

Levine on “Realism”

from George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination* (1981) p. 12

If it were possible to locate a single consistent characteristic of realism among its various rejections of traditional forms and ideals, it would be that antiliterary thrust I have already noted; and this thrust is also—inevitably—antigeneric in expression. The quest for unmediated experience becomes central to the dramatic tensions of most realistic fiction, even where the rhetorical strategy is to establish several layers of mediation—as in *Wuthering Heights*, which is generically a romance, or in *The Newcomes*, with Pendennis narrating a quintessentially realistic fiction. The fate of realism and its complicated relation to all those literary forms in which it confusedly manifests itself are intimately involved with the writer’s and the culture’s capacity to believe in the accessibility of experience beyond words.

If we agree to take realism in this way, as a historical phenomenon, we can discuss it with some precision, locate those qualities that mark it as anticonventional, and keep it unstably in process. For the label *realism* sticks. In disentangling the threads that weave the label, I want to insist on three major points. First, realism was *always* in process as long as it was important to nineteenth-century fiction; second, there was no such thing as naive realism—simple faith in the correspondence between word and thing—among serious Victorian novelists; and third, and not quite contradictorily, Victorian realists, recognizing the difference between truth and the appearance of truth, did try to embrace the reality that stretched beyond the reach of language. Their eyes and hearts were on Keats’s fair maiden.

Despite its appearance of solidity, realism implies a fundamental uneasiness about self, society, and art. It becomes a dominant way of seeing at the time J. Hillis Miller describes as marking “the splitting apart of [the communion] of . . . verbal symbols with the reality they named.”¹⁷ While “Nature” had become for Carlyle a “grand unnameable Fact,”¹⁸ poets and novelists were engaged in naming it. But the activity was self-conscious, and truth telling was raised to the level of doctrine. Such intensity of commitment to speaking the truth suggests difficulties where before none had been perceived. The mystery lay not beyond phenomena, but in them. Description, as Lukács argues, begins at the point where things are felt to be alienated from human activity. *Realists take upon themselves a special role as mediator, and assume self-consciously a moral burden that takes a special form: their responsibility is to a reality that increasingly seems “unnameable,” as Carlyle implies mockingly in the pseudo-science that opens Sartor Resartus; but it is also to an audience that requires to be weaned or freed from the misnaming literatures past and current. The quest for the world beyond words is deeply moral, suggesting the need to reorganize experience and reinvest it with value for a new audience reading from a new base of economic power.*