Adventures in Realism

Edited by Matthew Beaumont
Praise for *Adventures in Realism*

“Every new generation of critics and scholars must come to terms in its own ways with the paradoxes of realism. Realism is a period style, but at the same time it is a perennial motive in literature, art, film, and other media. Realism purports to represent things as they are, or were, but at the same time it is a constitutive set of conventions that tells people in a given time and place what is to be taken as real. This distinguished collection of essays brilliantly articulates these paradoxes for our own time.”

*J. Hillis Miller, University of California at Irvine*

“What a wonderfully wide and deep and pushing inspection of realisms (and irrealisms) in history, in theory, in practice. Here’s realism, then and now, cannily philosophized, politicized, feminized, psychologized. Here are so many of realism’s practitioners, its aesthetic friends and enemies, the missionaries and also the scoffers, being heard and watched as they engage with their chosen media – novels, plays, paintings, photographs, films, buildings. It is, I think, as serious, engaging, educating a look at the large realist project as could well be assembled.”

*Valentine Cunningham, Corpus Christi College, Oxford*

“*Adventures in Realism* is an exciting and necessary book. It collects together a stunning array of essays that, both individually and as a whole, show why we need to consider the nature and importance of realism. The volume encourages us to think through the concept both in relation to its mid-nineteenth-century origins, and today’s philosophical discussions; to see it both as manifested in specific literary or artistic forms and as a more abstract way of figuring our place within the material world. Matthew Beaumont should be congratulated in placing his contributors into such effective dialogue with one another: in doing so, he has returned realism to the center of historical, aesthetic, and political debate.”

*Kate Flint, Rutgers University*
For Michael and Joanna Beaumont
Adventures in Realism

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Notes on Contributors


Andrew Hemingway is Professor in History of Art at University College London. His books include *Landscape Imagery and Urban Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1992) and *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (2002). He has also edited the volume *Marxism and the History of Art* (2006).


Sally Ledger is Professor of Nineteenth-Century Literature at Birkbeck, University of London. Her books include *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (1997), *Henrik Ibsen* (1999), and, most recently, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (2007).


Michael Löwy is Emeritus Research Director at the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research), Paris, and Lecturer at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. He is the author of several books that have been translated into English, including *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (1981), *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (2001), and *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”* (2005).

Laura Marcus is Professor of English at the University of Sussex. She has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and culture, and has recently co-edited (with Peter Nicholls) *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Literature* (2005). *The Tenth Muse,*
a study of early twentieth-century literature and film and the making of a film aesthetic, is forthcoming.

**Josephine McDonagh** is Professor of Victorian Literature at Oxford University and a Fellow of Linacre College, Oxford. She is author of *De Quincey’s Disciplines* (1994), *George Eliot* (1997), and *Child Murder and British Culture, 1720–1900* (2003).


**John Roberts** is Senior Research Fellow in Fine Art at the University of Wolverhampton. He is the author of several books, including *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (1998), *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory* (2006), and *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (2007).

**Helen Small** is Fellow in English at Pembroke College, Oxford. Her publications include *Love’s Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800–1865* (1996), and a study of old age in literature and philosophy, *The Long Life* (2007). She is also the editor of *The Public Intellectual* (2002).

**Brandon Taylor** is Professor of History of Art, University of Southampton. His recent books include *Collage: The Making of Modern Art* (2004), *Art Today* (2005), and, as editor, *Sculpture and Psychoanalysis* (2006).

Foreword

Rachel Bowlby

Poor old realism. Out of date and second-rate. Squashed in between the freshness of romanticism and the newness of modernism, it is truly the tasteless spam in the sandwich of literary and cultural history. Compared with other long-established members of the cast of critical players, it has recently been having a really bad press. First, in the sad sense that no one has been arguing about it. The number of critical books on realism from the past couple of decades can be counted on the fingers of one hand; but try doing that with the stars that come before and after it: romanticism still gets a high billing, as it has for some while, but modernist studies, in particular, have expanded far beyond the capacities of any individual bookshelf, leaving realism behind as their dingy Victorian relation, moldering in an unilluminated corner. The corollary of this no-press bad press is the more obvious kind. For secondly, when realism does get mentioned it is usually in the form of a passing, knee-jerk dismissal of it as something self-evidently without interest, not to say a bit dumb. Realism normally comes stuck with one of a set menu of regular adjectival accompaniments, and whether it’s gritty, or vulgar, or kitchen-sink, or photographic, the standard formulations reinforce the way it is seen as itself formulaic, something we already know about and need have no interest in exploring: it is predictable and simple, and serves only as the foil (or the cling-film) for showing up the more exotic or more complex courses that are always to be preferred to it. Nowhere is this clearer than in the regular scorn for realism’s crudely “linear” narratives, its naively “omniscient” narrators, and – worst crime of all – its facile assumptions of linguistic “transparency,” all of these being qualities that are quite untransparent and unanalyzed in their own meaning but essentially
damning in their aim. Found a realist work that doesn’t fit the stereotype? No matter, the virtues must be to do with its anticipation of modernist experimentation or else its continuing romanticist exploration of subjectivity.

Thus it comes about that realism today, poor old realism, has a doubly “understudy” status. It rarely plays a critical part in its own right, instead serving as the simple straw man whose role is only to show up the authentic and original literary or critical action occurring elsewhere. And it is under-studied, not much seen as a worthwhile, let alone an exciting topic for teaching and research. There are several ironies in the set-piece devaluation of realism as being without intellectual or aesthetic interest. First, the gesture elides the historical significance of realism (and, for that matter, of other movements to which it is negatively contrasted), instead treating the positive qualities of formal innovation as transhistorically valid and homogeneous. This is to ignore the historical variability of aesthetic criteria, or that of criteria for considering the subversive or stabilizing effects, politically or psychologically, of particular kinds of art; the overlapping or separation of these various kinds of criteria is itself also, of course, a matter of historical variation. It is also to ignore the multiplicity of realisms in realism’s own primary time (as well as before or since).

Realism was the focus of an international artistic movement beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The first attested use of the word is in French – *réalisme* – in 1826; before long it was everywhere. The concept was hotly debated both in practice and in theory, between painters, novelists, and critics of every kind; and it underwent various kinds of more or less marked development or modification, most notably in its French modulation into the “naturalism” of the latter part of the century, with its posture of exposing the dirtier realities that realism had itself failed to show. Finally, the valorization of non-realist “-isms” – modernism above all, since that is the one whose historical inception follows chronologically right after the period of realism – depends on just the kind of straightforward and ideologically laden linear narrative that is ostensibly relegated to realist history. The obviousness of the story in which “make it new!” supersedes and surpasses “show and tell” is itself a simple narrative of the kind that the pro-modernism critics automatically associate with stupid old realism.

This downgrading of realism is all the odder at a time when the popularity of “reality TV” gives a new focus to the question of why people might enjoy looking at images of life going on in its tedious passage through real time. Zola claimed that his naturalist novels were “experimental,” in the sense that his method was to put together a set of character types
in a particular, well-documented social environment and then watch what would happen. Dumping a bunch of “personalities” into a tropical rain forest or a big house on the outskirts of London is in one way the actualization of this: they are real people doing real things with real bodies, and the producers and viewers all get to watch what really and truly does happen. But the social situations of reality TV are quite unlike the elaborately researched milieux of Zola’s novels. Every viewer is aware that the reality out there is contrived. This is not these people’s normal world, and to preempt the boredom that might otherwise ensue, for participants and viewers alike, things must be got to happen through infantilizing tests and games and ejection rituals. Zola, on the other hand, represented his role as socially therapeutic, likening the naturalist novelist, in an essay from 1880 on “Le Roman expérimental,” to the surgeon cutting out the infections in the body of society (Zola 1971: 57–97). However overstated in its pretensions, this demonstrates a will to change as well as to show: to “tell the world” in both senses. Recording that world’s undersides and its unknown corners was not just a matter of pandering to readers’ curiosity or voyeuristic pleasure (though the novels were often taken to be doing only that).

Admittedly, part of realism’s negative-image problem lies with the label. Even in the early days, it was often refused by those whose own artistic credos or practices might seem closest to what card-carrying realists were advocating. Baudelaire and Flaubert both disliked the term, yet in his prose manifesto The Painter of Modern Life (1863), Baudelaire argues for the aesthetic value of representing everyday urban sights – places, people, and fashions – in all their triviality and ephemerality; while Madame Bovary (1857) is ranked as one of the landmarks of realist narrative, focusing as it does on the obscure life of a discontented provincial doctor’s wife. Realism was in the spirit of the democratizing movements of the nineteenth century, bringing into literary or painterly view common worlds of experience that had previously been aesthetically unseen, disregarded, or out of bounds. The extension of the constituencies of political representation went along with an extension of the fields of artistic representation. Ordinary people were portrayed going about their working daily lives – as rural laborers or factory workers or coal miners or office clerks or servants. Middle-class women like Emma Bovary were shown going about their bored, daydreaming daily lives; the eventlessness and ennui of their existences are one subject of a narrative that then, from the inside, gets its readers involved in the woman’s own search for diversion. In the English industrial novels of the 1840s by writers such as Dickens and Gaskell, the necessary narrative “event” within an otherwise repetitive routine
is typically provided by a strike that has the effect of exacerbating and personalizing the underlying class tensions, in Gaskell highlighted and sensationalized by cross-class sexual tensions as well. Realist writers have struggled since with the difficulty of reconciling the wish to represent the real-life dullness of nothing much ever happening “out of the ordinary” with the need to maintain some sort of narrative interest (or readerly awareness): the Big Brother problem in history.

Like the American slave narratives that were trans-Atlantically contemporary, European realist novels typically had consciousness-changing or educational aims. After moving to Manchester, Elizabeth Gaskell sought to make middle-class southerners like herself aware of the hard reality of working people’s lives in the northern mill towns they had never visited. George Eliot pleaded eloquently for the moral benefits to be gained from a combination of faults-and-all realism with authorly affection. In Adam Bede (1859), she argues that the writer should represent ordinary folk not grand ones, and not idealize but show them neither better nor worse than they really are: thus an extension of the range of milieux and characters available for representation is associated with an equivalent extension of truth-telling. This commitment to the ethical and subjective values of “sincerity” and “sympathy” – two favorite Eliot words – was joined to a desire to use the novel to take the measure of recent and ongoing social changes with the would-be detachment of a scientific observer. Eliot’s novels are generally set a few decades before the present, producing a historical distance that can be harnessed to an appearance of sociological objectivity: with the sureness bestowed by hindsight, characters and occupations can be represented as emerging or fading types.

Ironically, Eliot’s mid-novel argument for realism itself makes use of the kind of debunking comparisons that are so prevalent in demotions of realism. Not only does she tell us how and why she favors the truthful depiction of ordinary lives; she tells us as well how much it is preferable to the “lofty” style she caricatures as what she is rejecting:

“This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!” I hear one of my lady readers exclaim. “How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice. You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things – quite as good as reading a sermon.”

Certainly I could, my fair critic, if I were a clever novelist, not obliged to creep servilely after nature and fact, but able to represent things as they never have been and never will be. . . . But you must have perceived long ago that I have no such lofty vocation. . . . (Eliot 1996: 175)
The mockery of pseudo-elevation – the lady critic, the idealizing sermon, and the lofty vocation – is crucial to the counter-assertion of an honest, plain-speaking compulsion to follow “nature and fact” (with its uneasy combination of an old and a markedly contemporary term, this conjunction itself marks a passage from one kind of literary ground to another). Throughout the nineteenth century, we find realist novels peppered with internal polemics that set out their own projects in contrast to the kinds of literature that they are rejecting. In George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893), for instance, a defense of an evidently Gissingesque realism is dropped into a drawing-room conversation between two mature feminists:

> What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists? They won’t represent the actual world; it would be too dull for their readers. In real life, how many men and women *fall in love*? . . . Not one married pair in every ten thousand have felt for each other as two or three couples do in every novel. There is the sexual instinct, of course, but that is quite a different thing. (Gissing 1977: 58)

Here the argument for realism is not just an abstract protest against idealism, countered by the modern appeal to the biological reality of a human “sexual instinct”; it is also pragmatic. The misadventures of a young girl who has got pregnant are attributed confidently to her mistaking novelistic fantasy for reality: “This Miss Royston – when she rushed off to perdition, ten to one she had in mind some idiot heroine of a book” (Gissing 1977: 58).

Such examples suggest that realism can never be simply codeless in its claimed replication of reality (for a discussion of *Adam Bede* in relation to this point see Bowlby 2006). It is always presenting a particular theory of what will count as a picture of reality, and it is always attached, if only by counter-positioning, to rival forms of artistic representation that it is out to replace. Arguably, this must be minimally true of any presentation of a new aesthetic program, which is rhetorically bound to stake out its territory by going beyond existing conventions and identifying them as such. In his mid-1950s manifesto for the *nouveau roman*, the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet topped this idea with a radically realist twist. He did not just argue that all new art forms present themselves in opposition to previously or currently dominant ones, but that all new literature is in fact a new form of realism, a new way of imagining reality. And this is an ongoing, repeated process, since representational styles must needs be always changing – they pass their tell-by date. First, because any form becomes hackneyed once it is normal and established;
also, because the world itself does not remain the same, so that the tools for telling it need to change with it; and lastly, the point that Robbe-Grillet stresses most strongly, and in relation to Kafka in particular, because new realisms themselves create new ways of seeing reality (Robbe-Grillet 1972: 171–83).

From this point of view, it is possible to see how the writers we think of as anti-realist modernists might themselves be included in a history of new realisms. Erich Auerbach made Virginia Woolf the closing and culminating example in his magisterial history of what the subtitle grandly calls “The Representation of Reality in Western Literature” – and did so with the political aim of making the daydreaming Mrs. Ramsay into the paradigm of a fragmentary, drifting kind of subjectivity whose universality might be a way of bringing together otherwise different and divided nations and cultures in the aftermath of World War II (Auerbach 1974: 525–53). Woolf’s own essays about literature repeatedly make use of a polemical opposition to those she dubs “materialist” writers, like Arnold Bennett, whose obsession with the notation of fact and detail she dismisses as not, after all, a true rendering of reality. In “Modern Fiction” (1919), after an extended critique of the Bennett-style novel, she writes: “Look within and life, it seems, is very far form being ‘like this’” (Woolf 1993: 8). Reality is being relocated – moved “within” – but the right representation of reality, or “life,” is the aim, just as it would be for an avowedly realist writer.

In Woolf’s version of the structure whereby a new aesthetic is presented as a new realism ousting another one, the psychological reality shows up as manifestly superior and more complex only through a simplifying parody of the “external” world of a Bennett novel. It is a commonplace of literary history that nineteenth-century realist novels were all about the observable world out there, until the early twentieth century discovered, post-Romantically and sometimes psychoanalytically, that the mind was the novel’s reality after all. But the overarching outside-to-inside story of the movement, if not progress, of realist representation is itself another of those straightforward narratives of the type derided by realism-simplifiers; behind it (or before it) lies a much more complex history of the relations between subjectivity and realism. In Adam Bede, for instance, there is already a subjective view that is modifying the standard realist analogy of the objective mirror on the world: “I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind” (Eliot 1996: 175). This allows both for the contribution of subjectivity and for the acknowledgment that this particular mind, “my mind,” may reflect things differently from others.
Woolf’s argument against Bennett’s external details might seem to fit the “external to internal” historical pattern. But again, once you look closer the simple separation disappears. After the “Look within” sentence, “Modern Fiction” continues with a famous general declaration, expanding “within” to appear as a type of chaotic mental multiplicity whose source is external: “The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms . . .” (Woolf 1993: 8). Woolf shows a mind overpopulated with the impressions it has received from outside – “from all sides.” There is a sort of ceaseless bombardment in which the individual – mind rather than body – seems both vulnerable and passive. This is a highly distinctive picture of psychological reality (by way of Walter Pater, it owes something to Baudelaire’s much more hedonistic receiver of transient urban impressions in The Painter of Modern Life). But its complex internal world is, nonetheless, externally derived.

Woolf’s “like this,” in quotation marks, refers to her own rhetorical question – “Is life like this?” – about Bennett’s allegedly life-unlike novels. But the phrase acknowledges the representational gap that provides the opening for realism. Life may be “like” this, but it never is this; the power or the pleasure of the story or image that convinces us of its lifelikeness depends on a knowledge of that difference. Yet at the same time such a theoretical separation of life – or reality – and its likenesses is perhaps too reliant on a residual model of separation between a world out there (or in here, “within”) and the words to say it or images to show it. Our reality is already, in large measure, a representational one, both verbally and visually. This is not only because of the media that visibly and audibly surround us – in print, on screens, in the airwaves – but also because of our own modes of communication. “Likely” or realistic stories, with their own always changing conventions for what comes across as plausible experience, are circulating all the time between mutually modifying private and public forms. In reality, as part of our reality, we are constantly representing and recording, hearing, overhearing, retelling, or reconstructing our lived realities and our views of the world – in conversation, in writing, or with images. And the forms in which such communication takes place are themselves always changing. In 1950, the British novelist Henry Green could declare that dialogue was the novel’s obvious future, since “we do not write letters any more, we ring up on the telephone” (Green 1992: 137). In the 2000s, against all expectations, we are writing letters again – even if we now call them emails – and writing them several times a day, just as the middle classes used to do before
the telephone was in common use. And we are also phoning and texting, again all day and everywhere, producing more and more words and using these stylized and specialized forms of distance communication to make up what our lives are “like” and to take in “myriad impressions” of “others” (Woolf’s hail of impressions appears today as nothing other than an overfull inbox without a spam filter).

Merely as speaking, conversing animals, then, we are already “in” realism, living a life that includes ongoing attempts to represent it “like” it is to others and to ourselves; thinking about “real” realism can help us to reflect upon this predicament. Realist works can disturb or please or educate us by showing reality as not what we think we know, by showing realities we have never seen or dreamed, or by making speakable realities that might previously have seemed only idiosyncratic or incommunicable. It is time for realism to be put back into the critical picture, center-stage.

References and further reading


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Introduction: Reclaiming Realism

Matthew Beaumont

Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue that must be handled and explained as such – as a matter of general human interest.

Bertolt Brecht

In a useful collection of historical documents about realism in literature that he compiled almost half a century ago, George J. Becker complained that “the subject of realism is not especially congenial to the critics of our day” (Becker 1963: 3). He grumbled that one type of critic in particular – not perhaps ideologically opposed to realism, like those that strategically promoted the modernist movement – had nonetheless “become bored with it and finds that this subject, always rather obvious and simple-minded, need no longer engage the subtle mind of the literary scholar” (Becker 1963: 3). Becker might have been thinking of formalistic critics like Northrop Frye, for whom realism was in some fundamental sense anti-literary: “One of the most familiar and important features of literature,” Frye had declared in his famous Anatomy of Criticism in 1957, “is the absence of a controlling aim of descriptive accuracy” (Frye 1990: 75). Becker’s complaint also proved to be prophetic, though. In the succeeding decades, philosophers and critics both opposed to realism and simply uninterested in it continued to replicate, and indeed to reinforce, the attitude that he had characterized. In an influential essay from 1982, for instance, Jean-François Lyotard collapsed realism into a superficial conception of mimesis, loftily insisting that it “always stands somewhere between academicism and kitsch”; realism’s “only definition,”
he concluded, “is that it intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art” (Lyotard 1984: 75).

Overstating the matter a little, then, it might be claimed that, in the intellectual climate that has characterized the decades since Becker’s statement, a climate that can most conveniently be identified with the name “postmodernism,” realism has not really been an issue at all. Postmodernism, defined in telegraphic form as “the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge,” has made an impatient or apathetic attitude to realism seem acceptable (Eagleton 2003: 13). Militant postmodernists, examples of whom I discuss more fully below, have crudely caricatured realism, claiming that as an aesthetic it assumes a fundamentally unproblematic relationship between reality and its representations. They have themselves risked assimilating reality to its representations – the world to the word – almost completely. In this intellectual climate, it could be said, realism has been an issue not even for literature, the discipline in which, confined as it often is to the field of nineteenth-century fiction and its adjacent territories, it has most comprehensively been cantonized. Although specialist scholars have continued to explore its historic importance, realism has come to seem obvious and simple-minded to most intellectuals in the humanities. It is as if Roland Barthes’s brilliant critique, in the late 1960s, of what he called the “referential illusion,” and his concomitant attempts to decode the “reality effects” that literary texts evoke in order to certify their claims to verisimilitude, became a pretext not for rethinking realism in relation to poststructuralist insights about narrative convention so much as for not rethinking realism at all (Barthes 1989: 148).

But it might equally be claimed that, at least in its philosophical implications, realism is perpetually at issue. Realism in this inclusive sense can briefly be sketched as the assumption that it is possible, through the act of representation, in one semiotic code or another, to provide cognitive as well as imaginative access to a material, historical reality that, though irreducibly mediated by human consciousness, and of course by language, is nonetheless independent of it. This comprehensive definition of realism cannot ultimately be separated from its specific significance in literature and other art forms. Aesthetic debates about realism are inevitably imbricated in philosophical debates. “To investigate realism in art is immediately to enter into philosophical territory,” Terry Lovell wrote in 1980, “– into questions of ontology and epistemology: of what exists in the world and how that world can be known” (Lovell 1980: 6). It is also to
enter into political territory, because the form in which these questions are answered at a particular time necessarily shapes the relationship of intellectuals both to the historical past and to the future into which, potentially at least, the past opens up; and it consequently determines whether intellectuals feel that it is their task, as Karl Marx famously put it, to interpret the world or to change it too. It needs to be added, though, that if thinking about realism inescapably raises political questions it does so most insistently at times when the philosophical assumptions on which it is premised appear to be threatened. It is thus because of and not in spite of the fact that, roughly since the 1970s, realism has come to seem philosophically compromised, as a result of the institutional entrenchment of the anti-realist elements of poststructuralist thought, that it is at present of peculiar importance for criticism. In Adventures in Realism, therefore, it is quite deliberately handled and explained, as Bertolt Brecht’s polemical formulation from 1938 puts it, as if it mattered.

One consequence of the tendency among militant postmodernist ideologues to police realism has then been to repoliticize it. The demotion of realism in the lexicon of contemporary cultural theory, and its partial disappearance from it, can rapidly be measured by consulting some of the innumerable dictionaries, primers, readers, and companions to postmodernism that fill the shelves of university libraries and bookstores. For it is in the pages, margins, and interstices of these introductory texts, so assiduously marketed at students, that a kind of academic ideology can be seen to adhere – one that the chapters that comprise this book seek to dislodge rather than to help cement. In the Routledge Companion to Postmodernism, for example, there is absolutely no reference to realism either as a literary and cultural form or as a set of philosophical assumptions, as if it is an ideological embarrassment. This seems anomalous in spite of the notorious difficulties associated with finding an adequate definition of the term “realism” – which Roman Jakobson once summarized in a comment on “the extreme relativity of the concept of ‘realism’” (Jakobson 1987: 25). The section on “Names and Terms” in this Companion to Postmodernism stutters from an entry on “Readerly texts” to one on “Reed, Ishmael,” and an uncomfortable but revealing silence about realism can momentarily be detected at this point (Sim 2005: 296). Furthermore, in its entry on “Representation,” this concordance makes no allusion to realist modes of representation, though (politely if not especially helpfully) it does mention the “denial of ‘reality’ as such” that is characteristic of poststructuralist thinkers (Sim 2005: 297).

When introductory textbooks on postmodernism do allude specifically to realism they tend to impugn the concept both for its ingenuousness
and for its disingenuousness. *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader*, for example, contains a concise anthology of terms in which realism is identified as “the antithesis of postmodern practice.” On the one hand realism is simple-minded: “From the postmodern position realism is inadequate because it implies an unexamined relationship with some prior reality.” On the other hand it is duplicitous: “In so far as realism pretends to offer an unproblematic representation, it is in fact the most deceptive form of representation, reproducing its assumptions through the audience’s unexamined response to an apparently natural image or text” (Wheale 1995: 51). This definition caricatures realism – in consequence it no doubt caricatures “the postmodern position” too – as an exercise in illusionism that is at once naïve and intellectually dishonest. It implies that all realism is a species of *trompe l’oeil*, an act of representation that, in replicating empirical reality as exactly as possible, dreams of attaining a complete correspondence to it. It is a conception of realism that at the same time overstates its mimetic ambitions and dramatically undervalues its ability to exhibit and examine the formal limitations that shape it.

It is certainly not a definition of realism that can reasonably be inferred from the experience of reading a canonical realist novel such as George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859) – to return to an example that is adduced by a number of contributors to this collection, notably Rachel Bowlby in her Foreword. For *Adam Bede* radically rethinks the realist aesthetic even as it reaffirms its author’s absolutely firm moralist commitment to the realism that she discerned in John Ruskin’s criticism, that is, to “the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality” (Eliot 1992: 248). Openly and restlessly conscious of its rhetorical strategies throughout, as the disquisition on the democratic avocation of realism in chapter 17 makes apparent, Eliot’s novel is supremely self-reflexive. It illustrates George Levine’s claim, in the chapter he contributes to this volume, that “realism makes the difficulties of the work of representation inescapably obvious to the writer.” *Adam Bede* is a meditation on both the necessity and the impossibility of what she mischievously calls the obligation “to creep servilely after nature and fact” (Eliot 1985: 177).

The novel’s opening paragraph is exemplary in this respect. In establishing the foundations of the historical reality that she is about to construct, Eliot at the same time renders them utterly unstable:

> With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what
I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799. (Eliot 1985: 7)

Eliot quite explicitly establishes a contract with the reader, as the opening sentences of all fictions must at least implicitly do: “This is what I undertake to do for you, reader.” This contract, though, is the stuff of a solicitor’s nightmare, because it is so carefully interlarded with contradictions that are expressly designed to leave the reader confused. Is the reader to expect a kind of fantasia of the past, as the reference in the first sentence to those “far-reaching visions,” that seem to evoke the “vague forms, bred by imagination” that she vehemently dismisses in the account of Ruskin, indicates? Or is the reader to expect instead a representation almost as solid and tangible as a three-dimensional stage set, its concrete forms attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, as the image of the “roomy workshop” in the third sentence suggests? Is the narrator a sorcerer or a carpenter? That image of the single drop of ink, acting like a microscopic lens as much as a miniature reflective surface containing magical properties, implies that the past, and specifically June 18, 1799, a date of strangely indeterminate millennial significance, is the object both of scientific intellection and the necromantic imagination. Is the novel’s experiment in representation like that of empirical science or else like some enigmatic spiritual séance?

The narrator’s contract with the reader, deliberately confusing on all these counts, in a double sense contains the inherent contradictions of realism’s attempt to reconstruct or resurrect a past that has effectively been lost, a past that, under the conditions of industrial and agrarian change characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century, is no longer empirically available. And it mischievously exploits the alienated conditions of production and consumption that prevail in mid-nineteenth-century literature – even as it is self-evidently unsettled and upset by them. Specifically, it attempts to negotiate the increasingly anonymous character, in a rapidly expanding literary marketplace, of the relationship between the writer and the reader. For, atomized as it has become, a book’s readership can no longer confidently be identified as a definite constituency. The consumer of nineteenth-century fiction, like the individuals that comprise the sorcerer’s casual audience, is a “chance comer.” The producer is therefore forced by the same token to perform acts of illusionism in order to attract and seduce an audience, like some magician standing in the souk perhaps, or like someone simply selling an ordinary commodity
in the marketplace. Eliot’s formal games in the opening paragraph of *Adam Bede* can thus be understood, in the context of this changing relationship, a context that is ultimately that of the transformations of industrial capitalism itself, as an attempt precisely to maintain the openness, the experimental value of realism, as it shapes its readership. The concept of realism that Eliot operates is a distinctly dialectical one, then, in addition to a democratic one. It is a dynamic force field rather than some static phenomenon. It accommodates vague forms as well as concrete ones, and, as Eliot’s late fiction such as *Daniel Deronda* (1876) testifies, it activates social visions as well as social facts (not that “social facts” themselves are self-evident at this time).

In the light of this, Eliot’s notion of realism – like that of almost all the realists, operating across the spectrum of artistic representation, that are assessed in this collection of essays – appears to be poorly served by a definition like the one proposed in *The Postmodern Arts*. (No doubt the formulation “in so far as realism pretends to offer an unproblematic representation, it is in fact the most deceptive form of representation,” is an implicit admission that the claim that this book makes about the form is finally simplistic and unconvincing.) The unreliability of the familiar opposition between realism and modernism or postmodernism that some commentators still expect to obtain can in fact be tested in relation to the opening of *Adam Bede*. For the first paragraph of Eliot’s novel, in all its self-consciousness, might be said to resemble a modernist or postmodernist fiction, if in the current critical climate this didn’t necessarily imply that its formal qualities are interesting only to the extent that they anticipate later literary developments. It is important not to fall into the trap of congratulating a realist novel, or painting, or photograph for that matter, for being proto-modernist or proto-postmodernist, largely on the grounds that it has demonstrated an intuitive, if ultimately dim-witted understanding of its own formal limitations. That said, the beginning of *Adam Bede* is remarkable for its self-reflexiveness: It emphasizes the materiality of writing; it foregrounds the illusionistic character of representation; and it directly, playfully addresses the reader. And it is thus scarcely less sophisticated, in its cautious, self-conscious attention to the difficulties of realist representation, than the first chapter of *Jacob’s Room* (1922), often described as Virginia Woolf’s first modernist fiction, which is also stained – and sustained – by a drop of ink from a pen (Woolf 1992: 3). Consequently, “Eliot’s experimental attitude to the demands of realist narrative requires a concept of realism that escapes its limited definition in terms of a passive, positivistic reflection of banal social reality – in terms
of what Woolf bemoaned in her diary as “this appalling narrative busi-
ness of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner” (Woolf 1980: 209).
It might be more productive, as Fredric Jameson has argued, “if we can
manage to think of realism as a form of demiurgetic practice; if we can
restore some active and even playful/experimental impulses to the
inertia of its appearance as a copy or representation of things” (Jameson
1992: 162). *Adam Bede*, the product of sorcery and of carpentry, so to
speak, demands to be understood in these dynamic terms, as a form
of demiurgetic practice, albeit one that aspires, as Eliot puts it, to offering
“no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mir-
rored themselves” in the author’s mind (Eliot 1985: 177). It resists
postmodernist attempts to limit it to an act of mechanical reflection,
insisting that “the mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will some-
times be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused” (Eliot 1985: 177).
It is susceptible instead to Levine’s richly suggestive, dialectical definition
of realism in *The Realistic Imagination* (1981):

Realism exists as a process, responsive to the changing nature of reality
as the culture understood it and evoking with each question another ques-
tion to be questioned, each threatening to destroy the quest beyond
words, against literature, that is its most distinguishing mark. (Levine
1981: 22)

Eliot’s novel is, however, precisely the sort of text that, in a celebrated
article in *Screen*, published in the mid-1970s, Colin MacCabe identified
as an example of “classic realism”; the sort of text that is supposedly
incapable of exploring reality in its contradictoriness, because “it fixes the
subject in a point of view from which everything becomes obvious”
(MacCabe 1974: 16). It allegedly suffers from just the kind of inertia or
formal stasis to which Jameson refers. In this connection, Eliot’s opening
paragraph would be a case in point – if its deliberate attempt to prob-
lematize the historical novel’s act of representation can momentarily be
forgotten – because it seems to locate the narrator, like a sorcerer, at some
transcendent point outside the fictional world that it constructs (though
in chapter 17, making a Thackerayan joke, the narrator casually remarks
that she talked to Adam Bede in his old age). It appears to promise, at
once ingenuously and disingenuously, that it can render Mr Jonathan
Burge’s roomy workshop completely obvious.

The influence of MacCabe’s formulation was quickly felt in the depart-
ments of literary and cultural studies. Catherine Belsey, for instance, in a
provocative and often fascinating book, *Critical Practice* (1980), which
helped to disseminate the concept of classic realism, and indeed to popularize poststructuralist criticism in the UK, identified it quite explicitly as “a predominantly conservative form,” and the label stuck (Belsey 1980: 51). Belsey offered this account of classic realism:

Realism is a culturally relative concept, of course, and many avant-garde movements have successively introduced formal changes in the name of increased verisimilitude. But the term is useful in distinguishing between those forms which tend to efface their own textuality, their existence as a discourse, and those which explicitly draw attention to it. Realism offers itself as transparent. (Belsey 1980: 51)

In this passage a deprecating attitude to realism can even be detected in the concession that Belsey makes in relation to those avant-garde movements that have reinvented the characteristic techniques of the realist aesthetic. She implies that, by successively introducing formal change in the name of increased verisimilitude, the avant-gardes have operated on it from the outside, and strategically, so that it can no longer be called realism – like technicians refining an instrument to the point at which it doesn’t resemble its original, archaic form. She thus excludes the possibility that these nameless avant-garde movements, deliberately inhabiting and interrogating the representational problematic of realism, tactically transformed it from the inside, in response to a historical reality that is in a state of constant, sometimes continuous, sometimes discontinuous, dialectical development. Even as she accepts that realism is “a culturally relative concept,” that is to say, Belsey explains it formalistically, and handles it as a static object: “Realism offers itself as transparent.”

Realism is still frequently admonished for its simple-mindedness, its lack of self-conscious sophistication. Perhaps the most dramatic example of the custom that I have identified, of depicting realism as a dangerous amalgam of the philosophically innocent and the ideologically deceptive, at least in the introductory literature on postmodernism, is Joseph Natoli’s Primer to Postmodernity. There, “classic realism,” although conventionally associated with the rise of liberal humanism in the nineteenth century, is disarmingly identified instead with the characteristic theology of the Middle Ages. In particular, realism is defined in relation to the medieval conviction “that there was a sort of transparent pane of glass between what we said about the world and what was in the world, between word and world, between representation and reality” (Natoli 1997: 13). Realism is from this perspective, one might think, to one’s relief, almost inconceivably outdated. In actual fact, disquietingly enough, it remains,