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Morris Dickstein: A Mirror in the Roadway

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## INTRODUCTION: A MIRROR IN THE ROADWAY

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ONCE THERE WAS a common assumption that along with everything else that gave meaning to literature—the mastery of language and form, the personality of the author, the moral authority, the degree of originality, the reactions of the reader—hardly anything could be more central to it than the text’s interplay with the “real world.” Literature, especially fiction, was unapologetically about the life we live outside of literature, the social life, the emotional life, the physical life, the specific sense of time and place. This was especially true after the growth of literary realism in England in the eighteenth century with Defoe and Richardson; in France in the early nineteenth century with Stendhal and Balzac; in Russia at midcentury with Tolstoy; in England again with George Eliot, Dickens, and Trollope; and finally in America with Mark Twain, Henry James, and William Dean Howells, who became the tireless promoter of a whole school of younger realists.

Much as we may still enjoy their work as effective storytelling, readily adaptable to other media, the main assumptions of these writers about the novel and the world around it are now completely out of fashion. That is, everywhere except among ordinary readers. Since the modernist period and especially in the last thirty years, a tremendous gap has opened up between how most readers read, if they still read at all, and how critics read, or how they theorize about reading. As common readers, we sometimes read books (or go to the movies) simply to escape, to get away from our own mundane lives, but part of the time we read for meaning as well. Books can tell us volumes about ourselves, but also about people and places remote from us, in different corners of society or in the distant past. Perhaps the writer could not actually have been there, yet we are transported: we come to trust the imaginative reality the work creates. Coleridge called this the “willing suspension of disbelief,” a state of mind that indulges not only the staged dilemmas of fictional characters but the “factual” circumstances of their lives. Even fully imagined works contain a large quotient of information—about other people’s sex lives, for example, or their politics; about how they look and dress, or how they behave in social situations. Some of these descriptive functions of literature have been taken over by journalism or pop sociology—by literary nonfiction, as we call it today—or by visual media like photography, film, and television. Yet despite the revolutions of modernist writing, which sometimes threatened to replace realism with fantasy, dream logic, internal monologue, disjunctive montage, and other verbal experiments, it takes a great deal of realistic detail to make these styles credible, as serious readers know and ordinary readers instinctively appreciate.

Without this tissue of correspondence to the real world, literature would be little more than a language game, a self-enclosed world operating entirely by its own rules. Whatever passion or energy goes into a game, the moves have no reference to anything outside the frame; and when it's over, it's over—until the next game begins. Literature, on the other hand, especially fiction, has an open grid. We live on intimate terms with the characters in any effective novel. They sometimes seem more real to us than the people we know, in part because they're purged of accident or contradiction, purified into whatever they essentially are. We may feel shocked and impoverished when a novel ends, and even speculate about what might happen after the curtain goes down. Literary form lays down strict rules (such as rhyme and meter in certain kinds of poetry), but in any actual work these rules are constantly being stretched and modified, even flouted. The creative process involves a curious alchemy between our perceptions and the words we find to express them, between the signifiers of language and the object world to which it beckons.

During the early part of the twentieth century, novelists tried to reduce their dependence on linear plot, background, and setting, just as poets made bold departures from regular rhyme and meter. Fiction writers found their Victorian predecessors bulbous and wordy, their works organized by a narrative logic that no longer seemed convincing. But this new generation also resisted the documentary impulse, the abundance of journalistic detail, that was crucial for the first modern writers, who had emerged in the 1890s under the tutelage of Howells and the influence of Zola. As Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams turned to the minimalism of the image, publishing poems that were as condensed as haiku, Hemingway and Fitzgerald stripped storytelling down to essentials, using descriptive language and dialogue that seemed bare yet were rich with implication. Responding to *The Great Gatsby*, Edith Wharton was struck by the erasure or omission of Gatsby's background. As a true social novelist, she wrote to Fitzgerald that "to make Gatsby really Great, you ought to have given us his early career . . . instead of a short resumé of it. . . . But you'll tell me that's the old way, & consequently not *your* way." We don't generally think of Willa Cather as a modernist, in part because her narrative manner is crisp and straightforward and she harbored a growing disdain for the modern world. But in the 1920s, she wrote some remarkable books, as spare as *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises*, by purging circumstantial detail and searching out the social and emotional center of her characters' lives. Yet the world of these tightly written later books like *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House* is no less realistically described than the immigrant worlds portrayed in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* which she remembered from her childhood in Nebraska.

To make a case for her new style, Cather boldly redefined realism in her critical writings, later collected in a 1936 book called *Not Under Forty*, whose very title was meant to challenge the younger generation. In "The Novel

Démeublé”—written in 1922, the year of *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*—she called for a less upholstered kind of fiction, free of “journalism” and “mere verisimilitude.” She saw hopeful signs in the new modern writers, whose work confirms her feeling that “the higher processes of art are all processes of simplification.” Like Virginia Woolf throwing down the gauntlet to Arnold Bennett, she thinks “how wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window . . . and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre.” But in renouncing the inert detail of documentary realism, Cather grasps at the essence of realism: the link between descriptive writing and the minds and lives of the novel’s characters. She notes that in Tolstoy’s work the details of the physical setting—the dress, the furniture, the houses—“seem to exist, not so much in the author’s mind, as in the emotional penumbra of the characters themselves.” Cather was exasperated by Balzac’s overflowing documentation, but Erich Auerbach (in *Mimesis*) saw exactly this fusion of character and milieu as the key to his realism. In Balzac’s visual inventory of Madame Vauquer’s pension in *Le père Goriot*, Auerbach emphasizes “the harmony between Madame Vauquer’s person on the one hand and the room in which she is present, the pension which she directs, and the life which she leads.” In short, “*sa personne explique la pension, comme la pension implique sa personne.*”

For all their swerve away from the accumulative methods of the Victorian novelists, the French naturalists, and the American realists, the writers of the 1920s shared their faith that works of literature powerfully reflected a world outside themselves. They differed only on the most effective ways of doing so. In *The Professor’s House* Cather used several contrasting “houses,” including ancient Pueblo cliff-dwellings, as emblems of her characters’ state of mind, yes, but also their different way of being: pre-Columbian, small-town traditional, and sleekly modern. As Fitzgerald did with the parties in *Gatsby*’s rented mansion and Hemingway did with bullfighting, Cather made the economy of a grand metaphor do the work of detailed description. These writers objected not to the realism of their predecessors but to their literalism. When scene and character are fused in Tolstoy, Cather says, “literalness ceases to be literalness—it is merely part of the experience,” as readers have always understood. But what ordinary readers readily knew can be something many scholars, literary theorists, and postmodern philosophers do *not* know, or at least find highly problematic.

Objectivity may indeed be an elusive goal but, as the philosopher Bernard Williams points out in *Truth and Truthfulness*, accuracy and sincerity are not only highly valued by most people but are considered, at least in a relative sense, obtainable. George Orwell had the same view. His case against modern politics, and especially against the new forms of absolute dictatorship, was not simply directed against the machinery of surveillance and the distortions of language; worst of all, these systems conspired against one’s sense of reality, which they treated as if it were a potter’s clay. When Winston Smith gives way

to his tormentor, O'Brien, near the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he becomes a kind of postmodernist, renouncing his sense of fact, his adherence to truth, the very evidence of his senses. "The fallacy was obvious," he says of his earlier empirical faith. "It presupposed that somewhere or other, outside oneself, there was a 'real' world where 'real' things happened. But how could there be such a world? What knowledge have we of anything, save through our own minds?" Under the pressure of mental and physical torture, he surrenders his individuality along with his sense of fact and takes refuge in solipsism. For Orwell this represents his complete breakdown, his loss of faith in his own perception of the world.

But even today the word "real" remains honorific, not chimerical, as in quirky colloquial phrases like "get real." The proliferation of reality-based TV shows, which began in 1992 with MTV's *The Real World*, may be attractive to networks because they're so cheap to put on. Like the first English novels, which claimed to be merely factual accounts, they appeal to viewers because they show actual events happening to "real" people—events that are competitive, often titillating, occasionally unpredictable. They cater to a blatant voyeurism, yet what the audience sees is in effect simulated: the participants are carefully chosen—they must be young, attractive, easily typed, outgoing—and the programs are edited along crudely "dramatic" lines from thousands of hours of "candid" footage. This editing process, which imposes a largely fake narrative on supposedly spontaneous material, is grist for the mill of theorists who argue that we have no direct access to what is real and true, only to patterns of representation that shape our perception of what we see and read.

We associate this viewpoint today with poststructuralism, especially the work influenced by French theorists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, but it became a virtual consensus in literary studies over the past thirty years. Foucault argued that the way we see and describe things is never merely empirical, let alone objective. Nor is it merely *subjective*. It is defined by what he called "discursive practices," the social ideologies that enforce relationships of power in any given society. So where Matthew Arnold, in his quaint humanistic way, described literature as a "criticism of life," for Foucault and the critics who followed him, writers could never truly subvert the values of their age, since they were invariably conditioned by its assumptions. They could not be critical of power since they were complicit with it, unable to break with their society's habits of mind. Derrida and Paul de Man added the idea that language itself, far from being a transparent medium of communication helping us make sense of the world, was full of rhetorical snares and contradictions, especially metaphors and other figures of speech that burdened us with inescapable traces of other people's metaphysics. Like Blake's sunflower, always turned longingly toward the sun, we pine for the real, we aspire to objective knowledge but always remain rooted in the mental soil from which we sprang.

The poststructuralist outlook was not completely new; the "hermeneutics of suspicion," which greets all rhetorical formations with skepticism, goes back

at least 150 years. But once it was established as an academic orthodoxy, it changed the face of literary criticism. Instead of describing how writers made sense of the world, American Studies scholars, for example, labored to show how they distorted the world, portrayed it along preconceived lines, and collaborated with social forces and institutions they imagined they were criticizing. This does not mean that if these writers were more honest, more talented or independent-minded, they could have portrayed their world in a more accurate light. According to these skeptics, none of us has access to any objective reality—the thing as it is—to any fundamental truth or foundation; all we have is our particular angle of vision, which is invariably partial and contingent. Nietzsche, one of the godfathers of poststructuralism, called this “perspectivism.” In criticizing positivism, the scientific, empirical view that the inquirer must somehow determine “the facts,” Nietzsche wrote: “No, facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact ‘in itself’: perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing.” But he added, “In so far as the word ‘knowledge’ has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.”

Elsewhere, in words that would be echoed by pragmatist thinkers from William James to Richard Rorty, Nietzsche wrote: “Will to truth is a making firm, a making true and durable, an abolition of the false character of things, a reinterpretation of it into beings. ‘Truth’ is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered—but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end.” This notion of truth as a process, as something changing and dynamic rather than fixed and found, was later developed by William James in his lectures on pragmatism: “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*.”

Nietzsche and James seem to be arguing that, at least in the sphere of understanding, there is no objective reality, nothing out there to be found and discovered, only a shifting series of interpretations (though James insists that once an idea is verified and validated, its truth has been established). By this view, the relation of literature to what we anomalously call “the real world” is either settled or meaningless, since objective truth is an illusion. In one blow the rationale for the modern realist aesthetic crumbles. The emerging realism developed with the novel in eighteenth-century England, was traced to Dutch genre painting in Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics, became a rallying cry for art critics, literary critics, painters, and novelists in mid-nineteenth-century France, became a force in American painting with the work of Homer and Eakins, and changed the whole direction of American literature under the influence of Howells. Many facets of realism have been familiar for so long that it’s hard to grasp why they encountered such resistance. They include: the

more faithful depiction of everyday life, a new emphasis on individual psychology and personal destiny that reflected the rise of the middle class, and a more prosaic style that accorded dignity to low-born figures like Defoe's Moll Flanders, Wordsworth's leech-gatherer, and Balzac's or Stendhal's Young Men from the Provinces, trying to storm the gates of wealth and power. Of course we must distinguish between realism, a varied set of conventions and period styles, and reality itself, which can be approached or simulated by many different styles, some of them far from "realistic." As James Wood has written in *The Broken Estate*, "everything flows from the real, including the beautiful deformations of the real; it is realism that *allows* surrealism, magic realism, dream, and so on." But Wood goes perhaps too far when he adds: "Moments of truth in fiction may be only in small part related to the lifelike; rather they flow toward and withdraw from the lifelike." Surely the lifelike has always been an essential element in fiction. The elements of realism I just described all entail an objective world in which the young may rise, living subjects expending energy and passion to make their way, and real centers of power and divisions of class, with ambitions in play, conditions exposed. In the nineteenth century, as the text itself grows more "objective" and lifelike, the author withdraws and becomes increasingly invisible as compared to the playful puppet master of earlier fiction, who freely intervened in the action.

This sense of an objective world is an essential feature of "realism" in philosophy as well as in fiction. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and other books and essays, Rorty describes this as the "correspondence" theory of truth, the notion that our minds can discover the facts that will enable our ideas to correspond with what is actually there. For this Rorty substitutes a "coherence" theory of truth, suggesting that the best we can achieve is an effective consistency rather than objective certainty. Elsewhere he distinguishes between "the claim that the world is out there," which he accepts as common sense, and "the claim that truth is out there," which he sees as dependent on the language we use to make sense of the world. While this separates Rorty from philosophical realism, and especially from positivism, it distinguishes him far less from literary realism, since any novel is less an objective inquiry than a subjective heterocosm, a second world, or one of many possible worlds. A novel comments on the world we know by verbally reconstituting it, and it aims to be consistent and credible rather than strictly faithful to that larger world. Not surprisingly, of all philosophers Rorty is perhaps the most attuned to fiction, especially in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). Nevertheless, one of the best-known definitions of the novel flows from a classic image of the "mirror of nature" that Rorty's work directly challenges.

In the epigraph to chapter 13 of *The Red and the Black*, among the greatest of all realist novels, Stendhal famously wrote: "The novel is a mirror being carried along a road." This saying, undoubtedly by Stendhal himself, is attributed to a seventeenth-century French historian named Saint-Réal, who actually

existed, though no such remark has been found in his work. With his fanciful ebullience and playful interventions in the narrative, Stendhal was anything but the Hidden God of his own fiction; an artist of the put-on, he often amused himself with bits of pseudoscholarship. He took pleasure in leading pedantic readers astray, notably his own later editors. He tended to make up these epigraphs, often inventing the author as well, but here he chooses a writer who happens to be “real,” a sort of saint of the real, as if to underline the realism he aims to define. Stendhal’s mirror image has been derided by critics and philosophers as evidence of the epistemological naiveté of realist theory: the notion that a work of fiction simply reflects the external world in the same way that a book progresses down the path of its plot and settings. (Even so informed a scholar as René Wellek describes it in *Concepts of Criticism* as “a recommendation of literal and total imitation.”) But Stendhal’s metaphor is more complex than his critics have allowed.

Stendhal returns to the image later in the book, apropos of almost nothing, in a long and ambiguous parenthesis: “A novel, gentlemen, is a mirror carried along a highway. Sometimes it reflects to your view the azure of the sky, sometimes the mire of the puddles in the road. And the man who carries the mirror on his back will be accused by you of immorality! His mirror shows you the mire, and you blame the mirror! Blame, rather, the road in which the puddle lies, and still more the road inspector who lets the water stagnate and the puddle form” (translated by Lowell Bair).

Stendhal stands accused of proposing just what Rorty attacked, a naive correspondence between the mirror of art and its surrounding landscape, the world. This kind of mechanical “reflection,” though dear to the commissars of socialist realism, was a notion that even Marxist critics like Georg Lukács and Raymond Williams avoided. Lukács’s theory of realism emphasizes not literal replication but the “type,” Hegel’s concrete universal, at once convincingly singular and emblematic of large social forces and movements. Along the same lines, Williams wrote in *The Long Revolution*, “The old, naive realism is . . . dead, for it depended on a theory of natural seeing which is now impossible.” Williams is saying that reality is in part created by our perception, by our complicated interchange with the material world (what Wordsworth described as “all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create, / And what perceive”). Another idiosyncratic Marxist, the young Richard Wright, concurred in a 1936 manifesto called “Blueprint for Negro Writing”: “The relation between reality and the artistic image is not always direct and simple. The imaginative conception of a historical period will not be a carbon copy of reality. Image and emotion possess a logic of their own.”

But Stendhal’s mirror image is anything but mechanical: it points not to simple seeing but to the tricky ways of seeing through art. His digression into theory aims to fend off another charge entirely—one that would be leveled at many later realists: that the writer is hanging out society’s dirty linen, giving

an unflattering picture of people and conditions that shouldn't be in a novel in the first place. By the criteria of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century classicism, which Stendhal attacked in his book *Racine and Shakespeare*, art should give an elevated, idealized portrait of general nature, including human nature, not the muck and mire of individual quirks and local conditions (which are perhaps accidental, and untypical). We needn't number the streaks of the tulip, as Dr. Johnson put it, perhaps thinking of the Dutch realist painters.

For Stendhal, Shakespeare was a Romantic before his time. He saw the tumultuous buzz of life in Shakespeare's plays—the mixture of styles, the range of characters and emotions, the shattering of the unities of time and place—as an antidote to the rarefied dignity of the French classical tradition. In much the same way, the mundane stuff of the new fiction, the low particularities, would challenge the decorum of older literary forms, including epic and tragedy. Don't blame the novelists for what they show us, Stendhal is saying; blame the bad condition of the road—the world—and the public officials who should have reported and improved it. Stendhal only appears to be invoking the mirror as an impersonal mechanism, a carbon copy that displays the world as it actually is. The image itself, as he positions it, belies this simplistic claim. This is not a stationary mirror fixed upon the passing show, observing the parade as from the viewing stand, but a dynamic reflector shifting position as it moves down the road. It must be held or carried by someone, and the images it provides will be framed, constantly changing, a series of partial views contributing to a larger picture. It takes in both the azure lyricism of the romantic sky and the all-too-real muck of the neglected terrain. To the modern eye this mirror eerily resembles a movie camera doing a sophisticated tracking shot—some sixty years before movies were invented, and several years before the beginnings of still photography. Or better still, these images of the sky above, the mud below, suggest a hand-held camera, which even today produces an appearance of artlessness as a token of authenticity. Initially, photography and then film gave a big push to realism in literature, especially in late nineteenth-century America, where they developed in tandem with the work of realist painters like Homer and Eakins. We might say that Mathew Brady and the photographers who worked under him were the first American realists, just as the Civil War was the first war that could be reported realistically. But by perfecting the external, descriptive aims of realism, the new visual media, with their stunning mechanical accuracy, made this kind of reproduction less important to painting and fiction. Eventually, it would sound the death knell of portrait painting as we knew it, though it also encouraged the subjective portraiture of painters like Eakins and Sargent, to say nothing of Van Gogh, Picasso, Matisse, and Bonnard. Instead, painting and fiction evolved into impressionism and modernism, where photography, with its ties to the surface of things, could not compete.

Despite an abundance of descriptive detail, the strength of the great European realists, from Balzac and Stendhal to Tolstoy and Proust, came not from

mirroring the material surface of reality but from laying bare its social structure and reenacting the ferocious ambitions and frustrations of those who played out their passionate lives within it. Realist novels are inevitably the product of a society in transition. New ways of making money and amassing power eroded social barriers, and this offered openings for new men like Stendhal's Julien Sorel and Balzac's Rastignac, who lay siege to society as if it were a fortress to be stormed. But such characters also have complex interior lives. With them the novel enters a domain of psychology and individual identity that was only rudimentary in Defoe and Fielding but foreshadowed in the work of their contemporary, Samuel Richardson. Richardson's *Clarissa* has rightly been compared to Proust's novel as a work of minute, endlessly exfoliating self-scrutiny. Eventually, as realism became more internalized, the world surrounding the characters would sometimes grow vague and blurry, and the psychological novel would develop as an alternative to realist fiction. Yet this was also a more subtle kind of mirroring, a new way of mapping the interaction between the inner and outer world. Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness at the end of *Ulysses* was at once a breakthrough into modernism and the ultimate stage of realism, an interior realism that mimed the wayward flow of mental associations.

Another challenge emerging from the heart of realism itself was the novel's aspiration toward art, its unrelenting effort to perfect and codify its own techniques. The novel began as a catch-all of prose narrative, the popular stepchild of the arts, sometimes ragged in its writing, with shifting points of view, undigested historical material, and a puritan pretense that it wasn't fiction at all, simply a trove of letters or an artlessly told personal history. For much of the nineteenth century, novels commanded a fervent readership but little cultural respect, and some of the leading critics, such as Matthew Arnold, scarcely took notice of them. With his immense popularity, Dickens was the special object of highbrow condescension, especially from critics like George Henry Lewes, who were committed to the new realism. But a few writers—first Flaubert, then Henry James—set out to change all this. James's reviews, essays, and prefaces build toward a monumental project to transform fiction into a fine art by developing rigorous formal principles, including the notion that the writer should never directly intervene in the narrative, but *should* portray the action from a consistent point of view. Prolific writers like H. G. Wells, using the old slapdash techniques, never quite forgave James for this. Wells saw James not only as the creator of the Art Novel but as someone who insisted that it must provide "real through and through and absolutely true treatment of people more living than life." For Wells, impatient with such exactitude, "it might be more or less than that and still be a novel," as he says in his *Experiment in Autobiography*. "It isn't a constructed tale I have to tell," says Wells's artless narrator at the outset of *Tono-Bungay*, "but unmanageable realities." But Wells's informal view did not prevail; critics like Percy Lubbock (in *The*

*Craft of Fiction*) turned James's approach into a manual of technique, and F. R. Leavis (in *The Great Tradition*) projected it into a strenuous reading of the history of the English novel.

James's predecessor, Flaubert, had gone even further than James by putting a tremendous emphasis on style. His letters are full of the agony of the phrase, the image, of finding the right word. Such an ambition had been foreign to fiction until then, for it had generally been a loose and open form, presided over by a wayward and garrulous narrator and stocked with an abundance of worldly information. (H. G. Wells's novels look back to this tradition.) Now Flaubert expressed annoyance that the novel actually had to be *about* something. Why couldn't it be a kind of prose poem that pivoted on the perfect precision of its own language? In an 1852 letter he wrote: "What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependant on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style . . . a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible. The finest works are those that contain the least matter. . . . I believe that the future of Art lies in this direction."

This proved to be a remarkably accurate forecast. The ambition to write a book about nothing, a book that was all form and style, was taken up languidly by aesthetes and decadents in France and England; it became part of the legacy of the *fin-de-siècle* writers to the early moderns. Though no writer, Flaubert included, has ever been entirely able to supersede the referential nature of language, Flaubert's fantastic wish foreshadowed both aestheticism (which saw art as feeding largely on itself) and certain strains of modernism (which drove art toward the formal investigation of its own techniques). Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* is his version of Stendhal's mirror, but the glass is turned inward toward the soul rather than outward toward the world. Early on someone says, "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion." This is the perspective of Romantic poetry imported into fiction, for Romantic poetry, as M. H. Abrams showed long ago, embodied the shift from the mirror to the lamp, from the neoclassical artist as reflector of the world around him to the Romantic artist as the source of his or her own creative fire. But even the Romantic lamp illuminates the space around it, shedding its light on the actual world, while modern writing and painting often make no such claims. With his attraction to humble men and women in ordinary rural settings, the Romantic Wordsworth, like the urban, demotic Whitman, was one of the progenitors of realism. Whitman's catalogues are novelistic (and often photographic) in their flow of detail, their ecstatic, voluminous concreteness, and Wordsworth too, in his poems about Michael and Matthew and the "Old Man Travelling," can be poignant in his matter-of-factness, which sometimes provoked his contemporaries to parody and invective.

But there is a strand of modern painting, especially abstract painting, that is simply about the paint, or about the geometry of the image, just as modern dance can be solely about movement, or about the body, modern music about sound, and modern poetry about the language. Can any writers have taken literature further away from mirroring the world than Gertrude Stein, who modeled her work partly on the cubism of her friend Picasso but also on the pragmatism and psychological theories of her teacher William James? Stein's use of language is nothing if not concrete, but her word-bound literalism parodies and undercuts the strategies of realism. In Stein's case, Romantic self-absorption and modernist experiment lose their titanic edge and terminate in a crisis of representation.

Let me summarize the argument and build upon it:

One of the great innovations in literature, starting from the eighteenth century, was the honing of techniques, especially in fiction, that enabled it to correspond much more closely to the world around it. If poetry should offer us real toads in imaginary gardens, as Marianne Moore suggested, then fiction gives us imaginary toads—invented characters—in real gardens, that is, against a backdrop that must seem entirely credible. Paradoxically, fictional characters are often based on real people, and the background must be richly imagined to engage us as real. Thus Orwell praised Dickens for his fertility of invention by noting that “the outstanding mark of Dickens' writings is the unnecessary detail.” For modernist critics like Leavis, this sheer abundance, the luxury of the irrelevant detail, was a drawback, a failure of organization, though it permitted the novelist to create a world.

Saul Bellow once argued that realism is still the great modern breakthrough. It allowed fiction to make sense of a society in perpetual upheaval. The novel's focus on the individual, especially the psychology of the individual, reflected the emergence of the new middle class, in a period when it became possible for individuals to succeed not only through birth and pedigree but by way of talent and ambition. But realism also encouraged writers to explore the social conditions created by the growth of industry, the new working class, the expansion of cities, the flow of immigrants, the changing position of women, the decline of rural life, the impact of technology, the emergence of America as a new force in the world, the impact of war and violence, the surge of nationalism and anti-Semitism, the power of race and ethnicity, the dissolution of hierarchy, the loss of religious belief, the rise of democracy and dictatorship, the accumulation of wealth, the increase in travel and leisure, the shifts in manners and morals, the development of the mass media, and hundreds of other social changes that could be condensed into the trajectory of individual lives.

In America, where literary realism supposedly never took hold, where romance was long said to be the prevailing form of fictional expression, novelists like Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis tackled these social subjects almost as if they were freelance journalists or intuitive

sociologists—doing research, packing in massive amounts of information, finding characters and situations that typified the changes they saw all around them. They recorded regional tics of speech and quirks of behavior but also showed how power was distributed and deep personal needs were played out and thwarted. Early in *Sister Carrie*, when Dreiser sets out to describe one of the new department stores in Chicago, he begins: “The nature of these vast retail combinations, should they ever permanently disappear, will form an interesting chapter in the commercial history of our nation.” These great enterprises reveal the nexus between commerce and desire, and Dreiser sees himself as their conscientious historian.

Much of this literature melding storytelling with social history and criticism appeared in the United States between 1890 and 1930, when the realist movement was at its peak. Some of it was focused on the small-town world from which the writers sprang. Hamlin Garland vividly recalled the hard-scrabble life of his parents on Midwestern farms and set out in *Main-Travelled Roads* to correct the idyllic lens through which this world was commonly seen. Sarah Orne Jewett, in the spirit of Winslow Homer, sketched some indelible portraits of women’s lives in small Maine fishing villages in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, placing herself in the picture as recorder and detached observer. Harold Frederic, a London correspondent for the *New York Times*, showed remarkable insight into the religious life of a troubled minister in a small American city in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*. Stephen Crane, with far less personal experience, painted a stunning impressionist picture of life in New York’s Irish slums in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Crane was influenced by the books and slide lectures of Jacob Riis, who covered the same material journalistically in *How the Other Half Lives*, using photographs, primitively reproduced, to complement his lurid, sensational reports on the turbulent underclass. Even Howells, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, makes his genteel but curious protagonist our tour guide to the poor immigrant districts of New York, with its ethnic restaurants, labor unrest, and heavy-handed police repression. His New York, where good apartments are hard to find, is already the modern city we know. Finally, in *Sister Carrie*, one of our greatest city novels, Dreiser built on his own journalism to describe the rise and fall of commonplace characters who inhabit his densely realized worlds of Chicago and New York.

All these books were published in a single decade between 1890 and 1900, years of serious depression, financial panic, and unprecedented social crisis in the United States. And all of them went out of fashion once modernism turned writers away from overtly social subjects and documentary approaches, toward a more refined technique for experimenting with language and exploring their characters’ rich interior lives. Few critics were more responsible for the low esteem into which these realist writers fell than Lionel Trilling, who, in “Reality in America” (the opening essay in *The Liberal Imagination*), accused Dreiser and the progressive literary historian V. L. Parrington of having a coarse, simplistic,

undifferentiated sense of reality. Of Parrington, he writes: "There exists, he believes, a thing called *reality*; it is one and immutable, it is wholly external, it is irreducible. Men's minds may waver, but reality is always reliable, always the same, always easily to be known. And the artist's relation to reality he conceives as a simple one," that is, one of passive "correspondence." To Parrington's charge that Hawthorne was "forever dealing with shadows, and he knew that he was dealing with shadows," Trilling responds that "shadows are also part of reality and one would not want a world without shadows, it would not even be a 'real' world." But Trilling insists that Hawthorne also "was dealing with realities, with substantial things." Far from dismissing realism, Trilling would expand Parrington's sense of "reality" to include the romantic, the psychological, the fantastic, and the moral, all the while insisting on a more intricate and active correspondence between the mind of the artist and the external world. This more nuanced understanding of realism is taken for granted today, though Trilling's viewpoint on the realist writers has been turned on its head.

In the last twenty years, scholars have rediscovered the flawed but fascinating books of the American realist tradition. Yet thanks to the influence of poststructuralism, they remain skeptical about any writer's ability to tell us much that is truthful about the real world. They see these works as vessels of ideology, shaped and distorted by their own points of view. Like Oscar Wilde, they think these portraits tell us more about the minds of the writers than about the world—not about their souls, as Wilde suggested, but about the social assumptions that were part of their mental baggage. Like Nietzsche they argue that "facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations." But what is a novel if not an interpretation of experience, a thoroughly imagined way of rendering it? Jacob Riis, in his reports and photographs, and Dreiser, in his novels, may have thought they were giving us the social facts as they saw them; they may even have thought objectivity was possible. But their own work shows how partial and committed they inevitably were. Recent scholarship has revived interest in the realist aesthetic yet at the same time discounted its access to reality, emphasizing instead its collusion with power and with the marketplace.

The socially textured arts, from photography to documentary filmmaking to fiction, provide excellent examples of Nietzsche's perspectivism at work. Novelists may have dreamed that they were the secretaries of society, recording objective facts and conditions. But by filtering them through fictional characters and invented stories, they provide them with a personal accent, an inward resonance, a narrative shape and resolution, that gives their accounts an advantage over the work of journalists and historians. This storytelling also makes them meaningful to a whole different range of readers.

In a recent book called *Savage Reprisals*, the historian Peter Gay tries to debunk the use of novels as a way of understanding history. As an empirical scholar he feels these novels are not accurate. Dickens, he says, is too emotional, and

entirely ignorant of the utilitarianism he lampoons in *Hard Times*. As a Freudian, he feels that novels are not impartial enough; they are distorted by the prejudices and neuroses of the authors, their grudge against the society that formed them. Gay, a voluminous historian of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, also clearly dislikes the kind of social criticism he finds in many of these writers; to him their outlook seems hostile, warped, and stereotyped. But he sets the terms of his attack too narrowly. Though the three novels he discusses by Dickens, Flaubert, and Thomas Mann contain a great deal of description and social information, no one would go to them for objectivity or strict verisimilitude. But why would a Freudian expect writers, of all people, to be coolly objective? Instead it's their *subjectivity* that gives them much of their historical *and* literary value. The subjectivity of their characters, who experience society in a personal (yet somehow typical) way, is made possible by the writer's own angle of vision; this is no mere distortion but itself a vital piece of historical evidence, shaped by the time and place as well as the formative experiences of the author. This subjective quality gives the work an emotional coloring that still connects us to it, many years later. This was Aristotle's argument for the superiority of poetry over history, which Gay aims to overturn. If these works had the balanced, rounded, impartial truth he seeks—and that theorists at the opposite extreme deny is possible—these novels would simply be documents of their time, inertly factual traces of the period in which they were written. Instead, they go far to reconcile the quotidian world and the always surprising world of art and imagination.

Novels mediate between subject and object, the perceiver and the things perceived, the hard facts of the world and the contingencies of the language we use to describe them. Novels show us that the real world, far from being simple and always available, can also be elusive and problematic. They create identifications that channel the quicksilver flow of our inner experience and redirect our social sympathies. They can be powerful tools of indoctrination. They can excite us sexually or inflame us politically. They are not simply mirrors that reflect the world but prisms that refract it, break it down. Yet they envelop us in a milieu that can seem more credible than the world we know. Novels somehow finesse the philosophical conflict between objective truth and the plurality of perspectives; they renew the world by refreshing our perception of it.