, is part of the value of literature. There is an informational or explanatory impulse, and it is a mistake for literary critics to run screaming away from that impulse as if there was something not genuinely literary about it.

A. D.: So is this what was happening in the 70s or the 80s when there was a dismissive and impatient attitude adopted by literary criticism towards realism? For years realism was defined as aspiring to access a historical reality with scientific objectivity. And in this sense it was undervalued by post-structuralism, which contested the epistemological guarantees assumed to be offered by realism.

B. R.: Yes, for many critics realism served as a scapegoat. There were both good and bad reasons for that. The best reason is that in those years everyone was discovering that all knowledge is mediated through language, and therefore the pretence that you can know something directly without the mediation of language is a mistake. But there was also a kind of ritual enactment of the founding rationale for literary studies, a ritual enactment of literariness itself, which is the 'as if,' the self-conscious step back from the thing itself. The idea is that I am going to tell you the story "as if" it were true, but I am not going to give you the truth itself. Literary studies as a discipline is based on that premise. We don't do reality. That's for the sciences, for the other disciplines. We do a version of the 'as if.' In a sense, every time people run away from realism they are reaffirming that founding definitional difference of literary studies from other disciplines. Whereas in fact my position is that we are not just the 'as if' people; we are also people whose existence depends on the importance of the visions of the world that are *framed* by this 'as if,' and we can't pretend that it's all 'as if' and no vision—no making sense of social givens whose existence could be verified by non-literary means. It's both things. The scapegoating of realism is a terrible mistake. Among other things it takes away one of the major motives for which people study literature. They do want to discover things about the world in a certain way which is a little different from how for instance historians would do it. On the other hand, historians have become very interested in the way we know the world. Many of them have realised that their knowledge of the world is also mediated through texts, narratives, rhetoric, metaphor, point of view, tone, and so on. We have things to teach those other 'harder' disciplines about their own kind of knowledge. I think that the students who come to us want the full package: the self-consciousness, the 'as if,' but also a lot of the world. Realism for me is a word that includes both of those things. Part of the scapegoating of realism and the move away from the Victorian period was based on the assumption that these are works that don't have that proper self-consciousness. But as soon as you start looking in the right spirit at these texts you see that of course there is lots of self-consciousness.

A. D.: Yes, there is an extraordinary awareness of the illusionary nature of narration, of the 'as if.' George Eliot famously called these subjective histories "reflection[s] faint or confused" in *Adam Bede* (159). So was it really an objective reality (or an unchangeable idea of truth) that realist texts attempted to represent? What about Eliot's or Hardy's own meditations on the possibility or impossibility of objectivity and the self-reflexive aspect of realist texts?

B. R.: Exactly. There are moments in *Middlemarch* which are astonishing in their self-consciousness about the limits of narration and the conventions one is working according to. I think very much of astonishing statements like, "one morning...Dorothea—but why always Dorothea?" (278). All of Robbe-Grillet's revolt against realism is there in that sentence. A character in Robbe-Grillet will walk into a room and look at a painting on the wall and as the narration follows the description of the

painting you pass into the painting and suddenly the narration is the story of what is going on inside the painting. That's already in George Eliot. So when I talked before of realism as a mode which jumps from different genres I am thinking of the multi-plot novel, which the Victorian period invented, invented it as a project of democratic epistemology. You can't know the world if you follow any one person. What you need is to set different characters in motion and to see the way their lives criss-cross, and at the end you want to know about how all of them ended up; no one has done that so well as the nineteenth-century novel. The multi-plot novel is, I think, part of the heritage of mankind, like the marbles from the Parthenon, and though this may sound shocking, I think that it is now being sustained in part in other modes, like television. I am thinking of certain series like *The Wire*, a series which ran for five seasons, and which was never a big commercial success. It takes the ambition of the Victorian multi-plot novel, the ambition to do social totality so as to show how the different sectors of society are connected in a way that is visible to no one. There is no one in this world who sees all the connections, but *you* see the connections because the character you've been following in this plot suddenly shows up in that other plot. What's happening to the workers on the docks of Baltimore who do not have any work somehow gets connected to the drug trade and the murders in the streets which is connected in turn to the schools not being funded, the man running for mayor, the corporate takeover of the newspaper business. All this represents *the* ambition invented by the Victorian novel, still alive and in astonishingly healthy form in the mode of television. (I recommend an essay by Caroline Levine about the connections between *Bleak House* and *The Wire*.) If you are writing about cultural history, you have to see the continuities between the Victorian multi-plot novel, certain elements of cinema, and the best television.

A. D.: Do you think it is being sustained better in these art forms rather than the contemporary novel?

B. R.: I think it is actually also working in the novel. I don't think it has ever gone away. There are novels like *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, good and very popular novels, which are doing what the Victorian novel taught us to do. These are novels I would really make a very strong case for. Good novels, the ones that we remember from every period, are usually only the highlights from that period. It has never been anything but a minority of texts that really sustained the highest ambitions, even in the nineteenth century, and this remains true today.

A. D.: My colleague and co-editor of this issue, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou, notes that in your article on Dickens's telescopic philanthropy, you state that "the novel produces knowable communities only at the cost of blindness to international effects, and analogues" (213). How wide, she asks, does the perspective of the realist novel have to be in order to reflect the real? Can the perspective of the realist be microscopic, myopic in the age of globalization?

B. R.: I want to say yes and no to this. Of course, why shouldn't there be such a thing as myopic realism, like that explored by Virginia Woolf, her realism of subjectivity? The no part is a question: is there such a thing, at least from the 19th century on, as a region that is not in some important way determined by forces outside its own perspective? Think of a novel like Gaskell's *Cranford*, an experiment in doing an extremely limited community. As many people writing about it have said, in all sorts of ways—including bank failures—it also gestures to larger, distant factors. If you want to understand what is going on in Cranford you can't just look at Cranford; you need the larger world. *Middlemarch* is a novel of provincial life but with awareness of the larger connections—think of Brooke on the hustings trying to tell the people of Middlemarch about the countries where their goods are sold. Look at Jane Austen and the references to the colonies (I'm thinking of Edward Said's famous *Mansfield Park* analysis in *Culture and Imperialism*) or Madeira in *Jane Eyre*. Strictly speaking, it is impossible to do a myopic realism for which the larger picture would not be relevant. It doesn't take all the value away from what is seen in myopic/microscopic perspective that the other things are left out. If you demanded in a very rigorous way attention to the big picture, you would be disappointed by almost everything written in the nineteenth century. In a book called *Politics and Letters*, a book of interviews with Raymond Williams, conducted by the Editors of the journal *New Left Review*, Williams was asked about his enormous enthusiasm for the realism of the novels of the

1840s and how these novels capture what Williams calls the structure of feeling of the 1840s. They do indeed capture a lot. But the editors pointed out that in these novels, though they were written in the time of the Irish famine, a stone's throw away, no one says a word about the famine although causally the system that is being described in Britain is responsible for the death of one to two million people. And Williams doesn't really know what to say, and I don't know what to say. I suppose you take the novel of the 1840s for what it gives you. I think the challenge for our times is to try to make the connections between the local and the larger picture and extend the formal and political discoveries of the nineteenth-century novel to the international plane or the global scale.

A. D.: So, as far as contemporary writing is concerned, you mentioned Zadie Smith and Jonathan Franzen as very good examples of contemporary global realism.

B. R.: Yes, I was thinking of how Zadie Smith incorporates colonialism into life in London and forces you to see it when you look at London. Among American writers, Jamaica Kincaid is very good at that. As for Jonathan Franzen, he is very good with financial crisis, which is much on our minds these days. In his whole career he has made some very interesting efforts to take the form of Victorian realism (especially the multiplot, multigenerational format) and update it in that way, and I'm very sympathetic to people who try to do that. His novel *Strong Motion* offers another good example.

A. D.: In a recent talk you gave at Stanford, entitled "The Worlding of the Novel," you said that "even the most ambitiously realist of novels have had trouble focusing on those sections of the world that don't appear on the Euro-American street, and they have had still more trouble focusing on the logics that connect their readers to the larger world. Judged at the world scale, or on a scale of worldliness, the novel is simply not a very reliable vehicle." Can you elaborate on the limitations of realist conventions when it comes to representing atrocity, violence, crime, or pain?

B. R.: The ordinary domestic novel does pretty well with pain, crime, and violence. It does less well with atrocity, considered as organized mass cruelty of a sort that would not ordinarily figure in the daily experience of a novel's characters. Of course there are exceptions—I think of the somewhat similar massacre scenes in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Midnight's Children*—but I think they prove the rule. At the international level, atrocity is in a sense easier, at least in the eyes of Americans, since Americans imagine that organized mass violence is much more characteristic of other societies than of their own, and indeed is a reason why people leave their own countries to come to America.

But this is to pose the question in terms of representation of social and historical reality, not in terms of effect on the reader. For people in the Lukacsian line, champions of realism, who looked at realism in terms of understanding history, the big weakness was in this question: what kind of effect on the reader does this good epistemology have? That's why the Brecht-Lukacs debate over realism was so important. Brecht said, 'how do people walk away feeling?' They have read your book; do they walk away feeling pretty much contented with themselves and their place in the world and not ready to do anything about it? Are they ready to stop feeling the usual things and instead to start *thinking*, as Brecht wanted? Maybe the criterion of aesthetic success ought to be not what realism says about the world, but what kind of effect it has on the reader or on the audience. Brecht was thinking as a practicing artist, a playwright whose main goal was to change the kind of effect his plays were going to have on the audience. He wanted audiences to be alienated from the story so that they could think of themselves in their own position. Critics in the Brechtian line have accused defenders of realism of not asking about what people are going to feel when they walk away. That seems to me a legitimate question. It's not the end of the argument; there are things to say that continue this conversation. For instance one of the things we've noticed in postmodernism is that people can walk away from extremely self-conscious/postmodern art or literature having consumed it in exactly the way Brecht accused people of consuming Lukacsian realism. That is, there is nothing inherently subversive about self-consciousness, even very exacerbated self-consciousness; it seems that people can consume anything and then just walk away. There is no guarantee built into any aesthetic form against a way of consuming or receiving it that will take away from the reader or consumer the will to act. But that

becomes an argument against the argument against realism. Realism has no such guarantee, but neither does any supposedly more modernist or post-modernist or otherwise 'self-conscious' form.

One of the questions I am beginning to think about is what it means to be realistic about historical atrocity. So for example Jeffrey Eugenides's novel, *Middlesex* which deals with the Megali Katastrofi [the Great Catastrophe of Asia Minor] of 1922. One thing you want to say about this is that the conventions of representation are borrowed directly from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. It is a little odd that the events of 1922 in Smyrna should be borrowed from the events of 1919 in Amritsar. But what historical responsibility does an author like Eugenides have? If you want to be a realist, it is your responsibility to try to capture the subjectivity of the victims, which Eugenides does a relatively good job of doing, or the horror of the violence committed, the irresponsibility of the British fleet or the Greek fleet that sails away—he does a relatively good job with those as well. But trying to understand these events in some kind of wider perspective—that's something he doesn't even try. Nor does he consider it as a continuing fact for the people of Greece. That just disappears. Unless perhaps you think the sexual ambiguities of the main character are a concrete metaphor for the meaning of 1922 (although I don't think it actually works). Here is one of the great historical events in the history of the Greek region. And he doesn't know how to extend it into history.

A. D.: How do you see this current trend in contemporary fiction: the tendency to fictionalise and limit or subjectify historical events, personages, or even places. I am thinking of fictional biographies of writers like James by authors like Lodge and Toibin or Conan Doyle by Julian Barnes and even of books like Peter Ackroyd's *London: the Biography*.

B. R.: I haven't read much by the authors you mention, so I won't comment on them directly. But more generally, when Lukacs said that the historical novel died, what he meant was that it died into the form of costume drama, where people merely resuscitate in BBC style the costumes, the feel of the time—how quaint, what fun, how escapist—but they lose the historical meaning which is always ongoing. I think that has been happening since the nineteenth century. There is bad historical fiction in the nineteenth century just as there is bad historical fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Which is why one has to be so grateful for those rare authors who carry the significance forward—who use narrative to try to make sense of their history in the most strenuous way. This is what we value most.

A. D.: Victorian studies are more and more influenced by the cultural turn, the tendency to read realist texts as depicting mainly materialities, which express specific historical moments/movements or serve specific ideological purposes. Victorian novels are often read as commodity histories, a critical tendency which has given rise to fierce debates about the future of literary criticism and the aims of literary criticism as opposed to those of historiography or cultural studies. Do you think that realism lends itself to such cultural analysis more than say romanticism or modernism?

B. R.: Yes, in this way Victorian novels are being globally connected. Via commodities you can see the connections. I have been looking recently at a book by Elaine Freedgood, called *The Ideas in Things*. It is entirely about Victorian fiction, and it is exemplary in giving importance to seemingly unimportant objects in very important novels. But from the beginning it is very self-conscious. It says in effect, 'do not expect completely different readings of the novels,' and this underlines your question about the tension between cultural studies and Victorian literature. Often there is no pretension that if you look at these material objects, the entire reading of the novel will suddenly be transformed. You have to be interested in the objects for their own sake, or at least what these writers are doing with the objects for their own sake, and be willing to hesitate on the question of 'oh well, I am teaching this novel to students who want to know about the ending, about Dorothea's marriage to Will Ladislav and Mary Garth's marriage to Fred Vincy, and what does all this have to do with that?' My first book was about servants in the novel, and it did not provide alternative readings of any one novel as a whole, and that is why not a lot of people read it. I now think maybe I should have organised the book differently, making it more user-friendly. Even I have not found my own book useful to teach with. Because when I teach Victorian novels I feel that I have to speak to the transhistorical value of the book, its value for

students now. I have an obligation to speak to what they feel when they put themselves into this elaborate emotional machine that makes you care about non-existent people and does things to your feelings, plays with them, throws them around, and then brings them to a certain place at the end. That's what I have to talk about when I teach. And I am not sure that it's possible for the interest in materiality/material objects to be brought together with that. In other words, it's easier for me to see what scholars like Elaine Freedgood and Mary Poovey are doing as a research programme for graduate students than as a programme of pedagogy for undergraduates. There is a kind of split, and we as academics are also split. But often we are not so self-conscious about our split. Every once in a while I'll get lucky, and there is something that I will find in my research capacity that I can bring into the undergraduate classroom, but other times I just have to let those things go and maybe hope in the long run that someone will find some way of bringing them in. Gayatri Spivak has managed to do that. She found a way of making imperialism in *Jane Eyre*, for instance, a way of teaching *Jane Eyre* to undergraduates. I would like to think the same can be done with the more 'trivial' materialities, like daily household commodities. I would love to see them open out undergraduate teaching of the Victorian novel so that the world capitalist system and the meaning of a novel as a whole would both be visible, say, in a shawl from Kashmir worn by an Englishwoman in Manchester.

A. D.: Finally, why, in your view, do we see such an increased interest in Victorian Studies? What is it about the Victorian novel that appeals so much to both academics and the popular imagination (e.g. through film adaptation)?

B. R.: These things have their ups and downs. To give any substantive answer to your question beyond what I've already said—for example, the relevance of the multi-plot novel to contemporary global relations—would be to expose myself to looking ridiculous if there were a sudden downswing. Maybe it's enough to say that, for one reason or another, the literature of the Victorian period seems to have held its value quite well over time, and seems to remain a good investment for the future.

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